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Identimetrics: Operationalizing Identity in Counterinsurgency Operations

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MICHAEL W. MOSSER, MAR 20 2012

In Tajikistan, on the borders of Afghanistan, a 2010 outbreak of destabilizing violence led to a government crackdown and caused both locals and the government to blame an influx of foreign fighters. With no validated information or intelligence, both locals and the Tajik government made the important assumption that violence *must* be caused by outsiders:

There were definite unknowns up there,” a local resident said, referring to the mountains where the fighting has raged, sparing the valley below thus far. “They were not from this area and they were not Tajiks.[1]

This anecdote underscores a paradox of modern counterinsurgency: the availability of vast quantities of data but the inability to hone in on the relevant portions of that data to ensure success (or at least raise the probability of success) in a counterinsurgency (COIN) operation. How did the villager *know* the fighters in the mountains were foreign fighters? Quite simply, he did not, but what he *did* know was that “they were not Tajiks.” How did the government respond? By promoting and reinforcing the narrative that the fighters were not Tajiks, thereby foregoing the possibility that they were in fact anti-government forces engaged in an insurgency.

Stories similar to the one above happen every day in areas with active insurgencies, and with COIN operations underway. Troops are tasked with identifying insurgents, but the information on which they are operating is either unreliable or downright false. On the modern battlefield, collection of data occurs at multiple levels and in multiple forms. Satellites peer down from orbit, gathering data to relay to analysts both in theater and in the national capital. Surveillance drones monitor battlefield conditions, and “human terrain” teams attempt to garner real-time information on population movements and motivations. But data and information gathering—even by human terrain teams deeply trained and prepared for insertion into foreign cultures—is by its very nature limited and imprecise, leading decision-makers at all levels to fall back on tried-and-true heuristic shortcuts for identifying threats (a la the anecdote above).

Making sense of any insurgency, and formulating a COIN strategy to target that insurgency, requires understanding the cultural *context* in which an insurgency is taking place, and the effect on that context when one inserts COIN forces (or partners with host-country national forces in a COIN strategy). This requires a deep appreciation of its identity, and the myriad levels on which identity is formed, shaped, and developed. On the one hand, it is imperative to comprehend the physical environment in which one’s forces are operating. But conceptualizing and visualizing the environment goes far beyond a superficial understanding of terrain. It is also important to focus on the populace: their goals, aspirations, fears, and their defining characteristics. Similarly, situational awareness—usually considered to be one’s ability to understand one’s surroundings—should also encompass *identity* awareness.

At both the individual and group levels, identity is one of the core determinants and drivers of societal integration and cohesion. Insofar as COIN strategies are societally-focused, it is imperative that practitioners appreciate how identities are generated and constructed. In devising an identity-based COIN strategy, it is helpful to ask these fundamental questions: How can identity be employed as a useful metric to determine a society’s willingness and receptiveness to COIN strategies and tactics?

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This brief article builds from an earlier paper by the author and Dr. Dan G. Cox of the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, which examined the instrumental usage of identity in a way similar to biometrics, which we called “identimetrics.”[2] The concept of identimetrics is simple: devise and develop ways in which *identity*, rather than physical characteristics, can be used to formulate population-centered COIN strategies. Identimetrics relies heavily on a deep understanding and appreciation of individual and societal traits to begin to build an “identity template” from which to start COIN planning.

Understanding and assessing identity usually begins with generating or utilizing a set of theoretical principles, which are generally found in the broad-based set of theories called “identity theory.” In our usage, however “identity theory” is actually a misnomer, as identimetrics incorporates elements of identity scholarship drawn from social psychology (at the individual level), sociology (at the group level), and political science via the international relations approach known as constructivism (at the sub-national, state, and international levels). Identimetrics goes beyond problematizing and questioning definitions of identity, toward comprehension and interpretation of identity as a cultural foundation, all while taking into account the very fluidity of the process of identity formation. To do so requires a thorough and systematic analysis of identity at all levels in the region.

One of the best starting points for operationalizing identity is Rawi Abdelal et al.’s work on identity as a variable.[3] Laying out a framework for analysis, Abdelal et al. advocate six methods for “measuring the content and contestation of identity”: discourse analysis, surveys, and content analysis, as well as experiments, agent-based modeling, and content mapping. Combining two or more of these methods yields sophisticated, comprehensive results in attempting to analyze identity.[4] It is our expectation that, only when the military employs sound social scientific methods such as these will we be able to overcome many of the stereotypes and misperceptions that have dogged what we are calling ‘identimetrics’ from its inception in Vietnam through to the present.

