

DEALING WITH THE IRAQI POPULACE

AN ARAB-AMERICAN SOLDIER'S PERSPECTIVE

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Editor's Note: *The author recently completed an 18-month tour of duty in Iraq where he served at a logistics site, with a Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha, with a maneuver battalion, and as a personal translator and cultural advisor to the commander of Task Force Freedom, a two-star command. This variety of jobs was possible because of his fluency in Arabic and familiarity with Arabic culture. He wrote this article to help units deploying or already in Iraq as one Soldier's perspective on what we are doing right and what we can do better.*

Although coalition forces have been in Iraq for three years, there are still some commanders who do not fully understand the significance and the importance of cultural and human factors in the success of our counterinsurgency fight in Iraq. Commanders need to realize that the unconventional fight in Iraq evolves primarily around the Iraqi people, not the insurgency, since the Iraqi people represent the center of gravity in this fight. As long as they continue to base their daily progress solely on the number of terrorists killed and the number of suspects in custody, real progress will be delayed and the U.S. could be in Iraq for decades. As long as the coalition forces are reacting to the insurgency and failing to mobilize the Iraqis in this fight, then the insurgency potentially will be a long one.

So, how can we effectively mobilize Iraqis in support of the counterinsurgency fight in Iraq? The answer is very simple. Coalition forces need to do a better job preparing their troops culturally prior to their deployment to theater and then continue to do so while on the ground.

We cannot expect the troops to understand Iraqi culture in a one or two-hour PowerPoint presentation. The cultural training should represent a good portion of the troops' predeployment training especially for maneuver and civil affairs units. During this phase, the troops should not only try to learn some basic Arabic words and some understanding of the religion, but they should also focus on becoming familiar with their new area of operation (terrain, history, tribes, ethnicity, level of cooperation, and prior coalition's accomplishments in the area). In a perfect world, all this information would be readily available to the troops and their leadership prior to leaving the states by picking the brains of their counterparts in theater. Another option is to create an Iraq-Afghan center that effectively debriefs and collects lessons learned from



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A Soldier with the 1st Squadron, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, hands out flyers to locals in a sector of Baghdad.

troops and commanders returning from either OIF or OEF tours and then feeds this data to the deploying troops.

Cultural knowledge accrued during predeployment training will serve the troops well while they are conducting dismounted patrols, checkpoints, raids or when they are among the locals. Troops, commanders, and civil affairs staff will all benefit from the training since it will allow them to draw a fair picture of what to expect once they are on the ground and to better plan for their mission.

Once in theater, commanders should spend ample time interfacing with the locals and engaging their leadership in order to better understand what drives these people on daily basis. Is it the need for better security, employment, fuel, electricity, health care or eliminating corrupt government officials in the area?

During these engagements, the commanders and their staffs need to carefully assess the influence, capabilities, and qualifications of government officials and military leaders in the area. During my deployment, I witnessed several appointments of Iraqi officials such as mayors, vice-governors, chiefs of police and others that were based on family and political affiliations instead of qualifications. On the Iraqi Security Forces side, I met numerous commanders from both the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi police who were promoted from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel or from major to brigadier general, and then they were assigned to command specific battalions or brigades. Both scenarios never sat well with local Iraqi people. Commanders need to be on the lookout for these types of situations and try to avoid them before

they happen because it can easily damage the stability of the area of operations (AO).

While engaging mokhtars, sheiks, mayors and informal authorities and leaders, commanders should pay close attention to the number of visits and time spent with different local leaders in order to avoid any speculation regarding the commander's favoritism toward certain tribes or villages. These social engagements are time consuming, require a lot of patience, and may even interfere with daily operations but are a key factor in the stability of the AO.

Once the commanders start interfacing with the local Iraqis and their leadership, it is mission essential to keep these channels of communication open at all times with the local leaders either through physical contact or cell phones/satellite phones (most Iraqi citizens have one nowadays). Commanders should meet with local officials on a weekly basis in order to share information and discuss the area's critical issues from both the locals' and the coalition's perspectives and to determine how they can fix them. Throughout Iraq, the most critical issues are fuel, electricity,

employment, and health care.

Fuel

As the Iraqi government continues to struggle with the fuel shortage and the increasing demand from Iraqi citizens for fuel, each AO requires a fuel control plan. A good method is to use the Iraqi security forces and local Iraqi officials in your AO in order to create a distribution plan of the fuel flowing into the gas stations. One plan that is very effective in the Tigris River valley area, which is located about 40 miles south of Mosul, is to use squads from either the local police or the army at all the gas stations to create order. This ensures a fair distribution of gas and, most importantly, eliminates price gouging and black market fuel in the area. This approach allows the Iraqi citizens to pump their share of fuel for the same price at all the gas stations without worrying about waiting all day in line to end up not getting any fuel because the gas station owner sold all his fuel to the black market merchant instead of to the regular citizens.

