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At the Limits of Knowledge – Human Terrain System

Abstract

Armed conflict is a human enterprise such that, by extension, understanding of the human dimension in a given area of operations should be thought integral to planning successful operations. Human Terrain System (HTS) was the most expensive social science program in history – the US Army's has quietly come to an end. During its ten years of existence, the controversial program cost tax payers more than \$ 725 million. The Pentagon distributed much of the funding to two large defense firms that became the HTS's principal contractors: BAE Systems and CGI Federal.

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Cultural awareness will not necessarily always enable us to predict what the enemy and noncombatants will do, but it will help us better understand what motivates them, what is important to the host nation in which we serve, and how we can either elicit the support of the population or at least diminish their support and aid to the enemy.

Major General Benjamin C. Freakley,
Commanding General, CJTF-76, Afghanistan, 2006

Introduction

As the Afghanistan campaign drew down in early-2014, plans to transition the program to a post-war capability took shape. The HTS program was transitioned on September 30, 2014, into the residual organization at TRADOC called the Global Cultural Knowledge Network. The network is composed of a commissioned officer, three social scientists, a geospatial specialist, and a knowledge manager (Fondacaro 2012, p. 34). Quoted in “The New York Times” in 2015, an intelligence officer at the command noted that the remaining organization was a “nucleus” capable of rapid expansion if required, but that TRADOC lacked the administrative and support infrastructure to embed social scientists in the future (Weinberger 2011, p. 6). Thus the fall of 2014 brought to a close one of the most ambitious and compelling social science experiments conducted by the U.S. military, and its character and content deserves investigation (Lamb 2013, pp. 21-29).

When HTS was first announced in late 2006, I followed its development with concern. Along with many other anthropologists, I opposed the program because of the potential harm it might bring to Iraqi and Afghan civilians – and to future generations of social scientists who might be accused of being spies when conducting research abroad (Belcher 2013, p. 62).

Apart from anthropologists, HTS had other critics. A small but vocal group of military officers publicly criticized the program, noting that it was “undermining sustainable military cultural competence” (Connable 2009, pp. 57-64) and that in practice, “the effectiveness of the HTT’s [human terrain teams] was dubious at best”. Yet despite these criticisms, the program grew exponentially. At its peak in 2010, HTS employed more

than 500 people ranging from career academics with PhDs to retired Special Forces personnel. Over the next few years, more than 30 “human terrain teams” (HTTs) were deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the program’s annual budget exploded to more than \$ 150 million (Brook 2013, p. 62). Then in 2014, an odd thing happened. News reports and official statements about HTS virtually disappeared. Its slick website was no longer updated. HTS’s boosters fell silent.

Human Terrain System

The Human Terrain System was a U.S. Army project intended to provide military decision-makers in Iraq and Afghanistan with greater understanding of the local population’s cultures and perspectives. HTS deploys Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) of five to nine civilian and military personnel to support brigade, division, and theater-level staffs and commanders with operationally relevant information. The program also provides training for deploying personnel, reachback analysis, and software tools developed by HTS to support socio-cultural analysis. HTS emphasizes the use of tools and approaches commonly associated with the academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology’ in its efforts to collect and analyze data about local populations.

First, the HTS program has been, in many ways, a success. It is a unique and dynamic program, and its leadership and staff have been able to generate a new and innovative capability within a bureaucratic environment that is not always open to such initiatives. In our interactions with HTS personnel and staff, we consistently came across individuals who were deeply committed to the mission, which most likely has also contributed to its successes. The program also has support within the Army leadership. General David Petraeus, who recently became commander of International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, is a staunch supporter. There are some indications in the data we collected for this assessment that this capability fills a gap for the war-fighter and therefore has made an important contribution to U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan (Connable 2009, pp. 55-62).

Second, the program remains the target of criticism. Part of this appears to stem from specific incidents and poor decisions that have occurred within the program, such as sending unqualified personnel into combat zones. Our analysis suggests that poor internal communications and the absence of an overall outreach or communications

strategy may also be contributing to a misunderstanding of the program's goals and operations. This may also account for some criticism.

The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) manages, supports, and is responsible for the oversight of the HTS program. The components of HTS can be divided into two primary categories: the deployed teams and the continental U.S. (CONUS)-based components that support them with administrative support, training, reachback analysis, and information technology (Brook 2013, p. 62).

