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1 Key Findings

■ **Sunni insurgents in Iraq and their supporters worldwide are exploiting the Internet to pursue a massive and far-reaching media campaign.** Insurgent media are forming perceptions of the war in Iraq among the best-educated and most influential segment of the Arab population.

■ **The Iraqi insurgent media network is a boon to global jihadist media**, which can use materials produced by the insurgency to reinforce their message.

■ **Mainstream Arab media amplify the insurgents' efforts**, transmitting their message to an audience of millions.

■ **The insurgent propaganda network does not have a headquarters, bureaucracy, or brick-and-mortar infrastructure.** It is decentralized, fast-moving, and technologically adaptive.

■ **The rising tide of Sunni-Shi'ite hate speech in Iraqi insurgent media points to the danger of even greater sectarian bloodshed.** A wealth of evidence shows that hate speech paved the way for genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

■ **The popularity of online Iraqi Sunni insurgent media reflects a genuine demand for their message in the Arab world.** An alternative, no matter how lavishly funded and cleverly produced, will not eliminate this demand.

■ **There is little to counter this torrent** of daily press releases, weekly and monthly magazines, books, video clips, full-length films, and even television channels.

■ **We should not concede the battle without a fight.** The insurgent media network has key vulnerabilities that can be targeted. These include:

  • A lack of central coordination and a resulting lack of message control;

  • A widening rift between homegrown nationalist groups and Al-Qaeda-affiliated global jihadists.

2 Introduction

Sunni insurgents in Iraq and their supporters and sympathizers worldwide are pursuing a massive and far-reaching media campaign that includes daily press releases, weekly and monthly magazines, video clips, full-length films, and even television channels. *Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War Of Images And Ideas* **casts light on this crucial yet understudied factor in the battle to shape perceptions in Iraq and the Arab world. The report surveys the products, producers, and delivery channels of the Sunni insurgency's media network; examines their message; and gauges their impact.**

The report shows that media outlets and products created by Sunni insurgents, who are responsible for the majority of U.S. combat deaths in Iraq, and their supporters are undermining the authority of the Iraqi government, demonizing coalition forces, fomenting sectarian strife, glorifying terrorism, and perpetrating falsehoods that obscure the accounts of responsible journalists. Insurgent media seek to create an alternate reality to win hearts and minds, and they are having a considerable degree of success.

But insurgent media also display vulnerabilities. The lack of central coordination impedes coherence and message control. There is a widening rift between homegrown nationalist groups and the global jihadists who have gathered under the banner of **Al-Qaeda in Iraq.** Moreover, insurgent media have not yet faced a serious challenge to their message on the Internet.

The popularity of online Iraqi Sunni insurgent media reflects a genuine demand for their message in the Arab world. An alternative, no matter how lavishly funded and cleverly produced, will not eliminate this demand. But this does not mean we should concede the battle without a fight. The vulnerabilities of insurgent media remain to be exploited.

2.1 Two Days in Iraq

Presented primarily in Arabic on an array of websites unknown to most Americans and Europeans, Iraqi insurgent media hover at the margins of mainstream reports in the form of a "claim of responsibility on an insurgent

website" or a "video posted to a jihadist forum." Such marginal references fail to convey the scope and significance of an effort that encompasses daily press releases, weekly and monthly magazines, video clips, and even full-length films.

The extent of the insurgent media network is clearly evident in coverage of the events of March 25 and 26, 2007. By the violent standards of today's Iraq, they were unexceptional days (see Figures 1 and 2). In central Baghdad, a suicide car bombing killed two Iraqis, while a roadside bomb in the capital claimed the life of a police officer. A mortar attack killed one in Al-Iskandariyah, 50 kilometers south of Baghdad. Four U.S. soldiers died in a bombing in Diyala Governorate, and another in an attack in Baghdad.

But those events are only half the story—the half told by news agencies, newspapers, television channels, and official statements. Iraq's Sunni insurgency, the motley collection of armed groups fighting to evict U.S. forces and supplant rival domestic claimants to rule Iraq, had its own story to tell about what took place on March 25 and 26. Posted to sympathetic websites on the Internet, the insurgents sang the praises of their self-proclaimed quest to rid Iraq of foreign "crusaders" and domestic enemies.

The following are excerpts from some, but by no means all, of the statements issued by Iraqi insurgent groups on operations they claim to have carried out on March 25 and 26:

- The **Al-Fajr Media Center** reported on March 27 that "the 'God Bless Its Men' forces of the Islamic State of Iraq detonated a truck loaded with explosives near a gathering of crusaders in the Al-Bu Hayat region south of the city of Al-Hadithah in Al-Anbar Governorate, completely destroying four Humvees, killing 15 crusaders, and seriously wounding another 20. This took place on March 26, praise be to God. These operations were carried out in the course of

> Insurgent media have not yet faced a serious challenge to their message on the Internet. The vulnerabilities of insurgent media remain to be exploited.

