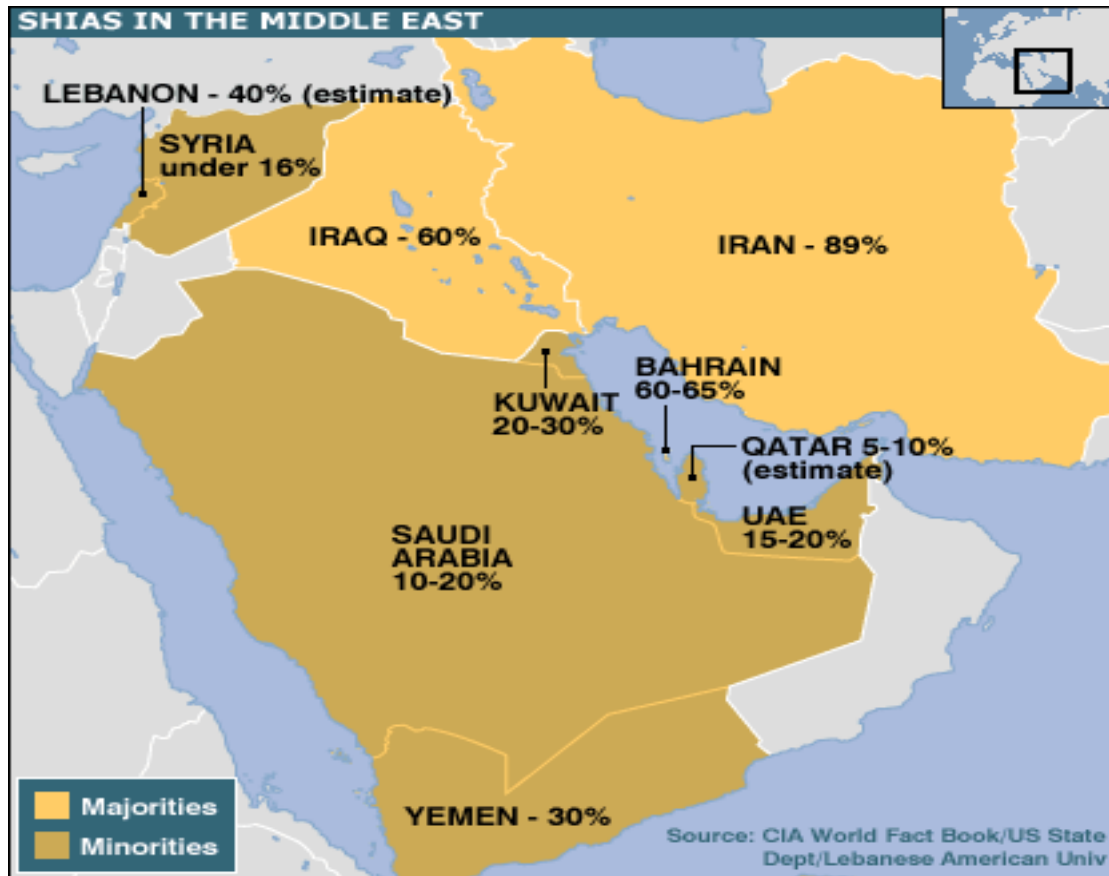




The Iranian Sphere of Influence, Twelver Shi'a Near Abroad, and Hezbollah



Disclaimer: This is a theater strategic level cultural product prepared by the US Army War College and the Army Culture and Foreign Language Directorate (ACFLD) in support of the Office of the Secretary of Defense - Policy (OSD-P) and does not necessarily reflect the views of any actual command headquarters. Please refer inquiries to Adam L. Silverman, PhD; Cultural Advisor, US Army War College/ Team Leader, ACFLD Cultural Operations Support Team, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013. Contact information: adam.l.silverman.ngo@mail.mil or 516-712-5384.



Cultural Operations Report

MEMORANDUM FOR: Commandant US Army War College

SUBJECT: Culture and Foreign Language Report: The Iranian Sphere of Influence, Twelver Shi'a Near Abroad, and Hezbollah

1. This analysis was conducted in response to a request for cultural operations support by the Office of the Secretary of Defense - Policy. Enclosed you will find an in depth theater strategic level analysis of the socio-cultural dynamics, focusing on Iran, its sphere of influence, the Twelver Shi'a Near Abroad, and Hezbollah.
2. The Cultural Operational Support Team at the US Army War College and TRADOC G3's ACFLD has prepared this report from open source materials from a variety of sources. Citations will be found as footnotes throughout the text.

//Original Signed//
Adam L. Silverman, PhD
Cultural Advisor
US Army War College/
ACFLD Cultural
Operations Support Team
Lead



Cultural Operations Report

Cultural Operations Support Team

Mr. Eugene Martinelli
Army Culture and Foreign Language
Directorate Cultural Operations Consultant
Dunedin, FL

Dr. Adam L. Silverman
Culture & Foreign Language Advisor
US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, PA

United States Army War College

MG Anthony A. Cucolo III
Commandant US Army War
College & Commanding
General
Carlisle Barracks, PA

BG (ret) Lance Betros, PhD
Provost
US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, PA

COL David Funk
Deputy Commandant
US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, PA

Army Culture and Foreign Language Directorate

COL (ret) Eric Stanhagen
Deputy Director
Ft. Eustis, VA

Col. (ret) James Schnell,
PhD
Lead Social Scientist
Ft. Eustis VA

Mr. Sameh R. Youssef
Culture & Foreign Language Advisor
Combined Arms Center/MCTP
Ft. Leavenworth, KS

Dr. Boshra N. EL-Guindy
Culture & Foreign Language Advisor
Maneuver Support COE
Ft. Leonard Wood, MO

Dr. Daryl K. Liskey
Culture & Foreign Language Advisor,
US Army Field Artillery School
Ft. Sill, OK

Dr. Hassan F. Ahmed
Culture & Foreign Language Advisor
ADA
Ft. Sill, OK



Cultural Operations Report

Introduction

As the Syrian Civil War continues, and the proxy conflict that it masks between several regional actors vying for regional hegemony¹ – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey – it is important to understand one of the major dynamics in the Levant, Arab and Persian Gulf, and Central Asia: the cold war between Sunni and Twelver Shi'a actors for control of what they perceive as their near abroad². Iran, diplomatically isolated and economically sanctioned since 1979, not only perceives itself as a victim – punished for organizing its national politics and society according to the velyati al ulema (rule by the clerics), but also as the inheritor of an ancient, continents spanning civilization that has played a major role in the Levant, the Arab and Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the South Caspian throughout history. An additional and compounding factor is that Iran and its people see themselves as not just the inheritor of this legacy, but as having the ability and the right to be that type of regional and global power again. Moreover, this right and ability are under the guidance and blessing of the Deity. Finally, Iran, the only majority Twelver Shi'a nation-state to organize itself around a specific understanding of Twelver Shi'ism, sees itself as the advocate, if not the protector, of the interests of Twelver Shi'a throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.

