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Detainee Operations in Counterinsurgency Operations: Lessons from Afghanistan 2005-2006

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With the ongoing engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan much has been written recently concerning counterinsurgency operations and irregular warfare. Even though counterinsurgency operations do not stop at the gates of a detention center, adequate guidance on dealing with detainees is lacking in much of this literature.¹

In early 2005 Task Force Guardian, the Military Police brigade task force in Combined/Joint Task Force (CJTF)-76² in Afghanistan began a new approach to detainee operations. This was accomplished by building on the hard work of previous rotations and allowed leaders to simultaneously meet broader counterinsurgency objectives as set out by CJTF-76 while improving the welfare of the detainee population. Two things were done differently in 2005 than in previous years. First, there was a push to vastly improve the living conditions and welfare of the detainee population beyond those required by international and historical norms. Secondly, Task Force Guardian initiated a Psychological Operations (PSYOP) program in the detention facility in order to convey key messages to the detainee population. This combined effort placed the leaders of Task Force Guardian in a better position to meet desired CJTF-76 counterinsurgency objectives. This paper highlights some of the lessons learned and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) used by Task Force Guardian in 2005 to meet desired end-states in the area of good detainee operations in counterinsurgency operations.

Detainee Operations in Afghanistan 2005

The detainee population at the Bagram Theater Internment Facility (BTIF) is small compared to detainee operations in Iraq. While Military Police in Iraq were responsible for tens of thousands of detainees (2005), the number in Afghanistan usually fluctuated between 400-600. However, this smaller population in no way should be considered homogenous or simple. There was a mixture of the various ethnic groups of Afghanistan, a Babel of languages, and a notable non-

¹ More recently, there have a number of minor pieces written about the successes of Major General Douglas Stone in Iraq regarding a transformation of detainee operations more in line with General Petraeus concept of counterinsurgency operations during the Iraqi Surge. See "Detainees chief sees Koran as key ally", *the Financial Times*, 16 July 2007, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/24c2e12e-3334-11dc-a9e8-0000779fd2ac.html?nclick_check=1 accessed on 30 June 2009; and Ricks, Thomas E. (2009) "The Gamble: General Petraeus and the Untold Story of the American Surge in Iraq, 2006-2008", Penguin Group: New York, pages 186-87 and 194-97.

² From April 2004 to March 2007, Combined Joint Task Force - 76 (CJTF-76) was a subordinate unit of Combined Forces Coalition - Afghanistan (CFC-A) headquartered in Kabul. It was replaced by CJTF-82 (March 2007) and eventually CJTF-101 (April 2008).

Afghan foreign fighter presence. This diverse population added to the already complex nature of detainee operations.

If the Golden Rule in counterinsurgency operations is to protect the local population then the Golden Rule for detainee operations is to treat all detainees with respect and dignity; from capture to release. This rule was the cornerstone of Task Force Guardian's detainee operations in 2005. Regardless of how undesirable we may find those in our custody, American Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and civilians have a responsibility to uphold the highest standards - in this there is no compromise. Besides the fact that mistreatment of those in our custody is legally and morally wrong, breaking this fundamental rule even once could potentially trigger a chain reaction that could undermine a counterinsurgency campaign.³

Furthermore, released detainees are a potential source of recruits and may offer active or passive support for Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. This is especially the case with detainees who have been mistreated, or believe they have been mistreated, as they are more likely to be susceptible to Taliban and Al Qaeda recruitment after being released. In addition, hardcore Taliban and Al Qaeda detainees already in detention will threaten or coerce less susceptible detainees to support their goals and objectives while in confinement by encouraging the use of destabilization techniques to incite riots or to influence other detainees not to cooperate and disobey rules. Poor treatment of the detainee population could exacerbate the use of destabilization techniques.

To counter detainee objectives inside the detention facility Task Force Guardian took a multifaceted approach to detainee operations including improvements in education, opportunities for work, improved medical facilities - including mental health treatment, opportunities for reconciliation, access to news and information, and a reintegration program for detainees who were soon to be released.

It is no secret that socio-economic factors such as poverty and illiteracy serve as a catalyst for insurgent activity. Many detainees have mentioned that their terrorist activities were economically motivated. Lacking the means and capability to provide for one's family, exacerbated by hyperbolic preaching in the radical madrassas and mosques about the alleged decadence of western society is an obvious receipt for terrorism.

