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CIVIL INFORMATION SHARING IN THE GRAY ZONE

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, General Votel, Commander of United States Special Operations Command discussed the term “The Gray Zone” with leaders of NATO Special Operations, defining what it means to operate in the Gray Zone. USSOCOM recognized that “a slew of state and non-state actors are now aggressively opposing the international order, but in ways that fall short of recognized thresholds of traditional war.”⁰¹ This space, just short of traditional war but not peacetime, is described as the Gray Zone. SOCOM simultaneously published a white paper expounding on operating in the gray zone by focusing on the Human Domain to understand the different challenges of the Gray Zone.⁰²

The Human Domain, as outlined in the new SOCOM white paper *Operating in the Human Domain Concept*, is comprised of five elements that influence human behavior. SOCOM asserts that to achieve success in the Human Domain, and thus in the Gray Zone, special operations forces must understand and

be competent in social, cultural, physical, information and psychological elements.⁰³ Furthermore, the Civil Affairs branch defines Civil Information as data related to civilian geographic areas, infrastructure, capabilities, organizations, people and events.⁰⁴ The doctrinal definition of civil information covers at least four of the five elements outlined by the Human Domain Concept; a clear demonstration of the relationship between the Civil Affairs core task of civil information management and the requirement from SOCOM for SOF to increase understanding and competency of the Human Domain. The correlation between the Civil Affairs core task of CIM with the concept of understanding the Human Domain also shows that Civil Affairs will continue to play a key role for U.S. success in the Gray Zone.

Civil Affairs Field Manual 3-57 describes the core task of CIM as a systematic process by which Soldiers manage reports, documents, assessments and other humanitarian and non-lethal information gathered by United States Government agencies in the field regarding the human terrain.⁰⁵

Through the simple execution of CIM, the Civil Affairs branch has already been working in — and helping leaders understand — the Human Domain through the gathering of civil information. Additionally, it is important for SOF, particularly Civil Affairs Soldiers, to understand that civil information and the elements of the Human Domain encompass threat and conflict reporting to illuminate the civilian population such as an auxiliary or parallel government that is susceptible to recruitment and exploitation by a sophisticated enemy. One recent and increasingly relevant example of why this type of civil information is so important comes from examining how Daesh is recruiting for non-insurgent roles such as teachers, engineers and doctors for Syria.

To understand the Human Domain, SOF are consistently asked to work in a Joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational environment through operational plans, executive orders, and operating concepts such as *SOCOM 2020*, *ARSOE 2022* and the Human Domain Concept. To be successful in that environment, SOF must capitalize on the programs, experiences and resources that other parts of the government work towards to meet national security objectives. Now more than ever, it is important for SOF, and particularly the Civil Affairs branch, to capitalize on the JIIM environment and use all available resources to understand the Human Domain. Civil information and data is traditionally gathered by civil reconnaissance in the field; however, programmatic data and reporting from agencies such as the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development are equally important, yet commonly undervalued. These agencies conduct the preponderance of their work in the steady-state, pre-crisis, and left of Phase 0 in countries where the U.S. Government has strategic national security concerns and objectives.

Since 2012, before any other U.S. military force was directly involved, the 92nd Civil Affairs Battalion provided Civil Affairs Soldiers as the knowledge management team to work with the USG Syria Transition Assistance Response Team, based in Turkey. The team manages civil information on the Human Domain in Syria for START and

the broader civilian assistance and train and equip enterprise. The team's work serves as a proof of concept for the importance and relevance of civil information and the task of CIM in furthering USG national security objectives and SOCOM directives to operate in the Human Domain.

PART I: CIVIL INFORMATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERAGENCY INFORMATION SHARING?

