

Send in the Advisers

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Washington

THE United States has more than 130,000 troops in Iraq, 14 combat brigades in all. But as sectarian violence rages in Baghdad, it is increasingly clear that success or failure in this war does not rest solely, or even primarily, on the efforts of American combat troops. Rather, it lies in the hands of some 4,000 soldiers -- the American officers and sergeants embedded as combat advisers in the new Iraqi security forces.

These advisers are the steel rods around which the newly poured concrete of the Iraq military will harden. They will determine whether President Bush can keep his pledge to "stand up" Iraqi forces so that American forces in Iraq can "stand down." And it is the Iraqi military that will in turn play the crucial role in girding Iraq against the chaos that now threatens to engulf it.

Given the importance of the advisory effort, one might expect it to be a top priority for the Bush administration. But there are worrisome signs that this is not the case.

Despite their critical part in this war, the advisers are thinly spread. Every Iraqi battalion, made up of some 500 troops, is assigned roughly a dozen advisers, although the true requirement is closer to 30. Sadly, the Army's best officers avoid serving as advisers if at all possible. The reason is simple: the Army is far more likely to promote officers who have served with American units than those who are familiar with a foreign military.

Because of the resulting shortfall, some Army units have been given the task of augmenting the advisory teams. Yet often these units simply send their "problem children" -- their most marginal officers and sergeants -- to support the advisers. This places an additional burden on the advisers, who must not only coach the Iraqis but also deal with their less-than-capable American colleagues.

Some American brigade commanders further compound the problem by imposing extensive reporting requirements on the advisory teams. While the Army has scores of "PowerPoint rangers" (the title given to officers who prepare briefings and reports), the Iraqis have none. And so the advisers often spend hours doing paperwork when they could have been working with their Iraqi counterparts instead.

The advisory effort is too important not to succeed. Advisers coach their Iraqi counterparts on how to plan, conduct and sustain counterinsurgency operations involving dozens and eventually hundreds of soldiers. They also work to identify and report the corruption in the Iraqi government that can make it difficult to get adequate supplies to Iraqi troops. Unlike the soldiers in American units, who retreat to fortified bases with air-conditioned barracks and other amenities, the advisers live, train, eat and fight with their Iraqi counterparts.

It is not surprising that many Iraqi officers come to treat their American advisers as "brothers," whereas they view United States units with skepticism. Revealingly, Lt. Gen. Martin Dempsey, who is in charge of training and equipping the Iraqi forces, reports that Iraqi troops have never betrayed their United States advisory teams to the insurgents. It is this kind of trust that will be essential to waging effectively what the Bush administration now calls the "long war."

Living and working day in, day out with the Iraqis, advisers are also an invaluable source of intelligence. They know which Iraqi military leaders are the most talented and worthy of promotion and which are incompetent and need to be relieved. They can help us identify which officers are loyal and which have sectarian sympathies, which are honest and which corrupt. The advisers can best tell us what equipment the Iraqis need to be most effective, rather than what equipment we think they should have.

With popular support for the war waning and sectarian violence in Iraq rising, the United States ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, has declared, "The next six months will be critical in terms of reining in the danger of civil war."

The Iraqi Army's ability to stem the violence will depend, as much as anything, on how well its American advisers perform. It is vital that we put our best people into this effort, in sufficient numbers and with sufficient resources to succeed.

This means doubling or, better still, tripling the number of advisers per battalion. To attract our best soldiers to serve as advisers, Army promotion boards must be instructed to give preference to those officers and sergeants who serve capably in this position.

Advisers should also be encouraged, through promotions and bonuses, to serve tours longer than the standard single year. Longer service enables the advisers and the Iraqis to develop strong bonds of trust, rather than building a new relationship every 12 months.

United States Army commanders in Iraq should demonstrate their commitment to the

development of the Iraqi forces by fully including Iraqi commanders in their planning efforts, conducting combined missions with Iraqi units as a matter of course, and eliminating all unnecessary administrative burdens on the advisers.

Expanding the advisory effort is a winning strategy for everyone. By making the Iraqi military more effective, advisers can ultimately enable us to reduce the number of American soldiers deployed in Iraq. Those who are looking for signs of how well we are doing in this war and how soon our troops can begin to come home would do well to measure the progress of this small band of American soldiers. Their success will determine whether we win this war, at what cost, and how soon.

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