



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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The Need for Local, People-Centric Information Does Not End in Afghanistan

Matthew B. Arnold and Anthony Vinci

Appreciating local contexts and applying that understanding strategically is something Americans are accustomed to doing in the domestic forum. Presidential campaigns, for instance, regularly collect information about the local level, down to individual small towns in rural America or urban neighborhoods, and use this knowledge to design national campaigns. Yet, when we look at the rest of the world we have tended to discount the local perspective and instead focus on the national level.

Our latest generation of counterinsurgency experts, like generations before it, has had to relearn the lessons of local-level understanding in order to compete with insurgents. People-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) appears to have been one part of an effective strategy in Iraq and now the US' strategy in Afghanistan is predicated on its acceptance. The people-centric approach to COIN demands appreciating the local realities amongst which insurgents and counterinsurgents must fight, *viz.* understanding life at the village and neighborhood level.¹ This means talking to local people, from farmers and truck drivers to village elders and merchants. It also involves asking the right questions about local dynamics, such as who provides social services, what the crop of choice to grow is, or how tribes interact with one another. This approach allows counterinsurgents to protect the local populace, assuring provision of basic social services, and to work with and through local leadership to ensure that actions taken are mutually beneficial to local communities and hence widely accepted.

But, the need for local, people-centric information does not end in Afghanistan. In an era defined by weak states with limited governance and the 'localization' dynamics that often make communities look inward for problem solving, adequately understanding foreign countries requires a more consistent emphasis on local socio-political dynamics. The counter-insurgency demands of Iraq and now Afghanistan provoked the initial development of an interest in localized, people-centric information. In the future, there is a need more broadly for such a localized approach to be consistently applied within the US government's presence abroad.

However, this focus is very different than the US' traditional information gathering about the world and the US' foreign policy and national security establishment still does not institutionally appreciate a need for local knowledge creation. Diplomats and intelligence agencies have

¹ See for instance, FM-3-24, Counterinsurgency, Department of Army, December 2006 and FM-3-07, Stability Operations, Department of the Army, October 2008.

generally been concerned overwhelmingly with the national level. Efforts are focused on understanding dynamics such as the real Gross Domestic Product of a country, its military structure, the members of the national leadership and so on. While the Department of Defense (DoD) intelligence agencies have a strong military focus that does allow for some localized information (*i.e.*, what we used to call “order of battle” – how many soldier, tanks, artillery pieces, etc., and where) it does not adequately address the local dimension regarding people-centric information. The composition of a village elder council, what national political parties are represented in a particular district, or how militiamen feel about their long-term job prospects doesn’t tend to come up much as a national priority.

Yet, the lessons learned the hard way in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have application to many US foreign policy and national security challenges throughout the world. By example, counterterrorism efforts in North Waziristan, peacekeeping in Kosovo and disaster relief operations after the 2004 tsunami all demanded that the US know the local level in detail, *viz.* the population flows of neighborhoods in Banda Aceh, the precise demarcation of Serb-Albanian fault lines, and the nuances of Pashtun tribal structures. Even at the highest levels of global diplomacy, the use of local, people-centric knowledge can be critical to *realpolitik*, such as understanding Israeli settlement patterns in the West Bank.

This article makes the case for the need of local, people-centric information to effectively carry out US foreign policy and ensure national security in the 21st Century. Specifically, it argues that there is a pressing need for an institutionally shared methodology allowing US agencies that are expected to work together in the field – the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of State (DoS), US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Intelligence Community (IC)- to collectively garner a detailed understanding of local communities that allows for their comprehensive engagement. The article begins by articulating what local, people-centric information looks like. Then it articulates how such information would be collected methodically. Lastly, the value of this information is demonstrated by two case studies that illustrate current foreign policy concerns where local, people-centric information would prove critically useful to the US: the rebuilding of Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake and the ongoing problem of Somali piracy.

