NETWORKS: Terra Incognita and the Case for Ethnographic Intelligence

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When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita.

—Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect*[1]

Author's note: What I have chosen to call "ethnographic intelligence" might be more accurately described as "ethnographic information," since much of the content involved in analyzing a hostile network will be open-source. I have chosen to retain "intelligence," however, to indicate the military utility of the content involved.

THE PROLIFERATION of empowered networks makes "ethnographic intelligence" (EI) more important to the United States than ever before.[2] Among networks, Al-Qaeda is of course the most infamous, but there are several other examples from the recent past and present, such as blood-diamond and drug cartels, that lead to the conclusion that such networks will be a challenge in the foreseeable future. Given the access these networks have to expanded modern communications and transportation and, potentially, to weapons of mass destruction, they are likely to be more formidable than any adversaries we have ever faced.

Regrettably, the traditional structure of the U.S. military intelligence community and the kind of intelligence it produces aren't helping us counter this threat. As recent debate, especially in the services, attests, there is an increased demand for cultural intelligence. Retired Army Major General Robert Scales has highlighted the need for what he calls cultural awareness in Iraq: "I asked a returning commander from the 3rd Infantry Division how well situational awareness (read aerial and ground intelligence technology) worked during the march to Baghdad. 'I knew where every enemy tank was dug in on the outskirts of Tallil,' he replied. 'Only problem was, my soldiers had to fight fanatics charging on foot or in pickups and firing AK-47s and [rocket propelled grenades]. I had perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness. Great technical intelligence…wrong enemy.'"[3]

I propose that we go beyond even General Scales's plea for cultural awareness and look instead at amassing EI, the type of intelligence that is key to setting policy for *terra incognita*. The *terra* in this case is the human terrain, about which too often too little is known by those who wield the instruments of national power. The United States needs EI to combat networks and conduct global counterinsurgency. This paper will therefore define EI, discuss some cases that illustrate the requirement for it, and propose a means to acquire and process it.

EI Defined

According to Dr. Anna Simons of the United States Naval Postgraduate School, "What we mean by EI is information about indigenous forms of association, local means of organization, and traditional methods of mobilization.

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Clans, tribes, secret societies, the *hawala* system, religious brotherhoods, all represent indigenous or latent forms of social organization available to our adversaries throughout the non-Western, and increasingly the Western, world. These create networks that are invisible to us unless we are specifically looking for them; they come in forms with which we are not culturally familiar; and they are impossible to 'see' or monitor, let alone map, without consistent attention and the right training."[4]

Because EI is the only way to truly know a society, it is the best tool to divine the intentions of a society's members. The "indigenous forms of association and local means of organization" are hardly alien concepts to us. Our own culture has developed what we call "social network analysis" to map these associations and forms of organization.[5] These unwritten rules and invisible (to us) connections between people form key elements of the kind of information that, according to General Scales, combat commanders are now demanding. Because these rules and connections form the "traditional methods of mobilization" used either to drum up support for or opposition to U.S. goals, they demand constant attention from the U.S. Government and Armed Forces.[6] Simply put, EI constitutes the descriptions of a society that allow us to make sense of personal interactions, to trace the connections between people, to determine what is important to people, and to anticipate how they could react to certain events. With the United States no longer facing a relatively simple, monolithic enemy, our national interests are found in a confusing cauldron of different locales and societies. Each of these has its own "latent forms of social organization" that create networks we cannot see or map, and to which we may very well fall victim, unless we aggressively pursue EI.[7]

The Threat: Three Case Studies

American national interests are affected by many societies about which we may know very little. In the early 1960s, few Americans recognized the importance of the *terra incognita* of Vietnamese society.[8] In the 1990s, America either failed to develop, or failed to employ EI on Al-Qaeda, Afghanistan, or Iraq.[9] Today, we have little insight into which cultures or networks may soon become threats to our national interests. For this reason, America must seek to understand and develop EI on a global scale, *before* it is surprised by another unknown or dimly understood society or network. As a first step toward becoming more EI-smart, we might look at three illustrative cases: the blood-diamond cartel, drug trafficking syndicates, and Al-Qaeda.