Civil information includes data regarding civilian areas, structures, capabilities, organizations, people and events.⁰⁶ This data can include leaders, businesses, government entities, infrastructure, media organizations, civil society organizations and even cultural networks within a population. Civil information includes the data and means to identify the uncommitted middle population that have the potential to evolve into an auxiliary (be it by force or support for the cause) for organizations such as Daesh. The criticality of civil information cannot be understated in modern conflict as the civilian population serves as a potential recruitment pool for armed opposition groups and civil governance leaders in Daesh governed areas. There is a variety of methods used to gather civil information and understand the Human Domain. One of these methods used by START's knowledge management team is the analysis of programmatic data,

field reports, and feedback from DoS and USAID agencies. Effective and transparent information sharing protocols are critical to DoS for a whole-of-government comprehension of the civil environment.

Since the events of 9/11 the criticality of interagency dialogue, synchronization and intelligence sharing cannot be understated. Domestic security laws, executive directives, fusions cells and interagency intelligence centers that focus on interagency intelligence sharing and collaboration were developed to address the gaps that lead to catastrophic tragedy. The synchronization and sharing of intelligence are intended to prevent future terrorist attacks and address domestic and international security vulnerabilities. It is equally critical to develop a parallel requirement for synchronizing and sharing civil information derived from development, diplomatic and humanitarian assistance programs. Established information sharing protocols for these efforts has the potential to broaden the utility and applicability of this data when it is shared with agencies and organizations that are not regularly associated with civilian programming efforts in the steady-state. Without such protocols, SOF risks losing civilian data throughout steady-state planning efforts when it is arguably the most relevant.

The 2015 national security strategy recommits us to "advance democracy, human rights and building and sustaining coalitions to combat corruption and

to support open societies."⁰⁷ To better meet these objectives, the data about the individual programs and operations conducted daily by organizations such as the DoS, USAID and the Department of Defense is not intelligence but simply civil information and programmatic data that can help SOF and our nation's leaders understand the Human Domain. There are currently no policies or agencies such as the National Counterterrorism Center, requiring and emphasizing the sharing of civil information and programmatic data to foster interagency collaboration and synchronization for meeting long-term national strategic goals.

Foreign assistance programs implemented by agencies such as DoS and USAID are a form of long-term security for the United States. If basic human needs are met while democratic principles and social change are instituted abroad then our nation will be more secure and have more opportunities to prosper. Through the implementation of programs such as establishing civil society organizations, teaching about democracy and human rights and in Syria in particular, establishing local governance organizations that provide essential services, there is immense effort towards supporting our national security objectives. The civil information from the reports and data from these programs supports the visualization of the Human Domain that is important during planning efforts for future crisis. In the 2009 GAO report on Interagency

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A Civil Affairs Soldier meets with local military and civil community leaders in a village in Kosovo. Engagements such as this enable CA team members to gather critical civil information.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO

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Syrian refugee families take up shelter in a tent community in Turkey. Camps such as this can potentially provide a means for terrorists to hide in plain sight amongst displaced people and allow them to enter the migrant flow to other countries.
USAID PHOTO



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Collaboration, the GAO repeatedly sites the importance of not just sharing terrorism related information and intelligence but also information related to reconstruction, capacity building and disaster response both nationally and internationally.⁶⁸ Civil Information sharing not only promotes better collaboration and synchronization, but it allows for better analysis by leaders and policy-makers while at the same time providing a well- rounded common operating picture of the activities and organizations in a geographic area.

Policy-makers and leaders require a wide variety of information to make the best decisions to support our national security objectives. Intelligence itself is just a subset of information thus, leaders cannot simply rely on intelligence. Understanding the goals, objectives and members of a civil society organization or local council can help leaders both at the strategic and tactical level to decide not only to support that organization in the future, but also how that organization fits into the broader landscape of organizations supported by the USG. Knowing that there are existing trusted networks and organizations in a country means that agencies such as the Department of Defense new to the country, or even the battlefield, do not have to establish new links to the civilian population. There are trusted networks already established and supported by U.S. agencies and most likely those trusted networks are supportive of U.S. goals and objectives. Agencies must understand and internalize that cataloging and sharing information on civilian-focused programs, organizations and populations support national security objectives in the steady-state and becomes paramount for decision making in a crisis.