In some cases susceptible individuals cannot make their own objective and informed judgments about the world due to illiteracy; they rely on others to preach to them, for example, in the madrassas. This creates a dangerous dependency on others and offers groups like the Taliban an opportunity to fill a void that would either normally not need to be filled or would be filled by a functioning state that simply doesn't exist in most of Afghanistan. In addition, illiteracy can make finding work difficult even in a country with a 33 per cent illiteracy rate⁴. As a result, Task Force Guardian introduced the BTIF work program and BTIF education program to better prepare detainees for their eventual release back into Afghan society.

The work program was an important component of detainee operations in 2005. It allowed the detainees to earn money while at the same time provided services to the BTIF through various

³ The anomaly of Abu Ghraib is a perfect example of this.

⁴ Central Intelligence Agency Factbook, Afghanistan, 2005.

improvements that included, but were not limited to: cleaning, cosmetics (painting walls, etc.) and laundry. The work program also provided detainees with an incentive to behave since only the better behaved detainees were allowed to participate; thus increasing better behavior from a recalcitrant detainee population. In 2005, the participating detainees were paid US\$1.50 a day for their services.⁵ This far exceeds the one-quarter of one Swiss Franc (US\$ 0.19 in 2005) that is required by the Geneva Convention.⁶ This may seem like a small sum but it is important to note that in Afghanistan this worked out to be the equivalent of what a low ranking Afghan National Policeman earned in 2005.

The work program in Afghanistan was in complete contrast to how the Soviets operated their detainee work programs. Labor was first introduced to Pul-e-Charki prison⁷ in 1981. In the first year the work from the detainees resulted in a profit of 30 million Afghan Dollars. Sixty-one thousand sets of uniforms and underwear were made for the Soviet military police in the work rooms of the Pul-e-Charki prison. Even with the large profits made, detainees never received any monetary compensation for their work.⁸

In addition to the work program, the education program was another key aspect of conducting good detainee operations for Task Force Guardian. In 2005, only 17% of the detainee population was literate. The education program focused on beginning level reading and writing skills. This program helped detainees to become literate which increases their potential for legitimate employment and reduces the possibility of rejoining the insurgency after release.

A facility library offered an assortment of books to detainees and offered practice to those learning how to read. In 2005, there were more than 145 books available to detainees in the detention facility. It is likely that this number has greatly increased since then. To meet the language needs of a polyglot detainee population, books were available in six languages to include English, Pashto, Dari, Farsi, Arabic and Urdu. Topics included Islamic Law, language dictionaries, novels/literature (both contemporary and historical), biographies and poetry.

In 2005 there was another groundbreaking initiative for detainee operations in counterinsurgency. In July, Task Force Guardian, in close coordination with the Government of Afghanistan, coordinated the reconciliation of 199 detainees held in the BTIF as part of the “Program Takhim-e-Solh” or “Strengthening Peace.”⁹ Program Takhim-e-Solh (PTS) was an Afghan Government initiative to repatriate former anti-Coalition forces (Taliban, HIG, etc) as well as exiles back into main-stream Afghan society. Once released, the former detainees were registered into the program and were allowed to return home under the supervision of tribal

⁵ It is important to note that at this time 1.2 billion people in the world live off less than US\$1 a day and 2.7 billion people live off only US\$2 a day. See: *The Economist*, “More or Less Equal?” 11 March 2004 and United Nations Millennium Project “Fast Facts: the Faces of Poverty” 2005.

⁶ Geneva Convention III, Part III, Section IV, Article 62, 12 August 1949.

⁷ Pul-e-Charki is a large prison outside Kabul. Its construction was finished in the 1980’s and it was used extensively by Soviet forces and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (communist ruled Afghanistan). Today the prison is divided into a number of blocks but only two are in use. One contains prisoners of the current conflict and remnants of the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime ousted in 2001 while the other block holds criminals.

