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## Implementing a Population-Centric Counterinsurgency Strategy Northeast Afghanistan, May 07 – July 08

**Nathan Springer**

This paper will examine the successful implementation of population-centric counterinsurgency strategy in northeastern Afghanistan through the lens of my experiences executing it in my area of operations as an Army Troop Commander from May 2007 – January 2008 and as the Squadron Fires Effects Coordination Cell (FECC) Officer in Charge, responsible for the squadron's application of non-lethal effects in the northern Konar provincial districts of Naray and Ghaziabad and the eastern Nuristan provincial district of Kamdesh.<sup>1</sup> I will recount how my unit, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 91st Cavalry, 173<sup>rd</sup> ABCT, arrived at the decision to apply a population-centric strategy and will outline the differences between an enemy-centric and population-centric focus, the transition points between the two strategies and within the population-centric strategy, and implementation of the population-centric strategy by line of operation. Finally, I will describe a battlefield calculus in terms of the time, patience, and personal relationships required to immediately empower the traditional Afghan leadership and population, from the village and the tribal levels on up, and at the same time marginalize and isolate the insurgency.

I have had the privilege of deploying to both Iraq and Afghanistan where I witnessed the implementation of two disparate strategies within the context of the War on Terror. My first deployment, OIF II in 2004-05, was set in Iraq's Sunni Triangle within a Squadron Area of Operation (AO) that stretched from Samarra north to Tikrit. My Squadron implemented an enemy-centric strategy. The enemy-centric strategy worked well in the most volatile central and southern portions of our expansive AO but we failed to recognize the situation was different in our northern AO. I didn't know it then but our Squadron missed a potentially game-changing 'transition point' in that portion of our AO. A transition point is a key juncture where the operating environment necessitates the implementation of a new strategy or the adaptation of an existing strategy to accommodate the fluid conditions on the ground. It would take a deployment to Afghanistan in 2007-08 and the implementation of a population-centric strategy for me to fully digest this and to assign full relevance to transition points, whether they represented a 180° shift from a wholly enemy-centric to a population-centric strategy, like our missed opportunity in Iraq, or the simple recognition of the transition points within our population-centric strategy in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Special Footnote: I commanded HHT 1-91 CAV in Afghanistan during OIF 07-09. HHT was a maneuver unit comprised of an Infantry Platoon, A Scout Platoon, a Reconnaissance Element, and a 120MM Mortar Section.

Colonel Christopher Kolenda, Commander of 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron, 91<sup>st</sup> Cavalry during our deployment, devised the comparative checklist seen in figure 1 below to visually depict the operating environment necessary for the appropriate implementation of an enemy-centric vs. population-centric strategy. As the figure clearly delineates, our Squadron's Area of Operation overwhelmingly demanded a population-centric strategy. The key was to understand the nature of the war we would be fighting, the nature of the people, and the nature of the enemy. Conventional wisdom suggested this was a cross-border insurgency; actually it was a local insurgency and an insurrection in the Kamdesh district. We had to understand the relationships between multiple sets of actors including the fighters and the people and the drivers of the insurgency and instability. This was critical in enabling us to develop an appropriate strategy.

Our Area of Operation was set in rural Northeastern Afghanistan where there was little to no perceived connection between the local population and the Afghan Central Government. Local tribes and community leaders had been powerful while local governance operated efficiently at the village level, which included every male in the village/tribe taking part in a Greek style tribal participatory democratic system. The village and community elders had watched their power wither over the past 30 years of fighting while radical mullahs and "commanders" had steadily gained power. An active local insurgency existed. The twist was that many of the fighters were the sons and grandsons of the village elders and mullahs, making our military's kill/capture operations often counter-productive. With over 70% of the Afghan population under the age of 25, we were not going to kill our way out of this. Finally, severe economic and social deprivation existed with a near 90% illiteracy rate while infrastructure was nonexistent.

## **DETERMINING THE APPROPRIATE STRATEGY**

<p><b>Enemy-Centric</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Conditions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Enemy is foreign or external influence; ideologically, ethnically, religiously, culturally separated from people</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Enemy unwanted in area</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Popular desire for kill-capture ops to free population</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> People connected w/ gov't</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Developed area; enemy disrupts economy, functional activities of daily life</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Method:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Focus on kill-capture; lethal (-) HVI targeting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other LLOs as able; esp as follow-on to kinetic strike</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Population-Centric</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Conditions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fighters mostly local; related to elders and villagers</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Traditional society; elders = local government</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Little popular desire for kill-capture; popular tolerance for fighters as individuals</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Immature environment; economic deprivation; fractured society</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Little connection with central gov't</li> </ul> </li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Method:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Marginalize</u> and <u>Isolate</u> insurgent leaders thru Focus on strengthening traditional leaders, governance, jobs, development, co-option (<b>Lethal and non-Lethal (+/-) HVI targeting</b>)</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Kill-Capture isolated enemy after deliberately setting conditions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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**Figure 1: Enemy Centric / Population Centric Comparison Chart<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> COL Christopher Kolenda and 1-91 Cavalry Staff strategy comparison list devised October 2007, Conn Barracks, Schweinfurt, Germany.

## **Determining the Right Mix of Strategy and Methods**

The population focused approach was neither popular nor was it the conventional wisdom of the day, as it is in Afghanistan now, in the months preceding our deployment in May 2007. The decision to implement a population focused strategy vs. an enemy-centric strategy came after months of careful preparation, consideration and research on our operating environment. Most of the leaders and Soldiers in the Squadron had completed a deployment to Iraq where an enemy-centric strategy had been applied. Changing mindsets in the Squadron took 15-18 months of preparation, study, analysis, and dialogue. The decisions about which strategy to implement or which methods within a particular strategy are tenable to execute in one's AO are critically important to success. Choose the correct strategy, or in the case of Afghanistan today, choose the correct mix of population-centric methods and your unit earns itself a chance at success. Choose the wrong strategy or mix of methods and no matter how much blood, sweat, or treasure is poured in, success will be limited.

