Virtual hostage dramas and real politcs

Kidnapping of foreigners and the production of hostage videos showing their pleas for life and in many cases their subsequent executions, have become a signature of post-war Iraqi terrorism. While the images make for striking news coverage they are but part of the terrorists' overarching strategy which includes the subtext of exerting pressure on western nations which are part of the US-led coalition force.

This paper examines the role of terrorist kidnappings and more importantly the release of hostage videos, in the overall terrorist strategy in Iraq. It also examines the terrorist machinations surrounding the execution of Englishman Kenneth Bigley and British-born Iraqi aid worker Margaret Hassan.

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"We refuse to permit the use of terrorism, and the seizure and holding of hostages, to impose political demands." President James E. Carter November 11, 1979.

Carter's stance of non-negotiation during the Iranian hostage crisis of the seventies, has been echoed by successive American presidents and state leaders across the world. The overall reluctance to conduct overt discussions with hostage takers, coupled with the political rhetoric of "not giving into terrorists demands" have even provided an air of predictability in most terrorist related hostage situations. But despite

continued failures in having their demands met, terrorist groups continue to take hostages in many theatres of conflict. Most recently, the terrorist strategy of hostage taking has found its way into newspaper headlines in the aftermath of America's much publicised War on Terror in Iraq.

While it is impossible to determine exactly how many hostages have been abducted by terrorist groups in post-war Iraq, an analysis of media reports indicate the number of foreign hostages to be between 100-150. But once again, with the exception of Filipino President Gloria Arroyo's decision to withdraw the nation's small contingent of 51 soldiers ahead of schedule in exchange for the freedom of truck driver Angelo de la Cruz, hostage takers have enjoyed little success in having their demands met either by the US-led coalition or the interim government in Iraq.

Despite the seemingly poor statistical chance of success however, terrorist groups remain undeterred from taking hostages, begging the question as to why terrorist groups continue to indulge in what western power-brokers boldly claim to be a futile exercises. The answer may be found not in the terrorists' demands - nominally the overt rationale of their actions - but in the political subtext that emerges from many hostage crises.

As the key to understanding the rationale behind the spate of civilian kidnappings in Iraq, is in understanding the psychological benifits of using terrorism as a military strategy in asymmetrical warfare, and the role played by hostage takings as a tactic within that overall terrorist strategy.

Terrorism: a weapon in psychological warfare.

At its core terrorism is merely an abstract concept – a theory which suggests that instilling terror in a target population enables the "terrifier" to have political control over the terrified. Thus it is a military strategy of indirect attack, aimed at generating a psychological response to trigger a preconceived behavioral response in the target population. Terrorist violence therefore enables terrorists to manipulate a target population's emotions and actions to suit the terrorist cause.

The severity of the crimes committed against the victims, the randomness of victim selection and the element of surprise in terrorist attacks all

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contribute to the psychological impression of an omnipresent terror which can strike anyone at anytime. Terrorists are therefore able to attack a small part of the targeted population – the immediate victims of the violence – in order to create a sense of insecurity in a wider target population, which in turn is expected to undermine public confidence in government. Through a relatively small number of isolated and seemingly random attacks, terrorists are able to expose the military impotence of the ruling authority – be it a government or an occupying force. O long as the authority, backed by the military, is unable to prevent attacks on civilian targets despite all the resources at its disposal, the terrorists are able to exert massive psychological and political blows on the authority with minimal and low cost 'military' attacks.

While the definition of terrorism is continuously debated at a global level in an environment that is both politically and culturally charged, from a perspective of moral and political disinterest or neutrality, it is more accurately defined as a politico-military strategy which is culturally neutral. Thus variations on the American definition - specifically that terrorism is violence or threat of violence on "non-combatants" for political gain - are accepted by many governments and international organisations as acceptable definitions of a phenomenon which has overshadowed many aspects of contemporary politics.

While the American definition itself is used with political bias in many theatres of conflict where the popular yet erroneous adage; "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" has gained ground, the definition in its purest form defines a military strategy that transcends political and cultural bias. Thus freedom fighters, revolutionaries, legitimate governments, recognised armies and any national, sub-national or transnational group are able to harness it as a tool in low-intensity conflict.

