

Was the Attack on Marja a False Flag Aimed at the Encirclement of Iran?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Less than three months ago, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, unleashed, amidst loud drumbeats, Operation Moshtarak. The battle of Marja was identified as the biggest, so far, of the eight-year war in Afghanistan. Highly impressionable foreign reporters stated that its outcome would determine the chances of “success” of President Obama’s revamped Afghan strategy. Three months since, little is heard about Operation Moshtarak. From time to time, reports from that corner of the world assure the West that the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troops were doing fine in Marja, located in southern Afghanistan’s Helmand province, but while some progress is visible, the area has not been fully secured.

However, what cannot be denied is that the ISAF is moving thousands of very well-equipped troops into Kandahar province—just a hop, skip, and jump away from northern Iran. It has set up a number of forward operational bases to accommodate a surge of troops close to Iran’s borders. It was known at the outset that the troops would not go after the massive opium production that is now harvested in the area, but what was not known, is that the troops have been ordered *not* to engage the insurgents, who dominate the area.

Meanwhile, a war of words between Iran and the West (and Israel, of course) has sharpened. And, the talk is growing louder among some in Western corridors that, barring an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, “everything is on the table,” needed to squeeze Tehran to give up its uranium enrichment program.

Tony Blair, whose shadow falls long on the Obama Administration, made clear his views on Iran last January, at the Iraq Inquiry hearing set up under Lord Chilcot. He said on that occasion: “When I look at the way Iran today links up with terror groups . . . a large part of the destabilization of the Middle East . . . comes from

Iran. . . . My judgment—and it may be other people don’t take this view, and that’s for the leaders of today to make their judgment—is we don’t take any risks with this issue.”

Inside the United States, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, neocon John Bolton, in a May 2 *Washington Post* op-ed, “Get Ready for Nuclear Iran,” wrote: “The further pursuit of sanctions is tantamount to doing nothing. Advocating such policies only benefits Iran by providing it cover for continued progress toward its nuclear objective. It creates the comforting illusion of ‘doing something.’ . . . Speculating about regime change stopping Iran’s nuclear program in time is also a distraction. . . . We therefore face a stark, unattractive reality. There are only two options: Iran gets nuclear weapons, or someone uses pre-emptive military force to break Iran’s nuclear fuel cycle and paralyze its program, at least temporarily. . . .”

However, within the Obama Administration, a number of senior Cabinet members, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates, and National Security Advisor Gen. James Jones, among others, do not subscribe to this view. These individuals recognize that any attack on Iran, at a time when the United States is crippled by the financial crisis, and ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, would unleash a debacle that would be impossible to control. These individuals want Operation Moshtarak to remain confined within Afghanistan, and to lay the foundation for an “eventual” withdrawal of the majority of troops from Afghanistan.

Moshtarak was launched with the objective of taking control of major towns in southern Afghanistan, by driving the “Taliban” out and installing “good governments,” which would work with the ISAF to “win the hearts and minds” of the Pushtun ethnic majority in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. At the time, journalists pointed out that Operation Moshtarak would be the



USMC/Lance Cpl. Walter Marino

While the spotlight has been on the U.S./NATO offensive, Operation Moshtarak, in Marja, thousands of troops are being moved into nearby Kandahar province, just a stone's throw from the border with northern Iran. Here, U.S. Marines patrol in Marja, March 14.

first big show of force, since Obama ordered 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan last December. NATO and ISAF forces were under pressure to achieve decisive military gains this year to turn the tide in the war, before troops begin to withdraw next year.

The thinking was that the assault on Marja, with a dense warren of desert canals, would demonstrate McChrystal's counterinsurgency strategy, which emphasizes seizing control of population centers. The town's role as an infiltration route for fighters coming from Pakistan, and as a center of opium production, which provides much of the revenue that has fueled the insurgency, makes it particularly significant. It was also pointed out that the pacification of the area is seen as critical for reversing Taliban gains in and around Kandahar, the country's second-largest city.

Did Kandahar Offensive Succeed?

While some in the West accepted the Obama Administration's version of the stated objectives of Operation Moshtarak, Asma Nemati, a researcher working at the American University of Afghanistan, in her Kabul dispatch published in the Feb. 22 *Foreign Policy* magazine online, reported that some Afghans she had spoken with were wondering why Operation Moshtarak has been talked about so much. Some Afghans in Kabul,

where she was based at the time, were clueless about what was going on in a province 400 miles away. Others were wondering what the strategic importance of Marja was to Afghanistan overall, and criticized the operation, Nemati reported. Some believed the hype around Moshtarak was part of an elaborate American publicity stunt to bolster support for the Administration's troop surge, announced in late December, she noted.

Meanwhile, a new report, "Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned," released in May by the International Council on Security and Development (ICOS), a policy think tank, with offices in London, Brussels, and Rio de Janeiro, found that 61% of Afghans inter-

viewed feel more negative about NATO forces after Moshtarak than they did before the February military offensive in Marja. Of those interviewed, 95% believe that more young Afghans have joined the Taliban in the last year. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents were often, or always angry, and 45% of those stated they were angry at the NATO occupation, civilian casualties, and night raids. The poll was based on interviews with more than 400 Afghan men, from Marja, Lashkar Gah, and Kandahar, by the ICOS in March 2010.

