

Flaws Cited in Effort To Train Iraqi Forces

U.S. Officers Roundly Criticize Program

By Thomas E. Ricks Washington Post Staff Writer Tuesday, November 21, 2006; A01

The U.S. military's effort to train Iraqi forces has been rife with problems, from officers being sent in with poor preparation to a lack of basic necessities such as interpreters and office materials, according to internal Army documents.

The shortcomings have plagued a program that is central to the U.S. strategy in [Iraq](#) and is growing in importance. A Pentagon effort to rethink policies in Iraq is likely to suggest placing less emphasis on combat and more on training and advising, sources say.

In dozens of official interviews compiled by the Army for its oral history archives, officers who had been involved in training and advising Iraqis bluntly criticized almost every aspect of the effort. Some officers thought that team members were often selected poorly. Others fretted that the soldiers who prepared them had never served in Iraq and lacked understanding of the tasks of training and advising. Many said they felt insufficiently supported by the Army while in Iraq, with intermittent shipments of supplies and interpreters who often did not seem to understand English.

The Iraqi officers interviewed by an Army team also had complaints; the top one was that they were being advised by officers far junior to them who had never seen combat.

Some of the American officers even faulted their own lack of understanding of the task. "If I had to do it again, I know I'd do it completely different," reported Maj. Mike Sullivan, who advised an Iraqi army battalion in 2004. "I went there with the wrong attitude and I thought I understood Iraq and the history because I had seen PowerPoint slides, but I really didn't."

Gen. John P. Abizaid, the top U.S. military commander for the Middle East, told Congress last week that he plans to shift increasing numbers of troops from combat roles to training and advisory duties. Insiders familiar with the bipartisan Iraq Study Group say that next month the panel will probably recommend further boosts to the training effort. Pentagon officials are considering whether the number of Iraqi security forces needs to be far larger than the current target of about 325,000, which would require thousands more U.S. trainers.

Most recently, a closely guarded military review being done for the Joint Chiefs of Staff laid out three options for Iraq. It appears to be favoring a version of one option called "Go Long" that would temporarily boost the U.S. troop level -- currently about 140,000 -- but over time would cut combat presence in favor of training and advising. The training effort could take five to 10 years.

Despite its central role in Iraq, the training and advisory program is not well understood outside narrow

military circles. Congress has hardly examined it, and training efforts lie outside the purview of the special inspector general on Iraq reconstruction. The Army has done some studies but has not released them. Even basic information, such as how many of the 5,000 U.S. military personnel involved are from the National Guard and Reserves, is unusually difficult to obtain.

But the previously unreported transcripts of interviews conducted by the Army's Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., offer a view into the program, covering a time from shortly after the 2003 invasion until earlier this year.

One of the most common complaints of the Army officers interviewed was that the military did a poor job of preparing them. "You're supposed to be able to shoot, move and communicate," said Lt. Col. Paul Ciesinski, who was an adviser in northern Iraq last year and this year. "Well, when we got to Iraq we could hardly shoot, we could hardly move and we could hardly communicate, because we hadn't been trained on how to do these things." The training was outdated and lackadaisical, he said, adding sarcastically: "They packed 30 days' training into 84 days."

Sullivan, who advised three infantry companies in the Iraqi army, called the U.S. Army's instruction for the mission "very disappointing."

Nor were the officers impressed by some of their peers. Maj. Jeffrey Allen, an active-duty soldier, noted that all other members of his team were from the National Guard, and that his team was supposed to have 10 members but was given only five. He described his team as "weak . . . in particular the brigade team chief."

A separate internal review this year by the military's Center for Army Lessons Learned, based on 152 interviews with soldiers involved in the training and advisory program, found that there was "no standardized guideline" for preparing advisers and that such instruction was needed because "a majority of advisers have little to no previous experience or training."

Lt. Col. Michael Negard, a spokesman for the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, the headquarters for training, said he has not seen the Lessons Learned report and so does not know whether the training has been improved or standardized since that report was issued.

After arriving in Iraq, advisers said, they often were shocked to find that the interpreters assigned to them were of little use. Ciesinski reported that at his base in western Nineveh province, "They couldn't speak English and we would have to fire them."

Nor were there enough interpreters to go around, said Sullivan. "It was a real juggling act" with interpreters, he said, noting that he would run from the headquarters to a company "to borrow an interpreter, run him over to say something, and then send him back."

But he was better off than Maj. Robert Dixon, who reported that during his tour in 2004, "We had no

interpreters at the time."

The Center for Army Lessons Learned study, whose contents were first reported by the Wall Street Journal, found one unit that learned after 10 frustrating months that its interpreters were "substandard" and had been translating the advisers' instructions so poorly that their Iraqi pupils had difficulty understanding the concepts being taught.

Trainers and advisers also reported major problems with the Army supply chain. "As an adviser, I got the impression that there was an 'us' and 'them' " divide between the advisers and regular U.S. forces, said Maj. Pete Fedak, an adviser near Fallujah in 2004. "In other words, there was an American camp and then, outside, there was a bermed area for the Iraqis, of which we were part."

Replacing basic office materials was one of the toughest problems advisers reported. "Guys would come under fire so they could get computer supplies, paper and things like that," Sullivan said. "It was a surreal experience."

Lt. Col. Paul Yingling, a staff officer with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 who worked with Iraqi units, came away thinking that the Army fundamentally is not geared to the task of helping the advisory effort.

"The thing the Army institutionally is still struggling to learn is that the most important thing we do in counterinsurgency is building host-nation institutions," he told the interviewers, "yet all our organizations are designed around the least important line of operations: combat operations."

Advisers found that the capabilities of Iraqi forces "ran the gamut from atrocious to excellent," as it was put by Lt. Col. Kevin Farrell, who commanded an armored unit in east Baghdad last year and this year.

Many worried that the Iraqi units being advised contained insurgents. An Iraqi National Guard battalion "was infiltrated by the enemy," said Maj. Michael Monti, a Marine who was an adviser in the Upper Euphrates Valley in 2004 and 2005.

Some advisers reported being personally targeted by infiltrators. "We had insurgents that we detected and arrested in the battalion that were planning an operation against me and my team," Allen said.

But Iraqi officers may have had even more to fear, because their families were also vulnerable. "I went through seven battalion commanders in eight weeks," Allen noted. Dixon reported that in Samarra both his battalion commander and intelligence officer deserted just before a major operation.

Iraqis also had some complaints about their U.S. advisers, most notably that junior U.S. officers who had never seen combat were counseling senior Iraqi officers who had fought in several wars. "Numerous teams have lieutenants . . . to fill the role of advisor to an Iraqi colonel counterpart," the Lessons Learned report stated.

Farrell, the officer in east Baghdad, said some advisers were literally "phoning in" their work. Some would not leave the forward operating base "more than one or two days out of the week -- instead they would just call the Iraqis on cellphones," he said.

Dixon was grim about the experience. "Would I want to go back and do it again?" he asked. His unambiguous answer: "No."

Yingling came to a broader conclusion. He recommended an entirely different orientation in Iraq, both for trainers and for regular U.S. units. "Don't train on finding the enemy," he said. "Train on finding your friends, and they will help you find your enemy. . . . Once you find your friends, finding the enemy is easy."

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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