Iran's location, which spans into and bridges across the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as the Arab and Persian Gulf and the South Caspian places it in a unique geo-strategic space. And this geo-strategic placement provides Iran with a great deal of both theater and geo-strategic leverage should it choose to utilize it. Iran could, without much difficulty, close the Straits of Hormuz, which is the southern Sea Line of Commerce and Communication (SLOCC) for the transshipment of oil, as well as do significant damage to the petroleum

¹ Philip Giraldi, "Who's Turning Syria's Civil War into a Jihad?", *The American Conservative*, 28 FEB 2013, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/whos-turning-syrias-civil-war-into-a-jihad/>

² "Iraq Accuses Qatar of Financing Jihadist Groups in Syria", *Foreign Policy's The Cable*, 4 MAR 2013, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/04/iraq_accuses_qatar_of_financing_jihadi_groups_in_syria

Cultural Operations Report

processing facilities on the Arab side of the Gulf³. At the same time, should Iran decide to flex its geo-strategic muscles, it could also strike at the northern Ground line of Commerce and Communication (GLOCC) for the transshipment of Petroleum: the Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan Pipeline. Moreover, the maintenance of a Twelver Shi'a Strategic corridor through the now Twelver Shi'a dominated Iraq, Alawite controlled Syria, and into Hezbollah controlled South Lebanon further increases the potential regional reach and impact of Iran creating an almost Shi'a near abroad phenomenon.

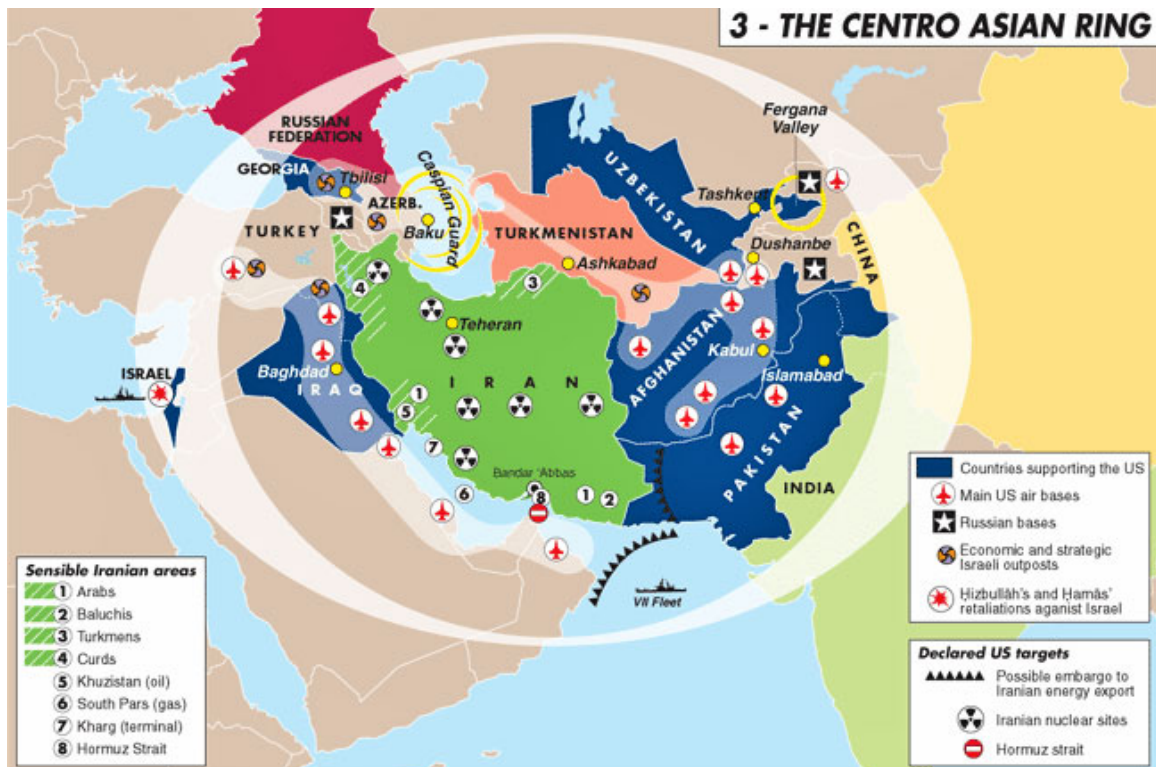


The human geography of Iran's geo-spatial location also has its downsides. Its neighbors to the east, India and Pakistan, are both nuclear weapons states and involved in their own cold to lukewarm warm. Russia, a historic antagonist to the north, though not an immediate neighbor, also possesses the remnants of the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal. To the west, Israel, a regional rival, also has its own nuclear weapons and an ever more bellicose political leadership when it comes to Iran.

³ GEN (ret) Barry R. McCaffrey, *Iran, Nukes, and Oil: The Gulf Confrontation*, Seminar: NBC Executives and Producers, 12 JAN 2012.



