



Rumors in Iraq: A Guide to Winning Hearts and Minds

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Introduction

A successful insurgency requires the active support of a comparative few and only acquiescence from the rest of the population. Despite the recognition that winning hearts and minds—and therefore local cooperation—is a critical aspect of a successful counterinsurgency, many military planners approach it as an afterthought. This is likely due, at least in part, to the inherent difficulties in determining what the primary concerns and fears are that prevent a populace from cooperating against insurgents, accurately assessing their perceptions of our efforts to reduce those concerns, and measuring our own effectiveness. This article proposes a way to guide and measure effectiveness of the battle for hearts and minds: the study of rumor. It is often rumor that attributes incorrect causes and motivations, fuels misperceptions, and escalates conflicts. By tapping into the abundant reservoir of circulating rumors in Iraq, we can determine the underlying fears, anxieties, and sentiment of the people and use that information to develop a more successful campaign to assess, monitor, and win their support.

Rumors are unconfirmed news in widespread circulation. They arise and spread when people are uncertain and anxious about a subject they deem important, and the rumor appears to offer a viable explanation.^[1] When desired information is withheld, unavailable or distrusted, rumors are likely to increase, for rumors help people make sense of the world. They thrive in times of uncertainty or social distress, like during war or natural disasters, or when access to credible information is lacking.

Rumor should not be dismissed as simply idle or malicious talk—it is a valuable tool that sheds light on the mind-set of a community. Rumors almost always precede riots and other acts of group aggression, providing a window of opportunity for officials to thwart it or at least prepare a response. Rumors also provide a means for measuring public opinion—a task central to winning hearts and minds. Rumors both express and form public opinion. They are unlikely to take hold unless they are perceived as plausible, and the more a specific rumor is heard the more currency it gains, shifting the orientation of public thinking and ultimately steering opinion.

Unlike polls that predetermine issues to discuss, rumors reflect opinion spontaneously, arising naturally out of the publics' interests. Ultimately, rumors can offer a glimpse of the deeper structure of public opinion—the rationalizations and projections upon which opinion is based—not

just the end results seen in polls.[2] Finally, rumor is an ideal tool of the propagandist to influence morale. Rumor not only offers wide and rapid dissemination, but it also disguises its source, enabling it to influence relationships or fuel doubts while bypassing the inherent skepticism that accompanies messages from the 'enemy'—a feat most standard psychological operations or propaganda attempts are unable to accomplish.

Even Saddam Hussein recognized the power and value of rumor. During his reign his security services monitored and collected them while his intelligence services fabricated and spread them. Rumors were his way of keeping his finger on the pulse of the people, and knowing when to get tough.[3] Iraqis have long employed rumor as a credible information source and reflection of the mood on the street, suggesting that naturally occurring, readily available rumors are an ideal guide in the battle for hearts and minds in this conflict.

Iraqi Rumor Analysis

For this study, I employed current psychological rumor theories to analyze circulating rumors in Baghdad and discern primary concerns and sentiments of the Iraqi people.[4] I created a typology of rumor subjects consisting of eight overarching categories, which successfully highlights specific Iraqi concerns.[5] The most dominant or significant themes of each category are presented here.

1. Government/Political (26.6%)

This category contained over a quarter of all the reported rumors, more than any other group. Three overriding themes emerged, the first of which concerns the transfer of authority at the end of June 2004. There was a great deal of uncertainty and fear about what would happen after the transfer, with many expecting a repeat of the looting and violence that occurred after Baghdad first fell. There are also concerns about the legitimacy of the new Iraqi government since it was not elected. Many fear the new government will be as self-serving, corrupt and brutal as Saddam's regime and will allow high-level Ba'ath party members to return to power. This does not mean Iraqis did not want the transfer to take place, but they are obviously still anxious about how it will turn out.

The second theme concerns international plots to control, interfere in, or harm Iraq. There are rumors of joint Zionist and US conspiracies to establish a Greater Israel, rumors of Iranian spies infiltrating both the resistance groups and the government to promote instability, and rumors that the US plans to wage wars against both Syria and Iran from Iraq. There are also rumors claiming that many Iraqis in the new government are nothing but US puppets, with one rumor even suggesting that seven of the new ministers are US citizens and members of the Republican Party. These rumors point to Iraqis' deep distrust of their new government, their neighbors, and especially the US.

