



CASE STUDY NO. 3
COMPLEX OPERATIONS CASE STUDIES SERIES

Right and Wrong, Balanced on the Edge of a Spear: U.S. Forces at a Mosque in Baghdad

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COMPLEX OPERATIONS CASE STUDIES SERIES

Complex operations encompass stability, security, transition and reconstruction, and counterinsurgency operations and operations consisting of irregular warfare (United States Public Law No 417, 2008). Stability operations frameworks engage many disciplines to achieve their goals, including establishment of safe and secure environments, the rule of law, social well-being, stable governance, and sustainable economy. A comprehensive approach to complex operations involves many elements—governmental and nongovernmental, public and private—of the international community or a “whole of community” effort, as well as engagement by many different components of government agencies, or a “whole of government” approach. Taking note of these requirements, a number of studies called for incentives to grow the field of capable scholars and practitioners, and the development of resources for educators, students and practitioners. A 2008 United States Institute of Peace study titled “Sharing the Space” specifically noted the need for case studies and lessons. Gabriel Marcella and Stephen Fought argued for a case-based approach to teaching complex operations in the pages of *Joint Forces Quarterly*, noting “Case studies force students *into* the problem; they put a face on history and bring life to theory.” We developed this series of complex operations teaching case studies to address this need. In this process, we aim to promote research and to strengthen relationships among civilian and military researchers and practitioners.

The [Center for Complex Operations](#) (CCO) emphasizes the importance of a whole of government approach to complex operations and provides a forum for a community of practice and plays a number of roles in the production and distribution of learning about complex operations, including supporting the compilations of lessons and practices.

Dr. Karen Guttieri at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) provided the research direction and overall leadership for this project.

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You are assigned to work with an Iraqi (host-nation) military unit as an advisor. You are anxious, and not because of the assignment itself. You have watched news telecasts and read some journal articles and a book on the history of Iraq. You have determined that this is a dangerous place, filled with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on the roadsides and people who do not appear to share your culture or values.

Your senses are heightened, and you are irritable. No one has been able to tell you in detail what to expect. You need to find a simple way to understand the people that seem alien to you so that together you can determine how to reduce conflict in the area.

You know your role: Lead an eleven-man U.S. military transition team (MiTT), directed by the Iraq Assistance Group, to provide training, advice, equipment, and assistance to Iraqi security forces.¹

And you know some of the common issues that MiTTs encounter: convoluted Iraqi chains-of-command, lack of direct and indirect logistical support from coalition forces (mostly U.S.), poor training standards adopted by Iraqi security forces, high operational tempo (daily routine patrols and weekly shooting engagements are common), and infiltration of militia groups into the Ministry of Interior forces, such as the paramilitary Iraqi Special Police (including commando and public order units).

Success as an advisor requires you to keep in mind other, equally important issues—the training you provide and the effect of your actions can impact the legitimacy of U.S. and Iraqi forces in the eyes of the local people.

THE GOLDEN MOSQUE

On February 22, 2006, the Golden Mosque in Samarra was destroyed by several bombs placed inside the shrine. This shrine holds deep significance

1. As a key component to the foreign internal defense strategy, these transition teams (MiTTS) are members of the U.S. military, serve a one-year deployment, and work directly with the newly formed Iraqi Security Forces units.

to the followers of Shi'a Islam, as they believe it is where the Twelfth Imam disappeared and will eventually reappear as the Messiah. The Sunni extremist group, Al Qaeda in Iraq, under the direction of Abu Mohamed al-Zarqawi, was widely suspected to be responsible for destroying this holy Shi'a shrine. Its destruction had violent repercussions throughout Iraq, centered on the mosques. The attacks deepened ethnosectarian divisions among the Iraqi people. Hundreds were killed in the aftermath by raging sectarian militias (such as Jayish al-Mahdi and Badr Organization forces) that had infiltrated the Iraqi security forces.

