



# Disarming the Key Leader Engagement

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PHOTO: MG Nash and Sayyid al-Moosawi approach Moosawi's horse ranch and goat farm.

INFORMATION ENGAGEMENTS IN Multi-National Division-South took place at warp speed during the build-up to the 30 June 2009 transition of U.S. forces in Iraq. Iraqi Security Forces were improving their capabilities every day, but were they ready to assume full control of the operations? What would life be like under the security agreement for U.S. forces? The agreement was understood in theory, but its application generated a litany of questions. However, one thing was clear: the way ahead would require systematic engagements with Iraqi leaders to leverage their powers of public persuasion.

Military commanders have been meeting with important local officials since the beginning of the conflict in Iraq. These key leader engagements help commanders advance their objectives by building relationships with influential Iraqis familiar with Iraq's complex human terrain, but the engagements frequently take place on an ad hoc basis and are rarely integrated into strategic operations.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, a key leader engagement is nothing more than a diplomatic tool to influence, inform, or educate a key leader.

After the calendar page turned on 1 July 2009, Iraqi forces accepted responsibility for security in Iraqi cities, but key leader engagements continued to be important. At Iraq's request, U.S. forces focused on training, advising, assisting, and coordinating with Iraqi forces inside the cities. Partnered with Iraqi forces, U.S. forces continued to conduct operations, although most U.S. combat troops withdrew from populated areas.

The commander of the 34th Infantry Division and Multi-National Division-South (MND-S) knew that engaging with key Iraqi audiences was central to helping Iraqis understand the new U.S. force posture. He used key leader engagements to connect the host nation key leaders to other leaders both in the community and in MND-S.

This article will help define the key leader engagement process, as well as establish its place in current operations. The phrase "disarming key leader engagement" refers to a homegrown method the 34th Infantry Division used to facilitate the information engagement process. Often, the engagement is conducted to build relationships and continue a dialogue. To maximize the linked effects of engagements across space and time, the MND-S commander

subscribed to the notion that the key leader engagement should be “disarming”: that is, allay suspicion or antipathy. If leaders could find ways of relating to potential allies through friendly, ordinary conversation, it would expand the sphere of their mutual influence. The division was able to articulate a successful strategy that offers lessons learned for operations in southern Iraq and—by extension—the border areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. This article provides some recommendations for an Army training strategy using vignettes from the division’s experience during Operation Iraqi Freedom as examples.

## A New Engagement Era

Located in Basra, far from the sprawling forward operating bases and congestion of Baghdad, MND-S took its cues from a very different operational environment. In almost every respect—politically, militarily, economically, and socially—Basra is distinct from its nation’s capital. It is a city that has long held promise for its people, with oilfields in west Qurnah and Ramallah and a serviceable international airport built by the Germans in the 1980s. Basra Province, Iraq’s deep-water pathway to the Persian Gulf, is steeped in riches and wracked by internal conflict. However, following the successful Charge-of-the-Knights Operation in 2008, the city began to show signs of life. During 2009, after the nearby deepwater port of Umm Qasr was wrenched from militia control, business picked up dramatically as greater numbers of Maersk shipping containers began to arrive each day. Despite these improvements, shipping experts agreed that the port city would need revamped infrastructure, guaranteed electricity, and additional berths before it approached international standards. In addition, local business leaders still complained about corruption at the port—a problem experienced throughout southern Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

As the new environment took shape during early 2009, the 34th Infantry Division Headquarters, an Army National Guard unit headquartered in Rosemount, Minnesota, was assuming command and control of MND-S. In this new Iraqi Security Force-led environment, with a new U.S. division at the helm, what would the division engagement strategy look like? Who should MND-S engage and how? Who would work with U.S. forces and carry command messages to the people? Furthermore, how could U.S. forces work to demystify their presence in the

post-30 June era? What were the concerns of the people, and how could the division engage in this new phase of the operation?

As the insurgency lost steam in Iraq and the conflict entered a new stage, the importance of information engagement could not be overstated. Although the militias were largely routed, there were critical events ahead: implementing a security agreement between Iraq and the U.S., holding a parliamentary election, drawing down U.S. forces, and managing the perceptions of ordinary southern Iraqis. These events helped focus the MND-S engagement strategy. Given this context, individuals such as the provincial governors, Iraqi Army commanders, and Iraqi chiefs of police were obvious engagement choices for the division commander.