The final theme in this category concerns sectarian issues. Numerous rumors claim the US wants and is encouraging sectarian strife and even a civil war as an excuse to stay in Iraq. The perception on the street is that the US unabashedly favors the Kurds, who will not hesitate to establish a separate state if they do not get enough power. With or without US encouragement, there appears to be significant fear that a civil war will occur. Iraqis are worried that even if elections are held, groups that do not "win" will not adhere to the new government and its laws, and stability will never be achieved. Finally, there is a great deal of discussion that government employment is based increasingly on ascriptive identity or party membership. If this fear (or fact, as some argue) increases, it could lead to groups attempting bigger and more violent grabs for power in order to claim a stake in the new Iraq before it is too late, which could very well fuel inter-group violence or civil war.

2. Quality of Life (18.1%)

The quality of life category refers to issues that affect Iraqis' daily or future welfare. Three themes stand out. First, Iraqis are understandably concerned about their daily survival. In addition to rumors and countless complaints about fuel shortages and inadequate utilities, there are also rumors about contaminated food, water and medicine; humanitarian aid being sold or destroyed so it does not reach the people who need it; and rising prices along with low or unpaid salaries. Many Iraqis are also concerned their new currency is being forged; resulting in reluctance to accept it and possibly fear the money they have will become worthless. From all these complaints the idea that things were better under Saddam has emerged—he fixed shortages faster and prices were better. Unrealistic expectations most likely play a large part in this discontent, but that does not make these concerns any less real to the Iraqi people.

The next theme is the fleecing of Iraq. Many Iraqis are convinced the US is stealing their oil and gas, explaining the frequent shortages. There is even a rumor that the Japanese discovered precious metals in their area of operations and are stealing it instead of helping with the reconstruction. Jordan is refusing to return Iraqi bank deposits, US soldiers are buying up properties and businesses in Iraq, while foreigners are smuggling goods out of Iraq—even palm trees and dates. Rich Iraqis are leaving the country and scientists are being killed, causing a brain drain. Overall, there appears to be a significant concern that at the end of the day there will be nothing left in Iraq for the Iraqis.

There are two competing ideas in the final quality of life theme—the character of Iraq. The first idea is that the US-led occupation is corrupting the country. Rumors of prostitution rings operating within the Green Zone, hotels becoming “whorehouses of parties with alcohol,” and even one rumor claiming US forces will turn a local mosque into an amusement park all point to this fear. At the other end of the spectrum, however, is the concern that Iraq is becoming too Islamized. Harassment of unveiled and western-dressed women is reportedly increasing, claims that Islamist parties have established “Islamic Police” and are intimidating university professors into relinquishing class time to them, and rumors that new Islamic laws will be soon be passed indicate fear of turning into a radical Islamic state. Iraq has long been a secular state, albeit with Islamic trimmings, and now that Iraqis feel they have some choice in the matter, concern that extreme elements on either side will impose their standards on the rest of the country is expected.

3. Insurgency (17.0%)

Rumors about the insurgency are very prevalent in Iraq, coming in a close second to quality of life concerns. Although I chose to list them as separate categories in order to highlight specific issues, there are commonalities between insurgency and the next two categories of security and terrorism, which if taken together notably equal over 40% of the rumors in Iraq. Many of the insurgency rumors are about resistance demands, threats, and calls for Jihad, but two interesting themes are also present.

First, many Iraqis do not believe the Coalition has been tough enough on the resistance, leading them to believe that the US is actually supporting the resistance, and even conducting some of the attacks, in order to justify its presence in Iraq. They do not seem to understand that because the US does not know specifically who or where the resistance is, harsher military actions would affect innocent civilians as well. They seem to believe the US, much like they thought of Saddam with his numerous intelligence organizations, is all knowing and they therefore just have to wait for the problem to be taken care. It is crucial this perception be changed if the US is to make real headway in the counterinsurgency.

The second theme concerns the make-up and motivation of the resistance. There is the natural tendency to assume resistance fighters are all foreigners or Ba'athists, and that all the support

they receive comes from Saddam and his family, Iran, or some other external source. There is tacit acknowledgement that Iraqis are also conducting attacks, but they are only doing it for the money. These rumors suggest that if economic and employment opportunities in Iraq were better, average Iraqis would not participate in the resistance. This wishful attitude allows many Iraqis to shift all the blame for the insurgency—and their other problems—onto others.

4. Security (16.7%)

Almost tied in frequency with insurgency rumors are those concerning security, in which three dominant themes are present. Most significantly are threats against collaborators. Over 20% of security rumors, and almost 4% of all rumors, threaten attacks or death on Iraqis and their families if they work for or help the Coalition. Lists of names of translators and other 'collaborators' are rumored to be posted in mosques or in the possession of terrorists and insurgents, and businesses and hotels are reportedly being told they will be attacked if they serve Westerners. These rumors are creating widespread fear and undoubtedly limiting the number of Iraqis that dare to assist the Coalition or speak out against the groups and individuals causing unrest.

