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FEATURES

HTS Project Wide Perspective

Social Science Analysis

Case Studies

Departments

HTS Support to Information Operations: Integrating HTS into COIN Operations

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The views presented in this article are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the HTS, TRADOC, or DA.

Introduction

Modern counterinsurgency (COIN) is conducted in a complex and multifaceted global information environment that is impossible to control and provides advantages to asymmetric adversaries. In the war of ideas over the allegiance and support of the population that is at the heart of COIN, insurgents have the distinct advantage of being physically, mentally, and culturally embedded in the population. This new information environment and the nature of COIN created significant challenges for information operations (IO) in Iraq. Insurgents' information and cultural advantages empower them by negating their lack of resources and leveraging their cultural strength while negating our resource strengths and multiplying our cultural weaknesses. Human Terrain System (HTS) Teams at the tactical level can help confront both of these challenges.

We present a simple methodology based upon cultural domain analysis in targeted populations and thematic analysis of insurgent propaganda to develop culturally resonant IO themes that counter insurgent ideologies. This methodology was originally fielded in Mosul, Iraq, in 2010 to help counter the rising influence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Results from this study are presented as are lessons learned for HTS support to IO during COIN are discussed.

The Problem: IO in Iraq

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have highlighted the difficulties of conducting IO in asymmetric environments. IO is widely recognized as being central to a COIN fight and successful IO has been shown to be a central element of insurgent victories in past conflicts.[1] From the strategic to the tactical level, counterinsurgencies are struggles over ideas and perceptions. Inadequacies in U.S. IO in Iraq became apparent from the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.[2] Much of this inadequacy was due to the inability to understand the cultural environment which provided the context of IO.[3]

Within this complex information and cultural environment, U.S. IO sought to bolster the legitimacy of the Government of Iraq (GOI) and the political process while discrediting the insurgents.

While these objectives were clear, finding messages and wording that "resonated with the hopes, desires, and fears of the population" proved elusive.[4] Critics of U.S. IO in Iraq point to the inability to truly understand target populations and to rely too much on IO themes that sound reasonable from our perspective. This led to what some have identified as "mirror-imaging"–projecting our own assumptions and beliefs onto the population.[5]

To combat these deficiencies, Bilingual/Bicultural Advisors (BBAs) were employed widely throughout Iraq to add cultural fluency to IO. While BBAs play an important role in interpreting the cultural landscape and developing appropriate IO themes they also have important limitations. BBAs are not trained in scientific methods to interpret public opinion and often rely on outdated cultural information. The authors met with over a dozen BBAs throughout Iraq. Their stories were very similar. Most were born and raised in Iraq and speak fluent Arabic. They left Iraq anywhere from 10 to 30 years earlier. They are viewed as the cultural experts because they speak the language and were born into the culture. While their insight is important, it must be remembered that their advice is often based merely on informed opinion. Most importantly, what BBAs lack is the kind of granular, locale-specific and evolving awareness that can assist in fashioning targeted, precise IO messages.

Culture changes constantly and a failure to understand this can have negative consequences in IO.

For example, consider the word "sick" in American culture. With adolescents growing up in the recent decade, the word "sick" refers to something that is "crazy, cool, insane."[6] To people living in the U.S. 10 to 30 years ago, the word "sick" had a different definition–"afflicted with ill health or disease; ailing" or "mentally, morally, or emotionally deranged, corrupt, or unsound: a *sick mind*." Now consider the development of an IO campaign to discredit a group of insurgents: "Those people are sick." The American who lived in the U.S. 10 to 30 years ago would understand this to mean that the group is mentally deranged or morally corrupt. However, an American adolescent today would interpret this to mean that the group is really cool and hip. Rather than being an abstract issue, this problem actually negatively impacted U.S. IO in Iraq on numerous occasions. In the summer of 2010 an IO campaign was pursued to portray several individuals and insurgent groups as criminals. Unfortunately, the Arabic language used presented these people in more of a "Robin Hood" fashion and may have actually assisted in their recruitment.