However, like the proverbial tree that falls in the forests, the 'horror' of terrorist violence needs to reach the wider target population for the terrorist strategy to work. If no one hears the tree fall, has it really fallen? It the media does not report bomb blasts has terrorism occurred? Isolated attacks on small groups of victims which do not reach the wider target, thus fail to instill fear though a threat of seemingly omnipresent and unpredictable violence threatening to endanger a wider section of the target population. Hence the media, and more particularly mainstream

media with its wider penetration, becomes a vital link between the terrorist and the target population.

Considering the centrality of the media, its mandate to "inform the public" and the terrorist's exclusion in the news selection process, terrorist groups are forced not only to capitalise on less measurable and less certain successes with random targets but also select targets that maximize their media exposure – hence the taking of foreign hostages.

This strategy is not new, and has been used and exploited by terrorist groups for decades. Following a spate of plane hijackings that help catapult the Middle-Eastern conflict on to Western television screens more than thirty years ago, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine founder Dr. George Habash argued that hostage taking had been vital for their success. "When we hijack a plane it has more effect than if we killed a hundred Israelis in battle," Habash told a journalist in 1970. "Ö.(F)or decades world public opinion has been neither for nor against the Palestinians. It simply ignored us. At least the world is talking about us now." (Der Stern,1970)[i]

In the current climate however, with a plethora of news being generated from the Middle East and in particular post-war Iraq, terrorists are utilising a prime headline grabbing tactic popularised by Middle-Eastern terrorists in late sixties – hostage taking, only this time using self-generated, highly choreographed propaganda packages of the hostage drama which can be conveniently slotted into the evening news.

The Iraqi theater:

The killing of around 3000 people during the 2001 Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Centre in downtown Manhattan, caused geo-political ripples felt half-way across the world in Kabul. America's overreaction, coupled with its ill-planned war on terror has seen the loss of even more lives than in Manhattan in the three years that followed. The US-led coalition's retribution on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan has been anything but swift, and its fragile victory continues to be overshadowed by lingering acts of terrorism. But having apparently lost September 11 master-mind Osama Bin Laden over the Pakistan border, the so-called hawks in the Bush administration turned their focus on Iraq– a target

The Iraqi theater

Australian intelligence whistle blower Andrew Wilkie believes had been at the top of Bush's war charts ever since the Twin Towers attack (Wilkie,2004).

On March 19, 2003 coalition forces led by US and British troops launched their attack on Iraq. Based on the "Shock and Awe" military concept designed by the National Defense University in Washington, the US promised to drop 600-800 cruise missiles on Iraq during the first 48 hours of the conflict - twice the number of missiles launched during the 40 days of the 1991 Gulf War (West, 2003). But once again, despite expectations of a speedy result, the war, code named "Operation Iraqi Freedom" by the US[ii], has been far from swift. Nearly two years later, and despite the successful capture of President Saddam Hussein and key figures in his ruling Ba'ath party government, fighting between coalition forces, pockets of Hussein's loyalists and the growing Shi'a and Sunni resistance movements continue.

With the capture or killing of all but 12 of the 55 'most wanted' Ba'ath party figures, including Hussein's two son's Qusay and Uday Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti (United States Central Command, 2004) a massive power vacuum has been created in Iraq opening new inroads for sub-national and transnational terrorists groups. This new development forced US Secretary of State Colin Powell to conceded the insurgency was, by mid-September 2004, "getting worse" (American Broadcasting Corporation, 2004).

With the coalition still struggling to secure control over the entire nation, the extremely fragmented terrorist network began to thrive under a number of regional and religio-political banners, including the extremist Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Tawhad and Khalid bin Al Walid Brigade.

Despite some military wins and talks of fresh elections in January, the security situation in a number of Iraqi regions remains dire. The storm in the Sunni triangle that connects Ramadi, Samarra and Baghdad continues to brew, and despite US attacks on Falluja violence continues to spread to Mosul in Northern Iraq. Baghdad is far from peaceful with the Green Zone – the fortified region housing the US command headquarters – constantly under fire from rebel forces; the roads south of Baghdad to

the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala remain extremely dangerous following the spread of violence from Najaf; and troops continue to come under rebel fire in Basra.

Furthermore the 'war on terror', like the events that sparked it, continues to be dominated by a war of images in the media – for example Fox news and Al-Jazeera. Al Qaeda's attack on the iconic base of US defense – the Pentagon, and even more importantly its greatest symbol of economic supremacy – the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, not only became the most filmed terrorist attack in history, but also set the tone for an overt exploitation of visual media in the war that followed. It was soon challenged by infra-red images of the coalition's 'Shock and Awe' campaign (symbols of American firepower); to the draping of an American flag over a statue of Saddam Hussein in downtown Baghdad - just moments before the concrete giant was brought to its knees by 'liberated' Iraqi's. The war of images has continued to dominate news in 'post-war' Iraq where terrorist groups including followers of al-Sadr and al-Zarqawi are exploiting the new found freedom of digital media and capitalising on images and video footage of foreign hostages and their execution to wage a psychological war on the west and its policy makers.

