



HUMAN TERRAIN SUPPORT FOR CURRENT OPERATIONS

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In the article “The Human Terrain System: A CORDS for the 21st Century,” which appeared in the September-October 2006 edition of *Military Review*, the authors (Dr. Jacob Kipp, Lester Grau, Karl Prinslow, and CPT Don Smith) described the need for “giving brigade commanders an organic capability to help understand and deal with ‘human terrain’—the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic, and political elements of the people among whom a force is operating.” For over a year Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) have been addressing that need in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The teams have supported brigades in numerous ways, including identifying local populations’ needs and perceptions from the “grass-roots” perspective; engaging influential political, military, business, tribal, religious and other cultural leaders to cultivate credible local, provincial and national governing institutions; and identifying the formal and informal centers of gravity and external influences on the local populations through social network analysis.

Operations Attal and Sham Shad, which were conducted in the Paktika province of Afghanistan from November to December 2007, were two of the first fully integrated operations to include a Human Terrain Team. The team successfully engaged and interviewed the local populations to map tribal dynamics, determine effects of coalition forces’ (CF) operations, conduct market assessments, and identify the population’s views on governance. This allowed the team to acquire a more robust and integrated socio-cultural, political, and economic awareness of the brigade’s area of responsibility in order to provide coalition forces with operationally relevant information related to the human terrain, improving the commander’s understanding of the local populations.

Through field research, the HTT was able to support the commander and his staff by identifying developmental, governance, and security issues within the province. Development within the province was in a questionable state, with the local population perceiving that the severe joblessness was due to the government not fulfilling its duty to provide local jobs. Local leaders voiced their concerns that, without jobs, their people were susceptible to taking money and support from adversarial elements. Additionally, households were relying on remittances from distant family members and loans. As noted on an HTT report from Operation Sham Shad, “money earned through work abroad is sent back to families as



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Human Terrain Teams identify local populations’ needs and perceptions from a grass-roots perspective.

remittances through the money transfer system (locally referred to as *hawala*), [which] is used to sustain families.” Through applied social science methods, the team determined that a rapid price inflation of staples was straining this *hawala* system. According to the report, analysis by the HTT determined that the price increase was the “primary determinant of whether the local situation was improving or deteriorating; and whether the current government is good or bad.” The team also discovered that the perception of the local government was linked to the price of staples. This analysis of the local populace’s needs was then incorporated into the unit’s planning and local operations, enhancing the development in the province and stabilizing the area.

The team was also successful in identifying the local populations’ perceptions and interactions with local governance. The HTT’s analysis discovered that locals viewed “good” government as one that consults with elders, incorporating the local tribal structure into government decisions. The team’s interactions among the local populace provided the following insights: “All respondents stressed qualities of listening, consulting with elders, fairness, equity, reciprocity, and bringing the government, tribes and people together.” Prior to operations in the area, both Afghan officials and coalition forces held strong perceptions that Paktika province was an isolated, insular area. Once on the ground, the HTT discovered that a portion of the district was actually highly transnational, possessing world views that included concepts of government that came from the Arab peninsula and Afghanistan’s neighboring

countries. In some areas, this generally younger, transnational population of those who left Afghanistan primarily for work was viewed as the powerbrokers of an area based on wealth, rather than age or family status amongst the tribes. This analysis led the HTT to recommend to the BCT commander a different method of interacting with the local populace; one that did not center on the common assumption that the center of power is based on the elder tribal members of the area.

The HTT was also able to highlight the negative synergistic effects of predatory local government practices on the district population. The effects of this “bad” governance led to the collapse of a district *shura* and a feeling among a segment of the populace that only the Taliban could protect them. One elder had reported, “People were tired of the Taliban because they beat them. Now, if this government [also] beats them, what should the people do?” The HTT revealed to the BCT staff a case study that Taliban fighters in the area affected some of the population, but the effects of bad local governance affected all of the population. Ultimately, Afghans view the *shura* as the center of decision making, and the provincial and national governments need to take into

account this model. This research analysis was a key planning factor for the brigade to support the need for provincial government officials to strengthen the ties to the local populace by meeting their security concerns. This improved interaction by the provincial government reduced the local populace’s support of the Taliban.

The HTT best displayed this type of cultural analysis in Yousef Kheyl District, where the team was able to assist the brigade in coordinating humanitarian assistance distribution in a more equitable manner. The HTT discovered the problem with the distribution process by interfacing with the local population during Operation Attal. The HTT recommended that the brigade distribute the supplies through the district sub-governor (DSG). This new system was based on the tribal elders supplying a list of village families in the greatest need of support to the DSG, who would then provide the distribution information to the brigade through the Provincial Reconstruction Team. This system was more successful than the previous system by ensuring equitable distribution based on tribal consensus, rather than a less legitimate, western manner. It also provided the brigade with accountability of distributed items.

Lastly, this manner of humanitarian assistance distribution brought the local population to the government and aided in developing legitimacy for the DSG.

Finally, the team was able to address local perceptions on security. The local perception was that there was a direct correlation between the ability of the coalition forces to provide protection for the local leaders and their capability to protect the general population. According to the Operation Sham Shad HTT report, this view stemmed from the fact that “since 2004, Paktika has been the site of numerous attacks on Afghan civilians, including electoral workers, tribal elders, religious scholars and professionals. A number of prominent tribal elders were assassinated between 2005 and 2007, most notably the head of the Sharan tribal shura, a prominent Sharan tribal member, and the head of the Kushamond tribal shura.” These assassinations led to many effects identified by the local populace. These included government officials leaving the province, the local population unwilling to work for or with the government, collapse of the tribal *shura* and anger at the assassinations. In fact, the report also noted, “One of the more profound effects both described and observed was elder self-censorship and fear of talking openly to both the CF and also to other senior shura members.”

