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## Socio-Cultural Intelligence and National Security

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Robert R. Tomes

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**ABSTRACT:** This article reviews, assesses, and makes recommendations relating to the provision and use of socio-cultural intelligence in support of national security policy. It details responses to gaps in socio-cultural intelligence during the 2000s, and reinforces the importance of socio-cultural intelligence in addressing challenges in the emerging operational environment.

The March 2005 report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (The WMD Commission) concluded that America's inability to discern crucial aspects of Iraq's weapons program stemmed from failures to understand "the context of Iraq's overall political, social, cultural, and economic situation."<sup>1</sup> In other words, "the Intelligence Community did not sufficiently understand the political dynamics of Saddam Hussein's Iraq."<sup>2</sup> Given the state of affairs with US policy towards Russia, China, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and other current and potential points of friction one wonders if we have improved our ability to understand such political, social, and cultural dynamics.

The implications for failing to sustain and improve socio-cultural intelligence capabilities are manifold. The failure to understand the true nature of Iraqi deception about weapons of mass destruction reinforced biases and misperception, ultimately leading to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The deliberate heightening of Sunni-Shia tensions in Iraq during the mid-2000s by Sunni extremists who wanted a sectarian war created the conditions for the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Many analysts missed the social, economic, and political antecedents to the Arab Spring, including the relationship between increasing dissatisfaction with government corruption, rising food prices and unemployment, increased religiosity, and the emergence of new, organized factions willing to demonstrate against the government. It appears analysts also failed to recognize Russia possessed both the intentions and capabilities to wage a pseudo-war in Ukraine, and that China would increase its expansionism in the South China Sea and escalate its cyber attacks on the United States.

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1 Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, *The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, Report to the President of the United States*. Unclassified. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2005), 173-174.

2 Ibid.

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Throughout the 2000s, strategists, planners, and policymakers seeking the same socio-political context identified in the WMD Commission Report lamented a paucity of capabilities to understand what has been termed “socio-cultural intelligence,” an area of intelligence collection, analysis, and reporting that atrophied in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> As former National Security Advisor Steven Hadley recently observed, “whether it’s Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, or the 2011 Arab Awakening, we are starting from scratch” and “after the kinetic phase against ISIS, there’s going to have to be some work done. How are we going to do that?”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, post-Cold War intelligence programs undervalued social science disciplines as emphasis was placed on technical collection and reporting disciplines. While the 1990s witnessed an increase in the open, unclassified resources available to help policymakers understand foreign cultures, movements, and peoples, they were not considered as part of the baseline data collected and analyzed for defense, development, and diplomacy missions. Policymakers did not have access to the best assessments, data, or experts available to inform intelligence analysis, estimates, or policy formulation.

The United States has a long history of collecting and using demographic, cultural, and identity-related information in support of national security policy. But the record is mixed. When there is a national security crisis or war, socio-cultural intelligence efforts are funded, social scientists are mobilized, and policymakers have access to key insights into foreign populations. Lacking the imperative for such support or direct intervention by senior leaders, however, funding for socio-cultural intelligence activities atrophy. Too often the available resources for socio-cultural intelligence collection and analysis fall between the traditional intelligence organizations or, because they are deemed unclassified or “open source” activities, are relegated to lower priority. This paradigm must change.

For the present, local and regional instability related to a global economic contraction, climate change, water and food shortages, urbanization, and other socio-economic problems will trump efforts to counter the effects of failed and criminalized states, criminal syndicates, and other malign transnational actors. Much of the developing world seems destined for new waves of instability, begging the question: what have we learned about socio-cultural intelligence and the imperative to understand human dynamics when it comes to national security policy?

This article explores recent experience with socio-cultural intelligence and recommends key issues and challenges for national security

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3 While there is no agreed on definition of socio-cultural intelligence the term connotes intelligence methods, processes, and analytic products that specifically integrate social, cultural, and human domain data into analysis to illuminate how identity-related, communal, cultural, and other factors influence decisions, perspectives, and behavior. Most US government activities informing and contributing to socio-cultural intelligence fall outside of the intelligence programs and budgets by design. They are often characterized as intelligence support or fusion activities to distinguish them from human intelligence activities, which require training, oversight, and formal association with intelligence operations that are ill-suited to leverage the expertise available through academic, research, and other non-government organizations. A controversial argument for making socio-cultural intelligence a separate discipline is made in Kerry Patton, *Socio-Cultural Intelligence: A New Discipline in Intelligence Studies* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2010).

4 Stephen Hadley, interview by Joseph Collins and Nicholas Rostow, October 7, 2014, *PRISM* 5, no. 3 (June 2015): 150.

policymakers and those that support them. The term “socio-cultural intelligence” addresses the nature of the intelligence and knowledge requirements that policymakers seek as input to decisions about preferences, ideology, behaviors, affiliations, and perceptions of individuals and groups.

### Cold War Socio-Cultural Intelligence

Today’s socio-cultural intelligence programs have roots in World War II. Programs in that era included the Human Relations Area Files project at Yale University, the use of anthropologists to understand Japanese culture and governance, initiatives to inform the recruiting of “partisans,” and efforts to shape and help implement post-war occupation policies.<sup>5</sup> Socio-cultural intelligence directly informed World War II operations, including those of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).