However, leaders must always think beyond the obvious and look for voices that have not been heard. Religious leaders in foreign countries are among the most vexing subjects to engage—mostly because U.S. military leaders tend to lack a proper cultural understanding of non-Western religions. However, division leaders realized that key religious figures carry a payload as representatives of a population normally unreachable through traditional media (e.g., press conferences). One indirect way to influence public opinion was to influence the religious leaders who presided over a particular public.

The term *sayyid* is an honorific title Shi’ite Muslims give to males they believe are descendants of the Islamic prophet Muhammad.<sup>3</sup> One such leader in the region was Sayyid Abdul Ali al-Moosawi, who carried weight within the religious information environment. In fact, he held sway over an estimated half-million Shi’ites in Basra Province alone. As the leader of the Shi’ite Shaykhiya sect, his influence transmitted across tribal, provincial, and—quite possibly—national boundaries. In a province with a population of between two and three million people, Moosawi’s voice could potentially reach an audience comparable to a medium-sized cable television network in the United States.

Sayyid al-Moosawi was also a world traveler and an astute businessman who employed more than 1,000 Basrawis in more than a dozen enterprises. When the British departed, Moosawi immediately reached out to the first group of U.S. forces assigned to Basra. In a stroke of luck for the 34th Infantry Division, he also had a connection to Minnesota

through his travel to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where his father—also a respected and renowned cleric—once received medical treatment. Moosawi led the largest mosque in Basra, with an additional 150 smaller structures throughout the city of 2.5 million. He was a key figure who could “open doors” for the division. After a June 2009 open house at the contingency operating base—to which the division invited a list of prominent Basra-area political, social, and military figures—the MND-S commander engaged Moosawi directly on his farm.

While senior military officers share a set of traits common to all successful leaders, the division commander’s civilian background in industry uniquely prepared him for a business-oriented engagement approach. An individual with a strong set of management skills who had done well in a civilian business environment, he found it easy to be candid and show genuine concern for the other person. In a civilian business environment, it is common to exchange frivolous conversation in the buildup to the actual work of the meeting. Qualities like active listening and relationship building are clearly valued among principals of industry. However, in the military (and down-range in particular), leaders often expect to engage persons hostile to U.S. intentions. By relying on so-called “soft skills” as part of an overarching engagement strategy, a commander can placate a key host nation leader, and thus work toward a common area where the two leaders’ interests intersect.

During their initial meeting, Moosawi and the division commander embraced (in accordance with custom); rode horses; walked around; feasted on a lavish buffet of flat bread, lamb, and locally grown vegetables; met a large gathering of leaders in Moosawi’s meeting hall (or *diwan*); feasted again; and finally toured a printing factory near Moosawi’s mosque. Clearly, Moosawi was a kind of renaissance figure with business concerns far

and wide: a genuine stakeholder in the Basra community. Throughout the day, he and the MND-S commander discussed the subject of Moosawi’s weekly sermon, the rule of law, the prison system, and even the pending security agreement framework. The commander also pledged to support the security agreement’s provisions that U.S. forces would act only when called upon by Iraqi Security Forces. As president of the Al-Moosawi Group—his holding company—Moosawi obviously had a variety of business ambitions. These ambitions did not go unnoticed by the division commander as he discussed Moosawi’s various enterprises.

In austere or hostile environments, commanders frequently develop a “task-purpose-method” mindset and conduct themselves in a serious, business-first manner when engaging with host nation leaders. Expecting immediate results, they may become impatient and irritated when the desired effects of the engagement do not materialize immediately.<sup>4</sup> They believe that direct interaction with an important member of the government is the best approach, since it is the most direct approach. However, in many Middle Eastern cultures it is important to develop a relationship *before* asking someone to reciprocate. Westerners tend to think in terms of quid pro quo; Iraqi culture does not function the same way. Rapport between two people does not emerge in a day, and building a necessary relationship is a matter of diligence.

