20

DISMANTLING AL-QAIDA IN IRAQ

*Liam Collins*¹

When Major General Stanley McChrystal took command of Task Force 714 (TF 714) in October 2003, he found a unit that was highly proficient at conducting raids but not one capable of dismantling a terrorist network. The Special Operations Forces (SOF) “operators” were extremely capable at kill or capture (*finish*) operations, but the task force lacked the ability to *exploit* and *analyze* intelligence in an effective manner required to *find* and *fix* new targets. McChrystal recognized that the task force could be much more effective, and he quickly developed the idea that “it takes a network to defeat a network.”²

Over the next three years, McChrystal oversaw the remarkable transformation of the task force into a highly efficient and effective network. In April 2004, the task force conducted only 10 operations in Iraq in the entire month; two years later, the task force conducted 10 operations on any given night, totaling more than 300 a month.³

This chapter describes the development and evolution of the find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze (F3EA) targeting cycle and the network that McChrystal built to combat al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). It also provides an operational vignette of how F3EA led to the death of AQI’s infamous leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Taking command of Task Force 714

TF 714 originated after 9/11 when its early predecessor, Task Force Sword, was established in Afghanistan. It was a combined (multinational), joint (multi-service) task force under the direction of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) that deployed to Afghanistan in September 2001 to conduct direct action missions against high value al-Qaida and Taliban targets.⁴

In April 2003, the task force was directed to support the invasion of Iraq. TF 16,⁵ composed of U.S. Army Rangers and other SOF units, was tasked with seizing key targets, including airfields deep in Iraq; capturing high-value targets; providing long-range special reconnaissance; and searching for weapons of mass destruction.⁶

After the fall of Baghdad, the task force’s mission changed to capturing former regime members, carrying out sensitive site exploitations at facilities suspected of being used to store or process weapons of mass destruction, and hunting down Baath Party leadership attempting to flee the country. On July 22, 2003, TF 16 led a raid that killed Saddam Hussein’s sons, who were two and three on the U.S. most wanted list.⁷

When McChrystal assumed command of TF 714 in October 2003, TF 16’s primary mission had shifted almost exclusively to hunting the former regime leadership.⁸ Teams were located with TF 16’s headquarters

in Baghdad, with General David Petraeus's 101st Airborne Division in Mosul, and with General Raymond Odierno's 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit. TF 714 also had a sizable presence in Afghanistan, a small number of personnel elsewhere in the region, and a few liaison officers at critical headquarters in the region and at a small number of partner agencies in Washington.⁹

Shortly after taking command, McChrystal took his first trip overseas, arriving in Iraq on October 24, 2003. He visited his task force headquarters in Baghdad before continuing to his "outstations," or teams, at other locations in Iraq. Both Petraeus and Odierno complimented the work of his teams, but McChrystal found the teams to be "largely cut off from the rest of [the] force." The teams and the task force had a clear mission but lacked a common strategy and "real-time links" to one another. The most glaring shortcoming was the way in which the teams handled raw intelligence.¹⁰

His task force understood the need to collect documents and electronic media for its intelligence value and worked on mastering "sensitive site exploitation," but the captured material was rarely exploited. Teams would grab everything they could find on target, stuff it in garbage bags or burlap sacks, load it on the helicopter with anyone they captured, and send it off to the headquarters for analysis. But teams never received anything back; it was a black hole.¹¹

When McChrystal inspected the intelligence processing facility at the headquarters at Baghdad International Airport, he opened a door to a spare room and found it "filled with piles of these plastic and burlap bags stuffed with captured material" that appeared to be unopened.¹² To be fair, the headquarters attempted to exploit the captured media and documents, but it lacked capacity. The media exploitation cell consisted of a single individual attempting to exploit the more than 75 computers that had been recovered.¹³

After his overseas visit, McChrystal concluded that his task force had five significant shortfalls: a lack of a common strategy; a lack of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets; a lack of human intelligence; a lack of interrogators; and a lack of document exploitation capability. McChrystal realized there was no common strategy and the headquarters was irrelevant to the forward teams, with each team fighting its own, independent campaign. He saw that he needed to tie the forward teams and the rear headquarters into a single fight.¹⁴

Two months later, TF 16 captured Saddam Hussein, but the team based in Tikrit, not at headquarters, conducted the exploitation that led to his capture. Starting with a seemingly low-level and distant lead, the team conducted a series of raids and interrogations that ultimately led them to Saddam on December 14.¹⁵

The start of find, fix, finish, exploit, and analyze

Despite the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2004, TF 16's mission was far from over. It quickly transitioned from capturing former regime elements to AQI, with its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, replacing Saddam Hussein as its top target.

