

Six Steps in Iraq: A Bottom-Up Plan from the Troops

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by Major Eric Eglund

The plan recommends six key changes to U.S. military operations in Iraq that will better enable our troops to win. It fits within the current strategy and could be immediately implemented by Congress, the Pentagon, and the new leadership in Baghdad. The first four steps will enable the troops to fulfill the fifth: smart offensive operations. The sixth step describes how to better fight the information war. While many of these actions have been carried out well by various units, overall success will continue to elude us until these are implemented throughout Iraq, denying the adversary the ability to simply shift operations away from certain units.

The plan takes a bottom-up approach and is based on inputs from hundreds of troops and dozens of experts in fields ranging from counter-terrorism operations and foreign aid to media advocacy and investment banking. The plan also reflects the author's experiences and observations during eight months in Iraq.

1. Encourage innovation by emphasizing small-scale technological solutions and reject peacetime bureaucracy

Deploying brigade commanders should be given authority to decide how to invest a large portion of the billions of dollars being allocated to counter-insurgency technologies. Representatives of organizations that provide the technology, such as government laboratories and defense contractors, should visit deploying units for venture capital-style Counter-Insurgency Technology Road Shows to convince them to authorize investment based on the merits of any capability. Currently, generals in Baghdad have some input, but even that is of limited value because a highly localized insurgency creates a significant gap between general staffs at Camp Victory and battalions walking the neighborhoods.

In the private sector, investors need to be convinced of investment value because they live with the results. Similarly, the troops live with the results of technologies sent to Iraq, so they should decide investments and priorities.

Troops prefer simple, proven off-the-shelf solutions, while Congress, the Pentagon and technology providers are accustomed to long-term, complex proprietary programs. Note that this approach should not apply to long-term investments in military infrastructure, but for supplemental spending designated for Iraq.

Furthermore, we must abandon the peacetime, business-as-usual mentality that pervades much of the government at home and in Iraq. A telling example occurred when Army bureaucrats denied a request from the troops for powerful handheld green lasers that were being used at checkpoints to safely warn oncoming traffic. The status quo remains, resulting in innocent Iraqis being killed in legally-justifiable but horrific escalation-of-force incidents that emotionally scar our troops and spawn local hatred that helps to fuel the insurgency.

2. Improve training by developing a support mindset in higher echelons, increasing pre-deployment training realism and intensity, and stripping legacy checklists

The staffs of higher military echelons in Iraq, such as division and corps, consider themselves combat forces and expect commensurate support, but it is actually the lower

echelons, battalion and company, that are engaged in combat and should be supported. To develop a support mindset at higher echelons, the military should change the top-down training model so leaders at each level understand that their role in Iraq will vary between command and support. Assuming the latter role can be a difficult shift for some rank-conscious conventional commanders, but it is critical for effective counter-insurgency.

Pre-deployment training checklists should be dramatically reduced to allow more input from the troops, who want more of the up-to-date counter-insurgency training offered by the new Centers of Excellence, and less of the high intensity conflict and legacy training from the Cold War and Bosnia eras. We will need the high-intensity training capability later, but first we need to win in Iraq.

3. Give tactical commanders needed support by establishing sponsorships between Americans and deployed troops, while dramatically increasing unit discretionary funds.

Many Americans feel disconnected from the mission in Iraq and want to play a bigger role. Cities, corporations and other large organizations should sponsor deploying battalions using Online Troop Sponsorship Registries, which could be created by synthesizing existing online web sites, from Wal-Mart.com to WickedLasers.com. These applications would enable troops to request what they need, whether for their mission, the locals or themselves. Congress should declare all contributions to these sites tax-free and tax-deductible, while the Pentagon should foster a spirit of friendly competition nationwide, encouraging and recognizing those sponsors who raise the most per capita support.

We should give the troops the resources needed to adapt to today's dynamic battlefield by adding \$1 million to each battalion discretionary spending account to facilitate Internet-enabled acquisition of commercially shipped goods. Our adversaries buy what they need online and change tactics far faster than we can create another billion-dollar technological silver bullet. We need to level the battlefield for our troops, if not tilt it in their favor. Given the choice, many units would trade \$5 million worth of jammers for a \$50k credit card to use to buy equipment such as generators and tools that they can use to entice greater local support. Current discretionary fund levels are embarrassingly low.

Units need cash to reward helpful locals because locals know where insurgents make bombs and plan sectarian attacks. We should facilitate the sharing of such information rather than hindering it. An existing small rewards program exemplifies this, because helpful locals receive coupons that require a life-risking redemption for cash at the nearest military base. If we can trust the troops with machine guns, we can trust them with small bills. Support from Iraqis will increase if battalions can hand four things to supportive locals: a \$20 bill, a video camera to record insurgent activity from the privacy of their living room or store, a phone to call it in, and a laptop to e-mail the video to U.S. and Iraqi forces for action.