Because engagement effects take time, the division developed a robust key leader engagement schedule with Moosawi and other local leaders. Having developed a plan to build the relationship, it became easier to engage on subjects of critical importance—namely attacks against U.S. forces—during subsequent meetings with Moosawi. (Improvised explosive device and indirect fire attacks were still an unfortunate reality in southern Iraq—though far less so than a year or two earlier.) However, a cheerful discussion of the date harvest often launched the division commander’s conversations with Moosawi. On more than one occasion, the two leaders exchanged gifts. It is good to engage an individual with thoughtful questions on things that matter to him and to use the “small talk” period for a specific purpose.

Collecting data is one such purpose. The engagement provides input for the commander and staff on enemy threat networks and insights on how political,

***Qualities like active listening and relationship building are clearly valued among principals of industry.***

economic, and social structures influence threats in the area. Ideally, intelligence also contributes to the engagement process. Intelligence can offer information and suggest questions that relate to priority intelligence requirements. Perhaps the best way to ensure that intelligence both *informs* and *is informed* by key leader engagements is to employ a military intelligence-trained liaison. Depending on their personalities, Soldier availability, and the commander's desires, military intelligence personnel can be helpful as "note takers" attending engagement events.

From an intelligence perspective, key leader engagement allows the commander to assess his degree of trust in government and military officials. As others have demonstrated, the challenge with using such engagements for insurgent outreach is that the outreach must be tied to a legitimate host nation government effort toward reconciliation or accommodation with the insurgents.<sup>5</sup> Intelligence support to key leader engagement allows a senior commander to assess not only the host nation government's willingness to protect its own population and conduct operations against insurgents, but also the host nation's technical capabilities. The commander can also determine the influence the host nation leader may have on his area of operations.

By way of illustration, during a 2009 key leader engagement with Iraqi Security Force leaders in southern Iraq, one senior Iraqi officer told a large group, "If they [insurgents] come into my area, they will face my rifles and be killed." While this proclamation did not prove his competence or capability, it revealed a quality of the leader and, equally as important, it suggested the type of social environment the Iraqi forces were likely to establish.

## **Making Friends and Influencing People**

According to the Center for Army Lessons Learned, "key leader engagement cells provide an effects-based approach to influencing full spectrum operations within a designated area of operations."<sup>6</sup> Key leader engagements help commanders build productive relationships with influential leaders in their area of operations. The 34th Infantry Division recognized this months before its mobilization and organized a key leader engagement cell to execute this requirement. The cell produced information for MND-S that was key to initiating conversations

that helped build personal relationships for a commander with multiple meetings and business contacts on his schedule. Of course, the effectiveness of a division-level key leader engagement partly depends on the personalities of the individuals in the meeting.

Different phases of conflict require different strategies. The need to exercise all four elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic) increased as the conflict and environment in Iraq matured. Diplomacy is now more important than ever, and with provincial reconstruction teams operating on the ground and Soldiers conducting "advise and assist" missions, the need to constantly develop meaningful relationships with political, military, and social leaders is paramount.

A commander receives no formal diplomatic training, so it is essential for him to engage his audience using the support of his assigned political advisor. He should prepare and rehearse prior to any formal engagements—especially those not directly linked to military, police, or border enforcement operations. Cultural advisors and experienced interpreters are also important. Their involvement is invaluable to developing talking points. During joint engagements, it is essential everyone speak with one voice and communicate a unified message. This type of consistency will generate superior results and enable each engagement to build on the previous one.

Iraqis, and especially Iraqi Security Forces, perceive a U.S. general officer in a unique way. In the role of diplomat, a U.S. general officer's words, actions, emotions, and communication skills are important. Appropriate mannerisms, cultural awareness, and Arabic language proficiency contribute to the effectiveness of an engagement. There are any number of ways to show respect for partners, but advising, coaching, and complimenting them on their successes help shape the engagement and produce positive results.

Once the commander establishes his engagement style and achieves a pattern of success, it is time to think about using his partners' influence to explore other avenues of engagement. Informal social networks are the most important components of society in rural Iraq. In many outlying border areas, tribes are the basic building blocks of Iraqi society.