OSS utilized anthropologists and other social scientists considered essential to strategic planning as well as tactical operations. As authors Max Boot, David Kilcullen, and others have argued, the underlying model for the OSS as an interagency, strategic services organization should be considered for adoption as a supplement to the expansion of special operations forces (SOF). While rightly considered a legacy of the famed OSS units, today’s SOF are not chartered or authorized to wage strategic warfare as an interagency activity in the same fashion as the civilian and military elements of the OSS. Information operations and the ability to focus “strategic services” on the human domain are critical to success in many twenty-first century international security challenges. Reflecting on interagency capabilities to integrate military, civilian, and academic expertise to deal with national security crisis in the 2000s, Stephen Hadley observed “we have not developed a systematic way to identify, train, exercise, deploy, do lessons learned, and improve.”<sup>6</sup>

During the early Cold War, assessments of foreign leadership, cultural issues, and the sentiment of foreign populations received periodic emphasis during times of crisis. Early in the Cold War, socio-cultural intelligence assessments deeply influenced the Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) estimates of stability in postwar Europe. The CIA concluded that poverty and underlying social conditions of post-colonial areas and in some of the devastated cities rendered susceptible to Soviet influence, especially in areas where leftist or socialist sentiments existed.

Today’s approach to pattern of life analysis for counter-insurgency operations revisits population-centric methods used during the Vietnam War, including socio-cultural intelligence support to Operation Cedar Falls. Cedar Falls involved identifying enemy dispositions and behavior in the area known as the Iron Triangle around Saigon. Despite debate about the success of Cedar Falls and its follow-on Operation Junction City, historians widely agree on the success of intelligence preparation

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5 For general history see US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics* (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, 2009); on the Human Relations Area Files see Clellan S. Ford, *Human Relations Area Files: 1949-1969, A Twenty-Year Report* (New Haven, CN: Human Relations Area Files, LLC, 1970); see also Louise E. Hoffman, “American Psychologists and Wartime Research on Germany, 1941-1945,” *American Psychologist* 47, no. 2 (February 1992): 264-273.

6 Hadley, interview, 150.

involved, especially the layered, multi-dimensional application of socio-cultural intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

After Vietnam, the military revamped its doctrine and planning to wage combined arms warfare against the Warsaw Pact. An aversion to military interventions went much deeper than avoiding another small war. US defense strategy focused almost exclusively on countering the Soviet threat to NATO in Europe and on modernizing the nuclear force.<sup>8</sup> The US military purged counter-insurgency doctrine, training, and force structure from its approach to preparing for war.<sup>9</sup> Post-Vietnam, national security decision-making imperatives reversed the learning curve for American intelligence agencies when it came to human dynamics. Intelligence and information collection, analysis, and reporting processes gradually shifted to technical collection methods.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1980s, Army infantry officers received only the most simplistic introduction to counter-insurgency principles and doctrine during their officer basic and advanced courses. Intelligence capabilities were retooled, shifted from insurgency and winning the hearts and minds of local populations with boots on the ground to tracking Soviet military forces and waging a different type of strategic information warfare against global communism. Military doctrine barely addressed counterinsurgency operations. The only real planning or doctrine for urban warfare focused on armor and mechanized infantry forces by-passing cities, with limited planning doctrine written or considered for operations in “urban terrain.”<sup>11</sup> With the current resurgence in ethnic crisis, ideological conflicts, nationalism, and other identity-related challenges, we cannot afford to repeat the pattern of atrophy in socio-cultural intelligence.

Expertise in socio-cultural intelligence collection and analysis atrophied in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Lessons from intervention in the Balkans, Iraq, and Somali emphasized airpower, precision strikes, and rapid decisive operations to overwhelm and defeat adversaries in combat without the need

7 For an operational history of Operation Cedar Falls see LTG (Ret) Bernard William Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City: A Turning Point* (Washington, DC: US Department of the Army, 1989). The debate continues on the utility of the intelligence support to Operation Cedar Falls concerning the outcome of the larger effort, a quibble that does not dilute the innovation and “pattern of life” similarities to current conflicts.

8 Robert R. Tomes, *American Defence Strategy from Vietnam to Operation Iraqi Freedom: US Military Innovation and the New American Way of War, 1973-2003* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007).

9 Ibid.

10 Robert R. Tomes, “Informing US National Security Transformation Discussions: An Argument for Balanced Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance,” *Defence Studies* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 20-35; and Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Batcherlor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 2010).

11 Tomes, *American Defence Strategy*, chapters 4-5.

12 For an overview of socio-cultural intelligence approaches see the conference report and briefings in LeeEllen Friedland, Gary W. Shaeff, and Jessica Glicken Turnley, *Socio-Cultural Perspectives: A New Intelligence Paradigm* (McLean, VA: MITRE Corporation Center for National Security Programs, 2006). Also see, US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics*, chapter 2 and appendix D. For a survey of efforts to address socio-cultural intelligence gaps see Joel Lawton, “How the Military Intelligence Community Has Failed to Incorporate Sociocultural Understanding of their Operational Environment,” *Small Wars Journal*, April 23, 2014, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/how-the-military-intelligence-community-has-failed-to-incorporate-sociocultural-understandi>.

for post-conflict occupation and nation-building forces.<sup>13</sup> These trends would not be reversed until after the first battle of Fallujah, which forced US planners to realize they may lose the strategic battle for the future of Iraq. One outcome was a push to integrate socio-cultural intelligence expertise from across the US government and an emphasis on stability and security operations across the defense, diplomacy, and development sectors.

