



## **IRAQ'S HOSTAGE CRISIS: KIDNAPPINGS, MASS MEDIA AND THE IRAQI INSURGENCY**

By Ibrahim al-Marashi\*

*This article analyzes the use of kidnapping as a tactic by the Iraqi insurgency in its effort to influence Iraqi, Arab, and Muslim public opinion and politics, as well as the international arena. It assesses how this method has yielded important advantages for the insurgents, despite the horror and opposition this behavior arouses in the outside world.*

Since the ousting of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, there have been ample reports covering and analyzing the Iraqi insurgency's diverse use of armed tactics such as roadside explosives, mortar attacks, and suicide bombings. At the same time, though, there has been less attention paid and understanding developed on the insurgents' media campaign directed at Iraqis as well as the Arab and Muslim worlds more generally. Observers of the Iraqi insurgency agree that its combat techniques have grown more sophisticated since President George W. Bush announced the end of major combat operations in May 2003. A media strategy, however, has simultaneously complemented these military activities.

Iraqi insurgents<sup>1</sup> employed these methods in order to garner sympathy from the Iraqi population for their "struggle," while keeping the international media spotlight on the American-led occupation of Iraq. The phenomena of kidnapping foreigners in Iraq emerged as a result of the insurgents' attempts to influence world media. Taking hostages and releasing video recordings of their captivity proved to be a successful tactic for gaining immediate coverage in both Arabic and international news sources, as well as pressuring world leaders to give in to the insurgents' demands.

The tactic of kidnappings reveals that Iraqi insurgents have a "public relations"

campaign intended to affect audiences inside and outside Iraq. Videos of kidnapped hostages have proved successful in forcing world leaders to withdraw troops from Iraq, preventing international firms from participating in reconstruction efforts, and instigating rallies against the occupation of Iraq in the hostages' countries. Therefore, however repugnant is the footage, it constitutes a success for the insurgents in attracting world attention to their cause.

### **THE MEDIA AND TERRORISM**

According to James E. Lukaszewski, a public relations counselor who previously advised the U.S. military and major international firms, "Media coverage and terrorism are soul mates--virtually inseparable. They feed off each other. They together create a dance of death--the one for political or ideological motives, the other for commercial success."<sup>2</sup>

Lukaszewski has argued that this relationship is a mutually beneficial arrangement, "Terrorist activities are high profile, ratings-building events." The media, Lukaszewski continues, provides the terrorists with access to an audience out of necessity, especially since it needs "[t]o prolong these stories because they build viewership and readership."<sup>3</sup> His comments--made in 1987, prior to the spectacle of planes

crashing into the Twin Towers--hold true in understanding why kidnappings occur in Iraq.

Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington described the beheadings videos as "made-for-television events." He writes that the beheadings videos are part of "A calculated set of actions and images directed toward influencing a mass audience. In this way, the audience is often more important than the action itself, and the symbolism is inseparable from the strategy. Missing this vital point can lead to precisely the wrong response."<sup>4</sup>

Brigette L. Nacos, who has written extensively on the subject of terrorism and the media, describes a "classical terrorist desire for publicity in terms of sheer volume of news coverage."<sup>5</sup> Nacos explains the relationship between the media and terrorism based on three variables. She calls the first "the Bomb and the Message," or in other words, the terrorist act and the media's reporting of the incident. The second variable is "public opinion," which reacts to the terrorist attack, while the third variable is the "decision-makers," which have to react based in large part on the public perception of the event.

By manipulating these three variables, terrorists affect public policy in a more efficient way than peaceful methods such as petitions or marches. Terrorism is guaranteed to create a mass-media mediated debate that influences policymakers, proving that when peaceful methods fail, violence succeeds. Kidnappings in Iraq, Nacos's first variable, have proven to succeed in rallying "public opinion" in countries. This has forced decision-makers to react, either by paying a ransom for hostages, withdrawing their troops entirely from Iraq, or refusing to negotiate with the terrorists, an option that has so far resulted in the death of the captives.

## THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE IRAQI INSURGENCY

In 2003, Ahmed Hashim, an instructor at the U.S. Naval War College, categorized the Iraqi insurgents into three groups: regime loyalists, Iraqi nationalists and Islamist groups. At first, the regime loyalists appeared to be the strongest element in the Iraqi insurgency, yet he predicted that if one faction of the Iraqi insurgency were weakened, another faction could manage to consolidate its control over the others: "The elimination of Saddam's sons, of Saddam himself, and of regime fighters opened the way for the consolidation of a group whose combat against U.S. forces had nothing to do with trying to bring back the *ancien regime*."<sup>6</sup> Hashim suggested that the triumph over one group opened the field for its rivals. The most prominent insurgent group immediately after the 2003 Iraq war was "The Return" (Al-'Awda), made up of former Iraqi security service members and soldiers determined to bring their former leader back to power. However, after Saddam Hussein's capture in December 2003, the group's stated goal seemed unattainable as he was in U.S. custody. Therefore, many of these forces offered their services to the armed Islamist organizations and bolstered their ranks, as Hashim predicted.

A few months after the war, elements in Iraq emerged that had no desire to fight for the return of their former dictator. Their attacks against Coalition forces were specifically directed towards ending the American occupation of Iraq. These groups can be categorized as the second faction, the Iraqi nationalists, most of whose fighters are recruited from Iraqi towns such as Falluja, Ramadi and Samarra, in what has become referred to as the "Sunni Arab Triangle." They have limited themselves to guerrilla-type tactics, and if they kidnapped foreigners, they avoided the grisly punishment of

beheadings that have become synonymous with the third group, the Islamist insurgents.

A shadowy organization known as "The Soldiers of Islam" (Jund al-Islam), emerged in September 2001, made up of Kurdish Islamists who began to seize control of several villages near the Iraqi town of Halabja in northern Iraq in order to establish a mini-state similar to the Taliban's Afghanistan. The organization, which has ties to al-Qa'ida, accepted that organization's fighters as they fled Afghanistan in October 2001. The group later changed its name to "The Supporters of Islam" (Ansar al-Islam) in December 2001. After U.S. Special Forces and Kurdish militias destroyed their main base during the Iraq war, members of Ansar al-Islam scattered over Iraq itself and, most likely, among Iraq's neighbors.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian national and former Arab fighter in Afghanistan, was believed to play a key role in directing Ansar, although he was not declared its leader. Al-Zarqawi opened his own terrorist base in the Afghan city of Herat in 2000, where it was believed that he forged connections with Al-Qa'ida.<sup>7</sup> It is reported that in late 2003, Abu Abdallah al-Shafi'i, also known as Warba Holiri al-Kurdi, took over the leadership of Ansar al-Islam and changed its name to "Army of the Supporters of the Sunna" (Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna). Its relationship to another organization, "The Unity and Jihad Group" (Jama'at al-Jihad wal-Tawhid), also believed to be led by al-Zarqawi, is unclear. For example, a posting on the internet depicting the beheading of a Turkish truck driver appeared on the website of the Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna. However, the statement read out during the beheading identified the kidnappers as belonging to the Unity and Jihad Group's Qaqa' Brigade.

The various names of these organizations are confusing. In fact, they essentially refer to the same group of insurgents, but perhaps also reveal a tactic

designed to give the impression that the Islamist elements are more numerous than the other factions. To make matters even more confusing, the Unity and Jihad Group assumed a new name, "The al-Qa'ida Organization for Holy War in the Land of the Two Rivers" (Tandhim Qa'ida Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn), indicating al-Zarqawi's allegiance to Usama bin Ladin's organization.

Besides the al-Zarqawi-linked factions, there are other Islamist insurgent groups responsible for conducting kidnappings in Iraq. The "Mujahideen Battalions of the Salafi Group of Iraq" (Kata'ib al-Mujahidin fil-Jama'a al-Salafiyya fil-'Iraq) claims its spiritual mentor as the deceased Abdallah 'Azzam, bin Ladin's mentor in Saudi Arabia and later Afghanistan. The other faction includes the "Islamic Army in Iraq" (al-Jaysh al-Islami fil-'Iraq); yet, it is unclear if the organization is made up of Iraqis or foreign fighters.

## HOSTAGES AND INSURGENT MESSAGES<sup>8</sup>

Gary Bunt, author of Islam in the Digital Age, coined the term "Cyber Jihad," to describe those Islamist organizations which use the internet to propagate a message of religious violence.<sup>9</sup> The current conflict, in which Iraqi insurgents have appropriated the internet in a quest to popularize their actions against the American presences in Iraq, can be described as a "Cyber Insurgency." The Iraqi insurgents have proven adept at manipulating the internet, as well as international news outlets in order to send their message to domestic and international audiences.