Electricity

Distribution of electricity in Iraq is uneven, unbalanced, and sporadic. For example, in Mosul some neighborhoods have electricity flowing through their lines for more than 20 hours a day while on the other side of the city, other neighborhoods only receive four to six hours of electricity a day even if the electricity in both areas comes from the same power plant. What is the reason behind this unbalanced distribution? The answer is either the insurgency or abuse of power by the local Iraqi government officials that control the distribution of electricity.

The insurgency is often responsible for the corruption of electrical wires or lines that feed electricity to certain neighborhoods because they are being used as safe havens by the terrorists. They do not want coalition forces to be able to use lighted streets and houses during night raids. Also, the insurgents shut down electricity in villages and certain neighborhoods at night as a signal that

A platoon leader with the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, listens to locals as they describe the lack of electricity in the area.

Staff Sergeant Sean A. Foley



coalition forces are present in the area.

The second reason for irregular distribution of electricity is that certain Iraqi government officials live in certain neighborhoods and they pressure the engineer in charge to make sure that their town or their neighborhood gets continuous service throughout the day regardless of the shortages in other areas. In either case, troop commanders should get involved in fixing the problem, especially those involving the insurgency's destruction of electrical wires, by recommending to their Iraqi security force counterparts that they increase patrols around power plants or even put a platoon/squad in each power plant. If the unbalanced distribution is caused by the selfishness of a local Iraqi official, the commander should try to resolve this issue with the local official and simultaneously push the issue through the chain of command, although it may take months and sometimes years for the Iraqi government to take corrective actions.

Employment

The local Iraqis always get their hopes up for better employment opportunities when new units arrive in the area. Therefore, commanders should plan the mission of their civil affairs section prior to their arrival in theater. In a perfect world, a large part of the planning should be based on the feedback of their counterparts already on ground, since they are in direct contact with the Iraqi locals and have a good idea about project priorities in different sectors of the AO. This will also allow the civil affairs members to avoid the assumption that every village in the AO needs new schools, new roads, water projects, and the like. The reality is that the Iraqi infrastructure needs will vary from one village or city to another. So, an effective civil affairs plan should be based on the needs of different sectors in your AO including what your predecessors have accomplished. It should also cover any long-term projects that have been already discussed with the locals so that both the departing and incoming civil affairs teams will be on the same page.

Once the commander and his civil affairs staff have spent the first month interfacing with the locals, it is time to start discussing the project list for the area with the sheiks, mokhtars, and mayors. During these meetings, it is very important that the civil affairs officer explains that this project list is the result of coordination with the departing unit and is based on the feedback they have received from locals as well as the departing commander. In this way, the civil affairs officer shows that the local Iraqi citizens' feedback is very important to the coalition. This approach also minimizes the distrust that exists between the locals and the civil affairs staff when it gets closer to the transition period. Unfortunately, there were numerous incidents where units promised a village a certain project, but it never got off the ground because the incoming unit decided that it was not a priority for them or just didn't want to be involved in any sort of civil affairs activities.

The civil affairs staff should put in place a fair and equal bidding

During my time in Iraq I was able to observe various American, coalition, and Iraqi units. The most effective were always the ones with closest ties to the local community.

process by which the local contractors may bid on a project. This process should give priority to local contractors over outsiders, but when an outsider gets the projects then he should be required to hire some locals to work on the project. This approach will ensure jobs in the area and allows the civil affairs to keep a close eye on the contractor through the local workers. The civil affairs staff should also pay close attention to the contractor that ends up winning

project bids all the time because this will automatically send a wrong message to the Iraqis, who will ultimately interpret it as form of favoritism by the coalition toward certain contractors.

Units need to create a tracking system with the history of old and current contractors that civil affairs have dealt with or continue to deal with and the quality of their final product. It is important to pass these records on to incoming units. There have been incidents where a contractor starts a project but never finishes it and in some cases, just takes the project funds and disappears until new units arrive to the area. Then he goes back and bids on new projects and unfortunately ends winning some of them because the departing civil affairs failed to pass the contractors' history to their counterpart. Lastly, the civil affairs unit should do a better job assessing the final cost of any project before it gets put on the list for bidding. According to Iraqi civilians, the coalition has overpaid on numerous projects.

Health Care

Public health in Iraq is in free fall, and care is often triage at best. While Iraqi health care services continue to suffer from the lack of medical infrastructure, equipment and staff, the coalition commander should seize the opportunity to strengthen bonds with the locals by creating a medical assistance program that will provide the local Iraqis with basic medical needs. The program should consist of frequent visits of coalition medics to clinics, hospitals, and villages in order to conduct medical screening and provide basic medicine to the Iraqis. This visitation not only benefits the locals, but it also serves as a training session for the Iraqi doctors and nurses. The coalition medical programs should not become the primary care in the region, but they can strengthen ties with the local community.

During my time in Iraq I was able to observe various American, coalition, and Iraqi units. The most effective were always the ones with closest ties to the local community. The average Iraqi does not want chaos; he wants a chance to raise his family and insure a better life for his children. If we show him the way to do so, he will support us and not the terrorist.

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