### Stability Operations in an Era of Persistent Conflict

Some of the important developments in socio-cultural intelligence in the 2000s involved the ascent of security and stabilization missions.<sup>14</sup> The Department of State created the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) in July 2004, subsequently renamed the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations in November 2011. The creation of an Office and then a Bureau to coordinate and oversee policies and programs related to stability and conflict provided structure, resources, and processes to better integrate socio-cultural intelligence into State Department operations.

Another significant inflection point occurred in November 2005 with the publication of Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (often referred to as SSTRO), revised and reissued in 2009 under the shorter title, Stability Operations. DoD Directive 3000.05 made stability operations a core military mission. The document codified in Departmental guidance what many strategists had already observed in programming, budgeting, and training activities: stability and support operations should not be viewed as secondary activities from the perspective of readiness, doctrine, training, and acquisition priorities. Security and stability operations were henceforth to be considered co-equal missions alongside traditional military missions.

Also in 2005, Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson published an article in *Military Review* calling for an Office for Operational Cultural Knowledge that informed the creation of Human Terrain Teams by the US Army Training and Doctrine Command in 2006.<sup>15</sup> The Army disbanded the Human Terrain System, the program managing Human Terrain Teams, in June 2015 in the wake of widespread criticism of its effectiveness and efficiency (although many brigade commanders had given the program high marks). Lessons learned from the Human Terrain Program will undoubtedly reinforce the need for similar efforts to provide combat commanders with socio-cultural intelligence in future conflicts.

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13 On the use of airpower in the battles of Fallujah see William Head, "The Battles of Al-Fallujah: Urban Warfare and the Growth of Air Power," *Air Power History* 60, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 32-51. For a critical view of airpower doctrine and support to counterinsurgency see Kenneth Beebe, "The Air Force's Missing Doctrine: How the US Air Force Ignores Counterinsurgency," *Air & Space Power Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 27-34; and Michael L. Downs, "Rethinking the Combined Air Force Component Commander's ISR Approach to Counterinsurgency," *Air & Space Power Journal* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 67-76.

14 Bernard Carreau, *Transforming the Interagency System for Complex Operations* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, Center for Technology and National Security Policy, 2007).

15 Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson, "An Organizational Solution for DoD's Cultural Knowledge Needs," *Military Review* 85, no. 4 (July-August 2005): 18-21; and US Army Human Terrain System, "History of the Human Terrain System," <http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/history.html>.

Meanwhile, in 2006 the US Army published Field Manual (FM) 3-24 on Counter-Insurgency, promulgated doctrine for stability operations (FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*) in October 2008, and updated its foundational doctrine *Operations* (FM 3-0) in February 2008, defining “full spectrum operations” as the simultaneous application of offensive and defensive measures in concert with stability operations.

The same year, Army Chief of Staff George Casey described the future operating environment as an era of “persistent conflict.”<sup>16</sup> In the United States Army’s 2008 Posture Statement, Casey argued:

We are on the leading edge of a period when an increasing number of actors (state, non-state, and individual) in a less constrained international arena, are more willing to use violence to pursue their ends...[S]even enduring trends exacerbate these sources of conflict: Globalization conjoined with Technological innovations; Demographic changes coupled with increasing Urbanization; rising Resource demands; Climate change and natural disasters; Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and the consequences of Failed or failing states.<sup>17</sup>

The changing nature of conflict and stability was also a central theme in the 2008 *National Defense Strategy*, which stated: “We face a global struggle. Like communism and fascism before it, extremist ideology has transnational pretensions.”<sup>18</sup> Widespread recognition of the need for greater understanding of extremism, resurgent nationalism, and other identity- and culture-driven national security problems spurred then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to create Project Minerva in 2008, a research program to expand social science research in support of military operations.

A Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force assessed the challenges the national security community would face in an era of persistent conflict in a March 2009 entitled *Understanding Human Dynamics*. The report defined human dynamics as “the actions and interactions of personal, interpersonal, and social/contextual factors and their effects on behavioral outcomes.”<sup>19</sup>

The Task Force’s focus on human dynamics as a critical issue for national security was based on the need for deeper understanding of adversaries, the demographics in regions and countries where American military forces or development personnel were deployed, the unfolding of strategic narratives and how to influence them, and of how local instability or crisis might lead to wider conflict.<sup>20</sup> Understanding human dynamics is not simply about gathering ethnographic, demographic, or other information about groups, peoples, or cultures. Such understanding comes only from the systematic analysis, synthesis, and integration

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16 Attributed to Chief of Staff of the Army General George Casey in Jim Garamone, “Gen. Casey Says Army Must Be Prepared for ‘Persistent Conflict,’” *American Forces Press Service*, May 11, 2007; and by Gregory Fontenot and Kevin Benson, “Persistent Conflict or Containment: Alternate Visions of Contemporary Conflict,” *Army* (September 2009): 74-80.

