



The Closers (Part III): Civilians in the Hold Phase

Gary Anderson

“Your Iraqi contractors are useless, they are incompetent and corrupt. There are still some potholes and bomb craters in the road”

“OK, we’ll have them come back and fix the potholes; but you need to show them what the problems are.”

“If they do, I’ll give them tea.”

--Conversation with Farmer Jamail, September, 2009

The second or “Hold” phase of a counterinsurgency will likely not be clear cut. It is generally the point at which the insurgents no longer can operate openly in any given area, and have to revert to the covert first stage of guerilla operations. The line is not easily recognized and may vary from locality to locality even within a single brigade or regimental operating area. The military will develop metrics to try to determine where they stand relative to the insurgency.

The civilian members of any Reconstruction Team (RT) will likely also develop their own measures, even if the process is less formal. I had a tendency to gauge progress in any given area by the quality of the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and of their manner of emplacement. As IED networks are rolled up in the clear phase and further degraded in the hold phase, the quality and quantity of the IEDs decreases with the replacement of skilled bomb makers and emplacers with less competent recruits.

One personal example illustrates the case. I was sitting with a prominent local tribal leader in the back yard veranda of his house in the Zaidon area of Abu Ghraib on one lovely spring day in 2009. The Sheikh was known to have been a local supporter of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) when they had been in charge of the area. My mission that day was to convince the Sheikh that he would be better off throwing in his lot with the government side. As we sipped tea in the pleasant April breeze, he had just finished telling me that there were, “no terrorists in Zaidon”, when a horrific explosion occurred two blocks away. A number of vehicle parts peppered the aluminum roof of his porch, and the steering wheel rolled into the backyard scattering some chickens. I handed the Sheikh his cigar, which he had dropped when the bomb went off. Puffing mine, I dryly remarked that before we were rudely interrupted, we were discussing the lack of terrorism in Zaidon. He weakly replied that, “there are a few bad apples everywhere.”

A joint American-Iraqi investigating team found that the bomber, a member of the Sheikh's tribe, had been driving north with the apparent intention of planting the IED at a choke point that had to be used by coalition forces. He had been traveling with the bomb between his legs. Two badly mangled cell phones were found in the area of the blast. Apparently, one was the trigger for the IED, and the other was his personal device. As best our people could tell, his phone rang, and he answered the wrong one. He had not placed the device back-up switch on safe; a common rookie mistake. In the next few months, there were several other similar incidents in Abu Ghraib that heightened my perception that the quality of the insurgents was declining.

The primary impact of this on civilian members of any reconstruction effort is to allow them greater freedom of movement in the operating area, and an increase in people willing to be seen talking to American and Host Nation Government officials.

Exploiting the Hold Phase. This is the point at which the seed planted in a good assessment can germinate. It is also a critical time for interagency cooperation in order to develop unity of effort, if not command, in counterinsurgency operations. This can be a delicate dance. The civilian priority will be establishment of governance and rebuilding infrastructure; the military effort will be focused rightly on security. It is important to understand that the two are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Without security, rebuilding becomes a Sisyphean labor doomed to ultimate failure.

In the best of all possible worlds, the military and civilian sides would work out a division of labor in which Coalition civilians would talk to civilians, and where the military talks to security forces personnel. This is fine in theory, but as a practical matter, it does not work that way. Some local authorities will have a mix of civil and security responsibilities, and this is true of almost all tribal leaders.

Many local leaders express frustration with seeing a large number of Americans with seemingly conflicting agendas coming through their offices. However, as they adjust and adapt, they often see the opportunity to play both ends against the middle. Neither attitude is helpful to the counterinsurgency effort. The best approach is usually to have the civilian and military agendas worked out in advance. At that point, representatives from the civilian and military sides can visit any given leader and tell him forthrightly that, on some specific matters, the military member will show up; in others, the civilian will carry the ball. Knowing that the Coalition Force is coordinating internally will help prevent local governmental and officials from dividing and conquering.

