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Census Operations

by Michael Trevett

When I took a decision, or adopted an alternative, it was after studying every relevant—and many an irrelevant—factor. Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards—all were at my finger-ends. The enemy I knew almost like my own side. I risked myself among them a hundred times, to learn.

-T. E. Lawrence: Letter to Liddell Hart, 26 June 1933.¹

Background

Mao explained that the guerrilla or insurgent swims among the sea of people. Consequently, thoroughly knowing the population is the best method of identifying, finding, and fixing the insurgent. Only after identifying the insurgent, does it become possible to isolate and kill him and protect the population. From the perspective of the counterinsurgent, these are the fundamental purposes of census operations, a subset of populace and resources control (PRC) measures, which, when attained, significantly contribute to the elimination of an insurgency and the establishment of civil governing control.

Law enforcement officers and civil authorities use census information and databases in most nations on a daily basis. In developed nations, when a citizen is stopped and questioned by local, state, or federal law enforcement officers, these officers have at their disposal multiple databases of information. The officials can obtain detailed information about the individual within minutes from these databases, which provide specific data on most aspects of the individual, including age, full name, physical description, place of birth, residence, digital photos, and vehicles owned. Although more time-consuming to obtain, much information on illegal aliens and foreign nationals is also available to law enforcement agencies. Regardless of the database, and there are many, the information used to populate it was collected consistently and systematically, usually over a period of years or decades.

The resulting available information permits law enforcement officers to make determinations about individuals and groups of people in the field at the scene of an event or incident. In the United States for example, registration databases on vehicles not only include specifics on the vehicle but also provide detailed information about the registered owner, including home address, telephone numbers, insurance particulars, and much more. When a driver's license is included in the law enforcement query, the officer is able to obtain more extensive information, including a detailed description of the individual, criminal history, arrest warrant information, and, in many cases, employment and medical information. These databases were created from the collection of census-type information, not in the sense of the door-to-door

¹ Colonel Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., USMC (Ret.), Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations, (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1966), 161.

questioning performed by U.S. Census Bureau employees, but from the planned and systematic collection, collation, and maintenance of data organized by authorities on specific populations for precise purposes.

Regarding contingency or stability and security operations, particularly counterinsurgencies (COIN), the example above provides a degree of insight into the level of clarity and situational awareness military forces need in order to know their areas of operation (AO) and the populations and pertinent aspects of those populations within their AOs. After all, during these types of operations or small wars, military forces are most often the only authorities present to ensure the safety and security of affected populations from internal criminal organizations, insurgents, or foreign enemies. Therefore, information available in existing or newly created databases is critical for effective decision-making, operational planning, and executing security operations. Unfortunately, most military commanders and units do not come to this realization until many months into their deployments, losing valuable opportunities and time to collect, analyze, and disseminate such detailed data. That is where census operations significantly contribute to successful operations.

What are Census Operations?

Neither the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* nor *Operational Terms and Graphics* (FM1-02) provides a definition of census operations.² Historically, military civil affairs personnel and units have had responsibility for populace and resources control and the census operation subset. However, no current U.S. civil affairs publication offers a definition or explanation of it.³ Consequently, the following definition of “census operation” is offered: *The systematic collection of all pertinent information on a population, including but not limited to, information on employment, individual, familial, and group identities, property, transportation, and photographs and biometric data, stored in databases accessible by civil and military authorities requiring the information to effectively govern and protect the population.*

Census operations are but one method of contributing to PRC in COIN and one method of contributing to mapping the human terrain. PRC includes determining who lives in an area, what they do, how they travel, and specifically where they live, shop, study, travel, and work and then affecting these aspects of the population for desired outcomes. These tasks require determining societal patterns and relationships including clan, familial, interpersonal, political, professional, religious, and tribal. *Establishing population control must logically begin with conducting a census, creating databases of accessible information with search capabilities for use by military, law enforcement, and civil authorities.* Census operations should be advertised to educate the affected population and must be conducted consistently and systematically. Additionally, census tasks include identifying and mapping who resides and works in which buildings and houses and who the heads of cultural and social organizations are. Ideally, those heads of tribes, households, families, clans, or other social organizations must then be required to report any changes in the categories of information discussed throughout this article to the

² Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 17 March 2009). United States Army Field Manual (FM), 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics* (Washington D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 21 September 2004).

