

Building Partnership Capacity 101

The New Jordan Armed Forces Noncommissioned Officer Corps

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As war has become more complex over the span of military history, nations striving to build modern armies increasingly have recognized the need for highly trained and professional small-unit leaders. It was the need for small-unit leaders that gave birth to the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps, and this necessity continues to demand NCO presence on the modern battlefield.

Where the U.S. Army has striven to build partnership capacity among partner armies in complex multinational operating environments, the need to promote professional NCO development has been one of many key lessons. One significant example of an NCO development initiative emerged in 2010, through the U.S. Army's partnership with the Jordan Armed Forces (JAF) in Afghanistan.





The JAF, like most of the armies of its Arab neighbors, lacks a well-developed, professionally trained, and empowered NCO corps. This likely is attributable to cultural factors as well as the fact that the JAF still operates using a highly directive centralized command system dominated by officers down to the lowest level, rather than a mission command model.¹

Understanding why Middle Eastern armies such as Jordan's lack a

professional NCO corps would certainly make for a worthy study of itself. Among other intriguing questions is to what extent the deficiency of small-unit NCO leadership among front-line units has contributed to a shortage of significant military victories and decisive operations among Arab armies over the past century. This was especially so when they were operating against armies with well-developed NCO leadership.

Prince of Jordan Faisal Bin Al-Hussein, Gen. Lloyd Austin, commander, U.S. Central Command, and Jordanian Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Mashal Zaben converse moments before a combined arms live fire exercise demonstration in Jebel Petra, Jordan, 5 June 2014.

(U.S. Marine Corps photo Master Sgt. Will Price, Marine Corps Forces Central Command)



Members of the Jordan Armed Forces (JAF) march outside at the Noncommissioned Officer Academy, 21 September 2009. The JAF is working to strengthen their noncommissioned officer corps and make it the backbone of their forces.

(Cpl. Jordan Johnson, 13th Public Affairs Detachment)

Setting aside speculation as to the causes, this article focuses on describing steps the U.S. Army took from 2010 to 2013 to help its Jordanian partners build a functioning and empowered NCO corps. It describes each step taken and the thought process behind it. The authors hope these observations will be useful to others supporting partners who face similar

cultural and organizational hurdles in professionalizing and modernizing their armed forces.

Tasting Real Combat

Combat was the impetus to change in the JAF. The son of one of Jordan's first sergeants major trained by the British, Jordanian Lt. Gen. Mashal al Zaben, chairman of the Jordanian Joint Chiefs



of Staff, knew by 2010 what was missing when his forces were struggling to adapt in Afghanistan: a professional NCO corps. Consequently, after the JAF had two years of combat experience in Afghanistan with mixed results, al Zaben and U.S. senior advisors agreed on the need to make institutional changes to NCO development, and they outlined a plan.

For years, junior officers in the JAF had been performing the functions that Western armies, including our own, normally designated as NCO duties. These ranged from accountability of equipment to training management. Such a broad span of responsibility for a junior officer might work adequately in a placid and routine-bound garrison environment but not for a force deployed thousands of miles from home facing an adaptive enemy in a dynamic, hostile environment.

In the caldron of wartime operations, JAF officers simply could not effectively oversee in person every aspect of the broad array of key activities units needed to perform in a combat environment. Difficulty in traveling between subordinate unit locations under dangerous conditions impeded their approach to commanding and controlling forces. Moreover, there simply was not time enough in the day to oversee every activity.

Building a Noncommissioned Officer Corps

In this context, al Zaben sought to build the kind of robust NCO corps that had disappeared from the JAF since its original establishment on a British model over 50 years ago. He initiated this by reprogramming the JAF's foreign military financing program funds, which were designed to buy equipment and secure training slots in the United States. He earmarked money to support a new and significant NCO training initiative.

To support this initiative, Gen. George Casey, then chief of staff

of the U.S. Army, enthusiastically agreed to host over one hundred Jordanian NCOs at the 2010 Fort Bliss Warrior Leader Course (WLC). These were more slots than any other country had ever sought or received. However, Jordanian leadership had consistently demonstrated its commitment to its partnership with the United States. For a country fighting and bleeding with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, Casey would make the slots available. Clearly, a partnership of this caliber was worthy of our special attention and support.

