WORDS ARE WEAPONS
...so use them wisely

Major Michael D. Jason, U.S. Army

Major Michael D. Jason, U.S. Army, is a student at the Command and General Staff College. He holds a B.S. from the United States Military Academy and an M.S. from Georgetown University. In his most recent assignment he was a Joint Chiefs of Staff intern working in the office of the Chief of Staff of the Army. He has served as a military transition team leader embedded with the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 1st Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army Division, and in a variety of command and staff positions in Germany, Kosovo, Italy, Iraq, and the continental United States.

PHOTO: The author, far right, and his counterpart, the 1st Battalion commander, on the left, brief the one-star commander of the 1st Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army Division, on the progress of an ongoing dismounted clearing operation, Taji, Iraq, April 2006.

(All photos courtesy of the author)

Baghdad, 2006: Lieutenant Jones and his platoon have a simple mission: go search the large house on Haifa Street for illegal weapons. However, Jones also knows there is additional guidance; he is to conduct all missions in combination with his partner Iraqi unit. His chain of command has ordered him to "put an Iraqi face on it." Jones is in a hurry and he does not really know anyone in the Iraqi Army (IA) battalion partnered with his own battalion, so he stops his patrol at one of the Iraqi Army checkpoints and asks, through his interpreter, to borrow a jundi *(a junior soldier, equivalent to a U.S. private) for the mission. The IA captain is hesitant, but the jammers on Jones's trucks drown out his radio and he cannot call his battalion for guidance. Jones moves on with a jundi and conducts the raid. That evening, there is a storyboard on a successful combined raid by the two partner units.*

On the other side of town, an irate Iraqi battalion commander and his U.S. Army advisor from the military transition team (MiTT) embedded with the IA battalion are having a heated exchange. Both men are frustrated. This, it seems, is not the first time the U.S. partner unit has taken the colonel's men and used them for their missions in his battle space. The advisor is caught in the middle. He relies on the partner unit for support, but a good relationship with his counterpart, the Iraqi commander, is critical to the overall success of his mission. Clearly, this cannot be partnership, he thinks.

I N EVERY WAR, the U.S. Army gives birth to new terms and expressions that take on lives of their own: examples such as *the whole nine yards*, *jeep*, and *high-speed* come to mind. The War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom have also given us new terms. Some, like *Shock and Awe*, have moved into American popular culture. Others are internal to the Army but have become so widespread that we use them throughout the force. Some, like the term *storyboard*, are easily understood and simply convey a new tool (albeit one dreaded by combat leaders) for providing specific detail on an otherwise doctrinal spot report. Others, like *presence patrol*, *cordon and knock*, and *battlefield circulation*, have made their way into our professional operational language in the guise of new counterinsurgency terms. The new terms are catchy, yet ambiguous—and thus dangerous—for professionals who deal with life and death on a daily basis.

Soldiering is a profession. Military professionals know from their military education and experiences at the combat training centers that success in the

profession, like all professions, depends in part on the precise use of a common lexicon. For example, one cannot fathom a surgeon asking a nurse for a *whatchamacallit* or *clamp thingy*, or an accountant preparing one's tax return with deductions for work *stuff* or income from *various moneys*. Our professional terms are clearly articulated in Field Manual 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, and in Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. These are our doctrinal dictionaries; they lay out, with precision, the language of professionals for professionals. Neither one of these publications defines the terms *partner* or *partnership*.

In Iraq, the word *partner* has tactical and strategic implications, so its imprecise use is all the more dangerous. The term's ambiguity has caused, and will continue to cause, misunderstandings, mismanagement of resources, inappropriate taskings, poor command and control structures, and strained relationships among U.S. maneuver units, MiTTs, and Iraqi forces.

> *In Iraq, the word* partner *has tactical and strategic implications, so its imprecise use is all the more dangerous.*

Military professionals began widely using the term *partner* sometime in 2005 in Iraq, when U.S. combat units began establishing relationships with units of the new Iraqi Army. U.S. units began to "partner" with Iraqi units, but the term's meaning varied from command to command. Some U.S. units began relationships with Iraqi units that were forming within their area of operations. This type of partnership was, in effect, an unofficial relationship that took the form of mentorship and support during force generation and training. Other U.S. units accepted tactical control of already formed Iraqi units and began employing them in combat operations.