The critical point is to understand the nature of the environment – the people, the insurgents, the factors that drive instability. Once you achieve a level of understanding, you can employ the right approaches and capabilities. Because the myriad of actors are adapting constantly, so must your approach. Unfortunately, there are no easy, pat answers or cookie-cutter solutions for any unit. In Afghanistan the overall goal of all units, ranging from Troop to Brigade, should be the implementation of a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy; however, our forces will not always find themselves in an Area of Operation ripe for its immediate, full, outright implementation. To complicate things further, you will find, as my Squadron did in Afghanistan, that each Troop or Company AO demanded a different orchestration of strategy and methods. In the northern portion of our Squadron AO in Afghanistan, it was B Troop and B Company, set in Kamdesh district, Nuristan Province, who experienced the heaviest fighting. In our Squadron's Center AO, the Troop I commanded, HHT, set in Naray and Ghaziabad Districts of Konar Province, contended with significantly less fighting and violence than B Troop and B Company in Nuristan. C Troop, set in the Squadron's Southern AO and headquartered in Asmar district, Konar Province, dealt with the least amount of fighting. Each Troop / Company in the Squadron would implement a population focused strategy; however, the methods available for implementation were different for each AO based on the enemy situation, the operating environment, and where each unit found itself in time and space using the Army's standard clear, hold, build methodology, as seen in figure 2 below.

## **Identifying Transition Points in a Population-Centric Campaign Plan**

Identifying transition points within a population-centric campaign plan has not been afforded the generous mental capital it deserves. In the early planning stages of our mission to Afghanistan in 2007, we recognized the need for an overt shift in strategy from enemy-centric to population-centric and determined it should be employed upon our arrival. A population-centric strategy was not widely used in country at the time. In today's Afghanistan, a shift in strategy to population-centric is underway beginning with the President's announcement of it to the

American people on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009.<sup>3</sup> This does not eliminate the need for the critical study of transition points within a unit from the Troop to the Brigade Combat Team. Recognizing transition points within your specific area is critical to success but easy to overlook. Now that the U.S. military has settled on a population-centric nationwide strategy in Afghanistan, a Commander must analyze where his unit exists in time and space within that strategy and what combination of methods are required for success.

Every unit that possesses an Area of Operation will find their AO is unique, possessing its own nuances, challenges, enemy situation, and population. Recognizing where you are, realistically, in relation to your dictated strategy is battlefield calculus you cannot afford to disregard. I chose the most dramatic timeframe, summer 2007, of my deployment to Afghanistan to illustrate this point. Figure 2, below, graphically represents this dichotomy. As stated above, the three Cavalry Troops and Infantry Company in the Squadron arrived at their respective AOs executing a population focused strategy. But in early summer 2007, heavy, protracted enemy contact occupied B Troop and B Company, our Infantry Company attached to the Squadron, in Nuristan constantly. Both Commanders, while forced to concentrate on fighting the enemy were still setting the conditions through building relationships with the local elders and coordinating development. Once B Troop and B Company's kinetic activities had sufficiently handed the insurgency enough of a blow to limit its effectiveness, the work they had done with the population created critical opportunities. Once this occurred, the Commanders recognized they faced a transition point and changed their focus back to the local population employing development, governance, and IO directly at the village and community levels. The conditions they had set enabled them to make the transition and sustain momentum. Meanwhile, throughout the entire summer fighting season, HHT and C Troop continued to execute a population focused strategy, each using a different combination of methods to best achieve progress within their respective AOs. As shown below, within a Squadron / Battalion-sized formation the three Cavalry Troops and Infantry Company were executing the same strategy but their tactical methods were adapted to local conditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Special Footnote: Prepared Remarks of President Barack Obama, "A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan", Washington D.C., March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

