

PSYOPs, “Media Warfare” and the “Weaponization of Information” in Iraq

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Iraqis are once again being made irrelevant in a war of spin as the Western media manipulates fact and narrative to support US action in Iraq, writes Ross Caputi.

Iraqis are once again being made irrelevant in a war of spin as the Western media manipulates fact and narrative to support US action in Iraq. Debates have been raging over what the US should do about ISIS.

Note the actors in this story: The US, ISIS, Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, and other regional leaders. Note who is missing from this story: the Iraqi civilian population.

Has the question ‘What do Iraqis want?’ come up even once? Along with an overly simple narrative of the ascendance and role of the anti-Maliki fighters in Iraq, the assumption that the US has a right to decide what the best course of action for Iraq will be has gone



unchallenged in the media.

Part of the problem is a cultural failure on our part to respect the political aspirations of Iraqis. What Iraqis want more than anything right now—and these are among the few goals that cross sectarian boundaries in Iraq—is independence and democracy. Iraqis want to manage their own affairs and solve their own problems without the interference and condescending tutelage of Washington and Tehran. Yet we are so quick to assume that the US ought to do something, that the US must do something, and that Iraqis need our “help” that we blunder forward with foreign policy that takes as its starting point an unquestioned belief in the US’s right to take military action in other peoples’ countries

whenever we decide it is justified.

Ross Caputi, giving testimony in the Iraq Commission during the IADL congress in Brussels on 16 April 2014,

Another part of the problem is our collective failure to come to terms with the lies our government told to us about the US-led occupation. Our misunderstanding of our past actions in Iraq is bleeding into our confusion over the present.

Connecting the Past to the Present

I had one source of information while I was a Marine in Fallujah in 2004—my chain of command. It never occurred to me that they would be actively manipulating the information they were feeding me, the other men in my unit, and the journalists imbedded with us. This was a naive assumption that could have cost me my life. Although I survived, others around me did not.

There was a conscious decision made by the US military to have Western journalists embedded with us during the 2nd siege of Fallujah. The [US military believed that the reason they lost the 1st siege of Fallujah](#) was due to their failure to control the media's reporting of that operation. They accused Al Jazeera, the lone international media crew in Fallujah at the time, for releasing false and exaggerated reports about civilians killed by US military actions, which created the international outrage and political pressure that forced the US to retreat out of Fallujah and hand control of the city over to the Fallujah Brigade. Although Al Jazeera's reports were corroborated by several other sources, and their projected civilian death toll later proved to be accurate ([over 749 civilian deaths](#)), the US military insisted on believing that Al Jazeera was invited into Fallujah by the "insurgents" and was actively conspiring with them as their propaganda organ.

The US military then engaged in a campaign of "shaping operations", which consisted of IO's (Information Operations), PSYOPs (Psychological Operations), and air strikes to better control the battlefield for the next siege of Fallujah. The centerpiece of this campaign was the [PSYOP to exaggerate the role of Abu Musab al Zarqawi](#), the alleged leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, who the US military claimed was using Fallujah as a military base from which he was launching attacks all across Iraq. Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, then spokesman for the Joint Task Force, claimed that the goal of the PSYOP was to "leverage xenophobia" in Iraq and turn the Iraqi population against foreign Mujahideen. Beyond creating a false existential threat that was used to justify the US's 2nd assault on Fallujah, the lies about Zarqawi's presence in Fallujah also placed an impossible condition for peace on the people of Fallujah. The US and Iraqi Interim Government demanded that the leadership in Fallujah hand Zarqawi over to them or face an all out military assault on their city, even though no one in Fallujah had ever even seen Zarqawi in their city and there is nothing in the way of real evidence to suggest that this man ever set foot in Fallujah.

Yet this lie quickly became a conventional wisdom and my unit was instructed that we were going into Fallujah to liberate the city from Zarqawi's forces. Half way into the operation, my command pulled us aside and said that they had just received an intelligence report that Zarqawi was just a few blocks away and that he was wounded in the leg. They encouraged us to keep fighting and to stay motivated, because victory was near.

Somewhere between [4,000 to 6,000 civilians were killed](#) and 63 American lives were lost in

the course of this operation.

Yet it was the loss of American lives that received the focus in the Western media, and the atrocities that we committed against civilians went unreported. This was not an accident, nor a matter of perspective taking. Reports of civilian deaths were regarded as IO (Information Operation) victories for the “insurgents”. Lieutenant General Metz, Commanding General of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq at the time of the 2nd siege, explained that, “IO challenges”, such as reports of civilian casualties, were things that “we could anticipate and for which we could plan. We took control of the hospital the evening before the main attack on Fallujah, removing it from the enemy’s IO platform.” The Fallujah General Hospital was considered to be yet another propaganda organ for those we considered to be our enemy. Thus, one of the very first objectives of this operation was to take control of the hospital, which Professor Noam Chomsky has explained to me was a [“major war crime”](#).

In preparation for these IO challenges, Coalition Forces decreed that only embedded journalists would be allowed inside Fallujah for the 2nd siege. Also, the “media commission” in Iraq, which was established by Order 65 of Bremer’s 100 Orders, sent out a warning to all journalists in Iraq that they should [“stick to the government line on the U.S.-led offensive in Fallujah or face legal action.”](#) Journalists who tried to enter Fallujah without being embedded with Coalition Forces were detained. This time around 91 journalists were embedded with Coalition units inside Fallujah, whereas in the 1st siege there were none. The role of these Western reporters was to “[offer] a rebuttal” to the enemy’s IOs. Only this time around, there was no media crew in Fallujah that was sympathetic to the plight of Fallujans.