Governance and Restoration of Essential Services in the Hold Phase. This is the point where local government can be reestablished. In Iraq, we created an attempt at local governance through district and village councils that were initially coalition founded. These were originally appointed by Coalition Forces with the plan to eventually hold local elections. Military and State Department officials, including myself, spent a large amount of time mentoring these creatures which were largely alien to the traditional Iraqi form of government. I came to believe that they would be discarded, or turned into strictly advisory mechanisms once the Iraqi government took full control; that appears to be happening today in Iraq.

Iraq, Afghanistan, as well as many other countries where we may operate in the future, have European style governmental systems where most civil services are centralized at the federal level, and local governmental rule is largely an alien concept. In most such countries, informal tribal influence is much stronger than any artificial edifice that foreigners might contrive. In retrospect, I would have spent much more time mentoring local elements of the central government and weaving tribal systems into the formal governance structure than I did. However, this was not an option. Mentoring the local governmental councils was a major part of my job description. I generally subscribe to the notion that; "If you can't do anything else, do what you are told to do."

In much of what we generally call the near east and Asia, the concept of public service has a different connotation than in the west. In that part of the world, a government position is considered to be a sinecure, or an end in itself. Since biblical times, public officials have been grossly underpaid on the official roles and expected to make up the difference between that and a decent living by kickbacks, bribes, or "baksheesh" (which has several spellings, but one ultimate meaning). This has been a seemingly sensible way for rulers since antiquity to keep their budgets balanced, but it is enormously harmful when it is abused; human nature being what it is, the baksheesh system will ultimately be abused. Intelligent rulers such as Solomon and Saladin have historically found ways to make examples of the worst offenders, but ultimately a system built on corruption will eventually collapse on itself as it did recently in a number of Middle East nations.

Although the military tends to identify governance and the restoration of essential services to be separate lines of operation, as a practical matter, I found them to be joined at the hip. People judge their government by what it can and cannot prevent. In Abu Ghraib, I tried a two track approach to mentoring the local representatives of the local ministries in restoring essential services. The first was attempting to lead by example; in the case of officials who would not or could not improve, I tired the track of officially getting them removed. The local council was also helpful in calling in local ministry representatives when they were accused of not doing their jobs properly, or for being corrupt. The councils did not have the power to remove these officials, but even in the case of corrupt or incompetent officials who happened to be well connected, putting the spotlight on them in public often embarrassed the Ministry enough to move him to someplace where he could do less harm.

By far, mentoring was the most successful approach that I found. In Abu Ghraib, one of the most embarrassing situations that we found was garbage and refuse that littered the entire district. Abu Ghraib had a functioning Public Works Department, but it was poorly managed and ill-motivated. The standard excuse was that security was making trash pick-up too dangerous. I eventually addressed this by using my security detail as an escort. This was an admittedly short term fix, but we eventually arranged to have Army or police units do the escort. This, in itself, was a complicated task because there were three distinct ministries involved (four if you counted Public Works where responsibility was divided between the provincial and central government). Iraq has no history of interagency cooperation at the national much less the local level, so we had to start from scratch. It was excruciatingly painful, but we eventually got the trash picked up in the towns. The rural areas are another matter.

Part of leadership by example is getting people to actually show up at their jobs at a reasonable time. I found that a useful tool was merely to show up at a government office at the advertised time that business hours were to begin. If the head official was not present, I would have my interpreter call him and tell him that I had an urgent matter to discuss. Eventually they began to get the picture.

Iraq has no tradition of providing services to rural areas beyond electricity, irrigation, education, and health. Some roads in rural Abu Ghraib had not been repaired since the sixties. The medical, irrigation, electricity, and education systems had once been the envy of the Middle East, but under Saddam, they had deteriorated badly in urban areas as Saddam pandered scarce resources to appease Baghdad's teeming masses. This avoided uprisings such as those that recently rocked Cairo and Tunis, but left the rural population unhappy. This made the job easier for insurgent groups like Al Qaeda when the vaunted American ingenuity supporting the new government could not fix the problems quickly.