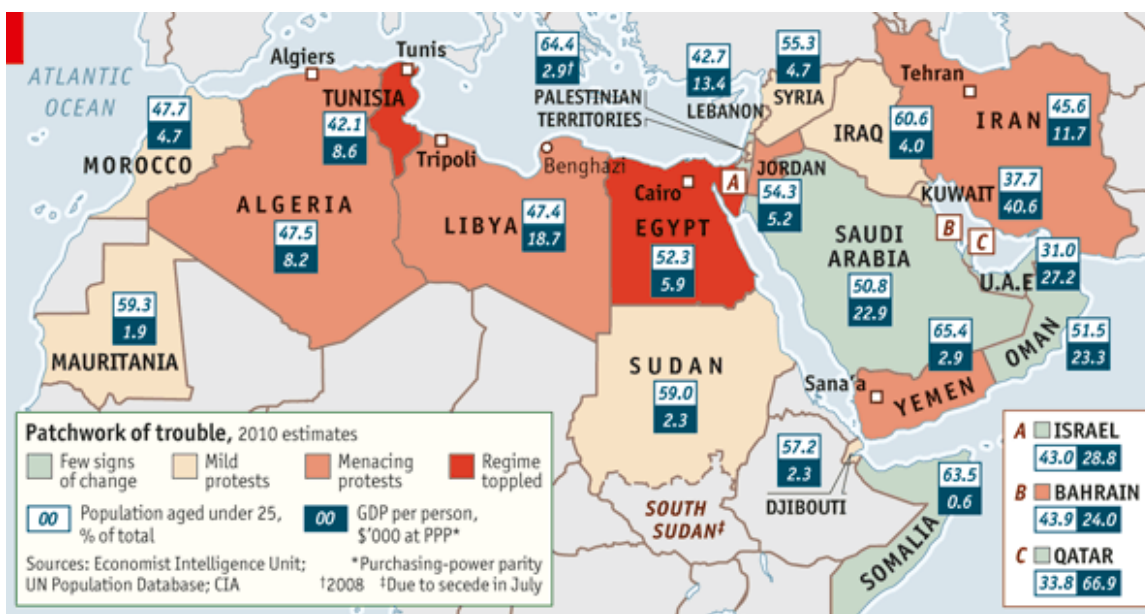
Additionally from Iran's point of view it is surrounded; specifically by the United States and its regional allies and partners. In some ways this is similar to how the United States felt leading up to the war of 1812. From Iran's perspective, like America's in the early 19th Century, it is a young and fledgling Nation, residing in a bad neighborhood, with few friends, lots of competitors, and some clearly identified rivals and enemies.



Finally, like so much of the Middle East and Central Asia, Iran, and the states with the highest levels of Twelver Shi'a populations within the region, all have

Cultural Operations Report

significant youth bulges. This socio-economic, socio-political, and socio-cultural time bomb will only increase pressure on leaders, both Twelver Shi'a and Sunni, throughout the Twelver Shi'a near abroad. In fact the pressures of the youth bulge have already manifested through the various socio-political uprisings referred to as the Arab Spring and may play an even larger role than religious sectarianism in Bahrain. While this has been considered in regards to what appeared to be a Twelver Shi'a uprising against the minority Sunni leadership of Bahrain in 2011.⁴ This important societal cleavage, between those under 25 and those over, is going to continue to be a driver of discord and upheaval throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. It will set the conditions in which lack of economic opportunity, political access, and social improvement will become significant challenges to the established order in the region. In regards to Iran, as well as the Twelver Shi'a near abroad, it will lead to two major socio-political issues. For Iran, how long will young/younger Iranians be willing to participate in what is, essentially the façade of democracy that runs in the foreground of velayati al ulema. In the Shi'a near abroad, the issues will be political access and economic opportunities for the young/younger Twelver Shi'a majorities or pluralities in states long dominated by Sunni minorities, such as Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, and to some extent Syria.



⁴ "Not Shi'a Not Sunni, Just Bahraini!: The Non-violent Pro-democracy Movement", International Institute for Non-violent Action, DEC 2012, <http://novact.org/2012/12/not-shii-not-sunni-just-bahraini-deconstructing-the-sectarian-narrative-behind-bahrainis-uprising-a-homage-to-the-bahraini-non-violent-pro-democracy-movement/>



Cultural Operations Report

This cultural operations report will focus on the socio-cultural dynamics of Iran, Hezbollah, and the Twelver Shi'a near abroad using components of two different socio-cultural frameworks: the Analytical Cultural Framework for Strategy and Policy (ACFSP) and the British Cultural Intelligence Model (BCIM). Additionally, insights gleaned through applying these lenses will be used to produce a DIME-Cultural and Design Cultural analysis. By doing so we intend to provide greater insight into not only the outcome of the imminent Iranian elections, the ongoing Iranian nuclear development program, Hezbollah's regional behavior, and some of the potential stakes in the Syrian Civil War, but to also allow for the better formation of US theater and national strategies to deal with Iran and the Twelver Shi'a near abroad.

The Analytical Cultural Framework for Strategy and Policy

The ACFSP has three component parts: **identity**, **political culture** and **social institutions**, and **resilience**. **Identity** seeks to provide the focus and clarity on the "who am I", or in this case of societal/state level analysis, the "who are we" question. Identity is formed when individuals collectively coalesce around a set of commonalities and can be either objective or subjective. These can be based on ethno-national, ethno-religious, ethno-linguistic, gendered, class, caste, kinship (family, clan, tribe, moiety, etc), locality, nation, region, religion, and/or other ideational constructs. Once a substantial number of individuals create, learn, and adopt a given identity or set of identities, structural and institutional development begins to take place. The **political culture** and **social institutions** lens seeks to capture the political, social, religious, economic, kinship/familial, military, and other structures within a given society. It refers to the socially constructed systems that provide patterns and boundaries to the daily life of the identities in questions. As they develop, grow, stabilize, and in some cases atrophy over time they then influence the identities; locking identity in or forcing it to change depending on the circumstances. An understanding of **resilience** provides strategic thinkers, analysts, and decision makers with information focused on how malleable is any given society to external or internal political, economic, social, diplomatic, informational, and/or military pressure. Moreover, resilience also refers to any given society's institutional ability to cope with these internal and external pressures, as well as other manmade or natural ones. In regards to the socio-cultural study of potential Syrian and Levantine outcomes the most important ACFSP analytical components are institutions and resilience.

The British Cultural Intelligence Model

There are four components to the BCIM: socio-cultural **elements**, socio-cultural **dynamics**, socio-cultural **location**, and socio-cultural **context**. Socio-cultural



Cultural Operations Report

elements refer to the populations, groups, sub-cultures, kinship groups, organizations, institutions, etc within a given society. Socio-cultural dynamics focuses on who is related to whom and why, who is and is not an elite and/or notable or why, and how the various groups and organizations interact with each other. Socio-cultural location captures where all of the societal elements reside in time and space and why they occupy those spaces. Finally, socio-cultural context deals with what all of this means and why. It also attempts to provide an understanding of the whole, rather than the component parts. This understanding is derived from the British Ministry of Defense's understanding of culture as three overlapping geodesics; context, network dynamic, and location, in relation to the overall socio-cultural elements. The key BCIM analytical components for the purposes of the socio-cultural study of potential Syrian and Levantine outcomes are socio-cultural dynamics and location.

