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The Closers Part V: Mentoring Host Nation Interagency Operations

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“It is the Deputy Governor’s fault; he’s corrupt.”

--A Council Member

“It is the fault of the Police; they don’t arrest anyone.”

--The Deputy Governor

“We are outgunned by the rich sheikhs; we need army protection.”

--The Police Chief

“This is a law enforcement matter.”

--The Army Representative”

“I will remove the violations, if someone will protect my people.”

--Water (Irrigation) Ministry Representative

-- April 2009 meeting of the Abu Ghraib District Council on enforcement of water violations

Governments get in trouble when they don’t provide needed services to their populations. Insurgents take advantage of this. The kind of situation is what we tend to be trying to rectify in counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. Insurgents try to make these governments look even worse than they are. Many of the problems that insurgencies pose require interagency solutions; and when we intervene in such situations, we need to remember that we represent an American governmental system that is not always a model of interagency cooperation itself. There were times that I tended to want to echo Casey Stengel’s question when he was coaching the lamentable New York Mets -- “doesn’t anyone here know how to play this game?” Someone smarter than I remarked a few years ago that -- “if this stuff was rocket science, we’d have won in Iraq years ago.” The same can be said of Afghanistan and Libya. This is tough stuff.

In this portion of the series, I’m going to try to outline some successes and failures that I experienced and observed in Iraq -- and derive some potential lessons learned from them. The point that I’ll try to make is that the creation of interagency cooperation is hard for us, and we are now expecting a much less mature form of governance to do something that we don’t necessarily do well ourselves. This requires hard work and a great deal of patience. Interagency cooperation at any level involves a shared vision and a commitment from all partners. Without that, no organization chart or process diagram, however sophisticated, can succeed.

Things That Worked; Sort Of

Getting Irrigation Water Flowing

Iraq would be a complete desert if the early Mesopotamians had not learned the art of irrigation. Without irrigation, Iraq would revert to becoming a total desert except for the immediate banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Abu Ghraib is a representative example of this model.

However, since the rise of Saddam in the 1970s, the canal system had deteriorated; the 2003 invasion exacerbated this deterioration. The final blow to the health of irrigation in Abu Ghraib came when rich Sunni sheikhs began illegally stealing water from the canals to build fish ponds as government control in the area evaporated. Seeing the sheikhs get away with it, other farmers began to tap water illegally taking more than their government scheduled ration. This began the onset of desertification in the heavily Shiite northern portion of Abu Ghraib, called Aqur Quf. These practices were clearly illegal, and the District Council complained bitterly that the Federal Government was undermining its authority by not stepping in to stop such flagrant challenges.

There were a number of reasons why the highly stove piped Iraqi government could not respond effectively to this challenge to its authority. The Water (Irrigation) Ministry local representative was honest and energetic, but he could only issue warrants to authorize the removal of the illegal pumps and to fill in the ponds. He had equipment provided by U.S. Army funding, but only the Iraqi Police could execute the warrants, and the sheikhs' guards outgunned the local police detachment.

In addition, only the Qaimaqam (County Manager) could issue warrants to actually arrest the offenders. He was usually very competent; but in this area since many of the perpetrators were his fellow Zobai tribesmen, the Qaimaqam was extremely reluctant to act in this area. He issued a few warrants against farmers with no affiliation to the Zobai as a polite gesture to me and the council; but in my time there, he never ordered the arrest of a Zobai

All of this put me in a bad position as the Senior Governance Advisor because the situation was degrading the authority of the Maliki government in Abu Ghraib where it was still trying to wrest control from Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Something clearly needed to be done.

In May of 2009, I asked the Council's Water Violations Committee to convene a meeting and to invite the Commander of the police garrison and the water ministry as well as the Qaimaqam. This happened in due course. During the meeting, I laid out a plan to take a true interagency approach. I told the Iraqi Police (IP) commander that I would provide top cover for his police with my security detail which usually consisted of three armored trucks (MRAPS) armed with fifty caliber machine guns supported by air. This detail had no water mandate, but if we happened to be traveling with an IP unit that came under fire, we were authorized under the Rules of Engagement (ROE) to return fire.

I further argued for the formation of IP task forces to start enforcing the law. This was agreed to by everyone, but I noted that the Qaimaqam was notably unenthusiastic. The police refusal to act due to force protection concerns had previously given him an excuse not to act, and he could also

safely accuse the police of being the main source of the problem. If my plan worked, and it eventually did, he would have no excuses.

