Figure 1. 2nd Company, 7th Tank Battalion, Southern Area Command, M1s screen during gunnery.

What Am I Doing in Saudi Arabia?

by MAJ Lance Brender

Early in my career after a deployment to Iraq and company command in Korea, I completed a month-long course at the Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management (DISAM) at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, a preparatory school of sorts for security-cooperation officers. Security-cooperation officers form the Department of Defense arm of U.S. diplomatic efforts abroad. They integrate with foreign governments and militaries to advance U.S. interests. This program impressed me because it showcased another aspect of what it means to serve in the military. It demonstrated to me that Soldiers like you or I are capable not only of winning wars but of helping to prevent them, too.

At graduation, DISAM spread the 100 or so students in my class across the globe to work with host nations, ranging from close allies of the United States to those we might otherwise be at odds with. I was assigned to the U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM), the security-cooperation organization that is paired with the Saudi regular army.

Even at this point, though, I had a lot of questions about what I was really going overseas to do. What exactly is my mission? What techniques would work and which would not? Ultimately, how can I have the greatest possible impact to ensure my assigned country never becomes the scene of an American war?

What's our mission?

Department of Defense Directive 5132.03, "Subject: DoD Policy and Responsibilities Relating to Security Cooperation,"[1] gives a broad explanation of what a security-cooperation office does, stating it "encourage[s] and enable[s] international partners to work with the United States to achieve strategic objectives," further specifying that it should "build defense and security relationships that promote specific U.S. security interests ... develop allied and friendly military capabilities ... and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to host nations."[2] So, in a nutshell: advance U.S. interests in foreign countries, improve their military in a way that is advantageous to America and secure willing access to those countries in peace and war.

USMTM "trains, advises and assists" the host country's regular armed forces (differentiated from Saudi Arabia's tribally based "National Guard," which is charged with "internal defense" and acts essentially as the royal family's personal military). While the stated mission description is accurate in the macro, it doesn't clearly define what an adviser should do on any given day.

In practice, USMTM advisers are paired with individual units at different echelons of command from brigade to the Ministry of Defense. As such, they form direct relationships with that unit's key officers, serving as something

vaguely similar to a member of the commander's personal staff. In pursuit of their chartered purpose, most advisers spend most of their day trying to make the Saudi army look more like ours (although you will not find that phrase in any doctrinal publication).

Making the Saudi military more like the U.S. military supports the overall mission of building interoperability between their forces and our own. However, making the Saudi army look like ours is a somewhat misguided goal. While the highest levels of their government's leadership might avow otherwise, the *de facto* truth is that the Royal Saudi Military does not really ***want*** to be like us. And neither should they, given their national-defense strategy. The U.S. military is a fundamentally offensive, expeditionary force designed to fight everywhere ***but*** on U.S. soil. The Saudi armed forces are almost entirely defensive; they are domestic forces with extremely limited will or ability to operate outside of the country's borders, especially with ground troops. Beyond narrowly defined operations like the present air strikes against the Islamic State and some peninsular coalition raids in the more remote areas of Arabia, the Saudi army will not fight wars outside its own border. There is nothing wrong with this. Indeed, it is a strategy that has fostered peace, economic growth and internal stability in the Kingdom for more than 60 years.

What they do want is to be as ***capable*** as the American military, yet remain themselves. They want to have the weaponry we have, project the image of power we do and sleep easy at night, knowing their military is up to any threat. What they do not want, however, is to empower subordinates like we do or create a military lifestyle as demanding as it is for the American Soldier. If an adviser is wedded to the idea of "making them like us," it will drive the adviser mad. However, if said adviser accepts that the Saudi mission is not ***our*** mission and their ways not our ways, it will help fill the gaps they see in the Saudi military and be content with them.

As such, it is important to understand that Saudi Arabia and the United States are not formal allies covered by any mutual defense treaty. Rather, Saudi Arabia is a "critical partner" of the United States. The difference is that while both countries have a very close working relationship politically, economically and militarily, they do not want any affiliation that approaches the degree of interaction the United States has with, say, our North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies. This fact is absolutely key to understanding a Saudi commander's relationship to his American adviser. It would be a capital mistake for an American to expect to be greeted with anything close to the same degree of trust or familiarity he might enjoy while serving in British, German or Korean commands.

