

Losing the War of Ideas in Iraq by Andrew Garfield

The U.S. led Coalition still faces a number of significant challenges in Iraq that must be overcome in order to win a war of ideas with the insurgents and extremists. Ten fundamental problems have been identified by Glevum Associates through extensive research and firsthand experience. These difficulties are outlined below.

First, the lines of persuasion on which the Coalition's campaigns are built, all too often relate to somewhat abstract concepts such as the promotion of democracy, citizenship or the Iraqi Security Forces; issues that have little or no relevance to the majority of Iraqis. As a result, these campaigns simply do not resonate with most Iraqis and are unlikely to change attitudes let alone behavior. Most Iraqis care far more about real-life issues such as personal security and jobs or are heavily influenced by the political position of their religious leaders, tribe or clan. The Coalition's information campaigns therefore need to do a far better job of linking Coalition objectives to the issues that matter to Iraqis.

Second, most Coalition campaigns are aimed at a generic Iraqi audience that simply does not exist. There seems to be an assumption that all Iraqis are broadly similar and therefore the same messages and emotional appeals will resonate with them all. In reality, Iraq is an exceptionally ethnically and ideologically diverse—one could even say divided—country. Therefore an overarching, national-level message campaign is rarely going to appeal to the majority except in the case of a few truly “national” issues, such as general elections. Even campaigns aimed at the three main ethnic groups are not going to resonate with everyone within that group, because there are also significant intragroup differences. For example, significant divisions exist within the Shia community, mainly along tribal and ideological lines, that necessitate much more focused and nuanced campaigning. The difference between the supporters of the key Shia groups are profound, and Coalition messages need to take due account of this, in order to achieve the desired effect. Indeed, a positive message for one community may actually be received negatively by another. The challenge of developing such focused campaigns is compounded by the fact that the primary means of reaching many key audiences is television and the preponderance of national and international satellite stations makes it very difficult to develop broadcast media products aimed at the right audience. Developing the right types of programming also places a premium on extensive cultural knowledge of audience preferences derived from attitudinal research

that has not always been available to Coalition planners, a situation that must be rectified.

Third, Coalition information campaigns have been hindered by a preference for measures of performance over efficiency. The bulk of the information campaigns deployed in Iraq have been executed at the national level by large international advertising firms that have made countless expensive, mostly television advertising commercials of 30 or 60 second duration. From the limited amount of research that has been done, it seems certain that these campaigns have had little effect on attitudes and none on behavior. These same firms have undertaken some more localized advertising, using for example billboards and newspaper advertisements, but have used the same abstract concepts drawn from the Coalition's lines of persuasion that simply do not resonate with most Iraqis. The success of these expensive campaigns is not measured on the basis of their impact but simply on performance. How many were made? How quickly were they released? How often they were aired? How many people were watching? Unfortunately, all these types of indicators show are that messages were seen, not what impact they had. Coalition officials perpetuate this failure by describing the success of the Information Operations effort on the basis of the amount of commercials shown and the amount of money spent, not on what immediate or lasting effect had been achieved. Some success has been achieved, often by units themselves, which have undertaken grassroots campaigns using leaflets, billboards, comics, and newspaper placements promoting issues that matter to the people in their AO. But these successes have been too few and far between.

A fourth and alarming shortcoming has been the failure to counter enemy propaganda either by responding with effective counter messaging or more proactively by challenging the issues, ideology, and vision for Iraq that the insurgents and extremists promote and exploit. The insurgents, extremists, and militia groups in Iraq have shown themselves to be highly adept at releasing timely and effective messaging that undermines support for the Iraqi government and Coalition and bolsters their own reputation and perceived potency. They are quick to exploit Coalition failures and excesses; they respond quickly to defend their own actions, often by shifting blame on to the authorities; and they are able to hijack Coalition successes and present them as proof that change only occurs as a result of their own violent campaign. They have also shown an increasing ability to respond to Iraqi government and Coalition messaging with their own counterarguments. They do all of this far faster than the Coalition—deploying messages that resonate with the local populace in real and near real time. Until the Coalition is able to counter this

enemy propaganda and seize the influence initiative, the adversary will continue to be in the ascendancy in the war of ideas.

A fifth problem undermining the Coalition's ability to deploy timely and effective arguments is its own approval process. Even excellent products developed by Iraqi authors for their own ethnic group, that will assuredly resonate with that audience, can take days and even weeks to be staffed through what can only be described as a Byzantine approval process. Even simple newspaper reports and advertisements aimed at the readers of a newspaper with a circulation of less than 50,000 have to be sanctioned by an approval chain that includes numerous Info Ops and PSYOP staffs, lawyers, and senior officers up to the rank of three-star general. Imagery of critical events filmed by Coalition assets that could be used to highlight the atrocities being committed by the insurgents can take days to clear this approval process.

It has to be acknowledged that in part, the approval process became so convoluted and requires the involvement of the lawyers because of problems with the messages being developed and the means being used to deploy them; for example, the lack of cultural sensitivity; the use of inappropriate messages and themes; and the payment of Iraqi journalists. However, unless the approval process is radically overhauled, so that the time taken to secure release approval can be reduced to only a few hours and ideally minutes, the Coalition will continue to struggle to prevail in the battle for the hearts and minds of Iraqis. The insurgents are most assuredly not encumbering themselves in the same way and it shows.

