U.S. Marine and Iraqi police officer guard
Joint Security Station Qatana in Ramadi

The Imbalance in Iraqi Security Force Transition

By SCOTT S. JENSEN

The United States is currently embroiled in a difficult situation in Iraq. One key to success will be an effective transition from U.S.-led security force operations to operations planned, led, and executed by Iraqi security forces.[1] Significant gains have been made in the transition,[2] but aviation and aviation support functions have not been properly addressed. This has led to an imbalance in joint military capability that threatens future Iraqi security and leads to undesired risk to Americans.

U.S. security forces in Iraq currently operate jointly, which includes ground forces, aviation and aviation support forces, logistics forces, and command and control forces. While the ground force transition is moving forward at a measured pace, too little is being done to train and transition aviation and aviation support assets to keep pace with the ground transition. The continued reliance on American aviation functions in support of the Iraqi ground force transition will lead to an Iraqi

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ground force trained and conditioned to integrate aviation into their operational construct but completely reliant on American aviation to support that requirement.

This article identifies the strategic environment that predicates a balanced and time-sensitive joint security force transition. It highlights the imperatives for synchronizing various aviation-related functions with the progress of the ground force transition. It also explores the time, training, and equipment challenges of building a relevant aviation enabler for ground forces. Finally, it provides recommendations for synchronizing the Iraqi aviation force transition in critical areas.

Security Transition Strategy and Policy

Some may argue that the initial planning for postconflict security and stabilization in Iraq was poor. Clearly, more could have been done at the strategy and policy level of the U.S. Government to provide a better plan and more assets to transition. Nevertheless, the President and his policy advisors sought to correct that mistake in 2005 by publishing the *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*.[3] One objective of

this strategy is "to develop the Iraqis' capacity to secure their country while carrying out a campaign to defeat terrorists and neutralize the insurgency."[4] Among the expectations is "*that our force posture will change over the next year*" and that:

as the political process consolidates and as Iraqi Security Forces grow and gain experience . . . as Iraqis take on more responsibility for security, Coalition forces will increasingly move to supporting roles in most areas . . . [and] *while our military presence may become less visible, it will remain lethal and decisive, able to confront the enemy wherever it may gather and organize.*[5]

The national strategy also defines numerous metrics that have been frequently addressed.[6] Specifically, those measures that receive the greatest attention are "[t]he quantity and quality of Iraqi units . . . the percentage of operations conducted by Iraqis alone or with minor Coalition assistance . . . [and] offensive operations conducted by Iraqi and Coalition forces."[7]

The *Iraqi National Security Strategy for 2007 to 2010*—a policy document released by the Republic of Iraq—supports the same

security objectives as the President's strategy. Some highlights include "Iraq's Joint Forces [focusing] on defeating terrorism and insurgency as their primary mission . . . [and] Iraq's Joint Forces [achieving] self-reliance such that only minimal external assistance and support are needed for accomplishing the primary mission."[8] Critical aspects identified by the Iraqi strategy are that all Iraqi army divisions must eventually come under the control of the Iraqi government and that part of that self-reliance includes assuming full responsibility for support functions such as "supply stocks, fire support capabilities and the Air Force."[9]
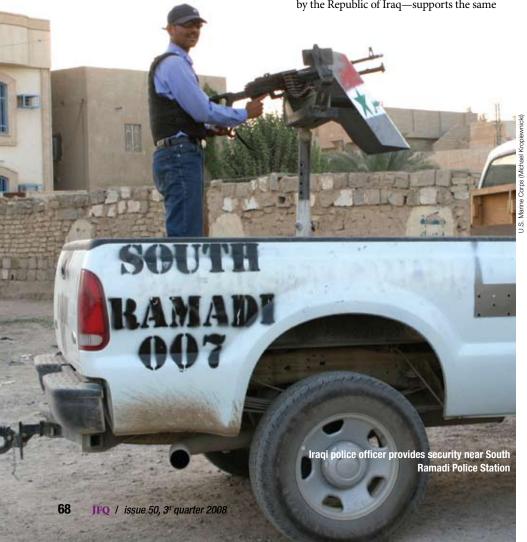
From both nations' strategic documents, it is clear that there is a requirement for eventual transition from an American-led security apparatus to an Iraqi-led one. Both strategies specifically identify security, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency as the most important short-term priorities. Both indicate that there will be a certain reliance on specific aspects of coalition power prior to a complete transition to Iraqi security forces. Unfortunately, both are vague on what will constitute reasonable measures. One says "with minor coalition assistance"[10] and the other says that "only minimal

> *the* Iraqi National Security Strategy for 2007 to 2010 *supports the same security objectives as the President's strategy*

external assistance and support are needed."[11] This vagueness contributes to the imbalance between the ground forces and the aviation support they receive by providing both nations an excuse to defer the aviation transition to a later time.

