

# Changing the Conversation: Conceptualizing the Fight against Non-State and Post-State Actors

## Executive Summary

The character of conflict is primarily a competition of narrative. Current thought, tactical and operational approach, and confusion at the strategic and policy levels ensure that the US is losing this competition. Influence is the relevant combat power for the narrative competition. In this case it is influence to effect the thinking and actions that shape people and nations. It is through matching actions with words and effective engagement that we develop meaningful relationships and the associated influence it brings. To develop the combat power of influence requires understanding the nature of complex systems associated with cultures and countries, recognizing the current character of conflict as a competition of narrative, and understanding the opponent in context.

This paper is written to frame the current fight where the main opponents are non- and post-state actors. It includes conceptual and contextual points to help leaders and thinkers to frame the discussion. It also provides observations, thoughts, and recommendations to assist organizations, units, and individuals engaging in the fight today. The material in here is based on years of experience living in and studying about the Middle East combined with recent involvement in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR)<sup>1</sup> in Baghdad, Iraq in late 2014 and early 2015.<sup>2</sup> This is not an academic paper. The presentation here is designed to provide a way of framing the current problem set in a way that effectively empowers organizations to use resources that currently exist.

## Disclaimers

Specific “lessons learned” from a combat theater have a shelf life measured in days. What is offered below therefore are the foundational ideas and concepts that have relevance beyond specific events. Any criticism, stated or implied, is not personal in nature. The men and women serving in support of OIR are doing so with tremendous professionalism, hard work, and commitment. This is not to target or comment on a specific leader or unit. These comments are reflective of broader organizational and institutional issues. Some of the comments are specific to the events that have and are transpiring in Iraq, but I would argue that many of them could apply to the deployment to West Africa, Jordan, or any other place where we are sending military forces to solve nebulously defined national security problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve or OIR is the named operation for US and Coalition actions directed against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

<sup>2</sup> About the Author. Brian L. Steed is currently a Military History instructor at the US Army Command and General Staff College and a Middle East Foreign Area Officer. He served eight and a half consecutive years in the Middle East including assignments in the Levant, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian Peninsula. He served briefly in Iraq in 2005, a full year in 2010-2011, and again December 2014-February 2015. He was a Jordanian Army Officer as part of the Military Personnel Exchange Program for two and a half years giving him an immersed perspective in Arab culture and a liaison to the IDF providing another immersed experience from a different regional perspective. He has written numerous books on military theory and military history and cultural awareness. His most recent book is *Bees and Spiders: Applied Cultural Awareness and the Art of Cross-Cultural Influence* about using cultural awareness to develop empathy and ultimately influence.

## Introduction

Despite what is heard on the Sunday morning talk shows, Da'ash<sup>3</sup> is not an aberration from history. It falls in the group of brigands, organized criminals, terrorist organizations, non-state actors, and now the post-state actor. Da'ash is the latest version of an arc of opponents to civilization. They are the current epitome of a Robber Culture. Robber Cultures focus on violence and asset acquisition – killing and stealing. The particular Robber Culture with which we are currently engaged adds to the standard violence a religiously motivated ideological justification. They are a post-state actor and they characterize their violence within a narrative space. They are a threat to civilization, but fighting them ignorantly poses an even greater threat to the civilization in the countries where the battles rage. This paper hopes to address some of that ignorance.

In late 2014 an invitation was extended for officers from Fort Leavenworth to assist the deployed division in Iraq as staff planners. At the time I was teaching an elective course on the history of the Global War on Terrorism which included the rise of ISIS. The course included material on US mistakes with respect to understanding the region, the opponent, and the narrative. I left to go to Iraq because I believed that we were fighting ISIS (Da'ash) incorrectly and that we (the US military) did not know that. After about three weeks in country and after I spoke with people across the US Department of Defense (DoD) and interagency organizations represented on the Embassy-Baghdad compound I confirmed that we were fighting the enemy incorrectly and that most everyone I spoke with knew it.

This leading observation causes me to ask the question: what does this mean for the US Army (or more generally, the military) as an institution and as an organization? If middle and senior management and leadership believe that the existing path undertaken will not result in the end state outlined by senior leadership then why are we still pursuing that path? Or, how can middle management affect the path to change course to better achieve desired end states?

## What are we (American Citizens, the USG, DoD, etc.) missing most?

The nature of threat indicators and warnings is that the observer can deduce intent from the actions observed. Otherwise any given action may be innocuous. Determining intent is one of the key failures in the intelligence collection since 11 September 2001. Understanding intent requires understanding the opponent in the complexity of context and the narrative for the conflict underway.

Much of the interpretation of events happening in Iraq, in specific, and against ISIS, in general, was and is being done through an American interpretative lens. Meaning, we see events and determine the intent based off what we would intend if we were to be doing the same things. Sometimes this may be accurate, but in many cases it is not. What follows below is a different lens to view the same events and possibly come to more relevant and useful conclusions about the opponent and the proper response to them.

**Cobb:** What is the most resilient parasite? Bacteria? A virus? An intestinal worm? ... An idea. Resilient. Highly contagious. Once an idea has taken hold of the brain it's almost impossible to eradicate. An idea that is fully formed - fully understood - that sticks; right in there somewhere.

*Inception (2010)*

**Sextus:** You can break a man's skull. You can arrest him. You can throw him into a

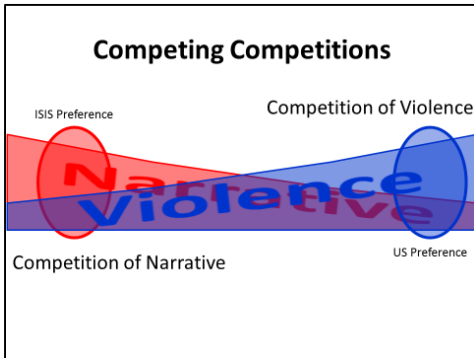
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<sup>3</sup> Da'ash is used here rather than DA'ISH for pronunciation purposes. It is well known that DA'ISH is an acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham based using Arabic letters. The problem is that the spelling with the letter "I" leads to mispronunciations of "Da'eesh" which is incorrect. ISIS and Da'ash will be used interchangeably throughout this paper as one is simply the English translation of the other.

dungeon. But how do you control what's up here? [taps his head] How do you fight an idea?

