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Seven Pillars of Ambiguity[1]

David Mason

Introduction

These thoughts are penned a few weeks short of a yearlong tour to Iraq. Having worked in cultures across continents in a variety of roles over a number of years[2], I thought the approach outlined in this paper might be of use to others working in different cultures generally and Arab culture in particular. So, imagine this, you are on your way to Iraq or Afghanistan to be an Advisor where you will likely sit down with a host government official.

TE Lawrence and Ricklefs talk about what you must do.[3] They provide Articles and Rules. This paper on the other hand, outlines what you do not know.

The Seven Pillars of Ambiguity are those things that, unless you are native to the country, you can never really know. What you can do however, is recognize your knowledge gap and work to close it. By understanding the pillars and working to inform yourself, you will feel more confident as an Advisor, and better able to usefully and meaningfully contribute to the mission.

These points are not rules to live by. Rather, they are a test. They set out what you do not know and challenge you to research and try to understand. While they are interdependent, sometimes one will be more important than another, or not be important at all. If you are planning on being an interlocutor, a middle man between one culture and another, these are the things you must think about before you go, to prepare yourself for your deployment. They might be useful when you get there too.

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[1] With apologies to TE Lawrence. The title of his book was, in part at least, based on the Biblical reference Proverbs Chapter 9:1: *Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars*.

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[3] T.E. Lawrence, 27 Articles *The Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917; N Ricklefs, Fourteen Rules for Advisors in Iraq, *Small Wars Journal*, 2008 www.smallwarsjournal.com

The Seven Pillars of Ambiguity

1. Advisor Ambiguity

One of the most difficult things for an Advisor is to understand just what is expected of him. There are at least two elements to this. The first deals with the relationship between himself and the local official with whom he works as an Advisor. What are the local official's expectations of you?

The second is the organization to which he is posted and his role within the chain of command. Is the Advisor really a defacto intelligence agent, reporting on the comings and goings, policies and plans, or budget projections within the host nation office? Alternatively, is he in fact a critical player in the development of the civil or military organizational infrastructure within the organization he advises? Or is he sometimes both?

The answers to these questions are particularly difficult as they go to the nature of the contribution an Advisor can make. What am I to achieve? Is there anything "hard" I can deliver, or are deliverables "soft" or qualitative? What the Advisor must do is understand the context in which he works and delivers advice. For example, how does his work fit within the Joint Campaign Plan or other strategic document that guides what his organization does?

2. Institutional Ambiguity

The governmental institutions of the Arab world, including Iraq, operate differently from those in the West. This is a world where real certainties include ambiguous inputs and ambiguous outcomes. To the Advisor, the reasons for things occurring will often be opaque or obscure, prompted by actions that are sometimes unseen, unknown or passively or actively hidden.

On the other hand, most of the officers in the Advisor's chain of command, and certainly senior officers, are systems thinkers. They think in this way because these are men who have excelled in an environment where the inputs and processes are understood and known, and where particular outputs can be anticipated.

It is on this basis that a three-star General will ask, "Where do I have to apply pressure to get the result I want?" and then, because the outcome is not entirely what he anticipated, ask, "Why is the process not like a wire-flow diagram? Why can't I map it?" Western governmental and military institutions are generally transparent and publish necessary inputs and processes that result in outcomes. Middle Eastern governmental institutions in general and Iraqi institutions like the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Interior in particular, are not transparent. In fact, officials within these organizations will work to ensure, for a variety of reasons including the reasons set out below, that process remains "flexible and responsive to needs," or what an Advisor's senior leadership might call, opaque and ambiguous.

3. Cultural Ambiguity

We recognize that cultural life in Iraq and the Middle East is not the same as in the West. We know enough to realize that there are significant religious and other differences in the way people dress, speak and deal with one another. What we may not recognize is the extent of the difference and how we might compromise our relationships by not being sensitive to these. An Advisor may not be fluent or agile within the culture, so he must try to make himself so.

We know therefore that we must inform ourselves about Islam, about the differences between believers within Islam, their holidays, festivals and significant rituals. There is nothing quite like losing all credibility and compromising relationships for yourself and others when you fail to inform yourself or be alert to the significance of particular events. One example I witnessed was during Ramadan. During business hours a helpful Advisor walked through the Ministry of Defence building in Baghdad handing out biscuits, saying, “You must be so hungry!” As one senior Iraqi later said to me with a smile, "You know, that Advisor makes excellent chai."

