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## IRAQ HOSTAGE CRISIS----QUO VADIS?

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**Paper 1095**

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**Guest Column-by Lt Gen (ret'd) S R R Aiyengar.**

1. Where are we headed? What are we being led to? What do you see in the future? I came to ask these questions in the face of glaring events now confronting us in Iraq with the daily news of kidnappings and threats of execution of the hostages.
2. Hostage taking has been also termed as “ smart” terrorism, because the terrorists involved maintain control over the situation, gain media attention for their cause over a sustained period of time, and force governments to recognize them in the course of any negotiations to free the hostages. In, effect the leadership of the terrorist group taking the hostages assumes the role of a puppet master, pulling the strings---- some might say jerking the strings --- of the government whose people are taken hostage. The obvious aims of the terrorist group are to gain maximum press and television coverage for the cause and themselves and to increase their bargaining power for the next round. The dilemma for the government becomes how to get the hostages released without giving in to the demands of the terrorists or having any of the hostages killed and how to do so in a timely manner, without making it look as if it is weak or overreacting.
3. Three Indians were among six persons taken hostage by a militant Group calling itself “ The Holders Of the Black Banners” in Iraq. The captors had earlier announced that the hostages would be beheaded unless their governments declare that all their citizens will be withdrawn from Iraq. The Indians who had been abducted were Antaryami, Tilak Raj and Sukhdev Singh. They apparently worked for a Kuwait based transportation company, Kuwait & Gulf Link Transportation Company (KGL), involved in ferrying supplies to United States forces in Iraq. The others kidnapped were two Kenyans and an Egyptian. The militant group in its first statement threatened that it would

behead a hostage every 72 hours unless the governments to which they belonged withdrew their citizens from Iraq and the companies they worked for closed their branches. The deadline started at 8 PM (1030 PM IST) on Jul 21, it said. The kidnappings followed the release of Filipino hostage Angelo de la Cruz after Manila abided by his captor's demand and withdrew its 51-member force from Iraq. An Egyptian driver of a Saudi Arabian company was also released after the firm announced that it was withdrawing from Iraq. More than 60 foreigners have been taken hostage in Iraq in recent months.

4. The government in fact has more than the terrorists to deal with in a hostage-taking event. Just as terrorists tend to see all people and governments as either for or against them, government leaders faced with dealing terrorists often do the same. The media bombards it with questions about what it is going to do about the hostages and broadcast up-to-minute report on their conditions, giving the terrorists an opportunity to air their complaints, demands, and the nature of their cause. Neither aspect of the media coverage falls on deaf ears as the attentive, and television –oriented, public identify with the hostages, often wondering what they would do if they were in their shoes. As the situation wears on, public support is put on the line, the government 's popularity fluctuates with the public's perception of how well or poorly the situation is being handled in seeking the release of the hostages. And alongside the families of the hostages write, call and visit various influential political leaders as well as the media. They plead with all those who they feel can do something, to get their loved ones back for them.

5. The Government in the instant case promptly set-up a 'Crisis Management Group (CMG)' presided over by the Minister of State for External Affairs at Delhi, to take charge of the situation. Crisis management is generally attributed to the process of preventing, containing or resolving crises (potential crises) as they arise. The aim of such a management system is to provide a balanced response to any situation that may occur. The command and control arrangements and procedures however are flexible and should be readily adaptable to accord with events and other circumstances. The political control and direction is exercised at the highest level by designated minister(s), either individually or in committee. National Intelligence assessments, including any strategic warnings would be available to such a group. As we saw, statements and briefings by minister concerned and senior officials provided the basis of information about the overall situation and nature of the ongoing efforts to get the hostages released. A range of media facilities helped to permit first hand knowledge and reporting. From the TV footages one saw, viewers were fairly kept updated about the background information and the response of the Government. Reading out a brief statement after a marathon meeting of the Crisis Management Group, Minister of State for External Affairs, Shri E. Ahamed said prominent religious leaders in Iraq had also called for the safe release of the hostages.

