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Military to Interpreters: Drop Dead

Standing on a principle in the shape of a land mine, the U.S. military has banned Iraqi interpreters from wearing face masks. “We are a professional Army and professional units don’t conceal their identity by wearing masks,” Lieutenant Colonel Steve Stover, a military spokesman, wrote in an e-mail to the *Post*, whose account continued: “He expressed appreciation for the service and sacrifice of the interpreters but said those dissatisfied with the new policy ‘can seek alternative employment.’” LTC Stover was pleased to report that the contractor that hires interpreters is having no trouble meeting its quota.

I’m sorry, LTC Stover, but this is stupidity and callousness posing as rectitude. For years, Iraqis working with American units were allowed to hide their faces so that they could keep their heads on their necks. The new order has already led to firings and a significant number of resignations, as well as desperate measures—one interpreter smearing his face with mascara, another hoping that a new beard will keep his identity secret. This is the kind of order that headquarters dreams up and combat troops detest.

Exactly what code of conduct is being maintained here? Iraqis aren’t in the American chain of command. They don’t take an oath; they don’t fall under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. If they did, they would be given regulation uniforms. They wouldn’t be allowed to use aliases. They would be housed on bases rather than obliged to make the dangerous trip home every night. They would receive pensions, health insurance, and death benefits. When one of them gets killed, the military would hold a ceremony. The widow would receive a flag. A grateful nation would remember.

I’m guessing that the military has decided face masks are off message: the surge worked, so the “terps”—the most vulnerable targets in Iraq, and among the most prized—are safe. They’re not, and they never will be, which is why the State Department has finally begun to improve efforts to repatriate our Iraqi allies here. Meanwhile, the Pentagon suddenly seems determined to get them killed or laid-off back in Iraq—just when we were learning how to do things right.

This is a worrying sign, and not just for the interpreters. It suggests that as the U.S. pulls out of the neighborhoods and cities next year, as required by the new security agreement just approved by Iraq’s cabinet, the military and the Obama Administration will be tempted to conceal a situation that might well be rapidly deteriorating. Face masks save interpreters’ lives, but as a form of strategic communications during wartime they get people killed.

Keywords

- LTC Stover;
- Pentagon;
- interpreters;
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- surge

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