DIME-Cultural Analysis

A DIME-Cultural, or DIME-C, analysis applies socio-cultural information against the four components of the DIME: the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic elements of national power. By doing so we seek to better enable and make a DIME appraisal of ends, ways, and means more robust and by doing so provide decision makers with additional points of view and entry into their problem sets.

Design Methodology-Cultural Analysis

A Design Methodology-Cultural, or Design-C, analysis applies socio-cultural information to the three lenses of the Army Design Methodology model: the environment frame, the problem frame, and the solution frame. By explicitly socio-culturally enabling the Design Methodology framework, we seek to provide a fuller and more robust basis for decision makers to begin to understand and deal with their problem sets.



Cultural Operations Report

Iran

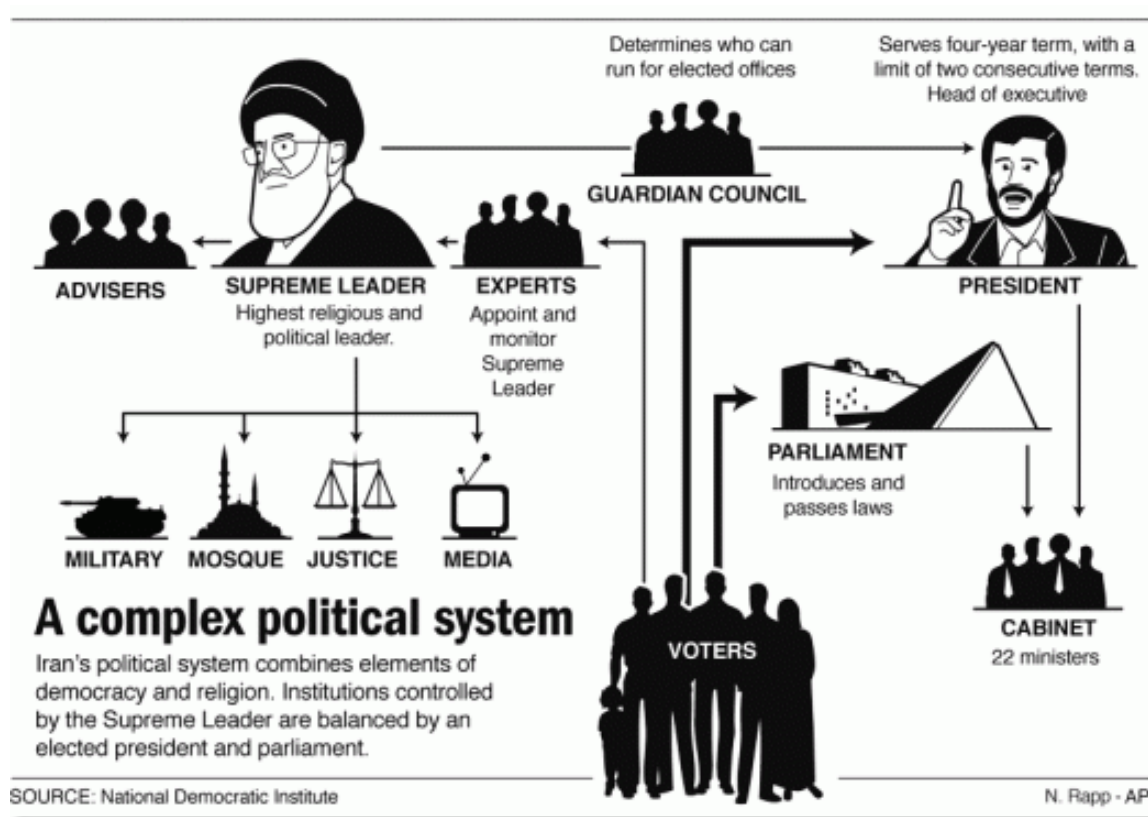
Iran, the modern inheritor of an ancient culture, as well as the historical memory of being a Middle Eastern and Central Asian imperial power, is also the only Twelver Shi'a theocracy in the world. As a result, much of Iranian identity, at the societal level, revolves around their inheritance of the ancient Persian Empires of the past, being a bridge between East and West, and being the only place that a Twelver Shi'a majority is fully empowered through all aspects of the government. Iran aspires to once more be a great power, to fully live up to its regional and cultural inheritance and it is these aspirations, as well as the desire to show a Western and global community that has largely isolated it since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, that it can compete on the global stage, be a regional power, and develop a nuclear energy capability. The Iranian attempts to demonstrate Persian capability, especially in regard to the strained to hostile relationship with the US and many of its European allies, also demonstrates an additional Iranian identity: the victim. At the societal level, specifically at the elite level of Iran's leadership they have demonstrated that from the Iranian perspective Iran has been victimized because of the events of and in the Islamic Revolution and Iran's form of governance since then. This is an important identity component to keep in focus when attempting to understand and deal with Iran and its actions; especially as it reinforces the existing victim identity within Twelver Shi'ism.

It is important to remember that Iranians, and especially the Iranian religious and other elites and notables from the revolutionary movement, view themselves as victims of Western manipulation of governmental power in Iran. This includes American meddling from the Mossadegh revolution and the re-imposition of the Shah through to the present day. Iran was also the subject of Great Power meddling for a long time; including by the Russians, the British and most recently the US. The lack of a well developed Iranian tradition of political thought relating to the rights of man may also be significant. It is important to remember just how unique the American theory of government is in the world. Our understanding of the sovereignty of the individual, working within a system of self government, often leads Americans to forget that this understanding is at the very foundation of our system of government and world view. It is also one of the most significant differences between America and nearly everyone else we come into contact with around the world.

A major driver of Iranian identity is the unique nature of its socio-political system. When the Islamic Revolution of 1979 overthrew the Iranian monarchy and established an extreme version of rule by the clerics, a completely new form

Cultural Operations Report

of governance was established⁵. In the foreground of the Iranian government is a representative democratic system with regularly scheduled elections, a legislative assembly, and an executive. Running in the background, and largely opaque to outside observation, is a theocracy controlled by a supreme religious leader, his eleven closest and most senior religious advisors, and a council of experts. Additionally, there is a larger council of clerics that reports to the supreme religious leader and oversees the democratically elected and representative portions of the government. Basically the real Iranian government, the people with the real power and control, are found in the theocratic government, which controls the military, the courts, law enforcement, the media, and even determines who gets to run for office.



