



Executive Summary



Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press

THE HUMAN TERRAIN SYSTEM: OPERATIONALLY RELEVANT SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

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This book traces the trajectory of a controversial program that embedded mixed military and civilian teams primarily in brigade combat teams, but also at division and corps level in Iraq and Afghanistan to act as a collection and dispersal mechanism for socio-cultural comprehension. Asking why the U.S. Army integrated civilian social scientists led by retired or reservist officers at the tactical level in a counterinsurgency environment necessitates an examination of the experiences of former embedded civilian social scientists and investigation of the program’s evolution.

Based on interviews, program documents, material from Freedom of Information Act requests, and secondary sources, this analysis finds a series of limiting factors inhibiting social science research at the tactical level, common to both Iraq and Afghanistan. Complexity in integrating civilians into the military decisionmaking cycle, creating timely research with a high level of fidelity, and making granular research resonate with brigade staff requiring informational clarity, all contributed to inhibiting the overall effect of the Human Terrain System. High operational tempo in contested spaces complicates social science research capabilities at the tactical level, capabilities which are instead ideally suited to studies intended to inform and influence long-term planning in more secure theaters of burgeoning interest to the U.S. Army.

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