



INFLUENCING THE POPULATION

Using Interpreters, Conducting KLEs, and Executing IO in Afghanistan

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Before deploying to Afghanistan with the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, I was trained to plan and lead combat missions during training courses such as the Infantry Officer Basic Course and Ranger School. Whether I was attacking an enemy patrol, bunker or logistics center, the task was always the same: destroy. But when I deployed, I didn't get to destroy things on every patrol ... far from it. In Afghanistan I attempted to *influence the population*.

When I first heard the phrase *influence the population* I thought, "How does that help me?" How does that vague term help a small unit leader — either platoon leader or company commander — on the ground?

Every leader needs to understand that in a counterinsurgency, destroying is not as important as influencing. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, describes an insurgency as a struggle between two fighting minorities for the "uncommitted middle." Doctrinally, we call this Information Operations (IO). IO is the set of tools that influences that "uncommitted middle." IO drives all our operations from security to training local security forces to distributing humanitarian assistance.

Still, to help the small unit leader, we need to move from the vague sounding "Information Operations" to actionable tips. This article hopes to provide those tips and to act as a short resource for developing a platoon or company-level IO campaign focused on the Afghanistan theater. First, I will give advice for using an interpreter — your lifeline to local Afghans. Next, I will give tips and techniques for conducting key leader engagements (KLEs) — the most used tool in IO. Finally, I will give tips on developing an IO campaign at the platoon level.

My experience is a deployment to Konar Province, Afghanistan during OEF VIII. Therefore, the majority of my advice centers on



Photos courtesy of author

During a shura, the author (left) addresses the elders from Pashad, Afghanistan. Key leader engagements are one of the best ways to distribute Information Operation themes.

Pashtun culture and may not apply to Iraq or other ethnicities in Afghanistan. I wrote this article as a guide for platoon leaders who have never deployed, but it could assist any Soldier in Afghanistan.

Interpreters: Your Lifeline to Afghanistan

A U.S. dignitary created a mini-controversy last summer when he made a gaffe in Afghanistan. While meeting with local nationals, the official made a comment about one man's daughter — "She is very beautiful." While the comment is perfectly harmless in America, in Afghanistan he crossed the line. I don't blame the official, though. His interpreter should never have translated that comment.

Before you can influence the population, you must communicate

with it; your interpreter is your only connection to the Afghan population.

An interpreter can do one of two things. On one hand, he can simply translate what you say into Pashtun or Dari. On the other hand, he can *interpret* what you say into the local language, phrasing it as accurately and appropriately as possible. He can also act as a cultural advisor, a subject matter expert on Afghanistan, a lie detector, an intelligence source, and an IO theme coordinator. The interpreter is an underutilized resource; try not to make this mistake.

Working With Your Interpreter.

Treat your interpreter as if he were your own Soldier. This means providing him with food, shelter, and security. Make sure he gets paid on time, is fed regularly, and has a place to sleep.

The interpreter occupies a special place in the platoon. He isn't just a new addition, he is a new addition who works directly for you. He reports to you the way a squad leader reports to you. Therefore, you must counsel and mentor him.

Counsel your interpreter on a regular basis. When he arrives, give him an initial counseling. Let him know your standards and all the tasks you expect from him. Let him know he does not merely translate your words, but that he interprets them for the audience. Emphasize how busy he will be, but that you will reward him for his work. Perhaps the best reward for interpreters is a letter of recommendation from you. Be prepared to give him one, but make him earn it. After every patrol, provide specific feedback for him. Bring him to rehearsals and after action reviews (AARs). Demand that he perform every day.

As your relationship develops with your interpreter, you will learn how much you can trust him. He most likely will not have a security clearance, but you will rely on him for many sensitive subjects. If at any time you question his integrity, replace him. Open communication is the key to trusting your interpreter.

Use Your Interpreter in a Variety of Roles.

Once you have laid down the ground rules to your interpreter, get as much use out of the interpreter as you can. He is not just your mouthpiece or translator — he is your guide to Afghan culture.

An interpreter knows more about Afghan

culture than you ever will. Therefore, ask him for feedback about your IO themes. Ask him how well you are respecting Afghan culture. Ask him to explain when you don't understand a local's response to a question or comment.

