Observations from a Year in the Sunni Triangle

By Lieutenant Colonel Craig A. Collier

From September 2005 to September 2006 my brigade deployed to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom IV. Most of our time was spent in Salah-ad-Din Province, part of the "Sunni Triangle" north of Baghdad. The brigade’s mission was to defeat the insurgency and create the conditions for a successful Iraqi democracy. The latter part of the mission involved working along all of our lines of operation to assist and train the Iraqi Security Forces, establish a working government and improve the local economy.

We can still achieve victory in Iraq in spite of the dramatic rise in violence and public dissatisfaction with our progress. However, we need an honest assessment of why 2006 was such a disappointing year and apply those lessons. From my perspective, we had too much faith in economic incentives and too little confidence in combat operations as a means to lower the level of violence. We didn’t fully recognize the powerful influence of money on Iraqi behavior and hence did not do enough to address the corruption which fueled the insurgency. Finally, we had too many Soldiers and contractors whose presence in Iraq was more burdensome than helpful.

The Army's new Field Manual (FM) 3-24, "Counterinsurgency" accurately states that an insurgency "...is a shifting 'mosaic war' that is difficult for counterinsurgents to envision as a coherent whole." ¹ My observations may be significantly different from what others experienced in other parts of Iraq at different times, but I believe that they are at least common to what leaders in my brigade experienced in our area of operations during our year in Iraq.

Curb our enthusiasm for funding Iraqi economic development.

We certainly wanted the economy in our province to improve and understood all of the good that could come from that, but found that attempts to stimulate the local economy did not noticeably decrease the level of violence. We estimated that from September 2003 to December 2005 Coalition units provided around $368 million in various contracts to Salah-ad-Din Province. Yet in spite of these substantial and sustained efforts to develop the local economy there was little to show for it.

Funding projects sounds fine in counterinsurgency theory: employing local Iraqis diminishes the pool of unemployed and disgruntled potential insurgents, improves local quality of life, provides some legitimacy for the new government and tangible proof that things will get better in their new democracy. Successful economic development should remove the economic incentive to join the insurgency and ultimately result in lower violence. This was not our experience in Salah-ad-Din Province. In fact, in some locations there seemed to be a direct correlation between the amount of money spent on projects and the level of violence; that is, violence increased as the amount of money spent in an area increased.

We did have success with some projects, but they tended to be smaller, discreet ones that focused on improvements in security (for example, streetlights in ad Dawr, pothole repair along improved roads). Some successful techniques used by local American commanders included advertising what was supposed to be accomplished with the funding, waiting to pay the contractor until after the successful completion of the project, and closely monitoring his progress. Also important was ensuring that Iraqi local and provincial authorities were competent enough to properly allocate the funds they received through us and their own government, a job perfect for Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

We estimated that a significant portion of the contract funds, as much as 50%, went towards paying off the local power brokers, which could be government officials, local sheikhs, thugs or insurgents. Nowhere was this corruption more obvious than in Samarra, where any work cost three-to-five times more than anywhere else. We figured that this was because those who won the project bids had to pay protection money, either to rival tribes or local bad guys, including the insurgents. The corruption in Samarra was so bad that many contractors refused to do business there or left projects half-completed after being threatened. We consistently heard from locals that the contractors who we were paying to pave the roads, pick-up trash, etc. were funneling money to the insurgents, either out of coercion or because the contractors were sympathetic to their cause. After several months of frustration we curtailed most projects in the province (except for some that were almost completed or focused on improving security) while at the same time continued to conduct "lethal" operations (raids, patrols, other combat operations) in and around cities like Samarra.

Cutting off project money did not increase violence from disgruntled locals. In fact, the level of violence in Samarra and elsewhere in the province continued to remain steady or decline. The combination of funding drying up, improvement in local Iraqi Security Forces, and sustained lethal pressure on the insurgents all led to a decrease and then a leveling-off of violence. This occurred in spite of the destruction of the Golden Mosque on February 22nd.