As such, Royal Saudi Forces have no intention of integrating an adviser into their daily operations. USMTM officers will not be habituated into a unit's daily meetings, will not serve on Saudi staffs in any operational way and will be largely viewed with suspicion if they venture to ask for such things. Two experiences from my tour made this abundantly clear to me.

The first was near the end of my assignment. For the preceding year, I had enjoyed a close relationship with my unit and felt comfortable asking my Saudi brigade commander to be part of my promotion ceremony. He initially declined, saying he would need special permission from the area (two-star) commander to even consider it. Nonplussed, I asked the brigade's public-affairs officer (PAO) why the commander had refused because the commander had never asked me to get permission for anything before. Part of me was galled because I knew that asking "permission" was, at times, the smokescreen used when a Saudi officer did not want to do something with the Americans. Was this the commander's indirect way of telling me to pound sand?

The PAO pointedly stopped me at that point, though, and said that had nothing to do with it. In an extremely frank exchange, he explained to me that I was fundamentally and inalterably an outsider. Everything this unit would ever do with me, ***by regulation***, absolutely must be approved by the next higher command. The preceding year of work I had executed without such red tape had been them bending the rules because they liked me.

However, the second experience more clearly illustrates the underlying relational issue. Once, a fellow adviser had an introductory meeting with a Saudi general officer. In this meeting, the adviser asked the officer some fairly commonplace questions about his unit, like its composition and what computer systems it used. The general's response was surprisingly abrupt: stop asking so many questions. ***We*** ask the questions, you give us the American answer and, if we like it, we will implement it on our own. If we do not like the answer, we will simply ignore it. We do not want any more "help" than that.

This fundamental Saudi view of USMTM's role is imperative to understand. However, it need not dishearten you. As this last example illustrates, an adviser should not make the mistake of thinking the mission is to do an "operations" job. Even at the brigade level, that is not what they want of our officers. Despite this, though, an adviser is completely capable of securing important common ground between American and Saudi interests. And, while I am certainly not privy to the inner stratagems of either government, history seems to reveal what these mutual interests are.

Saudi Arabia wants a stable economic environment that permits the profitable sale of oil to the world, defense from border incursions and a political milieu free of threat to its form of government. America wants unfettered and affordable access to petroleum, an influential and amenable ally in the Arab world and a market for American exports, not the least of which are military hardware and services.

It might be easy to become cynical about the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the West, considering the strain inherent in our dealings. Indeed, their culture and ours seem to connect on very few points that do not involve money. Are we just basely using each other to get what we want? I argue we are not. Two countries that enter into a deal to provide a day's work for a day's wages are no more using each other than your local hardware store is using its employees.

The vast majority of the United States' dealings with Saudi Arabia are transactional and based on naked self-interest. Our chief concern in Saudi Arabia lies in material gain and military access to a volatile part of the world. Truly, we would have little to do with them if it were not so. This is not wrong, though. A just transaction between two free parties is good, even if the individual motivation on both sides is just to make a buck or build a base. However, that does not lessen the importance of our relationship with the Saudis. On the contrary, if business and security are the basis of our relationship, it becomes all the more important that we bolster them. As the American rapport with the People's Republic of China will clearly show, few things support international peace like a good old-fashioned deal. So, if economic and military cooperation are vehicles for open dialogue, liberal travel and peaceful exchange, then anything an adviser can do to support those ends is not only a service to the American national defense strategy, it is a favor to the world.

Obviously, though, the average adviser is incapable of addressing all these lofty issues in the course of daily duties. But the issues can be addressed some. National security is clearly one thing an adviser can assist with. While advisers cannot fight for the Saudis, they can help them fight for themselves by assisting in the design of training plans, recommending and facilitating the acquisition of appropriate weaponry and, in some cases, providing direct training to Saudi forces.

Diplomacy of this sort, particularly security cooperation, is part of what Joint Publication 3-0, ***Joint Operations***, calls the "shape" or "phase zero" of war. In this phase, elements of American power interact with foreign countries in peacetime to create a political and military environment advantageous to the United States through programs like foreign military sales (FMS), multinational exercises and direct U.S. advisement.

