COUNTERING IRAQ'S WEAPON OF MASS EFFECT

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More than three years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, pundits and military experts alike continue to debate the reasons why the United States so far has failed to defeat the insurgency and quell the sectarian violence there.

Arguments about the possible solution may run the gamut, but all experts agree on the central problem plaguing the former Ba'athist state: an acute lack of security. In its final report, the Iraq Study Group headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton called for significant troop reductions as a way of reconfiguring the Coalition presence.[1] By contrast, President Bush's new Iraq strategy, outlined publicly on January 10th, centers on a "surge" of some 21,500 troops as part of a "clear and hold" plan whereby military units eliminate the threat in troubled areas and stay to provide security.[2] But, irrespective of whether the U.S. pulls out its troops or sends in more, there is one area where American policymakers should immediately focus their efforts. Kidnapping is the common link connecting all components of the security crisis that currently envelops Iraq.

Until now, however, hostage-taking incidents have largely been considered a symptom of the problem, rather than a contributing cause. This represents a serious error; unchecked abductions have been central to our inability to counter the insurgency and stop sectarian violence in Iraq. Indeed, the trend has become something of a metaphor for our failure to bring security, stability and governance to the country. It has hastened the exodus of tens of thousands of

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educated, middle-class Iraqis, and resulted in more than a million internally displaced refugees. Kidnappings likewise have hijacked the previously promising reconstruction effort. And hostage takers have extracted strategic goals from Coalition partners, and reaped hundreds of millions of dollars in ransom—with much of this money funneled back into the insurgency that is killing soldiers and civilians alike.

Kidnappings in Iraq, in other words, have become a weapon of mass effect (WME). Although most hostage-taking incidents tend to be viewed as isolated, and tactical, their overall strategic impact is catastrophic. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, more than 450 foreigners have been taken hostage, while domestic victims of such abductions have been more than tenfold that number. Rampant kidnappings have systematically eroded and undermined the original goals of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

The challenge is clear. Our efforts to establish stability, to rebuild a viable society, to maintain Coalition solidarity, and to promote a functional Iraqi government require the defeat of this phenomenon.

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While the United States shoulders overall responsibility for the current state of Iraqi security, the roots of the kidnapping phenomenon stretch back long before the 2003 invasion. Kidnappings have been prevalent in the Middle East for generations, used as a common scheme to generate cash, embarrass enemies, and/or force political action. Since biblical times, Bedouin tribes have used hostage-takings as a means to acquire wives, obtain bargaining chips in tribal negotiations, and participate in the region's widespread slave trade.

The Old Testament and Koran both make numerous references to kidnappings, reflecting the fact that hostage-taking has been a way of life for literally thousands of years.

This culture is deeply ingrained in modern-day Iraq. Under Saddam, state-sponsored seizures averaged more than 100 a day, although these abductions were rarely if ever reported.[3] In all, more than a million people disappeared during Saddam Hussein's 24-year reign (1979-2003). And on the eve of the U.S.-led invasion, Saddam again resorted to this tactic, albeit in a different fashion, releasing some 100,000 convicted criminals from Iraqi jails. By doing so, he flooded the Iraqi "street" with potential perpetrators equipped with the requisite skill-sets of a hostage-taker.

The post-invasion explosion of abductions in Iraq, therefore, should not have been unexpected. The collapse of Saddam's authoritarian police state and its occupation by a limited number of Western military forces created an environment ripe for exploitation by local criminal and insurgent elements. This state of affairs, in turn, has been perpetuated by a lack thus far of credible central authority.

The modern kidnapping crisis in Iraq began on April 9, 2004, when a thirty-vehicle supply convoy driving through the Abu Ghraib neighborhood west of Baghdad was ambushed by militants. That success quickly gave rise to other incidents; almost a hundred foreigners were taken hostage that month alone. Kidnappings in post-invasion Iraq previously had been unmonitored and virtually unreported, but the situation quickly escalated out of control.

The motive, as with kidnappings elsewhere in the world, is extortion, both economic and political. Hostages

are taken by both criminal gangs seeking purely monetary rewards, and by insurgent groups who only want to send a message of terror. The two types of hostage-takers coordinate with one another and adopt similar tactics. The security situation offers low risk and high return for the perpetrators. Anyone with a few friends, a car and weapons can set up a business where the earning potential far exceeds the $300 average monthly salary of a well-paying Iraqi job. A quick "snatch and grab" off the streets of Baghdad can net thousands of dollars within a week from desperate families willing to mortgage everything they own to save a relative or loved one. For foreigners, the asking price ranges from $500,000 to $12 million, with the amount determined by the victim's nationality and compounded by their country's reputation for acceding to terrorist demands.

