

Losing the battle for Arab hearts and minds

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No charm offensive by US-UK coalition forces can persuade Arab public opinion that the war in Iraq is just. A study of the Arab media during the period of conflict illustrates how deep is the inner resistance of Arab minds to the seductions of western propaganda.

For the Arab media, the toppling of Saddam's statue in al-Firdaus square in Baghdad on 9 April was no Belgrade. The population of Baghdad, a city of 7 million people, did not erupt in jubilation. Not one million of them; not even one thousand. There were hardly two hundred people in the square, and most of these were foreign journalists.

In Arab eyes, this was an event staged by the international media, who challenged a handful of Iraqi youngsters to attack the statue, and so start to win the battle for 'Iraqi hearts and minds'. But, just a few hours after the phony euphoria, it was realised that the fighting in Baghdad had in fact continued and was harvesting even more Iraqi civilian casualties. Far from signaling liberation, the fact that US forces gave 'permission' for the destruction of Saddam's statue gave the green light for the looting and anarchy that followed.

McOccupation

Having witnessed the chaotic human crisis unfolding in Baghdad, Arab public opinion, as reflected in the Arab media, seems more convinced than ever that the Anglo-American slogan of 'winning hearts and minds' is sheer cynicism, a strategy for mass deception. Voices across the Arab media are doubtful of the coalition's ability to sell this concept to its own public, let alone to the Arabs themselves.

To the Arab media, the slogan and the concept behind it are mere propaganda and demagoguery – a false cry in the Iraqi desert. For 'hearts and minds' in the Arab culture have a very distinguished status, and cannot be won easily, especially not in a foreign language.

Coalition spin-doctors target western public opinion by suggesting that to 'win the hearts and minds' of the Iraqis is to liberate them from tyranny. Convincing the occupied Iraqis by using the well-known Israeli line of

'enlightened occupation' is an altogether different matter. Based on an American consumerist approach of fast liberation – what we might call 'McOccupation' – this is a concept remote from Arab realities and shows an orientalist perception of Arab culture.

The Palestinianisation of Iraq

If the aim of propaganda, in the words of Eugene Ionesco, is 'misdirection and brainwashing' then Anglo-American propaganda against Iraq (even without the counter-propaganda of Mohammad Sa'id al-Sahhaf), stands no real chance of meeting its aims. This applies as much to the Arab world as a whole as to the people of Iraq.

Besides the traditional media, the overwhelming majority of Arab households, both in the Middle East and in the diaspora, have access to new media – among them the Arab satellites MBC, LBC, al-Jazeera, ANN, al-Manar, al-Arabiya, Future and Abu Dhabi, as well as endless Arab newspapers available online, such as *al-Quds al-Arabi*, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, *al-Hayat*, *al-Nahar*, *al-Ahram* and others. Due to the growth of technology, these new Arab media have equalised in their capability to present alternative coverage, news counter-framing and opinions, reaching large audiences.

One needs to look no further than the traditional and new Arab media to see the contempt and anger held for the coalition's public relations effort. Having different patterns of ownership and opposing ideologies, no single Arab media was in favour of the war, although some of them wanted to see the back of Saddam Hussein.

From those who opposed the war in their news terminology and views, to those who aimed to strike a balance in their news coverage but opposed the war through editorials, to those who tried to be neutral but gave a podium to the chief propagandists of both the occupying powers and occupied Iraq, the Arab media have held a plethora of opinions and have helped shape wider Arab public opinion. Yet, they have been united in conveying the message that the coalition consists of 'invaders', and in representing the Iraqi people as an aggressed Arab nation alongside the Palestinians: occupied, humiliated and suffering under siege.

Writing in the Beirut-based *al-Nahar*, the Palestinian novelist Ziyad Khaddash published a short story titled: *As if I am in Basra, as if you are in Ramallah*. Emphasising the 'Palestinianisation' of Iraq, in an imagined telephone conversation with a Basra-based Iraqi novelist, Khaddash finds it hard to distinguish between the sound of the Apache helicopters attacking Ramallah and those attacking Basra.