Hostages: pawns in deadly politics.

Between 100-150 foreigners have been taken hostage in this politically charged environment, and while more than 30 of them have been killed – mostly ritually beheaded, the others have been released by their captors or have succeeded in escaping . An even larger number of Iraqi hostages have also been taken captive – as many as ten a day, according to the Gulf Research Center's Dr Mustafa Alani (Davis, September 16, 2004), however, many of them have been abducted by opportunistic groups seeking financial ransoms, as opposed to terrorists seeking political capital.

The foreign hostages in contrast have been abducted mostly by political terrorists, or traded to political terrorists by the opportunistic gangs which have carved a niche in the 'post-war' anarchy. While most of the hostages are nationals from countries that support the coalition's war on Iraq, even those from countries which have remained neutral have been targeted.

Terrorists meanwhile have offered a flimsy excuse for their target selection, arguing that any nation which supports America is not safe. Ironically even French nationals have been taken captive under the ambiguous pretext of siding with America, despite France's opposition to the US-led invasion.

It was Italy – the coalition's third largest contingent, which suffered the first blow in what was to become a series of foreign hostage assassinations, with the murder of security guard Fabrizio Quattrocchi by a group calling itself al-Katibat al-Khadra or the Green Battalion (BBC, April15, 2004). The killing put serious political pressure on Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government, which desperately tried to put a heroic spin on the man's death – claiming he tried to take off his hood and then shouted: "now I'll show you how an Italian dies,"(BBC, April 15, 2004). Meanwhile opposition leaders including Piero Fassino, the leader of the Democrats of the Left party responded to the assassination by saying Italy's policy on Iraq "needs a radical change of direction" (Smith, April 15, 2004). The killing also solidified fears of further attacks on Italians who had already suffered a massive blow to their morale in November last year, when a suicide truck bomb killed 19 of their solders in Nasiriya – making it the country's worst single military loss since World War II.

Media reports of the hostage killings confirm nearly 40 foreign hostages have been either ritually executed or shot by their captors since the Quattrocchi killing. These include Care Australia worker Margaret Hassan and Kenneth Bigley - both British nationals, Americans Nick Berg, Eugene Armstrong and Jack Hensley, South Korean translator Kim Sun-il, and the lesser known killing of 12 unnamed Nepalese workers.

The murders and the signature videos which have become a crucial tool in the terrorists' strategy, have been orchestrated under a number of different banners including al-Tarawa's Taw hid we'll-Jihad – who are believed to have executed Bigley, Berg, Armstrong, Hensley and Sun-il; Filipino Angelo de la Cruz's captors the Islamic Army -Khaled bin al-Waleed corps; Italian Fabrizio Quattrocchi's captors al-Katibat al-Khadra - the Green Battalion; Islamic Response, Ansar al-Sunna and the Black Banners (Davis, 2004).

In a world connected through digital media networks, terrorists have also been able to readily exploit these new technologies to penetrate an audience which was previously closed to them and hence increase political pressure on the coalition. Using digital recording and internet, the terrorists draw direct attention to the plight of hostages by disseminating graphic images of the hostages' suffering caused directly by the West's involvement in the Gulf.

Terrorists and the media:

Journalists and the mainstream media have been slowly losing their monopoly on news since the advent of the Internet. While the web has shaped the way journalists communicate, construct their stories, publish their material and interact with their audiences, it has also provided a way for radical groups, who might have previously relied on small audience, to bypass the mainstream media and offer their intellectual wares directly to an international audience with wider audience penetration (Knight and Ubayasiri, 2002).

The Internet's global reach, coupled with developments in digital technology and web-streaming has given terrorist media unprecedented reach and access to scattered terrorist cells, sympathizer groups, curious readers and even the news-hungry media.

