

## UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

Israeli Arabs are married in Arabic and buried in Arabic—but they cheer for soccer in Hebrew. It might not be surprising that at a face-off between two Arab teams, Arab fans held signs bragging about their star Arab coach: “Azmi we love you forever, Azmi, the best coach in the Arab sector.” What might be more surprising is that these signs were in Hebrew.

When the predominantly Arab team Bnei Sakhnin won Israel’s State Cup last May, it earned a spot in the European championship tournament, the UEFA Cup. Feelings of sectarian pride and national integration intermingled for many Israeli Arabs. Identity is a complicated matter for Israel’s Arab citizens, caught between the pull of Palestinian nationalism and integration into Israeli society. Yet, even as Israeli Arabs have increasingly identified with their cousins over the Green Line, the soccer bleachers—a wildly popular destination for many Israelis, but especially Arabs—remain a locus of integration into mainstream Israeli culture.

As Bnei Sakhnin fans celebrated their team’s State Cup victory in May, they cheered as the squad’s Arab and Jewish players circled the stadium waving Israeli flags, oblivious to the supposed contradiction between honoring the Palestinian flag at home and cheering the Israeli one on the bleachers. After receiving congratulatory phone calls from both Ariel Sharon and Yasir Arafat, Sakhnin’s manager must have pondered the depth of what his Cinderella team had done.

Sakhnin’s next tournament game is against Newcastle United on September 16, the first day of the Jewish New Year. ■ - DZ

## MADE FOR TELEVISION EVENTS

By Jon B. Alterman

As news of kidnappings and beheadings flowed out of Iraq this summer, it was easy to assume that Iraq had fallen into a state of primordial chaos. The brutal forces of tribalism and barbarity appeared to be triumphing, and the modern appeared to be giving way to the medieval.

Such a reading misses much of what is important in present-day Iraq. What is happening is not a return to a premodern past, but a blast forward into a postmodern future. In fact, many of these kidnappings and beheadings are best thought of as made-for-television events; a calculated set of actions and images directed toward influencing a mass audience. In this way, the audience is often more important than the action itself, and the symbolism is inseparable from the strategy. Missing this vital point can lead to precisely the wrong response.

All of the kidnappings carried out in Iraq do not fall under this rubric. Indeed, the overwhelming majority are never reported, and they are the sorts of criminal enterprises that emerge out of lawlessness. They are opportunistic, private efforts to make a buck, and they can be controlled through effective policing.

But clearly another kind of violence is becoming more common in Iraq. Increasingly, kidnappings and executions are carried out with elaborate staging meant to demonstrate the power of the kidnappers and the weakness of the kidnapped. Startling images find their way onto videotapes, satellite television, and streaming Internet video.

The most important audiences for these messages are the Iraqi and Arab publics, who often see themselves as being surrounded by a feckless and passive leadership. While many Iraqis are dissatisfied with the status quo, the groups under arms articulate the publics’ grievances and take action to force others to address them. They show themselves to be men of action and not mere talk, men who take to the ramparts rather than huddle and hide.

(continued on page 2)

## IRAQIS OPTIMISTIC DESPITE FAILURES

Although Iraq’s governing institutions lack adequate capacity and negative trends dominate security, jobs, and services like electricity and sewage, Iraqis themselves remain optimistic, according to a new CSIS report. “Security and economic problems continue to overshadow and undermine efforts across the board,” states the report, *Progress or Peril? Measuring Iraq’s Reconstruction Progress*. “Iraqi optimism and patience have somehow endured. The challenge for U.S. and Iraqi officials alike is to harness and capitalize on Iraqis’ optimism but at the same time not to overstate its significance, because there is a real potential it could swing the other way if events in Iraq continue to trend negatively.” Frederick Barton and Bathesheba Crocker, codirectors of the CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project, wrote the report which is available online at [http://www.csis.org/isp/pcr/0409\\_progressperil.pdf](http://www.csis.org/isp/pcr/0409_progressperil.pdf) ■

These kidnapers and executioners embody the frustration of their audiences and project a commitment to strength and a demand for respect. They do not seek to construct a detailed political plan for their nation's future, and they have no desire to win majority support. The goal, instead, is to win the committed support of a small fraction, the grudging support of some more, and the indifference of most. Their embrace of anonymity suggests the strategic nature of their goal: a narrowing political arena rather than a broadening one. They seek to paralyze the majority out of fear and to compete in a battle between zealots.

In this light, their heavy appropriation of the slogans and symbols of the past is mere window dressing that gives roots and a feeling of authenticity to what is fundamentally a forward-looking message. Historical references serve to cloak rather than explain and to justify rather than convince.

On the international stage, the goals are different. There, the kidnapers seek to weaken foreign governments' commitments to remaining in Iraq. Seeing the current Iraqi interim government as dependent on foreign forces, the kidnapers and executioners seek to raise the perceived risk (and thus, the perceived cost) of continued involvement. They seek to play the hoped-for foreign exodus in two ways: first, as a demonstration of Arab strength in the face of international might, and second, as a way to weaken the current Iraqi government and pave the way for their own increased influence in the country.

Because these actions are so clearly directed toward being represented in the mass media, and because their true measure of success is how the viewing public interprets them, a counterapproach that relies primarily on the tools of the military or law enforcement is insufficient. Instead, those seeking to defeat these movements need to gain a better understanding of those same audiences and to fashion countermessages that resonate with them. Doing so should not be hard, given the stark departure that the behavior of such groups represents from long-held norms of conduct in Iraq and further afield in the region. The greatest mistake would be ceding the authenticity card to such provocateurs and fighting a battle with them on their terms. Such a battle would almost certainly be lost.

One can be under no illusion that winning a battle for the hearts and minds of Arab publics will be sufficient to make these insurgent threats go away. Eliminating the violence and lawlessness will still require an extraordinarily large measure of intelligence, military, and law enforcement resources. By the same measure, however, the mere use of those resources will be insufficient without a simultaneous campaign to target those same audiences that the terrorists are targeting.

As societies that not only gave birth to modern media but also presided over the creation of media events, it would be ironic if we were not to recognize them when we saw them. ■

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## Links of Interest

Jon Alterman's op-ed on Arab liberals was published in London's Financial Times on August 3, [Beirut's Daily Star](#) on August 6, and in Arabic in Beirut's [Al-Nahar](#) on August 13.

Updated information on the [Newcastle United-Bnei Sakhnin match](#).

Anthony Cordesman, CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy, released a report in August, ["Intelligence Lessons of the Iraq War\(s\): New Strategic Environment Demands Better Human Intelligence Before, After War."](#)

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