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A New IO Strategy: Prevention and Disengagement

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 5 (May 2006)

by [Ed O'Connell](#) and [Dr. Cheryl Benard](#)

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Introduction

Recent IED events in the Middle East and Iraq have witnessed the Baghdad Al-Aimma bridge incident, where several hundred children and women were trampled to death at the mere mention of a suicide bomber in the vicinity; a female involved in the Jordan bombings, allegedly because her brothers were killed by Coalition forces; soaring Iraqi casualty rates; increasing frequency of Iraqi children involved in emplacing roadside bombs, and teens now driving suicide bomb vehicles; and most recently, increasing export of terrorism outside Iraq's borders (Amman).

More importantly, we are currently letting the terrorist and insurgents pick the time and place of their information operations in today's Iraq. We appear to be fighting the enemy's fight, and only addressing the symptoms and not the causes of the larger battle by cleverly copying enemy fliers, or mirroring their themes in our psychological operations efforts.

We must not continue to 'fight their fight.' If we do the results will be likely prove disastrous.

One insurgent video that was being passed around the streets of Baghdad in the fall of 2004 shows an IED attack from the triggerman's vantage point as he patiently waits for the right moment to detonate a bomb inside an old car a hundred yards down a busy Baghdad street. After U.S. soldiers pass by, a young boy and a girl walk between them and the car. Yet the bomber does not hesitate to detonate, and in the last frame, a fireball roars up the street toward the boy and girl. The deeper 'information' significance for us is that it clearly shows that young 'insurgents-for-hire' are increasingly killing other Iraqi youths. We often overlook key scenes in enemy video that can be used by the Iraqi Government to inform and influence. For example in this video an age-old Iraqi Army marching cadence is set to new lyrics urging Iraqis everywhere to kill and maim the generic "enemy."

We could put out our own videos highlighting the carnage from these attacks. But this would only highlight that we are failing to protect the average Iraqi citizen in Baghdad. We could emphasize that the terrorists are contravening religious precepts from the Quran and Hadith. But religious motivation appears to be less of a factor in suicide bombings than previously thought and the question of jihad appears interpretive for the enemy. In order to combat these disturbing videos and the fomenting of unrest in the region through television and Internet programs might require a

Creative Use of the Media program featuring a cataloging of existing programs in the region that have proved effective against terrorists and insurgents: the humor campaign run by the Egyptian government; the recent Syrian Soap Opera *Al-Hur Al-Ayn*; and the Iraqi Ministry of Interior's *Terrorism in the Grip of Justice* TV program(s).

However effective these are only small steps in the overall scheme of things. If we are truly serious about a sustained effort we must adopt an overall framework or new way of looking at information operations in this age of Irregular Warfare, Asymmetric Warfare and Counter-insurgency, or Global Jihad. Therefore, an innovative IO campaign which *prevents* the recruitment of Islamic jihadists from abroad and paid-for-hire insurgents inside Iraq as well as *disengages* them in custody seems increasingly imperative in this new context.

Another more basic challenge is framed for us by the current Iraq experience. How do we break the 'social contract' of the streets that is attracting so many paid-for-hire insurgents? Potential insurgents, particularly in the Baghdad area increasingly seeing the appeal or incentive of taking \$20, \$50, or increasingly \$100 and in some cases as little as a pack of cigarettes to emplace and IED device and engage and become a hero.[1] The alternative is that Government or Coalition Forces hand them \$5 and they stick to cleaning up trash now ubiquitous around the city.

At present there is little deterrence for would-be recruits to engage in the first option: they can more or less meld into the population after the act; they will not be killed from the air in a violent Predator strike; the Iraqi Police are not on patrol, but are bunched up at the local Police department headquarters; their heroics are likely to be captured by an enterprising colleague (cameraman) at close-range; and if they do get captured they are likely never to go further than a Brigade Interrogation Facility, which has a shortage of trained interrogators—and even if they go to a regional correctional facility, it is likely they can visit with relatives, continue to coordinate with fellow insurgents, and the Iraqi Tribunal will turn them out on the streets in months due to "incomplete evidence."