⁸ The Woodrow Wilson International Center, “The KGB in Afghanistan” Working Paper #40, p. 141

⁹ U.S. Central Command Press Release, Release Number: 05-07-02, 2 July 2005, “Detainees released under PTS Program”

elders. But there was a deal—if they were ever recaptured, they were given a life sentence in the Afghan prison system. A major part of counterinsurgency operations is identifying and dividing the reconcilable from the irreconcilables in the insurgency and the PTS program allowed Task Force Guardian to do this.

PTS was initially a program not open to detainees in U.S. custody but the military leadership in 2005 saw the value it could have in detainee operations. The advantages of expanding the PTS program to the detainee population in Afghanistan were twofold. First, releasing low level and minimal threat detainees under the guise of an Afghan led reconciliation program proved that the Afghans were leading the reconciliation process with American support. Secondly, it sent a message to the detainee population that good behaviour could be rewarded—and that the new Afghan Government was serious about reconciliation.

There is little doubt that an expanded PTS program which included the detainee population was ahead of its time in terms of detainee operations in a counterinsurgency environment. It has been popularly said that in a counterinsurgency a “defection is better than a surrender, a surrender is better than a capture, and a capture is better than a kill.”¹⁰ Reconciliation programs generally, and the PTS program in Afghanistan specifically, offer commanders a second chance at making those insurgents who surrendered to, or were captured by, Coalition forces defect to the side of the host government. If the program is driven by the host government, like it is in Afghanistan, then the “defection” is done so on local terms applicable to the unique social and cultural constraints in Afghanistan. Consequently, in close coordination with the host government, reconciliation programs can be one of the most useful tools for commanders conducting detainee operation in a counterinsurgency.

So far the PTS program has been successful in terms of giving detainees a second chance. When senior Afghan Government officials visited the BTIF in June 2005, and offered amnesty in return for allegiance to Afghanistan, all 199 detainees initially eligible agreed to the terms¹¹. To add to the effect of the PTS program the releases occurred in a timely manner with the first group of 152 released by 9 July¹² and the remaining 47 on 15 December 2005.¹³ In total, since 2005, 529 detainees have been released, with only two being detained again for subsequent insurgent activities, a recidivism rate of less than one-half of a percent.¹⁴

¹⁰ Kilcullen, David (2006), “Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency”, *Military Review*, Vol 86, issue 3, pages 103-06

¹¹ Initially only 198 detainees accepted the terms. This was due to the fact that the 199 eligible detainees were addressed in Pashto and one detainee, only speaking and understanding Dari, refused the terms on the grounds that he didn’t understand. This situation was quickly resolved but highlights the need for heightened cultural understanding.

¹² Combined Forces Afghanistan-Afghanistan Coalition Press Center Release, 16 July 2005, “More detainees released under Takhim-e-Solh program”

¹³ U.S. Central Command Press Release, Release Number: 05-12-40, 15 December 2005, “U.S. Military Releases Dozens of Afghan Detainees from Bagram”

¹⁴ Combined Joint Task Force- 82, Press Release, 17 April 2009, “14 detainees released via Afghan reconciliation program”

Psychological Operations (PSYOP) in Detainee Operations

The fundamental objectives of Taliban and Al Qaeda elements do not change once they are detained. They continue to share the common goals of destabilizing the Government of Afghanistan, spreading mistrust of Coalition objectives and intentions, and instilling fear in Afghans so they will either fear or Taliban and Al Qaeda forces or at least not support the Government of Afghanistan. The creation of a detainee operations PSYOP program in 2005 by Task Force Guardian helped to counter Taliban and Al Qaeda goals in the BTIF and could potentially assist in countering the same goals upon release of the detainee back into Afghan society.

The first mention of the importance of PSYOP assets for detainee operations is not found in doctrine until the release of Joint Publication 3-63¹⁵ (*Detainee Operations*) published in May 2008. However, one can find earlier examples of integrated PSYOP and Military Police thinking in counterinsurgency operations as early as 2004 in Field Manual Interim 3-07.22. Specifically, Chapter 5 of FMI 3-07.22 lumps PSYOP and Military Police together, implying that their roles and capabilities in counterinsurgency operations is complementary.

