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## Winner, Winner, Chicken Dinner: Clear, Hold and Build in Shulla, Baghdad

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*The following was adapted from a recent email sent home to family and friends, marking six months I've spent down-range in northwest Baghdad serving with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment from Fort Riley, KS.*

If there's one word to describe what is going on here in Iraq right now, between all the parties involved--US forces, the Iraqi security forces, the government of Iraq, the insurgents/militias, and--lest we forget--the Iraqi people--it is transition. What makes it difficult is that while each of these groups are going through their own separate transition, each of these transitions are inextricably linked together.

For my fellow troopers and me our transition, as our new commander in chief recently spoke about, will be the drawdown of combat brigades and the deployment of what are being called advisory and assistance brigades, units charged with training, advising and mentoring the Iraqi army and police over the next several years. The theory is that as our presence gradually reduces, the Iraqi army and police will take over providing security to the people of Iraq with the aid of US advisors, air support, intelligence and reconnaissance assets. State Department provincial reconstruction teams will stick around as well to help build the capacity of the Iraqi government and economy.

President Obama announced that "combat operations" would cease on Aug. 31, 2010 and that these new advisory brigades will start rotating into country over the next year, but "combat" itself will not cease here. To clarify, "combat" as we traditionally understand it (tactical fire and maneuver, shooting and killing the bad guy) doesn't really occur here anymore. Believe it or not, not one soldier in our battalion has fired a round with the intent to kill a positively identified target since we've been here--there've been no targets we've had to positively identify.

While violence is at record-lows and the feeling to declare victory in Iraq is tempting, we know full well things can change overnight. IEDs (hidden land mines), RKG-3s (a nasty hand-held grenade that looks like one of those old Vortex footballs we used to throw around when we were kids), mortar and rocket attacks, suicide bombings, car bombs, etc., still target US and Iraqi forces. "Sticky bombs" placed under cars target Iraqi government officials. Crime, kidnapping and acts of intimidation still plague pockets of Baghdad. Corruption is rife at all levels of government. The folks we deal with, from sheiks to contractors to government council members to ex-insurgents, could easily be casted for The Sopranos.

This is what "combat" looks like in Iraq today. It's muddy, it's really hard to see where it's coming from, and sometimes we're not even involved. No doubt there's been progress; Iraq was at the brink of chaos only a couple years ago, on the verge of becoming a failed state. Today, though, as General Ray Odierno describes it, Iraq is a "fragile state." I'm afraid it'll take a few more years before Iraq can go from a fragile state to a stable state and you can bet that a sustained American presence will be there along the way.

For me, personally, all the big picture stuff is really important because it determines how we operate on the ground. There's been one place, in particular, in our battalion's area of operation where I've spent a good deal of time (at least for a staff officer like me) on the ground.

### **Operation Iron Dagger**

Let's rewind for a minute, way back at the end of December. There was huge car bomb on Christmas Day in the western neighborhood of Shulla. The car bomb blew up in front of a popular chicken restaurant, which was located at the corner of a busy T-intersection along the main drag in Shulla.

The bombing occurred after a spate of RKG-3 attacks on US troops earlier in the month throughout the neighborhood of Ghazaliyah, which is directly south of Shulla.

While the chicken restaurant bombing was unrelated to the RKG-3 attacks the division commander assessed that, given the troubled recent histories of both neighborhoods (Shulla, a mini-Sadr City with heavy Mahdi Army influence; and Ghazaliyah, a Sunni neighborhood with AQI connections), two separate insurgent/militia networks were trying to reestablish a foothold in their respective neighborhoods. If insurgents/militias were able to demonstrate that they could operate freely, attack US convoys, and intimidate the locals by blowing up their restaurants, the hard-won security gains made over the last year might start to slip away. We needed to seal the deal, so to speak, so as to not allow this to happen. Thus, our brigade instituted a plan with a name only the Army could think up: terrain denial through non-lethal fires. It was officially called Operation "Iron Dagger."

Basically, this is the application of something the Army calls "clear, hold, build"--a simple way of explaining our counterinsurgency doctrine: 1) clear the insurgents/militias out of the neighborhood by living in and patrolling throughout the neighborhood, thereby protecting the population and making them feel safe enough to rat out the insurgents/militias; 2) hold the security in the neighborhood by working with the local security forces, whether they be army or police, and making them legitimate in the eyes of the people; and 3) build the neighborhood by supporting local legitimate political actors, fostering economic development through small scale reconstruction projects and micro-finance, and enabling the local government to deliver essential services (trash pick-up, clean water, sewage networks) to the neighborhood. By holding and building the neighborhood, in theory, you create an environment that makes it inhospitable for the insurgents/militia to come back to. The people have their basic needs and realize the only thing the Mahdi army or AQI can offer is more violence.