McChrystal understood the importance that al-Zarqawi had in Iraq, but he also recognized where Iraq fit in the larger fight against al-Qaida. With most of al-Qaida's senior leaders believed to be increasingly isolated in Pakistan, al-Qaida needed to remain relevant. It was difficult for the al-Qaida core to conduct operations, so it became reliant on its affiliates in Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, and Iraq to remain active. These groups were largely cut off from the al-Qaida leadership, and the local groups often acted on their own, with little guidance or direction.¹⁶

Communication, when it did occur, was slow, often through couriers carrying compact discs or letters; the leaders simply did not communicate using e-mail or phone.¹⁷ Given this decentralized network, McChrystal concluded that there was "no single person or place" that the United States could strike that would cause al-Qaida to collapse.¹⁸ So he developed a strategy to target "two of the enemy's surfaces": al-Qaida's senior leadership and its regional affiliates. If successful, the al-Qaida brand would suffer, as onlookers who might consider joining or supporting the group would think twice after seeing the organizational losses.¹⁹

In the summer of 2004, Colonel Bennet Sacolick, the TF 16 commander, came into McChrystal's office and put a single PowerPoint slide on the monitor that read "FIND-FIX-FINISH-EXPLOIT-ANALYZE."²⁰ The words represented the targeting cycle that his deputy, Colonel Scott Miller, had outlined earlier in the year.

Sacolick's brief captured what the task force referred to as the "blink" problem.²¹ A blink was anything that slowed or degraded the targeting process. This process often involved at least a half dozen units or agencies working in separate locations. Between and within each step of the process, information crossed organizational lines, cultural barriers, physical distances, or time zones.

Sacolick summarized the ineffectiveness of the process that existed at the time: "By the time we're ready to go after another target it's often days later, the situation has changed, and we're essentially starting from square one." McChrystal described this process as "[feeling] slow at the time. In retrospect, it was glacial."²²

The task force could sense AQI growing. They wanted to hit targets but lacked the actionable intelligence of where to find them. Most nights, they were stuck sitting in their base. It would take a new approach to defeat the enemy; it would take a network to defeat a network.

Building the network and expanding F3EA capability

Over the next two years, TF 714 would build the aircraft while in flight. Simultaneously, McChrystal flattened the organization with the help of video teleconferences (VTCs), established a robust liaison network, created two Joint Interagency Task Forces (JIATFs), expanded and improved interrogation capability, expanded ISR capability, and improved the document exploitation capability.

Flattening the organization

McChrystal's first task was flattening the organization—a rigid hierarchy could not keep pace with a networked enemy. What happened in one region impacted others, so the subordinate teams had to have a complete picture to wage an effective campaign. A rigid hierarchical structure impeded the flexibility of subordinate commanders to execute time-sensitive operations and their ability to rapidly share information.

To increase situational awareness, McChrystal expanded the use of VTCs within TF 714. He forced all his deployed teams to take part in daily operations and intelligence meetings and purchased the required communications packages to make it possible. This provided the dispersed elements situational awareness to everything within the command and allowed each element to understand how they contributed to the larger campaign plan.²³ Many task force members were initially opposed to attending daily meetings, but they soon saw the value. The daily VTCs provided the forum to synchronize the task force's efforts so that everyone knew the priorities.²⁴

McChrystal took another measure by establishing a "portal"—a one-stop shop on the task force's internal network to find all the task force's operations and intelligence information. It served as a repository of information and a venue to manage important staff actions. To force its use, McChrystal and his staff would constantly emphasize the importance of using the portal, and his chief of staff was well known for remarking, "you are either a martyr or a zealot" to anyone who did not fully embrace it. Eventually, McChrystal expanded portal access to his conventional military and interagency partners.²⁵

A final measure that McChrystal implemented to flatten the task force was changing the e-mail protocol. If information was meant for McChrystal and his staff, subordinates were mandated to send it directly to him and his staff rather than going through multiple layers of command, which both delayed and filtered the information that was necessary for McChrystal to understand both the enemy situation and his own command. Yet to make this system function, everyone needed to understand what McChrystal and his primary staff needed and what someone else could handle. Otherwise, the volume of e-mail would cripple McChrystal and his primary staff.²⁶

Expanding the liaison network

McChrystal's next task was to expand his liaison network. In April 2004, TF 714 supported Major General James Mattis and his Marines in the first battle of Fallujah. Yet McChrystal was caught by surprise when Mattis informed him that Washington had halted the attack when they were on the verge of taking the city. McChrystal had not realized that Washington had concerns with the attack, and he blamed himself for having established too few links with the Marines. He described it as "a mistake I worked hard not to repeat."²⁷ Soon thereafter, McChrystal sent liaison officers to as many units and commands as he could and would soon expand the liaisons to relevant agencies in Washington.²⁸

McChrystal believed eliminating the "blinks" would have a dramatic payoff, but it required significant physical, organizational, procedural, and cultural changes from his interagency partners. It required everyone in the network to believe in the network premise and trust their counterparts throughout the network, including those they would never meet in person or with whom they might not have otherwise communicated.²⁹

To bring the task force and interagency partners closer together, he greatly expanded the TF 714 operations and intelligence VTCs. Until this time, they primarily served as a synchronization tool for his staff. But McChrystal's newly formatted operations and intelligence meeting differed from those conducted by most units by "its regularity; the size, diversity and dispersion of the forum; and the richness of the information discussed."³⁰ The VTC occurred six days a week: at 4 PM in Baghdad, which was still several hours prior to the start of many of the task force's night raids, and 9 AM in Washington, which was the start of the work day for many agencies.