All of this showed up in our assessment. When American presence had been of the "drive by" nature, the US had started many projects, but without permanent security, the insurgents quickly undermined them or co-opted the contractors in such a way that little or no progress was made. During our assessment, we quickly realized that we couldn't be everywhere at once, so our governance team decided to concentrate on three rural areas that our partner brigade combat team had designated as hot spots of the insurgency. In one area the primary problem was a milk collection facility that was previously mentioned in the Part II of this series; this had been destroyed in the fighting. With the facility, went the local dairy industry and the local economy. The other two areas were in the northeast and northwest of the Abu Ghraib Qada'a (or District) where irrigation was a major economic showstopper. We believed that, if we could show some real progress here we could do it anywhere, and we set out to create a civilian version of the military "ink blot" counterinsurgency strategy.

The problem, as it nearly always was, was with money. The State Department Quick Reaction Fund was small and hard for a small team such as ours to manage; they were also becoming restrictive in what it could be used for. USAID funds are even more difficult to come by and their implementation has a long time line because they have to contract with NGO Implementers, they were of no use during the fast moving clear and hold phases. This left us with Army Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds. We had good ideas, but little money; they had money and were looking for good ideas.

It was a potential marriage made in heaven, but we needed to put our ideas into the context of their doctrine (which in theory was also interagency doctrine although PRT members only got an hour of it when I went through PRT training); fortunately, our interagency embedded PRT had a military deputy and operations officer; as a retired Marine Corps officer, I had lectured on counterinsurgency at the Marine Corps University

The Governance Team was careful to frame its proposed projects in terms of COIN strategy within the framework of the Army/Marine Corps Publication FM 23-4/MCWP 3.33.5 *Counterinsurgency*. At the end of the day, we had three initiatives that we needed Army funding to implement.

Before discussing our ideas, it needs to be noted that the Army was already doing some projects that would ultimately meet our civilian ends. School repair, solar lighting, humanitarian assistance drops to hard hit populations, refurbishing of government buildings and critical infrastructure repair were key components to what the military calls “non-lethal terrain denial”. In simple English, that means doing enough good things to convince the fence sitters among the civilian population that they had a better chance with the Coalition Forces and the Iraqi Government than they did with the insurgents now that the government was back to stay. The Army spent a lot of money on these, but their staffs were pragmatic and open minded. They were quick to identify programs that didn’t work or transition those that did to Iraqi control. We may not have always agreed, but we tried to do so in a professional manner, and I think we generally succeeded. Rebuilding the Milk Collection Facility and canal repair would take time. The quick fix Army programs laid the foundation by showing sincerity and resolve through near-immediate results. It also helped to save lives among the security forces by making the terrain more hostile to the insurgent.

Not all of our ideas worked, and what follows is by no mean a template to be applied everywhere. Much of what we did was based on an assessment of our local Area of Operations (AO), and we even did different things within certain tribal and geographical areas of the AO. However, we based our ideas on our initial assessment done in the clear phase, and in subsequent, governance patrol assessments which were done on a near daily basis among the population, as well as with meetings with key leaders. Our problem was slightly different from that of the military. We wanted to increase the credibility of the both the host nation local and national government. The goals were consistent, but the implementation was slightly different.

Night Watering Belts. As my relationship with Farmer Jamail (mentioned in the last installment) improved, he began giving suggestions about how the situation around Zaidon Market could be improved; this was one of our key target areas. One of his greatest concerns was the incidents in which Americans and Iraqi security forces fired on farmers conducting night watering of their crops due to the fact that water was released from the irrigation canals at set intervals, sometimes at night. Often, the Americans and Iraqi soldiers would mistake the farmers and their implements for insurgents carrying weapons.

Jamail suggested the possibility of issuing reflecting vests to the farmers to identifying the farmers as non hostile. This made sense to me and I promised to consider it. I mentioned the concept to the Deputy Commander of our partner Brigade Combat Team (BCT 2-1; The Dagger Brigade) at dinner that night, he also thought it was a good idea. He offered CERP money knowing that, even though the amount was small, I would have a lot of paper work to do with the state department; he had a Project Management Office that did a superb job of quickly turning around good ideas with CERP money; it was the beginning of a productive partnership. Lieutenant Colonel (now Colonel) Beckert and his able Civil Affairs Chief, Lieutenant Colonel Todd Auld provided the impetus and advice that encouraged their very able commander. Colonel Joe Martin to fund this and other projects.

