Hostages, Murders, and Desecrated Corpses: Iraqi Political and Psychological Warfare

Anthony H. Cordesman

Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
Center for Strategic and International Studies

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There is something horribly ironic about the tendency of the US military and officials to describe what is going on in Iraq as "post conflict" operations. This simply is nonsense, and in some ways is as degrading to the men and women who are dying in Iraq as dragging their corpses through the streets. The fact is that the Coalition and US have been involved in continued combat for well over a year, and the difference is that high intensity combat simply gave way to low intensity combat and asymmetric warfare.

There may still be post conflict operations, but probably not for months and possibly not for another year. It does no one any good to talk about operations in Iraq as being against a small minority. That is the literal definition of guerrilla ("small") war. Low intensity and asymmetric combat are virtually always wars fought by small, weaker factions seeking to use a combination of armed force and political and psychological warfare to seize power. People do not die of "peace."

Almost from the fall of Baghdad, and certainly since early August of 2003, hostile Iraqi factions have been actively at war with a Coalition that many Iraqis oppose and perceive as an enemy occupation. (An ABC public opinion poll in February 2004 showed very substantial levels of hostility in every group polled except the Kurds, and limited popular faith in the "legitimacy" of virtually all the leaders in the Interim Governing Council).

Over time, an opposition composed largely of former regime loyalists has mutated into a mix of Iraqi radical nationalists, hostile Sunnis, local clerics, and foreign volunteers – some pan Arab and some with ties to Islamic extremist movements. (While there are also "criminals" and paid agents, these are typical of the lower echelons of such movements: Stalin was a successful bank robber.)

The past weeks have potentially added a significant new faction. Not simply the Sadr Militia, but a broader mix of hostile Shi'ites which the ABC poll indicated include 12% of Shi'ite popular opinion in February (about 1.8 million of Iraq's population of 25 million), and which the recent fighting may have mobilized in large numbers.

It is still far from clear what goals these factions have in common or how well they will cooperate. What is clear, however, is that they have a common motive to use terrorism and asymmetric warfare to achieve political and psychological goals. It is equally clear that they have at least 40 years of practical examples to draw upon – dating back to at least the 1967 war between Israel and the Arabs and the rising of Palestinian terrorism, if not to the much earlier periods of internal violence in Yemen and Lebanon. They do not need to innovate. They have historical example after historical example and a highly detailed literature in Arabic. Every new success and failure is immediately televised

throughout the Arab world, and satellite news virtually eliminates the need for many aspects of a command and control and information system.

A Year of Consistent War and Varying Tactics

Consider the techniques that have already been used, and their political and psychological implications:

- Use of media, particularly Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya as propaganda tools, linking images of Coalition and Israeli operations wherever possible.

- Random and targeted sniper and RPG attacks on Coalition, friendly Iraqi, NGO, contractor, and UN personnel to create a climate of insecurity, show the Coalition is not firmly in control, and prevent Coalition economic aid, political, and civil-military programs from being effective.

- Indirect fire from mortars, rockets, and Manpads to achieve the same ends at less risk to the attackers.

- Use of targeted theft and sabotage to obtain money and prevent Coalition economic aid, political, and civil-military programs from being effective.

- Attacks on convoys and aid contractor operations to again prevent the Coalition from winning hearts and minds.

- Car bombings and other forms of attacks on UN, NGO, and allied embassies and aid personnel to prevent international political and aid activity, and show the Coalition does not have control and does not have effective popular Iraqi support.

- Systematic efforts to use IEDs, suicide bombings, car/truck bombs, and a wide range of other means of attack on US and allied troops, civilians and contractors to create a constant pattern of killed and wounded with a progressively higher cumulative total. In most cases, this is done regardless of the tactical military effect – with the belief that the psychological and political impact will ultimately undermine domestic US and British and foreign support for the Coalition.

- Similar efforts to kill or intimidate Iraq civilians, officials, political figures, police and security officers, and military to prevent successful nation building, ensure Iraqis will not risk supporting the Coalition, and create the psychological and political that divide Iraqis from the Coalition.

- Provoke Coalition military and security operations in towns where these alienate more Iraqis and against targets like Mosques that have an immediate psychological and ideological impact.

- Use mass bombings to attack Shi'ite and Kurdish popular festivals and religious ceremonies in the belief that mass casualties make it more difficult to achieve Iraqi political unity, may trigger civil conflict that makes it impossible for the Coalition to succeed, and that success makes those attacked more hostile to the Coalition for failing to provide security.

- Conduct attacks on key dates and anniversaries knowing such attacks get more publicity and have a higher psychological and political impact.

- Seek to create "no go" or sanctuary areas, and failing this, persuade Coalition forces to leave populated areas while infiltrating and intimidating the Iraqi security forces that replace them; seek to covertly use the Iraqi political structures and security forces as political and military weapons against the Coalition.