In the winter of 2004, the VTC's audience was relatively small. It included some of the larger bases in Afghanistan and Iraq and the conference room of a few key agencies in Washington. By the summer of 2005, the VTC had grown to include even the most remote bases thanks to the development of pre-packaged communication bundles that could connect from anywhere in the world. Eventually, anyone with access to the portal could watch the daily operations and intelligence meeting from their computer.³¹ By 2007, the daily meeting was a worldwide forum of thousands of people associated with the mission, with up to 72 distinct locations participating daily.³²

Beyond the value the operations and intelligence meetings provided in terms of sharing information, McChrystal described it as the "single most powerful tool I had at my disposal in leading a dispersed force." It provided him nine hours each week to "influence, inspire and learn" from the diverse force that he led.³³ He established a culture where "everyone knows everything . . . all the time."³⁴ Situational awareness was centralized, while decision-making was decentralized.³⁵ The culture encouraged initiative and free thinking, liberating subordinates to act without hesitation.

Everyone left the daily operations and intelligence meeting knowing the task force's current intent, strategy, rules, and approvals. Outside of the military members of the task force, the operations and intelligence meeting helped animate the Washington beltway for critical support despite the fact that it was a nine-to-five job for many of them. It served as a daily reminder that the United States was at war.³⁶

Forming the JIATFs

Given the geographical dispersion of al-Qaida, McChrystal understood that the military alone could not defeat the group, but he recognized that "early on, counterproductive infighting among the [Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)], [Department of State], [Department of Defense] and others back in Washington threatened that campaign."³⁷ Likewise, General John Abizaid, the CENTCOM commander, grew increasingly frustrated with the U.S. government's lack of a "unity of effort" and convened a conference in January 2004 to focus key organizations for the war on terrorism. Abizaid argued that two years after 9/11, the United States had lost its focus on al-Qaida.³⁸

McChrystal sought to leverage the enthusiasm from the conference into real gains by bringing all potential intelligence sources to bear and followed the recommendation of Rear Admiral Bill McRaven, his deputy, to form a JIATF.³⁹ A JIATF is an interagency element that is formed when the close integration of two or more agencies is required for a specific task and purpose. TF 714 required a JIATF focused on al-Qaida to leverage the CIA's human intelligence, the National Security Agency's signals intelligence, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) forensic and investigative expertise, the Defense Intelligence Agency's military reach, and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's mapping ability.⁴⁰

While the concept was not new, McChrystal described it as a "transformative" step for TF 714. McChrystal understood that to be effective, the JIATF had to be physically located in Afghanistan or Iraq because

the Beltway culture compelled, or allowed, the agencies to be less collaborative. Valuable information that might slide across a table downrange had to cross miles and clear bureaucratic hurdles back in Washington where the myriad of essential but compelling priorities, from bureaucracy to family life, always slowed action.⁴¹

Having everyone in the same tent allowed the analysis to be processed faster, which was essential for fleeting targets. Less obvious but even more important, having them live and work together decreased the gravitational pull back to their respective headquarters in Washington and increased "the sense of shared mission and purpose."⁴²

McChrystal established a JIATF in a tent in Bagram, Afghanistan, and the seats slowly filled over the ensuing weeks and months. Most of the JIATF was resourced from outside of his command—only the director, deputy director, and a handful of analysts came from his stateside special operations unit. Success was not measured by how many reports an individual produced; instead, it was measured by the impact of the reports.⁴³ McChrystal described the establishment of the JIATF as beginning the process of "turning TF 714 from a collection of niche strike forces into a network able to integrate diverse elements of the [U.S. government] into a unified effort."⁴⁴

Al-Zarqawi's network had grown more sophisticated and more powerful since the U.S. invasion in 2003, and the steady increase of foreign fighters was one measure of effectiveness that indicated that al-Zarqawi was perceived to be winning. At the time, the task force estimated that 100–150 foreign fighters entered Iraq each month; by comparison, the coalition estimated insurgent numbers at 12,000–20,000 fighters.⁴⁵ But the strategic effect of the foreign fighters was significant. They accounted for roughly 75% of all suicide bombers in Iraq, and since they had no stake in a stable Iraq, they were not afraid to hit infrastructure targets that only made the situation worse.⁴⁶

