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Information Wars: Are the Iraqis Getting the Message?

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 12 (December 2004)

by [Bill Putnam](#)

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Opinion

During his first post-election press conference, President Bush proclaimed that he had earned “political capital” from his election day victory—and that he planned to spend it.

Many Americans want that capital spent on winning the conflict in Iraq, according to a post-election poll taken by the Associated Press. However, defeating the Iraqi insurgency will prove difficult if the U.S.-led Coalition fails to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Coalition efforts to do so have achieved limited progress thus far because it has been unsuccessful in transmitting its messages to the Iraqi people, as it has relied on middlemen Arab media outlets to push its agenda. The battle for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people is thus being lost, and this scenario will probably continue unless the U.S.-led military coalition establishes its own media outlet in Iraq to directly reach the Iraqi people.

Why is the Coalition Failing?

One reason why the Coalition is losing the battle for hearts and minds has been the U.S. military’s rigid determination to make the Iraqi information environment conform to its Information Operations and Public Affairs doctrine on how things should be done, rather than vice versa. During my year-long tenure in Baghdad as the head of the Coalition’s Open Source Intelligence Cell—which monitors and analyzes the Iraqi and Arab media—I witnessed how slow the Coalition has been in understanding the way information and opinions are formed in Iraq.

The Coalition has focused its efforts predominantly on dogmatic methods of engagement, mainly via press releases, with various “middlemen” media outlets that have markedly different goals. Failure to understand how Iraqis receive their information and formulate their opinions has resulted in the Iraqi people becoming increasingly distrustful of the Coalition and more susceptible to anti-Coalition propaganda.

The Circle of Influence

Iraqis receive their news and formulate their opinions primarily from five sources: Arab satellite channels; one's family, tribe, and friends; the streets; Islamic clerics; and the newspapers.

The satellite channels—led by Al Jazeera—are the primary disseminators of information and normally take an anti-Coalition tone. Other leading sources of information are the streets, the Islamic clerics, and the newspapers. Once these sources disseminate their information, people begin to talk about the issues with those they immediately trust: their family and friends. It is here where all the information is processed and fused together and most attitudes are developed. These opinions and information will travel through the family and will then go back out onto the streets.

They will be spread in a circle that will affect others on the streets, and they will likely come back to the originator, further reinforcing the perspective that person created, and causing them to retransmit it again. It is imperative that one understands the Circle as this demonstrates how Iraqis receive their information and formulate their opinions. Most of the Circle's influences are anti-Coalition, and the Coalition has thus far not been able to gain access to the Circle—except on a limited basis.

The coalition has established some cordial ties with newspapers and some of the satellite TV channels, but unfortunately these conduits have their own agenda and desire not to appear as pro-Coalition or pro-America. The Arab satellite channel Al Arabia is such an example. The Coalition has succeeded in working with Al Arabia and getting it to moderate, but one of its commentators once told this author that Al Arabia's biggest problem is Al Jazeera's stranglehold on the Arab populace. For ratings' sake, he claimed, Al Arabia cannot be seen as being too neutral, much less pro-Coalition.

A lack of influence with the Circle, or even a place within it, has meant that Coalition efforts to disseminate its messages to the Iraqi people have been for the most part unsuccessful. This lack of influence has ensured that the campaign to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people has remained largely unsuccessful. Even in the cases where it has worked, Iraqis are too afraid to publicly express such views.

Insurgent/Terrorist Influence on the Circle

Unlike the Coalition, the insurgents/terrorists do not lack sway within the Circle of Influence. They have a strong influence with the Arab satellite channels and the Iraqi streets. Because of their being part of Iraqi society, the insurgents/terrorists are able to spread anti-Coalition rumors onto Iraq's streets. Since these rumors are placed onto a trusted medium, many Iraqis accept them as the truth. Another way in which the insurgents/terrorists are able to dominate the information environment is the fear they have created in Iraq's streets and countryside.

Iraqis, even pro-Coalition ones, are afraid to publicly say anything positive about the Coalition or to denounce the insurgents/terrorists for fears of retribution. This has resulted in a continuing circle of anti-Coalition rhetoric that has actually rooted itself into the psyche of Iraq's streets. It is an impossible task to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people when no one can say anything positive about the Coalition in public, and anti-Coalition rumors circulate Iraq's streets uncontested by Iraqis and accepted as fact. Such developments ensure that those in the middle—who are the majority—will have a negative impression of the Coalition.