The spate of kidnappings in Iraq began after the 2003 Iraq war, but the primary victims were Iraqis abducted by Iraqi criminals and ransomed for financial reasons. In April 2004, as U.S. forces conducted simultaneous attacks against insurgents in

Falluja and Najaf, the Islamic Army in Iraq and al-Zarqawi-linked groups began kidnapping foreigners in an attempt to prevent those countries from sending troops or participating in Iraq's reconstruction. These two organizations were primarily responsible for the spectacle of kidnapped hostages pleading for their lives in front of a video camera. The videos are designed both for local Iraqi and international consumption, sending simultaneous messages to two very different audiences.

#### *Messages to the Iraqis*

Videos of decapitations are designed to serve as warnings for any Iraqis serving in the interim government's security forces or "collaborating with the Crusader American army," in the words of groups linked to al-Zarqawi. A videotape posted on their website in October 2004 depicts the beheading of two Iraqis, Fadhil Ibrahim and Firas Imayyil, reported to be members of the Iraqi National Intelligence service, who were captured on Baghdad's Haifa Street on September 28, 2004.<sup>10</sup> The kidnappers identified themselves as the Brigades of Abu Bakr al-Sidiq of Jama'at al-Jihad wal-Tawhid. Before their executions, the victims warned fellow Iraqis working in Iraq's security services to leave their posts and "repent to God" for their sin of collaboration with the occupation.

Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna kidnapped another Iraqi, Sayf 'Adnan Kana'an, for working as a mechanic for the American forces based at the Mosul airport. The videotape showed him bound, in front of three masked insurgents and the group's black flag with white Arabic script. His execution was based on the charges that he was "a crusader spy recruited by the American troops to follow and carry information about the mujahidin in Mosul." Before his execution he was forced to confess in a fashion similar to the Iraqi security agents: "I am telling anybody who wants to

work with Americans to not work with them. I found out that the mujahidin have very accurate information and strong intelligence about everything. They are stronger than I thought."<sup>11</sup>

Other beheadings are directed to specific Iraqi communities, as an October 2004 video that appeared on the Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna's site depicting the execution of a Shi'a Muslim, Ala' al-Maliki.<sup>12</sup> Al-Maliki is depicted as reading a statement, similar to a forced confession, whereupon he is beheaded amid screams of "God is Great" from the kidnappers. The Shi'a have been a specific target for the al-Zarqawi groups as they have been accused of conducting attacks against Sunni Muslims in Iraq as well as allying themselves with U.S. forces. Al-Zarqawi has attempted to spark a civil war between the two sects in Iraq, thus undermining American attempts to bring stability to the country. He allegedly released a 33-minute audiotape where he declared that Iraqi Shi'a were not true Muslims and were "the ears and the eyes of the Americans" in Iraq. Thereafter, he urged the Sunni Muslims in Iraq to "burn the earth under the occupiers' feet."<sup>13</sup>

The insurgents have also targeted Iraqi Kurds for their alleged collaboration with U.S. forces. In September 2003, members of the Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna beheaded three Iraqi Kurdish militiamen in retaliation for the cooperation of Kurdish political parties with the Americans in Iraq. The statement of their website said that they were "renegade military men, affiliated with the traitor Kurdistan Democratic Party" and that they were beheaded "for them to be an example to others, and for us to avenge our women, children and elderly who die daily from American raids."<sup>14</sup>

As in the case of the Shi'a killings, these groups have targeted the Kurds for their "sworn allegiance to the crusaders [who] fought and are still fighting Islam and its people," and have accused Massud Barazani,

leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan of being Israeli agents.<sup>15</sup> Essentially, the insurgents have justified the killing of Iraqi Muslims by branding their captives as “unbelievers” (kafirs) for aiding in the reconstruction of Iraq, under an “infidel occupation.”

