Countering the Spread of Islamic Extremism

Through Culturally Sensitive, Religously Respectful Soldiers Who Possess Enhanced Language Skills

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Reviewing the events of the decades preceding the devastating attacks on 9/11 reinforces the fact the world in general — the West and the United States in particular — has been subjected to the constant threat of terrorist attacks by groups and individuals espousing a twisted version of Islam through bombings, shooting sprees in public locations, and suicide attacks against mostly soft targets. The United States and its partner nations in the battle against Islamic extremist groups must discover new and improved courses of action to combat these extremists and their ability to recruit, brain-wash, and train continuing waves of future terrorists.

In the foreseeable future, the dominant challenge facing the United States is the asymmetrical threat of terrorism, especially in the form of Islamic extremism. From the original attack on the Twin Towers in 1993, to the African embassy attacks in 1998, to the devastating destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11, and more recently the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and overthrow of the Yemeni government, the U.S. military apparatus has proven incapable of adequately addressing this threat through the application of predominately conventional warfare. To combat this ever-worsening rise of extremism requires the focused dedication to the creation of hybrid joint forces that are culturally sensitive and religiously respectful and that possess enhanced language skills.

Many will most likely comment that we already have forces that have training in these three areas and that these forces reside in the Special Operations Command. It is true we do have our Special Forces (SF), Civil Affairs (CA), and Psychological Operations/Military Information Support Operations (MISO) forces who are exposed to this training during the process to earn their military occupational specialty (MOS). As a result of this training, they are extremely adept at working with host nation security forces and the local populace. However, there are not enough of them to conduct their own mission, much less work with the tens of thousands of Soldiers who will deploy to conduct overseas contingency operations. Therefore, it is vital that we greatly expand this capability

A platoon leader with the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division and his translator (right) walk with the local leader of a town south of Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, on 23 October 2014. (Photo by SFC Brock Jones)

so that every squad-sized element has at least one Soldier adequately trained and educated to a specified level. Expanding the cultural awareness capacity of units engaged in missions that put them in constant contact with the local population will serve us well in our efforts to minimize the instances of Soldiers engaging in offensive actions, often accidentally, due to a lack of understanding local customs/traditions or a basic exposure to the values of respecting other cultures that are most likely very different from those they were exposed to growing up in the United States.

As recently as February 2015, the Army Times reported a huge push to recruit, train, and field 5,000 Special Operations Soldiers, including 3,000 SF, 950 CA Soldiers, and 800 MISO Soldiers. This will be an extremely time-consuming process as only a small percentage of recruits are ultimately successful in completing a pipeline taking 43 weeks for MISO, 46 weeks for CA, and 67 to 103 weeks for SF. Another indication of the demand for Soldiers in these critical specialties is the fact they are eligible for selective reenlistment bonuses.[1]

These are not the forces we have to worry about alienating Muslim populations in the areas of responsibility where U.S. forces conduct operations. It's those young Soldiers, NCOs, and commissioned officers who are conducting the day-to-day interactions, key-leader engagements, and presence patrols in the cities and villages of Iraq and Afghanistan, and whose actions — proper and improper — are being witnessed by the very populace we hope to influence in a positive way.

Culturally Sensitive and Religiously Respectful Joint Forces

On a positive note, our engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan have created recognition among the services of a need for education on culture. However, each service has approached cultural education based on an assessment of its particular needs instead of from a joint perspective. Some of the programs include but are not limited to the Defense Language Institute, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Culture Center, U.S. Air Force Culture and Language Center at the Air University, U. S. Navy Center for Language Regional Expertise and Culture, and the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) Center for Advance Operational Culture Learning.[2]

Of all these initiatives, it is the Marines who have led the way through its Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization (RCLF) concept. This is a web-based application that breaks down the globe into sub-regions, concentrating on the ethnic groups and languages to that region. The program's mission statement is "to ensure that Marine units are globally prepared and regionally focused so they are effective at navigating and influencing the culturally complex 21st century operating environment in support of the Marine Corps' missions and requirements. The program is based on 17 regions that may expand as required in the near future. Each region may contain many different cultures but due to some shared cultural traits and geographical proximity, they are bound by common economic, political, and historical or social issues."[3] This encapsulates the needed focus of all services and the joint community necessary to counter Islamic extremism the U.S. and the West will continue to face.

