

Helmand on the Move: Migration as a Response to Crop Failure

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1. Introduction

Comprising the districts of Lashkar Gah, Marjah, Nad-e Ali, Nawa Barakzai and Nahr-e Seraj, central Helmand includes a myriad of different communities, each of which is exposed to different economic opportunities and contrasting security regimes. It was anticipated that these populations would experience significant changes in their security following the end of the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) combat mission in Afghanistan in December 2014. The reductions in aid flows that would accompany the withdrawal - as much a function of an inability to continue to deliver international assistance in the absence of the security umbrella as a symbol of the waning of donor interest - was also expected to have an impact on the population's economic opportunities.

But where do these communities stand now that the international forces have left? How has the departure of foreign soldiers actually impacted the multiplicity of communities and households in central Helmand and, in turn, what effect has this had on their perception of the Afghan state and their economic situation? Of particular interest is the extent of the Afghan National Security Force's (ANSF) coercive power and how this has impacted on levels of opium poppy cultivation; a crop that has been the economic mainstay of the Helmand economy for a number of decades - even in the presence of ISAF - and is likely to become all the more important following NATO withdrawal. This paper¹ provides an account of how the shift in security provision from a combined ISAF and ANSF operation to one driven by local actors has impacted upon a number of different locations in central Helmand. It is based on 140 in-depth interviews conducted in ten research sites in May 2015, and draws on a more extensive body of research consisting of fieldwork in many of the same locations dating back to May 2008.²

1 Thanks go to the Organisation for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR) for their work in Helmand and to Alcis Ltd for access to high resolution remote sensing imagery and analysis.

2 This body of fieldwork consists of a total of 3,320 individual interviews, which were conducted every six months over seven consecutive years and that by May 2011 came to cover 28 distinct Research Sites (RS), including seven in the desert area to the north of the Boghra canal. The first round of fieldwork was conducted in November/December 2007 (N 42) but covered only seven RS; the second round in November/December 2008 (N99) covered ten RS; the third round in November/December 2009 (N112) covered 11 RS; the fourth round in April/May 2010 (N 87) covered 11 RS; and the fifth round in November/December 2010 (N 360) covered 23 RS. From the sixth round in April/May 2011 (N 447) until November 2013, 28 RS were covered. The seventh round was in November/December 2011 (N 373); the eighth round was in April/May 2012 (N 462); the ninth round was in November/December 2012 (N 404); the tenth round was in April/May 2013 (N 462); and the eleventh round was in November 2013 (N 472).

In central Helmand, as with most of rural Afghanistan, much can be learned from how households and communities access both water and land. It tells us a great deal about their history of settlement, their geographic and political position within the province, as well as how households and communities derive their livelihood - particularly the crops that can be grown. In this regard there are three primary population groups in central Helmand.

First, there are those communities straddling the Helmand river as it travels north to south, passing through the city of Gereshk on the main highway and onward through the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah before heading further south into Nawa Barakzai. These are the original settlements of central Helmand and are dominated by the Barakzai tribe. Second, there are those communities settled by the large-scale irrigation programs implemented by the Afghan government during the 1950s and 1960s. Settled on the former desert lands of Nad-e Ali and Marjah, these communities are consist of different tribal groups, many made up of “outsiders,” known locally as the Naqilin, largely Pashtuns from eastern and northern Afghanistan, along with nomads, and the land-poor from northern Helmand. Third, there is the newly settled population that has encroached upon former desert land north of the Boghra canal over the last

decade. These communities access water using either shallow or deep wells, tapping into the ground water to provide irrigation for their crops and water for their families and livestock. These former desert areas are dominated by those tribal groups who consider themselves indigenous to the area; the Barakzai, Ishaqzai, Noorzai, Alikozai and Alizai, many of whom have been gifted the land or purchased it from former mujahidin commanders, or their families. Initially consisting of only a few isolated communities escaping the drought in Washir, this group came to consist of well over 160,000 people occupying what is legally considered “government land.”³

This paper is divided into four further sections: the first three of which offer a detailed account of how these different population groups in central Helmand have fared now that ISAF is no longer present. The final section is a conclusion which highlights just how little has changed as a consequence of the departure of foreign soldiers in the better irrigated areas of central Helmand. It argues that currently the real challenge lies in the former desert area to the north of the Boghra canal, where the fifth consecutive year of a failed opium crop has exacted a significant impact on the rural population, resulting in outmigration; the consequence of which could prove highly destabilising for the rest of central Helmand, and possibly further afield.



Figure 1: Off-season vegetables grown “under plastic” in Bolan, Helmand.

3 This estimate is based on a population density of 0.9 persons per jeribs of cultivated land. ‘From Bad they made it worse: The concentration of opium poppy in areas of conflict’ by David Mansfield, AREU, Kabul.

2. Staying the Course: Life Near the Provincial Centre

As of the summer of 2015 the insurgency had made little headway in the main irrigated area of central Helmand. Here, farmers show little desire to return to the situation prior to 2010 when there were pitched battles between the ANSF, ISAF and the insurgents, and there were few government services. Currently, many landowning households appear relatively content with their lot and willing to accept the rule of the government and its proxy, the Afghan Local Police (ALP), even if it can sometimes come at the cost of a ban on opium production. The same cannot be said of those sharecropping or leasing land in the canal command area, but their lives have never been easy - and the number of these households has fallen considerably since the imposition of the ban on opium.

It would of course be wrong to suggest that the conditions across the canal command area of central Helmand are uniform. In fact, the security and economic situation is complex and shaped by local circumstances and conditions. On the whole, security conditions are a function of proximity to the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, economic opportunities, tribal composition and the authority of local elites. In places like Bolan and Qala Bost and other areas in close proximity to Lashkar Gah, it is the government and the ANSF that hold sway, consistent with the Afghan state's historical subjugation of the lower valleys. These are areas where there is a long tradition of social contract between communities and the state, where the population has good access to services, such as health and education, and where commodity and labour markets function.

Just as importantly, these are also areas where the economy remains relatively strong. Although wage labour rates and opportunities are declining from their heyday during "the surge," farmers around the provincial centre report that they are maintaining their overall quality of life despite the withdrawal of ISAF. Most successfully exploit a number of different agricultural and non-agricultural income sources. In Qala Bost, for example, farmers typically combine a winter crop of what is high yielding wheat, a varied mix of high value annual - and increasingly perennial⁴ - horticultural crops with the sale of livestock (and their byproducts),⁵ as well as trade and employment opportunities. In Bolan, to the west of Lashkar Gah, the focus is on exploiting the demand for spring and

summer vegetables in the provincial centre, along with taking advantage of the demand for labour in the city. Here, wheat, along with maize and mung bean in the summer, has largely been replaced by a growing array of vegetables. In the winter months there is an increased incidence of off-season vegetables grown "under plastic" (meaning under the plastic sheeting of the polytunnels where off-season vegetables are typically grown during the winter and spring seasons), supporting farmers to increase their income (see Figure 1). For example, a spring crop of cucumber is likely to earn anything from 40,000 to 60,000 Afs per jerib⁶ (the equivalent of USD\$3,137- 4,706 per hectare [ha]) compared to 25,000 to 35,000 Afs (the equivalent of USD\$1,960-2,760 per ha), were the crop grown in the summer.

In both Bolan and Qala Bost, farmers not only have a higher degree of physical and economic security than is attainable in other parts of the province but they have better access to government services that they make full use of. The vast majority of respondents report sending their children to school, being able to access health services (both public and private, including in Pakistan) and having sufficient food for their families. It is the only area where farmers still reported the delivery of development programs, i.e., agricultural assistance and small scale infrastructural efforts.⁷ Further, there are none of the vociferous complaints about the government in this area that can be heard elsewhere.⁸ There remains hope that the economic situation will still improve and confidence that the government⁹ and the security it has delivered will prevail.

