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Creating an Iraqi Army from Scratch: Lessons for the Future

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Iraqi security forces are becoming a credible force. They are growing in number and capabilities, and they are accepting responsibility for their country's future. This is due in no small part to the cadre of embedded military advisors. These advisors will be essential in tomorrow's conflicts as well. We need to invest more in their training and equipping today.

The entities (the "Dissolved Entities") listed in the attached Annex are hereby dissolved. Additional entities may be added to this list in the future.

—Coalition Provisional Authority,
Order 2, May 23, 2003¹

With these words, the United States Armed Forces found themselves unintentionally embarked on what was to become the largest—and perhaps most intricate—job of advising foreign military forces in U.S. history. With the formal disestablishment of Saddam Hussein's Iraqi military forces, U.S. and coalition forces were suddenly faced with the daunting task of rebuilding an Iraqi army from scratch. One of the few respected institutions in Iraq was totally abolished. Its few vestiges could neither be reconstituted nor rebuilt around what little leadership and structure could be salvaged. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) intended to generate a "new force—the New Iraqi Corps, which would be professional, non-political, militarily effective and representative of all

Iraqis."² The impromptu foreign military advisory effort began then and remains a key mission to this day.

The wisdom of the dissolution decree and the ensuing demobilization will long be subject to debate. Many argue that the dissolution was vital to the necessary de-Baathification process and simply completed the already near-total meltdown of uniformed security forces. Others contend that the dissolution removed the remaining semblance of security forces and forced thousands of military-age Iraqi men into unanticipated unemployment. Either way, the argument does not change the outcome, nor does it ease the security dilemma that arose in the initial combat operations in Iraq. Washington directives abolished all Iraqi intelligence, security, and military forces, and coalition military commanders were left to face the fallout of the decision and a growing set of new challenges in the face of a threatening insurgency. The need to rebuild an Iraqi military became evident, requiring an unexpected military advisory mission.

Initial CPA discussions called for building a new Iraqi army that would be oriented toward external threats. This force, with a clear focus on border security, would fill the growing need for a national military force, but with a measured equipping program and without any true logistical capacity, it would not have been viewed as a

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threat to Iraq's regional neighbors. Concerns voiced by military commanders in the fall of 2003 eventually garnered CPA support for the establishment of a few additional Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) units. Over the course of the next year, the ICDC grew into several Iraqi National Guard battalions trained and equipped by coalition ground forces that were simultaneously executing counterinsurgency, stability, support, and reconstruction operations throughout Iraq.

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The CPA plan was to create three motorized Iraqi battalions. Fielding the first division of roughly 12,000 infantry would take about one year, with an additional year required for the establishment of two more Iraqi divisions.³ The new Iraqi army rapidly became a key component of the U.S. plan to restore security in Iraq and avoid an open-ended commitment to combating the insurgency. Unfortunately, the planning and resources for this effort were not growing as quickly as the obligations of the new Iraqi army.

While foreign internal defense (FID) and advising fledgling militaries had long been accomplished by Army Special Forces—one mission for which they were originally established—competing commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and Colombia, as well as other global counterterrorist action, precluded their undertaking the bulk of the Iraqi mission. With insufficient conventional military forces available to train the CPA-envisioned Iraqi forces, the task of building an Iraqi security force was outsourced to U.S. civilian contractors.⁴

The prime civilian contractor had a strong track record of working with Arabic-speaking soldiers during a previous twenty-five-year period of providing training to the Saudi Arabian National Guard. Its one-year, multimillion-dollar Iraq contract was for the production of nine battalions (three brigades) of Iraqi infantry within twelve months. The force-generation methods included the training of Iraqi officers in Jordan at a non-commissioned officers' academy and a "recruit training academy" in Kirkush, Iraq. Trained and equipped Iraqi forces would then be used to train additional Iraqi

forces. The contractors would deliver "trained units" and "trained leaders" to larger Iraqi army formations. Because of the Geneva Convention, as well as legal and regulatory concerns, the contractors would not become embedded advisors once initial training was complete and Iraqi units moved on to combat operations. Beginning in June 2003, the contractor training and all supporting efforts under CPA direction were overseen by the small, multinational Coalition Military Assistance Training Team (CMATT) headquarters.