The idea was quickly implemented. There were initial concerns that the insurgents would get hold of the vests or similar equipment and use them as cover. We were able to work through the

local Deputy Governor (Qaimaqam or County Manager) to distribute the vests through the local farmers associations. The intent was to number them with strict provisions for accountability. Within a few months, the Army had settled on the same kind of Safety belts that they issued to all of their troops for running at night on base. In order to achieve our PRT objective of building up the credibility of local governmental and non governmental institutions, the belts were handed over to the Iraqis for their implementation in the late summer of 2009. The whole program cost less than \$5000.00. To the best of my knowledge, no farmers have died from friendly fire since September of 2009.

Mobile Rural Support Teams (MRST). Our embedded PRT began its work in North West Baghdad as an urban team. My predecessor was faced with a city government that was hard pressed to provide basic services and government officials who were unlikely to willingly supply services to neighborhoods with religious confessional populations different from their own. He came up with the brilliant solution of creating local Public Works Sub Stations (PWSS) that would service particular districts with managers who would be from those districts and feel some neighborhood pressure to perform. The concept proved to be very successful, and was eventually successfully transitioned to the Iraqi government. The PWSSs were co-located with security stations for protection and eventually provided a haven for civic meetings and government hiring events.

As we moved west into rural Abu Ghraib, I considered the PWSS approach to the problem of the lack of rural services, but it soon became obvious that the terrain was too remote. We needed a different approach. I remembered reading someplace that in Vietnam, the Americans and Host Nation government had created mobile teams of civil servants to provide a range of services to the rural population on a rotating basis. These teams provided medical services, well digging, school repair, and entertainment in the form of propaganda to show some evidence of government interest to the locals in areas that had been militarily cleared.

As I researched the idea in an Iraqi context, I quickly realized that we would have to scale back and modify the concept to fit what was realistically possible in Iraq in general and Abu Ghraib in particular. The Health Ministry was jealous of its prerogatives, and any attempt at sophisticated information operations (propaganda) was out of the question at that stage of development. In addition, I was looking at ways to buck up the local government agencies, that we had created; wise or not, supporting those institutions was part of our embedded PRT mission. However, since any manifestation of government interest was an improvement in what the rural portions of the district had seen before, anything would be an improvement. The cost was beyond what the Department of State could afford, but it was chicken feed compared to what we were spending in some parts of the country. Again, I turned to the BCT for the funding.

Within a few months, we had the MRST up and running as a local contract. One of the stipulations of the contract was that each vehicle would have a sign that read in Arabic words to the effect that the service was provided by the Government of Abu Ghraib. The MRST did local road repairs and picked up trash along the roads. Our surveys showed that the locals took immediate note. The hold process was underway. Services in both urban and rural areas were beginning to flow.

Although we concentrated these efforts in our identified hot spots initially we eventually expanded them. As the security forces tightened their control and we began to create a web of non lethal terrain denial operations, the number of IED and other terrorist actions began to decline radically. Our last fatal IED attack in Abu Ghraib occurred in May of 2009; there were no others by the time I left in February of 2010.

Restoring the Canal System. Perhaps the least expensive and most effective approach to improving both governance and the economy of Abu Ghraib lay in getting the irrigation canal system up and running again. As mentioned earlier, the canals were largely clogged by years of Baathist neglect.

However, there was another problem. A number of the Zobai sheikhs took up fish farming. This might sound innocuous; in many parts of the world, particularly in coastal regions, fish farming is a great development tool. However, in water starved inland Abu Ghraib, it was a luxury that the rural economy could not afford as it took away canal water from the irrigation of grain field and pasture land. Consequently, fish farming was illegal. This did not stop rich sheikhs from illegally tapping into the canal system and stealing water from the canals that flowed north from the Euphrates into Abu Ghraib. They were turning the northern areas of Abu Ghraib back into desert. Cleaning out the canals required moderate investment; stopping the water theft was a rule of law problem. The US Army took aboard the canal cleaning. I tackled the issue of the Sheikhs as personal project.

