

## The Long War Journal: A chronology of the Musa Qala dilemma

Written by Featured Writer on December 3, 2007 12:03 PM to The Long War Journal

Available online at:

[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/a\\_chronology\\_of\\_the\\_1.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/12/a_chronology_of_the_1.php)



*A Taliban column moves through the heart of Musa Qala.  
IWPR photo. Click to view more photos from Musa Qala.*

*Matt Dupee takes a look at the Taliban takeover Musa Qala in Afghanistan one year on. Matt writes about the Afghanistan conflict at [Afgha.com](http://Afgha.com).*

It has been over 10 months since Taliban forces staged a violent overthrow of the Musa Qala district in southern Helmand province. Although the Taliban have occasionally succeeded in seizing remote districts throughout the country since last year, they are usually evicted shortly thereafter by a stronger Afghan National Army, International Security Assistance Force, or Coalition contingent. Musa Qala is the only exception.

Musa Qala is a strategic piece of land occupied by the Alizai tribe, Helmand's largest Pashtun group, and is plagued by an out-of-control poppy-opium economy. The Alizai tribe holds sway across most of northern Helmand, including Musa Qala, Baghran, and Kajaki districts. The Alizai are known to be Taliban sympathizers, arms smugglers, and heavily involved in the illicit drug trade. The former governor of Helmand province, an unsavory Alizai tribesman named Sher Muhammad Akhundzada, was found with [over nine tons of opium at his provincial headquarters](#) by US officials. Karzai subsequently fired Sher Muhammad upon the insistence of UK forces who were preparing to deploy throughout Helmand province in 2006.

The district has seen an uptick in clashes since it was overrun in February. Three Taliban commanders associated with the takeover were successfully killed by ISAF airstrikes and battles over the summer left over 300 Taliban fighters killed in separate incidents. Several Taliban heroin labs were also targeted and destroyed.

Wide-scale assaults, ambushes, and airstrikes have repeatedly hammered Taliban trench lines and other defensive positions throughout southern Musa Qala since September. Despite the onslaught on the southern fringes of the district, Taliban fighters have continued to [tightly control the city center](#), shutting down all schools, forcing military conscription, and imposing heavy taxes on the local populace.

A daring raid into southern Musa Qala City late last month by a column of 50 British armored vehicles ignited local fears that a Coalition assault on the city center has begun. The operation [according to British military officials](#) “is part of a longer term strategy to keep the Taliban unsettled and confused. We have frustrated them in what they consider to be their heartland by maneuvering into the area, and by disrupting their resupply and other operations.” Local Afghan security officials have [acknowledged](#) Coalition preparations to launch raids into the city have indeed begun.

Around the same time, [Mullah Abdul Salaam](#), an Alizai tribal leader commanding a large Taliban force inside Musa Qala city, announced his desire to surrender to the government without a fight. President Karzai endorsed this development as he has insisted since [March](#) that Musa Qala should be wrested back through political negotiations. Yet, the negotiations with Mullah Abdul Salaam, have stalled, if not failed altogether, and it appears patience in Kabul has finally waned. With a force of nearly 2,500 Taliban fighters held up in the city, [according to Musa Qala Taliban commander Enqiadi](#), the looming battle for Musa Qala may be the fiercest combat witnessed in Afghanistan since Operation Anaconda in 2002.

Listed below is an in-depth time line of events that have occurred in Musa Qala since the British peace agreement began in October 2006.

### **Chronology of events in Musa Qala:**

**October 17, 2006:** British forces [pull out](#) of Musa Qala City after signing a peace agreement with local elders. Security responsibility is handed over to them in exchange for keeping Taliban militants out and the evacuation of British troops from the area.

**October 20, 2006:** Taliban forces [claim](#) victory saying they forced the British to withdraw from Musa Qala.

**December 3, 2006:** UK and Danish patrol [engage Taliban fighters in a massive gun fight](#) outside of Musa Qala City. Airstrikes are called in killing several militants.

**January 26, 2007:** An ISAF airstrike targets and [kills regional Taliban commander](#) in Musa Qala. The commander is later identified as [Mullah Ibrahim](#).

**February 2:** Hundreds of Taliban storm Musa Qala City. Police are [disarmed](#) and the [Taliban flag is raised above the district headquarters](#). The band of Taliban fighters is led by commander Mullah Ghafoor, who is also the brother of slain commander Mullah Ibrahim.