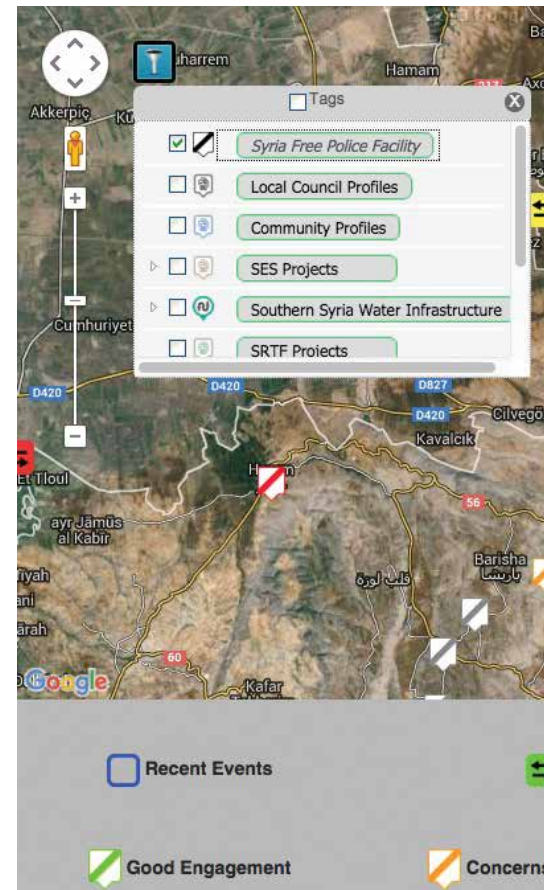
PART II: KMT MODEL: HISTORY AND INFORMATION SHARING

After the last 15 years of war, our national interests and objectives have expanded two-fold internationally; consequently, there have been many ways to try to resolve the issue of synchronization and information sharing about development and diplomacy programs and humanitarian assistance from the United States. Since

the start of the Syrian complex emergency crisis the United States has been providing non-lethal, development and humanitarian assistance to the Syrian population from both Turkey and Jordan. In an effort to synchronize the assistance across the USG, the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team was established. START is an interagency coordination mechanism based out of Embassy Ankara that is comprised of six offices and bureaus from the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development that provide assistance primarily into northern Syria. The Southern Syria Assistance Platform is an interagency team based out of Embassy Amman that coordinates the provision of assistance to the southern governorates of Syria. Without U.S. diplomatic representation in Damascus, the START and SSAP platforms are now responsible for coordinating and synchronizing U.S. foreign assistance efforts in Syria. These platforms work with international organizations, NGOs, the Governments of Turkey and Jordan, and the Syrian opposition to ensure assistance effectively addresses the needs of the Syrian people and meets U.S. policy objectives.

In 2013, with the various reports and updates generated by the START agencies and bureaus, through the implementation of their robust assistance initiatives into Syria, the Ambassador to Turkey recognized the need for a knowledge management capability within START. Under the definitions of CIM and the Human Domain, the KMT conducted CIM for START and helped the START offices, and eventually the CJIAF understand the Human Domain. KMT gathered the various reports from over seven different DoS agencies, USAID departments, various contracted implementers and international agencies. The KMT established the Protected Internet Exchange-Syria (PiX-Syria) as the universal data-sharing platform for the Syrian Crisis and created civil information products in order to illuminate the human networks within the Syrian Opposition governing bodies, security councils and actors, and other civil society organizations START identified since the beginning of the Syrian Crisis.

