

TRANSITION TEAMS AND OPERATIONAL INTEGRATION IN IRAQ

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“We are embedding coalition ‘transition teams’ inside Iraqi units. These teams are made up of coalition officers and noncommissioned officers who live, work, and fight together with their Iraqi comrades. Under U.S. command, they are providing battlefield advice and assistance to Iraqi forces during combat operations. Between battles, they are assisting the Iraqis with important skills, such as urban combat, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance techniques...”

— President George W. Bush
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Since 2004, the main effort of coalition forces in Iraq has been the establishment and development of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and their transition to independent operations. Success has been achieved in Iraq once the ISF have assumed the lead role in security with supporting assistance from coalition forces. It is critical for U.S. units to understand that history has shown that foreign forces cannot normally win a protracted war against insurgents. It is also important to understand that the ISF were handicapped before they began due to the disbandment of the previous military forces in 2003 and the subsequent limitations on who could rejoin the new ISF. For these reasons and others, the ISF have had to effectively start from ground up not only in developing systems and infrastructure, but also knowledge and experience in its personnel. The most effective method of influencing and assisting the ISF is the same method used to influence U.S. Soldiers: personal example. Coalition personnel must become embedded in the ISF organization to set that example, identify issues, and assist in their resolution. Those personnel comprise the transition team (TT).

This article is designed to give company, battalion, and brigade commanders and



Courtesy photos

Members of a military transition team observe an Iraqi Army and partnership unit rock drill.

their staffs a better understanding of externally sourced transition teams in order to facilitate better integration of efforts, improve working relationships, and successfully develop the ISF.

Composition and Purpose of Transition Teams

TTs are either generated in theater out-of-hide (OOH) by the coalition unit partnered with the ISF or sourced from the continental United States (CONUS) with the Secretary of Defense’s approval of a request for forces (RFF). Because OOH personnel are organic to the unit partnered with the ISF on the ground, the structure, composition and capabilities of those teams are inherently understood by the chain of command. Externally sourced (RFF) TTs, however, are generally more challenging to understand for coalition units as their structure, personnel, and purpose are often foreign to them until they meet on the battlefield. The coalition unit that the TT

is working with is known as the partnership unit (PU).

There are many transition teams operating in Iraq today. There are military transition teams (MiTTs), special police transition teams (SPiTTs), police transition teams (PTTs), border transition teams (BiTTs) and Ministry of Defense (MOD)/Ministry of Interior (MOI)-level transition teams. Although this article will mainly discuss MiTTs, the information here can be applied when considering or working with other types of TTs. TTs are now present at all levels of ISF command from tactical battalions to MOD/MOI-level staff sections. Each level of TT above the brigade has a different structure and purpose.

TTs are groups of personnel brought together from across the military that are assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, and formed into 10-person teams. The teams undergo individual and collective training within CONUS for three months and are then

deployed to the Central Command (CENTCOM) theater where they receive further training in Kuwait and Iraq. Training focuses on language, cultural, tactical, and equipment operations. Upon completion of training, these teams are deployed to the location of their ISF unit.

The TTs have collective and individual tasks that support the overall purpose of the mission of training and advising the ISF. The collective tasks are to provide broad advisory support to the Iraqi commander and staff and enable direct access to coalition effects (artillery, rotary and fixed-wing air), quick reaction force (QRF), intelligence, and logistics. TTs are expected to assist the appropriate level staffs in tactics, military decision-making process, counterinsurgency warfare, leadership, teamwork, communications, and urban combat. At brigade and battalion levels, the TT's overall focus is on enhancing the ability of the ISF commander and staff to plan, execute, coordinate, direct, and support operations. The TTs must advise and assist the ISF unit commander and staff with training, planning, and decision-making. On a personal level, as advisors, TT members must act as role models and provide mentorship and leadership for ISF unit commanders, staff officers and personnel while helping foster a wartime ethos and service ethos in those units. TTs should provide coalition leadership with ground truth assessment of the current ability of the ISF unit leadership and future capability and potential of those units and leaders.

The 10 personnel assigned to a TT are a mix of officers and NCOs. Each has a different task and therefore a different area of background experience. Functional areas that are covered down on are command, intelligence, operations, and logistics. The intelligence, operations, and logistics elements have an officer and NCO to provide these functions. Additionally, each team is assigned an effects officer and NCO and medic in theater. Each member of the TT "wears many hats" and performs multiple functions during his tour on a TT. These duties include advising the NCOs in the unit, advising the support companies that exist in the battalions and brigade, and assisting in personnel functions



With the help of an interpreter, a transition team advisor conducts training for Iraqi Army staff.

to name but a few. How the TT specifically divides up duties with regards to the additional functions will vary with each team.