Understanding the Local Level

The US Intelligence Community is extremely good at collecting and analyzing certain types of information.² In particular, the IC is adept at collecting and analyzing information targeted at understanding individual nations, their goals and their capabilities. Despite the inherent obstacles to understanding totalitarian regimes, the IC was able to consistently collect information about the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, with some significant success. Since 9/11 the intelligence community has gotten much better at collecting and analyzing information about non-state armed groups, such as terrorist groups, and their leadership. However, the IC still lacks the consistent ability to understand the local social, political and economic realities below the level of the nation-state with any real methodological rigor or

² For general discussions, see Handel, Michael *Intelligence and Military Operations*; Keegan, John *Intelligence in War*. For a more recent discussion, see Major General Michael T. Flynn, ‘Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan’, *Center for a New American Security* (Jan. 2010).

success. This was most recently illustrated in the report, *'Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan'* by Major General Michael T. Flynn, which argued that the IC was not consistently grasping the local understanding necessary to make a strong contribution to the COIN war effort.³ The lack of understanding of the local level by the IC is even more pronounced outside of Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the IC most often fails to understand the local level, social scientists and aid workers are extremely good at documenting local social, political and economic dynamics in troubled societies. Social scientists, such as anthropologists and sociologists, specialize in gathering and analyzing information about local villages or obscure tribes. Similarly, aid and development workers are experts at assessing what is necessary on the local level for people to survive. Individuals like these are able to gain unique access to even the most insular groups. They have the methodological tools to survey, interview and understand these groups. And, they have the lifelong understanding of a region as well as the time and intellectual resources to analyze the implications of the gleaned information.

Indeed, the US government and, in particular, the Department of Defense and Department of State have often turned to such individuals to help in specific circumstances. Academics have often been brought in to act as subject matter experts on particular groups or regions. By example, the DoD has implemented the use of Human Terrain Teams (HTT), which team up social scientists with infantry units to collect cultural information on tribal life and provide cultural insight and recommendations for better interacting with local communities as part of their COIN efforts.⁴ There are a number of other ongoing efforts that follow a similar theme- improving the US' understanding of local communities in one way or another- in Afghanistan. For instance, Stability Operations Information Centers (SOICs), Atmospherics Teams, District Support Teams (DSTs), Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and Civil Affairs Teams to some extent all collect and analyze data about local communities.

Problems with the Current Approach

However, current efforts lack in several major areas. Most significantly they are directed at already ongoing conflicts, those being Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, the most important benefits that such efforts can provide is in understanding local socio-political dynamics and composition before a conflict begins (Phase 0 Operations), predicting the outbreak of hostilities and laying the groundwork ahead of time so that when conflict does take place the US government is prepared to take part in the most effective way possible. Toward this end, for example, HTT is working with AFRICOM and the DoD employs Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) to build up subject matter expertise over the long-term, but these efforts lack in multiple areas.⁵

³ Major General Michael T. Flynn, 'Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan', *Center for a New American Security* (Jan. 2010).

⁴ See for instance, Matthew Arnold, 'Human Terrain Mapping in Kapisa Province', *Small Wars Journal*, May 2010.

⁵ See for instance, 'Help Wanted: "Human Terrain" Teams for Africa', Nathan Hodge, *Danger Room, Wired Magazine*, 12 January 2009 (accessed on 10 May 2010) and Kaplan, Robert, 'The Man Who Would be Khan', *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2004

Firstly, they are relatively limited in scope – both in terms of activities and size. The FAO and Defense Attaché system has representatives in many countries throughout the world but few members in any one location. Moreover, these individuals are generally more concerned with national level politics and diplomacy, particularly with the national military structure, than they are with the local level. Although HTT efforts have been expanded out of Iraq and Afghanistan into parts of Africa, these efforts are still extremely limited when compared to the innumerable countries and local regions that the US has a strategic interest in better understanding.

Secondly, and more importantly, current efforts are generally dependent on working with conventional military units. This is especially the case with HTT units in general, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere. This tends to raise their profile to such a degree that they cannot necessarily obtain the unbiased and truly local information that they require. Likewise, attachment to uniformed units precludes the use of these teams in most pre-war environments. While covert intelligence officers gather information more discretely, again, they tend to focus on national-level politics as opposed to local, people-centric information.