The sixth failure is the lack of effective coordination and oversight of the multiplicity of entities involved in the War of Ideas in Iraq and the failure to develop a truly integrated and mutually supporting campaign. On occasion, message themes notionally linked to the Coalition's overarching lines of persuasion, are actually contradictory and therefore at a minimum confusing for the target audiences. The standard of IO activities also varies across the force because there is no single command authority coordinating and deconflicting activities across the theatre and ensuring that all entities reach a minimum level of competency. Or that the all too limited resources available are deployed where they will have greatest impact. Interagency cooperation is encouraged but this is not the most effective means to ensure command and control one of the most vital aspects of our mission in Iraq.

The next failure concerns the competency of the operators tasked to execute the Coalition's IO campaign and the resources allocated to them. While a

minority of personnel do have the necessary skills needed, most are seconded from other branches of service and have at best only an eight week IO course to prepare them for what is a complex undertaking. This type of undertaking requires the government to have access to a combination of skills and experience encompassing at a minimum strategic communications, marketing advertising, public relations, lobbying, political campaigning, journalism, multi media production and broadcasting. Backgrounds in the key social sciences for cultural understanding and an extensive attitudinal research capability. Most importantly, senior leaders need expert advice to enable them to exploit IO to maximum effect and to fully consider the influence implications of all other operations. Even after three years of occupation, this full array of skills and experience is still sadly lacking. This shortcoming is compounded by the rotation of personnel who have gained skills and experience through “on the job” training, who are replaced by the next batch of inexperienced personnel with only limited training, who must start the learning process all over again.

This lack of skills has resulted in a number of crucial mistakes being made in the development of effective IO campaigns that actually change attitudes and behavior. These have included:

- Development of messages that are boring and turn audiences off
- Lack of consistency in messages and products
- Lack of adequate target audience understanding
- Lack of understanding of the nature of the threat
- Use of rhetoric that does not resonate with Iraqis
- Failure to use all mediums including entertainment
- Development of products that resonate with the Coalition but not Iraqis
- Failure to respond in timely manner to key events

The eighth and closely associated failing is the proper exploitation of the private sector contractors who are supposed to provide the Coalition with the skills and experience that are not available in the public sector. In the first instance, the Government has been a poor client, which has allowed contractors to provide inadequate services. Requests for Proposals are all too often poorly written and reflect a lack of understanding of the actual operational requirements of commanders and of the IO mission. The contractor selection process is undertaken by personnel, who too often lack the knowledge and experience needed to determine if a contractor’s proposal is achievable, and to ensure that a prospective contractor’s claims regarding capabilities are genuine. This lack of due diligence in the selection process is a primary reason that contractors have so often failed to deliver that level of

service that was required and promised. After a contract has been let, some Coalition personnel lack the technical skills to properly assess contractor performance and are unable to effectively demand an improvement in service when standards slide as they all too often do. Nor do they have the experience and support needed to terminate contracts.

Contractor shortcomings including the failure to provide the full extent of services promised in the winning proposal, usually because of a failure to deploy sufficient numbers of suitably qualified staff. This situation in large part results from the fact that contractors, in order to secure an IO contract regularly include in proposals the resumes of individuals who cannot or will not actually deploy to Iraq. The hope is that the right personnel can be recruited after the fact. Other shortcomings include the failure to provide effective (and costly) in-country management to ensure that standards and discipline are maintained. As a result, contractor staff regularly infringe General Order Number One and/or deliver inferior performance. Contractors also sometimes fail to commit all of the funds that should be allocated to a project, which can seriously undermine the operational effectiveness of their effort. Contractors also lack the necessary cultural knowledge or specific skills needed to communicate with a foreign and culturally diverse audience. Some contractors also inflate prices either deliberately or through the selection of national and international broadcast media, which is typically the most costly and least effective media to reach and influence key audiences, as highlighted previously in this paper. Overall it is assessed that the IO contractors have generally failed to deliver even an adequate service to the Government; performance has been generally inferior; and worse poor performance and disaffected staff have undermined the public confidence in the IO mission.

A key failure of our IO effort in Iraq has been our inability to encourage the Iraqis themselves to become the key exponents and advocates of their Government's and the Coalition's vision for Iraq. While a significant effort has been devoted to standing up the Iraqi Army and supporting the Iraqi Government, insufficient resources have been devoted to the identification and empowerment of spokespersons and advocates across Iraqi society. Some success has been achieved but it is not enough. It is therefore vital that the Coalition support a concerted effort to find, train, resource and support individuals, companies and the Iraqi Government to become their own best spokespersons and the operational lead in the war of ideas in Iraq.

The tenth and final failure in this war of ideas is the failure to win domestic public and political support. As the recent press controversy over the payment

of Iraqi journalists has demonstrated, the case for the need to engage in a war of Ideas in Iraq has not been made. As a result it sometimes appears that the American press and politicians appear far more comfortable with using violence than reasoned arguments to defeat this adversary. And yet in the end this adversary can only be defeated, stability restored, and reconstruction completed if the influence war is won, and this must include an effective and timely information campaign. Whenever a limited public debate does occur on this topic, opponents often deploy the word “propaganda” to denigrate the use of information as a weapon and yet the only alternative to dialogue is violence and intimidation. The U.S. government therefore has to make a compelling case to the public to justify the necessity for this type of operation and to gain political and public acceptance of the tools that must be deployed. Whether the public agrees or disagrees with the Iraq War, winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi public is vital in order to bring peace to that country and this necessitates securing domestic public and political support for the various tools of an influence based campaign. As one American interviewee noted, “If we cannot win this argument, how on earth are we going to succeed in stabilizing and reconstructing Iraq?”