

## After Action Report: Politics 101 for Small Units in Counter-Insurgency

By Major Jeremy Gwinn, U.S. Army

THE KEY ROLE that politics play in counter-insurgency finally became clear to me in the spring of 2006, as my soldiers and I escorted a delegation of Ghazaliyya's Sunni clerics onto a mini-bus, compliments of the Iraqi National Police. My rifle company's area of operations in western Baghdad had seen its share of turmoil during the previous months. Home to a mixed population of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, the Ghazaliyya neighborhood was hit hard by sectarian violence following the February bombing of Samarra's Askariyya Shrine. My battalion, 1-87 Infantry of 1-10 Mountain Division, was recalled within days to quell the chaos after having handed over the area to Iraqi forces the previous December. Now, struggling to find an Iraqi solution to Ghazaliyya's security ills, my company was in the midst of a gradual transition to the National Police force. The largely Shi'a police were perceived as illegitimate among the area's Sunni population, which was being terrorized by vengeful Shi'a militias. Reports abounded of abuse at the hands of the National Police, whom many viewed as simply a de facto wing of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army.

On that spring morning, the shaykhs, several members of Ghazaliyya's neighborhood advisory council and I made our way to the police brigade headquarters across town to visit the commander and tour the detention facility. The day's visit did not cause an outbreak of peace throughout Ghazaliyya, but was a small step toward improved police performance and dialogue with local leaders. The religious shaykhs, with whom I met regularly, significantly toned down their vitriol toward the police force. Instead of pronouncing that "the police must leave Ghazaliyya at once," the shaykhs' message changed to "this is what the police must do to gain our acceptance." Without a doubt, the police colonel understood the tremendous influence wielded by the shaykhs and, seeing the validity in many of their complaints, the need to professionalize his force or

continue to fuel the violent backlash of Ghazaliyya's Sunni citizens against his men.<sup>1</sup>

I cannot take credit for the visit or any progress that was made since the idea was the council's, not my own. Yet between the Iraqi security forces

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on one side, and the shaykhs and the neighborhood council on the other, I became the only person willing to initiate dialogue. That day, I saw the value of months of work with the local council and eventually the shaykhs, a duty I had initially considered a mere distraction.

As posited by the bulk of classic insurgency literature, political engagement is critical in this kind of war. This truth holds not only at the national level, but locally as well. My experience with Iraqi local politics is limited to 2005 and 2006 within western Baghdad. Political systems outside urban areas function differently, and clearly the advent of the Sons of Iraq and similar groups has brought a markedly new dynamic to the environment. Yet, the small unit COIN practitioner should continue to find relevance in the following lessons when taken in context and adapted to his/her unique situation.

### Realistic Expectations

What should a small unit leader expect to achieve through the local political organization in his AO? At the platoon, company and even battalion level, host-nation political goals often seem distant—beyond our ability to influence. At our level, the neighborhood advisory councils may appear to be ineffective, dysfunctional or even criminal, which

<sup>1</sup> While some readers may view this as legitimizing attacks against ISF as a negotiating tool, a pragmatic counter-insurgency approach must acknowledge the leverage of such influential actors.

in some cases is accurate on all three counts. Nonetheless, by accepting the cultural differences and establishing realistic expectations, small unit leaders can make important gains for their counter-insurgency effort, particularly in the areas of governance, Information Operations (IO) and intelligence.

### Governance

In addition to representing the U.S. military, leaders should take the advisor role with the local council. In the conduct of Civil Affairs projects, we often saw council members make requests without a willingness to do any legwork to make them happen. In cases like these, we learned that the council's active cooperation should be a requirement, except in emergency situations or those carrying an unacceptable physical risk to the council members. In doing so, the council takes ownership of the project and is forced to function as an organization. My unit's policy eventually required that all project requests must move through Iraqi channels. In practice, this meant the local council could no longer make requests to the U.S. representative. Instead, they sent project requests through the district advisory council, which could then draw on U.S. resources. While this slowed the start of a project, it exercised and strengthened the Iraqi organization at multiple levels and was the preferred technique for most projects.

Another way small unit leaders can aid governance is by improving the internal decision-making process. Early in my unit's tour, the council decided they could no longer tolerate the incompetence and corruptness of the chairman who had, among a host of other transgressions, stolen the new furniture from the council building for use in his own home. Not wanting to offend him, they waited until the chairman missed a meeting to vent their frustrations on me. The council members indicated indirectly that they wanted to replace him, but they wanted it to be my decision. I informed the council that I would not make such a decision and recommended they vote on the matter. This seemingly obvious solution took the council by surprise, but they voted and the chairman was dismissed. The same scene was repeated several more times on lesser matters,

and again, a nudge toward making a decision was needed to stop otherwise endless debate.