There was never a hierarchy implicit in the term. A unit could have a partnership with a like unit or a higher unit and vice versa. For example, sometimes an American battalion partnered with an Iraqi battalion of like size. Sometimes an Iraqi battalion was partnered with an American brigade. In 2006, the Multi-National Division-Baghdad (MND-B) commanding general, Major General J.D. Thurman, forbade his U.S. subordinate units to conduct U.S.-only operations. Commanders in the MND-B sector ordered that all operations would have U.S. and Iraqi forces acting as *partners.* In addition, in an address to the Nation on 10 January 2007, President George W. Bush laid out his plan for Baghdad and said that U.S. brigades would partner with Iraqi divisions. What does all this imply?

The vignette at the beginning of this essay is based on several actual events; it was used to illustrate that words matter. Words have meaning, and misinterpreting a word's intent can affect actions even at the lowest tactical level. The lieutenant in the vignette certainly thought he was meeting the MND-B commander's guidance. There were both Iraqi and U.S. forces working together on the search, in this case one jundi. In the lieutenant's mind, he was being a partner. His higher headquarters agreed with his assessment and proudly storyboarded the partnered operation.

The above illustrates the problem with non-doctrinal terms: they do not have a common definition known by all. Well-meaning professionals interpret them differently up and down the chain of command, from the commander in chief down to the lowest squad leader at the tip of the spear.

As a result, *partner* has come to mean many things. In my year as an advisor to an Iraqi infantry battalion, my Iraqi battalion (thus my transition team as well) was partnered with four different U.S. Army brigade combat teams (BCT), eight different U.S. Army combined arms battalions, four separate U.S. Army line companies, and even one Special Forces Team. The *Partner* relationship was different with every one of those organizations.

The term's vagueness also affects our MiTTs. Transition teams in Iraq are not structured to operate independently. In the case of my team, we relied heavily on our partner BCTs. Though fragmentary orders from MND-B outlined the support relationship between the MiTT and the partner unit, we had to thrash out the details of that support in time-consuming negotiations. In order for my team to merely function, BCTs had to provide us with maintenance support, fuel, ammunition, intelligence and imagery, and battlefield effects such as

The Iraqi Army's 1st Battalion, 1st Brigade, 9th Iraqi Army Division commander, second from right, briefs his platoon leaders and first sergeants on the execution of a high value target raid, Taji, Iraq, February 2006. The author, far right, looks on.

air support, air medical evacuation, explosive ordnance delivery support, and unmanned air systems support. Additionally, we were usually augmented with a handful of BCT Soldiers for each MiTT team because our teams were so small.[1] Since the terms of the partnership were not clearly defined, the negotiations for support, along with discussions regarding the manner in which the Iraqi unit and its advisors would be employed, would begin anew when an Iraqi unit and its advisors were moved to a new AOR or an American BCT rotated with an incoming unit.

Operating in the same battle space as an American unit was an extremely problematic proposition. Sometimes we merely passed each other in the night. The lack of a formal relationship caused numerous problems for Iraqi commanders. For example, commanders could not maintain credibility with the local populace: just as they earned the trust of a local tribal leader, a U.S. unit would raid and trash the elder's home. Locals did not understand that there were literally two different, independent units in the same neighborhood. In a best-case scenario, the U.S. partner unit and the Iraqi unit leaders and their U.S. advisors would meet early on and often to plan for and conduct a combined mission. Unfortunately, these were rare occurrences. Usually, the units would plan and conduct mission preparation independently of one another and then meet on location to conduct the operation.[2]

Some of the more frustrating experiences were much like the episode articulated in the opening vignette. Frequently a well-meaning U.S. junior leader would stop by one of my Iraqi patrols and ask the platoon leader to give him an Iraqi Soldier to "put an Iraqi face on" his mission. This expression, "putting an Iraqi face on it," is used throughout Iraq when planning or conducting combined missions. It is an expression U.S. advisors universally despise.

When it came to supporting the Iraqi units, American commanders all wanted to know the status of the IA's capabilities. Some resourced our training by helping us with fuel, training aids, or instructors. Others just wanted to see our assessments. Others were so overwhelmed conducting operations that development and training ceased completely as we tried to keep up with the increased operational tempo.