4. Historic Ambiguity

It is understood that different people will have different perceptions of history. It is important to understand that Iraq is a new country, with relatively new borders, the product of post-World War I settlement. It is also important to consider that in 1920, in the period of the British Mandate of Mesopotamia, there was an Iraqi revolt against the British. Coupled with war against Iran, Iraqis have a memory of conflict with the British and with the United States (and others) in the course of Gulf War I. They are aware that they have fought and lost – or at least drawn.

We cannot forget that the majority of men who hold positions of power in Iraq today were officers of Saddam’s regime. Certainly, they may not have much liked or agreed with some of the approaches taken by Saddam, but they delivered on them. The ambiguity in dealing with these men goes to two issues. First, even given they were often part of the security apparatus, they are generally proud of many of the things they did and do not much like to be reminded of the less-than-savory things they, or others, have done. Second, while they mostly aware of the importance of democratic control of the security, they are also aware of, and comfortable with, centralized control in winning battles and defeating terrorism. In these two things then, there lies not only a tension, but an ongoing sense of ambiguity about the best way forward for themselves and for their country. An Advisor must be sensitive to the tensions and ambiguities inherent in local history and the implications of that history for the country.

5. Political Ambiguity

In the western world, membership of a political party generally indicates a willingness to engage in the political process to achieve one or more political ends. In Iraq, as in a range of other countries, membership of a political party generally indicates much more. It can indicate regional, ethnic, religious and or tribal affiliations. Two men are in the same political party will be an indicator they have a great deal in common. Political links may indicate a relationship of trust and may include, depending on the relationship, a number of rights and obligations between

the parties. Not knowing the nature of the political relationships can compromise the Advisor's ability to get things done and rapidly diminish or dilute any store of good will the Advisor may have.

6. Linguistic Ambiguity

What we say, and how we say it, is important. More than that, the way we communicate is fundamental to human interaction. What we know is that we often cannot speak the language of the land to which we are posted. Because we do not, we miss the cues, implicit ideas and understood conventions that are part of the fabric of language. Even if we do speak some of the language, do we really know how much we are missing? For example, to a long time citizen of the United States, mention of "Old Glory" means a range of things, not just a flag. Similarly, to a citizen of France, if you were to mention "Marianne" you can identify the image on coins and banknotes; but it means so much more to a Frenchman. Knowing this then, when an Iraqi indicates that they are observing "Ashura" or "Eid," you know they are significant events, but what do they really mean? Language is the vehicle for culture, religion, politics and daily life. Without recognizing that language carries with it cultural meaning and cultural cues, we are viewed as insensitive, thoughtless, ignorant and arrogant. Recognizing we need to learn more, we can alert our counterparts to the fact that we know we do not know, and ask them to be tolerant of us. They will be thankful for your candor and your willingness to put yourself in their hands.

7. Network Ambiguity

In our relationships with Iraqi colleagues, we recognize there will be things we do not know that underpin the structure of their relationships and dealings with peers, subordinates and superiors. Working in the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, for example, if you did not know who shared time in prison under the Saddam regime, it would be impossible to understand the dynamics of decision making in that Ministry. For example, the Minister appointed a senior Army officer to the post of Secretary General of the Ministry. That person had no background working in a diarchal structure, having only ever been a senior operational commander. Had there not been knowledge that he had been a cell mate of the Minister under the Saddam regime, the appointment would have been more than curious, it would have made no apparent sense at all. Generally speaking, it is understood that promotions are based on relationships, political links and reliability more than technical on the job proficiency. Moreover, if we understand that relationships between Arabs are more important than institutional process, we will better understand, (and be better able to manage our superiors' expectations) how an outcome was concluded, and why it may have been inconsistent with apparent or expected institutional process or policy.

Conclusion

It is no easy thing being an Advisor. It is at once challenging, exhausting and frustrating. It can also be immensely rewarding on a personal level and as a means of contributing to the mission. We set ourselves for success when we lay foundations and know what we have to build. The seven pillars of ambiguity, mnemonic CHAPLIN, provide an intellectual structure that sensitizes and guides the new Advisor through a structure of thinking. It assists in recognizing and taking

advantage of ambiguity in the world. It enables an Advisor to inform his thinking through or around an apparent problem.

Perhaps too it will assist informing your decision making, relationships and recommendations so that when the curtain does close on your tour, others may think you wise.

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