Another unique aspect of Iran's institutions, that itself grows out of and in turn influences Iranian identity, is that Iran's government and civil society are organized around an ageing revolutionary ethos. Like several of the states and societies that have seen loosely related and somewhat parallel internal dissent

⁵ "Iran: Who Holds the Power", BBC News, undated,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/03/iran_power/html/



Cultural Operations Report

and revolution, that we are collectively calling the Arab Spring, Iran has a revolutionary regime that is in between its second and third generation. The power centers that Iranian government and governance are organized around are directly tied to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. These include the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, the revolutionary cadre, largely made up of former students that were mobilized on behalf of the Revolution and that took the hostages at the American Embassy, and the clerical establishment based at Qom.

And it is here at the intersection of national and societal level identity, unique and hybrid form of governance and government, and the various stakeholders from the 1979 revolution collide. With the next national level elections imminent and set to take place on 14 JUN 2013, the seams within the aging revolutionary society and system that is modern Iran are beginning to show. During the last set of elections in 2009, a mass societal movement backing a reform candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, engaged in public protest, civil disobedience, and garnered a great deal of interest outside of Iran; especially in the US. To many it appeared that liberal democratic change had finally begun to take root in Iran. The official outcome of the election, however, followed by charges of ballot rigging and botched counting, led to no change in the elected leadership of the country. Mr. Mousavi lost and Mr. Ahmedinijad retained the presidency.⁶ While much has been made of the role of social media in Iran's Green Revolution, as well as in other uprisings across the region, analyses of actual events indicate that social media's power and efficacy may have been oversold in the initial reporting.⁷ Beyond this, what was also missed in all the hype of social media and its role, as well as the hope that a reformer might be elected to the Iranian presidency, was that reformer in regards to Iranian politics and society is a relative concept.

Mr. Mousavi's real political profile was far more complicated. He played a critical role in the 1979 revolution by helping to found the Islamic Party, served as the Iranian Prime Minister in the 1980s, and while he has often been in opposition to the current Supreme Religious Authority, Ayatullah Khamenei, being on the left side of a reactionary revolutionary cadre, movement, and

⁶ Ian Black, "A Devastating Defeat for Iran's Green Revolution", *The Observer*, 14 JUN 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/14/iran-tehran-election-results-riots>

⁷ Mohammed el-Nawaway and Sahar Kamis, "Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's 'Facebook Revolution' and Iran's 'Twitter Uprising'", *CyberOrient*, VOL 6, ISS 1, 2016, <http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=7439>



Cultural Operations Report

government simply makes one a more moderate, reasonable reactionary.⁸ And this oft forgotten and/or ignored reality of Mr. Mousavi's political, social, and religious history points to the reality behind the Iranian political system: it is a rigged game. Mr. Mousavi, the hoped for reformer of 2009 had to be approved to be on the ballot by those appointed by and loyal to his longstanding political nemesis Ayatullah Khamenei. The democratic system that is running in the Iranian foreground is completely controlled and dominated by the absolute theocracy that runs in the background. As a result the potential for meaningful political and social change occurring through and because of Iran's existing political system are highly unlikely.

In the upcoming election, the Supreme Religious Authority has managed to tamp down a seeming attempt by the current Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmedinijad, to manipulate the system and produce a Putinesque outcome of installing his handpicked successor and factotum to replace him.⁹ In doing so he may have finally insured that his own handpicked choice Ayatullah Velayati, long blocked from the Iranian presidency by other Iranian factions will finally become president. Should this happen, or should one of the other candidates with close ties to Khamenei win, this will allow for a further consolidation of Iranian political power within the Supreme Religious Leader. And this appears to be the point. As Iran's system of governance ages, and as the Islamic Republic of Iran moves into the middle of its third decade, tensions have emerged between revolutionary elements that would like to see power shift from the Supreme Religious Authority to themselves and their allies. Despite articles, reports, and analyses that focus on when real change will come to Iran, using the 2009 Green Revolution as the potential exemplar, the real socio-political struggle is between two different factions within the existing socio-political structures of the Islamic Republic.

This struggle between the, for lack of a better term, establishmentarians represented by the exceedingly conservative Ayatullah Khamenei and the revolutionaries, represented by the even more reactionary Mahmoud Ahmedinijad, is over where power should be vested domestically and just how

⁸ "Mir Hossein Mousavi", *Iran Chamber of Commerce*, 12 JUN 2013, http://www.iranchamber.com/history/mmousavi/mir_hossein_mousavi.php

⁹ Damien McElroy, "Mahmoud Ahmedinijad's Heir Blocked by Clerics in Humiliating Blow to Iranian President", *The Telegraph*, 7 MAY 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10041845/Mahmoud-Ahmadinejads-heir-blocked-by-clerics-in-humiliating-blow-to-Iranian-president.html>



Cultural Operations Report

antagonistic Iran should be within the global system. It is within this context that the pursuit of Iran's nuclear program needs to be considered. For instance, at one level the ability to refine uranium, process and harness it for domestic energy consumption is intended to demonstrate an Iranian resilience rooted in its historic continent spanning civilization identity.

At another level it is intended to demonstrate that America and her allies can surround, isolate, and sanction Iran and they can still develop this capability. The real question becomes what it means for Iran's pursuit of nuclear weaponry. Iran's leadership is rational in the sense that we use the term in International Relations theory – making decisions that will bring the nation and state the greatest rewards. From this perspective, the pursuit of a nuclear energy program allows Iran to get out from under the petroleum race and OPEC's thumb. Another view is that from Iran's perspective it is surrounded by America, her allies, and her clients. Two of her immediate neighbors to the east are nuclear weapons states, a neighbor to the west is one as well, and certain American and Israeli politicians and pundits are increasingly bellicose towards Iran. As such it would be perfectly rational, from a deterrence perspective, for Iran to pursue a nuclear weapons program; especially, as Iran pursues its interests in the region in an attempt to assert power against its rivals.

