The Psychological Battle For Iraq: Lessons from Algeria
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In Iraq today, despite President George W. Bush's declaring an end to the war in Iraq, fighting between U.S. forces and insurgents continues to foster instability in the region. Insurgency warfare is a relatively new field for U.S. war planners. In order to evaluate which strategies are most effective in defeating transnational insurgents, the United States should pay particular attention to the case of the French military in Algeria. Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "There are but two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind."[1] State-sponsored military forces use their firepower to convince the population that they are the most probable victors in a war. Insurgents, lacking equal military power, instead must turn to psychological warfare to advance their interests and give them an advantage over occupying forces. The French military's experience in the Algerian Revolution is a case study of the importance of developing psychological strategies to combat insurgency in the Middle East, and the possible consequences of a failure to do so.

In Algeria, France secured a military defeat over the Front de Libération National (FLN), but it lost the support of Algerian civilians due to the adverse effects of its relocation programs, numerous instances of torture, its inability to explain its presence in Algeria, and its failure to protect Algerian civilians from terrorist attacks. FLN rebels, lacking the munitions to win a military battle against the French, instead opted for psychological tactics to counter the notion that France remained in control of Algeria and to gain popular support for their revolt.[2] Their tactics were two-fold—they first worked to convince the population that occupying forces were either incapable of or unwilling to protect them. They also manipulated occupying forces into engaging in behavior that demonstrated their disrespect for Algerian culture.

Insurgents in Iraq now employ many strategies once used by the FLN. The United States risks making mistakes in Iraq that are similar to those of the French in Algeria. Coalition forces are at present focusing on combating insurgents and rebuilding of infrastructure. Certainly these activities are vital; they contribute to the growing self-sufficiency of Iraq as a sovereign and independent state, and demonstrate to the Iraqi population that the Coalition is sincerely interested in building a stable and secure Iraq. However, the French/Algerian example shows that the Coalition must also put mechanisms in place to punish atrocities directed at Iraq's population. This paper analyzes what strategies formerly used by the FLN are now being used in Iraq with marked success. It consequently recommends that the United States adopt a psychological strategy that better incorporates Iraqis into the process of the rebuilding and stabilization of their country, thus giving them a stake in the outcome of the battle against insurgents.

TACTICS

Perceptions of Occupying Powers

As noted above, one of the greatest psychological weapons employed by FLN insurgents in Algeria was to make the region appear unstable under the control of Western powers. Neutral Algerians endured frequent raids on their villages by French soldiers seeking to capture suspects accused of firing at their personnel. However, the same effort was not put forth to punish those FLN members who attacked Algerians accused of collaborating with the French.[3] The organization capitalized on these circumstances, pointing to them as proof that the French military considered Algerian lives to be of less worth than French ones and that it would not ensure Algerians' security. This psychological warfare also fortified the FLN with new recruits. Fearing France's extreme use of violence, previously neutral Algerians turned to the FLN as their only source of protection. Indeed, the largest numbers of FLN recruits came from areas where French troops had just exacted reprisals for the deaths of its soldiers.[4]

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Further, the FLN's leadership played upon Algerian fears that all Algerians risked torture or death at the hands of the French, regardless of their political affiliation. Algerians were well aware of France's widespread application of torture for intelligence gathering purposes, and insurgents disseminated the erroneous information that extra-judicial executions perpetrated by the French included Algerians without connections to the FLN.[5] Such information was not difficult for the local populace to believe, given that French forces had in truth killed numerous Algerians, both FLN combatants and innocent non-members. However, what the FLN neglected to reveal was that all too often these innocent individuals had been apprehended because actual FLN members had named them during torture sessions.[6]

The success of the insurgent information campaigns in stirring distrust among the local populace was further facilitated by France's lack of response. France did not engage in counter-information campaigns which may have convinced some that many of those arrested were not "innocent noncombatants," but FLN members. This was a tactical error. Algerians felt the burden of harboring insurgents in their communities, and many hoped that the French military would form a force in local villages strong enough to prevent insurgents from establishing a safe haven among civilians. In his book *Algeria in Turmoil*, Michael Clark cites one French journalist's perspective on what might have led neutral Algerians to instead cooperate with the French:

