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Improving the Coalition's Understanding of 'The People' in Afghanistan: Human Terrain Mapping in Kapisa Province

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Central to the Coalition Forces' (CF) counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts in Afghanistan is the positive engagement of the Afghan people. This is particularly true for the 'point of contact': the connection between CF field units and local Afghans. Hence, it is critical that field units dedicate sufficient time and resources to the collection of information about the driving socio-political factors of their operational environment (OE). Under the context of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, detailed socio-political information should allow field units to better understand and hence successfully engage the local population such that they can be detached from supporting or enabling the insurgency. This necessity of garnering a deep understanding of local populations is common to commander's guidance and military doctrine.

Embrace the people: Be an expert on the local situation.

--General Stanley McChrystal

Leaders must critically assess the area of operations (AO) and carefully consider how best to influence the local population.

--Small Unit Operations in Afghanistan Handbook

However, while COIN is ostensibly all about 'the people,' it is staggering how little consistent effort the Coalition puts into systematically understanding local communities in locales that are most critical to ultimate success or failure. Afghanistan is a valley by valley war and the Coalition needs to understand the many peoples of the country in sufficient detail to approach it as such. This article provides a summary of the work being currently undertaken by the Human Terrain Team (HTT) of TF La Fayette (TFL), the French Brigade, to better systematically understand local populations in Kapisa Province. Specifically, TFL's efforts mean undertaking Human Terrain Mapping (HTM), which in the context of Coalition efforts in Afghanistan can be understood as the collection, collation, and presentation of the socio-political information necessary for a field unit to decisively influence a local population. Concurrently, this paper also articulates the role that HTM could play in the day-to-day campaigning of other Coalition units trying to better understand local populations. Overall, the author hopes the paper will highlight

for other units in the field some practical possibilities for consideration based on TFL's initial efforts.

Problem Statement

While there is a plethora of guidance in the form of doctrine and professional writing regarding COIN at the field level, there is a dearth of tangible guidance within the US military on how to actually collect the necessary information regarding 'the people' of a respective unit's OE. This is especially true for the specific context of Afghanistan, which has a very diverse range of local politics and demographics rendering macro-analysis fairly useless for application by field units. Overall, the reality for field units, especially Small Units (company level and below), given the lack of guidance and consistency of approach, is that several major problems face them in regards to adequately understanding local populations:

- Field units have to perpetually re-invent the wheel when it comes to knowledge about the local socio-political situation. This is because there is no consistent methodology allowing for the systematic compilation and storage of basic socio-political data about a said population.
- Field unit leaders are currently expected to produce socio-political analysis, but they are not provided with specific tools or methodology to do so in a comprehensive, systematic manner, notably regarding local peoples. The result is that field units' analysis is not particularly thorough and fairly subjective to individuals' interests, opportunities, and awareness.
- Interaction with the population at the field unit level is often spontaneous, in that it is not specifically planned for, and hence superficial. While some situational awareness is possible, actual situational understanding regarding the people is often lacking.
- Problematically for field units, data collection is often driven by the needs of larger units and is siphoned off to detached databases and analysis at a higher level rather than being firstly utilized at the field unit level and then shared.
- Multiple actors within the OE (PRT, HTT, CA, PsyOps, IO, etc.) tend to collect similar data which is then 'stove-piped' by those actors. This redundancy of data collection increases risks and stymies information sharing leading to a lack of unity of effort which ultimately fails to provide the command with the required holistic understanding of the people to successfully engage them.

The overall result of these challenges is that the necessary engagement of local populations by field units is not effectively enabled by an institutionally deep understanding of local populations. Utilizing existing COIN doctrine as a framework, there is a need to design a simple, practical methodology for systematic data collection and analysis that can be used directly by field units in the rigorous context of a combat environment. This data collection needs to allow field units to collect Afghan-specific information on individual locales that can be used first and foremost by themselves (i.e. at the tactical level). In terms of strategic application, simple logic dictates that if there is more precise, consistent data collection at the field level, there can then also be clearer, more comprehensive reportage to higher echelons. Conversely, heavy demands from higher echelons that do not firstly benefit the field unit itself are not likely

to improve the depth or quality of the overall data collection effort. Simply put, the effort must start on the ground.