³ Joint Publication 3-57.1, *Joint Doctrine for Civil Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 14 April 2003). United States Army Field Manual 3-05.40, *Civil Affairs Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, September 2006). United States Army Field Manual 3-05.401, *Civil Affairs Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, September 2003).

responsible civil or military agencies and authorities, systematically contributing to the updating of databases. Information obtained or provided must be cross checked by periodic patrols and searches or subsequent, dedicated census operations.

Census operations must be designed to collect information on all aspects of the targeted population. Beyond the obvious information related to individual and familial characteristics, these aspects also include business associations, educational backgrounds, familial relations, military records and training, political and religious affiliations, property and weapons ownership, social groups and organizations, and any other patterns and relationships. In addition, authorities must identify and record data on apartments, houses, other living accommodations, and places of employment, such as descriptions, 10-digit grid coordinates, or location by latitude and longitude. If this information does not exist or insufficiently exists, then a methodical, numerical or alphanumeric system of designating these infrastructures must be undertaken, recorded in databases, standardized, and disseminated to all concerned.



The main open-market in Jisr Diyala, in southeast Baghdad. Businesses, markets, and black markets are also important sources of information to be targeted with census operations and other PRC measures.⁴

⁴ Photo taken by author during a counterinsurgency patrol in Jisr Diyala and Salman Pak, Iraq, 9 March 2007.

Conducting Census Operations

The key to developing a sufficient census database that consistently contributes to operations and situational awareness is systematic and thorough collection. Census operations must be planned and are not tantamount to simple cordon and search or cordon and knock patrols. As a declassified study on COIN for the U.S. Army indicated, census operations should be planned and executed as an independent operation with the aim of collecting census data beneficial to civil and military authorities.⁵ The study further explained:

To accumulate the necessary data, populations of whole villages would be fingerprinted, photographed, and required to provide vital statistics and personal histories, including the names and locations of all relatives. This could be done by police of the indigenous power (with such supervision by US advisors as might seem desirable for accuracy and thoroughness). Thereafter the data would be processed by electronic means that can be readily made available. Local police could then periodically sample group populations, picking up individuals at random at odd times and places, and any newcomers would have to explain themselves. The effect of an accurate, operating system of this kind on the morale of the guerrillas should be considerable.⁶

If units are unable to execute operations exclusively for census operations, they can incorporate the task of data collection into other types of patrols and missions. Regardless of the type of mission or patrol, census information must be sought, captured (usually through patrol debriefs), collated, analyzed, and disseminated during and after all types of operations. Such information must be collated and input into the unit census database upon completion of each operation. For example, during routine patrols in neighborhoods, the systematic collection of all pertinent information about all residents on one or more specific streets or blocks should be a goal. This information must then be input into a database covering that unit's AO. Standard forms and questions should be developed for use by all authorities involved or potentially involved in census operations. These forms or questionnaires should be designed to capture all information deemed relevant to a peaceful populace for that culture or environment. However, they should also be developed and updated to highlight any potential abnormalities within the populace and to identify any indicators of illicit activities.

⁵ Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy, USA, Ret., ed., *Isolating the Guerrilla*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Advanced Research Projects Agency, Department of Defense, 01 February 1966, unpublished study), 23-24, 90.

⁶ Colonel Dupuy, *Isolating the Guerrilla*, 90.



Systematically obtain information from the population.⁷

Any apparent conflicting information should be flagged and examined. Conflicting or new information dissimilar to information in the database for a group of people or a neighborhood can expose anomalies that might show links to insurgent, militia, or terrorist organizations. For example, if after visiting a house and obtaining census data on the residents, an abnormally high number of males or nonresidents are seen frequenting the same house, civil or military authorities should begin questioning neighbors and, if deemed necessary, begin surveillance on the house, residents, and visitors. Similarly, if it becomes known that registered residents or visitors are using dialects and languages foreign to the locale, these issues should also be investigated.