#### **Information Operations**

Merely rehashing talking points from a note card is certainly a missed opportunity for meaningful IO. Without adjustment for local context and integration into a broader communications plan, IO themes are blunt, ineffective tools. Moreover, local leaders do not want to be lectured by the newest Westerner to appear in their neighborhood. Official IO themes should underpin our communications and be tailored to the local situation, but certainly not constitute the extent of small unit IO. Equally important is countering insurgent IO.

At one meeting, several days after my soldiers discovered a weapons cache attached to a mosque, a council member angrily accused my men of desecrating it. In truth, my men uncovered the cache outside the wall, prompting our sister Iraqi unit to search inside, where they discovered additional contraband weapons. U.S. soldiers never entered the mosque's walls. When confronted with the truth, which I pointed out could be backed up by video, the agitated council members backed down and admitted that perhaps their second-hand report was wrong. My error in this case was not involving the council leadership sooner, even engaging them while the operation was still in progress. I generally heard the same themes from the council as from ordinary citizens on the street, and therefore regarded the council as a reliable indicator of public sentiment. When combined with the religious shaykhs, I believe the group's ability to influence the population was significant.

Small unit leaders should consider using a counter-insurgent's version of a customer service approach when working with the council. As far as OPSEC and common sense will allow, it is our responsibility to keep local leaders informed of our units' activities, sending the message that we respect their institutions and want them to be in charge. This comes not from a sense of friendship, but recognition of the group's influencing power and the imperative to strengthen the institution. We began by only updating the council

on U.S.-funded projects, but eventually broadened this to include combat operations.

Week after week, I appeared at council meetings and was predictably greeted by one or two weeping mothers, wondering why my soldiers had detained their sons. The weekly scenes were arranged and officiated by the council chairman, who created a deliberate spectacle to showcase our supposed injustice. I tried my best to justify our actions, but, in this forum, was not positioned for success. After several months, I tried a new approach. My company, with several Iraqi Army platoons, was conducting multiple raids involving five or six houses at night, with the objective of detaining about 10 targeted individuals. Before the operation began, I envisioned the line-up of insurgents' mothers at the council meeting several days later, so I decided to be proactive. In the early morning hours immediately following the operation, after ensuring there were no remaining OPSEC constraints, I placed a cell phone call to the council chairman. To my amazement, he already knew about our operation and was glad to talk. I briefed him on each detainee, telling him why he was detained and his likely timeline through the Iraqi justice system. At our next meeting, there were no weeping mothers. Instead, the chairman, empowered with information, dealt with the families individually and without a scene.

We often heard complaints about the local Iraqi police during council meetings. My initial course of action was to take note of the grievances that seemed valid and later confront the police chief. I soon saw this procedure as a wasted effort, so I convinced the police chief to attend a council meeting, opening a line of communication that had not previously existed. When the National Police came to town, this same procedure evolved into a formal weekly security meeting between the National Police brigade commander, the local council and several religious shaykhs. The Iraqi colonel typically received a tongue-lashing at these meetings, but began establishing goodwill by making noticeable changes in police procedure, such as improving the treatment of women at checkpoints. Perhaps most importantly, the shaykhs acknowledged these improvements.

#### **Intelligence**

Small units will not typically glean groundbreaking intelligence from the local council, but they can gather valuable information that contributes to the overall intelligence picture. Being aware of the internal divisions present in the council, I was usually skeptical when one of the members made an accusation against another. I regarded one member, however, as particularly reliable, and took seriously his confidential report about another member's son who he believed was conducting attacks for the Mahdi Army. A visit to the son's home the next day by one of my platoons turned up a supply of hand grenades and eventually revealed that the son's place of work was a major hub of Mahdi Army activity.

Following the Askariyya Shrine bombing and the subsequent spike in sectarian violence, the Sunni shaykhs looked to the U.S. military for security assistance. As a result of relationships built through the local council, several of the shaykhs began calling me frequently with reports of Mahdi Army activity. One mosque in particular was the target of frequent drive-by shootings, so the shaykh called me directly via cell phone when he spotted suspicious activity on the street outside. As a result, my patrols more effectively disrupted the shooters and reduced the attacks on the mosque. As always, counter-insurgents need to be wary of traps disguised as tips. Still, I found that tips given by people we knew were much higher quality than anonymous tips because the informant's reputation was on the line. In the case of political or religious leaders, we are not only accessing the observations of one person, but a deep network of contacts. Caution is still necessary, however, as the tendency for vendettas and rivalries among prominent leaders is also higher, and they may attempt to lead counter-insurgents astray for these purposes.