The second security theme concerns common crime, such as murders, theft, and kidnappings. Many of these rumored crimes are directed towards 'innocents,' including women, children, and even doctors. These rumors serve to warn of the dangerous environment in Baghdad, but also invoke a great deal of fear. For instance, rumors that doctors are being kidnapped for ransom have reportedly caused many doctors to go into hiding. These fears, and the reactions to them, ultimately interfere in other aspects of Iraqis' lives.

This leads to the last security theme, the performance of the Iraqi security forces. Opinions appear to vary, with some saying the Iraqi police are more polite and effective than Coalition forces, while others claim the police are corrupt, lazy, and even working with the criminals and terrorists. Several rumors blame Iraqi security force shortcomings on the US, claiming the police are improperly used for political aims and against terrorism, and not allowed to focus on crime. Others say the US has not armed the police adequately, undermines their efforts to arrest criminals by immediately releasing them, and generally does not respect them. Once again, rumors claim the US wants the police to be weak so it can justify its need to be in Iraq.

5. Terrorism (9.3%)

Two primary themes are evident in rumors about terrorism. First, the terrorists are not Iraqis. Similar to beliefs about resistance fighters, but much more adamant, are rumors that the terrorists come from other Middle Eastern countries, like Iran, Kuwait, and the Sudan, because suicide attacks are not characteristic of the Iraqi people. Much as the US is prone to do, many Iraqis have also blamed all the terror attacks on a single person, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who they believe was "created" by the US to perpetuate terrorism and provide yet another excuse to stay in Iraq. While there is no doubt that many terrorists are foreign to Iraq, this line of thinking serves to remove any fault for the current situation from the Iraqi people.

Interestingly, the second theme somewhat contradicts rumors of US plots to keep terrorism alive and well. While many of the terrorism-related rumors were about the fear of future attacks and the power these groups have over Iraqi lives, almost 20% of these reports were actually wishful rumors that the US already had or was in the process of stopping the terrorists. For example, numerous rumors claimed the US had already captured Zarqawi and other well-known figures, but was waiting to announce their arrests for political reasons. There was also a rumor that the US was sending 400 specially trained FBI agents to Iraq to solve the terrorism problem. These rumors indicate a positive desire for US help, but will likely lead to further hostility if the US cannot improve the situation.

6. Military (7.2%)

Most rumors about US forces concern their behavior, and are almost exclusively negative. US forces are rumored to steal from Iraqis during house searches, indiscriminately target civilians, drive too aggressively, and to generally be rude. When these rumors are compared to poll data taken from the April 2004 CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll, however, 94% of respondents said they had never actually had any personal contact with US forces. Granted, this poll covered all of Iraq, not just Baghdad, but this statistic shows how damaging rumors can be and how a few isolated incidents can influence perception.

Another interesting theme is that US forces are using special weapons against the Iraqi people. One rumor claimed a sleeping agent was used to knock Saddam out, causing the sheep in a nearby field to sleep for a week; or that interrogators were using a special ray on Saddam to make him talk. Other, more serious rumors claim US forces are deliberately infecting the population with AIDS, and that candy distributed by Coalition soldiers is poisoned. These rumors perpetuate fear of the Coalition, with many undoubtedly started by enemy propagandists for precisely that purpose, but they should not be simply dismissed as they have the power to prevent Iraqis from talking to and cooperating with Coalition forces.

7. Communication (3.5%)

One important theme emerged from the communication category, and is reinforced by many of the rumors in other categories—the Coalition does not appear to be getting its message out effectively. Many Iraqis do not trust they are getting the whole story from the Coalition or the Arab news outlets. Some rumors suggest the US is purposefully lying and withholding information, going so far as to kill journalists who are exposing its lies. For example, US reports that terrorists have been captured are not believed because no pictures are released and there is no follow up on how they are punished. The Arab media also receives some blame for not reporting all the attacks in Iraq. Furthermore, while there is some recognition that the satellite news channels do not say anything positive about the Coalition, because Iraqis do not see the Coalition side of the story they assume what the Arab media reports is true. These rumors indicate that the US should not expect Iraqis to search out the Coalition message on new radio or TV channels, but should take the Coalition message to the sources Iraqis already watch and listen to. Overall, the perceived unwillingness of the US to share information with the Iraqis is attributed to the US not valuing or respecting them.