## Operationalizing the Population Centric Counterinsurgency Strategy

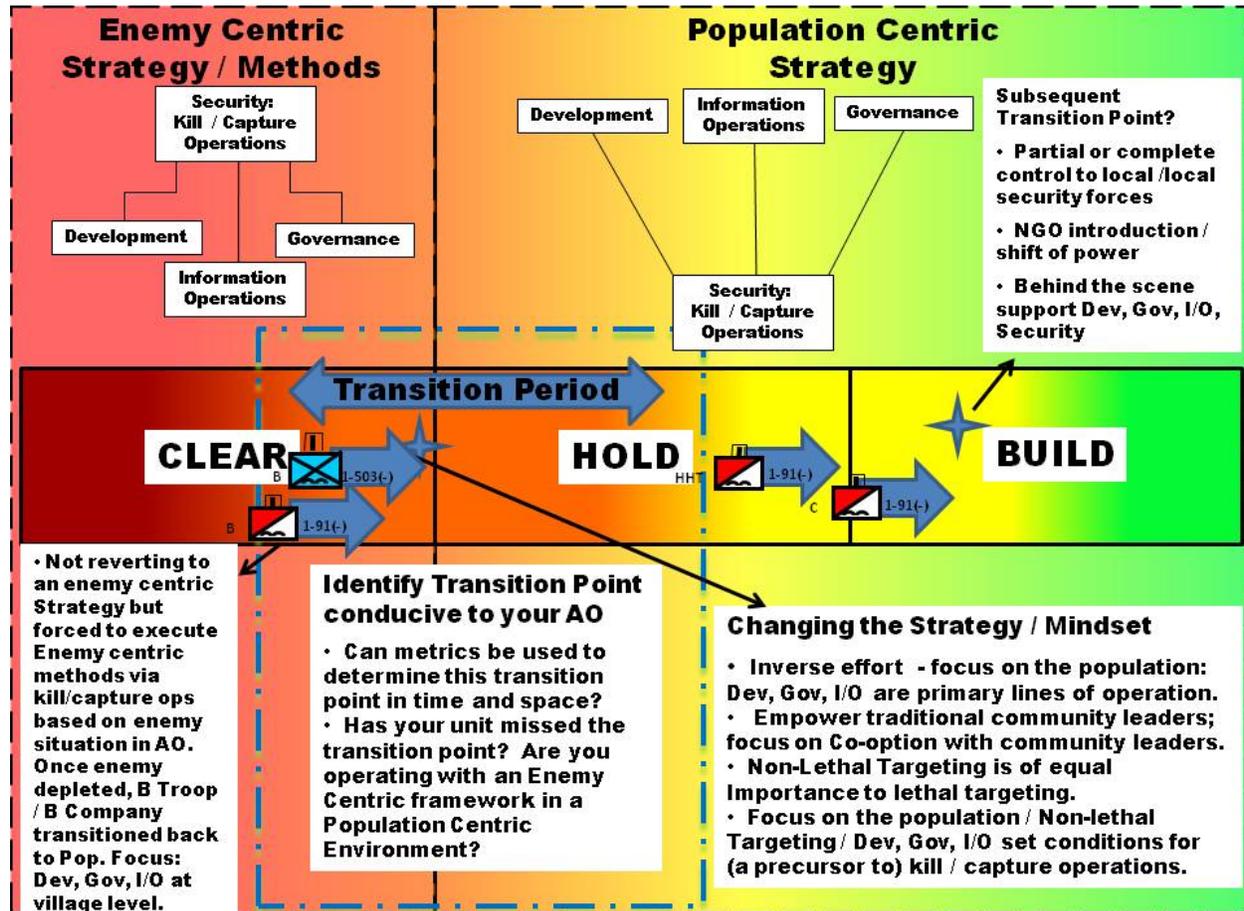
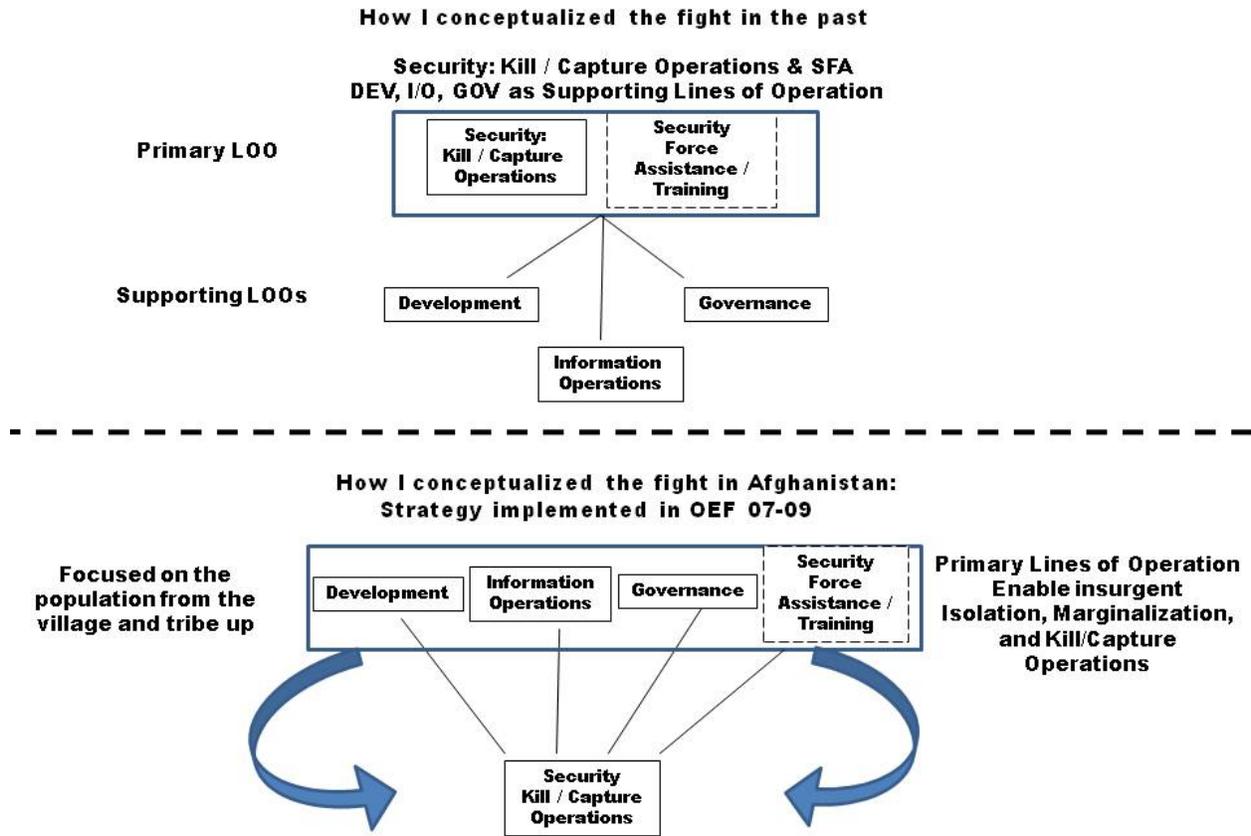


Figure 2: Population Centric Strategy

### Lines of Operation: Conceptual Shift from Conventional Wisdom

In order to operate within the parameters of the population-centric strategy my Squadron took the standard lines of operation (shown in figure 3 below) and upended them. Previous conventional wisdom, to include my deployment to Iraq, had kill-capture operations as the number one priority with Development, Governance and Information Operations serving as supporting functions. In Afghanistan we made Development, Governance, and Information Operations our primary lines of operations, with a heightened focus upon the village and district levels. This strategy hinged upon empowering local leaders, specifically village elders, lifting up and protecting the local population, and improving local infrastructure. Our unwavering focus on the population's well being necessarily isolated the insurgency, making kill/capture operations more precise with less collateral damage. Often we had both the cooperation and support of local leaders. We quickly found that by placing Development, Governance, and Information Operations as our primary lines of operation, they, in turn, created the right conditions to conduct kill/capture operations. Governance, Development, and Information Operations enabled Security, not the other way around.



**Figure 3: Lines of Operation**

### **Implementing the Lines of Operation in Konar Province, Naray and Ghaziabad Districts**

The version of the population-centric strategy I used in my AO was to leverage my primary lines of operation, Development, Governance, and Information Operations in an effort to re-empower traditional tribal and village elders. Daily, we asked one another, “What asset, knowledge, technique, or training do we possess that can be used to elevate tribal and village elders to take charge of their villages and regain the respect, reverence, and obedience of the young men living there.” We believed if we could accomplish this at the village level while providing security, improving the infrastructure, enhancing standard of living and daily life, and re-establishing a sense of normalcy the population would reject the insurgency, ban them from their villages, and demand an end to violence. We were right. Once the village and tribal elders began to restore their power and villages were empowered to reject the insurgency, the insurgency became isolated. Once the insurgency was isolated, they were easier to target, engage, and destroy. The focus on the population using Development, Governance, and Information Operations set these conditions. An analysis of the implementation of my population-centric strategy and associated methods follows by line of operation.

## Development

In my area of operation one fact was clear; the insurgency could not compete with our development dollars. Development and the dollars associated with it served as the most influential and successful weapon I possessed. The ability to bring construction and social projects into my rural communities empowered local elders while engendering the local population and marginalizing the power and control of the insurgency over that population. That said, from our first day in country we began working against organizational norms, conventional wisdom, and the established in-country processes to best utilize this very potent asset. The development money was not being spent in a way that maximized its impact. I discovered I could easily get a project approved but directing the implementation of that project was incredibly time-intensive. In almost typical American fashion development projects were given to the large companies, with the best equipment and material, often not from the local area. Further, many of the projects in progress were American ideas, not the ideas of the locals. Because of this, Americans were “building projects” but the local elders and population didn’t gain the monetary benefit or commit to the quality, security, or success of the project. Sure the company building the project hired some locals for unskilled labor, however, they couldn’t have cared less about the quality of the project once the ribbon was cut and they received their last paychecks. They would leave town soon enough but the local people would have to live with it.