Deployed components include:

- Human Terrain Teams (HTTs): support brigade-level commands;
- Human Terrain Analysis Teams (HTATs): support division and higher-level commands;
- Theater Coordination Elements: provide social science support to theater headquarters, provide in-theater project management support to teams deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan, and coordinate HTS SSRA capability;
- Social Science Research and Analysis teams: also at the theater level, hire indigenous organizations to conduct surveys and then analyze and distribute the survey results;
- CONUS-based operations are located in Newport News, Virginia, and Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and include: Project management office, business office, and human resources: provide administrative and project management support;
- Operations directorate: provides logistical and administrative support to deploying, deployed, and returning personnel and plans for future personnel requirements;
- Training directorate: conducts the 4.5-month training program for deploying personnel;
- Social science directorate: develops policies and research standards, communicates these standards to deployed HTS personnel, and conducts outreach to the military, academia, and the media;
- Project development team: conducts assessments and gathers lessons learned to improve the HTS project;
- Reachback research centers: responds to requests for analysis submitted by deployed HTS personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan;

- Knowledge management: has developed a suite of software tools for deployed HTS personnel and is developing additional software and database capabilities;
- Combatant command (COCOM) liaisons: reach out to regional combatant commands to help them define their requirements for socio-cultural research.

HTS has outlined the following process for human terrain teams' work. According to HTS officials, this is based on lessons learned from teams that have been deemed successful by brigade commanders:

1. Prioritize efforts: work with the brigade commander and his staff to determine priority areas and issues where the human terrain teams should focus.
2. Conduct background research: review open-source and classified information available in theater. If needed, contact the HTS reachback research centers for more in-depth information.
3. Create a research plan: determine where the team should visit, who they should talk to, and what questions they should ask.
4. Conduct field research: conduct primary field research (principally interviews) and write field notes.
5. Analyze field research: conduct additional database and background research to determine what else was going on during the time the team was in the field. Determine links, patterns, or trends.
6. Report findings: write a research report and create briefing slides for the brigade staff. If appropriate, release the report for further dissemination.
7. Follow-up: work with brigade staff to prioritize and plan for follow-on research (Russell 2006, pp. 53-62).

A successful HTT should be fully integrated into the unit, and the team leader and field social scientists should become trusted advisors to the commander and staff. HTTs should participate in a variety of working groups and meetings within the brigade. They should receive command and staff direction in the same manner as other attached special staff elements, such as the chaplain or the judge advocate general (JAG). The brigade combat team commander determines the extent of the HTT's interaction and relationships with the rest of the BCT staff and subordinate units.

Social Science Research and Analysis Management Teams (SSRA)

The SSRA management teams are in Iraq and Afghanistan, co-located with the TCEs. The number of deployed personnel as of June 2010 is: 12 (3 contractors in CONUS and 9 deployed contractors).

HTS contracts support for SSRA teams in Iraq and Afghanistan. The deployed SSRA management teams contract with local polling organizations to collect information through polls, surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The SSRA management team develops the research plans for the local polling organizations, collects the results, provides initial analysis, and distributes the results to the theater headquarters, supported human terrain teams, and the reachback research centers.

The SSRA capabilities are theater-wide assets, and the deployed SSRA management teams are co-located with the theater coordination elements described above. Their primary focus is answering questions for deployed HTS teams. These teams request survey research, and the SSRA managers' scope the survey projects and determine what questions will be asked based on their budget and the availability of local national surveyors (Russell 2006, p. 72).

In Afghanistan, the SSRA has two on-going surveys: the national identity survey and the tribal matrix survey. SSRA asks the same questions to different survey respondents on a 45-day cycle. Based on information requests from specific human terrain teams, they also add new questions to specific areas or country-wide.

The results of these two surveys are compiled every 45 days and shared via Sharepoint. The deployed SSRA management teams and the three personnel at the CONUS-based research and analysis management center review the surveys and survey reports to ensure that appropriate statistical methodologies have been employed and the survey results have been accurately reported. The social science directorate, described further below, intends to hire an SSRA coordinator to review the SSRA products, look for survey trends over time, and provide long-term peer review of the survey program. SSRA surveyed thousands of individuals and issued numerous survey reports. It has provided information to individual teams about individual questions, but to date, no one has systematically reviewed this large body of information.

Operationally Relevant Social Science Research in Iraq and Afghanistan

“Effective war-fighting depends,” wrote the anthropologist Montgomery McFate in her 1994 doctoral dissertation on British counterinsurgency in Northern Ireland, “at the most basic level, on the ability to cope effectively with disorder.” The U.S. government’s controversial effort to harness the social sciences in support of its counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in an initiative known as the Human Terrain System, was one of the most ambitious and innovative efforts of the post-9/11 era to help warfighters make sense of conflict’s inherent chaos (Wax 1987, pp. 23-38).

Human Terrain Teams, which blended civilian academics with military personnel, were intended to help soldiers better understand the battlefield. Attached to front-line military units, teams would provide information on the cultures, customs, and practices of local communities—otherwise known as the “Human Terrain” of the battlefield. The program marked a significant wartime experiment for the U.S. Army: More than 1,000 personnel were deployed during its duration, from 2007 to 2014 at a total cost of nearly \$ 750 million, making the Human Terrain System the largest investment in a single social science project in U.S. government history. And yet for all of its promise, the Human Terrain System failed to deliver. The program sought to make the U.S. campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan smarter, more culturally astute, and more self-aware – but what resulted was a clash of cultures, ideologies, and egos that contributed to the end of the Human Terrain System in September 2014 (McFate, Laurence, pp. 10-34).

