



Afghanistan Policy Page

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A one-page brief from the [Afghanistan Congressional Communications Hub](#) on a major issue concerning U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

Province Profile - Helmand

Take Aways

- **Helmand is a major producer of opium, which is a significant source of revenue for poppy farmers, insurgents, and criminal networks involved in the drug trade.**
- The illegal opium production in Helmand is highly lucrative, encouraged by insurgents, and fosters government corruption.

Key Facts

- **Governor of Helmand:** Gulab Mangal
- **Provincial Capital:** Lashkar Gah
- **Mayor of Lashkar Gah:** Haji Mohayuddin Khan
- **Size:** 22,619 square miles, approximately the size of West Virginia
- **Arable Land:** 1,220 square miles (around 5% of total land).
- **Number of Districts:** 13
- **Members of Parliament:** 8 including 2 women, out of 249 total *Wolesi Jirga* members.

Helmand Province Population: 1.44 million

- 92% speak Pashtu; the rest Dari or Balochi.
- Major tribes: Barakzai, Noorzai, Alokzai, Eshaqzai, Alizai, Baluch, Kharoti.
- 95% live in rural areas, many near the Helmand River and its tributaries and irrigation canals.
- Around 75-80% work in agriculture.
- Around 15-20% work in livestock.
- Around 5% work in services.

Literacy and education in Helmand is low:

- 8% of men are literate.
- 1% of women are literate.
- 6% of children between 6 and 13 are in school.
- 9 out of 10 children in school are male.

Infrastructure in Helmand:

- Roads are fairly well developed: almost two thirds can take traffic in all seasons.
- Around one quarter use safe drinking water.
- Only 5% have sanitary toilets; the remainder use traditional latrines or open areas.

Key Issues

Increasing International Military Presence – Camp Bastion, an ISAF base near Helmand's provincial capital of Lashkar Gah, will be the site of a new NATO-ISAF regional command headquarters: Regional Command Southwest, which will be commanded by a two-star U.S. Marine general.

- Many of the 30,000 troops President Obama ordered to Afghanistan are expected to head to southern Afghanistan. This will exceed the number of forces that can be effectively coordinated by a single regional command.

Governance – Much of the local governance in Helmand is contested between the Afghan government and the Taliban "shadow government."

- Helmand's provincial governor, Gulab Mangal is a Pashtun from Paktika (eastern Afghanistan). He worked in the Interior Ministry under the communists in the 1970s and later fought against the Soviets as a mujahidin.
- Governor Mangal served as the head of Afghanistan's Constitution Commission in the United Nations, and is highly regarded by Afghanistan's UN Assistance Mission.
- Governor Mangal served as governor of both Laghman and Paktika provinces, and sees reconciliation as a crucial component of improving Helmand's security.
- Following the recent coalition offensive, the town of Marjah in central Helmand received a new "government-in-a-box" to counter the Taliban presence.

Helmand Opium Production – Helmand produced around 60% of Afghanistan's opium in 2009, and the province contains many heroin manufacturing laboratories.

- From 2003 to 2009, the farm-gate value of opium produced in Helmand was \$2.2 billion out of a total of \$5.9 billion for all of Afghanistan's opium. This is approximately \$366 million per year for Helmand's opium farmers.
- 22% of total arable land in Helmand was under poppy cultivation in 2009.
- It is believed that the Taliban charges farmers a 10% tax on all crops, including opium. The Taliban also receive protection payments from Helmand's heroin production facilities and drug smuggling networks.

Helmand's Development Efforts: Past and Present

Afghanistan received competing Cold War development assistance projects from the U.S. and Soviet Union that shaped present day Helmand province.

- Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah, was built up in the 1950s to serve as the headquarters for the Helmand Valley Authority, (modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority), to oversee Helmand's new massive irrigation systems.
- Helmand River's Kajaki Dam was built in the 1950s by the U.S.; rehabilitation efforts since 2002 allows for its hydroelectric plant to transmit 33 megawatts to southern provinces, more electricity than either Kandahar or Helmand had seen for 30 years. Insecurity, however, has prevented new turbine installation and maintenance.
- USAID is developing Alternative Livelihood Programs for poppy farmers as part of Afghanistan's counternarcotics strategy. However, credible enforcement of opium laws by the Afghan National Police and access to legal crop markets is often perceived as unreliable, reducing the incentive to grow legal crops.

In the News: Major Military Offensive in Marjah

On 13 February 2010, the town of Marjah, approximately 20 miles outside of the capital of Lashkar Gah, was the site of a major coalition offensive. Over three weeks around 15,000 U.S. and coalition forces swept out Taliban militants and its shadow government, replacing them with Afghan National Security forces and a "government-in-a-box" to quickly attempt to install confidence in the Afghan government.

Possible Questions

- How are alternative livelihood programs for poppy farmers monitored and evaluated for effectiveness?
- How effective is Marjah's new "government-in-a-box?" What has been learned from its implementation?
- Is the new Regional Command Southwest effectively liaising with the Afghan National Security Forces?

Further Reading

[MRRD](#)
[NPS](#)
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