

# Developing a Unit Language Capability for War

By HARRY D. TUNNELL IV

**T**he Language Enabled Soldier (LES) program is a locally designed and implemented 10-month Arabic language and culture program for selected Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) Soldiers at Fort Lewis, Washington. The student body ranges in grade from private first class to lieutenant. The program is conducted by the Fort Lewis Foreign Language Training Center and was the initiative of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 2<sup>d</sup> Infantry Division (4/2 ID) (SBCT). Before deploying to Iraq, the team handed the program off to its sister brigade, 5/2 ID (SBCT). It is common among SBCTs to share lessons learned, and the LES program is no exception.

The original curriculum was developed in coordination with the language center and has been refined based on the needs of com-

manders and lessons gleaned from the Iraq theater. The center's staff and faculty maintain contact with deployed LESs and update the program of instruction appropriately. The interpreter/translator assigned to 5/2 ID (SBCT) serves as the noncommissioned officer in charge. He is a combination platoon sergeant for the students, military language instructor who refines the lessons based on his own combat experience, and point of contact for the brigade's leadership.

The concept began as a somewhat traditional Arabic language program. Based on feedback from deployed 4/2 ID (SBCT) LESs, however, it has evolved into more theater-specific training. For example, instructors have students in the parking lot practicing a car inspection in Arabic to prepare them for traffic control points, or working

on verbal skills by interpreting for field grade commanders who are exercising their own negotiation skills. 5/2 ID (SBCT) has further refined the program so it is focused almost exclusively on the intelligence warfighting function. Today, in addition to 10 months of Arabic language training, Soldiers attend 1 week of predictive profiling training, part of which is in Arabic.<sup>1</sup> After their language and predictive profiling instruction, the students formally graduate and are ready to attend several follow-on courses.

Graduates take a specialized Red Team Mobile Training Team course taught by the Fort Leavenworth University of Foreign

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Soldier takes notes as village leader speaks to him through interpreter during home search

Military and Cultural Studies that trains them in non-Western decisionmaking. They subsequently attend Arabic media training so they are prepared when they see Arab journalists on the battlefield. Finally, one LES per company attends the Mirror Image course, which is terrorist immersion training. This Soldier is part of the company intelligence support team.<sup>2</sup> The current postgraduate sustainment program is conducted every Friday. We are exploring initiatives to expand it, including providing limited interpreter support to nonmilitary agencies that work with Arab communities in the Seattle-Tacoma area.

### Evolving Operations

The LES is considered part of the intelligence warfighting function rather than merely a Soldier devoted to cultural awareness/understanding because 5/2 ID (SBCT) has adopted the Army's counterinsurgency doctrine in Field Manual 90-8, *Counterinsurgency Operations*. Counterinsurgency operations and counterinsurgency (COIN) share many disciplines, but the focus of counterinsurgency operations is the enemy, contrasted with the population-centric focus of COIN. Consequently, the training of the LES is not designed to help commanders gain an assessment of the needs of a population. 5/2 ID (SBCT) LESs are expected to look for and investigate indicators of enemy activity (based on an understanding of language, culture, and profiling), assist in the initial evaluation of information at or near the point of capture, question civilians (detainees remain the realm of military intelligence personnel), and deliver command messages to Arab media, among other things.

Notions about how to employ the LES continue to evolve. Lessons learned from 4/2 ID (SBCT) will be important, as is the concept of counterinsurgency operations. Since Iraqis have been conditioned to the fact that few American Soldiers have a working knowledge of Arabic, there may be great potential to use the LES in an eavesdropping role as well as overtly during patrolling. For instance, the Soldier can be employed as a stoic guard on an objective or elsewhere and monitor conversations between unsuspecting detainees. An LES from another battalion can be requested by a commander to assess the reliability of locally hired interpreters (since the language skills of this Soldier will be unknown to the local hires). LESs are going to be taught Arab children's games, so they can interact

with children in a nonthreatening way on an objective, at a medical civil action program (MEDCAP), or during other events. Parents who see Soldiers interacting with their children in a benign fashion might be more forthcoming. Children, while not the object of an intelligence activity, have often proven to be a sound source of information. There are innumerable ways to take advantage of an enhanced language capability; one only needs a little imagination.

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### Positive Effects

An adjunct feature of the language and culture capacity is improved negotiation ability throughout the brigade. Senior commanders normally have someone available to help them prepare for meetings with indigenous personnel, but company commanders are usually on their own. Company Equal Opportunity Leaders (EOLs) in the brigade attend a Washington state mediation training program. This not only certifies them to perform mediation but also easily translates into a basic understanding of how to prepare for a negotiation. The expertise of the EOL, combined with the cultural understanding of the LES, can be an important tool for a company commander. The LES and the EOL as a team help company commanders prepare for bilateral negotiations with indigenous leaders.