Still another most disturbing challenge or trend is the increasing number of young people and females being rounded up by authorities in Iraq for engaging in IED activities. On September 28, 2005 a woman suicide bomber from Zarqawi's Al Qaida Organization in the Land of Two Rivers blew herself up at an Iraqi police station in Tall Afar, killing five people.[2] In an October border operation near Tall Afar, Iraqi officials related to us that they just captured a 10-year old Syrian boy who had "come to wage jihad." [3] The 3rd Squadron, 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's squadron intelligence officer recently reportedly seeing children placing roadside IEDs, including a 14-year old girl while on patrol just south of Baghdad.[4] In November 2005, a fourth would-be suicide bomber in the Amman bombings was reported to be an Iraqi female. In fact, these trends buttressed a previous rumor that more Iraqis were reportedly signing up to be suicide bombers—something unheard of in the insurgency's early days.

Perhaps the most difficult and self-critical challenge to confront is that the criticisms of the United States that dominate Iraq and the region may reflect *policy* resentments, and not *perception* problems at all. Thus a policy focused solely at changing perceptions is likely to be stillborn. Many of the world's children and many adults already relate to American society and people with "respect, understanding, and a sense of common interest and common values." [5] This became evident in the aftermath of the wedding bombings in Jordan. This is why innovative informing and not just influencing programs will continue to be important,

A Way Ahead

Our debriefings from Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo increasingly show us that the enemy is far from monolithic in their motivations and agendas. Some are motivated by religion and social

factors in and outside Iraq, such as Sunni insurgents and Islamic jihadists entering Iraq, but in fact a large number could be categorized as "paid-for-hire" insurgents.

Unfortunately, many of our IO campaigns in Iraq continue to operate from the opposite assumption. Therefore we fail to focus our IO efforts directly at the insurgents whom we see as intractable. Yet we cannot win the counterinsurgency by focusing solely on the population, nor can we win by focusing solely on enemy High Value Individuals. We must focus our efforts at preventing the enemy foot-soldiers from enjoining the battle, and on the other end disengaging—or dissuading, deterring, and turning them when possible.

There are some emerging trends that support a comprehensive prevention and disengagement IO campaign. However we must not only have a quick reaction capability in Iraq, we must maintain one throughout the region. The two capabilities are inextricably linked.

The Coalition and its regional partners are starting to see the power of productively harnessing the outrage of Iraqi and Muslim families, from Beirut to Baghdad to Damascus to Amman. Decidedly anti-terrorist TV programs like the *Iraqi Terrorism in the Grip of Justice* show and the Syrian produced *Al-Hur Al-Ayn* soap opera are increasingly popular across Iraq and the Middle East.

The targeting of civilians, including women and children, which was often lost amongst the daily chaos in Iraq, has now come to the light of day in the wake of the horrible Jordan wedding bombing. Citizens across the Middle East, as we saw in Lebanon last year, are starting to say *kafeya*, or "enough!" Tribal and religious leaders inside and outside Iraq who formerly kept their criticisms to themselves to preserve a united front against Coalition Forces have begun to speak out against violence by both sides, sparking debate on the morality of urban warfare.

Growing splits among jihadists are beginning to undermine the theological and legal justifications for suicide bombing. As that emerging schism takes its toll on the jihad movement, it could represent an opportunity for the West to combat jihadism itself. Sadly, we do not seem to have capitalized on these regional events and their explicit and implicit vulnerabilities in a focused manner.

1. Prevent Islamic Jihadists and Paid-for-Hire Insurgents from Signing Up in the First Place

We know that mass recruiting of foreign jihadists takes place at the pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina and other Muslim holy places. We need to work with governments to develop public information campaigns informing pilgrims passing through their borders to be careful not to let people take advantage of them during this time of religious fervor and to avoid potential zealots and recruiters.

At the same time, for a more localized perspective, we need to keep the 'paid-for-hire' insurgents off the street by supporting Iraqi Government programs that build and invest in a long-term future for them. The Iraqi Government might address holding the families of young IED emplacers, transporters, and spotters socially or financially accountable—i.e. this is nothing to be proud of, and nothing to profit from.

2. Disengage the Detainee Population

At present the detainee operation in Iraq has some serious challenges. We are taking risk where there is no opportunity and failing to take advantage where there is substantial opportunity. Aggressive interrogations and absurd scare tactics may make the Coalition feel better in the short-run, but this clumsy approach has little return on investment for enhanced effectiveness on the battlefield or putting down a counterinsurgency.