6 A jerib is a measurement of land and is approximately one-fifth of a hectare.

7 Bolan #9, 5 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai; Qala Bost #5, 8 jeribs, owner cultivator, Achekzai; Qala Bost #9, 8 jeribs, owner cultivator, Achekzai; Qala Bost #11, 3 jeribs, owner cultivator, Achekzai; Qala Bost #12, 4 jeribs, owner cultivator, Achekzai; Qala Bost #13, 6 jeribs, owner cultivator, Achekzai.

8 Although, as in the rest of central Helmand, there is still considerable criticism leveled at then Governor Naeem Baloch, much of it a function of his ethnic status. For example: "We don't like the governor but other Chawarki are good people" (Bolan #9, 5 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai); "We are with the government; this is a good government. But we do request that the government send a good governor to do good work with the people" Bolan #11, 3 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai; "The governor is a very poor person. He doesn't work for the people, just for his pocket" Bolan #13, 3 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai.

9 "The attitude of the government is good here. The people are happy with them and I am happy" Bolan #10, 10 Jerib, owner cultivator, Barakzai; "There are no Taliban here. All the people from this area support the government" (Qala Bost #7, five jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai).

4 Of the 13 interviewed in Qala Bost, seven had vineyards; two had been newly established. Gross returns for vineyards varied from 55,000 to 110,000 Pakistani Rupee (Rs) per jerib (the equivalent of USD\$2,664 - 5,328 per hectare).

5 One respondent reported earning around 400 Afs per day for eight months of the year from the sale of yoghurt and milk in Lashkar Gah (Qala Bost #7, 5 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai).

3. Cracking, Not Breaking: Coping in the Canal Command Area

Further afield the situation is not as positive as it is in places like Bolan and Qala Bost. Once beyond the areas both irrigated by the Helmand river and in close proximity to the provincial centre, and into the canal-irrigated areas to the northwest of Lashkar Gah and southwest of Gereshk, the security situation and the economy becomes more challenging. These are areas settled by the government's large irrigation program of the 1950s and 1960s - the Helmand and Arghandab Valley Project. The amount of land initially distributed by the program in Nad-e Ali and Marjah was relatively generous, ranging from 25 to 30 jeribs of land per household, depending on the quality of the soils.¹⁰ However, with further phases of settlement by each successive generation, this land has been subdivided resulting in landholdings that are now often less than ten jeribs and rarely more than 15 jeribs. With households that typically contain from ten to 12 people, of which only two to three will work full time, there is often insufficient take-up of high value crops and too few wage labour opportunities by which to prosper.

Since efforts to ban opium poppy in these areas began in earnest under the former governor Gulab Mangal in late 2008, most farmers have abandoned the crop and replaced it with wheat, along with spring crops of cotton, melon and watermelon. Low-risk low-return crops like maize, mung bean and, in some areas, cotton and ground nut, still occupy the lion's share of the land during the summer months. This is not an area that has seen the wholesale shift into high value annuals and perennials that is seen in Bolan and Bost; instead it is just a few farmers with no more than a jerib of cucumber or tomato being grown.

Wage labour opportunities are also limited, and even harder to find with the reduction in development investment that these communities have experienced in recent years. For those with access to non-farm income - a shop, a car, a tractor, or some kind of trade - the extra 7,000 to 16,000 Rs per month (the equivalent of USD\$70-155) can be a lifeline. It can be the difference between consuming meat and fruit twice a week, and affording private healthcare, perhaps even in Pakistan, or having a diet that consists largely of consuming what is grown on your own land and using only the government clinic, if not the local pharmacy.

These are also areas where there is often a delicate balance of power between the central government and its representatives - the district governor and the ANSF - and local politico-military elites. This is a balance that is all the more precarious with the establishment of the ALP. ALP commanders are typically drawn from these local elites and their establishment has given them an important source of patronage and power within the local community. In some locations, such as Malgir, Shin Kalay, and Loy Bagh, the ALP commanders have earned a level of respect; they typically work in unison with the government and are careful not to do anything to undermine the privileged position they have gained from their appointment and the largesse it offers them.

In other areas the ALP have gained some primacy and are accused of both corruption and abuse. Under commanders such as Baz Gul in Marjah and Hamid Gul in Babaji, these local militias are conscious of the central state's vulnerabilities; its need to appease the local elite in its desire to maintain order and prevent the insurgents from returning. In these areas political power is negotiated between the center and local elites and between elites and the local population; it is not imposed. ALP commanders are also aware of the economic needs of their constituencies and the fragility of their own political position. After all, the ranks of the ALP are swelled by extended family members and those from the rural community whose own households, relatives and friends are keen to return to opium poppy cultivation after years of growing less remunerative crops and suffering the economic consequences.

It is in areas like Marjah and Babaji where more widespread opium poppy cultivation has returned following the withdrawal of ISAF.¹¹ The return of opium has been accompanied by payments to the ALP and, to a lesser extent, the Afghan National Police (ANP). And while these payments can often appear to be systematised, with reports of payments of 1,000 Rs per jerib of opium poppy cultivated to the ALP and 500 Rs per jerib to the ANP, the process of extraction is often more negotiated and contingent than it can often appear on the surface - just as with the payments to the Taliban to the north of the Boghra. Farmers refer to requests for payments from the ALP commanders

10 Ghulam Farouq, "Socio-economic aspects of land settlement in Helmand valley, Afghanistan," (Beirut: American University of Beirut, thesis paper, June 1975), 71.

11 Nine of the 14 farmers interviewed in Marjah 2A had cultivated opium poppy in the 2014/15 growing season. Marjah 2A is adjacent to the Marjah district centre and an ANA Forward Operating Base (previously an ISAF/ANSF base).

“to support their soldiers and their families,” and of the ALP leaving their checkpoints during the season and visiting the fields to request for payments directly. How much is actually paid is often unknown but once a specific amount has become the accepted figure within an area most will pay this, or at least say they have when talking to others.¹²

Moreover, the payments do not come with a guarantee. As a number of farmers in Marjah 2A complained, “I paid money to the arbaki but the government still came and destroyed my crop.” This is illustrative of the fragile balance of power that needs to be maintained by a local commander in this kind of terrain, constantly weighing up the demands of those with formal power in the provincial and district centre alongside the needs of rural constituents on whose support he also draws. Even in Marjah where an ALP commander like Baz Gul is considered to have substantial leverage, he does not look to confront the provincial authorities directly and deter an eradication campaign completely - particularly in Block 2A next to the district centre - in order to appease the rural population. Instead, eradication is managed so that it spends as little time as possible in one village, never returning to the same area the next day to finish the rest of the crop, thereby allowing all parties in the drama to be seen to be cooperating while at the same time managing the threat of resistance.

Marjah and Babaji are not the only areas where opium poppy has been grown in the 2014/15 growing season. There were also reports of opium in Malgir¹³ and Shin Kalay,¹⁴ as well as small amounts in Loy Bagh.¹⁵ However, in these areas the ALP has neither looked to obtain payments for the crop or offered any guarantee against crop destruction. Indeed, it is alleged that ALP commanders in these areas have specifically told farmers not to cultivate opium poppy and informed them that if they do and the provincial

authorities mount an eradication campaign, the ALP will support it. In these areas the ALP is more beholden to the provincial authorities and less responsive to the local population. In Shin Kalay, for example, the ALP commander, “Nisar,”¹⁶ went even further and compelled those that had grown opium poppy to destroy their crop prior to the provincial authorities mounting a campaign in the area.