> The bandits have relatives, friends, in all the little eagle-nest villages. The people there live in the grip of fear, yet not daring to speak, much less to point the rebels out to the authorities. And yet with a single voice they implore the aid and protection of our [French] troops and long for some sign of French presence. 'Ensure our security!' is what one hears at every turn; 'then we will be able to help you rid us of the handful of rebels who now give the law to us all.'[7]

Given this reality, had the French military consistently demonstrated its willingness to protect Algerians from the FLN, it might have had better success extracting information and countering the movement. Instead, knowing that France would not respond and was reserving its military force for confrontation with insurgents, the FLN was able to use fear and intimidation with impunity, both as a recruitment tool and to silence opposition to the insurgency.

Lastly, the FLN did all it could to highlight the occupying forces' inability to comprehend regional culture, and alienate them from the Algerian population. For example, although the FLN based its ideology on sovereignty for

Algeria, it included Islamic beliefs in its statement of objectives, thus sharpening the cultural divide. As a result, they were able to convince some Algerians of their cause who otherwise might have resisted the FLN's beliefs.[8] They furthermore recognized the effectiveness of the media in publicizing their cause, and were highly skilled at using and manipulating the press to their advantage. Those who survived the grueling interrogation sessions shared their stories of French cruelty, and publicity became an effective tool to gain international attention.[9]

Insurgents in Iraq have succeeded in using many of the same psychological weapons employed by the FLN in Algeria. They have been able to make the region appear unstable under the control of Western powers, and have convinced the population that the Coalition is unable or unwilling to protect it. Their efforts have been facilitated by the fact that many Iraqis were already predisposed against the United States before the U.S. military attacked Iraq in March 2003. The perception that the United States was indifferent to human security in Iraq was already widespread, since many Iraqis had experienced adverse conditions under United Nations sanctions and held the United States responsible for advocating in favor of the sanctions.[10] In addition, the prolonged presence of Western troops in Saudi Arabia, combined with U.S. policies interpreted as more favorable towards Israelis than Palestinians, encouraged general Arab opposition to an increased U.S. presence in the Middle East.

With these strikes already against them in the eyes of the Iraqi people, U.S. forces needed to immediately demonstrate their concern for Iraqis' well-being in order to reduce the potential for future popular uprisings. Instead, the U.S. military failed to effectively react to reports of occupying forces engaging in attacks against innocent people. A major example is the Arab media's portrayal of a Coalition raid on an insurgent safe house as a ruthless attack on innocent members of a wedding party. Although most of the casualties were women and children, U.S. intelligence had indicated that the wedding party's home was also a safe house for suspected

terrorist, Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi.[11] Broadcasts of the wedding video appeared in Arab and American media, but the United States did not adequately use the media to provide evidence of Zarqawi's association with the suspected safe house.

The United States has furthermore missed opportunities to either prevent attacks or strike back at insurgents that terrorize the Iraqi people. Many among Iraq's civilian population fear that the U.S. and Iraqi governments are unable to protect them as attacks on the Iraqi National Guard (ING) increase. Recruits to the ING return home from training centers without weapons and face insurgents who target them for kidnappings and murder. President Allawi publicly held the United States responsible for the November murder of members of the ING.[12] While U.S. military assaults on insurgents continued after the ING murders, U.S. forces did not specifically announce their intent to capture insurgents responsible for the murders.

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Also as in the Algerian example, Iraqi insurgents highlight the occupying forces' inability to comprehend regional culture, and have emphasized situations where they have been ignorant or disrespectful of local values. For example Shii cleric Muqtada al-Sadr chose an ingenious way to make U.S. forces appear disrespectful of important religious sites for Shiite Muslims. Al-Sadr stationed his Mehdi Army at a Shiite cemetery, renowned for being the final resting place of the Shiites' revered Imam Ali.[13] From the base of the shrine, the Mehdi Army could fire at U.S. troops; however, when troops were forced to fire in response, they risked demolishing the shrine and incurring the wrath of Iraq's Shiite majority.

