

IN THE MOSUL COIN FIGHT, PERCEPTION OFTEN CREATES REALITY

MAJOR ROB THORNTON

One of the benefits of being an embedded advisor to an Iraqi Army battalion is it offers you the chance to form some independent observations about the environment and challenge what you read, hear, or see from people wearing the same uniform as you, but are outside of your own team. If you are willing to listen to the people who have lived here all of their lives, who have an understanding of why people here do what they do, why they live where they live (who understand how corruption and the black market work, how criminals here operate, how the enemy fights, what the people are talking about on the streets, etc.), you will learn things about the operational environment that you would not in a conventional assignment as a member of a task force. One of the things I've learned about the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight here in Mosul is that perception often creates reality.

We call it Information Operations (IO) or non-kinetic effects, but essentially it is about winning the battle over perception or winning minds. Some of this can be accomplished by showing reality for what it is; this might be through community engagements, IO flyers and other media, or just by being visible. However, other parts are more difficult and require a significant demonstration with material results in order to make them believable. For example, if you wish to change people's perceptions about improvised explosive devices (IEDs), you might show them how IEDs impact their personal lives — unsafe neighborhoods, loss of profits, loss of wives, sons, daughters, etc. However, if you are going to tell people their government is working on their behalf, you better be able to back it up with examples of improvements in basic services, lower prices for propane, or decent opportunities of employment to counter the incentive for participating in criminal or terrorist activities. If there is a strong perception that these services are absent, you would

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be wasting your time and credibility trying to convince people who obviously know otherwise.

Creating the Perception of Being More Than You Are

Sun Tzu prized deception as means of unsettling the enemy and creating doubt in

his mind. This is something the insurgent/terrorist elements also wish to do. It is a tenet of insurgent operations to create fear in the opposition, create doubt in the populace, and cause paralysis in government forces in order to create opportunities for exploitation. We can also do this to the insurgent, through what is referred to as “mirroring” the enemy. However, “mirroring” can be interpreted to mean “matching;” another interpretation might be “neutralizing” since the primary means of defeating an insurgency is to deny it public support.

If the enemy has freedom of movement, he can strike simultaneously in several locations as long as his goals are not tied to specific terrain, at a specific time. This makes it difficult to allocate resources to meet every potential threat. If we put an overt overwatch here, or employ some other static asset to target activity at that location,



Specialist Clydell Kinchen

A member of the Iraqi Security Forces helps an Iraqi woman deliver school supplies donated by Operation Iraqi Children (OIC) to a girls school in Mosul. OIC is a grass roots program started by U.S. military personnel that distributes pencils, books, and other supplies to children in Iraq.



Courtesy photos

The AIF showed the ability to conduct a two-stage propaganda campaign. In the first stage AIF issued a propaganda flyer that promised amnesty to any policeman or soldier who quit the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) before the end of one month after the end of Ramadan. The instructions said to paste their resignations to the doors of any mosque. In the second stage, the AIF generated fake names and posted them on mosque doors in a target neighborhood where they wished to retain population support. The campaign was sophisticated attempt to use perception to create reality.

the enemy picks a new spot, uncovered by the movement of coalition and host nation security force assets from one location to another. The enemy knows our resources are finite, and has employed information collection assets (people with cell phones) which blend in perfectly with their environment against the places where we base combat power, or along those entry and exit points we must travel as we come and go. He uses civilian patterns such as work times, population movement times, vehicles that appear indistinguishable while observed from helicopter or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) altitudes because they understand we use aerial platforms to direct maneuver units. Their intent is to create confusion and provide further opportunities for their operations.

The enemy here concentrates on coalition MSR (main supply routes) and to a lesser degree ASR (alternate supply routes) with SAF (small arms fire) and IED ambushes. He understands our requirement to maintain the primary lines of communication (LOC). The enemy also understands that by attacking those LOCs he will draw coalition forces' (CF) and Iraqi Security Forces' (ISF) combat power to them and away from the neighborhoods where the populace lives, giving him more freedom to influence the critical human element.

