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The Transition to Iraqi Sovereignty:
The Impact on US Military Advisory Efforts

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ODA (Operational Detachment Alpha) 5122 and its principal partner force, the 7th RCB (Regional Commando Battalion) were instrumental in disrupting the activities of Sunni Insurgent Groups in northern Iraq throughout late 2009. In less than six months, this combined force conducted over 50 operations, attained an 85% capture rate, and detained five of the ODA's top ten HVIs (High Value Individuals). These successes were not simply a direct result of our own diligence and professionalism, but also a reflection of the professionalism and high level of ability of our Iraqi counterparts.

Simultaneously, our combined, aggressive, precise, and counter-terrorism efforts were complemented by an equally aggressive and robust array of shaping efforts. Relationships with local civic, religious, and military leaders were cultivated and networks of influence expanded. The ODA also orchestrated no fewer than ten carefully developed and successful Psychological Operations. These were implemented using multiple forms of media and were intended to shape the perception of local nationals, incite violence between rival threat groups, and discredit specific HVIs. This paper explores a representative cross section of the ODA's activities during the latter half of 2009. This is the story of a small group of men who thought and acted unconventionally, and were able to leverage their capabilities to obtain maximum effects within their area of operation.

The enactment of the 30 June 2009 Security Agreement (SA) established a timeline for the drawdown of U.S. troops. Since that date, the Iraqi Security Forces have taken an increasing lead in the planning and execution of counter-terrorism, intelligence, and routine constabulary operations. At times this process has been unpredictable, and at one juncture, the Security Agreement was often referred to as the beginning of Operation "*La Shukran*," or "No, Thank you," due to the increasing resistance to advisory efforts perceived at some levels.

Iraqi governmental requirements, generally characterized by considerable bureaucratic opacity, moved to the forefront as possible "show-stoppers" to missions, local media assailed the competency of Iraqi Security Forces, and restrictions on unilateral U.S. activities multiplied. Northern Iraq was characterized by diminished but persistent threats from Sunni terrorist groups and as Iraqi civil infrastructure evolved, the governmental and media environments became increasingly difficult to navigate. Early on, it became clear that in order to successfully maintain pressure on enemy networks a simultaneously aggressive, yet nuanced and inventive approach would be required. Fundamental to the success of this ODA was a willingness to consider all

possible means to influence the environment. In this dynamic and transitional environment it was imperative to emphasize the indirect approach more so than ever before. **1**

Conditions in the post-30 June 2009 Iraq compelled Commanders to complement combined offensive operations with a carefully conceived and comprehensive approach to information operations in order to accomplish the tactical, operational, and strategic goals and objectives of United States forces.

The continued transition to Iraqi sovereignty presents numerous challenges to military advisory efforts in Iraq, perhaps most significantly to ODAs, various transition teams, and other advisory elements tasked with conducting combined operations with their Iraqi counterparts. Procuring warrants and the associated evidentiary burden, a cumbersome and sometimes unresponsive multi-tiered Iraqi civil and military approval process, and restrictions upon the role played by advisors to Iraqi military and law enforcement personnel during mission execution all serve to slow the targeting cycle and complicate the relationship between the advisor and members of his host nation partner force. ODA 5122, through tireless effort and the assistance of advisory echelons extending up the organizational chain to theater level Iraqi and United States Special Forces commands, was able to maximize the opportunities available to bring force to bear on the enemy. Yet this was insufficient to achieve our desired ends of increasing the number of Iraqi operations in order to maintain pressure on enemy networks and increase United States Special Forces influence in northern Iraq.

In an effort to further increase pressure on enemy networks, the ODA developed and implemented a "full-spectrum" campaign plan that accounted for these organizational obstacles and other complexities, enabling the ODA to succeed in an administratively restrictive yet ambiguous environment. In addition to combined offensive operations, the ODA devoted significant planning and resources to the implementation of robust and concurrent information operations, which were an indispensable component of the ODA's success.