**Messala:** Sextus, you ask how to fight an idea. Well, I'll tell you how... with another idea!  
*Ben-Hur (1959)*

**Narrative – competition of narrative**



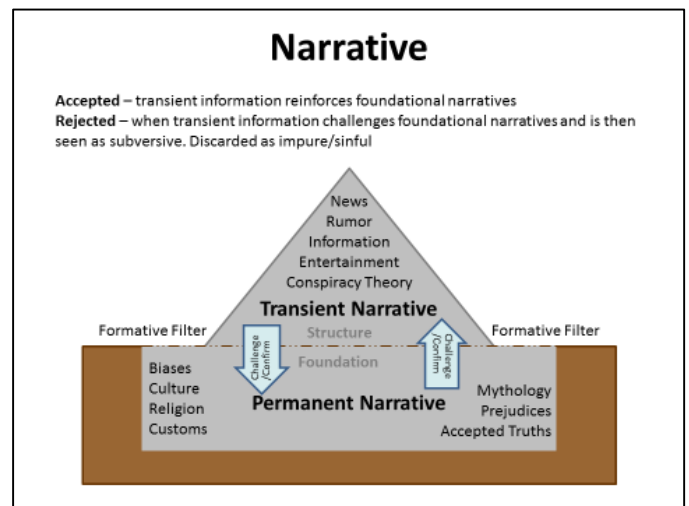
Historically armed conflict was based on a competition of violence – whoever won the competition of violence won the war. This held true regardless of the results coming from an ancient battlefield with the clash of phalanxes or legions or a modern battlefield with the firepower of rifles, artillery, and aerial delivered ordnance. The character of war has changed to being a competition of narrative. In neither case is violence or narrative exclusive – this is really a question of emphasis or dominance. The “decisive operation” on the current Middle Eastern battlefield is narrative. Violence is still a critical portion of armed conflict, but it serves a subservient and supporting role only. Da’ash and others use violence primarily to communicate, confirm, or advance their

narrative.

This argument runs counter to prevailing US military culture and doctrine which emphasizes kinetic targeting and effects as the means of achieving stated ends. This ignorance of the power of the narrative causes US leaders to look incompetent to host nation counterparts and ineffectual in the ways and means employed to regional partners and competitors.

Narrative has numerous uses. In the context used here it includes both permanent and transient narratives. Permanent narrative begins with the first instruction provided to a child. It includes customs, religion, culture, biases, mythology, prejudices, accepted truths, and other permanently shaping means of filtering ideas and perceiving information. The transient narrative includes news, rumor, information, entertainment, conspiracy theories, and other time sensitive means of information or data flow. When a person receives new information that has potential impact on the narrative then that information is filtered through the permanent narrative. Does it challenge or confirm the narrative? Based on the answer and based on the individual’s experience and the flexibility or permeability of the permanent narrative filter, the transient narrative information will either be accepted or rejected. If accepted it may slightly adjust the narrative and if rejected it maintains the existing narrative’s permanence. Transient narratives are accepted when they reinforce foundational narratives. They are rejected when transient information challenges foundational narratives and is then seen as subversive. This leads to the information being discarded as impure/sinful.

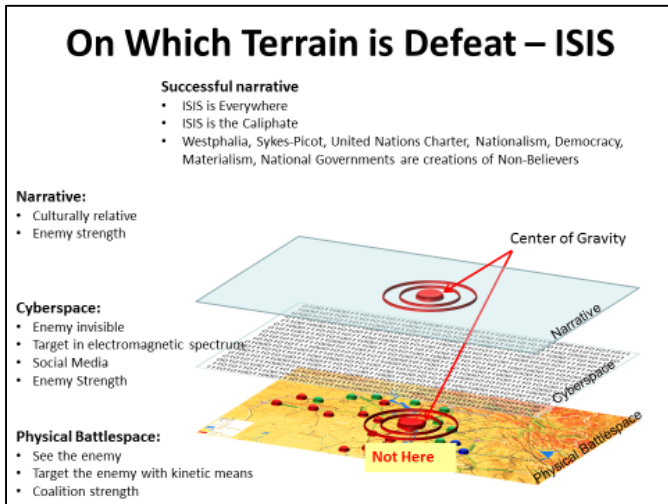
Several examples of narratives currently playing out in Iraq are provided below. One is provided here to illuminate the point. The most popular narrative in Iraq in early 2015 was that the US created and was then supporting Da’ash in combat operations. For the average American soldier this was ludicrous. The US permanent narrative includes concepts of freedom, justice, separation of church and state, and humanitarian behavior. What Da’ash stands for, as popularly communicated in US media and amongst US service members, all run counter to this US permanent narrative and thus this transitional narrative is



discarded because the filter does not let it through. A way to look at the Iraqi perspective may go as follows. The Iraqi permanent narrative includes concepts like the US and its coalition allies having a singular purpose of making the people of Iraq suffer since 1991, the US wants to protect Israel and keeping Iraq weak and divided by Shia and Sunni killing each other serves that purpose, and the US through its technology can control all of its actions and sees and knows what is happening throughout Iraq. The transient narrative includes statements from Iraqi militia that they have seen US support to Da'ash, pictures on Twitter of coalition airdropped supplies in the hands of Da'ash, and US weapons and equipment being used by Da'ash. All of these transient narrative items fit very well with the permanent narrative and thus they are accepted.

In this competition of narrative it is improbable that the US can achieve objectives like defeat and

destroy in the physical battlespace. These objectives are only possible in the narrative space. This means that searching for a center of gravity that exists in the physical battlespace will be fruitless as that center of gravity (if it exists at all) will be in the narrative space. In the physical battlespace we have identified eight elements of combat power.<sup>4</sup> Many of these elements have only tangential value in the narrative space where the primary source of combat power is influence.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the doctrinal and conceptual challenges with respect to influence, the US military and even the US government have very few physical, conceptual, and legal tools that allow them to successfully engage in this narrative space. The argument for and the specific desired tools to more effectively engage are



outside the scope of this paper. Despite having limited tools, we still have measures at our disposal. These measures include engagements, information operations, and military information support operations or psychological operations.

### Influence – Long Game Philosophy

Creating success within the narrative space requires influence. First, it requires the ability to influence the positive narrative for our own force. Negative narratives can work based on negative emotions like fear, anger, and hate. This type of narrative only lasts as long as these emotions can continue to be stoked. Positive narratives have the potential to be longer lasting and more constructive. Constructive influence is essential as civilizations need to be constructed and built. The non- and post-state actors with whom we are fighting can focus on tearing down the structures of civilization because their narratives do not require those structures to hold true. That said, it is important to note, as will be given in more detail below, the narrative of our current opponent is positive and therefore motivational for a constructive and apocalyptic purpose. Positive narratives usually are connected with policy and strategic vision – what we want the world to look like once the fog of war has dissipated. Second, we need to effectively

<sup>4</sup> The eight are mission command, leadership, information, movement and maneuver, protection, intelligence, sustainment, and fires.

<sup>5</sup> It might be argued that mission command, leadership, and information deal with influence. Though this is generally true they tend to be focused on influencing within the command and not influencing the host-nation counterpart or even the enemy narrative. Information is most often identified as the element that deals with this, but it is too narrowly defined and used to be effective in actually influencing the opponent's or the counterpart's narrative.

communicate our narrative, positive or negative, to our counterparts and influence them to cooperate and ideally advocate that same narrative beyond our immediate circle of influence.

If influence is the combat power of the competition of narrative then engagements are the delivery mechanism of that combat power. All commanders conduct engagements and therefore the effective execution of engagements needs to be a critical skill. As we are engaged in a regional and global generational fight against a narrative-driven opponent it is essential that we effectively engage in a *long game* of influence. Victory in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, etc. will not be determined solely by accomplishments in one or two years but by our position of influence five, ten, and twenty years in the future. This vision requires a sea change in US military behavior. We need to look beyond the immediate task and see how to use the tools available for the immediate task to set ourselves up for a position of improved influence after the immediate task is accomplished. The fight in Iraq, in specific, and against Da'ash and their ilk, in general, is not about numbers – ever. It is about who we win over to our way of thinking and perspective. Our standard behavior in the Middle East in terms of influence is to either bully our way to the answer we want or to bribe our way. Both of these methods have the benefit of speed, but neither one lasts beyond the departure of the bully or the money.<sup>6</sup>

Our opponents in the region have developed a *long game* approach out of cultural pre-disposition and through fiscal and tactical necessity. They could not and cannot compete with our technical, technological, and tactical supremacy so they had to have a different way to get to success. As we are forced to do more with significantly less we must also move out of our comfort zone with respect to influencing others.