Insurgents have used kidnappings to even demonstrate that the Iraqi interim prime minister, Ayad ‘Allawi, is not immune to their actions. On November 10, 2004, a previously unknown group called Jama’at al-Ansar al-Jihad claimed responsibility for kidnapping three of Allawi’s relatives. On an Islamist website, the following declaration was made: “Praise be to God, for with his support and his Glory in this holy month, a faction from Ansar al-Jihad, may God honor them with victory, and set their aim upon the target, kidnapped three relatives of the head of Iraqi treason, Allawi, may God burn him and slay him.”<sup>16</sup> The group demanded that all male and female prisoners be released in Iraq, and that U.S. and Iraqi security forces end their assault on Falluja, which began in the first week of November 2004. They threatened to behead ‘Allawi’s relatives if their demands were not met, perhaps indicating that the group was linked to al-Zarqawi.

#### *Messages to International Businesses*

Insurgents have carried out kidnappings in order to drive foreign companies out of Iraq or to deter future investors from aiding in the U.S.-led reconstruction of the country. Before the 1991 Gulf War, Turkey was one of Iraq’s largest trading partners and it seems Turkey will reclaim that role. The presence of Turkish companies doing business in Iraq is clearly visible not just in the north of Iraq, but as far as the markets in Basra in the south. Most of the trucks providing transportation for Iraq’s reconstruction effort originate in Turkey. Due to this visible role, Turks have

been the primary victims of this aspect of the insurgents’ campaign.

Al-Zarqawi’s Jama’at al-Jihad wal-Tawhid posted videos on the internet of the executions of Murat Yuce, an employee of Bilintur, a Turkish company, and Durmus Kumdereli, a Turkish truck driver.<sup>17</sup> In October 2003, Maher Kemal, a Turkish contractor, and Ramazan Elbu, another Turkish truck driver, were executed by another al-Zarqawi linked group, Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna. While the video of Elbu’s death was released on the website of Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna, the kidnappers identified themselves as belonging to the Qaqa’ Brigade of Jama’at al-Jihad wal-Tawhid, underlining the close link between the two groups. Before his beheading he was most definitely coerced into saying the following: “I drove a truck of supplies to the Americans.... When I was coming back (to Turkey), the group captured me. I call on all Turkish drivers not to come to Iraq.”<sup>18</sup> Afterwards, one of the masked gunmen behind him declared that his holy warriors will deliver death upon those who help “the Crusaders” (i.e. the Americans). The “Salafist Brigades of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq,” also believed to be linked to al-Zarqawi, claimed responsibility for seizing ten Turkish hostages in September 2004. On October 4, the al-Jazira news channel received a video from this group depicting the death of one of the hostages.<sup>19</sup>

These kidnappers made demands that the Americans release all Iraqi prisoners and demanded that all Turks conducting business with the Coalition to vacate Iraq. “We of the group of Unity and Jihad announce... that we will cut off the head of this hostage if our demands are not met.” The kidnapper directed a final warning to his Turkish audience, “We have long warned them not to enter the land of Islam and land of Jihad, the land of Iraq.”<sup>20</sup>

Another group of kidnappers, under the previously unknown name of the Holders

of the Black Banners, kidnapped three Indians, two Kenyans and an Egyptian, even though those countries had not participated in the war or occupation of Iraq. Nevertheless, they manipulated these hostages to deliver a warning to a broader international audience: "We have warned all the countries, companies, businessmen, and truck drivers that those who deal with American cowboy occupiers will be targeted by the fires of the Mujahidin." The statement continued saying, "Here you are once again transporting goods, weapons, and military equipment that backs the U.S. Army."<sup>21</sup> The message they sent was that no nationality is safe upon entering Iraq.

#### *Message to Nations Deploying Troops in Iraq*

The main focus of the insurgents has been to kidnap foreigners from nations contributing military forces to the Coalition. Usually, these foreigners were threatened with decapitation unless their leaders withdraw their troops from Iraq. One of the first victims was Kim Sun-il, a 33-year-old South Korean translator beheaded on June 22, 2003 by Jama'at al-Jihad wa-Tawhid in retaliation for his nation's refusal to withdraw its troops from Iraq.<sup>22</sup>

Italians in Iraq have also been kidnapped and executed due to the presence of their military in the southern Iraqi town of Nasiriyya. Enzo Baldoni, an Italian journalist, was executed on August 26, 2004, by the Islamic Army in Iraq when the Berlusconi government refused to withdraw its troops.<sup>23</sup> On September 7, two Italian aid workers, Simona Pari and Simona Torretta, were kidnapped. A statement released over the internet from a group called the Islamic Jihad Organization in Iraq threatened to kill the two Italian women if Italy failed to withdraw its troops within 24 hours. The hostages were released, but only allegedly after a ransom was paid to the kidnappers--a payment the Italian government denies was made.<sup>24</sup>

Iraqi insurgents threatened to behead the Filipino hostage, Angelo dela Cruz, unless the Philippines withdrew its troops from Iraq. The Philippine government acceded to the kidnappers' demands and withdrew 51 soldiers and police officers from Iraq.<sup>25</sup> This event proved that hostage takers could force governments to reverse their positions on committing troops to the American-led Coalition.

