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Fiction of Marjah as City Was US Misinformation

Posted By [Gareth Porter](#)

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For weeks, the U.S. public followed the biggest offensive of the Afghanistan War against what it was told was a "city of 80,000 people" as well as the logistical hub of the Taliban in that part of Helmand. That idea was a central element in the overall impression built up in February that Marjah was a major strategic objective, more important than other district centers in Helmand.

It turns out, however, that the picture of Marjah presented by military officials and obediently reported by major news media is one of the clearest and most dramatic pieces of misinformation of the entire war, apparently aimed at hyping the offensive as a historic turning point in the conflict.

Marjah is not a city or even a real town, but either a few clusters of farmers' homes or a large agricultural area covering much of the southern Helmand River Valley.

"It's not urban at all," an official of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), who asked not to be identified, admitted to IPS Sunday. He called Marjah a "rural community."

"It's a collection of village farms, with typical family compounds," said the official, adding that the homes are reasonably prosperous by Afghan standards.

Richard B. Scott, who worked in Marjah as an adviser on irrigation for the U.S. Agency for International Development as recently as 2005, agrees that Marjah has nothing that could be mistaken as being urban. It is an "agricultural district" with a "scattered series of farmers' markets," Scott told IPS in a telephone interview.

The ISAF official said the only population numbering tens of thousands associated with Marjah is spread across many villages and almost 200 square kilometers, or about 125 square miles.

Marjah has never even been incorporated, according to the official, but there are now plans to formalize its status as an actual "district" of Helmand province.

The official admitted that the confusion about Marjah's population was facilitated by the fact that the name has been used both for the relatively large agricultural area and for a specific location where farmers have gathered for markets.

However, the name Marjah "was most closely associated" with the more specific location, where there are also a mosque and a few shops.

That very limited area was the apparent objective of "Operation Moshtarak," to which 7,500 U.S., NATO, and Afghan troops were committed amid the most intense publicity given any battle since the beginning of the war.

So how did the fiction that Marjah is a city of 80,000 people get started?

The idea was passed on to the news media by the U.S. Marines in southern Helmand. The earliest references in news stories to Marjah as a city with a large population have a common origin in a briefing given Feb. 2 by officials at Camp Leatherneck, the U.S. Marine base there.

The Associated Press published an article the same day quoting "Marine commanders" as saying that they expected 400 to 1,000 insurgents to be "holed up" in the "southern Afghan town of 80,000 people." That language evoked an image of house-to-house urban street fighting.

The same story said Marjah was "the biggest town under Taliban control" and called it the "linchpin of the militants' logistical and opium-smuggling network." It gave the figure of 125,000 for the population living in "the town and surrounding villages." ABC News followed with a story the next day referring to the "city of Marjah" and claiming that the city and the surrounding area "are more heavily populated, urban, and dense than other places the Marines have so far been able to clear and hold."

The rest of the news media fell into line with that image of the bustling, urbanized Marjah in subsequent stories, often using "town" and "city" interchangeably. *Time* magazine wrote about the "town of 80,000" Feb. 9, and the *Washington Post* did the same Feb. 11.

As "Operation Moshtarak" began, U.S. military spokesmen were portraying Marjah as an urbanized population center. On Feb. 14, on the second day of the offensive, Marine spokesman Lt. Josh Diddams said the Marines were "in the majority of the city at this point."

He also used language that conjured images of urban fighting, referring to the insurgents holding some "neighborhoods."

A few days into the offensive, some reporters began to refer to a "region," but only created confusion rather than clearing the matter up. CNN managed to refer to Marjah twice as a "region" and once as "the city" in the same Feb. 15 article, without any explanation for the apparent contradiction.

The Associated Press further confused the issue in a Feb. 21 story, referring to "three markets in town – which covers 80 square miles."

A "town" with an area of 80 square miles would be bigger than such U.S. cities as Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, and Cleveland. But AP failed to notice that something was seriously wrong with that reference.

Long after other media had stopped characterizing Marjah as a city, the *New York Times* was still referring to Marjah as "a city of 80,000," in a Feb. 26 dispatch with a Marjah dateline.

The decision to hype up Marjah as the objective of "Operation Moshtarak" by planting the false impression that it is a good-sized city would not have been made independently by the Marines at Camp Leatherneck.

A central task of "information operations" in counterinsurgency wars is "establishing the COIN [counterinsurgency] narrative," according to the Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual as revised under Gen. David Petraeus in 2006.

That task is usually done by "higher headquarters" rather than in the field, as the manual notes.

The COIN manual asserts that news media "directly influence the attitude of key audiences toward counterinsurgents, their operations and the opposing insurgency." The manual refers to "a war of perceptions ... conducted continuously using the news media."

Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, commander of ISAF, was clearly preparing to wage such a war in advance of the Marjah operation. In remarks made just before the offensive began, McChrystal invoked the language of the counterinsurgency manual, saying, "This is all a war of perceptions."

The *Washington Post* reported Feb. 22 that the decision to launch the offensive against Marjah was intended largely to impress U.S. public opinion with the effectiveness of the U.S. military in Afghanistan by showing that it could achieve a "large and loud victory."

The false impression that Marjah was a significant city was an essential part of that message.