The RCLF module is the most appropriate approach within the Department of Defense as it not only provides distance learning capabilities in language and cultural immersion, but also ties this training into the professional military education (PME) requirements for officers and NCOs. This establishes "blocks" of requirements to be accomplished throughout their career path from lieutenant/warrant officer through lieutenant colonel/chief warrant officer 5 and sergeant through master sergeant.[4]

In the book Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death, Jim Frederick chronicles what can occur when Soldiers lack the ability to respect local culture and religion — viewing the local citizens as non-humans — which can lead to crimes against the very individuals we are there to help.[5]

These criminal actions can also impact the relationships with the security apparatus (military and police) our forces are working, training, and living with on a daily basis. Cultural insensitivity and a real or perceived lack of respect of Islam obviously creates friction points between our Soldiers and the host nation forces. This friction prevents a synergistic relationship, commitment from our partners, and in extreme instances is an instigator of insider attacks. In the Department of Defense December 2012 Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, there is significant discussion on the dramatic rise of insider attacks (commonly referred to as "green on blue") between 2007 and 2012. The number of incidents ranged from a low of three in 2008 to 29 in 2012.[6]

The report identifies four probable motives for the insider attacks as:
1. Infiltration (an insurgent is able to enlist in the Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF]);

2. Co-option (a current member of the ANSF is recruited by the insurgency to conduct the attack);
3. Impersonation (insurgent obtains an ANSF uniform and uses it to gain access to the forward operating base);
4. Personal motives (members of the ANSF act on their own without guidance from the insurgency).[7]

This represents a tremendous recruiting tool for the insurgency and further demonstrates a dire need for institutional education through pre-commissioning, initial entry training, NCO and Officer Education Systems, and PME. As David Kilcullen, the former senior counterinsurgency adviser to GEN David Petraeus, points out, the United States is much more likely to face irregular warfare in the future as opposed to conventional force-on-force conflicts.[8] Moreover, the common thread of our involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Horn of Africa has been battling opponents that base their existence on the tenets of Islamic extremism.

Language Capable Joint Force

In the overwhelming majority of school districts throughout the United States, there is a crippling lack of a requirement for our youth to learn a foreign language. This translates to potential military recruits and leaders who are devoid of this highly valuable skill when serving in a foreign nation and working with host nation officials, local leaders, military partners, and the general populace we want to leverage to dry up support to an insurgency. The ability to communicate, at any level of conversation, with people in their native language is usually considered the most basic sign of respect for their culture and their country. This does not necessarily imply the ability to conduct an entire key leader engagement without the services of a Department of Defense translator or a local interpreter, but at least the capability to converse in the pleasantries that are an important component of establishing relationships in the Muslim world. These include greetings, asking about your counterpart's family, eating and drinking, counting, the days of the week — phrases you can expect to use in virtually every key leader engagement. This shows an effort to learn about the locals and their customs/traditions and helps establish a lot of goodwill early in the relationship. Will these actions change the mind of the most virulent jihadist? Of course not. But for that part of the population which does not actively or passively support the insurgency, it can help counter any message that U.S. forces are there to disrespect the host nation customs, traditions, and religion.

During my 2005-2006 deployment to Iraq working with the Iraqi police forces in the Kurdish provinces of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah, I developed a several hundred word capability in Kurdish, instead of Arabic. This effort bought tremendous amounts of goodwill with Kurdish government and police leadership, especially with those older and very senior in rank. I was informed that when Saddam Hussein was still in power, it was illegal for the Kurds to speak their native language in public. So to see a U.S. Army captain greeting them in Kurdish instead of Arabic, they were simply astonished and incredibly receptive to any advice I presented, making my deployment an extremely productive and rewarding experience.