The success of TT members depends on their scope of experience and maturity more than their rank and MOS. A member's ability to demonstrate competence to and develop a personal relationship with a senior-ranking ISF officer is proportional to the amount of success he will experience. The closer the personal relationship becomes the greater resolution the advisor will gain into the workings of the ISF staff section and greater the influence the advisor will have with the counterpart officer or NCO. Establishing and maintaining this rapport, as well as providing competent advice is the full-time and highest priority job for the TT. Any additional tasks assigned by the TT leadership or PU leadership serve only to take away from these priority tasks and can quickly result in the lack of ability to identify and assist in the resolution of issues within the ISF unit staff or command.

The number and scope of tasks for a TT and its members can be overwhelming to experienced personnel let alone those with less experience in these areas. Depending on the situation and the requirements of the ISF, a TT member can be a teacher, an advisor, a rifleman, a provider of effects, or a friend. Often, several roles are required at the same time. PUs must understand the challenges that the TTs face and support them as necessary. The bottom line is that the overall purpose is to enhance the ability of Iraqi forces to operate independently. This is not only the purpose of the TT but the purpose of the PU as well. The two must come together and develop an integrated and coordinated plan to achieve this goal.

Command and Control Structure of Transition Teams

It is critical for the maneuver commander working with the externally resourced (RFF) TTs to understand the command relationship in order to ensure unity of effort. The relationship is convoluted somewhat in that command is different for operational control (OPCON), tactical control (TACON), and administrative control (ADCON). Additionally, there is often one "pseudo" chain of command that exists for TTs.

Before we look at the command relationship, it is worthwhile to review the definitions for ADCON and TACON. Army FM 3-0, *Operations*, defines ADCON as:

"Administrative control is the direction or exercise of authority over subordinate or other organizations with respect to administration and support. It includes organization of service forces, control of resources and equipment, personnel management, unit logistics, individual and unit training, readiness, mobilization, demobilization, discipline, and other matters not included in operational missions of the subordinate or other organizations."

TACON is defined as:

"The authority normally limited to the detailed and specified local direction of movement and maneuver of forces to accomplish a task. It allows commanders below combatant command level to apply force and direct the tactical use of CSS assets but does not provide authority to change organizational structure or direct administrative or logistic support. The commander of the parent unit continues to exercise those responsibilities unless otherwise specified in the establishing directive. Combatant commanders use TACON to delegate limited authority to direct the tactical use

of combat forces. TACON is often the command relationship established between forces of different nations in a multinational force. It may be appropriate when tactical-level Army units are placed under another service headquarters. Army commanders make one Army force TACON to another when they want to withhold authority to change the subordinate force organizational structure and leave responsibility for administrative support or CSS with the parent unit of the subordinate force.”

The Iraqi Advisory Group (IAG) is assigned ADCON of the externally resourced RFF TTs in Iraq. The IAG is a one-star command with a joint support staff under the Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I). The primary mission of the IAG is to provide administrative and logistical support to the TTs. Previously, TTs assigned to work with MOI elements were assigned to the Multi-National Security and Transition Command Iraq (MNSTC-I). All TTs were assigned to the IAG in the spring and summer of 2006 in order to unify the advisory effort.

The IAG is responsible for all administrative processes to include awards and evaluations. They ensure that the TTs are resourced by providing personnel and durable, nonexpendable items needed to accomplish their missions. Examples of these items include weapons, vehicles, radios, computers, and personal gear. The IAG is not required to provide maintenance for these items other than replacement of destroyed or damaged equipment. As the advisory effort in Iraq expands and eventually becomes the primary mission for coalition forces, the IAG will assume a greater and more tactical relationship in the operations of the TTs.

The MNC-I has retained OPCON of the TTs but has given TACON of the TTs to the major subordinate commands (MSCs) throughout the Iraqi theater of operations. Specifically, TACON of the TT is normally assigned to the U.S. battalion or brigade-level element in the area in which the TT is working. Since the TTs are assigned to an Iraqi unit vice a regional command, the TACON will change if the Iraqi forces move. For example, the Iraqi National Police Commandos, an MOI unit, are frequently moved from one crisis area to another. As the Iraqi unit moves, the TT moves with that Iraqi unit, and the TACON relationship shifts to the MSC of the unit



An MiTT advisor conducts train-the-trainer training for an Iraqi Army headquarters company.

in the area in which the TT has moved to.