The wild card in all of this is the Iranian youth bulge. There were three revolutions in Iran in the 20th Century. In all of them three groups had to come together in order to bring about socio-political change: the clerics, the merchants/business class, and young educated intelligentsia. While the aging revolutionary government, cadre, and factions are engaged in their own high stakes game of chess, the young, educated and not so educated, Iranians are perpetually locked out of the game. If actual socio-political change is to occur in Iran at some point the youth bulge that seemed so important and integral to the 2009 Green Movement will have to come together in a meaningful way and organize around the futility of participatory democracy and governance that is a façade. This enthusiasm will, however, only take young/younger Iranians so far. In order for real political change to occur, for Iranians to reach a better social, political, economic, and religious system within an Iranian context they must develop a more attractive centralizing philosophy of how to order and structure the Iranian state and society than currently exists. This is what happened with the 1979 Islamic Revolution – it provided, within an Iranian context, a positive set of potential outcomes. As a result Iranians, and especially young/younger Iranians, were willing to buy into the premises and promises of the Islamic Revolution and fight for it. That is the significant difference between Iran from 1979 onwards and Syria today. The only unifying factor in Syria is the desire to



Cultural Operations Report

remove Bashar al Assad from power. There is no unanimity on who to replace him with or how to reorder Syrian government and society.

The Twelver Shi'a Near Abroad

The Twelver Shi'a near abroad, or simply the Shi'a near abroad, refers to the states, societies, and areas within the region with Shi'a majorities, pluralities, or sizeable/significant minorities. Iraq and Bahrain are the only two other Twelver Shi'a majorities within the Middle East. While Azerbaijan does have a Twelver Shi'a majority, the ethno-religious and ethno-national behavior of the Azerbaijani Shi'a is so significantly different from that of either the Iranian Shi'a or the various Arab Shi'a of Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as to place them outside of the scope of this report.

Bahrain, the Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia

Bahrain is the only one of the Gulf emirates to have a Shi'a majority, which led to charges that the Iranians were stirring up the Bahraini Shi'a in 2011 in an attempt to overthrow the al Khalifa family. While the reality of that uprising is likely much more nuanced and complex¹⁰, the reality is that a majority population ruled by a minority monarchy with a significant youth bulge is not a recipe for political stability and societal calm. While the percentages of the Shi'a population in the other Emirates and Saudi Arabia are significantly lower, ranging from an approximate 30% high in Kuwait to about 8% in Saudi Arabia, the Arab Gulf States are within the overlap between Iran's and Saudi Arabia's spheres of influence. And this was demonstrated quite graphically during the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, where the Saudis provided significant assistance and aid to the al Khalifas in restoring and maintaining order.

Part of this Saudi interference was an attempt to check a perceived, if not real threat, of Iranian influence within the Arab Gulf States. Another reason, however, arises from Saudi religious identity. The form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, Wahabbiya, is genocidally hostile toward Shi'a Muslims. As a result the Saudi religious authorities have historically and consistently promoted exceedingly harsh and negative attitudes towards Shi'a in general and the Saudi Shi'a in specific.¹¹ This religiously based concept is a Saudi socio-cultural

¹⁰ "Not Shi'a Not Sunni", op cited.

¹¹ As'ad AbuKhalil, *The Battle for Saudi Arabia*, Seven Stories Press, NOV 2003.



Cultural Operations Report

imperative to contest with the Shi'a, whether they are inside or outside of the Kingdom.

Iraq

The Iraqi Shi'a, making up almost two thirds of the population, are themselves divided. While the current and immediate past Governments of Iraq (GOI) have been dominated by the Shi'a majority, the Shi'a elites who are currently dominant are those who went into exile, predominantly in Iran.¹² As such there has been a significant discussion since 2007 over whether America's actions in Iraq simply placed it into the hands of the Iranians. This is of especial concern given that the US integrated a significant portion of the Badr Corps, the military wing of the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (SIIC or ISCI) into the Arab portions of the Iraqi Army. The Badr Corps was originally established, organized, outfitted, trained, and controlled by the Quds Force of the Iranian Special Forces.¹³ More recently, Iran has sought to mollify and control Muqtadr al Sadr and his various factions - the Office of the Martyr Sadr, the al Sadr Movement, which is Sadr's political party, and Jeish al Mehdi (JAM), the militant wing of the Sadr Movement by encouraging Muqtadr al Sadr to pursue his religious studies in Iran.

Extensive fieldwork conducted by members of Human Terrain Team Iraq 6 (HTT IZ6) on behalf of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team/1st Armored Division within Multinational Division Central in 2008 provide significant insight into this phenomenon of Iranian domination of the Iraqi Shi'a political leadership. In over forty-five in depth interviews conducted of tribal, religious, and/or political leaders in a four month period of 2008, a central message was conveyed by local Shi'a elites: the Government of Iraq is dominated by Iran through the Shi'a exile parties, these Shi'a are not real (as in Iraqi) Shi'a, and the US does not realize that it has handed Iraq to the Iranians. Similar statements were made by Sunni elites in the operating environment, as well as by non-elites such as internally

¹² Gareth Porter, "Iran's Regional Power Rooted in Shi'a Ties", *InterPress Service North America*, 16 DEC 2008, <http://ipsnorthamerica.net/news.php?idnews=1900>

¹³ Reidar Visser, "Allegiances Among Pro-Iranian Special Groups in Iraq", *Combatting Terrorism Center*, 26 SEP 2011, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/religious-allegiances-among-pro-iranian-special-groups-in-iraq>



Cultural Operations Report

displaced Iraqis that were encountered while undertaking humanitarian assistance missions.¹⁴

While the cold compromise that allowed for the formations of the last two Iraqi governments has begun to thaw and melt leading to an increase in sectarian violence throughout Iraq, Prime Minister Maliki has also allowed Iran to overfly Iraqi airspace in support of the Assad government in Syria.