In a column headed 'Lies are the Salt of War', Amjad Nasser writes in *al-Quds al-Arabi* that 'it is widely assumed that the politician is a professional liar'. Referring to the coalition's military spokespersons, he continues: 'The assumption is to attach to the military person characteristics such as honour, self-control and respect. But the current war on Iraq gives us an example of the military person who beats the politician in his lies.' Such a perception is clearly not conducive to the coalition's attempts to create a positive 'spin' on their actions.

The news in Arabic

Today, Arab newspapers, radio stations, television, the internet and particularly satellites play a pivotal role in presenting uncensored coverage that the American media do not show, as well as countering

Anglo-American propaganda by giving airtime to Arab voices the US media overlook.

In this media, Arabs address one another in the Arabic language, the sacred language of the Koran, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad fifteen centuries ago, a language with thousands of years of history and 300 million speakers worldwide. On a daily basis, the Arab media expose what they call 'the constant lies, rumours and disinformation of the invading powers' in the world's media, and how the invaders' information campaign is losing credibility by the hour, given heavy Iraqi civilian casualties and the situation of lawlessness. In a news item from al-Jazeera on 1 April 2003, one title reads: 'The Iraq War is Full of the Invading Powers' Phony Arguments'. Quoting an Iraqi poet, the Saudi-owned *al-Sharq al-Awsat* writes: 'A 35-year nightmare has been removed, only to be replaced by a worse one.'

Despite the huge pressures placed on it, in this Iraq war the Arab media have attempted to be credible in their coverage, in the eyes of both Arab and world opinion. Criticism from the American administration of al-Jazeera (see Colin Powell's comments to the

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media on 26/27 March 2003), and the later bombardment of their office and the killing of their reporter Tariq Ayyub, is seen as a method for concealing the truth and silencing the Arab media.

In the Arab media, terminology is frequently subversive, with journalists, writers and artists resisting the 'aggressors, invaders and occupiers'. In his live show on 28 April 2003, ANN presenter Hisham Diwani claimed: 'As an Arab journalist, once you have discovered the truth and given an accurate account of events, you cannot stay aloof and not condemn the actions of the occupation. This is your role as a journalist: it gives the occupying coalition forces no hope of winning the Iraqis' hearts and minds'.

Another Arab columnist, writing in *al-Wafd* newspaper on 22 April 2003, warned the official American media policy that it would have to 'use Arab voices and Arab pens' to promote its imperialist agenda, since 'Arab audiences suspect any direct American media'.

Poetry and propaganda

Recently, the two most eminent living Arab poets, the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish and the Syrian Adonis, joined with the Egyptian poet and folklorist Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi in publishing three powerful polemical poems in the Arab press. These three poems, *Nothing but Iraq*, *Salute to Baghdad* and *Baghdad*, lauded Iraq's contribution to the rich Arab culture and heritage and called for Arab fraternity and solidarity with Iraq.

The prominent role of the Arab poet should be seen in its cultural context. Historically, the ruler in Arab culture secured the minds of his citizens through allegiance, respect and other means. To win their hearts, he was usually aided by a poet laureate. During his invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Saddam may have had recruited poets at his palace, but found no Arab poet to rally the Arab masses behind him.

In this Iraq war, the situation was different. It was US-led assaults on 'Iraqi honour; the land and the human', as described by Arab interviewees such as Nour al-Din al-Sayed and others (see *al-Quds al-Arabi* and Reuters, 1 April 2003), that captured the Arab mind. And it was the committed Arab poets who described the sufferings and feelings of their fellow Arabs, in an eloquent, artistic style and making use of the richness of the Arabic language with its socio-linguistic and semiological power, who captured the hearts of the Arab world.

