



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (127/2006)

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## **Low-Intensity Conflicts and Sniper Attacks: Lessons from Iraq**

*Joey Long\**

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IT DOES not cost much to undermine the morale, and eventually the fighting capacities, of a technologically- and numerically-superior armed force. Ask the historically-informed sniper. History is replete with the achievements of lone marksmen thwarting the plans of larger armies. In 1777, Timothy Murphy, a sharpshooter in the American Revolutionary War, helped break the British attempt to capture American positions at the Battle of Bemis Heights when he terminated the lives of two inspirational British generals. In 1942, Vasily Zaytsev contributed to the successful Soviet resistance against the mighty German *Wehrmacht* at Stalingrad by killing over 100 enemy officers and soldiers with his rifle.

Closer to the present, insurgent snipers like 'Juba' are giving U.S. soldiers tough times in Iraq. It is unknown whether he is real, fictitious, or a combination of several snipers, but videos on the internet credit Juba for scores of kills. There are no precise numbers, but a U.S. Army spokesperson recently revealed that sniper attacks carried out by Juba-like gunmen killed more U.S. troops in the first ten days of October than the total number killed in all of September. The worst, however, is not over. Recent reports indicate that the insurgents are stepping up their recruitment of sharpshooters, offering, among other incentives, attractive pay packages to entice disgruntled Iraqis to join their ranks. If this is an indication of how the tactical military situation in Iraq is progressing, the impact on U.S. forces and operations in Iraq will be significant.

### **Significance**

First, it is clear that Iraqi insurgents intend to use the sniper attacks as a strategic weapon against Washington. Iraqi snipers and spotters have been producing video clips of their kills, and making them freely available on the internet. Some of these clips have also found their way onto mainstream television such as CNN. They show American soldiers coming within sight of the camera. They show rifle shots felling the soldiers. They show the stealthy qualities of the snipers, and their ability to make an escape after the kill. Most important, they suggest that operations of this sort will persist for the foreseeable future.

The operations are, of course, not filmed merely for posterity. They appear to be attentive to American domestic politics and public opinion. They seem to be crafted with the aim of further undermining domestic U.S. support for the war. One reason why the Pentagon initially forbade the release of photographs of flag-draped caskets being loaded off planes onto U.S. tarmacs was that it feared adverse public sentiment toward the war would mount. If images of star-spangled coffins can influence emotions, the haunting images of the last

moments of sniper victims are certain to exacerbate negative domestic American attitudes toward the administration's conduct of the conflict. They will initially feed public opposition to the administration's management of the war. They will eventually feed public opposition to the American involvement in Iraq.

Second, the insurgents are evidently using their strengths to offset superior conventional American military power. U.S. forces, to be sure, have had little trouble devastating the conventional Iraqi army. They have had less success, however, in squashing opponents who do not don military attire; who lie in car boots and shoot at American soldiers through keyholes; and who melt away into the populace after they have scored their kills.

U.S. tactical manoeuvres will also most likely be disrupted following a sniper attack. Counter-sniper operations and flanking assaults will have to be unleashed. The wounded will have to be tended to, and the dead cleared from the scene. The psychological impact of the hit, however, will be the most significant. The unnerving screams of a blood-soaked fellow soldier will swiftly destroy the morale of his squad or platoon. Tactical plans will be disordered. And operational aims are likely to be thwarted.

But the ramifications can go beyond the tactical and operational. However well-trained or disciplined American troops are, the adversary's tactics are bound to have a corrupting influence on U.S. soldiers. The elusive enemy provides no outlet for pent-up outrage. Stored up, mindless retaliatory violence can rapidly undermine in days any improvement achieved painstakingly over many months on the 'hearts and minds' front.

Indeed, reports of American soldiers committing atrocities in Iraq are symptomatic of the psychological effects advanced armies have yet to overcome in conflicts against unsophisticated but lethal forces. The trouble is, abuses on the battlefields or even in detention centres tend to dynamically find their way into the national and international media. They end up wrecking the reputations and careers of many. They end up undermining the legitimacy of the war. They end up alienating domestic and global opinion. And they could end up in a modern state losing a war to a motley bunch of raggedy, bearded insurgents.

## **Implications**

Yet it should be said, from the outset, that no amount of training or preparation can fully immunize soldiers from the psychological traumas of war. Nevertheless, the Iraq conflict is instructive for established armed forces on two main fronts.

First, offence may be critical for defence. Competently-trained and adopting similar fighting techniques, modern armed forces can beat the insurgents at their own game. Marine Corps sniper teams, for example, have been deployed to hunt down insurgent snipers. It is in such a fight that the technological superiority of modern militaries will count for something. Equipped with thermal imaging equipment, night vision devices, and high-powered sniper rifles, U.S. sharpshooters own the night in Iraq.

Second, defence may be the best defence. As much as they would like to, modern states can no longer fully avert media scrutiny of their military's operations as these unfold on the ground. This is certainly not for want of trying. The U.S. military has attempted to mitigate the potentially adverse impact of daily press and television coverage of its campaigns by embedding journalists with military units. Reporters scurrying around in the field dodging

bullets and shrapnel often develop sympathy for, if not a feeling of indebtedness to, their protectors, leading to news coverage that might redound to the benefit of the fighting forces.

But while such arrangements can moderate the major media agencies, there is little governments can do to stop web-browsing, internet-savvy insurgents from posting their handiwork on the World Wide Web. Furthermore, modern communication flows are such that even if YouTube complies with public or official requests to remove sniper 'snuff films' from their servers, there is no stopping unsympathetic websites from continuing to host the insurgents' propaganda.

In such circumstances, established militaries, for one, need to prudently invest their resources and know-how in enhancing the less glamorous parts of their arsenals — like the humble armour. Body armours should be relatively lightweight, should leave the majority of the body and extremities unexposed, should not overly impair mobility, and should be fully capable of stopping small arms and, ideally, all forms of sniper fire.

## **Conclusion**

Meeting all these ideals will seem like a tall order. But if thinkers like Martin van Creveld are right in suggesting that low-intensity conflicts will be the norm rather than the exception for the foreseeable future, military planners will need to review their propensity to consider the foxhole-clearing precision bomb or the tank-busting flying platform as their pride and joy. The foot soldier will gratefully appreciate the infantry-saving vest. It is only then that insurgent snipers will have nothing entrancing to upload the next time they visit YouTube. After all, apart from the God-thanking look on the victim's face, a bullet ricocheting off armour is not particularly captivating.

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\* *Joey Long is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*