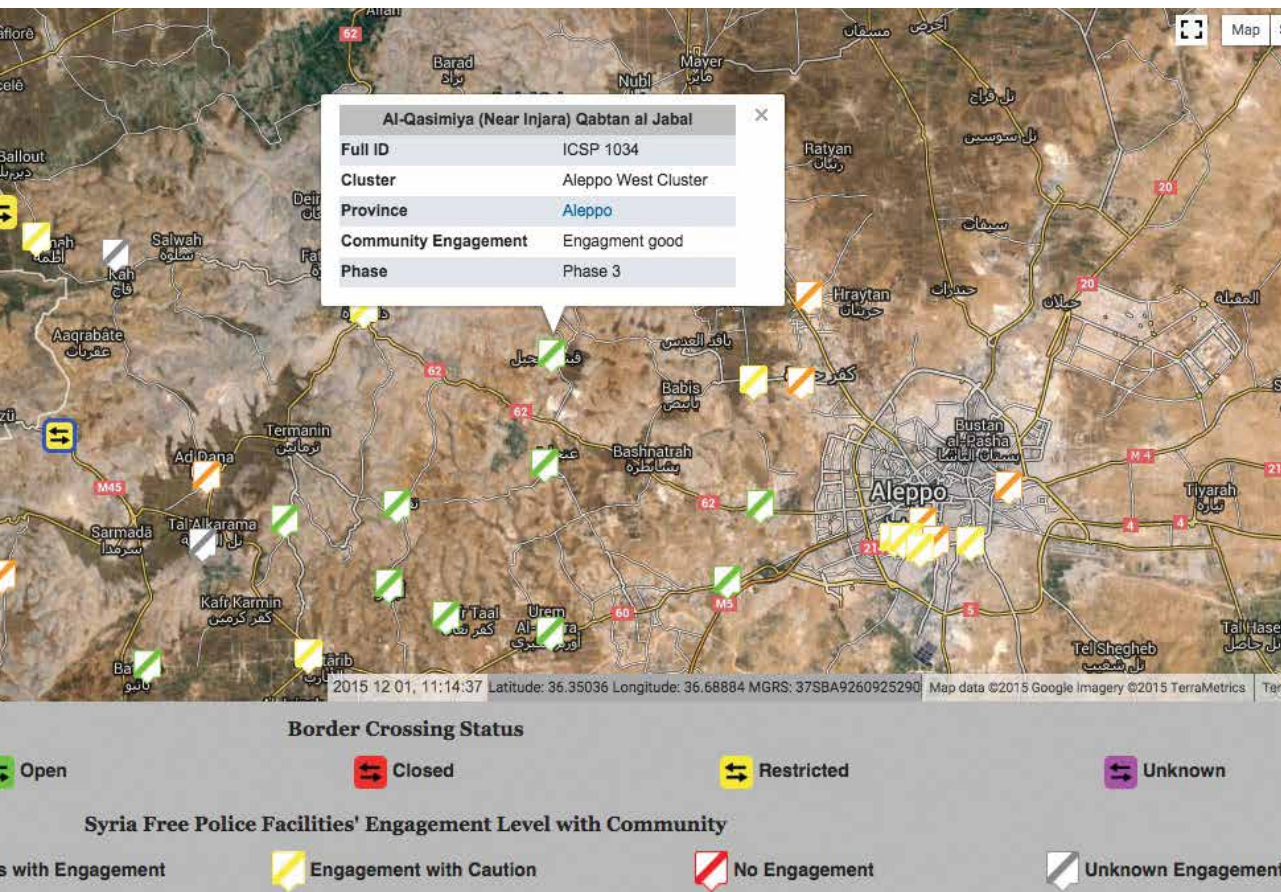
The systematic collation of information is the first step the KMT conducted



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in CIM and applies to all START and USG relevant data. The KMT consolidated and processed DoS weekly, monthly and annual diplomatic cables, weekly roll-ups, analytical papers, field surveys, implementer reports, daily cross border delivery updates, readouts of training and equipment provided to the Syrian moderate opposition and educational articles from USAID, DoS, implementers and other international organizations. These various reports include but are not limited to, information on how START's assistance efforts are being distributed to the Syrians, to whom and what populations these assistance initiatives affected and supported, and the situational perspectives of various Syrian populations who are being controlled and affected by the warring factions within Syria (Regime forces, ISIL, Al Nusra etc...).