In interagency operations in any nation, planning is one thing; implementation is quite another. Our first two planned missions were abject failures. In the first, the task force was supposed to meet at the IP Headquarters. That failed when the IP guards refused to admit the Water Ministry Team due to lack of proper credentials. For the second mission, we planned to rendezvous at the Council Hall. This failed when the IP unit did not show up because the proper orders had not been issued to the station house commander. On the third try, I personally went to the IP HQ and “escorted” the unit to the agreed rendezvous point. From late May to June we ran three highly successful missions. In each mission, my security detail kept greater and greater distance from the rest of the task force to boost confidence in the ability of the IP to do the mission with us just over the horizon.

In late June, I left for a scheduled three week leave period, but left behind an implementation plan for July. When I returned, I discovered to my disgust that no missions had been run. Angrily, I asked for a meeting of the Violations Committee. When it convened, I took out a map of the district and slammed down my fighting knife on the table (officially a non-combatant, I justified carrying the knife to cut the seat belts in the event of a vehicle rollover). I told them that, in three hours, I could cut more illegal irrigation hoses than they had cut in three weeks. Finally, I angrily asked, “are you going to run your county or are you going to allow a bunch of rich sheikhs and farmers do it?”

Following that, we ran at least a patrol a week until the Qaimaqam found an obscure point of law that forced us to stop. Over 120 major water violations had been destroyed and the water ministry estimated that irrigation in Aqur Quf was reaching eighty percent capacity. However, only three persons had been arrested, all of them small fish. Did we succeed in creating a better governmental approach? I think the jury is out on that. About all we could do was to show them the possibilities.

Cholera Prevention

One day in May of 2009, I was invited to an ad hoc committee of District Council members; the Deputy Governor; the Police Chief, the Executive Officer of the Iraqi Army, and the representatives of the Ministries of Health, Water (Irrigation), and Public Works (Drinking Water). The subject was the prevention of a recurrence of a Cholera outbreak that had reportedly killed twenty-six and sickened hundreds in the summer of 2009. It was the first sign of self-organization that I had seen in the community.

Cholera is a big deal in developing countries, and Iraq must now be placed in a category of concern regarding this issue. Some countries are so embarrassed by being associated with Cholera, they call it by other names when it breaks out. The Iraqis are more upfront about it. None-the-less, I was surprised to go to an Abu Ghraib District Council meeting in early May to find them self-organizing an anti-Cholera campaign. They had invited the Iraqi Army, the Iraqi Police, and the representatives of the Ministries of Health, Water (Irrigation), and Public Works (Drinking Water).

For a governance advisor, seeing a community attempt to self organize is manna from heaven. This opportunity had to be exploited. It seems that there had been an outbreak in the district in 2008 that had killed an estimated 26 people and sickened many others, especially children. Most of the cases occurred in remote farming areas without municipal drinking water. They drew their drinking water directly from the irrigation canals or from the Euphrates. In the dry season the disease festers in the shallow stagnant water most accessible to the population.

To understand what we are dealing with, we need to grasp the significance of what Cholera is because it is a disease largely eradicated in the first and second worlds. It is a highly preventable waterborne disease caused by the bacterium *Vibrio Cholerae* in the small intestine. Left untreated, it can cause dehydration caused by diarrhea and vomiting leading to electrolyte imbalance. It is caused by drinking contaminated water, if the water is not cleaned through boiling or chemical treatment.

The good news was that the Ministry of Health (MOH) had plenty of chlorine tablets which will effectively kill the bacterium. The bad news is that many people didn't use them because they made the water taste strange to Iraqis. Others fell for local rumors -- the chlorine tablets would cause sterility. Most Iraqis learned in school that boiling water would kill the germs, but cooking oil was so expensive that few people would go to the expense of boiling it as they did not fully realize the risk. Others simply could not afford it. We had a serious public education problem.

For a governance advisor, to find a community self organizing is manna from heaven. For once I could be in a support role rather than in a situation of prodding and cajoling. That said, the district would need help from the U.S. side in resourcing the campaign. In my view, what transpired was the best example of interagency cooperation that I saw in Iraq.

We agreed to fund the Cholera prevention leaflets through U.S. Army information operations money. The Army also set aside some rented billboards for the campaign. The Iraqi Army and Police agreed to hand out the leaflets at their checkpoints.

For its part the Ministry of Education ensured that leaflets were handed out in the schools, it also gave the personnel manning their medical clinics the training to look for the symptoms. The police were also trained to look for symptoms.

Meanwhile the Ministry of Health ensured that chlorine tablets were distributed to the at risk areas as part of the monthly food rations that each Iraqi family gets as part of the Oil for Food program.

For our part, the Governance Team took out leaflets as part of our daily assessments visits to the countryside. Both the U.S. and Iraqi armies transported potable water to water points in the remote countryside where the district water system did not reach.