### *Achieving Long Term Gains with Development Dollars: Changing the Way We Did Business*

The first idea we outright dumped was the notion that each project needed to be of a certain American quality, built with the finest of materials. Who better to know what their village needed than the village elders? Our development dollars became a primary accelerant to re-empower traditional community and village elders. We stopped telling the communities what they needed or by what standard it should be built. We started listening. We told the village elders they now possessed the power to bring prosperity to their villages. The elders would take full credit for the prosperity to come and they would be responsible for hiring the engineer to design the project, hiring the local village skilled and unskilled labor, and finally the elders took it upon themselves to provide security and quality control. The power, money, and employment the project would manifest did not leave the confines of the village itself. At countless village shura meetings across the Naray and Ghaziabad districts, heated Greek style democratic debates soon began between the elders over what projects the villagers most needed. Projects were nominated, voted on, and agreed upon at the village shura meetings with no American interjection. Once the project was decided, the village elder or elders responsible for its future success or failure attained a piece of the puzzle that had been missing in the previous way we were doing business. Their reputation and honor was now on the line to ensure the project was successful and to ensure their people were pleased with the results.

This process was the same at the district level where larger-scale infrastructure projects were proposed. The projects often benefited our larger villages comprised of multiple tribal ethnicities. The most powerful village elders from the major ethnic groups and tribes<sup>4</sup> of each

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<sup>4</sup> Special Footnote: 4 ethnic groups: Nuristani, Kohistani, Pahtun, Gojar. 3 Nuristani tribes: Kom, Wai, Gujar; 2 Pashtun tribes: Mushwani and Salarzi. There are very few tribal cluster areas with the exception of both the

district would attend their respective weekly district shura meetings. In both Naray and Ghaziabad the elders voted on and created development and infrastructure priority lists for their districts. We were completely cognizant that disagreements could arise as to the execution of the cross tribal district projects. To ensure equitability and trust between the tribes, we had the elder hired project engineers attend the weekly shura meetings, give a progress report to the elders on the project, and answer any questions they might have. Additionally, the project engineer would receive payment for the project at the 25%, 50%, 75%, and project complete stages at the district shura meeting after the tribal elders had inspected the projects progress and approved payment. We used this method at the village level when necessary. This technique worked well and possessed the same positive incentives for the elders to have a stake in the outcome because the elders themselves, the most powerful and respected in the district, had initiated these projects. They had a vested interest in seeing the project succeed.

### ***Development as the Catalyst to Establishing a Relationship with an Anti-government Village***

Development dollars opened the door to a large number of anti-government areas and villages in my AO. Personal relationships kept those doors open. The village of Saw, a key Kohistani village of around 3000 people, located very near to the boundary between the Naray and Ghaziabad districts was such a village. At my weekly Naray district shura meetings Shah Wali, a younger elder from Saw attended every week. He was sent to the Shura meeting to keep the powerful elders in Saw up to date on the happenings of the Americans based just 17KMs to their north. They weren't actively fighting U.S. presence; however, they did not support the presence of U.S. forces. Many months later I would find out from the head elder and mullah in the town why. In winter of 2005, Saw was a U.S. friendly village until one night a U.S. Army unit acted on bad intelligence and raided the village. The unit was searching for a high value target (HVT) that had been responsible for rocket attacks against the American Forward Operating Base to the north. The unit did not find the HVT, searched each house, kicking in a number of doors, and left as quickly as they came. The village elders felt dishonored and decided to withdraw from contact with U.S. forces after that day.

After a couple months, around August 2007, of weekly district shura meetings in Naray, Shah Wali and I had become friends. I talked of my desire to bring projects to Saw and establish a connection with their village. Wali would graciously listen but was still unsure of my motives and agenda. The Afghan National Army (ANA) would prove critical in our building a relationship with the village. The ANA went to Saw and began building relationships with the elders. They found out the elders of Saw were focused on bringing education to their children. After learning this, our unit sent truckloads of school supplies to Saw. The next day, the elders, accompanied by Shah Wali came to our outpost with 100 thank-you notes written in Pashtu from the kids. I was introduced to the head elder, Gulam Sakhi and the village mullah, Mullah Latif Ullah. We immediately began talking development projects for Saw. I knew I had to get a project approved quickly to re-establish trust and confidence with both Gulham Sakhi and Mullah Latif Ullah. I knew Sakhi had taken a personal chance on meeting me in the first place. He reminded me often that "when they had openly talked with Americans in the past, lots had been promised and nothing had ever been delivered."

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Ghaziabad and Naray District Nuristani populations. Villages were often comprised of a particular tribe; however, interspersed with neighboring villages of different tribal affiliation.

The development projects became a priority for Saw and were approved quickly. Between August and November 2007 we began construction upon a clinic, bridge, and school in the village. Contact with the people of Saw and Gulham Saki increased exponentially over these months to discuss project-related issues and progress reports. The Afghan National Army began to make regular trips to Saw executing medical missions, humanitarian assistance, and simply social visits with the people. I introduced Saki to my boss and he immediately became a key ally and advisor for not only my Troop but for the entire Squadron. Saw village completely turned from red to green because of the combination of the Afghan Army, development dollars and a commitment to the traditional leaders and the people of Saw to maintain a positive, active, personal relationship.

## **Governance**

I had the wrong impression of how governance would work as I entered Afghanistan. I'll never forget sitting through one of my first village level shura meetings and thinking what an amazing, advanced, effective system was in place. The Greek style, participatory tribal shura is a more pure form of democracy than we experience in our own country and provided each Afghan man a voice, opinion, and stake. The system's structure yields a drastically higher participation in Afghanistan than that of our Jeffersonian system at home. The district level meetings were another story and required a lot of my time and patience.

The district level shura meetings were run by the Troop Commander when I arrived in my AO. I worked hard to end this practice quickly and pass authority where it belonged, to the sub-governor. I fell in on what would be the best set of sub-governors I would work with during my time in Afghanistan. In Naray, Samshu Rochman, Kohistani, was accepted by the elders, was respected, and the best district administrator in my AO. After just a couple months in Naray, July 2007, I created a district governor pre-meeting with Samshu Rochman. The day before the shura Rochman and I would meet and I would pass him all the information I knew to include project approval statuses, information on my Troops operations, and good or bad news stories the elders of the district shura needed to hear. After the exchange of information I would practice with Samshu Rochman and he would provide a brief back and any concerns he may have. The next day at the Shura meeting Samshu was in charge. He ran the meeting and made the decisions, while I assumed the role of spectator. This turned out to be a great technique in the Naray district and Samshu Rochman got better with time.

