International Affairs Forum Interview
By Stefan Daniels
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Colin Kahl is an Assistant Professor in the
Political Science Department at the
University of Minnesota. His article "How We
Fight" is based in part on his experience
conducting research for the Defense
Department from January 2005 to August
2006 during a fellowship offered by the
Council on Foreign Relations. His article in
the November/December 2006 issue of *Foreign Affairs* explains how the
US is fighting the war in Iraq and how it has worked at improving the
way it fights.

International Affairs Forum: How accurate are the statistics used in
your article?

Professor Colin Kahl: The article uses data collected by the Iraq Body
Count, which is a non governmental organization that is basically a set of
academics and researchers who track media accounts of civilian
casualties in Iraq, although they also include in that category Iraqi
police. They track English language media but also track Iraqi and Arab
media that is available in translation. Included in that, whenever morgue
and hospital data is reported through the media it also gets updated.

It's obviously an undercount, there are going to be deaths that it misses.
How much of an undercount is difficult to say. Recently the Ministry of
Health in Iraq suggested that the number of Iraqi civilians and security
forces killed since the war is somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000.
Even if you subtract the portion that is security forces that number
would be about twice the number from Iraq Body Count. The reason I
use the data is not because it's low but because it is the only data
available that provides any indication as to who is doing the killing.

So, do I have a lot of faith in those numbers being completely accurate?
No. They are estimates. And there are other estimates - for example I just
mentioned the Health Ministry. The Brookings Institute has its own

estimate that relies in part on the Iraq Body Count data, and makes some other adjustments, and it has a slightly higher figure. There have been some reviews by the Los Angeles Times and the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq of death certificates, and they arrive at a figure roughly similar to the Iraq Body Count figure. I would say that most estimates of the Iraqi civilian casualties put the totals somewhere between 50,000 and 150,000, but the Iraq Body Count data is the only one that breaks it down by who is doing the killing.

IA-Forum: The college student example at the beginning of your article points directly to the problem of killing terrorists. The inevitable collateral damage with going after the terrorists is that it breeds more terrorism. I think Rumsfeld said this before - if we kill one terrorist, we don't how many we create by killing that one terrorist. Your article stresses how we fight and how it's changing. Can that problem of killing terrorists and creating more terrorists be solved by how we fight or should it be a question of why we fight? Are we looking to eliminate terrorists completely?

Prof. Kahl: I think it's both. I should say that the example you are speaking about is the Haditha incident. One of the things that happened in the Haditha incident is the kind of normal progression of events. There is a roadside bomb that hits a Marine patrol that is going through Haditha. One Marine is killed, another is injured. The squad gets out, and what happens after that is open to some debate, but by the end of the day there are two dozen Iraqi civilians who are dead. Among them are a group of college students who approach the scene in a taxicab.

The situation under which they got shot is open to dispute - the Iraqis claim that they were stopped, taken out of the car and basically executed. Others have claimed that the car didn't stop, it was full of five military aged males, and that they were shot under the assumption that they had something to do with the roadside bombed. I think there is probably more evidence for the former interpretation than the latter, but the case hasn't gone to trial and all the evidence isn't out.

But I think what the incident speaks to is that in any war in which the adversary is indistinguishable from the civilian population, you are going to have a lot of civilian casualties. So the only way to avoid a large number of civilian casualties is to not fight the war. But if you decide that fighting the war is necessary to advance your country's national security or national interests, or all the reasons that countries go to war, then it's incumbent under international law for countries to fight in certain ways, that is to fight in ways that put precautions in place to minimize the likelihood that civilians get killed.

I say minimize because you can never eliminate it, there will always be mistakes, there will always be accidents, and there will always be individuals that engage in atrocities. War is a nasty, brutish, terrible thing. That's why the old slogan says 'War is Hell' and the laws of war as codified in the Geneva Convention and the Hague Convention were never meant to eliminate human suffering, they were meant to minimize human suffering and bring it into balance with military necessity.

The article claims that by a historical standard, the United States is doing reasonably well. Does that mean the United States has never killed innocent civilians? No. In fact the United States has undoubtedly killed thousands of Iraqi civilians, and we shouldn't trivialize that. On the other hand, in a single night of bombing in Tokyo 85,000 Japanese civilians were killed on purpose by the United States. Are we seeing carnage like that in Iraq by US forces? No, so I think we need to keep in mind that war is hell, and civilians are going to die and the only way to prevent that is to not fight the war in the first place.