17 US Department of the Army, “Information Papers: Persistent Conflict,” *2008 Army Posture Statement*, [http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information\\_papers/prepare/Persistent\\_Conflict.html](http://www.army.mil/aps/08/information_papers/prepare/Persistent_Conflict.html)

18 US Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, June 2008), 7.

19 US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics*, vii.

20 *Ibid.*, 117.

of human-centric thinking into national security decision-making processes.

In 2009, former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy and one of her assistants, Shawn Brimley, argued “the US military will increasingly face three types of challenges: rising tensions in the global commons; hybrid threats that contain a mix of traditional and irregular forms of conflict, and the problem of weak and failing states.”<sup>21</sup>

The characterization of emerging security challenges as hybrid threats was fueled in part by widespread adoption of the term “hybrid wars” to describe conflicts in the twenty-first century. While the DOD has not officially defined the term, the prevailing view is hybrid threats incorporate the “full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder, conducted by both states and a variety of non-state actors.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the proliferation of the terms “hybrid threats” and “hybrid wars,” many analysts and strategists failed to anticipate Russian military activities in Ukraine, despite indications that Russian President Vladimir Putin was planning operations to disrupt Ukraine’s accession into the European Union and to challenge NATO’s continued integration of former Soviet territory.

The 2010s are bringing the national security community full circle back to the dilemma faced by post-Cold War planners and strategists seeking to reduce spending on defense, intelligence, and other national security programs.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the post-Vietnam environment, the United States cannot shift its defense, diplomacy, and development strategies away from insurgency, terrorism, and similar forms of warfare.

In 2010, the office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence published *The Human Dimension: Analyzing the Role of the Human Element in the Operational Environment*, a concept paper that emphasized the changing requirements for socio-cultural intelligence. It called for increased “understanding of the human dimension among practitioners and consumers of intelligence, from the tactical to the strategic level” and outlined an approach to integrate “human domain awareness” into all aspects of military operations across the traditional warfighting domains (land, sea, air, space).<sup>24</sup> Despite five years of efforts to build capabilities for security and stability operations and repeated attempts to characterize the emerging era of persistent conflict and hybrid wars, little was done

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21 Michèle Flournoy and Shawn Brimley, “The Contested Commons,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 135, no. 7 (July 2009): 16-21. On US Army adaptation in Iraq, Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005: Transition to the New Campaign* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008).

22 Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 8.

23 See Robert Greene Sands and Allison Greene-Sands, *Cross-Cultural Competence for a Twenty-First Century Military* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); Michael T. Flynn, James Sisco, and David C. Ellis, “Left of Bang: The Value of Sociocultural Analysis in Today’s Environment,” *PRISM* 3, no. 4 (September 2012): 13-22; Charles Ehlschlaeger, ed., *Socio-Cultural Analysis with the Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Intelligence Paradigm*, White Paper (Washington, DC: US Army Engineer Research Development Center, July 2014); and Sarah Canna, ed., *Operational Relevance of Behavioral and Social Science to DoD Missions* (Boston, MA: NSI Conference Report, March 2013).

24 Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, *The Human Dimension: Analyzing the Role of the Human Element in the Operational Environment* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, September 15, 2010), 3.



in the 2000s to institutionalize our capacity to provide socio-cultural intelligence at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

### The Imperative for Socio-Cultural Intelligence

The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and Africa refocused attention on improving socio-cultural intelligence capabilities. The so-called Arab Spring sprang from a number of related social, economic, and political challenges common to nations in what the US National Intelligence Council termed an “arc of instability” stretching from the northern parts of South Asia, across the Caucasus, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and into the Andean region of Latin America.<sup>25</sup> The destabilization that followed led to increased oil prices, which in turn caused a price spike in world food prices, leading some governments to increase food subsidies in an attempt to prevent further unrest.<sup>26</sup> Internationally, food security experts are already warning of a repeat of the 2007-2008 world food crisis based on changes in oil prices, droughts, and other factors.<sup>27</sup>

The Arab Spring was quickly recast as the Arab Winter as initial moves toward pluralism and liberalization faltered and extremism increased.<sup>28</sup> The explosion of new mediums of communication has simultaneously created more informed citizens and provided new tools for political mobilization, manipulation, and propaganda. Additionally, immigrants fleeing regional instability for Europe are aggravating an already stressed political and economic climate on that continent.

For some observers, the Arab Spring was a harbinger of coming instability.<sup>29</sup> Instability seems imminent in any state where more than fifty percent of the population is under thirty years of age, educated, increasingly aware of their poverty and lack of opportunities, resents government corruption, and can be mobilized into political action using new, pervasive social media and personal communication networks.<sup>30</sup> There is already a perceived “gap” in intelligence support to policymakers leveraging available social media sources. One of the goals of CIA Director John Brennan’s recent reorganization, which included moving the previously stand-alone Open Source Center into the CIA Directorate for Intelligence, is making social media analytics more responsive and relevant to policy customers.

25 National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, November 2008), iv.

26 On the Arab Spring’s causes and aftermath, see “Special Report: The Arab Spring,” *Economist* (July 13, 2013); David McMurry and Amanda Ufheil-Somers, eds., *The Arab Revolts: Dispatches on Militant Democracy in the Middle East* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013); Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sarah Johnstone and Jeffrey Mazo, “Global Warming and the Arab Spring,” *Survival* 53, no. 2 (March 2011): 11-17; and Samah Ayed Ahmed, “The Impact of Food and Global Economic Crises (2008) on Food Security in Egypt,” *African and Asian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2014): 205-236.