A Second Try

By December 2003, it was becoming obvious that the contractor-trained Iraqi army would satisfy neither operational nor political requirements, particularly in the context of the growing insurgency. The civilian contractors had technological expertise but not enough warfighting spirit or military rigor. Additionally, the trainers were not able to embed with Iraqi forces, and Iraqi leaders struggled to maintain high competency levels. Before the first battalion completed its training, it suffered a nearly 50 percent attrition rate; commitment to tactical operations proved even worse.

It soon became apparent that this aspect of FID was more suited to the military and that contractor-delivered classroom instruction was insufficient.⁵ The April 2004 breakdown of the Iraqi Second Battalion and its refusal to respond to an insurgent uprising in Fallujah confirmed the shortfalls in the training approach, the lack of sufficient equipment, and the ineffectiveness of Iraqi leadership. The new Iraqi forces were still unprepared to assume any security responsibilities from coalition forces. ICDC units being developed by coalition forces around Iraq for ancillary combat tasks were likewise achieving mixed results.

In May, National Security Presidential Directive 36 placed the future advising, support, and training of all Iraqi security forces under U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and raised the ante on the urgency of generating Iraqi army and police forces. A wide variety of advisors, both military (active and reserve) and civilians under contract, began arriving to bolster the training and to increase the number of trained Iraqi police and soldiers. Office of Security Transition (OST) headquarters and advisor teams had grown from five CMATT personnel to a team of 863 in one year. CMATT made contracts for the refurbishment of several Iraqi facilities to enable increased force generation; CMATT itself generated one

infantry brigade of the Iraqi army's Iraqi Intervention Force by May 2004.

In July 2004, the Iraqis were formally granted sovereignty and the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) was established. Instead of expediting the creation of forces, the inexperienced IIG unintentionally complicated matters. With the creation of the IIG, the CPA had been dissolved. Two days after Iraq was proclaimed sovereign, Coalition Joint Task Force 7 was replaced by Multinational Force – Iraq (MNF-I), a four-star joint headquarters in Baghdad under the command of Gen. George Casey.

Within a fortnight, Lt. Gen. David Petraeus assumed command of OST as the new Multinational Security Transition Command – Iraq (MNSTC-I). For the first time, the mission of transitioning security responsibilities to the Iraqis was under the control of a commander on equal footing—in terms of rank—with the commander of the coalition forces conducting daily counterinsurgency operations. The training, advising, equipping, and reorganization of the Iraqi security forces took on new momentum, and January 2005, when elections would be held, was set as the target for the effective deployment of twenty-seven Iraqi army battalions.

MNSTC-I, reporting directly to MNF-I, retained responsibility for advising, organizing, equipping, training, overseeing, and supporting all Iraqi armed forces. The ICDC was disbanded and replaced by the Iraqi National Guard, still under training by deployed coalition force units. The Iraqi Coastal Defense Force and Iraqi Air Corps rounded out units organized, trained, and equipped under MNSTC-I. While the equipping of the Iraqi Commando Battalion and Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Forces fell to MNSTC-I, those advising and support missions would have been more appropriately assumed by U.S. special operations forces (SOF). When combined with the alignment and partnering of Iraqi forces alongside coalition units, the creation of a viable Iraqi armed force finally seemed possible.

Capitalizing on New Momentum

The United States Special Operations Command is the only combatant command with a legislatively mandated FID core task. Specifically, the “SOF role in FID is to train, advise and support host nation military and paramilitary forces.”⁶ SOF units, particularly Army Special Forces, have long prided themselves on being able to create effective fighting forces from ragtag indigenous forces. Today's demands in Iraq, Afghanistan, the

Philippines, and other areas, however, are far too great for Special Forces to undertake alone, and many of their historical FID tasks have shifted to active and reserve conventional military units. There are too few Special Forces units to develop and nurture entire armies from scratch in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Conventional Army and Marine Corps units have accepted the additional mission of training foreign forces somewhat reluctantly, in part due to the lack of additional personnel and equipment. It represents a significant drag on logistics and increases stress on fully tasked units. Nonetheless, the mission to advise, organize, and train foreign indigenous forces fell to conventional forces. Where conventional units were not available, the mission was assigned to a “pick-up” team of military personnel from other areas.