TTs may have a higher TT chain of command that is important for MSCs to understand and respect. A previous commander of the 2nd Iraqi Army Division MiTT called this semiformal relationship “MiTTCON.” The TT chain exercises ADCON of the TTs underneath it. Additionally, the TT chain of command is responsible for ensuring that TT operations fall within the directives and guidance set force by the IAG and MNC-I commanders and that the TTs are being used appropriately by the MSCs. The command structure helps ensure that there is multi-echelon unity of effort on the part of the TTs in the development of the ISF. This structure allows issues to be tracked from subordinate units to the headquarters units and has proven critical in the development of accountability processes and procedures within the ISF. Not all TTs will have this form of a higher TT chain of command. As an example, one TT had a formalized chain of command that went from the battalion TTs up through a brigade TT to a division TT. Another had a battalion to brigade TT chain of command but did not have a higher RFF-resourced TT division chain of command and, therefore, reported directly to the IAG from the brigade for ADCON affairs.

Transition Team Relationship with the Partnership Unit and the Iraqi Security Force

As stated previously, a TT’s primary purpose is to advise, assist and provide coalition effects (QRF, medical evacuation [MEDEVAC], and fire support) to ISF forces. PUs should view the TT as a “bridge” between the coalition forces and ISF. The TTs not only advise and assist the ISF, but they advise and assist the PU on the capabilities and limitations of the Iraqi unit they are working with.

It is critical that TTs should not be viewed as extensions of the PU staff. PUs often require TTs to provide detailed information on the ISF which can often overload the TTs with staff-type work which detracts from their advisory mission. During one of the author’s tour in Iraq, the PU required daily formatted products to include charts, briefs, and presentations. These products took valuable time and effort to produce that could have been better used in training and advising the ISF element.

The TTs may require assistance in manning from the PU in order to accomplish their mission. TTs at the brigade and battalion levels are 10-man teams. Leave, injuries, and other commitments often reduce the manning levels on the teams to eight or nine personnel. This is critical since once the team falls below nine personnel they cannot man more than two vehicles without assistance from the PU. Daily duties can also stretch TT capabilities. TTs often maintain a U.S.-only tactical operations center (TOC) when located on a remote ISF

base due to secure communication systems and networks. Full-time manning of an additional ISF TOC liaison element is normally only possible with PU augmentation. There are many different operational methods for PU and TT integration. Though the command relationships are often well defined, the interaction of the TTs and the PU are often not. PUs must evaluate the capabilities and limitations of each TT individually and adjust interaction accordingly. Due to varying degrees of leadership, experience and competence, some will be better than others. In one of the author's experience, TTs were sometimes treated as "step children" and a secondary effort to the overall mission. PUs should work to avoid this and, if necessary, assist the TTs in overcoming any personnel shortfalls they have.

TTs should be viewed as the coordinator for efforts to train and assist the ISF. One successful method of operation is to view the TT, PU, and ISF relationship as a triad effort. The "triad" occurs when all three elements partner together for the common goal of advancing the capabilities of the ISF.

Using the triad concept, information should be given directly to the ISF by the PU. For example, operations orders should be given by the PU to the ISF directly. This ensures that the ISF are treated as true partners and helps in the process of establishing credibility and relevance. TTs should be included in the process in almost an observer/controller (OC) manner instead of the typical liaison and communication channel that most PUs view TTs as being. In his article "Forging the Sword: Conventional U.S. Army Forces Advising Host Nation Forces" (*Armor*, September-October 2006), Major Todd Clark, an advisor on a TT with the 1st Special Police Commando Brigade said, "Western thoughts and the Eastern mind do not combine to form a common picture." TTs advise and assist both the ISF and PU to ensure common understanding by both elements. Much is often lost in translation and having TTs who are in tune with the situation and culturally aware of the players (ISF and coalition) can go a long distance to ensure that this does not happen. Open and effective communication channels must be maintained between the TT and the PU. It must be emphasized again that the ISF should be the operational focus.

It should be clear to this point that TT personnel must be fully



An Iraqi Army officer and transition team advisor coordinate operations in Abu Ghraib.

integrated into the ISF unit in order to perform their duties to the fullest extent. The advisor must establish a strong personal relationship with the counterpart ISF officer through competence, reliability, and dedication. The advisor and PU must always remember one thing: it is the ISF commander that is in charge of his unit and must be perceived by his subordinates, superiors, and peers as such. It is the task of the TT advisor to influence the ISF counterpart in a way that achieves success and allows them to maintain their own authority. The only time it is acceptable for a TT or PU to attempt to command ISF is when the lives of advisors are at risk or the situation has become critical. Each ISF commander or staff officer must feel like they are the final decision maker and feel they are perceived in that light. Treating the ISF as an equal will make great inroads in this effort.

