Stabilizing Iraq:

Intelligence Lessons for Afghanistan

by Barry Harris **(/experts/barry-harris)**

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Brief Analysis

After the U.S. initiation of hostilities in Iraq in 2003, Washington's focus shifted away from the conflict in Afghanistan. Until recently, U.S. policy focused on winning the war in Iraq while securing an apparent coalition victory in Afghanistan. Although this policy yielded positive results in Iraq, it led to drift and a series of security reverses in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, despite vastly different circumstances, the United States has learned many lessons from Operation Iraqi Freedom that can be applied to Operation Enduring Freedom, particularly in the intelligence arena.

Background

Not long ago, sectarian violence, brutal attacks with improvised explosive devices, ambushes, assassinations, and kidnappings were the norm in Iraq. This situation, however, has changed dramatically over the last eighteen months, and the frequency of these types of events has diminished significantly. Some observers attribute the dramatic changes in security to the 2007 "surge" of U.S. military ground forces into Iraq, while others believe the Sunni Awakening, in which U.S. forces helped establish local Sunni militias, should be credited with much of the success. Both factors contributed to the remarkable turnaround in Iraq; however, the major reason for success can be traced to timely and accurate intelligence, born of new technologies and innovation, new leadership at the combat support agencies (CSAs), and new tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) derived from lessons learned on the battlefield, which enabled U.S. forces to undertake highly effective, intelligence-driven operations.

In Iraq, initially, the enemy was always one or two steps ahead of the coalition, but improved intelligence capabilities and adjustments in TTPs changed this dynamic. Accurate, timely intelligence allowed coalition forces to be proactive rather than reactive -- often disrupting the enemy during the planning or implementation phase of an operation. Army and Marine intelligence along with the Department of Defense (DOD) and national intelligence agencies have made significant changes to better support counterinsurgency operations in Iraq.

Intelligence-Driven Operations

The entire intelligence community and each intelligence discipline -- human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), geospatial or imagery intelligence (GEOINT), as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems -- primarily unmanned aerial vehicles -- have contributed in varying degrees to the effort in Iraq. The CSAs have begun to replicate in Afghanistan the support they have provided in Iraq, increasing the

strain on the most precious resource -- manpower. But with a shift in priority from Iraq to Afghanistan, and with Washington committed to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011, the manpower burden should ease.

Human Intelligence. Initially, HUMINT operations in Iraq were difficult and did not yield timely and accurate information: it takes time to develop HUMINT capabilities in any environment, especially under combat conditions, due to the need for operators to become familiar with their surroundings and understand the society and culture they are operating in. HUMINT was particularly important for exploiting the opportunities created by the Sunni Awakening, which yielded a torrent of information as local citizens began to identify al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) facilitators and operatives in their communities, allowing coalition forces to deliver a serious blow to AQI's infrastructure.

HUMINT has improved significantly in Iraq, and many of the lessons learned are being incorporated into training and preparing forces for future deployments. HUMINT units have also benefited from increased resourcing. HUMINT platoons are now being established in every military intelligence company at the brigade combat team (BCT) level, and two robust HUMINT companies are being incorporated into every battlefield surveillance brigade military intelligence battalion, providing an unprecedented level of tactical HUMINT capability. Experienced HUMINT planning and management sections have been added at the BCT and division levels. Civilian contractors have been employed to fill the need for more interpreters.

Lessons from Iraq have also informed an upgraded HUMINT in Afghanistan. As in Iraq, HUMINT assets are being pushed down to the BCT level, and operational commanders now have a better grasp of how best to employ HUMINT assets. Consequently, HUMINT teams and unit leadership are now more familiar with their surroundings and Afghan culture. Finally, through the use of civilian contractors and refocusing of the Army's language program, more interpreters and interrogators are being provided. Despite these successes, more needs to be done. U.S. forces must continue to make sensitive HUMINT information available to its coalition partners and the Afghan government. And NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) must train Afghan military and civilian personnel to conduct HUMINT operations so they can collect, analyze, and disseminate this information to their own forces.

Signals Intelligence. SIGINT was very important at the onset of hostilities in Iraq, but became less relevant after the Iraqi army was defeated. With the reconstruction of Iraq's communication infrastructure, however, SIGINT has reemerged as a valuable source of information. The National Security Agency (NSA) has pushed cryptologic support teams down to the BCT level and deployed assets in theater so that information and support is timely and relevant. Because NSA has control over all SIGINT operations, it is able to lead effectively and synergize these operations. NSA hosts weekly meetings and video teleconferences in Iraq and Afghanistan with all SIGINT-producing entities to guide SIGINT collection, discuss successes and failures, share TTPs, and assess emerging enemy tactics.