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Initially, most conventional coalition forces operating in Iraq approached the advisor requirements for their “partnered” ICDC/Iraqi National Guard units with “out of hide” assets already being used for other purposes. This placed an extraordinary additional demand on the same cohort of leaders already fully employed in leading their own forces, planning counterinsurgency operations, conducting civil military activities, and often serving as governors in towns, villages, and provinces. The success of the advisor efforts and their associated Iraqi units varied widely based on many factors, including coalition unit commitment to the advisory mission, ability to perform counterinsurgency tasks in assigned areas, ongoing nation-building tasks, and capacity to improvise. For the most part, however, noteworthy progress was made in generating capable ICDC forces.

Embedded advisors were undeniably the greatest contributors to the initial force generation and early successes of the maturing Iraqi security forces. Earlier attempts by contractors to train, equip, coach, teach, and mentor Iraqi forces simply did not produce the desired results in terms of quality, quantity, or sense of

urgency. The CMATT approach focused on maximizing available facilities, coordinating and targeting equipment delivery efforts, assessing unit training and readiness, and keeping military advisor teams embedded with Iraqi units from inception through combat operations with as great a sense of urgency as possible. The CMATT advisors sought the ground truth regarding Iraqi unit readiness training gates, competence, equipment, staffing levels, and leadership. While ensuring the urgency, rigor, and integrity of Iraqi training, the CMATT advisors also guarded against the tendency to rush Iraqi units into combat. Additionally, the advisors served as reliable liaisons to the coalition units that worked alongside of and partnered with Iraqi forces.

The advisor teams, now called military transition teams (MiTTs), continue to be some of the most significant contributors to the growing successes of Iraqi security forces across the board. Like their Special Forces counterparts, all MiTTs are principally focused on helping the Iraqi forces assume full control while establishing a long-lasting military institution. Drawn from across the U.S. services, today's embedded advisors mold their Iraqi counterparts by personal example as they coach, teach, and mentor foreign leaders of equal or higher rank.⁷ Advisor teams work to "train the trainer," guiding their Iraqi counterparts toward running their own effective military organizations.

After embedded advisors shepherd their assigned units through formation and initial organization, their dual role as coach and mentor remains essential. Advisors assume critical combat responsibilities: liaising with friendly forces, providing reliable communications and support, and other combat multipliers. As the Iraqi forces gain additional competence and capabilities, the advisors' connections to immediate firepower (often air-delivered), reliable ground and aeromedical evacuation, and coalition quick-reaction forces often provide necessary confidence and victory for Iraqi forces. Just as they were for South Vietnamese and Afghan forces in the past, advisors remain all-important in Iraq. The ultimate goal of the advisor teams is to develop foreign security forces that are competent at all levels, capable over sustained periods of combat, committed to state security, and confident in themselves to secure their country.

High-quality advisor training—particularly for somewhat inexperienced conventional force advisors—is also essential. Conventional forces cannot quickly be brought up to the high standard of Special Forces units, which

are specially trained and equipped for FID missions. With the right training, however, active and reserve conventional forces have proven they can quickly learn how to be advisors. Distributed between stateside bases and overseas staging areas, the training programs move MiTTs through their acclimatization processes. Ingenuity, resourcefulness, and innovation prove harder to instill in training, but these qualities can be found in even the most conventional of American warfighters—compounded by the varying experiences and backgrounds of team members. Additionally, the increased numbers of advisors with prior combat tours contributes significantly to their credibility and effectiveness. Filling advisor positions with high-quality military personnel is costly, but it is critical to long-term success.

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To increase the impact and effectiveness of embedded advisors, several initiatives are now underway. At Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance is adopting lessons and best practices from security force assistance operations, including how best to improve embedded advisor performance. The U.S. Marine Corps Security Cooperation Education and Training Center is aggressively observing and teaching lessons from deployed advisor teams. The Marine Corps is also forming a foreign military training unit that is expected to train indigenous armies in military skills and furnish combat advisors in previously ungovernable countries. Formal programs with skilled instructors, cultural experts, foreign equipment and tactics classes, and experienced advisors are emerging. Additionally, advisor duty is now viewed as career-enhancing, so high-quality military personnel are seeking these critical assignments. Each of the services is now investing in conventional force advisor programs to support current and future foreign force assistance.