However, the support to eradication has not fared well with the farming population, but neither has the crop failure that has beset the canal command area this year just as much as it has in the former desert area to the north of the Boghra canal.¹⁷ In fact, only a small number of farmers in these locations report that their crop was left intact after the eradication campaign, complaining that the ALP had facilitated access and given little room for negotiation.¹⁸ Those whose crop was left unscathed report yields of less than one man¹⁹ per jerib (the equivalent of 5.625 kg per hectare). Some report even less, such as one farmer in Loy Bagh who claims to have obtained only 4 khord²⁰ of opium from his half-jerib plot (the equivalent of 4.5 kg per hectare).²¹ In some areas the crop was just left to die (See Figure 2). Most blame the US government for spraying the crop; some even suggest that other corps have been affected.

Many of the farmers in these areas feel that the failure of the poppy crop and the counternarcotics efforts of the local authorities leave them with few alternatives in the coming year. As one farmer stated: “Next year people will not grow poppy as from one side the government will destroy their crop, and from the other it is affected by disease.”²² In search of respite, many farmers talked of planting basil, known

12 It is clear from more long-term contacts in these areas that there is considerable scope for avoiding payments altogether by drawing on patron-client relationships.

13 Nine of the 14 farmers interviewed in Malgir had cultivated opium poppy in the 2014/15 growing season; all of whom had dedicated less land to the crop than the previous year. All but two reported that their crop had been destroyed but it was not always clear if this was by tractor during the provincial eradication campaign or due to disease, which they believed to be a consequence of “spraying.”

14 Two of the 14 farmers interviewed in Shin Kalay reported that they cultivated opium poppy in the 2014/15 growing season. There were further reports of opium poppy being cultivated concealed within the gardens of the household compounds, known as the *mahwata*.

15 Two of the 14 farmers interviewed in Loy Bagh reported that they cultivated opium poppy in the 2014/15 growing season. There were further reports of opium poppy being cultivated concealed within the gardens of the household compounds, known as the *mahwata*.

16 “Nisar” is the son of Wakil Safar, a prominent local leader.

17 “The government has destroyed my home and family, I will destroy them.” (Malgir #5, 15 jeribs, sharecropper (one-fifth), Chanjir, three years ago, Ishaqzai); “I fuck the mother of this dowus governor.” (Malgir #11, 12 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai); “The dowus governor destroyed our crop. We are poor [the government] is just the slave of the kafir.” (Malgir #13, 12 jeribs, sharecropper (one-fourth), Torghay, three years ago, Barakzai); “Fuck the wife of the Wali! He is not a good person. In one area he has banned poppy and in another area they grow it.” (Shin Kalay #4, 12 jeribs, owner cultivator, Kharoti); “Always I pray to Allah to remove this governor from Helmand. Since he arrived here he has done nothing for the province.” (Shin Kalay #23, 17 jeribs, owner cultivator, Kharoti).

18 “The [eradication] campaign didn’t allow anyone to negotiate, they just destroyed our crop.” (Malgir #6, eight jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai).

19 A man is a unit of weight and in southern Afghanistan is the equivalent of 4.5 kg.

20 A khord is a unit of weight in southern Afghanistan and is the equivalent of 112.5 grams. There are forty khord in one man.

21 Loy Bagh #7, ten jeribs, owner cultivator, Alizai.

22 Malgir #4, 12 jeribs, owner cultivator, Barakzai.



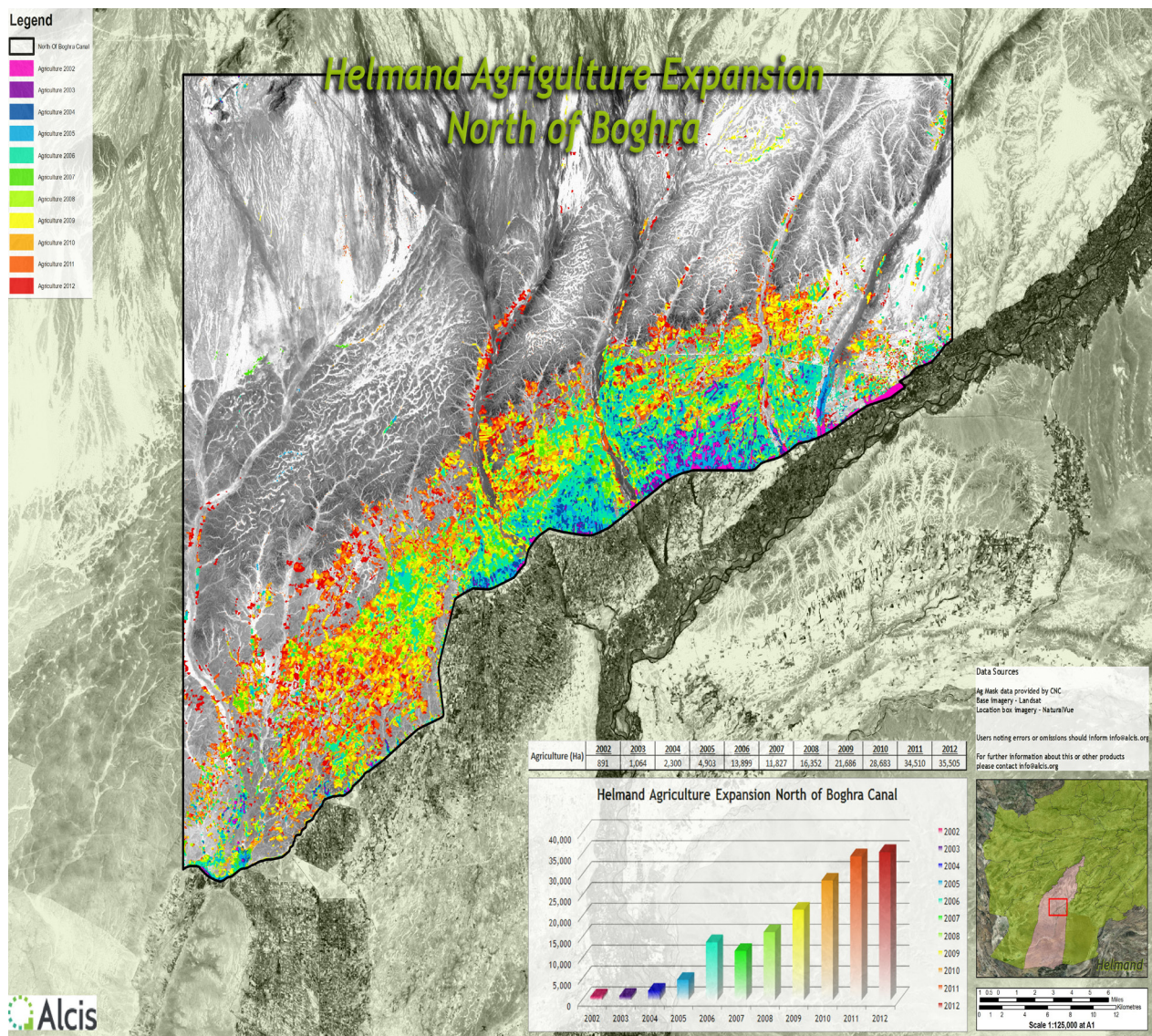
Figure 2: Failed crop in Chanjir, Nad-e Ali

locally as *raihaan*, in the summer, in the hope that it lives up to the rumours of high returns - a veritable miracle crop.²³

On the face of it, there is little sense in farmers in the canal command area continuing with opium poppy; a crop that currently seems to have a high probability of either not reaching harvest or producing such low yields that it will not meet the costs of production. However, much will depend on how the economic and

security situation changes in the coming months; and this, as the next section will show, could be as much a function of what happens in the former desert areas to the north of the Boghra canal as the next growing season approaches, as it is to do with events in the canal command area itself.

