

Human Terrain Team Operations in East Baghdad

Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan D. Thompson, U.S. Army



Editor's Note:

The term "psychological operations" (PSYOPS) has recently changed to "military information support and/or operations" (MISO).

Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan D. Thompson, U.S. Army, was a human terrain team leader for the 4th BCT, 10th Mountain Division, and 3d BCT, 82d Airborne Division, in Baghdad. He is currently a staff observer and controller-trainer for the 3d Battle Command Training Brigade, 75th Battle Command Training Division, Fort Sheridan, IL. LTC Thompson received a B.A. from Wheaton College, IL.

PHOTO: A member of a human terrain team (HTT) in central Iraq speaks with local Iraqi men about damage caused to a school house during an HTT site survey mission, 15 September 2009. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Benjamin Boren)

IN LATE MARCH 2009, Iraqi Security Forces arrested Adel Mashadani, a popular Sunni Sons of Iraq leader, in the Al Fadil area of east Baghdad. While U.S. forces had anticipated this action, they did not know how the people of Al Fadil would react to the arrest. The brigade combat team (BCT) worried that the locals would see Mashadani as a popular Sunni leader arrested at the direction of the Shi'a prime minister, Nuri Al Maliki. If so, the potential for violence was strong. U.S. forces had worked tirelessly over the past year to stop sectarian violence in the area, an effort that culminated in an Iftar celebration during which Sunni and Shi'a neighbors broke the Ramadan fast together. Now the concern was that the local Sunnis would turn against the U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces working in the area, causing a setback to the U.S. goal of reconciliation in Baghdad.

Commanders from the brigade to the cavalry troop level recognized they needed a better understanding of the people's views of the arrest. How the people reacted would ultimately determine the brigade's course of action. For the previous two months, a human terrain analyst from the BCT's human terrain team had worked with the cavalry troop during routine patrols in the Al Fadil neighborhood. Two days after Mashadani's arrest, the commander took the team member out again to assess reactions to the event. By talking to Iraqis throughout the Al Fadil neighborhood, she learned that, instead of contemplating a popular uprising against the Government of Iraq, most were glad to see Mashadani arrested and were impressed with the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces because of the professionalism they exhibited in limiting collateral damage.

Once the BCT understood the attitudes of the people on the ground in Al Fadil, it immediately began working with the Government of Iraq to bring in humanitarian assistance and medical services. Remaining Sons of Iraq turned themselves in and Iraqi Security Forces disarmed them with few incidents. By talking to regular Iraqis on the street, the human terrain team played a critical role in helping the brigade understand the operating environment and

execute a course of action to strengthen support for the Government of Iraq and Iraqi Security Forces.

Army counterinsurgency operations doctrine in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, stresses that successful conduct of counterinsurgency operations depends on understanding the local society and culture in the area of operations. Soldiers and Marines must understand the—

- Organization of key groups in the society.
- Relationships and tensions among groups.
- Ideologies and narratives that resonate with groups.
- Values of groups (including tribes), their interests, and motivations.
- Means by which groups (including tribes) communicate.
- Society's leadership system.¹

Collectively, these factors define the human terrain in the operating environment. Undoubtedly, as many Soldiers and Marines have completed successive tours they have developed a basic understanding of Iraqi, Arab, and Muslim culture. However, the cultural education that units receive prior to deployment is not sufficient to provide the depth of understanding required to properly know the human terrain in the area to which they are about to deploy. In addition, the human terrain is a dynamic element that is constantly changing and moving. Even if Soldiers returned to the same area where they worked in a previous tour, the human terrain would be different due to such factors as refugee movements, sectarian cleansing, and other socioeconomic stresses. Units must conduct in-depth studies on the people in their particular area and constantly update them. In fact, FM 3-24 states that successful COIN operations require Soldiers and Marines at every echelon to possess the following:

A clear appreciation of the essential nature and nuances of the conflict.

- An understanding of the motivation, strengths, and weaknesses of the insurgents.
- Knowledge of the other roles of other actors in the area of operations.

Without this understanding of the environment, intelligence cannot be understood and properly applied.²

Clearly, comprehension of the human terrain is as important as understanding the insurgent threat.

