Beyond Reconciliation
Developing Faith, Hope, Trust, and Unity in Iraq

Major Nathan Minami, U.S. Army;
Colonel David Miller, U.S. Army;
Lieutenant Colonel Michael Davey, U.S. Army;
and Mr. Anthony Swalhah

Major Nathan Minami is the operations officer for 2-14 Infantry. He holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, an M.A. from American Military University, and an M.S. in systems engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Colonel David Miller is the brigade commander of 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. He received a B.S. from the University of Montana, an M.A. in administration from Central Michigan University, and an M.A. in strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College.

Lieutenant Colonel Mike Davey is the deputy commander, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. He received a B.S. from Slippery Rock University.

Mr. Anthony Swalhah is the Department of State section head for the Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team. He holds a B.S. from Tennessee State University.

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PHOTO: U.S. Army CPT Andrew Lewis, commander of Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, discusses plans for additional humanitarian efforts with Iraqi soldiers and local government officials near Joint Security Station Shawra Um Jidr in Baghdad, Iraq, 21 March 2010. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Jesse Gross)

AS THE U.S. military begins its drawdown in Iraq, how we transition out of the country is just as important, if not more important, than how we entered in 2003. If Iraq is to become a legitimate democracy, our long-term ally, and a beacon of hope and prosperity in the Middle East, it is critical that we exit Iraq in a manner that supports these strategic goals. While much progress has been made since 2006 to reconcile various divides (ethnic, political, economic, and social), Iraq still has much work ahead toward becoming a unified state. This article discusses the efforts of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 10th Mountain Division, to help the leaders of eastern Baghdad and the Mada'in Qada region to develop a forum where influential leaders from all sectors of the community (religious, governmental, nongovernmental, tribal, and security) can meet to discuss practical solutions to various challenges and problems. This includes theoretical and conceptual development of the problem and the selected course of action, as well as discussion of how the forum was established and lessons learned from the process. It also describes how the BCT integrated various staff and enablers such as the Human Terrain Team (HTT), Information Operations, Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), Operations Planning Group, and subordinate units in developing an itihad (unity) strategy for the BCT.

Problem and Purpose

There are a multitude of different schisms within Iraqi society that prevent unity at all levels. The one that is most often cited and recognizable is the general divide between Sunni and Shi'a groups. But other divides exist, such as disenfranchised Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish sub-populations who do not have political access due to a lack of balanced government representation. Other schisms stem from inadequate minority rights; unequal wealth and benefits distribution; unreconciled grievances between various tribal, political, governmental, and ethnic groups; and external influences such as Al Qaeda and Iran that encourage movement toward political extremism. While all of these divides serve as barriers to progress, they are exacerbated by entrepreneurs who take advantage of these schisms for their own benefit.

Early in the planning process, we acknowledged that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for any one effort to address even the most important divides. Consequently, instead of viewing the problem as a diverse collection of many fragments, we reframed it by looking at the population on a scale from those supporting extremism on the two ends of the spectrum to those in the middle supporting national unity and a peaceful and prosperous Iraq (Figure 1). While detailed statistics were not collected, it was assumed that the population followed a distribution that was generally uniform in nature. The problem, therefore, was developing a movement that would shift the distribution from generally uniform to more of a bell curve. The number of people who support Shi'a or Sunni extremists would decrease and the population supporting national unity would increase.

In seeking to help the people of eastern Baghdad and the Mada'in Qada to overcome this challenge, the brigade staff set out to encourage Iraqis to support national unity and a peaceful, prosperous, and unified operational environment. Further, the purpose of the brigade's *itihad* effort included encouraging Iraqis to reject extremism, resolve conflicts and disputes peacefully, and build trust between various parties. The end state for this effort was a system of meetings in which a diverse group of influential leaders could break down schisms and barriers through open dialogue to promote hope, faith, trust, and unity. Ultimately, this would allow the Iraqis to build on the success of the 2010 national elections and set the conditions for the drawdown of U.S. forces in the area.