²³ As many as 32 farmers indicated that they would cultivate *raihaan* this summer, yet none of those interviewed had cultivated the crop before. The crop is planted in May and harvested in September and is allegedly sold to India as a medicinal crop. Traditionally it is a garden crop grown in the household compound but this year there are reports of commercial cultivation. Locally, there were claims of the crop producing around 70 man per jerib with prices of between 1,500 and 2,600 Rs per man, and therefore gross returns of between 105,000 Rs and 182,000 Rs per jerib (the equivalent of USD\$5,085-8,815 per hectare). There were also reports of advance payments being offered on this year's crop - a system known as *salaam* that in the past was available for the opium crop - of 500 Rs per man.



Map 1: The growth in the area under agriculture north of the Boghra canal, 2002- 2013.

4. To Hell in a Hand Cart:

The Impact of Crop Failure in the Former Desert Areas

It is perhaps no surprise that the insurgency consolidated its position in the former desert area that lies north of the Boghra canal once NATO's combat mission ended. There is little love lost for the government of Afghanistan amongst the population in this desert space. This was an area in which the insurgency initially gained influence with the escalation of the conflict in central Helmand in 2008. The Taliban subsequently strengthened its position here when their fighters were pushed out of Marjah, Nad-e Ali and other canal-irrigated districts of central Helmand following the deployment of significant numbers of western soldiers in 2010 and 2011.

Support for the insurgency grew further in this former desert area as growing numbers of households relocated there to escape the uptick in violence, as well as the government and the international community's drive to eliminate poppy from the canal area; an initiative that became known as the "Helmand Food Zone." In fact, between 2008 and 2013 the area under agriculture in this former desert area grew by almost 20,000 hectares (ha) from 16,352 ha to 35,505 ha with concomitant increases in the size of the population, and a groundswell of support for the Taliban (see Figure 3).²⁴ This was a population alienated by the

24 This is the estimated area under agriculture only for the territory north of the Boghra canal and south of Highway 1.

government, compelled to flee the relatively well-resourced canal-irrigated area of central Helmand into the arid terrain north of the canal; driven there by a government that the population believe was far too eager to put its relationship with its western backers ahead of any perceived duty to the population.

By the spring of 2015, the Taliban and those that opposed the government had consolidated their position in the former desert area. No longer fearful of air attacks from the foreigners' planes stationed at the military camp to the north (Camp Leatherneck/Bastion), the Taliban had established permanent bases in the former desert near Dasht-e Ab Pashak and Shna Jama. As such, Taliban soldiers could be seen openly wielding weapons, where in the past they would have been much more circumspect.

Across this desert area the Taliban's commanders and courts resolve disputes in a manner that involves less time and lower payments than the government-imposed system in the canal command area; an attribute that wins further favour from the local population. This relative order comes with a levy of 2 khord for each jerib of opium poppy grown (the equivalent of USD\$222.75 per hectare) and 300 Rs for each jerib of wheat (the equivalent of USD\$14.55 per hectare). Of course, the actual amount paid is ultimately determined by "negotiation"; a function of an individual's access to patronage networks, their economic position, as well as the degree to which the Taliban have consolidated their military position in the area. Ultimately these payments are low enough that farmers make few complaints, typically regarding them as *komak* (assistance) in support of the jihad, in contrast to what they would refer to as *rishwat* (bribes) paid to government forces to not destroy their crops.

Now that ISAF is gone, the population of this area is no longer confronted by the encroachment of ANSF into the former desert area. Without foreign backing, the ANSF have been much more reluctant to engage Taliban forces north of the canal; they have largely been left to their own devices apart from the former desert areas of Trek Nawa and Dasht-e Sistani.²⁵ Nor were farmers troubled by the Afghan government's eradication campaign, which in the past had sent tractors north of the canal each spring to destroy the opium poppy crop. Ultimately this foray into the desert space was more an irritant for farmers than a real threat to their livelihoods, as the local population believed these efforts were motivated by predation rather than any desire to destroy the opium crop.

²⁵ Trek Nawa is the former desert land located to the south of Nad e Ali, to the east of Marjah and to the west of Nawa Barakzai. Dasht-e Sistani lies to the northwest of Marjah.

	Amount	Units	Cost per Unit (PR)	Total Cost (PR)	Total Cost (Afs)	Total Cost (USD)
A: Annual Inputs						
Seed	4	Kg	111	444	253	4.40
Tractor	2	Hrs	2,500	5,000	2,850	49.50
Manure	1	trailer	3,500	3,500	1,995	34.65
Herbicide	0.33	per jerib	2,200	726	414	7.19
Diesel	80	per jerib	120	9,600	5,472	95.04
Fertilizer (DAP)	2	(Bag (50kg	5,000	10,000	5,700	99.00
Fertilizer (Urea)	2	(Bag (50kg	2,400	4,800	2,736	47.52
Hired Labour	0.25	of yield	22,500	5,625	3,206	55.69
Food for labourers	28	days	250	7,000	3,990	69.30
Sub total:				46,695	26,616	462.28
B: Capital Depletion						
Water Pump	0.5		80,000	40,000	22,800	396.00
Generator	0.5		50,000	25,000	14,250	247.50
Pipes	0.5		55,000	27,500	15,675	272.25
Subtotal:				92,500	52,725	915.75
C: Post harvest payments						
Mullah	0.5	of yield	22,500	1,125	641.25	11.14
Taliban	0.05	per jerib	90,000	4,500	2,565	44.55
Subtotal:				5,625	3,206	55.69
Outputs						
Opium gum	0.25	man	90,000	22,500	12,825	222.75
Seed	7	seer	66	462	263	4.57
Subtotal:				22,962	13,088	227.32
Net Returns				Including capital depletion	-121,858	-69,459
	Excluding capital depletion			-29,358	-16,734	-290.65

It was, however, a further source of antagonism for a population that had fled the government and its actions and that wanted to be left alone.

In fact, in the absence of ANSF operations and eradication, the primary challenge to the local farming population in these former desert areas is the systematic failure of the poppy crop. Each year since 2011, yields have fallen from a peak of three man per jerib (the equivalent of 67.5 kg/ha) to around one to two charak²⁶ per jerib (the equivalent of 5.6-11.2 kg/ha) in the spring of 2015. Some farmers received even lower yields from their crop. For example, one farmer reported a yield of just 36 khord of opium from five jeribs of land (the equivalent of 4.5 kg per hectare). Others abandoned their crop entirely, leaving it in the field to die.

²⁶ A charak is a unit of weight and in southern Afghanistan is the equivalent of 1.125 kg. There are four charak in one man.

There are no longer debates about why the crop is failing, as was the case in the past. Could it be a consequence of the salination that blights the land? The low level of nutrients in what was after all once desert land? Is it the result of poor plant husbandry, such as the reusing of diseased seed and the degree of monocropping that has taken place in recent years?²⁷ These were explanations that were once mentioned by farmers - admittedly a small number. Now the only account offered for the failing opium crop is that of crop spraying, and it is the US government that is typically blamed as part of a wider narrative of malice and ill will directed at Afghanistan and its people.²⁸ As one farmer put it: "My crop is damaged; the Americans sprayed. They are enemies with Muslim people!"²⁹

The situation is desperate. For those that own land, the returns on opium are not meeting the costs of production, and farmers are losing even more money when the costs of replacing capital equipment such as water pumps, generators and pipes³⁰ are included in what is, on the whole, an expensive method of production (See Table 1). High diesel prices (falling from 120 Rs per liter at the beginning of the season to 60 Rs per liter in March) have raised costs further and prompted some farmers to look at solar technology.³¹ With losses at a minimum of 30,000 Rs per jerib (the equivalent of USD\$1,453 per hectare), it is only due to the fact that many of these farmers have established homes, built communities, and acquired some assets during the "good years" of opium production that keeps them from abandoning their life north of the Boghra canal. They live in hope that their opium crops will recover one day and that for now they can grow enough wheat to feed their families and draw on any opium they have stored to meet their expenses for meat, clothes and healthcare along with other goods and services.