The boom in free web-space and an exponential growth in discussion boards, chat rooms and bulletin boards have provided an almost untraceable forum for terrorist media to infiltrate the public sphere. In addition to using discussion boards created specifically for the purpose of disseminating terrorist media, the fundamentalist followers of al-Sadr and al-Zarqawi have also been known to hijack a large number of discussion boards used by moderates and students of Islam. A large number of these discussion lists are hosted through internet giant Yahoo's -http://groups.yahoo.com/

American web activist Jeremy Reynolds argues Yahoo's Global Islamic Media (GIM) and its many aliases have been at the center of an Al Qaeda media campaign. He claims that while Yahoo has been forced to remove GIM from its network, the discussion board has reemerged under two main aliases, Markazilamislami and Jabha – both on Yahoo groups.

Terrorists and the media:

Both sites have since been removed, with Yahoo's records only showing that Markazilamislami had 141 members and Jabha 81 at the time of closure.

Furthermore, Reynolds cites the American-based www.itshappening.com bulletin board as the online origins of a video showing the beheading of Lockheed Martin Corp employee Paul Johnson on July 17. While Johnson was kidnapped in Riyadh in neighbouring Saudi Arabia on June 12, by the county's self-proclaimed Al Qaeda leader Abdel Aziz al-Muqrin, his abduction fits the overall anti-coalition terrorist strategy in the Gulf.

The bulletin board posting titled "How to behead Paul Johnson" appeared on www.itshappening.com under the handle – bulletin board pseudonym – Abu Hajarii, and contained two links – www.powow.com/coffeeshop (another free web host) and www.itshappening.com's own file sharing system – both of which allowed web surfers to download the 5.4MB zipfile containing the video footage of Johnson's beheading. While requesting web administrators not to " become frightened and remove the file" Hajarii signed his message with what later became his signature sign-off – "Our deaths are in the paradise and their deaths are at the hell".

Hajarii continued to be active onwww.itshappening.com even as late as October 10, and has continued to post a number of similar videos and images including a 4.8 MB zipfile containing a Ken Bigley video viewed by 297 people; a 3MB zipfile containing the murder of Jack Hansley viewed by 9425 web visitors; and a 5.99Mb zipfile containing a video of Eugene Armstrong viewed by 8852 people. Armstrong's posting is titled "the First American already traveled for hell", followed by Hajarii's signoff – "Our deaths are in the paradise and their deaths are at the hell".

Former Reuters journalist and British based Al Qaeda specialist Paul Eedle argues terrorists websites and discussion boards offer an insight into elusive organisations such as Al Qaeda and should be taken seriously by the West. "I think it's much more important for the West to pay attention to Al Qaeda's messages and think of political ways to counter that" instead of simply attempting to shut the sites down, he told Lateline's Tony Jones in March 2004 (ABC, 2004, March 19).

Eedle argues that while GIM and its many aliases had re-emerged for short periods of time after they were first removed from the Yahoo websites, Tawhid wa'l-Jihad's illusive terrorist propaganda mastermind Abu Maysara al-Iraqi – father of Maysara the Iraqi, had consistently posted messages on the subscriber discussion board – www.ansarnet.ws/vb/ (Eedle personal communications, October 2004). During the past few months Abu Maysara al-Iraqi has caused serious headaches for Washington's terrorism sleuths, with his knack for remaining elusive within the wider cyber world, and "constantly switching online accounts and taking advantage of new technologies to issue his communiquÈ to the world," (Cha, 2004).

The current Jihadist network includes Qal3ah at www.qal3ah.info/vb and Islah at www.yasilah.org/vboard/index.php, (Eedle personal communication, October 2004), both operating on vBulletin version 3.0.3 software designed by the UK based Jelsoft Enterprises Ltd. www.qal3ah.info is registered under the name of Qalaah Qalaah, Hmdan Street, Abu Dhabi, 25852, Arab Emirates, since October 8, 2001; while www.yasilah.org/vboardis registered to Saad Al-Fagih, Islah, 21 Blackstone Road, London, NW26DA since May 28, 2003. The latter records a staggering 47,926,012 hits since it began.

The elusive of these "e-terrorists", has also paved way for the emergence of a new generation of online terrorist trackers and archivists, who post the video clips on their sites, and in the case of American-based groups, are covered by their First Amendment right to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. One such site www.ogrish.com/index2.htm[iii], archives a large number of video clips dating back to the Daniel Pearl Beheading Video in Pakistan (2001). Among more than 25 clips, the site contains: Margaret Hassan Video Captured By Unknown Militant Group; Turkish Truck Driver Beheading Video - Execution Performed By Qaqa Brigade (Tawhid and Jihad group); American Hostage Jack Hensley Beheading Video; American Hostage Eugene Armstrong Beheading Video (Killed By Zarqawi Militant Group); and Kenneth Bigley Video - Pleading In Cage and Ken Bigley Beheading.