- Use force and threats to isolate US and allied personnel and turn the Green Zone as much as possible into a fortress enclave – as much for psychological and political as for military impact.

The full scale of these efforts has been disguised by Coalition efforts to deliberately minimize the reporting of the number and types of attacks and incidents, and a reporting system that focuses largely on US killed. As a result, most media reporting only covers major new daily incidents that involve significant additional US and foreign deaths. For much of the last year, the reporting most Americans have seen has been more on the mortuary than the overall nature of on ongoing war. Few have understood, that the number of actual attacks and incidents has averaged around 150 a week, and the day reports of low-level incidents have described a broad pattern of conflict reaching beyond the Sunni Triangle.

This has not meant that the various insurgent groups have been winning, or that the Coalition has not had important successes, but constantly understating the seriousness of what is happening has scarcely prepared the American people (or anyone else) for the events of the last few weeks or what may well be another year of similar cycles of violence. Calling war "post conflict" does not make it go away, or develop the popular resolve needed to deal with the realities on the ground.

The New Patterns of the Last Few Weeks

It is in this context that the events of the last few weeks might be judged. The fact that the CPA is scheduled to transfer power in less than 100 days was a virtual political "red flag" that almost certainly would have generated new cycles of violence – just as every major event in the Iraqi, US, and Coalition allied political calendars can be expected to trigger new cycles of violence for the rest of 2004, and probably for at least all of 2005. The period around every major date on the Iraqi political, religious, and social calendar will be a potential target – with the caveat that attacking on the precise day may be avoided because it creates a predictable state of Coalition alert.

At the same time, the nature of the battlefield in changing:

Attacking Outside Iraq

The Madrid bombing – which now seems to have been part of a broader pattern of attacks – showed that Al Qaida or its affiliates are now conducting attacks outside Iraq with the same kind of political and psychological goals behind the long series of attacks on UN, NGO, and allied personnel that have taken place in Iraq ever since the fall of Baghdad. It is clear that the attackers have a relatively good and realistic picture of US and allied vulnerabilities, that external terrorism has become the extension of the war in Iraq by other means, and that these attacks will continue to be targeted against governments that intervene in Iraq. Key dates like US conventions, the 4th of July and US elections are obvious examples. So are key targets like US summer tourist traffic.

It should be noted in this regard that even the worst mass killings serve several political and psychological ends at the same time. They tend to isolate the US from its allies – whose publics almost universally show less support for intervention in Iraq. They polarize US public opinion and may swing "undecideds" against US intervention. They alienate the US and the West from the Arab and Islamic world, producing the usual round of Western media attacks, and reinforcing efforts to purify the Arab and Islamic world of Western and secular influence. They create at least some linkage in Europe to Israel as provoking violence.

Useful "Atrocities:" Desecrating the Dead, Hiding in Mosques, and Taking Hostages

There is nothing new about deliberately mistreating the dead, taking and keeping hostages while making horrible threats, or hiding in shrines and religious buildings. All of these approaches have been used cyclically in asymmetric warfare for centuries – if not millennia – and all have become steadily more attractive tactics with the advent of satellite new and modern media. They offer strong groups a wider range of political and psychological tactics and offer weak groups political and psychological leverage far beyond their actual strength. Regardless of what people may think of them, they are part of the standard arsenal of asymmetric warfare.

The point, however, is that until they are recognized as well-known "weapons," and not as shocking or surprising developments, they will achieve their desired effect, and the greater the publicity, the greater and more excessive the reaction, and the greater the intimidating or blackmailing effect, the more often they will be used. It is time to realize that a desecrated corpse is no less a weapon than an RPG, and that the US and Coalition face opponents who can be counted on to use every other such political and psychological weapon out of the arsenal of asymmetric warfare if given the opportunity to do so.

In fact, the only short term defense to the political and psychological aspect of such tactics is to under react or ignore them as much as possible – a defense which in general is politically and psychologically impossible, no matter how desirable in theory. The fact remains, however, that the Israeli approach is often the model of how not to fight an

asymmetric war. A strong and immediate military reaction, devoid of any clear political goals or context, may produce successful tactical operations but the end result is to increase the political support for the hostile side, and escalate to nowhere. Political and psychological warfare must be fought on political and psychological terms.

The Shi'ite Factor

The one real and truly troubling shift in the war over the last few weeks has been the involvement of a significant Shi'ite faction in the fighting. Troublesome as an asymmetric war against Sunni factions has been, they have always been too weak to have any serious hope of winning. Time has also been on the side of the US and Coalition in dealing with the Sunni insurgents as military operations took their tool, the flow of aid began to influence Iraqi perceptions, and the transfer of power back to Iraqis undermined much of the rationale that Sunni insurgents had for seeking broad political support. As a result, no act of Sunni violence or terrorism could – by itself – offer much prospect of being a turning point in the war.