SIGINT support continues to improve in Afghanistan, and as the country modernizes and the infrastructure improves, opportunities for collection and exploitation will increase. As it did in Iraq, NSA has started pushing cryptologic support teams down to the BCT level in Afghanistan. The biggest challenge in Afghanistan is being able to share intelligence with coalition partners without divulging sensitive collection methods. As with HUMINT, the Afghan government needs to be trained to conduct SIGINT operations on their own.

Geospatial Intelligence. In the area of imagery or geospatial support, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) continues to enhance the operational commander's ability to visualize the battlefield. In Iraq, NGA established geospatial support teams at the force, corps, and division levels, and in coordination with NSA recently provided manning down to the BCT level. NGA analysts were integrated into cryptologic support teams providing near-real-time actionable SIGINT and GEOINT to brigade combat team commanders. In conjunction with NSA, NGA developed the TTPs and identified requirements for integrating GEOINT into SIGINT and HUMINT "find-fix-finish" support

operations. In addition, NGA advisors, working with the Iraqi Directorate of Imagery and Mapping-Intelligence Affairs (DIMA), forged an effective relationship with their Iraqi counterparts and helped them develop the analytic skills to support Iraqi combat units. These interactions also led to the development of a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement between NGA and the Iraqi DIMA. The agreement facilitates the exchange of geospatial data, allows the Imagery and Mapping Directorate to support Iraqi military forces with GEOINT, and decreases Iraq's reliance on U.S. forces. No other CSA has developed this level of intelligence cooperation and sharing with its Iraqi counterparts.

In Afghanistan, GEOINT has eclipsed the other intelligence disciplines in sharing of information and TTPs as well as training of analysts, just as it did in Iraq. NGA established geospatial support teams at various levels within ISAF and, again, similar to Iraq, plans to integrate NGA analysts into cryptologic support teams. In 2008, NGA advisors developed an excellent relationship with the Afghanistan Geodesy and Cartography Head Office. As a result, Afghan GEOINT analysts are providing products at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels and a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement has been developed between the two organizations.

Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance. DOD's 2009 Quadrennial Roles and Mission Review Report states that persistent reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities provided by unmanned aerial systems have proven to be invaluable force multipliers in Iraq and Afghanistan. ISR platforms such as these give ground forces the ability to cover more territory, including previously inaccessible terrain. Gen. Raymond Odierno, commander of multinational forces in Iraq, commented that "employment of ISR, according to the current counterinsurgency doctrine, set the conditions for the initial success of the surge in Iraq. Decentralization of ISR assets allowed brigade combat team and regimental combat team commanders (faced with vastly different problem sets) to gain and maintain contact with the enemy. ISR evolved along with the fight."

The robust ISR currently available to brigade-level commanders in Iraq provides them with an unprecedented level of situational awareness and is now being deployed to Afghanistan, where ISR use on the battlefield is becoming critical and decisive. Commanders will now have the flexibility to push ISR assets -- which are among the most powerful enablers on the battlefield today -- to the lowest tactical echelon. Afghanistan is a large country, roughly the size of Texas, with diverse and treacherous terrain, which in many places is not easily accessible. Persistent surveillance will significantly multiply coalition combat capabilities in Afghanistan. (See **PolicyWatch #1519 (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3056)** , "Intelligence Transformation: Meeting New Challenges in the Middle East and Beyond")

Conclusion

While Iraq and Afghanistan have many similarities, one major difference is the presence in Afghanistan of forty nations working as part of ISAF, under NATO command. The complexity of interoperability, data management, and data sharing (in part due to classification issues) is one of the top issues that NATO faces in day-to-day operations. The recent establishment of an Intelligence Fusion Center in Afghanistan, where analysts from NATO nations work together on critical intelligence products, provides an excellent example of needed cooperation. Sharing sensitive data in a multinational environment is challenging, but these issues must be resolved in order to win the counterinsurgency campaign and provide a peaceful and secure environment in Afghanistan.

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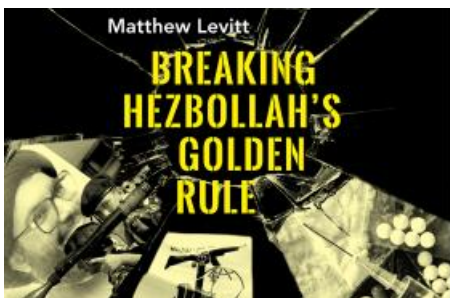(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

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