The blood-diamond cartel. West Africa's blood-diamond cartel is a good example of the seemingly random mixture of networks, private armies, governments of questionable legitimacy, and social environments in conflict that plague the world today. At the core of the cartel are guerrillas in Sierra Leone who have used terror tactics to control access to diamond mines. They were assisted by the former government of Charles Taylor in Liberia, which helped launder the diamonds in Europe for money. Some of that money then went to international arms dealers who smuggled weapons to the guerrillas, and some went to finance international terrorists like Al-Qaeda. War, as the U.S. military has traditionally preferred to consider it—the clash of state armies and navies—has given way to a mix of crime, money, and terror executed by dark networks in league with each other and with reprehensible governments to secure profits and export terrorism. According to H. Brinton Milward and Jorg Raab, "Covert networks have come together with warlords controlling access to resources to create commodity wars. These wars are fought over control of diamonds, petroleum concessions, coca leaves, and poppies that yield narcotics, not for any real ideological or political reason."[10]

While entities like the blood-diamond cartel have heretofore not been deemed threatening to vital U.S. interests, and thus have not justified the attention of significant American assets or numbers of troops, such a presumption is overdue for reconsideration. The United States cannot afford—nor should it be inclined to act—as the world's policeman,

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Liberian President Charles Taylor talks to reporters in Monrovia, 8 April 2003. Taylor called on opposition politicians and the international community to investigate claims that he has billions of dollars in a Swiss bank, saying he will resign as president if any such account is found.

but these unholy alliances now demand scrutiny. This is where EI enters the picture. When crime, brutality, poor governance, and terrorist financing come together, they are so enmeshed in the local social environment that only a detailed understanding of ethnographic factors can provide the basis for further identification of who and what truly threaten U.S. national interests. An understanding of the societies in which these networks roost is the indispensable bedrock upon which any further analysis rests.

Traditional military intelligence, in examining opposing formations and weapons systems, does not even speak in the same terms as those found in the blood-diamond "conflict." In Milward and Raab's words: "In the period after Taylor became president, the Republic of Liberia became a nexus for many dark networks. There are linkages between various dark networks; some are more central than others are and some only loosely linked with the others."[11] Borrowed from social network analysis, terms like "network," "nexus," and "centrality" are useful concepts that allow analysts to better identify threats to American security.[12]

It is only through extensive, on-the-ground observation that latent forms of social organization and mobilization can be made apparent. When those indigenous forms of social organization are exploited by people like Charles Taylor, or become linked to external nodes such as other networks, then EI feeds and blurs into the police-style social network analysis needed to identify and counter threats to U.S. interests. In this way, EI takes the incognita out of the human terra so that the United States can craft effective, realistic policy actions.

Drug trafficking syndicates. Drug syndicates or cartels are another networked threat that will not disappear in the foreseeable future and that cannot be depicted effectively by order-of-battle-style intelligence. Phil Williams has clearly articulated the ethnic qualities that make drug trafficking a particularly opaque threat: "[M]any networks have two characteristics that make them hard to penetrate: ethnicity and language. Moreover, many of the networks use languages or dialects unfamiliar to law enforcement personnel in the host countries. Consequently, electronic surveillance efforts directed against, for example, Chinese or Nigerian drug-trafficking networks do not exist in a vacuum, but instead operate in and from ethnic communities that provide concealment and protections as well as an important source of new recruits. Some networks, such as Chinese drug-trafficking groups, are based largely on ethnicity. They are global in scope and operate according to the principle of *guanxi* (notions of reciprocal obligation), which can span generations and continents and provides a basis for trust and cooperation. Such networks are especially difficult for law enforcement to infiltrate. In short, drug-trafficking networks have a significant capacity to protect their information and to defend themselves against law enforcement initiatives."[13]