More importantly, after arriving at Brigade Internment and Coalition Correctional Facilities many detainees aren't interacted with, interviewed, or debriefed for weeks or months after arriving. In many cases we have only provided a "container" for them, inside which they can network and become even more radicalized.

And there is even more trouble on the horizon: U.S. authorities posit that many youth—those under 18 years of age—currently being held will be turned out on the street as the prison system is increasingly turned over to the Iraqi Government. It is therefore imperative that we address these changing dynamics as soon as possible.

But an IO campaign focused on a prevention strategy isn't good enough. It must be coupled with an equally innovative disengagement strategy: one that *disengages* those already in the radical ranks through a highly-nuanced influence campaign that starts with detainees, whose future potential to do ill or good we often ignore. We are learning that jihadists are not monolithic in their desire to commit suicide to attain salvation, and many are manipulated into this dire last act.

One of the Jordanian bombers apparently was in our custody in Iraq and we let him go. Unfortunately this is symptomatic of greater dysfunction across current Coalition and Iraqi Government detainee operations, and tragically manifests itself in enhanced enemy freedom of action on the battlefield.

There is a better way. There is a growing feeling among some academics studying Muslim issues that there is much to be gained by *disengaging* those involved in radical activities *before* they become full-fledged terrorists as well as youth who have not fully developed a sense of right and wrong but may be in confinement for committing terrible acts.

One way to engage these individuals is to have a mullah sit down and talk to them; another might be to use other types of influence-maker in more secular settings where one might use a sports figure, or even a family member. One such program being conducted at present has produced a very low recidivism rate.

By following a policy of disengagement, we can turn a vulnerability—high detainee throughput and recidivism—into an opportunity. An information campaign should start by focusing on our current detainee population, who can then go out and do our bidding if we are successful.

3. Demystify the Terrorists and Insurgents: Harness Outrage before Tragedy Strikes

One video we acquired on the streets of Baghdad targets Iraqi youth and combines spiritual as well as elements of emotional exploitation in an attempt to mystify terrorists and insurgents as martyrs.

This video features a direct appeal to a young man's desire to become a *zefa* or an escort of the beautiful virgins occupying paradise or heaven. Here the enemy is appealing to what is denied the youth in life—*al-hur al-ayn* (the beautiful ladies of paradise). The theme, which guides many of these homemade videos, is "The Winds of Victory," which features an eerie, howling wind that announces the beginning of each video. The above-noted video features each dead martyr, one-by-one ascending into heaven—or toward the light. However, one should note that in this scenario their ascent begins in the basement, from which one could conclude that this is where the United States and Israel have placed them. The commentary accompanying the video as narrated by a fellow dead martyr continues:

"In the name of God of the Kabba, I did win. God Bless him. Don't be sorry... he is alive and happy in heaven. He said goodbye to the Earth. In Heaven, his destiny is eternity."

This video also illustrates emotional exploitation—the same sort of dead ancestor worship that the IRA and other terrorist groups and gangs have used in the past.

Generally in these videos, the jihadists make themselves appear heroic, but in fact they are ruthlessly killing bystanders and children. Their form of “suicide” is only in part voluntary, as illustrated by one video that illustrates a jihadist getting hustled out of bed early in the morning, and into the truck still looking dazed. By doing the forensics on these videos, the countervailing message one might cull from them is that the people these youths have come to fight for in turn don’t value them as human beings.

One can look both inside and outside Iraq for encouraging programs that demystify terrorists, and that should be proliferated. Iraqi families and communities are unrealized assets and resources that must be mustered by the Iraqi government in order to stem the daily violence and extremism directed at Iraqi youth. Iraqi mothers are figures of authority and in many ways are the emotional voice of the community. An effective program currently being used by Iraqi Ministry of Interior officials is to line-up local and foreign insurgents and film them being confronted by grieving and sometimes hysterical mothers and family members. This is the *Terrorism in the Grip of Justice* nightly TV program shown on *al-Iraqiya* at 17:00 Baghdad time. The mothers involved in this program are effective because they are past the point of fear—still ubiquitous among their neighbors. They have already lost everything. However, the real challenge that remains for Coalition and Iraqi authorities is organizing these mothers and harnessing the power of their collective emotional voice in a more effective longer-term approach—*before* the deaths of more of their sons and daughters.