8. Detainees (1.7%)

The final category concerns detainee rumors. I expected there to be a significant number of hostility rumors pertaining to the Abu Ghuraib prisoner abuse scandal revealed in late April 2004, but only 1.7% of rumors mentioned Iraqi detainees or the prison. Most rumors occurred in the first two weeks of May and then quickly died down; some of these rumors did not even condemn the abuse, but condemned the US for releasing so many prisoners so quickly in the aftermath. Many Iraqis were fearful that hardened criminals were being let loose. There is no doubt that Iraqis are angry and concerned about the appalling abuses that were uncovered, and the US definitely did not win any hearts or minds over the incident, so why were there not more rumors pertaining to it? While I can only speculate, two possibilities come to mind. First, although Iraqis are definitely upset about the incident, the fact that there have not been more rumors or apparent shock by Iraqis may be indicative of their low opinion of US standards. The abuse, after all, is not new, only the perpetrators. The second possibility is more optimistic. The US responded to the incident incredibly fast—charging and trying guards, replacing the prison leadership, reducing the number of prisoners, and even promising to build a modern new prison and demolish all traces of Abu Ghuraib. Perhaps this demonstration satisfied some Iraqi anger as they saw the US attempt to rectify the situation. While one hopes the second possibility is more applicable, there is also the

risk of Iraqis wondering why such speed and efficiency is not applied to their other problems and concerns.

Rumor Remedies

Combating rumors could alleviate many of the misperceptions and possibly even resentment that is currently flourishing in Iraq, improving our chances at winning hearts and minds and effectively fighting the insurgency. Because rumor remedies rely primarily on effective communication skills, I've adapted three general principles for rumor control to incorporate Arab cultural communication styles.[6]

1. Proactive

The first principle is to monitor and anticipate the conditions under which rumors thrive—uncertainty and anxiety—and defuse them before damaging rumors develop. This is done by ensuring lines of communication are open and accessible, and authorities are truthful in responding to concerns so as not to breed mistrust. People must have faith and confidence in their leaders and media to provide complete, accurate information, otherwise they will always wonder what they are not being told and try to fill in the gaps themselves. This proactive approach to rumor remedies is the most likely to be effective, for once suspicions and prejudices take hold of a population, they become much more difficult to dispel.

In Iraq, however, providing information alone is unlikely to produce trust. How that information is transmitted, and by whom, may be just as important as the information itself. Concerted efforts to establish and build relationships are required before trust will develop and information is likely to be fully considered. There are numerous levels at which relationships can be built and the US should actively pursue them all. The most effective is the personal, one-on-one relationship, which simply requires an investment of time and appreciation of communication styles and cultural norms. While this approach may seem inefficient, extended Arab social networks should serve to multiply efforts as family and friends learn of relationships. Once established, personal relationships are likely to be stronger and more trusting than any other type.

The next type of relationship is at the community level, which can be established by regular participation in community forums or town hall events. At this level, the opportunity exists to share and debate information, discuss community concerns, but most importantly to listen.

The last type of relationship is one established via the mass media. While this vehicle is the most difficult and least effective way to build relationships, television and radio are increasingly prevalent in the Middle East, and if used effectively the ability to reach and influence large populations exists. However, although independent stations are typically considered more trustworthy than state-run broadcasts, mass media in the Middle East is still seen as less credible than face-to-face communication.[7]

The primary requirement for all relationship-building efforts, regardless of the level, is time. Relationships require dedication and energy and must be built before they are needed. There are no quick fixes, but once relationships are established, trusted avenues will exist for addressing and alleviating uncertainties and anxieties before they become damaging rumors.

2. Reactive

If prevention fails and destructive rumors begin to circulate, the second principle is to pay attention to what they reveal about the sources of people's anxieties and uncertainties, and work to alleviate the underlying causes. It is important to note that severe anxieties must be diminished

before uncertainties can effectively be tackled.[8] Reducing idleness, monotony, or disorganization in a population can decrease anxiety. By involving the local populace in community efforts or programs to improve their situations, they have less time to dwell on uncertain future events. Additionally, they gain the satisfaction of “doing something” versus just waiting for the unknown. Once anxieties are at a less intense level, trusted sources providing complete, accurate information and refuting damaging rumors will help repair the situation.