Ghaziabad was my most challenging district. The district sub-governor, Haji Gul Zimon, a Mushwani, had control of 4 of the 5 tribes that lived in Ghaziabad. The weekly shura meetings were comprised of Kohistani, Mushwani, Salarzi, and Gojar's; however, the Nuristani tribe refused to participate in the Pashtun run "criminal shura." The Nuristani tribe of Ghaziabad also provided me with my largest insurgent population, often complicit in attacks on both coalition and local convoys in my AO. The Nuristani villages in Ghaziabad were one of the few tribal areas in my AO that were clustered. They were located in the high elevations, off the main road (the only road in my AO) in the Helgal, Marid, and Darin Valleys. After establishing a good relationship with Haji Gul Zimon beginning the District Governor pre-briefs, he took charge of his district shura meetings and I reached out to the Nuristani population. In July 2007, I began to

send word through the local population in Ghaziabad that I wanted to start a Ghaziabad Nuristani Shura. I was not interested in talking about the past or in their heavy participation in the local insurgency. I wanted a relationship and I wanted them to have an equal chance at the development, humanitarian assistance, and progress that the other 4 tribes were soon to receive. After a couple weeks of sending requests for meetings, the Ghaziabad Nuristani Shura came to the Forward Operating Base. They first sent a couple lower elders to feel me out and make sure I wasn't setting a trap. After a couple iterations of this, the head Mullah and elder of the shura came to see me with a shura of 30 men. We met for the first time in late August, immediately following a deadly insurgent attack on a U.S. convoy in Ghaziabad for which their tribe was responsible. The Mullah was Shamshu Rahman, and the spokesman and 2<sup>nd</sup> in charge was the senior elder Haji Mohammad Salam.

Haji Mohammad Salam was the spokesman of the Nuristani Shura for a reason; he was smart, educated, and wise. I always felt when I was talking to him that he knew more than he let on. It was rumored that he understood English but hid the fact to gain an advantage when communicating with Americans. My relationship with the Ghaziabad Nuristani Shura was tenuous at first. Some onlookers initially questioned me on why I would meet with a group known to have fought Americans in the past. My boss, COL Kolenda, had the best answer for this; he would say, "Do we want vengeance or do we want to win?" Well, I wanted to win.

The Ghaziabad Nuristani Shura issued forth a number of demands in exchange for establishing a relationship with us. They desired recognition as official representatives of their communities, possessing the same power as their rival Pashtun shura in Ghaziabad. They wanted access to development projects and humanitarian assistance and they wanted to administer it all through their newly formed shura. These conditions were easy for us to meet if only they, too, would bend a bit to accept our terms. The local insurgent leader in their area of Ghaziabad was Mullah Juma Khan. He had been complicit in a number of deadly attacks on coalition and Afghan forces in the past. We wanted the attacks to stop. Mullah Shamshu Rahman and Haji Salam did not agree to deliver Juma Khan to us; however, they agreed to marginalize him and stop his attacks. It quickly became clear that if we would recognize their legitimacy and come through on our end of the agreement, a relationship that would benefit all of us, while further isolating and marginalizing the insurgency, was possible.

The shura met every two weeks from late August 2007 on. It was our intention to eventually combine the Ghaziabad Nuristani Shura with the Ghaziabad Pashtun shura. It would prove too difficult to accomplish, however, we had achieved something, we were in direct contact with the Ghaziabad Nuristani's and we had not been before this shura. We quickly infused development dollars into their area. The proverbial carrot of development had brought them to the table while the relationships we built and our non-standard governance arrangement with their tribe kept them there. Attacks in Ghaziabad declined drastically from September 2007, on.

### **Information Operations (I/O)**

Forward Operating Base Naray possessed one of the most unique radio station capabilities in all of Afghanistan. The radio station had a range of around 50 KMs; it worked on an FM band and was fully manned with an Afghan staff. Wind-up radios were provided to the local population in

huge quantities through humanitarian assistance initiatives. The Afghan radio staff played traditional Afghan music, Afghan poetry, national and local news, and finally served as a command information medium for the Squadron. This was a huge asset for the Task Force and a capability that enabled our Squadron to quickly put out important information, dispel rumors, and tell both good and bad news pertaining to the Squadron before the insurgency had a chance to put a negative spin on it.

The radio station provided me an excellent medium to empower local leaders. This was a limitless capability that was only stifled by lack of imagination. After village or district level shura meetings, I would often invite the head elder of the meeting to the radio station to talk to his people. This was a great way to announce new project initiatives in villages or good news stories while at the same time elevating the elder making the broadcast. It also provided a great unintended consequence for us by staking the elders' reputation on the success of the project or whatever good news he announced. No elder wanted to announce good news to a few thousand of his people and then not come through. Additionally, the radio was a great way to connect the local population to its government. We would often have the Commander of the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Commander of the Afghan Border Police (ANBP), and the Commander of the local Uniformed Police talk about their organizations and how they were assisting the local population in the area. The radio station was extremely popular in the surrounding communities and it was, by far, our most effective communication medium.

We also employed a local, fully staffed newspaper crew at Forward Operating Base Naray. The Afghan journalists produced a weekly newspaper, which was widely distributed from Asmar to Kamdesh covering the local news in the area, upcoming events, and good news stories such as the kick-off of a new project or special event. It was not uncommon to be on a patrol in a local village and find a young man reading the newspaper to a group of people in the village center. The newspaper staff also completed special projects for the Squadron. We relied on the newspaper staff to conduct specific polling data of the local population that we then associated with metrics to gauge success or failure of Squadron policies or practices. The newspaper staff created handbills for distribution to the local population that both my Soldiers and the Afghan National Army Soldiers would distribute while on patrol. The handbills ranged from information announcing U.S. sponsored events in the A/O to warnings of insurgent activities.