We suspected that the availability of project money attracted the insurgents to the city, much like thieves are attracted to banks, "because that's where the money is." Limiting the amount of money and keeping them under constant pressure reduced this incentive.

---

2 Ibid, p. 5-17.
"Money is ammunition," FM 3-24 instructs…but if money is ammunition we should ensure that we’re not giving it to the enemy.\(^3\) The bad guys moved to other areas where extortion paid better and there was less chance of getting shot.

We need to avoid funding Coalition projects that we think the locals need but they may not see as a priority. Local health officials in ad Dawr, for example, had no intention of rebuilding their Coalition-provided health clinic that was destroyed because they claimed they never wanted it there anyway. They were, however, eager to get a former state-run factory up and running again, an opportunity where our economic assistance combined with substantial support from the provincial government and foreign investors stood a much better chance of achieving success; in this case, long-term job creation.

Without coordinating our projects with local Iraqis' own development plans, we risk having facilities that will be unsupported after we leave or function only a few days after their ribbon-cutting. The provincial and local governments had a hard enough time adequately planning for normal operations and maintenance, supplies, or payroll for the services they already provided. Adding to their burden without their support was a good way to ensure that they would have health clinics without supplies or a water treatment plant without trained operators. Battalion commanders - who know their area of operations far better than anyone else and are capable of properly monitoring a project's progress - are in the best position to determine if a local infrastructure project or service is necessary.

Funding several similar projects at once presents other problems, such as quickly exceeding the local industrial capacity. With limited experience and without an adequate number of skilled workers (not to mention endemic corruption), too many Iraqi-built projects were of such low quality that they either required immediate repair or abandonment. Poor quality projects were a frequent complaint from locals and government officials, so the progress we expected to achieve through economic development efforts ended up being a visible sign of our incompetence.

Commander’s Emergency Response Program funds (CERP) was not the only or even primary funding stream available for Iraqi projects and services. The most substantial funding available to the provincial government actually came periodically from Government of Iraq funds. Although they came with some strings attached, these funds were many times larger than what we could provide with CERP. Interestingly, the provincial leaders used it for the same types of projects and services that we were so eager to provide through CERP.

Iraqi officials husbanded their own money far more scrupulously than they did the money they received from us. In one memorable exchange, a provincial official commented that "Iraqi money is hard, American money is easy" after one of our officers asked how the provincial government appeared to get much more mileage out of their own funds than ours. In another example, at a Provincial Council meeting a health official asked for Coalition funding to pay for the yearly operations and maintenance costs of the province's

\(^3\) Ibid, p. 1-27.
only Magnetic Resonance Imaging machine. When informed that there was no money (part of our limiting CERP funding to security-related projects) a heated discussion broke out amongst the council and provincial leadership. In the end, the provincial leaders decided to use their own funding to pay for the operations and maintenance costs of their own critical hospital equipment, something that just moments before they would gladly have let us fund.

We’ve placed unrealistic expectations on the ability of projects and services to decrease the level of violence in Iraq. In my brigade's experience, Coalition-funded projects had a modest impact at best, and these were the less-glamorous, under-$250,000 local projects supported and monitored by the local American commander. Throwing too much money at once into an area that wasn’t ready for it appeared to contribute to the level of violence. At the end of 2006 it was reported that the number of completed Iraqi projects exceeded 4,000.\(^4\) But how many clinics, schools, or water treatment plants built is the wrong metric, as is how much money is spent on CERP. Whether or not the project resulted in a decrease in violence, is actually being used for its intended purpose a year later or resulted in long-term job creation are much better indicators of a project’s success or failure.

Pumping money into an area to jump-start economic development or improve essential services is not a panacea everywhere, all the time. Without adequate controls, our altruistic effort to drain the insurgent swamp through projects and services may be making things worse by providing an additional funding stream for the insurgents.

