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## Fallujah and its Aftermath

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Towards the end of October there were numerous reports of a substantial build-up of US troops in the region to the west of Baghdad. All the indications pointed to a major assault on insurgent positions in the city of Fallujah, with some suggestions that the final decision would depend on the outcome of the US presidential election on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. The assumption was that if George W. Bush was re-elected, there would be an immediate decision to go ahead with the assault on the basis that this would result in a severe setback for the insurgency and would do much to ensure that elections could take place in Iraq at the end of January.

In the event, President Bush was re-elected, the assault went ahead and, some four weeks later, there are abundant indications that the insurgency continues to develop. This is not, however, the perception among some of the more right-wing commentators in Washington, where the analysis points to a developing success for US forces in Iraq. Which viewpoint turns out to be correct will provide the clearest indication of prospects for decreased violence and increased security in Iraq in the coming months.

### The Election Outcome

Although there have been persistent reports of electoral problems in some US states, most notably Ohio, there is a general acceptance that President Bush has won a second term by a reasonably clear majority in the electoral college, backed up by an overall the majority of votes cast. Moreover, the Republican Party has consolidated its control of both Houses of Congress, giving President Bush a particularly strong power base for his second term.

The Cabinet appointments made so far indicate a move to the right, especially in the area of foreign and security policy, with Colin Powell replaced at the State Department by Condoleza Rice. Perhaps more significant have been the many changes and resignations at the Central Intelligence Agency, where there is now a clear presumption that CIA activities must be more clearly moulded to the needs of the second Bush administration.

Although the mood in Republican circles is buoyant, the issue of Iraq remains central to the problem of extending the idea of the New American Century. This world-view presupposes that it is possible to pre-empt the dangerous activities of rogue states such as Iraq, Iran and North Korea, and that the methods being used to pursue the 'war on terror', are proving effective.

The problem is that al-Qaida and its associates remain highly active, as shown by October's attacks on the Australian Embassy in Djakarta and the Taba Hilton in Sinai. Meanwhile, Iraq remains deeply enmeshed in insurgency. This is most likely the central reason why the overthrow of insurgents in Fallujah was seen as so important.

With the Bush administration safely returned to power, potential civilian casualties would be less of a concern and the taking of Fallujah could therefore more easily involve the use of heavy military force.

Fallujah was seen as important because there was a firm belief that the city acted as the primary centre of the entire insurgency throughout central and northern Iraq. By having a major urban centre that was effectively a “no go” area for US and Iraqi security forces, insurgents could train, organise, produce car bombs and other weapons and use Fallujah as a staging post for widespread operations.

Immediately after the main assault, Professor Mackubin Thomas Owens of the Naval War College, wrote an analysis for the *Weekly Standard* (27<sup>th</sup> November) in Washington, arguing that the taking of the city had been a major military success but that it had to be extended to all the other centres of population that were largely or partially controlled by insurgents. In his view “All wars hinge on logistics. No force, conventional or guerrilla, can continue to fight if it is not resupplied. Storming Fallujah was absolutely essential to the destruction of the rebel logistics infrastructure.”

While few military analysts would dispute this view, the real question that arises from this assessment is whether the insurgency in Iraq does need to maintain a relatively small number of major logistics centres, or whether it is already much more dispersed and integrated throughout many of the Sunni communities of Iraq. If it is the latter, then the insurgency will be extremely difficult to control, and meaningful elections in January will be impossible.

### The Fallujah Assault

Four days into the military operation in Fallujah, the *International Herald Tribune* reported (11<sup>th</sup> November) that “American forces cornered insurgents in a small section of Fallujah after a stunningly swift advance in which they seized control of 70 percent of the military stronghold...”. The use of substantial military force, including tanks, artillery, assault helicopters, strike aircraft and the highly destructive AC-130 gunship, all enabled Marines and Army troops to take over much of the city, albeit while causing massive structural damage and civilian casualties.

Within ten days, the assault was represented in the United States as a substantial military success, a view made easier by the copious embedding of reporters with US troops in contrast to an almost total absence of reporting from within the city. Even so, three separate issues emerged during the latter part of November that cast serious doubt on the “success” of the operation.

The first is that there was a substantial increase in attacks on US and Iraqi security forces elsewhere in the country at the very time the Fallujah operation was under way. During the course of October there had typically been 60-70 insurgent attacks a day, but this rose to around 120 a day in mid-November, returning to the previous level towards the end of the month. Moreover, there was a substantial increase in major insurgent operations in cities such as Ramadi and Mosul, with insurgents taking over large parts of the latter city. The situation there became so serious that the US military had to divert several thousand troops from elsewhere in Iraq in an attempt to restore control.

The second issue relates to the assumption, prior to the attack on Fallujah, that the city was the primary location for 5,000 or more insurgents. During the military operations in the city, it became apparent that there were far less insurgents, possibly around 2,000-3,000, with many of them having left the city before the assault began. Even so, insurgent casualties were high, almost certainly well over 1,000 killed, but this, in turn, has to be put in the context that there were still persistent attacks on US forces in the city by the end of November. In other words, it did not prove possible to fully secure the city, despite a well-equipped force of close to 15,000 US and Iraqi troops facing a much smaller number of insurgents armed only with light weapons.

