



# Security Force Assistance Operations

## Defining the Advise and Assist Brigade

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PHOTO: U.S. paratroopers with 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division, interpret the results of zeroing fire at a rifle range in Al Asad, Iraq, 25 August 2009. The brigade is the first fully augmented advise and assist brigade to deploy to Iraq for the mission of security force assistance. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Michael J. MacLeod)

**O**VER THE PAST six years, the U.S. Army has shown an extraordinary ability to adapt to the evolving environment in Iraq. As the fight shifted from combat operations, to a brief peacekeeping operation, to classic counterinsurgency, the Army has had to profoundly adapt its tactics, structure, and most importantly, its mind-set for each phase of the operation. Our shortcoming has often been our inability to adapt fast enough to the changing operating environment. The implementation of the security agreement in January 2009 and the ensuing agreement to move out of major cities have heightened Iraqi nationalism and the desire to assert their sovereignty. Once again, the Army is in a period where rapid and widespread adaptation to U.S. force mind-set is imperative to safeguard recent gains. Understanding the nature of this new environment and then anticipating the changes to doctrine, tactics, and mind-set required is the preeminent challenge facing our deployed and deploying forces. Defining this change in mind-set, Secretary Gates stated in a 2007 address to Army leaders that “Arguably, the most important military component in the War on Terror is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern their own countries. The standing up and mentoring of indigenous armies and police—once the province of Special Forces—is now a *key mission* for the military as a whole.”<sup>1</sup>

As U.S. forces gradually hand over security responsibilities to the host nation, success becomes less about what we can achieve than what we can encourage and promote our host nation partners to achieve. The doctrinal framework for this type of approach is “Security Force Assistance Operations.” Field Manual 3-07.1 defines security force assistance as the unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation, or regional security forces in support of a legitimate authority. This article offers some insights and lessons learned from one brigade’s experience while conducting a security force assistance-type mission in southern Iraq between 2008 and 2009.

In June 2008, the 4th Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 1st Cavalry Division, arrived at Contingency Operating Base Adder in southern Iraq and assumed responsibility for a temporary operating area that encompassed three provinces previously controlled by British forces: Muthana, Dhi Qar,



U.S. Army photo by MAJ Chad Carroll

Colonel Mohammed Abdel Wahlid gives planning guidance to his staff and that of the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, at Camp Dhi Qar near Nasiriyah, Iraq, 20 September 2010.

and Maysan. All three were under “provincial Iraqi control” and, because of the British focus on Basra, had seen very little coalition force presence in the past two to three years. Maysan in particular was rife with violence and lawlessness. Due to the unique political and geographic limitations of operating across three provinces about the size of South Carolina, our brigade’s main effort from the outset was to improve the effectiveness of the Iraqi Security Forces already present in the region. The lack of any tangible sectarian strife in Southern Iraq also helped to make this effort possible. In essence, 4th Brigade Combat Team started its 12-month campaign as a security force assistance force and maintained that focus for the duration of the deployment. Performing the mission of a prototype advise and assist brigade (AAB), 4th BCT developed operational partnerships with the 10th Iraqi Army Division and its four maneuver brigades, three provincial police forces, and the 11th Brigade of the Directorate of Border Enforcement. Over time, 14 externally sourced transition teams augmented 4th BCT, dramatically enhancing our

ability to partner with the Iraqi Security Forces.

Team leaders quickly discovered that security force assistance requires a different mind-set and focus from the traditional counterinsurgency mission of previous tours. We could no longer define our success by the number of insurgents we detained or the local population’s sense of security. Rather, the quality of the host nation security forces we left behind ultimately defined the success of our campaign. The brigade learned many hard lessons conducting these operations in southern Iraq.

One important caveat to remember is that this is one BCT’s experience in one corner of Iraq for a brief and evolving period of history. Because of the lack of sectarian violence in southern Iraq, we could rely on the Iraqi Security Forces to secure the population in ways that may not be applicable to Baghdad, Mosul, or Kandahar. With that in mind, we list 16 principles, gleaned over a year of operations that we offer to help define the new environment for units training for this unique mission.

