

Operation Lionclaw: Building Iraqi Route Clearance Capability Through Active Partnership



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During the past several months, U.S. and coalition forces have become increasingly focused on transition. Over time, as U.S. forces draw down in Iraq, the Iraqi Army (IA) will be required to expand its capabilities. For example, the No. 1 threat to both coalition and Iraqi forces continues to be the improvised explosive device (IED), which makes route clearance teams (RCTs) necessary. Since the current Iraqi Army modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) only authorizes one engineer company for each division, and since a division's operational environment typically covers 5,000 square kilometers in southern Iraq, more Iraqi RCTs will be needed to meet the threat.

Recognizing the capability gap within the Iraqi formation, the 4th Brigade Special Troops Battalion (BSTB), 3d Infantry Division—along with Echo Company, 3-7 Infantry, and the 760th Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Company—developed Operation Lionclaw to build Iraqi route clearance capability in the 8th Iraqi Army Division by transforming Iraqi infantry platoons into RCTs at the brigade level. The operation was named after the symbol of the Babil Province, the Lion of Babylon, and Iron Claw, the name of many U.S. RCTs. Operation Lionclaw consisted of four critical pieces: manning, equipping, training, and partnering. It would be necessary to successfully complete each of these parts to reach the ultimate goal of independent Iraqi route clearance operations coordinated by the Iraqi brigade.

Manning

The mobility support gap in the Iraqi Army became evident after conducting operations for six months, but we knew we could not build their capability without buy-in from our Iraqi partners. The 4-3 BSTB leader engagement team, in conjunction with the 31st Iraqi Army military transition team, led the discussion with the commander of the 31st Iraqi Army Brigade, who saw the importance of bringing route clearance capability to his brigade and assigned a platoon of Iraqi infantry forces from 2d Battalion, 31st Iraqi Army Brigade, to take the lead in Operation Lionclaw. Three more platoons followed—one each from the 1st, 3d, and 4th Battalions—and were to be handpicked by the battalion commanders of each respective battalion for this critical mission.

Equipping

Another key issue was determining the right equipment set for the Iraqi forces. The standard Iraqi Army route clearance vehicle is the Badger, a version of the mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) Cougar. With only four of these vehicles available for each Iraqi division, we were forced to develop alternatives. An American route clearance patrol includes a detection element, an interrogation element, and a security element. In a U.S. patrol, the detection element includes the Husky mine detection vehicle and the RG-31 MK III with self-protection adaptive roller kit (SPARK).

The Buffalo mine-protected clearance vehicle conducts interrogation, and the RG-31—or MRAP-type vehicles—provide security (see Figure 1). For the Iraqi Army, we would have to improvise. The initial plan was to use the Polish-built DZIK armored car as the platform for both the detection and interrogation by mounting a blower for detection and a ferret arm for interrogation. We would round out the patrol with an RG-31 with SPARK for detection and an Iraqi M1114 for security.

After an initial engineering and mechanical assessment, we determined that the DZIK would work to mount the blower, and we would mount the ferret arm on the mine roller mount, which our maintenance team designed and fabricated. Once the fabrication was complete, our initial equipment set was complete. The set included the RG-31 with SPARK, RG-31 with ferret arm, and the DZIK or M1114. We were now ready to train the Iraqi Army.

Training

The Lionclaw Academy at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Kalsu served as a 14-day cornerstone training event for the program, where Iraqi forces were trained on critical tasks that would allow them to operate with their U.S. counterparts. A U.S. route clearance platoon leader, enlisted squad leaders, and EOD Soldiers served as cadre. The first week consisted mostly of classroom instruction, in which the students were trained in areas of vehicle maintenance, vehicle recovery, patrolling, and mission briefings. An average day consisted of a classroom portion in the morning, followed by practical exercises in the afternoon.

During the second week of training, the students conducted “mock patrols” on a situational training exercise (STX) lane on the FOB. With help from the EOD Soldiers, the cadre set up inert IEDs and initiation systems common to our operating environment. The students drove the vehicles and operated the equipment themselves, looking for the suspected IEDs. This phase applied the crawl-walk-run method, with coalition forces assisting in the beginning, and ended with the Iraqi platoon conducting a certification STX patrol. Language was a challenge to the training, but with numerous translators assisting, it became easier each day. In addition, the cadre improved their Arabic language skills, enabling them to interact more comfortably with the students.

