

Cultural Competence is Crucial to Military Success in Counterinsurgency Operations

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Abstract

The United States' military and political involvement with Iraq and Afghanistan have placed our military and foreign service officers shoulder to shoulder with (or more frequently in conflict with) people whose culture is almost completely opposite that of most Americans and Westerners in general. Without a studied understanding of the region and people's culture, misunderstandings, misinterpretations and offenses are not only likely to occur, but may become the norm rather than the exception. Given the gravity of our mission in both countries and the high cost extracted from our soldiers, our society and our economy, it is vital that leaders learn the culture of the region and apply that knowledge during interactions with the indigenous population to avoid becoming a stumbling block to mission success.

Introduction

I. *Background*

In 2008, General Petraeus, then commander of the Multi National Forces-Iraq, issued a multipoint memorandum providing counterinsurgency guidance to the military forces operating in Iraq. General Petraeus, drawing from counterinsurgency doctrine, directed forces to:

Secure and serve the population. The Iraqi people are the decisive "terrain."

Together with our Iraqi partners, work to provide the people security, to give them respect, to gain their support and to facilitate establishment of local governance, restoration of basic services and revival of local economies.

Fight the information war relentlessly. Realize that we are in a struggle for legitimacy that in the end will be won or lost in the perception of the Iraqi people.

Every action taken by the enemy and United States has implication in the public arena. Develop and sustain a narrative that works and continually drive the themes home through all forms of media (Petraeus, 2008).

Culture- What is it and why do we care about this "touchy feely stuff" anyway? Culture has been defined in several ways:

The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from another (Lewis, 2006).

The relatively stable set of inner values and beliefs generally held by groups of people in countries or regions and the noticeable impact those values and beliefs gave on the people's outward behavior and environment (Peterson, 2004).

A learned set of shared perceptions about beliefs, values and norms, which affect the behavior of a relatively large group of people (Lustig & Koester, 1996).

Culture forms our beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad, what is honorable and true, what is despicable and unworthy. But what is particularly important for military forces to take from the above definitions is that culture affects a people's behavior. "Culture establishes predictability in human interactions. Cultural differences are evident in the varying ways in which people conduct their everyday activities, as people "perform" their culture in their behavioral routines" (Lustig & Koester, 1996).

II. Argumentative Statement

In this paper, I contend that Petraeus' aforementioned tasks of secure and serve the population and fight the information war relentlessly are impossible if military forces fail to understand Iraqi culture and apply that knowledge during the planning and conduct of military operations. This is not to say that one must be an expert in Iraqi-Arab culture, however; at the very least we must understand what motivates them, what speaks to their identity and what alienates or insults them. Ideally, the skillful application of cultural understanding will assist US forces in positively influencing the burgeoning Iraqi military and police forces and avoid furthering the insurgency. Careful integration of cultural knowledge into all phases of military operations will increase the likelihood of success across the spectrum from the tactical to strategic level. Employing culturally savvy methods will rob insurgent leaders of anti-US propaganda fodder, minimize unintended consequences from US operations and support more accurate intelligence analysis.

II. Supporting Reasons

A. Proper application of cultural understanding will minimize unintended consequences.

In stating his guidance to MNFI, General Petraeus essentially provided a bulletized synopsis of Field Manual 3-07.22, Counterinsurgency Operations. The very first chapter discusses the origins and causes of insurgencies and makes it clear that the support of the population is required to sustain an insurgency, thus the people are the "center of gravity" (FM 3-07.22, 2004). Insurgent leadership, with a firm understanding of their own language and culture, use the media, rumor, and word of mouth to propagate their grievances against the established government and occupation forces and gleefully exploit any cultural blunders. Subsequent outrage over excessive or perceived excessive force and cultural faux pas conducted by security forces helps to increase the membership and strength of the insurgency.