The campaign was successful. By the time the dry season ended, there had been no cases of Cholera reported in Abu Ghraib.

What Didn't Work

Cross Boundary Coordination of Municipal Projects

Communities could sometimes come together to do things in an interactive manner using interagency cooperation if the situation was serious enough. Irrigation and Cholera were definitely serious enough to get people energized. However, some things fell into the “too hard” category.

Getting communities to work together on problems of mutual interest should not be hard, but in the atmosphere of mistrust that permeates places like Iraq and Afghanistan, it is sometimes difficult or even impossible to do this. For example, yet another water related problem we ran into in Abu Ghraib was one of drinking water in which squatter farmers were illegally tapping into the drinking water line from Baghdad into Abu Ghraib. The farmers were across the line within the Baghdad city limits, but they were severely impacting the availability of potable water in Abu Ghraib. It should have been a fairly easy matter to solve, but it was not.

There were two potential solutions to the problem. The first would have been to have the City of Baghdad evict the squatters who were illegally farming on city land. The second would have been to have the Ministry of Municipalities and Public works, which was responsible for drinking water, to simply cement over the violations. Neither was easy. In the case of the City of Baghdad, there was a national election coming up, and the Maliki government knew that the squatters could vote; consequently, they had stopped evictions nation-wide.

The problem with the Public Works Ministry solution was sheer indolence and corruption. Neither the local Abu Ghraib representative, nor the official responsible for drinking water was inclined to do anything without a bribe. There were a lot of excuses, but the problem was sheer bureaucratic inertia. We tried hard to get the local representative fired or replaced, but he was running for Parliament on the Maliki ticket and was untouchable. We tried to get the Ministry official responsible for drinking water replaced, but five months after the process started, he was still there when I left.

Vehicle Registration

Another, even more egregious example of lack of interagency cooperation was in attempting to get the Irrigation office permission to use some equipment that the U.S. government had bought using Commanders' Emergency Response Fund (CERP) money. A previous unit operating in our Area of Responsibility had bought some heavy equipment to be used to repair and improve the irrigation canals in Abu Ghraib. I noticed that, for some time, the equipment was sitting in the Irrigation Office parking lot, unused. This was unusual as our Irrigation Ministry representative was usually very energetic and diligent. When questioned, he replied that he could not get registration plates. When the equipment arrived in country, no-one had paid the import tax, and without the tax being paid the Transportation Ministry would not register it, and if it was caught being operated on the roads, the Iraqi police would ticket the operator. After weeks of trying to work it out with the ministry responsible for taxes and the Transportation Ministry, we put it into the “two hard” category. The final solution simply consisted of getting the Police

Chief not to ticket the vehicles. This “work around” was a failure of governance rebuilding on my part, but it is something that needed to be done. The bottom line is that we did not solve the underlying problem, but we created an ad hoc solution to an immediate problem. This was a case of ignoring the laws to get something done. Not the way it should work, but sometimes the best way to get two ministries to work together is to ignore one. In my view, it was a case of, “lead follow, or get out of the way.”

General Thoughts on Fostering Host Nation Interagency Cooperation

From my limited experience in Afghanistan as well as my continued reading on that situation, interagency work with the Afghans is even more complex than in Iraq, but I have found the guidelines below useful in both my military and civilian interagency experience with host nation governments.

There is a good chance that interagency operations constitute an unnatural act in their way of doing things; be patient. Most emerging nations have stove piped bureaucracies and there will not be a history of close civil-military relationships. Breaking down these walls won't happen overnight. If it doesn't work the first time, keep trying.

Much of interagency operations, even in our system, are personality based. Finding two people who get along with each other is a great help; this is true even if the agencies don't get along.

It helps if both agencies have a vested interest in getting the project done. The Cholera and Violation Enforcements problems were reflecting poorly on everyone. There was a vested interest in getting the problem solved if no single agency is totally empowered to solve the problem.

As a third party, you may be the catalyst for getting things done, even if two of the agencies don't have “diplomatic relations” with each other. The Cholera and Violation Enforcements problems required the Iraqi Police and Army, which didn't have good relations with the District Council, but we had good relations with all three.

Sometimes there is nothing wrong with “workarounds”. If an agency is such an impediment to a needed solution that it is counterproductive sometimes going around it is the best path if it can be done safely. We had to cut the Deputy Governor out of the pattern in the Irrigation Violations solution. It was not a perfect solution, but it was better than continued inertia.

Don't Look for a Template

As with all counterinsurgency matters, there are no templates for building host nation interagency capacity. Every situation and locality will be unique. The rules of thumb listed above are just that. There is no substitute for hard work, persistence, and creativity. Not everything will work. The secret is to reinforce what works and to move on when something doesn't.

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