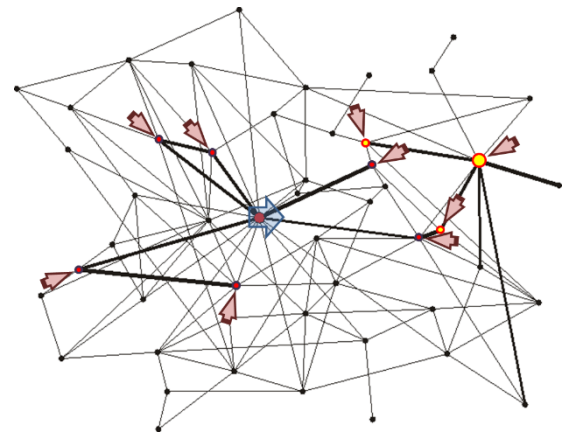
It is important to emphasize that this is not about numbers. Yet the US fixates on numbers. During this deployment there were numerous anecdotes of engagements where the primary questions from US personnel – conventional, special operations, and Department of State (DoS) – were about numbers. How many people at training? How many tribesmen enrolled? How many weapons on hand? Etc. etc. etc. Iraqi counterparts often looked mystified and US cultural advisors recognized the problems, but the US Government (USG) personnel felt compelled to get the numbers because that was what was demanded from Kuwait, Tampa, DC, etc. There are ways to answer higher headquarters demands without looking like a cultural and problem-set simpleton. Yes, Iraqis want weapons from the US, but in Arab culture it is about people and human needs and fixation on numbers smacks of barbarity and being uncivilized.

### Engagements with a Tone of Partner not Proxy

The primary weapon in the fight against Da'ash is non-lethal and non-kinetic engagement – developing relationships that lead to influence. This requires personnel resources similar to lethal and kinetic engagement. To be successful in this realm, those who engage need to understand the motivations and personal connections (social network map) of the counterparts being engaged necessitating a completely different collection regime. Once this understanding exists then the network needs to be engaged in addition to the individual.

Some critical principles of engagement for senior leaders and others include:

- The most important purpose is to develop the relationship.
- The most important relationship is between the person on the ground and the counterpart. This



<sup>6</sup> The traditional method for military leaders interacting with political leaders or the populace is to promise victory better, faster, and cheaper. What is advocated in this paper is certainly cheaper than kinetic and high-technology solutions, but it is also just as certainly not faster as it requires patience as the primary attribute.

means that senior leaders need to empower the typically junior advisor through word and action. For example, resources should flow through the advisor to the host nation person so that the advisor is perceived as having the *wasta*.

- Every engagement should be used to develop and strengthen this critical relationship which means having the advisor present whenever possible.
- There is a process to developing genuine and lasting Influence with the counterpart that mirrors the process through which an individual intellectually progresses with any single topic or new idea: **information – understanding – acceptance – advocacy**. It is critical that the counterpart is intellectually moved from simple information to understanding and then to accepting the idea as valuable and finally to advocacy for that idea. Depending on the idea and the counterpart this progression could happen in a single meeting or over dozens of meetings. The ideal of influence – advocacy – is our ability to get our “partners” to do what we want them to do, when we want them to, and continue to support the idea even in our absence.
- The non-kinetic targeting team is crucial as they need to develop the program and method of progressing the counterparts for each issue. Success requires developing understanding of the counterpart and the critical issues. This team needs to be robust enough to provide the information and program in a timely matter to those conducting the engagements.
- Talking points need to be crafted such that the counterpart first understands the value that this idea or action has to them. It may be of use or necessity to express the objective or outcome first, but then it is important to communicate the value and finally the message itself as follows: [outcome] – benefit – message
- Quantity time matters – the person doing the engaging needs to be present when their counterpart is ready to listen rather than just when we want to be present to deliver the message. This truism is another reason why the advisor is so crucial because they can provide the quantity necessary to develop influence.

What is a meaningful metric? The metrics that get reported in daily situation reports are what an organization values. Engagements need to be reported. Who visited whom? What messages were delivered? Did the counterpart make progress from one step to the next? These are the questions that communicate whether or not a given unit is developing influence. Numbers trained, rounds fired, equipment delivered mean nothing to the *capacity* we are trying to build if the ideas are not being transmitted.

This is not solely about moving a single person intellectually. You need to move the entire web of connections (see diagram above). We are trying to influence organizations and segments of society. We have to think about groups and not solely one or two apex personalities. This requires that we are the trumpeters of our own value and success. This is not a contradiction to the next section (by, with, through). No host nation person in the Middle East will take on the responsibility of communicating why the US is value added. The permanent narrative of the region is against the US and any leader seen as too closely<sup>7</sup> connected risks their political position and maybe their life. If we want to be seen as doing good things then we must show the good we are doing.

### **Working with a Fully Sovereign Host Nation Partner – By, With, and Through**

The only effective solutions in the Middle East are the host nation solutions: Iraqi Solutions for Iraqi Problems. This means that we need to be seen as facilitating Iraqi success in Iraqi ideas – influence is the key. Thus we need to first understand what the host nation perceives to be the problems and then we can start to explore their definition of the preferred solution. Along the way we use the influence developed through the engagements discussed above to shape both the perceived problems and the

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<sup>7</sup> “Too closely” varies in meaning depending on the country concerned.

desired solutions. Helping them to be successful in something important to them carries significantly more weight than does forcing them to do the “right thing.”

As stated above, we can try to bully or bribe our way to faster solutions, but they will not last. The events in Iraq of 2012-2014 should be ample proof of what happens when we depart a place where we left US solutions to US identified problems. The Iraqis addressed their self-assessed problems their way and created an opening for Da’ash. Rather than trying to be the bully we need to be a prompter that helps the actor (host-nation) to recognize the correct lines and stay on the agreed upon script. The agreed upon script is a collaborative product and should not be a script forced on the actor.

### **Emergent Phenomenon**

In Iraq the US is trying to get the Iraqi people to come together in a cohesive and government sponsored rejection of Da’ash. Loyalty to the national government did not exist in 2014 among the Sunni population and not even among the Shia population. The Sunni believed (and most still believe) the Government of Iraq (GoI) was corrupt and bent on humiliating and destroying Sunnis.<sup>8</sup> The Shia believe the GoI is corrupt and only useful to funnel money to their political parties, tribes, villages, or families. Thus when ISIS came close to Baghdad there wasn’t an influx into the GoI led response, but rather the Sunni, at least tacitly (or under duress), accepted ISIS and the Shia formed extra-governmental militias (See comment in the specific narrative section below on perceptions of Sunnis and Da’ash).