A video, recently uploaded to Live Leak and YouTube,¹ shows a US Soldier berating a group of Iraqi police (IP) standing in formation. The soldier, clearly frustrated with the performance of the IPs, launched into a profanity filled tirade in what I believe to be an attempt to motivate them to action. The soldier, through his translator accused the IPs of being women, liars, and cowards and threatened to personally take on any police officer who wanted to fight him. He challenged the IPs as to whether their loyalty was to Iraq or to sectarianism, and answered that due to their cowardice and failure to act his soldiers were dying for Iraq. He repeatedly told any IP who spoke up to shut up and failed to address their concerns, stating that they were making excuses. The video does not provide a translation of the IP's comments, which would have provided more insight into the IP's responses. The soldier's anger and frustration is completely understandable given the enormity of his mission and the loss of his soldiers; but did he accomplish his goal? His tirade might have been effective had he been addressing a younger

¹ Youtube video, "Lazy Iraqi Police get motivational speech," accessed via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1GrdTakv18>

American military audience or sports team, but by allowing his frustration to control him, he inhibited effective communication by publicly insulting the police. Three facets of Arab culture are useful in evaluating whether the Soldier's methods were culturally appropriate and effective:

1) Iraqis place great emphasis on "face." Face is social and always external and has nothing to do with one's self impression, but rather how one is treated by others. "To maintain face, people want others to act toward them with respect, regardless of their "real" thoughts and impressions. Great effort is expended to avoid losing face (Lustig & Koester, 1996).

2) Loyalty and Self Identification. An Iraqi Arab's first and primary loyalty is to his family and extended family.

3) Honor. Closely related to face, is the concept of honor. Lazar Berman, an Israeli officer with experience working with Arabs, explains:

In this culture, at its most basic, a man must strive to maintain his honor at all costs. He must fight, even lie or kill, to protect his honor and that of his family. Conversely, when a man fails to protect his honor, he is shamed. He may regain his honor by vengeance against those who shamed him, often through bloodshed (Small Wars Journal, 2008).

Given just these few key facets of Arab culture, it would seem that that the soldier was ineffective and probably counterproductive.² Rather than motivate, the Iraqis were insulted and belittled. The Soldier may have been trying to use his understanding of shame to motivate; however, until one truly understands a culture, it is best to consider how to positively motivate rather than risk causing an offense that requires retribution. Regaining honor may involve the

² This example is not to impugn the work of this particular Soldier who was attempting to accomplish his mission and take care of his soldiers under very stressful conditions. I use this video as an example of the difficulties facing US service members who are operating in foreign cultures without the benefit of applicable culture specific training.

death of US soldiers. In his advice to US Military Advisors working in Islamic countries, Michael Metrisko, points out: "Sometimes the physical circumstances of the advisor's presentation may negate his message as well, causing an unwelcome reaction in his listeners, especially if they become embarrassed or insulted" (Metrisko, 2008). Appealing to one's patriotism and loyalty to country is effective when speaking to US forces, but does not speak to a group of men whose primary group identification and loyalty is to the family and extended family/tribe and who are engaged in a struggle to provide for their families and to simply stay alive.

US Forces must learn to understand what matters to the indigenous people and determine how to apply this cultural knowledge to persuade and motivate them to action. Amidst all the training and tasks that must be accomplished prior to deploying overseas, cultural "sensitivity" training may seem to be something nice to do if one has time; however, there is never enough time for everything that must be accomplished prior to deployment. If leaders do not understand the importance of cultural training, it is easily disregarded in lieu of other training.

B. Knowledge of the culture supports accurate intelligence analysis and reduces misunderstanding. Two examples are from my own experience as a Counterintelligence Agent. In 1997, I was sent to Guantanamo Bay, in support of Operation Marathon. A ship containing illegal Chinese immigrants attempting to smuggle themselves into the US foundered off the eastern coast of New York state. The immigrants were detained and moved to a camp on Guantanamo Bay while the US government determined whether to grant them asylum or to repatriate them to China. A USMC unit from Camp Lejeune ran the camp and provided security. Concerned that criminals were hiding among the detainee population, the Marines were very concerned over a yellow piece of cloth containing Chinese characters that a detainee carried.