Through the advancement of a militarily strong and pro-West Saudi Arabia, the adviser meets a number of American goals such as encouraging a stable region for civil commerce, developing a strong actor in the area for coalition efforts, dampening regional aggression toward Israel by means of Saudi Arabia discouraging open support for that country's enemies and engendering a market for American defense contractors. The adviser can also meet a number of the Saudis' goals – namely the advancement of the aforementioned petroleum market, deterrence of foreign invasion and, indirectly, bolstering the Saudi style of governance. Though the adviser might think nothing more than shuffling paperwork gets done all day, his presence helps to create a crossroads of interest that not only builds economic prosperity but, more importantly, creates a platform for peaceful exchange between our two countries.

Techniques that work

Allow me to transition away from what USMTM does in Saudi Arabia and instead offer you some ideas on how you could be a more effective military adviser should you ever find yourself assigned to the Kingdom. The following three traits – relationships, tact and boldness – are concepts you are already aware of as a military officer. However, like in any foreign culture, particularly a non-Western one, they have profoundly different applications in Saudi Arabia.

Relationships. Arab culture, particularly the Saudi Bedouin one, is relational. The old saying that "it's not what you know, but who you know" is not only a positive statement, but (to borrow an economic term) a ***normative*** one. To them, it ***should*** be all about who you know. While the fact that we have a saying for it implies American familiarity with the concept, the extent of this worldview is a radical departure from what most of us would intuit.

Figure 2. An American adviser presents an award to a Saudi soldier. Relationships are important in Arab culture.

Americans generally place a great deal of faith in the integrity in our institutions and professional codes of conduct. If multiple people are considered for promotion, the most qualified candidate will get it (or at least we believe that person should). If two businesses make a deal, the terms of the contract will protect both parties regardless of who they are. If two allies go to war against an enemy, both would sooner die than betray their friend. These are considered reasonable beliefs in our American culture. Indeed, our very legal system is predicated on the righteousness of such principles and is formulated to protect them. To the Arab mind, though, who but the most naive of fools would trust money, lives or nation to some secular rules?

There are few clearer examples of why such a distrustful mindset exists than the Arab-Israeli Six Day War. In 1967, Syrian troops, as part of a coalition of Arab states, were engaged with Israeli forces in the Golan. The Syrian command withdrew elite forces from the area, then falsely announced that Israeli units had captured the town of Kuneitra, which was important because that city was ***behind*** the largely conscript regular army. In truth, the announcement was a Syrian ploy to try to prompt prominent nations to broker a truce. However, Syrian regular army commanders were never told of the deception or its ulterior motive. The "enveloped" Syrian army panicked, resulting in the Arab coalition's loss of the Golan Heights.[3] In a world where one's own army can willfully render false reports during wartime, it would be the epitome of idiocy to entrust anything important to anyone you do not personally know and have confidence in.

Therefore, it is important for you to build a personal relationship with your counterpart. Spend time with him in his office and do not be in any rush, yet be careful to not waste his time. Be prepared to spend the first five to 10 minutes of any conversation talking about family, culture, questions about America, or anything else. These are not mindless pleasantries; they are interpersonal connections that both he and you will use to gauge how much you can trust each other. Many Americans are all business, especially with superior officers. I confess I am one of these. However, as an adviser, you have nowhere near the demanding schedule you have experienced on the line and you, if you are like me, will have to train yourself to make time for tea.

Tact. Being tactful is every bit as important to an adviser as being tactical. Understand from the outset that most Saudis will never ***try*** to be rude to you; however, some things that are just normal to them may be offensive to you. If you are pro-Israel, be prepared that a number of the people you meet will likely reference the Israeli

government in the same way we talk about the Nazis. I was told several times that everything from 9/11 to the murderous rise of the Islamic State to the Shi'a-Sunni divide itself is a Jewish plot. They are probably not trying to offend you; they are just espousing what to them is putative.