27 Julian Cribb, *The Coming Famine: The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do About It* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010); and Andrew S. Natsios and Kelly W. Doley, “The Coming Food Coups,” *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2009): 7-25.

28 For additional commentary on the rise of extremism and retreat from liberalism after the Arab Spring, see Howard J. Wiarda, “Arab Fall or Arab Winter?” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 34, no. 3 (2012): 134-137; Michael J. Totten, “Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?” *World Affairs* 174, no. 5 (January/February 2012): 23-42; and “Special Report: The Arab Spring,” *Economist*.

29 “Special Report: The Arab Spring,” *Economist*.

30 Jack A. Goldstone, Monty G. Marshall, and Hilton Root, “Demographic Growth in Dangerous Places: Concentrating Conflict Risks,” *International Area Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (June 2014): 120-133.

For much of the past decade debates on and discussions about US national security have been dominated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the global war against terrorism and religious extremism. Fundamental to these discussions are questions about the nature of Islam, ideology, nation-building, and the roiling of identities from the cross-cutting pressures of globalization, Westernization, and liberalism. After struggling to design and implement an effective strategy to defeat counterinsurgency and extremism in Afghanistan and Iraq, a people-centric counter-insurgency strategy was adopted and deep understanding of “patterns of life” became a priority. This population-centric approach required “whole of government solutions” integrating defense, diplomacy, development and other domains across strategy, policy formulation, and exaction phases.

Adopting a population-centric approach as the overarching strategy to prevail in Afghanistan and against violent extremists presented a number of challenges. It was not a natural approach or orientation for the legacy intelligence and information support activities that underpin the defense, diplomacy, and development arms of the broader national security community. The organizational and institutional memory required for a population-centric strategy did not exist. And, as Gian Gentile argues, the emergence of “population-centric counterinsurgency has perverted a better way of American war which has primarily been one of improvisation and practicality...but is not a strategy” for prevailing in future conflicts.”<sup>31</sup>

Adopting a population-centric strategy as a national security policy imperative required changing how resources were allocated, what equipment was procured, how people were trained and evaluated, and how the interagency would collaborate to form whole-of-government solutions. This has not been entirely successful, as evidenced by ongoing debates about the importance of defining and addressing Islamic extremism, assessing the regional implications of increasing nationalism among ethnic Russians residing in Eastern Europe, and understanding Chinese strategic culture and its role in shaping Chinese foreign policy decisions.<sup>32</sup>

Population-centric planning also altered expectations for the length of US (and Coalition forces) deployments, changed the rules of engagement for counter-terrorism and other operations, and shifted how US forces engaged with and related to the local population. When it appeared the prevailing approach was not working in Iraq and a “surge” was needed, socio-cultural intelligence programs were funded, made a national security priority, and the imperative to understand patterns of life and the ideational and motivational underpinnings of foreign leaders and group behaviors brought social science methods and analytic approaches into the mainstream of the national security decision making process.<sup>33</sup>

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31 Gian P. Gentile, “A Strategy of Tactics: Population-Centric COIN and the Army,” *Parameters* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2011-2012): 116-127.

32 See Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>; and for a recent assessment of China’s strategic culture, see Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace American as the Global Superpower* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 2015).

33 US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics*, chapters 1 and 2; and Wright and Reese, *On Point II*.

Meanwhile, the fight against terrorist and insurgent networks required the US government to build a stronger interagency, whole-of-government “network” able to share information and expertise at the level of detail and in the timelines required to degrade adversary networks. Sustaining constant pressure on insurgent and terrorist networks in Iraq and Afghanistan required deep insight into local (including tribal) politics, how local politics related to political dynamics in Kabul and Baghdad, how politics in both capitals were influenced by regional and international actors, and the myriad activities and events that influenced support for the government as well as for anti-regime forces.

More important for thinking about the future of human domain analysis were the changes required inside the US national security community with respect to thinking about security policy in the twenty-first century. Adopting population-centric strategies required fundamental changes in measures of effectiveness and in the very types of information and intelligence required to inform policy, decision-making, and operations decision-makers.<sup>34</sup>

It is unclear whether this people-centered strategic focus will last in light of budget cuts and waning support for continued emphasis on counter-insurgency doctrine. The historical record, moreover, suggests our capabilities to understand socio-cultural dynamics and to apply that understanding to policy-making may once again atrophy in a post-conflict environment as priorities shift and budgets decline.

## Human Dynamics

At no time in the history of American national security has it been more crucial to achieve greater insight into the social, cultural, political, and ideological factors underlying contemporary security crises. From Russian and Chinese nationalism to the Islamic State to reactions to the Charlie Hebdo shootings in France to mass demonstrations sparked by social media “mob” activity, international security affairs are increasingly dominated by issues that require deeper understanding of ideas, ideology, religion, societies, cultures, values, perceptions, and grievances, ambitions.

In the mid-2000s, the militant group Al-Qaeda in Iraq promoted sectarian violence to spark a Sunni-Shia civil war to mobilize Sunnis and recruit extremists. Since then Sunni extremists have promoted their radical interpretation of Islam and expanded their operations across the region. In 2014, the Syrian Civil war and a dysfunctional Iraqi government created a power vacuum ripe for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to seize territory and rename itself an Islamic State.