They believed they found an indication of criminal activity or secret communication until they showed it to a US service member who was ethnically Chinese. He quickly explained that it was a simple good luck talisman and the crisis was diverted. Another example of how cultural knowledge helps to support accurate intelligence analysis and force protection operations comes from an incident that occurred in Okinawa, Japan in 2004. Several Middle Eastern looking men wearing Shalwar Kamiz (traditional clothing worn in Pakistan and Afghanistan) were seen walking in the vicinity of a military base and kneeling and praying in front of a shopping center frequented by US forces. One of these men later defecated near a seawall behind the shopping center. Okinawa is host to numerous military facilities and with the recent invasion of Iraq, force protection concerns were at an all time high with both Japanese police officials and US force protection personnel. The sight of bearded, Middle Eastern men, appearing as though they had just arrived from Kabul and acting strangely near US military bases caused alarms to go off within the law enforcement community. With the assistance of someone who was intimately knowledgeable of the Middle Eastern community on Okinawa it became clear that the individuals, no matter how odd looking and out of place they appeared, were not terrorists bent on striking Americans, but were simply from a rural/tribal area and not familiar with modern toilets. During a time of heightened concern of terrorism from Islamic extremists their appearance and behavior was suspicious because of our unfamiliarity with their culture and their presence in a place where it is uncommon to see anyone other than Okinawans and Americans. Of course, we cannot be experts in the cultural nuances of every group of people in the world; however, we must understand that what is suspicious in one culture is completely normal in another and factor this into our intelligence analysis.

C. Cultural knowledge supports mission success. Every military action must support our strategic goal and ignorance of a culture may lead to poor decisions that work at odds with that goal. This supposition requires of course, that we properly define and understand our strategic goals. What is the desired end state? If the objective in Iraq and Afghanistan is the establishment of a functioning civil society that no longer poses a threat to the United States, it will only happen with the support of the populace. This requires that we consider the history and culture of the populace, anticipate their reaction to operations, manage expectations of the indigenous population and resist the urge to insist they do things our way. In the case of Iraq, perhaps if the civilian leadership in the Department of Defense attempted to understand the Iraqi culture and history and not engaged in assumptions and mirror imaging (projecting one's own thought processes and values onto someone else) they might not have been taken by surprise that an insurgency arose out of the crumbled society. To be fair, military war gamers did account for the irregular warfare we have seen in Iraq; however, senior civilian leadership chose to discount the outcome (Naylor, 2002).

III. *Counter Argument*

A. Cultural knowledge, while an admirable trait is not the key to military success. Rather, offensive, overwhelming military force and security operations are what will ensure mission accomplishment. During the planning for the Iraq war, General Franks repeatedly admonished his planning staff that speed, flexible maneuver along with precise and lethal firepower would be the key to winning the war in Iraq (Franks, 2005). It is noteworthy that there was neither discussion of Arab mindset, culture, thought process nor even serious discussion about the regime's primary security concerns throughout Gen. Frank's account.

IV. *Conclusion:*

If war were merely about battles between military forces, I would wholeheartedly agree with General Franks; however, there seems to be something missing between crushing the opposing military and establishing a functioning, stable country. What do we do once the battles have been won and we have trounced them with our speed and lethal firepower? Dr. Echavarria, Director of Research for the U.S. Army War College, in discussing the American way of warfare, makes the following comment:

Political and military leaders must habituate themselves to thinking more thoroughly about how to turn combat successes into favorable strategic outcomes. Such thinking is not new, but it is clearly not yet a matter of habit. Failure to see the purpose for which a war is fought *as part of war itself* amounts to treating battle as an end in itself. Until Americans clarify the roles of grammar and logic and develop a habit of thinking about war that goes beyond battles, they will have a way of war in name only (Echevarria, 2004).

If our strategic goal is more than simply destroying a country's military, then we must bring knowledge and understanding of the enemies culture, history, psychology, fears, prejudices, etc to the table when planning for and conducting operations. Failure to do so will almost guarantee missteps and inappropriate actions resulting in unintended consequences.

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