Let such nonsense roll off your back. You can no more convince them of a different worldview through direct argument than they could convince you that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration faked the moon landing. Instead, simply let your character and personal beliefs, if called for, speak for themselves. When confronted with offensive remarks, especially if they are intentional goads, sidestep the issue or casually state you have a different opinion before moving on to something else. Now, if you have a particularly close relationship with your counterpart, you two may trust each other enough to discuss frankly what you believe. You are truly honored if you find yourself in this situation. Even in such cases, though, remember to be polite.

Even when talking about innocuous professional matters, remember to think about his position. Consider our society with its respect for innovation. Experienced leaders know that failure is a part of pursuing innovation. However, even failure in American society has consequences, and they are usually not good. Saudi society is even more severe. You may have been told in the past that Saudis are reluctant to take responsibility for things gone bad, which might lead an American to make some derisive remark about a cultural lack of accountability. But have you ever considered why they are that way? It's not because they are cowards. Menial failures or perceived challenges to honor in Saudi society, particularly the military, have extreme consequences.

Figure 3. Saudis assigned to 7th Tank Battalion, Southern Area Command, polish their skills in the class portion of their tank-crew gunnery skills test.

To illustrate, I remember a story from a former USMTM adviser and Reserve Officer Training Corps professor of military science. He once told me of a friend of his, a particularly gung-ho Saudi communications officer who was perceived as too forward and too persistent with his commanders. If this were an otherwise tactful American officer, he would probably be seen as a go-getter and be rewarded for it. In Saudi Arabia, though, his effrontery got him reassigned to the hinterlands of the country – "banished," as he described it. Only after 10 years and several generous gift-giving occasions was his command beginning to consider him for reassignment back to the national capital, a desirable station and his hometown. Outright failures result in devastating career setbacks, loss of social honor and lessened income that might last for generations.

As such, do not ***ever*** bring up anything but the most dismissible of problems in public unless specifically questioned. You will see that they find it fine to talk about problems in the abstract or issues with "higher," if said

higher is somewhere in a far-off ivory tower. However, they will almost never bring up criticism in any public situation that could hurt themselves or their friends, so don't you do it, either. When there is a problem, voice it quietly to the commanding officer or responsible party. Give him a chance to solve the issue before the news goes public.

This really is not so foreign to the American mind. Most U.S. commanders would probably agree they would never appreciate having their dirty laundry aired to the world, especially by some foreign adviser.

Figure 4. Saudis practice on the Desktop Advanced Gunnery Training System.

Boldness. Boldness is also an important and perhaps counterintuitive trait to display. Most Americans, particularly professional Soldiers, would find it inappropriate to point out flaws to a superior three echelons up unless that superior ***specifically*** asked for candid opinions. However, consider who the average American adviser is to a Saudi commander. You are a very junior officer (captains and majors are often paired with brigadier generals), not Saudi, not a commander in his organization and not there for very long. You are an outsider and a transient. With that said, a Saudi commander also sees you as an experienced and professional representative of a very powerful partner. Handled correctly, the confluence of these two opposites can play to your benefit.

On the negative side, you have an uphill battle to win a Saudi commander's trust. You and your counterpart might find your relationship strained by the barriers of language and culture. Or, perhaps your partner will be a proud man not keen to receive help. Or, the difficulties you might face may have nothing to do with any such ethereal factors. A very real possibility is that your counterpart just might not have the first clue what to do with you. Understand that even under the best of circumstances, it may take months to be even tangentially admitted to a unit's decision-making processes, if ever. Most of these things, however, may be ameliorated with time, respect, assertiveness, competence and, frankly, a lot of luck.

On the positive side, though, your partnered commander has no intention of ordering you about like one of his tea servants. Truthfully, he will generally see you not as just another staff officer but as an emissary of the American military. It is not only proper, it is ***expected***, that advisers will (privately and tactfully) point out organizational flaws, suggest ideas for training, recommend new equipment and upgrades, and be something like a full-time observer/controller. You are not a Saudi officer, so do not try to be a company commander or S-3. Rather, you are the hired help who is there to make ***their*** organization run better.