Other indicators might not initially become obvious through direct observation. For example, if a family of five is recorded as the only residents of a single family home, but abnormally high levels of electricity or water are being used for five people, authorities could surveil the property to identify other people using it or search the property to identify why such abnormalities exist. For example, law enforcement agencies in the West have used these techniques to identify clandestine drug labs hidden in homes, garages, or backyards. Abnormally high levels of electricity use, which can easily be monitored, should serve as a red flag to observant authorities.

⁷ Photo taken by author during a counterinsurgency patrol in Jisr Diyala and Salman Pak, Iraq, 9 March 2007.

Many similar situations and indicators exist for abnormal or illicit activities that authorities might be able to link to insurgents or other illegally armed groups. Such indicators might include volumes of traffic during hours of darkness abnormally high for the home or neighborhood in question; the presence of numerous sleeping spaces over that needed for the size of the resident family; comparing the number of children claimed with the amount of children's clothing, toys, photographs, and other items for the specific culture and environment. The behaviors, tactics, and techniques of illegally armed groups are practically unlimited, so too are the countless indicators and signs associated with them.

Photographic and Biometric Data: The realm and discussion of biometrics has expanded exponentially in the last decade. In various forms and degrees, biometrics are indispensable to effective census operations and PRC. Although seemingly obvious, digital photographs and biometric information must be methodically collected on all people individually then, if possible, together as family units and of other groups. Fingerprints and other biometric data are essential in identifying individuals as insurgents or associating their involvement in illicit activities. Soldiers and Marines should systematically take digital photographs of all living accommodations and methods of transportation. Methods of transportation should include aircraft, boats, buses, cars, motorcycles, pack animals, trucks, vans, and any other air, land, or waterborne methods of transporting people or cargo. In Iraq for an example, despite the fact that the country is arid, descriptions and photographs of all waterborne craft should also have been collected, because insurgents and militias used the Euphrates River (the size of a creek for most of its length) and the Tigris River to ferry fighters, transport arms and ammunition, and evade Coalition Forces (CF).⁸ If systems of registration do not already exist for living accommodations, work sites, and methods of transportation, then the responsible units must create these. U.S. and other regional, state, or national systems for automobile and waterborne vessel monitoring and registration should suffice for emulation. Authorities must then issue and track identification and registration cards.

Responsibilities: Brigadier General Frank Kitson stated, "The main responsibility for developing background information rests with operational commanders and not with the intelligence organization."⁹ This fundamental fact is consistently missed by academics, pundits, and even military authorities. Consequently, PRC measures and census operations are inconsistently and infrequently applied because of inadequate education and understanding about the various benefits derived from this type of information. Although operational civil or military units should conduct census operations, responsibility for maintaining the data should rest with civil authorities, particularly upon cessation of major combat operations or with the restoration of law and order. The declassified study on counterinsurgency conducted for the U.S. Army in 1966 concluded:

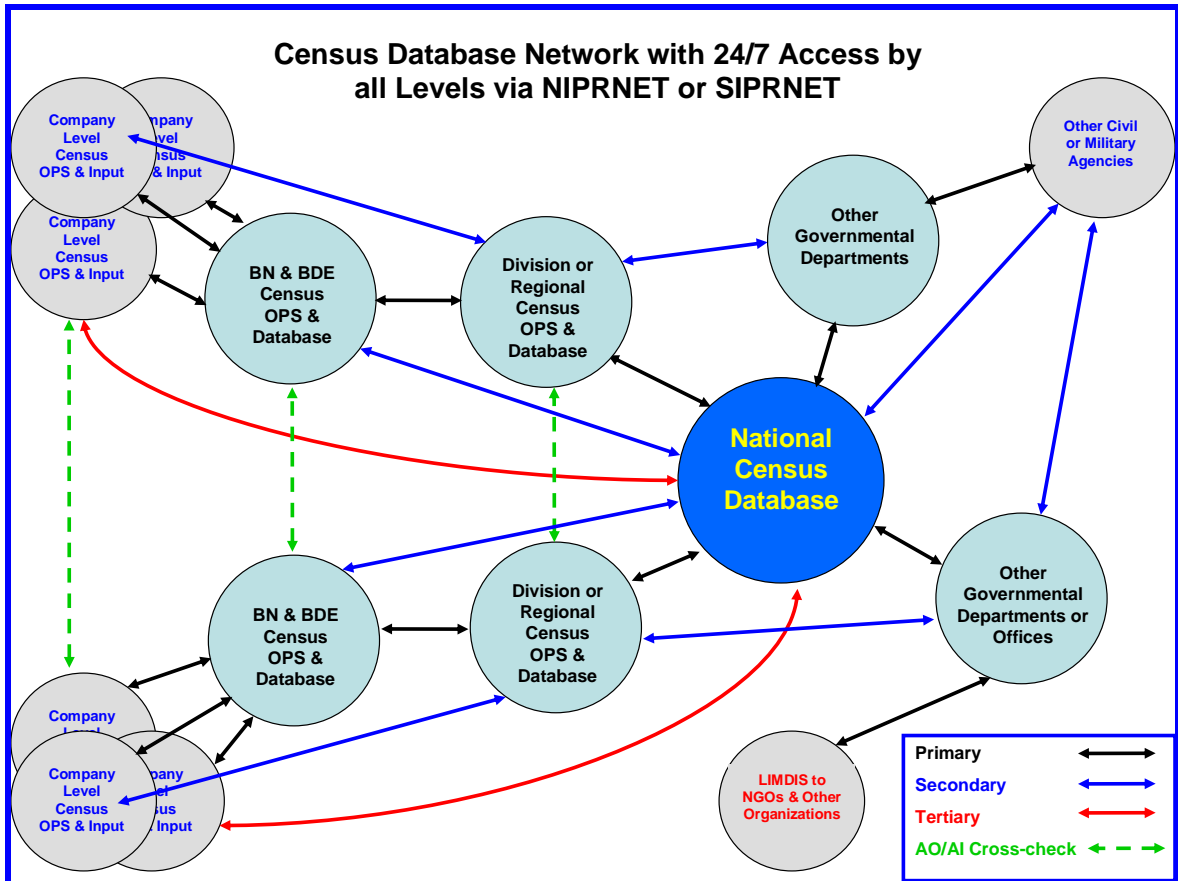
It is a big task for the government to learn as much as possible about every individual, but it has been achieved in one form or another, throughout history. The first essential is a registration of the population, and some form of personal identification. The ideal, from the government point of view, is an identity card with

⁸ Counterinsurgency Center for Excellence, Multi-National Force-Iraq. Author's knowledge and experience obtained through COIN specific operations in five multi-national division AOs in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad, and analyzing the insurgent, militia, and terrorist organizations in Iraq from mid-2006 to mid-2008.

⁹ Gen. Frank Kitson, British Army Ret., *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peacekeeping* (Harrisburg PA: Stackpole Books, 1971).

photograph, issued universally, with safeguards against forgery and duplication. This is a task for the civil police, but troops may also have to be used, and will probably be needed in any case to man checkpoints and to carry out surprise checks.¹⁰

In the absence of a legitimate and effective host nation government, the Department of State (DOS) should be responsible for at least collating the data and maintaining the database of census-related information. This would benefit the transition process from military control to civil and police control and would ensure a longer-term continuity in maintaining the data. However, due to the lack of security in most COIN or other operational environments, it is highly unlikely that DOS would assume such responsibilities. Consequently, the best location for maintaining such databases is within the staff element of the overall military commander responsible for the operations in the country or region in question. For example, during the active insurgency in years past, Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) would have served as the best central repository for such data in Iraq, and currently, the International Security and Assistance Force in Afghanistan is the best repository there.