Elsewhere, as the world focused on the Olympics in Sochi, analysts failed to anticipate Russian plans to seize the Crimea and foment

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34 For insights into population-centric warfare, see Gentile, “A Strategy of Tactics”; and Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York, NY: The Penguin Group, 2013). For insights into aspects of population-centric warfare see Hans Binnendijk and Stuart E. Johnson, eds., *Transforming for Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, Center for Technology and National Security Policy, 2004); Scott Atran, *Briefing to the US Defense Science Board on Countering Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: ARTIS, February 2013), <http://cis.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/images/DSB-CVE%20Briefing%2013FEB14%20-%20Final.pdf>; and US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics*, chapter 2.

a separatist movement in Ukraine. Russian manipulation of ethnic cleavages in Ukraine to foment instability may be less about the status of ethnic Russians in former Soviet states than impeding Ukraine's near-term plans to join the European Union and long-term overtures to join NATO. Both the EU and NATO resist accession by states with internal conflicts. At home, Putin's actions in Ukraine seem to be part of a larger push to solidify nationalist support.

Looking forward, it is important to understand the dimensions of the human security landscape that will shape twenty-first century national security challenges and to improve our understanding of the human domain. A number of policy issues require additional study. Chief among them are projected changes in GDP in the developed world based on demographic shifts that may lead to overall changes in economic power and influence. The continued growth of "youth bulges" in many countries currently experiencing internal civil wars (e.g., Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, Somalia) will require additional policy innovation and regional initiatives to deal with chronic instability. Because innovation is demographically associated with youth, nations experiencing a population graying will find their economies progressively less innovative.

Across the globe, policymakers will have to deal with the interaction of macro-level changes in the environment, shifts in economic production, and additional waves of radicalism that, based on local and regional demographic changes, will create uncertainty and instability requiring a more flexible and adaptive range of policy initiatives.

The global population increases at a daily rate of around 200,000 people with the fastest growth occurring in the fifty least developed, poorest countries which collectively account for or enable a large percentage of the world's current security challenges. For the first time in human history, over fifty percent of the world's population lives in cities. There are some 500 cities with populations over one million people with a projected doubling of the global urban population every thirty-five to forty years. Soon, sixty percent of the global population will reside in cities, with most of these cities in the poorest, least-developed countries and over thirty of the cities categorized as mega-cities (having a population of ten million or more).<sup>35</sup>

Many of these locations lack levels of governance, justice, police, sanitation, medical, or other central infrastructure. In addition, over one-sixth of the world's population lives in shanty-towns or slums, a population that is growing more rapidly than the overall growth of cities. Cities and slums are the ungoverned spaces of the future, the places where terrorists and anti-Western extremists may find sanctuary. National security planners will have to become more adept at crafting and pursuing long-term strategies to moderate instability and crises in large cities, many with ungoverned areas.

Even seemingly subtle changes in things like dietary preferences have larger implications for global affairs. Food prices and the stability

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<sup>35</sup> On the future of global population and related demographic challenges see National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Intelligence Council, 2012). See also Jack A. Goldstone, Eric P. Kaufman, and Monica Duffy Toft, eds., *How Population Changes are Reshaping International Security and National Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

of the global food market directly influence internal politics when governments are forced to adapt policies or quell internal dissent over food shortages, prices, or growing awareness of food inequalities. Climate change is an important factor influencing human security problems, with rice, corn, and wheat yields estimated to fall ten percent with every one-degree rise in temperature. An important area of research is the analysis of “spatial inequalities” that involve how geographic, social, and political conditions create inequalities in access to or the distribution of food, water, and energy resources in countries and regions and how these inequalities are controlled, and manipulated.

Managing food and water security issues requires more effective use of open source information on indicators of global food price changes as well as “big data” analytic methods to integrate open source, proprietary (or subscription), and other sources of information. Traditional intelligence approaches will be less effective, requiring additional funding and innovation to incorporate new intelligence methods into the policy- and decision-making arena.

While the 2000s witnessed an increase in open, unclassified resources available to help policymakers understand foreign cultures, movements, and peoples, they were not considered part of the baseline data collected and analyzed for defense, development, and diplomacy missions. Policymakers did not have access to the best assessments, data, or experts available. Sadly this is still the case. Despite significant investments in demographic data, cultural intelligence collection and assessments, and open source intelligence capabilities, policymakers and commanders still do not have routine access to available information and expertise, even for basic demographic realities of conflict-prone areas.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to demographic realities, a generational change in key global leaders, such as Chinese state leadership, is shifting the calculus of strategic culture in important areas that require deeper understanding of leader perceptions, intent, and motivations.<sup>37</sup> With its continued population growth, “graying” population, and skewed male-to-female population ratio, understanding human dynamics is a prerequisite to understanding Chinese national decision-making, economic policy, and foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> The explosion in online “netizens” as more Chinese take to the internet directs us to an emerging area of research for socio-cultural intelligence: how the cyber domain can be used to influence nationalism and to mobilize the masses.<sup>39</sup>

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36 See Flynn, Pottinger, and Batchelor, *Fixing Intel*; and US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics*.