4. Strengthen intelligence sharing between tactical and national levels and establish a national database to track worldwide attacks

National intelligence organizations should have representatives operating on the

remote bases in Iraq so they can interface between the tactical level, where the intelligence is collected, and the national level, where more can be gathered when cued by what is collected tactically.

The Israeli defense and intelligence communities cooperate in this way, and such an approach succeeded when applied by U.S. forces in Mosul, Iraq where a battalion had representatives from CIA, NSA and DIA at daily targeting meetings. The increased interagency coordination contributed to a dramatic reduction of insurgent activity because it leveraged the strengths of each organization. Too many U.S. intelligence professionals in Iraq work in palaces, far from the tactical units that battle the insurgency. Instead, they should eat, sleep and patrol with battalions and brigades who need their support.

We need a better database to keep track of how the enemy is attacking our forces. The lack of an effective attack database renders our forces almost incapable of conducting pattern analysis—a critical type of intelligence for targeting shadowy insurgents. Further, the rapid, Internet-enabled global migration of effective attack tactics and technologies requires a database with inputs and outputs available to U.S. forces worldwide.

5. Seize the smart offensive by reducing predictable patterns and integrating with local forces to conduct offensive operations that hunt, rather than chase, the adversary.

An offensive mindset is lacking in military leadership in Iraq. New leadership in Baghdad should ban presence patrols, a legacy from Bosnia involving troops driving around visibly hoping to deter violence. The actual result, though, is to offer our troops as targets while keeping them too busy for offensive operations. Leadership should require offensive hunting missions that are tactically-initiated and intelligence-driven. There are many pockets of excellence, or areas where U.S. forces have successfully applied this approach in Iraq, but the enemy consistently shifts operations to nearby areas and overall casualties continue to climb because the model is not applied broadly.

General Odierno should tell his divisions to work with Iraqi forces to reverse the growing number of casualties by reducing insurgent attacks by one-third in the next six weeks. They could likely succeed if higher echelons support tactical units and battalions are allowed to take the lead—but not if they continue to be blocked from pursuing new approaches while their time, energy and resources are sapped by presence patrols from the last war.

Sending more troops for surge operations in Baghdad will help if these operational changes are made. An unchanged status quo, however, means sending more troops may just offer more targets to our enemy.

We must engage insurgent networks offensively, starting at the tactical level. As the White House recently said, the weapons coming from Iran are much more deadly than the average roadside bomb. If all bombs were like those, the results would be devastating. The threat will grow until engaged offensively.

6. Accept the realities of warfare in the media age by decentralizing the sharing of information with the media and public.

Winning the daily information battle about Iraq requires offering the most consistent, visually compelling message—and a flaming car bomb beats a Pentagon podium every time. We need to counter the enemy's brilliant Flaming-Car-Bomb-A-Day

media campaign by getting stories out from units on the ground—the echelon considered most credible by the national media. Justified or not, the national media distrusts information from senior military leadership and their spokesmen.

Each battalion should designate a Unit Blogger, modeled on the war correspondent of the past—not as an additional duty, but a primary responsibility with commander emphasis—to record two weekly news stories, complete with sound bites, using video and computer equipment bought with increased discretionary funds. Units should forward the stories directly to the Pentagon, and the best news pieces would be shared with the national media, with rewards going to originating units. Meanwhile, all of the stories would be shared with local media outlets across the country through a Hometown Hero program that specifically distributes stories to outlets near the home bases of military units, and hometowns of individual soldiers featured in the stories. Units should send copies of stories to higher echelons in Iraq—keeping the chain of command informed but bypassing bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Pentagon complaints about media bias represent a lack of focus. We must provide credible, visually compelling stories to fill the media vacuum and contest the adversary's current dominance of the information war in Iraq.

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The U.S. can succeed in Iraq without abandoning our strategy. The operational status quo, however, must change. Leaders in Washington and Baghdad should listen to the soldiers on the ground and make these six changes to better enable our brave troops to finish the mission our nation sent them to do.

Author biography:

Major Eric Eglund (Reserve) has focused on Iraq since 2004. He has also deployed to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Colombia, and Saudi Arabia, where he was serving on 9/11. His professional experience includes operational and analytical roles working to defeat terrorism, narcotics trafficking and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). He holds a Master of Science in Strategic Intelligence from the National Defense Intelligence College.

He is the author of *The Troops Need You, America! Six Ways to Help Them Win From Your Living Room*, scheduled for release in mid-March 2007, four years after the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

He recently contributed to *Blog of War: Front Line Dispatches from Iraq and Afghanistan*, which was published by Simon and Schuster, and has been featured on CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News Radio to discuss national security.

Video links:

CNN on September 11th, 2006: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FzkgwzmBSE>,
MSNBC: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2h1DMirns0>

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