Thus, the deaths of Americans dominated the headlines, and our operation was labeled a “liberation” in the media without any competing narrative. Fallujans were effectively silenced. No one ever asked for their perspective on our assault of their city, or asked if they really felt like they were being liberated. Even something as violent and as objective their deaths was dismissed, in the sense that their reality did not matter, and was only acknowledged as IOs from the enemy.

The Weaponization of Information

The “shaping operations” that characterized the 2nd siege of Fallujah are not anecdotal. The dehumanizing ideological climate that these operations created, where information is weaponized and truth becomes irrelevant, is still killing Iraqis. The lies and myths that live on from this period are still at play, the least of them being: the presumed legitimacy of the US-led occupation, the illegitimacy of the Iraqi resistance (and the exaggerated role of al Qaeda in the Iraqi resistance), and the facade of US state building in Iraq.

Journalists today are attempting to draw a direct, chronological line from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the current leader of ISIS. Facts that complicate this narrative—such as the PSYOP on Zarqawi’s role in Iraq, or the fact that [ISIS has undergone such significant changes](#) its organization structure, ideology, and political goals that the only feature it currently shares with its ancestor al-Qaeda in Iraq is cruelty—are conveniently omitted.

Furthermore, the US’s role in creating the current crisis in Iraq is lost in an a-historical narrative that takes as its starting point the moment Iraqi security forces were kicked out of Mosul. However, if we back up in history a year and a half to the [nonviolent protest](#)

[movement that swept Iraq](#), which went by the name of the Iraqi Spring, it becomes clear how Maliki's violently oppressive and sectarian policies turned a nonviolent movement into an armed rebellion, and how the US armed him every step of the way.

It was the tribes in Fallujah and Ramadi who first picked up weapons against Maliki when he sent troops to attack their protest camps in December of 2013. [ISIS came later](#), and an alliance of convince was formed between them and the tribal fighters in Anbar province, despite the fact that these groups had totally different political goals. Two of the Iraqi Spring protestors' main demands was an end to sectarianism in Iraq and an end to all discussion of dividing Iraq up into autonomous federal regions. Even though federalism and sectarianism are the main political platform of ISIS, [these differences were brushed aside](#) when ISIS and the tribal fighters joined forces against Maliki.

The US then increased its supply of military weapons, including Apache attack helicopters and Hellfire missiles and other forms of military assistance, to ["help"](#) the Iraqi military "in the battle to uproot Islamic fighters from Ramadi and Fallujah". Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki then used these weapons to conduct an indiscriminate campaign of bombing in residential neighborhoods of Fallujah and other Sunni cities, which has been so indiscriminate and so sectarian in nature—complete with the use of experimental ["barrel bombs"](#), a tactic adopted from Bashar al-Assad's assault on Aleppo—that it approaches the legal definition of a ["genocide"](#). Since the start of this campaign in December, [433 civilians have been killed](#) in Fallujah and over 1633 have been wounded.

Iraqi Solutions to an American Problem

The US is currently presenting itself as a solution to a conflict that it has elicited and nurtured every step of the way. Even the voices in Washington that want to get rid of Maliki accept the premise that the US is a legitimate actor in Iraqi affairs and they avoid discussion of US accountability for current and past violence.

In President Obama's [statement on June 19th](#), he declared that ISIS "poses a threat to the Iraqi people". Does it matter that ISIS is actually just one participant in [a loose coalition of militias that have come to embody the hopes and aspirations of the Sunni population of Iraq](#), or that [Shia organizations support this revolution as well](#)? Does it matter that there are [militias within this coalition that are willing to rebuke ISIS for its sectarianism](#)? Does it matter that 500 residents of Mosul fled their city, not out of fear of ISIS, but out of [fear of Maliki's reprisal](#)? Does it matter that Obama's decision to continue supporting the Iraqi security forces is akin to choosing sides in a sectarian war? Furthermore, does it matter that Obama's plan to seek a diplomatic solution with "Iraqi leaders and the countries in the region" renders the Iraqi population as passive spectators in their own society? Or will the Western media continue to let Obama speak for Iraqis and parrot his misleading statements uncritically?

The Western media has created a narrative of the recent events in Iraq that omits the US's role in facilitating a genocide against the Sunnis, and positions the Iraqi population as an irrelevant actor in any possible solution to this crisis.

Furthermore, our collective failure to come to terms with our own history in Iraq is leading us towards policy decisions that will only result in more civilian deaths, more deeply entrenched ethnic and religious divisions, and a weak and divided Iraq, dominated by foreign powers. US interference in Iraq has done nothing but bring death and hardship to the

Iraqi people for over a decade, and continued interference will be no different. The US has no role to play in Iraq—not a military one or a diplomatic one—apart from giving reparations to the Iraqi people for destroying their society. We must learn to respect the right of Iraqis to self-determination and independence.

Ross Caputi is a former US marine, having served from 2003 to 2006. He took part in the second siege of Fallujah in November 2004. He became openly critical of the military and was discharged in 2006. Ross holds an MA in linguistics and is the founding director of the [Justice for Fallujah Project](#). He is also the director of the documentary film [Fear Not the Path of Truth](#): a veteran's journey after Fallujah

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