

BY MITCH MEADOR

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A literal translation of a common Arabic phrase would be "there were too many sailors on the boat and it sank."

But what it means in English is "too many cooks spoil the broth."

A Turkish idiom translates literally to "my eyes don't drink water from you."

But the real meaning of that phrase is "I'm suspicious of you. I don't trust what you say."

Those two examples show why understanding the nuances of a culture are crucial to highlevel negotiations.

Raising cultural awareness among students at the Fires Center of Excellence has been the job of Mahir Ibrahimov, a naturalized U.S. citizen who was born in the part of the former Soviet Union that is now Azerbaijan. He has a Ph.D., speaks five languages and deployed to Iraq in 2004-05 as a volunteer from the State Department.

But now Training and Doctrine Command's very first cultural affairs adviser is leaving Fort Sill to take a new job as the Army senior culture and foreign language adviser.

Ibrahimov will be assigned to the Combined Arms Center (CAC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. There he will have a supervisory role over a dozen cultural affairs advisers that TRADOC has hired since he was brought on board. Part of his job will be to standardize what they do so as to replicate his success here at other TRADOC installations.

Ibrahimov said he will be an adviser to CAC Commander Lt. Gen. Robert Caslen, and he will provide instruction on cultural affairs to the field grade officers who attend the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth.

"So far I've been a culture and language adviser at Fort Sill. Now, Fort Sill is going to be one of my responsibilities, in addition to Fort Gordon, Fort Benning (and other TRADOC installations)," he said.

As he was clearing out his office on Monday, Ibrahimov was notified he had received the Commander's Award for Civilian Service for his exceptional service to the U.S. Army Field Artillery School. It's a long way from where he started.

'Brutal service'

Ibrahimov was a dentist in Azerbaijan when he was drafted into the Soviet Army in 1974. The Soviet Union was then a prosperous superpower under Premier Leonid Brezhnev.

As a cadet, Ibrahimov served near the site of the World War II battle in Stalingrad where more than 1 million people died. His own father, an artilleryman on the eastern front, was badly wounded during that battle. Ibrahimov experienced a harsh winter there and in Kaliningrad, formerly Konigsberg, the capital of East Prussia.

"It was very tough, very brutal service, even in peaceful times," he recalled.

Ibrahimov also had to endure Russian prejudice against Azeris while in service.

"I hated those realities then, but it helped me a lot, because it made me very strong," he said. "I had to prove two or three times that I deserve something or mean something."

After completing his service, he studied international journalism and linguistics of English, Arabic and Russian. He earned his master's degree and continued his education in both Moscow and the U.S., eventually earning a doctorate.

Life in the U.S.

After a stint with the State Department in Washington, D.C., he came to Lawton in 2008 to work for Northrop Grumman as a manager/instructor. His autobiography, "Invitation to Rain," came out that year, and on March 30, 2009, he was hired as the first TRADOC culture and language adviser. TRADOC now has a dozen of these and is expected to hire three more.

Ibrahimov believes the Fires Center of Excellence was selected to receive the first cultural affairs adviser because he was already on the ground here with Northrop Grumman, which had crafted the program and had Ibrahimov physically working on Fort Sill, doing part but not all of what he would be doing as cultural affairs adviser. He came to the attention of TRADOC Commander Gen. Martin Dempsey through a book signing, and the rest is history.

"When I was hired, there was absolutely nothing. There was a very rough draft of the Army culture and language strategy, which wasn't that proofed yet. There wasn't any structure in TRADOC overseeing the cultural awareness or language. The only thing we had was the general guidance by (then Army Chief of Staff) Gen. (William) Wallace. He highlighted the importance of culture and language to support the overseas missions of our soldiers and leaders," Ibrahimov said.

'Global approach'

Ibrahimov believes TRADOC wanted to take a global approach rather than a specific approach toward the Middle East, East Asia or some other region.

"My background is multicultural. I had multicultural exposure - different experiences in different countries," said Ibrahimov, who speaks five languages.

He was told that was one of the main reasons he was hired. Military leaders felt American soldiers needed a better understanding of other cultures because of what had happened in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and other places.

"There was a lack of understanding of basics of culture and language. Everybody started understanding (that) to be culturally astute is very crucial to get the mission done, because you cannot just win only through military means, particularly at this time. There should be a combination of efforts - military, diplomatic, civil affairs, etc.," Ibrahimov said.

"If you are going to be engaged with indigenous cultures, you should be able to understand their history, culture, customs, in order to be able to win hearts and minds. That's the main thing," he said.

Ibrahimov observed firsthand some mistakes that were made in Iraq while he was deployed there in 2004-05 as a State Department volunteer. No one doubted the ability of coalition forces to take Iraq militarily, but the main problems started to emerge afterward. Ibrahimov saw the insurgency starting to take shape. There were serious misunderstandings because interpreters translated idioms in such a literal way that they made no sense in English.

While here, Ibrahimov has done briefings and presentations for the lieutenants, captains, warrant officers and noncommissioned officers who attend school here. He has also written articles for professional journals to help raise awareness of other cultures.

Both the Army culture and foreign language strategy and its leader development strategy were approved by the Army Chief of Staff in 2009. Recently, an accreditation team from CAC and TRADOC visited the Fires Center, and in the outbrief, it praised the cultural and foreign language program here as the best they had seen and should be the model for the rest of the Army.

"That's one of the reasons why they're hiring me for CAC - (so) I can replicate this for the rest of the training enterprise, to synchronize the efforts," Ibrahimov said.

STEVE MILLER/STAFF

Mahir Ibrahimov, the very first cultural affairs adviser ever hired by Training and Doctrine Command, is leaving Fort Sill to take a new job as the Army senior culture and foreign language adviser at the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.