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into detail on the use by identimetrics practitioners of each of Abdelal’s methods. To take but one example of how identity can be turned into a “metric” for collection, consider the case of discourse analysis. As Abdelal et al. put it, discourse analysis is “the qualitative and interpretive recovery of meaning from the language that actors use to describe and understand social phenomena.”[5] It is at the same time the most effective but also the most demanding tool in the identimetrician’s toolbox, because it “requires deep social knowledge, interpretive skills, and a familiarity with a body of interrelated texts in order for scholars to recover meanings from a discourse.”[6] But what discourse analysis provides is the overarching cultural narrative of the society in question. Texts—or the oral interpretation and recitation of these texts in low-literacy societies—are the means by which a society communicates knowledge, norms, and cultural mores. Deep reading of texts (both sacred and secular) which are central to the society’s conception of self will give COIN strategists and planners added insight into that culture.

The social or group aspect of identimetrics takes its theoretical precepts from the pioneering work of Tajfel and Turner, whose work on social identity theory laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of intergroup relations.[7] Groups, in Tajfel and Turner’s formulation, are “collections of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it.”[8] Individuals within social groups engage in “social categorization,” enabling them to “provide a system of orientation for self-reference.”[9] Groups provide structure and coherence for individuals, but they also serve to validate individual identity through group membership and *against* the members of another group (the classic ‘in-group/out-group’ differentiation).

From groups are formed societies, bargained and arbitrated formulations that have little cohesiveness beyond the societally-accepted contract. What people mistakenly point to as a systemic propensity or the status quo in a human social system is actually the tenuous bargain, at that particular point in time, between the competing group identities contained within a society arbitrated and expressed through either election or force. What joint, international, interagency, and military (JIIM) interveners have to understand in order to effectively operate in such a situation is their own shared identity and desired outcomes for the nation-state in which they are intervening, the competing identities within their area of operations (AO), which of these competing identities are complementary to their shared

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goals and which are countervailing. Once this is ascertained, the military intervener needs to divine how to nurture the complementary local identities while marginalizing the competing ones.

As is often the case in counterinsurgency, the mere insertion of forces into an environment may have the paradoxical effect of uniting disparate groups into opposition. Moreover, allegiances, at least at the surface level, appear to be impermanent, leading to incidents where supposedly trusted allies have turned on coalition forces, often with deadly consequences.[10] This is why the continued development and expansion of identimetrics is so paramount to modern warfare. Identimetrics, beyond mere ID cards or biometric ID scanners, gives COIN practitioners insight into cultural norms and fundamental beliefs that go to the root of what comprises the society in question.

To be clear, identimetrics is a concept and not yet ready for execution. Moreover, we are not claiming that the collection and use of biometric data is not important. What we are asserting is that these tools are better suited for use in very specific, tactical or criminal justice operations. What identimetrics and the study and use of a shared intersubjective understanding of group identities adds is an operational and strategic context which must be considered when operating in foreign environments and within foreign cultures. Constructivism, better than criminal justice theory, allows the military intervener a theoretical construct from which to frame the identity data and understanding and ultimately to more effectively interact with local groups within society and the host nation itself.

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[1] "Outsiders destabilize Tajikistan," 22 November 2010, by Miriam Elder, *globalpost.com*, available at <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/tajikistan/101119/tajikistan-afghanistan-instability?page=full>, last accessed 10 March 2012

[2] Our usage of the word 'identimetrics' is not to be confused with the company of the same name, which markets traditional biometric identification systems to schools and other organizations. See <http://www.identimetrics.net/> for more information.

[3] Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko M. Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable" *Perspectives on Politics* 4:4 (December 2006), pp. 695-711.

[4] Ibid, p. 702.

[5] Ibid, p. 702.

[6] Ibid, p. 702.

[7] See, e.g., Henri Tajfel (1974), Social identity and intergroup behaviour. *Social Science Information*, 13, 65-93.

and Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1979). An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole .

[8] Tajfel and Turner (1979), p. 40.

[9] Tajfel and Turner (1979), p. 40.

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[10] See "Shooting in Afghanistan continues deadly trend," CNN International, 21 February 2012, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/21/world/asia/afghanistan-shooting/>, last accessed 12 March 2012.