In fact, those farmers that own land in the former desert area have not sat idle in the face of a failing opium crop. Their primary response has been to increase wheat production. It is now rare to see the kind of monocropping of opium poppy that was common across much of this former desert area between 2011 and 2012, and further reductions in poppy cultivation occurred between 2014 and 2015.³² In the 2014/15 growing season, only a small minority of those interviewed cultivated opium poppy on more than 40 percent of their land, and wheat has become the dominant crop. This must be a first in the history of the settlement of this former desert area, where opium has often occupied at least 60 to 80 percent of the total agricultural area in a typical year.

In recognition of the risk of low opium yields, farmers have invested more heavily in their wheat crop. Whereas in the past the wheat crop would go unattended, in 2015 it is fertilised, well-irrigated and herbicides are even applied to control the weeds. The rise in reported yields is startling, increasing from between 60 to 70 man per jerib in 2010 (the equivalent of 1.3-1.5 mt/ha), to anything from 100 to 120 man per jerib in 2014 (the equivalent of 2.25 -2.7 mt/ha). Along with the increase in the amount of land dedicated to wheat, this has allowed many landowning households to meet the household food requirements from their own land, perhaps for the first time,³³ rather than having to purchase wheat through the sale of their opium crop.

To make up for the cash deficits that occurred as a consequence of the failed opium crop, those owning land north of the Boghra canal are also talking of experimenting with basil during the summer months - like farmers in the canal command area. This is particularly unusual for the former desert area, given that in the summer months most of the land has typically been left fallow due to the high summer temperatures and the cost of irrigating the land and the low returns on traditional summer crops such as

27 For example, farmers typically use the seed from the previous year's crop and plant in the same land, thereby increasing the risk of infection of a variety of pathogens.

28 "Life is worse as poppy was sprayed by foreigners. They are my enemy and of our country, they don't want our country to be built." Dasht-e Ab Pashak# 4, seven jeribs, owner cultivator, ten years, Watan (canal-irrigated area), Barakzai; "Life is worse because the Kafir sprayed our crop. The Kafir came here to destroy the life of the Afghan people." Shna Jama #1, ten jerib, owner cultivator, ten years, Washir, Noorzai.

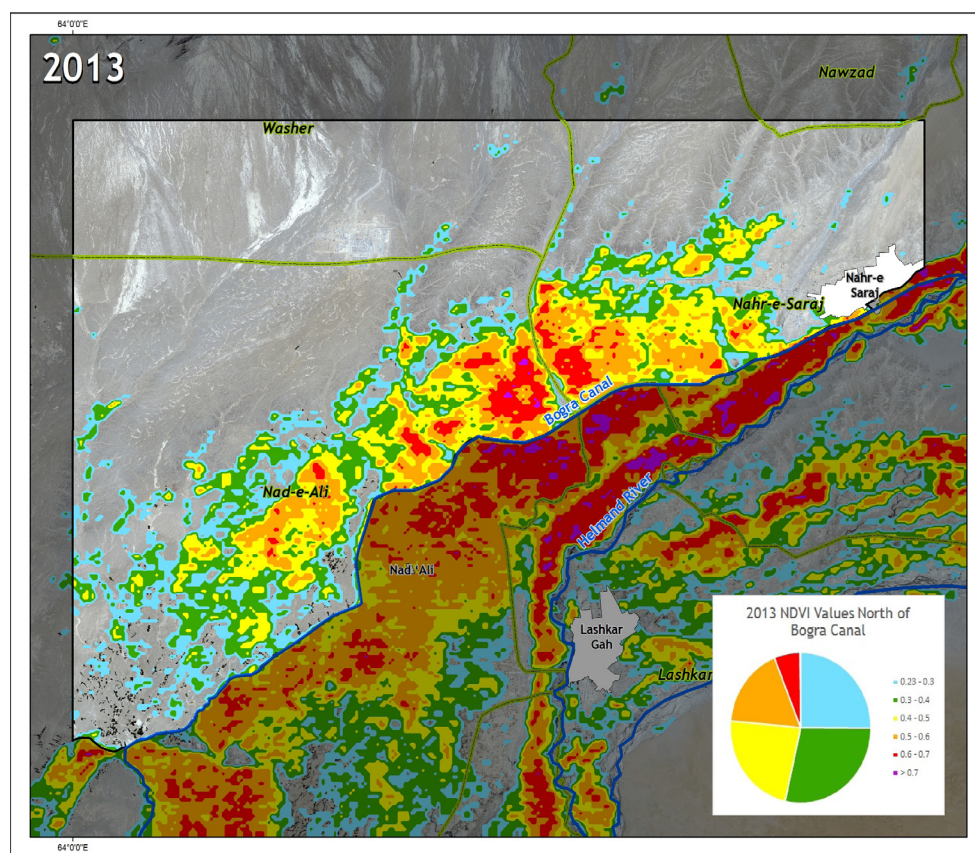
29 Dasht-e Ab Pashak #9, 12 jerib, owner cultivator, one year, Nad-e Ali, Noorzai.

30 Typically, farmers claim that this equipment needs replacing every second or third year.

31 Of the 27 households interviewed, two were using solar panels instead of diesel to fuel their tubewells. While previous fieldwork has indicated solar-powered tubewells are being used in Bakwa (Mansfield 2015) and in Kandahar, this is the first time this technology has been found being used in the former desert areas of Helmand.

32 Of the 27 households interviewed in the former desert areas to the north of the Boghra canal in May 2015, 18 households had increased the amount of land that they had cultivated with wheat, reducing the size of their poppy crop; five households cultivated the same amount of wheat and poppy as they did the previous year; and four households had no record of what they had grown in the desert the previous year as they had only come to the area at the start of the 2014/15 planting season.

33 Previous fieldwork has shown that the average household in the former desert area north of the Boghra cultivates 11.9 jeribs of land and contains 9.6 persons (N 602). A typical family member will consume 500 grams of wheat flour per day, and 182.5 kg per year. This means that an average household consumes 1,752 kg (or 390 man) of wheat per year, which is the equivalent of the production of a minimum of 3.2 jeribs of land. This figure does not include post-harvest losses (ten percent), milling costs (ten percent), or payments to the Mullah (five percent) and the Taliban (300 Rs/jerib).