Theoretical Development

While the theoretical development for the BCT's *itihad* concept included various lessons and concepts from the general reconciliation, conflict management and negotiation, and peace and stability operations literature, most of the ideas came

The Challenge
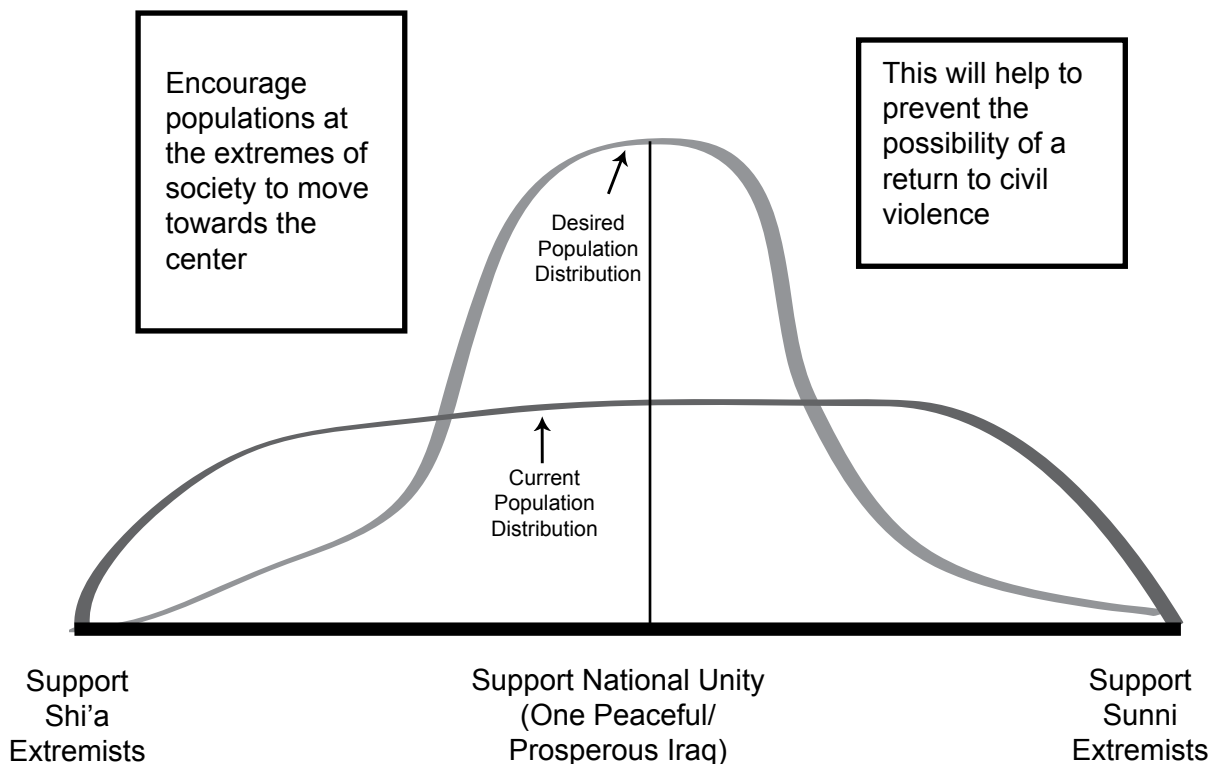
Figure 1: The Challenge

from Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.** Key for this project were Gladwell's concepts of contagiousness, the understanding that even the smallest things can have big consequences, and that positive changes do not happen incrementally, but rather in one critical moment in time. Gladwell describes the tipping point as the moment in time when a thought, product, or virus instantly takes hold and exponentially spreads. Consequently, the main objective for this project was to determine how the idea of unity among the people of eastern Baghdad could become like a virus and spread throughout the region at an epidemic rate.

Gladwell describes three types of people who are critical for creating an epidemic. The first of these is a *maven*. According to Gladwell, mavens gather knowledge about a particular subject, product, or matter. Mavens are obsessed with a particular topic. The second type of individual is a *connector*, who has an astonishingly large number of personal acquaintances. Connectors can rapidly pass anything to dozens, if not hundreds, of people due to their vast number of contacts on any given day. The third type of individual is a *salesman*. Salesmen are unusually persuasive and can easily sway people in one direction or another.