In the initial phase of establishing an effective PSYOP program in the BTIF Task Force Guardian established four PSYOP objectives that are directed at the detainee population:

- Increase detainee ownership, participation, and membership in a pluralistic Afghanistan whether at the village, district, provincial or national level;
- Increase detainee support to the national Government of Afghanistan;
- Improve detainee perception of U.S. and Coalition involvement in Afghanistan; unlike the Soviets and previous invaders, the U.S. and Coalition forces do not wish to occupy Afghanistan;
- Detainees behave in a manner fitting an adherent of Islam while detained and after release to become a productive member of the Afghan nation (or the international community).

There are many opportunities throughout a detainee's detention in which he can be positively influenced to meet these four objectives. Access to news and information concerning the positive aspects of Afghanistan's reconstruction are both important and interesting to the detainee population. The distribution of the *Peace Paper*¹⁶, a newspaper produced by the CJTF-76 PSYOP section, met this requirement.

In 2005, the *Peace Paper* was also supplemented with a Facility Newsletter, an important information dissemination tool for Task Force Guardian staff and commander. The Facility Newsletter was a monthly newsletter, translated into Pashto and Dari, which focused on specific issues affecting the detainee population. The Facility Newsletter included: news on facility upgrades and improvements, a commander's message in each issue that addresses the detention

¹⁵ Chapter II, Pages II-8 to II-9, paragraph 13.

¹⁶ The Peace Paper is a bi-weekly newspaper distributed across Afghanistan. It provides national and international news; editorial and public service announcements that affect Afghanistan and its citizens. It is written in Dari, Pashto and English to maximize the target audience.

facility commander's concerns, news and information that the detainees indicate a desire to read about but is not included in the *Peace Paper* such as international sports scores.

Part of the Task Force Guardian PSYOP program included face-to-face interaction with the detainees to determine which kind of PSYOP products and what messages would be most effective with the detainee population. This was accomplished through the monthly lunch with each cell leader. In the BTIF, each cell of detainees was required to elect a leader to represent the interests of all the detainees in the cell to senior officers in Task Force Guardian. It is better that the detainees address their grievances through this quasi-representative process than through destabilizing tactics and rioting inside the facility. While addressing grievances of the detainee population was the primary objective of these meetings, the secondary objective was to use information gathered to better target PSYOP products.

As already mentioned there are many ways to meet PSYOP objectives during a detainee's time in U.S. custody; ranging from the distribution of the *Peace Paper* to the BTIF education program. However, eventually, detainees are released giving one last opportunity to meet these objectives. To seize this opportunity, Task Force Guardian initiated the Detainee Reintegration Program (DRIP). The aim of the DRIP was twofold. First, the DRIP facilitated the smooth transition from "detainee" life to "village/family" life. Secondly, the DRIP offered Task Force Guardian a final opportunity to influence detainees not to support or aid Taliban or Al Qaeda and to be more cooperative or at least neutral concerning the Afghan Government and Coalition forces; thus decreasing the chance of recidivism. The former was addressed by a mental health team and helped to prepare detainees on what to expect upon returning to their villages and families and how to cope with the myriad of challenges and difficulties one may expect from being away for an extended period of time. Similar programs are available for U.S. troops returning back to family life after a year long deployment so it made sense to provide a similar service for the detainees. The latter informed released detainees on the legitimacy of the Afghan government and some of the successes of Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

The DRIP was complimented with a detainee release kit. The release kit is something tangible that will be used to help the transition process back to family and village life. The contents of the release kit include: three halal meals, three bottles of water, personal hygiene kit, Qu'ran, blanket, sandals, one set of clothing, radio, duffel bag, an assortment of CJTF-76 PSYOP products (for example: calendars, leaflets, and pamphlets all containing CJTF-76 PSYOP messages) and all the detainee's personal belongings with them at the time of capture minus, of course, any weapons.

As mentioned above, the cornerstone of good detainee operations is to treat all detainees with respect and dignity; from capture to release. At the end of the day, basic welfare and good treatment go a long way. The soldier that guards, feeds, escorts and cares for the detainee has the ability to influence in a way that no PSYOP product ever could.