In December 2004, McChrystal created a second JIATF, JIATF-West, to reverse engineer the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. The JIATF in Bagram, focused on al-Qaida leaders in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, was renamed JIATF-East. Like JIATF-East, JIATF-West had its own weekly VTC, which focused primarily on the foreign fighter network. The VTC quickly grew to include station chiefs from across the region and three dozen agencies back in Washington. This improved our understanding of the enemy network, as each agency could contribute its piece to the larger puzzle to help "connect the dots."⁴⁷

Improving the interrogation capability

Among the task force's various shortfalls, its interrogation capability was McChrystal's most urgent priority. On the day he took command, his deputy, Air Force Brigadier General Lyle Koenig, called from Iraq and told McChrystal, "We need to close the screening facility. . . . We don't have the expertise or experience to do this correctly."⁴⁸ McChrystal called it "our Achilles' heel" and remarked that "if we don't do

this right, we'll be taken off the battlefield.”⁴⁹ Everyone recognized that detainees were a critical source of intelligence, so he resolved to keep the facility open but made fixing it a priority.⁵⁰

At the time, the task force had a skeletal staff of about 13 people working in inadequate facilities, and they rarely provided the teams any intelligence of value from the detainees they captured.⁵¹ But they were only partially to blame. The teams would simply throw anyone they captured onto a helicopter with bags full of captured material with no explanation as to who they were or the contents of the bags. The interrogation team did not know where to start and lacked the time to conduct enough interrogation sessions to extract anything of value.

Out of necessity, the operators, who lacked formal training, were sometimes forced to conduct their own interrogations.⁵² In one instance, headquarters finally sent a formally trained interrogator to a team to use at their location; however, the interrogator was trained as a “strategic debriefer” and had no experience as a tactical interrogator. After a week of disappointing results, the team sent him back to the screening facility so he could be paired with an experienced interrogator to conduct on-the-job training. The final straw came after the team discovered the “interrogator” had never heard of “Stockholm syndrome.”

Improvements only came when the operators started accompanying their detainees back to the tactical screening facility instead of sending the detainees to the screening facility blindly. This allowed the operators to learn what the interrogators needed to be effective and vice versa. They soon learned that providing the interrogators with detailed information of what they learned on target helped the interrogator refine his or her questioning and hasten the exploitation process.⁵³

Likewise, the operators educated the interrogators on what they needed from the detainees. The screening facility quickly became so effective that instead of the teams resisting transferring their detainees until after they had interrogated them, they could not get them transferred fast enough.⁵⁴ In 2004, TF 16 built a professional screening facility that provided a clean, sterile environment with the appropriate oversight to include cameras in every room.⁵⁵

Expanding intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capability

Over the course of the war, TF 16's ISR capability increased exponentially in terms of platforms, sensor packages, and employment. When McChrystal took command in October 2003, he had access to only a single Predator unmanned aerial vehicle that was augmented by a helicopter outfitted with a camera.⁵⁶

By June 2004, the task force had gained access to a few more Predators, but the process for controlling them remained awkward. The Air Force controlled the platforms and viewed them as a strategic collection platform and tried to manage them this way, but the task force required tactical surveillance to watch people or vehicles for the subtleties required for man hunting or network operations.⁵⁷ Eventually, the task force gained control of dozens of platforms.

The expanded use of ISR started to pay off when the U.S. military's ground operations into Fallujah were halted. While watching a Predator feed, one of the task force's intelligence analysts noted that a tractor appeared to be blocking a street to keep out foot traffic, so he directed the Predator, through its controller thousands of miles away, to investigate. There he observed what looked like men loading suspicious crates onto flatbed trucks that they covered with canvas. When the first truck pulled away, the analyst followed it with the Predator. When it entered Baghdad, the task force commander launched the finish force to intercept the vehicle. As expected, they found it full of munitions: machine guns, grenade launchers, rockets, and explosives for car bombs.⁵⁸

After the operation, they flew the Predator back to the second truck and followed it to a house at the edge of Fallujah that they assessed to be a bomb-making factory. With ground operations into Fallujah still on hold, the TF 16 commander called an airstrike on the house. Seconds after the bomb detonated, the munitions in the house started to cook off and continued to burn for the next 20 minutes—this

confirmed they had indeed hit a large weapons cache. Sources in Fallujah and signal intercepts indicated that 20 people, most of them Tunisian foreign fighters, had been killed when the house exploded. This operation validated the task force's ISR techniques that would be replicated hundreds of times in the following years.⁵⁹

After visiting Israel in February 2004, McChrystal asked SOCOM to bypass the slow acquisition process and buy ready-made Israeli platforms. The Air Force rejected SOCOM's attempt and instead promised to quickly field more Predators. After the Air Force failed to follow through on its promise, SOCOM purchased six commercial single-engine turboprop planes and gutted the insides of all amenities, stripping them down to metal frame to reduce weight—the lighter the aircraft, the more fuel it could carry and the longer it could fly and collect intelligence. Only essential communication and surveillance equipment was installed. This fleet was soon dubbed the "Confederate Air Force."⁶⁰