4. Develop a Regional Quick Reaction Program

In the greater Middle East, particularly in the wake of the Palestinian Prime Minister Hariri’s assassination earlier this year and the more recent Jordan bombings, we must be ready to capitalize, mobilize, and organize when and where the terrorists have overreached and outraged local populations.

Our “deep IO” programs must attack the jihadists on both the *theoretical* and *emotional* levels. One could argue the prevailing jihadist theoretical technique consists of saying that there is religious sanction for the killing of Muslim civilians, and that neither the innocent victims nor the bombers are doomed to suffer in hell. Jihadist claims about the *certainty* of salvation—whether it be meeting their recently departed relatives or virgins of paradise—could be the most important emotional techniques in their recruitment efforts. We can’t afford to fight the enemy’s IO fight, which is what we have been doing when it comes to IEDs. The highlighting of enemy killing of innocents in our pro-Iraq ads can cut both ways—it can further enrage citizens and at the same time make us look more powerless to protect them.

5. Catalog, Create, and Reinforce Creative Use of Media Programs

The “catastrophic terrorism” we are seeing imported into Iraq has more in common with the gunman as poseur, i.e., the Red Brigades, than with traditional terrorist organizations. The Iraqi Ministry of Interior has seized on this poseur vulnerability with their *Terrorists in the Grip of Justice* TV program by showing the startling transformation of the former poseur into a quivering wreck—lined up against the wall, waiting to feel an innocent family’s wrath.

Abdullah Bjad, a Saudi who writes the script for the controversial anti-terrorism Syrian TV soap *Al-Hur Al-Ayn* (which refers to the 70 virgins militants say will meet the martyrs, at the first drop of their blood), said that just before one of the 2003 attacks on a residential compound in Saudi Arabia an attacker who was in contact with his superiors was “heard on the mobile phone counting the seconds to Al-Hur Al-Ayn. His last words were, “One second to Al-Hur Al-Ayn.” He

then blew himself up. The series focuses on the influence of underground clergymen luring young men from the more moderate message of other clerics, and brainwashing them into becoming suicide bombers. The serial is aimed at those who have not made up their mind about terrorism yet. Bjad said he felt the show offered a way to counter radical views:

“In the serial we refute every militant argument by referring to the Quran.” Najdat Anzour, the Syrian director, said that “no one can deny that one of the reasons that push terrorists to commit terrorism is a concept in terrorist literature, ‘blow yourself up so you can meet Al-Hur Al-Ayn.’”^[6]

In the wake of the Jordan bombings, these beliefs and claims are beginning to appear unstable to a majority of onlookers in the greater Middle East, and they may in fact comprise the movement’s Achilles heel.^[7]

6. Youth May be the Center of Gravity in the Long War: Focus Messages on Life and Opportunity

The Iraqi Government and the Coalition need to focus on enigmatic messages promoting life, community, and nation. They must also realize that an IO strategy based on youth isn’t soft—giving out candy. Iraqi and Muslim youth have become the center of gravity for the information war. We can’t afford to fight the enemy’s IO fight, which is what we have been doing when it comes to recent C-IED IO campaigns. The graphic highlighting of the enemy’s killing of innocents in our pro-Iraq ads can cut both ways—it can further enrage citizens and at the same time make us look more powerless to protect them.

In the past year, with the Bali and London bombings, it has become increasingly obvious that the success of the terrorist movement rests on the vulnerability of youth—worldwide. The smiling face of Amrozi, the young Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist responsible for the Bali bombing, showed the world that terrorists recruit those who are psychologically disturbed and hence highly susceptible to their brainwashing and exploitation. The “American Taliban,” John Walker Lindh, from Afghanistan, and the Pakistani youth involved in the most recent London bombings, offer further examples of this trend of multi-faceted exploitation—if not outright brainwashing.