Analysis of the Imbalance

Transitioning security responsibility in Iraq is clearly driven by policy that has recently gained urgency at the American national political level. This has led to increased pressure on the operational commanders in Iraq to complete the transition as effectively as possible under the shortest timeline. Since 2005, transition efforts—led by the Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC–I)—have been broad-based and generally effective. Accounts abound in the press and congressional testimony about the effectiveness of individual Iraqi battalions, brigades, and in some cases divisions.[12]

U.S. Marine Corps (Michael Kropiewnicki)

Iraqi police officer provides security near South Ramadi Police Station

Published figures indicate growing numbers of Iraqi ground forces (along with the associated battlespace) being taken over and controlled by Iraqi commanders. American teams work at the battalion level and below on a direct and personal basis to train and assist the Iraqi ground forces in assuming responsibility.[13] Unfortunately, while a ground formation controlling its own territory and operations is an important measure of success, it ignores the need for a fully balanced *joint* force capable of self-reliance. The level of effort given to transitioning Iraqi aviation support—and the ability of the ground forces to leverage aviation support in their counterterror and counterinsurgency fight—have not kept pace.

When measuring joint security forces, ground formations receive priority attention. By the very nature of the task, large numbers of people are needed to operate an effective security force. Division-strength formations require the training and equipping of tens of thousands of people. Once the individuals have been identified, however, they can be trained relatively quickly. Additionally, compared to aviation units, they require less technical and lower-cost equipment. Vast amounts of assets and time are being put toward the issue, resulting in training teams or advisors being assigned down to the lowest levels of the ground formations.[14] Training has been consistent with strategic guidance that focuses the joint Iraqi security forces on security, counterterror, and counterinsurgency operations. The Iraqi ability to operate on its own receives much of the attention. Taking nothing away from the huge success of these formations of brave Iraqis, those ground forces are operating "independently" while relying—with rare exceptions—on aviation support that has been planned, coordinated, and controlled by and through American Servicemembers.

The vast majority of aviation airspace control, fire support coordination, terminal attack control, logistics, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) is conducted and controlled by specially trained American troops. The Iraqis' ability to execute these functions is not improving at a pace that would allow successful integration.[15] In stark contrast to ground force training, aviation functions generally require money, technologically advanced equipment, and advanced understanding of specific skill sets not often found in developing countries. Aviation success therefore tends to be measured by the number of "things" in the form of radars, airplanes, and communications equipment. People capable of executing aviation support functions are hard to come by, and the training is costly and time consuming.

Transitioning aviation support for security operations thus becomes a difficult task. That task was admittedly put on a back burner with a vague recognition that it would take time and come later in the game.[16] This approach appears to have provided an excuse to delay what would be a costly and demanding task—with the caveat that American aviation support will be needed past the time when Iraqi ground forces are postured for independent operations. This overextended delay has created an imbalance.[17] While there has been some growth in a small Iraqi air force, the actual amount of people, equipment, and training has been minuscule in comparison to the ground force of the new Iraqi joint force.[18]

As of August 2007, for instance, there were 359,700 ground troops who were trained in Iraq compared to 900 Iraqi air force personnel.[19] The air force operates a handful of small fixed-wing aircraft for ISR and C–130 cargo planes for logistics, and it is receiving 16 Huey helicopters for logistics and troop movement—totaling 45 aircraft in the Iraqi inventory.[20] By comparison, the U.S. Marine Corps, engaged in what has been identified as a "supporting effort" in Anbar Province, operates nearly six full helicopter squadrons, three full jet squadrons, one C–130 squadron, and a full maintenance and command and control system.[21] The Marine aviation contribution supports one division and totals approximately 4,500 Marines and over 130 aircraft. This is a rather large aviation element for only a *portion* of Iraq—and rather small in comparison to what the other Services add to the theater's aviation support function. Nine hundred Iraqi air force members and a handful of aircraft pale in comparison.