But also keep in mind, that when we fight its incumbent upon us to take every precaution necessary, and the article argues that the United States military has done a reasonably good job by historical standards, and that that its performance has been improving over time. Could it still get better? The article concludes that it could. This actually is the long way at getting at the question of when you kill someone you suspect of being a terrorist, do you create more? I think the answer is if you are not really careful you can end up doing so, because most so-called terrorists or insurgents have families, they have children, they have wives, they have extended family members, and you are likely to, regardless of whether you feel it was just in a given encounter to kill or capture that individual, engaging in the action has spill over effects on the families and communities. So, that is important to remember, the military is a blunt instrument.

A lot of times people talk of precision-guided munitions and surgical strikes, and I think that language presents war as if we can easily identify the good guys and the bad guys, and we will only kill the bad guys if nobody else will be hurt and affected. You can have the smartest bombs in the world, and you can still have a lot of innocent people get caught in the crossfire. So, I think that the war on terrorism, and to the degree to which the war in Iraq has been folded into the broader war on terrorism, one problem with it is that there is a tension between the war part, and the goal of eliminating terrorism part.

The war part of the war on terrorism risks in every encounter the possibility that you create as many adversaries as you kill or capture. I

think a really telling statistic in this regard is there always seem to be 20,000 insurgents in Iraq. It doesn't matter how many insurgents get killed or captured, there are always 20,000, which suggests either that we have no idea how many there actually are and that we just make up the number, or maybe there are 20,000, but every time we kill and capture them the supply gets replenished, and it gets replenished by the communities that are aggrieved by how the war is being fought, or by the fact that the war is being fought at all.

IA-Forum: Going back to the historically low percentage, the United States appears to be trying as hard as it can militarily to avoid the death of innocent civilians. Even through avoiding these deaths, and by only killing the enemy, you create a situation where something like the Samara Bombing, or the most recent attacks from Sadr City, where these people are the families of the bad guys. So it almost seems like destruction is still fueled by only killing the bad guys, and the bad guys have families who kill, creating more bad guys.

Prof. Kahl: First of all I wouldn't say that the United States is only killing the bad guys - there have been quite a large number of innocent people who have been killed accidentally, or in the cross fire, and there have been instances of atrocities. For example, there is a lot of escalation of force incidents that happen at check points and alongside convoys, in which Iraqi drivers who aren't paying attention end up getting shot because they ignore a sign to stop or warning to do so.

There is other behavior that the United States is engaged in such as, especially in the first year of the war, of rounding up tens of thousands of young Iraqi men and throwing them into jail, in a desperate bid to try to get intelligence out of them. Between accidental deaths of civilians, and these detention practices, we ended up alienating a lot of people. Your comment about the way in which the violence in Iraq has changed since February 2006 after the bombing of the Golden Shrine in Samara, is that it has taken on this communal, sectarian civil war dimension.

I think it is useful to break the Iraq war into three acts. Act one was the war against Saddam, and the major combat operation is what the military calls it, 'the big war'. It was hundreds of tanks in the desert, streaming toward Baghdad taking on the Republican Guard and taking down the regime.

The second act is the insurgency, and basically that act starts immediately upon the fall of the regime, and picks up steam in the late summer and fall of 2003, and comes into full bloom by 2004.

That was basically running up to the current period. Overlapping with that act is the third act, which is the communal and sectarian civil war, which was happening at a low level for years. It really burst out into the open after the bombing by Sunni insurgents, probably affiliated with Al-Qaeda, in February 2006 of the Golden Shrine at Samara, which is the holiest shrine in all of Shia Islam. For a lot of Shia, who viewed for years that they had been targeted by Sunni insurgents and Al-Qaeda in Iraq in the spectacular bombings in market places and funeral processions, which killed thousands of Shia civilians, that the bombing of the Samara Shrine was the last straw.

You have seen a couple of things happen since February. You've seen the total number of civilian casualties going up astronomically - my suspicion is that more people have been killed since February 2006 than in the entire war up to that point. You are seeing the Baghdad morgue receiving 50-100 dead bodies every day. You are seeing people being pulled out of the river. The vast majority of these casualties are being inflicted by the continuation of Sunni insurgents, and terrorist groups that are attacking Shia civilians. But now, Shia militia groups, especially groups that are one way or another affiliated with Muqtada Al Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi, the US military refers to them as JAM, the US media refers to them as the Mahdi Army, have been retaliating. Large numbers of Sunni civilians are being killed, often times by death squads that show up in the middle of the night, drag families out of homes and kidnap and torture them.