Was Task Force Guardian's detainee operations PSYOP program successful? In terms of process it certainly was. Joint Publication 3-63¹⁷ (*Detainee Operations*) clearly states seven PSYOP responsibilities for supporting detainee operations. Out of the seven, five were decisively met: 1)

¹⁷ Chapter II, paragraph 13, pages II-8 to II-9

providing support in regards to camp instructions in the relevant Afghan languages, 2) assisting the BTIF commander in countering rumors and disinformation spread by the detainees, 3) helping to produce and expose detainees to a number of approved PSYOP products, 4) being able to build rapport with detainees through face-to-face activities, and 5) conducting an evaluation of PSYOP products possessed by the detainees. All of these were accomplished well before the publication of Joint Publication 3-63.

The two PSYOP responsibilities for supporting detainee operations, as stated in Joint Publication 3-63, that were not accomplished were: 1) providing cultural expertise on potential disputes or discipline problems due to social or cultural conflicts with or among the detainees; and 2) providing a graduated response through loudspeakers in crisis situations. The first point is an area that required improvement in 2005 and will be discussed below in more detail. The second point, although not accomplished by Task Force Guardian's PSYOP section, was accomplished through other means available to Task Force Guardian. In terms of outcome, it is more difficult to determine if Task Force Guardian's PSYOP program was a success since any tool of measurement would have to be in years and not months. However, it is safe to assume that many aspects of the program, including the DRIP, had a positive impact and were successful.

Conclusion

Detainee operations will always be the *bête noire* of counterinsurgency operations, especially after the Abu Ghraib incident and the controversy surrounding Guantanamo Bay. Regardless, it is a task that will likely have to be conducted exclusively by the United States¹⁸ and we should not shy away from discussing the matter in order to ensure that lessons are learned and the correct TTPs are applied. When done correctly, detainee operations in counterinsurgency can make an unwanted situation tolerable.

In retrospect there were areas with Task Force Guardian's detainee operations that could have been improved. First, as mentioned above, there was little or no awareness of how tribal alliances, ethnic divisions or applicability of tribal codes such as Pushtunwali could be properly levered in help obtain optimal PSYOP results or influence detainee behavior inside the detention facility. This isn't to say this information wasn't available. In fact, a vast amount of information was compiled on the detainee population. The problem was that the information wasn't used by the Military Police—or shared by the Military Intelligence personnel for that matter—in a way that could have been useful to meet intended objectives. Nor is this to say that there wasn't any cultural awareness at all. Quite the contrary. American guards understood and were taught basics in terms of religion and Afghan culture including basic skills in Pashto and Dari. However, a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances of the many tribal structures and ethnic groups in Afghanistan would have further improved detainee operations.

Secondly, although resources and time were not readily available to do so, more emphasis should have been placed on transferring detainee operations over to the Afghan authorities. During 2005 there was talk of doing so, including several visits to Pul-e-Charki prison by senior U.S. Military

¹⁸ For example, ISAF forces in Afghanistan currently operate a 96 hour policy. Anyone captured on the battlefield may only be detained by ISAF forces for up to 96 hours. After this time the detainee in question must be released or transferred to Afghan authorities.

Police and engineer personnel to assess the feasibility of using the Afghan prison for an Afghan led detention center. Since 2005 progress has been made on this front and a good number of detainees formally held by American forces have subsequently been transferred over to Afghan authorities. Nevertheless, it is likely that more should have been more done at an earlier stage to transfer detainees in U.S. custody over to the Afghans.

David Kilcullen, former senior adviser to General David Petraeus and leading counterinsurgency expert, jokingly argues that the number one rule in counterinsurgency operations is to not put yourself in a position where an insurgency has to be fought to begin with. The same applies to detainee operations in counterinsurgency operations. When the situation permits, those detained by Coalition forces should be released at the soonest possible moment—of course, only after all intelligence value has been exploited and there is no continued threat to Coalition or Afghan forces. Furthermore Coalition forces cannot hesitate to utilize local security forces to conduct detention operations when possible due to the “home field” advantage they enjoy. All effort must be made to improve the capabilities of local security forces for detention operations. There will be a lot of pushback from various competing interests when it comes to outsourcing detention operations to local forces, but in paraphrasing T.E. Lawrence, it is better that they do it tolerably than we do it perfectly. However, when U.S. forces are required to conduct detainee operations—an inevitable consequence of warfare—there are certain guidelines that should be followed. The actions of Task Force Guardian in 2005 can serve as a good template.

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