Other foreigners have been killed due to their government's mere contemplation of sending troops to Iraq. Raja Azad and Sajad Naim, both from Pakistan, were working in Iraq for a Kuwaiti-based firm. They were killed on July 28, 2004, by the Islamic Army in Iraq because Pakistan was considering dispatching troops to aid the Coalition.<sup>26</sup> These executions had a two-fold message: deterring Pakistan from bolstering the ranks of the occupation forces and discouraging the Kuwaiti firm from contributing to Iraq's reconstruction.

Even private Nepalese security guards in Iraq were targeted as troops contributing to the Coalition. The Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna killings were rationalized with the following statement: "We have carried out the sentence of God against twelve Nepalese who came from their country to fight the Muslims and to serve the Jews and the Christians... believing in Buddha as their God." They used the Nepalese kidnapping to launch a verbal assault on the United States: "America today has used all its force, as well as the help of others, to fight Islam under the so-called war on terror, which is nothing but a vicious crusade against Muslims." The video concluded with a kidnapper vowing to fight the interim Iraqi government: "We will work on exterminating them until the last fighter."<sup>27</sup>

#### *Messages to the United States and Britain*

In addition to protest against U.S. actions in Iraq, kidnappings also occurred to protest

against the American “war on terror” in general. For example, Nicholas Evan Berg, a young American businessman conducting telecommunications work in Iraq, was captured in April 2004. The video of his death shows Berg wearing an orange boiler suit, symbolic of those worn by al-Qa’ida inmates detained at the Guantanamo Bay facility. He was surrounded by five masked men reading a lengthy statement claiming that his execution is retaliation for the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. troops at the Abu Ghraib prison. On May 11, 2004, an Ansar website broadcasted a video entitled “Abu Musab al-Zarqawi Slaughters an American,” which shows Berg being decapitated over a period of five minutes. Berg’s father publicly blamed George W. Bush for his son’s death, demonstrating the insurgents’ can even succeed in alienating American support for the ongoing occupation of Iraq.

Jama’at al-Jihad wa-Tawhid kidnapped British engineer Kenneth Bigley in Baghdad on September 16, 2004, along with two American co-workers employed with the Gulf Services Company of the United Arab Emirates. A video issued in the name of al-Zarqawi threatened to kill the captives unless the United States freed all Iraqi women in custody.<sup>28</sup> The two Americans, Jack Hensley and Eugene Armstrong, were beheaded, with the videos of their murders posted on the internet on September 21. The next day, another video was released showing Bigley pleading for his life, begging British Prime Minister Tony Blair to help him and release the female detainees held by the coalition.

Various individuals, politicians and non-governmental organizations participated in a campaign to save Bigley’s life. The Muslim Council of Britain sent a delegation to Iraq to negotiate his release. Since Bigley’s mother was Irish, politicians from this country appealed for his release on the al-Jazira station, as did Muammar Gaddafi and Yasir Arafat. The fact that international

leaders intervened on his behalf bestowed upon these groups a sense of legitimacy and importance. Nevertheless, these overtures failed to save his life as, on October 10, a video of Kenneth Bigley’s execution was posted on an Islamist website.

On October 19, armed men abducted Margaret Hassan, the head of the humanitarian group CARE International in Iraq.<sup>29</sup> A video was later released where Hassan was seen begging to be spared the fate of Bigley, demonstrating how the latter has emerged as a symbol of what would happen if the kidnappers’ demands go unmet. The video, which received maximum exposure in the Western media, coincided with a British decision to dispatch 850 troops southwest of Baghdad. She said in the video, “Please help me. Please, the British people, ask Tony Blair to take the troops out of Iraq, and not to bring them to Baghdad. That’s why people like Mr. Bigley and myself are being caught, and maybe we will die like Mr. Bigley. Please, please, I beg you.”<sup>30</sup> Such comments have demonstrated how the kidnappers can send a message directly to the British public thus avoiding dealing with its leaders altogether. In this case, the British public viewed what the kidnappers wanted them to see.

