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SOF Detachment Civil Military Operations in Iraq

by Shaun A. Reynolds

“All the air conditioners are gone,” said the interpreter. The Special Forces Operation Detachment-Alpha (ODA) team leader forgoes the niceties that usually accompany the first few minutes of most meetings with Iraqi citizens. “Ask him where the air conditioners went,” he tells the interpreter, maintaining a no-nonsense look at the boy’s elementary school principal. The principal, through the interpreter, explains that due to the threat of theft the air conditioning units were removed and locked in storage for the summer months. Despite the locked security gate and posted security guard, the possibility of losing them when school is out of session is too great a risk for the principal. After a few minutes the ODA is led to a locked class room where the units are stored. A quick count by the team leader ensures that all the units are in fact present, two months after he and his team supervised completion of this major school renovation project.

Scenes such as this are nothing new for U.S. Forces in Iraq, who have been in the forefront of Iraqi reconstruction along with other Department of State initiatives since the 2003 invasion. What is new is the increasing direct role Special Operation Forces (SOF) operational detachments now play in these efforts. SOF detachments have been vital to counter-terrorism and stability operations in Iraq. This has centered on its core missions of Foreign Internal Defense (FID), a key component of counterinsurgency operations, as well as Direct Action against militant insurgent/extremist factions and Counter-Terrorism, the scope of which includes activities engaging the local population. While a keen understanding of the local populace as part of the overall operational environment has no doubt played a role in SOF’s success in Iraq, SOF initiatives to directly address the needs of the people largely laid with embedded Civil Affairs Teams (CAT). Humanitarian and development actions of CAT’s through the years have played an important supporting role as SF ODA’s and Navy SEAL detachments focused on FID and other core missions such as direct action against insurgent and extremist factions. Historically, ODA’s without direct CAT support often had little involvement in civil-military operations (CMO). This has changed dramatically in the past year, as more SOF detachments are actively involved in CMO initiatives than at any time in the course of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

A Changing Operational Environment

The reason for the shift in recent years has much to do with the change in Iraq’s overall security since the “Surge” of 2007-2008. A prominent result of the Surge was a lower overall number of threats to Coalition Forces and Iraqis in general in the form of attacks, from a height of nearly 1,600 violent attacks per week in June 2007 to a steady state of under 200 through 2010¹. This, along with the November 2008 U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement set the

¹Department of Defense, *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq* March 2010 Report to Congress in accordance with the Department of Defense Supplemental Appropriations Act 2008 (Section 9204, Public Law 110-252) (April 29, 2010):

conditions for Operation New Dawn, in which U.S. Forces have significantly reduced active combat operations. While FID in the form of developing and refining Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) remains a primary mission for USSOF in Iraq, because of the SOFA other missions such as direct action have largely fallen out of favor as ISF take on the burden for Iraq's own security.

SOF always strives to understand the “civil terrain,” often gathering what's been coined as “atmospherics” from the man on the street as well as key tribal leaders and government officials. The benefits of this are many, and fill the needs of a range of SOF operational needs and desired effects. One in particular is to better understand the grievances of the local area. These often are the same that allow widespread insurgent or extremist acceptance. This in turn provides agents with fertile ground for recruitment and expansion of such groups. Beyond SOF ability to identify the development of an insurgency, it has the capability to bring US “soft power” to bear in countering the re-emergence of the full-scale insurgency that marked the better part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

This isn't a new concept learned in Iraqi deserts and Afghan valleys. In the Central Highlands of Vietnam, Special Forces engaged in training the minority Montagnards to counter Viet Cong did much to raise their standards of living by enabling basic services such as improved healthcare and other opportunities otherwise denied them from the South Vietnamese government². Immediately following the first Gulf War, SF teams worked alongside Civil Affairs (CA) units caring for displaced Kurds during Operation Provide Comfort³. While never a front and center mission of most SOF operations outside of CA units, such humanitarian and development intervention on behalf of the indigenous population have and continue to play episodic roles in USSF and SOF operations in the form of di minimus projects (small scale humanitarian assistance from O&M funds) during three decades of Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) and other combined SOF missions abroad.