#### **Additional Considerations**

In addition to establishing realistic goals for their work with the local council, small unit leaders should bear in mind several other factors.

#### *The Council as a Target*

Depending on the local threat situation, and other factors such as demographics, some council members will likely be targets of the insurgency.

During my unit's tour, the Ghazaliyya council experienced an attempted double assassination, a successful assassination and a kidnapping ending in assassination. For a council of approximately 10 members, this represented a 40% attack rate. All of the attacks, except for the kidnapping, took place in the vicinity of the council building. Following the kidnapping/assassination, the council essentially broke down for several weeks out of fear. We eventually resumed meeting in a more secure part of the city, but only later moved back into Ghazaliyya at my urging. In order to better secure the council and boost the members' confidence, my company significantly reinforced the physical defenses of the council building, including concrete barriers and firing platforms for the small Iraqi guard force. I also issued the members handguns and weapons cards for personal protection.

#### *Internal Conflicts*

As mentioned earlier, internal conflicts were a persistent issue. Prior to my first council meeting, the chairman furtively waved me into his office and proceeded to accuse more than half of the other council members of insurgent activity. Later, I found that some of the accusations contained a hint of truth, but overall this was just a clumsy attempt to put me in his camp and alienate the other members. Week after week, the accusations and counter-accusations became a regular occurrence, as various members attempted to pull me aside before meetings or call my cell phone late at night. I cannot offer an easy solution to this problem, other than attempting to filter out the bad information and demonstrating that you will not be manipulated for the sake of personal rivalries. As work with the council progresses, counter-insurgents will gradually learn the appropriate level of trust to afford each member, and the amount of finger-pointing will decline when they realize it is not bearing fruit.

#### *Alliances*

Counter-insurgents should not assume that council members are solely loyal to their constituents, nor should they assume that loyalties are divided neatly by religious sect. Expect that most council members are affiliated with political parties, which may have

loose connections to militia groups or insurgent organizations.<sup>2</sup> In my experience, council members view themselves as politicians first, avoiding direct involvement with militia or insurgent activity. Nonetheless, they often have knowledge of illicit activity, but will not, of course, freely share this information. Every situation is different, but confrontation on the issue or posing an "us or them" ultimatum will generally not end in the counter-insurgent's favor. At a minimum, we should be keenly aware of possible outside allegiances among council members and attempt to leverage their influence with these external groups.

#### *Religious Influence*

As indicated earlier, the religious shaykhs came to play a major role in our work with the Ghazaliyya council. I quickly learned that shaykhs from the local Sunni mosques were major influencers with the chairman behind the scenes. The clerics and I eventually commenced regular meetings, which several council members also attended. The shaykhs never attended actual council meetings, but did attend the security meetings held with the police. Despite my best efforts, I was unable to convince the Shi'a clerics to participate. I recognize that intentionally bringing clerics into political activities may have its downside, not least of all the appearance of favoritism from only having the Sunni sect represented. In this situation, however, I determined the benefit of having Sunni shaykhs interface with the Shi'a-dominated police force outweighed any appearance of one-sidedness. The general lesson for small unit leaders is that religion will be intertwined with politics, and a comprehensive political approach requires recognition of this fact.

#### *The Initial Testing Period*

Counter-insurgent leaders could ideally operate in the same area with the same local leaders for the duration of the conflict. Unfortunately, with the nature of "the long war," we rotate frequently, and local leaders will see a fresh Western

face approximately each year. With this, there is a tendency to initially "try out" the new commander, testing his limits of generosity, tolerance and naiveté. My only recommendation is to expect this and set an appropriately firm tone from the outset. A high quality relief-in-place will also mitigate problems.

#### **Conclusion**

Work with host-nation political organizations is among the most frustrating and least rewarding activities of counter-insurgents. Particularly at the local level, clear measures of success are elusive; we must simply be satisfied with small steps. While it is impossible to say with certainty, I am highly confident that my company's work with the Ghazaliyya council significantly contributed to the local counter-insurgency effort. Perhaps the benefit to combat operations was minimal, but along other lines of operation—such as IO, essential services and governance—the impact was significant. We will always need to kill or capture certain individuals, but a sole focus on these activities is generally counter-productive. Small unit leaders, particularly company commanders, can deal the harshest blows to an insurgency by not only conducting direct action and securing the populace, but also by dedicated and astute political engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> From my observations, militia or insurgent groups with which council members may be involved are usually of the "local resistance" variety, many of which have since been co-opted through the CLC/SOI programs, as opposed to irreconcilable terrorist organizations such as al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. This distinction is critical.