On November 18, 2004, the Dar al-Salam radio station in Baghdad announced the news of the death of Margaret Hassan.<sup>31</sup> She was the first woman foreign hostage to be killed by kidnappers creating a widespread outrage among the Iraqis. Articles appeared in Iraq questioning why her captives would kill someone who had devoted her life to helping the Iraqi people.<sup>32</sup> However, others in Iraq surprisingly defended those who killed her. Nuri al-Muradi of the Iraqi Communist Party blamed her death on the Iraqi authority, “The Iraqi Government killed her to damage the reputation of the resistance, but they will fail.”<sup>33</sup> Fakhri al-Qaissy, a leader among the Iraqi Salafists justified her

murder in response to the images of a U.S. Marine that killed an unarmed Iraqi in a Falluja mosque in mid-November: "Since the Americans are waging an extermination war on us, the resistance, too, will kill everyone-- women, old people, infants. The Americans have left us with no other choice than violence."<sup>34</sup>

#### *Messages with Islamist Themes*

Kidnappers have also used hostages in attempts to force foreign leaders to change their policy on broader Islamic issues with little relevance to events in Iraq. In late August 2004, the Islamic Army in Iraq kidnapped two French reporters, George Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot, despite the fact that France had vehemently opposed the 2003 war. The group gave the country 48 hours to revoke a government ban on Muslim girls wearing headscarves at schools.<sup>35</sup> Moderate French Muslim organizations condemned the tactic.

#### **ANALYSIS OF THE HOSTAGE VIDEOS**

The videos of beheadings have been described as the insurgents' version of "shock and awe," terrorizing their audiences into submission. These acts reach the front page of almost every major newspaper, giving the perpetrators of such crimes the international attention they crave and the ability to broadcast terror to a wider audience. Insurgents have released most of these video communiqués to Arabic news channels, knowing that they serve a dual purpose: these news channels enable terrorists to reach young Arabs and Muslims in the region, while at the same time the broadcasts will be picked up by channels such as CNN or the BBC.

These videos, because of their gruesome nature, serve the insurgents' interests on numerous levels. First, the videos give them the ability to display their symbols, whether they be flags or logos, leaving a permanent impression on Arab and Muslim

viewers. Some of the insurgents' communiqués have become quite sophisticated, most likely using advanced computer programs to display flashing logos in Arabic of their organization on the corner of the screen. Most of the beheading videos were conducted with the black and yellow flag of Jama'at al-Jihad wa-Tawhid or black and white flag of the Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna in the background, thus associating their banner with the fear caused by such violent executions.

The images of American and British hostages are designed to intimidate Western audiences, while damaging the popularity of President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, the two key partners in the Coalition. The videos served to taunt Bush during his election campaign. While they failed to prevent his re-election, they highlighted the instability that has beset Iraq since he declared the war's end in May 2003, thus preventing him from declaring Iraq as a victory in the "war on terror." Perhaps Kenneth Bigley's kidnappers kept him alive for an extended period of time before murdering him to maximize their manipulation of the British press, causing the British public to question Blair's commitment to the Coalition.

These videos are also designed for consumption in Iraq, as well as the Arab and Muslim world at large. For some Muslims, the image of a helpless foreign hostage redresses the humiliation of a Western power occupying a country in the heart of the Middle East. In these cases, the insurgents are in control of the hostages' fate while the impotent West is helpless to obtain their release. There are indications that such images are not only popular in Iraq, but the wider Arab world as well. Videos of insurgent attacks against Coalition forces as well as of the beheadings of foreigners have proven to be fast-selling "entertainment" in Iraq, implying that sympathy for these acts



exists. The sale of video discs featuring hostages being executed by Islamic militants was banned by the Iraqi police, yet still make up 75 percent of the domestic movie vendors' sales, indicating that Iraqis are aware of the insurgents' capabilities for sowing fear in Iraq, if not approving of the insurgents' actions.<sup>36</sup>

Discs depicting scenes of Iraqi resistance in Falluja, as well as beheadings, are also being purchased in markets in Cairo and Damascus. These films feature the lyrics of Fallujan singer Sabah al-Janabi celebrating such insurgent tactics: "We are the men defending the town and beheading the enemy. When Falluja called on us, we rose up and met the challenge."<sup>37</sup>