U.S. Route Clearance Team Formation Iraqi Route Clearance Team Formation

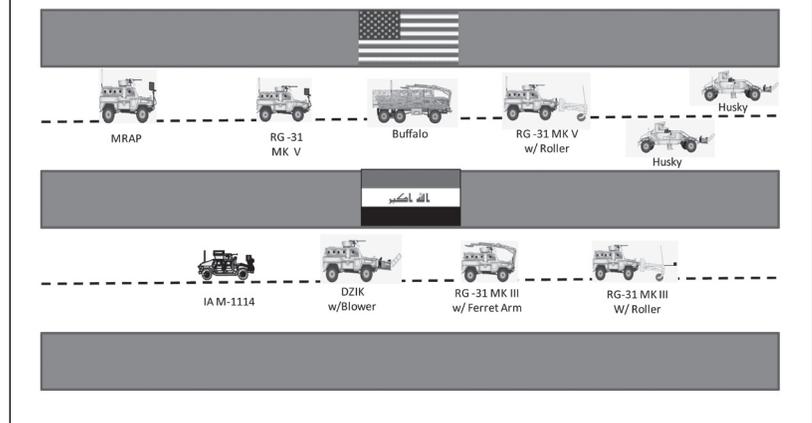


Figure 1

Partnering

After the first Lionclaw platoon completed the initial 14-day training, we were ready to begin the partnership. Prior to Operation Lionclaw, other coalition units had conducted route clearance training with Iraqis in Baghdad and elsewhere. We took it a step further, including an aggressive partnership program with U.S. route clearance platoons. We were able to draw on other units’ experience and programs of instruction as we developed the Lionclaw Academy, but partnership was uncharted territory. The first part of the partnership cycle had the U.S. platoon in the lead and included a leadership ride-along, rehearsals, and integrated patrols with



Iraqi Soldiers conduct a mock patrol in an RG-31 MK III with SPARK.



Iraqi Soldiers train on critical maintenance tasks.

the U.S. platoon (see Figure 2). The second part of the partnership cycle put the Iraqi Army in the lead and included rehearsals and combined patrols with the Iraqi platoon in the lead (see Figure 3). One of the U.S. route clearance platoons was designated the “partnership platoon” so that the operations were consistent and the platoon leadership could develop the personal relationship that is so critical to success in the Arab culture. The partnership expanded to include all platoons in the company as additional Iraqi platoons completed the Lionclaw Academy.

On the first day of the partnership, the Iraqi platoon leader and platoon sergeant conducted a ride-along with the U.S. platoon leader and platoon sergeant in a standard route clearance patrol. After the ride-along, we began work with the rest of the platoon. Some initial challenges were developing command and control tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) and combined battle drills. To meet these challenges, we broke the platoon into two sections, with each section conducting two days of instruction on battle drills and mounted rehearsals on the FOB. During the rehearsal days, the U.S. and Iraqi Army chains of command worked out the details of communications between the vehicles. Battle drills trained and rehearsed included IED found, IED interrogation, IED detonation, medical evacuation, and vehicle recovery. Iraqi forces were integrated into the security plan and all aspects of the battle drills.

After the rehearsals were completed on the FOB, the combined patrol was certified to conduct operations off the FOB. Each section conducted three days of combined patrols. The daily schedule included a combined intelligence update, rock drills, patrol briefing, the actual patrol, an after-action review (AAR), and lunch with the U.S. platoon at the mess hall. We started

out with lower threat areas along multilane roads to allow the Iraqi Army to continue learning in a live environment. On these patrols, the Iraqi element conducted interrogation of suspected IEDs and served as part of the cordon during interrogation. After each mission, we conducted a combined AAR to glean the lessons for the day’s operation and fine-tune command and control of the formation. After a week of combined patrolling by section, the conditions were set for the Iraqi Army to take the lead in partnership.

Iraqi-led patrolling began with rehearsals to refine TTPs and adjust the patrol to the new formation with the Iraqi platoon in the lead. With their proficiency proven in previous combined patrols, only one day of rehearsals was necessary. After final refinements and communications were set up, the patrols were ready to execute. As before, the patrols started off on a multilane highway with limited traffic, which allowed the Iraqis to navigate easily and focus more on the basics of route