Syria

While Syria is not really a Shi'a majority, plurality, or minority state and society, its patronage by Iran places it within their sphere of influence and the Shi'a near abroad. This link is a strange one as the Assad governments, of both pere and fils, are at their core Alawite systems that have co-opted portions of the Sunni majority and the other Syrian minorities, such as the Syriac Christians and the Druze. The Supreme Religious Authority of Iran has formally recognized Alawites as falling under Twelver Shi'ism. While this belies the true nature of Alawism, which is a syncretic offshoot of Shi'ism that asserts that Ali was prophet and messenger, not Muhammad, it has provided a covering justification for Iran's support and allowed the Assad's to leverage such support in ever increasing ways. Syria is also geo-spatially important to Iran, providing an additional proxy for meddling in Lebanese affairs. Now that Iranian proxies are in control of the Government of Iraq and the Arab portions of its military, Syria is part of the Shi'a land corridor that connects Iran through the Levant to South Lebanon and Iran's other regional proxy Hezbollah. The importance of Iranian recognition of Alawism as within Twelver Shi'ism cannot be remarked upon enough. Not only did it provide the Assads theological top cover within Shi'a Islam, it reinforced the relationship between Iran and Syria. This theological declaration of Shi'a kinship allowed Iran to reinforce its regional position by exerting influence over Syria, which in turn provided it with access to and proxy control over a key, strategic corridor within the region. Maintaining this relationship, and access to Syria became even more significant once Iran's proxies came to power in Iraq. The ability to keep its regional proxies in power is central to Iranian aspirations for regional influence and dominance.

¹⁴ Adam L. Silverman, "Preliminary Results from Voices of the Mada'in: a Tribal History and Study of One of Baghdad's Six Rural Districts", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, VOL 23, NO 2, 23 JUN 2010.



Hezbollah & the Contest for Lebanon

Hezbollah, since its inception during the sectarian conflict and strife of the Lebanese Civil War, has played a major role not only in Lebanon, but also the Levant. This is especially true of Hezbollah's ongoing fight with Israel in Southern Lebanon. What has recently changed has been Hezbollah's achievement of a long held aim – becoming part of Lebanon's government as part of the March 8 Alliance. More recently, even though they are a minority within a coalition, they have been able to exert ever greater control over Lebanon's fragile consociational political system.¹⁵ This was the result of the formation of a new government in March of 2012 that brought increased seats to Hezbollah and its Christian and Druze allies in the March 8 Alliance.

Hezbollah actually presents a paradox. It, like the Sadrist movement in Iraq, which seems to be modeled on Hezbollah, is a hybrid, or rather tripartite, movement. It is one part social movement providing necessary and needed educational, medical, and financial support to poor Lebanese, especially in South Lebanon, one part political party seeking to represent Lebanon's Shi'a, and one part militia and terrorist organization. This paradox lies at the heart of the revolutionary Shi'ism that the Iranians promoted, and to some extent exported, after the 1979 revolution, which is why we can also observe it mirrored among the Sadrists in Iraq. Lebanon's unique consociational democratic system, while always fragile, has managed to stitch together the competing ethno-national and ethno-religious factions to prevent a return to the sectarian civil war of the 1980s. At the same time, Hezbollah's shift into legitimate political activity, while still remaining as a prime antagonist of the Israelis, and serving as an Iranian proxy in both Lebanon and Syria, places Lebanon's government and governance in jeopardy. Hezbollah's attempt to have its cake and eat it too makes Lebanese stability, as well as Hezbollah's continued ability to navigate the world of Lebanese governance, regional social movement, and regional militia and terrorist group, highly untenable.

Hezbollah's untenable position threatens not only the stability of Lebanon, but also Hezbollah's ability to engage in the work of a legitimate social movement

¹⁵ Sara Sorcher, "Lebanon's Government Now Officially Dominated by Hezbollah", *National Journal*, 29 MAR 2013, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/nationalsecurity/lebanon-s-government-now-officially-dominated-by-hezbollah-20110613>



Cultural Operations Report

and political party, as well as its ability to function as a military proxy for Iran in the Levant, particularly in Syria. At some point Hezbollah will either have to give up on at least one, if not two, of these aspirations and activities or find itself pulled in too many directions to remain viable and effective.

DIME-C Analysis

Iran

Diplomatic and Economic Power

Iran has faced diplomatic isolation since 1979. When the intent of the isolation, especially when combined with economic sanctions, is to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table, the combination has been effective. That does not always mean that the US has taken advantage of the opportunity.¹⁶ Recently we have seen the Iranians seek to come to the negotiating table over their nuclear development program as a result of vigorous diplomacy between the US and its European allies and the economic sanctions against Iran's financial and petroleum sectors. While these tools are effective it is very important that we recognize the Iranian pride in their culture and history, including their cultural and historical achievements. Pursuing nuclear power is partly rooted in a desire to demonstrate that the modern Iranians are the full inheritors of that heritage. It is also partially rooted in demonstrating to the world that despite diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions it can still do something that is perceived as the prerogative and privilege of the great powers. So when utilizing diplomatic and economic power it is important to not box the Iranians into an all or nothing dynamic. Pursuit of nuclear energy is not solely about acquiring a nuclear weapons capacity it is a demonstration of national ability and a source of pride.

Information and Military

From the perspective of information power we are often our own worst enemies. While freedom of speech, especially political speech, and most especially the least popular and acceptable variants of political speech, should be safe guarded, the US needs to make a concerted effort to more effectively communicate with Iran in a calm and rational manner. While it is certainly appropriate to recognize

¹⁶ This appears to have been the case in 2003 when the Swiss, who function as the interlocutors between the US and Iran, brought an offer of cooperation to the Bush Administration that was summarily rejected.



Cultural Operations Report

that we take no options off of the table, and for us to engage in appropriate contingency planning, we cannot forget that the Iranians are not merely receiving our carefully phrased official communications, but are observing and responding to a wide variety of American communications, including the ones that are largely outside the control of the US Government. Unfortunately many of those messages are bombastic, ill informed, and incendiary. Combined with the reality from their point of view, that they are living right next to two states with nuclear weapons (one a clear US ally and one a somewhat reliable one), with US Forces engaged in combat in another of its neighbors, a key US NATO ally just to the North and West in Turkey, and American bases to its North, West, South, and East, this is a volatile information environment. Whether we intend to convey the message or not, we are telling the Iranians that we have them surrounded and the nuclear powers in their neighborhood are our friends and/or clients. As a result American messaging through the power of information needs to be clear, straightforward, and intended to demonstrate to the Iranians that if they make domestic political and social changes, within an appropriate Iranian context, and also adjust their foreign policy within the region that it will get better for them diplomatically and economically. At the same time we should be engaged with and encouraging the development of movements that have an Iranian appropriate understanding of self determination and self governance.