**February 4:** An ISAF airstrike successfully [kills Mullah Ghafoor](#) and his bodyguards near the city limits.

**February 10:** Hundreds of Taliban remain in the city. The situation is tense and chaotic; hundreds of families flee fearing an impending invasion. [Taliban fighters dig in, lying booby traps, and fortifying positions](#).

**February 11:** Helmand governor Asadullah Wafa [tells reporters](#) over 700 foreign fighters are operating in his province. Chechen, Uzbek, and Pakistani fighters are among the nationalities listed.

**February 13:** Taliban [reportedly](#) capture Helmand's Washir district.

**February 14:** ISAF airstrikes kill a third Taliban commander just outside of Musa Qala. He is identified as [Mullah Manan](#), a top regional commander, and is thought to be a key player in the Musa Qala take-over.

**February 19:** Taliban [seize](#) Bakwa district in neighboring Farah province. They are quickly evicted two days later.

**February 26:** [Reports](#) of Musa Qala's worsening situation begin to trickle out. Some tribal elders are still under house arrest; Taliban are reasserting their iron grip on the public.

**March 5:** [Reports](#) of Taliban seizing Helmand's Nawzad district emerge.

**March 6:** ISAF's [Operation Achilles](#) is launched in northern Helmand aimed at securing the site of the Kajaki dam complex, easily the most vital reconstruction project in southern Afghanistan.

**March 29:** President Karzai, Defense Minister Rahim Wardak, and Helmand Governor Wafa [speak](#) in Helmand's capital urging the Taliban to leave Musa Qala.

**April 4:** Taliban [hang three men in Musa Qala](#) they suspected of spying for ISAF. The victims, according to the Taliban, provided information that led to the death of Mullah Manan.

**April 18:** Defense Minister Wardak ominously announces the government plans to recapture Musa Qala.

**June 24-28:** Four Afghan men are hanged for allegedly spying for American forces. Locals claim that the Taliban closed all of the schools in Musa Qala and force females to wear a burqa and be accompanied by a male relative when traveling in public; they also claim Taliban FM radio program airs during the day. A hefty Taliban tax has also been imposed on the impoverished citizens and tales of forced military conscription have merged.

**July 5:** The Taliban launch an armed incursion from Musa Qala into neighboring Sangin district. A malfunction in their mortar system caused an explosion that killed three Taliban and left three others injured. No civilian or Coalition casualties are reported. [Pajhwok report](#)

**July 22:** Taliban fighters launch a coordinated ambush against a joint Afghan-Coalition patrol in southern Musa Qala near the Shaban village. Coalition forces utilize close air support that dropped four 500-pound bombs on two compounds. More than 24 fighters are believed to have been killed during the onslaught. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**July 23:** As the combined Afghan-Coalition patrol leave the destroyed compounds in the Shaban village, Taliban reinforcement launch a second ambush and attempt to shoot down a Coalition helicopter with a surface-to-air missile but miss. An additional 24 Taliban fighters and two mid-level commanders died in the encounter. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**July 26:** Taliban fighters ambush an ANA patrol in southern Musa Qala. Coalition advisers on site with the ANA unit call in close air support to help attack 16 compounds occupied by Taliban insurgents. Two munitions are dropped on the highest concentration of insurgents leaving over 50 Taliban confirmed killed and an unknown number wounded. [CJTF 82 report](#)

Musa Qala residents [claim](#) the airstrikes left up to 16 civilians dead and scores injured.

**August 15:** Coalition and Afghan forces push deeper into Musa Qala. Taliban militants ambush the patrol in the Regay village, five kilometers north of Shaban village. Close air support is called in to bomb an entrenched Taliban unit firing from a trench line. Four Taliban fighters are killed and two wounded. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**August 16:** A second ambush occurs against a joint Afghan-Coalition patrol in Regay. A small-arms and light-artillery duel ensues leaving an unknown number of Taliban killed and wounded.

