



Advising Iraqis: Building the Iraqi Army

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IF AMERICA AGREES with President George W. Bush that failure in Iraq is not an option, then the adviser mission there will clearly be a long-term one. The new Iraqi Army (IA) will need years to become equal to the challenge posed by a persistent insurgent and terrorist threat, and U.S. support is essential to this growth. Having spent a year assigned to the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I) equipping and training a new Iraqi armored brigade, I offer some recommendations to future advisers as they take on the job of working with the IA to build a professional and competent fighting force.

This article draws on my experience as the senior adviser for the Coalition Military Assistance Training Team (CMATT) charged with assisting the 2d Armored Brigade, 9th Mechanized Division, based 15 miles north of Baghdad in Taji, Iraq. When my 10-man team arrived in August 2005, the brigade was just beginning to form. Equipped with the T-72 tank, the 2d Brigade was the only armored brigade in the IA. Over the next 11 months, my team, along with 4 other battalion-level teams, assisted in manning, equipping, training, and employing this growing military organization. At the end of my tour in June 2006, the 1700-man brigade had taken the lead in its area of responsibility. I share the following observations for future advisers.

First, appreciate the importance of the advisory mission and understand the enormity of the task at hand. Iraqi officers with whom I have spoken agree unanimously that a U.S. presence in Iraq is absolutely essential to prevent catastrophic collapse of the government and civil war. A vital element of this presence is the Iraqi Adviser Group (IAG), which is tasked to coach and guide the IA toward self-sufficiency. While the new Iraqi government struggles to become autonomous, there is just no competent institution other than the IA that can prevent anarchy. But the dismantling of the old IA in 2003 left little to reconstruct, so multi-national forces have been forced to reconstitute a new IA from scratch. The wisdom of the dissolution of the old army is not at issue here; it is the consequences of this decision that advisers must comprehend to appreciate the full scope of their challenge.

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PHOTO: Soldiers with the 9th Iraqi Army Division (Mechanized) parade a fleet of refurbished T-72 tanks before an audience of Iraqi and Coalition officials at Taji Military Base in November 2005. The tanks were part of a donation of equipment arranged by NATO. (U.S. Army)

Next, make an effort to understand the Iraqi soldiers; cultivate a respect for their culture. Each American adviser starts with great credibility in terms of military expertise, and the Iraqis believe that we can do anything if we put our minds to it. With a measure of humility and cultural sensitivity, each adviser can use this perception to great advantage building the new Iraqi force.

Finally, understand that the relationship among the Iraqi unit, the advisers, and the partner unit can be contentious, so as you work with your Iraqi unit, foster your relationship with the Coalition partners as well. The Coalition is charged with building the IA to stand on its own so that eventually it can be self-sustaining. But it's tough to simultaneously conduct combat operations against insurgents while providing training opportunities for the Iraqis, and the friction among all the organizations involved can inhibit the Iraqi unit's growth.

The Adviser's Challenges

By disbanding the old IA, the United States accepted responsibility for replacing an institution that was both respected and feared throughout Iraq. Saddam could count on his army to maintain control against internal dissent, as evidenced by the effective suppression of large-scale rebellions in the north and south during the 1990s. Iron discipline was the norm under Saddam. The lowliest lieutenant could expect instant obedience and extreme deference from his soldiers. Today's army is very different. Unlike Saddam's, the new army serves the cause of freedom, and officers and soldiers alike are a bit confused about what this means.

Recruiting, retaining and accountability. One of the most critical tasks for the army is recruiting and retaining soldiers. Soldiers are under no effective contract, and they always have the option to leave the service. As of this writing, the only power holding them is the promise of a paycheck (not always delivered) and a sense of duty. Good soldiers leave after receiving terrorist threats against their families. Less dutiful soldiers fail to show up for training if they think it will be too hard. In areas where the duty is difficult and deadly, unit AWOL rates approach 40 percent. The old IA executed deserters unhesitatingly; the new army watches powerlessly as soldiers walk away from their posts, knowing full well that the army has no real means to punish them.