The messages al-Zarqawi sends through these videos also inspire young Muslims to join his jihad in Iraq. One account describes how a Lebanese man was inspired by his message and later volunteered, albeit unsuccessfully, to conduct a suicide mission against U.S. forces: "Zarqawi addressed himself to all Muslim youth, saying that the Americans have come and come with all their armies, they attacked us, so we should go ourselves to take our revenge."<sup>38</sup>

For those Muslims who do not find inspiration in such brutal acts, the videos also serve another purpose. Beheadings could be the insurgents' message that their enemies are in fact violating "Islamic" law, even though this is merely what the insurgents claim. In other words, aiding the Coalition is "un-Islamic" and those collaborators will be punished in kind for such blasphemy.

The debate over beheading raises the question of how the media should deal with phenomena of televised beheadings. One must ask if the insurgent videos serve the interests of the mass media. Bigley's kidnapping created a personal drama of the kind that most television news stations crave. However, even if the media fails to report on the kidnappings, insurgents can still publicize

their captives and their fate over the internet. When the video of the decapitation of Nicholas Berg was released, it was the most popular search item on the internet.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As of the time of this article's publication, more than 150 foreigners have been kidnapped in Iraq since President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in May 2003, and the trend will continue as long as it delivers results for the kidnappers. While some hostage takers have been rewarded with ransom money, others with political objectives have succeeded in forcing the withdrawal of foreign companies or troops serving in the U.S.-led multinational force.

While many Iraqis are disgusted by videos of beheadings of hostages, they argue that there is little difference between the insurgents and the Americans, who displayed the images of the mutilated corpses of Uday and Qusay Hussein after their deaths. The images of Iraqi inmates humiliated during their incarceration at the Abu Ghraib prison are given as another case in point. Some of the hostages were supposedly killed in retaliation for these images. Indeed, it appears that the popular reception of these videos in Iraq and the Arab world underlines the growing unpopularity of the U.S. presence in Iraq.

The former Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein instilled an all-embracing sense of fear into Iraqi society. The insurgents have essentially replicated these tactics. Their videos instill fear in Iraqis who might consider cooperating with the interim administration. However, unlike the domestic fear of Saddam's regime, the insurgents have exported this atmosphere of fear into the Arab and greater Muslim world. They serve as a warning to any oil workers, businesspersons, or diplomats contemplating taking part in Iraq's reconstruction. The

videos send a message of fear to any world leaders who take part in the process, proving that they could hurt their domestic popularity, such as in the case of Prime Minister Blair.

This tactic has yielded successes for the insurgents, such as exposure in the international media. The kidnappers can claim victories in forcing companies to withdraw from reconstruction efforts, hampering the Coalition's attempts to create stability for a new Iraqi government. For al-Qa'ida-linked insurgents, it is in their best interests to perpetuate the jihad necessary for their existence. These decapitation acts can also be said to bolster advocates of the "war on terror" by showing the "barbarity of the Islamic world." By releasing these videos in the name of organizations linked to himself, al-Zarqawi has emerged as the de-facto leader of the Iraqi insurgency. These victories indicate that such tactics will continue in Iraq in the immediate future.

*\*Ibrahim Al-Marashi (Ph.D. Oxford University) is a post-doctoral fellow at Sabanci University. He was a consultant to the Iraq Analysis Center in New York and a lecturer at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, as well as a research associate at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Those taking part in the violence in Iraq against Coalition forces, the interim Iraqi government, and civilians have been referred to as either "resistance fighters," "terrorists" or "foreign jihadists." For the sake of this article, the term used most often in the media, "insurgent," has been employed.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, Weapons of Mass Deception: The Uses of Propaganda in Bush's War on Iraq (New York: Jeremy P. Tacher/Penguin, 2003), p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> James E. Lukazewski, "The Media and the Terrorist: A Dance of Death," Executive Speeches, June 1987 <http://www.e911.com/speeches/mediaandterrorists.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Alterman, "Reading A Postmodern Future in the Iraqi Beheadings," The Daily Star, October 23, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Brigitte L. Nacos, Terrorism and the Media, From the Iran Hostage Crisis to the Oklahoma City Bombing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. xv.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Hashim, "The Sunni Insurgency in Iraq," Middle East Institute Perspective, August 15, 2003, <http://www.mideasti.org/articles/doc89.html>.

