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Abduction as a tool of terror

Extremists strive to thwart Iraqi democracy through abductions and executions

For months, each day has brought new reports of casualties in Iraq. Since the war officially ended on May 1, 2003, the death toll has steadily climbed. As of July 13, 2004, coalition deaths had reached 1,010, including 890 Americans, compared to the 137 U.S. troops who perished between March 19 and April 30, 2003. These figures do not include the more than 200 civilians from coalition nations who have died in the Middle East, such as the widely publicized executions of American businessman Nicholas Berg, engineer Paul Johnson Jr. and South Korean translator Kim Sun-II.

Economic opportunities exist in post-war Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, but growing anti-American sentiment and heightened terrorist activity imperil the lives of entrepreneurs willing to operate in that volatile market. Extremists have seized upon publicized butchery as an effective method of sabotaging the reconstruction of Iraq, and experts fear that the use of abductions and executions will increase in the months ahead, ultimately spreading from the Middle East to other parts of the world.

Abduction for profit and politics

The term “kidnapping” often connotes child abductions, such as the disappearance of 20-month-old Charles A. Lindbergh Jr. in March 1932. According to a national non-profit organization, about 4,600 children are abducted each year by strangers, while an estimated 56,500 children are reported missing after abduction by a family member. In the overwhelming majority of kidnappings by strangers, money serves as the driving factor, and the child returns home safely after a relatively short period. Murder of an abducted child is a rare event—with fewer than 100 incidents estimated in the United States annually.

Naturally, kidnapping is not restricted to children, and the crime has become a thriving business in some parts of the world. While estimates vary, approximately 12,500 kidnappings of traveling foreigners take place each year, with more than half committed in Latin America. In 2003, 2,200 abductions occurred in Colombia alone, where an average of six people are kidnapped per day. These figures are believed to represent only a

fraction of the actual number of abductions—perhaps 10 to 40 percent of the total—because families of many victims fear for the safety of their relatives and do not report the incident.

The recent wave of kidnappings in the Middle East represents a far more dangerous evolution: abductions and brutal executions to effect policy change. The terrorists issue outrageous demands they know will not be met, making the fate of the unfortunate victim a foregone conclusion. In the case of Nicholas Berg, extremists demanded the release of all detainees in Abu Ghraib; the captors of Kim Sun-II called for South Korea to withdraw its pledge to send 3,000 troops to Iraq. Unlike traditional kidnappings where the criminals seek money, these individuals abduct people with the intent of murdering them as a political statement, converting this common crime into a terrorist event.

Although South Korea refused to accede to the terrorists’ demands, the government did order the evacuation of South Korean non-essential personnel from Iraq following the beheading of Kim by the terror group led by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi. Approximately 65 South Korean nationals were living in Iraq at the time of Kim’s abduction. In addition, the South Korean government has launched an investigation to determine whether more could have been done to secure Kim’s release.

“The abductors and the terrorists have come to the conclusion that these singular acts of brutality have a tremendous impact, and they’re hoping that one of these days, it will actually succeed in changing government policy,” said one security authority.

Such “success” for the terrorists may come sooner, rather than later—as demonstrated by the situation unfolding in the Philippines. The Philippine government has accelerated plans to withdraw its peacekeeping force from Iraq in an attempt to save the life of truck driver Angelo dela Cruz, who was abducted July 7. At the time of this publication, eight of the 51 humanitarian soldiers have already left Iraq.

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Grim reality

Experts agree that the abductions and executions are unlikely to stop and, in fact, will only increase in number and expand beyond the Middle East. One Israeli security expert attributes the perceived success of this brutal tactic to widespread media exposure. The terrorists have released videos of the captives identifying themselves and pleading for their lives. Subsequent videos capture the slayings of the victims. “We know that terrorists seek this kind of exposure,” he said. “It provides encouragement to others who might not have thought of these actions to replicate the ‘heroic’ acts of these terrorists, so it’s likely we’ll be seeing more of that.”

Further contributing to this trend is the relative ease of targeting civilians. Unlike military personnel, who are well trained, armed and prepared against attacks, civilians often have little protection, if any at all. Abducting private citizens offers a simple means of maintaining a high level of terror: The extremists nab one unsuspecting person and use the combined power of television and the Internet to leverage the shock effect of the capture and assassination. This method of coercion stokes fear, sustaining an atmosphere of terror and uncertainty while the terrorists plot the next major assault.

In Israel, where suicide bombings and other terror attacks have become an unfortunate way of life, the security forces have achieved considerable success in averting violence. Bombings still occur, but many are thwarted. “The first step is alertness, not only of the military services and the law enforcement agencies, but also trying to maintain a sufficient level of alertness among the population that might fall victim to these acts,” said the Israeli expert cited above. “The Israeli public, due to the sad experiences we’ve had in the last three years, is a very alert public. The slightest indication that might seem suspicious

usually brings forth an alarm, and in some cases, this prevents the carrying out of a terrorist act.”

Achieving this level of awareness among U.S. citizens both at home and abroad may appear unrealistic now, but heightened vigilance may become more attainable as casualties mount.

Personnel protection

Businesses that choose to participate in the rebuilding of post-war Iraq must recognize the extent of the risk involved and prepare to take necessary precautions. Among the actions that private-sector entities should take, whether conducting business in the Middle East or in other parts of the world, are the following:

Conduct a risk assessment. Organizations must thoroughly analyze their security needs before deploying personnel to another nation. This process involves identifying potential risks, establishing relative threat levels and implementing appropriate security measures, such as bodyguards and armored vehicles. This assessment needs to evaluate security needs at work, in transit and at home. The security plan should identify a safe haven where employees can gather in the event of an emergency, and the program also needs to include detailed steps for a rapid evacuation, if necessary.