The BCT has a variety of resources to use to comprehend the human terrain. These assets include attached civil affairs teams and the tactical psychological operations detachment. Both of these elements directly engage the people on a continual basis. However, both focus on developing projects or influencing the population rather than understanding the people.

In 2004, military commanders defined a requirement to capture information on local social and cultural factors so that incoming units would not have to relearn these factors every time a unit rotation began. Shortly afterwards, unit commanders found a need to have sociocultural experts at the BCT level. Thus, in 2006, the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command began developing a capability to provide social science research at this level. This was the beginning of the Human Terrain System as a proof of concept project. In 2007, the first human terrain team deployed to Afghanistan, and was followed soon by teams going to Iraq.³ The Human Terrain System rapidly expanded to provide support to most BCTs and U.S. Marine Corps regimental combat teams in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, the Human Terrain System developed human terrain analysis teams for divisions and a corps-level team for Multinational Corps-Iraq. The Human Terrain System continues to field human terrain teams and human terrain analysis teams in both theaters to provide relevant sociocultural knowledge to the commands.

Human terrain teams at the BCT level are the key element of the Human Terrain System. With an academically qualified social scientist on board, the human terrain team provides relevant social science research capabilities to the BCT commander, his staff, and subordinate commanders. The team provides a capability previously unavailable at this level of command. While higher echelon units have had cultural advisors, BCTs have had to create this capability out of hide. However, as FM 3-24 notes, "Many important decisions are not made by Generals."⁴ At BCT and lower levels of command, Soldiers regularly engage with local citizens in all venues. As both Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate, the actions of small units, junior leaders, and Soldiers can have strategic implications. While no one would debate that senior commanders must understand the key leaders of the population in their

area of operations, Soldiers on the ground must understand the populace. The human terrain team is a key element in allowing these Soldiers to gain the required sociocultural knowledge.

The Human Terrain System is not without controversy. In academia, the American Anthropological Association has raised ethical concerns about putting anthropologists into the field to work for the U.S. military.⁵ The primary concern is that the social science research will be used to conduct lethal targeting of individuals. Even in military circles, the need and effectiveness of the system is controversial; one example is the article “A View from inside the Surge” by Lieutenant Colonel James C. Crider in the March-April 2009 *Military Review*, which debated the teams’ effectiveness.⁶

This debate centers on who is best suited and most effective at providing research. Despite the debate, most BCT commanders have a human terrain team as an additional enabling element in Iraq and Afghanistan. This article follows the employment of one human terrain team working in eastern Baghdad in support of 4th BCT, 10th Mountain Division (4/10) and subsequently, 3d BCT, 82d Airborne Division (3/82). I was the team leader for Human Terrain Team IZ5 from September 2008 through June 2009, so I can describe how the team contributed to the counterinsurgency fight in a very complex, diverse, and difficult area of Baghdad. Indeed, the human terrain team enabled BCT and subordinate battalion- and company-level commanders to gain a clearer picture of the human terrain. As a result, they could factor the dynamic of the local populace into military decision making. Without this embedded social science research capability, commanders would have had a more difficult time understanding the people.

Background

The human terrain team has five to nine personnel assigned to it. It is a mix of military and Department of Army civilians.⁷ A typical human terrain team consists of four elements:

- Team leader—bridge between the command and the civilians on the team. Typically, this is an active duty field grade officer or a retired officer.
- Social scientist (one or two per team)—develops the research plan and research design to answer unit information requirements. Social scientists have

...the human terrain team enabled BCT and subordinate battalion- and company-level commanders to gain a clearer picture of the human terrain.

either a Ph.D. or a master’s degree in a relevant field such as anthropology or political science.

- Human terrain analysts—execute the social scientist’s research design. Most fall into one of two categories: naturalized U.S. citizens that came from Middle-Eastern countries or persons with special skills such as advanced degrees in Middle-Eastern studies or military intelligence analyst skills.

- Research manager—catalogs the team’s research and disseminates it to appropriate sections of the BCT staff, subordinate commands, and the Human Terrain System project.