<sup>7</sup> David S. Cloud, "Elusive Enemy: Long in U.S. Sights, A Young Terrorist Builds Grim Resume," Wall Street Journal, February 10, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Insurgent messages are usually posted on their websites, which are closed after a few weeks, if not days. Their statements can also be heard in Arabic on "beheading videos," which have proliferated to numerous websites that have no link to the insurgency. Rather than encouraging access to these websites and for the sake of this article, the author has relied on transcripts of insurgent comments found in the Associated Press or various news sources in English.

<sup>9</sup> Gary R. Bunt, Islam In The Digital Age: EJihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments (London: Pluto Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Maamoun Youssef, "Tape Shows Insurgents Beheading Two Iraqis," Associated Press, October 14, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> "Web Site Shows Iraqi Militants Beheading Man," Associated Press, October 23, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> "Ansar al-Sunnah Army Claims It Beheaded Shi'ite Worker," Iraq Report, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Vol. 7, No. 38 (October 15, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mariam Fam, "Militants Behead Three Iraqi Kurdish Militiamen," Associated Press, September 19, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "Ansar al-Jihad Group Claims Responsibility for Kidnapping Allawi's Relatives, States Demands," translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, (FBIS), November 10, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> "More Than 150 Foreigners Kidnapped in Iraq," The Associated Press, October 14, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> "Kidnapped Turkish Driver Is Beheaded In Iraq, Shown On Video On Islamic Web Site," Associated Press, October 14, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> "Militant Group Says It Is Holding 10 Hostages in Iraq in A Video Broadcast On Al-Jazeera," Associated Press, September 18, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Rawya Rageh, "Islamist Web Site Shows Beheading of Two Hostages in Iraq; Another Turkish Hostage Threatened," Associated Press, October 11, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Tarek El-Tablawy, "Militants Threaten To Behead Hostages," Associated Press, July 21, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Todd Pittman, "Militants in Iraq Kill South Korean Hostage; Arab TV Says He Was Beheaded," Associated Press, June 22, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Mariam Fam, "Italian Journalist Held Hostage Is Killed Al-Jazeera Says," Associated Press, August 26, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Katrin Bennhold, "Hostages in Iraq: For Europe, It's Personal," *The International Herald Tribune*, September 30, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> James Glanz, "Iraqi Insurgents Using Abduction As Prime Weapon," *New York Times*, July 26, 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Omar Sinan, "Militant Group in Iraq Says It Has Killed Two Pakistani Hostages," Associated Press, July 28, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> "Website shows Nepalese Hostage Execution Video and Images," Cable News Network (CNN), August 31, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Hamza Hendawi, "Suicide Bomber Targets Baghdad Police, U.S. Forces Pound Fallujah and Nearby Villages," Associated Press, September 17, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Vick, "Head of CARE in Iraq Abducted," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Kim Sengupta, "Harrowing Footage Shows Hassan Pleading For Her Life," *The Independent*, October 23, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> "Program Summary: Baghdad Dar al-Salam Radio in Arabic," FBIS, November 18, 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Abd-al-Qadir Ahmad, "Why Did They Kill Margaret Hassan?," *Irbil Khabat*, translated by FBIS, November 24, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> "Iraqi CP Official Accuses Iraqi Government; Defense Minister of Kidnapping Hassan," *Al-Jazira Satellite Channel*, translated by FBIS, November 23, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> "Iraqi Salafist Official Defends Hassan's Murder," *Liberation*, translated by FBIS, November 18, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> "French Reporters Vanish in Iraq," *BBC News*, August 22, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Mcallester, "Iraqi Beheading Now Fueling New Global 'Snuff' Film Market," *Newsday*, October 17, 2004, < <http://www.SundayTribune.com> >.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Michaels, "U.S., Iraqi Forces Gear Up For Fallujah Showdown," *USA Today*, October 20, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Neil Macfarquhar, "A Recruit's Journey to Jihad in Iraq," *The International Herald Tribune*, November 3, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Mcallester, "Iraqi Beheading Now Fueling New Global 'Snuff' Film Market," *Newsday*, October 17, 2004. <http://www.SundayTribune.com>