Combined Offensive Operations: Successfully Navigating Legal and Administrative Obstacles

The ODA arrived in northern Iraq shortly after the implementation of the Security Agreement and faced an array of obstacles to the conduct of combined operations with the ODA's partner force. Initially, differing interpretations of the SA made it unclear whether it was even legal for the members of the ODA to accompany the 7th RCB on missions. Ultimately, it was determined that the ODA could in fact do so, but this was simply the first in a series of administrative and legal barriers we would face. The next area of resistance encountered during the targeting cycle was obtaining warrants for targeted individuals. One significant barrier to these efforts was the 7th RCB's lack of access to a vetted judge throughout the entirety of the ODA's deployment. The ODA had some success mitigating this through video teleconferences with judges in Baghdad, arranged by higher headquarters and Army lawyers. At the time, obtaining a warrant generally involved two witnesses with firsthand knowledge of the event or activity and subsequently, providing their sworn testimony to an Iraqi judge. However, the application of law and the minimum standard for this testimony is unequally applied and recognized. Depending on the location, some judges require three or more witnesses, along with

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1 In other words, an approach favoring the "by" and "through" components of the doctrinal "By, with and through triad."

independent Iraqi Government or United States Forces - Iraq reporting to confirm the events. One judge went so far as to require the ODA to provide the medical records of U. S. soldiers injured during an attack conducted by one of the ODA's targeted individuals. This required weeks of legal assistance in order to provide the information requested without disclosing the personal information of the injured service members.

Furthermore, the seemingly glacial pace of the warrant approval process directly affected the ability of both the ODA and the RCB to take action against time sensitive targets. Relevant information became increasingly immaterial with the passage of time as targets changed location or witnesses lost access to areas of interest. In short, the administrative challenges of the Iraqi legal system have taken precedence over the operational requirements of its counter-terrorism forces and the current legal climate is largely unsupportive. To overcome this apparent institutional resistance, the ODA and our Iraqi counterparts exploited an existing backlog of warrants to ensure that high operational tempo was maintained. This was critical in order to maintain pressure on enemy networks, demonstrate resolve to the citizens of Iraq, and build capability in our partner force. Additionally, the ODA coordinated with other U.S. and Iraqi Security Forces elements to obtain warrants from other jurisdictions, with which the ODA did not have a direct relationship. In sum, we attempted to pursue every individual warranted after the passage of the 2008 Amnesty Law[2] to whom the ODA and its partner force could possibly gain access.

Mission approval offered its own frustrations, principally on the Iraqi side, as Iraqi Special Operations Forces missions require approval at a minimum from the Counter Terrorism Service, three echelons above the 7th RCB. In some cases, based on the target, missions must be personally approved by the Prime Minister. Moreover, the friendly fire death of an ISOF soldier near Baghdad, caused by Iraqi Army soldiers, led to the imposition of additional coordinating mechanisms. The ODA and its partnered force subsequently had to sit idle while all ISOF missions underwent deconfliction through the Ministry of Defense, from which the Counter Terrorism Service is administratively separated. This led to further delays and increased the potential of compromising operational security. As this is a recently implemented change to the approval process, more data is required to comprehensively assess the full impact on ISOF missions.

The combined result of these measures is an extremely slow target development process at the ODA and RCB level, characterized by what should be avoidable administrative delays for mission approval. It is likely, or at the very least possible, that this is by design, as the Iraqi military has a proclivity to maintain strong central control over subordinate units. By controlling the flow of warrants obtained at the unit level and impeding the target development process, it can control the operational activities of the unit and re-direct it to detain targeted individuals of specific interest to higher echelons. Similarly, the convoluted mission approval process discourages target nomination at the unit level. The staff relationships in place at the battalion and brigade level support this assumption. Due to a recent reorganization of the battalions, across the board the RCBs currently have no targeting function within their S2 staff, who are principally charged with internal counter intelligence and detainee handling. The intelligence

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2 The Iraqi Council of Representatives passed a general amnesty law in early 2008 which applied to individuals convicted of a wide spectrum of crimes. It excluded, however, those sentenced to death, those convicted of terrorists crimes, theft, embezzlement of state funds, rape, incest, trafficking in artifacts, drugs and the counterfeiting of Iraqi or foreign currency.

that drives unit operations is obtained and reported by two separate elements, the Regional Reconnaissance Team and the Regional Coordination Cell. While the stated purpose of these elements is to support the RCB's combat operations, until recently they operated completely independently. As of this writing, the RCB Commanders have operational control over these elements at each location. Target intelligence packets are still submitted to the Counter Terrorism Center, which is an echelon above the Iraqi Special Operations Forces Brigade, for approval. These factors, plus the continued financial difficulties faced by Iraqi Special Operations Forces units attempting to conduct HUMINT operations without an approved budget, all served to slow the development of targets at the unit level and reinforce higher echelon control over the RCB's operations.