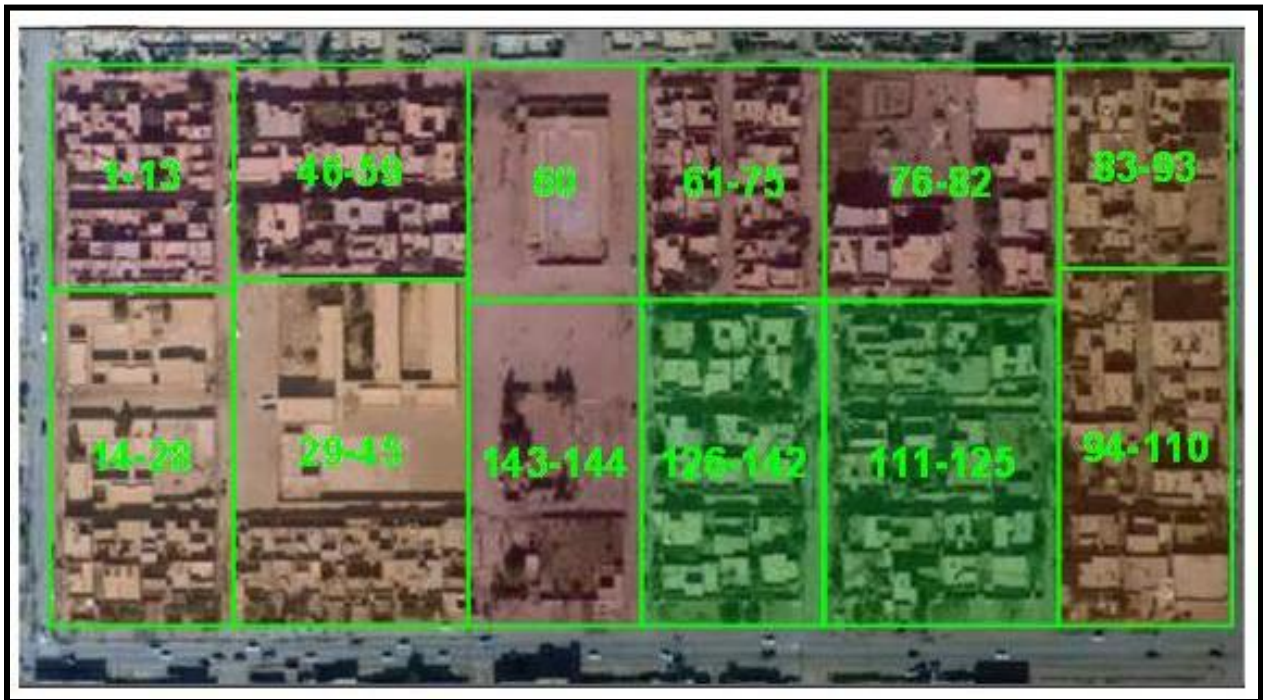
¹⁰ Colonel Dupuy, *Isolating the Guerrilla*, 23.

In any case, units, beginning at the company level, responsible for designated areas of operation should create one or more databases comprising the information outlined above. To be effective, these databases must be readily accessible via the Nonsecure Internet Router Network (NIPRNET). Eventually, the regional commands should link the various databases in their respective AOs. Finally, the national or theater-level command would maintain the database or multiple databases from all AOs throughout the theater of operations and serve as the central repository for related information with ever accessible, knowledgeable personnel being the continuity. Databases could be escalated in terms of the information input, analyzed, and processed. This additional information would likely require storage and use on the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNET). Subordinate commands should be able to access the nation-wide data via links on the NIPRNET or SIPRNET and use the data for civil affairs, intelligence analysis, operational planning, and targeting. Limited distribution of information and access could be permitted for other governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