Military solutions aimed at recapture in such situations are only one element of the answer to U.S. foreign policy questions at both the strategic and tactical levels. Understanding the historical trajectory of a region through social, economic, and political lenses, including as much engagement with communities as security allows, can create powerful platforms for policy formation. The output of research conducted in and around Sadr City, Iraq, by HTTs for example, has afforded a deeper understanding of the position of the population regarding the violent actors than previously existed, by investigating popular sentiment and the relation of civilians to these actors. As one social scientist notes of the prevailing tendency to obscure the host nation in studying the Iraq conflict, there has been a systematic neglect of any: detailed examination of the localized dynamics of violence (instead, more commonly dismissing the viability of such exploration by presenting Iraq as hopelessly divided and impenetrably complex), the

country and its people have received only token attention from authors whose central focus has lain elsewhere.

There is scope for institutionalizing social science research capabilities if the home for the HTS would be in the planning phase of military strategy. However, the program envisaged as a strategic articulation was improperly conceived.

When we talk about phase 0 – theater security, we are talking about in its current form from four social scientists at our Army service component commands. We are talking very small numbers at a headquarters. And when they deploy for a specific mission, go and embed with a force, going forward with a force for 3 weeks, 4 weeks, for however long a discrete mission is and returning. Nothing as permanent or as direct as what you are talking about what we did in Afghanistan to support the Village Stability concept (*Ibidem*, p. 55).

The HTS embedded field social scientists throughout 8 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, and their research explored these “localized dynamics of violence” through a myriad of heterogeneous methodologies.

The ongoing effect is an aggregation of research, insights, and experiences borne from a program which, at its height in 2009, had more than 40 HTTs deployed and embedded an estimated 700 people between 2007 and 2010/2011.

The public output of this research is already considerable, including in its sweep several academic presses and multiple scholarly journals.

Research Results

Social science research had to be adapted to the battle rhythm: “if it takes 3 months to conduct a study and the deadline is 2 weeks, that automatically makes the person conducting the study irrelevant in the eyes of the commander and in helping the mission” (Krohley 2015, p. 67).

The result, is that the extent to which these cultural initiatives had permanence or integral relevance to the day-to-day operations planning was questionable: “It’s not bad, it’s not irrelevant, it’s not non-existent, but it’s just questionable” (Department of the Army and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps (2006, pp. 3-33).

That makes the research goals of primary importance; if HTT research products serve the commander, then they are tailored to the operational tempo of the mission

and must necessarily be rapid reporting. The operating environment, “the battle rhythm was important; we were hinged to the operational pace of things. Human Terrain Teams; I saw maybe three briefs during the commander briefings, so maybe at a pace of one a month” (Krohley 2015, p. 67).

This problem experienced by HTTs in the field in Iraq and Afghanistan was captured in the unresolved tension of modeling insurgencies in the 2006 Counterinsurgency field manual: “It is important not to oversimplify an insurgency. However, analysts and commanders still require a means of defining and describing the enemy that can be commonly understood” (Russell 2006, p. 72).

“The changing character of the human terrain is also stated explicitly in U.S. Army doctrine: Societies are not static, but change over time” (Department of the Army and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps 2006, pp. 3-33). Capturing this change with deep qualitative analysis is complicated by the military that “as a customer of social science knowledge, wants to apply whatever they learn to solve problems in a timely, practical manner” (Kaplan 2013, pp. 213-219).

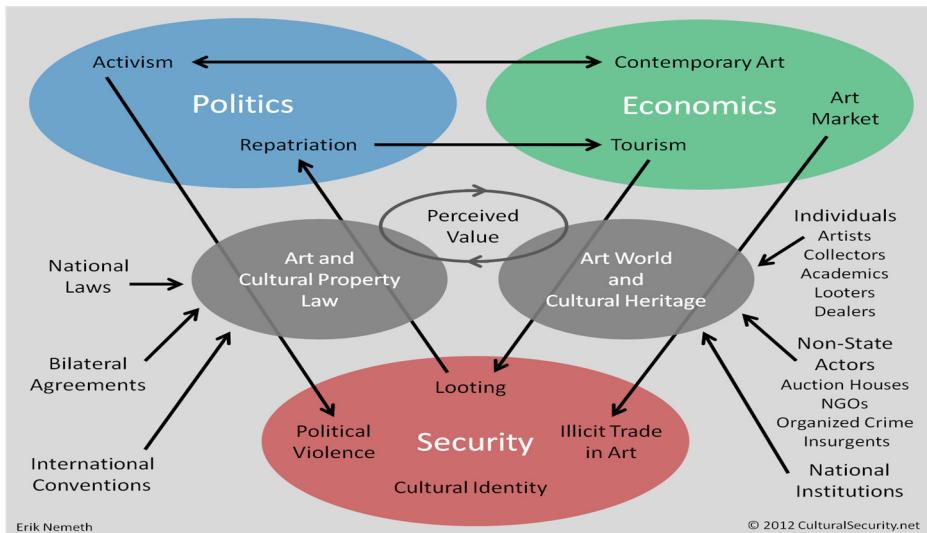
The customer ideally learns at the pace of the most valuable asset a command has – its data. As the data evolves, monitoring must capture that evolution in real time. Qualitative research, however, necessarily takes time to develop a plan, conduct the research, write-up the findings, and brief. By that time, what is the state of the original snapshot of the human terrain that was researched? (Krohley 2015, pp. 57-62).