These difficulties aside, the ODA was fortunate to have an enthusiastic and highly professional partner force. Within the RCB, personnel at every level welcomed the ODA's presence. Due to this strong partnership, and the assistance of higher United States Special Forces advisory echelons, many of these obstacles were overcome or bypassed. Attention to detail by intelligence officers within the 7th RCB, Regional Reconnaissance Team -North, and the ODA helped to maintain an 85% targeted individual capture rate. Encouragingly, when properly resourced, our FID partner proved more than capable of accomplishing complex missions with excellent results. The majority of officers, noncommissioned officers, and individual commandos demonstrated a high degree of competence and almost always performed magnificently. This attests to the close advisory relationship maintained by United States Special Forces and the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, which for many of the commandos extended back to the inception of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces in 2003, and to the strong professional culture that permeates this RCB. On one occasion the combined force conducted a helicopter assault to a village more than 100 kilometers away from base, and detained two IED cell leaders, then proceeded to a second objective, a 15 square kilometer farm. Within this complex objective a force of less than 45 men were able to rapidly isolate and clear numerous, dispersed compounds and capture a high level terrorist financier. A subsequent helicopter assault operation led to the capture another high value target, also a financier, with ties to Sunni terrorist groups. Both of these missions clearly demonstrated the capabilities of our Iraqi partners and the continuing value of combined offensive operations.

However, as the security conditions in Iraq improve, future Iraqi Special Operations Forces training and missions should become increasingly specialized in focus. As the emphasis on the development on Rule of Law has increased in recent years, there are fewer direct violent encounters during operations. Regional police elements are currently capable of conducting the constabulary missions often assigned to the RCB, and building more specialized capacities within Iraqi Special Operations Forces will ensure its credibility as Iraq's Internal Defense and Development agenda matures. Until the responsibilities of respective Iraqi Special Operations Forces and Iraqi Security Forces elements are realigned, capacity building and combined offensive operations should continue to be actively and simultaneously pursued.

Information Operations

Key Leader Engagements: Making Friends and Influencing People

One of the keys to long-term success in northern Iraq is the development of networks of influence as well as networks of obligation. Early and consistent engagement with influential individuals is a fundamental component of these efforts. Consistency is key as US government

credibility is not sustainable if approached from a position focused on obtaining short-term advantages. Once rapport is firmly established engagements should focus on mutual incremental support and enable a commander to demonstrate a commitment to long-term security and stability. Numerous conversations with local Iraqi leaders reveal a pattern of unfulfilled quid pro quo arrangements made by previous U.S. government personnel. With some local persons of influence this created a credibility deficit and yet another obstacle to surmount in order to gain the trust of these individuals. While the way forward may not be immediately clear, in such situations careful and considerate discussion and demonstrable action will, in most cases, prevail.

An illustrative example of this was the ODA's relationship with the commander of a regional Counter Terrorism Directorate. Over the course of several meetings, as trust grew between both sides, this developed into a productive means of obtaining access to greater amounts of information regarding subjects of specific interest in northern Iraq. This official remarked that he had wanted to establish a working relationship with an appropriately aligned U.S. military element for some time. However, prior engagements had been sporadic or unsystematic and therefore he had withheld the support of his agency. Later discussion indicated that prior United States Forces-Iraq elements had been content simply to establish contact with his office, neglecting subsequent meetings, and therefore leaving the relationship undeveloped and open-ended. In this case, we simply took the next step, coming back for following meetings and evidencing goodwill over time with respect to resolving issues of mutual interest.