I believe that many of the officers join because they have a great sense of duty and want to save their country from chaos. They have assumed roles in the new IA at great personal risk. In my brigade alone, the litany of personal tragedy grew with depressing regularity. The commander's brother was kidnapped and killed. The deputy commander's cousins, hired to protect his family, were found murdered and stacked up on his doorstep with a note saying he was next. Two of four battalion commanders had to move their families because of death threats. A deputy battalion commander's son was kidnapped and has not been found. Staff officers, soldiers, and interpreters spoke of murdered relatives or told harrowing personal stories of close calls with terrorists.

Iraqi soldiers and officers are making a daily choice between continuing to invest in the new government and opting out to focus on making the best of possible anarchy. Without steadfast American support, these officers and soldiers will likely give up and consider the entire effort a lost cause. Until the government and its security forces become more competent, this will be a risk.

Personnel accountability is another issue, but not so much for the Iraqis as for the Americans. The Iraqis are horrendous at keeping track of their soldiers. There are no routine accountability formations, and units typically have to wait until payday to get a semi-accurate picture of who is assigned to the unit. Because Iraqi status reports are almost always wrong, American advisers have taken to counting soldiers at checkpoints to get a sense of where combat power is distributed.

IA motivation. In addition, Iraqi commanders are reluctant to deploy a robust percentage of their combat power outside the wire. In one instance, Coalition partners and advisers to 2d Brigade observed with alarm that a 550-man infantry battalion could only put about 150 soldiers in the battlespace at any given time. Initially, American advisers tried to increase deployed strength by securing copies of the daily status report and questioning why so few soldiers were on mission. We sat down with the Iraqi commanders and highlighted the dismal statistics in an effort to embarrass them into doing better. We attempted to get the Iraqis to enforce a Ministry of Defense (MOD) policy that allowed no more than 25 percent of the unit to be on

leave. We developed PowerPoint® slides that depicted the number of combat platoons on security missions and asked about the status of uncommitted platoons. Using another metric to illustrate how the numbers just did not add up, advisers counted combat vehicles on mission. This sustained effort led to no noticeable improvement. The Iraqis believed they were meeting mission. They did not perceive their allocation of manpower to be a problem.

It was not until 2d Brigade was poised to take the lead in its area of operations (AO) that advisers witnessed a new approach to making the maximum use of available combat power. When they started planning their first independent operation, one of the Iraqi battalion commanders and the brigade staff worked together to devise a plan that allocated a significant amount of combat power to the mission. While some of this power was reallocated from current operations, a fair percentage was new combat power finally getting into the fight. Clearly when the Iraqi commander believed in the mission, he would find the forces to make it happen.

Still fighting the last war. Another challenge is that the IA's tactics are outmoded. They are still fighting their last war, the high-intensity Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, a war with clear battle lines fought with mass military formations, and one in which civilians on the battlefield were a nuisance, not the center of gravity.

Future advisers would be wise to study this war, an 8-year conflagration with a total casualty count of over 1.5 million. Large-scale attacks and huge battles were the rule. Iranian human-wave assaults presented Iraqi soldiers with a target-rich environment. I heard many stories of battlefields covered with bodies following huge expenditures of ammunition. The T-72 tank was considered extremely effective, but required infantry to keep Iranian soldiers from leaping onto them to deliver grenades. Iraqi officers claim the battles against the Americans of 1991 and 2003 were aberrations, whose outcomes they attributed to U.S. air power and huge technological overmatch. They continue to take great pride in their accomplishments in "defeating Iranian aggression."

Accordingly, at the tactical level, officers and soldiers from the old army are inclined to try to solve



Iraqi soldiers, with help from Coalition advisers, spent three days off-loading 77 T-72 tanks, which will equip the 2d Brigade.