*Follow the money.*

When working with the Iraqis, one thing that was certain was that we were never sure what their motivations were or where their true loyalties lay. Their actions were often contradictory or inscrutable. With the competing and interlocking layers of family, tribe, politics, culture, religion, ethnicity, history, score-settling, envy, and self-preservation, an outsider could never be confident of what was really going on. It is even more difficult to discern when the Iraqis concealed their true intentions, and this applied to the Iraqis we worked with in government as well as those in the Iraqi Security Forces. Penetrating this tangle of Iraqi loyalties and motivations proved difficult if not impossible, with one significant exception: money. Following the money - who stood to gain or lose monetarily from a particular event or course of action – explained Iraqi behavior and much of the violence we were witnessing better than anything else.

Consider the effect money had on two of the key cities in our province: Bayji and Samarra. Both lay astride the Tigris River between Mosul and Baghdad, similar in size but with vastly different resources. With the Golden Mosque and the Spiral Minaret, Samarra has a richer cultural history and modest tourism potential, but Bayji sits next to the far more lucrative Northern Oil Refinery.

Samarra had a reputation as a violent town even before coalition forces arrived. Provincial officials noted that there was a reason Saddam built a bypass around it. Competing tribes and families vied for control of what little there was to milk out of the city. Add to that the effects of the insurgency, and Samarra made for a challenging place to bring under control. While we were able to keep the violence in Samarra somewhat in check, we were unable to accomplish the same feat in Bayji.

In spite of Samarra's reputation, Bayji was the more violent of the two towns and accounted for a disproportionate number of our casualties. The violence in and around Bayji remained resilient in spite of similar, successful methods used in other locations in the province. These included berming-off particularly bad areas, partnering with the local Iraqi Army unit, establishing good relationships with the city police and government officials, funding small projects focused on security, and aggressively conducting combat operations in and around the area. The one thing that we could not control in Bayji that we at least had some modest control of in Samarra was money. We came to believe that it was the black market money coming out of the Northern Oil Refinery that made Bayji so violent and so difficult to control.

The Northern Oil Refinery is an irresistible magnet for corruption. Most of the price of refined fuel in Iraq remains subsidized despite some successful efforts by the national government to gradually end the subsidies. In theory, this means that Iraqi citizens benefit from cheap gas. The reality is that government-authorized distributors stand to make so much money from artificially low fuel prices they would rather sell it illegally on the black market or in Turkey, Syria, or Jordan and make a huge profit than sell it locally at the government-fixed price. Enforcement and punishment for this illegal activity was non-existent. Everyone associated with the refinery was in on it: government officials, distributors, refinery guards, truckers, the thugs "protecting" the trucks (of which the insurgents were a subset), and the oil ministry officials who sold fuel distributor licenses.

This corruption manifested itself in other destructive ways. For example, the multiple attacks on the oil and gas pipelines and facilities were less an effort by the insurgents to cripple the Iraqi oil industry than an attempt to limit the supply of fuel and keep demand high. It's worth noting that all of the refined fuel lines from Bayji to Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq were cut (and Northern Oil Company officials were not particularly interested in repairing them). However, the main crude oil pipelines from the northern oil fields near Kirkuk to the refinery in Bayji were disabled just often enough to prevent export of surplus crude to Turkey, but only rarely enough to actually idle the refinery. Ruining the product pipelines made trucks the primary method of fuel transportation, giving black marketeers their entry into the process. It was noteworthy that within two weeks of Iraqi plans to ship propane to Baghdad from Bayji by rail, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were found on the tracks, and the attempt was halted. Another interesting data point was that civilian Iraqi fuel trucks were rarely attacked, despite being such numerous, obvious and easy targets.
Local citizens understood and hated the corruption at the refinery. They constantly complained about either having to pay many times above the government price for black market fuel or wait in line for twelve hours from only one or two open gas stations while dozens more were closed and hundreds of fuel trucks clogged the highways. Worse, because of our inability to do anything substantial about the corruption, many were convinced that we were in on it.

We estimated that somewhere between 10-33% of the money from black market fuel went to the insurgency. With each fuel truck containing thousands of dollars worth of gas and hundreds of trucks per week filling up at the refinery, it gave the insurgents a significant and reliable source of funding.

