

Improving Information Operations in Iraq and the Global War on Terror

Farook Ahmed and Oubai Shahbandar

Introduction

The Surge of US military forces in Iraq has delivered a tremendous level of success in providing security to areas of Iraq that were previously under insurgent control. In order to build on these successes, the United States would greatly benefit from force multipliers that can help promote security and foster political reconciliation as the extra troops provided by the Surge withdraw.

A cheap and effective way to augment the Soldiers on the ground is to defeat radical extremist groups' ideologies and continue to win over the Iraqi population. The first step in developing this capability will be for the United States to establish a strategic framework that provides a central role for information operations. These operations are analogous to a political campaign; they revolve around putting together and conveying a coherent message that convinces people to be sympathetic to one group and oppose that group's adversary. In Iraq and in the broader war against violent Jihadism, the United States not only needs the power to act, but also the power to influence how its actions are interpreted.

It is important to recognize that the successes that the United States and Iraqi government have enjoyed during the Surge are not only a result of the increase in troops, but also a result of the coinciding popular revolt against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its ideology. This backlash against al-Qaeda has not only affected the group's capacity to operate within Iraq but also carries repercussions in the broader war against al-Qaeda. If the United States can marshal its resources and get across the right message, it will be able to take full advantage of al-Qaeda's present moment of weakness and win a major battle in the Global War on Terror.

And as AQI's operational capacity wanes, its leadership has been forced to reconstitute and reassess their strategic priorities. A concerted information operations strategy is thus needed to sustain progress by channeling the burgeoning Islamic and Arab backlash against Islamist extremist in Iraq and extending it to other theaters. Though there has been a long-standing narrative that the conflict in Iraq has contributed to the worldwide Jihad, many commentators and analysts are coming around to the realization that Iraq has become not only an operational vise for AQ but a black hole for the Jihadist trend in general.

Right now, the United States is not as good as its enemies in carrying out effective information operations. In his seminal work, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, the French theorist and practitioner David Galula points out that insurgents are able to employ propaganda and disinformation through all media imaginable to great effect and with minimal public backlash. Furthermore, counter-insurgents cannot use information in the same way or to the same effect as insurgents can because the public expects more than words and holds the government to a higher standard of truth. For this reason, Galula argues that in counter-insurgency, information operations are secondary to the primary mission of securing the population, though they are still useful. For the United States, this problem is magnified for several reasons. Dr. Christopher Paul of RAND Corporation adds that the United States currently has a problem because of an excessive focus on kinetic aspects in warfare as well as a lack of coordination at all levels among those who are ostensibly responsible for information operations. Finally, effective information operations require direction from intelligence to put out the right messages that are targeted to the proper audience. At present, however, there is no collection requirement or focus on leveraging intelligence assets and analysis for use in information operations. On the contrary, American military intelligence assets are still oriented towards supporting maneuver warfare operations even though the United States military finds itself in two protracted counter-insurgencies.

It is critical that our military and civilian leaders recognize these shortfalls and take the necessary steps to address it. The new bureaucratic and doctrinal procedures necessary for an effective information operations capability will augment stretched American forces for years to come in Iraq. Additionally, with such an institutional capacity in place, the United States will be well-positioned to expand this campaign into other Middle Eastern countries to help win the broader fight against violent Jihadists and their ideologies.

If the United States is able to relay the message of its successes (and, more importantly, al-Qaeda's extreme excesses) in Iraq to others in the region, it would provide a cheap and effective way to challenge the extremist narrative that al-Qaeda has so successfully sold in many areas of the Muslim world. As al-Qaeda reels from its setbacks in Iraq, the United States is in a position to exploit its vulnerabilities and dismantle its abilities to wage a successful terrorist campaign in Iraq, the Middle East, or anywhere else in the world.

To that end, the United States needs to develop a capacity to put forth effectively its message in order to support moderate allies in Iraq who are in position to continue providing political support to the Iraqi government in the fight against extremist groups in Iraq. Establishing such a the bureaucratic procedures necessary for effective information operations in Iraq will support the United States' policies not only in that country, but throughout the region.

Iraq

Senior leaders in the Coalition, Iraqi government as well as al-Qaeda are all agreement that al-Qaeda in Iraq suffered a severe blow over the past year because it lost the support of Iraq's Sunni communities. According to an article by Martin Fletcher published in the Times on February 11, a leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq in al-Anbar province – once the group's stronghold – has acknowledged that the group faces an "extraordinary crisis". Last year's mass defection of

ordinary Sunnis from al-Qaeda to the US military in al-Anbar province "created panic, fear and the unwillingness to fight." The terrorist group's security structure suffered "total collapse."