Data Collection and Presentation

A beginning point of TFL towards improving its understanding and subsequently its engagement of local populations in Kapisa Province is the holistic collection of basic socio-political data on a specific population. This has been approached through the consistent data collection made possible through a 'Practical Data Collection Toolkit.' Subsequent to that has been the need to present and store the information in a manner where it is useful to TFL, what can be termed the creation and management of a Human Terrain Map (HTM) on a specific population. Given that, the emphasis has been on allowing TFL to quickly access a deep pool of information necessary to meet its assorted needs.

Practical Data Collection Toolkit

Aside from the four 'TCAPF' questions from USAID that regard public perceptions, there is currently no significant guidance for troops on the ground about the types of questions they should be asking locals. Data collection on local populations by TFL has placed an emphasis on a 'bottom-up' approach. Hence, the initial effort has focused on comprehensively defining what information is actually required in order to improve the precision and consistency of data gathered about 'the people.' To this end TFL's HTT and PsyOps units produced a handbook entitled: "Understanding Local People in Afghanistan: A practical data collection toolkit for small units."

This 'Practical Data Collection Toolkit' is a compilation of guidance materials for field level, primary data collection about local populations in Afghanistan. The tools in it consist of interview guides, assessment guides, and profile sheets that allow TFL's small units to systematically compile information on their OE- *malek* by *malek*, village by village, *shura* by *shura*, and Key Leader by Key Leader. Copies of the handbook have been printed in French for wide distribution in TFL and then training will be undertaken for troops. At its most rudimentary level, having such a Toolkit is necessary so that there can be some consistency, focus, and precision of data collection by field units. Without such structuring guidance, data collection ends up, as is currently the norm, being superficial, ad hoc, and inconsistent.

The 'tools' of the Toolkit are limited in number and fairly basic ones that, after nine years of Coalition presence, have proven useful in Afghanistan. For example, a basic need is to firstly provide specific guidance on conducting effective interviews. Interviewing is a very specific skill-set, especially in the context of a complex foreign country, and just having a basic list of 'good questions' to ask in assorted situations can greatly facilitate more precise and consistent data collection. A second basic need is to have profile templates that can guide data collection on a standard aspect of an OE, such as a village. There are certain things that a field unit should know about most of the villages in its OE, such as who the local leader is and the ethnicity of the village. Thirdly would be assessment guides necessary to ascertain the basic needs of a population. For example, knowing what guidance is available to determine the development

needs of a village is something that a company commander should have in common with a PRT commander.

Having a single Toolkit is important because it allows for a ‘one-stop shop’ of easy access to the types of guidance that meet the vast bulk of data collection needs regarding local populations in Afghanistan. Rather than small units having to delve through the depths of existing doctrine or attempt their own ‘trial-and-error’ of designing new data collection tools themselves, the Toolkit allows them to immediately access tools for application knowing that they have already been field-tested and conform with doctrine. Furthermore, the challenge has been that the existing guidance on how to do this necessary data collection in Afghanistan is limited or even non-existent. This Toolkit, in contrast to most existing doctrine and guidance, is specific to the Afghan context and focuses narrowly on understanding local communities. In this way it allows field units to collect information on such crucial aspects of local populations as the *shura* system of locales (local community councils). Furthermore, embedded throughout the tools are Afghan-specific interests such as understanding the *tanzim* linkages (mujahedeen veteran networks) or governance questions that match the structure of the actual Afghan Government.

The most significant benefit of utilizing a Toolkit is that it allows data collection about the local population to become a unit-wide task rather than just be marginalized within a single, small specialty unit, such as an HTT or a PRT’s CA Team. These specialty units can rather become catalysts and structures for the data collection by the broader unit. By example, TFL’s data collection efforts are a common effort for the Brigade itself rather than being limited to one or two small units at Brigade HQ. In this way the HTT role has been more to facilitate and catalyze the broader effort rather than undertake it alone. The Toolkit is of enough simplicity that it can be widely shared in the unit and more significantly, it is a tool that can be trained on. This is especially important in terms of helping soldiers prepare for going out into the field in Afghanistan.