Use your interpreter to set up shuras on your forward operating base (FOB) or combat outpost (COP). He can provide recommendations on food, and he can set up your shura room.

Have your interpreter act as a lie detector. After meetings, he can tell you who seemed trustworthy and who did not. He'll probably pick up on cultural cues that you may miss.

Your interpreter will run your local cell phone. In most cases, he will answer calls for you. He can also set up meetings with locals. If he knows your IO themes and respects you, he will do this in a heartbeat. My interpreters ran my cell phone towards the end of deployment. Instead of having to have a 10 minute conversation to set the time of day of the next shura, my interpreter would handle the conversation.

Share your interpreter with the platoon. When your Soldiers give a class to Afghan National Army (ANA) or Afghan National Police (ANP) counterparts, have them rehearse with the interpreter.

Your interpreter can also teach your entire platoon basic Dari or Pashtun. Armed with this knowledge, your platoon can then wage IO at the personal level with local Afghans.

Additional tips for using interpreters.

When talking with a local national, speak with him, not the interpreter. Have your interpreter stand to your side, or slightly behind you. He is interpreting your conversation, but the conversation is between you and the local Afghan.

Tell your interpreter to stop you if what he is translating will offend the recipient. It seems simple, but if an interpreter does not like you then he will go ahead and translate inappropriate conversations. When he stops you, provide positive feedback.

Encourage him to ask for clarification about things he does not understand. This will keep him engaged in the conversation. Encourage your interpreter to clarify your points to any locals who misunderstand them. It will save you time.

When writing or assembling patrol debriefs, PMESII (political, military, economic, social, infrastructure,

information) reports or target packets, use your interpreter's knowledge. He will remember much more than you. He will also have insights on a local national's body language and subtext.

Get as many interpreters as possible. Even if you have one or two who you work very well with, have more for complex operations. For example, a simple traffic control point (TCP) operation needs a minimum of four interpreters: one to run a KLE with the checkpoint commander, one at each end of the TCP, and one assisting with the Biometric Automated Toolset (BAT)/Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (HIIDE) system. Imagine more complex missions like a cordon and search with the ANA. Get as many interpreters as your unit can afford.

Do not treat interpreters like dirt. I have seen this, and it is disrespectful to the uniform.

Do not think they are inhuman, evil, or any other base stereotype. Stamp out this attitude in your platoon. Afghans can spot insincerity a mile away. Bad attitudes will drive local populations to the Taliban.

Key Leader Engagements: The Bread and Butter of the Small Unit Leader's Soft Skills

KLEs are the most common patrol in Afghanistan or Iraq. Despite their frequency, most young leaders are unprepared to lead them.

Key leader engagements occurred on roughly 90 percent of my platoon's missions. On most of my patrols I conducted more than one KLE. As time went on, I found these patrols were also the best way to distribute IO themes to the locals. No single skill will separate the locals from insurgents like well planned and executed KLEs. As the most effective tool in the IO tool box, a small unit leader must do them well.

The single biggest tip for a successful key leader engagement is to give more than you get. You give support, build relationships, and provide the resources of the U.S. Army so that you may one day get intelligence. Be prepared to talk, talk, and talk some more. An effective KLE respects Afghan culture. The elders of Afghanistan, not the coalition representatives, are the important actors. Therefore, devoting your time, energy and resources to KLEs will not pay off at first,

but over time you will see dramatic results.

Next, study and prepare for a KLE as if it were any other type of combat patrol. Large operations have rehearsals at several levels and so will KLEs. Conducting them systematically will teach you how to respond better to local issues. By studying information about locals, your area of operations and past meetings, you will gather more effective intelligence and make better decisions.

Background.

First, some terms. Our battalion referred to KLEs as any meeting with Afghans, locals, or security forces. I will call any meeting between a platoon leader and one to three other locals a key leader engagement. I use the Pashtun term *shura* to describe large meetings (over a dozen attendees) designed to address district issues. These are usually scheduled on a regular basis and will have the same participants. Finally, my battalion also conducted larger *mega-shuras* (several dozen attendees). These were multi-district events that the provincial governor and battalion commander attended. As a PL, you will mostly attend mega-shuras but will not participate in them.

