

Fourteen Rules for Advisors in Iraq

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These thoughts were initially penned on my way to RnR, while stuck at Baghdad International Airport for three days waiting for the mother of all dust storms to end. At the time, by chance, I was handed a photocopy of T.E. Lawrence's "27 Articles" – and while reading it was impressed by how useful the information still was for those working in an Arab cultural environment. I thought that this would have helped me prepare for my work in the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, and wondered if I could put together something similar to help those who come to Iraq to work as advisors. Inspired by Lawrence and, especially, the work of Gertrude Bell, I've written the following points, which bring together my experiences of working with Iraqis over two deployments since 2005. It is not intended to advance the notion of cultural determinism – many of the individuals you meet in Iraq will defy many of the examples below, as individuals do in all cultures – but it is intended to provide examples of some of the chief cultural differences between Iraqi and Coalition culture and thus a few jumping off points for the advisor as he begins his work in an Iraqi Government office, a Provincial Reconstruction Team or Military Transition Team.

There are numerous sources that you can read before you deploy but the starting point (especially for US personnel) should be FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency. I've provided some suggested starting points for FM 3-24 at the end of the paper.

As the Coalition presence in Iraq increasingly moves away from a warfighting role, the advisory role will become more important, and I hope that the points below will add to the section in FM 3-24 which deals with advisors in the context of building host-nation security forces (especially chapter 6).

I hope also that the points below will also be relevant and useful, at least in part, to those serving in Afghanistan, though it is focused on Iraq.

Guiding Principle: We Are No Longer in Control

Since my first time in Iraq, in 2005, one essential fact on the ground has completely changed. While Coalition troops are still the most powerful fighting force in the country, the Coalition is no longer in control. The Iraqi Government is now exercising its sovereignty, and does not wish to be dictated to. This attitude filters down to the lowest levels and will color your interaction with Iraqis. You will only be able to perform your role as an advisor if you accept this fact and work with it. You are there to offer help, not

to dictate, and your advice should be offered subtly and without appearing to be a demand.

Fourteen Rules for Working as an Advisor

Rule 1 – Bearing and Attitude

Iraqis are especially keen to judge people by their bearing and attitude. Be deferential with your principal, but be prepared to stand your ground when you think it necessary. Do this only very rarely, only when absolutely necessary, and never in public; but once you have stood your ground, do not back down unless you think that this is necessary to avoid a complete breakdown in the relationship between you and your principal. Demonstrating your strength of character by standing by your word is important. Iraqis do not tolerate fools easily.

Rule 2 – Clothing

Dress well – dressing well indicates status, just notice the difference between the way the junior staff and senior staff dress themselves in the government offices. Dress like a senior Iraqi official and you will gain more respect. This is, of course, of more relevance to those wearing civilian clothes, but hopefully in the near future military personnel who work with the Iraqis in an office environment may be able to move away from ACU or other battledress towards the type of uniforms worn in Defense headquarters buildings such as the Pentagon.

Rule 3 – Presence is a Must

Be physically present as much as possible. Do not get in the way, but your principal should know that if he needs you, you are available – not on a Coalition base some distance away. Going to visit for an hour a day while spending the rest of your time on a Coalition base does not allow a relationship of trust to be built and a feeling of shared striving towards a common goal. Constant, but non-invasive, presence allows you to drop ideas into conversations over tea, after meetings, while travelling together. This is a much better way to advance your agenda than formalised meetings and agendas.

Rule 4 – Status and Maintaining It

You are an advisor to a host nation official or senior military officer. This is a respected position. Do not allow junior staff to restrict access to him. Call only your Iraqi principal 'saidi'. You work directly for him and he is your superior. Your actual rank is immaterial, like all advisors (think political advisors in the US political system) you stand outside the normal rank hierarchy. If you feel that it is necessary to use terms of respect for other seniors, call them 'Ustath (=teacher, an honorific)', 'General', or even 'Sir' in English. But saidi is a particularly strong term and indicates a level of your respect for your principal that should not normally be used for others.

Rule 5 – Don't Bend the Truth to Exaggerate Success

We should let the host nation do things by themselves. But when the host nation needs our help, we should not pretend that they are doing it themselves. This is an artifice and it disguises the necessity of Coalition help in some areas, preventing a rational assessment by the host nation of where their strengths and weaknesses lie and thus delaying our departure.

Rule 6 – Use Translators and Cultural Advisors Wisely

Use them for their strengths. Don't rely uncritically on their advice. Unless they are of Iraqi origin, they are outsiders also, and even if they are Iraqi, they will be distrusted by many in the Iraqi government due to their association with you. Don't let them become the negotiator – your host nation interlocutors want to negotiate with you, not with your translator. They are a facilitator of communication, not a negotiating party. Some translators and cultural advisors rise above this due to the strength of their personality and natural ability, but you should not assume that just because someone is a native Arabic speaker, that they automatically have rapport with your Iraqi interlocutors. It is especially important to remember that an Algerian may know as much about Iraq as a Spaniard knows about Denmark. The fact that the formal literary language is shared across the Arab world should not mask the fact that there are great differences between Arab countries.