Successful ground forces ultimately rely on a broad spectrum of aviation support to enable the joint security force operations envisioned by both U.S. and Iraqi policy expectations. The aviation training has not happened. Soon, the chasm between independently operating Iraqi ground forces and a responsive Iraqi aviation support system will grow so wide that a self-reliant joint security force will not be a realistic expectation. This imbalance is due in part to a failure to integrate joint planning, training, and execution into the mantra of the transition—relying on stovepiped development of ground forces separate from aviation forces. This has resulted in half of the equation—aviation—relying heavily on American support and capabilities.

Successful security, counterterror, and counterinsurgency operations require a joint force with responsive capabilities capable of leveraging available assets, quick to communicate changing environments, and certain of conditions on the ground. When successful, aviation support is seamlessly tied to the needs, expectations, and requirements of the ground

Iraqi soldiers during dismounted tactical movement exercise

55th Combat Camera Company (Timothy Kingston)

force. In order to enable security operations, aviation support needs to understand what information may be required of a ground commander and how to get it to him. In addition, aviation support must be deconflicted to ensure safety and security of the aviation force, while providing flexible support to the ground force.

While an aviation force that is enabling operations has a responsibility to support the ground force, the ground force has a responsibility to meet a specific level of knowledge and proficiency in using that aviation support. In other words, both sides must come together to increase the synergistic effects of the joint capabilities of the force. The U.S. model for aviation support of joint operations is effective. Ironically, it is not being followed in the transition in Iraq.

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Recommendations

There will be a lag between ground force capability for independent operations and aviation force capability to operate and support those ground forces. That lag time, however, is critical. It cannot be wasted waiting for aircraft to be built, systems to be produced, or aviators to be trained. The period must be focused on deliberate functional planning and training at the ground force level and within the immature aviation support arena. American advisors must look at their transition training programs and pursue a more holistic approach based on existing models. It is not good enough that Iraqi squadrons are slowly standing up and executing occasional logistics and surveillance missions.[22] This represents *part* of the requirement but simply misses the larger capability needed to attain mission success as demonstrated by aviation assets enabling current security, counterterror, and counterinsurgency operations. Greater attention must be focused on developing skills in communications, aviation-delivered fires, airspace management, and formal training.

Communications. Not enough emphasis is being placed on communications skills and equipment. By this stage in the ground force transition, purchasing, distributing, and training with communications equipment should have been as high a priority as purchasing, distributing, and training with weapons; communications skills and equipment knowledge are as critical as integrating and using individual weapons. In a counterterror or counterinsurgency fight, aviation assets become critical eyes and ears for the commanders in the field, as well as a critical link for medical evacuation, logistics, and fires. Without the skill sets and equipment to coordinate and communicate via sophisticated equipment, there is no way a ground commander can leverage the aviation enabler.

This aspect of transition is not being executed.[23] Instead, the American team members supporting Iraqi ground forces are communicating with, coordinating, and directing aviation assets. In order for there to be an *independently* operating ground force, they must be able to communicate and coordinate with their support. In light of both nations' strategic admission that aviation will transition more slowly than ground forces, at some point there may no longer be enough Americans on the ground to execute aviation coordination. Even now, Americans supporting Iraqi ground forces rarely have enough information on what is happening to provide adequate situational awareness to aviation assets and usually cannot find the correct Iraqi to pass information from aviation assets. Until there are radios in the hands of and under the direct control of Iraqi ground troops, American team members will not be able to fully integrate aviation support.

American advisors are making a huge mistake by managing the responsibility for communicating and controlling the radios used to leverage aviation support. It is past time to force the system to function with Iraqi voices on the radios. Will this initially lead to frustration, confusion, and wasted time? Yes—just like when young lieutenants and sergeants are taught to struggle through similar problems. All involved must realize there will be difficulties in the beginning, and American trainers must stand ready to take back the airwaves if a situation becomes too dangerous. However, the need to relinquish some of that control is necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Without increasing the communication skills of Iraqi ground forces, there will not be a balanced aviation transition.

Aviation-delivered Fires. Based on the current imbalance in transition, an American aviator could eventually deliver fires for an Iraqi commander with no American on the ground to oversee or control the fires. Under what guidance and authority will the American aviator deliver his ordnance? If we are not working toward defining rules of engagement, risks and mitigation, and the effects of improper fires execution with our Iraqi counterparts, we could put Americans at risk and in situations that may result in a negative strategic impact.