Mosques are considered "protected areas" by the Geneva Convention and the Laws of Land Warfare. U.S. forces are typically forbidden to enter a mosque even when conducting an intelligence-driven operation. It was up to the Iraqi security forces to conduct the search. It was known that imams (religious clerics) were often under heavy pressure by religious-affiliated militias to store weapons and known insurgents.

Sharia courts were sometimes held in mosques. Citizens would be kidnapped, bound and gagged, then transported to a mosque for trial. These courts were presided over by the local militia leaders and, at times, Shi'a clerics in the mosque. Members of the community would present evidence against the accused. If the accused was found to be a "good Muslim" by the Sharia court, he would be released; if not, he was summarily executed and his body dumped in the street.

SITUATION: APRIL 1, 2006

At approximately 8:00 p.m. on April 1, 2006, a reliable intelligence source provides a tip: Seven civilian hostages are being held in a mosque in Abu Descheer, with a Sharia court under way. If the captives are not rescued, they likely will be executed. Jayish al-Mahdi (Arabic for Army of the Messiah, a Shi'a militia loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr) is heavily present in the area and in firm control of the suspected mosque. They are estimated to have two hundred armed fighters in the area. To date, they have not directly attacked coalition forces. They use a mix of armed subversion and extortion to control the local population, under the guise of a neighborhood watch program.

When Operation Scales of Justice was initiated in Baghdad in March 2006, the U.S. brigade took tactical control of the Iraqi public order brigade forces in the area. Prior to this operation, there was no formal command relationship between the Iraqi national police—who worked for the Iraqi Ministry of Interior—and U.S. forces.

Through direct coordination with the U.S. battalion on the ground and the MiTT leadership, the U.S. brigade orders MiTT and the Iraqi security forces battalion to raid the mosque and rescue the hostages.

Two battalion-level MiTTs are operating in the area: SHADOW and WILD CARD. They are directly controlled by their brigade-level MiTT, known as LION.

In passing the verbal tasking order to SHADOW, Major Campbell, LION team commander, clearly states his intent: “This has been going on long enough—burn it down.”

Due to the extreme risk of initiating a firefight, SHADOW is reinforced by WILD CARD (twenty U.S. soldiers total) and four Bradley fighting vehicles as a quick reaction force; they are ten minutes away. SHADOW is the lead element for the coalition forces.

At the assembly point (less than two kilometers away from the targeted mosque), the MiTT is to link up with an Iraqi force (thirty Iraqis) plus a leader from an Iraqi unit brigade. The latter is not familiar with Iraqi security forces battalion tactical operations. The Iraqi colonel states, “I am in charge and will be leading this raid. What is the plan?”

The Iraqi colonel is not a commander and is not known to MiTT members. (It was later determined that he was a staff officer on the Iraqi brigade staff.) After a quick inspection, SHADOW finds that the Iraqi forces are not in the proper uniform and are uninformed of the target of the raid (this is a common procedure to protect operational security). Furthermore, the Iraqi lieutenant, who is assigned to be the assault team leader, is widely regarded as a poor-quality officer by both Iraqi and U.S. forces.

The local Iraqi battalion commander (who normally would be present for such a high-profile raid) is notably absent. SHADOW contacts him and asks if he would be joining the operation. The Iraqi replies, “I have been informed that the brigade commander wants to change leadership and told me specifically not to attend this mission.”

MiTT headquarters (Major Campbell) informs SHADOW that the U.S. division (led by a two-star general) has not approved the mission—although the brigade commander (a colonel) has done so. Major Campbell suggests the team put the operation on hold.

While preparing to launch the raid, a member of SHADOW captured his thoughts on video. As the MiTT member states, through the frustration and gravity of the decision facing him, he is “living the dream.”

You are SHADOW 6 – the commander. What actions do you take?

ACRONYMS

HTT	Human Terrain Team
IED	improvised explosive device
MiTT	Military transition team
VBIED	vehicle-borne improvised explosive device

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