Human Terrain Mapping

Based on a more systematic approach to collecting data on local populaces, the next aspect of the work at TFL has been the actual Human Terrain Map (HTM). The crux of HTM methodology is the collection of profiles of the key socio-political ‘building blocks’ of rural Afghanistan. Key profiles necessary for collection in rural Afghanistan include: *shuras*, villages, traditional Key Leaders, and specific geographic areas (viz. a valley, town, or section of road, etc.). Currently, at TFL the storage and presentation of these profiles has taken the specific form of a comprehensive database (now on Excel) about villages, maleks, Key Leaders, and *shuras* in Tagab Valley. Complimenting these profiles are ‘public sensing’ reports, which provide the opinions and perceptions of local people - villagers, merchants, teachers, etc. - regarding the political and security situations of a respective area. This public sensing provides local perspectives on the situation which are very valuable to deepen the small unit’s situational understanding of the dynamics driving the actions of local people. The tools necessary to collect this information are all present in the Practical Data Collection Toolkit.

Prior to beginning Human Terrain Mapping there was already some information within TFL about these aspects of the local population but, as mentioned, it was stove-piped in individual

units, inconsistent in content, and spread out over endless numbers of individual, unrelated reports. Much of the Human Terrain Mapping at TFL subsequently focused on compiling existing information when possible, especially some solid, well researched French Civil Affairs reports, but more generally about deepening TFL's understanding through routine primary interviewing using the Toolkit for consistency. The Human Terrain Map provides detailed information not available elsewhere in a consolidated form - for instance about a village such as geography, demographics, socio-politics, development history, relationships, and public sensing. For now this Human Terrain Mapping is limited to Tagab District, but efforts are now underway, using the Toolkit, to compile Human Terrain Maps on other key valleys in the whole OE.

In sum, a developed HTM will ultimately consist of two main, related components: Profiles and Public Sensing Reports. Field units will maintain both a digital copy and a hard copy of an HTM in the company Command Post/TOC so that leaders at all levels will have access to the information and can reproduce those products that apply to their areas or particular operations. Soldiers can use the information to strategize how best to address certain individuals during Key Leader Engagements, or how best to use the human terrain to drive a wedge between the people and the insurgents. Lastly, it is important to note that a current central analytical requirement of field units is conducting socio-political analysis using existing doctrinal approaches such as the US Army's generic framework called ASCOPE, which places emphasis on the P (people). HTM is not meant to replace existing doctrine such as ASCOPE but rather to allow field units to improve their situational understanding of 'the people' as part of their ongoing requirements.

Overall, implementing this methodology to develop an HTM of a respective OE would allow the respective field unit to develop plans and operations that directly take into account the socio-political and cultural factors at play in their OE. The HTM would provide the field unit with a pool of operationally relevant socio-political information that could be applied towards many ends, such as deciding whom to work with and through, identification of centers of gravity and power brokers within the local population, and what sorts of development projects should be undertaken and where.

There are some basic reasons why HTM is a very useful tool for field units to construct. Firstly is that HTM is an 'anti-reporting' tool in that it needs only be added to, not continually replaced. Rather than investing huge amounts of time in writing reports that are read once and then disappear forever in a database somewhere, the HTM is also a 'living' tool. This is because having once established baseline data on a local population, existing and future units would only need to refine and update it rather than needing to start anew perpetually. It is also a common tool, one that can be used by many different groups at the Brigade and down levels for their own purposes and continuously updated as new data is collected. It is systematic data collection that can hence provide for much more of a holistic picture of the ongoing local socio-political situation than can many separate, individual reports.

