



# Combat Advising in Iraq

## Getting Your Advice Accepted

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**I**N THE ONGOING wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, small teams of advisors (e.g., military transition teams, national police transition teams, police transition teams, border transition teams, and embedded training teams) advise, coach, teach, and mentor host nation security forces. They also provide situational awareness for host nation units, helping to shape the operational environment through their counterparts. As coalition combat forces begin to draw down in Iraq, advisory assistance brigades are replacing them. Our Nation's future conflicts will require adept professionals for this crucial advisory mission. Therefore, the U.S. military needs to examine the scope of the advisory mission and determine the methods of effective advising required for mission success.

The nascent democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan need strong, professional militaries and self-policing and self-learning internal security forces. At the national policy level, these forces must support the host nation constitution and the duly elected members of the national, provincial, and local governments. Said another way, they need military leaders who will not instigate a coup at the first sign of trouble. At the unit level, these nations need soldiers who can defeat their enemies, while learning from setbacks and successes. This article strives to define the advisory mission, show a snapshot of advisor reality, set forth some tenets of combat advising, and identify measures of effectiveness to shape the training of future advisors and the expectations of coalition force commanders.

### Prerequisites: Having the Right Stuff

From 2006 through 2009, these advisor teams trained at Camp Funston at Fort Riley, Kansas, and deployed to the theaters of war as needed. Soldiers, from the rank of staff sergeant to colonel and from a wide variety of military occupational specialties, served as combat advisor, for approximately 15 months, including their training. However, the training at Camp Funston, seemingly excellent at training advisor survival skills, misses the mark on teaching the fine art of actual combat advising. As one advisor put it, "Camp Funston taught us to survive. The Mada'in (a rural district in Baghdad Province) taught us to advise."<sup>1</sup>

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PHOTO: Advisors with 35th brigade commander BG Abdullah at Al Ani farms in vicinity of Salman Pak, Iraq. (Photo, MAJ [P] Mike Solis)

Training at Camp Funston is a mix of Soldier common tasks, collective combat skills training, counterinsurgency (COIN) theory, language and culture training, and team building. The schoolhouse hones combat lifesaver, individual and crew-served weapon, communications equipment, and operator HMMWV maintenance skills. Counterinsurgency is taught as a combination of lectures and readings from counterinsurgency classics such as David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, John A. Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, and U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*.<sup>2</sup> Language and cultural training involve classroom instruction, presented through a variety of media and concentrating on the specific language and area where the team will be employed. "Leader Meets" training exercises are staged scenarios with role players from the targeted language and culture-simulating situations that U.S. military advisors may encounter on the battlefield. The course ensures that all deploying advisory team members have the requisite skills to survive in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Oddly, though, teaching future advisors the art of how to *advise* takes up very little training time, lending credence to the idea of learning to advise while on the job. Many advisors literally learn the craft through trial and error while doing it. As the reader can imagine, this leads to a wide variety of results. Many advisors have returned from deployment completely frustrated by the experience and demoralized about the mission's overall chance of success. Yet, others return with a tremendous sense of accomplishment. What, we might ask, causes some advisors to return fulfilled, and others disenchanted?

## Partner Units

In Iraq, advisor teams advise host nation security forces in order to help build a sustainable, professional military or policing capability that can provide security for the Iraqi people, defeat the insur-

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gency, and secure the nascent democracy. Coalition force combat units are "partnered" with Iraqi units towards the same ends. All three are engaged in the day-to-day struggle of counterinsurgency. Depending on the location in Iraq, this can mean—

- Operating static checkpoints.
- Conducting cordon and searches.
- Governing humanitarian aid missions.
- Performing command and control.
- Sustaining units.

When time allows, initial and sustainment training of all military occupational specialties and the vital staff functions for these combat units is necessary. In this environment with the perceived overlapping tasks of advising and partnering, who is responsible for the maturation and professionalization of the host nation forces? Who does what to whom, and how and when? Without question, coalition advisors and partner coalition-force units are involved with the continued professionalization of the Iraqi Security Forces. Understanding the difference between advising and partnering is critical to the success of both missions: despite how we use the terms *advise* and *partner with*, the two are not the same.

## Advising versus Partnering

For most of us, the most common partnership experience is marriage. Two people involved in a marriage have, or should have, the same or combined goals, whether the goal is putting food on the table, putting a roof over their heads, or raising a family. In a perfect world, this is a partnership of equals, who share the burdens and rewards, examine and discuss challenges, and reach decisions together. In the context of unit-to-unit partnerships in Iraq, partnership translates into combined planning, combined training, and combined decision making, followed by combined execution. Although the coalition force partner unit shares in the goal of professionalizing the host nation security force unit, its first mission is to defeat the insurgent and secure the Iraqi people.