Rule 7 – Use the Host Nation's System and Processes

Do not try to impose what you know of western modes of organization or bureaucracy. Learn the host nation way of doing things as thoroughly and as quickly as you can. Iraqis have their own bureaucratic and organisational systems, mainly paper-based, learn to use these systems yourself, or else your situational awareness and ability to influence will be greatly reduced. While these systems are a little slow, they are a highly effective record-keeping method. We have granted sovereignty, don't undermine this by trying to re-introduce a western system, instead, try to work within, and improve, their systems.

Rule 8 – Record Everything in Writing

Note that Iraqis record everything in writing, you should also. An official letter to follow up a successful, or unsuccessful, meeting creates a paper trail and will be filed away by your interlocutors for future reference. That way you have a written record of what has occurred and what was agreed.

Rule 9 – Situational Awareness, Link Analysis

Learn all you can about your workmates. Get to know their sectarian affiliations, families, clans and tribes, friends and enemies, political allegiances and home locations. Don't ask direct questions, instead use open questions about history or social relations (so as to educate yourself in correct forms of behaviour) or their careers. Most people like to

talk about themselves, as long as you don't give the impression of prying. This will help you to understand the power dynamics at work just below the surface.

Rule 10 – Time and First Impressions are Important

Go easy for the first few weeks, don't be too pushy. Be prepared to sit and listen. Be prepared to leave the room if it is clear that they want to discuss Iraqi-only business. If they need you, they will ask you to return, if not, you have just demonstrated your respect for your principal and your host nation.

Rule 11 – Win the Confidence of Your Host Nation Principal

Demonstrate your use to him by giving him what he can't get from his host nation colleagues. He can benefit from the outside ideas that you bring, and your western education and professional experience. Offer ideas to him, and advice. But when you provide advice to him, do not do so in the presence of his colleagues. Do so in private, and try to lead him towards the position that you are advising in an indirect fashion. If he comes to the conclusion by himself, this is even better. The end result should be that he makes a better decision, and, in doing so, increases his own prestige. Never advise him in front of others, or disagree with him in public. Your Coalition colleagues will have to understand that you are not there to support them when they make suggestions or provide briefings to him, and that you may even publicly support him when he disagrees with them. Your role is to work behind the scenes, and to advance the Coalition agenda in a more indirect manner – through direct one on one conversation, not in a public forum where matters of face become significant. Iraqis do not like to be pushed, the less obvious your influence, the more effective it will be.

Rule 12 – Remember Who You Are

Coalition force members are not popular in Iraq, they see us as responsible for destroying their country, even if they are glad to have been liberated from Saddam. This may not be fair, but in their eyes it is true. Similar opinions about the foreign invaders are also found in Afghanistan. However friendly and relaxed your relationships with Iraqis are, remember that you are an outsider and the foundations of your friendships are based on your personal skills and are often despite, rather than because of, your status as a Coalition member.

Rule 13 – Be Careful About Doing Favours

Doing favours can bring rewards, but be sure that you are not used. While some favours should be simply performed on moral grounds, such as providing medical care to sick children, others should require a favour in return. Help with a badging application should bring about help with attaining documents that you might need, or an introduction to a senior person for whom you need someone else to vouch for.

Rule 14 – Learn to Laugh

We are working in war zones. People's lives are often difficult. In such circumstances, humans turn to humour. Learn to laugh, particularly at difficult situations. This will build rapport with your host nation colleagues, and make your own situation easier to bear.

FM 3-24, Counterinsurgency: Starting Points for New Advisors

Text box on CORDS and Accelerated Pacification in Vietnam, pp. 2-13 -14

6-14 – Refers to military trainers, but the point is valid for ministerial trainers – Coalition forces do not have enough personnel specifically trained to carry out advisory mission, those personnel chosen for this mission need to develop the skills on the job.

6-42 - On mission of ministerial advisors = developing a procurement and management system.

6-80 - More detail on ministerial advisory role.

6-86 – The relationship between HN personnel and their advisors. Two important points: “Segregation is kept at an absolute minimum”; “U.S. commanders must remember that advisors are not liaison officers, nor do they command HN units”. This section is worth quoting in whole.

6-86 - Advisors are the most prominent group of U.S. personnel that serve with HN units. Advisors live, work, and (when authorized) fight with their HN units. Segregation is kept at an absolute minimum. The relationship between advisors and HN forces is vital. U.S. commanders must remember that advisors are not liaison officers, nor do they command HN units.

6-87- Effective advisors are an enormous force enhancer. The importance of the job means that the most capable individuals should fill these positions. Advisors should be Soldiers and Marines known to take the initiative and who set the standards for others. (FM 31-20-3 provides additional information and guidelines for advisors.)

6-88 - More than anything else, professional knowledge and competence win the respect of HN troops. Effective advisors develop a healthy rapport with HN personnel but avoid the temptation to adopt HN positions contrary to U.S. or multinational values or policy.

6-89 - Advisors who understand the HN military culture understand that local politics have national effects. Effective advisors recognize and use cultural factors that support HN commitment and teamwork. A good advisor uses the culture's positive aspects to get the best performance from each security force member and leader.

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