Educate employees prior to deployment. Firms operating overseas need to teach personnel about the nations where they will be working. These educational programs should address such areas as culture, language, history, geography, economy, government and current political situation. The U.S. Department of State maintains up-to-date information on every country in the world and publishes Consular Information Sheets, which include details on crime and security conditions, specific areas of instability and other pertinent travel information.

Manage information carefully. Few secrets remain in today’s interconnected world, but organi-

zations need to guard closely any information pertaining to workers in foreign lands, particularly in dangerous areas such as the Middle East or Latin America. Arrival and departure information, hotels, transportation companies, schedules, meeting places and local contacts, for instance, should not be common knowledge, lest someone unwittingly disclose this information to the wrong person and jeopardize the safety of colleagues working abroad.

Develop a support network overseas. Companies that operate in foreign nations need to build relationships with other organizations in those countries—with native and foreign firms within their industry, as well as with other firms from their home country. Such a network will help organizations stay abreast of the overall security climate and leverage security resources in a joint effort. Membership in the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) will also help businesses make informed decisions on the best way to protect their investment, facilities, personnel and intellectual property in other nations.

Implement a rapid-notification system. Companies that operate in foreign nations should develop a “call tree” or warden system, which enables them to reach all employees in a short period of time. If a dangerous situation arises, the primary point of contact can activate an alert pyramid, notifying two or three predetermined individuals who then notify four or five others, and so on. This system allows an organization to contact all personnel in an area and disseminate or obtain information quickly.

Employ cutting-edge technology. The first few hours following an abduction are the most critical and hold the greatest potential for successfully recovering the victim. Some firms may invest in digital tracking technology to help protect employees working in areas with a high risk of abduction. These devices combine satellite and mobile phone technology to pinpoint the location of a person or a vehicle. A discreet panic button inside an automobile can enable a passenger to

summon help at the first sign of danger, setting a recovery plan into motion. Companies that choose not to use these technological solutions should require personnel to check in frequently while traveling. One national security expert recommends establishing contact every 15 minutes.

Establish a crisis support plan. Organizations must routinely update family notification information to facilitate contact if an emergency occurs. Should the unthinkable happen and extremists abduct an employee, the company needs to implement a crisis support program, either using an internal team or bringing in an outside organization that specializes in crisis support. These firms provide psychologists or grief counselors to assist family members and co-workers. A media specialist needs to insulate the family and the organization from press calls, while providing periodic updates with developing information.

Personal responsibility

Traveling businesspeople must anticipate potential security risks and take preventive action. Common sense should govern behavior. Although not always possible, people should avoid traveling alone, especially at night, and they should stay away from areas with which they are not familiar.

Other safety tips for Westerners traveling or working abroad include the following:

- **Know the area thoroughly.** Before leaving for another country, individuals need to research their destination to gain a comprehensive understanding of the region, culture, language, people and politics. The State Department briefings provide excellent insight into safety and security, but travelers must educate themselves on the nuances that characterize daily life in the host nation. Violating a local taboo could produce devastating results.
- **Select accommodations and transportation wisely.** When choosing lodging, Americans

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should stay in areas with a central location, where they can blend into the surroundings. Factors to consider include availability and response time of police service. Investigate hotel security, and avoid rooms that are easily accessed from the outside. Exercise caution when using public transportation. If possible, engage a private car with a trained driver.

- **Maintain a low—or a different—profile.** Americans traveling or living in other nations need to dress inconspicuously and behave in a manner that does not draw attention. Visitors should attempt to blend in with the native inhabitants. Experts warn against carrying items or wearing clothing that bears a corporate name or logo, which could invite the attention of anti-Western extremists. Basic precautions include carrying limited amounts of cash and wearing simple, understated jewelry. Women in Arab countries need to exercise special care not to dress or act in a way that could unintentionally offend the local population.
- **Avoid predictability.** Varying departure times and travel routes will decrease opportunities for attacks in transit. The more action a person takes to lower the likelihood of attack, the safer that individual will be. Many would-be abductors will select an easier target instead of attempting to cover all possible options for a security-conscious person.
- **Exercise vigilance.** Complacency increases vulnerability. When possible, stick to main routes with high traffic volume. Watch for debris along the road. Coalition forces have seen improvised explosive devices hidden in plastic bags, soda cans and even animal carcasses. Militants have also thrown grenades and other explosives into vehicles from overpasses, especially in crowded areas.
- **Operate within the security envelope.** Depending on the perceived level of threat in a particular region, organizations may try to

restrict activities of employees or place them in the care of security personnel. People who are not accustomed to working and traveling under these conditions may become frustrated and attempt to escape from this security net. Such action, however, could have disastrous—and even fatal—consequences.

While citizens of coalition nations face obvious security threats in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East, security experts warn that attacks against Westerners and Western sympathizers will increase in other parts of the world, including Western Europe, Southeast Asia and Africa. These areas have an infrastructure with a predisposition to violence that does not currently exist in the United States. Consequently, Westerners will likely face greater risk regardless of where international travel takes them, requiring increased awareness at all times.

Violent unrest in the Middle East threatens bodily harm and even death to individuals who participate in the reconstruction of Iraq and other industrial endeavors. Every passing day brings new casualties at the hands of militant extremists, bent on thwarting efforts to establish a democratic Iraq. Rising body counts continue to fuel anti-coalition protests around the globe, pressuring the U.S. government and its allies to withdraw and encouraging further atrocities by the terrorists.

The United States of America and other coalition members cannot give in to the evil forces that routinely slaughter innocent people to further their fanatical goals. Giving in to their demands will not stop the bloodshed, but will only encourage greater atrocities by these zealots.



The Lipman Report Editors