U.S. Army

current, low-intensity tactical problems using the techniques of the 1980s. I frequently heard the refrain that if the Americans would only "turn them loose," the Iraqis would defeat the insurgency in short order. But Iraqi commanders are reluctant to put tanks in an urban environment because the close quarters give excellent opportunities for insurgents armed with rocket propelled grenades. They refuse to split up three-tank platoons because it has been ingrained in them to never subdivide below this level.

Iraqi soldiers tend to react under fire as though they are in a large-scale attack. They must learn fire discipline and careful target selection in a battlefield filled with noncombatants. Unfortunately, the Iraqi "death blossom" is a common tactic witnessed by nearly every U.S. Soldier who has spent any time outside the wire. Any enemy attack on the IA, whether mortar, sniper, or an improvised explosive device, provokes the average Iraqi soldier to empty his 30 round magazine and fire whatever belt of ammunition happens to be in his machine-gun. Ninety percent of the time, there is no target, and the soldiers always agree that this is extremely dangerous, in addition to being a grievous waste of ammunition. But they continue to do it.

A similar phenomenon occurs when Iraqis react to the death of a comrade on the battlefield. The reaction is very dramatic. I once observed overwrought Iraqi soldiers start to rampage through a civilian community, an event that could have been tragic if an adviser had not stepped in to stop it. At another time, an enemy sniper attack triggered a reaction that had Iraqis "returning fire" nearly 90

minutes after the enemy had delivered one deadly shot. This “burst reaction” may be attributed to Iraqis experiencing denial, anger, and grief all at the same time. Still, although they react strongly to the loss of a friend or loved one, grim repetition seems to allow them to move on rather quickly.

At the operational level, the Iraqis do not fully grasp the importance of multiple lines of operation, to include governance, infrastructure, and the economy. Their tool of choice is the blunt instrument of force directed liberally at all threats, real and perceived. The IA disdains working with civilians—the 60-division Saddam-era army had no need to ask for cooperation. Many Iraqis assured me that the local sheik is always responsible for whatever happens in the area under his control. Under Saddam, if any trouble occurred, the sheik and his entire family would be sent to jail with no questions asked. And jail in Iraq was an unpleasant place. Iraqi leaders understand our reverence for the rule of law in theory, but not in practice. For example, they have difficulty understanding why we treat detainees so well and why so many are released back into society. Under Saddam, the army did not have to worry about winning hearts and minds. Force and fear worked well to ensure domestic submission.

This is not a good model for the current low-intensity counterinsurgency (COIN) operation, and it complicates the mission of helping the Iraqis defeat insurgents. The new IA must learn to fight

using strategies and tactics far different than those used in the past and largely alien to the new army. Officers below the grade of lieutenant colonel are good at following orders but less comfortable at initiating and planning the small-unit operations required in COIN. Overall, the new generation of soldiers and officers is slowly learning the difference between serving their country and serving a dictator, but it is clear that the process of adopting more effective tactics, techniques, and procedures is clearly going to take some time.

Infrastructure. Some aspects of building a new army can be overcome relatively quickly. The MOD will soon make routine a system to recruit, train, and distribute new soldiers. The National Maintenance Contract will open up the flow of spare parts from eager foreign suppliers. Soldier pay should soon become a reason that soldiers stay in the Army instead of a constant source of frustration that has driven many out.

Other advances will take more time. The nascent system of schools and training centers should evolve into a coordinated network that ensures military competence and professionalism. Regional support centers will need time to establish an effective Iraqi logistics system. Personnel management agencies will improve to reduce distractions and allow commanders to make the most of their available manpower. In the meantime, advisers and U.S. support provide critical credibility while these systems become viable.

