

US Army's strategy in Afghanistan: better anthropology

Counterinsurgency efforts focus on better grasping and meeting local needs.

By [Scott Peterson](#) / Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*
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Shabak Valley, Afghanistan - Evidence of how far the US Army's counterinsurgency strategy has evolved can be found in the work of a uniformed anthropologist toting a gun in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Part of a Human Terrain Team (HTT) – the first ever deployed – she speaks to hundreds of Afghan men and women to learn how they think and what they need. [Editor's note: *The original version gave the incorrect initialism for the Human Terrain Team.*]

One discovery that may help limit Taliban recruits in this rough-hewn valley: The area has a preponderance of widows – and their sons, who have to provide care, are forced to stay closer to home, where few jobs can be found. Now, the HTT is identifying ways to tap the textiles and blankets traded through here to create jobs for the women – and free their sons to get work themselves.

"In most circumstances, I am 'third' gender," says Tracy, who can give only her first name. She says that she is not seen as either an Afghan woman or a Western one – because of her uniform. "It has enhanced any ability to talk to [Afghans]. There is a curiosity."

Such insight is the grist of what US forces here see as a smarter counterinsurgency. "We're not here just to kill the enemy – we are so far past the kinetic fight," says Lt. Col. Dave Woods, commander of the 4th Squadron 73rd Cavalry. "It is the nonkinetic piece [that matters], to identify their problems, to seed the future here." Nearly six years after US troops toppled the Taliban, the battle is for a presence that will elicit confidence in the Afghan government and its growing security forces. "Operation Khyber," which started Aug. 22, aims for a more effective counterinsurgency – using fewer bullets and more local empowerment.

US commanders have doubled US troop strength in eastern Afghanistan in the past year. They are also fielding the HTT – a "graduate-level counterinsurgency" unit, as one officer puts it – to fine-tune aid and to undermine the intimidating grip of militants in the region.

"This battlefield has changed," says Colonel Woods, from Denbo, Pa., whose 450 or so troops are working with 150 Afghan police and 500 Afghan Army soldiers to bring

security to three districts along the Khost-Gardez Pass, a key trade route. "I think the enemy has changed. He has to work harder to gain popular support. He can't work openly any longer."

Militant influence is palpable

US and Afghan officers estimate 200 to 250 Taliban, foreign fighters, and members of local criminal networks operate in the three districts – Gerda Serai, Swak, and Waze Jadran.

Several key Taliban leaders have been killed in Paktia Province and neighboring Paktika Province in recent months, and an expected Taliban spring offensive never took hold.

But this week in Chawni, as Afghan and US forces pushed deeper into territory steeped in Taliban influence, two 107-mm rockets fell close by on either side of their camp one night. No third shell came, and while the attack was small by the standards of Afghan violence, it illustrated the challenges of rooting out militants.

One villager in Chawni, where the high, dun-colored compound walls are divided by tall trees and irrigation ditches, recounts how, the night before, he had seen a Taliban convoy of six cars and two motorcycles pass through, preventing him from watering parched fields.

"I was very scared and didn't go outside," said the man, his white beard brilliant against his dark-green silk turban.

"The problem is at night, when the Taliban walk here," says another villager. "The government told us not to come out at night. The Taliban tell us the same thing."

US and Afghan officers say the militants meet after 11 p.m., make plans, then leave by 4 a.m. The fighters have been forced into the mountains, where radio intercepts reveal uncertainty and hunger.

"A lot of the counterinsurgency fight is to deny the insurgents the ability to feed and shelter themselves by the local populace," says Maj. Craig Blando, head of a team working alongside Afghan police.

But intimidation remains. A one-day US military medical and veterinary service this week in the Shabak Valley, in which doctors and veterinarians stood ready to help, was nearly vacant.

Local police officer 1st Lt. Taj Mohammed had predicted that many hundreds of people would show up at the clinics – up to 400 have visited ones elsewhere – but only 100 men and a handful of women came to this one on Monday.

One reason, US officers said, may have been because they arrested six Taliban in the area the previous week. Rumors had spread that suicide attacks might target the clinics. A roadside bomb was discovered two nights before.

"They are afraid of the Taliban," confirmed one black-turbaned elder, Maligul, who walked through the ring of US and Afghan security only to argue his tribe's case in a land dispute. "Already the Taliban beheaded one elder a month ago. They told people he was a spy of the coalition."

"The young people don't come. They are all Al Qaeda; they're up in the mountains," says Lieutenant Mohammed. "All young people have no jobs, so they join the Taliban ... to get clothes and hashish."

"Al Qaeda has influence all the time over people," he says, estimating the "enemy" in his district at between 10 and 40, perhaps one-third of them from Pakistan or the Arab world. "We don't have government people here. Whenever we [Afghan and US forces] leave this place, they will come down and it will be just like it was before...."

Operation Khyber has yielded promises from 73 families in three districts to provide auxiliary police recruits, but this officer says none have come forward.

"When the Afghan Army and coalition leaves, the Taliban will come back down," says Maligul, who has only one name.

An anthropologist at work

Finding ways to challenge that fear – and learn what makes Afghans choose to support the government or its enemies – is the job of the HTT. The key ingredient is a "senior cultural analyst," in this case, Tracy, the anthropologist in uniform.

She has interviewed hundreds of Afghan women and men, sometimes for hours on end, hearing how most are "so tired of war." In nine months, Tracy has gained deep knowledge, she says, aimed at helping "fill the vacuum that the Taliban and other nefarious actors want to fill."

Tracy tells Afghans that she wants to "enhance the military's understanding of the culture so we don't make mistakes like in Iraq." But the bar is high, and this village with the medical clinic shows signs of militant influence, such as being "coached."

Still, Tracy says that she sees real progress, "one Afghan at a time." And the US military's views are evolving accordingly, away from firepower to a smarter counterinsurgency.

"It may be one less trigger that has to be pulled here," Tracy says of the result. "It's how we gain ground, not tangible ground, but cognitive ground. Small things can have a big impact."

That was the case in learning about the idle young men in Shabak Valley.

"I would have never known that was a problem in that community; they wouldn't tell *me* about that," says Woods. "[She] is taking the population and dissecting it, and giving us data points to improve or help solve other problems. It's not the end -all, but it's a tool."

The strategy has been refined since it was first applied in Afghanistan last year. When this reporter traveled to Nuristan a year ago, around Naray, US officers spelled out the new fight-and-build strategy of winning trust in remote villages with projects, and staying on in grim, wet, and barely-resupplied conditions throughout the winter to deny militants a haven.

"In counterinsurgency, you can't lead with a rifle," Lt. Col. Mike Howard said last year. "You must lead with actions, with reconstruction."

But the goodwill was undermined by a couple incidents last November, in the outpost of Kamdesh. In one case, a Special Forces strike netted a high -level Al Qaeda operative and killed another after a wedding ceremony.

Days later, according to an American on the outpost, casualties from an Apache helicopter strike "made people angry and bent on revenge."

Building Better Understanding

Still, the new counterinsurgency template was passed on, and is likely to reach beyond US efforts in Afghanistan to Iraq.

"Across the armed forces, there is a desire to build this capacity and field it," says Tracy. "Because of the turn of events in Iraq, it made it extremely clear that we had to have a better understanding.

"I'm amazed at the soldiers, they get it," she adds. "And the receptivity of the commanders – they know we need to get it right."

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