Other sites which contain a number of clips include www.confederatelinux .com registered to Frank Cimrhanzel of Texas[iv]; and World of Death at www.everwonder.com – a free hosting posted by Ohio based David Long[v].

Gatekeepers thrown asunder:

Despite an unprecedented growth in terrorist media on the internet, terrorists are still unable to directly set the news agendas on mainstream media. However, they are able to gain media attention through the clever manipulation of their propaganda tailored to fit basic news selection criteria.

Gatekeepers thrown asunder:

In many cases the release of hostage videos to the Qatar based Al Jazeera television station has been successful in arousing the interest of the Western media, who are then forced to play "catch up". Similarly terror messages and video clips released on the internet have also been successful in arousing the interest of terror trackers and mainstream media giving the messages wider coverage and deeper audience penetration.

Capitalising on the voyeuristic and suspenseful nature of a hostage drama, the terrorists are able to sustain the attention of media consumers, and generate a level of political discussion of, and self-reflection on, coalition foreign policy. The visualisation of the events in a terrorist hideout therefore become a successful tool in focusing Western media searchlights on 'remote' political backwaters of Baghdad, Najaf and Fallujah on mainstream media, and through it generating a mass public debate on matters which would have otherwise been the purview of a select few.

However, even with this flow of information from terrorist propagandist to consumer, the media still operates within the bounds of their traditional role as gatekeepers of news, and continue to filter the images created by the terrorist media. But their inevitable references to the web as the original source of the selected terrorist propaganda easily directs consumers to the internet, where a simple web search reveals either terrorists sites or, more likely, terror video archives maintained by voyeurs and terror-trackers.

Commercial search company overture.com's search word results for September reveal 226,395 searches for†"beheading", 199,789 attempts to find websites containing "beheading video", 77958 on†"Armstrong beheading Eugene" and 25420 on†"beheading Hensley jack". Similarly a search on top key words related to "Iraq" reveal 864407 hits for the word, with seven search word combinations relating to beheading and hostage taking in the top 20 searched phrases, adding up to 120,677 hits.

The frequency of searches for 'beheading' and related words had however shown a significant drop by the end of October, with 99435 searches for "beheading", 74580 hits for "beheading video", 26516 for†"Bigley beheading", 16,138 "Iraq beheading", and a total of 43876 for a number of search variations on "Bigley beheading video"[vii].

Searches for beheading videos spike even on extremely small search engines such as Lycos where their classification "Beheadings in Iraq: Terror Continues" rated third in the search engine's top 50 searches between September 27 - October 4, dropping down to thirteenth position the following week.

While it is impossible to determine the exact number of searches conducted for topics relating to beheading and hostage takings, the statistics provided in Overture and Lycos provide a snapshot of how the Internet has provided an uncensored and unregulated forum for terrorist media.

The Ken Bigley scenario, and the terrorist media:

While all hostage dramas have exerted considerable political pressure on the coalition and have caused a certain degree of embarrassment for coalition leaders, the kidnapping of Kenneth Bigley and his subsequent murder was relatively successful in delivering a political blow to the US's strongest supporter, British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The Ken Bigley scenario, and the terrorist media:

British citizen Kenneth Bigley, and two of his American colleagues Jack Hensley and Eugene Armstrong were taken hostage on September 16, 2004 by the Tawhad and Khalid bin Al Walid– lead by Jordanian born Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Two days later their captors agreed to release the trio unharmed in return for the release of female Iraqi prisoners within 48 hours. The coalition claimed it had only two female prisoners in custody – Rihab Taha and Huda Ammash, both alleged germ warfare experts, and said it was unlikely they would be released without due process.

When the coalition and the US-backed interim Iraqi government refused to comply, Armstrong was beheaded by al-Zarqawi himself (Baker,

2004), Hensley executed a day later, while the orange-clad Bigley continued to be used as a political pawn against Tony Blair's government. The drama was played out through a series of carefully choreographed video messages and pleas filmed and distributed by the terrorists – most finding their way to mainstream news bulletins and online archives.
The power play cast a shadow over Blair's involvement in Iraq during a sensitive Labor Party annual conference in Brighton in late September. It can also be argued that the swift execution of two Americans as distinct from the month-long negotiations for Bigley's release was an attempt to drive a wedge between London and Washington by offering Blair time and opportunity to back out of the coalition and save Bigley's life.