## **1. The AAB is a mission, not a Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE).<sup>2</sup>**

The modular BCT design is six years old and has demonstrated its success in two wars and virtually all forms of combat operations. The brigade combat team is an agile, flexible organization that provides a diverse toolbox of complementary skills, weapons, and organizations that a commander can use and adapt to specific missions. Our experience in southern Iraq has shown that the modular BCT is the right organization to form the core of security force assistance operations in Iraq. When properly augmented with senior level advisory capability, this organization can simultaneously train and mentor large host nation formations while protecting and sustaining itself in a hostile territory. The inherent flexibility of the BCT allows it to shift from security operations to counterinsurgency to major combat as the environment evolves during the deployment. We believe that discussions to develop a custom-designed advisory force structure to replace the BCTs are moving in the wrong direction. With the proper training focus and enabler augmentation, the BCT structure has the built-in flexibility to perform any mission assigned. There is no need for wholesale force structure redesign.

## **2. Security force assistance requires full spectrum tactical proficiency.**

In April 2009, 2-7 Cavalry executed a combined arms live-fire exercise with partnered elements of the 38th Iraqi Army Division. This exercise employed Iraqi helicopters, artillery, and mounted and dismounted forces with Air Force and Army aviation synchronized in a live-fire offensive scenario. The purpose of the exercise was to demonstrate the Iraqi Army's growing deterrence capacity and increase the interest in full spectrum training. Planning, training, and executing this complex live-fire exercise required every bit of tactical and technical expertise that 2-7 Cavalry could draw upon. Master gunners laid out surface danger zone diagrams and battalion staff officers worked their execution checklists just like they would preparing for the live-fire breach through Drinkwater Valley at the National Training Center. This exercise fully tested battalion and BCT proficiency at basic major combat operations Mission

***In the security environment, you can't teach what you don't know.***

Essential Task List activities. The lesson learned was that we must maintain our ability to conduct full spectrum operations. In the security environment, you can't teach what you don't know. As Iraqi forces grow in maturity, they increasingly perform both population security and traditional deterrence operations. The U.S. forces that train these forces must be proficient in full spectrum operations to perform their security mission effectively and to be prepared to shift to major combat operations should the operational environment unexpectedly change.

## **3. Understanding the Iraqi security bureaucracy is essential.**

The decisive mission during security force assistance operations is developing the host nation's security infrastructure. This infrastructure forms the conceptual terrain upon which the U.S. forces conduct their operations. A detailed understanding of the host nation security bureaucracy is as important to mission success as knowing the terrain in traditional combat operations. The Iraqi security bureaucracy has expanded rapidly over the last six years, and the Army has not kept pace with the changes. The Phoenix Academy and recent Center for Army Lessons Learned publications on the Iraqi and Afghan force structures are good first efforts but we need more detailed and current information. We struggled to learn the complex relationships among entities such as the Iraqi Provincial Police, National Police, Border Forces, Port of Entry Directorate, National Intelligence, and the like. Within the Iraqi Army partnerships, our logisticians tasked with teaching effective sustainment operations had to sort out how the Iraqi system worked as they went along. Teaching a U.S.-centric process does not help host nation forces. Units in training to conduct these missions should learn as much as possible about host nation systems and processes prior to deployment. Embedded transition teams can assist in this effort by providing the most current information.



#### 4. Key leader relationships are the tactical center of gravity in security force assistance operations.

In May 2009, an unfortunate Iraqi fatality during U.S. combat operations in a neighboring province received wide media coverage and generated considerable hostility against coalition forces. Partners we had worked closely with for months immediately declined to support any future combined training or operations. Fortunately, relations improved after a relatively short period, and we realized the importance of a positive relationship with Iraqi Security Forces leaders. Without that strong relationship, we would have been unable to complete our mission. Those relationships were our tactical center of gravity. In post-deployment interviews we were often asked, “How much of your time was taken up in relationship building?” The question implies that “relationship building” is a distraction or, at best, a critical housekeeping duty. In security force assistance operations, relationship building *is* the mission. A commander’s most valuable contribution to his unit is a productive and mutually trusting relationship with his host nation counterpart, because it is the foundation for the unit’s partnership.

#### 5. Transition teams and partnered units have complementary and mutually supporting roles.

As we transitioned to security force assistance operations, we were often asked the question, “If all your leaders in the brigade are doing advisory duty, what are the other 4,000 Soldiers doing?” The answer is that an advisor and the partnered unit perform complementary and reinforcing roles (Figure 1). As we integrated our transition teams into our formations, the importance of these separate and reinforcing roles became apparent to us. Soldiers perform advisory duties at all levels. An advisor spends time embedded in the host nation unit, observing their processes and decision making and offering assistance or expertise where appropriate. However, the advisor does not have access to combat enablers and lacks the staff to organize large training events or demonstrate what right looks like. This is the role of the partnered unit. On any given day, our