Consequences and Impact of Tactics

The overall consequence of such psychological tactics is the alienation of Iraqi civilians. To succeed in countering the psychological impact of the insurgency, the US

must move quickly to replicate the relative daily stability and security in which Iraqis lived prior to the war. Otherwise, severe unemployment and destruction of common social structures, common factors of war, will result in a population simultaneously desensitized to the daily battles occurring around it, and subject to growing stress and frustration in the face of both physical and economic insecurity. Such was most certainly the case in Algeria. As with any population, Algerians were profoundly concerned for their families' physical and emotional security during the war. The French response was to erect relocation zones that grouped civilian Algerians into ghettos distanced from insurgent strongholds. Unfortunately, these zones not only lacked the familiar social structures, but also had high instances of unemployment.[14] Therefore, any Algerians collaborating with the French were faced with the choice of security at the cost of almost definite job loss and subsequent unemployment in one's new location. Such failure by French authorities to meet Algerians' need for work in order to care for their families sparked anger among civilian Algerians at the war's complete upheaval of their normal lives. Absence of employment and disruption of the social structure left any Algerians who wanted to remain neutral with few options; both anger and necessity may have pushed some to join the FLN.

Iraqi civilians find themselves in a similarly difficult situation. Overwhelmed by instability, many Iraqis experience great difficulty obtaining employment.[15] Lack of economic opportunity becomes a tremendous incentive for Iraqi locals to oppose the US military presence in their country. For unemployed Iraqis, the sight of numerous US contractors employed in Iraq, while so many Iraqis remain unemployed could result in greater support for the insurgency.

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Conclusions and Recommendations

Democracy's Obligation

The Bush administration has until now instilled doubt among Iraqis concerning American intentions by frequently altering its stated justifications for invading Iraq. The most current justification for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq comes from President Bush's 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States. In his strategy President Bush offered what would become his reasoning behind the Iraqi invasion—as the leader of a superpower and democratic nation, he was obligated to bring freedom to other nations.[16] Furthermore, the presence of weapons of mass destruction obligated him to act in the name of national security.

McClintock states that the most appealing ideologies are those which take into account the population's immediate concerns and motivate them to resist insurgents in favor of the ultimate benefits they will reap from putting the ideology into action.[17] Thus, from the American public's perspective, Bush's ideology was indeed appealing on both levels. The search for weapons of mass destruction responded to Americans' fear of an impending attack. At the same time, it relates the military intervention in Iraq to an interest in political freedom and concern for the welfare of Iraqis.

The same ideology was not as effective with the Iraqis, nor did it stimulate the same enthusiasm for the invasion. Its major failure was to not effectively explain how locating weapons systems would change Iraqi lives. However, the ideology of democracy's obligation could have satisfied the Iraqi populace had it been better conveyed and acted upon. First and foremost, the U.S. military must now present a single justification for their presence in the region. Such a justification must consider the insurgents' stated goals, and then convincingly refute them.[18] The United States should be forthright in stating its intentions. In the battle for people's hearts and minds, the military is responsible for executing a clear goal that Iraqis can understand, consistent with an ideology that they can support. This will relieve Iraqis of part of their psychological

burden, allowing them to comprehend U.S. actions, perceive concrete steps towards reaching stated outcomes, and believe U.S. assurances that it will eventually withdraw its troops.

Secondly, the U.S. military must take responsibility for Iraqis' physical security. If the true reason for having intervened in Iraq is to bring freedom to its people, then the justifications of war obligate the United States to target insurgents as well as help civilians rebuild institutions important to their daily lives. To counter insurgent claims that occupying powers are indifferent to the population's suffering, the military should interact with the local population as direct service providers, offering medical assistance and infrastructure construction.[19]

It must furthermore invite Iraqis to join in their own emancipation from violence and instability. Improved and more visible U.S. military-Iraqi civilian cooperation in rebuilding infrastructure is sure to improve Iraqi belief in American dedication to achieving stability in the country. Iraqi participation in the practical application of democratic ideology will give them an investment in the outcome of Coalition activities—military and otherwise—in the country. Once Iraqis notice U.S. forces contributing to the restoration of normal life, incentives for joining the insurgency will diminish. Reconstruction of schools, businesses, and other symbols of community is crucial in order to prevent the civilian population from suffering a psychological defeat amidst instability. It would allow them to return to as much of their regularly scheduled daily activities as possible, provide an essential means to block the realities of war from their minds, and temporarily set aside the negative psychological effects of witnessing an insurgency.