Other important concepts in creating a tipping point according to Gladwell are *context* and *stickiness*. Context refers to how and which small aspects in the environment play the largest role in determining our identity, how we behave, and whether or not epidemics occur. Stickiness refers to the ability to parcel information in a manner appealing and enticing enough that people readily accept it.

Finally, an important concept in Gladwell's work is that epidemics have a surprising paradox. This paradox states that in many cases it is necessary to create several tiny movements before one large movement or epidemic can take hold.

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Using these tipping point concepts, the BCT staff developed a phased methodology. The first step was to identify as many mavens as possible who could help the team better understand the problem. The second step was to examine the precise message the BCT wanted to infuse into the population. The next step was to develop the context and determine which aspects of the environment weighed most heavily on the problem. The fourth step was to determine how to make the message stick, or rather how to get Iraqi leaders to adopt the message as their own. The final step was to identify which connectors and salesmen among the two million inhabitants of eastern Baghdad would be most important for spreading the unity theme.

Concept Development

Based on the theoretical construct for this project, a campaign plan was developed with representatives from the HTT, Information Operations, Psychological Operations, PRT, the S2 section (intelligence), the S3 section (operations), and all maneuver battalions. In addition, maven input included consultation with professors and graduate students, subject matter experts, a review of existing reconciliation and stability operations literature, and local leaders from the community who were believed to have in-depth knowledge regarding the problem. The most important aspect of maven input was what the group received from local leaders. Despite the wide range of expertise among staff representatives with multiple tours in Iraq and extensive academic knowledge, ultimately, it was the local leaders who best understood the intricacies of the many challenges, disputes, and concerns of people in the region.

One example of the importance of local leaders' input concerned the initial concept of developing reconciliation within the community. As the team listened to local mavens, it became obvious that the community did not view the problem as reconciliation, as most viewed reconciliation as implying a state of ongoing conflict. Local mavens clarified that the problem was slightly different. The real issue was a lack of unification between various groups, which prevented efforts to work collectively for the common welfare of the population.

Two central objectives were developed as part of the campaign plan. The first was to encourage

Iraqis to support national unity within eastern Baghdad. The second objective was to encourage the population to reject extremist positions, work to resolve conflicts and disputes peacefully, and to build trust between various entities in the community.

In addition, three phases were developed for the campaign. The first phase consisted of preparation, or development of the campaign plan itself. This included holding weekly unity working groups with key staff members to develop the theme, context, and stickiness, as well as to gather maven input and to identify critical salesmen and connectors in the community. The second phase involved Gladwell's paradox of the epidemic, creating small movements to inject the theme into various segments of the population. The concept for this phase was to initially invite Iraqi mavens to a series of meetings where the theme, context, and stickiness of the message could be refined. At some point, local salesmen and connectors would be invited so that they could spread the theme among the population. The plan called for development of constructive measures for diverse leaders from different communities to work together and build trust. There were also two important decision points during this phase of the campaign. The first was to determine which Iraqi leaders to empower during the meetings so that those with good ideas would not be stifled by others with more influence. The second decision point was to determine which Iraqi leaders to empower with responsibility for continuing and leading the *itihad* process.

The unity epidemic would be ignited during the third phase. During this period, Iraqis would take full ownership of the movement and U.S. leaders would attend meetings only to monitor and offer assistance when asked. In some cases, it was conceived that this might include providing funding for unity projects. The end state for the *itihad* movement was that the citizens of eastern Baghdad would overcome existing tensions and disputes and support a peaceful and unified region within Iraq. In addition, the end state envisioned citizens working together to resolve conflicts peacefully, with trust and mutual respect existing between all groups and among the majority of the population.