Applying Capabilities Indirectly

Fueled by large caches of money hidden by Saddam and his regime prior to March 2003 and uncovered by Coalition Forces, the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) was initiated by the Coalition Provisional Authority as a means for commanders to quickly respond to the immediate needs of the populace in their areas of operations. Replaced by Congressional-appropriated funds by November 2003 as Saddam's millions were spent, U.S. Department of Defense expenditures of CERP now accounts for a good portion of the multiple billions spent on the reconstruction of Iraq, along with Department of State and international contributions to the nation whose infrastructure has declined steadily through thirty years of conflict and sanctions⁴. A long-used tool by Brigade Combat Teams and CA units, the widespread use of CERP, as well as partnerships with non-CA development agencies, has played an even greater role in recent years within the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Arabian Peninsula.

28. http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/March%209204%20SecDef%20signed%2029%20Apr%202010_1D80.pdf (accessed July 22, 2010).

2Stanley Sandler, *Glad To See Them Come And Sorry To See Them Go: A History Of U.S. Army Tactical Civil Affairs/Military Government, 1775-1991* (Fort Bagg: U.S. Army Special Operations Command History and Archives Division, 1993), 355.

3Sandler, 426.

4Mark Martins, “No small change of soldiering: the Commander's Emergency Response Program in Iraq and Afghanistan – CERP” *Army Lawyer* (February 2004). FindArticles.com.

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m6052/is_2004_Feb/ai_115695635/ (Accessed July 16, 2010).

Civil Affairs Teams (CAT's) and CMO staff sections in line units are the most common end user of CERP. When tied into a larger engagement strategy for a supported unit, CERP-funded initiatives make a powerful impact to a unit's overall engagement plan by providing “deliverables” in response to identified needs. CAT's traditionally bring much of these capabilities to bear when working with ODA's and SEAL detachments. However because of the low density of CA units in relation to SOF detachments in Iraq (and Afghanistan), CAT placement and employment must be carefully weighed to provide the biggest impact in their support to overall objectives. A SOF detachment's ability to conduct its own CERP-funded initiatives compliments its core capabilities. It provides an additional option in its interaction with the populace- a means to make a meaningful, tangible connection with them as a foundation for continued dialogue and future cooperation.

Executing CERP projects also fits well with detachments' combined skill sets and inherent capabilities. This is especially true of SF ODAs with their wide range of military occupational specialties. A Special Forces Engineer Sergeant (18C) trained in a myriad of engineering tasks ranging from demolition to carpentry and construction, provides a ready base of knowledge in assessing typical “brick and mortar” projects such the rehabilitation of a school building or the installation of a pump generator. Special Forces Medical Sergeants (18D) are natural leaders of Medical Civil Military Operations (MCMO- related to the more commonly known MEDCAP) that are designed to enhance the capabilities of local physicians while addressing critical health issues. In all cases, the success of all ODA-initiated CERP requires the combined efforts of the entire team.

The flexibility and responsiveness of CERP makes it a key addition to a SOF detachment's civil engagement campaign by allowing it to provide a rapid response to the local populace's needs. This is especially useful in Iraq, where the government's resources (or ability to apply those resources) still don't match the needs of its people, particularly in rural areas. During an initial engagement with a sheik in a rural village, the tribal leader lamented to an ODA the substandard conditions of his village school, which led many children to avoid classes. Though the government provided teachers and supplies for the students, the lack of steady electricity often left classrooms dark and uncomfortable. Working with the sheik and with district leadership approval, the ODA submitted a CERP project proposal to supply the school a backup generator, along with new wiring, lights and fans. The proposal was approved within one week, and work began immediately after to complete the project before the next school year.

CERP-funded initiatives often lead to more significant key leader engagements. Responding to a critical lack of medical services in a neglected portion of their province, a SEAL detachment sponsored a medical humanitarian assistance visit to clinics identified by its partner Iraqi Security Force (ISF). While providing insights to the local perception of US and ISF, it also established a dialogue between local civil and tribal leadership when the leadership turned out during the event. In other cases when U.S. assistance is provided, prominent leadership previously reluctant to interact with SOF detachments tend to “come out of the woodwork”, often becoming amiable to a relationship, with incredible gains not just to SOF but to partner ISF they advise.