This is no secret to the enemy's ability to predict our intentions; he has watched us rotation after rotation. He knows how we move, when we move, etc. He now has an institutional record of how a company, task force, or brigade combat team (BCT) will progress through their year in Mosul. The enemy understands the evolution of our

reactions over a year rotation, and as such they often seem to be two steps ahead of us. Because of the changes in Baghdad which required the second BCT here during our rotation to go south, we got to watch another BCT arrive on station. The action, reaction, counteraction, counter-counteraction cycle were almost the same. Differences in TO&E (table of organization and equipment) and some changes in the proficiency of the ISF kept it from being exactly the same, but the enemy did try and feel out the new unit much as we saw them do with the last one. We often establish patterns unconsciously even when we try not to. Sometimes we even do it on an organizational basis.

If we continue to confirm their expectations, we will telegraph our

intentions and expend resources while he moves his operations from one location to another; this allows him an advantage to stage a second or third attack. If he doesn't seize the initiative, we cede it to him by playing to his strengths. However, if we change the rules, by taking advantage of their expectations, some of their strengths become a weakness. Imagine the leader for an IED emplacement cell who does not get one or two phone calls about the location of a coalition or Iraqi Army/Iraqi Police patrol, but gets 50 saying the patrol is in 12 neighborhoods instead of two by redirecting patrols to generate more spot reports; or through gaining access to their network. What type of operational picture does that confront the enemy with? What conclusions does he make about where to go, his chances of success (meaning he collects his money, and lives to do it again), or his chances of getting to a site among all the patrols he believes are operating out there?

A capability sorely lacking is ISF human intelligence (HUMINT) and covert operations. What if ISF could infiltrate AIF networks with ISF moles? This opens up options not available to western coalition forces. Consider the damage that could be done to an insurgent or terrorist network from inside. Such capabilities reside in other states, and even in the U.S. we take this approach with fighting crime, but we have not developed it in the ISF to the degree where it is a practice at the local



Iraqi Army soldiers execute a traffic control zone in Mosul.



During a patrol, Iraqi Army soldiers came across a government-sponsored propane distribution truck in one of the poorer neighborhoods. When the patrol arrived, the vendor was charging five times the official rate and was only going to hand out a limited amount. The patrol blocked the truck and kept the distribution reasonably orderly and at the official rate. This may not have endeared the IA to the vendor, but such actions cause the people to see the IA in a different light, and by extension their government.

level. Consider the IO effects of information obtained through undercover operations where an AIF cell leader made it clear that he was unconcerned about civilian casualties, regardless of age, gender, profession, religion, etc.; the counterinsurgent forces could use this to wage an effective IO campaign that called into question fundamental Arabic values such as honor as they apply to the enemy. Consider the evidence for trial!

Even though the Iraqi Army (IA) and Iraqi Police (IP) are getting better and stronger through better resourcing and training, they would still be pressed to be exactly at the right spot at the right time on a consistent basis without compromising some other location. If you focus solely on "Tier 1" sites (known for specific activity), the activity at those sites will migrate. This is where a combination of pattern analysis, which indicates likely migration sites to be used against the intended targets, and an increase in the frequency of patrols to cover those and other areas will help to create the perception of failure or compromise in the minds of the insurgent/terrorist. At this point you are targeting his will to conduct the attack. It does not mean you will stop all attacks or that he will not adapt and change his tactics, but you have changed the dynamics of the situation and reclaimed some of the initiative. This is just one example of creating a perception in the enemy's mind that causes him to doubt what he believes to be true about his assumptions on how we operate.

