



The unseen impact of Petraeus' strategy

(Published in *Scripps Howard Service News*, August 23, 2007)

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Colaboraciones n° 1909

September 4, 2007

The first concept to grasp is that the global conflict now underway involves both a clash of arms and a clash of ideas. To succeed in this war will require effective combat on both fronts.

The second concept is this: The clash of arms and the clash of ideas influence one other, often in peculiar and even counter-intuitive ways.

One example: Al-Qaeda in Iraq could not challenge American troops directly. Their solution has been to target innocent Iraqis instead, to slaughter innocent Muslim men, women and children by the hundreds.

Why wouldn't this cause outrage around the world? It did – but al-Qaeda calculated that in much of the West, the outrage would be di-

rected less at them than at Americans for “stirring up a hornet’s nest.” And, as they also expected, images of death and destruction, coupled with reports of soldiers killed by roadside bombs, soon would erode the will of many Americans to continue the fight.

Now, however, a new phase in the clash of arms may be having an unanticipated impact on a different audience. A shift in strategy initiated by the new U.S. commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, is changing ideas about both al-Qaeda and the U.S. in Muslim societies -- and on the theological plane.

I learned this from Hassan Mneimneh, a scholar and director of the Iraq Memory Foundation, a research institution with offices in Baghdad and Washington. Mneimneh also

served, as I did, as an advisor to the Baker/Hamilton commission on Iraq . And we were recently on a panel exploring U.S. interests in Iraq at the United States Institute for Peace.

This time last year, even most military people concluded that Anbar Province was irretrievably lost to al-Qaeda. But General Petraeus was not ready to give up: A few short months ago, he told Anbar's traditional leaders, the tribal sheiks, that if they'd ally with the U.S. , their people and their lands would be liberated from al-Qaeda's "occupation."

They agreed. Since then al-Qaeda terrorists by the score have been killed, captured and driven out of Anbar. Mneimneh wondered: How would the sheiks and religious scholars justify this alliance to themselves and their people? To put it bluntly, how would they explain partnering with infidels against fellow Muslims?

He found the answer in numerous sermons and publications -- everything from books to blogs and websites. The truth, he discovered is that most Iraqis, unlike so many Westerners, do blame al-Qaeda for the carnage al-Qaeda has carried out. And most Iraqis have not embraced al-Qaeda's brand of Islam, with its barbarism - e.g. the murder of children to teach their parents obedience -- and ultra-fundamentalism.

What's more, Iraqis were deeply offended by al-Qaeda leaders - almost all of them foreigners - saying

their interpretation of Islam is flawed and inadequate, as has been that of their families and clans for generations. Mneimneh reports that Iraqi clerics have responded by calling al-Qaeda's version of Islam "excessive and unfair."

To express such views while al-Qaeda militants were walking the streets would have brought severe reprisals. But over the past few months, as the surge has been making progress, and as more Iraqis have felt more secure, they have been articulating these views loudly and clearly. Mneimneh believes they are being heard beyond Anbar, beyond Iraq and even beyond the Middle East . "This is coming out," he emphasized.

At the same time, because Petraeus has moved his troops from cloistered bases into Iraqi communities, more Iraqis are coming into contact with Americans and learning that - frightening though they may look with their body armor and big guns - they aren't quite as satanic as advertised. They don't ask for bribes. They like kids. They show respect. And they have been providing security while training Iraqis to protect themselves. They are willing to stay and assist but they would prefer to go home as soon as conditions permit - not quite the dictionary definition of a foreign occupier.

"Note that the troops taking part in the surge have not been attacked by the Iraqis who live in the neighborhoods where they are now posted," Mneimneh said. "On the contrary, those Iraqis have been bringing the

troops the intelligence they need to succeed." Accepting a tactical alliance with such people does not violate Islamic doctrine, Iraqi religious scholars are daring to assert.

"The longer this persists," Mneimneh said, "the more Iraqis' views will be changed. As these new views are expressed, disseminated and

reinforced, it becomes less likely that they will be abandoned later."

In other words, every day the surge continues, every day American soldiers continue to wage the clash of arms in Iraq , they also are fighting – and perhaps winning – a consequential clash of ideas.

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