Casey assigned then Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth Preston and Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Wells (of the Office of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff G-3/5/7 [Operations]) the mission of traveling to Jordan to conduct an assessment and develop a plan to bolster the JAF NCO capabilities. The two sergeants major along with Sgt. Maj. Amanda Smith (assigned to the Military Assistance Program-Jordan) worked with senior JAF NCOs to develop a course of action for meeting the commander's intent. The final plan laid out by the sergeants major, and approved by Casey and al Zaben, established a four-step process within a framework calculated to have immediate impact on JAF deploying units:

1. English language training for JAF NCOs.
2. Participation in the WLC at Fort Bliss.
3. Shadowing of U.S. NCOs at Fort Bliss (following and watching to learn how to do the job of an NCO).
4. Deployment to Afghanistan for combat operations.

Once the senior leadership established this framework, the U.S. country team in Jordan and the JAF proceeded to identify NCOs and turn the concept into reality.

Language training. One of the first challenges faced in sending NCO candidates for training in the United States was finding 100 Jordanian soldiers with adequate English language skills.

Ordinarily, in the JAF, advanced English language training is reserved for commissioned officers. Before JAF personnel can receive military training in the United States, a minimum score of 70 percent is required on the English Comprehension Level Test (the test normally used to measure the English language proficiency of international participants in U.S. military schools and exercises).

However, it quickly became apparent that for the NCO development initiative, this standard was unattainable. The pool of Jordanian NCOs with a working base of English language skills was very limited. Consequently, the standard was adjusted to allow for any NCO candidate scoring a minimum of 55 percent on the test to take training in the United States.

Implementation then proceeded by identification of the first 10 NCOs able to meet the minimum English requirement. They went to Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas, to participate in advanced English language training for eight weeks. Although test scores did not increase dramatically after the eight weeks, the confidence level of the group was bolstered. This helped them communicate more effectively and motivated them to continue practicing English outside classroom training. Nine additional groups eventually followed.

Warrior Leader Course at Fort Bliss. Upon completion of the English language training, groups then would move to Fort Bliss, Texas, to attend the U.S. Army's WLC. Though foreign students, the Jordanian NCOs participated in every aspect of the course with no special provisions made.

Shadowing U.S. noncommissioned officers. Upon completion of the WLC, the Jordanian graduates remained at Fort Bliss to be assigned to various units of the 1st Armored Division for two weeks. The intent was to have the Jordanian NCOs partner



Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Amanda Smith, U.S. Army

Jordanian NCO Basic Course cadets work on their sit ups, March 2013.

with and shadow U.S. NCOs. Basically, this was an opportunity for the Jordanian NCOs to observe to the best possible example of U.S. Army NCOs conducting their daily duties, interacting with the soldiers and officers of their units, and, most importantly, exercising small-unit NCO leadership.

Deployment to Afghanistan.

The final step in the plan called for all graduates of this program to deploy with JAF units to Afghanistan. Of 98 who graduated, 75 deployed to Afghanistan for a six-month tour and returned with combat experience. The graduates who did not deploy were assigned to JAF Headquarters or to the JAF Lessons Learned Center, both in Amman, Jordan.

Overcoming Program Challenges

Not surprisingly, there were challenges throughout the process of moving approximately one hundred NCOs through training whose English skills and exposure to Western armies were limited.

Some of the key challenges experienced were that—

- ◆ The process took a long time—over two years.
- ◆ There were significant cultural differences to overcome between Jordanian and American soldiers.
- ◆ Jordanian NCOs were unable, or in some cases unwilling, to participate during the Ramadan period of fasting.

Despite these challenges, all connected to the program deemed it an overall success. It was clear that the NCOs who trained and subsequently deployed to Afghanistan were far better equipped than they otherwise would have been for their missions. Most returned from Afghanistan anxious to share their knowledge and experiences with the remainder of the JAF.



Sgt. 1st Class Sidney Curtis (right) Arabian Peninsula/Levant Branch NCO-in-charge, walks with Jordanian Maj. Ibrahim Al-Garalleh at the Noncommissioned Officer Academy, 21 September 2011. Curtis was one of four senior noncommissioned officers who traveled to Jordan to discuss procedures and ideas for strengthening the Jordanian noncommissioned officer corps.