By themselves, drug gangs might not represent a clear and present danger to America, but they warrant

study for two reasons. First, they are increasingly moving beyond mere profit-making ventures into alliances with other types of networks, such as the gun-runner and terrorist networks active in West Africa, that do pose a significant threat to the United States. Second, drug-trafficking networks provide a relevant example of how subversive groups can exploit ethnic social bonds and indigenous forms of mobilization about which we Westerners remain ignorant. Phil Williams' illustrative invocation of *guanxi,* which won't appear in any traditional military intelligence summary, is instructive here.

A concept of mutual obligation that can endure from generation to generation and across great distances, *guanxi* can be a powerful tool in the hands of a network with evil intent. Drug trafficking can be harmful enough to a society, but when it is lashed together with the trafficking of weapons, money, and perhaps even materials of mass destruction, such racketeering does become a clear and present danger to America. A nexus of dark networks, peddling destruction in various forms, and facilitating international terrorism, becomes inordinately threatening when powered by traditional social practices such as *guanxi* that are invisible to states that don't do their ethnographic homework. Williams appropriately notes that these practices, or means of "indigenous mobilization," work precisely because they are embedded in an ethnic population. This is true whether the population in question inhabits an ethnic enclave in a culturally dissimilar host nation or occupies its home region. In fact, under the latter conditions, local forms of organization and means of association can become more powerful than any written law, and therefore that much more efficacious for the network using them. They can be extraordinarily effective at creating local networks. However, he who has done his ethnographic analysis stands a decent chance of neutralizing the hostile actions of a dark network or perhaps even turning the activities of the network to advantage.

Al-Qaeda. A third case that illustrates the need for EI is Al-Qaeda. In 2004, Marc Sageman wrote *Understanding Terror Networks* to clarify what he saw as a widespread misperception in the West about who joins these networks and why they join. Sageman concentrates on Al-Qaeda's sub-network constituents, mapping the individual networks and partially filling in their foci, such as certain mosques.[14] Sageman obtained his information by accessing documents via friendly means, but he freely admits that his examination is limited.

Sageman's main agenda is to refute the myth that terrorists such as those in Al-Qaeda are irrational psychopaths created by brainwashing impoverished Muslim youths. He contends that the majority of terrorists are educated, generally middle-class, mature adults. They are usually married, and they come from caring families with strong values. They are also believers wholly committed to the greater cause of global Salafist jihad.

According to Sageman, these people belong to four general groups in the Al-Qaeda network: the Central Staff, the Southeast Asians, the Maghreb Arabs, and the Core Arabs. The Central Staff is comprised mainly of Osama bin Laden's older compatriots, men who heard the call to jihad against the Soviet infidels in Afghanistan and who continue the fight today. The Southeast Asians are mostly disciples of two particular religious schools. The Maghreb Arabs are first- or second-generation Arabs in France. Socially isolated, the Maghrebs have sought community ties in local mosques. The Core Arabs grew up in communal societies in Islamic lands, but became isolated and lonely as they moved away to schools or jobs.

With the exception of some Maghreb Arabs, many of Al-Qaeda's recruits have a good education and strong job skills; they have no criminal background. Sageman writes at some length about the feeling of isolation that led many of the expatriate Al-Qaeda members to seek out cliques of their own kind, and about the gradual strengthening of their religious beliefs prior to joining the jihad as a source of identity and community. He emphasizes that people join in small cliques, and that the motivation is primarily fellowship, and only later, worship. The cliques are not recruited as much as they seek out membership in Al-Qaeda. In the search for fellowship, some men happened upon one of the relatively few radical mosques or became embedded in a clique that happened to have an acquaintance in the jihadist network. Sageman debunks the theory that Al-Qaeda has recruiters in every mosque, yet he does point out the existence of a few people who know how to contact the larger group and will provide directions, travel money, and

introductions to clandestine training camps. In sum, Sageman argues convincingly that our stereotypes of Al-Qaeda are dangerously misleading.