The Amy took aboard several projects to support the Ministry of Irrigation in cleaning up and repairing the canals. The canal system had generally been well built and designed; it had mostly suffered from neglect, and fixing that was an engineering problem. Iraq has a surplus of good engineers.

Stopping water theft problem was another matter because it was part of the fabric of Iraq's rich tribal culture; this is at the heart of many problems of Iraq and Afghanistan that go well beyond the problems of insurgency. Much of Abu Ghraib was dominated by the powerful Zobai tribe which had had a long and proud history of resisting domination by any central government. Indeed, they were at the heart of the revolt against the British shortly after World War I. Saddam had kept them in line through lucrative government grants, contracts, and outright bribes. They were big losers when he fell. Like most tribes in Iraq, the Zobai splintered. Some supported the insurgency, while others sided with the Americans. Others became free agents.

The sheikhs were rich from Saddam's largess and well armed. In most cases they could outshoot or intimidate the local police and buy off local officials. This was a huge issue. Exacerbating matters was the fact the Qaimaqam (County Manager) was Zobai. He was a generally competent administrator in many ways, and we had worked together effectively on things like the reflective belt and MRST issues; but on the irrigation problem, we reached an impasse. He was not willing to issue warrants to prosecute the worst offenders.

The combination of intimidation of the police and the inaction of the Qaimaqam was a thorny problem. The Irrigation Ministry however was empowered to remove irrigation violations physically even if the Qaimaqam did not issue arrest warrants against the owners of the land on

which the violations occurred. The problem was that the police were needed to provide protection to the Irrigation Ministry officials in carrying out the removal of violations. Even if the police could do it, they would need to coordinate with the Irrigation Ministry to get the job done. As I mentioned earlier, interagency cooperation was not an Iraqi governmental strong point.

This is where my Governance Team came in. As in the case of trash removal, we provided my heavily armed security detail as top cover for police-Watery Ministry task forces to begin systematically destroying the water violations. Few sheikhs, no matter how well armed, were willing to take on the US Army or the increasingly capable Iraqi Army. From May 2009 to January 2010, the local Water Ministry representative estimated that water to the Aqur Quf and other northern parts of the district was flowing at 80% capacity.

Although an Iraqi court eventually found that our actions were bordering on vigilantism due to Iraq's byzantine legal system, we dealt illegal fish farming a serious blow in Abu Ghraib. I was later alarmed to find that that, while our team was wiping out fish farming, USAID was funding a project to rehabilitate these same farms as an attempt to stimulate the local economy. This was not an interagency clash; it was an example of the ongoing lack of coordination of interagency efforts.

None of the projects listed above cost the US government a lot of money, but they made an impact. My contention is that some of the best things in counterinsurgency can be done on the cheap; they do not require the billions that enemies of counterinsurgency theory and foreign aid, in general, allege. The military side spent millions in projects in Abu Ghraib, but the cost was on the low side of millions. They repaired schools and infrastructure, dug wells, put in solar lighting to make it more difficult for insurgents to operate at night, and assisted with the health situation. This was accompanied by a vigorous information operations approach that used leaflets and billboards as well as print and telecommunications messages.

The overall impact of this "non-lethal terrain denial" effort to convince the population that supporting the insurgents was not in the best interest of the individual citizen was dramatic in Abu Ghraib as it had been in North West Baghdad. It was combined with a systematic counter-terrorist "lethal" approach to disassembling insurgent networks by detaining key personnel.

IED attacks dropped from a level of daily occurrences to a few incidents a month. By May of 2009, 2-1 BCT had suffered no fatalities to hostile action. To the best of my knowledge, its successor suffered no fatalities to hostile action in Abu Ghraib during its tour.