The US solution is a work in progress that is based on ways of thinking that are yet to emerge in the populace in general. We want the idea of opposition to ISIS and support for the government to grow in the hearts and minds of the people. This takes time and events – usually shared suffering or success – to develop. How ideas grow is consistently misunderstood. The historical example used by US leaders in Iraq is *The Surge*. Do we understand how the emergent behaviors associated with this event actually happened? How did the positive behaviors grow and why? The answers to these questions get at the complexity and reality of emergent phenomena. One of the US military narratives for *The Surge* is that five brigade combat teams, a new doctrine, and a “hero general” rescued a lost war. It is a useful narrative for the institutional purposes of self-congratulation and blame-shifting. It serves individual purposes by making a complex problem more cognitively manageable. There are other myths associated with the *The Surge* and what caused the significant decrease in violence from 2006-2009. Which is true? Money and toys alone will not force a truly emergent event. Working with tribes and getting populations to reject an ideology are emergent and not directive.

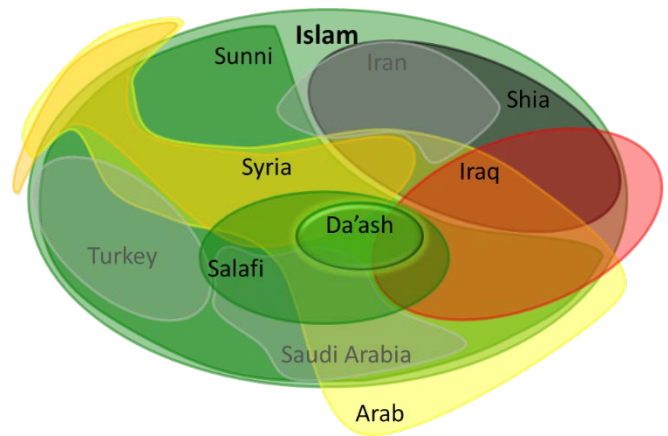
It is important that leaders understand the complexities of Iraq and why ideas and behaviors grow and develop and why they do not. Only then will it be possible to try and influence this behavior. Even once understanding is achieved it is difficult to impossible to rush emergent behavior. As a thought experiment, imagine if Multi-National Forces-Iraq had tried all the same USG behaviors in Iraq in 2005 that it did in 2007. Would *The Surge* of ideas and troops have changed the violence two years earlier than it actually did? Though one cannot be certain, it seems highly improbable because the emerging ideas of opposition to al Qaida, the potential benefits of cooperating with the government outweighing the perceived costs for the Sunnis, and the paying of Sunni fighters being better than fighting them were all ideas yet to be created in the minds of the various tribal and governmental leaders, not to mention the individuals themselves. These concepts needed time and experience to teach the people before the people would change their behaviors.

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<sup>8</sup> The terms Sunni and Shia and Kurd are used throughout the paper even though they are imprecise. There are complex and numerous divisions and groupings in Iraq; some are ethnic and others sectarian. For simplicity in this paper – Sunni, Shia, Kurd are used to cover all of the other divisions even though this is simplistic and wrong depending on the specifics intended.

### Complexity

Iraq is a complex problem. The complexity of Iraq stems from the overlapping problem set defined in the included Venn-like graphic that requires understanding of numerous overlapping historical, cultural, and linguistic realities coming into collision in Iraq today. For an intelligence officer, cultural advisor, or targeting officer to provide accurate assessments they would need to understand something like this order of environments: Islamic religion and history; Arab culture (including tribal dynamics); Iraqi history and societal dynamics; Salafist interpretations of Islam; and Da'ash interpretations, ends, ways, and means. In addition to this are the competing interests of Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. This requires nearly a lifetime of study to understand in sufficient breadth and depth and anyone who says that they understand it all is probably less than honest. This is conflict rocket science.



Based on the previous statement it should be expected that staff officers arrive in this environment ignorant of critical context. What is the mechanism for defeating ignorance for the staff? Ignorance is dangerous. As a military culture we do not understand Da'ash. That said, Da'ash is not inscrutable. We can understand them, but the challenge is finding the time to inform and instruct leaders about these various layers of the environment.

It is first essential that the importance of understanding is communicated. Too many officers do not think they need to know the enemy and why the enemy thinks the way they do. Many of our officers believe all they need to know is where the enemy is so that we can deliver the ordnance to the target. This gets at communicating the importance of the competition of narrative and the primary tool for victory is influence. If the staff understands and accepts these two premises then they will want to know more. The final challenge is carving out time to educate them on the historical and cultural contextual layers of the environment.

### Specific Observations from Iraq in 2015

For contextual reference I include the general organization of OIR as it existed during my most recent deployment to Iraq. This should help readers to understand the nature of the command chain and the interactions between US and coalition senior leadership. As noted below the separation of responsibilities is not neat and clean nor is the list provided in anyway a reflection of all of the responsibilities, but simply a way to give a sense of division of labor.

- US Central Command (CENTCOM) as lead in theater – four-star commander
  - Combat Operations
  - Security Cooperation (Security Sector Reform, Foreign Military Sales, Tribal Engagement)
  - Security Force Assistance (Advise & Assist, Build Partner Capacity)
- US Army Central (ARCENT) as Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) with responsibility for Iraq and Syria – three-star commander
  - Combat Operations
  - Security Cooperation (not a primary responsibility)
  - Security Force Assistance (Advise & Assist, Build Partner Capacity)
- Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) with responsibility for long-term security cooperation – three-star director
  - Security Cooperation (Security Sector Reform, Foreign Military Sales, Tribal Engagement)



- Security Force Assistance (not a primary responsibility)
- Combined Joint Force Land Component Command-Iraq (CJFLCC-I) with responsibility for conducting the conventional force fight in Iraq (kinetic, non-kinetic, advise and assist, build partner capacity) (four Brigadier Generals (BGs) as Deputy Commanding Generals (DCGs) as current US policy requires BG approval for kinetic engagements – to maintain the requirement for no civilian casualties) – two-star commander
  - Combat Operations
  - Foreign Military Sales (provides input on priorities and organizations)
  - Security Force Assistance (Advise & Assist, Build Partner Capacity)
- Special Operations Joint Task Force-Iraq (SOJTF-I) with responsibility for conducting the special operations fight in Iraq (kinetic, non-kinetic, advise and assist, build partner capacity) – tribal engagement – one-star commander
  - Tribal Engagement
  - Security Force Assistance (Advise & Assist, Build Partner Capacity)
- I worked as a planner in CJFLCC-I J-5<sup>9</sup>. The J5 was an Australian Colonel. We had about 14 coalition officers in the section with nine Americans including two from Fort Leavenworth.

In addition to the organizations identified above there were numerous other organizations that were participants in the area of operations or that regularly visited the area of operations. There is not a lack of participation nor is there a lack of people doing good things. The challenge seems to be focusing all of these various organizations and senior leaders into a consolidated engagement program that results in powerful effects and real influence. With lots of senior leader involvement there seems to be an increase in personality friction. Each person or organization tends to protect their perceived equities and as they stay within their lane they also create competitions for resources and attention of both the host nation leadership and US Government senior leaders. Sometimes this is referred to as engagement fratricide as messages get confused and influence is negated. As stated above, influence is the combat power in this war.