Fortunately, there are several tracks we can pursue to develop the language capability of our joint forces: traditional college and universities where our future leaders are participating in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program; the Defense Language Institute, Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in Monterey, Calif., where the majority of Army personnel are trained; the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS) at Fort Bragg, N.C.; or command language programs operating within units utilizing commercially available systems such as Rosetta Stone software.[9]

Aside from the process of actually identifying future service members with the ability to learn a foreign language and successfully training them for this new skill set, one of the most difficult tasks for our strategic leadership is to correctly identify languages for future needs and contingencies. Chinese, Korean, Arabic, and Farsi will easily appear on most planners' radar. The last two administrations have focused a lot of attention on the continent of Africa, integrating all aspects of national power — DIME (diplomatic, information, military, and economic). Africa has more than 1,000 languages and dialects, and many strategic fault lines that may flare up may involve a populace that speaks Berber, Portuguese, or Swahili, so it is impossible to make perfect predictions.[10] But we can certainly focus on the most likely scenarios and start with our future leaders attending institutional learning at our nation's military academies and ROTC programs by implementing requirements for a minimum of basic and intermediate foreign language courses and advanced courses for those demonstrating a higher proficiency. We can also encourage and reward those students who wish to obtain their degree in foreign languages. If a standardized level of foreign language proficiency is established at the academies and ROTC programs, this will create tremendous inroads toward developing a multi-language capable joint force.

The initial process for helping to identify the ability to learn a foreign language is to administer the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB). This test needs to be administered to all incoming freshmen at the academies, first-year students in the ROTC programs, and new recruits who achieved a minimum score on their service's version of the Armed Forces Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). For efficiency, it would be advisable to develop a "pre-test" to the DLAB and then administer the full battery to those applicants achieving a certain score. The actual DLAB is a web-based test, comprising 126 multiple-choice questions and is scored out of a possible 176 points. Half of the test is audio and half is written. It does not test a current language proficiency but rather the ability to learn a foreign language.[11]

From a practicality standpoint, based on the limited number of training seats available and the protracted period of time it takes to send a service member through the Defense Language Institute (over one year for many languages), training via this method alone is not practical and will require other training approaches. The Special Warfare Center and School already provides language training for CA, MISO, and SF operators at their Fort Bragg schoolhouse. This is another source to be leveraged, although it would certainly require an increase of civilian and military instructors, web-based training material, support staff, and classroom facilities. However, expanding the capacity of a current capability is always more advantageous, less expensive, and time-consuming than the initial creation of the capability.

Another resource that was previously available to service members, as well as their families, was the Rosetta Stone web-based language training program. This was provided to service members free of charge by simply accessing this software via the Army Knowledge Online (AKO) website where there was a direct link to the Rosetta Stone website. The Army elected not to renew the user contract with Rosetta Stone when the contract ended in September 2011.[12] As someone who effectively used this software, I can attest to its value as a language resource tool. It would need to be reinstated for this proposal to be viable and would certainly be more cost efficient than traditional methods of language learning in a classroom setting.

Additional Skill Identifier (ASI)

Although they may go by different names, the overall concept is basically the same within the various services: identify a need for specialized capability, training, and education, then create an alpha-numeric combination to capture this ability for future assignments. Within the Army's personnel structure, it is known as an ASI.[13] The Navy uses the term additional qualification designator for officers, and the Air Force goes by special experience identifier to match uniquely qualified personnel to specific critical missions.[14] Regardless of the name, the philosophy must be adapted within the construct of establishing a manner in which to identify those who have accomplished this valuable level of learning and ensuring they are assigned to those leadership positions requiring this education for mission accomplishment.

Recommendations

As our military leaders look to the future in an effort to forecast where we will be required to conduct operations and against whom those operations will be conducted, it can be anticipated our civilian leaders will continue to seek out partner nations with which to work to create a coalition, especially in the Middle East with Muslim countries. This was the case with Desert Storm, and efforts are in place to achieve the same with the current fight against ISIS. In the 2012 strategic guidance "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," it specifies the following challenge for the military leadership: "U.S. forces will plan to operate whenever possible with allied and coalition forces."[15] Accordingly, U.S. commanders will be required to not only be aware of the culture, norms, and thoughts of the enemy, but will be required to also understand the same when working with partner militaries and government leaders. Failure to establish positive working relationships with senior leadership from different cultures and religious backgrounds at the strategic level will create potentially more difficulties than at the operational or tactical level. To achieve this, the Department of Defense must do the following:

1. Codify this concept in all of our strategic documents: National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, National Military Strategy, Quadrennial Defense Review, and the Quadrennial Development and Diplomacy Review. Fully integrate the value of cultural capabilities into the framework of the various war colleges and create a curriculum of study designed to offer a master's level degree to students, both those in residence and distance learning. Senior level buy-in is key for the rest of the force to fully realize the importance of attainment of this skill

set on our future conflicts with religious extremism.