Back to my brigade's terminology. Terrain denial: insurgents/militia can't operate in a particular neighborhood anymore because the people don't want any more violence; the people deny them

that piece of terrain. Non-lethal fires: because artillerymen likes yours truly don't fire artillery rounds in Iraq anymore, we "fire" non-lethal rounds like micro-grants, reconstruction projects and media events to influence the population in a favorable manner (the build stuff).

When the chicken restaurant was blown up in late December, Shulla was already in the "hold" and "build" stages. Bravo Company was partnered with an Iraqi Army battalion as well as the local police unit, who more or less act as traffic cops. We paid out micro-grants to a slew of shop owners in November and we had established a pretty good relationship with the Shulla Neighborhood Council. The Shulla Beladiyah (their public works administration) was one of the most effective in all of Baghdad. But, given its recent past, Shulla--the mini Sadr City--was and still is the most economically depressed neighborhood in our area of responsibility.

Brigade published the operations order for "Iron Dagger" and we were tasked with basically doing a lot more "build" stuff, as we had a substantial amount of reconstruction dollars reallocated by our division headquarters specifically for this mission. Our sister unit to the south in the neighborhood of Ghazaliyah, 5<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 4th US Cavalry, was the "main effort" for Iron Dagger, as they--unfortunately--experienced more of the RKG-3 attacks, and so the allocation of funds was about 65/35 in favor of 5-4 CAV. A key component of all the "building" we were going to do was capturing the progress with a media event via Baghdad TV and press coverage for each project completed in order to influence and/or convince the people of Baghdad that Ghazaliyah and Shulla were safe and open for business. This is one of many ways we conduct information operations, a critical piece in a counterinsurgency campaign plan. After all, the people determine which side wins their support.

For our battalion, our priority was rebuilding the bombed out chicken restaurant. Initially, we wanted it complete in one month. We pursued alternative sources of funding like the Baghdad Chamber of Commerce. Nothing panned out, so understanding that the chicken restaurant was one of the most well known businesses in Shulla we determined we could give the restaurant owner a micro-grant to rebuild his restaurant. It would take longer than a month to get it back on its feet, but it would be rebuilt. The chicken restaurant would be the feature of our "Iron Dagger" plan.

For us, though, Bravo Company would be our eyes and ears on the ground in Shulla. They asked the Neighborhood Council what areas they felt needed improvement and, believe it or not, they recommended that all of their soccer fields get a facelift. They explained that after school, the kids all play soccer but that most of the fields were in disrepair. The fields needed leveling, new goal posts, nets, soccer balls and bleachers. I should point out that only one of the soccer fields that were identified had grass; the rest were dirt. But given that Shulla is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Baghdad, as long as the kids and teenagers had a place to play--dirt or grass--they were happy. The council also recommended several shop owners for micro-grants as well as an upgrade to their own meeting hall. All this may not seem like much (except for the fact that there are 8 soccer fields in Shulla), but the fact that everything we did was coordinated through the Neighborhood Council. Although the projects were funded by your tax dollars through the Commander's Emergency Relief Program (CERP) fund, the local representatives had a legitimate say in what they felt their community needed.

## **Leveraging Information Operations: Hosting a Media Day**

As our projects got underway, we needed to ensure to capture the IO (information operations) win. In other words, we needed to get the word out that Shulla was a safe neighborhood and that it was open for business. The guidance we received early on from higher headquarters was that we were to conduct a "media day" to more or less showcase a "new and improved" Shulla. This was to be a big deal.

The usual course of action for just about every project we complete (a school renovation, government building refurbishment, sewage pump station, etc.) is to conduct an opening ceremony with all the parties involved, which normally includes in the contractor who did the work, the recipients of the projects (i.e., for a school, the headmaster, students, teachers), local government officials, local police and army officers, and any tribal or religious figure. When we verify that work on project is completed in accordance with the contract, one of our Bilingual/Bicultural Advisor (BBA) Engineers normally contacts the contractor and the Iraqi representative for that particular project and lets them know everything is ready. Those two folks then get together and plan the grand opening event, which always includes a huge spread of chicken, lamb, rice and flat bread. The day of the event, we keep a low profile despite the fact we paid for the project and did all the quality assurance/quality checks. Everything we do is done with an Iraqi face on it.

