



U.S. Military Advisors

A Need for Guiding Principles

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THE KEY TO VICTORY in Iraq is not kinetic” is a phrase now commonplace in the halls of military leadership the world over. The U.S. Army turned that rhetoric into action in the summer of 2006, when U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Peter J. Schoomaker directed a division headquarters and two entire combat brigades to shift their primary responsibility from warfighting to Iraqi training and advising.

This was a significant step, but it is only part of an equation that is complicated by the well-entrenched kinetic solutions of our best warfighters. It took years to hone those warfighting skills, and yet there is only a fraction of that time available to acquire the specific skills that the new trainer-advisors (and many others to come) need for their mission.

As with any skill, learning the basics often determines success or failure. But what are the basics for an advisor? What principles equivalent to the warfighter’s “shoot, move, and communicate” might guide advisors of any background or specialty and help them perform effectively?

Army officers and NCOs are armed with vigor and enthusiasm and charged with a genuine can-do attitude about getting the job done. When advisors from a can-do culture meet the “just enough” culture of Iraqi Arabs and Kurds, two things will happen: first, there will be different and oftentimes conflicting views on how the advisory mission should be executed; second, coalition personnel will try to do the Iraqis’ tasks for them. For those who do not already find such a conclusion to be self-evident, I can say that I personally witnessed these two results often enough during my year in Iraq to call them the norm rather than the exception.

Advisors need something less proscriptive than “don’t do it for them,” but more prescriptive than “assist them in their tasks.” I certainly don’t think I offer anything unique here, but I can tell you that after a year of interaction with dozens of our advisors in the Iraqi Joint Headquarters, the Iraqi Ground Forces Command, the Multi-National Division, and various Iraqi divisions and brigades, the things that were overlooked were fundamental. There are numerous reasons for an advisor to do more, but any advisor worth his or her salt will tell you that you have done well enough if you can stick to the three commandments presented below.

1 Offer Principles-based Assistance

Advisors should facilitate the Iraqi application of the following four basic skills and avoid getting into the details of how they choose to implement them.

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PHOTO: SSG Keith McDonald demonstrates rifle techniques to Iraqi police officers from the 4th Brigade, 1st National Police Division, during training at the marksmanship range at Camp Rustamiyah, Iraq, 2 December 2006. (DOD)

- Follow the chain of command.
- Ensure proper staffing.
- Ensure the integrity of time and task management.
- Avoid acts or perceptions of favoritism.

Both Iraqi and coalition personnel will be tempted to violate any one of these in the name of some higher priority. You, as an advisor, must be prepared to police both sides.

When your Iraqi partner or his staff poses a question about whether or not an issue in question passes the test of principle, pose the question back to them. If they answer incorrectly, coach them on the principle and encourage them to come up with their own techniques for applying those principles. Offer your own technique only when they have none that meets the principle, but try to do so in the form of a loaded question, for example, "Since this deals with logistics and has not been to the G4, who do you think we should send this to before it goes in to the commander?" No matter how obvious and elementary the principles may seem to you, they are not always so clear to the Iraqis. In addition, they may simply find it far less convenient to do something the right way. That tendency, of course, isn't a specifically Iraqi one: how many U.S. officers or NCOs do you know who would forgo these principles in their own commands if they knew they could get away with it?

2 Practice True Partnership, Not Surrogacy

Although everyone seems to know what partnership means, the first six months in a culture as foreign as Iraq's can make even the best advisor forget his task and purpose. Partnership is not limited to your immediate partner. You may think it will save you time and heartache to focus only on your partner, but do not underestimate the destructive, undermining potential of his staff. To practice effective partnership, keep the following ideas in mind:

- *"Where is your partner?"* Partnership must include the presence and participation of the Iraqis. As obvious as this may sound, it should say something that I bother to mention it here. There is a high likelihood that your partner and his staff will routinely and sometimes intentionally violate the principles outlined above. When you find that you are saying the same things in the sixth month that

you said in the first month, you must resist the inner drive and temptation to do their tasks for them. Doing the tasks yourself might be easier and less stressful than attempting, oftentimes in vain, to show an Iraqi counterpart how to do the task while you watch or struggle to coach. But remember: each time you do his job, you undermine your own efforts.

- *"Practical" always trumps "ideal."* By now, many coalition officers know T.E. Lawrence's dictum by heart: *"Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to 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."* Whatever one chooses to take from Lawrence, you will save yourself grief if you accept the Arab and Kurdish cultural premise that, practically speaking, "a task completed is good enough." The phrase "pick your battles" will take on new meaning for you as an advisor.

- *Know when to prevent failure (the contradiction to partnership).* To avoid being their surrogate, ensure the Iraqis perform all tasks themselves. Inevitably, though, you will face situations where you cannot let a specific task fail. If assistance is clearly required or you are directed to provide it, you must provide it in a way that avoids your doing the task outright. Before you act, judge whether a perceived failure will have critical implications. (A multinational division or Iraqi commander should assist in providing such guidance in this regard. Examples include circumstances where soldiers will not be paid or fed.) If the action in question allows the Iraqis to make a correction that prevents complete failure, *let them* do (or re-do) what is required. If intervention is unavoidable, at least make sure the Iraqi staff officer who failed his assigned task is standing right next to you while you pick up the pieces.

3 Be a Test Conduit/Issue Raiser, Not a Problem Solver/Investigator

As a partner to the Iraqi effort, you will be asked to look into issues for both the coalition and the Iraqis.

- *Test conduit.* Coalition information channels should be used to determine if a step has been skipped, if and where a problem exists in their (the coalition's) system, or to track a significant action *for the coalition*. It should not be used to

solve problems or obtain information for the Iraqis; conversely, you should not let coalition leaders use you to resolve sticky issues directly with your Iraqi partner. *They WILL ask.* If you do serve as a test conduit for a specific issue, do not let your Iraqi partner know that you have done so. Your close relationship would demand that you provide similar assistance in the future when he asks for it.

- *Issue raiser.* If information (particularly an adverse issue or piece of information) has been raised through or by the coalition to you, be discreet in how you introduce it into the Iraqi system. First reports are just as incomplete in Iraq as they are in the United States, and Iraqi commanders are just as prone and tempted as coalition commanders to act immediately on critical issues.

- *Remain neutral.* When things go wrong or appear to be corrupt, do not become an investigator. Even more important, however obvious a wrongdoing may appear to be, do NOT take sides. Raise the issue with your Iraqi partner or staff as dispassionately and objectively as you can, and ask them what

they think about it. Track the issue if you feel you must, but remain a neutral party during the exchange of information. Oftentimes the Iraqi partner is fully aware of the issue and he either believes that bad news actually will get better with time, or he does not want to carry or deliver bad news. Or, he may ask, or even insist, that the coalition take adverse action against one of his subordinates or that the coalition report the adverse action to Iraqi superiors.

Final Advice for Advisors

The irony running through many of these principles is clear: most of us are still learning how to exercise these principles in our own lives, where we are surrounded by family and friends of the same culture. This condition alone makes being a warrior in the U.S. Army easy in comparison to being an advisor. The best-trained warrior in the world may amaze the most seasoned Iraqi leaders and soldiers with what he knows, but his efforts will mean very little if he cannot convey the above basic principles. **MR**

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