### **Interagency and Coalition**

Iraq in 2015 is not Iraq of 2011 or 2007 or any other time. The situation is different at every level and in every relationship. Lines of authority and coordination are not clean or clear. Relationships and teams need to be built and nurtured across and through multiple agencies and organizations.

During my time in Iraq (December 2014-March 2015) units deployed under chief of mission (US Ambassador) authority. This means that the US Ambassador had a say in almost all decisions regarding interactions with the host nation. This included everything from the conduct of information operations and military information in support of operations to where US forces traveled and under what security posture. This means that the DoD-DoS relationship is critical. Officers and leaders need to understand how embassies work, who works there, and how and through whom issues and approvals are raised and requested. In addition to authority, CJFLCC-I headquarters was located at the US Embassy forcing an even greater level of coordination and communication between deployed and assigned and civilian and military personnel. In addition to working with the DoS personnel and other agencies at the embassy there are multiple DoD organizations represented as well. For example, there is a US three-star general who leads the security cooperation office and effort. That affects how various engagements, equipping decisions, and other decisions associated with the Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MoD) work and flow. Officers and leaders need to understand the roles and responsibilities of defense attaché, security cooperation, security assistance, operations, and engagement and who should and could do which.

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<sup>9</sup> Within staff sections the S-, G-, or J-5 are responsible for plans rather than the current fight.

Coalitions have personalities as each country that participates brings something a little different to the headquarters and to the operation. Understanding the strengths and the possibilities requires curiosity, humility, and patience. In the case of OIR nearly every country comes into Iraq with different national caveats for actions from their home nation and they have negotiated different immunities with the host nation. This really gives a wide breadth of possibilities and considerations that are necessary to understand. Things that US forces cannot do are not necessarily out of the capability of the coalition as a whole and conversely not every country enjoys similar immunities and protections from the host-nation.

### **Influence in Iraq**

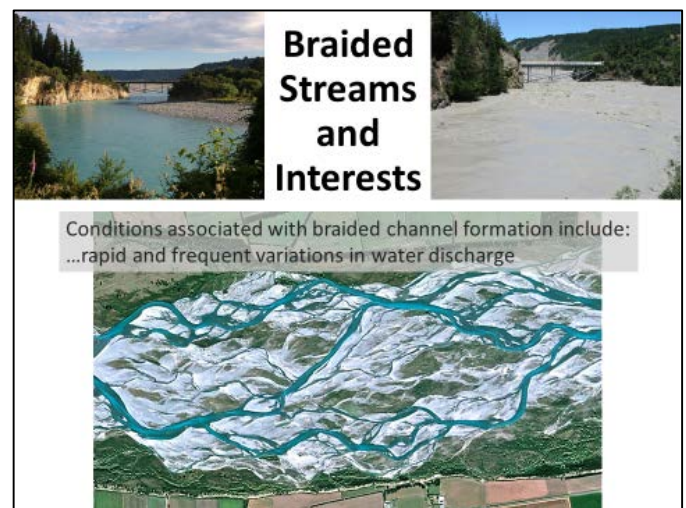
As stated above, influence is the way this war will be won. Influence in Iraq means influencing the Iraqi government and security forces to want to do, say, and be what we want them to do, say, and be.

In the current environment, Iranian influence dominates coalition influenced decisions. This is primarily because of the specific competing narratives in the country and region which will be further defined below. The failure of the heavily Iranian-influenced Shia militia at Tikrit may have some impact on the level of the influence, but Iranian influence will still trump US influence if it comes to an us-or-them decision for almost all Iraqis. US personnel must always remember Iran is never going away. They have the longest border with Iraq and they will always have significant influence in Iraq.

What does Iran want to accomplish with their influence? 'I don't know,' is the simple and complete answer. I suspect that they want to create a state-within-a-state as they have in Lebanon. Iran recognizes the strength of the international community and the fact that they will not be able to fully dominate the formal Gol. Thus they want to have a powerful subordinate organ – the Shia militias – who will be the executors of Iranian will and policy in the country. This requires a highly sectarian and divided Iraq politically.

In this fight it is useful to recognize that for us and our opponents there are no permanent allies or friends. The image of the braided stream<sup>10</sup> is illustrative of this point. Interests may flow together for a period based off common perceived threats or opportunities, but once those opportunities pass or those threats depart then the interests will separate. Some of the best potential voices to help us in the narrative competition are people and organizations that may hate many of our policies and some of our other allies. They may even hate us. This doesn't mean that we should not include these voices in the fight. We need to see the braided stream and willingly flow with other currents that give us benefit for now and understand that they may eventually or even soon breakaway on other, possibly opposing, paths.

The influence tactics used by Da'ash prior to 2014 and since is instructive. Da'ash leaders came into Iraqi towns and cities a year or more before they ever brought traditional combat power into the area. They met with tribal and community leaders, including government representatives. They conducted



<sup>10</sup> One of the causes for a braided stream is when there are large fluctuations in water volume through a given channel. When the run-off is high then there may be a single flow of water. When the run-off is lower the streams separate into a braided appearance. In the metaphor referenced above when there is a significant threat then numerous groups may band together to oppose the common threat. As the threat decreases then groups will start separating to pursue individual interests that may be in direct confrontation with former allies.

numerous meetings that essentially moved their engagement targets through the above identified pattern (information-understanding-acceptance-advocacy). They gave gifts. They provided resources. They promised resource control and authority. Some less religious groups felt like they could control Da'ash and so they were willing to use them to sweep away the corrupt and hated Shia government. More conservative people found the ideology acceptable and also wanted the corruption to go away. Their message was not always positive. They also sowed threats and warnings for local police and military leadership. By the time Da'ash arrived in 2014, they moved in on a carpet of engagements, gifts, resources, and promises and they were, in general, welcomed.

This method is not unique.

Shia militias are following a similar pattern. They broadcast and communicate their narrative and they engage tribal and community leaders and respected elders. They provide gifts and resources and they are eventually invited in by the Shia and even many Sunni who through the engagements and narrative believe that Shia militia security is better than Da'ash security. Thus the Shia militias are typically (not universally) welcomed and invited to engage and the local populace favors their efforts. This has been generally true at the beginning; how governance plays into this in a longer term is still an evolving dynamic.

The big fight in Iraq is not with Da'ash. Nearly every key player in Iraq (Iran, Kurd, Shia, Sunni Tribes, Gol, etc.) knows this. The big fights are yet to come. They are the struggle for Kirkuk and the definition of the Gol-Kurd Green Line, issues associated with Sunni-Shia reconciliation and access to government largesse, Shia militia demobilization or arming and training, and numerous other issues associated with the complex personality, tribal, and organizational politics of Iraq. US actions and decisions in the short-term will have impact on our position and influence in these future big fights. We need to use our resources now to position ourselves for those fights that matter and we need to take a long view of the conflict.

