Operation Knockout: COIN in Iraq

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ON 12 NOVEMBER 2005, Coalition and Iraqi forces demonstrated again the flexibility and agility so necessary for counterinsurgency (COIN) operations against a smart, adaptive foe. After concentrating large-scale operations for months in Ninewah and Al Anbar Provinces northwest and west of Baghdad, Coalition forces conducted a new, no-notice operation in Diyala Province, northeast of Baghdad. Named Operation Knockout, this successful action reinforced the tactics, techniques, and procedures needed to defeat the insurgents and terrorists in Iraq.

Cordon and Search Operations

The bread-and-butter offensive COIN operation in Iraq is the battalion and smaller unit cordon and search. From 2003 to 2004, Coalition forces conducted literally dozens of these operations daily. In 2005, however, Iraqi Security Forces independently planned, prepared for, and conducted most cordon and search operations. Confronted constantly by these operations, some insurgent and terrorist cells adapted to survive; others did not, and Coalition and Iraqi forces disrupted their operations or destroyed them.

Coalition and Iraqi forces have also been successful in large-scale, deliberate offensive operations such as in Fallujah in November 2004 and in Tal Afar in September 2005. Publicized ahead of time and with deliberate force buildups accompanied by provincial, tribal, and sectarian diplomacy, these large-scale operations resulted in significant gains in two major insurgent strongholds—gains that were reinforced with economic, social, and civil efforts. As with cordon and search operations, large-scale offensive operations are increasingly Iraqi-led. For example, in 2004 nine Coalition battalions led five Iraqi Army battalions in the attack on Fallujah. By contrast, in the successful 2005 attack on Tal Afar, 11 Iraqi Army battalions led 5 Coalition battalions. Coalition forces killed or captured insurgents who did not flee Tal-Afar, disrupted their cells, and restored law and order to the towns and surrounding areas.

Operation Knockout

Operation Knockout confronted the insurgents and terrorists with another challenge: a division-size raid designed to destroy or disrupt all of their cells in a large locality in a single night. In this case the target was the city of Ba'qubah and its environs. Seven battalions under the command of two brigades and a single division headquarters departed after midnight on 12 November 2005, moved along three separate routes, and struck hundreds of targets in Ba'qubah and nearby towns. Coalition and Iraqi forces captured 377 suspected insurgents without destroying one house or harming one civilian; nor did they kill any friendly or enemy combatants, and only three Iraqi Special Police were wounded. More remarkable was that the Iraqi Special Police Forces of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) had planned, prepared, and executed the entire operation.

In late October, the minister of interior told the Operations Directorate to study options for a large-scale, simultaneous strike in Diyala against a large number of suspected insurgents and their support and information networks. After receiving the options, the minister decided on 5 November to execute the mission. That same day the intelligence section of the Operations Directorate provided a list of insurgent and terrorist targets to the Public Order Division commander with a warning order to be prepared to move to Ba'qubah and conduct operations to detain those targets.

The Public Order Division immediately began planning, focusing on developing target folders for the hundreds of discrete targets forces would have to secure. Simultaneously, Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) was notified through its cell in the MOI National Command Center. Planning and coordination continued with an MOI/Multinational Command-Iraq (MNC-I) meeting on 9 November to address deconfliction of routes, battlespace, and access to Coalition medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) and effects. The 3d Brigade Combat Team (BCT)
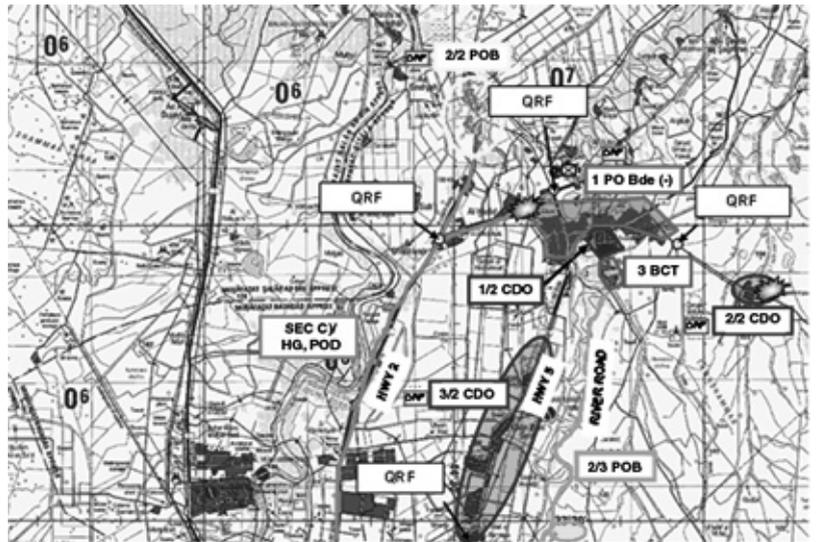
of Multi-National Division-North Central hosted the meeting and conducted detailed coordination with Public Order Division units to prepare for supporting the Iraqi operation.

