

Progress and Triumphs for U.S. Correctional Advisers in Iraq

By Mark Saunders



The fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq created a drastic gap in governmental services — so drastic that many of the Iraqi prisons were evacuated. The only prisons that remained relatively intact were the Kurdish prisons in the northern areas of Iraq. Hussein had released several thousand inmates at the onset of the war with the hopes of enlisting them as soldiers to fight in his army. Instead, they scattered and hid, refusing to defend the way of life that unjustly put many of them in prison. With no government to instruct or pay them, prison workers abandoned the remainder of the prisons, and the inmates escaped from them soon after.

After overthrowing the Iraqi dictator, the U.S. military established holding facilities in the structures that were used as prisons prior to the war. After a few months, advisers from other countries, primarily the United States, were brought in to manage the Iraqi civilian prisons, allowing the U.S. military to focus on the detention of terrorists and war criminals. This transition occurred in late 2003, creating the need for additional advisers to complement the small advance parties. More advisers began arriving in Iraq in early 2004. Within weeks, more than 50 U.S. prison workers were on-site in Baghdad to help train and advise the Iraqis working in the Iraqi Corrections Service (ICS). Upon arrival, their mission became one of managing rather than advising, because the Iraqi prison workers were not yet able to make decisions and establish prison policy. The Iraqis, through no fault of their own, were untrained and inexperienced. The clear priority was training, but the training had to be somewhat secondary, because the prisons had to be managed safely and humanely, a task that absorbed most of the advisers' time and efforts.

The Culture

Among the multiple challenges were those relating specifically to culture and tradition. Because Iraq is an Islamic state, the lifestyles of its people are dominated by Muslim practices. Affiliations and relationships with tribal and religious sects took precedence over individual status such as “inmate” or “correctional employee.” An immediate distrust between advisers and Iraqi correctional officers was created because the prison workers seemed to have no boundaries in their relationships with their wards. They would greet inmates with hugs and kisses, sometimes openly displaying their servitude to those inmates who had certain standing in their mosque, tribe or community.

In addition, Iraqis considered it rude to tell each other “no.” If someone made a request that could not or should not be accommodated, it was customary to answer him or her with reasons and excuses. It would be discussed back and forth for long periods of time, usually concluding with no definitive response. The request might get honored or not, but personal decorum was maintained because the request was not really denied — it simply was not honored. Corrections, as the advisers knew it, used “no” as a frequent answer for which everyone had perfect understanding. The Iraqis would not readily accept this, thereby causing some frustration both for themselves and the advisers. The Iraqis were an ingratiating people; they would simply accommodate or rationalize an impossible request rather than argue or face conflict. In most environments, this would have worked, but not in a paramilitary institution such as prison.



Photos by Mark Saunders

Initially, ICS staff lacked training and experience.

The strategy of the advisers was to aggressively inform and train the Iraqis to overcome cultural obstacles when they presented an overt danger to the operation and to find ways to live with the other cultural differences. Degrading or changing the culture of the people was never the mission or, thankfully, the result. Teaching them good correctional judgment was both intended and realized, mostly occurring on a one-to-one basis.

Living in a Third-World Country

Living conditions in third-world countries present their own set of issues, and Iraq was no different. Iraqi prison workers found it unreasonable that certain rights would be granted to inmates, especially since their country was only on the doorstep of globally accepted human rights. Power outages in the prisons were not considered to be a big problem by the prison workers because the general public endured their share of power outages, and therefore, the inmates could get by with interruptions in power. The Iraqis failed to consider the dangers inherent in a prison without electrical power, such as darkened perimeters and housing areas, because it never occurred to them that the inmates might use the outages to behave deviously without fear of detection or try to escape under the cover of darkness.

Medical care and other services, considered routine in U.S. prisons, were met with the same type of attitude. Iraqi correctional officers did not always accept that inmates should get medical care, especially when they could not get quality medical care for their families. They did not understand the insistence that the inmates get three meals per day, because no one guaranteed their families three meals every day. Cleanliness was not a priority in prisons, in part because many of the prison employees lived in dilapidated shacks with dirt floors. This resistance lessened as the standard of living for the average Iraqi rose, which fortunately did not take long. Postwar salaries were greatly increased from the Hussein days. Teachers, correctional officers, police and other government workers were making at least seven times more than they had made in the same positions prior to the war. Entrepreneurs' earnings were limited only to the amount of work they wanted to do, as the demand for construction, goods and services

skyrocketed and brought higher compensation. Complementing the increased earnings was a cost of living that remained essentially at the prewar level.