Just like in a marriage, success or failure in counterinsurgency often hinges on the *quality* and *quantity* of communication. An advisor, however, is not a partner in a marriage. An advisor provides advice, often requested, sometimes not. In this sense, he is more like a sibling, close friend, or even



MAJ (P) Mike Solis

American commanders confer with Iraqi commanders in Baghdad.

a marriage counselor. Siblings and friends want to see the success of their loved ones, but they often do so as onlookers, without the shared goals and associated burdens and rewards of partners. They may provide advice along the way, but ultimately the success of the relationship is the responsibility of the two parties involved. In advising, what separates the advisor's role from that of the partnered coalition force unit is his *relationship* to the host nation unit. The advisor is not an "owner" of ground. He does not "fight" counterinsurgency in an assigned sector. He is concerned with his host nation unit's performance in the counterinsurgency fight and he is concerned about the health of the partnership, but the advisor's primary mission is the professionalization of the host nation unit.

### The Tenets of Combat Advising

*Advice for Advisors: Suggestions and Observations from Lawrence to the Present*, is a book given to prospective advisors headed for Iraq and

Afghanistan that provides insight into the challenges of combat advising.<sup>3</sup> Two consistent truths about combat advising jump off the book's pages—*time* and *patience*.

**Being there all the time.** Time is so critical to advising that without the proper investment of it, the mission is surely to fail. A resolute investment of time is necessary to:

- Assess the unit and its personnel.
- Build trust and a personal relationship producing opportunities for honest and open discussion.
- Understand problems faced in the partnership or host nation unit and by key leaders and soldiers.
- Ask many questions, and patiently and attentively listen to the answers.

An advisor must maximize the amount of time he spends with his counterpart. The best way to do this is through constant physical proximity. My personal experiences demonstrate the power of this method.

Upon arrival in Iraq, our team was assigned to advise the 35th Mechanized Brigade, part of the 9th

Mechanized Division. The brigade headquarters was in an abandoned hotel in Salman Pak, Iraq. Our predecessors lived at Combat Outpost Cahill on the other side of town and commuted to work. Our team also took up residence at Cahill. Despite recognizing the need to live with the 35th Brigade in its headquarters, and invitations to do so by the brigade commander, for a variety of good and bad reasons, the team was never able to move into the hotel. The immensity of this mistake became clear five months later when the team was reassigned to advise the 9th Division at its headquarters on Al Rasheed. In this case, the team did live on the Iraqi base, and the benefits of doing so were immediately apparent. To be certain, there are many other factors involved, but without question, physical proximity with the host nation unit and its leaders and especially shared living quarters make a huge difference in mission success or failure.

The advisor must share a joint domicile with the host nation unit he is advising. By physically being present there, the advisor is—

- Able to learn the daily patterns of his counterpart and recognize anomalies.
- Exposed to the good, the bad, and the ugly of the host nation unit.
- *On call* when his counterpart asks for him.
- Able to *fit in* as a “member of the team” and adopt the battle rhythm of the host nation unit instead of attempting to force battle rhythm change for the sake of convenience.

A phone call just will not do. Effective advising requires the individuals to look each other in the eye, observe body language, share light moments as well as business moments, and in so doing, establish trust. An advisor must share the risks in combat by accompanying his counterpart at every opportunity. An advisor who is not willing to share dangers in combat with his host nation unit may as well go home. Without getting to know the individual in this environment, the advisor will never be able to recognize those rare and elusive opportunities when real advising can take place.

The advisor must measure and mitigate risks as he lives with his counterpart. One such risk is the challenge of physical security for the advisory team. Other risks range from sanitation to the potential that a host nation soldier may turn his weapon upon the advisors. Advisors can mitigate

## ***An advisor must share the risks in combat.***

these risks through due diligence, establishing an advisor compound within the host nation base, a solid base-defense and internal-communications plan, basic buddy team rules, and, perhaps most important, making friends and building trust at all levels. Our team adopted the philosophy of *force protection with a smile*. Making friends and establishing sound, military working relationships with your counterpart, his subordinates, and the common soldiers of the host nation unit goes a long way toward advisory team security. Your friends are far less likely to kill you than your enemies, and very likely to warn you in advance of trouble that is brewing. Although it seems paradoxical, risk actually decreases the longer the advisor team lives among the host nation unit.