In addition to expanding the fleet itself, the sensor packages continued to improve. In the spring of 2004, a couple operators briefed McChrystal and his staff about a technology they encountered that, if slightly modified, could prove game changing by allowing the task force to capitalize on the enemy's own increasing use of newer technologies. The potential of the product was obvious, and McChrystal directed them to produce the capability.⁶¹

After several months of working with interagency partners and technology experts, their innovation was ready to field. To complement the technology, the operators also developed software that "revealed the relationships among the owners of captured equipment," which provided the task force a vivid understanding of the enemy's organization. McChrystal described it as an "accelerant to F3EA that had a distinct impact on [the al-Zarqawi network], forcing them to modify how they communicated and making it much harder to hide in the expanses of Anbar."⁶²

Expanding document and media exploitation capability

The lack of adequate document and media exploitation capability was one of the last significant shortfalls to be addressed. Several solutions were developed early on, but none were particularly effective. Most teams identified one or two computer-savvy operators to exploit the computers they captured, since they never received anything back after shipping them off. It was slow, however, and even if they pulled the data, they lacked the linguists to analyze the exploited material. Another solution was to ship them back to the United States for exploitation, but since it required more than 30 days to ship and process, any information recovered was rarely "actionable."⁶³

To better triage and exploit captured documents, the task force created the Joint Exploitation Team. Given the massive amount of media that was captured, it was impossible for such a small element—it started with four reservists—to exploit media quickly. It could only triage. The task force hired Arabic linguists to improve its exploitation and analysis capacity, but exponential improvement only occurred after the National Media Exploitation Center contributed a "powerhouse" capability that the task force could not generate internally.⁶⁴

The National Media Exploitation Center's 30–40 people had the ability to download the contents of locked or damaged computers and could extract phone numbers, names, messages, images, and, using its software, process and store the data and link it to other information that would not only find individual targets but also illuminate large portions of the network.⁶⁵

By this time, the task force possessed an effective triage capability in Iraq, so the solution was to leverage the National Media Exploitation Center's capability through reach back.⁶⁶ This required pushing large amounts of data to Washington, so the task force purchased huge satellite dishes and paid for commercial satellite bandwidth to push the data.⁶⁷ Luckily, the dot-com bust created a glut in commercial satellite pipelines, and there was excess capacity available for the task force to buy. The task force was reported to have spent close to \$1 million a day on commercial bandwidth early in the war.⁶⁸

The payoff was almost immediate. The National Media Exploitation Center saw instant value of their contributions and soon started working 24/7 operations to support TF 714. The exponential growth of document and media exploitation served as another significant accelerant to the F3EA cycle.⁶⁹ Since the exploitation of captured battlefield material exceeded the capability of forward-deployed intelligence professionals, “exploitation VTCs” were created where specialists in Washington could weigh in on material only minutes after capture.⁷⁰

The results

By the end of McChrystal’s first year in command, TF 714 had grown from disparate strike teams into a budding network. McChrystal provided a common strategy; developed the F3EA targeting cycle; flattened his organization; expanded his liaison network; established two JIATFs; and expanded interrogation, ISR, and media exploitation.

In Iraq, however, the task force conducted only 18 operations in August 2004, little more than the 10 it conducted in April. At the same time, insurgent attacks were up five-fold to more than 2,500 a month, casualties had more than doubled to more than 750 a month, and coalition fatalities nearly doubled to just under 80 a month.⁷¹ McChrystal had built his interagency network, but it had yet to mature.

Over the winter of 2004–2005, the task force’s main effort shifted from *finish* to *exploit* and *analyze*. By the summer of 2005, the operators had mastered the F3EA cycle, and it became a true operations-intelligence cycle.⁷² Operators were now involved in all phases of the cycle, not just the finish phase. They were watching ISR video, taking notes, directing drones, reading interrogation and other intelligence reports, and mapping the enemy network on dry-erase boards.⁷³ Because they understood the network and the intelligence picture, it accelerated the F3EA process; the operators could ask pointed questions on targets, which could immediately lead to subsequent targets and further accelerate the F3EA cycle.⁷⁴

By the summer of 2005, the task force was finally pressuring AQI. The task force became so effective that many enemy leaders, even mid-level ones, started sleeping with suicide vests or barricading themselves in basements and firing through the floorboards when the task force entered.⁷⁵ Their desperation was on display.