Field Marshal Viscount Slim, on serving with foreign troops in World War II:

Accustomed as I was to Indian battalions in the field with usually only seven or eight Europeans, it [having a large number of European soldiers in native units] struck me as an unnecessarily generous supply. I never changed that view and later experience confirmed it. This I know is rank heresy to many very experienced ‘coasters.’ I was constantly told that, far from being too many, with the rapidly expanded African forces, more British officers and N.C.O.s were needed. But these large British establishments in African units had great drawbacks. The only way to fill them was to draft officers and N.C.O.s willy-nilly to them, and this did not always give the right kind. The European who serves with native troops should be, not only much above average in efficiency and character, as he must accept greater responsibility, but he should serve with them because he wants to, because he likes them.

—William Slim, Viscount, *Defeat into Victory*, MacMillan Publisher Limited: London, 1986. p. 166.

Know the Soldiers, Know the Culture

We must be careful when making broad generalizations about working with Iraqis. The 2d Brigade commander once held up his hand with fingers extended to make the point that, like the varying lengths of his fingers, people come with different strengths and weaknesses: Each of us is unique. Nevertheless, it helps for advisers to be aware that they aren't working in Kansas, or Georgia, or Texas. In other words, it is good to know the soldiers and the culture.

Relationships. Iraqis value relationships more than results. They will interrupt a conversation, no matter how important, to pleasantly greet someone who has entered a meeting room late or unannounced. Their reputation for not wanting to recognize misconduct or failure is well earned. (Advisers have found that photographic evidence is essential to achieve a constructive after-action review.)

Ingenuity. Economic sanctions and austerity have made the Iraqis outstanding improvisers. We witnessed an Iraqi sergeant working to improve the appearance of his new brigade headquarters. Lacking a paint brush, he was applying red paint to decorative fence posts with his bare hands. In a later upgrade, the commander had his men use purple metal headboards from surplus bed parts to line the sidewalk, creating an appealing approach to his building. Because beds seemed to be in excess across post, his example spurred many copycats.

Iraqis also display great ingenuity with maintenance operations. A maintenance adviser for one of the tank battalions told me with pride how his unit mechanics were doing “direct support level work with less-than-organizational-level tools,” which is like removing a tank engine using a hoist and an off-the-shelf tool kit from Wal-Mart. When we conducted a routine check of a traffic control point, an IA company commander demonstrated how his men had changed an engine head gasket on site. This expertise and can-do spirit extends to finer work as well. One mechanic fixed a complex traversing and elevating unit using only pliers and a coat hanger. In certain endeavors, the Iraqis definitely illustrate the cliché, “If there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Fatalism. Iraqis tend to be fatalistic, surrendering their future to the will of Allah. This explains how they can continue to function despite daily car bombings, atrocities, and murders that have touched

nearly every family. When my Iraqi friends returned from leave, I always asked them about their “vacation.” (It is one of the phrases I have memorized in Arabic.) About 30 percent of the time, they had some bad news to relate: a kidnapped cousin, a death threat, or a bombing near their home. After we commiserated about the event, the Iraqi typically ended by saying “Allah kareem” (“God is generous”). This was not really stoicism, because it was sometimes accompanied by tears. It did, however, show that Iraqis feel far less in control of events than the average American does.

For Americans, the most frustrating aspect of this fatalism is that it translates into a lack of diligence and detailed planning. Iraqis eschew operational calendars and typically forecast little beyond the next 48 to 72 hours. One example of this lack of regard for planning occurred prior to the handing over of operations to the 2d Brigade. The American commander’s battle rhythm included representation at local government meetings each week. When the Iraqis took charge of this schedule, they continually re-tasked responsibility for attendance, selected officers at random to attend and take notes, and generally failed to make the most of this opportunity to engage local leaders. The morning operations and intelligence update, a staple at every American tactical operation center (TOC) and an opportunity to synchronize operations, usually drew only token Iraqi attendance.

To their credit, the Iraqis almost always made mission, but it was typically not to the standard that Americans expect. When fellow advisers complained about how the Iraqis would fritter away opportunities by failing to plan, I encouraged them to persevere. If repeated often enough, at least some of our advice eventually had an effect. But to reduce frustration, I would also tell them, “Remember, we’re in Iraq!”