After a few months of getting to understand how this process worked and its impact, and with a new Iraqi Army unit to partner with, the local American battalion commander began some small operations to counter corruption at the refinery. For example, the Iraqi Army battalion, with our support, began to detain those obviously involved in fuel corruption, such as catching truckers without the required paperwork transferring fuel in restaurant parking lots. He also told local gas merchants that if there was not some improvement in the number of open fuel stations their trucks would be confiscated. During a raid U.S. forces busted a room set up for black marketeers, complete with fake oil document stamps, account ledgers of who owed what for how much fuel, and contact information. These few relatively minor actions had a significant impact: gas lines decreased to half of what they were and the local price of black market fuel dropped substantially. The Iraqis in our province enthusiastically encouraged us to do more.

The most dramatic result of threatening black marketeers' income occurred when a brave Iraqi Army officer threatened a key official at the refinery. The Iraqi officer warned that unless the refinery official ended his corrupt ways immediately he would be arrested. The fact that the black marketers had seen the same unit arrest their own kind and confiscate their trucks put some teeth into the threat. The smooth, genteel refinery official was uncharacteristically shaken. Within a week, for the first time in almost a year, crude oil flowed from the refinery for export to Turkey and continued for more than three weeks, providing about $370 million to the central government of Iraq. Dozens of Coalition officers had for months assisted and encouraged the Iraqis to export oil for the good of their country, but it wasn’t until we finally threatened a key and corrupt official at the refinery that crude oil began to be exported.

A concerted effort should be made to improve the Iraqi criminal justice system to allow for the arrest and prosecution of those involved in corruption, especially if it involves oil. Although plans to thwart oil corruption through the Iraqi judicial system were just talk in 2006, it’s encouraging to see that we have recently adopted a more aggressive plan at the Northern Oil Refinery.  

---

Following the money did more than just explain the criminal behavior at the refinery. Some examples:

- After encouraging the provincial government for months to provide us with statements of work for their future projects, the only way we could finally get them completed was when we threatened to cut off all CERP funding.
- One significant problem with morale in several of our local Iraqi Army units was poor food service. Ultimately we traced the problem to lack of money actually getting to the contractors, despite enough funding allocated for food service. When confronted by a Military Transition Team leader, one Iraqi Army commander didn't dispute the accusation that he was skimming money off of his Iraqi Army food service contracts, saying instead that "Everybody does it."
- Several downed power lines appeared to be the work of the same contractors we paid to repair them, a cynical but effective way to keep themselves employed.
- Much of the violence directed at projects was caused by local criminals extorting money from contractors rather than insurgents trying to keep Iraq from being prosperous. We suspected that these bad guys were all broadly-brushed as "insurgents" because the contractors figured we'd be more likely to do something about it than if they reported garden-variety thugs or members of a rival tribe threatened them.

Most local criminals and terrorists we killed or captured did much more than just attack us. They were almost always involved in other income-producing endeavors such as kidnappings, extortions, murders, robberies or other mayhem. The one thing they had in common was that money was the engine driving their behavior. While the center of gravity in this insurgency is the Iraqi people, following the flow of money proved crucial to understanding their behavior and much of the violence around them.

**Renew our confidence in the positive impact of lethal operations.**

Nothing we did in Iraq had a more significant impact on reducing the level of violence than killing or capturing those who were committing the violent acts. The best way to do that was through offensive, combat operations. This was in spite of the attention we paid to Iraqi economic development, our constant work with the Iraqi Security Forces and our efforts with local and provincial government officials. Time and again the level of violence would noticeably drop in an area where we captured or killed suspected insurgents or when we got lucky and they blew themselves up with a faulty IED. The bigger and more extensive the operation, such as "Operation Swarmer" in March 2006, the more significant the impact. Only an offensive operation could confirm or deny a particular bit of intelligence, and then the operation inevitably led to better intelligence which we then used for future operations, and so on. We usually knew that an operation was a success when a particular enemy technique would disappear for a week or longer, such as when mortar attacks ended for months at one of our forward operating bases (FOBs) after we captured mortar tubes and their operators near one of their firing points.
Unfortunately, lethal operations currently enjoy a bad reputation. With popular books such as Thomas Ricks’ *Fiasco* taking the aggressive tactics of some units in earlier phases of OIF to task, the zeitgeist is that the soft, non-lethal, government/economic solution offers the best chance of reducing the violence in Iraq.\(^6\) Portions of this concept are undoubtedly true, such as the imperative for some type of reconciliation and amnesty for the Sunni minority that can come only from the majority-Shia government. However, violence in Iraq in 2006 increased dramatically in spite of the relentless focus on the non-lethal lines of operation.\(^7\)