Once the problem, purpose, and initial campaign plan were developed, the working group began

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to focus on developing the theme and addressing context and stickiness. Based on the input of various mavens, the central theme was changed from one of reconciliation to a more positive focus on creating trust and unity. The ideas of faith and hope were also introduced as being central to making trust and unity possible. Some of the ideas that followed from this theme were that working together will create a prosperous future for families and future generations; communication between various groups is important, and mutual respect is a critical component of creating and maintaining civil accord; many are stronger than just a few, and harnessing the collective capabilities of the whole allows economies of scale to increase the prosperity of all; and, if the group stands united, they will be successful, but if not they are likely to never see the positive social and economic conditions desired by the majority.

Once this theme was developed and refined, the team examined the context of the problem in order to understand what small conditions in the environment might assist or hinder efforts to promote the message of unity in eastern Baghdad. The team focused on environmental factors that prevented people from working together. Two factors driving wedges among the population were massive amounts of garbage littering the streets and excessive graffiti in many neighborhoods. These factors seemed similar to Gladwell's study of New York City crime, where rampant graffiti in the subways spurred lawlessness and criminal activity. Other factors contributing to the problem were a general disconnect between the government of Iraq and the majority of the population and a lack of trust that caused people to focus on their own welfare and not the collective good of the whole community. Another contextual factor that divided the population was people not knowing their neighbors in adjacent communities, creating
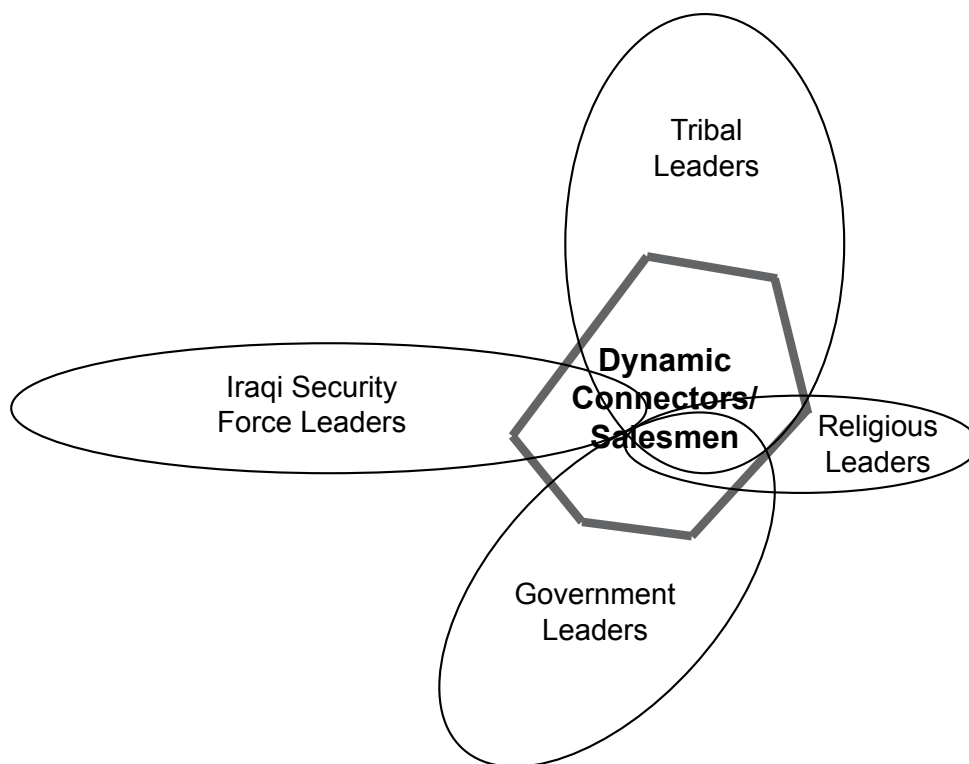
Figure 2: Network Analysis

ignorance and a barrier to communication and unity. Finally, aggravating this distrust was widespread corruption and a lack of governmental follow-through.

There were also a number of important environmental factors that united the population, including soccer, oral traditions, the success of the 2010 Iraqi national election, and common values such as patriotism and honor. Another important unifying condition was the hope expressed by much of the youth in Iraq that the future will be positive, prosperous, and nonviolent. Complementing this is the soft power that the West wields by connecting the region to the rest of the world through the media, movies, and the internet.