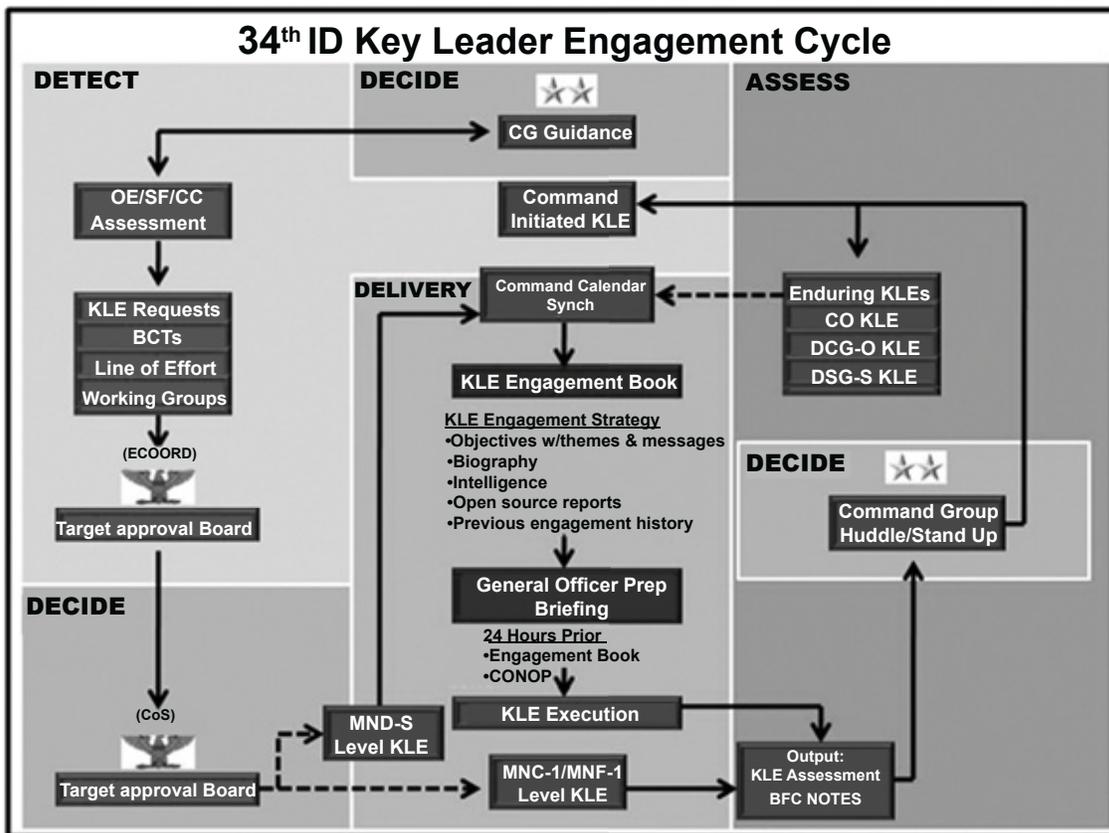


Figure 1

Knowing this, we chose Moosawi’s farm for the second meeting between the division commander and Moosawi, because its casual environment facilitated opportunities for other meetings—not just with Moosawi but also with those in and just external to his social network. If the division required knowledge of a social network outside Moosawi’s sect, it was a fair bet Moosawi knew who to approach.

During the 34th Infantry Division’s preparation for deployment, we were operationally compelled to reduce our footprint in southern Iraqi cities. This degraded situational awareness for commanders at all echelons, engendered critical information gaps, and caused significant drawbacks for the division. As a result, in addition to informing and influencing Iraqis, key leader engagements also helped U.S. commanders understand the operational environment. A well-structured key leader engagement process can significantly advance a commander’s understanding in ways a dozen intelligence analysts never could.

## Multi-National Division-South Strategy

The 34th Infantry Division fires and effects coordination cell is responsible for information engagement, which includes everything from civil military operations to sensor management. Presiding over this confederation of capabilities is the effects coordinator. The effects coordinator’s philosophy can be summarized briefly:

- Focus engagements; less can be better.
- Define the engagement’s task and purpose.
- Link engagements to division priorities and nest them in operations.
- Be cautious; know who is engaging whom.