Sageman's analysis of the Al-Qaeda network has been widely quoted, yet he himself underscores the lack of available first-hand information and makes it plain that he used open-source documents, with some limited personal exposure; in other words, he wrote the book without much access to EI.[15] Let us imagine what Sageman's sharp intellect would have found if he had had access to a full, well-organized range of EI from each of the four subgroups' regions. What might a dedicated core of EI specialists have discovered about the recruitment pattern? As an illustration, Sageman uncovered a key ethnographic point in the bond between student and teacher in Southeast Asia.[16] The active exploration of this key example of "indigenous forms of association" might have led to the two radical Southeast Asian schools much sooner. Perhaps armed with such knowledge, the governments in question could have taken more steps against the network years ago.

Acquiring and Processing EI

To acquire ethnographic knowledge, there is no substitute for being on the scene. For the U.S. military, the structural solution to EI could be relatively easy. Some form of U.S. Military Group, or the military annex to the embassy, could become the vehicle to collect EI. While the defense attaché system is charged with overtly collecting military information and assessing the military situation in particular countries, there currently is no comprehensive effort to collect and process EI. The security assistance officers attached to U.S. country teams often obtain a fine appreciation of the cultural aspects of their host nation, but they are not charged with the responsibility to collect EI and may not always have a smooth relationship with the defense attaché (if one is even assigned).[17]

There is a relatively low-cost way to set up a system to collect EI. The United States could develop a corps of personnel dedicated to the task and base them out of a more robust military annex to our embassies. There are two key points to developing such a corps: it must be devoted exclusively to the task without distraction, and its personnel must be allowed to spend extended time in country and then be rewarded for doing so.[18] Their work could be considered a form of strategic reconnaissance, and in reconnaissance matters there is simply no substitute for being physically present on the ground. Since the ethnographic ground in question is actually a population and not necessarily terrain, a constant and near-total immersion in the local population would be the means to turn McNamara's terra incognita into a known set of "indigenous forms of association, local means of organization, and traditional methods of mobilization."

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While the most streamlined EI organization would probably combine the functions of the defense attaché and security assistance officer, such a move is not absolutely necessary.[19] The most important structural aspect is that the EI developed in country should be analyzed at the embassy, forwarded to the staff of the geographic combatant commander, and shared laterally with other relevant embassies. This kind of information sharing would make for better contingency plans, and it would create a hybrid network to counter the dark networks that profit from blood diamonds, drugs, and terror.

A small number of Americans, usually military foreign area officers (FAOs), are already in tune with this type of work, and some have achieved a high level of excellence. There are not many of them, though, and they are not organized into a truly comprehensive system focused on the ethnographic aspects of networks. A sterling example of the capacity that the United States could build can be found in an officer named "David." On a mission with a platoon of Army Rangers in western Iraq to find out how foreign fighters were infiltrating the country, David traveled in mufti. At one village, he "met a woman with facial tattoos that marked her as her husband's property. As they chatted, the pale-skinned, sandy-haired North Carolina native

imitated her dry, throaty way of speaking. 'You are Bedu, too,' she exclaimed with delight." From her and the other Bedouins, David finds out that the foreign fighters are using local smuggling routes "to move people, guns, and money. Many of the paths were marked with small piles of bleached rocks that were identical to those David had seen a year earlier while serving in Yemen."[20]

David gained access and operational information by using ethnographic knowledge. The deeper that personnel like David dig into local society, the better their ability to assess which groups threaten the United States and which should be left alone. If America could build a healthy corps of people like David, based out of each U.S. embassy in the world, then our nation could identify those networks that, in Simons's formulation, are "invisible to us unless we are specifically looking for them; [and that] come in forms with which we are not culturally familiar."