Successful Cases in Point

One real-world example that highlights some of the best practices and lessons learned mentioned above is that of the census operation conducted in the AO of Multinational Force-West (MNF-W), primarily by the 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, U.S. Army. Although various units undertook some aspects of census operations in Ramadi, they never completed this project but, nonetheless, did progress further than any other organization in Iraq during the peak of insurgent activities. MNF-W made the data readily accessible to coalition forces. The information, with an intuitive format, included multiple levels of hyperlinks and maps. City sections were color-coded and linked to smaller subsections and neighborhoods. A user could simply drill down from the city level to a section then to a neighborhood and finally to individual houses or apartments. Data available on the individual homes or apartments included digital photographs of occupants, names with spelling variations, employment data, and other demographic information. The 1/1 AD census program, covering an AO including the city of Ramadi, served as a positive model and was used as a teaching tool at the Counterinsurgency

Center for Excellence at Camp Taji to instruct maneuver units arriving in Iraq.¹¹



Example of a hyperlinked, numbered overlay covering a city section.¹²

Perhaps the best description of a company level success in conducting census operations is that of Company F, 2d Battalion, 24th Marines responsible for a 200 square kilometer AO in and around Al Yusufiyah, Iraq. “The company collected census information in over 80 percent of the towns and villages” in their AO.¹³ Towns with over 2,000 homes took the company just a week to complete with small villages taking only one or two days. The results were tremendous. They had critical information on almost 17,000 Iraqi males, including digital photographs, which they used to build targeting packages. They incorporated information from CIA and DIIR reports and made all the information in the database easily accessible through common searches on computers. Directly because of their efforts with census operations and databases, the company detained over 300 insurgents and seized 100,000 pounds of explosives. However, the Company Commander explained, “The key to a census operation’s success... was not the actual operation itself but the follow up database workflow process.”¹⁴

¹¹ From author’s knowledge and experience serving as the S2 and as an instructor on various topics, including populace and resources control and census operations, at the Counterinsurgency Center for Excellence from December 2006 through October 2007.

¹² “Initial Impressions Report,” 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, April 2007, available from the Army Center for Lessons Learned.

¹³ Major Morgan G. Mann, “Census Operations’ and Information Management,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, 1 April 2006, 24-28, <http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/>, accessed 18 March 2011.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In some areas of Iraq, successful coalition forces incorporated their Iraqi counterparts into census operations, thus ensuring long-term situational awareness and enhanced human terrain mapping. In August 2007 for example, Marines with Battery K, 1st BN, 11th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Logistics Group (Forward) worked with their Iraqi counterparts in Sin Adh Dhibban to execute a multilateral census operation. “To help secure the village by documenting its residents, the operation consisted of a joint foot patrol, which allowed them time to interact with the population.”¹⁵ Colonel Muhammed Karim Muhammed, commander of the participating Iraqi Army BN, explained the census operation: “They collected key data that includes ages of family members, the number of vehicles per household, the name of the male head of household as well as any standard of living complaints.”¹⁶ Colonel Muhammed further explained that the information would be used to determine the needs of the population and “to recruit members for the Iraqi army and police.”¹⁷ Most importantly, he pointed out that the information obtained during the census operation “serves a tactical purpose by clarifying the Iraqi army’s picture on who is coming in and out of their assigned area, making it easy for them to watch for potential insurgents.”¹⁸

When truly examined, census operations and the more encompassing PRC measures are so essential to effective governmental control over a populace and security for that populace that most nations, including the United States and other western nations, must necessarily be successful at conducting these operations. Unfortunately, the government of Iraq under Saddam Hussein conducted census operations and used the information for both benign and malicious purposes. This is one important reason why many Iraqis feared a new census.¹⁹ Conversely, the requirement for the U.S. Government to conduct censuses was first established in the late 1700s and soon after codified in the U.S. Constitution in 1787. To understand what information the U.S. Government collects for its purposes, examine the six-page U.S. Census short questionnaire at http://2010.census.gov/2010census/pdf/2010_Questionnaire_Info.pdf.²⁰ Census forms can provide a foundation from which units can build their own census questionnaires or surveys, transliterated and targeted, of course, in the appropriate languages used in their AOs. To get a better idea of how the U.S. Census Bureau uses the information, examine the Census Bureau website to view some of their products, which show detailed demographic statistics and trends in table formats and interactive map displays for the nation, all 50 states, and the thousands of counties composing all the states.