The working group determined that stickiness was the most difficult aspect to address. Some corollary messages that might help the theme stick were that working together will enhance the quality of life for all; cooperation is the path to developing economic prosperity; and the population has a common enemy, namely extremists and Iranian influence that seek to usurp their hard-earned freedoms. Traditional

Arab values of honor, pride, heritage, and self-worth could also help to make the message of unity stick, as well as developing mechanisms (small victories) to show the population that working together leads to success, and that success breeds success.

The final step in concept development was to determine which of the many influential leaders in the community were essential to invite to the unity meetings. The goal was to keep meeting size to approximately 20 people so all invited could participate actively without making the meeting's length unmanageable. In addition, a smaller group would allow members to develop strong relationships. A list of the most influential leaders in the operating environment was collated based on nominations from various staff members, subordinate units, and local leaders themselves. This list included each leader's contact with other leaders in the community, which allowed the group to develop the network diagram shown in Figure 2. In addition, special emphasis was placed on choosing leaders who had already demonstrated they were willing to place the greater good in front of their own personal interests.

While it was clear that all of the leaders nominated were important and influential (most qualified as all three of Gladwell's people types: mavens, connectors, and salesmen), what was less clear was how they were interrelated. The network diagram produced by the BCT's human terrain team showed that once all of the various leaders and their contacts were mapped out, they naturally aligned along four general groups: tribal leaders, religious leaders, Iraqi Security Force leaders, and governmental/political leaders. The software package used an internal algorithm to determine how the various leaders were interconnected and which were most important for connecting all of the disparate leaders together in a unified network. These dynamic connectors/salesmen included leaders from all four general groups and were determined to be of great importance not because of the large number of associations within their own or groups, but because they were key for linking diverse segments of the community together. While there were some exceptions made for particularly influential leaders, the majority of the people invited to the meetings came from the dynamic connectors/salesmen portion of the network diagram.

Execution

While the original concept was to invite only a small number of local mavens to initial "phase two" meetings, delay of the Iraqi national elections and other factors in the operational environment forced some changes. Approximately 20 individuals who were believed to embody all three characteristics of a maven, connector, and salesman were invited to the first meeting. In addition, the initial goal became more ambitious: to infuse the message of unity to the group at the first meeting. The first meeting began with introductions of the BCT commander and division deputy commander by the BCT's PRT representative, who had already built a relationship with most of the invitees. Both leaders provided opening remarks, and then the BCT commander invited everyone to introduce himself. This was an important part of the initial meeting since it included a diverse group of leaders who did not know each other prior to the meeting. Following introductions, the BCT commander delivered the unity theme and invited the guests to share their suggestions and comments. After a lengthy discussion and lunch,

all were solicited for suggestions about the next meeting.

The central theme delivered was that "we, the U.S. Army, have asked you all to come together because you are all noble, influential leaders who are critical to building prosperity in the region. In order to create prosperity, you must communicate with each other, create mutual respect, work together, and stand united against external forces that want to create unrest." Vignettes were used to reinforce this message, especially the success of recent efforts to develop democracy, freedom, elections, the economy, and essential services. The message was delivered in a positive manner with special attention to ensure that the theme did not come across as belittling or talking down to the guests. It was delivered in a collegial manner that focused on how progress could be expanded. In addition, the BCT commander emphasized that the U.S. Army viewed everyone at the meeting as equals, which was underscored by ensuring there was no table or head in the seating arrangement. Instead, sofas were placed in a square so that no invitee would feel more or less important than another.

In order to work together, communication is essential, and the unity conference forum was advertised as one way to increase the communication between various diverse groups. Likewise, the meeting's theme stressed mutual respect as an important part of creating civil accord and essential in efforts to work together. It was noted that the local population has a great history of being able to work together to create prosperity, evidenced by its role as the cradle of civilization, and the focal point that Baghdad played in the realms of science, medicine, mathematics, education, business, literature, and philosophy during its Golden Age.

