

# The Human Terrain System in Northeast Baghdad: The View From The Team Level

Written by Peter W. Pierce and Robert M. Kerr

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PETER W. PIERCE AND ROBERT M. KERR, AUG 20 2012

Much has been written about the U.S. Army's Human Terrain System (HTS). The idea of embedding civilian social scientists with combat units in Afghanistan and Iraq has been met with a wide spectrum of opinions, ranging from supportive (Kipp, Grau, Prinslow, and Smith 2006) to vehement opposition (Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009; AAA Statement on Human Terrain Project 2007). Some have also tried to take a more objective look both at the ethics and the overall effectiveness of using HTS in military operations (Connable 2009; Hodges 2011; Lucas 2009; Schatman 2008); but most of these focus on arguments made by people lacking direct experience with the HTS program or its embedded Human Terrain Teams (HTT). US Army Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Thompson recorded his experience as a former team leader of an HTT in east Baghdad (Thompson 2010), but his account of the actual work and utility of a deployed team stands virtually alone in providing an interested reader a realistic account of the utility of HTTs in the field. Rather than engaging in the already lengthy debates surrounding the ethics or roles of social science in military operations, the focus of this article is to provide another insider account of the HTS concept in a culturally complex area: the northeast Baghdad Districts of *Istiqlal*, *Adhamiya* and *Sadr City*, where heavy fighting persisted throughout 2008.

### The HTS Concept

In a 2005 article published in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Montgomery McFate highlighted "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture" (McFate 2005b). In it, she argued that military planners consistently fall short of total mission success when they do not fully understand the cultures of their adversaries. The HTS mission takes this concept a step further by saying that while it is important to "know thy enemy", it is just as—*not more*—important to know and understand the cultures of those noncombatants living in an area of operations, even if they are not an enemy. The reality in Iraq is that by 2008 multiple insurgent groups representing a variety of interests (Sunni, Shia, and nationalist) were fighting not only against Coalition Forces (CF), but against the Government of Iraq (GoI) as well. Yet, the vast majority of Iraqis had no interest in fighting either American troops or the GoI's own security forces. The danger for CF troops operating in Baghdad was that cultural misunderstandings and failure to understand how the society functioned in this area had the potential to turn neutral (or even supportive) groups of people against the coalition and to the side of the insurgents. Perhaps the post Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) sequel to McFate's article should be "The Military Utility of Understanding the Culture of Potential Partners as well as Adversaries". This was the focus of HTT IZ03: finding and getting to know the key leaders in the area who would be instrumental in increasing security and stability.

### HTT IZ03 and 3BCT4ID

As part of the strategic-component of the famous Iraq "Surge" of 2007-08, Human Terrain Team IZ-03[1] (HTT IZ03) was assigned to the U.S. Army's Third Brigade Combat Team of the Fourth Infantry Division (3BCT-4ID) which was operating in the northeast Baghdad Districts of *Sadr City*, *Adhamiya*, and *Istiqlal*. 3BCT was commanded by US Army Colonel (COL) John Hort. Prior to "the Surge", Coalition Forces had primarily operated out of huge Forward Operating Bases (FOBs), some of which were so large they contained all the comforts of home, including enormous Post/Base Exchange complexes where CF soldiers and personnel could purchase anything from plasma televisions

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to fast food. Harley Davidson motorcycles could even be delivered straight to soldiers' homes in the United States. By 2008, COL Hort's BCT had relocated from one of these "Super-FOBs" to a smaller FOB on the east bank of the Tigris River in Adhamiya: 3BCT dubbed the FOB, "War-Eagle". Elements of the 3BCT were pushed further out into neighborhoods throughout northeast Baghdad, occupying a series of even smaller Combat-Outposts ("COPs"), and a number of very small Joint Security Stations ("JSSs") shared by both American and Iraqi troops. Never before in OIF had so many American troops lived in such close proximity to everyday Iraqis, and the overwhelming need for the military to quickly learn as much as possible about their new neighbors became both critical and unavoidable.

## The Mission of HTT IZ03 in the Operational Environment (OE)

HTT IZ03 had as its major responsibility, the task of helping COL Hort, as the Brigade Commander and senior ranking military authority in northeast Baghdad, sort through the complicated web of personalities, tribes, and sectarian interests in his "Operational-Environment" (OE)[2]. HTT IZ03's task was all the more formidable, given that (in 2008) these Baghdad Districts and neighborhoods were not only among the most (ethnically) diverse places in Iraq (with Sunnis, Shias, and even some Kurdish and Christian groups living in extremely close proximity), they were also among the "kinetic" (the Army's somewhat euphemistic phrase for violent or combat-intense). For instance, the District of *Adhamiya* retained a large number of Saddam loyalists and *Al-Qaida-in-Iraq* (AQI) insurgency support-networks, while *Sadr City* was unarguably the epicenter of the Shia-led insurgency steered by *Muqtada al-Sadr* and his *Jaish al-Mahdi* (JAM), or "Mahdi Army". Unfortunately, a tragic legacy for the HTS, and a reminder of just how violent and lethal this District is, occurred when one of HTT IZ03's Social Scientists, Nicole Suveges, along with several CF soldiers, State Department officers, and Iraqi citizens were all Killed-In-Action (KIA) in an IED bombing of the Sadr City District Council building on June 24, 2008.