Second, I would like to caution against assuming that training at mobility readiness exercises (MREs) will adequately prepare a small unit leader to conduct KLEs downrange. MREs have a two-to-three week window to simulate an entire deployment. A platoon leader must meet, introduce himself, develop a relationship and then gain resolution on issues within two weeks. When downrange, meeting all the key leaders of your AO will take two weeks alone, if not more. Further, developing relationships and solving local issues will occur throughout a deployment, not in a set timeline as in an MRE.

Third, to explain a typical KLE experience I will describe some of the engagements I conducted in Afghanistan. On our three-day patrol cycle, I visited two district sub-governors to discuss district-wide issues. At these meetings, I would also conduct a separate engagement with the district chief of police. About once a week, we conducted a larger shura or humanitarian aid distribution with elders somewhere else in the district. Once a month on average, my company commander ran a tri-district shura, which brought together GIROA (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) officials and key leaders in our AO.

In the three-day period, we would also conduct security patrols. During the day, we conducted TCPs at ANP police checkpoints. My Soldiers also conducted training with ANA and ANP

soldiers. I would meet with the checkpoint commander to discuss security issues. At night, we conducted coalition force-only movement to contacts. At the end of one of our routes, we checked on ANP checkpoints. I also conducted joint KLEs with ANA soldiers and their Marine trainers at our FOB.

Fourth, I conducted KLEs in a region heavily influenced by the Pashtun-Wali code. This influences many of my recommendations throughout the article. However, understanding the local culture is vital to success no matter what region or country you're operating in.

Before the Key Leader Engagement.

The work begins before you even depart for a key leader engagement. To start, identify a KLE/IO/intelligence team. These are the members of your platoon or company headquarters that will join you on most of your meetings with local nationals. This includes yourself, your RTO (recorder), your forward observer (FO — or whoever coordinates intelligence and IO with you), your interpreter, your platoon sergeant (senior advisor to the platoon leader), your ANA counterpart, and, if possible, your allies in the local Afghan government. Before any KLE you will conduct a rehearsal with these elements to prepare and ensure all participants are on the same page.

Next, study all the relevant information of your AO. At a minimum, review notes from the last KLE, your IO themes, and your AO-specific priority intelligence requirement (PIR). Either before every KLE or at a regularly scheduled meeting, review with your KLE team the environmental situation, atmospheric of the area of operations (the mood or feelings of the village from human collection teams), and battalion IO themes.

After reviewing the background information with your team, brief your team on the specifics of the KLE. Describe who you expect to be there and the specific objectives of the meeting. Have your interpreter back brief your intended IO themes to ensure he



A group of elders from Pashad, Afghanistan gather for a shura with the Serkani district sub-governor. This meeting was the first time in six years a representative from the Government of Afghanistan visited Pashad.

understands them. Answer any questions from your interpreter or your team. Get their opinions on your talking points. Ideally, at the end of the rehearsal, you will have a 3x5 card with the objective of the meeting and your talking points. Finally, spot check your team to make sure they have note pads, pens or pencils, a camera, and any gifts you are bringing.

If you plan on having the KLE at your FOB or COP, set up the shura area. Design it according to Afghan custom with rugs on the floor and pillows. Find funding to provide food at regular shuras. In Afghan culture it is expected to eat food and drink chai. You should provide soda, too (I found that Mountain Dew was popular). As I mentioned above, your interpreters know how to set up an Afghan meeting room. Charge them with this task and make sure it happens.

At the Key Leader Engagement.

If appropriate, bring gifts. Ask your interpreter what he recommends. Simple gifts include weapon lubricant (CLP) to Afghan police checkpoints or school supplies to village elders. For people who often live on a dollar a day, simple gifts can mean a lot. To build up a supply of gifts, find a Web site that adopts Soldiers and tell them you want gifts for the Afghan people, such as toys, school supplies, etc. American citizens want to support our troops; all you have to do is ask. Don't be shy about bringing cigarettes either; cigarettes are a cross-cultural conversation starter.