Cultural Domain Analysis in Mosul

During the summer of 2010, Mosul had become an important base for AQI. The organization routinely extorted money from local businesses to fund its operations throughout Iraq.[7] U.S. Forces (USF) and Iraqi efforts succeeded in limiting the amount of foreign funding and fighters, making the organization more dependent on the population of Mosul and other Sunni Arab areas for funding and recruiting. While attacks had dropped significantly in Mosul, high profile attacks attributed to AQI had been positive trending since January of that year.[8] Additionally, USF had withdrawn from Mosul City and Iraqi local and Federal Police (FP) were frequent targets of AQI. Solving the Mosul problem was essential in limiting AQI's influence across the country.

An informal IO and non-lethal targeting working group including representatives from Counter-Improvised Explosive Devices Operations Integration Center (COIC), the USF Iraq IO Targeting Section, HTS, and the USF-Iraq (USF-I) J2 Targeting Section was formed to look at the issue of AQI in Mosul. A targeted IO campaign for Mosul was needed; however there was a serious concern about repeating the mistakes made in Baghdad only a few months earlier. We proposed conducting further assessments and research in Mosul to help develop and refine messaging themes and language.

At the time, Mosul was a non-permissive environment for USF. Local units rarely conducted missions of any sort within the city. With this in mind, we developed a social science-based research design that focused on gathering as much pertinent data in as little time as possible as we knew missions there would be very constrained.

We suggested the use of a rapid ethnographic technique known as Cultural Domain Analysis (CDA). CDA has been recognized as a simple and powerful tool for eliciting cultural information from a relatively small group of respondents. As such, this technique is well suited to rapid ethnographic assessments in non-permissive and semi-permissive environments. A cultural domain is a set of words or ideas that a group of people understand to somehow belong together. Studying cultural domains generally begins with eliciting free list responses. Respondents are asked to list all the words, objects, or ideas that they associate with the topic of interest. The frequency with which words are repeated across respondents reveals the concepts that are most central to that topic for the population.[9]

For our CDA in Mosul, we choose the topics of the "hero" and the opposite of the hero. This topic was chosen for two reasons. First, we knew that AQI presented itself as heroes and guardians of the Sunnis of Mosul. Second, concepts such as "hero" are value laden and culturally defined, suggesting they would elicit richer and more detailed responses. A pilot study was first conducted using a nine member contracted Iraqi focus group in Mosul. Questions were tested for response time, cultural appropriateness, and data quality. Upon review of the pilot study, the HTS team social scientist and the COIC Deputy in coordination with the IO campaign manager narrowed the CDA collection to two questions: "What are characteristics of a hero?" and "What are the characteristics of the opposite of the hero?"

Additionally, content analysis was conducted on AQI martyrs' eulogies found within their propaganda. A list of descriptors that were used to describe the martyr was gathered from each text.[10] The frequency of usage of each descriptor was re-

corded in the individual texts. The frequency with which a descriptor word is used in a text to describe a martyr is assumed to correlate with the importance of that word to the idea of martyr with AQI's propaganda. This allowed us to compare the image of the hero held collectively by Moslawis with that propagated by AQI.

Mission Preparation

Several challenges faced the CDA mission in Mosul. The first issue was trust. Senior military leaders were very skeptical of the importance of the mission. Most officers are not trained in ethnography or social science and many do not even view the disciplines as science, requiring data and proper statistical analysis. There was a cultural bias within our own military. Many believed that while HTS social scientists may know their discipline, they did not understand warfare since they were civilians. As such, they could not see the value that HTS brought to the fight, or they did not feel comfortable in knowing how to integrate social scientists into military operations. Fortunately for the Mosul CDA mission, the IO failures in Baghdad and the simplicity of the CDA ethnography method allowed senior leaders to see the importance of the mission and approve of its execution.

The primary concern of the mission was the security of the team (civilian social scientists and interpreters). There had not been any patrols into the crowded markets of Mosul for about 5 to 6 months. Al-Qaeda held a strong presence in the city as well. In fact, the chief of the Iraqi Federal Police in Mosul was initially uncomfortable with the security of the mission.