Correcting Erroneous Perceptions

The media can be either adversary or ally for a military institution, depending, in part, on the extent to which its activities attract publicity. As mentioned previously, the French military grew infamous in the media for its torturing of Algerians. In Iraq, insurgents also use negative media to their advantage. Arab news stations will continue to broadcast images of U.S. attacks on apparently unarmed Iraqis, and the tragedy of Abu Ghraib is notorious in the Middle East, with the images of abuse emblazoned in Arab minds.

The U.S. must better counter negative images and respond to potential scandals. Media involvement could contribute to psychological security through verifying the U.S. military establishment's commitment to protecting Iraqis and punishing crimes against civilians. It should disseminate information that depicts the United States as ensuring Iraqi civilian security. Furthermore, U.S. forces must quickly detect perpetrators of civilian abuse and conduct damage control by showing that such actions have serious repercussions. In the case of Abu Ghraib, the U.S. military made a wise strategic decision in trying the officers less than a year after the story became public. However, the soldiers' trials received dramatically less press attention than the initial prison scandal. In addition, the outcome of the soldiers' cases lacked sufficient penalty to positively affect the perception of the U.S. military. Publicizing the Abu Ghraib trials and adequately punishing the perpetrators would have demonstrated American conviction that Iraqis' lives are just as valuable as those of U.S. soldiers.

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Such publicity is an important psychological tool for retaining the support of U.S. citizens, as well. In the case of Algeria, allegations of torture and French military deaths led the French population to question why their government remained devoted to retaining Algeria. Media reports, fueled by the writings of francophone intellectuals like Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre, challenged the validity of continued Algerian colonization. Information campaigns could serve to avoid this eventuality and ensure that the American public's opposition to the war does not reach levels of the Vietnam Era.

Positive media depictions of the U.S. military would also benefit the work of military intelligence. The Algerian case demonstrates how France's inability to guarantee their safety dissuaded Algerian civilians from cooperating with the military.[20] Frequent press releases from the U.S. Defense Department and information from soldiers stationed locally in Iraq will keep Iraqis aware that temporary U.S. occupation is more advantageous than sustaining the insurgency. The more trust fostered between Iraqi civilians and U.S. military authorities, the less difficult it should become to obtain Iraqi cooperation.

The United States must also counter its image problems in the countries that border Iraq. Just as the Tunisian government encouraged its citizens to participate in Algeria's revolution, institutions within Syria and Iran advocate transnational insurgency as a means of preventing instability in their own countries. Clerics who fear the U.S. war on terror will target Syria offer financial compensation to volunteers who will go to Iraq and carry out an insurgency, hoping that the violence will occupy the attention of U.S. forces and keep them busy.[21] Iran's government likewise foresees a future U.S. invasion as a possibility, particularly since President Bush named the state an "axis of evil."[22] Considering Iran could constitute the next setting for the war on terror, Iran's government stands to gain from a protracted war in Iraq. The Shiite majority in Iran also has government support in transporting insurgency to Iraq. Jordan's King Abdullah alleged that the Iranian government assisted over one million Iranians to enter Iraq in order to illegally vote for Shiite political leaders in an attempt to ensure Shiite dominance in the new government, [23]

Given the increase in the activities of violent non-state groups, future wars will increasingly involve insurgents who will use psychological tactics and ideology to gain leverage in asymmetric military battles. U.S. officials recognize the growing need to develop tactics aimed at countering such groups. The prospect of an increasing number of insurgencies makes effective response to psychological warfare all the more important in Iraq. The French experience in Algeria is a testimony to the severe consequences which may result when a military establishment disregards psychological strategies of 'weaker' opponents. The French military failed to appeal to Algerians' basic security needs for protection from attacks and maintenance of their usual way of life, and was ultimately forced to withdraw in humiliation. The United States has made progress in the psychological battle by training Iraqis to protect their own country, conducting democratic elections, and creating a provisional government composed of Iraqis. However, U.S. policy makers must continue to foster nationalism in Iraq by having locals work together towards the common goal of stability.

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