Training

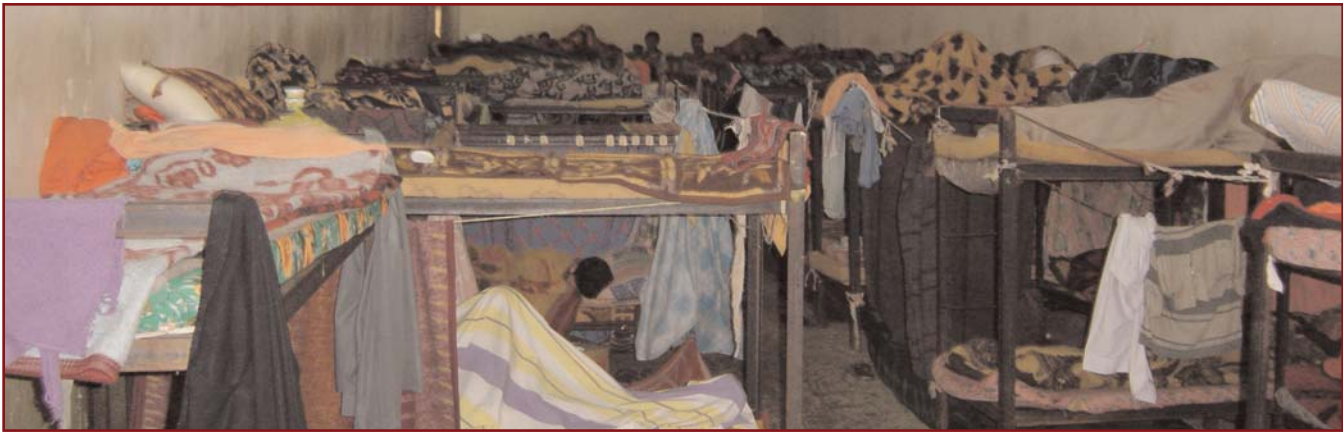
Training would take two distinct forms: on the job and formal classroom style. On-the-job training was a daily adventure that occurred frequently and often unexpectedly. After the discovery of a problem, advisers would deal with it. Only on few occasions would one interaction resolve an issue. As in all good learning, repetition was the best teacher. It helped when various entities reinforced each other — from advisers to Iraqi supervisors to other correctional officers. “Corrections 101” was taught with live subjects, so mistakes, when made, were generally more significant. As one might expect, some bad outcomes had to be endured. Escapes, disturbances and other problems occurred because Iraqi correctional officers were not where they were supposed to be and not doing what they were supposed to be doing. Over time, training improved their knowledge base and practices, thereby greatly reducing incidents.

The prisons were spared any widespread inmate abuse. After discovery of just a few cases, advisers made it clear that inmates were not to be abused or tortured. Although the Hussein regime routinely abused and tortured inmates (murdering them by the hundreds per week), the Iraqis were relieved to find that such treatment was neither expected nor tolerated. It was as if the weight of the world was lifted from their shoulders when they learned that their fellow citizens, inmates or not, were not to be physically abused.

Pending the construction of the Iraqi Corrections Service Training Academy, the advisers wrote curriculum and began sending new and existing correctional officers to an academy-like atmosphere for formal training. Graduates



After proper training, the ICS became a respected professional work force.



Upon arrival of the U.S. advisors, housing areas were dirty and cluttered.

helped raise the level of professionalism as they filtered into the work force, raising standards in the prisons and making the environments safer and more secure. Soon after, advisers began in-service training programs in the prisons, getting more and more Iraqi correctional officers the quality training they needed to sustain professionalism in their prisons in the years to come.

Construction and Remodeling

The physical plants of most of the prisons were outdated and in various stages of decay. The structures that were most worthy were used to house inmates while others were remodeled and new prisons were built. Because the system was new, the inmate population was small. However, the more active the courts and police became, the faster the population grew.

Water supplies were a constant concern because of the heat and close proximity of the inmates in poorly ventilated cells. Advisers challenged the Iraqis to maintain fresh, cool water in every cell and dormitory while installing and repairing fans and ridding the living areas of unnecessary clutter. The Iraqis responded and, in a few short months, accomplished the objectives, which made a major improvement in the living conditions of the inmates. In the occupied prisons, dormitories were remodeled one or two at a time, as the population would allow. The process was slow, but eventually they all were remodeled. New prisons and units began reopening within the advisers' first year in Iraq, providing better conditions and easing the burden on the existing prisons.