### **Security: Kill / Capture Operations**

The focus on Development, Governance, and Information Operations within the population-centric strategy implemented in my AO does not preclude kill/capture operations; it makes them more accurate, focused, and sets the conditions for success. Further, nowhere in this strategy does it infer we didn't fight. We fought hard and punished the enemy when we were forced to do so. I was quite vocal at my shura meetings when asked about an engagement. I would always tell the elders "I may not fire the first bullet, but I promise you I'll be firing the last." The day after each fight however, we refocused and got back on track with our population-centric strategy. The best example to illustrate how the execution of a population-centric strategy can affect a major kill/capture or terrain seizure operation is the Squadron's final operation. In Nuristan's Kamdesh district, the eastern most village of Gowerdesh possessed a key bridge that had become an insurgent strong point in a relatively unpopulated area on the

outskirt of the village. Geographically, it was located at a key point on the only road in the District serving as both the southern boundary of the Nuristan Province and Kamdesh district and the furthest eastern village of size before reaching Pakistan. It was referred to by the locals in the area as the “Gateway to Nuristan.” At the beginning of our deployment, Gowerdesh served as a security station for the Afghan Border Police. The insurgency threatened the Border Police, who then ran away from their position. This opened the east/west corridor from Pakistan into Afghanistan, giving the insurgency virtually free reign to move supplies, weapons, and materials. The months to follow entailed an uptick in combat within the area. We had to devise a new approach if we were to gain, maintain, and re-establish government presence in the Gowerdesh area.

COL Kolenda, the Squadron Commander, and Captain Joey Hutto, the B Troop Commander, had established a powerful shura comprised of the most influential elders in Kamdesh in February 2008. Like the Ghaziabad Nuristani shura, they sought official recognition and access to the associated development and governance initiatives that came with it. We desired an end to the violence in Kamdesh district and to re-establish Afghan government presence in Gowerdesh. All that was asked of the elders was to marginalize the local insurgency in their district so we could bring them the lucrative development projects their population so needed. The shura had the power to do so. Many of the local fighters were relatives of the elders and would not go against them if they were united. The Kamdesh shura was huge, often over 100 members would attend, and COL Kolenda did everything he could to elevate their power in the eyes of their people. Tons of humanitarian assistance was distributed through the elders to the people. They coordinated all aspects of the development projects being infused into the area. The Squadron began to push Information Operation themes to the elders, outlining the critical importance of government presence in the Gowerdesh bridge area. Project proposals for Gowerdesh bridge and surrounding areas were approved and waiting. Meeting by meeting, the elders slowly warmed to the idea of re-establishing the Afghan Border Police at the Gowerdesh bridge. The conditions were set. Development and Humanitarian Assistance was standing by. Information Operation themes were out in every channel we possessed from the radio to the local police to citizens on the street, continuously for weeks prior to the operation. Everyone had heard the good news of the American help that would soon come to Gowerdesh.

Despite the condition-setting we had achieved, Operation Mountain Highway II was planned as a kill/capture operation. After all, we had fought there multiple times before and there were known targets of value in the area. The operation was executed, after months of pain-staking preparation, in April - May of 2008. The elders of the Kamdesh Nuristani shura agreed the operation should proceed; they had been co-opted. They agreed on the need for the border police to establish a strong position at the bridge. Development projects began immediately upon our arrival. Information Operations were aggressive and effective. Humanitarian assistance was distributed to the local population in the area within hours. After fighting in the Gowerdesh area nearly every time we had conducted an operation in the area during our deployment, this one was executed without incident because we had done the hard work of correctly setting the conditions. A few hours after arriving at the Gowerdesh bridge and immediately starting construction on the new Border Police building, the Nuristani shura walked together along the road to greet us at the bridge. There would be no bullets fired that day.

## **Afghan National Army, Afghan Border Police, and Uniformed Police**

Inherent to the success of our population-centric strategy was the success of the National, Regional, and District level Afghan security forces. I made it a rule to integrate with at least one of the three Afghan security forces in my AO on every operation, even if we were simply conducting a daily patrol. I felt comfortable operating with the Afghan National Army and was delighted to have a tactically and technically proficient counterpart, CPT Hyuddien Uddin. I did not feel as comfortable operating with the local uniformed police and the border police gave me even greater pause but I had created techniques to do so from the very beginning.

In order to adhere to my rule of including Afghan security forces in every operation, I had to get inventive. Other than what I had learned from the previous Commander, I was not acquainted the personalities in the police force. Depending on what district I was operating in that day, I would call or send for the police chief or his representatives, about an hour before our operation. Once they arrived I would brief him/them on the operation and then execute it. Nine times out of ten, even with late notification, they would be happy and honored to participate. The other technique we used often when we didn't have the Afghan Army with us was to stop at the police station in each respective district and run the same drill as described above. Once we got accustomed to the area of operation and figured out who was who, those standards were relaxed slightly for specific individuals.

As training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) was a top priority, the Squadron had two embedded training teams (ETTs) focused on the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Border Police (ABP) respectively. The Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) were trained by the local U.S. Troop or Company that possessing the area of operation in which the AUP resided. Our Afghan Army training team was Marine led. They focused on integrating the Afghan National Army into every operation we conducted in the Squadron. We integrated the Afghan planning staffs and supporting functions with their counterparts within our Squadron headquarters. The ANA was a critical component of every major operation we conducted.

A U.S. Army ETT was brought in to train the Afghan Border Police. They performed magnificently taking an inexperienced ABP Battalion comprised largely of new members and turning them into a viable police force. The ABPs efforts were critical in the planning, execution, and success of the Squadron's last operation to re-establish an ABP post at the Gowerdesh bridge. Finally, the AUP gained trust and respect quickly in my area of operation. The Naray AUP, led by their able Commander Haji Yousef, would accompany me on nearly every patrol I conducted in the district. It would not take long until Yousef was leading his police force on independent operations. Haji Yousef led the Squadron to its largest insurgent weapons cache in September 2007. The Afghan National Security forces were critical to our success and critical to the success of a population focused strategy. An overt effort was made to include, train, and mentor the Afghan Security forces with every asset we had. They are the future of their country, not us.

## **External Factors Key to Success**

### ***The Importance of Personal Relationships***

Inherent to the successful population-centric strategy I've described are the external factors that served as its foundation. Time, patience, compassion, empathy, and a desire to form lasting relationships with the local population are critical. Ninety percent of my time each day was spent building relationships with locals, learning about the tribes, clans, sub-clans of the area, having tea or meals with elders, businessmen, farmers, and mullahs. Only ten percent of my time was spent planning operations to kill or capture members of the local insurgency. Greg Mortenson's famous quote from his friend Haji Ali in the Book *3 Cups of Tea* is right on, "*The first time you share tea you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything, even die.*"<sup>5</sup> This describes the cultural situation that existed in my AO perfectly. What Mortenson fails to emphasize is once that relationship is established, the context of your relationship and future meetings from that point on are almost wholly skewed to the social side with a usually just a tiny sliver of the time addressing business. Even if there is an important, pressing issue you feel is critical to discuss, this fact does not change, ever. There was no such thing as a quick question or a rushed meeting. Our American cultural tendency to get to the point in a conversation or attain information quickly because we are in a hurry did not exist in my AO. We were guests in their country; we respected their customs. We did it their way.