But, unlike the rest of the world, where the end result is usually strictly financial, in Iraq terrorist-inspired kidnappings impact politics on a worldwide scale. Today, the enduring image of the security situation in Iraq has become that of a kneeling hostage, pleading for his life in an orange jumpsuit surrounded by armed *mujahideen* gunmen. This experience has put a new twist on the terrorist maxim: "Kidnap one, terrorize thousands...."

Beyond the tactical

In July 2004, shortly after the birth of the hostage-taking industry in Iraq, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad established a Hostage Working Group (HWG) to handle the threat. The decision was a sound one; kidnappings were beginning to impact military operations and strain international partnerships in Iraq. In its day-to-day operations, the HWG brought to bear all of the elements of national and regional power: diplomacy, intelligence, law enforcement, and military force. It has been directly involved in every major kidnapping incident in Iraq, including those that have dominated the headlines.

The effort has undoubtedly had an impact. Within a year of the initial outbreak in April 2004, the numbers of kidnapping incidents had dwindled significantly, and by the spring of 2006 were in the single digits. What has been missing, however, is a broader view of the problem.

The kidnapping phenomenon in Iraq threatens more than just the lives of those it touches. It has become a leading source of income for insurgents, with the money used to finance further attacks, and effectively hinders the reconstruction effort. Conservative estimates now place the funds reaped from hostage-taking at more than $100 million annually.[4]

Similarly, it has intimidated the local population, causing educated Iraqis—doctors, engineers, and educators—to leave the country in large numbers. Those that have stayed have been cowed into silence. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) now estimates that up to 1.8 million Iraqis are living in neighboring countries, and that at least 1.6 million have been displaced internally.[5]

Equally significant, kidnapping has provided a major contribution to turning the tide of U.S. public opinion against the war in Iraq. Over the past three years, high-profile cases such as the January 2006 abduction of journalist Jill Carroll have captured the attention of the American public and hammered home the human costs of our engagement in Iraq. Indeed, it is possible to trace the decline of popular approval for the Bush administration's handling

of the situation in Iraq directly to the rise of the kidnapping phenomenon.

Hostage-taking, in short, has undermined everything the United States is purporting to do in post-Saddam Iraq. The U.S. and its Coalition partners desperately need a strategy for dealing with this threat, one that consists of three parts:

Accountability—Today, many officials in Iraq's Ministries of Interior and Defense are part of the kidnapping problem, complicit in the country's numerous hostage-takings and extortion rackets or at least aware of them.[6] These individuals must be identified and brought to justice, with their trials and sentences serving as examples to deter future corruption on the part of others. To this end, a Coalition-led investigatory team should be created and empowered at the highest levels of both the American and Iraqi leadership to track down and root out such activities on the part of Iraqi civil servants.

Targeting—The Coalition needs to take both the tactical and the political offensive against kidnappers operating in Iraq. The former can be accomplished through the creation of a dedicated U.S.-led Hostage Task Force with elements from the special operations, intelligence and law enforcement communities. This team would train, coordinate and take action against targets in conjunction with specialized Iraqi military and police units. The latter, meanwhile, is achievable by putting kidnapping gangs on notice that they are considered part of the insurgency, and will be targeted and eliminated by Coalition military forces.

Messaging—In order to be successful, a counter-kidnapping campaign will need to include outreach designed to win the "hearts and minds" of locals. Ordinary Iraqis must be reassured that the Coalition understands the scope of the problem, and is expending serious effort to take on hostage-takers and their enablers. Equally important, given the Administration's long-term plan to cede security to Baghdad, Iraqis need to have confidence that their government is becoming increasingly capable of dealing with this challenge independently.

The new counterinsurgency manual of the United States military declares that, "At its core, counterinsurgency warfare is a struggle for the support of the population. Their protection and welfare is the center of gravity for friendly forces."[7] Today, these goals require that the United States target the kidnapping epidemic in Iraq. Greater security and stability will surely follow.

1. See *The Iraq Study Group Report* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 61.
2. George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, January 10, 2007, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-7.html.
3. Statistics extrapolated from figures of Iraqi deaths and abductions obtained by the Regime Crimes Liaison Office established by the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003.
4. Estimate derived from *Daniel Risk Mitigation Database on Foreign Kidnappings in Iraq*, April 2004-April 2006.
5. United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, "The Iraq Situation: Growing Needs amid Continuing Displacement," n.d., http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/iraq?page=intro.
6. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: End Interior Ministry Death Squads," October 29, 2006, http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/10/29/iraq14473.htm.
7. Department of the Army, FM 3-24: *Counterinsurgency (Final Draft—Not For Implementation)*, June 2006, 1-24.