

Lessons from the Sunni Triangle

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Brief Analysis

The Mission of the 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq

Like all U.S. forces in Iraq, the 82nd Airborne Division worked hard in 2003-2004. Beginning in February 2003, the division's headquarters were split between Afghanistan and Iraq. From February 2003 to April 2004, at least two maneuver brigades from the division were continuously deployed in one of these two countries. Eventually, every brigade in the division rotated through Iraq.

Prior to the war, the 82nd Airborne was prepared to jump into Baghdad to secure the capital if Saddam Husayn was killed or went into exile. During the war, the division confronted Iraqi paramilitaries that had been bypassed by other forces and secured the lines of communication for advancing U.S. troops. During the postwar period, the division conducted combat and stability-and-support operations.

The 82nd Airborne's area of responsibility included Iraq's western Anbar province, stretching from the Syrian, Jordanian, and Saudi borders in the west to the Sunni Triangle cities of Iskandariya, Fallujah, and Ramadi in the east.

Operational Approach

The primary mission of the 82nd Airborne was to capture or kill those trying to kill U.S. soldiers. In order to achieve that goal, the division had to gain the support and assistance of local populations. In August 2003, the division received an average of twenty tips per week regarding insurgent activity. By March 2004, this figure had increased to 300 per week. Encouraging Iraqis to support the U.S. military is the key to achieving stability, and these figures show that U.S. forces have made significant headway. As little as one percent of the population is actually interested in attacking coalition forces. Most of the remaining 99 percent of Iraqis are on the fence; they are potential supporters of either the coalition or the insurgency. For the most part, it seems that they have supported the coalition because they want a better future for Iraq.

That 1 percent, however, has sought to intimidate the majority. Hence, in order to gain the trust of the Iraqi people, the 82nd Airborne went after the insurgents with surgical precision. It also created a public works program that stimulated the economy and employed Iraqis -- principally young, military-eligible males who were potential insurgents -- so that they could provide for their families through legitimate rather than nefarious means.

In addition to drying up the pool of potential militant recruits, the 82nd Airborne also tried to deny the insurgents the means of attacking coalition forces. Eliminating Iraq's copious stockpiles of ammunition was an important goal. Approximately ninety-two large ammunition supply depots have been rendered inaccessible to insurgents. Most of these facilities were either consolidated or destroyed. Only four depots remain intact, and they are all under heavy guard. Eight hundred Iraqis were employed in these efforts. This arrangement was mutually advantageous; because the ammunition was transported in Iraqi trucks, the convoys were not attacked.

Establishing Security

Like other coalition forces, the 82nd Airborne had to deal with insurgent attacks on a daily basis, often involving AK-

47 and RPK rifle fire and rocket-propelled grenades. The insurgents also attacked coalition positions with mortar fire and rockets; U.S. troops used precision artillery strikes in retaliation. Not even aircraft were safe; several coalition helicopters were shot down in the Fallujah area by surface-to-air missiles. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) proved particularly dangerous; they are inexpensive to make, easy to conceal, and can be detonated remotely, allowing the attackers to escape. The most difficult of these devices are vehicle-borne IEDs. Even shooting the drivers before they reach their targets may not prevent them from accomplishing their objective. In addition, recurring attacks on military convoys led the 82nd Airborne to reinforce its vehicles. Steel plating was added to the doors of Humvees, and Kevlar blankets were used to line the floors. When the division was deployed out of Iraq, it left this material behind for the relieving unit.

Surgical combat operations were the hallmark of the 82nd Airborne, which conducted over 600 such actions. These operations are very different in scope and technique from conventional warfare. Through them, the division was able to capture 3,800 individuals, including 37 high-value targets and 50 foreign fighters. The number of foreign fighters currently in Iraq is unknown at this time, but it seems that the majority of the insurgents are Iraqis. Yet, the foreign fighters have been largely responsible for launching vehicle-borne IED attacks and providing technical expertise and financing

Fallujah continues to present several unique problems not encountered in other parts of the country. When Saddam released thousands of inmates from Abu Ghraib prison, many of them went to Fallujah. The city is also highly tribal and religious in character; the current atmosphere in the city is probably much the way it was in the eighteenth century. Tribal shaykhs and religious clerics play a major role in inciting the population to violence against the coalition.

Recruiting Security Forces

In addition to engaging the enemy in combat, the 82nd Airborne helped the Iraqis build their own security forces, establishing seven battalions of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps. Under Saddam, the Republican Guard -- the Iraqi military's elite force -- was the most powerful internal security organization in the country. With that force routed during the war, one of the most difficult postwar tasks involved preparing the Iraqi police to assume responsibility for internal security. Iraqi security personnel did not have the right equipment to fight the enemy, and obtaining resources such as flak vests, radios, and vehicles was a slow and frustrating process. Even personnel who were properly equipped had difficulty gaining the respect of the Iraqi people, who previously had not looked to the police to maintain order.

Approximately 2,200 Iraqi border police operated in the 82nd Airborne's area of responsibility. They were tasked with patrolling the western borders and managing four crossing points. The 44,000 religious pilgrims who returned to Iraq from Saudi Arabia after the hajj were handled exclusively by these border police. At the suggestion of a tribal shaykh, much of the border security force was made up of Bedouins, who could spend long stretches in the desert and navigate it at night.

Reconstruction

Iraq has tremendous potential for investment. The 82nd Airborne spent \$41 million to create jobs, establish a veteran's office, and start a civic improvement program. During Ramadan, the division paid Iraqis to refurbish some 230 mosques and to clean up towns in Anbar province. Refurbishing looted clinics was also a major priority. Moreover, Iraqis, not the U.S. military, were charged with running the province. A fifty-one-member provincial council met with military officials once a month for coordination purposes. The structure of the original council was largely tribal; thirty-six of its members were tribal shaykhs. In January 2004, the total number of members was whittled down from fifty-one to forty-one, all selected through a caucus. Only eight members of the new council were

tribal shaykhs. The rest were businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and educators. The new council is more representative of the province as a whole, particularly its urban areas, where tribal shaykhs compete for influence with the professional classes.

The United States has made significant inroads in Iraq. The U.S. campaign in the country was a just cause, and continued commitment is crucial. The aftermath of World War II provided sixty years of peace in Europe. Current U.S. actions in Iraq could likewise provide for a stable Middle East in the future.

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