### **Brief Explanation of ISIS/Da'ash**

Da'ash, as a named group operating in Iraq, is an umbrella organization that can and does include numerous other groups. Using the same imagery as the braided stream from above, many groups flowed together in 2013-2015 in opposition to the Shia government led by Nuri al Maliki. In some cases, those groups believed they could control Da'ash and that once in the city or the governorate then the particular group would make Da'ash subordinate. That did not happen and thus Da'ash provides the umbrella leadership for secular, political, religious, and other groups. At its core are stalwart believers in the Da'ash narrative who come from Iraq, the region, and around the world to promote the existence of a Caliphate.

Da'ash is Salafist. This means they adhere to an interpretation of Islam that hearkens back to the original generations of the faith and the period in which Islam advanced across the Middle East and North Africa in a seemingly miraculous fashion. Adherents of this interpretation of Islam tend to come from Sunni Islam.<sup>11</sup> The Da'ash ideology is aggressively anti-Shia and particularly anti-Iranian.<sup>12</sup> Da'ash literature and videos regularly refer to Iraqi and Iranian Shia as Safawis (reference to the Safavid Empire). This was the primary time in which Mesopotamia became the zone of imperial collision between Shia and Sunni. Da'ash are *Takfiri*. Declaring *takfir* is calling someone an infidel or an apostate to the faith. In this case, it means that Da'ash promotes the idea that if a Muslim does not hold with Da'ash's interpretation of the faith then Da'ash can declare that person to be an apostate and therefore worthy and deserving of

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<sup>11</sup> This is another simplistic explanation. Salafists refer back to a time before the so-called Sunni-Shia schism or *fitna* and therefore their interpretation might not be technically Sunni or Shia.

<sup>12</sup> The Shiism of Iran is referred to as Twelver Shiism and it was most ardently promulgated and proselytized by the Safavid Empire (ca. 1500-1736) who converted what is today known as Iran into a majority Shia country from a majority Sunni population. The Savavids and ottomans clashed repeatedly.

death. As previously noted, Da'ash has declared a Caliphate with a Caliph who is the recognized successor to the Prophet Mohamed. This designation imposes on all "true Muslims" (see comment above about *takfir*) the need to come to the caliphate and pledge allegiance to the Caliph. Da'ash has an apocalyptic vision and message. As will be stated below this is about the end of days and the collision of the men (warriors) of light and men (warriors) of dark.<sup>13</sup>

Da'ash is not a terrorist organization.<sup>14</sup> Da'ash is a post-state actor. They do not ascribe to the state definitions from the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia nor as laid out in the UN Charter. They claim to be a state that does not adhere to non-Islamic definitions of statehood. Da'ash has consistently conducted their violence as a means to promote their narrative. They are pragmatic in that they will employ tactics, techniques, and procedures that can be reminiscent of terrorist groups, of non-state actors, and of states. They use mobility and follow what could be termed as an Islamic Way of War<sup>15</sup> which includes: loose control of organizations; loyalty based on purpose and relationships; common broad goal – looking toward prophetic fulfillment and eternal rewards; fast moving; long duration; desert to the back; if going poorly, withdraw and reengage when situation is more advantageous. Fighting Da'ash could be analogous to sweeping water. Rather than lines of effort or communication they value flow. Note that after losing most of Tikrit in April 2015 they *flowed* into Ramadi and began significant attacks within days.

### Specific narratives in Iraq

As previously stated, narratives are what matter and the influence derived from the narrative is the combat power that has effect. There are some general narratives and every player in Iraq has specific narratives linked to them and their organizations. These are the messages they use and repeat to gain credibility and shape the desired current and emergent behavior of the local or supporting populace. These narratives are provided only in brief as each might be a separate chapter.

Da'ash believes that it is the Army of the Righteous (men (warriors) of light) fighting the battles before the end of days. They are freeing Iraq from the control of the refusers of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, and apostates who have strayed from the true form and function of Islam. In this narrative, the Army of the Righteous will win and advance, but they will eventually be pushed back through defeats until only a few thousand warriors are left alive. It is at this time that Jesus will come again and the Dajjal (Anti-Christ) will be defeated at Dabiq (a small village in northern Syria). This is a narrative reinforced by statements of the Prophet Mohamed and numerous later scholars of apocalyptic literature. They must be an army that is everywhere – Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, everywhere. By so being it doesn't matter if they lose somewhere. Thus physical battlespace is irrelevant in that losing a city, no matter how big or significant, does not fundamentally contradict the pre-existing narrative. That narrative accepts the idea of eventual near defeat. Da'ash chooses grandiose violent gestures as these are what garner international media attention that continues the message – we are everywhere all of the time. Da'ash does not want to lose battles or cities and they will fight tenaciously to maintain many of them. Remember that being in the Army of the Righteous and dying in its service carries blessings and benefits. That said, loss of geographic locations will not severely weaken the narrative and may even empower it as they can then say they are getting closer to those very end times encouraging more foreign volunteers to rush in to be present for the miraculous finish.

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<sup>13</sup> The phrase "men (warriors) of light and men (warriors) of dark" has resonance with Sunni and Shia though end of days literature has significant variance in Islam within given sects and greater variance between sects.

<sup>14</sup> The terms terrorism and terrorist organization carry too many connotations of certain forms of behavior that to label them as such tends to lead one down a road of expected actions, techniques, and intent.

<sup>15</sup> By this term, which could be controversial, I mean that they want to fight like the early Islamic military forces did. These are the same forces that defeated the Persian and Roman Empires and thus they draw on this imagery and the way those early warriors fought to inspire their current warriors.

The Shia believe that they are fighting against the Anti-Christ's army or the army of dark (the specific interpretation of the army varies wildly). They use seventh century prophecies of this "evil" army which closely matches Da'ash behavior to explain their opponent as an army that requires opposition as expressed by the first imam – Ali ibn Abi Talib. In addition to this religious opposition, the Shia leadership – both Iraqi and Iranian challenge the US by claiming that we are hiding in the Green Zone while the Shia (including Iranian allies) fight for Iraq. Linked to this narrative is a prevalent narrative held by non-Shia as well that the US (and Israel) created Da'ash as a form of punishment and weakening of Iraq as stated above. This continues with the belief that US and coalition forces are currently supporting Da'ash. Twitter photos of off course air dropped supplies recovered by Da'ash fighters serve as physical proof of this last assertion. It is important to note that this last narrative is accepted by Sunni and Shia and even some Kurds.

Sunni acceptance of Da'ash is both real and perceived. Many Sunni Iraqis have welcomed and supported Da'ash even if the majority have not. However, the Iraqi Shia and Kurds believe that nearly all Sunnis are, at best, acquiescent of Da'ash activities or, at worst, collaborators and active supporters.

Linked to these group specific narratives is the inherent instability of the GoI. The founding narrative of the GoI detracts from its ability to provide significant leadership in the narrative competition and is at odds with Iraq's cultural and historical context. The GoI was established by the West (the US, in specific). The institutions and practices of the GoI are derived from Western institutions and practices that are discredited by Da'ash and Iranian voices. Thus the GoI serves only to be a bill payer for individuals rather than a loyalty inducing entity. This means there is little selfless service, only selfish service. An example is Hadi al Amiri who is the current Minister of Transportation and the head of the Badr Corps. He is in the government so that he can access the only thing the government is useful for – resources. It is through the government that revenue flows – both international aid and domestic proceeds. So the GoI has no standing in the competition of narrative.