The accompanying figure depicts the decision cycle used to synchronize and nest key leader engagements within the commander’s objectives and lines of operation.

At the division level, it was standard practice to prepare a key leader engagement package for senior officers. Initially, each packet contained an engagement strategy review. The package included

biographical information along with notes from previous meetings. It sometimes included previous engagement notes, significant events from the area of interest, and projected parliamentary election information. As time progressed, the following information was included:

- Zone of possible agreement.
- Events in the military and global information environment.
- Educated guesses on what motivated the key leader.
- Predictions for how key leaders would behave and speak publicly in the near future.
- Themes, messages, and talking points.
- Information requirements.
- The desired effect we were trying to achieve.

The division effects coordinator reviewed the preparation package at least two days prior to the engagement and made any suggested changes. Twenty-four hours prior to the engagement, the coordinator met with the commander to review the package. The key leader engagement section handled additional requests for information. Once the engagement was complete, a recorder posted the battlefield circulation notes to the SharePoint SIPR website along with an assessment, if applicable. The notes were also coded into the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE) database so they could be referenced for future engagements. (As a tool, CIDNE is integrated into corps and division planning, and units at all echelons need to process their data collection using the same platform. There is probably a training opportunity across divisions and brigades to bring cell members up to the same level of CIDNE competency and accountability. By consolidating critical information using the CIDNE tool, the key leader engagement cell can earn its money by being a nimble and mentally adaptable organization for the commander.)

In the COIN environment of workgroups and targeting boards, planners often lose sight of the intended effect. Many times, commanders and their Soldiers engage with and make promises to local leaders without ever thinking through the consequences of their actions. Take a Commander Emergency Response Program project as an example. Everyone agrees it is nice to build a school where there is none. Host nation businesses benefit from the construction activity and local children have a

school close to home. However, a commander at any echelon should ask several things before he decides to break ground on the new school:

- Does the population need the school?
- How many people will the school actually serve?
- Will the local government finance school operations?
- What are the second- and third-order effects of building a school?
- Will its construction alienate people in the surrounding communities from U.S. forces?

The commander needs to know the informational objectives for building a school and how to use supporting data. A key leader engagement read-ahead addressing such questions will help him determine what the intended end state and the proper conversation and approach should be.

## The Art of Influence

Because key leader engagement is primarily an “influence operation,” nothing illustrates the “disarming” concept better than a quick lesson in social psychology. We use engagements to reach people to propagate a message and expedite the passage of the conflict to its next phase—stability operations. While social influence has several components, education and simple persuasion are better tools to use than, for instance, demands for compliance. When used to influence, engagement aims to impart knowledge or persuade. Influence is an art; coercion is hard science. Divisions build rapport to develop leverage and information collection capabilities at the highest level. This is at the heart of the disarming process.

Pre-persuasion is one tactic to influence a situation and establish a favorable climate for information engagement. Pre-persuasion refers to the way one structures an issue and frames a decision. A communicator needs to establish source credibility and project a favorable image to his target audience. The senior officer communicator needs to appear likable, authoritative, trustworthy, and possessed of any other attribute that would facilitate persuasion.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, one key leader engagement goal is for engagements to beget new engagements and expand the division’s sphere of influence. By inquiring about others’ lives and motivations, a commander can build towards an intended effect by setting the

groundwork for a potential relationship that can lead to a network of relationships. Ultimately, a key leader engagement can influence or inform, but it must always produce an effect and facilitate a collection process and an information objective.

Key leader engagements link division commander engagements to deputy division commander engagements, deputy division commander key leader engagements to brigade commander key leader engagements, and so on. Supporting data from previous engagements to frame divisional future objectives is also used. Supporting data contributes to commander inquiry skills and provides the division the ability to ask the right questions once the relationship is established. Supporting data also permits the division commander to engage individuals on a level that is agreeable to them by asking straightforward questions about the things that interest them most.

Influence involves altering the opinions and attitudes of the population through engagement, and in MND-S, we sought to do this by establishing a trusting relationship using reference points like family and business while always being mutually inquisitive. As referenced earlier, active listening was important, and simply recognizing the fact that people enjoy talking about themselves and their interests invites candor and helps shape future meetings with increasing respect and openness.

