

Combat Librarian: Knowledge Management in Iraq

Caryn L. Anderson

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND
INFORMATION SCIENCE
The iSchool at Illinois

Ending the War

At the peak of coalition military operations in Iraq, in 2008, the United States Government (USG) operated roughly **500 military bases and embassy locations** and employed an estimated 320,000+ soldiers, diplomats, US civilian government staff, and contracted personnel in Iraq. In addition to **military operations** and **diplomatic relations**, the USG was executing **reconstruction and development** programs in almost **every sector of society** in all 18 provinces of Iraq.

With the departure of the US military, over 700 DOD* operations were transitioned to DOS* or GOI* in categories of security, communications, etc. (Brennan). **Knowledge Management (KM)** was one of 13 “lines of transition” tracked by the most senior USG military and diplomatic leadership in Iraq.

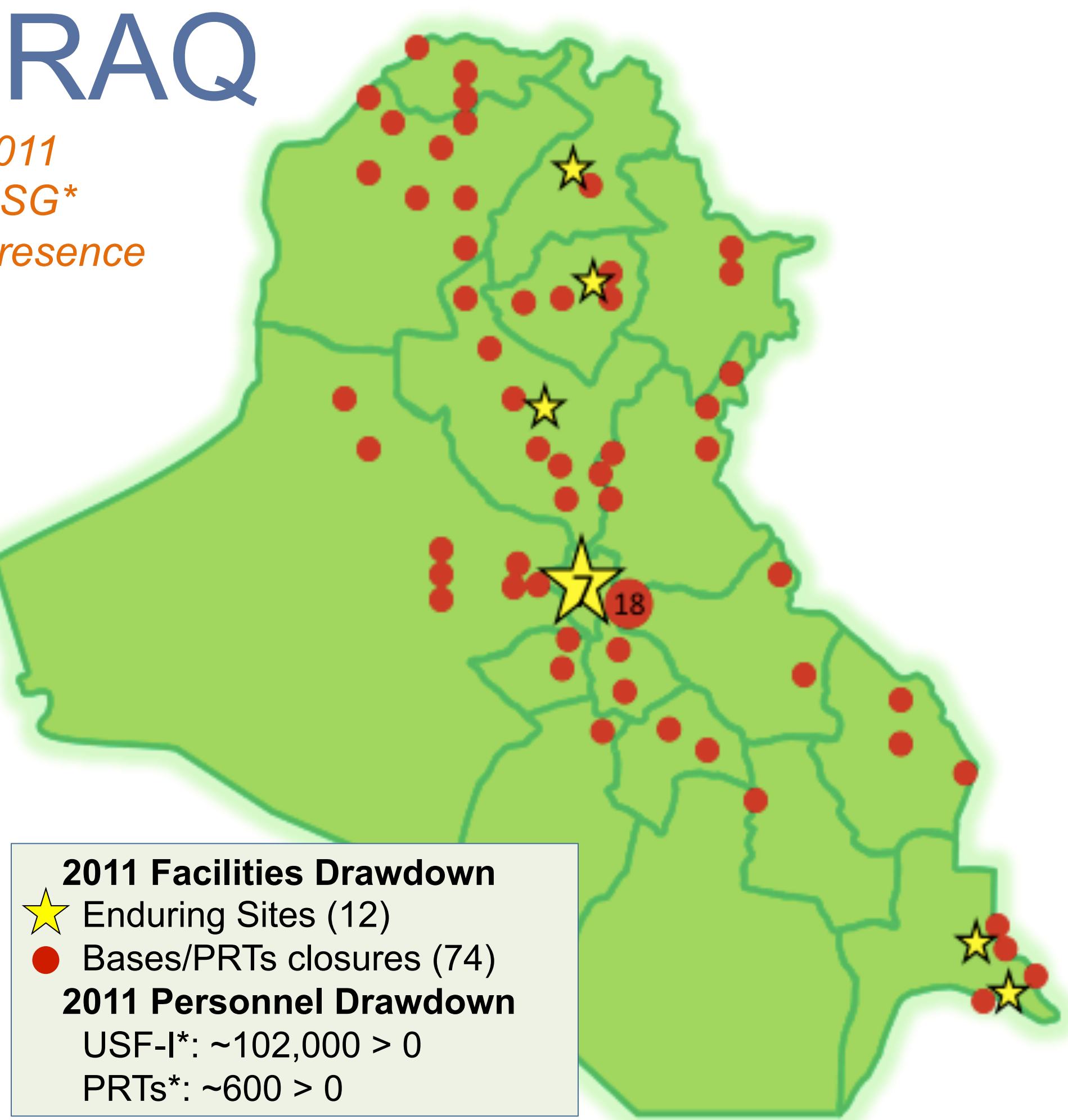


Mission: Preserve Strategic Knowledge

The KM Transition ensured that the intelligence, relationships, capacity building and reconstruction developed over the previous eight years in Iraq could continue to be leveraged by the US Mission after 2011.