This approach combined security, governance, and limited reconstruction successfully. It isn't a template for every situation. As I mentioned what worked in urban North West Baghdad had to be radically modified to fit rural Abu Ghraib next door. However what was done in the hold phase assessment became the basis for laying the foundation for recovery in the build phase.

Rule of Law. The quest for human dignity and the belief that all people are answerable to the rule of law is a key element to a healthy society. However, it is very difficult to achieve in a place where an insurgency is occurring. By nature, one of the things that likely caused the

insurgency was probably some problem with the rule of law to begin with. In Iraq, the system had been destroyed by decades of Saddam's misrule. In Afghanistan, it was destroyed by years of Soviet occupation and civil wars. But the Karzai government was never able or willing to effectively rebuild a responsive legal system. The Taliban have made this a key part of their program.

When their shadow government takes over an area, it quickly establishes courts based on Shaaria Law. The justice is rough, but timely and responsive. The Taliban do not have to be good, they merely need to be more responsive than the government legal system which is either nonexistent or glacial in most areas of the country.

Afghanistan could benefit from a legal version of our Mobile Rural Support Teams in Abu Ghraib. Protected convoys or helicopter delivered legal teams consisting of circuit judges, lawyers, and legal infrastructure teams could reverse this Taliban advantage. This can still be done in Afghanistan if we can convince the Afghan government that they are their own worst enemies in this regard. This would be a key tool of the hold phase of any operation in Afghanistan.

Civil Society in the Hold Phase. Another thing that has likely been lost in the case of insurgencies is that civil society has largely broken down. This will be the most difficult part of society to change. USAID will try to rebuild non-governmental structures through contract implementers. Contracting takes time, and these implementers need to have a relatively secure environment to work in. In many cases, civil society may need to wait until the build phase of the counterinsurgency effort.

The Civilian Role in Counterinsurgency Operations. FM 3-24 identifies five basic lines of operations for Counterinsurgency. These are:

- Combat Operations
- Developing Host Nation Security
- Governance
- Essential Services
- Economic Development

Civilians on RTs can help all of these areas. The last three have been discussed here, but let us look at the security aspects of the first two. In the area of the US role in combat operations and local security, the RTs can be invaluable in developing combat intelligence information for their military partners, but they need to understand what they are looking for, and they need to be willing to share information with their military counterparts. This is currently a deficiency in the training of civilians on RTs. In some cases, the problem goes deeper. Some civilians on such teams are reflexively anti-military. In the clear and hold phases, this attitude is not only counterproductive, but it is dangerous. It may be acceptable in the build phase, but in my opinion, such people should be identified and ruthlessly eliminated early. They have no place on the battlefield; make no mistake about it, the Clear and Hold phases are a battlefield environment.

Civilians can be of help in enormous ways if they possess situational awareness of what they can contribute. If they are doing their job, out amongst the population on a day to day basis, they can notice the little things that soldiers may miss:

Are people willing to talk to people who may represent coalition or host nation authority?

Unwillingness to do so may represent the fact that the insurgents are still a threat or that the population remains anti-government or anti-coalition. Neither is a good thing, and it is something that the military needs to know.

Does what the population believes line up what we are hearing in Key Leader Engagements?

As mentioned before “community leaders” and public officials are often not in line with the actual mood of the population because they are isolated from them.

Are our initiatives and programs having the desired effect? What the people tell armed combat patrols and what they will tell unarmed civilians can often vary.

What new problems have arisen between visits? Communities are dynamic living organism. Civilian interaction can spot grievances long before the military can if they are doing their jobs properly.

Commanders Critical Information Requirements (CCIR). The RTs should be aware of what their partner military requirements are. The CCIR should be proximately posted in the command posts of the partner military organization. The smart RT leader should make sure his people are aware of them and are prepared to report things that they see. However, this is a two way street. RT leaders should ensure that his information requirements are known to the military commander and are part of his collection plan.

Conclusion. The hold phase should be the key part of any civilian effort. It is the time when the military can most help the civilian effort with resources and information. In the build phase, the military will be concentrating on “getting out of Dodge” and going on to their next mission and transition to total Host Nation control. A civilian or military failure to recognize this will squander a key opportunity.

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