Secondly, HTM allows for institutional memory creation. So much of the Coalition's engagement with the population is driven by personal connections with locals but when those CF individuals disappear at the end of their tours, so does all of that knowledge regarding the local socio-political situation. A rough approximation from the author's experiences with RIPTOAs (when units rotate) is that the Coalition loses the majority of its local knowledge every time there

is one. HTM allows the Coalition, and specifically field units rotating into an OE, to nearly bridge that gap because the information has been systematically recorded and stored with the specific intention of being shared with and built upon by future units. Furthermore, systematically approaching HTM also improves relationships at the field level because locals don't have to go through the same tedious process again and again of getting to know new units—getting called onto a FOB and asked the same basic questions again, and again, and again because there are always new people showing up.

Thirdly, and most importantly, HTM fills a crucial gap not currently met in the Coalition's COIN campaign. The CF is very good at collecting data systematically on targeting insurgents and the official GIROA structure. But, if somebody wants to know who the leader of a village is and how to contact him, or what *shura* represents a specific area and the inner dynamics of that *shura*, good luck because that data is either going to be non-existent, buried way down in the system, or dependent on the personal knowledge of an individual. HTM really is a way of garnering a deep understanding of the local people, something largely missing now at the local level. It is village by village and *malek* by *malek*.

Layered Analysis of Human Terrain Maps

A Human Terrain Map is only a compilation of data; there is no 'analysis' to it. Hence, the next methodological aspect of HTT-TFL's endeavor has been how best to make operationally relevant sense of such immense amounts of data on local populations. To date the analysis of the HTM work has been limited as it has only been since late-2009 that the HTM effort started at TFL and the priority has been on consistent data collection. However, it is still worthwhile to articulate the initial efforts and the longer-term intentions of the analytical approach, which is to conduct fairly routine 'layered analysis' using the more consistent data made available through a routinely applied HTM methodology.

Overall the analytical efforts at HTT-TFL have focused on how all of these assorted actors, dynamics, histories, and locations that were garnered through the HTM effort relate to one another. Utilizing its HTM data, there has been a need to conduct systematic analysis to identify correlations between the assorted 'layers' of socio-political data available. For example, the question might be, how do the *tanzim* networks relate to the present *shura* system? Or, another question could be, how does the presence of weak *maleks* (i.e., those with little local legitimacy and influence) relate to successfully implemented aid projects, if at all? Additionally, another example question could be, What is the correlation between past aid provision to the support levels that local communities presently provide to CF?

Subsequently, the following 'layers' of HTM data are being compiled as maps allowing for comparative analysis to be undertaken and for correlations to be identified:

- Civil Affairs data (presence of clinics, schools, wells, etc.)
- Aid history (where, when, and what aid has been provided)
- Shura system (who and where of shuras)
- Sub-clan presence (who and where of Safi sub-clans)
- Agriculture (what crops where and the agriculture calendar)

- Economic situation (relative economic status of villages and broader areas)
- Traditional Governance (who and where relating to strength of traditional leadership)
- GIROA presence and efficacy (ANSF and District Government)
- 'Local resistance' map (who, where, and when of locals resisting insurgents)
- Collateral damage history (where, what, and when of insurgent and CF damages)

Simply comparing these 'Layer Maps' would allow CF strategists to have a greatly improved understanding of such key themes regarding local populations, for example, as:

- What effect aid programming actually has (or not) on local levels of support to the CF
- How past collateral damage relates to current insurgent activity
- Where the strongest and weakest traditional leaders are
- How the *shura* system relates to the GIROA presence
- How the *tanzims* relate to the shuras

An improved understanding of the correlations within the OE's socio-political space would allow TFL strategists to make better informed decisions about what local people to work with and through, what specific areas should be prioritized, and how best to engage local communities in productive partnerships. Ultimately, based on a comprehensive HTM and the detailed analysis of it through layered analysis, key questions, such as those listed below, could begin to be answered more comprehensively:

- Who are the Key Leaders?
- What are the assorted communities?
- What are the most important development needs?
- What are the histories of the communities and Key Leaders?
- How do Key Leaders and communities relate to one another?
- What are the influential institutions that provide informal governance and social service provision?
- What are the relationships between Key Leaders and communities with GIROA and ANSF?