For much of the past few months, the planning for this "media day" became our non-lethal section's primary task. Our original intent was to go to the Neighborhood Council and the Beladiyah to plan the event together, but as we found out, after an initial meeting, if this event--as we foresaw it--was to be a success, we were going to need to do the lion's share of the planning. At first we thought we would do a press conference and then we were told we were going to do a "walking tour" of all the projects completed and then it became both. We also were going to turn over control of our Joint Security Station in Shulla to the Iraqi Army as part of the press conference. The whole thing would be capped off with a big chicken lunch, supplied by the recently rebuilt chicken restaurant.

My boss, the battalion fire support officer, took the lead in hashing out the details and assigned specified tasks to all of the players involved. We developed a plan that would take us from the press conference with army and police leaders and Shulla council members to a soccer game on the premier field in Shulla to a press visit at the chicken restaurant and, finally, the chicken lunch. We learned this event was getting the attention at higher echelons of command, so the pressure was on.

A couple days before the event, we had a walk-through rehearsal with all the key leaders. When the Shulla council members showed up and realized this event was actually going to happen (we told them a month before), they thought it'd be a good idea to change it up and add their last minute thoughts. We told them we're sorry, but we've already made the arrangements with the contractors and the chicken restaurant. Plus, a ton of local and western media was slated to attend. While it was clear we had done all the planning, the Shulla leaders understood they were the face of the media day and that their community would ultimately reap the benefits of a successful event.

When the big day came, it went off without a hitch. An Iraqi Army lieutenant colonel, who serves as the Public Affairs officer for the Iraqi army brigade in northwest Baghdad, agreed to be the event's host. He smoothly introduced each of the key speakers, from the executive officer of the Iraqi Army battalion in Shulla, the Shulla Local Police commander, a representative from the Shulla Neighborhood Council, and the Shulla Beladiyah director general—who passed out his own glossy program highlighting the Beladiyah's projects throughout Shulla. At the end of the press conference, we then had the official transfer of authority ceremony for JSS Shulla. My battalion commander said a few words and then handed a ceremonial key we had made up over to the Iraqi Army battalion executive officer. Really, we could not have asked for a better photo-op.

After the press conference, the tour began with a quick tour through the Shulla Neighborhood Council building, which at that point was about 90% complete. The entourage then walked about five hundred meters down the street to the grassy soccer field, outfitted with a new sun-shade over the brightly-painted concrete bleachers, for a match between two local teams. After the soccer match, we all gathered for our chicken and rice lunch, proudly prepared by the newly rebuilt chicken restaurant. Goodwill permeated the luncheon as Iraqis and Americans broke bread together, hoping for better days ahead in Shulla.

My battalion commander said media day went as well as it could have, given the circumstances. Local media in Baghdad covered the event and the word we got from our Iraqi army partners was that the event received pretty positive coverage. BBC News was there as well and documented the event here:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/7941943.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7941943.stm). They report, you decide.

### **Six months down, six to go...at least for me**

Much more can and will be said about the media day in Shulla, as well as the long-term effects of "Iron Dagger" in Ghazaliya and Shulla. Today, a month after our media day, Shulla continues to be violence-free. The last major event was the chicken restaurant bombing. Locals say they enjoy the peace right now. The Beladiyah continues to pick up trash and repair the sewage system. The neighborhood council loves their new council building. Considering that a year ago, Shulla was literally blowing up with the Mahdi army controlling all the routes into and out of the neighborhood, you can't help but be optimistic.

But, this is Iraq. In Tom Ricks' new book, *The Gamble*, citing a conversation with the then-US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, he says that the events for which the Iraq war will be remembered have yet to happen. I think this doesn't mean those events will appear on the front page of the newspaper or will be the lead story on the nightly news broadcast. And, it doesn't necessarily mean we'll see a return to sustained violence--despite the recent bombings throughout the country. All I would say is to think about Iraq's political geography and think about who the political majority is in Iraq today—you might start to find your answer there.

When I go home for good in about 6 months and as we transition our posture here over the coming years, the story of the Iraq war will be far from over.

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