6. The media has a very important role to play in any hostage-taking situation, both on the national and international scene. The kidnapers first aired their threats in a videotape broadcast by the Dubai based Al –Arabia television. " We have warned all the countries, businessmen and truck drivers that those who deal with American cowboy occupiers will be targeted by the fires of the Mujahedeen," the statement said. " Here you are once again transporting, goods, weapons and military equipment that backs the US Army". An analogy that is often quoted is that it is like the use of a theatre. The media enable the terrorists to "make all the world a stage"- "to attract an audience and deliver a message." and the action involved in the kidnapping of hostages makes good copy. The question that props up is, do members of the media

understand the difficult position they put the decision makers in when they dwell on the sufferings of the hostages and their loved ones, or when they repeatedly ask what the government is going to do? The media are important to terrorists because they not only relay information but also, like good drama critics, they interpret it as well. The slant they give - by deciding which events to report and which to ignore, by intentionally or unintentionally expressing approval or disapproval-can create a climate of public support, apathy or anger. The media need to continue their recent considerations of what the responsibilities of a free press are in covering hostage episodes, including the distinction between reporting new developments and rekindling a story that for a moment has not changed. Some guidelines, even if unevenly applied might enhance their sensitivity to the role they can play in such stressful situations. Given the demands of a 24-hour news cycle, reporters may find it difficult to obtain sufficient material to fill the airtime. In the absence of any new information on an unfolding event and sometimes-tight control in the name of security, journalists may use unattributed sources, indulge in idle speculation or produce slanted reports influenced by rumour. In the media saturated world, with constant flow of words, sounds and images, '24/7 News' (24-hour news, 7 days a week) has emerged as a television genre in its own right.

7. We need to look at how we at the national level reacted and whether we have some reasonably mature 'standard operating procedures' for dealing with the terrorist kidnappings of Indian citizens abroad. Considering that terrorism, particularly the taking of hostages is unlikely to cease in the near future, we need to address the macro –level strategies that can strengthen the government's hand in dealing with these crisis situations. Proliferation of agencies with counter-terrorism responsibilities is partly due to a greater awareness of the growing terrorist threat. But there is an equally potent danger that bureaucratic complexities do not come in the way of less than complete co-operation among the agencies. Also there is a lurking suspicion that strategies to deal with terrorism may never be fully developed because decision makers will respond to each new crisis on an ad-hoc basis, as discrete event, often unrelated to those which have happened before. Consideration of how our policies might fail (as well as succeed), and what happens if it fails, would encourage forward planning and assignment of people to think about the next steps. To assist in such an endeavor, a catalogue of previous dealings with international hostage-taking situations becomes vital. If one were to plot the chronology of events in previous hostage taking episodes, which types of decisions would we find to have followed by failure, and which by success? As we are dealing with people's lives in a hostage –taking event, there is a need for policies to succeed. But experience tells us that there are often many failures before a success. Can we prepare ourselves to deal with failures with some sort of emotional inoculation of the people involved in the decision making process?

8. A survey of research on terrorism reveals that there has been little examination of the pressures such events put on those government authorities who must cope with them. To deal with the phenomenon of terrorism, policy makers must understand their own reactions and how these reactions affect their decision-making. Only then will they be equipped to deal effectively with the hostage-taking event. The Indian hostages had done nothing personally to trigger the hostile behavior directed them except to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Equally noticeable in such cases is the trap "damned if I do and damned if I don't" predicament, while experiencing the trauma and stress so often associated with decisional conflicts that are consequential for both the leaders and country. The establishment of an interagency group with strong leadership, authority and proven working procedures and accountability is a must in such situations. Persons with expertise and

experience would be a great help to control the escalating situation. It is also important to have within the intelligence community people who are knowledgeable about various terrorists groups and a roaster of people around the world who have dealt with or studied particular terrorist organization. And in the event of a terrorist incident, the decision makers should have ready access to these specialists. Terrorist events like hostage taking creates problems that affect the policymakers, who confront them and who, affect the outcome of the crises.

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