Increasingly, there is intra Shia violence, between different Shia militia, and there may even be some violence that is occurring within in the Mahdi Army between those groups who are most closely associated with Muqtada al Sadr himself, and rouge elements that are not listening to what he is saying, as well as conflict between the Mahdi Army and other groups, like the Badr Brigade. The reason this is fundamentally different from the insurgency is that the insurgency was always predominantly a Sunni movement that was aimed at taking down the Shia dominated government and kicking out the United States who were perceived as being occupiers.

The sectarian struggle is not aimed at the government. It is groups aiming their violence principally at other groups. Now they're competing for political domination, but the dynamic is very different. One could argue that much of the dynamic driving the insurgency was the perception of occupation. The dynamics that are driving the sectarian civil war are largely a sectarian security dilemma. That is, each side is attacking the other because it believes the other is a threat to it, and by attacking the other it becomes a threat, and you get a self-fulfilling prophecy. You get an action and reaction spiral of violence and revenge,

which is the underlying dynamic now. That is why I think we have entered a new phase, and in terms of addressing that conflict it also is very different.

When the United States was all about the insurgency, and the United States was backing the Iraqi government in the counterinsurgency campaign, it was taking sides, it was a party to the conflict, it was saying that look, we think this government is legitimate, we are backing this government against these forces we take to be illegitimate. In terms of communal or sectarian civil war the role the United States is that of a neutral pivot, basically a peacekeeping role, although it is more a peace-enforcing role as there is no peace to be kept. It is supposed to stand between the two sides, and basically go after who ever is doing the killing, which means that sometimes it is going after groups who are closely with the government. Muqtada al Sadr is the biggest base of support for Nouri al Malaki, the Iraqi Prime Minister, and so going after Sadr is to some degree going after the Iraqi government. So the United States finds itself basically caught in between warring parties.

IA-Forum: In your article, you speak of the training that the United States has undergone, and how that training is getting better, and how that better training is corresponding to lower casualties. Is there any way to train the Iraqi security forces, who one would assume are largely Muqtada al Sadr's forces, to instill in them the rules of war?

Prof. Kahl: Actually, I think it's a really important question because there are a lot security forces that the United States relies on to work with in Iraq that are not directly under their control. Obviously, the Iraqi security forces include not only the Army, but also the National Police, as well as paramilitary groups which are associated with the protection of certain ministries. There are also private security contractors that the US government relies on, and in both the case of Iraqi security forces and private security contractors there is evidence that they do not behave with the degree of restraint and compliance with international law as the US forces for whatever reason – maybe their training or the fact that there isn't sufficient oversight or punishment for offenders.

I think that the US military is attempting to instill in them a commitment to the laws of war, but the degree to which that is successful is open to question. I wouldn't make an argument that it's because Iraqis are incapable, it is just that the conditions in Iraq are bad, and the training for the Iraqi security forces is much more limited than the training for US forces. The American soldier or Marine is going to go through basic training and advanced individual training and is going to have these things pounded into them for months before they go to war, and yet with

the Iraqi security forces training is truncated, and compressed and occurring in the middle of a war. I think it's not surprising if we see evidence that the Iraqi forces are not behaving quite as well.

I think the more troubling pattern though, is that there is a lot of evidence that especially among a lot of the police forces, its not just that they are not doing all they can to minimize civilian deaths, it is that they are complicit in the death squad activity that's ongoing - it's the inverse of what we are talking about. It is the direct targeting, it is their complicity in working with militias to basically act as death squads. Sometimes it is as simple as letting a death squad into a neighborhood and looking the other way, other times its death squad activity being run out of the Ministry of the Interior. The war in Iraq is a dirty war, there is a lot of blood on a lot of people's hands.

IA-Forum: Toward the end of the article you talk about soldiers coming forward in the US Army, not pointing fingers but saying some abuses have gone on, and how the camaraderie within the soldiers is preventing that. Is there any way for the police forces to come to the US military and say that there are abuses going on?

Prof. Kahl: I think that within the US military, my article suggests a hypothesis that needs to be evaluated, which is that there are probably atrocities that don't get reported. The reason they don't get reported is because they occur in small units, and they never get reported up the chain of command, or they do get reported up the chain of command and someone decides to not make an issue of it.