- Company Commanders Course
- Combat Lifesaver Train the Trainer Course
- Rifle Marksmanship Training
- Bomb Disposal Training
- Mortar Training
- Route Clearance Academy
- Vertical Construction Academy
- HUMINT Operator Course
- Border Fort of Excellence Training
- Vehicle Checkpoint Training
- Police Investigator Training
- Forensic Evidence Training Course
- Maintenance Training
- Warehouse Operations Training

Figure 1. Some of the training events executed by 4BCT as part of security force assistance operations.

brigade had hundreds of Soldiers training or mentoring security force partners across every BCT functional area. Figure 1 depicts some of these training events and the daily force protection and sustainment duties of a brigade operating across three forward operating bases and eight joint security stations. This work was more than sufficient to fully employ the brigade’s Soldiers each day.

#### 6. For advisors, talent is paramount, access is second, and rank is third.

Most of us appreciate the value of talented and capable advisors to the security force assistance mission. However, we often overlook the importance of access. To maintain credibility and influence, an advisor must demonstrate his ability to produce resources. Even the best advisor will not retain his influence for long if he depends solely on the value of his own sage advice. Host nation security force leaders are astute observers and quickly recognize that both resources and power flow through the ground maneuver chain of command. To retain his credibility and relevance, the advisor must demonstrate he has a close and reliable relationship with the maneuver commander. For this reason, we attached our Iraqi brigade military transition teams directly to the maneuver battalions responsible for those brigades. Not only did this give

the maneuver battalion commander direct control over his own main effort, but it also eliminated a redundant chain of command. As expected, battalion commanders took great care of the teams they owned and integrated them into their security force assistance mission. This relationship also worked well because brigade-level advisors were majors who fit neatly inside an existing battalion structure.

### **7. The first step of every battle drill is to call the local host nation security forces.**

On 20 January 2009, insurgents fired a rocket at Contingency Operating Base Adder. A Q36 radar detected a point of origin inside dense urban terrain. We dispatched a patrol immediately, and it was on site within 23 minutes. Within two hours, we had captured both rocket rails and a suspect from our top ten enemy list. This would have been a successful mission by most traditional standards. What was truly amazing about the incident was that *no U.S. forces entered the city*. Upon impact, brigade tactical operations center personnel passed the Q36 acquisition to a combined command post at the Provincial Joint Coordination Center, which forwarded it to the local police for action. The Iraqi forces in the city were well-led and motivated to prevent the insurgents from using their neighborhoods as launching pads for attacks. We could rely on them to be the action arm for our operations. They appreciated this trust, and we discovered we could achieve great synergy by combining our technical intelligence capabilities (in this case, counterfire radar) with their responsiveness and cultural intuition. Building on this success, the brigade combat team eventually established three combined command posts within the Iraqi Security Forces headquarters. These command posts enabled us to rapidly fuse intelligence and maintain Iraqi and U.S. situational awareness.

### **8. Effective targeting starts with intelligence sharing between host nation and U.S. forces.**

Our first step toward effective intelligence sharing was to overcome the institutional dogma that classified all high-value target lists as “SECRET US Only.” If our partner host nation security forces are ultimately responsible for security in

an area of operations, then we have an obligation to share with them all releasable information about criminals operating in their area. We had to educate ourselves and our leaders rapidly on the limits and constraints of foreign disclosure operations. We discovered that under the security agreement, we had to share intelligence if we expected to remain effective and relevant. Background checks and polygraphs for selected key leaders within the Iraqi Security Forces enabled us to both disclose and release some classified material to these leaders. We had to move from a targeting model that brought U.S. and host nation forces together only during the operational phase (combined operations) to a model that embedded us in the Iraqi Security Forces targeting process from initial intelligence development through capture, exploitation, and prosecution (combined targeting).

### **9. U.S. forces are often the glue that binds the host nation and interagency together.**

As Iraqi elections approached in January 2009, it was essential that the Iraqi people saw their own security forces establishing security for the elections. Our first attempts to inspect security preparations at polling stations misfired badly. It became clear to us that U.S. HMMWVs and body armor were counterproductive near polling booths or ballot warehouses. However, we could make a tremendous contribution as the honest broker bringing together Iraqi government agencies and provincial reconstruction teams. Instead of inspecting polling stations, we hosted a bi-weekly meeting with all involved agencies from the Iraqi Army to the police to the local representatives of the Iraqi High Electoral Commission and provincial reconstruction team rule-of-law and governance experts. We created the venue for the collaboration and then allowed the process to unfold as the Iraqis desired. In this way, we discovered our unique position as the glue in the host nation’s interagency process. We did not impose U.S. solutions on this process. Instead, we created the conditions for interagency collaboration and problem solving.