Expect to be bored, and then fight through it. In the long run, the hours of talk will develop the local government and make your life easier. The best cure against boredom is to know your IO themes and hit them. Know the information you want and ask about it when it is respectful. Know the point you are trying to get to and work towards it. Show interest in the village and concern for its people. Ask questions about the village's history and culture. Remember their answers to demonstrate that you care.

In a shura, minimize the number of Americans who speak. In Afghan culture, only the most respected person speaks. Sometimes, the speaker is not the key elder but his chosen representative. Treat him as if he were. Your FO, RTO and any other coalition force members should allow only the unit leader to speak. It is not a group discussion, but a conversation between two

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people that everyone watches. In larger meetings, expect several people to speak but in turn and slowly. I had a forward observer who did not understand this. Whenever he spoke out of turn, it slightly disrespected me.

Acknowledge the awkward situation your presence puts on the elders of Afghanistan. As a 20-something-year-old platoon leader, you will probably be the youngest person at the meeting. You will probably never meet with someone your own age; they are not invited. Accept that you will violate Afghan customs, and then do what you can to be respectful of their culture. This will make your KLEs run smoother.

Expect little progress initially. You will get answers to simple questions (such as how many people live in certain villages) but very little definite support. They will offer assurances but little else. Expect that you will conduct dozens of these over deployment and expect progress to take time.

Taking notes shows you are paying attention and responsive. Even if you have an RTO doing this task, have a notepad ready and use it for your own notes.

After the Key Leader Engagement.

This is a patrol like any other, so conduct regular AARs. Conduct informal AARs directly after small KLEs, then conduct regularly scheduled AARs to brief larger points. The same audience will attend the AAR as attended the rehearsal. Provide feedback to your interpreter, FO, and RTO at these meetings to improve their performance. Use this time to clarify any questions about Afghan culture. Get your interpreter to give you feedback on your performance.

After every patrol, write a patrol debrief covering the KLE. Do not write this in a vacuum. Have your interpreter, FO, RTO and any other relevant sources write up what

they saw, heard and experienced. This will fill in gaps in your memory.

Finally, update any relevant data sources. If locals provided intelligence, pass that to the next larger level's collection system. Update your intelligence on your area of operations. If part of a larger mission or a significant meeting, then write a "good news story" for larger publication.

What not to do.

Do not focus solely on your needs or wants. If the only question you ask is, "Where are the Taliban?" the elders will see you as arrogant. If you only demand for attacks to stop, the elders will view you as powerless. If elders lose respect for you, they will not provide for you.

Do not expect to gather intelligence at a meeting of more than two people. Afghans consider that disrespectful. Don't demand, "Where are the Taliban?" at every meeting. That will not yield results. Build rapport, and intelligence will come slowly over time.

Do not make promises or assurances. Afghans know American rank so they will understand the limits of what a squad leader, platoon leader, or company commander can realistically provide to an AO.

Do not demand a specific resolution to specific problems. Be open to Afghan solutions. Have objectives but not the solution to that objective. If you want to end improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in your AO, ask for their help and see what they can provide. Ask for their solutions. They might provide ANP soldiers or better intelligence. But don't demand they follow your course of action.

Do not strong arm or insult your guests. Calling Afghans liars, cheats, or Taliban will ruin your relationship. They will still seem cordial, but you will have destroyed your relationship.

Afghans do not lie. If questioned, they will try to answer your question as best they can and believe they are not lying. If you put them into a position where they must lie, they will lose respect for you.

Great Information Operations at the Platoon Level

Too often, we think IO involve pamphlets to hand out or billboards to post. If I can convince you of one thing, I would like it to be this: every operation is an Information

Operation. Every patrol, every battle, every discussion is a chance to persuade the population to support the government, or a chance to turn the population against the government and the coalition. Too often IO is considered a battalion function. In the decentralized nature of Afghanistan, every unit that controls an area of operations must conduct its own IO campaign.

To develop a great IO campaign, start with the basics. When you get on the ground, find the previous battalion's IO themes. After touring the AO and getting a feel for the ground, revise them to your needs. Based on your talking points, plan your patrols. If you claim that the government can provide security, then plan security patrols. If you tell elders the government can provide economic benefits, then plan humanitarian assistance deliveries and bring the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) into your area of operations.

