

U.S. military conducted a PSYOP program “to magnify the role of the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq”

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U.S. military plays up role of Zarqawi
Jordanian painted as foreign threat to Iraq’s stability

By Thomas E. Ricks

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The U.S. military is conducting a propaganda campaign to magnify the role of the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, according to internal military documents and officers familiar with the program. The effort has raised his profile in a way that some military intelligence officials believe may have overstated his importance and helped the Bush administration tie the war to the organization responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks....

The Zarqawi campaign is discussed in several of the internal military documents. “Villainize Zarqawi/leverage xenophobia response,” one U.S. military briefing from 2004 stated. It listed three methods: “Media operations,” “Special Ops (626)” (a reference to Task Force 626, an elite U.S. military unit assigned primarily to hunt in Iraq for senior officials in Hussein’s government) and “PSYOP,” the U.S. military term for propaganda work...

The military’s propaganda program largely has been aimed at Iraqis, but seems to have spilled over into the U.S. media. One briefing slide about U.S. “strategic communications” in Iraq, prepared for Army Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the top U.S. commander in Iraq, describes the “home audience” as one of six major targets of the American side of the war.

One internal briefing, produced by the U.S. military headquarters in Iraq, said that Kimmitt had concluded that, “The Zarqawi PSYOP program is the most successful information campaign to date...”

Kimmitt is now the senior planner on the staff of the Central Command that directs operations in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East. In 2003 and 2004, he coordinated public affairs, information operations and psychological operations in Iraq — though he said in an interview the internal briefing must be mistaken because he did not actually run the psychological operations and could not speak for them. Kimmitt said, “There was clearly an information campaign to raise the public awareness of who Zarqawi was, primarily for the Iraqi audience but also with the international audience.”

A goal of the campaign was to drive a wedge into the insurgency by emphasizing Zarqawi’s terrorist acts and foreign origin, said officers familiar with the program. “Through aggressive

Strategic Communications, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi now represents: Terrorism in Iraq/Foreign Fighters in Iraq/Suffering of Iraqi People (Infrastructure Attacks)/Denial of Iraqi Aspirations," the same briefing asserts...

The Zarqawi program was not related to another effort, led by the Lincoln Group, a U.S. consulting firm, to place pro-U.S. articles in Iraq newspapers, according to the officer familiar with the program who spoke on background.

It is difficult to determine how much has been spent on the Zarqawi campaign, which began two years ago and is believed to be ongoing. U.S. propaganda efforts in Iraq in 2004 cost \$24 million, but that included extensive building of offices and residences for troops involved, as well as radio broadcasts and distribution of thousands of leaflets with Zarqawi's face on them, said the officer speaking on background...

Officials said one indication that the campaign worked is that over the past several months, there have been reports that Iraqi tribal insurgents have attacked Zarqawi loyalists, especially in the culturally conservative province of Anbar. "What we're finding is indeed the people of al-Anbar — Fallujah and Ramadi, specifically — have decided to turn against terrorists and foreign fighters," Maj. Gen Rick Lynch, a U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad, said in February.

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