



## **Building Relationships and Influence in Counterinsurgency: One Officer's Perspective**

by Eric von Tersch

*Editor's Note: The names of most of the Iraqi officers mentioned in the narrative, as well as place names, have been changed since all of the Iraqi officials alluded to are still in positions of authority. Masking the names and locations does not take away from the essential arguments put forward.*

It is well understood that to be successful in counterinsurgency, the real goal must be to influence the local population, not just destroy the enemy combatants. It is also clear that non-military elements of power can be as or more efficacious than guns and planes. The difficulty is how to apply those two maxims. More times than not, the application of these two maxims intersect in the position of the apparent host-nation leader, be it at the village, regional, or national level.

The following vignette explains how a U.S. team of advisors managed their relationship with a Provisional Director of Police (PDOP), MG Khalid, in a northern province of Iraq in order to convince the general to move decisively against terrorists and develop his 27,000-man police force so that it had credibility with the Iraqi population.

When the U.S. Infantry Division deployed to Iraq in October 200x, the Division leadership augmented one of its Brigades with a number of additional officers who the brigade commander tasked to develop the capacity of the Iraqi police force. The Army was employing what it termed a Stabilization and Transition Team (STT). That small group of officers, no more than eleven, worked closely with a number of U.S. civilian police advisors hired under a DoD contract, to train and mentor the Iraqi police force. The STT's focus was primarily on the Provincial-level staff, Provincial-level commander, and the subordinate District commanders, which had responsibility for the 27,000-man police force spread out over an area twice the size of the state of New Jersey.

### ***Putting a Personal Relationship with a Counterpart in Perspective***

A good personal relationship will not get your counterpart to do what you want, but a bad relationship will erase any constructive influence upon which steps forward will be built. This makes clear the importance of investing the time to have more than just a professional relationship with the host-nation counterpart whose hand will be directing the counterinsurgency. The STT used simple but time-honored practices to develop rapport such as: using Arabic for greetings, terms of endearment and expressions of meaning; following local customs such as observing the Ramadan fasting rules; providing personalized gifts that reflected the interests of the PDOP, his family, and his staff; mirroring the speech and mannerisms of the STT's Iraqi counterparts; always showing respect even when delivering messages of criticism, meeting the

demands of the counterpart's schedule rather than the U.S. official's schedule and sense of timeliness. The personal relationship was meant to enhance the professional relationship.

### ***The Professional Relationship Should Focus on Empowering the Host-Nation Counterpart – Not the American***

What utility is there in having the local populace credit the U.S. for their improved standard of living or security? Such action rarely gives the host-nation official more power or influence. In fact, it runs the risk of creating the impression that the U.S. is building up its own base of support so that it can remain in the "host" country.

In Iraq, the STT focused its involvement on strengthening the office of the PDOP and the credibility of the police. An Iraqi official, such as the PDOP, fills a formal position in society, i.e. police director, and an unofficial position, tribal elder. Both roles are important and need to be reinforced by the U.S counterpart. Many Iraqi officials both in Baghdad and in the Northern Province considered MG Khalid to be a weak individual. Indeed his slight build, diminutive voice, introvert personality, and grandfatherly demeanor created such an impression. What was hidden was his keen sense of political timing, a sharp intellect, and an understanding of the various political factions that needed to be balanced. The STT officers helped the PDOP recognize his strengths and weaknesses so that together his weaknesses could be minimized and his strengths could be capitalized on. Having a good personal relationship allowed these sensitive conversations to take place.

Strengthening the office of the PDOP often meant making him more assertive in his meetings with the Governor and the military leadership in the province. At the beginning of MG Khalid's tenure as the PDOP, he was nervous and uncertain in his meetings. The military leadership would openly criticize or ignore the PDOP during inter-security department meetings. When the PDOP did speak, he was mealy mouthed and apologetic. To counter this condition, the STT would discuss with the PDOP what issues might be tabled at upcoming meetings and rehearse possible responses. The STT functioned as more of sounding board and councilor vice giving the PDOP direction as to how to respond. The only responses that were acceptable were the ones where the PDOP himself was invested intellectually and emotionally in the answer. This gave him the confidence to speak openly and forcefully in a public forum. A concurrent emphasis on the Provincial Police's media section helped improve the public's perception of the PDOP as an assertive leader, and by extension, the police in general. This was not an insignificant development! In Northern Iraq, the average man on the street respects the demonstration of power. If a leader appears strong, he can garner the public's respect. If the leader appears weak, regardless of the reality, the leader will lose public appeal. In a counterinsurgency focused on expanding the public's support for the police, image matters.