Opportunities for Improvement

Census operations are fundamental to the efficient and successful functioning of any city, state, province, or nation. In counterinsurgencies and small wars, census operations are crucial. In fact, without these, modern campaigns and operations will not easily succeed, and military and security forces will not attain sufficient levels of awareness about their AOs and areas of

¹⁵ Corporal Wayne Edmiston, USMC, “1/11, Iraqi Army Perform Joint Census Operation,” *Federal Information & News Dispatch, Inc.*, 2007, available at <http://proquest.umi.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/pqdweb?did=1322663531>, accessed 18 March 2011.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Iraq Abandons Nationwide Census,” 17 August 2009, no author listed, BBC News article on-line available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8204550.stm>, accessed 27 November 2009.

²⁰ United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, “2010 Census Form D-61,” available at: http://2010census.gov/2010census/pdf/2010_Questionnaire_Info.pdf, accessed 12 March 2011.

interest, resulting in unnecessarily prolonged conflicts. Therefore, every unit involved in COIN or similar security operations should obtain or initiate and complete thorough censuses of their respective AOs and share that information with other units in the theater of operations. It is imperative that units conduct census operations on a regular basis. Of equal importance, units should review and update information on populations throughout their AOs as areas are revisited during subsequent operations and patrols. Additionally, authorities and units assuming responsibility for an AO must understand the degree and status of census operations already conducted and yet to be conducted throughout the entire AO. Finally, it is crucial that newly arriving units and staffs continue to maintain and update census databases initiated by their predecessors.

Neither information nor knowledge is power. Only the proper application of knowledge, achieving a desired outcome, is power. Consequently, militaries need to provide guidance, information, and training to soldiers on PRC measures, particularly census operations, and their advantages. For the U.S. military, FM 3-05.40 *Civil Affairs Operations* lists populace and resources control as the number one core task for Civil Affairs personnel and units.²¹ JP 3-57.1 *Joint Doctrine for Civil Affairs* mentions this indirectly.²² Logically, Civil Affairs should assume the lead in initiating and coordinating census operations, one of the most important subsets of PRC. Unfortunately, census operations are not explained or discussed to any degree in either FM 3-05.40 or JP 3-57.1.²³ Even more unfortunate, FM 3-05.401 (MCRP 3-33.1A) *Civil Affairs Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* has no mention of census operations.²⁴

Civil Affairs forces are not the only group missing the fundamental importance of census operations. Neither FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* nor FM 3-24.2 *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* addresses or explains census operations or adequately covers PRC.²⁵ Due to its preeminence in successful COIN operations, a full chapter on PRC, with a section thoroughly covering census operations, should be developed and incorporated into newer editions of the above-mentioned and similar publications. This would ensure that Soldiers and Marines would at least have sources from which they could begin reading and learning about these critical operations. One positive example regarding PRC is the *Special Forces Population and Resources Control Handbook*, offered through the Center for Army Lessons Learned.²⁶ Unfortunately, it also lacks information on census operations. Finally, courses of instruction should be developed that teach census operations and PRC measures to Civil Affairs personnel and maneuver units requiring such knowledge so that they can properly apply these tactics, techniques, and procedures, achieving desired objectives.

²¹ FM 3-05.40, *Civil Affairs Operations*, *passim*.

²² JP 3-57.1, *Joint Doctrine for Civil Affairs*.

²³ FM 3-05.40, *Civil Affairs Operations*. JP 3-57.1, *Joint Doctrine for Civil Affairs*.

²⁴ FM 3-05.401, *Civil Affairs Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*.

²⁵ United States Army Field Manual 3-24 (MCWP 3-33.5), *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2006). United States Army Field Manual 3-24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, April 2009).

²⁶ *Special Forces Population and Resources Control: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures*, Handbook No. 09-03, U.S. Army, Center for Army Lessons Learned, December 2008.

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