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Anatomy of a village razing: Counterinsurgency, violence, and securing the intimate in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

In autumn 2010, the United States military partially or completely razed several villages in Helmand and Kandahar provinces as part of its counterinsurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan. In the spring 2011, U.S.-led forces rebuilt one of the villages, Taroke Kalacha, to showcase the "humane" side of contemporary U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine. This article analyses the logics and rationalities informing the reconstruction of Taroke Kalacha, and why the rebuilding effort ultimately failed. I examine a wide spectrum of biopolitical initiatives involved in the 2010–2011 "Hamkari" counterinsurgency operations, and show how violence became a protracted condition for displaced villagers as durable lines of force were inscribed into the communal relations and material arrangements of the built environment(s) in Kandahar. I focus on what I call "securing the intimate"; namely, the attempts by U.S. forces to harness Afghan households as sites of indirect rule. In this anatomy of a village razing, I analyse two specific problems with the reconstruction of Taroke Kalacha: (1) the bid to establish a new political order by bringing the villagers closer to local governance structures through the dubious process of U.S. military compensation schemes; and (2) how the rebuilt structures in Taroke Kalacha deviated from the "local style" with devastating effect, especially for women in the village.

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On April 1, 2011, Lieutenant Colonel David Flynn, the commanding officer for the U.S. Army's 1-320th Field Artillery Regiment, presided over a mosque opening ceremony in Taroke Kalacha, a small village in Arghandab district, located just north of Kandahar City in southern Afghanistan. In the previous autumn 2010, Taroke Kalacha was one of several villages either partially or completely destroyed by Flynn's forces as part of the U.S.-led Hamkari[1] counterinsurgency campaign in the northern and western sections of Kandahar province (Fig. 1). The "clearing operations," as they were called, entailed the systematic destruction of "abandoned" homes, compounds, mud walls, farm plots, and, in a few cases, entire villages in Kandahar and Helmand provinces.[2] The *macabre tableau* left in the wake of the operations was justified by military officials as a legitimate means to deprive sanctuary for Taliban insurgents (Broadwell, 2011). As he stood alongside Kandahar Governor Toryalai Wesa and other provincial leaders, Afghan military commanders, and village elders, Flynn presented the mosque as the centrepiece of a broader U.S. military effort to rebuild Taroke Kalacha's homes, walls, and surrounding fields amidst the charred rubble.

For Flynn, the reconstruction of Taroke Kalacha was as much symbolic as it was strategic. The rebuilt homes were intended to send a message to returning villagers that the motivations of the U.S. military were very different than the scorched earth tactics used by the Soviets, who, during their own counterinsurgency operations in the 1980s, decimated the countryside of southern Afghanistan (Ackerman, 2011b). Instead, Flynn wanted to demonstrate the power of the "clear, hold, *build*" mantra then popular among U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine advocates, and rebuild the Afghan village in a way that established "order" and prevented the (re)infiltration of Taliban insurgents (Flynn, 2011). While village destruction and reconstruction has many precedents in U.S. and British counterinsurgency operations—e.g., the early 1960s strategic hamlet program in South Vietnam, and the New Villages scheme in Malaysia (Scott, 2016; Sioh, 2010)—this phase of U.S.-led

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[1] Hamkari translates as "Cooperation" in Pashto and Dari.

[2] The number of villages completely or partially destroyed in the Hamkari operations is contested. U.S. officials claim three villages, while the Arghandab District Governor, Shah Muhammad Ahmadi, named seven villages in an interview with the *New York Times* (Shah & Nordland, 2010). Ahmadi estimated 120 to 130 homes demolished in his district alone. The four villages discussed in this article are confirmed by interviews and cross-referenced with multiple sources, but it is important to keep in mind that there could be more.