Two points on organization: do not rush the meeting, and shape the engagement to get the most out of your limited time together. Prioritize questions and take a calm, deliberate approach. Understand that a key leader engagement is a two-way meeting and prepare to answer tough questions while responding in a professionally diplomatic tone even if you are in an uncomfortable position. Word travels faster than a sandstorm across tribal social networks, and once you have earned your counterpart's trust and a reputation as a "straight shooter," your reputation for trustworthiness will precede you wherever you go.

For instance, because we were still operating near the cities even after the 30 June agreement, influential host nation key leaders seemed to distrust our intentions. They wondered why U.S. forces were still there. Because we had developed a relationship through the art of influence and pre-persuasion, we were able to demystify the issues of the day and

clear the information fog that too often clouds the operational environment.

## Training Strategy

Before the division's mission rehearsal exercise, the division commander, deputy division commanders, and Soldiers underwent a program of generic cultural awareness training. For the 34th Infantry Division, the exercise was a trial by fire, but the key leader engagement train-up offered little more than the opportunity to work with an interpreter. While this experience is valuable, at the general officer level the goal for this training is to develop a strategy to transition partnerships from one general officer to the next. Therefore, well before he actually arrives down range, it is important to consider the depth of the key leader engagement system and how a division commander can approach the process of bringing about an effect. A commander needs strategic depth and interpersonal adaptability if he is to conduct a disarming key leader engagement that will help him interact effectively and build trust in the field.

## Lessons Learned

As with any major unit deployment, expanding institutional knowledge is a professional imperative. While a mission rehearsal exercise is instructive, it only touches on the processes a division commander will face once in theater. That said, the mission rehearsal exercise is also the ideal place for the key leader engagement cell to carve out its role as a conduit for information. As mentioned earlier, the cell should be flexible, responsive, and produce *useful* information. It will be up to the key leader engagement chief to ensure that information is accurate, up to date, and quantifiable, because there is a need to know whether the key influencer influences 100 people or 100,000. A well-advised effects coordinator should then be able to transform this information into meaningful effects, endstates, and objectives. Armed with this information, the division commander is empowered to succeed.

A disarming key leader engagement is a unique tool in that it is dependent on the personality of the general officer conducting the engagement. In the 34th Infantry Division's case, the commander had a civilian background that complemented his military training and permitted him to leverage experience as



Photo courtesy of author

**MG Richard Nash and Sayyid Abdul Ali al-Moosawi speak with merchants in a bazaar, Basra, Iraq.**

an operations executive in the commercial construction industry. The commander's dual perspective as general officer and a civilian executive contributed something to each engagement. While commanders at all echelons may feel the need to get to the point immediately, relationship building involves cultivating influence through the development of mutual trust.

A division commander needs both resources and staff to enable him to win over a host nation leader and expand the division's sphere of influence. Similarly, he needs both recommendations and strategy. In this way, a division engagement distinguishes itself from a brigade level engagement in both style and content. While a brigade commander has urgent needs—tactical effects pertaining to his area of operation—the key leader seeks engagement effects that are not immediate. The brigade commander stands up his engagement network to protect his troops and disrupt attacks. His patience may sometimes wear thin. He may not have time to question assumptions or have access to information engagement recommendations. On the other hand, the division commander must prepare the engagement foundation

for the brigade commanders. The general officer has the engagement infrastructure to provide him strategically useful information and recommendations. He pre-persuades his target audience to produce a deliberate influence strategy and, thus, helps expand the social network of local-national engagers across the division's brigade and battalion sized units.

During the 34th Division's engagements with the governor of Najaf Province, the division commander had a latitude on subjects that a brigade commander would not. Because a governor in any province is an important person to engage, the division commander needed to firm up the partnership—not only as a commander and a politician, but also as a diplomat. To do this, the commander met with Governor Zurfi on more than one occasion. During these meetings, the Najaf security situation came up, but they also discussed the governor's family in Michigan, along with his thoughts on the legacy of Ba'athism, his satellite television preferences, and even his love of the Chicago Bulls. During one such engagement, the commander presented the governor with a coffee table book of Minneapolis/St. Paul (Najaf and Minneapolis had

recently established a sister-cities relationship). A relationship emerged that allowed MND-S leaders to assess the host nation leader's willingness to work with U.S. forces in operations against Iranian-backed insurgents. A disarming key leader engagement in this situation not only led to an enduring civil-military partnership between the 34th Infantry Division and Najaf Province, but also improved the relationship between U.S. brigades and their Iraqi Security Force partners.