The Bigley scenario is a clear case study of the terrorists' attempt to exert political pressure not simply through the hostage taking, but through a clever manipulation of hostage images created by the terrorist media machine. The hostage drama that unfolded though a period of more than three weeks was used by the terrorists to project a media subtext which is conveniently disguised in the overt terrorist demands – the release of female prisoners.

The media tactic used in the two Bigley videos fit a classic terrorist strategy outlined by Morris Tugwell (1987) who argues that terrorist media use a series of recurring themes, including Guilt Transfer and Spurious Justification – the justification of their actions through moral righteousness, as part of an overarching terrorist strategy. Using these repetitive themes, the terrorists attempt to shift the blame for their macabre actions on to the coalition by drawing parallels between Bigley and the prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. With the images of prisoner abuse still clear in the minds of many media consumers, the terrorists attempt to portray their actions as an inevitability stemming from the coalitions' treatment of Iraqi prisoners. Bigley's orange overalls and the compromising positions he is filmed in – in a cage, or kneeling in front of five armed men, are clearly designed to resemble and represent the US treatment of Iraqi prisoners in Cuba, and all add to the terrorists' deadly theatrics.

Through this clever manipulation, images of Bigley in a cage or kneeling in front of a fundamentalist banner, wearing orange overalls, became household images in the west. Even mainstream media drew symbolic parallels between the terrorists' captive and US prisoners at Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay in Cuba (Marshall, 2004).

The symbolic connections to US prisons are also underscored by Bigley's own pleas for his life, where he pleads with the British government to give in to the terrorists' demands and free the women at Abu Ghraib prison. "I am a simple man, just wants to live a simple life with his familyÖ.Please, please give them what they require, the freedom of the women in Abu Ghraib prison, I beg you. If you do this the problem is solved," he says, moments before he is beheaded by his captors.

On a previous recording Bigley said "I don't want to die here. I need you to help me, Mr. Blair, because you are the only person now on God's earth that I can speak to". Sitting in front of a flag bearing the message "In the name of God, the Merciful", Bigley pleaded for Prime Minister Blair's compassion. He says the Iraqi people have "suffered greatly" and that his captors weren't "asking for the world". The 11 minute video ended with a simple message displayed on the screen "Do leaders really care about these people?" (CNN, September 22, 2004).

The words of the hostage in the cleverly orchestrated terrorist theatre thus attempt to put the bloodied knife in Prime Minister Blair's hand when the terrorist's set the scene at the end of the first video ending with the message – "Do leaders care about these people". The argument is sealed in Bigley's plea where the terrified hostage says Blair was the "Only man on God's earth" that could help him. Thus the terrorists' attempt to transfer the guilt of their crime by suggesting Bigley's life always rested in the Prime Minister's hands and that the terrorist were merely following a path set for them by British policymakers.

The emotions created through the pleas of a man who simply wishes to get back to his family, is also used as emotional leverage to highlight the plight of prisoners in Iraq. It attempts to portray the terrorists as champions of the faceless individuals that languish in coalition controlled Iraqi prisons – in Bigley's 'own' words "the Iraqi people have suffered greatlyÖ.these people are not asking for the world."

Deeper in the subtext there is also a play on the sexuality of the prisoners the terrorists want released from prison – the interplay between sexuality and family continue. Through out the entire hostage drama the terrorists are specifically seeking release of the female prisoners. Once again Bigley himself contributes towards this information subtext when he says; "There is no use putting Iraqi mothers in prisonÖall mothers help their

childrenÖ.free them." The comments are followed by a reference to the failing health of his own mother, who Bigley simply wants to return to. These politically loaded statements are aimed at creating a maternal and non-threatening persona for the face-less women in Abu Ghraib – two women the Americans claim are germ war experts. Thus the terrorist propagandists are shrewdly attempting to harness a maternal archetype, in order to psychologically manipulate the western media consumer into seeing the world through the eyes of an Iraqi woman – who according to the argument is simply assisting her son like any mother would.

The religious symbolism displayed in a number of hostage videos, including that of Bigley's, could also be interpreted as an attempt to attribute Spurious Justification to the terrorists' actions. The banner in the background bearing the group's name - Tawhid wa'l-Jihad, and the message "in the name of God the merciful", provides a sense of religious virtue, that attempts to exonerate the terrorist from guilt by attributing a degree of divine sanction to their actions. The exploitation of religious symbolism also attempts to persuade the media consumer of a religio-moral justification – a stark distinction between the terrorists who are simply serving their God, compared to the morally bankrupt coalition policymakers who do not even care for the lives of their fellow men. The semi- religious undertone of the chanting moments before the decapitation, and the sacrificial nature of the beheading also add to the religious subtext.