Throughout the planning and coordination stage of Operation Knockout, Special Police Transition Teams (SPTTs) under Colonel Gordon B. "Skip" Davis and Colonel Jeffrey Buchanan advised the Iraqis and planned and coordinated their own support to the operation. These teams of 10 to 12 soldiers lived, trained, and fought alongside the Iraqi Special Police 24 hours a day and contributed significantly to the Iraqis' development. For several months before Operation Knockout, Davis and Buchanan's teaching, coaching, and mentoring helped the Iraqi Special Police plan, coordinate, and develop the operational skills necessary for success. At the small unit level, the SPTTs did not just train the Iraqi Special Police to fight; they helped develop noncommissioned officers and junior leaders who could lead the fight.

Multiple, simultaneous operations in Operation Knockout.

At execution, Public Order Division elements, reinforced by a brigade of Iraqi Special Police commandos, moved along three separate routes to their objectives in and around Ba'qubah, conducting clean-up operations in small towns along the way. At 0500 on 12 November 2005, seven battalions of Iraqi Special Police struck their main objectives nearly simultaneously. At target areas, they dispersed into small groups, each executing several preplanned and prepared targets. As soon as they accomplished their missions, the units redeployed. By noon all raids were complete, and by 1800 all units had returned to their bases. Detainees were immediately placed in the detention facility at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Justice, with the overflow held in the FOB dining facility.

In designing Operation Knockout, Iraqi planners used the same sophisticated approach U.S. planners had employed for Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989. Both operations were based on well-developed intelligence and knowledge of the enemy. Both were supported by in-place capabilities: in the case of Operation Just Cause, by U.S. forces permanently based in the Panama Canal Zone; in Operation Knockout by Iraqi Army and Special Police units and the 3d BCT.

In both actions, operations security and deception were effectively integrated and contributed to success. And, in each operation, the main body deployed en mass from out of sector to achieve surprise. The critical similarity is that both operations struck dozens of points almost simultaneously to overwhelm the enemy physically and mentally. Finally, both operations swiftly exploited combat gains. In successfully executing Operation Knockout, Iraqi Special Police carried out one of the most complex and challenging types of military operations.

Intelligence-Based Operations

Operation Knockout demonstrated the necessity for and effectiveness of intelligence-based COIN operations. The MOI Intelligence Office of the Operations Directorate spent several weeks developing the targets that would eventually be raided. Local informants confirmed potential targets, and the Intelligence Office produced one- to three-page papers detailing why each individual was targeted. Using manual methods and Falcon View Light (an airborne mapping capability), Special Police units developed a target folder for each individual. Surreptitious eyes-on provided last-minute updates to target sets.

One of the other lessons learned is that planners must provide clear targets to raiding forces. For some of the targets, the MOI gave the Public Order Division little more than names and addresses. When that happens, the burden of target development is transferred to the tactical unit, and the reason for going after that target becomes unclear.

A second lesson concerns the need for accurate maps. While Iraqi Special Police demonstrated great agility in planning, preparing, and executing a division-size operation in a week, they did so without accurate maps because the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and MOI have virtually no map-production and distribution system. Iraqi Special Police units were forced to rely on the SPTTs for maps. The Coalition must

work with the security ministries to develop a responsive capability to produce more sufficient maps.

Surprise and operations security. A number of factors helped Iraqi Special Police gain the advantage of surprise, which in turn resulted in an effective mission with almost no casualties or collateral damage. The short time between notification of the mission and its execution reduced the chance that notice of the operation would leak to the residents of Ba'qubah or the media. MOI leaders also employed basic deception techniques. Special Police commanders briefed their troops on potential operations in southern Baghdad and then employed deception as to the timing and magnitude of the coming operation. Next, rather than a slow buildup of troops visible to insurgents and their supporters, Special Police units staged in Baghdad at various FOBs, then moved the approximately 40 kilometers to the Ba'qubah area along multiple routes in the middle of the night.

The speed with which units moved slowed enemy reactions and reduced advance warning to intended targets. The use of a new tactic, a division-size raid rather than a smaller, sequential cordon and search or deliberate attack, ensured that opponents would have to react without preplanned counters or tactics. This tactic and the raiders' swift departure after mission accomplishment meant Special Police units had already returned to their protected compounds near Baghdad before any opponent could react.

Small, distributed, simultaneous operations. We can attribute much of the Iraqi Special Police's success to tactics that were ideal for the COIN environment. Insurgents survive by dispersing into small cells distributed across the battlespace and by reacting and adapting faster than conventional opponents. Operation Knockout negated these advantages during execution when the Public Order and commando battalions broke into dozens of company-size elements that struck simultaneously.

Simultaneity was the key because targets had no opportunity to react or even to pass warnings before other targets were hit. More conventional operations are conducted linearly, starting at one end of a town and pushing deliberately through that town on line. They resemble squeezing a tube of toothpaste from the bottom up: You might get the first insurgents you put the clamps on, but those further up the street will escape to fight another day. In contrast, the Iraqi Special Police's small-unit raids were distributed laterally and in depth, allowing little opportunity for escape. By executing distributed, simultaneous operations, the Special Police units demonstrated solid training, discipline, and the ability to execute actions using mission orders and commander's intent instead of detailed, direct supervision.