Reacting versus planning. Failing to plan does not necessarily mean laziness. It just means that Iraqis prefer to “react to contact” and make things happen when they have to. Soon after the Samarra mosque bombing on 22 February 2006, the government of Iraq called on the new armored brigade to send a battalion task force into Baghdad to assist in controlling sectarian violence that threatened to devolve into civil war. A warning order came to the unit leaders around noon on a Sunday, and the official order was issued at about 1800. American

planners were busy requesting a 24-hour delay to facilitate detailed planning, but the Iraqis were assembling a task force for movement. As the advisers scrambled to prepare teams to accompany them, the Iraqi commanders were issuing orders and checking load plans. At about 0200 Monday morning, the first company left the motor pool on its way to the link-up point. Between 0530 and 0845, 3 companies totaling 11 BMPs (Russian armored vehicles) and 19 tanks had rolled into separate operating bases to report to 3 different brigades of the Iraqi 6th division. I accompanied one of the tank companies. Upon arrival, I asked where the soldiers could bed down for a couple of hours to get some sleep. The Iraqi commander replied that the tankers would be going directly into the city; a short time to refuel and conduct maintenance was all that could be afforded. By 1130 that morning, all elements of the armored task force were in positions around the city of Baghdad, providing a powerful symbol of the

growing strength of the IA. Over the next 12 days, Iraqis watched with pride as their tanks and BMPs were a daily fixture on the evening news.

Bottom line. Advisers are most effective when they can approach Iraqis with a measure of humility, appreciating Iraqi strengths while acknowledging their weaknesses. Iraqis will return the level of respect that we accord them.

Getting the Relationships Right

Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are here to help them, not win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is. It might take longer, and it might not be as good as you think, but if it is theirs it will be better.

—T.E. Lawrence, “Twenty-Seven Articles,”
Arab Bulletin, 20 August 1917

This quotation, displayed at biweekly meetings of senior leaders and advisers to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the Multi-National Division, Baghdad (MND-B) AO, offers today’s advisers a great example to emulate. Clearly, the job of creating long-term order and prosperity in Iraq is in the hands of the Iraqis. Any casual observer of American politics can understand that. Moreover, we know that Iraqi leaders do their best work when they feel ownership of a course of action.

Problematic command relationships. The command relationships among the IAG advisers, the Iraqi unit, and the Coalition partner unit are problematic. The partner unit is normally a U.S. brigade which has responsibility for an AO within one of the multi-national commands. The IAG advises Iraqi units that operate in the partner unit’s battlespace. But neither



DoD

2d Brigade soldiers on parade in refurbished T-72 tanks and BMP armored personnel carriers in a ceremony at Taji Military Base 15 miles north of Baghdad, 17 November 2005.



DoD

Iraqi soldiers march by the reviewing stand at Taji Military Base in a ceremony celebrating the largest NATO-driven equipment donation to date (17 November 2005).

the IAG nor the Iraqi unit have a formal command relationship with the partner unit. Iraqi units have their own chain of command, and are not part of the Coalition.

One of the most frustrating points of friction I observed was caused by mistaken beliefs about the latter. Many U.S. commanders thought that the Iraqi force was part of the Coalition and OIF was another exercise in Coalition warfare. Numerous examples demonstrate how this misunderstanding created confusion and discord: An Iraqi platoon leader refusing to participate in a combined patrol because he had not received an order from his battalion commander; Iraqi patrols leaving their assigned area to respond to an MOD order to escort a convoy from Baghdad to Taji; an Iraqi brigade commander ordering a squad to remain in an ambush position, effectively masking a U.S. unit that had already occupied a position nearby; and Iraqi soldiers refusing to follow American orders to search a mosque until the order was cleared by an Iraqi division commander. In all of these examples, the U.S. commander had operational control of Iraqi units, but the Iraqi chain of command was leaning forward to take charge before it was designated for official command and control functions. While the American commander's first impulse was to be furious with the Iraqis, from the perspective of building new units, there was clearly good news in this evidence of a strengthening Iraqi chain of command.