When it comes to training, the ISF do not possess, and won't likely possess for some time, the capability to effectively run individual and collective training at the unit level without direct U.S. oversight and support. A TT's training focus is normally on the individual and collective skills for the ISF staff. TTs have limited ability to conduct training at lower levels. Multi-echelon training can only be effectively executed with PU assistance. Success has been found in Iraq by having the TTs focus on the staff-level training and having the PU focus on training companies, platoons, and squads. It is critical that the PU understands that training is not limited to only combat skills, but combat support and combat service support skills as well.

Training needs should be identified by the TT, the ISF, and the PU. After the required training is identified, the TT and PU can determine how best to support those training requirements with their elements. As with American units, it is critical that the focus on training the ISF remains in preparing to train themselves. The Transition Readiness Assessment (TRA), the document that identifies ISF unit capabilities, can be used to identify some of the training shortfalls, but it should not be the only document.

TT advisors are responsible for planning and conducting collective staff training with the ISF command and staff. These events may come in the form of planning classes and exercises, or actual operations that force the ISF leaders to put what they have been taught into action. The benefit of training in an operational environment is that actual large scale operations can be conducted to have a tactical impact while achieving training goals and improving performance. As the ISF begin to see the benefits from training, they tend to internalize the concept and push it down to subordinate levels.

TTs and the ISF leadership must evaluate their unit and determine the training requirements. Below the battalion level, the PU has the responsibility to train individual and collective tasks. There are, however, schools and training within the ISF system for specialty skills and leadership development. The TT advisor must work with the ISF commander and training officer to decide who should attend this training. The TT advisors must influence the critical step of sustainment training or Iraqis training Iraqis. By sending ISF soldiers and officers to ISF-run schools, the idea of self-sustaining training becomes more achievable to the ISF personnel. The TT and PU must help develop the infrastructure and multi-echelon programs of instruction for the ISF to use and manage independently. PUs can help secure critical training resources such as ranges, classrooms, ammunition, and

administrative materials such as paper and pens. The TT leadership must work with the ISF and PU leadership to protect training time from the high operational tempo, in order to sustain the Iraqi unit for long term operations.

Planning for all operations involving ISF should be conducted as a combined element. If the mission originates with the PU, the PU operations officer should notify the TT operations officer of the mission. This will allow the TT operations officer to study the mission and provide initial advice to the PU operations officer on best use of the ISF. This is critical to identify any capabilities or limitations that the ISF may have at that time. The PU should then work directly with the ISF to develop the operation as they normally would with a subordinate or adjacent unit. The process of direct involvement between the PU and the ISF is critical as it helps establish their relevance and build confidence as true partners. When required for time sensitive operations, the TT can act as the conduit of information to expedite the process, but this should only be done as a last measure.

The process should work similarly in ISF-generated operations. The ISF leadership should notify the TT of the upcoming operation. The TT then, in turn, notifies the PU of the operation. If time permits, the PU should be directly briefed by the ISF. If not, the TT can use its communication channels to ensure that the ISF plan is communicated to the PU.

If the PU does not directly plan with the ISF unit, the TT should assist in ensuring the ISF understands the concept and purpose of the overall operation, and help them plan the mission. The TT should also ensure that any issues found during planning are immediately relayed to the PU. While the ISF unit is planning, it

is the responsibility of the TT to ensure that all coalition effects are understood by and made available to the ISF leadership. The ISF does not have similar systems and is not normally familiar with their capabilities, limitations, and requirements for use. The process of providing coalition effects to ISF begins with assisting in the planning for, the request of, and the integration in the execution of those assets. By repeating this process, the ISF and coalition effects providers become more familiar and comfortable working with each other and eventually develop their own systems and processes. The TTs span the capability gap until the ISF can develop its own capability to provide the necessary effects.

The primary purpose of the TTs during mission execution is to provide PU situational awareness to ISF operations, give advice to the ISF elements, and provide coalition effects. The PU should understand that if the operation is mounted, the TT will normally only be able to embed with one element (normally the command element) due to vehicle manning. TTs should not normally be expected to embed at the squad, platoon, or company level on a habitual basis. Effects that TTs must be able to provide are coalition QRF, fire support, and MEDEVAC. PUs should ensure they are familiar with the true request capabilities of the TTs they are working with, as training in basic fire support procedures and emergency close air support (CAS) at Fort Riley is often their only experience.