The team’s task is to conduct operationally relevant social science research, allowing commanders to make astute sociocultural decisions. The team provides a unique social science research capability that includes collection methods such as informant interviews and polling. The Human Terrain System also provides longer-term research capabilities in “research reachback centers” and the “social science research and analysis” function, which conduct quantitative and qualitative research to support the collection efforts of the teams. The human terrain team does not replace civil affairs or psychological operations units’ products or skills, but complements their missions and allows the commander to understand the effects of operations on the local populace. In fact, Human Terrain Team IZ5 colocated with both civil affairs and psychological operations staff in the BCT headquarters and worked closely with these staff sections and the supporting civil affairs company.

The initial area in which we operated consisted of three political districts within Baghdad: Rusafa, Karada, and 9 Nissan. Although the geographical area was relatively small, the human terrain in these districts was unusually diverse and complex. The operating environment was predominantly Shi’a



U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Chrissy Best

A civilian with an Army human terrain team and an interpreter talk to the people at the Five Mile Market in Basra, Iraq, 22 June 2009.

with strong connections and influences from neighboring Sadr City. Still, the Shi'a population was not politically homogenous. In the more middle-class areas, streets were adorned with election posters of Abdul Aziz Al Hakim, the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. Closer to Sadr City the posters were of the Sadr family, including Muqtada Al Sadr. Shi'a connections also ran to the southern parts of the country since tribes from the southern marshes moved north to Baghdad decades ago. They retained their culture (and in extreme cases their traditional ways of life and their water buffalo) as well as tribal connections with families remaining in the south. Additionally, there were concentrations of Sunni Arabs in the western parts of the area, close to the Tigris River. There was also a small but significant Christian population and an isolated Palestinian community.

Most of the region was urban, with rural areas on its southern, northern, and eastern edges. The previous regime and the current Government of Iraq neglected 9 Nissan. Essential services in much of that area, especially electricity and water, were severely lacking during this period. The north-eastern neighborhood of 9 Nissan contained the Baghdad city garbage dump, which was nothing

more than an open landfill. Many destitute poor lived in the garbage dump, building their homes from the refuse. During this period, 9 Nissan was riddled with corruption, making local governance ineffective.

Also part of IZ5's area of operations was a region called Zafaraniyah. The Karada political district contained the Zafaraniyah area, which was in the southern part of the district. Like 9 Nissan, Zafaraniyah was neglected by the government and had a lower socioeconomic base.

Initial Research Design

The two areas comprised 13 total neighborhoods or *hayys*. The neglect of the Government of Iraq and limited coalition force involvement outside of lethal operations led to a power vacuum filled by sectarian (mostly Shi'a) militias and local criminals. The BCT deputy commander said these areas would fall apart if the BCT pulled out, and tasked IZ5 to figure out why that was the case and what could be done about it. (There was little knowledge of the human terrain in these areas).

The human terrain team provides the unit with a unique capability, but that capability only adds value when the team answers operationally relevant

questions. The key is that the research must be operationally relevant. While general in nature, the guidance must be clear enough to allow the team to construct a sound research design.⁸

For IZ5, the general guidance for 9 Nissan and Zafaraniyah led to the next step in the process, the development of the research plan. The team leader, working with the two social scientists, developed a two-phase plan to answer the brigade's questions. The team realized that the research project would be time-intensive because of the complex terrain and the dearth of knowledge about it. The team also knew that these areas were non-permissive due to a high level of enemy actions. This limited freedom of movement during the initial months of research.

Phase I of the plan involved developing a baseline of information through interviews of coalition personnel with operational experience. In addition to the maneuver units, Team IZ5 interviewed transition teams, civil affairs teams, and PSYOP teams that understood key problem areas and then compiled all the information into a database. This served two purposes. First, it established a knowledge baseline, what the BCT collectively knew (or in the words of one of the social scientists, what they thought they knew) and second, it identified gaps in information. Filling in these gaps would be phase II.