North of Bogra Canal Change in NDVI

Legend

- Rivers and Canals
- North of Bogra Canal AOI
- 2013 NDVI Extent (>0.23)
- Provincial and District Centres
- District Boundary

NDVI Value

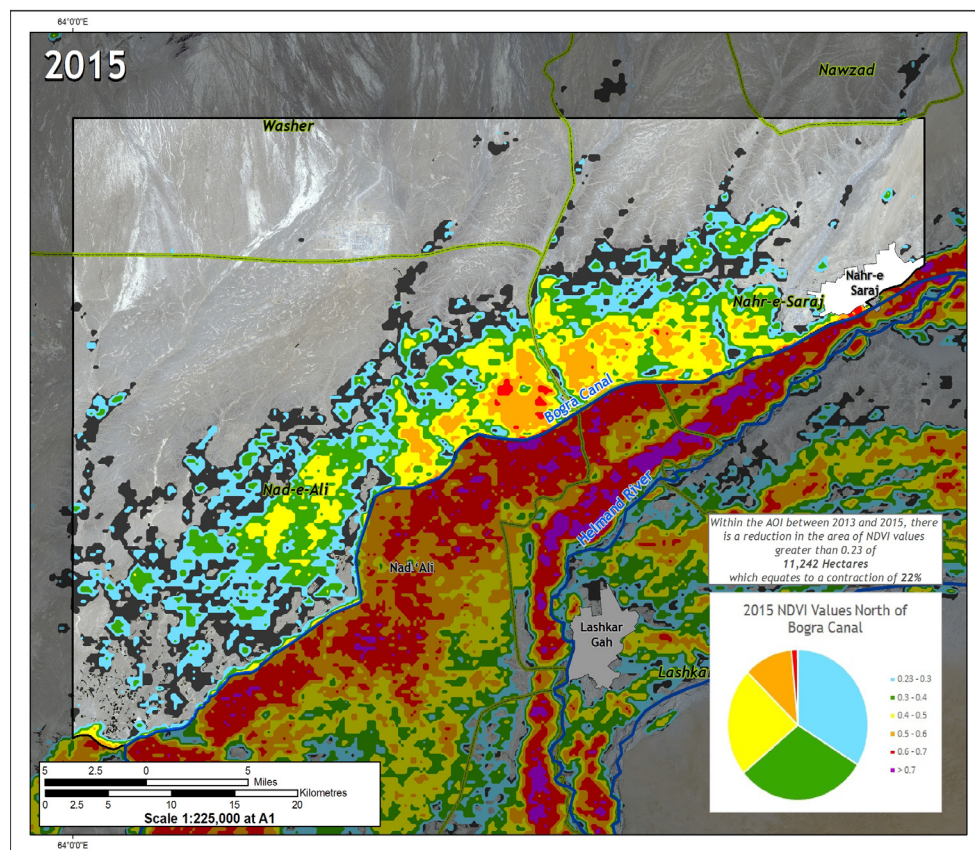
- Max NDVI > 0.7 High Activity
- Max NDVI 0.6 - 0.7
- Max NDVI 0.5 - 0.6
- Max NDVI 0.4 - 0.5
- Max NDVI 0.3 - 0.4
- Max NDVI 0.23 - 0.3
- Max NDVI < 0.23 Low Activity or Non Ag

Data Notes

Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) is a measure of plant greenness and vitality, and therefore overall vegetation health. It is created by comparing the difference in reflectance values of the Red and Near Infra-Red spectral bands.

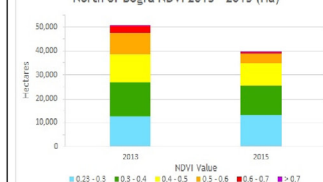
Data Sources

NDVI is generated from MODIS satellite imagery
Boundaries provided by AGCHO
SPOT Base Imagery



North of Bogra - Hectares per NDVI Value		
NDVI	2013	2015
0.23 - 0.3	12,435	13,159
0.3 - 0.4	14,455	12,352
0.4 - 0.5	11,790	9,238
0.5 - 0.6	8,908	4,232
0.6 - 0.7	2,999	406
> 0.7	47	5
Total (>0.23)	50,634	39,392

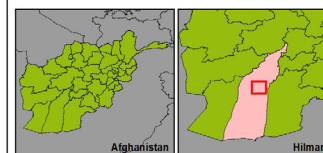
North of Bogra NDVI 2013 - 2015 (Ha)



Coordinate System Information

World Geographic System 84
Geographic Lat/long

Scale 1:225,000 at A1



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Map 2: Changes in the Normal Difference Vegetation Index north of the Boghra canal, Helmand, 2013-2015.

maize and mung bean. It remains to be seen if the crop will fare well in these conditions and what will happen to the market price with so many turning to the new “miracle crop.”

Those who only own land in the former desert area, and do not have irrigated land elsewhere, intend to stay. They argue that they have nowhere else to go that can offer them a better life even with the failing poppy crop; this is illustrative of just how trying things are. Some have taken to selling their possessions, others have married their daughters off, hoping that the money they received will stand them in better stead.³⁴ The economic situation is much worse for those sharecropping or leasing land in the former desert area; and there is growing evidence of this group looking to abandon the area altogether.

Imagery already shows less land under cultivation in 2015 than in 2014 and 2013, as well as a significant reduction in the quality of the crops produced. As an area that was barren, stony ground a decade ago, it has consistently been a far less productive environment than the canal command area, as the vegetation index shows.³⁵ However, with the failing poppy crop there has been a further loss of both land and biomass in the last two years. For example, Figure 4 not only shows a 22 percent reduction in the amount of agricultural land (a fall of 11,000 ha) in the area north of the Boghra canal between 2013 and 2015 but also the amount of land with a high vegetative index (NDVI of more than 0.6 - the purple and red) falling from over 3,000 ha to less than 500 ha.

It is certainly clear that for a sharecropper earning only one-fifth or one-quarter of a failing opium crop, life in the former desert lands north of the Boghra canal is no longer viable.³⁶ Even improvements in the wheat yields make little difference. They would need to cultivate a minimum of 12.8 jeribs of wheat just to

Box 1: Growing Food Insecurity North of the Canal

Fieldwork has shown that the average sharecropping household in the former desert area north of the Boghra cultivates 12.4 jeribs of land and contains 9.6 persons (N 248). As with other households, a typical family member will consume 500 grams of wheat flour per day, and 182.5 kg per year. This means that an average household consumes 1,752 kg (or 390 man) of wheat per year. However, sharecroppers in the former desert area typically receive only one quarter of the final yield which is the equivalent of the production of a minimum of 12.8 jeribs of land were it to yield 120 man per jerib. This figure does not include post harvest losses (ten percent), milling costs (ten percent), or payments to the Mullah (five percent) and the Taliban (300 PR/jerib).

feed their families in bread, and this is more land than the majority of sharecroppers have typically farmed (see Box 1).³⁷ Tenant farmers, who typically cover all the cost of production and pay the landowner one-sixth or one-seventh of the final crop, have incurred even higher losses. Both groups are experiencing growing hardship, further reducing their intake of meats and fruit. Most complain of having only bread and yoghurt to eat. One sharecropping farmer even claimed to have married off his six-year-old daughter due to his increasingly desperate economic situation.³⁸

34 “This year I married my daughter off for 1,000,000 Rs but I have not yet received the walwar (bride price). No one is happy from the government in this area as all the people lost money from poppy this year.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #14, ten jerib, owner cultivator, three years, Babaji, Alizai.

35 Normalised Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) is a measure of plant health due to levels of chlorophyll. It is created by comparing the difference in reflectance values of the Red and Near Infra-Red electromagnetic bands. NDVI values range from +1.0 to -1.0. “Areas of barren rock, sand, or snow usually show very low NDVI values (for example, 0.1 or less). Sparse vegetation such as shrubs and grasslands or senescing crops may result in moderate NDVI values (approximately 0.2 to 0.5). High NDVI values (approximately 0.6 to 0.9) correspond to dense vegetation such as that found in temperate and tropical forests or crops at their peak growth stage.” (see http://phenology.cr.usgs.gov/ndvi_foundation.php)

36 “Some people will move to the Watan as there is no benefit in poppy here. In summer I will go to my village.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #10, eight jerib, tenant, this year (September 2014), Watan, Alkozai.

37 While there are anecdotal reports of sharecroppers taking more land than in the past - a function of the availability of land now that more people are leaving the area, the fact that without opium poppy more land is required to meet basic needs, and an average household will be able to farm more land under wheat than poppy due to the lower labour demands of the crop - only three of the 12 sharecroppers interviewed during this round of fieldwork were farming more than 12.4 jeribs.