The integration of this human terrain information gathered in the field by the Human Terrain Team provided the brigade’s common operating picture an added cultural perspective. Thus cultural perspective positively influenced the planning and decision-making processes of the unit.

In Sadr City, Iraq, a Human Terrain Team provided extensive support to brigades during local key leader and governance engagements. The activities of identifying, prioritizing and interacting with influential political, military, tribal, business and religious leaders fit perfectly within the Human Terrain Team’s scope as researchers and facilitators of the socio-cultural aspects of the operational area. HTT analysis of key leader engagements were based on the local culture, which assisted the brigade in distinguishing individuals on the basis of tribal and religious affiliation, in contrast to western measures of influence based on occupation, wealth, fame, or success.



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A Soldier with the 4th Brigade Combat Team’s Human Terrain Team drinks tea with the heads of the local schools during a mission in Nani, Afghanistan.

The primary focus of the HTT in Sadr City has been the engagement of tribal support councils, neighborhood/district councils and Government of Iraq leaders to assist the brigade in influencing the community into supporting the local and national Iraqi governments. This improved the equal distribution of good governance and government services to the local populace, which increased government services and provided a more equitable distribution of those services to the local populace. A key factor in this success was HTT efforts in the certification of tribal support councils and their integration into the governance of Sadr City. The end-state of this model was a protocol of neighborhood/district council meetings where the executive branch of the Government of Iraq interfaced and engaged with the neighborhood/district council representatives. This cultivated long-term opportunities for reconciliation of disputing factions and helped build credible local, provincial, and national governing institutions.

One HTT technique that greatly contributed to the brigade's success in Sadr City was a tiered and nested engagement plan within the brigade that engaged the appropriate level power structure with the appropriate coalition leader. An example of this was the team's idea and support in hosting *iftar* dinners during Ramadan which incorporated political, tribal, and religious leaders, furthering operational goals and demonstrating the brigade's support of local cultural/religious traditions.

Examples of an HTT's extensive and successful support of a brigade's reconciliation and security efforts occurred in Zarafaniya and Tisaa Nissan. The team there had been successful in assisting the brigade in realizing the need for a balanced approach to lethal and non-lethal operations in this area of Baghdad. To support the non-lethal effects desired by the brigade, the team made use of non-traditional methods to develop a systematic key leader influence strategy, assisted the Civil Affairs units in prioritizing projects to support that strategy, identified and leveraged the current and historical owners of real estate, and supported the brigade's creation of a reconciliation and security co-op individually and between Sunni and Shi'a populations. The key to all of these tasks was accurate identification of the formal and informal centers of gravity and external influences on both Zafaraniya and Tisaa Nissan. This process was successful in influencing the Zarafaniya and Tisaa Nissan populations to support the local Iraqi government.

The team began by identifying the key leaders in the brigade's area of operations through council meetings and interviews of the local population. These events allowed the team to start to piece together a social network analysis of leaders and their constituents in the area by "study[ing]...social structure to analyze the patterns of ties linking its members...to understand properties of the social, economic, or political structural environment and how these structural properties influence observed characteristics and associations related to the characteristics." By engaging both coalition-perceived power brokers (council members) and previously unidentified leaders (discovered through discussions with the local population), the team zeroed in on the true key influencers. Once they had identified these leaders and understood their personalities, they were able to develop an engagement strategy. These engagements, held outside of current council meetings, assisted the brigade in building invaluable relationships which enabled them

to address local concerns and needs. This needs analysis allowed the Civil Affairs unit to focus the brigade's limited resources on projects that provided the most positive effect on the community. This process of identifying the community's highest priority needs and working these projects with local leaders was a key factor in the brigade's success.

One of the key issues identified by the HTT through this field research was to identify real estate ownership. Due to the recent violence and forced removal of both Sunni and Shi'a personnel in the area, rightful ownership of land and the return of displaced personnel was the key factor in developing a reconciliation strategy. The HTT was invaluable to the units in the field by identifying major land owners and how the brigade supported the legal process in determining the rightful owners. An example of this was the Bouniya Farm issue. *Jaysh al-Mahdi* had forced the rightful owner out and was using this large estate as a cache site and a staging point for operations. The recapture of the estate (through the legal process in Karada and enforced by Iraqi Army/coalition forces) and its redevelopment has helped cement a pro-Government of Iraq (GoI) presence, boosted the economy by stimulating agriculture in the area, and increased the legitimacy of both GoI and the legal process in east Baghdad.

The identification of the key power brokers, use of reconstruction projects for appropriate effects, and recapture and redevelopment of lands led to a more amenable environment and improved security and reconciliation. In Zafaraniya and Tisaa Nissan, the key to reconciliation of Sunnis with the current majority Shi'a was increased security, primarily from *Jaysh al-Mahdi* and other Shi'a militias. The security plan was developed with the assistance of the HTT, which was different from the "Awakening" process seen elsewhere in the country. Instead of bringing primarily tribal Sunni personnel into a pseudo-security force, the unit's security plan focused on the implementation of the current laws which eliminated any notion of sectarianism or tribalism. This plan allowed estate owners to take part in securing their own personal property. In addition, the security plan linked the neighborhood councils to the Iraqi Army and police leaders to form a security council. The benefits of this plan were they improved local stability, enforced local rule of law, secured rightful real estate ownership, and legitimized the Government of Iraq. The security plan had secondary effects of economic activity and investment in local goods (specifically agricultural).

The three examples described above keenly display the human terrain system's dedication to training and deploying Human Terrain Teams to assist combat brigades. This support has taken many forms and used different methodological constructs, leveraging the socio-cultural aspects of the brigade area of operations and creating a clearer picture of the human terrain for both the commander and his staff.

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