Official Anglo-American propaganda directed at the Iraqis, such as Blair and Bush's speeches aired from 'Towards Freedom TV', transmitted from an American Hercules aeroplane, has attempted to affect behaviour on the ground, and to persuade Iraqis to accept the 'invading-liberating' powers. The coalition line of winning Iraqi hearts and minds aims to bring about permanent behavioural change. Yet this is unlikely to occur, since the Iraqis – of all Arabs – have long experience of propaganda.

In a society such as theirs, it is recognised that messages are invariably propagandistic, even when biases are unconscious. In Iraq – as elsewhere – propaganda has emerged as an essential element of warfare. Moreover, it has become a major weapon in ideological struggle, both before the outbreak of these hostilities and after. Having being engaged in a propaganda war for the last thirty years it will not be easy to change Iraqi attitudes and behaviour. The 'gratification' factor has been maintained in the Iraqi and national Arab propaganda expressed in the Arab media, although the latter have also given full coverage to official Anglo-American propaganda.

As is shown in the Arab media, the overwhelming majority of Arabs and Iraqis know that there is no substance to the coalition's campaign to 'liberate the Iraqis and win their hearts and minds', for they know that the coalition's prime concern is Iraq's natural resources, as has been the case since Britain's first occupation of Iraq in the early 20th century. Having seen the results of this invasion on the ground and in the media, many ask how the coalition can secure Iraq's oil fields and the ministry of oil, yet cannot prevent the destruction and looting of its national heritage.

In the Arab view, had these preachers of democracy and freedom cared at all for Arabs living under oppression, they would have liberated the Palestinians, suffering the longest occupation in modern history. Instead, they merely see Palestinians being killed with US money and arms.

Invading hearts

'Hearts cannot rest in peace quickly, for in order to accept you have to re-trust the one who killed your father, wife or children', wrote the Christian Arab Bishop George Khader. Anglo-American sloganeering will never convince the relatives of those Iraqis killed in this war. Nor will it be possible to market this concept to those who have been injured, or those who have been looted or harassed with the permission of

the American occupation. In short, this is a slogan too cynical for Arabs to believe.

The mood of the Iraqis and Arabs, as reflected in the Arab media, tells us that coalition propaganda and its techniques are weak weapons. For Arab media expresses the view that the Arab world is right behind the Iraqi people. In this war, it is the suffering Iraqis who have gained possession of the overwhelming majority of Arab hearts and minds.

In the Gulf war of 1991, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the national Arab heart was broken. Although some Arab regimes joined the coalition forces to liberate Kuwait, the Arab mind felt disrespected, both by Iraq's invasion of another Arab capital, and by the fact that 'the imperialists', who were the driving force behind the attack, had attacked a leading Arab country to secure their national interests in the Middle East. And yet, unlike now, the Arab world did not then throw its weight behind the people of Iraq, because Saddam had occupied another Arab country.

To win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis the Arab media charge, you do not bombard them, slay them, deny them medical aid, cut off their water from two major rivers then offer them limited supplies of 'fake' mineral water. By such methods, the coalition can

hope for little more than to temporarily silence a few Iraqi stomachs, before these hungry stomachs become angrier minds.

Hitler's chief propagandist Goebbels argued that it is relatively easy to influence people's mood (*Stimmung*), but that it is far more difficult to change their behaviour (*Haltung*). Although signs of temporary relief among Iraqis was expressed after Saddam's removal, this began to shift negatively with the continued scenes of killings and destruction. Hence, real evidence of change in mood in Iraq is absent, and it is hard to believe that behavioural change will occur in the foreseeable future.

Although it is hard to establish whether it was a mere unlucky translation error or rather a Freudian slip, the official BBC website in Arabic translation for this campaign was 'the invasion of hearts'.

In battles as well as in romance, the heart in Arab culture is never won through aggression, by depriving it of its basic human rights, but through relentless, gentle actions. The mind is only won through appreciation and respect. All of this is lacking in the current occupation, and so the coalition's battle for hearts and minds cannot be won.

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