38 This respondent came to Shna Jama in the autumn of 2014. He was a Noorzai who previously lived in Loy Manda. He was sharecropping 12 jeribs of land in the former desert area, receiving 50 percent of the final crop and incurring half the costs of hired labour (41,000 Rs), fertiliser (7,400 Rs), diesel (50,050 Rs), herbicide (1,650 Rs) and the rent of the tractor (2,500 Rs). In 2014/15 he had cultivated four jeribs of opium poppy and eight jeribs of wheat. The total yield from the poppy was four man, of which he received two man, selling each for 82,000 Rs. With 11 people in his family, and only two people working the land, he did not have sufficient wheat to feed his family and after paying the costs of opium production (102,600 Rs) he had less than 15.3 Rs per family member per day in cash (Shna Jama #9).

The anger amongst these groups is palpable. Many of these farmers had already left the canal command area to come to the desert, fleeing conflict,³⁹ eradication⁴⁰ or having lost access to land due to the poppy ban. Now, here, they believe their opium crop has been destroyed at the behest of the western powers. As noted earlier, the rumours of the crop being sprayed persist and the view that the Afghan government is more than willing to give in to foreign interests in destroying the crop prevail.⁴¹ As one farmer exclaimed “The government accepts the order of the *kafir*. If the *kafir* says anything the government accepts it. [The government] have sold the country to the *kafir*.”⁴² Many other comments were far more profane.⁴³

Those who do not have land and assets in these former desert areas see little choice but to leave the area entirely.⁴⁴ The question is, where do they go? There are reports are of poor yields in other parts of southern and western Afghanistan. Attempts to return to cultivation in the canal command area in places like Marjah, Chanjir and Loy Bagh, and the subsequent low yields, do little to instill confidence. Furthermore, there are claims of failing poppy crops in other desert areas, including in Bakwa, where some sharecroppers had already departed

for in 2013, believing that yields there were not as badly affected by “disease,” as they were north of the Boghra.

Some sharecroppers have already left, relocating to the canal command area over the last twelve months to places like Malgir,⁴⁵ Shin Kalay,⁴⁶ Loy Bagh,⁴⁷ Marjah 2A48 and Zarghun Kalay.⁴⁹ Others have begun looking for land following this year’s failed crop, returning to the villages where their extended family still reside.⁵⁰ These farmers know that their prospects in the canal command area are not good and that it will only get more difficult as more of those in the desert area leave and land will come at an even greater premium; potentially pushing rents up and further reducing the share that the land-poor receive for their labour.⁵¹ There is a recognition amongst this group that if they cannot find land and shelter in the canal command area they may well have to consider leaving the country altogether.⁵²

While many of those most concerned with drug control might celebrate what appears to be a significant reduction in opium production in Helmand this year perhaps even a turning point for the former desert areas of southwest Afghanistan where opium poppy cultivation had become so concentrated in the last five years it is important to consider how a fifth consecutive year of crop failure might play out for the

39 One of the farmers interviewed arrived in the fall of 2014, leaving Trek Nawa to escape the fighting. He had taken ten jeribs of land under *lekha*, an agreement where the tenant pays all the costs of production in return for a payment to the landlord of one-sixth of the final crop. He was one of the few respondents to monocrop opium, dedicating all ten jeribs of land to poppy. He received a total yield of only four man of opium (Shna Jama #8).

40 Dasht-e Ab Pashak #8; Dasht-e Ab Pashak #10; Shna Jama #11.

41 “I fuck the mother of this government. They are not a government, they are just slaves of the Americans. Because of this government our life is too hard and difficult.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #5, ten jerib, owner cultivator, eight years, “lower part,” Barakzai; “He is just by the name of governor. All decisions are made by the foreigner; he doesn’t have any authority.” Shna Jama #2, seven jerib, sharecropper (one-seventh), three years, group 6 Nade Ali, Noorzai.

42 Shna Jama #5, 15 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), Chanjir, four years, Noorzai.

43 “I fuck the mother of this government. They are not a government, they are just slaves of the Americans. Because of this government our life is too hard and difficult.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #5, ten jerib, owner cultivator, eight years, “lower part,” Barakzai; “Most of the sharecroppers lost everything this year. I fuck the mother of this government. The cause of poverty is this government!” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #11, 14 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), this year, Spin Majjid, Barakzai; “First I will fuck the wife of the governor, then of the Waliswal.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #13, 15 jerib, owner cultivator, seven years, Sangin, Ishaqzai; “Our poverty is from this dowus governor and government. They created this problem.” Shna Jama #8, ten jerib, rent (one-sixth), Trek Nawai, this year, Ishaqzai.

44 “Most people with no land will leave.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #4, seven jeribs, owner cultivator, ten years, Watan (canal irrigated area), Barakzai; “If the same situation continues, no one will stay in the desert as without poppy there is no opportunity in life.” Shna Jama #6, five jerib, rent (700 man wheat), Nad-e Ali, four years, Noorzai.

45 Malgir #9, 18 jerib, sharecropper (one-third), one year, Dasht-e Ab Pashak, Barakzai.

46 Shin Kalay #1, ten jerib, sharecropper (one-fifth), this year, Mataqa Sistani, Barakzai; Shin Kalay #6, 12 jerib, sharecropper (one-fifth), this year, Shna Jama, Sadarzai.

47 Loy Bagh #11, 18 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), this year, Dasht-e Shin Kalay, Ishaqzai.

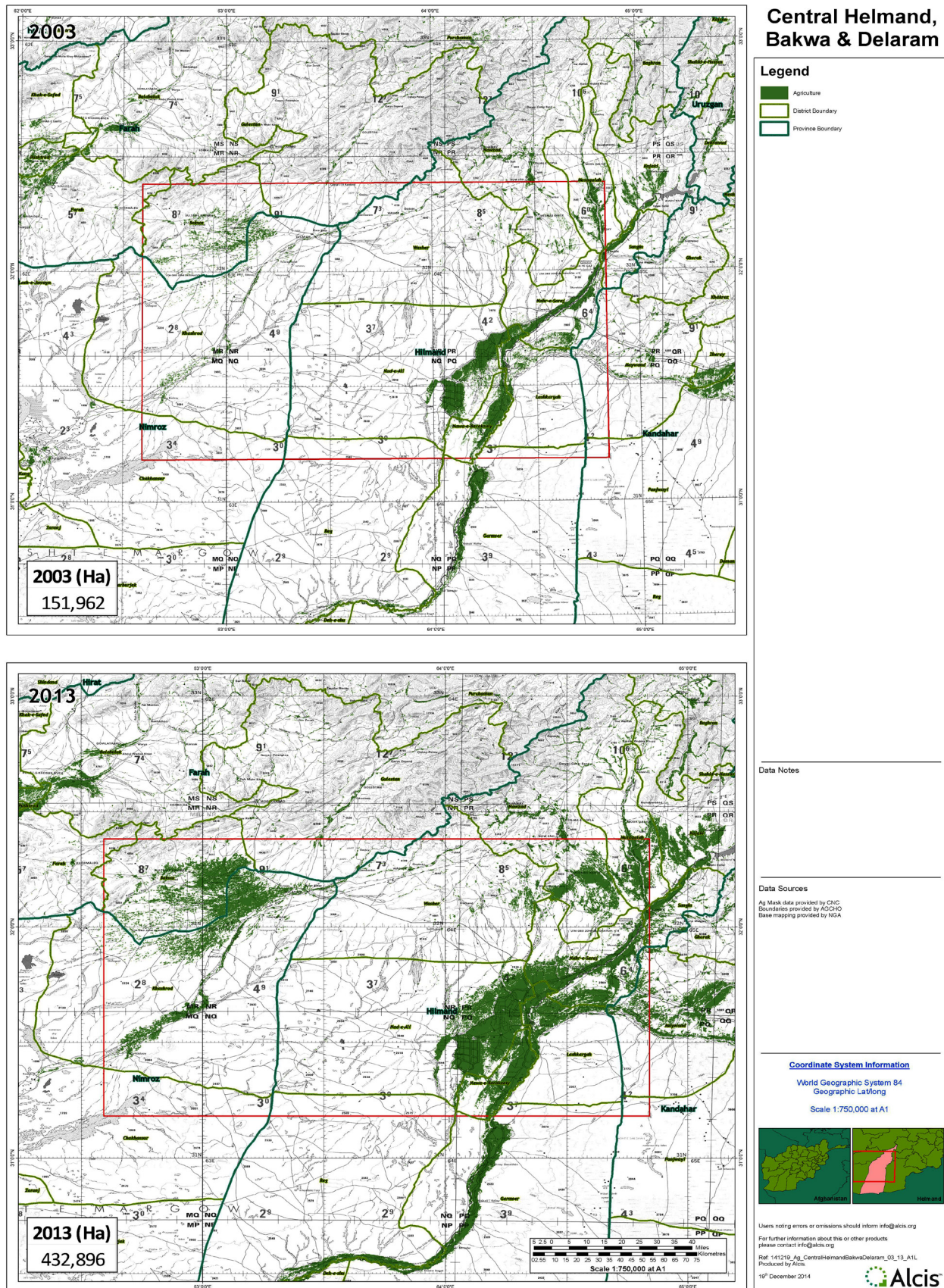
48 Marjah 2A #12, 12 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), this year, Dasht-e Sistani, Alizai; Marjah 2A #14, 15 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), this year, Dasht (generic), Alizai; Zarghun Kalay #13, 15 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), this year, Shna Jama, Barakzai.