One social scientist provides an example of an Afghan who is illiterate and received no formal education being polled as to the legitimacy and security of the national government. “Legitimacy” and “security” are not innate concepts, but abstract concepts learned through childhood education, and with increasing sophistication as that education continues; therefore understanding is contingent upon being educated. Asking that Afghan about security, to which they reply “great” reflects as “good” in the poll. But if you talk to the Afghan for 30-40 minutes, talking to him for as long as you can, you find that the Taliban physically abused him last week or has stolen his phone; that for him is security because he is not being killed, and from an International Security Assistance Force perspective that is not security, and for what the poll is trying to measure, that is also not security (von Clausewitz, Howard, Paret 1976, pp. 119-120).

The diagram illustrates interactions that create a political economy of cultural property. The large colored ovals designate major dimensions – politics, economics, security

– and associated motives for exploiting the perceived value of cultural property i.e. artworks, antiquities, and monuments.

Fig. 1. Cultural Security



Source: Kilcullen 2013, pp. 288.

The smaller, grey ovals identify manifestations of art and culture. The central, overlapping oval depicts how laws on art and cultural property and actors in the art world interact to develop the “Perceived Value” of cultural property.

The result is polling data which has emerged from Afghanistan which, lacking qualitative assessment, can be highly misleading. From this perspective, mixed methods would win out over a purely quantitative understanding of the tactical and operational pictures.

In that social scientist's view, it is dangerous to draw a Link Chart, and say “we are mapping their telephone calls”. You also have to understand the social relationships and personal histories of the people involved, in order to bring valuable context. This means that you have to “sit down and have lengthy conversations with people and get to know them; you have to dig deep and quantitative methods don't allow for that sort of digging” (Seymour, Deitchman 1976, p. 348).

Thus, while the promise of big data is shifting the military emphasis toward quantitative analysis, in the words of data scientist: “quantitative is going to take the charge with a lot of the data analysis. It is not really a criticism of qualitative analysis. I think when done well, both have utility” (Human Terrain System 2010, p. 34). When done well and with a responsive staff command, HTT research augmented the picture of the battle space. To satisfy the military consumer, the social scientist must capture granular detail quickly and enter the battle rhythm to brief the commander on its significance. So too, the research itself requires significant expertise to resolve within its myriad complexities. As Seymour and Deitchman noted of the complexities of social science work undertaken during the Cold War, “The fact of the study, its subject, and the presence of the researchers all affect the social system being studied, in ways that are uncertain and difficult to assess” (Metz 2015, p. 45).

As such, HTTs will always fight against the military preference for kinetic modalities in operations – US Department of Defense exists primarily because of a need to apply force – but it is a fight that is crucial to a more granular understanding of combat, a more nuanced comprehension of the links between societies and war (Sims 2012, pp. 178-180).

The high operational tempo of brigades necessarily hastened research processes and created something new; a social science reporting platform which was never standardized through 2007-2014 because of the difficulty of integrating *sui generis* experiences at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, under a program management engaged in an ad hoc working pattern. A baseline research template for applied social science may facilitate future integration of the research into staff planning.

Success was defined by the militarization of the civilian, by personality and adaptability. Integrating personnel into the unit was pivotal if they were to be considered a valuable addition to the array of personnel and could contribute not just research capabilities but a number of functions from erecting HESCO barriers to guard duty when attached to Special Operations Forces units. Academics therefore had to become military personnel, in function if not in form. Probably the most prominent item of training and from lessons learned: was that you had to spend more time on militarizing those folks that we took from all the civilian walks of life and bringing them into an organization that is not necessarily one you have down on Main Street.

The cross-cultural divide is pronounced, complicating uniformly robust value-added social science capability to brigades in stabilization operations, as seen by the heterogeneous performance of embedded teams in Iraq and Afghanistan. Effective social scientists all successfully made the transition.

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