While building the baseline in phase I, the team members spread out into the affected areas to interview units operating there. Starting with battalion commanders and staffs, the team members worked to collect reports and conduct interviews. The next step was interviews at the company level and of the Soldiers who walked the streets daily. The team analyzed the compiled information to see what gaps existed. This activity produced written reports on each *hays* with added questions that guided future research for phase II. Phase I took about five weeks to complete. The team then submitted their research reports to those who had been interviewed to check their accuracy. These reports focused BCT discussions on the way ahead.

Decentralized Operations

To collect the information for phase II of the plan, team members went out two at a time or individually and spent four to six weeks at the company level immersing themselves in operations. Embedding down at this level and living

and working out of the combat outposts or joint security stations permitted direct access to Iraqis from numerous positions. This decentralized approach for collecting information was different from human terrain systems training. The training stressed keeping the team altogether so that the individual skills and talents of each team member could contribute to the massed effort.

Because of the general nature of the brigade's information requirement and the relative lack of information across a wide area, the team leader determined that the decentralized approach was necessary to allow broader coverage and to collect as much detailed information as possible. One team moved to the Zafaraniyah (southern Karada) Government Center. This site was beneficial because it was a hub of activity for Iraqis, private citizens, Iraqi security forces, and government officials who appeared there on a daily basis. During this time the rest of Team IZ5 focused on 9 Nissan, moving around the resident company's battle spaces to collect data.

The decentralized approach was novel. Concentrating the team in one area theoretically allowed the combined skills to create a synergy for maximum benefit. The social scientist closely supervised the research conducted by the human terrain analysts and then tied everything together. Keeping all team members together did allow the team to focus and get a good depth of understanding, but concentrating the team proved to be impractical in light of the mission. Decentralized operations allowed the team to spread out across the area and gain a better understanding of the districts faster than if the entire team had focused on one neighborhood at a time. Decentralized employment also reduced the burden on companies providing the team's life support. It was much easier to provide living space, work areas, transportation, and security for one or two team members than to provide for five or six.

After I arrived as the team leader in September 2008, I maintained the decentralized employment of the team. Even after phase II was completed, team members remained working with their respective battalions. The teams were able to maintain important personal relationships they had fostered with key local leaders, a requirement for the teams as they prepared for the upcoming BCT relief in place/transfer of authority.

Relief in Place/Transfer of Authority

Human terrain team rotations are purposely scheduled to not coincide with the relief in place so that team members on the ground can help new units understand the human terrain in their areas.⁹ The team maintains the human terrain database on separate systems so that information collected year after year is not lost as units transfer and depart.

Human Terrain Team IZ5 supported the BCT relief in place in two phases. First, to prepare for 3d BCT, 82d Airborne Division's arrival, I wanted to update and complete a human terrain assessment of the entire area of operations. This entailed expanding the team into the Rusafa political district. There was no history of human terrain team collection in this area. Since the team was focused on 9 Nissan and Zafaraniyah, working in Rusafa would have overstretched the team's capabilities. However, with the research plan mostly complete in those areas, I managed to dedicate a single human terrain analyst to work with the outgoing unit in Rusafa. The work that she completed would become very important a few months later when the Iraqi Security Forces arrested Adel Mashadani.

Another key task in phase I was to update our reports on 9 Nissan and Zafaraniyah. One of the team's social scientists interviewed other team members to update conditions since the previous spring and summer. The team also built social network charts to show links. This was our first attempt to build a operating environment network diagram showing how key leaders connected to each other through religious, tribal, family, political, and social connections.

Passing information to the incoming BCT entailed two key steps. The first step was linking up with BCT leadership at the Multinational Corps-Iraq Counterinsurgency Academy at Taji Airbase. As the team leader, I spent five days with the BCT commander, his leaders, and key staff members. I provided copies of our recent reports to all commanders so that they could understand the human terrain within their respective areas. I further provided an information and capabilities briefing. Since the BCT had worked with a team during their predeployment exercises, they were familiar with the human terrain team concept. I was able to provide the commanders with actual

products to show not only what we could do but also how we did it.