Next, the KMT then data mines the various reports, with particular interests and focus on identifying the resilient human networks within the Syrian Opposition. KMT identified early on the need to share and collaborate this information with not only other interested DoS partners but the CENTCOM and EUCOM DoD elements



01 Products such as this Turkey/Syria Border Crossing Status Map, developed by the CA knowledge management serve as invaluable tools for government partners to plan and execute cross-border activities.

with focus and concern in this region as well. KMT established Protected Internet Exchange (PiX) Syria as the primary data repository system for START reporting. PiX is funded by NGA and is a Wikipedia-structured, interactive, searchable, repository presented at the unclassified or sensitive but unclassified level. The KMT identified PiX as the preferred data repository for START reporting for several reasons; PiX is accessible by Web access utilizing a login and pin, ensuring all users can access the information as long as they have access to the internet. The fact that PiX is not a standalone system, or requires the use of a common access card to access the data, ensures information can be easily accessed and shared by all stakeholders and interested parties. Finally, PiX content managers extract information from START reports and interweave it with other forms of open-source information; conducting a continual process of updating old and changing information as rapidly as the information in the environment changes.

KMT has designed and produced several products from the various reports and cables START produces. Perhaps one

of the widest disseminated products across the interagency is the KMT Turkey/Syria Border Crossing Product. The information compiled in this product is derived from START implementers, and the local NGOs and contractors on the ground in Syria and Turkey who transit these various border crossings in order to deliver assistance into Syria. The Border Crossing Product illustrates who is in control of each border crossing station, whether the border crossing is open or closed, and the type of traffic utilizing the border crossing, be it private, commercial, humanitarian or passenger. The KMT Border Crossing Product also contains general information, satellite imagery, and a historical time line of significant events concerning the border dating back to the beginning of the conflict. The KMT updates this border-crossing product as events occur to the digital, collaborative, interactive, border-crossing product site hosted on PiX-Syria. The Border Crossing Product is consistently used by DoS and DoD partners for planning cross-border activities, showing that a complete civil information picture is a crucial resource that isn't necessarily provided by the intelligence community.

The KMT also creates ad hoc products in response to a specific request for information from various stakeholders such as the Ambassador, theater special operations command staffs and agency bureau chiefs. One such example is the combined Civil Defense Map for Northern Syria. This particular map features an overview of the scope, location and country providing support, for all civil defense initiatives from USG, coalition partners and NGOs to Syrian civil defense assets in Northern Syria. The U.S. provides robust support to Syrian civil society through an array of activities to bolster their organizational and technical capacity, foster linkages between civil society groups and local and national governance institutions and enable them to effectively provide services to their local communities. Syrian Civil Defense Units are inherently neutral, impartial and humanitarian in nature. Their relief work predominantly consists of search and rescue, and debris removal in the wake of Daesh destruction and Syrian Regime barrel bombs and indirect fire in urban centers. The USG coordinates assistance specifically for civil defense units and the local councils that support

them with stipends, heavy and light equipment and supplies.

Before consolidating various civil defense initiatives on one map, the USG, and other partners had little to no knowledge of each other's civil defense initiatives or areas of concentration in Northern Syria. The KMT's Civil Defense Map of Northern Syria provided the common operating picture that facilitated necessary discussion among all stakeholders for combining, leveraging and de-conflicting efforts where civil defense initiatives were succeeding, failing or in areas where the programs declined due to Daesh or Jabhat al-Nusra involvement. The collation of Civil Defense initiatives represents the KMT's unique capability to provide civil information fusion and analysis, as the conduit of information flow and fulfills the requirement to the capability gap among interagency and our foreign partners in sharing information.

KMT's Civil Defense Map and the Turkey/Syria Border Crossing also represent how operationalizing the

CONUS base increases effectiveness and becomes a force multiplier for teams in theater. The 92nd Civil Affairs Battalion CIM cell created and routinely updated the Civil Defense Map and the Turkey/Syria border-crossing product. By operationalizing the CONUS base, the 92nd CIM cell allows the KMT to conduct knowledge-management operations 24 hours a day. Both of these products were transitioned to PiX Syria and the KMT digitally updates in real time as information changes on the ground.