Application

While the actual analysis of the HTM at TFL is still an early work in progress, one that is an iterative process as an ever larger mass of data becomes available, it is still possible to explain how the HTM data by itself has proven useful to COIN operations. The Tagab Valley HTM's data by itself is useful to many different 'customers' in the field. Indeed, that is one of its primary attractions: it is a common tool. By the very nature of COIN, assorted actors within field units are all seeking to answer similar questions: Who are 'the people?'; What do they need?; What are their histories and motivations?; and Who should I work with? The major challenge for Coalition field units to date has been that while everybody has an interest in being able to answer these questions, there has been no effort at gathering such information comprehensively and systematically. However, if such commonly useful information becomes available, many actors within the field unit can then apply it to their own ends. For example, the HTM data of TFL so far has been used thusly:

- Helped the PRT plan shuras with local communities to resolve property damage issues caused by road construction;
- Helped USAID brainstorm ideas of where and what types of aid should be going out to the villages and through what local intermediaries;
- Provided to the Brigade Command detailed socio-political information on specific trouble spots (e.g., individual villages - where they are interested to expand their non-kinetic efforts);
- Provided to Brigade Command detailed suggestions on how to manage their engagement with the shuras and maleks of specific areas; and
- Provided to Brigade Command histories of villages where recent violence is occurring, hence explaining why some of it is happening and can hence be mitigated or stopped.

Most significantly, the ultimate purpose of the HTM work, especially when layered analysis comes into full effect, will be to use the improved understanding of the local populations to support the development of TFL's 'Positive Forces Network' (PFN). This is really the 'so what?' aspect of the HTM work. The PFN is TFL's systematic effort to better engage the local populations in the hot spots of the AO. This is done by identifying 'positive influencers' within communities that can counter the negative influence of the insurgents. The HTM work helps TFL to make better informed decisions about what local people - individuals and communities - to work with and through, what specific areas should be prioritized, and how best to engage local communities in productive partnerships (for example through presence patrols, more frequent meetings, mediation with GIROA, specific aid projects, etc.).

The PFN's ultimate success (and representative of the broader CF efforts at engendering 'positive influence') is dependent on a more precise understanding of the people so that the famous wedge can be driven between the insurgents and the people. The reality is that the Coalition's current understanding of the people is direly lamentable. By example, even though Coalition Forces have been in the Tagab Valley since 2005, even just consistently knowing who the local *maleks* and *shura* leaders are and what their relationships to one another has been limited or nonexistent. More complicated information, such as what communities are currently fence-sitting and what inducements are required for them to choose sides, is totally lacking. In the end, the biggest gap that the HTM work can be applied towards is non-kinetic targeting, viz. towards projects such as the PFN and development programming. This is because it is a holistic, consistent approach focused solely on garnering a deeper understanding of local populations, what is so critically important but so often lacking in depth. This has been one of the main applications of the HTM at TFL because central themes for TFL are development and influence, and to achieve that the Task Force wants to invest a lot of effort into interacting with the local villages and shuras.

Conclusion

The author very rarely meets local Afghans who are unwilling to talk to him about their local community and personal perspectives. Indeed, they most often exclaim that they are shocked but happy to be asked what they actually think of their local situation. The shame is that after nine years of presence, the Coalition still has such a limited understanding of the local populations it

is spread out amongst and ultimately trying to win over. Throughout the Coalition presence in Afghanistan there is a dire need to better improve the understanding and hence engagement of local populations. This requires a specific, trainable methodology that allows field units to create a deep situational understanding about the local populations in their OEs and share that with future units rolling in and who will then deepen it. The HTT at TFL has made a start towards this end and the ongoing work being undertaken by TFL to better understand the peoples of its OE comprises the following, which can be considered in whole as an effective methodology towards better understanding local Afghan populations:

- Improved data collection by field units: “*Understanding Local People in Afghanistan: A practical data collection toolkit for small units;*”
- Improved collation, storage, and presentation of specific, essential information on local populations for field units: for example, the Tagab Human Terrain Map;
- Improved analysis of a local population by field units: layered analysis of HTM data; and
- Application of an improved understanding of the local people through the support of positive influencers by field units: for example, the Positive Forces Network.

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