Facilitating Interagency Activities

Detachments have other resources assisting their civil-military initiatives as well. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) can be excellent partners to SOF units who seek their

expertise and assistance in the development and execution of their CMO plan. First established in 2005 as a means of applying Department of State resources directly through DoD and Provincial governments, their expertise draws from the number of US agencies it represents. As described in a US Embassy Baghdad fact sheet, PRTs “are staffed from multiple agencies including the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, Department of Defense civil affairs units, coalition partners, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, contracted Subject Matter Experts and locally engaged staff.”⁵ As Civil Affairs units draw down their operations and the Department of State takes on overall responsibility in Operation New Dawn, PRT's in Iraq have a narrow window as the lead for US-sponsored reconstruction before they too cease operations in late 2011. Meanwhile, SOF Detachments are taking advantage of their resources, often forming solid partnerships in development through joint ventures.

Through the course of its deployment, an ODA developed a relationship with a district deputy governor. Sharing his development plan for his rural district, the ODA found opportunities to foster deeper inroads through small-scale water and agriculture projects. These projects would keep farms productive despite an overall decrease in electric power that run the area's many irrigation canals. However, the full impact of their initiatives would not be met because of the failure of a primary pump from the Tigris River which feeds the entire canal network. Replacement of that pump called for over a million dollars the Iraqi government would not be able to provide for some time. The ODA brought this to the attention of the PRT, and the USF-I CMO representative agreed to take on the project as part of the PRT's slate of agriculture initiatives in the region. Starting with a single meeting, the ODA helped improve the prospect of thousands of farmers facing severe water shortages.

Along with PRTs, neighboring conventional forces can also be a great resource in support of a SOF detachment's CMO plan. Operational environment (formerly “battle space”) owners (OEO) typically share the areas of focus, often engage with the same circle of key leaders, and conducting civic assistance operations that answers the need of surrounding communities. Just as with the PRTs, coordinating efforts with the OEO provides additional and most times valuable insight to civil problem sets. Combining those efforts can be synergistic as well. Well before taking on its own humanitarian and development program, one ODA in northern Baghdad developed a close working relationship with the S-5 (civil military operations) officers of their neighboring battalions. Through this, the ODA met key leaders, received information on the needs of nearby civilians, and gained a better overall understanding of their area of operations. As the ODA began its own CERP initiatives, the CMO officers proved invaluable in providing technical specifications for similar projects completed in the past, analysis on particular areas of interests, and other information that eased the team's efforts. Perhaps most telling in this particular relationship is that as one OEO readied for its redeployment, it approached the ODA about the possibility of it assuming its ongoing and planned CERP projects. The team chose those projects that best fit their capabilities and priorities at the time, and with most of the ground work already completed, they continued them seamlessly.

⁵“Provincial Reconstruction Teams: Provincial Reconstruction Teams Fact Sheet” *Embassy of the United States Baghdad, Iraq 2010 PRT News*, http://iraq.usembassy.gov/iraq_prt/provincial-reconstruction-teams-fact-sheet.html (accessed July 23, 2010).

Persistent Engagement

“I wish we had this back in 2005 and 2006. I think we would have had a whole lot less problems overall back then.” Returning from a meeting with a PRT to discuss one of his team's CERP projects, one ODA team sergeant's musings speaks volumes of the potential impact of SOF detachment CMO in combat. While it's impossible to speculate what impact a more robust focus on such initiatives could have had five year ago, there's little doubt about its effects today. Two hundred miles away, another team completes the post-completion assessment of its school rehabilitation project. The air conditioners are locked away for safe keeping by the principal. Will they be reinstalled when school's back in session? Outside one of the team members points out posters displaying the prominent spiritual leader of an Iraqi extremist group. They're along the outside wall of the school, but not on other nearby buildings. Perhaps this team will be back to check on the units, and discuss other area issues as well. They, along with several other detachments, have established relationships in the community and with influential leaders that have improved communities, enhanced ISF capabilities, and set the foundation or persistent engagement from Operation Iraqi Freedom into Operation New Dawn.

Captain Shaun Reynolds is a U.S. Army Civil Affairs officer previously assigned to Special Operations Task Force Central, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Arabian Peninsula as Civil Affairs planner. He is currently assigned to 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne).

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