Lastly, there is no overarching methodology within the US government, and notably nothing shared between assorted agencies, of how to make sense of local communities. An enormous amount of rhetoric is placed on ‘unity of effort’ and ‘national effort’ for the US presence abroad but the reality is still that there is often little tangible cooperation on the ground, even within such units as Provincial Reconstruction Teams that place a premium on consolidated efforts between agencies.⁶ This is especially true in terms of basic data collection and analysis. Without even a rudimentary, shared conceptualization of how to best understand local communities, *e.g.* a methodology, there is a huge redundancy of effort and subsequently divergent interpretations of the who’s, what’s and why’s of local situations.

One can quickly see the deficiencies of current efforts in comparison to social scientist efforts. US academics have or can study all areas of the world down to the smallest village. They are not attached to military units (nor, generally, anyone else) and without this ‘baggage’ they can more easily obtain access and trust in insular societies. Finally, they have a well-developed methodology in place.

This is not to say that academic social scientists or aid and development workers are by themselves the best approach either. Academic social scientists are not necessarily focused on information relevant to national security requirements and, moreover, their timelines for research – which may range into years and decades – are not realistic, given the time sensitive information needs of US government. Moreover, aid and development workers do not have the broad level of interests that the US government has and their decentralized approach and lack of a single methodology limits the value of their approach for national security issues, where for better or worse, there are centralized decision-making systems in place.

⁶ See for instance, ‘Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Lessons and Recommendations’, Nima Abbaszadeh, Mark Crow, Marianne El-Khoury, Jonathan Gandomi, David Kuwayama, Christopher MacPherson, Meghan Nutting, Nealin Parker, Tava Weiss, *Woodrow Wilson School*, Jan. 2008

A New Approach to Information Collection

Collecting and analyzing local, people-centric information towards the pursuit of national security goals demands the creation of a new approach. The DOD and IC have many resources but not necessarily the right methodology or focus. Social scientists and aid and development workers have good means of obtaining information and analyzing it but they too have their failings. The US government is best served by borrowing those features of social scientists and aid and development workers which work more effectively.

At its heart, the key to obtaining and effectively using truly local information is in knowing who to ask, how to ask and what to ask and doing so *methodically*. A starting point for achieving greater comprehension would be to design a simple methodology that is field-tested and allows for greater unity of effort on the ground by creating common understanding. This means taking a different approach not only to information gathering methodologies – through the use of social scientist/professional collector teams – but also taking a different approach to identifying requirements and defining sources and information collection questions.

The relevant information gathering requirements for a local, people-centric approach are different than those for national-level collection requirements. Predictions about future hot spots, the emergence of armed groups or political groundswells leading to national change must come out of information gleaned from local social, political and economic changes. A truly local, people-centric approach to collection means getting below the surface of social, political and economic realities. This means being able to consistently answer questions such as:

- Who is in charge at the local level?
 - Which government, religious, cultural, economic individuals/groups?
 - Who is *really* in charge (*i.e.*, informal power networks)?
- Who can we work with locally?
 - What people can make change?
 - Who can we trust?
 - What can they specifically do for us?
- What do local people want?
 - What will bring them to our side?
 - How can we help them?

There would be three major aspects of such a local, people-centric approach. The first aspect would be to undertake the systematic preparation of profiles of the most important socio-political ‘building blocks’ of a given locale. These would need to be identified specifically for a respective local situation but could range from villages, community councils, sub-clan groupings, religious organizations to political parties, agricultural cooperatives, and tribal collectives. Additionally, profiles would also need to be systematically prepared for local key leaders, ranging from businessmen, political activists to government officials and – importantly - informal leaders, such as village elders and religious leaders. Creating profiles would involve the structured collection of key themes of local building blocks and key leaders such as historical background, political dynamics, relationship networks, economic status, and interaction with national actors and dynamics. This profiling would also involve performing ‘public sensing’ in

which the qualifying context of local public opinions would be included. This would be achieved from the ground up through the interviewing and surveying of villagers, farmers, truckers, militiamen, teachers, merchants and so on.