### **10. The security agreement represents the Iraqi desire for dignity and sovereignty.**

It is critical for every leader to understand the legal authorities and prohibitions in the security



U.S. Army, SFC Michael J. MacLeod

**U.S. paratroopers with 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division, work with Iraqi Security Forces in Al Asad, Iraq, 25 August 2009.**

agreement, but this alone is not enough. Leaders must understand and appreciate what the agreement means to the local population. The security agreement restores dignity to the Iraqi people. It establishes limits to what a foreign army can do to Iraqis on their own soil. It has a tremendously important psychological effect. So long as we fully comply with the agreement, the Iraqi people perceive us as a protecting and stabilizing force rather than a threat to their honor and dignity. This is why unilateral, time-sensitive raids, while often enormously successful in the short term, so often generate long-term setbacks. Technical compliance is often not enough. The local people must see and hear us deferring to the authority and the spirit of this agreement.

As an example of this, leaders in the brigade discovered that a midgrade Iraqi police officer had a Central Criminal Court of Iraq warrant issued against him for the murder of British soldiers in 2003. Under the security agreement, we were well within our authority to arrest the officer and

transport him to Baghdad to stand trial. When we presented the warrant to the local police chief, he suggested that he provide an escort to travel with our forces and the officer to Baghdad to hand him over to the Iraqi court. In this way, no U.S. force ever had exclusive custody of the suspect. This process allowed the police chief to show his commitment to the rule of law without suffering the indignity of a foreign army arresting his officer.

### **11. The host nation judicial process is the central component of targeting.**

Over the last six years, we have built a truly phenomenal intelligence architecture in Iraq. From company support teams to fusion cells at divisions and corps, we created a process for intelligence sharing that was light years ahead of where we were in 2003. However, the security agreement and the emergence of an independent Iraqi legal system forced a fundamental redesign of this system. While good intelligence is essential to anticipate and preempt enemy action, it is often insufficient



to remove a hostile actor from the battlefield. In today's environment, we need more than good intelligence. We need evidence. Classified source reports are not enough to secure a warrant. The source must now present himself to an Iraqi judge and provide a sworn statement admissible in an Iraqi court. Intelligence and targeting officers now need to become familiar with the articles of the Iraqi antiterrorism laws. Leaders must understand the difference between the inquisitorial Eastern judicial system and the adversarial system common to most Western nations. To help manage this transition, we made extensive use of law enforcement personnel detailed to the BCT. With over 100 years of combined law enforcement and prosecutorial experience, these seasoned officers were tremendous assets to the S2s who were trying to assemble district attorney-quality cases on suspects while also trying to predict tomorrow's rocket attack, all with a paltry five-person staff.

## **12. No nation wants to see foreigners detain its citizens.**

The security agreement provides a procedure for U.S. forces to detain Iraqi citizens under certain circumstances. Our experience, however, uncovered a huge difference between what was legally permissible and what was tactically and culturally appropriate. Regardless of the legal authority we retained, most Iraqis understood the security agreement to mean that foreigners would no longer arrest them. Unilateral arrest of an Iraqi citizen was seen as an affront. We found that it was usually possible to recruit the assistance of a local host nation security unit to perform the arrest and then deliver the detainee to an Iraqi detention facility where we had an established relationship and a degree of access and oversight. The host nation jails then became our key terrain. This was often where we did much of our intelligence collection.

The competency and availability of Iraqi investigative judges varies widely from location to location, but most investigating judges were much more willing to order long sentences for Iraqi criminals when their detention and prosecution appeared to be an Iraqi-led process instead of an American-led one. While we provided substantial support to host nation investigators as

they assembled their cases, it was important that the host nation led the affair and that the detainee remained under host nation control throughout the process. Too many U.S. "fingerprints" on the case often undermined the credibility of the process and led to a reduced sentence.

## **13. Rapidly exploit the information component of enemy and friendly actions.**

Westerners underestimate the power of the spoken word to shape the minds of host nation populations. Rumors travel hundreds of miles in hours by word of mouth and cell phone. Bizarre and implausible conspiracy theories can crop up on the most unlikely pretense and spread across a province in an afternoon. Our forces must constantly and rapidly tell our story through every available venue, including through host nation forces and their media. Anything likely to generate "buzz" in the local community, from a school opening to an air strike to an enemy rocket attack, requires an immediate information campaign to explain what just happened and why. The best "counterfire" is often a timely press release. We must engage the host nation media, local websites, public affairs officers in local security forces, and any other prominent opinion makers. They must be on our "short list" to call during a crisis.