The most important external aspect of the population focused strategy I executed was time spent on developing personal relationships. If I was not willing to put in the countless daily hours at the social level, I would not have been able to gain the trust and confidence of the elders in my area, which would, in turn, hobble progress. What I have said sounds simple but it is not. I encountered plenty of leaders who understood it was important to form these relationships but they did not possess the compassion, empathy, and patience to do it. If I had not been willing to let down my social barriers and form lasting relationships and friendships, the strategy would not have ever been successful. You cannot execute this strategy from the safety of your desk within your Forward Operating Base. It must be executed in the countless village centers, living rooms, district centers, and police stations you are trying so desperately to protect.

### ***Distribution of Sphere of Influence (SOI) Responsibilities and Feedback Loop***

I assigned each of my subordinate leaders with their own Sphere Of Influence in Naray and Ghaziabad districts. My Squadron Commander had his SOI comprised of the senior leaders of the districts in the AO. My main SOI was the interaction with the district sub-governors, senior Afghan security force leaders, and head elders. My Lieutenants interacted with the senior and mid-range security force leaders, elders, and local business leaders. The assignment of SOI went down to the youngest man on the patrol. It amazed me how much information I received from a Private who had just spent 5 hours in a village talking to the people and kids. SOI assignment is another thing we all know to do but few take the time to specifically assign each Soldier. It is not natural for many leaders and Soldiers to initiate such contact. It is critically important to

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<sup>5</sup> Greg Mortenson, *3 Cups of Tea* (Chicago: Viking Adult Books, 2006), p 78.

assign your Soldiers a name, face, or area for SOI and then create a feedback loop and talk to each other.

The feedback loop associated with SOI can be formal or informal. I connected more dots, devised more strategy, and learned something new about my AO every night by simply taking 20 or 30 minutes and smoking a cigar with my boss. His SOI and mine overlapped in numerous ways just like the SOI of my subordinates overlapped with mine. Each of us had met with various elders or local leaders for hours of our day. It amazed me how often I would find out that these the meetings dealt with the same issues; however, were delivered in completely different contexts and possessed altered agendas. These informal discussions often provided me with the missing piece of the puzzle I had yet to decipher. I was a big fan of the informal leader discussions and often had the same success in similar situations with my subordinates. I found that if your feedback loop required work, or was painful, it probably wouldn't happen and an opportunity would be lost.

### ***Understanding Tribal Complexities: Naray and Ghaziabad District, Konar Province***

The below tribal map depicts the complexity of the tribal situation in the Naray and Ghaziabad districts. The map was a work in progress during my deployment and provides a good general idea of the tribal areas of my AO. It took an overt effort to reach this level, which merely scratches the surface of the complexity involved when you consider the clans and sub-tribes associated with each of the major tribes of the area. That being said, I studied the tribes daily and was still learning when I left the country. As you can see in figure 4, the tribal mixture by village in my AO was random with few tribal clusters. I had to understand how these sub-tribes and clans worked with each other, what the history between them was, and their likes, needs, and wishes. Additionally, tribal mapping helped me maintain an equitable Development scheme so I wouldn't inadvertently make a couple of the villages, sub-tribes and clans powerful and rich while unknowingly excluding, marginalizing, and angering a different one.

I also learned that the district boundaries in my AO meant little to any of the locals. The district boundaries had been created by the Afghan government and were just flat not recognized by a large majority of people, especially the Nuristani's. Prior to the Ghaziabad and Naray District boundaries being redrawn, clustered Nuristani populations depicted on the map in the North / Northeast of the Naray District and the vast majority of the eastern Ghaziabad districts were part of Nuristan. The Nuristani's in those villages still consider themselves part of greater Nuristan and don't recognize the Pashtun district into which they were partitioned. Interestingly enough, the Pashtun district and tribal leaders of Naray and Ghaziabad believed the same thing and make little to no attempt to pull the Nuristani villages caught up in this situation into the fold. After careful research and a lot of time on the ground, the blue line on figure 4 below represents the reality on the ground and what the locals believe. This kind of information can only be attained through hours of interaction with the local people. These tribal dynamics greatly affected how I dealt with the local population in those areas and often led to adjustments in strategy in Development procedures, Governance, and Information Operations.

The tribal dynamics and history in my area was fascinating and my ability to understand it, or attempt to understand it, was critical. If I had not focused my effort here, I would not have been

able to break down the invisible barriers of information asymmetry. Locals naturally guarded information for survival reasons. They were not willing to share information until you built a relationship of trust. Even then you had to learn what question to ask because something obvious and self-evident to them might completely escape us if we did not know to ask the question. An example of this is the story of Mohammad Nasir, a Nuristani elder and reliable project contractor who lived in the Naray district, and Mohammad Urallah, the head Gojar elder in the Naray district. Nasir's father was Anwar Amin, a leader of a popular political organization in the 1980's called the National Islamic Front( NIF). Anwar Amin led the NIF movement in the northern Naray and eastern Kamdesh area. He was also a local hero Mujahedeen fighter and Commander in the Afghan / Soviet war. During the Afghan / Soviet war, the other rival political party the Nuristani people had joined in large number was *Hezb-e-Islami* (HIG).<sup>6</sup> The two political parties were fundamentally opposed to many of each other's beliefs; however, they maintained a marriage of convenience in their fight against the Soviets. Mohammad Urallah's father led the Gojar tribe of Naray during the Afghan / Soviet war. The Gojars at the time, and even today, served as unskilled labor and farmers for the Nuristani's. Urallah's father saw an opportunity and the Gojars joined forces with the Soviets to attack into Nuristan and establish Gojaristan. The attack into Kamdesh district failed, the Soviets and Gojars didn't make it past the village of Kamdesh and Urallah's father was killed in the fighting.

After the war, HIG proved more powerful in the Kamdesh district than NIF and expelled the NIF associated Nuristani's to the south, into the Naray area. Anwar Amin was despised by the HIG and was murdered in 1994 in his home in the town of Bari Kowt in northern Naray district. It was rumored, but never proven, that Amin was murdered by HIG operatives. Mohammad Nasir, his son, would wind up remaining in northern Naray unable to return to Kamdesh even today. Nasir, who proved to be a brilliant contractor in the Naray district, was recommended as the lead contractor for many district level projects while I was in country. Four of the five tribal elder groups would vote for Nasir every time. The Gojar elders, led by Mohammad Urallah would aggressively oppose Mohammad Nasir. Their history dictated it to be so. The point to this story is important. Tribal dynamics and their histories are complicated, twisted, and hard to follow but are critical to seeing your Area of Operation within the right historical context. You never want to get involved in someone else's blood feud. If we fail to understand the local histories and relationships, we run a high risk of becoming a pawn. There are hundreds of stories like this one and a thousand more I didn't know. You must make the attempt; without an understanding of the historical context you wind up making decisions in a vacuum and that can lead to the wrong ones that can have serious security and stability implications.