While these results are certainly heartening to those who hope for a quick resolution of the conflict, the battle for Sunni hearts and minds has not yet been decided. It remains to be seen whether the Iraqi Sunnis will continue to support the counter-insurgency campaign past a significant withdrawal of Coalition forces. There remains a considerable amount of mutual mistrust between Iraq's Shi'a and Kurdish-dominated government and the country's Sunni Arab community.

The Coalition must stay vigilant on the operational front, as its adversaries in Iraq will continue to adapt their tactics to deploy more effective improvised explosive devices. Along the same lines, the United States must recognize that al-Qaeda in Iraq will try to adapt its message to Iraq's changing political circumstances to try and reverse its political losses that came with the Surge. Captured al-Qaeda in Iraq documents indicate that the group's leadership is telling its followers to soften their tactics in order to regain popular support in the western province of Anbar, where the revolt against al-Qaeda began in 2005, as Sunni tribes turned against the organization and begun working with U.S. forces.

It would be foolish to expect al-Qaeda to go quietly into the night without trying to adapt. One of al-Qaeda's most prolific writers and strategic thinkers, Abu Musab al-Suri (now captured) wrote that al-Qaeda must adjust its relationships with other resistance groups as well as the local communities in which they operate. Suri is the most prominent advocate of what he terms a 'pragmatic' Jihad, which would address some of the impetus for AQI's severe setbacks over the past year. Furthermore, recently captured al-Qaeda in Iraq documents published by the Combatting Terror Center at West Point indicate that AQI's senior leadership has begun to make a concerted effort to reconcile with the Iraqi people whose support it previously relied upon.

If the Coalition and Iraqi government's counter-insurgency campaign is to succeed, they must ensure that the rift between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi people remains. Otherwise, al-Qaeda will be able to enjoy sanctuary in areas from which it was previously ousted and many of the gains of the Surge will be reversed and the United States will find itself facing a much tougher fight than otherwise necessary.

To that end, the Coalition and Iraqi government must design an information operations strategy that functions throughout the country and will counter al-Qaeda's continuing attempts to reconnect with the population. This campaign must bolster anti-al Qaeda groups and movements in Iraq's Sunni community politically as well as by using a full-spectrum of Arab media. These groups will serve as a bulwark against radical Islamists who seek to mobilize Iraq's Sunni community against the Iraqi government. Indeed, a strong information operations campaign could delegitimize al-Qaeda politically and cripple its capabilities to recover from its setbacks in Iraq. If effective, this will counter al-Qaeda's efforts to exploit the tenuous political environment in Iraq to win back those of its former supporters who turned to the Iraqi government. Though this is a temporary measure, such an outcome would provide the effects of the Surge by ensuring that leaders in the Iraqi government have the political space to make the necessary compromises to foster true ethno-sectarian reconciliation.

What would such a campaign look like? “Information operations” often connotes nefarious activities such as spreading propaganda. But lying is unnecessary and often counter-productive, given the media’s oversight of US and Iraqi actions; the Coalition and Iraqi governments must only make sure that the people hear the truth. A typical example could follow the lines of a videotape showing the training session of AQI recruits northeast of Baghdad that was recently released to Al-Arabiyah Television. The video shows that the new members of the organization are children no older than 12 years old. The footage also shows an operation conducted by the Iraqi forces to liberate a child kidnapped by an armed organization in Kirkuk. The organization also demanded a ransom in order not to behead that child. Such images convey two clear messages: First, Al-Qaeda in Iraq is not a liberator but an oppressive and thoroughly sadistic organization that is not likely to win. And second, the Iraqi government is capable and eager to provide security to all Iraqi people. These are the exact messages that need to be conveyed to the Iraqi people as well as to the broader Middle East.

AQ Global

As al-Qaeda in Iraq’s operational capacity comes under increasing stress, al-Qaeda’s central leadership will try to regroup and reassess its strategic priorities. This will likely see it pouring in more efforts for terrorism in other areas. As a result, the United States will be best off staying a step ahead and ensuring that it continues pressuring al-Qaeda to sustain its downward trend. This focus would be best augmented with a concerted communications strategy that pushes a similar narrative as that which could be useful in Iraq.