Although the Coalition units and IA units do not share chains of command, U.S. platoon leaders in the partner units are required to conduct combined (Iraqi and U.S.) operations in order to improve the IA unit's combat readiness. The intent is that the

experienced, well-trained U.S. units will train Iraqis in troop-leading procedures, the orders process, and mission execution for an operation, but all too often the combined operation consists of a "drive-by" pick-up of an Iraqi squad while the U.S. unit is on the way to the objective. This puts an Iraqi face in the crowd, but does little to develop a capable ISF.

Strategy and tactics at odds.

For some time now, building the new ISF has been the strategic main effort in Iraq. Pentagon pronounce-

ments emphasize placing Iraqis in the lead. Nearly every mission statement I saw in theater referred to "developing capable ISF" as an essential task. At the tactical level, however, brigade and battalion commanders must necessarily concentrate their time, talent, and resources on fighting insurgents. This was clearly the case in my experience during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) III and IV. The MND-B AO, for one, is still too dangerous for tactical commanders to focus on training the IA at the expense of security, which leaves the heavy lifting of building the new ISF to Iraqi commanders and their advisers. This arrangement can work only if the U.S. force provides enough stability to allow the Iraqis to train and practice tactics, techniques and procedures inside and outside the wire.

Culture trumping mission. Another problem plaguing the strategy is that it's unnatural for U.S. Soldiers to step back and allow their Iraqi partners to take the lead when the Soldiers think they can do it more efficiently and quickly. From private to colonel, the American Soldier is task-oriented, and even the most experienced advisers forget that our real charge is to train the Iraqis so that they can do the job. I once saw an adviser developing a PowerPoint® "storyboard" depicting a significant

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action that had occurred with an IA unit. I asked him if he was working with his Iraqi counterpart to put it together. He replied that it would “take four times as long to do it that way.” This same thinking prevails in combined operations centers, where American battle captains have a tendency to tell their Iraqi counterparts what to do, rather than allowing them to work through the planning and decision making process.

This is the wrong approach. Eventually Iraqi officers will have to make their own judgment calls and handle complex situations without U.S. support. We must improve their planning skills and strengthen their chain of command at every opportunity. Iraqi leaders should chair meetings with local leaders and the units should handle tactical situations to the limits of their capability. We must constantly find ways to put the IA in front while making sure they are prepared to succeed.

Disparity of capability. The great disparity in capability between U.S. and IA units also works against the IA training effort. It takes a 2,000-man Iraqi brigade to take over an AO formerly controlled by a 600-strong U.S. battalion, and even then there is a drop in capability. There are many reasons for this delta:

- The U.S. work ethic is second to none—especially when Soldiers are deployed far from home and can focus 100 percent on getting the job done. Arab culture, on the other hand, is much less focused on the clock; it takes the long view that everything will happen in due time, “in shah-allah” (“God willing”).

- The IA is not rotating units into the AO; rotation off the line consists of a liberal leave schedule that reduces the force by 20 to 30 percent at any given time.

- The American military is probably the most thoroughly trained force in the world, but Iraqi soldiers make do with 3 to 5 weeks of basic training before entering the battlespace. Most IA units rely on experienced former soldiers to make up for immature training programs. This new IA must fight as it forms and grows. The Iraqi brigade I advised went from initial soldier reception to independent operations with Coalition support in a mere 10 months.