PART III: INCLUDING THE DOD IN INTERAGENCY INTEROPERABILITY TO COMBAT THE SYRIAN AND DAESH CRISIS: A PARADIGM SHIFT FOR SYRIA

While the overall concept of closing civil information gaps remains constant, the approach is slightly modified and enhanced by the unique placement of a Civil Affairs element in a civilian assistance platform. Whereas military

efforts are usually the first and main effort in a crisis of this proportion, with civilian programming efforts initiating after security and order is established, the Syrian Crisis is a unique paradigm shift. This shift is characterized by civilian efforts initially leading the response and postured to continue providing assistance until the realization of a stable and secure political solution. In the case of Syria, civilian assistance programming for humanitarian and political transition assistance predates military involvement by almost four years. Hence, the State Department and USAID program officers initiated and developed Syrian political and armed opposition networks through non-governmental implementing organizations. A critical factor in interagency interoperability in this case was the effective institutional transfer of information and knowledge of these networks. This transfer transcends mere information management; requiring instead an interagency relationship that



01 A map featuring clickable links to information about organizations, activities and projects in the area of operations. Products such as this developed by the CA knowledge management teams serve as invaluable tools for military and government partners to plan and execute activities.

is based on trust, transparency and cross-organizational literacy. Trust and transparency go hand in hand to ensure civilian counterparts are confident that DoD planners and engagement teams understand and respect the proprietary nature of their relationships with Syrian opposition activists, fighters and humanitarian contacts. Moreover, DoD planners are dependent on the transfer of lessons-learned and institutional knowledge that civilian counterparts have accrued after nearly five years of work in response to the Syrian Crisis.

In 2014, as the U.S. strategy for Syria evolved from a purely civilian-led response to a shared partnership with the Department of Defense, the KMT was intimately involved, both forward deployed in Turkey and in the U.S., in facilitating the exchange of civil information and the relationship between START and the broader train and equip enterprise. This exchange was initiated at the tactical level between DoD engagement teams in Turkey and

CIVIL AFFAIRS REPRESENTS A CRUCIAL LINKAGE NOT ONLY AT THE STRATEGIC BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY AT THE TACTICAL AND OPERATIONAL LEVELS OF INTERAGENCY INFORMATION SHARING AND CIVIL MILITARY COOPERATION

included routine coordination with civil-military planning efforts at the headquarters responsible for the train and equip program: Combined Joint Interagency Task Force - Syria. Tactical-level information sharing is most recently and relevantly illustrated by the KMT's efforts to provide context and initially streamline information sharing protocols to support the development of a no-strike list for Northern Syria. The KMT was a natural choice to conduct the initial consolidation of USG humanitarian and governance assistance activities, in a geospatially-referenced document, for CENTCOM air strike efforts. The KMT's status as a member of START ensured the security and privacy of proprietary information that DoS and USAID program officers provided. This security protocol was critical in ensuring that program officers shared current and reliable data with CENTCOM planners while maintaining the assurance that the information would be safeguarded. These protocols laid the groundwork for future information exchanges that ensured military planners were aware of civilian efforts on an increasingly complex and dynamic battlefield. Additionally, products such as the previously mentioned Civil Defense Map, Border Crossing map and the reporting repository PIX illuminated Syrian civil networks as well as political leadership, organizational and non-standard logistical networks for military opposition groups. The relationships and information exchange facilitated by the Civil Affairs Soldiers in Turkey in support of CJIAF-S efforts encouraged SOCCENT to duplicate the KMT concept by embedding a similar element in the SSAP headquartered in Jordan; effectively integrating defense, diplomatic and development efforts across the EUCOM and CENTCOM theaters.

As the U.S. response to the Syrian Crisis approaches its fifth year and with the initiation and expansion of the Defense Department's response to the

Syrian and Daesh crisis, the State Department and USAID also embedded liaisons with the DoD train and equip headquarters to ensure effective coordination between civilian and military efforts. The initial intent of emplacing civilian program liaisons in a military headquarters was to ensure the military command understood the fundamental concept and approach of U.S. civilian assistance programming and support in Syria. These liaisons collaborated closely with the KMT as the train and equip program expanded to ensure mutual understanding and effective cooperation between all echelons of the train and equip program. Embedding interagency liaisons in a military command is not necessarily a new concept for military organizations, as we have all seen political advisers and USAID reps at combatant commands and commands across Afghanistan; the difference with the interagency liaisons in the CJIAF-S and START construct is the empowerment of the liaisons and their close information exchange facilitated through the Civil Affairs resourced KMT.