I will share one example from my personal experience. It was an incident where my services were valuable because I was viewed as trustworthy and, more importantly, because I was not Saudi. One day, I met a prince from the Saudi Armor Corps. In his entourage was a very empowered sergeant major who privately told me that the command was displeased with the performance of one of the battalion commanders I advised. The sergeant major said that his expectation of a U.S. adviser is that he would, when needed, pull a partnered commander aside and tell him quite frankly that he is doing a poor job and specifically how he needs to improve. I was astounded, to say the least. However, I was further surprised when I was then given the specific task of privately warning this commander that his job was in danger and telling him to clean up his act quickly. This unusual experience is just one illustration of the degree of confidence Saudis put in the American military and the unique benefit that you, as an outsider, represent to them.

As such, use your position to lead your units toward attainable and beneficial goals. Do not be so foolish as to say things like "you should stop praying so often so you can train more." This and other culturally imperialistic "suggestions" are not only a risk to Saudi-U.S. relations, they are also not going to happen. Rather, use the trust placed in you to suggest things that actually help such as annual training models, classes on professional topics, train-the-trainer programs, slots for U.S. professional military education through the International Military Education and Training fund and other things they can really use. Base what you recommend off their needs after careful observation and asking their opinions. You would resent someone giving you an impossible mission or irrelevant advice, so do not give it to them.

Techniques that don't work

Just as important as understanding what will help your mission is understanding what will detract from it. There are many potential pitfalls before a new adviser. However, I would like to highlight for you what I believe are the three most important things you can actually do something about: prejudice, expectations and your own personal presence.

Prejudice. I will address what I think is the biggest concern first. If you disdain the Arab people or the Islamic faith, do not go to Saudi Arabia. This is somewhat like the warnings on McDonalds cups that say "coffee is hot": it would not need to be said if someone had not made it an issue. To those people who think that Middle Easterners are filthy and culturally inferior and who feel compelled to say how Islam is a religion for criminals and terrorists, the USMTM does not need you. Unlike even a combat deployment to Afghanistan, where you may occasionally find yourself somewhat removed from conversing with non-Westerners, you will be talking with your counterparts constantly here.

People who hold these unsavory opinions are not nearly as slick as they think they are. I assure you from personal observation that if an adviser genuinely holds such an attitude about his hosts, it will be noticed, the mission will be jeopardized, and the adviser just might put himself at personal risk. This is not to say that anyone has anything to fear from the Saudi government, the military or 95 percent of the population. However, just as there are those in America who have no goodwill toward foreigners, there are those who think the same way about you in Saudi Arabia. Nothing damages the U.S. diplomatic mission more, nor places an adviser in greater personal danger, than being the ugly American.

However, do not misconstrue this to think that you must personally revere the Saudi Arabian lifestyle. I can confirm that the Saudis you will meet and work with are intelligent men who know that you will likely have as many intellectual issues with their culture as they have with ours. This is fine. Still, unless you are in an extraordinarily close relationship with a Saudi (and even then), keep your conversation civil.

Expectations. Another potentially disastrous point of failure is improper expectation management. The Saudis really do see you as an extension of a military they deeply admire. If you say something, they will generally believe you. And, even though the officers you will likely work with are worldly individuals who have been around for quite a while, many advisers in the past have made the professionally fatal mistake of promising things they could not deliver. If you say you will have a product or presentation by a certain date, have it. If you cannot make M1 tanks appear by next Thursday, do not say that you can. If you are asked for something and do not know if you can do it, say "I'll get back to you" and then do so.

This is extremely important because the Saudis see you as being here for a reason: namely, to help them. Now, they logically understand that everyone has a boss with veto power and sometimes an adviser's good intentions will be overridden; however, they ***will*** take your word for it if you say you have the ability to do something.

Also, consider the financial relationship that exists between the Saudi government and the adviser: the adviser's salary is funded by the royal purse via an FMS case. To their way of looking at it, they are paying for you to be there. If they ask for something and you say yes, they expect their money's worth. Never commit the U.S. government to anything it is unable or unwilling make good on.

Presence. The last point is less a technique than a mindset. As you have read, Saudi culture is relational. You have also read that Saudis have certain expectations of advisers. On top of that, an adviser is inherently an outsider. Held in tension among these three factors is you. Depending on your personality, you will find that this tension drives you in one of two directions: to either be totally uninvolved or annoyingly present. There is a delicate balance between the extremes that successful advisers find and unsuccessful ones do not.