Ninety-seven percent of Afghans interviewed said the operation had led to new flows of internally displaced people. Thousands of Afghans were forced to move to overcrowded refugee camps with insufficient food, medical supplies, or shelter. Aid agencies were overwhelmed and under-resourced. In addition, 68% of Afghans questioned by ICOS believed that the Taliban will return to Marja.

In an April 15 article, "McChrystal Backtracks on Troop Veto for Kandahar Shuras," Gareth Porter of Inter-Press Service (IPS) reported that the U.S. military has now officially backtracked from its earlier statement that it would seek the consent, or consultative conferences, with the local shuras (councils), to carry out the coming military occupation of Kandahar City and nearby districts. This contradicts a pledge made by



At the end of April, NATO commanders scrapped a helicopter assault by hundreds of U.S. and Afghan troops. That decision, designed to prepare the ground for the biggest offensive of the nearly nine-year-old war, has frustrated U.S. officers on the ground, who say their local partners are not ready to lead. “It wasn’t Afghan enough. . . . Approval was denied,” a U.S. Army officer with knowledge of the plans told Reuters. “The implication is that the Afghans are in the lead. The

Afghan President Hamid Karzai not to carry out the operation without such consent.

Lt. Col. Tadd Sholtis, a spokesman for General McChrystal, told IPS that local tribal elders in Kandahar could “shape the conditions” under which the influx of foreign troops operate during the operation, but would not determine whether or where NATO troops would be deployed in and around the city. Asked whether ISAF is committed to getting local approval before introducing more troops into Kandahar and surrounding districts, the spokesman said, “We’re not talking about something as simple as a referendum.”

At a March 29 briefing in Kabul on plans for the Kandahar operation, however, an unnamed senior U.S. military official told reporters that one of the elements of the strategy for gaining control over the Taliban stronghold is to “shura our way to success”—referring to the Islamic concept of consultative bodies. In those conferences with local tribal elders, the officials said, “The people have to ask for the operation. . . . We’re going to have to have a situation where they invite us in.”

bottom line is we’re nowhere near the stage where they can be in the lead.” The assault in a rural part of Kandahar—due to take place in March, and repeatedly postponed—would have been one of the biggest operations so far in the province, where U.S. troops are massing to carry out a major offensive beginning in June.

All this suggests that the issue of how to go ahead with the large-scale military operation scheduled to begin in June is far from resolved. It is clear that the support of the elders is hard to come by. President Karzai said NATO’s Kandahar operation would not be carried out until the elders themselves were ready to support it, according to a number of press reports.

In other words, a full-fledged military operation to take control of the city of Kandahar is being side-tracked. Karzai, who hails from Kandahar, is strongly opposed to the bloodbath that is expected to follow such an operation. On May 3, speaking to reporters via video conference in Kabul from Kandahar, provincial governor Tooryalai Wesa said, “I have to say it is not a military operation. No tanks, artillery, aircraft or bombings are discussed.”

“It is very much contrary to the operations we conducted in Marja,” he said, referring to the military campaign by thousands of Afghan and foreign troops in villages in neighboring Helmand province earlier this year. “As we agreed, and as President Karzai said earlier, no operation will be conducted without the agreement of Kandahar’s people,” Wesa said.

At the same time, all reports indicate that ISAF troops are massing in large numbers in Kandahar, the spiritual homeland of the Taliban, in what will ostensibly be the largest offensive of the war. But then, if it is not a military operation, as Governor Wesa says, one wonders why the troops are being massed in such large numbers.

The Massing of Troops

This August, when all 30,000 U.S. troops promised by President Obama are stationed in Afghanistan, foreign troop numbers, not counting the more-than-100,000 private contractors, many of whom are “unofficial” arms bearers, will reach 150,000. Reports indicate that, in fact, Kandahar, which housed 9,000 coalition troops as recently as 2007, is expected to house as many as 35,000 troops by the time the surge is complete.

With the objective of bringing such a large number of foreign troops into the area, the U.S. has also sped up building bases to house and secure them. In a Feb. 10 article, “Totally Occupied: 700 Military Bases Spread Across Afghanistan,” Nick Turse of Tomdispatch.com, wrote that, according to official sources, approximately 700 bases of every size dot the Afghan countryside, and more, like the one in Shinwar, are under construction or soon will be, as part of a base-building boom that began last year.

The bases range from relatively small sites like Shinwar, to mega-bases that resemble small American towns, Turse said. One such mega-base cropped up recently in the desert land of Helmand Province. According to Capt. Jeff Boroway from the 25th Naval Construction regiment, “This place was desert at the end of January. I mean nothing. And now you’ve got a 443-acre (179-hectare) secure facility,” he told reporters. Boroway said engineering units were rushing to finish work on the camp to accommodate the deployment of thousands of additional troops, including most of an 8,000-strong brigade of U.S. Marines.