To address the security concerns, the Stability Transition Team (STT) operating in Mosul provided transportation and security for the mission, partnered with the 3rd Iraqi Federal Police. The STT leadership was able to see the value of the mission and was motivated to provide support. The leader of the CDA mission had served in the 1st Special Forces Group with the STT leader about 10 years earlier and although they did not know each other at the time, their shared military experience provided confidence and trust. In a meeting with the chief of the Iraqi Federal Police, the CDA mission leader discovered that the chief was former Iraqi Special Forces and had a strong admiration for West Point, where the mission leader had served as a professor. After sharing a few stories of similar experiences, the chief felt comfortable enough to authorize the partnered mission into Mosul.

The Iraqi Federal Police did an excellent job of providing cordon and outer security for the CDA mission, while the STT members acted as bodyguards for the social scientists. Data collection was limited to one hour on station and focused on speaking to vendors in the markets. In one of the markets, there was suspicious activity in the second floor residences above the market in a couple locations, which provides perhaps the biggest challenge to any HTS mission: balancing security with mission accomplishment.

The tradeoff between an ethnography focused mission and security is a difficult problem. The civilian social scientist is not trained in combat operations and may not be able to adequately assess the security and safety of a situation. On the other hand, the soldier is not trained in ethnography and is not able to adequately assess whether potential security measures might bias data collection or even determine how much time is needed on station to complete the mission. Success of the mission depended upon rapid collection of data. The time spent developing the research design, honing our research questions through discussion and pre-testing, and the ease and speed of CDA as a method allowed us to collect the required responses for a valid sample on two short missions. This limited the exposure of the researchers, linguists, and the U.S. and Iraqi forces providing security while ensuring adequate research to develop IO messaging.

It is critically important to discover the balance to ensure that the HTS can serve as a combat multiplier. The value of an ethnographic approach such as CDA is as much of a combat multiplier as sources of intelligence. Traditional military intelligence is limited in that there is no necessary scientific background to collect current cultural data. A reliance on sources lacking trained social scientists such as BBAs or soldier first-hand accounts can lead to outdated or scientifically biased data that result in failed operations such as the IO campaign in Baghdad.

Results

Mosul CDA. Responses collected in the Mosul CDA were transcribed and coded in Arabic, then

translated into English. The translated data was analyzed using Visual Anthropac 1.0 Freelists to reveal the frequency, average rank, and salience of responses. Responses that were mentioned by more than one respondent (see Table 1) were interpreted as representing a shared assumption about the nature of the hero.

Table 1. Responses of Mosul residents to the question: What are the qualities of a hero?

Item	Frequency (%)	Average Rank	Salience	
Courage	36.4	2.38	0.293	1st Tier Response
Generosity	27.3	2.67	0.171	
Morals	25	2.36	0.172	
Sincerity	20.5	3	0.148	
Trustworthiness	20.5	3.44	0.114	
Helping	11.4	3.2	0.041	2nd Tier Response
Chivalry	9.1	2.5	0.064	
Good	9.1	2.25	0.049	
Manliness	9.1	4.5	0.049	
Vigilance	9.1	3	0.065	
Concerned with the Family	6.8	2.67	0.028	
Religion	6.8	1.67	0.061	
Truth	6.8	2.67	0.04	

AQI Martyr Eulogies. The frequency of usage of each descriptor of a martyr in AQI eulogies was recorded in the individual texts. The descriptors of each text were then arranged according to frequency. These descriptor lists were then used as freelists and analyzed using Visual Anthropac 1.0 Freelists. This ranked the descriptors across all the texts by frequency, average rank and salience (See Table 2).

The AQI martyr eulogies contained a list of frequently used descriptors that occurred in all or most cases. This suggests that AQI has a clear and consistent messaging agenda. This image of the martyr, however, conflicts with the image of the hero as described by *Moslawis*. A hero for Moslawis is characterized by the possession of a recognized set of values and principles. Attributes that addressed physical strength and prowess generally ranked low compared to those representing virtue and morals. While the hero is seen protecting family and community, no respondents mentioned fighting or struggling against enemies, nor jihad or martyrdom. Islamic State of Iraq martyrs, on the other hand, are distinguished by their waging of jihad, fighting and struggle against enemies, as compared to the hero described by *Moslawis* who solves problems peacefully.

Table 2. Descriptors of martyrs found within AQI martyr eulogies.