Another possible method is to get ahead of the enemy's decision cycle by showing him what he thinks he should see, or is used to seeing, then taking another action which results in his neutralization, defeat or destruction. You might do this through a combined ISR and maneuver plan that overtly covers tier one sites (the goal here is to fit the mold of the guy who did the same thing before you), while covertly covering Tier 2 sites far enough away to not be compromised by local information collectors with cell phones, but close enough to direct some type of effects once the

enemy commits. If you can tie it to a time window and a known favorite target, so much the better. The object is not to target the location of the activity; it is to target the activity.

Keeping the enemy off balance requires constant adjustments like innovative variations of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) such as flash TCPs (traffic control points), TCZs (traffic control zones), overwatches, etc. It requires guarding against setting patterns in routes, patrol times, duration of TCPs, force protection practices, and even in such areas as detainee handling and transfer. Every aspect of operations must leave some seed of doubt in the insurgents mind in order to keep him from being mentally prepared for what he will face. It must change constantly because each variation of a TTP has a shelf life in a given area before the enemy adapts and innovates. To gain and retain the initiative, the opponent must be kept off balance for gravity to have any effect. It requires a constant assessment and reevaluation of what friendly, enemy and neutral forces are doing in order to stay ahead of the enemy's decision cycle.

The Venus Fly Trap & the Lantern Fish: Predator Mimicking

There are a number of ways to make the insurgents wonder if we have helped the ISF develop as fully as we should, either because they are uncomfortable to our conventional sense of things, or we are institutionally ignorant of them (it could be forgotten knowledge as well). If the insurgent seeks to make our life difficult by blending in with the population, then we should do the same to him. If the impression is that there are insurgents who are really covert/undercover counterinsurgent forces out operating amongst the population, then what impact does that have on his operation? Who does he trust? Is the guy on the cell phone calling in a patrol or just talking to his cousin? Is the guy running a kiosk or is he part of a neighborhood watch? This is another aspect of attacking his will, and one in which we are culturally ignorant as a military. While big city police forces use such tactics against organized crime all the time, our military does not think along those terms (probably because unless we use surrogates, we would not blend in). The ISF, and for that matter other indigenous security services in current and future COIN environments, do have that capability and we should encourage them and resource their exploitation of it. Anything that causes the insurgent to doubt what he sees gives us an advantage.

Where the Mind Goes, the Heart Will Often Follow

We know that stability and security are joined at the hip. We also know that we will have no long term solution for either without public confidence in the government as an adequate provider of basic services and freedoms where people can at least tolerate life. One of the tools that the insurgent uses against security forces, and one that unfortunately puts the burden of proof on government and its organs, is to discredit the government by pointing out their inability to improve the situation fast enough. The insurgent only needs to create the impression that the government could do more, but chooses not to because it does not care about the people it is supposed to serve in order to draw away public support from the government.

An example would be the propane shortage. The terrorists took advantage of a 500 percent increase in the cost of propane by

declaring it the fault of Apostates of Islam (you see this type of language a good deal in AIF propaganda) and killed a few black market propane salesmen to make their point. They then got bonus points out of it by accusing the government and its security forces of being corrupt and weak because either they were clearly profiting at the population's expense, or they were too weak to do anything about it. In truth the problem is very big, ranging from production to delivery in an unstable security environment to a black market that expanded to meet the demand. However, the perception that the insurgent was trying to cultivate was a much easier sell, because it provided an explanation the majority of the public was more likely to accept.

The combination of propaganda with murdering a few propane salesmen further exacerbated the problem by spreading terror amongst the black marketers, so then there was almost no propane inside of Mosul for about a month, black market or otherwise. The government and its security forces at that point were forced into a complicated position and deprived of the initiative. The AIF takes one or two aspects of a problem, then they look for enough evidence that could support the perception they seek to use to influence enough people to gain traction. That is how influencing perception works: it doesn't matter what the truth is, only that it is believable enough or convenient enough for the target audience to ingest. In this way it's not too different from a savvy ad campaign, political pundits, or the 6 o'clock news.

