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Winning the 'Three-Block War' in Baghdad

By [Terry Boyd](#), Stars and Stripes

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BAGHDAD, Iraq ? Soldiers and officers in Baghdad have a new phrase for a new phase ? now they're fighting the ?Three-Block War.?

On one block in Baghdad, they say, soldiers are meeting with local officials, working basically as civics teachers ? disciples of democracy transferring neighborhood and metropolitan governance skills to Iraqis.

On the next block, soldiers are rebuilding infrastructure ignored for decades by former dictator Saddam Hussein, renovating a school, or funding sewer and water projects with money seized from the deposed regime.

On the third block, they are in a firefight.

With little support from allies or the United Nations, policymakers in Washington, D.C., are using the Army to do a complex, interrelated matrix of missions ? everything from nurturing local neighborhood and municipal councils to recruiting spy networks and launching raids.

?My wife asked me what my day is like, and I told her it?s completely bizarre. One disconcerting event after another,? said Col. Ralph O.

Second Brigade on the job

The Baumholder, Germany-based 2nd Brigade is responsible for two of Baghdad?s 11 districts, an area that includes both sides of the Tigris River and is home to about 700,000 of Baghdad?s estimated 5 million people. The 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment has 400,000 people in its area of responsibility alone, said Col. Ralph O. Baker, 2nd Brigade commander.

The populous northern section, Karkh, has 18 distinct neighborhoods over 400 square miles.

The more rural southern Al-Karadah section is less populous, but much larger.

On one slide Baker uses to brief congressional delegates and other visitors, he breaks out one day in Baghdad, a day in which his soldiers paid 15,000 former soldiers and freed 14 kidnapped women.

Brigade soldiers operate under a public works mission dubbed SWEAT, for sewers, water, electricity, academics and trash. In the mission, the military

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Baker, who runs a huge swath of Baghdad as commander of the 1st AD's 2nd Brigade Combat Team.

He and his 5,000 soldiers work with Baghdad's neighborhood councils in the morning and with public works projects in the afternoon, Baker said.

Then at 2 a.m., he's working command-and-control for a raid: "That's what makes the 2nd Brigade Combat Team unique: logistics, diplomacy and warfighting." Baker and other 2nd Brigade soldiers believe they're winning the Battle of Baghdad, or at least the battle for the brigade's giant sector. And if they win Baghdad, they can win Iraq, they say.

The easiest of the three blocks to deal with is the violence, which Baker claims is on a downtrend since peaking in July, though Lt. Gen. Sanchez, commander of U.S. troops in Iraq, says attacks are increasing. Moreover, he said, the brigade can't win on the third block without success on the first two: "You can't get security with bullets and violence."

The plan's success hinges on convincing a "silent majority" of educated, technically competent, entrepreneurial people that they are moving in the right direction.

"They're on the verge of taking this country out of 30 years of economic doldrums, and into the 21st century," Baker said. To do that, he has to overcome "30 years of the Iraqi people being lied to by the Baathists, Iran and Al-Jazeera about Americans." Baker also believes the media is focusing on violence while ignoring a bigger story: "There are a hell of a lot of good things happening here."

Baker and others said improving ordinary Iraqis' lives is a matter of moving heaven and earth.

To move heaven, they meet with local clerics and community leaders. Baker meets regularly with a cast of local moderate power brokers. He displays a sword, a gift from Thamer Al-Dulaimi, head of the National Organization of Iraqi Tribes representing 750 tribes from Mosul to Am-Kasar. He has what he calls a "mild friendship" with a prominent local sheik. He meets with Hossein Khomeini, who, even though he's Ayatollah Khomeini's son, is a fierce opponent of Islamic republics.

To bring things down to earth, brigade personnel typically have

provides oversight for finding local contractors, nongovernmental organizations or anybody who can complete projects to improve the average Iraqi's standard of living. It is funded with seized money.

Throughout their two sections of Baghdad, 2nd Brigade soldiers oversee a huge array of projects: 32 active sewer projects, with 21 completed. 16 water projects, 9 completed. 22 electrical projects, 7 completed. 167 schools renovations, 11 completed. 22 trash projects, 16 completed.

Public works is just on part of a full spectrum of operations that include: Crime fighting. Intelligence gathering. Raids. Escort missions. Buying back shoulder-fired, surface-to-air missiles. Recruiting soldiers for Iraq's new army.

? Terry Boyd

multiple projects going, anything from new pumping stations to unclogging sewer pipes and draining raw sewage standing on the streets, Baker said.

However, most 1st AD officers said that neither they nor their men are trained to rebuild nations, only to destroy America's enemies.

"You learn it as you go," said Lt. Col. Bill Rabena, battalion commander for the Geissen, Germany-based 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment of the 1st Brigade. "And there's a lot to be said for staying here longer."

Some involved in trying to bring stability worry American officials are relying too much on an Army designed for warfighting.

One 2nd Brigade officer said it's not uncommon for him to scour reserve units, trying to find, for example, engineers who can fix water systems. "Everything we do is different from our military occupational specialty," said one young 1st Brigade captain. "The surprising part is that we do it better than the people trained to do it."

Baker, who said he knew little about Iraq coming into the war, now rattles off the names of prominent Iraqis while delving deep into the social and religious dynamics of his sector. It is, he said, as if he's added an unofficial master's degree in Middle Eastern affairs to his actual economics degree. "It's day and night" from what he knew as a war planner for the tactical phase, and what he knows now in phase of stabilization, Baker said. Yes, he said, he's a war planner one minute, the next minute paying the surviving soldiers of that Iraqi army he just destroyed.

"But," Baker said, "that's the way we are now."

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