First, do not allow yourself to turn into the adviser who only shows up for work once every two weeks for an ineffectual office call. The Saudis will see this and instantly recognize it for what it is. Granted, there is a lot of downtime on diplomatic assignments like USMTM. However, there is also a lot of work to be done, and the adviser is getting paid to do it. Do not take advantage of the Saudi pace of life to enjoy a 12-month vacation from reality.

More challenging for most advisers, though, is the opposite. In my career, I have always striven to be, if not the smartest guy in the office, the hardest-working. In my first few months in Saudi Arabia, I made the mistake of being in my counterparts' office every day, in the instructors' every class and generally being around just to be around. After all, I am a commissioned officer and I ***should*** be at work, right?

It wasn't until I was more than a quarter into my tour that I realized my constant presence had turned from boon to nuisance. In retrospect, I can see why, too. Aside from a couple of guest appearances, I was not the instructor for any but a few classes, I was not in the Saudi chain of command, I was not a key staff officer, nor did I usually have any hot news to pass on. I was just ... there. Taken to an extreme, this can be just as bad being an absentee adviser.

Remember that the Saudis want you for a purpose and your position is aptly named: you are to provide advice and to do it at their pleasure. Unless you have specific engagements or extemporaneous business, show up at your counterparts' office once a week for a general meeting. Make your rounds among all the commanders and staff officers you support. At each of them, be ready to talk about your activities and projects but equally prepared to merely have tea and or even just go away.

During the rest of your time, check on the progress of your other projects. In my case, one of my units was going through initial training on the M1A2S Abrams tank, so I would often spend time with the instructors and the students, teaching as appropriate. Sometimes I would just watch from the back of the room. Sometimes I would see a deficiency in my unit's training and need a few days to develop a class on it. Sometimes I took a morning off to train my interpreter on my Pacific Northwestern brand of American English. Regardless, whatever it is that you do or do not have to do that day, be shrewd enough to discern when you should be in the room – and when you should be tactfully absent.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to leave you less with tactics, techniques and procedures than with encouragement about what you can accomplish in Saudi Arabia. The continual application of all our methods – joint exercises, U.S. schooling, FMS cases and, most importantly, personal relationships – make Saudis and Americans look at each other over a table and think, "I don't want to go to war against you."

In almost any other walk of life, I would never have the opportunity to live and work among Saudis for a year. In this brief span of time, I have seen that the subjects of this country are human just like I am and value life as deeply I do. They are worth getting to know better and worth building a world with.

One day I was sitting with a Saudi officer I met while conducting tank training. After we had had a drink and told some poor jokes, I said, "This is why I'm here." I remember him looking amused: "You're here for tea and dirty

stories?" Laughing, I said no. I explained that at that moment there was peace between him and me. Maybe not a complete merging of worldviews or a lifelong friendship, but ***peace*****.** And, if he and I could build peace in that room, perhaps our two countries, different as they are, could continue to build that same peace in the world.

MAJ Lance Brender is a student at the Command and General Staff Officer's Course, Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous assignments include Armor adviser to the Royal Saudi Land Forces, Khamis Mushait, Saudi Arabia; commander, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1-72 Armor Battalion, Camp Casey, Republic of Korea; commander, Company B, 4-7 Cavalry, Camp Hovey, Republic of Korea; assistant operations officer, 4-7 Cavalry, Camp Hovey, Republic of Korea; regimental adjutant, 16th Cavalry, Fort Knox, KY. His military schools include Command and General Staff Officer's Course, Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management Overseas Course, Joint Firepower Course, Maneuver Captain's Career Course and Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course. He holds an associate's of arts degree in general studies from Wenatchee Valley College and a bachelor's degree in business administration from Pacific Lutheran University.

Notes

[1] Department of Defense Directive 5132.03, ***DoD Policy and Responsibilities Relating to Security Cooperation***.
[2] The Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management, ***The Management of Security Cooperation, 32nd edition***.
[3] N.B. DeAtkine, n.d., "Why Arabs Lose Wars," ***American Diplomacy***, 11.

Figure 5. Soldiers and airmen peer at an ancient land on a morale, welfare and recreation trip on the outskirts of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Figure 6. View from the tower of the Southern Area Command's tank-gunnery range.