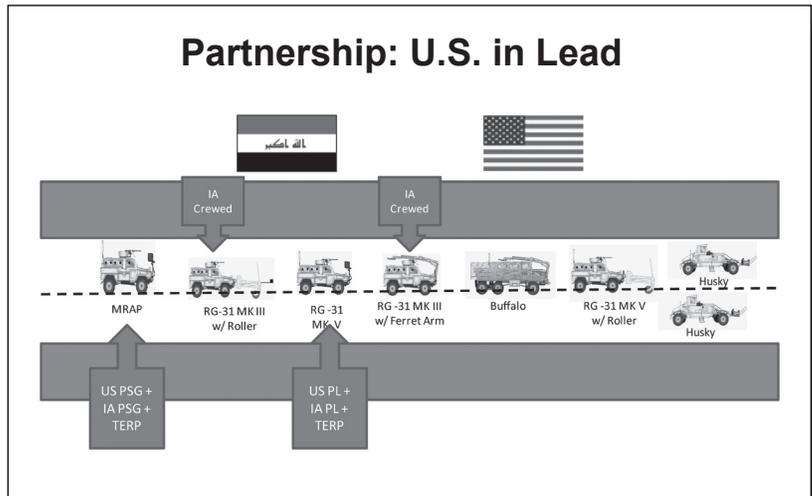


Figure 2

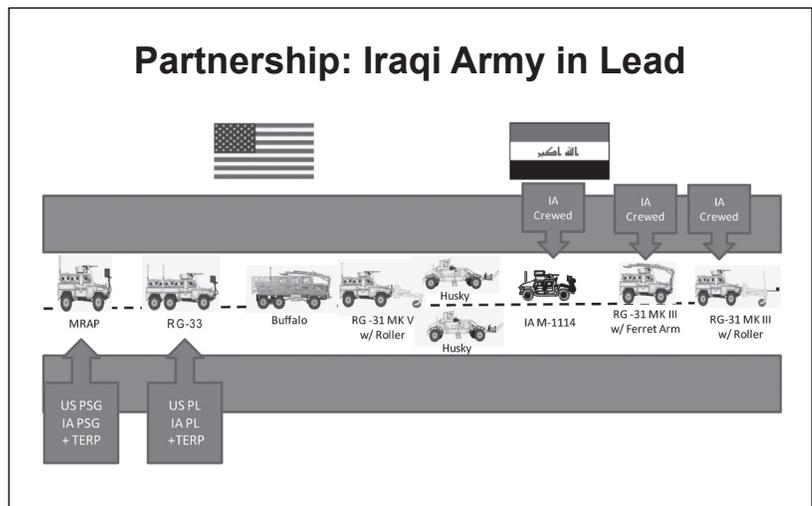


Figure 3

clearance rather than being concerned with civilian traffic in built-up areas. The Iraqi platoon leader was partnered with the U.S. platoon leader and rode in his vehicle. From here, the Iraqi platoon leader was able to both command and control his formation and coordinate with the U.S. patrol via the interpreter over the vehicle's internal AN/VIC-3 communications system. The Iraqi patrol's frequency was loaded on the second radio set, so the Iraqi platoon leader was able to use the AN/VIC-3 for both internal and external communications. This setup streamlined command and control of the patrol and allowed direct contact between the two patrol leaders.

The platoons conducted five days of combined patrols with the Iraqi Army in the lead. These patrols progressed from relatively simple routes on a multilane highway to more difficult terrain. The "capstone" patrol was an Iraqi-led patrol through the congested towns of Haswah and Iskandariyah. The Iraqi Army's navigation and command and control skills were put to the test as they maneuvered through the challenging urban terrain.

Conclusion

Operation Lionclaw has been successful in building Iraqi Army capability, enabling combined operations and building the relationship between the Iraqi and the U.S. Armies. However, the Iraqi platoons cannot conduct independent operations until they are properly equipped. The ultimate goal for equipping would be one RG-31 MK III with the ferret arm, one with the SPARK, and one Iraqi DZIK or M1114 as a security vehicle (see Figure 4). The current challenge is that the RG-31 MK IIIs are still U.S. Army property and cannot be transferred to the Iraqi Army for independent

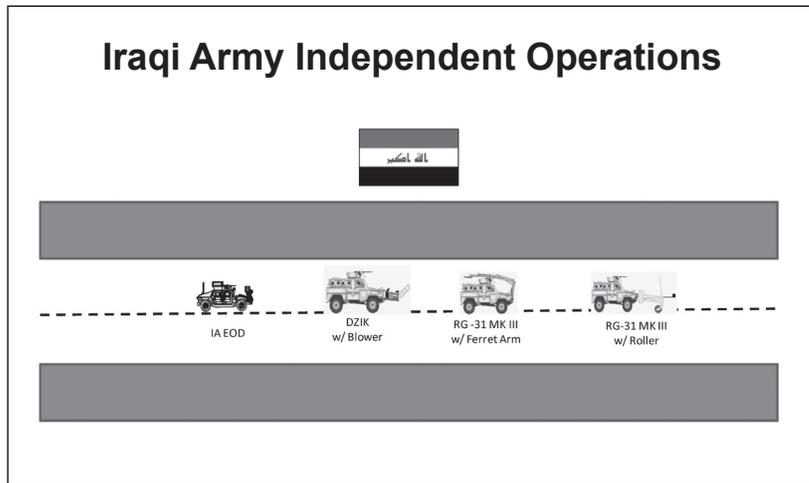


Figure 4

use. Until the equipment can be transferred, or the Iraqi Ministry of Defense buys more sets of route clearance equipment, route clearance at the Iraqi Army battalion and brigade levels will be limited to combined patrols with U.S. platoons. 

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First Lieutenant Gentzel is the lead advisor/officer in charge for the Lionclaw Academy and is the support platoon leader in HHC, 4-3 BSTB, conducting EOD security missions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As platoon leader for E/3-7 Infantry Battalion, he conducted route clearance operations in and around the Babil Province of Iraq from November 2007 to May 2008. Commissioned from the Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, he holds a bachelor's in telecommunications management from Ohio University.



U.S. Soldiers lead a combined patrol brief.