- American staffs are huge, and a host of technological tools facilitate situational awareness. The battle captain in a brigade combat team (BCT) runs a TOC shift of 15 officers and soldiers while

his Iraqi counterpart typically has 2 radio operators and a cell phone to call the commander. Iraqi officers are amazed when they enter a U.S. brigade command post; they are awed by the buzz of activity and big-screen displays. The contrast between the well-funded, professional U.S. Army and the fledging Iraqi volunteer force is huge. An adviser who does not keep this in mind is likely to unfairly denigrate his Iraqi counterpart and do poorly in coaching him. A U.S. commander who ignores this disparity is likely to paralyze the Iraqi TOC by demanding the same level of information from them that he expects from his own TOC.

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In spite of these disparities, in less than one year the 2d Armored Brigade received and distributed all combat equipment, soldier uniforms, and even barracks furniture while simultaneously conducting individual and small-unit training. The brigade did this even though officer fill remained at 50 percent or less during the first 5 months and present-for-duty status suffered from the aforementioned leave policy. Moreover, the brigade now takes the lead on operations within its AO, suffering casualties and fighting the enemy alongside its American partners. Coalition partners and advisers share in this accomplishment because they have allowed the IA to perform while taking pains to shield them from failure. They will have to do so for some time to ensure continued progress.

Distractions of combat. Some friction between advisers and U.S. tactical commanders is inevitable. Advisers know firsthand that preparing a brand-new army in Iraq requires patience, flexible expectations, and compromise, but U.S. tactical commanders are busy fighting insurgents; they have little time to meet with their Iraqi brothers-in-arms, to debate tactics, or to concern themselves with the

IA's administrative problems. It doesn't help that, at times, adviser teams require augmentation from the U.S. unit of 10 to 25 Soldiers per battalion to accomplish tactical missions. Some commanders see this requirement as a wasteful drain on their resources. Then there is the burdensome requirement to train Iraqi units during combat operations. This effort involves pesky translation issues and tiresome distractions; it is easier to conduct a U.S.-only mission than to go through the pain of turning a combat mission into an Iraqi training event. While the U.S. Army's reputation for being task-oriented is well earned and one of our greatest strengths, it becomes an impediment when the essential task is to cede mission accomplishment to the Iraqis.

Signs of change. The differing emphases between OIF III (which ended January 2006) and OIF IV demonstrated that American commanders were definitely improving in their ability to support Iraqis in the lead. In November 2005, an OIF III brigade commander staunchly defended his formal authority over Iraqi formations by refusing an IA division commander's request to allow a company team to participate in a ceremony marking a donation of NATO armored vehicles. During preparation for the December election, this same colonel emphasized that "if we want our Iraqi units to play in our battlespace, they better be ready." From the operational standpoint this stance made sense; the colonel clearly wanted either reliable troops or none at all. But from the strategic standpoint of developing a capable ISF, he missed the mark. The opportunity to get IA soldiers into the fight was worth every bit of lost military efficiency.

During OIF IV, after the sea-change directing that Iraqis be put in the lead, U.S. commanders deferred to the "Iraqi solution" from MOD down to the company level. As the 2d Brigade took over its AO in May 2006, the U.S. commander respected the Iraqi commander's prerogatives. Although misunderstandings continued to occur, the overall direction was very positive, thus reinforcing the Iraqi chain of command.

It would be naive to think that the problems between advisers and partner units have been solved. Some friction will inevitably persist. But both groups must find a way to put the Iraqis in the lead; otherwise, the Iraqi dependence on U.S. forces will continue. Good relations between advisers and

the partner unit are essential to mitigate adviser-commander problems. Advisers must be nearly as proactive in educating their U.S. partners as they are in working with their Iraqi counterparts, but the partner unit must be willing to participate. During my year in Iraq, I worked with two American brigade commanders. The first preferred not to deal with advisers, and I was unsuccessful in establishing any semblance of a constructive relationship with him. The second commander was far more focused on making advisers and Iraqis part of his team. I was invited to participate in morning net calls designed to improve situational awareness and address outstanding issues. In addition, periodic meetings between the American commander and his Iraqi counterpart were extremely productive.