Margaret Hassan: a change of tactic or copycat kidnapping?

Baghdad-based CARE International director Margaret Hassan, was abducted by unidentified armed men outside her office on October 19, 2004. Just hours after the abduction, a silent video of Hassan sitting on the end of a sofa looking alarmed was aired through the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera network. Hassan's captors later released another video on October 22 to Al-Jazeera, this time with the veteran aid worker pleading for her life.

"Please help me, please help me, these might be my last hours .... Please help me, please British people ask Mr Blair to pull the troops from Iraq

and not bring them to BaghdadÖ.Please, please I beg of you, the British people, to help me. I don't want to die like Bigley. I beg of you, I beg of you," she pleaded.

Hassan's captors release a third video which was aired through Al-Jazeera on October 27, showing the CARE director close to tears, urging British Prime Minister Tony Blair to pull troops out of Iraq, for CARE International to close its office in Baghdad and for Iraqi women prisoners to be freed (BBC, November 3, 2004). "Please don't bring the soldiers to BaghdadÖPlease, on top of that, please release the women prisoners from prisons," Hassan urged the British government (Al-Jazeera, October 27, 2004).

Following the plea CARE International ceased its operations in Iraq, while the British government agreed to "seriously consider" the demands (Al-Jazeera, October 27, 2004).

On November 2, the Al-Jazeera station once again reported they had received another video from Hassan's captors warning of "dangerous and serious" deadlines, but said it had refused to air the images saying they were "too graphic". However, the station did reveal that the terrorists had imposed a 48 hour deadline for the British government to comply with their demands, and had threatened to hand Hassan to al-Zarqawi, who had allegedly kidnapped and killed Bigley. Once again there was no mention of the identity of Hassan's captors, except for suggestions they did not belong to al-Zarqawi as previously feared (Al-Jazeera, November 2, 2004).

A day after the 48 hour deadline lapsed, Al Jazeera reported that al-Zarqawi had condemned Hassan's abduction on an Arabic website, and had said his group would "release her immediately unless she is proven to have conspired against Muslims" (Al-Jazeera, November 5, 2004). "It's meaningless to try to outbid us... by saying that they would turn the captive Margaret Hassan over to us within 48 hours unless their demands are met," the statement said. "Those using this captive as a bargaining chip do not truly know our religion ... (which states that) women not involved in combat should not be attacked." (Al-Jazeera, November 5, 2004).

On November 16, nearly a month after her abduction, the media reported that Hassan had been killed by her captors. Quoting United Press International, the Washington Times wrote: "The Arabic television channel Al-Jazeera said Tuesday that it had received a video showing a militant firing a pistol into the head of a blindfolded woman in an orange jumpsuit".

The Margaret Hassan hostage drama, unlike that of Bigley's, is shrouded in mystery and speculation. The absence of identification banners and hooded men which have become a signature of hostage videos, and a lack of symbolic parallels to the orange clad prisoners of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay – until the introduction of an orange jumpsuit in the final video, suggests significant divergence from the media tactics used in the Bigley and other al-Zarqawi sponsored abductions.

Despite significant deviations in the visual content, Hassan's appeals – the release of female prisoners and the withdrawal of British troops, or more precisely a plea not to deploy the British Black Watch Regiment in Baghdad, bear an uncanny resemblance to Bigley's video appeals – a tenuous connection which at some level may suggest the Hassan abduction simply followed on from where Bigley's ended. Hassan's own admission of not wanting to "die like Bigley" may even support this line of argument.

The question remains however, as to why these abductors didn't make the link between Hassan and Bigley stronger and more overt – it was after all a link that could have exerted more pressure on the British Government following Bigley's death and the uncertain future of Hassan – a high profile aid worker. In a country riddled with political, quasi-political and even simply criminal kidnappers, the clear lack of visual continuity suggests Hassan could have been abducted, not by Bigley's kidnapper al-Zarqawi but another – a theory supported by al-Zarqawi's own condemnation of the abduction of Hassan – the wife of an Iraqi man.