49 Zargun Kalay #11, ten jerib, rent (100 man of wheat per jerib per year), one year, Mataqa, Kakar.

50 “I will go back to Group 6 if I can find land.” Shna Jama #2, seven jerib, sharecropper (one-seventh), three years, Group 6 Nad e Ali, Noorzai; “Some people will move to the Watan as there is no benefit in poppy here. In summer I will go to my village.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #ten, eight jerib, tenant, this year (September 2014), Watan, Alkozai.

51 “I have plans to move from the area. I will go to the Watan. I will search to find land. In summer I will search for daily wage labour and land in the lower part.” Shna Jama #4, eight jerib, rent (one-sixth), Nad-e Ali, two years, Ishaqzai; “My crop was very poor. I am not sure if I stay or I go, as I don’t know where to go. If I find land in the lower part I will never come back to the dasht.” Shna Jama #8, ten jerib, rent (one-sixth), Trek Nawai, this year, Ishaqzai.

52 “I will move from this area back to the lower part. Other sharecroppers will also go. If every year our crop is the same as this year we should migrate from this country.” Dasht-e Ab Pashak #2, 15 jerib, sharecropper (one-fourth), five years, Nad-e Ali, Ishaqzai.



Map 3: Expansion in agricultural land in southwest Afghanistan, 2003-2013.

population of central Helmand. Like it or not, over the last decade the former desert areas of Helmand to the north of the Boghra canal and of Highway 1, as well as in the districts of Bakwa and Gulistan in Farah province, Khashrod in Nimroz, and Maiwand and Zahre in Kandahar, had become a safety valve in the wake of a burgeoning rural population and finite irrigated land. Settlement increased dramatically in response to growing levels of conflict and violence, and then the imposition of a ban on poppy across the “Food Zone” and other areas where the state gained a foothold.⁵³

In southwestern Afghanistan alone almost 300,000 ha of former desert land was settled between 2003 and 2013, potentially housing a population of anything from 700,000 to 1.2 million people (see Figure 5).⁵⁴ Opium production had made an area with a harsh climate, high fixed and recurrent costs of production, and few market opportunities, economically viable. In the absence of opium poppy, life in these former desert areas will only get worse, prompting migration into the better-irrigated areas that are currently largely under government control and where there is little capacity to absorb them. This may only be the first port of call, as unless these farmers and their families can find a viable source of livelihood they will undoubtedly have to turn to well-trodden pathways for economic survival, including migration to the cities, neighbouring countries, and possibly even further afield.

“I will move from this [desert] area back to the lower part [of Helmand]. Other sharecroppers will also go. If every year our crop is the same as this year we should migrate from this country.”

⁵³ For example, fieldwork in Bakwa showed that a number of settlers arrived in 2006 and 2007 following the imposition of an opium ban in the areas around the provincial centre of Farah. See David Mansfield “Ready to Burst? Examining the role of the ‘balloon effect’ in the expansion of opium poppy into the desert frontiers of Afghanistan” (Unpublished paper for the EC-funded LINKSCH project, 2015), 29.

⁵⁴ This calculation is based on the population density determined by previous fieldwork in the desert spaces of Bakwa (N 170) of 0.51 people per jerib and in the area north of the Boghra canal (N 602) of 0.9 people per jerib. Ibid.

5. Conclusion

On the whole, the security situation remains relatively stable in the well-irrigated areas of central Helmand, particularly when we consider the scale of the fighting across this area from late 2008 to 2011. Even the local economy perseveres; not as it did during “the surge” - and it certainly offers greater benefits to those located near to the provincial centre, as well as those with larger landholdings and access to non-farm income than it does others - but the economy has not collapsed entirely as some anticipated. On the whole, the threat of a widespread return to opium poppy cultivation has also been seen off in 2015 by the efforts of local and provincial actors, the economic opportunities that continue to offer some benefits, and by the low yields that appear to have plagued the crop for a number of years.

Instead, the real problems in central Helmand appear to lie in the former desert area to the north of the Boghra canal. This is a turn of events given the dramatic transformation of this area over the last decade, particularly since 2008, largely as a consequence of widespread opium production. In this former desert area, the fifth consecutive year of crop failure is having a significant effect on the local population given its high dependency on opium production and the absence of any viable economic alternatives.

Once again the land-poor are on the move. The pressure to move is intense and many of those who do not own land in the desert have already spent the summer months looking for new lands to cultivate along with an accompanying house in the canal for the 2015/16 growing season. Yet in the absence of resurgence in opium production, there is currently neither sufficient land or demand for labour to be able to absorb this migrant population in any meaningful economic enterprise.

The land poor can only hope that the security situation in the canal-irrigated areas of central Helmand will disassemble and there will be greater scope for increased poppy cultivation during the 2015/16 growing season. But with such high incidence of disease and low yields even in the canal-irrigated area of central Helmand in 2015, as well as the continued risk of eradication, it is far from clear if landowners will be willing to take the risk of employing sharecropped labour. The landed are presented with the choice of forgoing a portion of their land and its product from legal crops - which might allow them to secure sufficient food and income to meet their basic needs - or allow migrants from north of the Boghra to work the land in return for a share of what could be a reasonable opium crop, but which no one can predict.

Only those with land holdings in excess of 20 jeribs, significant non-farm income, or influence over local security arrangements by which to protect their crop would take this risk. Without sufficient landowners in this position, capable of reshaping local political settlements, or a dramatic breakdown in the relationship between local security providers, in the form of the ALP, and state actors in Kabul and Lashkar Gah, the canal irrigated area of central Helmand currently offers few opportunities for those in the desert who are desperate for new lands.

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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice by conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and by promoting a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policy makers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity, and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community in Afghanistan and has a Board of Directors comprised of representatives of donor organisations, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU currently receives core funds from the Embassy of Finland, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

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