[CJTF 82 report](#)

**August 25-27:** Taliban fighters ambush a joint Coalition-Afghan patrol seven kilometers south of Regay village, referred to as the Musa Qala Wadi. Coalition forces respond with small-arms, machine-gun, and MK-19 fire that killed some 12 Taliban fighters. [CJTF 82 report](#)

The next day it was determined the Taliban platoon was in charge of protecting a large heroin lab. A large cache of "opium-processing chemicals such as ammonium chloride, liquid ammonia and charcoal" were found along with various guns and ammunition. The lab and chemicals were subsequently destroyed. Hours later, Taliban militants launched a salvo of 82mm mortars at the advancing Coalition patrol but missed leaving one civilian wounded. [CJTF 82 report](#)

Another ambush occurs north of Regay after the mortar salvo. Taliban fighters firing from trenches and compounds are met by Coalition artillery and small-arms fire. Twelve Taliban are killed during the clash, including three who are shot dead at close range in the trench line as ANA forces conducted a search. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**August 29:** A second Taliban-run heroin lab is discovered by Coalition forces in the village of Khyajehdad, Musa Qalah District. This lab, only five kilometers away from the other Taliban heroin lab, was also defended by a platoon of insurgents. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**August 30:** More trench warfare in Regay village. Entrenched Taliban fighters unleash a barrage of RPG and small-arms fire at a joint Afghan-Coalition patrol using trenches and compounds as defensive positions. As Taliban reinforcement began to arrive in trucks, close air support is used to destroy the vehicles and engage the trench lines. More than a dozen Taliban died in the assault. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**August 30:** Taliban insurgents ambush a joint Afghan-Coalition patrol seven kilometers south of Regay village, nearly the same spot that the August 25 clash erupted. An unknown number of Taliban died during the clash. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**September 5:** Afghan Auxiliary Police backed by Coalition advisers are ambushed in the Musa Qala Wadi area. Taliban reinforcements soon arrived and begin firing from a trench line. Close air support is called in to bombard the trench system leaving up to 24 Taliban fighters dead. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**September 25:** Afghan Army soldiers battle with Taliban insurgents in the Musa Qala Wadi region. After several dozen Taliban fighters ambush the Afghan-Coalition convoy from trenches and compounds, Coalition artillery and air strikes are used against the Taliban positions leaving an estimated 61 Taliban killed. One Coalition soldier [died](#) from wounds suffered after an RPG struck his position, four others are wounded. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**October 19:** Joint Afghan-Coalition patrol is ambushed in the Musa Qala Wadi area. The pitched six-hour battle came to an end after close air support was called in and bombed the entrenched Taliban fighters. At least 72 Taliban fighters are believed to have been killed from the airstrikes. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**October 20:** Further clashes erupt in the Musa Qala Wadi region. The protracted engagement left nearly 36 Taliban fighters dead. An Afghan civilian provided the location of a freshly placed IED and averted its detonation against a Coalition vehicle. [CJTF 82 report](#)

**October 31:** [Mullah Abdul Salaam](#), a Musa Qala Taliban commander and leader of the Alizai tribe, holds

direct negotiations with the central government in hopes of defecting peacefully. The former governor of Helmand, Sher Mohammad Akhunzada, is also an Alizai tribesman and has [recently asserted his desire to return to power](#).

**November 9:** A local Afghan journalist for Ariana Television is [arrested and questioned](#) after he conducted a trip into Musa Qala City with three other journalists. He was later released.

**November 12:** A British armored group leads a charge through the upper Sangin Valley and into southern Musa Qala. Some 50 armored vehicles, including the highly touted Viking and Mastiff vehicles, surround the southeastern area of Musa Qala City. [Daily Telegraph](#)

**November 14:** French Mirage 2000 fighter jets are flying over Musa Qala as a show of force to deter enemy activities in Musa Qala. [Report](#)

**November 28:** Tribal elders in Musa Qala [claim](#) Afghan and Coalition raids into the City center are set to begin. Hundreds of families have fled fearing the impending onslaught.

**November 29:** Musa Qala Taliban commander *Enqiadi* tells local reporters he commands 2,500 fighters in the district. "Last year we used guerrilla attacks," he said. "This year we will organize frontal assaults. Our lines are so strong that the foreigners will never break them. The foreigners say they are going to launch a major operation in Musa Qala. We are ready for that. In Musa Qala alone, we have 2,500 fully armed fighters. It will be very easy for us to resist the attack. We want to take the whole province this winter."

**December 3:** A Coalition airstrike near Musa Qala [kills Mullah Sainy](#), the Taliban commander who kidnapped an Italian journalist last March; four other Taliban died in the raid.