The second step was maintaining the team's decentralized employment in 9 Nissan, Zafaraniyah, and Rusafa. The team received the new battalions only when they entered these sectors to complete the relief in place. Essentially, the human terrain analysts became human terrain advisors to the battalion commanders; I fulfilled the same role at the BCT headquarters. We introduced the commanders to the key Iraqi leaders. As operations in the area shifted to mostly nonlethal ones, key leader engagements were very important to the incoming unit. Our team provided valuable introductions for many key leaders. Team members worked with the battalions throughout the next few months.

Operations for 82d Airborne

Significant changes in operating conditions quickly followed. These included the implementation of the U.S.-Iraq security agreement, provincial council elections, major religious events, several BCT and battalion boundary realignments, and the movement of U.S. forces out of Baghdad. Because each change affected the Iraqi people, the team played a major role in BCT operations. This relationship dictated a shift in how the team worked. With changing conditions in the operating environment, the team began to conduct research on more specific issues.

Under 4/10, Team IZ5 worked for the effects coordinator and participated in all effects cell meetings. Then the command relationship changed. The human terrain team became a special staff section of the BCT and a full participant in BCT military decision making and targeting. Integration into the BCT's targeting cycle was critical to provide support. While receiving specific tasks in the commander's guidance, I also had to determine the implied tasks we needed to accomplish, and then allocate resources to answer the information requirements. Often, this involved the team looking into more than one neighborhood or area at a time. As a special staff section, the team had to answer specific BCT information requirements, which dictated a more centralized approach. Because most of the information requirements involved gathering



U.S. Army photo by SSGT James Selesnick

Colonel Timothy McGuire talks with a Soldier during a Joint patrol with Iraqi Police outside a forward operating base in East Baghdad, Iraq, 13 June 2009.

information from across the entire area of operations, the team continued to operate with one or two team members in each battalion area. However, their research priorities shifted to answering BCT questions first.

Team IZ5 became involved with support to key leader engagements. Working with the S9 and S7 (information operations) officers, the team conducted key leader assessments before the commander or his deputy met with these leaders. We identified the social networks in which the key leaders circulated and their connections to other political, religious, tribal, and business leaders. Building these networks was an ongoing process. The team worked closely with battalion fire support officers who coordinated many of the battalion-level key leader engagements. The team also provided information gathered from its own sources to the battalions so they could double check it. Realizing that information from local Iraqis might be tainted, the team wanted to make sure that its findings were similar to what the battalions were seeing in their areas. Working back and forth with

the battalions, IZ5 was able to build comprehensive social network charts.

The team also maintained the BCT's biographical cards (commonly called baseball cards) on the key leaders. These one-page documents provided the commander and his staff with relevant background information on individuals. The team worked with the battalions to update this information. Frequently, battalion commanders had met with the key leader before anyone from the BCT had, and they possessed the latest information on these individuals. These short biographies became an important part in building the key leader preparation packets.

Team IZ5 conducted many of these engagements in conjunction with other elements of the BCT, including the civil affairs company, battalions, and transition teams. One goal during these meetings was to gain an understanding of how key leaders felt about certain issues of importance such as the elections, what they meant for Iraqis in the area, how they viewed the security agreement, and how the local people felt about its impact on their lives.

Social networks, biographical cards, and engagement reports were all included in the commander's preparation packet along with any relevant S2 information regarding connections to persons of interest. Even with the centralized collection plan in place, the team still worked closely with battalions and companies, because they were the best avenues for team members to use to get out and talk with the Iraqi people.

The team had no outside resources and was dependent on other elements for life support, transportation, and security. Thus, team members decided it was important to provide value to these lower echelon commands. This resulted in closer cooperation with lower echelon commanders. Prior to going out on a mission, we asked what information they needed. In Rusafa, a troop commander submitted a list of information requirements through his squadron leaders. These questions were valuable in letting us know what the command needed to know so we could focus our efforts accordingly. We included information requirements from all echelons of command in our research design.

Team members used many different methods to collect the information. They engaged people on the street or in teahouses while accompanying U.S. patrols and attended district and neighborhood council meetings. Because we relied on the supported element for security and transportation, we coordinated every meeting with the unit. The decentralized employment with a centralized collection method proved effective.

Key Points

In East Baghdad, Team IZ5 provided valuable understanding to two successive BCT commanders. As military operations continue in Iraq and Afghanistan, human terrain teams will continue to support the BCT by providing an excellent social science research capability. Following are some key points that will help enable effective use of human terrain teams.