Sadly, there aren't nearly enough Davids in the military. The Army has about 1,000 FAOs, but most of them are in Europe. A mere 145 are focused on the Middle East, and even that number can be deceptive because a FAO's duties include many things that aren't related to EI, such as protocol for visits and administrative duties.[21] Certainly, one solution to the growing threats from networks would be to produce more Davids and reward them for extensive time on the ground exclusively focused on the development of EI.

The benefits to be derived from such a corps would be tremendous. Consider, for example, the impact good EI could have had on the war plan for Iraq. There has been much discussion of late about how American forces did not really understand the Iraq's tribal networks, a failure that contributed to the difficulties we are currently facing. With the "consistent attention and the right training" Simons has prescribed, knowledge like this could have been built into contingency plans and then updated in the regular two-year plan review cycle to insure currency. Ethnographic understanding could have allowed U.S. forces in Iraq to use tribal networks to advantage from the outset; they would not have had to figure things out for themselves, as Lieutenant Colonel Tim Ryan did: "The key is a truce brokered by the National League of Sheiks and Tribal Leaders and U.S. Army Lt. Col. Tim Ryan, the 1st Cavalry Division officer responsible for Abu Ghraib—a Sunni Triangle town west of Baghdad and a hotbed of the insurgency. Under the agreement, Ryan now meets regularly with tribal leaders and provides them with lists of residents suspected of taking part in attacks. The sheiks and their subordinate local clan leaders then promise to keep their kinsmen in line. 'They [the sheiks] do have a lot of influence. To ignore that is to ignore 6,000 years of the way business has been done here.'"[22]

EI that might lead to beneficial relations with local power figures, along the lines of the one between Ryan and the sheiks, could be developed from each U.S. embassy around the clock in peacetime to inform contingency plans and enable activity against the dark networks that seek to harm America. In some places, such as pre-war Iraq or in outright killing fields similar to a blood-diamond zone, Washington will judge the presence of an embassy to be too dangerous, but in the absence of an on-site embassy, personnel can be invested in the surrounding embassies to glean as much EI as possible through borders that are often porous.

The Broken Windows Theory of criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling suggests that we might reap another benefit from establishing an American ethnographic counter-network in surrounding, linked embassies.[23] The essence of the theory is that if a building has a broken window that remains unfixed, then people will assume that no one is in charge or cares; as a result, they will do whatever they wish to the place—the broken window will invite vandalism, graffiti, and so on. Once these acts of disorder commence, crime becomes contagious, like a fashion trend or virus. A more robust military annex to an embassy and a low-key, constant interest in overt ethnographic matters would show that the United States cares and is indeed watching. Perhaps this constant attention

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would serve to subtly constrict the amount of safe-haven space available for dark networks. The overt information gathered by military ethnographers could complement the covert work done by the CIA (and vice versa).

U.S. citizens, at least intuitively, have always recognized the presence of networks in society, from family ties to economic relationships, indeed, to the very structure of daily life. The law enforcement community has long since recognized and acted against domestic criminal and extremist variants of these networks. However, the U.S. Government and military have had a difficult time coming to grips with networks like Al-Qaeda. It took the shock of the September 11th attacks to galvanize national attention on terrorist networks, and the ensuing years of struggle to grasp that terror networks can be more than ideologically motivated, and that they can flourish in the nexus of crime, drugs, weapons trafficking, money laundering, and a host of other lethal activities.

Terrorism can take many guises, and it blends very well into the cauldron of dark phenomena like blood diamonds, drug trafficking networks, and Al-Qaeda. The United States desperately needs a counter-network to fight the dark networks now surfacing across the globe. Ethnographic intelligence can empower the daily fight against dark networks, and it can help formulate contingency plans that are based on a truly accurate portrayal of the most essential terrain—the human mind. United States policymakers must not commit us ever again to terra incognita. The Nation must invest in specialized people who can pay "constant attention" to "indigenous forms of association and mobilization," so that we can see and map the human terrain. ***MR***

NOTES

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