Despite the shortfall of adequate interrogators, by late 2005, TF 16 had what Lieutenant General Michael Flynn called “industrial-scale, capture-interrogation-exploitation operations.” Just as ISR assets were “massed” to provide an unblinking eye, exploitation capabilities were massed to exploit detainees and find subsequent targets in record time. As a result, when interrogators entered the booth to interrogate a detainee for the first time, they had a wealth of knowledge on the individual, which made them more effective and efficient at pulling information. Interrogation booths were next to the rooms where document and media exploitation occurred. Analysts were paired with interrogators in teams that worked together from start to finish for each detainee.⁷⁶

Operators who captured detainees often joined the interrogation team and provided detailed sketches showing where detainees were captured and where documents and media were recovered, which was necessary to determine what equipment belonged to whom and to help identify the most significant members captured on target. While the operator was debriefing the interrogation team, other members of the network were exploiting the media and documents.⁷⁷

By the end of 2005, McChrystal had fully transformed his command. The operators fully embraced F3EA, making it an effective operational cycle. He had flattened the organization by pushing out communications packages. Running effective daily operational and intelligence VTCs together with other VTCs provided an environment where situational awareness was centralized, but decision-making decentralized. With the help of the JIATFs, ISR, document and media exploitation, interrogations, and new signals intelligence collection capabilities, the F3EA cycle had been accelerated from a process that took days and weeks to a process that took hours, minutes, and seconds.

Operational Vignette: the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

TF 714's ability to find and ultimately kill AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi demonstrates the amazing evolution of the task force. The first lead for the operation came on January 6, 2006, from a liaison officer who reported that Iraqi forces had captured Abu Zar, a high-value target on TF 16's target list. Abu Zar was subsequently transferred to the task force screening facility, where the expanded interrogation capability paid off.⁷⁸ Abu Zar identified a group of buildings in Yusufiyah, a rural area on the outskirts of Baghdad, that AQI used for planning and staging and that Abu Ayyub al-Masri, al-Zarqawi's deputy and the *amir* of the foreign fighter network, used for shelter. TF 16 immediately redirected ISR to Yusufiyah.⁷⁹

For eight weeks, the TF 16 intelligence analyst directed spare ISR to watch Yusufiyah. The patient and robust use of ISR paid off on April 8, 2006, when the analyst observed a convoy of vehicles approaching the house. The task force loaded helicopters and launched for a daytime raid. While airborne, one of the vehicles departed, but having multiple ISR platforms allowed the task force to continue to observe the house and follow the car to another location. Meeting resistance at the house, the finish force killed five insurgents and conducted a thorough sensitive site exploitation. The finish force then launched for the second location, where, encountering little resistance, they detained the 12 men that they found.⁸⁰

The interrogations of the 12 individuals produced nothing of value until the 51st interrogation of a detainee named Mubassir. Had it not been for the task force's new detention facility and additional capacity, it never would have been able to conduct the necessary number of interview sessions required to discover this critical intelligence. Mubassir provided information that Abd al-Rahman, al-Zarqawi's spiritual advisor, lived in Baghdad and met with al-Zarqawi every 7–10 days.⁸¹ After reading the tactical interrogation report, the TF 16 intelligence analyst directed ISR to fly to the address that Mubassir had provided. The ISR fleet had grown to such a point that the analyst had several assets at his level of control.⁸²

Only minutes after arriving, the ISR platform observed a silver sedan pull up in front of the house. The driver exited the vehicle and entered the house before returning to the car with a second individual and proceeding to drive away. The analyst directed the ISR operator to stay on the car and followed it to another house that was one of five locations that the task force believed was part of al-Masri's courier network.⁸³

What he observed matched the information from Mubassir's tactical interrogation report. If it was al-Rahman that they were observing and if the intelligence was correct, he would meet with al-Zarqawi within the next 7–10 days. Over the next few days, the analyst directed much of the task force's ISR to watching the targets. After further interviews, Mubassir provided 14 sites in Baghdad related to al-Rahman's movement routine.⁸⁴

To develop al-Rahman's pattern of life—necessary to identify signs that he was meeting al-Zarqawi—the task force dedicated 70% of its ISR fleet to the effort. The tradeoff, however, was that the number of raids conducted by the task force dropped significantly because the ISR, which was critical to finding and fixing new targets, was focused on a single target.⁸⁵

McChrystal was concerned about the decrease in the operational tempo because he wanted to keep constant pressure on the network. The decision to focus on a single target was controversial within the command. Some wanted to detain al-Rahman for questioning, believing that if they did, he would provide information on al-Zarqawi. Others thought he was their only lead to al-Zarqawi and would be unlikely to talk, and his capture would spook al-Zarqawi and cause him to flee.⁸⁶

A new TF 16 commander arrived on June 1. He had previously served as a JIATF director and was firmly in the camp that believed it was best to continue to wait and follow al-Rahman in the hopes that he would lead to al-Zarqawi.⁸⁷

On June 7, after some 19 days of heavy ISR coverage, moving trucks showed up at al-Rahman's house. While watching the ISR feed the following day, the task force commander and intelligence analyst noticed more strange behavior. As usual, al-Rahman entered the silver sedan at his brother-in-law's house, but

instead of driving to his house as he usually did, he circled around the neighborhood and returned to his brother-in-law's house, driving as if he was worried about being followed.⁸⁸

From there, developments really diverged from al-Rahman's normal pattern of life that they had observed over the past 19 days. This time when the vehicle departed, it took a highway out of Baghdad toward Baqubah. The vehicle pulled over to the side of the six-lane highway, dropped off al-Rahman, and then drove off. Al-Rahman started walking against traffic and put a cell phone to his ear. A few seconds later, a blue truck stopped, picked him up, and then accelerated away.⁸⁹

One ISR platform stayed with the silver sedan while a second followed the truck. An hour later, the truck arrived in Baqubah and pulled into a parking area in front of what appeared to be a restaurant in a commercial part of town. Al-Rahman exited the vehicle and entered the building. A minute later, a white pickup truck with a red stripe pulled up and parked nose to nose with the truck. A man exited the vehicle and entered the building.