Unfortunately, the police in this Northern Province did not have a great deal of public acceptance. In general, the population saw the police as corrupt and ineffectual. There was good cause for that perception because the police were recruited from the local villages and towns. This made it easy for the terrorists and criminals to threaten the police. The military or paramilitary forces, on the other hand, were not from the local area, and thus were relatively free from such pressure.

There were other realities that contributed to the public's lack of confidence in the police. First, the Iraqi central government had put the military in charge of all security in the Northern Province. This was affected through the creation of a Provincial Operations Center (POC), a military-led headquarters based in the main city in the province that answered to the military in Baghdad, not the governor of province. The POC deployed its military forces throughout the major cities and districts of the Province and gave those military commanders the authority of policing powers. The PDOP's uniform police could not even move from one part of the main city to another without being stopped, and in most cases, denied movement by the local military commander. This made problematic any collection of evidence, questioning of witnesses, and community policing.

Conditions were especially difficult in those areas in the province under the control of Army General Kabir. He had an established record of arresting police and detaining them. He did so claiming that he had such authority because his area of operations, mostly the main city of the province, was under a state of emergency as declared by the Baghdad government. While all that was true, in fact, General Kabir's authority stemmed from his personal relationship to Prime Minister Maliki. It was readily apparent that General Kabir's power could challenge that of the POC commander, even though the POC commander outranked General Kabir and the Kabir's Army Division was a subordinate unit of the POC. PM Maliki installed General Kabir in Ninewa because the general had no religious or tribal leanings. He would arrest a Sunni, as quickly as he would arrest a Shia, Christian or a Kurd. Since the Northern Province was mostly Sunni, such a general was useful to a Shia PM. General Kabir was also harshly effective. It was well understood that he had used very brutal measures to extract information from his detainees when he was a Brigade commander in the Baghdad area. He was able to play on that understanding as a Division commander when his subordinates conducted interrogations in the Northern Province. To his credit, he also demanded a high level of performance from his subordinates and took the time to effectively supervise all levels of his command. While he was feared by his troops, they also respected him. In one instance, a police colonel fumed to the STT about the time he, the police colonel was stopped by one of General Kabir's privates at a checkpoint. The police colonel demanded the right to continue on, saying he would report the instance to the (Iraqi) Ministry of Interior. The private replied the Minister of Interior may lead the police but he (the private) was led by General Kabir. What made General Kabir's command so problematic for the police was the general's order authorizing the arrest of police officers, detaining the police in a secret prison, then denying the fact that the General Kabir's forces had the missing police officer.

Something had to be done to address the security structure that left the police so emasculated and powerless. The first step was to convince the military leadership in the POC that the police would never improve its performance if the police were not given some measure of responsibility. This meant putting the police in charge of parts of province's major city and pulling out the military from those parts. The STT fashioned the argument that the police must exercise the weight of responsibility if they are to strengthen their institutional muscles. The U.S. commanders in the Northern Province, as well as the head of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, were the primary message bearers to the Iraqi military and the Governor on this point. While the governor embraced the idea as a way of reducing the authority of the military in his province, the military was staunchly against the proposal because it cut into their local base of power.

In early 200x, the Iraqi Government ordered the POC to transfer one of its brigades to another province in response to an increase in violence in that region. The POC commander initially resisted losing some of his combat power, but was forced to comply. The POC commander attempted to make a purse out of a sow's ear. Grasping at the U.S. request to give the police more authority, he assigned the police to the part of the main city that had originally been under the command of the military brigade that was to be transferred to another province. While the POC commander was publicly saying he was giving the police a chance to take charge, privately he was telling his staff that he had every confidence the police would fail. He was sure that the police would fail because he was giving the police responsibility for one of the most violent parts of the main city when 3 months earlier he was not willing to give the police the most pacific section of the same town, the police were undermanned for the new command, and the POC commander gave the police less than a day from the time the police were notified to the time they had to be on the street replacing the military that was leaving as the police arrived. The POC commander welcomed the transfer of authority to the police. Not only would that end the bothersome requests from the Americans for police primacy, but when the police failed, the POC commander could then report to Baghdad that the Iraqi ground Forces Command had made a mistake in taking his brigade from him.

