

Standing Up the Iraqi Police Force

By Captain Jason Burke

Before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, many theories and rumors surfaced around Army posts worldwide about whether we would go to war or if it would be called off at the last minute. Regardless of what you believed, all roads seemed to point to an inevitable war. In this conflict, many saw the final major battle being staged in Baghdad—Iraq’s capital and, until recently, the crown jewel in Saddam Hussein’s corrupt and evil empire.

Unlike the first Gulf War, coalition forces do not have the luxury of pushing Iraq’s war machine back and leaving the region. Soldiers in Iraq know that this is the last stand for the Ba’ath Party and Saddam Hussein’s regime, which ruled Iraq with an iron fist for nearly three decades. It was the job of the coalition forces to loosen Saddam’s grip over his people and liberate them, and the U.S. Army did precisely what it was trained to do—fight and win a very one-sided battle and successfully drive the enemy out of power. So what happens now that the bombs have stopped falling and the major engagements have all been fought? How will the country get back on its feet and get out of the shadows of the old regime? The military police have transitioned to stability operations and support operations (SOSO) to help this war-torn country get back on its feet.

With U.S. forces at the forefront, the simplest of governmental principals need to be reestablished—a system of government that will maintain law and order, while digging Iraq out of the shadowy past that has clouded its image with many nations across the globe. The military police are leading the way in restoring order and providing security in the lawless postwar Iraq, taking on the massive task of quickly and efficiently standing up a police force in Baghdad that can maintain order for years—long after coalition forces have departed.

In Baghdad, the mission of the military police is defined in the execution of two basic military police functions: law and order and police intelligence operations. This is a familiar role for the military police, having been called on to perform these tasks in similar situations during the last decade, including places like Haiti and the Balkans. And with this similar mission comes a similar problem—how do you stand up a

police force without getting embedded in day-to-day business and locking into a mission that could carry on for years? The Army needed results similar to those achieved in Kosovo, where an independent police force maintained law and order, but for a shorter duration. These new parameters required military police to be versatile in the many different roles of teacher, mentor, observer, and controller and flexible through the transition phases and short timelines of the operation. A good example of reestablishment operations includes having police officers return to work in a matter of days as opposed to months.

Reestablishment operations are very difficult too achieve in a country with a collapsed infrastructure. The lack of telephones, computers, and e-mail required troops to perform a lot of legwork before the Iraqi police force could return to work. Units coordinated



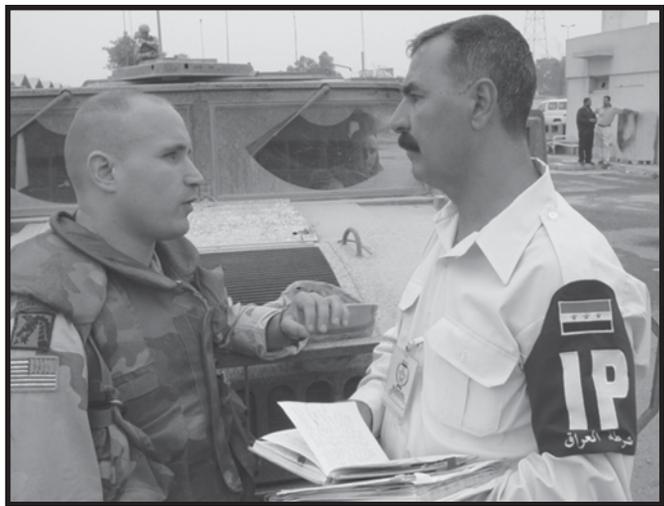
Soldiers from the 18th Military Police Brigade and members of the Iraqi police service cut the ribbon during a dedication ceremony for one of Baghdad’s newest police stations.

operations so everyone knew a starting point—a baseline—and worked with the Iraqis to establish goals to achieve a common objective. Some of the biggest issues were the lack of available communication equipment and weapons. With no modern radio system in place, the Iraqis could not communicate within the city or even from car to car. Additionally, very few Iraqi police had weapons, because many of them were stolen from the police stations during the war. The weapons that were available were either old or the personal property of the policemen, leaving no way to establish weapon and ammunition control. Many areas did not have a weapons system in place, choosing instead to mirror the American units.

Keeping things simple and relying heavily on the most basic unit—the military police team—the troops pushed forward with their mission. Local television and radio put out the word in the city for the Iraqi police force to return to work and, based on the agreed-upon standards, the Iraqi police and military police hit the streets. The first phase of the plan, the assessment of facilities and identification of issues and concerns, identified such things as power and water outages at stations, to stations totally destroyed during the war. Trying to find locations to base the future police force became a key objective in a town where, after the war, displaced civilians quickly occupied empty buildings and transformed them into homes.

When all concerns were identified and troops secured a foothold for operations within the city, sectors were identified and joint military police and Iraqi police patrols began. Teams and squads on patrol with the Iraqis observed how the police force functioned. In many cases, squad and team leaders also had to serve in teacher and mentor roles to guide the Iraqi police through serious cases. This was due to the early development stage of the system and the role the Iraqi police force played in the old regime. In the past, the Iraqi police force was a totally reactive unit, with the majority of law and order controlled by six layers of Saddam Hussein's thugs and secret police. Getting the new officers out in public helped gain validity for their new role, and the publicity helped boost the officers' morale as they worked to keep their streets and homes safe from crime. The first few weeks were full of hard work and many lessons learned on both sides.

After establishing patrol operations, the military police focused on reestablishing and, in some cases,



A military police officer from the 18th Military Police Brigade coordinates with a member of the Iraqi police service.

establishing stations to process criminals and track crimes. This also posed a great challenge for the military police in Baghdad, since some units were responsible for running 24-hour, 7-day-a-week operations for as many as seven stations. Additionally, many military police had a hard time adjusting to working within the vastly different Iraqi system. Team leaders in the majority of cases had to work 12-hour shifts alone, performing operations as desk sergeant and tracking prisoners, daily complaints, and police weapon and vehicle control.

The goals achieved and the sacrifices made by soldiers and citizens in Iraq are no small accomplishment. The new government and police force in Iraq will serve their citizens for many years down the road. There are still kinks in the armor—pay issues, uniforms, interpreter shortages, and training—but the foundation is laid. A clear plan is in place outlining the way ahead to achieve future desired goals. The Iraqi policemen are eager to learn and gain knowledge from their American counterparts. This information exchange will hopefully lead to both sides reaching the agreed-upon end state—a stable and secure Baghdad policed by a new Iraqi police force. There will be difficult issues left to resolve, but with the measures set in place, there will be a vast improvement in the Iraqi police system. Military police serving in Iraq can leave knowing that they served their country in time of war and aided a people in their new, free land.