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Final Observations

Moderate Iraqis are taking great risks to build their country and defend it against those who choose anarchy, extremism, or a Saddam-style dictatorship. When I asked an Iraqi deputy brigade commander if he was optimistic about the future, he responded that security was the first imperative and the most difficult condition to achieve. Once the Iraqi Government provides security, he said, then everything to follow will be easy. He argued that the Iraqi people do not expect much from their government because the vast majority had received little during 35 years under Saddam.

As American military forces begin to pull back, Iraqi forces will become more central to establishing a safe and secure Iraq. U.S. advisers are critical partners in this mission. They provide expertise and, more important, reassurance that the forces for democracy and moderation have a powerful ally at their side. Advisers who approach this important mission with a constructive attitude and a willingness to put Iraqis in the lead will make important and satisfying contributions to this effort. I personally

consider my year in Iraq as the most significant of my 22 years in the Army.

Despite low approval ratings and doubters back home, President Bush might just be correct about establishing a free and democratic Iraq in the center of the strategic Middle East. My Iraqi friends yearn for a day when their children can enjoy peace and prosperity in a country that has no excuse for being poor. The current generation understands that they are paying the price now so that future generations can enjoy what has so far been denied.

The land of the two rivers, brimming with untapped oil resources, can surely become a shining example that elevates the region above its history

of perpetual conflict. Of course, the future holds more senseless killings and strategic setbacks. The enemy is determined and will continue to go to any length to frustrate freedom. But the process of gaining control while battling the insurgency must continue even as the entire world debates the wisdom of the effort. This mission is a significant challenge for the most powerful military in the world; it will exceed the capability of this new IA for some time to come. But no great undertaking has ever come easy. Current and potential partners participating in OIF should keep this in mind as they continue the important work suggested by the mission's name. **MR**

GOING HOME

I'm wearing my Class A uniform, waiting on flight number 4505.
The plane will pick me up in New York and deposit me in Philadelphia, where
I will meet an old Army friend; together we'll travel to a special ceremony.

My polyester uniform does not breathe well; on a long trip
I begin to offend those around me.
The tie chokes me: like a man noosed for execution.
My luggage strap tears at my ribbons, scattering them on the dirty floor.
I am choking.

As I make my way to Gate 28, a vet from The Greatest Generation walks up to me.
He and his wife would like to buy me lunch.
I thank the man for serving our country and add that it is I who should buy him lunch,
Then remember: I am waiting for Dave to come home from Iraq.
The old vet nods understandingly, we look into each other's eyes, shake hands, and
I disappear to be alone.

While I sit in the empty gate (I am early) CNN reports that a suicide bomb went off in Tal-Afar.
Tal-Afar is near Mosul, where Dave was stationed.
I think, "These are the times to say 'I'm sorry' to those who matter most."
I wait for Dave in silence.
My only companions are a tired stewardess and CNN—broadcasting to no one.

A woman in a two-piece suit comes up to me.
Reflexively I reply: "Yes, Ma'am"
She informs me that Dave is waiting for me in the cargo area.

The gate slowly fills; the gazes multiply.
I can't stop it.
A flood I have sought to suppress washes down my face.
Stares crowd closer...I can barely see them, yet I feel them.
They suffocate me.

A man in a suit waiting to board "First Class" casually reads
the sports section of a newspaper,
Tossing aside the front page aside: "Suicide Bomber Kills Four in Mosul."
I don't need to read the story because I know the picture too well.
I also know that the press probably mailed in the story from the comfort of a hotel suite,
ignoring the details.

I want to tell this man that while he lounges in "First Class" my friend Dave lies in cargo.
What will I say to his wife Cindy when I meet her?
Words and thoughts swirl around my head, but I can't locate anything.
All I feel is grief, and Cindy does not need me to cry on her shoulder.
There are no Army manuals to instruct me on what to do. I am at a loss.
I am the escort officer who is taking my fallen comrade home for the last time.