Communication

Communication was an enormous barrier. Although aided by language assistants, many words and phrases do not easily translate from language to language, and some

meaning was often lost or altered. This delayed understanding of a problem or explanation of a solution, adding time to every interaction and thus lowering effectiveness. Language barriers not only slowed the processes but also could distort a situation so completely that an adviser might think an Iraqi was refusing to perform a task when, instead, he did not understand what to do. Iraqis, in turn, would read faces and actions and sometimes mistake frustration for anger. Anger, of course, is not a good mechanism to employ for training purposes, and when the Iraqis perceived anger, the effect was the same as if their trainers really were angry.

Also at issue was the method by which certain notions translate. When describing how to do a cell check or what to look for when manning a tower, the Iraqis would often interpret that instruction as applicable only to the current moment, failing to understand that it was to be a regular function of the post. The translation from English to Arabic seemed not to allow for the idea of constant repetition. Although the interpreters were invaluable, most of them spoke only broken English, raising suspicion about their understanding as well.

Slowing down the verbal exchanges, double- and triple-checking to ensure understanding, combined with the exercise of patience, eventually led to mutual understanding. Unfortunately, it took some time to get there. The advisers and Iraqis were thrust into relationships with each other that were viewed differently based on the situation. The Iraqis were overwhelming at times with their praise and thanks. They were constantly telling the advisers how much they appreciated their coming to Iraq, far away from their families and normal lives, to help them.

The advisers tried to maintain professional boundaries because they were seen as authority figures to the Iraqis. At the same time, they also had the underlying fear that at some point any Iraqi could be influenced to do them harm. Terrorists employed unscrupulous tactics and would

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Living conditions drastically improved with remodeling, cleaning and property control.

threaten Iraqis who worked with Americans. The advisers understood that an Iraqi might act in the best interest of his or her family at the expense of an adviser or the security of the mission. Even while being personally drawn to the Iraqis as they got to know them and their daily struggles individually, advisers still kept in mind this conflict.

Corruption

In prewar Iraq, corruption was the way of doing business with the government. Hussein placed his Bath Party followers in positions of power so that they could gain and retain wealth. Iraqis thought nothing of paying a government official for a job, as long as they got what they paid for. It was not even a consideration that the person who could not pay for the job would never get one. Bribing government officials was the way Iraqis could get their relatives out of prison, their enemies in prison and anything in between. In the new Iraq, Iraqi prison administrators were promoted and removed with startling frequency because of corruption they would engage in when they were put in positions of power. Families, government employees, vendors and others would approach them and offer them money for favors, and too often they could not resist the temptation because they were so accustomed to this way of doing business before the war. This old habit died hard. It was a subject that had to be taught and retaught, visited and revisited, until almost entire administrations were replaced in some prisons.

Working in a War Zone

There are significant inconveniences when working and living in a war zone. Terrorists in Iraq would mortar the prisons almost daily and frequently fire on them. The advisers' living quarters were bombed. Caravans carrying the advisers traveling to and from the prisons were attacked by explosive devices and gunfire. Personal safety took on new meaning.

As the threat escalated, so did the security measures. Travel was prohibited except for work purposes. Advisers began traveling in vehicles retrofitted with armor and under the escort of a U.S. military convoy or armed private security forces. Protective helmets and ballistic vests were worn, and advisers carried fully loaded pistols and automatic rifles. While cumbersome and time-consuming, the ultimate benefit was that they were alive to complete their mission.

Enjoying the Process

The triumphs of the learning process were jointly celebrated and appreciated. In some cases the accomplishments could be compared with a child learning to ride a bike — the father watching the two-wheeler wobbling along the sidewalk with pride after he lets go of the bike, knowing that some falls will come but that the child is learning. The Iraqis achieved the satisfaction and excitement of “riding the bike” on their own for the very first time and not letting the frequent spills discourage them, because they knew that “Dad” would help them back on and get them started again.

The Iraqi Corrections Service has advanced far beyond the old system of unjust imprisonment and abuse. However, it has one thing in common with every prison system in the world: it is not perfect. It has something else in common with most other prison systems: it is getting better every day. This is due to the courage and determination of the many Iraqis who have risked everything for a chance at a justice never known to them before. American advisers who worked daily with the Iraqi Corrections Service, and those who continue to work with them, count this experience as one of the most meaningful in their careers and their lives.

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