

Civil Education Center

By Lieutenant Colonel Rodney S. Morris

Author's foreword: *The names of certain locations and people in this article have been changed to protect those outstanding Iraqi citizens who have the intestinal fortitude and personal courage to stand against the insurgents and defend their country.*

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, "Ali Mohammed" wanted to be part of rebuilding his country right away. Ali, a life-long resident of a small city in "Alpha Province" called "Shakir City," immediately became involved with the American forces as a member of the Iraqi Advisory Council to the 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One.

Because he had lived in the area for so long and knew so many people, Ali had sources of intelligence that no American would ever have. Over a period of time, he noticed that several detainees released into his community were up to no good. After personally getting involved and conversing with several of these individuals, Ali realized they did not understand why the Americans and their coalition allies were in Iraq. Their reasons for attacking American and coalition forces were based on their old beliefs, which had not changed during the time they had spent incarcerated.

Ali said that the former detainees admitted that they had felt safer in the custody of the American Soldiers than they had felt under the control of their own police or army. However, nobody had ever explained the truth of the American occupation to them. Ali knew this would continue to be a problem if he did not do something, so he developed a plan that he believed would fix it. It was a program designed to reintegrate former detainees, not to rehabilitate them. Ali thought that if he could spend personal time with the former detainees who were being released in his community, he could change their way of thinking and get them working toward rebuilding the country that he loved instead of trying to defeat the very force that was helping it.

Realizing that he could never accomplish this alone, he joined forces with the 1st Infantry Division's provost marshal's office (PMO) to make it happen. In September 2004, Ali, his staff, and the city of Shakir opened the doors to a community center that he named the Civil Education Center. The center's primary function is to support the reintegration of detainees who are to be released back into the community, but it can also provide support for other events when reintegration program classes are not in session. Financial support for the project came from the US Army and from prominent members of the Iraqi community.

The program is three days long, with the first day focused on welcoming the former detainees back into society and explaining to them what the program is about. They have an opportunity to take showers, get haircuts, and receive a new set of clothes. They also get a detailed medical examination and a full explanation of the results. Finally, they learn that they have served their time and do not have to stay for the program, but that by staying, they will be taught the skills necessary to function in a free society



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and will receive help in finding a respectable job. To date, not one person has walked away from this opportunity, Ali said. As of September 2005, there have been 1,413 former insurgents that have gone through the program.

The second day includes classes that focus on religion, terrorism, cultural differences between Iraqis, interaction with the new Iraqi police and Iraqi army, and discussions about the new future of Iraq. "They get into some very deep conversations about what they have always been taught and believed and about the way our country used to be," Ali said. "I let them share themselves with the group and then we try to explain and help them understand why it is not that way any more."

The final day includes additional classes and a field trip around the city. The trip reinforces firsthand the significant improvements that have taken place since the former detainees were incarcerated and the good things the American and coalition forces are doing for the community and country. The day ends with a formal graduation attended by prominent community leaders, including the provincial governor or his representative, tribal leaders, and sheiks.

The PMO credits three primary reasons for the success of the program. First, it is Iraqi-established and Iraqi-run. "Although we are heavily involved in making the program work," said the division's deputy provost marshal, "the Iraqis don't see it. We think it is important for the success of the program to teach the Iraqi people to take ownership so that the community believes it is completely Iraqi-run."

Second, the program is strongly supported by the community. The people of Shakir City and the surrounding communities understand the importance of embracing these individuals, giving them a sense of belonging that they have not experienced in quite some time. To reinforce that aspect of the program, the former detainees spend a night with volunteer families in the community while attending the program.

The third reason for the success of the program is its curriculum. The majority of the classes are

oriented toward teaching the former detainees how they can successfully function in their new society. They learn how to get jobs to support their families, how to avoid ending up on the wrong side of the efforts to achieve a free and democratic Iraq, and how to avoid going back to prison.

At a recent graduation ceremony, "Jassim Ahmad," an admitted former insurgent, shared an honest moment. "Yes, I try to kill Americans," Jassim said. "My father told me Americans come to my country to steal our oil and women. So, I must protect my home and my family. It is my duty."

"But now I understand truth of the Americans," Jassim said with a smile. "Now I know truth. I know Americans are my friends and I know they come here to help me and my country. So now I do my best to help them do that and I tell all my friends and my family to do same things."

Major General William Brandenburg, deputy commanding general for detention operations in Iraq, was impressed with the reintegration briefing he received from the 1st Infantry Division's PMO. "This is a great, great program," he said. "We need to do this throughout the whole country."

Over the last six months, the recidivism rate in the 1st Infantry Division's area of operation was less than one percent, testimony that the program is working. Realizing the success of this program and seeing the need for more like it, the division's PMO is working with Ali to stand up two additional reintegration centers, one in a northern province and another in a southern province.

"I am very thankful for the 1st Infantry Division (military police)," Ali said. "We work together a very long time to make this program work ... without their help, I cannot do it by myself. They are my good friends and are always welcome to my country."

In keeping with the finest traditions of excellence of the Military Police Corps, the 1st Infantry Division's PMO stands ready to assist today and lead the way toward a future free and democratic Iraq.