Conversely, the Iranians send mixed messages to the US. For instance, the official pronouncements of the ruling clerics – the actual power in Iran – are few and far between. Moreover, they are also often drowned out by remarks made by the much less powerful Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinijad. For instance, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa (binding religious pronouncement¹⁷) in 2005 forbidding the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons as forbidden to Muslims, as well as clearly stating that Iran will never acquire such weapons. In reality Grand Ayatollah Khomeini's clear message regarding nuclear weapons' proliferation gets drowned out by the hyperbolic and incendiary rhetoric of President Ahmedinijad. As a result it makes it difficult for American analysts, let alone decision makers, to determine which of these is the more accurate Iranian message.¹⁸

¹⁷ For all Twelver Shi'a Muslims within Iran, as well as significant numbers in Lebanon, Syria, and those in Iraq that accept his authority over that of Grand Ayatollah Sistani who is actually the more senior cleric.

¹⁸ This is not to take the official fatwa at face value. Religious rulings can always be renounced and it would be naïve to assume that the Supreme Religious Authority did not have Iran's strategic interests in mind when issuing the fatwa.



Cultural Operations Report

Syria

Diplomatic and Information

From a diplomatic standpoint there is little that the US can do to directly influence Syria. Relations between the US and Syria have never been good and the most likely diplomatic initiatives will have to be worked through Syria's neighbors, as well as with their Russian patrons. The key will be to both engage diplomatically and informationally with the Russians in a manner that eases their own national interests and concerns for the region, specifically ongoing port access on the Mediterranean coast, so that a way ahead for Syria can be effectively planned and executed in regards to both the ongoing civil war and its aftermath.

Economic

Economically the US will continue to push for embargoes on Syrian oil and sanctions on Syrian economic activity. Both of these have the ability to reduce Syrian economic resilience and force the Bashar Assad government to change its behavior. At the same time the US will need to increase its aid to Syria's neighbors in order to assist with the ongoing and worsening humanitarian crisis. Here too the US needs to engage the Russians. While we do have to be concerned with their economic power and resilience as a major petroleum state, they should be engaged through the economic levers of power to demonstrate that continued support for Syrian bad behavior, in the hope of having port access in Tartus to the Mediterranean, will be quite expensive.

Military

Direct US involvement in the Syrian civil war has the ability to actually worsen the situation. We have no good military or even civilian contacts within Syria and the US does not have a lot of clarity on exactly who is involved with the opposition and what they really want and are willing to do. This was demonstrated by a recent Senatorial fact finding mission. The best use of US military efforts will proceed along two lines. The first is to continue to help prepare Syria's neighbors to deal with the humanitarian crisis, leverage their security forces to assist with disaster management and emergency response, and prepare for extended stability operations to contain what is emerging as a prolonged Syrian/ Assad collapse, as well as the likely instability that will follow such an event.



Cultural Operations Report

The second is to utilize Special Forces in their traditional role within Syria. To identify who can and cannot be worked with, mobilize the local population, and set the conditions on the ground as effectively as possible to shape the environment to prevent negative effects for America and its allies.

Hezbollah

Diplomatic and Information

Currently the US has no engagement with Hezbollah because we classify it as a terrorist movement. Like our relations with Iran, this means we have removed the positive ways and means to motivate Hezbollah to engage in more positive behaviors. All we have is isolation and ostracism. The problem with this approach, no matter how morally satisfying and appropriate for American domestic political consumption it might be, is that it removes all the other tools at our disposal to effect positive change in regards to Hezbollah, its behavior in Lebanon, as well as the Levant. A more productive approach would be to change our messaging under the information lever of National power to make it clear that the US supports Hezbollah's good works as a social movement and its legitimate political aspirations and activities as a political party within the Lebanese government. This support, however, is conditional on Hezbollah's willingness and ability to divorce itself from its militia and terrorist wings and their deradicalization and demobilization. Moreover, this would create a potential motivating pathway (carrot) to achieve legitimate contacts between the US and Hezbollah and an end to American opposition to Hezbollah's participation in the Lebanese government. Although there is no guarantee that these actions would be successful, given that America's ongoing attempts to isolate and ostracize Hezbollah has not produced positive results, continuing to do the same thing over and over and expecting different results is a commonplace definition of insanity.



Design-C Analysis

The Iranian Sphere of Influence and the Shi'a Near Abroad

Environment Frame

- Spans 2 Combatant Commands
- North/South & East/West transit
- Contains Multiple transnational societal elements
- Longstanding socio-cultural grievances: Syrians vs. Lebanese, Sunnis vs. Shi'a, Saudis vs. Iranians
- Iranian, Israeli, Turkish, and Saudi aspirations to be regional hegemon

Problem Frame

- Attempt by Iran to dominate the region and establish a Shi'a Near Abroad
- Syrian civil war
- Saudi versus Iran proxy war now being fought in Syria
- Expanding humanitarian crisis including multiple waves of refugees
- US dependence on oil
- Oil production & distribution region: extraction, refining, pipelines, shipping,
- The ability of Iran to negatively effect oil production and distribution
- Multiple transnational socio-cultural elements

Solution Frame

- Deter Saudi and Iran from transforming the Syrian civil war into a larger regional conflict for power and influence
- Deter Iranian nuclear weapons aspirations
- Prevent establishment of Iranian hegemony/Shi'a Sphere of Influence
- Reconcile Iran back into the global community and normalize relations



Cultural Operations Report

Contributors

Eugene Martinelli is a consulting cultural operations specialist to the Army Culture and Foreign Language Directorate. He holds a bachelor's degree in education from Saint Leo University, to include a separate certification in psychology and behavioral science from Baylor University in a program sponsored by the US Army. Mr. Martinelli has a background in both executive and managerial positions for several corporations in the retail and restaurant industries with a primary focus of international development and cross cultural integration in the business model. Mr. Martinelli served as Cultural Analyst/Research Operations Manager for 2nd Brigade Combat Team/1st Armored Division and supporting units and deployed with the brigade to Iraq 2008 to 2009. He is now working with other US Agencies in operational development and support.

Adam L. Silverman is the Culture and Foreign Language Advisor at the US Army War College. He holds a doctorate in political science and criminology from the University of Florida. He also holds masters' degrees in comparative religion and international security. During 2012 Dr. Silverman temporarily served as the Cultural Advisor to III Corps on temporary assignment from JAN through AUG. He previously served as the Cultural Advisor to the Commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team/1st Armored Division from OCT 2007 through OCT 2008 and was deployed with the brigade in Iraq in 2008. Upon returning from Iraq he served as a social science advisor in the TRADOC G2 (2009). He routinely provides operational support to a number of US Army, DOD, and other US Government elements.