To illustrate the impact this has on mainstream Iraq, let's look at an example of four Iraqi male friends at a teashop. Drinking tea at a table is Aziz, Hussein, Abdul, and Ghassan. The first two are anti-Coalition, while the third is pro-Coalition and the fourth is undecided. The first two comment how they dislike the Coalition and how it has committed many atrocities against the Iraqi people. Abdul feels forced to agree, as he is too afraid to publicly defend the Coalition for

fear of retribution or being shunned as a collaborator. In turn, Ghassan, who was undecided, may decide that the Coalition presence is a negative development, with his environment—the streets and his friends—being the deciding factor.

Although this interaction is not completely truthful—as Abdul has hidden his true feelings because he fears revealing his opinion in order to protect his family—Ghassan is swayed to the anti-Coalition side, while Aziz and Hussein are only further convinced that their opinions are correct. It will remain impossible to win over Iraqis so long as scenarios such as this continue unchallenged.

The Way Forward

The Coalition will not win the Iraqis' hearts and minds nor eventually achieve its goals in Iraq unless it finds a way to get its message across. It must reshape the current negative information environment that exists in Iraq by creating its own dedicated media sources.

To begin with, the Coalition needs to establish its own terrestrial TV station and print media outlet. These would be different than the current Iraqi government-funded TV station Al Iraqia and the Al Sabah newspaper, as well as the U.S.-funded Al Hurrah satellite channel—which has had a difficult time establishing itself within the Arab world since its start earlier this year. These outlets operate independently and are not interested in pushing the Coalition's perspectives to the Iraqi populace. It is imperative that the middlemen media outlets be removed so the Coalition can directly engage the Iraqi populace.

Iraqis have constantly said that they would like to know what the Coalition's perspectives and opinions are on many issues. Additionally, they want to know what type of reconstruction projects the Coalition is conducting. A TV station that operated from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. would be enough to provide this information, and to provide additional information to the Iraqi people. Talk shows discussing local street rumors or how to file damage claims with the Coalition would be watched, and could stand up to allegations of being nothing but "propaganda."

Such an outlet does not currently exist in Iraq, and this is only to the detriment of the Coalition. A leading Coalition official recently said that such a station is not necessarily needed, as there are plenty of Arab TV stations to work with in order to disseminate the Coalition's messages. The problem is that the Coalition is putting itself at the mercy of middlemen—who have their own agenda and can water down its messages, and are unlikely to ever change their anti-Coalition tone. Meanwhile, a national newspaper run by the Coalition military focusing on Iraqi news and Iraqi issues, along with the Coalition messages such as editorials and Coalition media announcements, would enable the Iraqi public to access Coalition messages during the day, while watching the TV channel at night.

The second step that must be taken is for the Coalition to ensure that pro-Coalition and anti-insurgent/terrorist perspectives are placed into the Iraqi Circle of Influence. This can be done by working with Iraqi intelligence through taxi cab drivers and market shoppers—and will go a long way to reshaping the negative environment that currently exists. However, this step will only have a medium success rate if the security situation does not improve, because Iraqis will continue to fear for their lives, even if pro-Coalition opinions are on the streets.

Conclusion

Defeating an insurgency requires making favorable inroads with the population. Military-only solutions usually alienate the people in the long-term, and many Iraqis believe the United States only knows how to use military force. As a result, the Coalition has become increasingly isolated from the Iraqi people since its arrival in 2003.

The hearts and minds of the Iraqi people have not been won. Indeed, the fight for their support is ongoing. Improving security and providing basic services and jobs will go a long way toward rectifying this trend—but more is needed:

- The Coalition needs its own media outlets to cut out the middlemen that currently stand between it and the Iraqi people.
- The Coalition also needs to break the monopoly the anti-Coalition forces have over the rumor mill on Iraq's streets.

The combination of these two steps, along with an increase in security, will put the Coalition on the right path—gaining the hearts and minds of the Iraqi public, and ultimately being victorious in its effort to stabilize and democratize Iraq.

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About the Author

During his year-long tenure in Baghdad, Bill Putnam served as the head of the Coalition's Open Source Intelligence Cell. He earned his B.A. in Political Science from Tulane University, and his Master's in International Relations from the London School of Economics.