Once public support is withdrawn from the government, it is often by extension withdrawn from government institutions (such as the army or police) or the known allies of the government (such as the United States). Once this occurs the insurgent then has ideological freedom of movement which paves the way for physical freedom of movement, or to paraphrase Mao's metaphor "fish amongst schools of fish." This is where stability and security are

linked, and any solution that relies on security alone either develops into a tyranny or falls victim to the insurgent because it becomes a war of attrition of wills (will to see it through, will to persist, and demonstrated public resolve).

The obverse of this is to tie the activities of the insurgent/terrorist to the decline in the government's ability to provide for the populace. It requires both a dynamic IO campaign that captures every act of terror and weaves it into a campaign fabric where the actions of the insurgent are seen as preventing the government from fulfilling basic obligations to the people. The goal of both sides is to gain and maintain public support for its operations while denying it (along with its benefits) to the other side. It is the perception of how hard government is working, the perception of how corrupt it is, or the perception of who can provide security and who cannot that determines who the people will support; and who they will not.

The effects of perception are not limited to the battle for public opinion. A great example of CF perception that might generate adverse action is lack of situational awareness of local or national events that fail to show up on our radar. While everyone waited for some type of event to mark the verdict in the Saddam Hussein trial, there are other events that slipped by. For instance, on a day where AIF had conducted a linear ambush initiated with an IED on a CF patrol, a major soccer game was also played which would influence population across Iraq. About one hour after the attack, Kiowa Warriors operating above the city reported tracer fire throughout the city on the CF net. Nobody had any other information that there might be an alternative reason, so the only available inference was that the gunfire was some sort of enemy action. However, the conclusion of a soccer match in the Asia Cup Semi-Finals (in which Iraq had beaten South Korea and would advance to the championship) was just televised. Iraqis across Iraq were engaging in celebratory fire, and no westerner here made the correlation.

Another example in today's stage of Iraqi Freedom might be the planning of a unilateral CF operation in battlespace that is supposedly transitioned to the Iraqi Army. The CF partner unit puts out TCPs with a task to block all non-CF traffic. Meanwhile, the IA ADC (assistant division commander) and his staff, who were enroute to attend a meeting with the CF ADC, were turned around at a checkpoint that they had no idea was there because the coalition partner unit failed to inform the IA of the locations, or allow them to pass through even though they were in clearly marked Iraqi Army HMMWVs and Toyota Land Cruisers. What is the perception of the Iraqi Army, or the civilians who witnessed it and why is it important?

Application for Now and Future COIN Environments

When developing an indigenous force, the organizational structure and capabilities should not be built on what is convenient, or familiar, or comfortable unless they match the



A brand new school that was about to open was destroyed by AIF with explosives. This is IO fodder for both sides. For the AIF, they use it as a tool of terror and claim immunity in their operations from a security force that cannot stop them. For ISF, it can be used to illustrate the AIF's lack of concern for human life and the well-being of the people.

problem at hand. This is both a cultural and an institutional problem exacerbated by resource constraints (time, training, equipment, etc.). We should not be constrained by institutional bias, but instead should try to look beyond the immediate problem; even if we can't implement the right solution at the time, we should at least acknowledge the need for growth in new directions to provide that indigenous force with the tools that make the most use of its organic potential and highlight its natural strengths. In this way we provide the basis for a security force that can function without the capabilities we augment them with, and at the same time neutralize insurgent strengths.

The lack of tools within an organization that is structured to conduct COIN should be built around the objective of securing the public will and denying it to the insurgent/terrorist. This means equipping that organization with the tools to influence minds such as Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations, Information Operations, covert information collection, and a good analytical capability to turn information into timely and targetable intelligence for a well-trained strike force. These capabilities, when joined in one organization, produce a synergistic COIN force that can gain and maintain the initiative, and hand the enemy a moral defeat. For U.S. forces the challenge is to adapt our own organizations structure and integrate those capabilities faster than the enemy can.