## Afghan Applications

Much of the current volatility in Afghanistan can be traced to the establishment of the Durand Line, which divided a number of the eastern Afghan Pashtun tribes. The Pashtun include over 60 clans with 12.5 million people residing in Afghanistan and the remaining 14 million in Pakistan. While this paper cannot assess the Soviet Union's information engagement practices after they invaded Afghanistan, we know that the Soviets initially planned to use terror to convince ordinary Afghans to stop supporting the insurgents. During the 1980s, this use of terror received much more international media coverage than the Soviets expected. As a result, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others began providing more support to the Afghan resistance than Soviet forces could neutralize.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the unintended effect of the Soviet approach was to alienate the population rather than engage it in a productive way and to create international support for the Afghanistan resistance.

While Operation Enduring Freedom is in a different phase from Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the security of the population has yet to be realized in Afghanistan, the social networks of southern Iraq are likely to have their parallels within the complex Pashtun tribal organizations along the border areas with Peshawar and Pakistan. For developing countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, we generally accept the premise that leadership—

whether governmental or tribal—propagates from the top down. Thus, it is likely someone is currently devising a strategy for how to defeat the Afghan insurgency by engaging Afghanistan's top-level social and religious leaders in order to penetrate the social fabric of the country. At the general officer level, if we employ this strategy properly, we should expect to see mutually influencing relationships emerge among key leaders at all echelons. If general officers adopt the disarming method by incorporating the right mix of interpersonal skills and adaptive behavior, this conflict will also find its way into the next phase.

While every operational environment has a different set of circumstances, we should still approach host nation individuals on the premise that honesty and trust produce a mutually beneficial relationship. In the 34th Division, we believe our key leader engagement process is portable enough to meet the conditions of any location so long as there are reasonable people among the host nation population willing to work toward a common end.

The Sayyid al-Moosawi experience leads us to conclude that key leader engagements do work. A commander should give key leader engagements top priority by using his resources to identify the target, the delivery system, and the desired effects. This degree of sophistication requires intellectual analysis that may reside beyond the scope of the G2 section alone. It should include analysts such as political and cultural advisors, G8, Engineers, and State Department enablers.

## Conclusion

Key leader engagements are dynamic processes that must adapt to the operational environment. We use the expression "disarming key leader engagement" as a means to describe pre-persuasion techniques and the managed expectation of key leader engagement effects. Effects are not immediate, and we must build them with candor, genuine concern,

***...we should still approach host nation individuals on the premise that honesty and trust produce a mutually beneficial relationship.***

and active listening. An engagement framework only succeeds to the extent that it is able to influence others. Thus, to realize an influence, the key leader engagement cell must provide information not only on the key leader but also on the complexities of

the information environment, and make strategic recommendations for expanding the key leader engagement network. In this manner, a “disarming” engagement program will prove to be an effective strategy. **MR**

*The authors would like to acknowledge the significant contributions of Colonel Neal Loidolt and Colonel Dirk Kloss with the structure and drafting of this article.*

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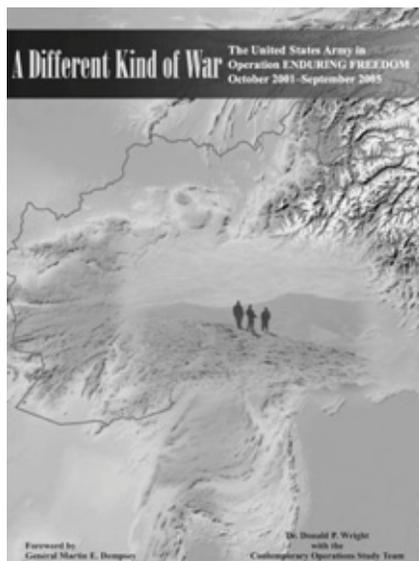
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