There have, however, always been several ways the US and Coalition could lose the present asymmetric conflict:

- Have factional tensions between the Sunnis and Shi'ites – and/or Arabs, Kurds, and minorities – reach the point of serious civil conflict.

- Lose enough Shi'ite support so a major or unacceptably large percent of the Iraqi population rejected the Coalition presence and approach to nation building.

- Have the Governing Council fail to act as an effective interim government, and have Iraqis fail to elect a mix of successors capable of governing.

- Alienate a sufficiently large part of the Arab and Islamic worlds to deny the US regional support and make the cost of its strategic involvement in Iraq more costly than it is worth.

The Coalition and US military have not exhibited particularly competent intelligence capabilities in general over the last month. Events in Fallujah and Ar Ramadi strongly hint at poor intelligence on key aspects of the Sunni threat as well as slow and poorly prepared tactical reaction capabilities. The US also seems to again be incapable of understanding how badly it normally is penetrated by hostile intelligence collectors, the problems in trusting regional allies, and the shortfalls in operational security. Some of this may be the product of the massive ongoing cycle of rotations, but some of it seems to be the result of treating war as post conflict operations and simply underestimating the enemy.

What is particularly hard to explain, however, is the entire sequence of events leading to Coalition operations against the Moqtada al Sadr, and what seems to have been the sincere belief that the Coalition and Governing Council had far broader and deeper

political support than public opinion polls indicated. The CPA and some US officials still seem to be in denial about how fragile Iraqi public support for the Coalition and its nation building really is, and as to the need to give the political and psychological dimensions of any operation involving the Shi'ite primacy over tactical military expedience. The US seems to be confusing fighting an asymmetric war in a country where it is largely tolerated but lacks real popular support with implementing a largely established and popular peace. The US simply has not yet made that level of progress and it is likely to be months before it does.

The risk of civil war that previously has seemed to pose the greatest risk of winning tactically and losing at a strategic level. The fighting against Al Sadr has indicated, however, that the real risk may be a combination of the other three types of political and psychological defeat: Lose enough Shi'ite support so a major or unacceptably large percent of the Iraqi population rejected the Coalition presence and approach to nation building; have the Governing Council fail to act as an effective interim government, and have Iraqis fail to elect a mix of successors capable of governing; and alienate a sufficiently large part of the Arab and Islamic worlds to deny the US regional support and make the cost of its strategic involvement in Iraq more costly than it is worth. Furthermore, there are now hints of serious cooperation between hostile Sunnis and Shi'ites, and this could lead to much broader patterns of terrorism, bombings, and other attacks – as well as cooperation by hostile outside elements like Sunni extremists and Iranian hardliners.

The US and its allies can only hope to deal with these situations if they give primacy to the political and psychological impacts of both military operations and nation building, if they accept the real-world limits to Iraqi popular support for the Coalition, and if they take the necessary steps to deal with the limited popular support for the Governing Council. The issue also may well not be Sadr – but who emerges if he is captured or killed – and it is coping with the inevitable mix of continuing Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish mistrust that will go on through every new step in the transfer of power and national building process through at least 2005.

A "Multitude of Evils"

Sunni insurgents and the Sadr faction are the most serious immediate threats, but they do not define the scope of the political and psychological battles the US and its allies must be prepared to fight. The Coalition must also be prepared to carry out military operations and nation building in the face of opposition from a much wider range of various actors that have somewhat different goals and objectives.

Some of the most important "opponents" in political and psychological term not direct actors in the conflict, while others rely largely on local proxies or are simply using the Iraq War to achieve other ends. The range of this opposition includes:

- **Hostile Arab media and intellectuals**: A large part of the Arab media and many Arab intellectuals will be active hostile because of US ties to Israel, the fact the

Coalition has brought down an Arab regime and is occupying Iraq, and the belief the US should not play a major role in the Arab world and Middle East. The most important single factor in this hostility is the backlash against the US growing out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – which has nothing to do with Iraq and which is effectively beyond US control. The US has no chance of either persuading such opponents to change their mind or of sponsoring any kind of information effort that can hope to counter them in shaping the perceptions of many Iraqis and much of the Arab world. Hostile comment and images – most based largely on sincere conviction – will dominate a large part of regional perceptions, and every Coalition action and mistake will be blown out of proportion and be spun in a negative and conspiracy theory-dominated way. At the same time, opposition violence and terrorism will generally be spun favorably and/or explained away. Such media and voices may not be active belligerents, but they are one of the most powerful voices in the war , and they can ultimately only be countered by successful nation building in Iraq, and Coalition withdrawal.