I believe one of the central objectives of Mosul AIF is to create conditions through perceptions that either improve their overall regional and national position, or allow them to maintain a long term base of support for later development. Their strategy seems to be to continue to diminish the effectiveness of ISF and CF as representatives of alternative government to what they — the AIF — purport to offer. The AIF seek to accomplish this through economy of force attacks (ambushes) to focus our attention and resources on MSRs/ASRs which prevent us from interacting with the public, working to provide the services which would positively influence public perception of government, and winning public support. They will then use the opportunities to gain freedom of movement and influence within the population areas.

Consider the face we show when we do go into populated areas to conduct cordon and searches of entire neighborhoods; what was our motive for doing so? Are we only reacting in the way that we've been taught in the CTCs (combat training centers) or from lessons learned by 2003/2004 because we've failed to understand the enemy's evolving use of the population? Has the public that we aspire to influence seen these types of reactions before in a coalition force unit and do our actions mark us the "occupiers" the AIF paint us as?

If we cordon and search/knock an area because its adjacent to a Tier 1 site, does the public there see it solely as a retribution type response to our losses to IEDs or as genuine concern for the improvement of life there? Are we symbolically being seen by the public as only looking to confirm our suspicions of guilt by association? If all we are doing is confirming the suspicions seeded by AIF, what is the incentive to risk the wrath of the AIF? What are we demonstrating to the public to expect from representatives of the government? Have we missed the intent of the AIF tactics by thinking their primary goal is to inflict casualties on CF forces, not influence the people? Are we creating opportunities for the AIF will to issue propaganda to reinforce or twist public perceptions to their own needs?

Counterinsurgency solutions are ultimately the victors of a contest of ideologies that are perceived by the population as being the best alternative for them to follow and support. It is a battle for the will of the people.

I think the only way to really discern and counter the AIF here in Mosul is to get out in front and truncate it. It is going to take a lot of resources, and it can't be a trickle; it has to demonstrate it on a large scale that AIF cannot react to fast enough. It means a campaign plan for Mosul that links security with stability. The problem is that while TFs and BCTs are resourced for security, the large resources required rest with the PRTs (provincial reconstruction teams) and OGAs (other government agencies). Without stability and security being linked the best we can hope for is a delaying effort in a war of attrition of public support.

To do this we'd need some tools like a census of:

- * Who lives where;
- * How many hours of electricity they receive a day;
- * How much they pay for propane, benzene (Mogas) and kerosene;
- * How long they wait for gas;
- * Do they have clean water;
- * Do they have enough food;
- * Do their kids go to school;
- * Do the military age males (16-40) have jobs; etc.

If you get a feel for the human factor, we may be able to operationalize a campaign that actually expends resources where they are needed by neighborhood, etc. We'd need to coordinate with local leaders such as muktars and sheiks so that it is not perceived as an attempt to collect information for military purposes of isolating a group or tribe.

While every city in Iraq has some like and unlike conditions in it, Mosul has provided some great lessons about the need to consider perception in a COIN environment where the key battleground is the human heart. Counterinsurgency solutions are ultimately the victors of a contest of ideologies that are perceived by the population as being the best alternative for them to follow and support. It is a battle for the will of the people.

Terrorism, IO, kinetic actions, etc., are all the tools and tactics used by one or both sides to influence that perception. If you deny the insurgent the population, he must retire, negotiate, or become limited to more clandestine activities until he can exploit another weak government and offer an alternative and begin the cycle again. Understanding the people's perception of actions and events can make all the difference in applying the right resources at the right place at the right time to achieve the objective.

Major Rob Thornton is the executive officer/S3 advisor for the 1/2/2 Military Transition Team (MiTT) in Mosul, Iraq. His previous assignments include serving as operations officer in the FBCT Experimental Element at Fort Knox, Kentucky, and as a staff officer and company commander in the 1st Brigade, 25th Stryker Brigade Combat Team at Fort Lewis, Washington. He also served as an XO and platoon leader with the 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.