Another risk is that of advisory team members “going native.” This does not refer to the often-heard complaint about advisors allegedly lowering standards. Wearing your counterpart’s unit patch, adopting his daily work and rest cycle, and growing a mustache (or a beard in Afghanistan) are all useful steps to build relationships, so there is no easy way to guard against “going native.” Be aware of its possibility and watch for warning signals.

A sure sign that an advisor has gone native is when his counterpart’s success begins to matter more to him than the success of his own mission, professionalizing the host nation unit. The best way to guard against going native is for the advisor to let the host nation unit fail, provided it is not catastrophic failure. (The host nation unit leaders can learn a great deal from some setbacks.)

Despite the numerous risks associated with the advisor mission, the real risk to mission success is in failing to invest the resources required to allow the advisor to maximize his time by living with his counterpart. Time is the main ingredient in the establishment of any relationship; it takes ample, quality time for the advisor to build the trust with his counterpart that permits accomplished advising to occur. Thus, *time* is a *tenet* of combat advising. *Patience* is another.

## Patience: Getting to the Point

Patience is hard to have when the situation appears dire. Yet patience is one quality the advisor needs in abundance. Imagine the advisor has a crucial need to reinforce checkpoint security near a polling site just prior to an important election. Every leader in his chain of command is telling him to “make it happen.” The advisor can demand or manipulate his counterpart into reinforcing the checkpoint. Everything from “bribery” through “gifts” of various classes of supply to threats of cutting off supplies already provided, can “force” compliance with coalition-force desires. If the advisor has already invested the time to develop rapport and trust, he can make such demands at crucial times without upsetting the relationship, but if he has not, then making demands will almost certainly damage the relationship, often beyond repair. Coalition force commanders must keep this in mind as they ask advisory teams to force compliance. The coalition force commander may get what he wants in the short term, but it may come at the cost of permanently damaging the advisory mission. It is far better to exercise patience and find a way for host nation unit leaders to understand the “why” and the “how” of a mission in order to have a lasting and meaningful impact.

Patience also means not pointing out every single weakness the host nation unit has all at once. After all, military officers of all nations have pride. An overly critical advisor may so damage the relationship he has with his counterpart that the counterpart comes to loathe having the advisor present. The advisor that passes quick judgment is very likely to set conditions for his own long-term failure.

A recent study of combat advising noted that most advisors and their Iraqi counterparts felt that it took one to three months to build an “effective working relationship.”<sup>4</sup> Even after trust and rapport are established, the exercise of patience, to wait for opportunities, is still a critical aspect of advising. One thing that helps is to find commonality of interest between the advisor and his counterpart. Whether it is history or ping-pong, the advisor can find something that he has in common with his counterpart that can start conversations. Several hours of “small talk” may eventually lead to 20 minutes of Army talk. When opportunity strikes, the good advisor makes that 20 minutes the most

productive 20 minutes of the day. Patience is indeed a *tenet* of combat advising.

## Advising Methods: Making It Their Idea

Combat advising is as varied as the individuals and units involved. Attacking the problem of getting a host nation military leader to do what you require, while making him think that it is his idea, is far easier to say than to do. Some advisors try to convince their counterpart in a debate of ideas. This is often a losing proposition because the counterpart has more actual or perceived experience and usually outranks the advisor by one or two grades. Most military professionals, regardless of the country they serve, are “type A” personalities. They do not rise to the position of command without being that way. So how does an advisor get that type of person to do something and make him think it was his idea to do it?

## Asking Questions: Providing Advice without Giving It

One of the best ways to shape the advising environment is to ask many questions. Asking questions about the unit is natural in the assessment phase. The advisor must ask questions to fill in his gaps of knowledge about the host nation unit and its leaders. Questions also aid the combat advisor in discovering how his counterpart thinks, processes information, and turns discovery into action. Asking questions is also a means to allow the host nation counterpart to *learn on his own*. Shaping a conversation using planned and artful questions can set the stage for opportunities to provide advice.

For example, if munitions smuggling is a problem in the host nation unit’s operational environment but the host nation commander has not taken steps to deter or prevent it, it may be because he does not know that it is occurring or he feels powerless to stop it. He will likely not admit that he is powerless to prevent it, which would be admitting failure.