PART IV: THE WAY AHEAD

As SOF refocuses efforts and training for operating within the Gray Zone and understanding their respective pieces in meeting these challenges, Civil Affairs represents a crucial linkage not only at the strategic but more importantly at the tactical and operational levels, of interagency information sharing and civil-military cooperation. The demand for conducting targeted CIM to providing a common understanding of the Human Domain will only continue to grow as SOF maneuvers within the Gray Zone. In the case of Syria, our interagency partners were conducting assistance initiatives from the onset of the Syrian opposition uprising in early 2013. The Syrian conflict and the onset of USG assistance to stabilize the conflict



represent critical opportunities for SOF and interagency cooperation and information sharing as a component of Preparation of the Environment. As the only DoD component attached to a civilian interagency platform responding to the crisis, the Civil Affairs knowledge management team, through targeted CIM, began the arduous task of mapping the potential Syrian Opposition fighters, governing structures, resilient networks, displaced populations, neutral actors and identifying those who threaten this network. The KMT provides yet another proof of concept for a Civil Affairs capability to engage in the gray zone through the support of our interagency partners. The teams capability to provide the support without being in the conflict zone, is particularly critical given that in addition to unsuitable security conditions, it may be politically unfeasible to deploy civil affairs or other SOF teams during this phase. The KMT's management of civil information and program data effectively fills an interagency capability gap that is not addressed through the intelligence sharing community, and is uniquely positioned to provide DoD components the degree of continuity that is necessary to understanding the Human Domain prior to an escalation of the conflict. Through the

disparate reporting channels, dynamic information requirements and various competing end-states predominant throughout the interagency, the KMT functions as the neutral broker; data mining the human networks and support structures in preparation for SOF activity and continued support to DoS and USAID activities. Synchronizing and sharing civil information from diplomacy, development, humanitarian assistance programing, through the KMT between START and the CJIAF-S, continues to be a proof of concept into the role of civil information in achieving national security objectives.

The structure of the KMT does not have to be replicated in other interagency or purely SOF operations; the task of CIM, in understanding the Human Domain, must no longer be an afterthought to other Civil Affairs activities. CIM must have a central role in all Civil Affairs operations, as its importance in current Gray Zone operations in not just

the fight against Daesh but also operations such as countering Russian aggression, is paramount to successful military and interagency led activities. Civil Affairs Operators need to continue refining and training CIM and knowledge management, CA core tasks, in all phases of operations, but most critically for phase zero. Through the various CMSEs and Civil Military Operations Centers established around the world, Civil Affairs interagency partnerships and targeted CIM must provide the critical elements and building blocks to understand the Human Domain to navigate effectively in the Gray Zone. **SW**

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NOTES **01.** General Votel Speech at NATO SOF HQ conference **02.** gray zone. **03.** Department of Defense, Special Operations Command, *Operating in the Human Domain* (Tampa, FL: 2015) 3 **04.** Department of the Army, *Civil Affairs Operations* (FM 3-57) (Washington, DC: 2011) 3-10 **05.** Department of the Army, *Civil Affairs Operations* (FM 3-57) (Washington, DC: 2011) 3-10 **06.** Department of the Army, *Civil Affairs Operations* (FM 3-57) (Washington, DC: 2011) 3-10 **07.** 2015 National security strategy **08.** Janet St. Laurent and Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers, *Interagency Collaboration. Key Issues for Congressional Oversight of National Security Strategies, Organizations, Workforce, and Information Sharing* (GAO- 09-904SP). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability office, 2009.



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Civil Affairs team members conduct a Key Leader Engagement in Bosnia. Meetings such as this require a solid understanding of the Human Domain.
U.S. ARMY PHOTO