Item	Frequency (%)	Average Rank	Salience	
jihad	100	1.91	0.927	1st Tier Response
martyr	100	2.73	0.859	
paradise	72.7	9.13	0.378	2nd Tier Response
enemies	63.6	4.57	0.462	
hero	54.5	8.83	0.3	
faith	54.5	11.5	0.255	
reward	45.5	8.2	0.231	3rd Tier Response
noble	45.5	13.6	0.204	
lion	45.5	14	0.164	
fight	36.4	7	0.244	
sacrafice	36.4	14	0.152	
brave	36.4	9.75	0.216	
righteous	36.4	13.25	0.157	
generous	36.4	11.75	0.192	
umah	36.4	6.25	0.233	
patient	36.4	12.5	0.172	

From Research Results to Messaging

As a result of our thorough mission analysis, research design and coordination with IO production assets, the results of this study were of immediate practical use to the staff. The results of the CDA provided a wealth of Arabic words and ideas that preserved elements of the Moslawi dialect and could be used in counter-AQI messaging. Additionally, the comparison with AQI martyr's eulogies showed clear domains where Moslawis were at odds with the organization and its goals. Subsequent analysis of results provided further insights that informed several products of an IO campaign aimed at limiting AQI's influence in Mosul.

Lessons Learned

Cultural and ethnographic data gathering should be treated like any other validated form of information that contributes to intelligence. It is an important combat multiplier for conducting military operations and it requires individuals with unique skills to accurately collect data. Missions require planning and resources on the same level as any other intelligence collection effort in the reconnaissance and surveillance plan.

CDA as a method has several distinct advantages. First, it generally requires a small number of respondents for representative sample, with 30 to 40 being a commonly cited number. This allows for ease of collection in non-permissive environments. Second, interviews are simple and generally progress quickly, allowing for more rapid data collection.

Third, since collection for a CDA does not directly ask about sensitive topics such as insurgent groups or support for the government, response bias is not a concern. Fourth, this method is particularly suited for IO development as it can capture regional and dialectical words and phrases that are appropriate for message development.

While we have focused on the collection of ethnographic information, it is important to keep in mind that the HTS mission is an intelligence enabler. While they certainly have a role in collecting a unique form of information as highlighted in this paper, they also serve as cultural experts to the command. As such, they provide a technical domain expertise in the same manner as a chemical, military police, engineer, or medical officer would. HTS is responsible for providing cultural input for mission planning across all operations. IO is only one example.

Placing a military officer in charge of the HTS team who possesses a graduate degree in social science is highly desirable. Civilians are not placed in charge of any other staff section or tactical unit in the military. The military plans for officers serving on special staff to receive proper training and experience for their role. Many Army officers pursue master's degrees sometime after their company command. Therefore, there are officers available who possess an understanding of social science. While their level of education may not be sufficient to effectively plan and conduct an ethnographic study, their education is important for their ability to understand the social scientist and bridge the gap between military operations and ethnography. The ideal situation of course, is to identify field grade officers with PhDs in an applicable social science and assign them as human terrain team leaders.

Endnotes

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"Forum Participant Posts Eulogy of ISI Martyr Abu-Umar Al-Shami," GMP20101103176001.

"ISI Releases 38th Edition of 'Biographies of Prominent Martyrs' Series," GMP20091130101001.

"Jama'at Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad Eulogizes ISI Leaders Al-Baghdadi, Al-Muhajir," GMP20100428083004.

"Writer Abu-Muhammad Al-Maqdisi Eulogizes ISI Leaders Al-Baghdadi, Al-Muhajir," GMP20100426050012.

"Eulogy of Iraqi Jihadist Doctor by Jihadist Writer Husayn al-Ma'adidi," GMP20101102121001.

"Islamic Group in Iraq Eulogizes ISI Leaders Al-Baghdadi, Al-Muhajir," GMP20100505101001.

"Al-Ma'sadah Media Interviews Mother of 'Martyr' Abu-Sa'd al-Tunisi" GMP20100825142006.

"Forum Contributor Eulogizes Al-Zarqawi's Lieutenant Sulayman Khalid Darwish," GMP20091117342001.

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