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The Army's foolish and cruel policy

Iraqi interpreters are now forbidden to conceal their faces, despite the risks

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In a triumph of bureaucratic small-mindedness over human empathy and common sense, the Army now forbids Iraqi interpreters from wearing masks to conceal their faces while working with U.S. troops. Iraqi interpreters continue to receive threats, and some are killed, because they collaborate with Americans.

The only rationale expressed for this new policy seems to be the flippant statement of Army spokesman Lt. Col. Steve Stover, who e-mailed The Washington Post to say: "We are a professional Army and professional units don't conceal their identity by wearing masks." If the interpreters don't like it, he suggested, they "can seek alternative employment."

How is this hypocritical? Let us count the ways:

U.S. troops are allowed to protect themselves in a variety of ways, most obviously by wearing armor and carrying weapons. Yet most of them cannot communicate with Iraq's citizens without the help of an unarmed interpreter. The "terps" are the essential ingredient to making American policy work in Iraq.

The U.S. counterinsurgency strategy, adopted in early 2007, was intended to send U.S. forces out into the Iraqi population to protect civilians and win their confidence. Yet, when it comes to interpreters, the Army seems indifferent to their personal safety.

Immigration policy has evolved to a point that seems to recognize the dangers faced by Iraqi interpreters. While the process remains mad- deningly slow and cumbersome, the U.S. has taken steps to make it easier for Iraqis who have worked for the military to escape the hazards of Iraq and immigrate to the U.S. How does that square with a policy to make them go about their work with their faces uncovered?

Talk to any Iraqi interpreter who has worked for U.S. troops and you'll hear stories of personal bravery that will humble you. Among the interpreters who have worked alongside Oregon soldiers, at least one was kidnapped and killed, one was threatened until he quit, and others have moved out of their homes to avoid drawing attention to their families. Those who don't live on a military base leave their homes at different times of day and take circuitous routes home to lessen the chances of being targeted. Almost all wore masks to conceal their faces.

An estimated 300 interpreters have been killed since 2003, many because they were specifically targeted for execution by people who consider cooperation with Americans to be an act of betrayal. And while violence in Iraq overall has declined, nobody suggests that all the old tensions and resentments have disappeared, or that a culture of shame, revenge and violence has gone away.

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden and others, including Oregon's own Checkpoint One Foundation, a nonprofit, are protesting the Army's unconscionable new policy. Here's hoping that the outcry is loud enough to cause somebody with an ounce of compassion to slap his forehead and reverse the ban on letting Iraqis use a few inches of fabric to protect their identities.

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