On the other hand, the Shinwar site, located in the eastern Afghanistan bordering Pakistan, will be a small

forward operating base (FOB) that will host both Afghan troops and foreign forces. A small number of the coalition sites are mega-bases like Kandahar Airfield (KAF), which boasts one of the busiest runways in the world, and Bagram Air Base, a former Soviet facility that received a makeover, complete with Burger King and Popeyes outlets, and now serves more than 20,000 U.S. troops, in addition to thousands of coalition forces and civilian contractors.

In addition, Lance Cpl. Dwight Henderson, Regimental Combat Team 7, in a report, “Marines establish new patrol base in Southern Afghanistan,” on April 19, said Marines and sailors with Weapons Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, established a new patrol base in the area of Laki, Garmsir District, Helmand province, March 30. A platoon from Weapons Company moved into the large, concrete compound that was a former hospital, to more easily conduct patrols and operations in the more southern portion of their area of operations.

To facilitate U.S. base construction projects, the Pentagon’s Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) has launched the Maintenance, Repair and Operations Uzbekistan Virtual Storefront website. From a facility located in Termez, Uzbekistan, cement, concrete, fencing, roofing, rope, sand, steel, gutters, pipe, and other construction material manufactured in countries, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan can be rushed to nearby Afghanistan to accelerate base-building efforts. “Having the products closer to the fight will make it easier for war-fighters by reducing logistics response and delivery time,” Chet Evanitsky, the DLA’s construction and equipment supply chain division chief, told the media.

While most of these bases are small, and abandoned as the troops get yanked out to assemble at larger bases, Rowan Scarborough, in a Jan. 7, 2009 article in *Human Events*, “U.S. Adds Eight Bases in Afghanistan,” said the U.S. Army is building eight major operating bases in southern Afghanistan in an expansion that underscores a new, larger troop commitment to try to defeat the stubborn Taliban insurgency. The planned network of new bases shows the degree to which U.S. commanders will step up operations to hunt down bands of Taliban insurgents from multiple staging points as part of the Iraq-style troop surge.

Scarborough said two Defense Department sources



USMC/Staff Sgt. William Greeson

A plan to set up large, forward bases in Afghanistan, to accommodate a surge of troops, close to Iran's borders, was activated in 2005. The troops had been ordered not to engage the insurgents who dominate the area. Shown: U.S. Navy Seabees build a forward operating base (FOB), in Nawa District, Helmand Province, October 2009.

reported that the company will build eight of the largest Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in Afghanistan in the Kandahar area and other southern Afghanistan locations. This area is the birthplace of the radical Taliban movement that seized control of the country in the 1990s, and was ousted from power by the U.S. in 2001. "The earlier bases were meant to hold hundreds. These will house thousands," one source said.

A Long, Enduring Plan

While Operation Moshtarak, which followed the propaganda barrage, aimed at Western audiences, about a "Taliban" takeover of southern Afghanistan, is a recent event, the plan to establish large, permanent bases in Afghanistan was set in place years before. On March 30, 2005, an *Asia Times* article, "U.S. scatters bases to control Eurasia," pointed out that Washington had decided to set up nine new bases in Afghanistan in the provinces of Helmand, Herat, Nimrouz, Balkh, Khost, and Paktia. The provinces of Helmand, Herat, and Nimrouz are all close to Iran's northern borders.

The article quoted U.S. Army spokesman Maj. Mark McCann saying that the United States was building four military bases in Afghanistan that would only be used by the Afghan National Army. On that occasion,

McCann stated, "We are building a base in Herat. It is true." At the time, the U.S. had three large operational bases inside Afghanistan; the main logistical center for the U.S.-led coalition was Bagram Air Field north of Kabul. Other key U.S.-run logistical centers in Afghanistan include Kandahar Air Field in southern Afghanistan, and Shindand Air Field in the western province of Herat. Shindand is about 100 kilometers from the border with Iran, a location that makes it controversial.

The proximity of the Shindand base to Iran is cause for concern to Tehran, says Paul Beaver, an independent defense analyst based in London. Beaver pointed out that, with U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf, and Shindand sitting next to the border of Iran, Tehran has a reason

to worry that Washington is in the process of encircling Iran.

Also in 2005, Gen. Richard Myers, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters in Kabul that the Department of Defense was studying the possibility of setting up permanent U.S. bases in Afghanistan. He said: "At this point we are in discussions with the Afghan government in terms of our long-term relationship, remembering that for the moment, the coalition has work to do here, the United States has work to do here, and that is where our focus is right now."

Pakistani Lt. Gen. Talat Masood (ret.), responding to Myers' statement, pointed out then, that while Pakistan will not be upset about this, Iran, Afghanistan's neighbor to the west, would be. Iran sees the United States as an enemy, recalling that President Bush had criticized it as being part of an "axis of evil." Masood said a U.S. decision to keep bases in Afghanistan could be partly out of a desire to contain Iran and monitor its forces.

That was in 2005, and things have moved much further forward in 2010. It is safe to say that, with 35,000 foreign troops soon to be in southern Afghanistan, and military bases in place, the process of encircling Iran has advanced considerably.