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COMMENTARY

Catalysts and Networks for Stability

MGen Andy Salmon

Operation Charge of the Knights in the Spring of 2008, which cleared extremist militias out of Basra, created a strategic opportunity for building stability in that troubled Province. Security had improved but the situation was still fragile: attacks on Coalition forces were common, essential services were poor, the City needed cleaning up and revitalising, and the people had to believe that the future was going to be a better place than the present. I was about to assume command of Coalition Forces in South East Iraq in the Summer of 2008 and my team and I were working out how to seize this “Kyros”¹ moment.

In working out possible campaign approaches, ideally before any intervention, I have always found it helpful to talk to people who really understand the nature of the operating environment. So, with 2 months left to go, I found myself in a lecture room at the London School of Economics, explaining our thinking and discussing ideas with a group of Iraqis and Iraq experts, who had personal experience of Basra. A local businessman, who had fled Basra with his family, calmly asserted that the first thing we should do was listen to the people. He said that would be a great start and would mark a refreshing change. Given that insecurity had led to the fragmentation of society and had made it difficult for communities to talk to each other, he said the sec-

ond step we should take was to use our position and authority to enable the people of Basra to connect with one another. Business needed to engage with the people, civil society with provincial politicians, the military with the police and security forces with the citizenry. After that, he said we ought to leave it to Basrawis to do the rest. Listening to and internalizing that advice led to a seminal shift in the way we approached our campaign. We became catalysts, both consciously and subconsciously, and embarked on a campaign of connecting people in order to create networks of stability.

We have witnessed since 9/11 – itself a series of coordinated attacks perpetrated by a network – a huge investment in security. We have also seen that military power, when applied in isolation, has limited utility in fostering enduring stability. Fiscal austerity also means that investment in military capabilities will decline, and governments will have less appetite to expend blood and treasure on endeavours such as Iraq and Afghanistan. With fewer military forces to go round, there is a greater need to work in an integrated and collaborative manner while finding smart approaches to tackling instability.

Those campaigns also underscored the bald point that the military can't do it all on their own. Accordingly, civilian, multi-agency and cross-institutional approaches are required that create new cooperative and collaborative compacts and networks. Myriad regional and local actors are in the mix too, and, as

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NATO Supreme Allied Commander Admiral James G. Stavridis explained in a TED talk on 'Open Source Security', connections need to be made between private, national and international domains which straddle the business, security, diplomacy and development communities.

NATO's operation in Libya also highlighted a campaign that had its origins in the way social media spreads information and ideas, which can go viral fast. Smart phones and the Internet enable connections and networks that have created a new stability dynamic. While high-tech in many respects, such technologies also reflect the fundamental wisdom of the Baswari businessman who reminded us that we must continue to understand catalysts and networks in the 21st Century.

Catalysts

In science, a catalyst is a substance that initiates a chemical change without changing itself. Leaders and people that facilitate and accelerate change – that oxygenate a room full of people, inspire by example and motivate without telling – are human catalysts. They typically have emotional intelligence, which enables them to work collaboratively behind the scenes, to build trust and to lead without necessarily relying on traditional command and control hierarchies. The key is to work out who they are, find enough of them and to deploy them effectively, because these people are good at creating close personal relationships and can create chain reactions that lead to irreversible momentum. They are your connectors.

When we arrived in Basra we soon realised that we needed to change the profile of the mission and help build a sense of optimism amongst Basrawis about their future. We needed more teachers, coaches and mentors who could embed deeply within the Iraqi security forces – the police and military. More personnel who could work the street, touch elements of Iraq society and help improve the delivery of essential services had to be found too. We surveyed our

human resources – diplomats and officers who conducted key leader engagement, the Provincial Reconstruction Team, contractors, USAID personnel, civil affairs experts and engineers – and the results were dismaying. We estimated that no more than three percent of the roughly 6,500 military and civilian personnel from the United Kingdom and the United States had regular contact with people and could theoretically influence the local population; even if they were doing their jobs properly, they weren't necessarily acting as catalysts. We had to change this equation and maximise the utility of our force to shift the campaign in the right direction.

The Consul General and I set about inviting Basrawis from all walks of life to seminars. For instance, we brought together teachers and industrialists. At one such meeting with local businessmen, after three hours of listening to a series of grievances and complaints, there was a realisation that there was a lot to do and that they, the Basrawis themselves, simply needed to get on with it. For some around the table, it was the first time they had ever met each other. We learnt a huge deal from listening and connecting, and, in general, the Basrawis we met felt valued, respected and empowered by doing something for themselves.