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**Soldiers of combat advisor Class 81 stand ready to deploy during their deployment ceremony held 18 September 2009 on North Fort Polk.**

The advisor may already have some suggestions, but advice given directly may cause the host nation commander to lose face or crush his confidence. Even worse, he may take the advice just to placate his advisor but without learning the “why” of the situation. The advisor may get what he wants but without the long-term benefit of increased professionalism. Better to ask a series of questions that allow the counterpart to internalize the situation. Asking “How are the insurgents getting munitions into this area?” can be followed up with a question such as “What do you think can be done about that?” Asking the right series of questions can aid in the learning process, shaping the conversation so the host nation commander teaches himself, and subsequently takes ownership of the problem and the solution.

Asking questions also helps the advisor avoid one of the worst things a combat advisor can do, make a comparison between his Army and the one he is advising. There are many differences between the U.S. Army and those we advise. Our technology is greater, weapons are better, soldier education is far more advanced, and the supply chain has a much greater capacity. Pointing these out, however, will not endear the advisor to his counterpart.

Asking questions also helps avoid assigning blame. The strengths and weaknesses of officers in any Army stand out, particularly the longer one is around them. Making off-hand remarks about a given officer or noncommissioned officer in the host nation unit is not going to solve the problem. For starters, the advisor may not realize the true strengths and weaknesses of a leader. He may also

be unaware of long-standing personal relationships between host nation officers or with tribal or familial relations. Making disparaging remarks may erode the relationship that the advisor is establishing.

Ultimately, asking questions, many questions, can lead the advisor and his counterpart to work in tandem toward lasting solutions to tactical and organizational challenges. Asking questions, whether to avoid pitfalls or to shape a conversation, often leads to individual learning, host nation leader ownership of their problems, creative and lasting solutions, and a professional host nation unit.

### **The Approach: Direct, Indirect, and Mixed**

The direct approach and the indirect approach are two methods of combat advising. As the titles imply, one is straight to the target and the other is by varied paths. Both are effective, and perhaps most effective when applied together. However, deciding which approach to use depends on the relationship between advisor and counterpart, the maturity of the individual host nation leaders, and the maturity of the unit.

**The direct approach.** The advisor, using questions to shape the conversation, is advising his counterpart man-to-man. If the counterpart is new to the job and has yet to establish trust in his subordinates or his staff, this may be the best and only approach available to the advisor. However, the advisor should not anticipate immediate results, for if the counterpart is indeed new to his command, his relationship with his advisor is also likely immature.

**The indirect approach.** In this approach, the advisor plants seeds in the mind of his counterpart by means of the advice of the counterpart’s subordinates or staff officers. This presupposes that the advisor or advisory team has established functional, trusting relationships with the subordinates. It also presupposes that the commander is willing to listen to them. It helps if the advisor knows which subordinates his counterpart trusts and with whom he has an existing solid professional relationship.

**Direct and indirect approaches.** The best approach to combat advising is a blend of both the direct and indirect approaches. For example, assuming the advisory team has the rapport it needs to plant ideas within the host nation staff, the advisors

can, over time and with experience, begin to predict when the staff will present those ideas to the host nation unit commander. The senior advisor can then make sure he is in the room when the subordinate presents the idea, so he can reinforce concepts, provide “color commentary” if required, and ensure that the ideas are presented to the commander. He must remember the tenets of *time* and *patience*. The advisor must make the time to “be there” and he must exercise patience to allow the host nation staff the time to present their ideas.

The advisory team must exercise patience in letting the “seeds” germinate. Our team discovered that two weeks is often required for a seed of an idea planted with the staff to reach the commander, and another two weeks for the commander to act upon that idea. That may appear terribly inefficient and too slow for combat operations, and in many cases, it is. However, the patient application of a mixture of direct and indirect approaches will likely yield lasting results that empower the host nation unit. The more often this approach is used, the more likely the lag time will shrink from planting to sprouting to sustained growth.

### Advising through Observation

In a language-hindered environment, host nation soldiers and leaders observe their coalition force partners closely. Observation is an often-overlooked method of advising and a powerful tool to promote learning.

For example, coalition force soldiers in Iraq wear kneepads to protect their knees from the sustained impact of “taking a knee” on patrol or the sudden whacks experienced inside tactical vehicles. In non-tactical situations, soldiers often slide the kneepads down around their ankles for comfort. Therefore, while on patrol with an Iraqi unit we observed an Iraqi soldier wearing *three* kneepads. One kneepad was applied correctly to the knee that he was using to take a knee during temporary halts. The other two were worn around his ankles. There is no way he could have learned this through communication. He learned it through observation. He had seen so many coalition force soldiers wear their kneepads in this fashion that he assumed it was what *right looked like*.