The second aspect would be the fairly conventional ‘layered analysis’ of the data made available through systematic profiling. Without the consistent and purposeful data collection about local socio-political building blocks it is simply impossible to begin to draw out the correlations in complex localized situations that otherwise are impenetrable to superficial, quick efforts at foreign comprehension. The layered analysis would focus on systematically comparing such aspects of a local situation as economic drivers, demarcations of ethnic or political control, networked relationships, historic conflict locations, key leaders’ areas of influence, and detailed aid and development requirements. This layered analysis would allow US government actors, both on the ground and back in the US, the ability to decipher complexities that simply cannot be overcome quickly and under the more pressing demands of an already unfolded natural disaster or violent conflict.

The third aspect of a local, people-centric approach would be the actual policy application of the approach. Most critically the systematic data collection and analysis of local socio-political situations based on a people-centric approach would allow for the definition of ‘engagement strategies’. The most common need for meeting foreign policy, national security and aid and development imperatives is to define local communities and leaders that the US can ‘work with and through’, to use the terminology found in the 2006 US National Security Strategy.⁷ Ascertaining such possibilities has proven to be tortuously difficult, especially at the local level, in the ongoing COIN campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Expending analytical efforts at the local level and preemptively mapping out important local actors, groups and dynamics would allow for a significant improvement in the manner to which the US works with and through local actors. With the predictable fatigue that will result from Iraq and Afghanistan, being able to rely on local partners before major interventions are necessitated will be all the more critical, especially in such complex and challenging, but strategically imperative locales as Yemen and Pakistan, for instance.

Overall, as described above, this is a very different approach to the typical human intelligence one of talking to the highest placed, ‘most important’ actors in a nation, especially within the national government and its security apparatus. Indeed, the effort and focus of a local, people-centric approach is on ‘open source’ information rather than conventional ‘intelligence’ emphases. The simple reality is that the most pressing needs currently are to understand basic local socio-political dynamics and actors rather than the more conventional, and secretive, ‘targeting’ needs of the IC and military community. Freely talking to village leaders about local quality of life issues, researching localized socio-political dynamics, and mapping out development priorities for impoverished locales have not been considered priorities but approaching them as purely ‘intelligence’ requirements is unnecessary and in fact counter-productive as it would stymie unity of effort on the ground between agencies that in reality share a basic need to understand local communities holistically. This understanding that local, people-centric information is not and will never be intelligence is fundamental to the approach.

⁷ Also see the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review.

Furthermore, the means of acquiring this information and analyzing it would come through the usage of trained social scientists to collect *and* analyze the information. Those who collect information at the local level must truly understand the culture that they are working with, and that means having studied it and understood it to a significant degree before arriving. The key to understanding the local level is being the gatherer and the analyst. It is only through that synthesis that one can put together the details with the theory to create understanding. This is why it has traditionally been done that way by social scientists. This synthesis of information gatherer and information analyst allows for rapid adaptation while collecting, because a lead can be followed and a more in-depth explanation obtained. It also helps at the level of analysis, where the 'mood' and 'atmospherics' are already known. This incorporation of information collector and analyst alone would do a lot to speed up the information processing of the US government on the local level and hence improve the broader engagement of priority populations.

Value of the Approach

There are several benefits for commanders and decision-makers using the local, people-centric approach to information collection and analysis. Firstly, this approach provides more targeted and more predictive insights than traditional analysis. Data collection can be directed at the most local level possible and predictive models can be based on a ground-up approach. This is the social science model and it is proven in its ability to make predictions and to take advantage of opportunities.