- **Antiwar media, politicians, and activists**: The US faces similar problems with the many non-Arabs who opposed the war and now oppose the role of the Coalition. These critics will be more objective – particularly regarding anti-Coalition violence ands terrorism – but also will oppose Coalition military action, see many tactical operations as excessive force, and see hostile Iraqi actions as motivated by Coalition mistakes. They are more subject to US and Coalition influence, and will respond sooner and more favorably to any political and military success. At the same time, the Madrid bombing, and taking of Japanese hostages, show they are also targets and that anti-Coalition forces are likely to repeatedly attempt to exploit their political and psychological vulnerability.

- **Outside Islamic extremists, al Qaida, etc**.: Iraq will be both a cause and another front for outside Islamic extremists. Such actors present special problems in terms of political and psychological warfare. They can strike anywhere, rather than in Iraq, and many such groups have little reason to show restraint in their actions. Killing hostages, mass bombings, desecrating the dead, etc. all contribute to the goal of alienating the West from the Arab and Islamic world. Such "Islamic" movements show little or no sensitivity to Islamic values and restraint, and are not seeking power in Iraq in ways that force them to compromise or negotiate.

- **Sunni Iraqi and foreign volunteer opponents**: Roughly one-third of Iraq Sunnis supported violent attacks on Coalition forces before the current round of fighting and two thirds opposed the war. As has been touched upon earlier, hostile Sunni groups can have different agendas ranging from trying to maximize casualties, terror, and psychological effects as part of religious extremism to trying to break up the nation building process to achieve practical political ends. One key problem is that these movements have become more splintered and more diverse with time. This both broadens their potential base among anti-Coalition Sunnis, and makes them harder to counter on a political and psychological level. It also

creates the possibility that some Sunni elements may ally with hostile Shi'ite elements against the Coalition while others attack Shi'ites and the nation building process.

- **Shi'ite opponents**: Roughly 12% of Iraq Shi'ite supported violent attacks on Coalition forces before the current round of fighting, and one third opposed the war. The events of the last few week have shown that Shi'ite opinion is highly volatile, and much larger numbers may now oppose the Coalition – although there is no way to know how many will actively support violence or how deep and lasting such opinion will be. Like the Sunni opposition, the Shi'ite opposition includes a wide range of opinion with significant differences as to religious and secular goals, and willingness to ally with other factions. Iran is a significant wild card in this mix of opponents, particularly if opposition to the Coalition becomes more broadly based on religious lines.

- **Political "losers" in the nation building process**. Iraq is already the scene of a broadly based political struggle for power among those who are working within the nation building process, or who are on its margins. At least some of the losers in the struggle for power and visibility will turn against the Coalition and some will ally themselves with violent elements. The Coalition faces at least a year of political difficulties with such individuals, some of which may be able to command a considerable political following.

The key point is that the political and psychological dimension of the both the present low intensity conflict, and any post conflict situation that may emerge in the near future, will remain volatile and uncertain, and the nature and mix of opponents will continue to mutate and evolve.

Resolve for a Long War?

A great deal has been said about the fact that the present war in Iraq is strategically too important to lose, and that America and its allies face a critical test of their resolve. It is also clear that the Coalition's enemies in Iraq currently are not militarily strong, and the Coalition has accomplished a great deal.

Resolve, however, has to be earned through honesty and leadership. It is unfair to blame the American people and media – and the people and media of allied countries – for not showing the proper understanding and resolve when the CPA, CJTF-7, and Bush Administration do not properly acknowledge that a war is still underway and the nature of the risks and challenges involved.

Moreover, until the true political and psychological nature of the war is acknowledged, every new major act of violence will have far more importance in shaping public opinion than it should, and the US and its allies will remain at least partially unprepared for the war they are actually fighting. Given the probability that the current war cannot be "won" in less than a year, it is time to honestly face the nature of the facts on the ground.

The Political Attitudes of Iraqis Before the Current Fighting:
The ABC News Poll of February 2004

Percent responding to Survey question	Sunni Arabs	Shi'ite Arabs	Kurds
Was Iraq Humiliated Or Liberated?			
Humiliated	66	37	11
Liberated	21	43	82
Was the invasion right Or wrong?			
Right	24	51	87
Wrong	63	35	9
Coalition should leave now?			
Yes	29	12	2
Attacks on Coalition forces			
Acceptable?	36	12	2
Unacceptable?	57	85	96
Preferred Political System			
Democracy	35	40	70
Strong leader for life	35	23	6
Islamic state	15	26	8
Preferred Political System			
Single strong leader	65	44	20
Democracy	14	24	60
Religious leaders	5	18	2
Preferred Political System			
Single strong leader	49	32	16
Democracy	31	39	67
Religious leaders	6	7	2