You do have instances in which the US military has not acted to investigate or punish people who have violated the laws of war, until the media or human rights groups have called them out. How often that happens, how often small unit camaraderie hides atrocities is something we don't know. One of the things that the article recommends is that in the case of American soldiers and Marines that there be more effort when they return from the war to get more information from them through interviews, or anonymous surveys. Not asking them to rat out their buddies, but to get a sense of how commonplace atrocities are, otherwise we won't know how well we are doing. We think we are doing better, but do we think we are doing better because we are not seeing it, or because it is not happening?

As it relates to the question of Iraqi police, or the Army, I don't think we have any reason to expect that they be forthcoming when they do things they know we don't like. I have no doubt that a lot of bad behavior is being hidden, and that some segments of the Iraqi police and Army are

working with the insurgents, and they are certainly not going to report their own crimes. At other times, I have no doubt that some of those organizations that have close ties to Sunni insurgents, or Shia militia blame the coalition for things the coalition didn't do.

When I was in Baghdad in July of 2006, I was speaking with an American general and who recently arrived in Baghdad, and was supervising a lot of military operations and US strategy, and he said, "You know in Iraq it's hard, everything is hard, and nothing is as it seems." In other words, the American military is blind to the complexity and duplicity, not that accompanies war in general, you know the fog of war, but that this war is really foggy. The number of actors, our ability to distinguish their motives, to know what they are after, to distinguish them from one another and from the civilian population is incredibly complicated, and unfortunately it gets more complicated every day.

IA-Forum: Is it the lack of planning beforehand, is it a lack of understanding of what we were getting ourselves into that made this war a lot foggier than we thought it was going to be? Or is it just the nature of the fog of war, is it something that is uncontrollable, which cannot be prepared for?

Prof. Kahl: To some degree it's both, but we shouldn't use the fog of war as a cop out. In this particular instance there were a lot of warnings by the State Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency, by people inside and outside, who had done a lot of thinking about what happens when you break a regime, what happens when you are in a postwar environment, or a peacekeeping environment, in a country that has really sharp ethnic and religious cleavages. There were a lot of warnings before the war that there weren't sufficient numbers of troops to secure the borders, or the huge caches of conventional weapons that the insurgents ended up arming themselves with. But there were enough troops to trigger the perception of occupation. It was the worst of all worlds, there were just enough troops to make people angry, but not enough to lock the country down.

So, there were warnings about troop levels. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz infamously stated that it was hard for him to imagine that it would take more troops to secure the country than it would to win the war and take the regime down. But, of course people who know a lot about stability operations would find it not surprising at all that it would take more troops to police the country than it would take down a decrepit, fragile regime. That was one problem.

The notion that there would be looting and chaos, the notion that there would be an insurgency, the prospect of civil war, and of sectarian conflict were all things that were talked about before, and so to the degree that civilian and military officials in Washington and at Pentagon didn't plan or prepare adequately for the day after the fall of the regime, that is something that the United States has responsibility for, and needs to think a lot about.

We should never pretend that wars are going to easy, that they are going to be bloodless, and that they will be uncomplicated, because there is no historical evidence for those claims.

Now all of that said, even had we had done a lot of planning, even if we had 500,000 troops, even if those troops had been better prepared and trained for the mission they were going to confront for the day after Saddam's fall, there were probably still going to be problems that we weren't prepared for. Our military isn't God, the military says that the enemy gets a vote.

There is only so much you can do, the other side is an actor, has agency, will react to what you do. There were going to be certain actors in Iraq that were always going to be upset at our presence. The Sunni Arab population in Iraq are only twenty percent of the population, but they have ruled that country with an iron fist for decades under Saddam. They were always going to be marginalized in a more democratic Iraq, and they were always going to have incentives to fight that marginalization.

There were always going to be incentives for Iran and Syria to stir up trouble in Iraq because they wanted us to be bogged down in Iraq so that we couldn't turn our attention to Damascus or Tehran. So there were always going to be problems, but we made those problems worse by not having enough troops, by engaging in de-Baathification that was too deep, by disbanding the Iraqi army, by dismantling a bunch of the state owned enterprises, putting a lot of people out of work.

We basically took a situation that was always prone for insurgency and civil war, and said hey, let's create a situation in which hundred of thousands of armed young men are unemployed. I think we took a situation that was always going to be hard, and made it harder, and we have been trying to catch up ever since, and unfortunately its been one step forward two steps back for the last three and a half years.

IA-Forum: Thank you very much for your time

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org