This lesson applied to combat advising often leads to excellent results, but requires coalition

force partner involvement. One such example is the quarterly training brief. Our team felt that its counterpart commander could benefit from a similar tool. Opportunity knocked when the coalition force partner unit was conducting its normal quarterly briefing. “Arranging” an impromptu visit to that unit provided a “chance” opportunity for observation learning. The host nation unit commander sat alongside his coalition force partner commander while he was receiving a quarterly training briefing. During the course of the briefing, discussion ensued between the commanders regarding why the event was important to the readiness and health of the organization. The host nation commander participated by asking questions. The advisors never said a word. Within a few weeks, the advisors walked in on an Iraqi quarterly training brief in progress. This eventually became a regular practice in the unit. The host nation commander had his subordinate battalion commanders present “status briefs” so that he could better understand the health and challenges of his subordinate units. Observation is a powerful tool for the advisor to wield. The advisory team and the coalition force partner unit should always make sure that they present the appearance and behavior of professional military officers and noncommissioned officers.

### Measures of Effectiveness

How does an advisory team or coalition force partner unit know when and if it is being effective in professionalizing a host nation unit? Metrics are useful, of course; items that can be measured provide the most useful data. However, they do not tell the whole story and can be misleading.

The metrics most often used by professional militaries worldwide are status reports on personnel, vehicle and equipment availability and readiness, maintenance days required for repairs, and personnel trained and qualified for certain skills. This data is a snapshot of health in an organization. What these metrics do not tell the advisor is *cause*.

Discovering causes for increases or decreases in efficiency is the art that goes with the science. For the combat advisor this is often made harder by the “fudging” of host nation unit reporting systems, outright lying, perceived or real corruption, and errors in language translation. There are also some areas of professional growth and maturity in a host nation unit that simply cannot be measured.

Early on, our team set a goal of professionalizing the noncommissioned officers in our host nation unit. After many months of assessing the problem, we determined that the problem was a matter of empowerment and confidence. The senior noncommissioned officers of this organization knew what they personally needed to be successful as individuals and as a group. Many of the junior noncommissioned officers, however, did not know what *right looked like*. The senior noncommissioned officers were routinely frustrated in any attempts to fix this problem independently. The most-often stated reason for this was that their commissioned officers did not let them tackle the challenge. However, when we asked the commissioned officers why they did not utilize the noncommissioned men more effectively, the answer was often that they lacked confidence in them.

A problem of this magnitude, and with so many entry points, required the entire advisory team's participation. Slowly, over a period of months, little signs became apparent that the message was soaking in. Then, one day at a command and staff meeting, the advisory team noticed the host nation unit command sergeant major sitting at the table with his boss. He did not have a speaking role, but the visual signal was enough, and it sent a powerful message to the subordinate commanders and staff at the table. The boss was signaling his confidence; he had empowered his senior noncommissioned officer with a "seat at the table." Immediately following this event, other signs of success started to emerge. The unit established a noncommissioned officer-led leaders course to impart knowledge from senior noncommissioned officers to junior noncommissioned officers. Noncommissioned officer development programs in subordinate units started to appear. Noncommissioned officers began leading training. The tipping point was the "seat at the table."

Metric evidence provides concrete measures of readiness. However, these metrics can be dangerous as the sole measure for success or failure. Advisory teams and coalition force partner units must invest time, exercise patience, use the power of questioning and observation, identify and use the appropriate approaches, and look for signals that indicate whether the advisory effort is working.

## Emerging Specialties

The U.S. Army devotes considerable time and resources to the development of combat advisors. As advisory assistance brigades take the lead in Iraq, training U.S. Soldiers how to be successful advisors becomes even more critical. The current effort, although preparing advisors to survive, falls short at developing competent and confident combat advisors. Similarly, commanders of coalition units receive little to no introduction to combat advising and therefore possess poorly conceived expectations of what advisors can do for them in the context of partnership.

On-the-job training costs valuable time. Expanding combat advisor education to include interpersonal skills training, the art of asking questions, and observation and listening skills will aid in their development. Learning how to master patient behavior through education and practical exercise must be part of the curriculum. By synchronizing effort and using a targeting cycle, with the host nation unit as the target, the coalition force unit commander's expectations will be better managed. Enabling advisors to live with their host nation unit will maximize the time advisors have to put these skills into practice.

Combat advising and partnering are related specialties emerging in our military profession. Specialties are characterized by a foundation in doctrine, continuing education from a certified practitioner, and an investment of time and resources. Just as we educate teachers, counselors, and consultants, we can educate advisors and partner unit leaders in the skills required to execute this mission successfully.

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### NOTES

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