The meeting's theme also emphasized that many are stronger than just a few and that the local population had come together during the 1980s to defeat Iran during that eight-year conflict. The final aspect of the message was the need to stand together against external forces attempting to create unrest and steal the Iraqi nationality, identity, and momentum of the recent elections. One recent success in this area was the stalwart actions of the Sons of Iraq and the Sunni Awakening in expunging Al-Qaeda and other extremists from

U.S. Army, PFC Richard W. Jones, Jr.

Unity Conference attendees, eastern Baghdad, 23 April 2010.

much of the country, including southeastern Baghdad and the Mada'in Qada. Other, more local, victories were important as well, such as establishing a tip line for informants and efforts to reduce vehicle borne improvised explosive devices. The initial message concluded with a final appeal to the group to work together to create faith, hope, trust, and unity.

Attendees made important points at the meeting. Improvements in essential services including water, electricity, and sewage services were not visible to the average citizen. Political reforms to represent and work for all the people were slow, and the majority of the population was skeptical about the new government's abilities to help its citizens. The Government of Iraq had failed to interact with local communities to address issues, especially in rural areas. Many attendees expressed concerns with economic development and the need for improvement with businesses, jobs, salaries, and the standard of living. Similarly, corruption throughout all levels of government was another concern, delaying prosperity and preventing change in the social infrastructure, especially essential services.

One of the most critical outcomes of the meeting was the Iraqis' combined understanding that they have the collective power to solve many problems themselves. By coming together they could produce a nonpartisan, unified voice to the Government of Iraq that represented the views of 2.5 million inhabitants. In addition, the group resolved several problems at the meeting. The government representative committed to more rural visits to assist with citizen needs. An Iraqi Army division commander agreed to grant amnesty for certain individuals in rural tribal areas. Through this dialogue, the *itihad* meeting attendees began to slowly develop trust among each other, a trust they realized would help them to withstand various pressures and external forces that will certainly be presented in the future.

Attendees also wanted to remove political hate and sectarian violence from the Friday prayer messages at Shi'a and Sunni mosques. The group determined that this would be an important part of building unity in the region. Iraqi security officers and government officials focused on the positive cooperation with tribal leaders on security, political unrest, and assisting with economic development.

The group recognized that the tribal leaders play an important part in carrying the message of unity to a majority of Iraqis and they needed to be incorporated into future efforts.

The reaction of the invitees far exceeded the expectations of the BCT working group. While many invitees took the opportunity to express their concerns in the area, nearly all agreed exuberantly that the concept of unity and the *itihad* forum was one that needed to continue. Several members of the group offered to host the next meeting, and the group collectively developed ideas for future agendas. They insisted on a focused agenda and agreed that hard solutions must result from future meetings. The group also identified other influential members to help with issues in subsequent meetings. While the BCT's working group had envisioned the need for several meetings to infuse the unity idea, it was immediately accepted by the group in a manner that showed the theme was much more contagious than expected.

Conclusion

There were several important lessons from this process. First, as U.S. presence declines in Iraq, U.S. forces still retain the distinct ability to pull together diverse segments of Iraqi society to create new movements and initiatives. Another important lesson is not to underestimate the desire of the Iraqis to work together. The national elections were a clear indicator that a large portion of the population wants to overcome partisan barriers and instead work towards improving the lives of themselves and their fellow citizens. In many cases, all that the population needs is a small catalyst to help initiate reforms, and the unity conference was one example. A final important lesson is that solutions to some problems exist outside the venue of official military doctrine. In this case, while it is unlikely that Malcolm Gladwell envisioned his tipping point theory applied to creating a unity epidemic in eastern Baghdad, it did provide an outstanding organizing framework for the working group.

As we transition from counterinsurgency to stability operations in Iraq and begin the process of withdrawing all military forces from the country, how we transition will be of great importance. Failure to create the conditions that will allow Iraq to continue fostering democracy will result in our loss of a long-term strategic ally in the region. The diverse segments of Iraqi society must work together. The unity concept is one way of accomplishing this. By creating local and regional unity movements in multiple areas across Iraq, it will be possible for Iraq to finally tip toward becoming a truly unified state. This idea could also be employed in Afghanistan to encourage various segments of society to work together for the common prosperity of the general population. ***MR***

NOTE

* Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002).