2. Designate cultural training as one of the most basic concepts of all initial entry level training for officers and enlisted service members. This includes the military academies and all ROTC programs. Develop a curriculum of learning that will enable students to earn a minor in cultural awareness, which can be applied to the process of earning their ASI once they are commissioned and achieve other milestones in their culture educational pathway. For our enlisted service members, develop cultural training to become a part of basic training and advanced individual training (AIT) for every MOS.

3. Make cultural training an integral component of all levels of PME for both the officer and NCO Corps. Make provisions to prevent "grandfathering" for those who have already progressed to higher levels of their military education. These are the leaders who will soon be in elevated positions of leadership and must be more prepared for working in a multinational/multicultural area of operations.

4. Another component of the cultural education process is language training. Language capability potential must be identified early in a Soldier's career by the development of an abbreviated version of the DLAB that will be administered to those achieving a minimum score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). Those earning an acceptable score will be administered the full DLAB once they arrive at their basic training station. Students of the academies and ROTC programs will go through the same process during their first year. All students will be required to take a minimum of two semesters of a foreign language and those who pass the DLAB will be "strongly encouraged" to earn a minor in a foreign language and be given preferential opportunities to attend further language training upon completion of their BOLC (Basic Office Leader Course). These opportunities must be extended to the Reserve component Soldiers as well.

5. Soldiers who have already completed their initial entry training will conduct similar language ability testing. Those passing the DLAB will be selected for attendance at an institutional language training facility such as DLIFLC or SWCS. Until such time as the capacity is sufficiently increased to accommodate this influx of students, a commercial language program such as Rosetta Stone will be made available in their selected language. In addition, they will be assigned to a distance learning cohort with an instructor from DLIFLC/SWCS to monitor their progress and further prepare them for attendance at an actual school.

The attainment of the cultural awareness ASI must be viewed by the force as a career enhancer. For enlisted service members, it must be worth a significant number of promotion points and place them ahead of their peers for attendance in their NCO professional development courses. For the officer corps, it should be required to serve in various leadership positions during overseas contingency operations that place the leader in positions of frequent interaction with the host nation populace and foreign military advisor roles. Promotion boards must be instructed to view leaders with this particular ASI in a very favorable light, much as was the case in 2006 when there was a concerted effort to get more officers to volunteer to serve as members of a military transition team (MiTT).

No matter what name they go by: al Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Ansar al-Shari'a, or most recently, ISIS — all of these terrorist organizations present an existential threat to United States' interests and allies around the world, the American homeland, and our way of life. The United States is losing the battle with radical Islam in general and ISIS in particular. Defeating this threat will require U.S. military intervention. This intervention means more than air combat missions and "boots on the ground." It means those boots need to be filled with U.S. Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen who are culturally aware, religiously respectful, and language capable.

Notes

[1] Michelle Tan, "Spec Ops needs 5,000 Soldiers," Army Times, 23 February 2015, http://www.armytimes.com/story/military/careers/army/2015/02/23/army-special-operations/23304113/.

[2] Vadim K. Simakhov, " Cultural Competence and the Operational Level of War" (research paper, Naval War College, 2013).

[3] USMC Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, 2013, accessed 14 May 2015, https://www.tecom.usmc.mil/caocl/SitePagesHome.aspx.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jim Frederick, Black Hearts — One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death (NY: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010).

[6] "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan" (Department of Defense, Report to Congress, December 2012), 36-38.
[7] Ibid.
[8] David J. Kilcullen, "The City as a System: Future Conflict and Urban Resilience," The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs 36, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 31.
[9] AR 11-6, Army Foreign Language Programs, 2013.
[10] One World Nations Online, "Official and Spoken Languages of African Countries." Accessed 11 May 2015, http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/african_languages.htm.
[11] AboutMilitary.com, "Defense Language Aptitude Battery", Accessed 12 May 2015, http://usmilitary.about.com/cs/joiningup/a/dlab_3.htm
[12] "Army Rosetta Stone Access has Expired." Accessed May 11, 2015, https://usarmy.rosettastone.com/
[13] DA Pamphlet 611–21, Military Occupational Classification and Structure, 2007.
[14] DoD Instruction 1312.01, "Department of Defense Occupational Information Collection and Reporting," January 2013.
[15] "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," Department of Defense strategic guidance, 4.

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