In another scenario, in the absence of trained Iraqi controllers, an American terminal attack controller could eventually work for an independent Iraqi ground commander, executing that commander's desires for fire

Iraqi air force C–130 waits to transport Iraqi recruits to training

U.S. Marine Corps (James P. Aguilar)

support with no American in the process to approve targeting, rules of engagement, or risk. This could lead to strategically impacting perceptions that an American is involved in delivering fires in ways that conflict with American policy.

Fires are some of the most challenging combat enablers that aviation assets provide. Aviation-delivered fires are also a huge combat multiplier. Anything that has a major impact on a battlefield also comes with considerable risks if done improperly. This risk is magnified in an urban environment or in a counterinsurgency or counterterror role.

Current Iraqi air force structure is not designed to support ground formations in fires delivered from the air.[24] There was a deliberate decision made "not to equip the Iraqi Air Force with fixed-wing jet fighter or attack (bomber) aircraft. In fact, [MNSTC–I] considers the assets unnecessary and incapable of influencing the counterinsurgency fight."[25] This is an interesting conclusion since so many American attack aircraft, both fixed-wing and helicopter, are committed to counterinsurgency operations in Iraq. Current operations prove the need for the Iraqis to pursue a limited attack aircraft capability.

Assuming the utility of attack aircraft in a counterinsurgency, American doctrine and procedures indicate that it takes *years* to become proficient in the execution of aviation-delivered fires,[26] particularly those used to counter an insurgent or terror threat.

This implies that Americans will be executing the mission for a considerable time.

Americans continue to coordinate and control the delivery of aviation fires even when these fires are in direct support of Iraqi ground forces. Specific American ground force members train for months prior to coming into theater in order to be joint qualified enough to control the delivery of aviation fires.[27] Part of the Iraqi ground force transition to independent operations must include the control and coordination of aviation-delivered fire.

Moreover, time must be spent at the designated training areas, with Iraqi ground force members controlling American aviation assets when these fires are delivered. This

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would provide much-needed proficiency training for American aviation units in theater and familiarize them with the Iraqi forces they are supporting. American controllers qualified as terminal attack controllers could supervise and train Iraqi ground forces, allowing the Americans to maintain proficiency in the perishable skills of controlling aviation fires. Most importantly, through a deliberate training program modeled after American military schools, Iraqis would be formally trained and qualified to control aviation fires and take one more step toward true independent operations. This type of training should be integrated up the chain of command to introduce and refine the deconfliction of fires, target approval and coordination, battle damage assessment determination, and rules of engagement training.

Airspace Management. Deconfliction of airspace is vital to aviation operations. There are many layers to this task, which begins at the highest levels of air tasking, order development, and targeting, and ends with the individual controllers who communicate with and control aircraft that pass through their assigned airspace. While there is occasional reference to the eventual need for Iraqi control and deconfliction of airspace, not enough action is being taken to ensure that capability once the Iraqi air force is ready to assume the role as an independent force.[28] This function requires a

U.S. Marine Corps (Michael Kropiewnicki)

Female police officers undergo marksmanship training in Ramadi

depth of technical knowledge in procedures and equipment that can only come with time and training.

At this point in the transition process, there should be future Iraqi command and control specialists sitting side by side with their American counterparts. These specialists should be completing on-the-job training while observing the process that plans for future aviation needs, puts the orders together to get aviation assets to end users, and then ensures each aircraft launches, flies to, executes, and returns to its airfield under the desired control and with the proper deconfliction. Again, American and Iraqi aircraft should be hearing *Iraqi* voices on the other end of the radio providing them direction. As with everything else, this would be under the direct supervision of a trained and experienced aviation command and control specialist. Without embedded Iraqi command and control specialists working in American aviation command and control centers, there will not be a balanced transition when the Iraqis assume the aviation role.

Formal Training Development. Aviation training and development go well beyond buying a few airplanes and teaching people how to fly and fix them. Creating an effective member of a joint force requires detailed development and training that take months or even years.

The Iraqi air force may not be mature enough to assume the roles and missions expected of a robust joint aviation force, and this is recognized in both nations' policy documents. However, the conditions and people exist in theater to do much more to ensure those combat-enabling functions associated with aviation support are being developed in a more balanced way. Training and development must be occurring now, particularly in those areas that connect a ground force to the aviation force.