While the success of these efforts at the tactical level is frequently assessed within a relatively short-term framework the impact of these efforts must be placed into a broader operational and strategic context. The relationships built now will be the future foundation of U.S. influence in the theater of operations. Engaging key leaders does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a complex and continually changing environment. Also, once a network of influence is established, generally speaking, it implies the parallel creation of a network of obligation. The contra-party will expect cooperation to be worth his while. Therefore, commanders must work vigorously to orient the partnership towards achieving progress on issues of mutual interest. Often, a simple demonstration of goodwill will enable the commander greater control over this dynamic and can lead to the creation of a strong and productive partnership. Ultimately, these engagements will generate productive information regarding situational awareness, force protection, targeting, and mechanisms of enhancing U.S. Government influence by, with, and through indigenous assets.

Integrated Targeting: Key Leader Engagements and Information Operations

During planning prior to deployment, we identified the need to integrate robust and concurrent Information Operations into the lines of operation we were directed to execute by our command. These were initially envisioned as a consequence management mechanism to mitigate issues that arose as a result of our combined offensive operations. It was recognized that a pre-emptive plan to address the concerns of the public, media, local tribal and religious leaders, and the elected regional government would be necessary to help support the Iraqi Special Operations Forces' ongoing counter-terrorism effort.

Conceptually, these shaping operations were considered the background upon which other actions would be executed and incorporating this concept at an early stage proved fundamental to the success of the ODA. After assessing the conditions prevalent in northern Iraq at that time the ODA began to consider Information Operations as an instrument of offensive

operations. While sorting through the initial ambiguity created by the Security Agreement, the ODA had an ideal opportunity to begin to implement these concepts. However, the success of these operations in an ambiguous, yet administratively restrictive environment was contingent on the ODA's ability to integrate them into the Key Leader Engagement and Information Operations infrastructure. Ultimately, this infrastructure became the means by which Information Operations were implemented and the effectiveness of these operations was proportional to the networks of influence and obligation established by the ODA.

While we had determined that the traditional Psychological Operations mechanisms of the leaflet drop and loudspeaker truck had little utility in our current operational environment, we were still uncertain how exactly to translate our intentions into concrete and focused action. In addition to developing a target for a clear, well-designed message, there are other complicating factors that require consideration. One is the suspicion of many local nationals towards Government-released information. Due to the propagandistic nature of the Saddam Hussein regime, the Iraqi populace is justifiably skeptical of heavy-handed or otherwise obvious attempts to use the media to mold public opinion. Also, on the other side of the spectrum, numerous locally based satellite media outlets ensure international broadcast of sensationalist reports. These are just two factors influencing the Iraqi information environment and one must realize that the successful transmission of information designed to shape the operational environment will require a significant investment in time and resources.

As indicated above, we had viewed Information Operations, specifically Psychological Operations, as an adjunct and supportive component of our other activities. However, we became increasingly certain that clever employment of these instruments could have noticeable, desirable effects in the operational environment. This became clear during the ODA's initial counter-propaganda efforts. At inception, these were population-based operations intended to discredit a major threat group in northern Iraq. After extensive pre-testing and vetting by trusted local nationals, products were distributed in key Mosul neighborhoods.

The product placement in and of itself was also carefully considered. Using a combination of nodal analysis obtained from the Human Terrain Team and the knowledge of the neighborhoods provided by indigenous assets, the ODA was able to determine about ten locations from which a product and its message could be transmitted most rapidly throughout Mosul, and by extension throughout Ninewa Province. The underlying logic was that ODA would have limited assets for distribution, but the message needed to target the largest possible audience. Therefore product placement needed to be very precise to facilitate broad dissemination. The operation not only met its initial goals of discrediting this group, but resulted in heightened tension between the target group and a rival organization. This temporarily disrupted the activities of both groups. Further, this provided additional opportunity for the still-developing Iraqi military and police elements improve their respective capabilities to secure the population of Ninewa Province.

Although we had expected this category of activities to play a major role during our deployment, these results exceeded our initial expectations. While initially unanticipated, this led us to become even more aggressive and ambitious, and we began to see a growing role for these types of operations that were otherwise usually relegated to the bottom of the priority list by other organizations. The ODA expanded its vision of the potential impact of information operations. As our growing network enabled more opportunities and provided more granular, or in other words specific and individually identifiable, components of information about our

intended targets, we began to view these methods of pressuring enemy networks to be equally as important as our combined offensive operations with our partner force. We began to aggressively develop a wide array of other plans as offensive Information Operations grew in importance to our mission. We introduced anti-counterfeiting literature to local businesses, continued to capitalize on points of disagreement between rival extremist organizations, developed military deception operations targeting high value individuals, and maintained our population-based counter-propaganda efforts.