37 Pillsbury explores the roots of Chinese foreign policy in Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015).

38 For an extended discussion of graying populations and related issues, including how the graying of Russians may be fueling Russian nationalism, see Jennifer Dabbs Sciubba, *The Future Faces of War: Population and National Security* (New York, NY: Praeger Security International, 2010).

39 On online activism and general assessments of protest in China, see Ya-Wen Lei, “The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens,” *Political Communication* 28, no. 3 (July-September 2011): 291-322; Xiao Qiang, “The Battle for the Chinese Internet,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (April 2011): 47-61; Rebecca MacKinnon, “Liberation Technology: China's ‘Networked Authoritarianism,’” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (April 2011): 32-46. For general socio-cultural intelligence issues related to online communication see Leigh Armistead, *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Information Warfare and Security* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2011), section 4.

Changes in global immigration and migration patterns are also critical to understanding global affairs. For the present, over two million people will migrate annually from underdeveloped to developed nations, many illegally, creating new diasporas that are more connected politically and economically with their home countries than any other time in history, with the flow of remittances back to their home nations becoming an important dimension of the global economy. Migrations, especially forced migration due to war, famine, disease, or other human security deficit, continue to disrupt patterns of political and social life.

Even in Western Europe, migration and immigration patterns have altered domestic politics, sparked riots and violence, and created international crises in the case perceived mistreatment of migrant workers. Understanding the interplay of social, political, economic, and ideological dynamics is critical to understanding and anticipating the regional crises likely to face Europe in the years to come.

### **Research on Social-Cultural Dynamics**

In response to requirements for socio-cultural information there have been numerous, albeit fragmented, efforts to collect data about humans, groups, activities, behavior, and perceptions; to analyze that data using methods, tools, or techniques; and to report findings or conclusions focused on the actions of behaviors of specific individuals all the way to groups (clans, tribes, sects), entire regions, and seemingly non-geographic or global networks. There has also been a dizzying array of terms to describe these efforts, including human terrain, socio-cultural intelligence, human socio-cultural behavioral modeling, human factors, social media monitoring, patterns of life analysis and, more recently, activity based intelligence. It is time for discipline, integration, and programmatic rigor to assess these efforts, develop doctrine, harmonize the lexicon, and institutionalize the development of capabilities for socio-cultural intelligence.

Improving socio-cultural intelligence requires broader, deeper, and more sophisticated approaches drawing on the latest research from communications, social movement, and other disciplines. Predictions of more sustained local and regional instability related to a global economic contraction, climate change, water and food shortages, urbanization, and other socio-economic problems suggest that much of the developing world seems destined for new waves of violence that will, inevitably, compel the United States to act. Research provided by human geographers and other social scientists are critical for understanding international security challenges in the coming decades.

To understand the full range of requirements for human domain analysis we must do more than “map” the human terrain. The capabilities to leverage surveillance systems are now in place that capture millions of tracks a day, including dismounted objects (pedestrians), create national biometric databases accessible to police and tactical units with real-time biometric and facial recognition technology, and provide very accurate geo-location on almost anything that emits a signal, connects to a cell tower, or touches the Internet. We are collecting huge amounts of data that can provide enormous insight when combined with appropriate methods.

Understanding how to leverage all of this data, to what effect, and for what users is not a new problem. At least the challenge of knowledge management solutions for big data is not a new problem. What is new, perhaps, are orders of magnitude increases in the expectations we now have on fusing or integrating all of this data in a fashion that satisfies requirements for accelerated timelines, more detailed and accurate predictions about complex events or trends, and for more automation in analytic workflows to enable analysts to spend more of their time doing analysis and less time finding and retrieving relevant information from disparate databases.

At the very least, the interdependence of global affairs requires American national security planners to improve their ability to anticipate, understand, and mitigate the consequences of regional instability. This requires sustaining the level of support for innovation in human domain analytics (including social media analysis), continued support for experimentation using interagency, multi-disciplinary approaches that remove barriers to information sharing, and recognition that emerging or future national security challenges will require as much or greater capacity than we currently possess to understand the human domain of global affairs. Critical to the success of future socio-cultural intelligence programs will be building data science and data analytics capabilities.

Military planners must have the capability to develop a deep, sustained understanding of local politics, perceptions, and behaviors at the level of detail required to identify, understand, and influence local leaders and actors. Sustained emphasis on social science research and analysis within the national security community, especially from senior policymakers, is critical to help shape research agendas and to preserve government engagement with academic and research communities.

Reforming the US national security planning process presents a number of challenges. It is difficult to adapt and reform processes that are operating at or near capacity without fundamentally changing priorities, adapting organizations, and having the leadership and political support to “sunset” current offices or programs. It is hard to enact reforms, or to “rebalance” resources, to borrow from former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, if one does not know the appropriate place to apply leverage.

In a 2008 speech to the Association of American Universities then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated “we must again embrace the eggheads and ideas” to inform national security policy and implementation.<sup>40</sup> Across the national security community – and indeed across American society – there are calls for increased funding for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education, research, and solutions. Recently many have argued to include “Arts” to capture the imperative to also increase funding for social science or liberal arts programs and research. This includes language and cross-cultural awareness programs which are increasingly perceived to be critical to US defense, diplomacy, and development efforts around the world.