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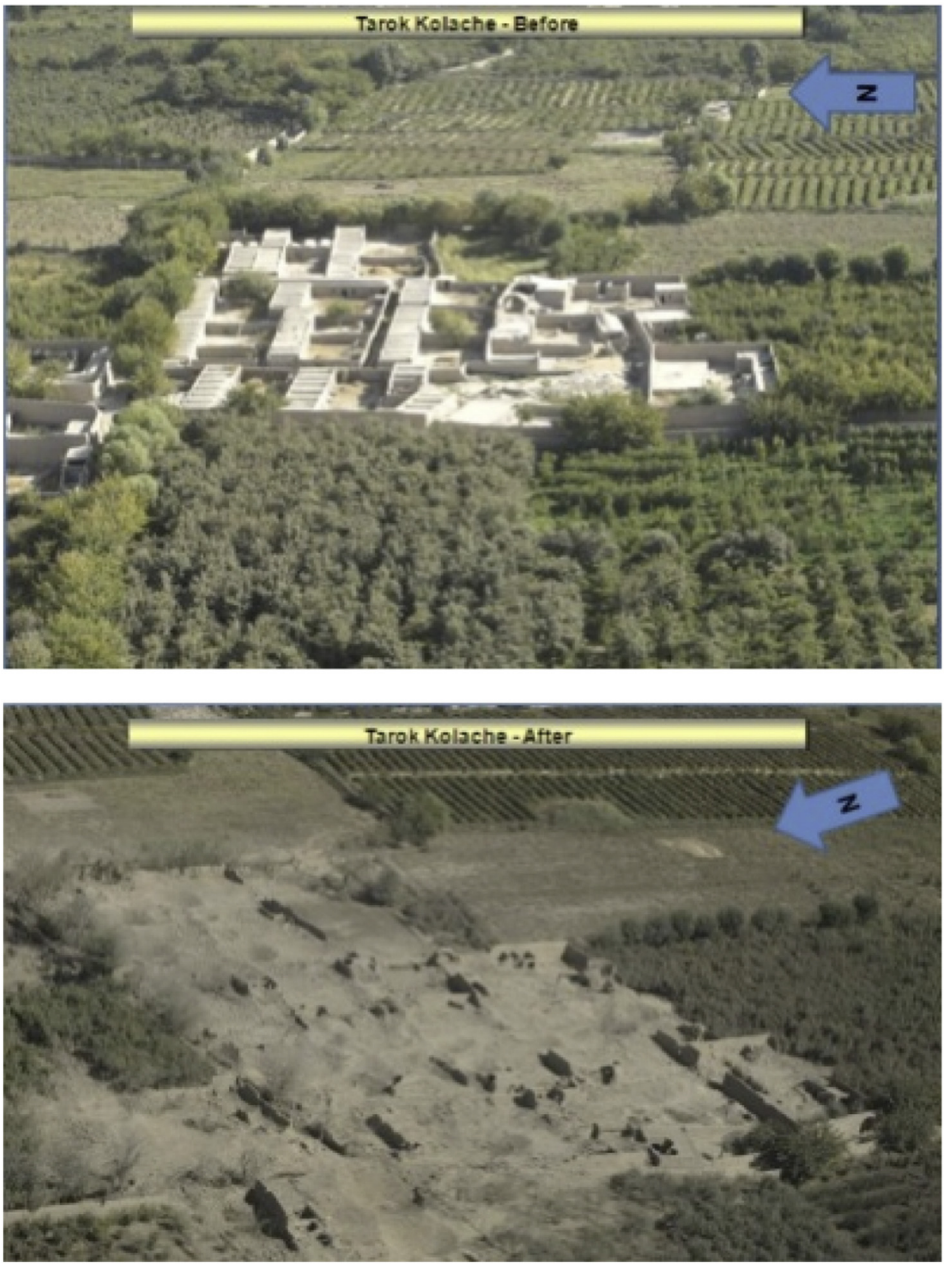

Fig. 1. The destruction of Taroke Kalacha. Source: Broadwell, 2011.

operations (summer 2010 to March 2012)[3] marked a dramatic shift in the counterinsurgency strategy in southern Afghanistan.

In this article, I critically analyse the logics and rationalities informing the military operations conducted by Flynn and other U.S. commanders during the Hamkari campaign and its aftermath. The overt "gloves off" approach taken by U.S. forces during Hamkari signalled a radical departure from the "population-centric" mission outlined by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Commander General Stanley McChrystal as part of President Obama's 2009 troop "surge" (Chandrasekaran, 2012, pp. 270–285; Forsberg, 2010a). McChrystal's tenure as ISAF commander retains a certain novelty against the historical backdrop of America's longest war, as he took notable steps to "win" over the Afghan population using "conventional" counterinsurgency statebuilding tactics. While Special Operations missions increased under his command (Niva, 2013; Robinson, 2013), McChrystal curtailed the use of airstrikes, increased ground patrols, encouraged face-to-face dialogue with local Afghan elders, and, relevant to my discussion here, issued strong guidance against property destruction: "destroying a home or property jeopardizes the livelihood of an entire family – and it creates more insurgents. We sow the seeds of our own demise (McChrystal, 2009)."[4]

McChrystal's sweep of "non-kinetic" guidelines were largely

[3] The build-up of U.S. troops (Obama's "surge") occurred in summer 2010. On March 11, 2012, Staff Sergeant Robert Bales went on a shooting rampage in three villages in Panjwai district, killing sixteen civilians, including nine children. The fallout from Bales' actions effectively ended formal counterinsurgency operations in Kandahar.

[4] This is not to say that McChrystal's approach was *less* violent. On the refined violence of "non-kinetic and non-lethal targeting" in counterinsurgency doctrine, see Gregory (2008, p. 9).

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