Many say that the defining elements of today’s Islamic terrorist are a nihilistic destructiveness born of a psychological malaise widespread among many radicalized and often well-educated young Islamic men who believe that a world dominated by western political ideals, culture, and economics holds nothing of them.^[8]

Al Qaida in Iraq operatives, foreign fighters, and local Iraqi insurgents are increasingly exploiting Iraqi youth in the current conflict. The exploitation of Iraqi youth takes many forms: mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical exploitation often leading to their untimely death. Perhaps the worst form of genocide is taking place as Iraqi youth are increasingly killing other Iraqi youth. The mechanism is the ubiquitous roadside bomb as young paid-for-hire insurgents emplace bombs by the side of the road to be triggered by operatives.^[9] Often these bombs led to the death of other young Iraqis.

What are some positive steps we might take from a *policy* perspective? We need to continue our efforts to demystify the terrorists while at the same time focusing on a three-pronged plan for Iraqi youth: “Saving a life, giving a life, and building a life.”

We have focused much effort on saving lives through the heroic efforts of Iraqi and Coalition police and security forces to save the lives of as many Iraqi youth as possible. We have focused much effort on giving lives to those Iraqi youth we have taken off the street and delivered into the

hands of courageous Muslim NGOs and a few western NGOs that have in large part fulfilled their immediate needs for food and shelter.

Where we have not put as much effort is toward helping these mentally, emotionally, and physically displaced Iraqi youth *build* lives for themselves: Instead we have relied on quick-fixes like giving them sticks, and asking them to pick up trash—among them many college students. This means not just teaching them a trade in Iraq, which may or may not be needed in the new market, thereby contributing to pervasive ‘underemployment’ problems—but helping them build a life and a *career* as a manager and a leader. We might send youth overseas to learn how to become entrepreneurs in safer countries like Dubai and Lebanon, under mentorship from business and civic leaders.

We need to send Iraqi society a clear signal that we are willing to invest in their future, and not simply be content to create a “nation of coolies to support Western investment opportunities” as one observer recently noted.

About the Authors

Edward (Ed) O’Connell is currently serving in Iraq and the Middle East as a Senior Analyst for the RAND Corporation. O’Connell retired from the Air Force as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2002, after more than 20 years of military service. His last duty assignment from 2001-2002 was Chief of the Current Operations Targeting Branch, US Central Command Headquarters where he worked directly for General Tommy Franks, during the War in Afghanistan. O’Connell ran a 150-person branch responsible for coordinating all attacks on Al Qaeda and Taliban senior leadership. He was awarded a prestigious fellowship by the Air Force Chief of Staff in 1993 to the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California. O’Connell first became involved in Iraq in Feb-March 1991, when he was a Captain serving on a combat survey team that operated inside southern Iraq at the end of the first Gulf War. He also served on an assignment to Korea from 1988-1989.

Since his retirement from the military, O’Connell has worked on projects for RAND involving counterinsurgency, counter-IED, information operations, and developing the potential of Muslim youth, and has written widely on these issues. He spent many months in the last two years studying counterinsurgency, counter-IED, and information operations in downtown Baghdad and across Iraq. O’Connell has two masters degrees: one in international relations and the other in national security studies. He has traveled extensively in the Middle East, is a graduate of the Naval War College, and has served as a military attaché overseas.

Dr. Cheryl Benard is a senior political scientist with the RAND Corporation. She received her B.A. in political science from the American University of Beirut and her doctorate from the University of Vienna. She has published widely on women in the Muslim world and women in development. Some of her publications are *Veiled Courage* (Random House 2002) which describes various forms of civil resistance against the Taliban during the years of their rule, and *Civil Democratic Islam* (Rand 2004) which suggests a way to better understand Islamic groups and movements by aligning them along a differentiated ideological spectrum. She is also co-author of *The Muslim World After 9/11* (RAND 2004).

Dr. Benard was recently featured as the cover story for her essay, “*Strengthening the Partnership*” (W.O.M.E.N. Inc 2005) in *In Touch* magazine it discusses military civilian cooperation in humanitarian aid. Other recent works include an article in German Women’s Magazine, *Emma*, on the role of the new constitution in the lives of Iraqi women. Currently Dr. Benard serves as the Director of RAND’s Initiative on Middle Eastern Youth, a division of the RAND Corporation’s Center for Middle East Public Policy.

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