LESs have the potential to offer a unit extraordinary resources; however, commanders and leaders must believe in the program. Because Iraq is such a lethal environment, it is difficult to convince Soldiers and leaders that they should send someone to Arabic class for nearly a year rather than to tactical training. We have noticed that since LESs enhance counterinsurgency operations—which focus on the enemy and are thus considered intelligence activities rather than enablers for COIN or stability operations—Soldiers and unit leaders have come to understand the program readily enough for it to succeed.

In cases when someone does not accept the importance of the training, there is sufficient command emphasis on it that

the concept is well protected. The brigade commander and all battalion commanders attend weekly Arabic language and culture training as the leader component of the LES program. Battalion commanders personally interview LES candidates. The noncommissioned officer in charge has direct access to the brigade command sergeant major and is expected to rapidly identify points of friction. The brigade intelligence and operations officers work closely together to manage the requirements of the program. There is no doubt that the program is the brigade commander's priority.

After 10 months, the concept has been accepted by subordinate units within the brigade. There are indicators of approval. Commanders routinely monitor the academic progress of their Soldiers. Units will ask to have a class to support local field training exercises as role players and LESs. The brigade's initial goal was to have 80 students in the program. After achieving that, battalion commanders requested or voluntarily supported several additional classes. There are now 106 Soldiers who are part of the program as students or graduates, and another class began in June 2008. A further indicator that the program has value is that after the first class graduated, one battalion had its two graduates in the field

Soldier adds Arabic phrases to quick-reference book



U.S. Air Force (William Geier)

the next day to support unit external evaluations, one serving as a company commander's interpreter and the other role-playing an Iraqi doctor on a MEDCAP site.

One of the best endorsements of the program came from a sergeant with two Iraq combat tours. He remarked that he wanted Americans in his unit who spoke Arabic; he did not want to rely on unknown locally hired civilians. The point is important and powerful; we would never contract civilians to man a platoon's machineguns, after all, so why rely on them for language and cultural skills? If we buy into the idea that our nation is at war with Islamic totalitarian terrorists and that culture and language are a weapons system important to victory, training Soldiers to operate this weapon cannot be considered

an annoying or unreasonable detractor from core missions. The LES is as important to defeating today's enemy as anyone trained to handle critical combat equipment.

#### Focus on Intelligence

The LES program supports counter-guerrilla operations by being a battle-focused program that is increasingly considered necessary to understanding adversaries and bridging the human terrain to get at them. Leaders need to understand the subtle but important distinction between this program and a COIN, stability, or counter-guerrilla operations strategy. Units that desire to employ a COIN or stability operations-focused concept will have to organize and train formations to provide security, essential services, government legitimacy, police and military capability, and so forth. This is considered an indirect strategy to attack a guerrilla, insurgent, and terrorist enemy. The language and cultural understanding requirements to implement such a strategy are enormous. They will also be different and will have to focus, for example, on skills associated with infrastructure development rather than profiling.

Counter-guerrilla operations, in contrast, center on the enemy, so intelligence capability throughout the formation is emphasized. When properly conducted, counter-guerrilla operations defeat or destroy the enemy, which has a direct and immediate impact on improving security and indirectly advances essential services, government legitimacy, and police and military capability. Because the principal focus of counter-guerrilla operations is fundamentally different from

COIN and stability operations, the scale of the requirement is different. The current 5/2 ID (SBCT) program will eventually yield about 120 Soldiers trained in Arabic language and culture—3 percent of the brigade's strength. While this is enough to significantly improve intelligence capability at every echelon, it does not scratch the surface of the requirement for COIN, based on the operating principles established in the Army's own doctrine. Twenty percent or more of the formation would probably need to be trained in Arabic to have the level of cultural understanding the Army's new COIN doctrine implies is essential.

When all is said and done, the initial training of Language Enabled Soldiers takes students away from their units for almost a year. The subsequent sustainment training is also time-intensive. However, the price is well worth it; American lives will be saved by improved situational understanding, and there will be a far more efficient and refined ability to attack terrorists, guerrillas, and insurgents. Graduates improve every day they use their language and observation skills, which is another combat multiplier. In a counter-guerrilla environment, the Language Enabled Soldier is as essential as any other part of the intelligence warfighting function, and every Soldier who matriculates from the program reduces the adversary's ability to evade the brigade. This unusual language potential will diminish enemy capability while at the same time enhancing our own. But the most compelling feature of these uniquely trained warriors may be, as a command sergeant major put it, that the Language Enabled Soldier "is the only weapon we have that learns." JFQ

Soldier receives Arabic lesson from Iraqi schoolchildren



U.S. Army (Sean Mulligan)

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Predictive profiling teaches students how to identify indicators of suspicious activity.

<sup>2</sup> Each company has an intelligence support team to conduct an initial analysis of combat information. The team consists of an LES, a tactical site exploitation technician, and an intelligence analyst (a nuclear, biological, chemical noncommissioned officer retrained by a Fort Huachuca mobile training team).