

Nailing bad guys How biometrics are helping soldiers 26

YourArmy

Biometrics give insurgents nowhere to HIIDE

Database helps pinpoint threats in areas where IDs are rare

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Biometric devices have helped soldiers put a “face” to many insurgents and Taliban fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan, where state-issued IDs are often unreliable or rare.

Front-line troops have collected the unique physical traits of many of the 3.6 million people in Defense Department biometrics databases using high-tech devices to snap photos and scan the fingerprints and eyes of the local population.

Using biometrics, soldiers connected suspects to about 700 improvised explosive devices and captured 775 high-value individuals last year, according to the Army’s 2011 Posture Statement.

Outside of combat zones,

in-theater collections and intelligence products have helped thwart threats at home.

On May 27, the Homeland Security Department refused a man entry into the U.S. because he popped up in a database, suspected of stealing evidence from an investigation in 2004, according to the Army’s operations office.

“You can’t change biometrics. They are yours,” said Navy Capt. James Fossa, director of biometrics in Iraq. “There is no forging it, no faking it,” he said.

Despite occasional system glitches, officials are working to carve a long-term role for Army biometrics, including developing a smartphone application to digitize fingerprints, even as forces draw down and war funds dry up.

Biometrics has seeped into the planning and running of most routine counterinsurgency operations — from patrolling to base security to compiling intelligence profiles.

The Defense Department will have spent nearly \$3 billion through 2011, including about \$2.4 billion of wartime supplements, on biometrics gadgets and networks, according to a



SPC. JAMES WILTON/ARMY

A soldier uses a Handheld Interagency Identity Detection System on an Afghan who works at Bagram Airfield. The HIIDE system is a biometrics collection tool that helps U.S. forces quickly identify and track known criminals and ensure they aren’t hiding among the general population.



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recent Government Accountability Office report.

But like other fast-moving wartime projects, biometrics programs have their limitations, particularly in remote and sometimes dangerous places where network holes have left soldiers on patrol without an instant connection to databanks that could confirm enrolled identities as “wanted” targets, the GAO reported.

Know your enemy

The need for biometrics collection in counterinsurgencies is rooted in what military expert David Killculen calls “Know your turf.”

“Know the people, the topography, economy, history, religion and culture,” he wrote in a 2006 paper passed among the ranks.

Devices such as the Biometrics Automated Tool and Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment act as repositories in which soldiers can tag background data to locals’ fingerprints and iris patterns.

Staff Sgt. Sarah Boley carried a HIIDE device on nearly every patrol earlier this year in Afghanistan. The 27-year-old served as a military policewoman with the 101st Airborne Division in Khowst province, working with Afghan forces.

“If we were on a checkpoint, we would just start at random and pull people to put them in the HIIDE system, just for recognition, to find out who they are,” she said. “So you know who’s living in your [area of operations].” The devices store

target lists and can alert soldiers that a newly enrolled individual’s information matches an existing one’s. Identities can be listed as “threats, potential threats, or who simply merit tracking,” according to an April biometrics guide released by the Center for Army Lessons Learned.

On some occasions, an alert signaled Boley’s next action.

“If they are on alert, you can call up higher to find out ... what level they are on, if they need to be detained,” she said.

Following an offensive mission in Afghanistan, special operations troops linked a captured target to fingerprints lifted from letters threatening to kill locals who supported U.S. forces.

Inside the wire, biometrics have proved a valuable tool to protect garrisons, said Staff Sgt. Carlos Davis, who supervised screening workers at Forward Operating Base Salerno in Afghanistan last year.

“If they are in the system, you check them by the fingerprint. You might get one or two hits by the same person. Then you check them by the iris, and the system will sort it out itself,” he said.

Every day across Afghanistan, the Army records four to five “watch list” hits, wrote Navy Vice Adm. Robert S. Harward, commander of Task Force 435, which oversees detention centers and biometrics in Afghanistan, in an April biometrics

guide by the Center for Army Lessons Learned.

The data can fuel questioning by U.S. interrogators and fill enemy intelligence profiles.

There’s also an intangible benefit.

“It provides a bit of a deterrent effect because now they know we know who they are,” said Dr. Thomas Killion, head of the Biometrics Identity Management Agency.

Offline outposts

Smaller outposts are often plagued by limited access to data. As a result, many units work from local or regional lists uploaded to devices and off network lines while on patrol.

Units can radio names to higher headquarters for deeper searches, but large, national level databases operated by the FBI and Department of Homeland Security are not readily available. This network gap makes units susceptible to fighters who migrate between areas of operations, and thus may not appear on local lists.

Biometrics programs strive to streamline information flow.

“We recognize the limitations of some of our systems, but I also know that we are making great strides in terms of improving the quality of the devices, their ability to do things like carry a significant portion of the watch list, so that a guy gets more instantaneous feedback as to ‘OK, I just took this guy’s fingerprints, what should I do about him,’” he said.

Lasting effects

The biometrics program, which began as task forces at two fronts, will likely leave a lasting mark on Iraq and Afghanistan.

Biometrics gathered by Iraqi agencies trained by U.S. forces are sometimes used to confirm defendants’ identities in Iraqi courts in place of eyewitnesses, Fossa said.

Afghans have been employed to enroll fellow citizens to support a national identification card program sponsored by U.S. forces and the Ministry of Interior, the biometrics guide stated.

Stateside, the future of biometrics as a tactical tool is less certain.

Biometrics training is available through the Army, but there’s no word on whether a biometrics military occupational specialty or skill identifier will be established.

After drawdowns, the network and equipment may reside with the military police or a provost marshal, Killion said.

“We develop ad hoc organization and ad hoc capabilities that grow up in a time of warfare,” he said. “The real question is, as the war winds down, which of those are things that we need to retain and sustain as a capability.”

“I believe this is one of them,” he added.