The attack on Tikrit (March 2015) communicated this well. The attack happened because the militias wanted it to occur. The GoI coordinated with the militias to conduct the attack with no coordination with the international coalition. The GoI only bowed to US pressure once coalition air strikes were deemed essential to move forward. The US demanded the Shia militias withdraw before any airstrikes would begin. Based off news reports and interviews with fighters when Tikrit's main government buildings were captured there seemed to still be significant Shia militia representation present. How this may or may not affect the narrative competition is yet to be seen.

Both Jordan and Saudi Arabia demonstrated the power of communicating your own narrative in their respective airstrikes into Syria and Yemen. In both cases there were looped broadcasts of gun-camera footage showing the airstrikes and the resultant destruction broadcast on the national television channels and provided to satellite news outlets. This serves as something like proof of action. The US has not shown any gun-camera footage within Iraq and little in the US itself.<sup>16</sup> How do we know that the US and

## Shia Competing Narrative

Nu'aym ibn Hammad narrates in Al-Fitan, that 4<sup>th</sup> Caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib said: When you see the black flags, remain where you are and do not move your hands or your feet. Thereafter there shall appear a feeble insignificant folk. Their hearts will be like fragments of iron. They will have the state. They will fulfil neither covenant nor agreement. They will call to the truth, but they will not be people of the truth. Their names will be parental attributions, and their aliases will be derived from towns. Their hair will be free-flowing like that of women. This situation will remain until they differ among themselves. Thereafter, God will bring forth the Truth through whomever he wills.

<sup>16</sup> There are gun camera images and videos posted on the CENTCOM web site and Facebook page. In a report by the UK based *Guardian* website the caption described the images as follows: "Four videos from mid to late-March purport to show air strikes against Isis targets near Mosul and near Ramadi in Iraq, as well as a fighting position in

coalition aircraft are striking targets? All we have is the word of US briefers, hardly believable given all of the bad blood in the region.

### **Realities of Iraq (as of March 2015)**

The US force deployed to Iraq is constrained within a specific number and with specific and pre-approved authorities. The force manning level (FML) is the driving element for what is done in country as are the restrictive authorities which dictate where and what US forces can do. Commanders are thus forced to negotiate temporary duty positions to exceed the limits which then force a short-term perspective as additional personnel come with a time horizon built in.

There are large disagreements about the objectives between DoS and DoD personnel and some differences even amongst the various DoD players. The general perspective is that the White House wants to limit involvement and do what can be done within the limits and restrictions. The DoD personnel believe they are on the ground to accomplish objectives provided by the National Command Authority. In an environment of little/no policy – action creates policy – leaders need to define success because the policy definition is unbelievable to nearly everyone.

Most DoD personnel have not worked in a foreign country that is deemed to be fully sovereign. The typical experience of mid- and senior-leaders is that of Afghanistan (2001-present) or Iraq (2003-2011) where the US military dictated and the host nation complied. That is not Iraq in 2014-2015. Not only does the host nation feel it is fully sovereign and the key decision maker in the coalition, but the DoS also believes that it is the leading agency for the USG. This is also very different from Iraq and Afghanistan of previous deployments. As most leaders are ignorant of how to interact in a true interagency environment a lot of damage has been done by the typical DoD – get stuff done – attitude.

### **Role of Military Decision Making Process (MDMP)**

We teach and typically execute MDMP with the intent of coming to a product that will be executed by the headquarters conducting the MDMP. That is not the purpose of the process conducted by US forces late in 2014 and into 2015. Since the US will not be conducting ground combat operations then the MDMP regarding ground combat exists to identify needed authorities and resources. The MDMP is then done not for operational execution, but to generate dialogue and conversation between US/coalition commanders for authorities and permissions, with Iraqi partners to add the detailed science of destruction to their already capable military art, and with the USG to gain additional authorities and permissions.

### **Resources as Engagement Tools**

The resources the USG has in Iraq are tools for engagement rather than operational assets. This is a perspective senior leaders would do well to adopt. If they treat our resources (airstrikes, training, equipping) as influence building tools vis-à-vis Iraqis it may be possible to earn long-term benefit. If we use them primarily as means to an operational end then we will continue to lose the narrative competition as we fail to develop greater influence. It is possible to effectively target and synchronize engagements to gain the desired benefit from these resources to make us look like we are providing critical resources rather than simply being a grocer filling an order.

### **Define REAL success.**

It has already been stated in this paper that we cannot achieve the defeat or the destruction of Da'ash through kinetic targeting. At best, kinetic targeting may facilitate the defeat. Also, as previously stated,

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Syria.” Quoted from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/mar/31/air-strikes-islamic-state-iraq-syria-video>.

most leaders recognize that our current emphasis on kinetic targeting without sufficient ground combat power will not achieve any measure of real success. They understand challenges of organizations and policy, but do not understand the way forward and how success is possible.

What does success really look like? How can we achieve it with the given limitations? The command's definition of success needs to be communicated to personnel deployed in support of OIR. In the absence of stated policy action becomes policy. It is important that current actions set the stage for future success in the issues that are important to US interests. This does not mean acting in opposition to given direction, but rather recognizing that the long game is crucial to our interests and getting us in the right position to be able to participate in that game now.

### **Thoughts for Leadership Development and Professional Military Education**

#### **Lots of Questions.**

The thoughts expressed in this section are mostly questions to generate thought rather than technical or specific professional development or curriculum comments. For the most part we are producing good officers, but that is also a problem – good is no longer what is needed. Officers need to be neurosurgeons rather than general practitioners. They need to be able to dive in and understand the complexity in context and derive the right answers to the problems rather than coming up with generally good plans.

Professional Military Education (PME) graduates understand MDMP, but they need more meat on the bones. They can talk DIME<sup>17</sup> and PMESII-PT<sup>18</sup>, but they do not understand economics (or other elements) in sufficient depth to be of value, nor do they know who to contact within the interagency environment who has sufficient expertise. MDMP is an algorithm, but the purpose is not to simply run the algorithm. The purpose is to create a discussion between commander and staff to fully visualize the area and the problem and come up with the best ways to solve the problem.

PME graduates need to have a passion for fighting through these challenges and getting to the details and creating the best solution. Too many officers downrange and students ask questions like, “why should I care?” Without passion they will simply run the algorithm and produce the good product. It must be reiterated that good will simply result in Iraq 2011 Redux. Not good enough.

The deployed division headquarters needs synthetic thinkers. How do we teach synthesis in leadership development and PME? The most common comment from Command and General Staff College (CGSC) graduates in Iraq was the desire for a greater link between the classes. Maybe we need to improve on this. Maybe we need to emphasize this as an opportunity for students to develop their own synthetic thinking and tie the classes together themselves. It doesn't hurt to make such things explicit and occasionally remind students of the need to look across staff specialties, warfighting functions, and all of the other barriers we place to synthetic thought.

The deployed division headquarters needs strategic thinkers. How do we teach strategic thought? I mean REAL strategic thought – seeing through the fog and beyond the horizon. Much of what is done at CGSC is tactical. We discuss targeting (which is the American Way of Battle) rather than strategy in most classes. Who is reaching beyond the military to understand the non-tactical and non-military perspective of conflict? The challenge is that these tasks do not fit neatly into most officers' list of responsibilities. It may be useful to analyze the functions of the staff elements to designate people who need to get above the day to day actions – whether that be targeting, FML, equipping, etc. This fight and the fight to come needs planners and operators who can see over the horizon.