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<sup>6</sup> Hezb-e-Islami is an Islamic organization that gained popularity for fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It is led and founded by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, The organization began in Pakistan in 1975 and grew out of the Muslim Youth organization. The Islamist organization was founded in Kabul by students and teachers at Kabul University in 1969 to combat communism in Afghanistan.

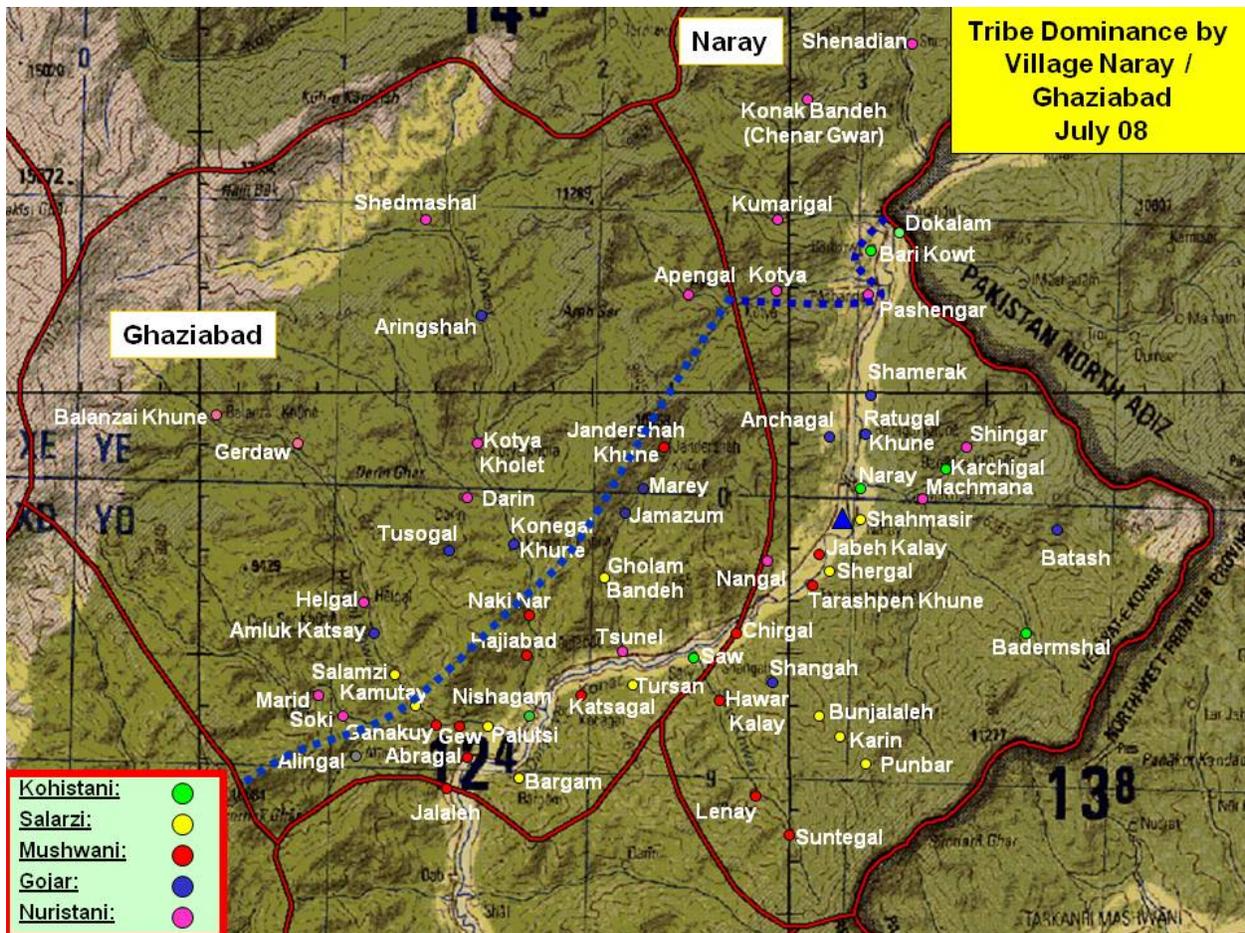


Figure 4: Tribal Mapping<sup>7</sup>

The Northeast Konar and Eastern Nuristan Areas of Operation provided plenty of challenges for my Troop and for my Squadron. We helped ourselves by adopting the right population- focused strategy. We had the latitude to change, react and adapt that strategy when necessary. The right mix of training, leadership, an inspired staff, and the courage to sit in homes on ancient rugs and listen delivered us positive results. Ours was one of the only AOs I know of in which senior leaders required all of us to read books like *Three Cups of Tea*, *Heroes of the Age*, and *Frontier's of Faith* for cultural reference. Our leadership encouraged us to reach out to the tribal populations in unprecedented ways. COL Kolenda actually wrote a letter to Greg Mortensen, author of *Three Cups of Tea* and the president of the Central Asia Institute, commending him on his efforts to build schools for the girls of Afghanistan and Pakistan and requesting advice on how to achieve similar successes in our AO. Within weeks, Mortensen's people were on the ground in our AO and our first Afghan girls' school was under construction. When leadership has the latitude to focus its military mission on the local population, everyone benefits.

<sup>7</sup> Special Footnote: Tribal map a product of the 1-91 Cavalry FECC during OEF 07-09. I was the OIC of this organization and compiled the above data.

We still have a lot to learn in Afghanistan but what I internalized the most is that everyone wishes to be respected. So when Troops deploy, it is our responsibility to enter the country with the heart of both a teacher and a student. As leaders we must analyze, study and understand the nature of the conflict and the human environment of our areas of operation. Only then can we select the right approach and apply both the appropriate capabilities for success and the right feedback loops and sensors to enable us to adapt, recognize critical transition points, and seize upon opportunities before they disappear.

*Major Nathan Springer, U.S. Army, is Chief of Operations of the U.S. Army / U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.*

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Special Footnote: Tribal map a product of the 1-91 Cavalry FECC during Operation Enduring Freedom 07-09.

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