Clear objectives. Commanders must provide a clear objective or information requirement that enables the human terrain team to focus its efforts. This does not necessarily mean a restricted focus.

The two brigades used Team IZ5 in different but equally effective ways. The initial guidance from 4/10 to IZ5 to gain an understanding of 9 Nissan and Zafaraniyah was clear enough for the team to design research that answered the BCT's question. Under 3/82, the guidance tended to be more specific, such as assessing how people viewed the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement. In both cases, the team was able to conduct its research effectively. Clear guidance ensured operationally relevant research. Both BCTs viewed IZ5 as a valuable contributor to the brigade combat team fight. Clear guidance made the difference.

Conditions of the operating environment. Conditions of the operating environment dictate how to employ the human terrain team on the ground. The choice between breadth or depth of coverage is critical. The conditions in our area and our research objectives allowed the team to operate in a decentralized fashion. The nature of what we were looking at was broad in terms of geographical space, so working across the operating environment allowed us to see a larger picture. However, certain missions required a consolidated effort. One such mission was a deputy commander specified task to interview persons attending a BCT-sponsored community soccer tournament. With soccer teams and people from all areas arriving for the tournament, the entire team came together to collect data.

Team research tends to be time-intensive. The time available to answer BCT questions also plays a role in determining how to deploy the team. Finally, the team's effectiveness in answering BCT information requirements is proportionate to the access it has to the local people. In other words, the team accomplishes little of value sitting in the BCT headquarters. No matter how high the level of their expertise, team members need to conduct

Commanders must provide a clear objective or information requirement that enables the human terrain team to focus its efforts.

extensive fieldwork. The academic background of the team's social scientist may give him some initial credibility, but no classroom education can take the place of being on the ground talking to the people. The human terrain team and the BCT staff should look at all resources that enable the team to talk to people.

Team IZ5 used many different venues to talk with people, including—

- Accompanying BCT, battalion, and company leaders to local council meetings.
- Patrolling with platoons and transition teams.
- Working with the civil affairs and and psychological operations assets.
- Participating in engagements at the forward operating base.
- Embedding at the company level.

Embedding at the company level proved to be IZ5's most effective and lasting means to gain access. Clearly, the company mission, threat

environment, and time available determine the extent to which the team members have access to the people. By whatever means, the team needs to be on the ground talking to locals.

The Future

The Human Terrain System will continue to deploy human terrain teams to BCTs for the foreseeable future. A team can provide the commander with a unique research capability that will allow a greater understanding of the vital human terrain in the BCT's operating environment.

Supporting two separate BCTs in East Baghdad, Team IZ5 provided this capability and allowed both commands to understand the people and factor their importance into military operations.

If it has guidance on research priorities and access to the people, the human terrain team can be a valuable asset to the BCT in the ongoing operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. **MR**

NOTES

1. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, December 2006), 1-22, 1-23.

2. *Ibid.*, 1-23.

3. See <<http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/htstimeline.html>>.

4. FM 3-24, 1-28.

5. See <www.aaanet.org/about/Policies/statements/Human-Terrain-System-Statement.cfm>.

6. LTC James C. Crider, "A View from Inside the Surge," *Military Review* (March/April 2009): 81 <http://usacac.leavenworth.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20090430_art010.pdf>.

7. During my term as team leader, Team IZ5 had between five to nine personnel, with one team leader, one research manager, one or two social scientists, and three

to five human terrain analysts. Personnel turbulence was a constant issue, with close to 100 percent turnover of members during my time as team leader.

8. Research design is the development of tasks on how the team will collect data and develop products to answer the BCT information requirements. It is more specific than a research plan, which provides a general focus on what the team will do.

9. Practically speaking, most Human Terrain Team deployments now are as individual replacements, not entire teams. A typical rotation for a team member is nine months. During my time as team leader, I experienced an almost 100 percent turnover, so in addition to training new units on the operating environment, I had to continuously educate team members. However, during the BCT relief in place, most of my team had been in the operating environment for several months.