Prior to executing these plans, we established metrics to ascertain our success in our efforts. Without a means to assess the effects of our operations we would have been unable to understand their impact on the operational environment. These operations were tracked by multiple and independent entities to obtain an objective view of their impact upon the operational environment. What resulted was an opportunity for the ODA to verify the reliability and veracity of unrelated individuals' statements regarding common information to which we did not have direct access. This provided us with multiple source confirmation of our effectiveness.

As we refined our approach we became very aware of a number of factors that were determinate in the success of our Information Operations. Our reliance on indigenous assets for both dissemination and assessment was obvious. Without developing a synergistic relationship between our product development and methods of dissemination and assessment, we would not have been able to determine ideal points of distribution, nor assess associated effects. We also realized, and this is extremely important, that a product which succeeds in one area may have adverse effects elsewhere. Our initial counter-propaganda effort involved two slightly different messages. Only one of those messages produced results and further attempts by others to use this product elsewhere have been reported as counterproductive. While actively driving product development and placement places a burden on the ODA, in a transitional environment it should be viewed as part of the targeting process, and as we have shown, precision and determination in this effort will yield substantial dividends.

Recommendations to Advisory Elements Operating in a Transitional Environment

While combined offensive operations will remain an important mission for United States Special Forces in the near future, eventually the United States Forces - Iraq change of mission will result in a cessation of these activities. At the same time, the growing relative importance of other means of influencing the operational environment cannot be ignored. Based on recent experience, and expected changes to the U.S. lines of operation at higher echelons, elements unprepared to employ a full spectrum of options to maintain pressure on enemy networks risk marginalization, minimized influence, and an inexcusable shift towards diminished relevance. As Iraqi Security Forces begin to segregate responsibility and the Ministry of the Interior assumes greater responsibility for internal security, advisors should assume greater roles as orchestrators of other engagement methods by, with and through indigenous forces.

We recommend future advisory elements arrive prepared to establish enduring networks of influence to support these activities which, in order to promote the credibility of our Iraqi counterparts,, must be conducted discreetly. In support of future missions, we advocate in the short term, the added presence of legal advisory personnel who possess an understanding of Iraqi criminal law at the lowest practical echelon within the command structure. As the combined U.S. and Iraqi targeting process attains greater transparency, the involvement of the advisor may

be reduced significantly; eventually the Iraqis will have superior knowledge and understanding of the warranting process and the Iraqi criminal court system.

However, in the meantime, sorting out the fine points of the Iraqi legal system, addressing the issues of judge availability and trustworthiness, and understanding the evidentiary burdens that must be met, both in order to obtain warrants and effect long-term detention of targeted individuals, is a serious and time consuming task. It is also a full time job for which personnel actively engaged in operational matters have neither the time nor the required legal expertise. Furthermore, to support the long-term development of U.S. influence and to effectively leverage other methods of influencing the operational environment, not only must commanders have a highly developed understanding of the development and application of Psychological Operations and Information Operations products, any assigned enablers working to develop these products must possess these skills as well.

Regardless of the degree of external Psychological Operations support, the burden of understanding the target audience, along with all the associated subtleties of demographics, ideology, timing of release, choice of media, etc., fall squarely on the shoulders of the advisory element. Any Psychological Operations teams supporting these missions must also be proactive and capable of understanding these factors. Well conceived and developed products do not tend to "template" effectively, and given the highly segmented demographics of northern Iraq, precision is fundamental to success. A resourceful advisor will find that much of the information required to be successful has already been developed, and discussions with Human Terrain Team social scientists, IQATF personnel, and members of the Provincial Reconstruction Team may yield a wealth of useful cultural knowledge and analysis. While the operational environment is becoming less dynamic with respect to offensive operations it presents a wealth of opportunity and challenges to flexible and situationally aware advisors.

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