Minutes later, when a couple of men exited the building, the intelligence analyst quickly identified one as al-Rahman even though he had changed his clothing. After watching al-Rahman for 19 days, he could identify al-Rahman by his gait. At this point, the task force had nine ISR platforms following four targets: the silver sedan in Baghdad, the way station in Baqubah, the blue truck parked there, and the white pickup driving out of town.⁹⁰

The pickup drove three miles northwest of Baqubah toward the small town of Hibhib. Outside of Hibhib, the truck turned off a frontage road and stopped halfway up the driveway of a secluded house. Al-Rahman exited the vehicle and entered the house. The TF 16 commander had no way of knowing if al-Rahman was meeting al-Zarqawi, but he determined he was and decided to bomb the house.⁹¹

Bombing was the finish option of last resort since it limits intelligence exploitation—a dead enemy cannot be interrogated, and destroyed electronic media cannot be exploited—but a manned operation was deemed too risky. The task force had hit hundreds of targets over the past two years, but this target offered al-Zarqawi too many escape routes, and he had narrowly evaded capture too many times before. Additionally, being isolated, the risk of collateral damage and civilian casualties from large bombs was almost negligible. A little more than an hour after al-Rahman entered the house, two F-16s dropped two 500-pound bombs on the building.⁹²

Already airborne, the assault force was 18 minutes away when the first bomb fell. By the time they arrived, Iraqi police were already on the scene, and they had loaded a single person into an ambulance. The police claimed not to know his identity, yet he was the only person they evacuated from the house. The task force believed he was al-Zarqawi. He was barely alive, and despite attempts to resuscitate him, he died within the hour. After securing al-Zarqawi, the task force launched on the other targets they had built over the past three weeks. Later that night, the FBI agent assigned to the JIATF confirmed through a fingerprint match that they had killed al-Zarqawi.⁹³

Conclusion

The death of al-Zarqawi demonstrated the effectiveness of the F3EA targeting cycle and the network that supported it. It all started with information from one of McChrystal's many liaison officers. Throughout the multi-week operation, the improved screening facility and its interrogator and analyst teams pulled valuable intelligence from detainees and disseminated their reports on the portal for everyone to analyze. The growing ISR fleet was critical in determining al-Rahman's pattern of life. In total, more than 600 hours of ISR were dedicated to finding and fixing al-Zarqawi during the operation.⁹⁴

The operators had learned patience and understood the role that intelligence played in finding their top-priority targets. Years earlier, they might have grown impatient with the low operational tempo and launched on al-Rahman prematurely, blowing the opportunity to finish al-Zarqawi. By this time, they operated more like the law enforcement community and put much more time into gathering intelligence

and developing targets than they did in the raid itself. From start to finish, it looked more like an operation to take down an organized crime ring than a military raid.

The development of the F3EA cycle and the evolution of the task force was significant. It went from being able to conduct 10 operations in a month to 10 each night in only two years. From 2005–2007, the task force sent more than 2,000 Iraqis to trial.⁹⁵ By early 2010, AQI was decimated. What had once been a broad terrorist network was now an underground group with only a few cells remaining.

The task force, with their Iraqi counterparts, killed or captured most of AQI's top leadership between January and March of 2010, including its *amir* for northern Iraq, the *amir* for operations, the *amir* of Mosul and his successor, the *amir* for east Mosul, the economic security *amir*, the *amir* for Baghdad, and an operative responsible for Baghdad's first major suicide attack in the summer of 2003.⁹⁶

On April 18, 2010, in a raid near Tikrit, Iraqi Forces and TF 714 killed Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who had succeeded al-Zarqawi as AQI's leader, and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State of Iraq.⁹⁷ The F3EA targeting cycle proved instrumental in nearly taking AQI off the battlefield in Iraq.