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Building a Jordanian Noncommissioned Officer Course

After successfully training 98 NCOs in the United States, the logical next step was to support the JAF in building its own NCO leadership course within Jordan—along with an NCO development system that would sustain gains. Therefore, the country team decided to pursue the following steps in establishing the first JAF NCO leadership course:

1. Identify and train a Jordanian cadre of instructors for the new NCO course.
2. Support the JAF in writing the program of instruction (POI) for the course.
3. Identify a training facility for the new course and ensure it would be resourced.



Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Amanda Smith, U.S. Army

NCO Basic Course cadets begin classes each day with the JAF NCO creed, March 2013.

4. Train and educate the JAF's commissioned officers on how to empower newly trained NCOs.

Identifying and training the cadre. The most obvious candidates for becoming trainers at the new Jordanian NCO leadership course were those from the original pool of 98 graduates. Fortunately, the military assistance program office in Jordan still had on staff the U.S. sergeant major that had been instrumental in assessing the original 100 Jordanian candidates, preparing them before their departure to the United States, and advising them throughout their training cycle.

Subsequently, this sergeant major, along with the senior staff of the JAF Training and Doctrine Directorate, helped identify the top nine graduates of the original U.S. training who also had obtained combat experience in Afghanistan. These became the first instructor team of the new JAF NCO leadership course.

These nine Jordanian NCOs then returned to the United States to shadow the instructor cadre of the WLC at Fort Bliss for three weeks. Again, the intent

of this shadowing was to expose the new Jordanian cadre to U.S. NCOs already skilled as trainers. This would give the Jordanians insight into developing their own POI and bolster their confidence for becoming instructors.

Supporting development of the program of instruction. Concurrently, Army officers of the International Affairs Program Directorate of the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command worked with the Jordanian senior leadership and the Jordanian NCOs to develop a POI tailored to the JAF. Starting with the U.S. Army's POI for the WLC as a model, classes were added, subtracted, or changed to accommodate Jordanian needs.

The final product resembled the U.S. model in that the course was divided into three sections: a week focused on leadership, a week focused on training, and two weeks focused on war-fighting skills. During planning sessions with the nine-man cadre,

classes were assigned to specific instructors with the requirement that each instructor resource the teaching material for his specific class.

Identifying a facility. In the summer of 2012, the JAF identified classroom space at the existing Noncommissioned Officer Corps Academy for use by the new NCO course. (The academy had been established to teach technical skills as opposed to NCO leadership.) Officials from the country team escorted by the nine-man cadre visited the proposed site, and the group assessed requirements jointly.

The facility allocated two large classrooms and one office space to the new instructor cadre. Concurrently, the team also determined that the field training facilities located at the school would suffice for field training exercises. Their use would be coordinated through Jordanian internal channels.

Training the commissioned officers to empower NCOs. At this point, support and encouragement from U.S. Army senior leadership became crucial in gaining the confidence of Jordanian senior leadership and commitment to the new concept of employing NCOs trained as true first-line leaders. Army-to-army staff talks, held annually, provided a venue for U.S. leaders to encourage the effort. In addition, the U.S. Army agreed to send a mobile training team to act as advisors for the duration of the first course.² The intent was to have U.S. subject matter experts available in a supporting role to answer questions, and lend credibility to the course material and the Jordanian instructors.

The greatest test the NCO leadership initiative faced was obtaining the acceptance and utilization of the course's graduates by the Jordanian officer corps. There is little history of empowered NCOs in Jordan. (This problem was also faced in Afghanistan and Iraq as U.S. forces attempted to build up local security forces.)³ There was stubborn resistance among some, if not most, of the Jordanian senior officer leadership to empowering NCOs with responsibility and authority.

Several Jordanian officers reported privately that they wondered how they would retain control of their NCOs. They were reluctant about broadening the authority and initiative of NCOs because they felt they would lose authority or control over their units and their resources. Many commissioned

officers were loathe to do what they felt would lead to losing control and prerogatives.

This feature of Jordanian military culture was and is the most difficult hurdle in the face of efforts to develop an empowered NCO corps in Jordan. If the officer corps could not overcome a leadership culture habituated to micromanaging every aspect of operations, then any investment in leadership training for their NCOs would be a waste. A fundamental change needed to take place in the JAF command philosophy and military culture.