The Way Ahead

Retired Army general Barry McCaffrey noted that the embedded advisor MiTTs and the partnering of Iraqi units with coalition units constitute "a brilliant success

story.”⁸ Neither partnering Iraqi units with coalition units nor embedding advisors can be successful in isolation, though. While partnering will ensure integration of the efforts of Iraqi and coalition forces, embedded advisors will continue to provide the guidance and coordination needed to continue to increase combat capabilities.

Today, the Iraqi security forces are becoming a credible force. They are growing in number and capabilities, and they are accepting responsibility for providing their nation’s security. They have assumed the lead action where they can for a large—and rapidly expanding—area and population. This did not occur accidentally, but rather because of planned, deliberate, and often heroic activities of embedded advisors. The success of the ongoing surge is as much dependent on an effort that is properly managed and has adequate resources as it is on increased combat power.

U.S. advisors got off to a slow start in Iraq but quickly became unsung, high-impact heroes. The armed forces were originally caught off guard, but they quickly relearned some old lessons. Today, over 4,500 coalition advisors are making great strides, enabling new Iraqi security forces to reclaim their country and assume the lead security role. Embedded advisor contributions belie their small size proportionate to our deployed forces. They remain the behind-the-scenes element working to hasten the transition. As we transform our forces for tomorrow’s conflicts, foreign security force advisors should be a central priority.

Notes

1. This decree, issued by L. Paul Bremer, followed Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Order 1, “The De-Baathification of Iraqi Society.” Order 2 came as a surprise to many senior civilian and military policymakers intimately involved in ongoing operations in Iraq. For excellent accounts, consult L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope*, with Malcolm McConnell (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), and for a perspective on the impact on military planning and operations, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2006). For an excellent detailed discussion of several aspects of developing Iraqi security forces, see Anthony Cordesman, *Iraqi Security Forces: A Strategy*

for Success (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006).

2. CPA, Order 2.

3. See Walter Slocombe (then—senior advisor to the CPA for defense and security affairs), speech (Foreign Press Center, Washington, DC, September 17, 2003).

4. The private military company/prime contractor awarded the contract for trainers to rebuild the new Iraqi army was Vinnell Corporation. Vinnell employed at least five subcontractors to fulfill the competitive contract awarded by the Army Contracting Office.

5. Maj. Gen. Paul Eaton, quoted in Ariana Eunjung Cha, “Recruits Abandon Iraqi Army: Troubled Training Hits Key Component of Bush Security Plan,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2003. Discussions with original members of the Office of Security Transition and Coalition Military Assistance Transition Team staff reinforced Eaton’s assertion that soldier-advisors were needed to perform the unit advisor mission as opposed to the contracted depot training approach.

6. Foreign internal defense (FID) is doctrinally a special operations forces mission in accordance with Joint Publication 3-07.1. See Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Foreign Internal Defense (FID)*, April 30, 2004. According to the U.S. Code, “special operations activities include: direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, civil affairs, psychological operations, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, theater search and rescue and other activities as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense.” (Unified Combatant Command for Special Operations Forces, U.S. Code 10, §167.)

7. For an exceptional overview of advisor duty requirements and necessary attributes, see Brig. Gen. Daniel P. Bolger (U.S. Army), “So You Want to Be an Advisor,” *Military Review* (March–April 2006), available at www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/bolger.pdf (accessed May 17, 2007).

8. A detailed academic trip report was submitted to the department head of the U.S. Military Academy’s Department of Social Sciences by Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey (U.S. Army, retired) on April 25, 2006, following a trip to Iraq and Kuwait. The report notes that “Iraqi forces have the lead action of huge and rapidly expanding areas of population and area—battalion level formations are in many cases excellent—most are adequate.” The report also addresses logistical, armor and aviation shortfalls in Iraqi equipping. It was furnished to numerous professional military education institutions to offer an overview and observations from McCaffrey’s visit.