We also imported catalysts. We created mixed civilian-military and Iraqi Joint Reconstruction Action Teams (JRATs) to tackle essential services and get out amongst the people. One JRAT overseeing trash collection and disposal, for instance, had a huge challenge ahead of it. But we found a waste management expert from Miami with good emotional intelligence, who helped make an immediate impact on the municipal rubbish collection. I'm not saying that the city of Basra looked sparkling after a couple of weeks, but one person made a big impact by being a catalyst.

The key is to find the right people, and give them freedom and room to manoeuvre and to work their magic. Chain reactions can occur, and the results can be startling. This can look loose and chaotic, and isn't neces-

sarily comfortable for conventional organisations with linear approaches. Overall, the levels of violence in the Spring of 2009 had reduced to 2003 levels, and the atmosphere in Basra city radically improved. The efforts to catalyse provincial elections after the re-establishment of Iraqi sovereignty in January 2009 and to create a positive result also paid off. When we tried to understand what had happened, we realised that by making connections through catalysts we had created a web or a network of optimism that had squeezed extremist networks. Although difficult to scientifically and fully quantify, this helped make Basra a safer and more stable place for its citizens.

Networks

Networks existed as soon as man was able to forge human relationships. Now, social media sites like Facebook have enabled networks to grow exponentially and globally through the Internet – and we can measure them. Libyans could tweet locations of tanks during the Summer of 2011. Through web platform services like Ushuhadi, Macedonians can report cases of corruption through the Transparency Watch Project. But as Karen Stephenson (2011), an authority on networks, states “We literally and figuratively live in a Milky Way of possible connections. The technological connection is only a catalyst, not a driver.” When we create networks, there needs to be a rationale, social interaction, face-to-face dialogue, time to get to know each other and, most importantly, trust.

This needs to be taken into account when we think of how to make concepts like the Comprehensive Approach and Open Source Security work. In Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), the military strategic headquarters for NATO, we have built a new Comprehensive Crisis Operations Management Centre. This is to assimilate new tasks as a result of NATO’s Strategic Concept of 2010, to improve the way (learning from Operation Unified Protector in Libya) we anticipate and deal with crises, collabo-

rate better with partners and connect to a network of stakeholders to approach security and foster stability in a comprehensive way.

This new Centre is a work in progress, but a docking station that is both virtual and physical is being created and will bring a comprehensive network to life during the next phase, which will be ready next year. Building on the successful experiment with the Civil-Military Fusion Centre, we are examining ways to harness smart technology and information systems, to share knowledge, coordinate and even collaborate where appropriate. Overcoming security caveats and creating the right protocols to access information are important for success. Openness and transparency are key as well, but having the space for people to meet face to face, create confidence and build effective personal relationships is what really engenders trust. This is networked and open-source security.

Network Culture

For conservative hierarchies like the military and large, pedestrian, multinational bureaucracies with stovepipes and silos, giving free reign to catalysts and working across networks are both threatening and challenging. It means transforming culture. When we stand in our learning room with our teams and work out how to create networked security approaches, we map out networks and quickly recognise the degree of interconnectedness. When you examine the criss-crossing lines and concentric circles, you can’t help but realise that the traditional boxes and organisational layers of conventional ‘organograms’ seem inefficient, slow and reveal some redundancy. Pointing out such complexity is deemed heresy by some and incomprehensible or too challenging by others. Acknowledging the complex nature of real-world networks highlights the need for a transformation of culture, work-spaces, mind-sets and behaviours.

This is a 20th Century hierarchical structure rubbing up against a 21st Century cultural phenomenon, which we need to em-

brace and get used to. The challenge is not too dissimilar or even distant from increasing the utility of our forces in Basra when I was there. The resources tied up in redundant parts of any conventional structure need to be transferred to create more catalysts to connect and encourage networks. In looking for the people to do this, we have to turn to a younger generation, who have often inadvertently put hours of practice into using smartphones, iPads, mobile apps, Playstation and other inherently networked technolo-

gies. They are the new generation of catalysts who are already shaping our future and need to reverse-mentor us, the older generation. With these catalysts, a dose of experience and people like the businessman from Basra, we can create networks for stability. [S](#)

NOTES

- 1 Kyros meaning now is the time, as opposed to Chronos, which means this is the time.