

## **Losing Iraqi Hearts and Minds**

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The post-war chaos has fuelled Arab media cynicism over US intentions in Iraq.

For the Arab media, the toppling of Saddam's statue in al-Firdaus Square in Baghdad on April 9 was no Belgrade. The population of Baghdad, a city of five million people, did not erupt in jubilation. Not one million of them. Not even one thousand. There were hardly two hundred people in the square, and most of these were foreign journalists. In Arab eyes, this was an event staged by the international media, who challenged a handful of Iraqi youngsters to attack the statue in order to claim a first victory in the battle for Iraqi hearts and minds.

Had "permission" not been given to these young men, April 9 would have been just another day of progress for the occupying army in Baghdad. Reality intervened within hours of the phoney euphoria of the toppling of the statue with the realisation that the fighting in Baghdad was continuing, and harvesting even more Iraqi civilian casualties.

Having witnessed the chaotic human crisis unfolding in Baghdad, Arab public opinion is ever more convinced that the Anglo-American slogan of "winning Iraqi hearts and minds" is sheer cynicism, a claim to deceive the masses. The Arab media are even doubtful of the coalition's ability to sell this concept to its own public, let alone to the Arabs themselves. One need look no further than the Arab press and television to see the contempt and anger held for the coalition's public relations effort. The various Arab media, who hold a plethora of opinions, have long titled the coalition "invaders". The Iraqi people are now seen as an aggressed Arab nation alongside the Palestinians: occupied, humiliated and enduring under siege.

In the Arab view, had these preachers of democracy and freedom cared at all for Arabs living under oppression, they would have liberated the Palestinians from the longest occupation in modern history. Instead, they see Palestinians being killed with US money and arms.

Today, Arab newspapers, radio stations, television, satellites and the internet play a pivotal role in countering Anglo-American propaganda. Arabs address one another in the Arabic language, with its thousands of years of history and 300 million speakers. On a daily basis, the Arab press exposes what it calls "the constant lies, rumours and disinformation of the invading powers" in the world's media.

Quoting an Iraqi poet, al-Sharq al-Awsat writes: "A 35-year nightmare has been removed, only to be replaced by a worse one."

Official Anglo-American propaganda towards the Iraqis, such as Towards Freedom TV, attempts to affect personalities on the ground and to persuade them to accept the invading-liberating powers. The coalition line of winning Iraqi hearts and minds aims to bring about permanent behavioural change. Yet this is unlikely to occur, since the Iraqis - of all Arabs - have long experience of propaganda. In Iraq, as in other Arab and non-Arab countries, propaganda has emerged as an essential element of warfare. It has become a major weapon in ideological struggle, both before the outbreak of hostilities and after.

"Hearts and minds" have a very distinguished status in Arab culture, and cannot be won easily, especially in a foreign language. In the Arab world, a ruler historically secured the minds of his citizens through allegiance, respect and other means. To win their hearts, he was usually aided by a poet laureate.

During his invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Saddam found no Arab poet to rally the Arab masses behind him. In this Iraq war, the situation is different: US-led assaults on "Iraqi honour: the land and the people" have captured the Arab mind and Arab poets and media have captured the hearts, fostering deep

resentment towards the coalition. The two most eminent living Arab poets, the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish and the Syrian Adonis, recently published in the Arab press two powerful polemical poems. These lauded Iraq's contribution to the rich Arab culture and heritage, and called for Arab fraternity and solidarity with Iraq.

In the Gulf war of 1991, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the national Arab heart was broken. The Arab mind felt disrespected, both by Iraq's invasion of another Arab capital, and by the fact that the "imperialists" had attacked a leading Arab country to secure their regional interests. And yet, unlike now, the Arab world did not then throw its weight behind Saddam.

If you truly want to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis, the Arab press says today, you do not bombard them, slay them, deny them medical aid, cut off their water from two major rivers then offer them limited supplies of fake mineral water. By such methods, the coalition can hope for little more than to temporarily silence a few Iraqi stomachs, before these hungry stomachs become angrier minds.

Hitler's chief propagandist Goebbels argued that it is relatively easy to influence people's mood (Stimmung), but that it is far more difficult to change their behaviour (Haltung). Evidence of change in the first in Iraq is absent, and it is hard to believe that the latter will change in the foreseeable future.

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**Location:** [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)  
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