Minimizing casualties and damage. COIN operations must do more than simply kill or capture opponents. To win the COIN fight, counterinsurgents cannot alienate the local population; in fact, the people must be turned from supporting the insurgents to supporting the legitimate government and its forces. Killing and wounding innocent civilians and destroying homes and businesses can have adverse strategic consequences that far outweigh any temporary tactical gains.

Under Saddam Hussein's regime, the police had a reputation for oppressing the people, a reputation that seemed to carry forward when disturbing images of abused detainees from the Baghdad Bunker surfaced the same week Operation Knockout was conducted. But the Iraqi Special Police took care in planning, orders, and execution to ensure the operation would show the people of Ba'qubah that government forces could defeat terrorists without destroying homes or harming innocent civilians. Through discreet, deliberate, precise targeting; by conducting operations at night; by focusing on detention, not killing; and by treating detainees humanely and rapidly releasing detainees who were innocent, the Iraqi Special Police set the example for operating in a manner designed to win hearts and minds without creating new opponents. That no civilians were killed or injured and no local buildings were destroyed proves the Iraqi Special Police understood the strategic, not just the tactical, effect of military operations.

Exploitation. In the days following the raid, the Iraqi Special Police took specific steps to exploit their success. First, they used investigators to screen out noninsurgents, whom they released as fast as possible. Those who remained in custody received three hot meals a day (the same food Public Order Division policemen were eating) and were given mattresses, blankets, clean clothes, and access to latrines and washing facilities. External observers, media, Coalition officers, and local sheikhs from the tribes of Diyala were welcome to observe this humane treatment and were free to speak to the detainees.

The Public Order Division also followed up the raid with preplanned media events designed to demonstrate their competence and to assure the Iraqi people that the Special Police were there to protect them from the insurgents. The speed with which the Public Order Division organized effective media events despite only a week's notice was impressive; more conventional forces with highly centralized approval of themes and messages are

often incapable of exploiting tactical success. By conducting a media event each day for several days, the Special Police kept their successful operation in the local and national Iraqi news long enough to reinforce the Public Order Division's key messages.

Operational mobility. The Iraqi Special Police, a national force designed to operate anywhere in Iraq, have worked in Baghdad, Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi, Tal Afar, and Samarrah. They provide a level of operational agility that other, more conventional forces simply cannot. And they will get even better. For Operation Knockout, Public Order Division and commando units had not yet received their full complement of cargo and fuel trucks, ambulances, water trucks, and personnel transport. Fortunately, the distances traveled and the duration of the raid were short, so the lack of vehicles did not hamper operational mobility. That must be corrected, however, to make full use of these units' unique capabilities.

The Public Order Division enhanced its operational mobility by building a Command and Control (C2) van, which the Division Commander used as an assault command post. With Iraqi Special Police tactical communications connectivity to the brigades and battalions; operational communications back to the MOI National Command Center and division headquarters; and laptop computers for battle tracking, the C2 van allowed the Division Commander to exercise command when away from his headquarters.

Iraqi Security Forces "In the Lead"

Operation Knockout is an excellent example of what happens when Iraqi Security Forces take the lead. Iraqi Special Police commanders planned, prepared, and executed the raid and then conducted an after-action review (AAR). The SPTTs also used the mission as a training vehicle, observing, providing Coalition coordination, and coaching when necessary.

While training for Operation Knockout, Davis's division-level SPTT focused on battle-tracking by the Division Commander in his van and by division headquarters at FOB Justice. The Public Order Division hosted several meetings to conduct detailed coordination with the 3d BCT/3d Infantry Division and its higher headquarters, the 101st Airborne Division, to ensure Coalition support (such as quick-reaction and MEDEVAC) was integrated into the operation.

The Public Order Division commanded and executed Operation Knockout. SPTTs at each level accompanied their assigned units, observed, and ensured that Coalition forces had situational awareness of the operation. They were prepared to call for Coalition support if required. The 3d BCT executed a small, parallel raid to reinforce the Iraqi Special Police's operation and to provide quick-reaction forces and on-call MEDEVAC. Far and away, however, Operation Knockout was an operational punch delivered by Iraqi units.

The final AAR was run entirely by the Iraqi Special Police chain of command, which used the review process to reinforce lessons learned and training at every echelon from battalion to division. The AAR was robustly attended, with the MOI, MNF-I, MNC-I, 101st Airborne Division, and Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq participating. Clearly, though, the Iraqi Special Police were "in the lead."

On the Road to Victory

In 21st-century counterinsurgencies one operation cannot win a war or even change the course of a conflict. But Operation Knockout certainly marks a positive stage in the development of the Iraqi Security Forces. The Iraqi Special Police proved to have a keen understanding of the fundamentals of COIN operations, as well as of the leadership, discipline, and training needed to execute those operations. They demonstrated clearly that they are fully capable of leading and executing both the kinetic and nonkinetic aspects of COIN operations. By conducting an innovative, effective operation, they have given the insurgents and terrorists a new set of problems to adapt to and overcome. All in all, Operation Knockout demonstrated that Iraq is on the road to defeating the insurgents and ensuring its future as a secure, democratic state. ***MR***

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