Additionally, the approach innately provides the foundation for responses. The same understanding that gives a commander an analytical perspective can also be used to focus operations at responding to public concerns at the local level. Knowing who the local leaders are and what the local community considers priority needs and concerns makes planning an information or civil affairs campaign much easier. It is even possible that information sources could be turned into operational sources to initiate change. This is the model of aid and development organizations and it is what allows those organizations to carry out their missions effectively.

Finally, the local, people-centric approach is not only effective but also efficient and inexpensive. Because it relies on small teams and local sources, it can be carried out relatively cheaply. Yet, by working to effectively keep a security situation at Phase 0, it is a cost saving measure in the long-run. And, if concerns do move into a higher-level phase, the groundwork laid by these operations will lead to more effective operations in the long-run. As numerous commanders (as well as analysts and academics) have noted, many of the struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan could have been avoided if there was more up-front understanding of the local cultural dynamics, tribal political structures and localized economic drivers.⁸ By example, a better understanding up front would have allowed the US to avoid many of the disastrous mistakes that were made in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, such as the limited engagement with informal power structures such as Sunni sheikhs and Shiite clergy.

⁸ See for instance, 'The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture', Montgomery McFate, *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 38 (2005)

Seemingly Intractable Problems Demand Local Understanding

Some of the most intractable problems in US foreign policy can be helped through the usage of local, people-centric information. Indeed, a good argument can be made that, as was true in Afghanistan and Iraq, without a detailed appreciation for local circumstances, appropriately responding to many of the most complex challenges facing the US is impossible. One is the most effective means for the US to respond to natural disasters, such as in Haiti. The other is how the US should respond to state collapse when it leads to regional threats, such as the rise of piracy around Somalia.

Haiti is the most impoverished country in the Western hemisphere and one that has played a consistent role in US foreign policy. Multiple interventions have taken place in Haiti where the US played the key role and a large UN peacekeeping presence continues. With the January 2010 earthquake, which left over 200,000 Haitians dead, the US was once again forced to respond with a sizable military force, including a brigade of combat troops. The earthquake was of such devastating magnitude that Haiti's government has talked of turning the tragic event into an opportunity to comprehensively rebuild the country, notably around the capital Port au Prince. Accordingly the US has geared up for a large, long-term effort to support the extended recovery of the country, both in terms of physical infrastructure but more challengingly in terms of good governance and democratization.

This effort requires an understanding of the national government but crucially of the neighborhoods of Port au Prince and its immediate vicinity which were most devastated by the earthquake. Indeed, it is telling that despite multiple US interventions over the course of more than a century, the US still does not understand Haiti's socio-political make-up adequately. This is a prime example of how the US has failed to understand a relatively small operational environment in spite of operating there for many years. However, currently, with a US presence that spans military units to aid workers and diplomats, all of whom are working at a local level doing governance, security and recovery work, there is a need for a consolidated, detailed understanding of Haitian socio-politics at the neighborhood level. The pre-existing presence of someone gathering local, people-centric information would have provided much of the groundwork necessary to understand the human environment of Haiti. They would have provided a huge list of individuals to turn to for further information gathering after the earthquake. Now that reconstruction is taking place, local information could provide a real-time assessment of how operations were proceeding and what was necessary, especially given that the near collapse of the national government in Haiti left little if any domestic capability to assess what was needed by the general populace.

Somali piracy is an issue that has emerged in the last several years as a major international concern. States from around the world, especially Western ones, have dispatched naval vessels to the coast off of Somalia to help safeguard commercial shipping from pirate attacks. While there is an international presence offshore, there is no presence in Somalia itself aside from very limited numbers of aid workers and a small African Union (AU) peacekeeping force in Mogadishu. Lacking an effective government, Somalia has languished as a failed state since

1991. Responding effectively to the challenge of piracy however will ultimately require more than an offshore naval effort.