Events like those above were challenging, but for the advisor, nothing was as frustrating as sorting through command relationships and having to answer to multiple chains of command. Most U.S. units saw the advisors as part of their chain of command. Instead of bringing the Iraqi commanders onto the team, commanders and their staffs passed orders directly to the advisors. This was not limited to the BCTs: all parties involved did this. In addition, the MiTT chain of command passed its own guidance to subordinate MiTTs. Sometimes this crossed between three-star commands, Multi-National Security and Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I) and Multi-National Corps–Iraq (MNC-I).[3] Likewise, the Iraqis began exercising their own chain of command: sometimes the Ministry of Defense (MoD) would call straight down to my battalion commander and direct a specific operation.

Rank and personalities also played roles in a partnership. Usually, an Iraqi colonel commands an Iraqi battalion, but his advisor is a major. The Iraqi colonel's partner unit may be a U.S. battalion commanded by a lieutenant colonel, but it could also be U.S. company commanded by a young captain. At the brigade level, the IA brigade commander might be an Iraqi brigadier general, advised by an American lieutenant colonel. Their partner might be a colonel U.S. brigade commander, but could just as likely be a U.S. lieutenant colonel battalion

commander. This structure makes rank almost insignificant. To be advised by an officer junior in rank or partnered to a peer with competing demands is tough for many professionals in a rank-sensitive culture. Without traditional command relationships and hierarchal rank structures, the interactions between these key players fall back to individual personalities and egos.

The plan the president presented on 10 January called for an American brigade, commanded by an American colonel, to partner with an Iraqi division, commanded by an Iraqi major general, whose principal advisor and MiTT chief is an American colonel. Who is in charge with a command and control structure such as this, and who is ultimately responsible for the Iraqi Security Forces' success or failure? Who is the main effort? Who supports whom? Who is the honest broker? Who is rated by whom, and who resources whom? These tough questions deserve doctrinal, precise, and professional answers. The devil is in the details. Clearly, the terms *partner* and *partnership*, as they are used to describe command relationships, deserve an explicit definition.

From the strategic to the tactical level, our partnership with Iraqi security forces has become the key to our efforts in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Thus, having a comprehensive definition for *partnership* and understanding what it implies may be the key to U.S. victory over extremist forces in Iraq. To increase our precision in conveying concepts and guiding the resulting actions, we must choose to either clearly define *partner* or drop the word from our lexicon and replace it with terminology that we all understand.

I propose the following definition: *To partner*: *To place a United States military tactical unit in a habitual command relationship with a tactical unit of a foreign military.* (We partner U.S. units with foreign units, not the other way around.) *The U.S. unit will seamlessly integrate with all aspects of the foreign unit's operations, support, and logistics. U.S. units will only partner with like-sized elements or smaller formations* (example, brigade to brigade, or brigade to battalion). *When the foreign unit has an embedded U.S. military transition team, the U.S.-partnered unit may place subordinate formations under the command of the transition team using traditional command relationships as defined by FM 1-02. For example, if a U.S. division partners with a foreign division with embedded U.S. advisors, the U.S. division may place U.S. platoons or companies under tactical control of the foreign unit's senior advisor. The combatant commander may further tailor aspects of the partnership in order to accomplish the mission; however, he may not delegate this authority to subordinate commanders.*

The relationship we have with our Iraqi Army brothers-in-arms is of vital strategic interest. We use the term *partner* to represent the crucial tactical relationship that plays out on the streets of Iraq, and the president of the United States has used it to lay out the way ahead. If we are to use the word *partner*, it deserves a precise definition. **MR**

NOTES

1. My team began with 11 Soldiers. My higher echelon, the brigade team, took my NCOIC, a SGM, to serve as the BDE NCOIC. After six months, one of my NCOs redeployed, and I usually had one or two advisors on R&R out of the nine that remained. To man three gun trucks just to go outside the camp, maintain a joint TOC with the Iraqis, and continue other advising duties, I needed at least six to nine additional Soldiers, mainly drivers, gunners, and RTOs. The young troopers attached to me from 3/1 AD, 1/ 4 ID, and 4/101 AASLT were an invaluable asset to our mission.

2. The youngest member of my team, our medic Corporal Tyler "Doc" Christensen best captured this problem, noting, "until we figure out how to work together, this will continue to resemble a 4th grade dance, with the boys on one side, the girls on the other, and no one having a whole lot of fun."

3. As my Iraqi division was still in force generation, the Division MiTT team was TACON to MNSTC-I. Because my Iraqi battalion and brigade were operational, my team and my direct boss, the brigade team chief, were TACON to MNC-I.