TT elements, like leaders, move to where they best can provide assistance to the ISF during operations. Normally, this will be located with the HQ element, but the task to provide effects often requires that the TT move to more forward elements. Operations by the authors in Iraq during 2004-2005 can be used as examples.



Military transition team advisors provide assistance during combined mission planning.

During operations the TT vehicles would collocate with the ISF HQ element and vehicles, and if required the TT would dismount a small element to move with the ISF forces if they conducted

dismounted operations. The TT vehicles served as a relay station for the dismounted ground element. The dismounted ground element would move to where they could best provide effects for the ISF and provide the PU with situational awareness by ensuring a two way flow of information. These TT members become most critical when U.S. forces are conducting a combined operation with the ISF and the movements and fires of ground forces must be de-conflicted in a rapid but accurate manner.

Due to the number of personnel, TTs often have to divide their effort during operations. Battle tracking of ISF operations is best done through the ISF TOC. TTs require augmentation to accomplish this task while they are embedded with ISF units on missions. A method that has proven successful in Iraq is to provide personnel from the PU unit to establish a liaison element in the ISF TOC. These elements can then battle track with the ISF and keep U.S. forces apprised of ISF reported locations or issues. The PU liaison element can also help the ISF maintain situational awareness of PU elements. A successful package was a Blue Force Tracker (BFT) TOC kit with at least one radio on the PU operational net. Care must be taken to ensure that these cryptographic items are secure. This augmentation is a small price for the added value and combat power of an ISF unit. Through continual use and positive influence by the TT and the PU, the ISF TOC will become more and more functional with time and achieve a critical step towards conducting independent operations; the ability of the ISF to battle track its forces, other friendly forces, enemy activity, and use that information to maneuver its forces successfully. As the TTs and PU identify that the ISF is progressing to the point that it is taking control of the fight, they can begin moving into more of a supporting role. A successful step is when the ISF exchange tactical information through their TOC with the PU and identify and request specific coalition

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support when needed.

TTs and the IAG have no inherent CSS capabilities and require support from the PUs that they are assigned to. The orders that assign the TTs to MSCs specifically spell out that PUs are responsible for providing CS and CSS support to the TTs. The exact support requirements for TTs from PUs will vary depending on the location of each team. Typically, TTs are collocated and live with the ISF that they support. Much of the Class I support comes from the IA with limited supplements from the PU. Class IX and maintenance are provided by the PU. TTs also receive limited funds to purchase items off the local economy in a self supporting role.

The support structure is the most underdeveloped element of most ISF units. A deliberate decision was made by U.S. commanders to develop the tactical capability to conduct counterinsurgency first and then develop the ability for ISF to support themselves. It was thought that US units could continue to provide the support while the ISF conducted operations and took the lead role in security of the country. Unfortunately, the ability to conduct independent support operations and independent tactical operations are tied together. If the ISF unit has justifiable, critical shortages, for example in body armor or authorized weapons systems, the TT logisticians must ensure the parent PU is informed and can therefore forward the requirements and apply pressure to their higher command to secure the necessary equipment. The lack of support can lead to the loss of personnel, equipment and therefore a fall in morale and unit effectiveness.

CSS training is being conducted for the ISF at national level schools. If specific training is not available or shortfalls exist, the TT should arrange the support skill training through the PU unit and its support elements. PU elements must understand that this training is as important as any other type of support they give to the ISF unit and resource it appropriately.

Conclusion

One of the first priorities of a new unit in country should be to determine how it can best support the transition of operations to the ISF. The key to this transition is the TT and

PU integration to support the ISF. The closer and more productive the relationship between the ISF, the TT, and the PU is, the more integrated and coordinated combined training, planning, and mission execution becomes. This allows coalition and ISF tactical leaders to effectively use the full power available to them against the enemy. Together the leadership of the triad should develop a plan to provide security in the area of operation and develop the ISF unit. The investment of a few personnel and some equipment on the part of the PU will pay great dividends in the form of effective ISF integrated in the fight.

The ISF leaders must be treated and made to feel as equals to the PU leadership by all levels of the PU. Maneuver leaders that understand the composition and purpose of transition teams, their command and control structure, and relationships with PU and ISF will be able to maximize the productivity of those relationships and achieve the goal of independent ISF in the lead. The only remaining hurdle is having the faith in the ISF unit to truly independently lead and conduct operations. It is this leap of faith that must be made for the coalition to succeed in our counterinsurgency efforts.

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