Command and control and fires are two functional areas that have available American resources in theater to begin developing the baseline skills needed for transition in the future. Transitioning aviation support for a joint Iraqi security force must include all facets involved in aviation integration and not only training pilots, maintainers, and airfield operators. The focus has to be on developing a professional cadre of aviation specialists. Developing formal training systems designed to sustain a force and provide for systematic and documented professional development can do this. No better time exists to formalize and execute the needed training, whether at the lowest level of joint terminal attack controllers or at the staff level of air tasking order and air space coordination order development. The models exist, the training templates are there, and the experts are in the theater right now.[29]

Some may argue that there is *not* an imbalance in the security force transition. They may point to documentation that indicates that deliberate decisions have established priorities that did not include the requirements identified herein. Deliberately prioritized or not, there is an undeniable lag in transitioning the aviation force in Iraq. Pressure to complete the transition continues to grow. Based on current political pressure for Americans to leave Iraq and the training time required to prepare aviation enablers, it does not appear that the aviation transition is where it needs to be when the United States is eventually forced to turn over responsibility.

Understandably, a lag will exist between the point when Iraqi ground forces are capable of independent operations and the time that Iraqi aviation forces are capable of conducting independent operations. Current practices, however, are not adequate to ensure a proper balance between the transitions of both forces. If not corrected, this imbalance has the potential for severe consequences. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2005), 8–13.

[2] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, *Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq* (Washington, DC: U.S. Congress, 2007), 7–15.

[3] *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*.

[4] Ibid., 8.

[5] Ibid., 12.

[6] Ibid., 12–13.

[7] Ibid., 8–13.

[8] *Iraq First: Iraqi National Security Strategy, 2007–2010* (Baghdad: The Cabinet and National Security Council, 2007), 25.

[9] Ibid., 26–27.

[10] *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, 13.

[11] *Iraq First*, 25.

[12] U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Report to Congress in Accordance with DOD Appropriations Act 2007, June 2007 (Section 9010, Public Law 109–289), 30–40.

[13] Ibid., 37–39.

[14] Ibid., 30–40.

[15] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, 72. This assessment was observed first hand when the author was an aviator during four separate flying tours in Iraq beginning at the start of combat operations and ending in May 2007. His last two tours were as a squadron commander in Anbar Province.

[16] U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, *Stand Up and Be Counted: The Continuing Challenge of Building the Iraqi Security Forces* (110th Cong., 1st sess., 2007), 98, available at <http://armedservices.house.gov/pdfs/OI_ISFreport062707/OI_Report_FINAL.pdf>.

[17] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, 72.

[18] U.S. House of Representatives, 96–98.

[19] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *Iraq Weekly Status Report*, August 15, 2007, 8.

[20] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, 72.

[21] Second Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), "2 MAW (FWD)," available at <www.iimefpublic.usmc.mil/public/iimefpublic.nsf/sites/iimawfwd>.

[22] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, 72.

[23] After over 800 hours of combat flying, much in direct support of Iraqi ground forces or police, the author has not once passed information directly to an Iraqi on a radio or been able to communicate immediate intelligence directly to a tactical Iraqi formation maneuvering on the ground.

[24] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, 76–77.

[25] U.S. House of Representatives, 98.

[26] U.S. Marine Corps, *Aviation Training and Readiness Manual*, AH–1, Marine Corps Order 3500.48A (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 2004), 10.

[27] See Joint Close Air Support Action Plan Memorandum of Agreement 2004–01, Joint Terminal Attack Controller (JTAC) (Ground), among Deputy Commander, U.S. Joint Forces Command, and U.S. Army Operations Deputy, U.S. Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Air and Space Operations, U.S. Marine Corps Deputy Commandant for Plans Policy and Operations, U.S. Navy Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Plans Policy and Operations, Director Joint Staff, and U.S. Special Operations Command Director Operations Support Group, September 1, 2004.

[28] Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq, 72–77.

[29] Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq, "Coalition Air Force Transition Team (CAFTT)," available at <www.mnstci.iraq.centcom.mil/caftt.htm>. Also see U.S. Joint Forces Command, "USJFCOM as Joint Trainer," available at <www.mnstci.iraq.centcom.mil/caftt.htm>.