## HTT IZ03's Mission Mandate

Not surprisingly, the Sadr City District Council Building IED strike had a profound effect on HTT IZ03; not only psychologically but also by directly impacting its mission to 3BCT. Most HTTs—in both Iraq and Afghanistan—operated in close concert with their respective BCTs "embedded-Provisional Reconstruction Teams" (ePRTs). The ePRTs, along with the attached US Army Civil Affairs (CA) Teams, were the designated US agents responsible for distributing humanitarian and reconstruction aid. In order to have any chance of success in aid-reconstruction, the CA/ePRTs needed to have some information (or "intelligence") on the local politics and culture. HTT IZ03 would thus play a (perhaps *the*) critical role in the gathering of this critical information.

The process by which HTT IZ03 would gather information was—not surprisingly—multifaceted. HTT IZ03 members would either debrief CF personnel who interacted with the civilian population or they would accompany such personnel "outside the wire" when these respective CF teams deployed into the neighborhoods. Such teams included: (1) CF Combat and Security Patrols; (2) CA Teams; and (3) Psychological-Operations Teams. HTT IZ03 would also debrief the CF personnel in charge of the *Iraqi Advisor Task Force* (IQATF), an initiative designed to tap into the Iraqi "Man on the Street" by hiring native Iraqi survey takers.

## Identification of Key Leaders and the Execution of Key Leaders Engagements (KLEs)

The "kinetic" nature of the 3BCT's OE, however, meant that gathering such information was problematic and dangerous. The Sadr City District Council Building IED strike further complicated HTT IZ03's mission by robbing the 3BCT's ePRT of its governance team advisor; Steve Farley from the State Department, the ePRT's governance advisor, was among those killed in the bombing, but he was never replaced. HTT IZ03 thus inherited the *de facto* role of (local) governance advisor for 3BCT.

Given its broad mandate, once on the ground level, an HTT could play many roles in a war-zone. Given the dual mission of (1) gathering political and cultural information, and (2) *focusing explicitly on aiding the local District and neighborhood government*, HTT IZ03 adopted as its primary role one that focused on identifying key leaders in the area to engage with governance and civil capacity building projects. Simply put, HTT IZ03 had to identify influential members of the local community, and then successfully execute Key Leaders Engagements (KLEs)[3] with these

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local power brokers in order to gather information, often in support of civil capacity-building. HTT IZ03 would continue to gather information from its other sources, but the KLEs would be its primary focus. With its additional governance mandate, HTT IZ03 could not exclusively identify key local Iraqi political leaders and develop a strategy to successfully engage them (for information); it also had to work with key local Iraqi political leaders and advise them as to how they could be more successful in operating basic government services at their local District and neighborhood level.

The main KLEs between HTT IZ03 and the key local Iraqi leaders were three-fold. First, HTT IZ03 would execute KLEs with the District Advisory Councils (DACs) and Neighborhood Area Councils (NACs)—the pseudo-elected bodies in each District (and neighborhood) created by the CF after the invasion. In 3BCT's OE, that would be the DACs for *Adhamiya*, *Istiqlal*, and *Sadr City*. Such KLE's would occur on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Second, HTT IZ03 would execute KLEs with local government managers (the *baladiya's* and *comecom's* of the Baghdad Provincial Government) as well as various elements from the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF): local Iraqi Army units, National Police units (from the Ministry of the Interior), and local Baghdad Police units. These KLEs would be more informal and only scheduled periodically.

Third, HTT IZ03 would execute KLEs with the *Sadr City*, *Adhamiya*, and *Istiqlal* Sheikh Councils. The tribal system in Iraq remained robust and important, and Sheikh Councils dated back to the old *Ba'ath Party* regime. Sheikhs remained influential members of Iraqi society even in urban centers like Baghdad. They were additionally important as the sheikhs were often secular in outlook and nature, and they could serve as useful counter-weights to the influence of religious leaders (*imams*) and the religious-backed political parties, who could be decidedly anti-CF. Moreover, the sheikhs were critically important as they were often in charge of the militia forces associated with the "*Sahwa*" Movement (also known as the Sons-Of-Iraq [SOI] Program). 3BCT also deliberately enhanced the sheikhs' "*wasta*" (influence) in Iraqi culture by implementing a semi-informal "parole-system", whereby insurgents could be "paroled" into the custody of their tribe's sheikh, in exchange for early release from custody.