The USG is not executing policy as it is supposed to and thus policy is well behind action. The announcement by CENTCOM in February 2015 of the plan for retaking Mosul is an example. By all accounts this was done independent of the White House or other elements of national policy. This means

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<sup>17</sup> Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economy

<sup>18</sup> Political, Military, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, Information, Physical Environment, and Time

that deployed divisions need to have eyes on the policy implications of nearly everything said and done. Who is doing that for the Chief of Staff? Or is the responsibility for all of this on one position. There should be multiple eyes looking at this angle on slides prepared and briefings presented. Consistently improving relations with an embassy can assist this process, but who are the ones improving that relationship? Are we empowering our students to even know who to talk to in the interagency or how to address these issues? Many officers downrange and students at our schools simply say this is someone else's responsibility (DoS, embassy, somebody higher ranking or somewhere else, etc.). That is not good enough.

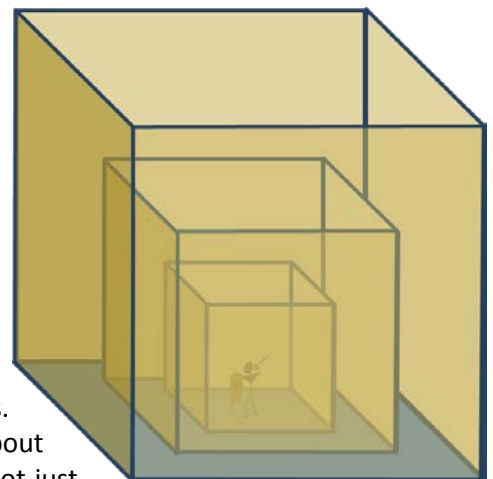
### Think

The deployed division headquarters needs a Red Team. This gets at the idea of who is thinking outside your box. The point is who is thinking a little different than all the others – the misfit toys.

An example of misfit toy thought: We were targeting any large concentration of fighters coming against the Kurds. We thought these guys were mostly individuals taken from the streets of Mosul and thrown together to fight. They seemed to not have command and control and seemed unsophisticated. If they were poorly trained civilians thrown into the fight then an alternative might be to engage them non-lethally. Drop leaflets on them rather than a 500 pound bomb. Maybe they will surrender. Maybe they will give us intel. Maybe they will fight to go back in and protect their families. Maybe not, but we don't know yet.

Many "out of the box" ideas can be bad, but some are good and can be game-changers. Who is doing the out of the box thinking? I was unaware of any formally trained Red Cell personnel in Iraq. It seems as if too many people are overwhelmed by the daily grind to think independently and creatively. It isn't because of a lack of smart people. Are we teaching the students to think outside the boxes of the US Army, DoD, USG, coalition, interagency?

Engagement strategy applies within DoD and the interagency environment – CJFLCC-I personnel have counterparts in CJTF, US Embassy, and coalition partners. Engagements and relationship developing in those environments is just as important as with the Iraqis. This needs to be taught during PME. It isn't about RFIs, it is about relationships and they need to be developed and built all the time – not just with their classmates in staff group XX.



### Learning personnel and organizations – we are ignorant.

Develop and sustain a professional development program in theater that informs about Iraq, Da'ash, interagency environment, coalition, etc. If we think of this as a unit run on a track then yes, people are running fast (very busy), but we are running fast out in front of the Iraqis. We will not motivate our counterparts by lapping them. An hour a week that removes ignorance may pay off with greater coordination and cooperation.

We need to correct this before we enter theater. How do we inform students and leaders and remove ignorance during PME and leader development? Are visiting lecturers doing this for students/leaders or are the speakers simply talking about parts of the military or organizational behavior? Understanding the army and organizational behavior are important, but students need to hear things that challenge their "boxes" and present different (sometimes radically so) perspectives of the problems at hand. Students also need to learn and be exposed to ways of developing programs for creative thinking while in the fight as they will still be ignorant regardless of the quality of the pre-deployment development program.



## **Complexity**

We need to understand Iraqi dynamics – “Pragmatic Surfers” (long view, patient, take what the environment gives them) – and Da’ash dynamics (historical Arab/Muslim way of war) for this current fight. Whether it is understanding an “Islamic Way of War” or a Chinese one or some other way students need to be exposed to the complexity of problems in the depth of their complexities and not at a surface level. This cannot be done with fictional scenarios. Only reality provides the complex detail sufficient to answer this crucial requirement.

Within a couple of weeks of returning from Iraq I was invited to speak to multiple CGSC staff groups who were using Iraq as a replacement of the often maligned schoolhouse scenario for their staff group exercise. I applauded the faculty who did this. As I spoke to the staff groups, I tried to emphasize the complex dynamics of the environment so that they could practice in complexity.

The interpretation of Iraqi behaviors and attitudes should be crucial in shaping where we push back and where we go with them. We fight too many fights with the Iraqis. Everything is a battle because we seem to think that we have to bully them into the fight. If they really perceived us to be fighting with them, I believe we would not have a fight on every issue.

## **Conclusion**

Why does this matter? As stated in the introduction, Da’ash is simply the latest version of an arc of opponents to civilization. The clash between civilization and Robber Culture is the fight of this generation and maybe beyond. That said, we must fight Da’ash and others within a context of understanding (competition of narrative, complexity, etc.). Continued ignorant kinetic targeting drills degrade and destroy the very infrastructure needed for civilization to exist. We are thus creating an environment wherein our opponents can thrive and we cannot. We need and want civilization around the globe. They do not. They will use the tools of civilization, but if all the Twitter, and Facebook, and social media in the world ended tomorrow; if all the roads, bridges, refineries, and museums were destroyed; civilization would end, but the robbers would continue. Ignorance will continue to create a desert and call it victory. We cannot fight Da’ash as we did al Qaeda nor we can we fight the successor of Da’ash this way. We have severely damaged or destroyed civilization in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria in this war. The robbers are growing there. We need another way. We need to change the conversation from a discussion on kinetic targeting to a discussion on the competition of narratives and effective engagement to result in influence as combat power.

As we change the conversation we will emphasize the importance of understanding and empathy: understanding that we are fighting enemies that challenge previously held notions of organization, intent of the competition, and the definitions of combat power; understanding the opponent is motivated by an ideology and encouraged to great effort through powerful and deep flowing narratives; understanding the opponent in their complex context and the competition of narrative; empathy to develop influence with our partner; and empathy to identify our opponent’s center of gravity and effectively engage and destroy it.

What is suggested here requires patience, understanding, and empathy at every level. Patience to let engagement develop into true influence. And, patience to let new information received by US military and civilian leaders grow into understanding and then become empathy. With understanding it is possible to engage the enemy in a meaningful way that can achieve effects in both the physical battlespace and the narrative space and truly defeat and maybe destroy them. Without understanding we will continue to strike targets, bully and bribe our “partners”, and achieve no appreciable long-term positive change in the environment. We will create more deserts of civilization.