## **14. Killing an insurgent, while sometimes necessary, is usually counterproductive.**

The killing of enemy combatants is often a necessary component of warfighting and peace-making when local security forces are incapable of maintaining order. As the local forces become more capable, however, the tactical value of an enemy kill drops precipitously. In a security force assistance environment, the role of the advisory force is to enable the host nation forces to secure their population and defeat the insurgents. Every time U.S. forces kill a local insurgent, regardless of the circumstances, we aggravate a deep wound that often leads to revenge and ultimately more violence. Killing insurgents was a necessary reality when sectarian violence and lawlessness threatened to tear Iraq apart. As security conditions improve and the host nation forces demonstrate

growing capability, we should expect increased hostility and resentment to U.S. unilateral operations. While tactical conditions may sometimes warrant violent action against a hostile force, these actions usually prove counterproductive to long-term success and can undermine security force assistance campaign objectives.

### **15. A coward is a better enemy than a martyr.**

An insurgent who has fled his operational area to seek sanctuary elsewhere makes a mockery of his cause and increases the freedom of maneuver for the counterinsurgent. When he hides in his sanctuary, the insurgent no longer competes for the support of the population and becomes irrelevant to the struggle. A dead or detained insurgent, on the other hand, often achieves the status of a martyr and this encourages increased violence in support of the cause, particularly if his fate came at the hands of an outside force.

Our goal should not be to capture or kill the enemy, but to render the enemy irrelevant by whatever means available. Billboards, wanted posters, and targeted information operations all help to create the image of the insurgent as a fugitive on the run instead of a leader of a noble cause. Most important, effectively portraying the insurgent as a fugitive of the local security forces can make him the enemy of his own people.

### **16. Empathy is a combat multiplier.**

Perhaps the best predeployment training is to sit for an afternoon with a thoughtful citizen of a different culture. Our own Western narrative has so insulated us that we often fail to see how other cultures perceive events. Not only do they see events differently, but our host nation partners often pursue goals, strategies, and approaches that can baffle even the most culturally attuned advisor.

We in the U.S. Army are fortunate to live in a relative meritocracy where we can reasonably expect that the success of our unit or our mission will lead to our personal and professional success. This is not the case in many other cultures—particularly in the Middle East. Personal loyalty and nepotism are enormous factors in these societies, and they shape the behavior of leaders just as much as the mission-first mind-set in our military drives

our behavior. In order to understand and influence the behavior of these leaders, we must first understand how they perceive events and how they calculate their own prospects for success. Without this insight, we often struggle to understand their behavior and grow frustrated with what we cannot understand. Empathy, the ability to see and understand the world through the eyes of another, is perhaps the greatest skill a leader can cultivate in the security force assistance environment.

### **Conclusion**

The 16 insights we have listed above offer a perspective on the unique characteristics of security force assistance operations as experienced by one brigade combat team, in one corner of Iraq, for one short year. As we discovered, security force assistance is a fundamentally different mission from traditional counterinsurgency operations and requires a shift in mind-set, focus, and approach. Traditional counterinsurgency places the security of the population as the preeminent goal. Security force assistance seeks the same end state but focuses instead on enabling host nation security forces to achieve that security. In cases where the local forces lack the capacity or motivation to provide basic security, then a more traditional counterinsurgency approach is appropriate.

The challenge for today's leaders is to understand the human terrain in their assigned area well enough to perceive which approach is appropriate. If conditions support a focus on security force assistance operations, then the key metric of success is no longer criminals captured or networks disrupted. In Security Force Assistance operations, the only real way to measure your success is by the quality and capacity of the host nation security forces that you leave behind. *MR*

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### **NOTES**

1. Taken from a speech by Secretary Gates to the 2007 AUSA convention on 10 October 2007. As quoted by Fred Kaplan, "Secretary Gates Declares War on the Army Brass," *Slate Magazine*, 12 October 2007, 2.

2. This principle is a direct quote from LTG Charles H. Jacoby, Jr., commanding general of I Corps and MNC-I during an Operations and Intelligence update brief given by the authors at Forward Operations Base Garry Owen, Maysan Province, in April 2009.