The US needs to respond to the destructive rumors in Iraq. There is a common belief, however, that it is neither feasible nor advisable to refute rumors. Many believe that by publicly acknowledging a rumor, even if only to prove it false, the rumor will gain credibility or spawn additional tales. However, the best evidence on rumor refutation shows that if a rumor has been heard, the least effective approach is to provide no comment. It is more effective to refute the rumor, and most effective to refute the rumor with a trusted source that does not have a vested interest in the subject. It is also important to provide a context or reason for the refutation, especially for those that may not have heard the rumor yet. It is when no context is provided, or the source is not trusted, that refutations can be detrimental and perpetuate rumors. Other guidelines for addressing rumors are to always and immediately confirm true rumors, or any part of a rumor that is true, and refute false rumors with consistent, memorable messages based on the truth.[9] This is not to suggest that rumors can ever be totally eliminated, or that every rumor should be refuted, but damaging rumors that negatively influence Iraqi perceptions and behaviors should be reined in.

3. Damage Control

In a situation like Iraq, it is inevitable that some destructive rumors will survive. The last principle is to take steps to minimize the damage rumors cause, such as taking legal action against instigators, yet it is improbable rumors in Iraq could be traced to their original source, or that the US could pursue legal actions against them even if they were. However, when rumors become so widespread they are printed or broadcast in the media, corrections should immediately be submitted or interviews conducted to refute the false claims. When these actions are not taken, perhaps because they are not seen as important or significant enough, Iraqis have little recourse but to assume they have heard the whole story, adding credence to the rumor. Just as the US media may distort or misrepresent issues, so will some Arab media outlets, but the Coalition needs to maintain a policy of active engagement. In Iraq, the US may not be portrayed in the best light on every channel, but we cannot counter this negative image if we refuse to participate in the conversation.

Conclusion

The analysis of rumors can identify specific concerns and fears of a population that explain behavior and affect local cooperation with US counterinsurgency efforts. If these concerns and fears are addressed, it could have a significant impact on security and stability. Furthermore, rumors can be used to assess foreign public opinion and measure the effectiveness of a hearts and minds campaign. While this analysis has focused on Iraq, the concept of incorporating rumors as an intelligence source is applicable to virtually any country as long as the content analysis and rumor remedies are tailored for the culture in which they occur.

Policy Prescriptions

The following recommendations could facilitate the practical analysis of rumors in Iraq, as well as the implementation of coordinated, effective rumor remedies.

1. Institutionalize Rumor Processing

Public affairs, information operations and psychological operations all require the insight rumors can provide in order to be truly effective in disseminating US intentions and shaping the Iraqi perspective. However, there is no central, hierarchical mechanism to tie these efforts together and to ensure the information gleaned from rumors is acted upon by the appropriate units. Even if rumor remedies are initiated, they could potentially backfire if coordination does not take place and conflicting responses are issued. Therefore, a cell should be established to determine which rumors should be addressed, ensure remedies are coordinated and complimentary, and share feedback on the effectiveness of different remedy techniques and strategies.

2. Centralized Rumor Repository

Analyses of rumors trends and underlying concerns are based solely on the institutional knowledge of the individuals assigned to the collection team and when they rotate out of theater, that knowledge goes with them. There is no repository for this data that can help make sense of it all. A centralized database of circulating rumors would help fill this gap, allowing rumor data to be manipulated to more easily identify and analyze predominant themes, trends and other findings. Rumor remedies should also be tracked to monitor effectiveness and ensure message consistency. This centralized database should be accessible throughout the operating area in order to share lessons learned about effective or ineffective rumor remedies, or receive guidance and suggestions for responding to new rumors.

3. Increase Deployment Lengths

Deployments of those involved in rumor collection and refutation should be extended to one year. Most of the knowledge about what rumors may mean or which ones are common and reoccur resides primarily with the personnel collecting them. A database would help, but it still takes times to learn the nuances of the data and to comprehend the worldview of the Iraqis. One-year deployments would provide more continuity and higher quality rumor analysis. Deployments should also be increased because one of the central elements of rumor remedies is trust, which in Iraq, is built on relationships. Trusted relationships are unlikely to be established in a few months. Short deployments may even frustrate Iraqis so they do not attempt to form relationships with Americans, since they know the person will be leaving soon.

In conclusion, rumors are another tool that can provide insight into the perceptions, concerns, and fears of a community, and should be added to the arsenal. Some familiarity and knowledge of the culture is needed to fully understand and alleviate the uncertainty and anxieties rumors convey, but the information gained could significantly contribute to mission accomplishment. Combating rumors is not an easy task, but it is one we should pursue if the US is to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis and defeat the insurgency. If we fail to address this source of hostility and fear now, it is likely to become more pervasive and destructive in the future.

About the Author

Captain Stephanie Kelley, USAF, is a recent graduate from the National Security Affairs (NSA) Department at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. This Strategic Insight is a condensed version of her Masters thesis titled, "[Rumors in Iraq: A Guide to Winning Hearts and Minds](#)," completed in September 2004.

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