Part of the appeal of the non-lethal solution may be a lack of understanding about what exactly American units do when they conduct offensive operations. American combat units are much more disciplined and capable than a few high-visibility failures suggest. Soldiers routinely operate successfully even under strict rules of engagement designed to limit the potential for civilian casualties. The vast majority of raids we conducted, for example, were "cordon-and-knock"-type operations in which civilians were treated courteously and with respect. Except for chance contact, we conducted offensive operations only after extensive intelligence had been gathered. We were always prepared for the worst to happen, but we rarely went in "guns blazing."

In our own daily discussions with local Iraqis, their most persistent frustration was our failure to reduce the level of violence. They applauded us when we eliminated bad guys and wished their own security forces would do more. Allowing the insurgents to sow death and mayhem with impunity was what led many Iraqis into despair, not that the local sewer system didn’t work properly. The Iraqis we encountered seemed to understand that lowering the level of violence was a pre-condition to real economic development. They also realized that a broken sewer pipe may decrease their quality of life but it probably wasn't going to kill them. Although in our majority-Sunni province few Iraqis wanted us there, Iraqis liked the insurgents and terrorists less. Unfortunately, the insurgents and criminals had one powerful weapon that was a match for any of ours: fear.

Several times we received calls from local or provincial officials asking us to please not release some thug we picked up because he was "a very bad man." During one exchange with a provincial leader, who promised and delivered multiple sworn statements attesting to the despicability of a criminal we captured, I asked him why the locals hadn’t come forward sooner. His response summed up the significance of removing the terrorists from society as well as the fundamental weakness of the "softer" approach: "When he is being bad, the people are afraid. When he is caught, the people feel safe." The fear sown by mass-murdering and amoral terrorists is more effective than our inconsistent and vague promise of a better life. Taking those evil men out of circulation was the best way to lower the level of violence, and the optimal way to do that was through combat operations aimed at them.

---

\(^6\) Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006). Mr. Ricks was especially critical of the 82nd Airborne and the 4th Infantry Division during OIF I.

Regain our focus.

Before we deployed to Iraq, part of our brigade's preparation included a visit by LTG (Ret.) David Grange and a team from Fort Leavenworth to provide us with the latest information on counterinsurgency operations. A former battalion and brigade commander with three tours in Vietnam, LTG Grange opined that we began to let that insurgency slip away when we built the first Quonset hut. After a tour in Iraq I think I now understand the point he was making. There are indications on almost every operating base that we're losing our focus on why we're there and what's truly necessary to winning this war.

Most Soldiers only require decent personal living conditions, a good mess hall and gym, and occasional access to the internet and phones to keep their morale high. But we provide far more than that. Contingency Operating Base Speicher, for example, has a Baskin Robbins, Taco Bell, Burger King, coffee shop, motorcycle-purchasing outlet, and other stores. This is in addition to a well-stocked post exchange and three very good mess halls open for three hours, four times a day for breakfast, lunch, dinner and midnight meals (which by the way offer Baskin-Robbins ice cream for free at lunch and dinner). The giant base at Life Support Area Anaconda, near Balad, has a 24-hour post exchange, the usual assortment of fast-food franchises, and an indoor and an outdoor pool. These "Little America" havens are fine at overseas Air Force bases in Germany, Japan, or Korea, but those bases are not receiving indirect fire every other day, like LSA Anaconda. These distractions come at a significant cost, both in the support requirements necessary to sustain them and by encouraging the mindset that a Soldier in Iraq should be provided with all of the comforts available at any other American overseas base...and enough free time to enjoy them.