Figure 1. An Iraqi boy passes by a damaged house after a mortar attack in Baghdad, March 26, 2007 (epa)

Figure 2. A British soldier takes position during a patrol in Al-Basrah, March 26, 2007 (epa)

Figure 3. A March 27, 2007, press release from the Just Vengeance Brigades

the Raid to Avenge Honor[1] announced by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State of Iraq."

- The **Just Vengeance Brigades** announced on March 27 that "the Lions of Truth from the Just Vengeance Brigades struck a group affiliated with the army of Muqtada the Filthy[2] with a Katyusha rocket in the Hayy al-Adil neighborhood near the Al-A'imma Husayniyah. This took place at 11:00 in the morning on March 25."

- The **Mujahidin Army** announced on March 27 that "at 8:30 in the morning on March 25, a four-wheel-drive vehicle belonging to one of the companies that supplies the crusader bases north of Baghdad was destroyed by a blast from an explosive device planted on the side of the Samarra-Baghdad highway, killing and wounding those inside it" (see Figure 3).

- **Ansar al-Sunnah** announced on March 26: "Guided by God, the Highest and the Powerful, your heroic brothers, lions of the Allies, on this day, March 26, at 12 noon, were able to attack a convoy of crusader forces using light and medium machine guns and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. This took place in the door- and window-makers

area on the right side[3] of Mosul. By God's grace, the attack led to the destruction and burning of a vehicle and the death and wounding of those in it. The brothers withdrew safe and sound, praise be to God" (see Figure 4).

- The **Al-Fajr Media Center** reported on March 27 that "a brave, daring brother, one of the heroes of the Islamic State of Iraq, a member of the Martyrdom-Seekers Brigade...set out on Monday, March 26, and plunged his explosives-laden car into a command post of the American crusader army at the Jerusalem intersection in the Al-Mafriq district of Diyala Governorate. Our heroic brother cried out, 'Allahu Akbar,' and detonated the car...killing more than 11 soldiers of the Idolatrous

The Just Vengeance Brigades announced that "the Lions of Truth...struck a group affiliated with the army of Muqtada the Filthy with a Katyusha rocket...."

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1 **Islamic State of Iraq/Al-Qaeda (ISI/Al-Qaeda)** announced the raid in March 2007 in retribution for the reported rape of a Sunni Iraqi woman identified as Sabrin al-Janabi by Shi'ite police officers in February 2007 (see Section 7.2, The Sabrin al-Janabi Case).

2 Lit. "muqtada al-qadhir," a disparaging pun on the name of Muqtada al-Sadr, the radical Shi'ite leader.

3 The right bank of the Tigris River, which divides Mosul, has a predominantly Sunni Arab population.

Figure 4. A March 26, 2007, press release from Ansar al-Sunnah

Guard[4] and destroying two Bradley armored fighting vehicles belonging to the American crusader army and killing and wounding those in them" (see Figure 5).

2.2 The War of Ideas

Much has been written about the war of ideas in the years since September 11, 2001. The 2003 war in Iraq, and the subsequent fate of the U.S.-led effort to remake that country, only sharpened the polemic. The two visions of Iraq presented above—one by the international media establishment, and another by the uncoordinated collective efforts of Iraqi insurgent groups—are a reflection of the daily skirmishes that take place not only on the battlefields of Iraq, but also in the ongoing struggle to direct the flow of information that shapes perceptions in the Arab world.

This report brings Iraqi insurgent media from the margins to center stage so that outsiders without a command of Arabic can glimpse the "other half" of what is happening in Iraq as it is presented by the other side. Section 3 surveys the media products created by Iraqi insurgents and their ideological allies inside and outside

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4 Lit. "al-haras al-wathani," a disparaging pun on "al-haras al-watani," the National Guard.

Figure 5. A March 27, 2007, press release from ISI/Al-Qaeda distributed by the Al-Fajr Media Center

of Iraq. Section 4 examines the main producers of insurgent media. Section 5 looks at the delivery platforms of Iraqi insurgent media, from websites to print. Section 6 looks at the target audience, accuracy and coherence, message and ideology, and tendencies and trends in Iraqi insurgent media.

The report also includes two brief case studies: 1) a "day in the life" of Iraq's insurgent media, highlighting the media products offered up by insurgents and their sympathizers on April 22, 2007; and 2) the coverage insurgent media provided of the Sabrin al-Janabi rape case as an example of the role insurgent and allied jihadist media play in inflaming Sunni-Shi'ite tensions in Iraq.

The report is intended for policy-makers, researchers, media professionals, and all other interested individuals. Its primary purpose is to make available to a broad segment of readers material that might otherwise be inaccessible. Its authors hope that by doing so they will generate a lively and informed discussion of the war of images and ideas in Iraq, the Arab world, and beyond, and how we in the United States might wage it more effectively.