Rather, an effective response demands engagement of the local communities from where the piracy stems. As Somalia's dysfunction perpetuated, its waters became prone to illegal fishing by foreign commercial fishing fleets. With this significant challenge to their livelihoods, Somali subsistence fishermen began to delve into piracy along the major shipping lane that passes Somalia and what began as a response to illegal fishing developed into a full-blown local industry for specific Somali communities. Although there are macro-causes for Somali piracy, notably the overarching state failure, understanding and engaging with the local communities where the pirates are concentrated, particularly those in Puntland, is nonetheless imperative. This is especially true in terms of a near-term strategy while the longer-term efforts continue to bolster the UN and AU backed government in Mogadishu as it battles an Islamist insurgency.

Conclusions and Implications

There is a pressing need to improve the US government's collective understanding of local socio-political dynamics in states of crucial importance to America's foreign policy and national security. As has been demonstrated consistently since the end of the Cold War, understanding local dynamics is critical to the overall success of US responses to crises abroad. This became established as a clear imperative through the messy fragmentation of Yugoslavia over the course of the 1990s but remains a consistent theme. While the US continues to engage national governments, it increasingly appreciates that much of its actual effort and intentions are dependent on a more narrow focus on sub-locales within a state. For example, the US' foreign policy towards Pakistan is presently very dependent on understanding and shaping the micro-politics of the Northwest Frontier Province while in the Philippines the US has also expended considerable military, aid and diplomatic efforts that have been focused very much in the far southern islands of Mindanao and Jolo. Other current localized areas of critical interest for the US, for example, include northern Sri Lanka, southern Lebanon, northwestern Yemen, western and southern Sudan, and assorted parts of the Sahel such as northern Mali and eastern Mauritania.

However, while there is a clear need for local, people-centric information, something that has been consistently demonstrated over the past several decades, the US government lacks both an explicit emphasis on gathering such information and resultant from that it also lacks a methodology that allows it to systemically collect such information. Momentum is building for furthering the 'Total Government' approach to engagement abroad during crises- be they natural disasters, counterinsurgency or state building activities.⁹ One of the most conducive steps towards achieving this end is placing an emphasis on creating a common understanding of complex local situations, a truly bottom-up approach. Being able to create a common understanding of local situations, through people-centric information, would facilitate the much improved cohesion of diplomatic, military, intelligence and aid and development efforts on the ground. Lacking both an emphasis and a methodology means that the assorted government actors on the ground are left with limited, disjointed understandings that actively contribute to a

⁹ See for instance the *Civilian Surge: Key to Complex Operations*, Ed. Hans Binnendijk and Patrick M. Cronin, NDU Press, 2009.

disunity of effort. In the end, the gathering of local, people centric information may be a perfect opportunity to blend the capabilities and requirements of the DoD, DoS, USAID and other relevant foreign policy and national security organizations in the US government.

This article has illustrated the need for local, people-centric information and the shape that gathering and analyzing such information must take. The need is there and the value is apparent, especially considering the inexpensive nature of such information gathering activities. Already two situations other than Iraq and Afghanistan have arisen which demand local, people-centric information – Haiti and Somalia – and more situations will undoubtedly occur in the future. The trick is to have the local, people-centric information in hand before the need arises or, even better, to use that information in order to keep a situation in Phase 0 before it shifts to Phase 1. The next step is to begin outlining, in detail, the methodology necessary for such information gathering and developing the organizational structures to obtain this information.

Dr. Matthew B. Arnold served in Afghanistan in 2009-10 as a socio-political advisor for the US Department of Defense and was seconded to French forces in Kapisa Province. Prior to that he worked as an aid worker for the United Nations in assorted countries in Africa and Asia. He has a PhD from the London School of Economics and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand.

Dr. Anthony Vinci received his PhD in International Relations from The London School of Economics. Dr. Vinci is the author of 'Armed Groups and the Balance of Power: The International Relations of Terrorists, Warlords and Insurgents' as well as articles in journals including Parameters: US Army War College Quarterly, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism and Journal of Strategic Studies. He has studied emerging threats and US responses to those threats on the ground throughout Africa and the Middle East. Currently Dr. Vinci consults on national security issues.

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