Once you have your patrols planned, craft your specific messages. After you conduct your patrols, conduct AARs to determine how well you put out your message. Most importantly, use your patrols to create future IO themes and messages. As you can see, the cycle continues.

The following are additional tips for conducting your intelligence operations at the small unit level:

*** Honesty really is the best policy.**

The only times that you will lose the IO campaign is when you are being dishonest. Honesty might not seem like a big deal, but little white lies will slowly eat away at your message. The best example of exaggerated IO that I have seen concerned Afghan national security forces. We wanted them to take the lead so we tried to put them in as many good news stories as possible. But since they relied on coalition firepower to survive, the message was not as effective as others. Over time, people could see through that embellishment and that may have done more harm than good.

So, for example, if you want to write a good news story about how the ANP took the lead in arresting a known Taliban operative, ask yourself, did they really take the lead? If the locals know that ANP only do joint operations with the U.S., then a story in the local version of the newspaper won't change that. It will be harder to change their minds in the future.

I had this experience as I wrote stories that verged on ridiculous concerning the ANA and ANP. I slowly learned that the more effective stories were true stories. So, I began an IO campaign in both print stories for our battalion — and more importantly via key leader engagement to village elders — about an ANP checkpoint commander who stood up to the Taliban and supported the government. The locals knew he did as well, so I just amplified what they already knew. Over time, the elders gave him and coalition forces more support because we told the truth.

*** Get allies in the local community.**

When I first started IO operations, I acted like the typical brand new PL: I tried to do everything all by myself. Eventually, the district governor and I started communicating. He began coordinating our efforts with the local community and working with me. He introduced me to locals I had no idea existed. Once we started working together on messages, we began communicating a coherent message to the district. The result was much stronger.

I had the same result with the local police chiefs. I distributed a thousand pamphlets to the checkpoints saying, "Don't be corrupt and fight back," but that didn't work. The best technique was having one powerful and honest checkpoint commander influence the rest. He helped me persuade them to conduct better TCPs and to participate in joint operations with ANA. They weren't perfect, but they got better.

*** Information Operations is not a one-man job.**

I made this mistake early, planning Information Operations by myself. The jobs are too large to do by yourself, especially when controlling your own area of operations. Invite your IO team to offer advice and help you craft your message.

Likewise, on patrol your men will interact constantly with locals. Brief your maneuver unit (be it platoon, section or company) on the vital tasks of Information Operations before you leave and do so on a regular basis. Develop platoon-internal IO themes, and then distribute them in nightly meetings. Whenever your patrol stops, have your men prepared to communicate with locals and do whatever they can, no matter how small, to

influence the locals.

*** Include your interpreter.**

We pay them plenty, so use them. You aren't from Afghanistan, they are. Get their opinions and your IO will be that much stronger. When I wrote letters of recommendations for my interpreters, I put joint Information Operations planner in their job description.

Ask your interpreter for themes. Have them brief you on what they think you should say. Discuss the nuances of the words.

Conclusion: The New Way of War

Like Adam and Eve after tasting the forbidden fruit, as a military and as an Army, we cannot go back to the days of simple high-intensity warfare. Killing the enemy will no longer suffice; we must also influence the population that allows those enemies to exist.

Further Reading

* "COIN: On the Job Learning for the New Platoon Leader" by 1LT Robert Baird, January-February 2009, *Infantry Magazine*

* "The Counterinsurgency Cliff Notes: Techniques for the Conventional Rifle Platoon, in Layman's Term" by CPT Craig Coppock, July-August 2008, *Infantry Magazine*

* "An Important Weapon in COIN Operations: The Key Leader's Engagement" CPT Joe Curtis, July-August 2008, *Infantry Magazine*

* "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency" by David Kilcullen, May-June 2006, *Military Review*

* "The Way of the Pashtun: Pashtunwali" by MAJ Richard Tod Strickland, Vol. 10.3, Fall 2007, *Canadian Army Journal*

* *Marine Corps Intelligence Activity Afghanistan Micro Mission Guide*

* FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*

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