While Hassan's kidnapping fails to offer any great insight into the overall terrorist tactic in Iraq – unlike perhaps Bigley's, it provides evidence of the deeply fragmented, and loosely connected terror network in the region. It also suggests the existence of a number of terrorist strategies, orchestrated by the numerous unconnected or loosely connected terrorist

groups that operate in the region, with varying degrees of strategic sophistication.

Hassan's captors were most likely a less prominent radical group that was using the opportunity to assert their position within the terrorist hierarchy. The group, following their interpretation of al-Zarqawi's tactic, abducted Hassan but failed to back their actions with the rich symbolism that had become a hallmark of al-Zarqawi's macabre and highly publicised hostage videos.

The Hassan abduction also suggests that the terrorist actors of Iraq, like the US-led coalition, are far from securing absolute control on the ground. With dominant terrorist groups failing to assert authority over the opportunistic and idealistic factions within the anti-coalition movement, the perception that there is some overarching terrorist strategy, an air of terror, hides what is in reality a ad-hoc resistance lacking a coordinated subversive strategy.

The absence of strategic direction also suggest that the actions of the individual terrorist groups could become counter-productive and self-destructive. The ill-planned abduction of Hassan – a pro-Iraqi aid worker, provides a classic example of this type of self-destructive terrorism where the resistance risks losing its foothold in Iraq by persecuting its own support base.

Al-Zarqawi's own condemnation of Hassan's abduction suggests that the more sophisticated terrorist groups are clearly aware of this delicate balance between 'acceptable' terror and the danger of alienating the resistance's support base.

Politics of 'hearts and minds':

From the onset of the "War in Iraq" the US-led coalition has focused on projecting an image of a liberating force as opposed to a conquering army, and having 'liberated' Iraq the coalition faces the arduous and expensive task of rebuilding the country and introducing Western-style democracy.

Last year's US invasion, coupled with the eight year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's and the international sanctions following Saddam Hussein's ill-fated invasion of Kuwait in 1990 has taken it toll on Iraq, and according to World Bank and International Monetary Fund calculations, restoring water, power, road and telecommunications networks is expected to cost an estimated $35.8bn US. In addition the Coalition Provisional Authority has estimated an additional $20bn will be required to repair Iraq's only economic lifeline – its oil industry (BBC, 2004).

In the military euphoria following the fall of Baghdad, US military strategists believed coalition troop numbers would drop to a round 30,000 by the middle of this year (Harper, 2004), instead more than 138,000 troops are still stationed in Iraq and it is believed the number will have to be sustained until the end of next year (White, 2004). This commitment is shouldered not only by the US but also by others in the "coalition of the willing" – including Britain. Under mounting pressure from his own Labor caucus and the British opposition in the wake of an election, British PM Tony Blair continues to be indecisive over Britain's commitment in Iraq raising suggestions of significant cutbacks to the country's 8,700 ground troops in the Gulf (BBC, 2004, April 15). Similarly Polish Prime Minister Marek Belka has called for a reduction in the 2500 strong Polish force – one of the largest contingents in the conflict (ABC, 2004, October 15). With its key allies under ever-increasing domestic political pressure, and the US government constantly feeling the economic and the social cost of the war back home, there is little doubt all members of the coalition wish to leave Iraq without much delay. Thus it is in the coalition's best interest to see Iraq return to local civilian administration swiftly, and a coalition trained armed force set in place to withstand the political sandstorms of the Gulf.

As such Iraq's anti-coalition resistance has only a limited window of opportunity to undermine the political transition through terrorist tactics - including random bombings and hostage takings - if they are to prevent Iraq's coalition-appointed Interim Prime Minster Iyad Allawi from gaining a stronger hold on power.

The strategy of hostage taking, which has been a key tactic of the anti-coalition resistance would loose its impetus, no longer able to secure headline news. In a newly reborn Iraq, war coverage may soon become yesterday's news in the western media, where information-myopic

audiences turn off to terrorist orchestrated hostage dramas in a country that no longer holds grass-roots interest.

Furthermore the mounting presence of private security agencies would diminish the opportunity for random kidnappings, making the strategy no longer an easy option for the Iraqi resistance.

The progressive planned withdrawal of coalition troops from the region and the introduction of an Iraqi military and administrative framework, would also undermine the resistances' key political leverage in hostage demands, namely the forced withdrawal of coalition military personnel – and it is unlikely the abduction of Iraqi nationals and demands for internal change within the Iraqi administration would make the same media ripples as seen with foreign hostages.

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