The United States is in a moment of great opportunity in the current fight against al-Qaeda. Iraq is an operational vise for al-Qaeda as well as a major blow for the global Jihadist movement. An information campaign along regional lines that shows al-Qaeda attacks as directed against common Muslims would help moderate allies who have protected their communities from Jihadist oppression gain credibility. It would further separate the small hardcore group of extremists from the region’s populace, both operationally and psychologically. This would sustain al-Qaeda’s current downward spiral through leveraging the narrative of communitarian resistance against Islamist extremism.

Just as al-Qaeda has recognized the necessity of adapting its strategy in Iraq, the group’s central leadership acutely recognizes its need to adapt around the world. There is a debate internal to al-Qaeda that the United States could use to its advantage. One senior al-Qaeda tactician, in his book *Management of Barbarism*, calls for Jihadists to manipulate tribal and ethnic communities against one another in order to serve their political needs. It is therefore clear that al-Qaeda’s leadership recognizes that it must adapt its strategies to the changing situation on the ground. For the United States, this means that an ad-hoc information operations strategy that is designed for this moment in time will likely fail to carry a lasting effect. There needs to be an institution that can adapt as fast as- or faster than - al-Qaeda can adapt.

Furthermore, the United States must be able to take advantage of splits within the Jihadist movement. A Jihadi strategist from Gama’a al Islamiyah, an Egyptian group with ties to the Muslim brotherhood and al-Qaeda’s senior leadership, denounced al-Qaeda and argued against

the use of violence to bring about an Islamic state. Hardly noticed by Western media, the book, titled *Rationalization of Jihad*, has been denounced among Jihadists with a global view, but has gained some support among veterans of Jihadi armed struggle against secular Arab regimes. This ideological rift represents an opportunity for the United States to promote this “quietist” strain of Salafism as an alternative to al-Qaeda’s violent revolutionary ideology. An institution that could recognize these shifts and react immediately and effectively would be able to take advantage of opportunities like these.

The idea of an information operations campaign is not new. Indeed, it is an extension of classic counter-insurgency doctrine and has been used to great effect for decades. In this case, however, the need for an information operations strategy extends beyond fighting a single enemy in a single country. The United States’ adversaries are great in number and ideology and have proven themselves adaptable. This means that there will remain in some fashion, albeit limited, some capacity for Jihadist terrorism regardless of the United States’ military actions. Terror and guerilla groups might not be adept at winning—and in Iraq they certainly are losing—but they have historically maintained a propensity to ensure that the winning side does not enjoy the fruits of victory for very long.

This requires that the United States be able to have an adaptable and effective message if it is to prevent the re-seeding and successful evolution of the Jihadist movement. This message must work not only in single countries like Iraq, but it needs to be constructed and disseminated with a broader, more strategic view that looks at the overall conflict against al-Qaeda. This will require the United States to conduct its information operations in a way that takes a longer view and approaches the Global War on Terror with an overarching strategic perspective.

Where Do We Go From Here?

To carry out an effective long-term information operations campaign will be as difficult as it is necessary. The requirements of such an information operations campaign would require significant changes in the way that the United States’ foreign policy bureaucracies operate. Indeed the United States’ great difficulties in securing a Status of Forces Agreement with the Government of Iraq in the face of an Iranian PR offensive speaks volumes as to the US’s shortcomings in the field of strategic communications. While the U.S. government – especially the military – is adept at putting out a message in favor of the war for an American audience, there is no single organization within the government that is resourced, staffed, and mandated to carry out information operations in foreign countries; this important facet of the Global War on Terror is everyone’s job, which means that it is no one’s job.

Currently, such operations are a secondary mission for numerous groups, which means that they do not receive the attention or even the limited resources necessary for success. Information operations are often left to contractors who do not have the expertise or experience. Furthermore, commanders on the ground are responsible for carrying out their own information operations. While they may be occasionally effective, this means that there is no overall strategic framework that guides and coordinates information operations throughout the theater, let alone throughout the world.

In order to address this, there must be a single entity that has the capabilities, resources, and mandate to do this job. Just as the State Department's primary mission is to carry out diplomacy and the Missile Defense Agency handles National Missile Defense, there must be an agency somewhere within the United States government that handles information operations. The exact form of this organization is a separate issue. It could be an entity within the State Department or Defense Department; it could be a resurrected version of the United States Information Agency. The issues that are beyond question are 1- that the United States is sorely lacking in its ability to carry out information operations and 2- that it must develop its information operations capabilities as soon as possible in order to speed that the defeat of extremist organizations and their ideologies. Without this capability, the United States will find that its fight against al-Qaeda continues to be much more difficult than necessary.

Farook Ahmed is a researcher at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington D.C. Oubai Shahbandar is a Defense Department employee currently stationed in Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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