Notes

- 1 Some of the text in this chapter is drawn from a much longer chapter in the author's dissertation. For more, see Liam Collins, "Military Innovation in War: The Criticality of the Senior Military Leader" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014), <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01br86b3727>.
- 2 Stanley McChrystal, "It Takes a Network," *Foreign Policy*, February 21, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/21/it-takes-a-network/>.
- 3 Michael Flynn, interview with author, April 2, 2013; Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 145.
- 4 Leigh Neville, *Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Osprey, 2008), 8; "Task Force 11–Task Force Sword," *Global Security*, accessed January 26, 2013, www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/tf-11.htm.
- 5 The task force went through several name changes. For simplicity, I will use one number for each component: TF 714 for the overarching task force and TF 16 for the subordinate task force in Iraq. See Leigh Neville, *SOF in Iraq* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 26–42.
- 6 Ibid., 9, 30–31.
- 7 Rym Brahimi et al., "Saddam's Sons Killed in Raid," *CNN*, July 22, 2003, www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/07/22/sprj.iq.sons/; Neville, *SOF in Iraq*, 41–42.
- 8 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 101.
- 9 Collins, "Military Innovation in War," 325.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Former JIATF deputy director, interview with author, January 29, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 106.
- 12 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 106. The unexploited captured material was confirmed during interviews by many others.
- 13 Former TF 714 field artillery officer, interview with author, April 12, 2013.
- 14 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 106–107.
- 15 Eric Maddox, *Mission: Black List #1* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).
- 16 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 115–116.
- 17 Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012); Liam Collins, "The Abbottabad Documents," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 5 (2012): 1–4; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 115–116.
- 18 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 115–116.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Stanley McChrystal, interview with author, April 1, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 153.
- 21 Scott Miller, e-mail message to author, March 26, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 153–154.
- 22 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 154.
- 23 Former TF 16 commander, interview with author, February 1, 2013; Former JIATF deputy director, interview, January 29, 2013.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).
- 26 Former TF 16 commander, interview, February 1, 2013; Former JIATF deputy director, interview, January 29, 2013.

- 27 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 131.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 154–155.
- 30 Ibid., 163.
- 31 Former JIATF deputy director, interview, January 29, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 163.
- 32 Former JIATF director, interview with author, February 7, 2013; Former JIATF deputy director, interview, January 29, 2013.
- 33 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 163.
- 34 Miller, e-mail message to author, March 26, 2013.
- 35 Flynn, interview.
- 36 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 164.
- 37 Ibid., 116.
- 38 John Abizaid, interview with author, April 12, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 117–177.
- 39 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 117–177.
- 40 Ibid., 117.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Former JIATF deputy director, interview, January 29, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 117.
- 43 Former JIATF director, interview with author, April 5, 2013.
- 44 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 119.
- 45 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 170–171; John Burns, “Iraq’s Ho Chi Minh Trail,” *New York Times*, June 5, 2005, www.nytimes.com/2005/06/05/weekinreview/iraqs-ho-chi-minh-trail.html.
- 46 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007), 18.
- 47 Former JIATF director, interview with author, February 1, 2013; Former JIATF director, interview, February 7, 2013; Former JIATF director, interview, April 5, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 162–166.
- 48 Ibid., 199.
- 49 McChrystal, interview; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 200.
- 50 Former TF 16 intelligence officer, interview with author, March 6, 2013.
- 51 Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, 246.
- 52 Former TF 16 commander, interview, April 8, 2013.
- 53 Former JIATF director, interview, April 5, 2013; Former TF 16 commander, interview, April 8, 2013.
- 54 Flynn, interview; Former TF 16 intelligence officer, interview, March 6, 2013.
- 55 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 200–201.
- 56 Ibid., 37.
- 57 Ibid., 138.
- 58 Ibid., 139–143.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid., 157–158.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Former TF 16 commander, interview, April 8, 2013.
- 64 Flynn, interview.
- 65 Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, 244–245.
- 66 Flynn, interview.
- 67 Former JIATF director, interview, February 7, 2013; Former JIATF deputy director, interview, January 29, 2013; Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, 244–245.
- 68 Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, 246.
- 69 Flynn, interview.
- 70 Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*.
- 71 U.S. Department of Defense, “Measuring Security and Stability in Iraq,” 27; “U.S. Military Casualties—Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Casualty; and Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, “Iraq Coalition Casualties,” accessed November 19, 2012.
- 72 Former JIATF director, interview, February 1, 2013; Former JIATF director, interview, April 5, 2013.
- 73 Former TF 16 commander, interview, April 8, 2013.
- 74 Former JIATF director, interview, February 1, 2013.
- 75 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 184.

- 76 Former TF 16 commander, interview, February 1, 2013; Former JIATF deputy director, interview with author, March 19, 2013.
- 77 Flynn, interview; Priest and Arkin, *Top Secret America*, 248.
- 78 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 204.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Ibid., 206.
- 81 Ibid., 204–216.
- 82 Former TF 16 intelligence analyst, interview with author, April 15, 2013; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 216–221.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Former TF 16 commander, interview, February 1, 2013.
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 Ibid.; McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 223–234.
- 90 Ibid.
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- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Glenn W. Goodman, “ISR Now Synonymous with Operations,” *Journal of Electronic Defense* 30, no. 7 (2007): 19.
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