Everything sold or provided to our Soldiers and contractors has to be shipped in either by expensive air or usually by ground along dangerous supply routes like Route Tampa. Support convoys usually consist of trucks driven by Third-World drivers who are protected by Army or Marine Corps escorts in up-armored HMMWVs, all of whom have to be fed, housed and maintained along their route by other contractors and Soldiers, who in turn have to be fed, housed, and maintained themselves.

The enemy figured out shortly after we crossed the line of departure that the best opportunity to attack us is along our extended supply lines. Only bad things can happen to supply convoys on the road in Iraq. Attacks on convoys along our supply routes in Salah-ad-Din Province, usually with IEDs, were a daily occurrence. When these large elements move they push all other civilian traffic out of the way and off the road, and the escorts keep traffic in front and behind at a respectful distance, actions which are a constant annoyance to local Iraqis. Also common were "escalations of force," in which supply convoy escorts fired on Iraqi civilian vehicles that appeared to be a threat, sometimes with tragic results. Limiting the amount of support traffic along our
vulnerable supply routes should be a priority effort, and the best way to do that is to reduce the need on the receiving end.

A recent CENTCOM survey estimated the number of contractors in Iraq at an amazing 100,000. A large number of them are Third World contractors who work in the morale, recreation and welfare establishments, drive the long-haul trucks and work exclusively on the FOBs to support our Soldiers. Since the sustainment and support requirements for the Sri Lankan mess hall servers and Nepalese laundry workers, for example, are essentially the same as for everyone else living on the FOB, keeping their numbers to a minimum will also reduce the sustainment requirements.

We're ignoring the sound advice in FM 3-24 to minimize support traffic, keep bases as small as possible, and limit our luxuries. In our effort to make our Soldiers as comfortable as possible we've put more of them at increased risk. We need to eliminate those distractions and amenities that aren't really necessary to winning this war, as well as redeploy the thousands of contractors and Soldiers who don’t need to be there.

**Conclusion.**

If our experience in one corner of the Sunni Triangle was any indication, the ability of economic incentives to lower violence is overrated. Too much money put into the local economy at once appeared to make the violence worse. Economic stimulants stood a much greater chance of success when violence was brought under control beforehand and the local Coalition commander supported and could properly supervise the project or service.

Following the impact of money does more to explain Iraqi behavior and much of the violence in Iraq better than anything else. We need to make it painful for those involved in corruption, stop throwing money at poorly supervised projects and services that we think the Iraqis might find useful and instead focus our efforts on projects with a high payoff that rewards good behavior.

Consistently the most effective method we used to lower the level of violence was a combat operation designed to kill or capture the insurgents. Sustaining that lethal pressure puts the initiative in our hands as often as possible.

We need to regain our focus by eliminating the distractions and redeploy those Soldiers and contractors whose contribution to the war effort is minimal, unnecessary, or burdensome.

During 2006 in Iraq the pendulum swung in favor of the non-lethal approach, perhaps as an over-reaction to what are now considered the heavy-handed tactics of some units in Operation Iraqi Freedom I. We appeared to be implementing a “softer” strategy that may

---

8 Renae Merle, “Census Counts 100,000 Contractors in Iraq: Civilian Number, Duties are Issues,” The Washington Post (December 5, 2006), D1.
9 *Counterinsurgency*, 8-3 and 8-5.
have been successful in 2003 but was inadequate to properly address the complex, intractable insurgency and dramatic increase in violence that we had three years later. As the surge comes to an end in 2008, we will face many of the same challenges that we had two years earlier. Our Army would benefit from an honest assessment of why 2006 was such a disappointing year in Iraq despite the emphasis on the currently popular, non-lethal side of counterinsurgency doctrine.

LTC Craig Collier served as Deputy Brigade Commander for the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Infantry Division during their deployment to Operation Iraqi Freedom IV. In 21 years of service he has served in a variety of command and staff positions and has been deployed on other operations to Panama, Macedonia, and East Timor. He is currently serving again in Iraq as the commander of 3-89 Cavalry, 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division.