The third issue relates to US casualties. During the month of November, US forces lost 136 soldiers killed, the highest number in any month since the war began in March of last year. Furthermore, the number of injuries was particularly high. Taking the period from 4<sup>th</sup> November to 30<sup>th</sup> November, US forces experienced 1,265 casualties, with almost half of them sufficiently badly wounded to require air-lifting to Landstuhl military hospital in Germany and then on to the United States. Because of the use of body armour, and the high standards of battlefield casualty support available, many of those wounded survived, whereas in other conflicts they would have died. The other side of this is that many of them have sustained very serious injuries that will affect them for life.

### The Fallujah Aftermath

During the Fallujah operation, there was worldwide press coverage of the conflict, with intense reporting from within the US military. As the fighting progressed, more information became available concerning the damage being done to the city and the increasing numbers of civilian casualties. Although no reliable figures are yet available, it is probable that they number in the thousands.

After the end of the main assault, many of the western media reporters were withdrawn from Iraq, and those that remained were largely based in very secure areas in Baghdad, with the security situation making travel around the country virtually impossible. As a result, news of the continuing insurgency comes largely from a small number of Iraqi journalists working for agencies, together with information on some blog sites.

This situation is resulting in two quite separate views of the war in Iraq for two very different audiences. In the United States there is an impression of success, with Fallujah now in US hands, an election in prospect, and little news seeping through of the level of the insurgency in the rest of the country.

Across the Middle East, however, the reporting is entirely different. The vivid TV images from reporters embedded with US units of heavy weaponry being used against mosques, houses and shops in Fallujah, have been supplemented with increasing numbers of reports of civilian casualties and the plight of refugees. This has been coupled with graphic accounts of the levels of destruction wrought on the city by what is seen throughout most of the region as an occupying force, bent on destroying the “city of mosques”.

Which of these views is more accurate, and what are the implications of recent developments? Supporters of the current US strategy insists that the operation in

Fallujah was essential to control the insurgency, and that similar operations, with substantial use of firepower, are going to be necessary throughout much of central Iraq. The view is that Fallujah was a turning point and that this, and other similar operations, will mark the beginning of the end of the insurgency.

If this is the case, then we would expect a substantial degree of optimism among military analysts. This should be coupled with the likelihood of reasonably early withdrawals of US forces as the insurgency begins to decay, now that it is being deprived of its key centres of operations such as Fallujah

The evidence so far suggests otherwise. Indeed, at the end of November it was confirmed that US force levels in Iraq are to be increased from the current level of 138,000 to 150,000. What is more significant is that all of the additional troops are front-line combat troops, including two battalions of paratroops from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Given that only about half of the US forces currently in Iraq are front-line troops, this is a substantial increase, especially as the initial deployment of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne troops, who currently serve as the US Army's rapid deployment emergency reserve, is to be four months.

This substantial reinforcement has to be seen in context in two quite different ways. One is that it is a clear indication that substantial efforts to create a viable Iraqi army, backed up by a renewed police force, are proving deeply problematic. The Iraqi police, in particular, are taking serious casualties on an almost daily basis. Meanwhile, very few of the new army units are considered to be reliable partners for the US forces, and informed analysts consider it will take five to ten years to build up a force sufficient to control the country.

The second factor is the contrast between what is now happening and what was originally anticipated. At the start of the war last year, it was confidently expected that US troops deployments in Iraq would have been reduced to about 50,000 by the end of 2003. While the majority might be withdrawn within a year or so, a much smaller number would remain in the country on a long-term basis at the small number of permanent bases being established.

By the end of last year that plan was in disarray, and the revised plan was that there could be slow withdrawals of troops during 2004. The numbers did actually drop to about 110,000 last February, but they had to be increased substantially as the insurgency developed during the Spring, with close to 30,000 troops added in the following months. Now we have a further increase, with the entire trend echoing the previously derided views of Army Chief of Staff General Eric Sinseki, expressed before the invasion, that several hundred thousand troops would be required to occupy the country.

The insurgency in Iraq is therefore deeply embedded and showing every sign of persisting if not intensifying, in spite of the assault on its supposed centre in Fallujah. Even so, with President Bush firmly ensconced for a second term, it will be entirely unacceptable for his administration to have Iraq as a major ongoing problem, so we should expect to see the continued use of substantial military force throughout the towns and cities of central and northern Iraq. On past experience, this will lead to a

further increase in anti-Americanism within the country that will, in turn aid the insurgency.

Furthermore, the impact of Fallujah and the future US military operations in Iraq will continue to be widely reported across the wider Arab and Islamic world. The effects of this are likely to be cumulative, and should be expected to lead to further support for the insurgency in Iraq and for the wider activities of al-Qaida and its associates. It therefore looks as if Fallujah, far from being a turning point for the US efforts to control the insurgency, will be one further part of a conflict that is still in its early stages.

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Professor Rogers' monthly briefings from May 2003 – April 2004 are published, along with new analysis and discussion, in the Oxford Research Group international security report for 2004, *'Iraq and the War on Terror'*. Copies can be ordered from ORG at £7.99 plus postage. More information is available from <http://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/publications/books/iraqandwaronterror.htm>.

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