

# Bridging the Gap



ANA soldiers take a break on patrol

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Bridging an irrigation channel

## Groundwork for Stability

Months of intense and carefully applied Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and Australian Special Forces pressure on insurgent sanctuary areas in Oruzgan Province have helped pave the way for a permanent Coalition and ANSF presence in the province's Mirabad region.

A series of operations in the area since July have seen the Australian Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) and ANSF steadily advance a counterinsurgency strategy, the overriding objective of which has been to gain and maintain the support of the local population by demonstrating ANSF and coalition ability to protect them, and by offering them an achievable, positive alternative to continued Taliban domination.

Operations designed to paralyse or disrupt insurgent leadership networks were a key first step.

The resulting actions against key local insurgent leaders and improvised explosive device (IED) facilitators fractured their control over local fighters and reduced their ability to intimidate and threaten the local population.

Building rapidly on these successes against insurgent leaders, ANSF and their Australian Special Forces partners met with key community leaders in follow-on missions across the Mirabad region to hear and better understand the fears, hopes and expectations of the people.

These village meetings, or shuras, were a vital means of reassuring the community

of the Afghan and Australian soldiers' determination to prevent a resurgence of Taliban influence, intimidation and violence in the area.

Shuras also paved the way for direct community assistance in the form of basic medical clinics.

Many of these clinics were comprised of female SOTG medics and interpreters, enabling the Special Forces to begin reaching out to an important part of the local population.

These clinics have made a real difference to the wellbeing of many in the communities, and have provided tangible evidence that the health issues of women and children are recognised as important by coalition forces.

Basic life-support infrastructure needs were also identified through the shuras for follow-up work, or addressed immediately where possible. Recent provision and set-up of a water pump in a village by the SOTG, for example, will assist in crop irrigation for a community of several hundred people.

Importantly, this single project opened the way for many similar projects to begin in an area where previous domination by insurgents meant no hope of infrastructure improvement.

The Mirabad effort also reinforced the effectiveness of the SOTG's partnering approach with the ANSF.

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This Afghan-led approach ensured local customs were respected, and reduced the potential for misunderstandings that can arise when military forces move through civilian areas. The approach also provided essential operational experience for the ANSF – a critical requirement for it to become self-sustaining and for the Australian Defence Force to meet its objective of eventually handing over security responsibilities to Afghan forces.

The cumulative result of the multi-faceted Mirabad operation is seen in improved levels of trust and support of the local population. That support now provides a firm foundation upon which to build a positive, durable and sustainable coalition force and ANSF presence – a shield – in the region.



Lieutenant Dale Beattie leads a patrol of Australian and Dutch soldiers in the Mirabad Valley