However, it was also clear that a changed NCO role in the JAF could not be imposed from outside. Change, if it came, would have to come from within the JAF. First, the JAF leadership would have to accept the need for change, without U.S. pressure. Second, even if they did come to believe that their traditional approach was less than effective and that change was desirable, change would need to unfold in a manner and at a pace appropriate for Jordan's culture and values.

In other words, it was not prudent or wise for U.S. Army leaders to believe that a command philosophy emphasizing delegation of authority to NCOs, which works so well in the United States and many other Western armies, was going to work similarly in an Arab army. Nor was it wise to believe that drastic change in that direction would occur in the near term. To effect change, a balanced approach had to be found that suited Jordan's needs, but in a manner adapted to Jordan by Jordanians.

Additional Recommendations to Promote Officer Acceptance

In adjusting measures to promote acceptance by Jordanian officers, U.S. Army leaders recognized that acceptance of the relatively drastic change in the role of Jordanian NCOs would have to start at the highest levels and filter down. Additionally, the internal cultural change would only occur if efforts were sustained long term.

Based on this understanding, the country team decided to emphasize obtaining senior leadership support in the JAF, focusing efforts on joint training with one unit at a time, and habituating commissioned officers to NCOs as trainers.

Senior leadership support. The highest levels of JAF leadership would need to desire and support the

change in command philosophy. Therefore, change would need to be enforced through Jordanian directives and encouraged through active examples. The United States role would be to foster Jordanian-generated initiatives aimed at empowering NCOs; and, to provide concrete support to Jordanian leaders pursuing such initiatives.

Focused efforts. Efforts to train NCOs and officers would need to be conducted jointly and focused on one unit at time. This would help maximize the effects and minimize the stress.

NCOs as trainers. Qualified Jordanian NCOs would need to be assigned to JAF military schools, with a focus on the officer academy. This would accustom officers at the very outset of their careers to the presence and capabilities of NCO leaders.

Fortunately, the willing and visionary partner al Zaben took the lead in promoting such changes from the top down. Taking the initiative, al Zaben led by example, as he assigned the first Jordanian sergeant major of the army to act as the army's senior enlisted member—Mohammad Ismail Mohammad al Samadi.⁴ Second, al Zaben issued directives to subordinates outlining his vision for the future JAF NCO corps. Finally, he initiated a campaign for empowering NCOs through training, lectures, and command example.

Implementation by the Jordanian Armed Forces

In execution of these initiatives, one assumption was that success would be its own best marketer. Therefore, a key decision was made by JAF officials and U.S. advisors to focus on first achieving and demonstrating success with a small group before attempting to expand the concept of empowered NCOs to the entire JAF.

Consequently, al Zaben and the U.S. senior defense official in Jordan agreed that only one Jordanian unit at a time would be selected to send its NCOs to the new NCO course for training, followed by closely monitored employment that emphasized officers empowering these newly trained NCOs within their assigned units. The thought process behind this decision was to move forward slowly, cautiously, and thoroughly to maximize the effects of the new concept in the JAF.

Such focus was necessary because, had the new course been offered to the Jordanian army as a whole, the effects likely would have been diluted. Having a few trained NCOs in a unit that had not made a cultural shift in officer attitudes regarding employment of NCOs would have had little effect on the unit as a whole; no real change would have taken place. In fact, such a situation probably would have been detrimental to efforts aimed at promoting NCO empowerment.

However, by focusing efforts on one unit and training most of its NCOs and officers together, the pace of change could be closely observed, managed, measured for results, adjusted, and then publicized as an example for other units to emulate.

Subsequently, the plan called for 30 NCOs from one brigade to attend the newly formed course. Simultaneously, the officers in the brigade would receive the directives and guidance from al-Zaben as to his intent for the future of the NCO corps. Furthermore, classes and lectures were organized by senior Jordanian and U.S. officers,



Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Amanda Smith, U.S. Army

Jordanian NCO Basic Course cadets improve map reading skills, March 2013.

focusing on how to utilize and empower the newly trained NCOs.

In conjunction, company-grade officers were required to sit in on select classes at the new course to gain a better understanding of the skills their NCOs were being taught. The goal was to train an entire brigade's worth of NCOs and officers in one year and make adjustments and changes as lessons learned presented themselves.

The Way Ahead: Recommendations of U.S. Advisors

To promote acceptance of NCO empowerment among a new generation of Jordanian officers, U.S. advisors recommended steps to the JAF leadership aimed at demonstrating the competency level of the newly trained NCOs.

