

BIOMETRICS TASK FORCE

IN THE NEWS



The U.S. Army Ramps Up Biometrics to ID Baghdad Residents Retina and Fingerprint Scans Help Sort Out Who's Who

By Alex Kingsbury
Posted May 1, 2008

BAGHDAD — Ali Saladin is silent as he holds open his right eyelid between his right thumb and index finger. His brown pupil dilates as he stares straight ahead at the American soldiers who are pointing a digital eye scanner at him. The soldiers then take his fingers and begin scanning them as well. “What is this for, can you tell me again?” asks Saladin, who only minutes ago admitted the five soldiers into his Baghdad home.

“We’re starting our own yellow pages,” says one of the soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division with a grin. The middle-aged Saladin hasn’t heard of the yellow pages and doesn’t get the joke, but he spells out his name nonetheless. Later, the soldiers upload the data into a computer, which in turn sends it to the Defense Department’s Biometrics Fusion Center in West Virginia.

To the soldiers, this is as routine as missions get in the Dora neighborhood of the Iraqi capital. In the past, a census mission meant that soldiers would dutifully jot

down the names, ages, and addresses of residents they encountered. On occasion, one or two of those thousands of names would be entered into a larger list or included in a report. But most of the time, the information stayed trapped between the pages of the standard-issue Army notebook.



A U.S. soldier scans the retina and fingerprints of an Iraqi local during a census patrol.

Explaining the ubiquitous problem of making identifications, Lt. Col. James Crider, commander of the 1-4 Cavalry, shows a picture taken of one of his platoon sergeants posing with four jovial-looking Iraqi men. Later, the Americans learned that two of the four Iraqis were “high value” targets wanted by the military, and a third was a known insurgent.

“The enemy was hiding in plain sight, so we had to get to know more about the people he was hiding amongst,” says Crider.

The once routine census patrols have now been formalized and augmented with biometrics—typically including fingerprints, eye scans, and digital mug shots. In the past three years, the Army has created a vast

classified database holding the biometrics of more than 2.2 million people. Many in this database of non-Americans are Iraqis—and some Afghans—who have been detained in connection with the insurgency or were, for instance, issued microgrants for their businesses. This kind of data gathering—mapping the social terrain—is a key element in counterinsurgency efforts. “Control of the population begins obviously with a thorough census,” wrote David Galula, who penned the book *Counterinsurgency Warfare* in 1964. It’s now a cult classic among thousands of military officers and was cited by Gen. David Petraeus and the coauthors of the Army’s *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. Yet despite five years of war, the Army is just now beginning to understand aspects of that social terrain.

Consider the case of the West Rashid area of Baghdad. For years, the American units in the area used maps received through their chain of command that indicated which areas were Shiite and Sunni and the relative proportions of each sect. “We always knew that the maps were not always accurate, but it wasn’t until we began to do census operations that we realized how little we knew about the mahalas we were patrolling,” says one combat commander, using the Iraq term for neighborhood. Because of these inaccurate initial counts, ethnic cleansing in some areas, he says, was either overestimated or underestimated.

Inadequacies. A report last year by the advisory Army Science Board, citing incompatible and slow systems, found that biometrics efforts were falling “far short of what our forces need.” Matching biometrics to previously collected data can take hours or even days, a common gripe from soldiers in the field who need real-time results. Currently, the hand-held scanners (about 3,000 are in use) can store only several thousand “watch list” files of wanted people and alert soldiers if one of those individuals is scanned during a census patrol. “The technological hurdles have been difficult, but we now have a standardized template for biometrics, which should speed up the process,” says William Vickers, deputy director of the Army’s Biometrics Task Force, based in an office building near the Pentagon.

Still, Lt. Wendell Jenkins leads his platoon around Dora taking down names and addresses of residents. Jenkins talks to dozens of Iraqis on his beat every day, and he’s gotten to know some quite well. When a man asks Jenkins to help locate his son who was arrested by coalition forces at an ice factory in another town, Jenkins pulls out his olive drab Army notebook and a pen. “When I get back to the base, I can run it through the computer and see what I can find,” says Jenkins. “Now, can you spell his name?”