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40 Robert M. Gates, “Address to the Association of American Universities,” Washington, DC, April 14, 2008.

## Conclusion

While there is evidence strategies incorporating cultural analysis have been used with success in moments of crisis, there is less evidence these lessons are being assimilated and institutionalized within the infrastructure of US intelligence and security policy. American national security planners and strategists have a mixed record when it comes to predicting and preparing for future conflicts.<sup>41</sup> We become Proteus, creating new strategy, military doctrine, and defense programs in the ashes of initial setbacks or defeats.

This pattern has been repeated though conflicts in Korean, Vietnam, Iraq, in the so-called Global War on Terrorism. In each case America's vast resources, ability to adapt, and technological prowess have been brought to bear to overcome challenges. Yet we revert back to being Sisyphus soon after each crisis passes, believing that we will have the time, resources, and capacity to adapt in the future.

This approach is no longer sufficient when it comes to prevailing in identity-related, ideological conflicts of the future or when it comes to fully understanding changes in the strategic environment.<sup>42</sup> As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff observed in the *2015 National Military Strategy of the United States of America*:

Today's global security environment is the most unpredictable I have seen in 40 years of service...We now face multiple, simultaneous security challenges from traditional state actors and transregional networks of sub-state groups – all taking advantage of rapid technological change.<sup>43</sup>

It also appears the broader national security policy community is connecting stability and prosperity in particular parts of the world to the existence of particular forms of data and particular social science expertise. Many of the places experiencing patterns of crisis and instability are also “data poor” from the perspective of geospatial data about socio-cultural dynamics.<sup>44</sup>

The ability to collect, to aggregate, and to make sense of information derived from social media and other unclassified sources is impeded by the lack of comprehensive open source intelligence capabilities, fragmentation of open source intelligence requirements management, and a general failure to integrate available sources and analytic methods from commercial and academic experts into intelligence production.

For students of American defense strategy and foreign affairs, mapping the future of US national security requires gaining additional perspective on the nature of the emerging era of persistent conflict. In nations as diverse as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Egypt, Mali,

41 Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Preparing for One War and Getting Another* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2010); and Charles E. Heller and William A. Stofft, eds., *America's First Battles, 1776-1965* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

42 For additional arguments see the essays in Juliana Geran Pilon, ed., *Cultural Intelligence for Winning the Peace* (Washington, DC: Institute for World Politics, 2009); and John D. Kelly, Beatrice Jauregui, Seant T. Mitchell, and Jeremy Walton, eds., *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010). See also Patton, *Socio-Cultural Intelligence*, chapters 1-2.

43 US Department of Defense, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America, 2015* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, June 2015), i.

44 US Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Understanding Human Dynamics*, chapter 7; and Armistead, *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Information Warfare and Security*, 19-20.



Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen the realization of American policy and security objectives are entirely dependent on 1) the US government's ability to understand complex social and cultural dynamics, 2) avoiding the problem of mirror-imaging (assuming they view problems or solutions similarly to the US government), and 3) creating long-term stability and security solutions by working with and through local leaders who may have different long-term objectives than we do.

To start, the Department of Defense should revisit and expand efforts to create Foreign Area Officers, to improve cross-cultural understanding, to increase language proficiency in Special Operations Forces, further expand joint duty assignments and interagency rotations, and refocus efforts to integrate ethnography, human geography, and cultural expertise. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey amplified the need for increased integration across the national security community in a July 2015 retirement speech, adding the requirement for integration with international partners. He stated that success in current and future conflicts will “increasingly depend on how well our military instrument supports the other instruments of national power and how it enables our network of allies and partners.”<sup>45</sup> But integration needs to extend beyond organizations. As was pointed out in a *Special Operations Journal* article on complex operations, “Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan exposed the truth that the military forces are not well prepared to carry out operations requiring more than a basic understanding of indigenous perceptions and their potential impact.”<sup>46</sup> We need to integrate academic and outside expertise as well.

Additionally, the Combatant Commands should integrate and align their requirements and capability needs regarding socio-cultural intelligence to increase their priority during the planning processes used by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Military Services to allocate funding.

Finally, additional funding should be provided to combat support agencies and defense intelligence components to assess, procure, and provide open source and unclassified socio-cultural intelligence support. For example, the recent push by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency to revamp and expand its use of open-source human geography, social media, demographic, and other data provides an opportunity to enrich and render more useful the operational baseline of both geospatial data and tailored socio-cultural information products that commanders will rely on to plan for and prevail in future conflicts. Reflecting on his experience with post-Iraqi invasion planning and the current crises facing national security planners, former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley recently pondered, “are we working now to develop information about these conflict-prone societies and the various actors so we can design reasonable strategies to bring some stability to these counties once (and if) we get through the kinetic phase?”<sup>47</sup>

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45 Marcus Weisgerber, “Dempsey to Pentagon: Prepare for the Never-Ending War,” *National Journal*, July 2, 2015, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/defense/dempsey-urges-preparation-never-ending-war-before-retiring-20150702>.

46 Matthew P. Dearing, James L. Jeffreys, and Justin A. Dupue, “Entry Point: Accessing Indigenous Perspectives During Complex Operations,” *Special Operations Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015): 9.

47 Hadley, interview, 153.