## Tactical Over-Watch Governance and *Iftar* Dinners

In conjunction with its secondary mission of advising and assisting 3BCT with enhancing local governance, HTT IZ03 developed a specific local governance strategy in anticipation of the coalition's overall drawdown, and in support of *Tactical Over-Watch*. *Tactical Over-Watch* was the military planners' term for the next strategic phase of the CF's overall Iraqi Campaign. On the "kinetic" (lethal) side, it meant handing over primary counterinsurgency duties to the ISF, with CF units in a supporting (or "tactical over-watch") role. CF planners on the "non-kinetic" (non-lethal) side also needed to develop a similar strategy for this next campaign phase, whereby the CF would turn governance (and the providing of basic services) back over to the Iraqis and their new government. Simply put, the idea of *Tactical Over-Watch* was to enable Iraqi leaders at all levels of government to assume the lead role in both security and governance issues in anticipation of the complete withdrawal of Coalition Forces. Within 3BCT's OE, HTT IZ03 saw that a critical shortcoming of local government was that democratically elected NACs and DACs had no real control over the local government managers; those managers still reported to the un-elected bureaucracy in central Baghdad. Under the advice of the Human Terrain Team, 3BCT started taking a less active role with the DACs and NACs to enable them to interface more deliberately with Gol representatives at the municipal and provincial government level. This increased the amount of influence local elected officials were able to assert in the context of the more powerful, and better funded city and regional institutions.

Deferring to the Iraqis at the District and Neighborhood governing councils was a bold step, and both CF leaders and their Iraqi partners were initially reluctant to take the first steps. Military leaders were nervous that relinquishing direct control over the councils might foster insecurity, while the Iraqis were unsure that they could count on the continued advice and support of the Americans upon whom they had become so dependent. Fostering trust and rapport during this transitional period was crucial to forging the new partnership, and the Ramadan season of 2008 provided an invaluable opportunity to strengthen the ties between the two groups. In Islam it is traditional to hold a special dinner during Ramadan in which the traditional daily fast is broken. These *Iftar* dinners provide opportunities for family and friends to come together and celebrate the bonds that tie them together. HTT IZ03 facilitated six *Iftar* dinners to bring together dozens of key players from the various centers of influence—the DACs, the Sheikh

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Councils, the Iraqi Security Forces, and local government managers— informally with the Brigade’s commanders, staff officers, and State Department representatives. This culturally appropriate gesture facilitated by the HTT had immediate and lasting dividends in terms of building trust between American troops and Iraqi leaders during the most pivotal time period of OIF.

## Conclusion

HTT IZ03 operated from 2008 well through 2010, and continued to operate through the replacement of every member of the team, with each team member actually re-deploying after tours of up to 12 months. Every team member successfully transitioned his or her respective replacements, usually during a two to three week overlap. HTT IZ03 stayed in the same OE through the transitioning/battle-handoff of 3BCT to its successor Brigade Combat Team, providing invaluable local political and cultural information to the new BCT. HTT IZ03 memorialized its information, especially its KLEs, through classified information/intelligence summary reports, generating up to two dozen each week; and 80% of 3BCT’S civil engagement reports originated from HTT IZ03.

How successful was HTT IZ03 in achieving its main goals? How successful was it at providing CF forces with valuable information (or “intelligence”) on Iraq’s local politics and culture? Alternatively—and perhaps even more importantly—how successful was it at helping the CF successfully implement *Tactical Over-Watch Governance* in the northeast Baghdad Districts of *Sadr City, Adhamiya, and Istiqlal*? There is wide-consensus that changes in strategy that occurred as a direct result of the famous (albeit 11<sup>th</sup> hour) “Surge” did achieve the significant success of avoiding a decisive CF defeat in Iraq. We believe that the Human Terrain Teams certainly played a role in that strategic success, for they clearly helped the CF battlefield commanders better understand their OEs. The answer to the second (and more important) question remains more complex and elusive. Perhaps much like the ultimate success (or failure) of OIF itself, the answers will remain unknown for at least a generation.

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[1] Human Terrain Teams are identified first through a two letter country code (AF = Afghanistan, IZ = Iraq) followed by a number (in the case of Iraq there were 12 active HTTs by 2008).

[2] “Operational Environment” is a term meant to describe an area in which a military unit is working. The term

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includes traditional notions of security, but the area's political, social, and economic conditions are also considered to be crucial elements of a unit's OE as well.

[3] KLE was the acronym used by US military-planners to describe the often formalized meetings held between CF representatives and Iraqi leaders who were capable of mobilizing local resources.

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