IRAQ

2011
USG*
Presence



Success and Failure: Explanations

Degrading degrees of success in capturing (success), sharing (partial success), and developing the culture to acquire and use (fail) critical knowledge seem connected to specific phenomena identified by social informatics research (Kling, et al.), such as temporal and spatial constraints, diverse theories and fears about knowledge among participants, and political and systemic issues in the relevant organizations. As participants would never return to Iraq to use the knowledge, they had little incentive to exert much effort (Grudin).

Combat and Librarianship

The author’s service in Iraq initially focused on libraries. Colleagues named her “Combat Librarian.” KM activities resembled combat in degree of difficulty and complexity. COL John R. Boyd’s theories of military strategy (Coram) are useful metaphors for KM activities in Iraq:

- Observe, Orient, Decide, Act (OODA loop)
- Energy-maneuverability equation: $P=[T-D/W]*V$
(Performance = [Thrust - Drag / Weight] * Velocity)

KM BY THE NUMBERS

Participants
16 PRTs*
3 Divisions
38 USF-I* Offices
26 Embassy Offices
19 Other Offices/Agencies
2 Full time equivalent staff
~500 Individuals engaged (officers, civilians, contractors; 2 DOS and 3 DOD staff cycles)

Activities
2 Theater-wide Conferences
12 Working Groups
5 Seminars
14 PRT/Division visits

Content
~500 Information sources
~40 Applications
3 new tools
Dozens of information products



KM Conference, Baghdad, Iraq
23 February 2011

Enemies & Allies: Social Factors Encountered KM

KM Dimensions		Social Factors in Iraq KM											
TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE													
Tacit	Hidden: Lots of knowledge in people’s heads					1	1						
	Unknown: Many didn’t know what they knew	1											
	Sharing: Bringing people together to exchange knowledge built new relationships	1	1			1	1						
Explicit	Interoperability: Different network platforms complicated data collection					1	1				1		
	Inequality: Unequal data value and labeling prohibited automation	1			1	1	1				1		
	Classification: Secret and other inhibited process										1	1	
KNOWLEDGE CYCLE													
Create & Capture	Personality & Politics: Choices to participate were motivated by self-interest	1		1	1		1				1	1	
Share & Publish	Leadership: Most sharing by KM team	1	1				1	1					
Acquire & Apply	Newness: Novelty & staff turnover inhibited use								1	1			
	Policy: No relevant KM policies reduced use								1	1	1		
COMPONENTS OF APPROACH													
Theories	Definition: Many believed that KM was just technology	1	1				1	1	1				
	Seeking and Use: Many could not envision future uses of their information	1					1				1		
Content	Interpretation: Variable interpretations of criteria for selecting knowledge to retain	1										1	
	Politics: The Wikileaks scandal had a significant negative effect on participation			1	1								1
Tools	Obfuscation: KM uncovered gaps, overlaps and lack of integration	1	1	1	1	1	1				1	1	
	Diversity: Many systems restricted centralization										1	1	
People	Resources: Time and human resources available inhibited marketing of new tools												
	Personality: Personality & politics dictated uneven participation	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1
Processes	Leadership: Supervisors determined participation	1	1	1	1			1	1	1	1	1	1
	Competency: Uneven technology competency inhibited progress		1	1	1							1	
Processes	Timing: Deadlines for site closures and unit/staff departures inhibited participation							1				1	1
	Validation: Often hard to validate what knowledge would be useful	1	1	1	1	1	1					1	
Processes	Face-to-Face: In-person engagement made a significant positive difference	1	1					1					
	Travel: Face-to-face engagement required travel, which was difficult on many levels				1		1					1	1
LEVELS OF ACTORS													
Individual	Motivation: Some saw value for the future, others only time/energy costs or threats	1	1						1				
	Turf: Some simply didn’t want to share	1	1	1	1								
Group or Community	Secrecy: Some whole sections had cultures of not sharing information	1	1	1								1	
	Procedures: Some sections had preferred methods of KM	1		1			1	1				1	1
Organization	Leadership: Advocacy by senior leadership in Iraq increased participation	1										1	1
	Policy: Lack of relevant department-wide KM policies inhibited participation	1										1	

Social Informatics Framework

Social Nature of ICTs

- [S1] ICTs are interpreted and used in different ways by different people
- [S2] ICTs enable and constrain social actions and social relationships
- [S3] ICTs provide a means to alter existing control structures
- [S4] ICTs can lead to negative consequences for some stakeholders

Technical Nature of ICTs

- [T1] ICTs have both communicative and computational roles
- [T2] ICTs have temporal and spatial consequences
- [T3] ICTs rarely cause social transformations
- [T4] ICTs are not magic bullets: they do not solve things by themselves

Institutional Nature of ICTs

- [I1] ICTs social and technical con-sequences are embedded in institutional contexts
- [I2] ICTs often have important political consequences

(Kling, Rosenbaum & Sawyer, 2005)

Conclusions

Key strategic resources for ongoing US diplomacy in Iraq would not have been available without a dedicated KM approach that incorporated sociotechnical principles and executed strategies and tactics with flexibility and fortitude in the face of resistance. Lessons learned can inform KM in non-combat settings.

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