To the surprise of the POC commander, the police did not fail. The PDOP transferred police from the western part of the province at some cost to himself politically. He also placed one of his best brigade commanders in charge and told the brigade commander to work closely with the STT. The U.S. brigade commander in the area also made a strong commitment of his resources, primarily engineer and public affairs, in support of the police. As a result, the number of armed attacks in the police-held area fell significantly below what had been the norm when the military was in charge of security in the same area.

While the image of the police was improving both in the POC and with the public, the General Kabir's arrest and secret detention of police continued to undermine: police morale, arguments to improve police performance, and the police's capability to do their duty. The U.S. field commanders, both at the Brigade commander level and the general officer level discussed with General Kabir about the need to work with the police. However, the army commander was not responsive. The STT recommended to the PDOP that he had to personally speak with the General Kabir about the situation. The STT argued that the police on the street could not be expected to show courage against the terrorists if they did not see it modeled by their commander in confronting the Iraqi military. The PDOP demurred claiming that the offending army commander was young and brash and would not listen. In truth, the PDOP was afraid to confront General Kabir because of the latter's connections in Baghdad.

Without success from the U.S. leadership or from the PDOP, the STT took a separate approach with the General Kabir. In a private meeting with the army commander, the STT discussed the problems that his secret detention of police was causing for the STT's efforts to improve the police. The commander initially denied that he was holding police in his jail then agreed to look into the issue when the STT explained when and how General Kabir's officers arrested the police. That short discussion was followed by what started out as a pleasant exchange about life in Cairo. At the time, General Kabir's family had a residence in Cairo. The STT member pointed out how unusual it was for a non-Egyptian in his official position to have a place in Egypt and not be approached by the Egyptian intelligence service. General Kabir took umbrage at the insinuation and ended the conversation. However, within a week, the PDOP

went to see the General Kabir at his HQ. When the PDOP left General Kabir's office, he (PDOP) had a pledge for the release all detained police. Two days later, 12 police returned to their police stations and General Kabir issued instructions to his Brigade commanders to develop greater cooperation with the police.

### ***The U.S. Assistance, Channeled Thru the Police Was Not For Building a Better Life for the Iraqi Citizens, But To Empower Those Iraqi Officials Who Would Build a Better Life for Iraqi Citizen***

The effectiveness of the police was also hampered by a lack of good intelligence. The Ministry of Interior's (MoI) intelligence organization, called the National Intelligence and Information Agency (NIIA), had agents in the northern province whose job it was to collect information on criminal and terrorist groups and report that information to the police for action. Instead, the intelligence agents focused on the Provincial-level governmental bodies supporting the Provincial governor, a Sunni in a Shia-led national government. There were also concerns that the head of this intelligence group in the Northern Province was himself corrupt. In any case, his organization produced very little actionable intelligence for the police. In this case, the PDOP had no authority over the NIIA chief in the Northern Province. Therefore, the STT had to rely on the U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I) staff in Baghdad to convey concerns to the Iraqi Ministry of Interior about the mal-performing provincial head of the NIIA. This is exemplar of a pattern of communications and USF-I/STT staff coordination repeated many times whether the issue was pay for new recruits, new boats for the river police, obtaining forensics equipment, etc. When the PDOP could not get resources or actions from Baghdad thru his established channels, the STT would work as an informal channel, being mindful that the PDOP received the credit for any resources from Baghdad, not the U.S. back channel. This is a critical point because, culturally, Iraqi formal and informal leaders rise in importance and effectiveness based on their ability to provide resources to their business, province, tribe, etc.

A similar approach was attempted for humanitarian assistance, whether the aid was controlled by the U.S. combat brigade in the area or directed by larger U.S. Government institutions. The expansive U.S. assistance projects for the police, such as the construction and rebuilding of police stations, was welcome but not immediately beneficial in reducing the influence of the terrorists because counterinsurgency demands a commitment of reconstruction resources at a level where the line connecting the beneficiary of the U.S. development aid and the local official who can take credit for providing the aid is very clear.

In conclusion, the unstated warrant throughout this narrative is the idea that effective counterinsurgency requires committed local leaders. Building a constructive partnership relationship is, in reality, an exercise in building up the capability of the host-nation partner by the judicious application of U.S. military resources and influence.

*Eric von Tersch is a retired U.S. Army colonel with service in Army Special Forces and as a Foreign Area officer.*

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