First, placing more NCOs in the Jordanian Officer Academy as a cadre of respected trainers was recommended as a powerful way to teach the next generation of officers the value of the NCO corps. Furthermore, U.S. advisors also recommended that NCOs play a greater role in all JAF schools that teach officers, as well as enlisted personnel. This would foster the habit and spirit of officer and NCO cooperation that would benefit the entire JAF. Historically, when U.S. Army officers themselves have experienced the competence and professionalism of U.S. NCOs as trainers during officer commissioning and training, they have been profoundly affected. Therefore, U.S. advisors believed it would benefit the JAF to replicate such experiences.

The end state would be to incorporate qualified NCOs in as many leadership roles as possible so their value to the officer corps would become evident.

Conclusion

Even as the measures described were being formulated and accomplished, no one was under the illusion that the JAF would have a fully functioning NCO corps empowered by its officers in the near term. It was understood that such an endeavor would require



NCO cadets participate in a fire team movement exercise during situational training held at the Jordanian NCO Basic Course, March 2013.

Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Amanda Smith, U.S. Army

time, patience, and long-term support. In fact, a brief review of the history of the U.S. Army's NCO corps clearly demonstrates that growing a competent corps requires the attention and support of leaders at all levels for decades. For example, no formal education system existed for U.S. NCOs until 1972.

Moreover, numerous potential pitfalls could stunt the growth, or even reverse the successes, of this Jordanian initiative. One of the most pressing concerns was that as the JAF drew down operations in Afghanistan, it would lose the realization it had gained during its operations there that it had a profound need for an NCO corps.

If history is any indicator for future outcomes, then it is possible that Jordan could follow the example of the United States at the end of World War I. In 1918, Gen. John J. Pershing identified the need for trained small-unit leaders. He wrote, "It often happens that a sergeant or even a corporal may decide a battle by the boldness with which he seizes a bit of ground and holds it."⁵ He requested and received an NCO training course for sergeants being assigned to his units, a first of its kind.

Unfortunately, due the U.S. government's rapid downsizing and decommissioning of its military after the war, the course was discontinued. The U.S. Army would not see NCO training as a priority until the great losses of the Vietnam War, where it again became

evident that small-unit leader training and a vibrant NCO corps were a necessity. This example shows that without the immediate need for trained small-unit leaders, hard-fought gains to develop such leaders easily can be reversed.

Therefore, the challenge likely will be for the JAF leadership to continue to recognize the essential need for small-unit leaders without operations in Afghanistan to reinforce this point. This challenge will be all the more difficult in an era of reduced budgets

and limited resources, where the temptation to cut training is ever present.

On the other hand, violence is erupting in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, and international coalitions are forming to respond to such crises. Along with Jordan's desire to build partnerships, these events could persuade Jordanian military leaders of the necessity to maintain the gains already made in modernizing the JAF through empowerment of its NCO corps. Time will tell. ■

Noncommissioned officer cadets conduct an after action review with NCO Basic Course senior cadre member 1st Sgt. Yousef Ahmad al-Hassan, a graduate of the U.S. Warrior Leader Course and a combat veteran of Jordanian operations in Afghanistan, March 2013.

(Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Amanda Smith, U.S. Army)



Notes

1. For a good description of centralized command, see Milan N. Vego, "Operational Command and Control in the Information Age," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 35 (October 2004):100. For Army doctrine on decentralized command through mission command, see Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], May 2012).

2. Significant effort was made to bring the WLC instructors from Fort Bliss who trained the first group of Jordanian NCOs to conduct instructor training in Jordan. The rapport that the NCOs had built among themselves was valuable in their continued tutelage.

3. Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS:

Combat Studies Institute Press, 21 May 2010), 457. The authors describe similar challenges: "Because the Iraqi Army historically lacked the tradition of a professional NCO corps, it took some time for the American NCOs to earn the respect of Iraqi officers and further to convince them to give responsibility to their own NCOs."

4. Command Sgt. Maj. Smadi was instrumental in selecting the cadre for the WLC, participated in writing the POI, and was a general advocate for empowering NCOs.

5. David W. Hogan, Jr., Arnold G. Fisch, Jr., and Robert K. Wright, Jr., eds., *The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps: The Backbone of the Army* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 37.

