

The Battle for Fallujah: The Underlying Military Issues

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Urban warfare can be highly unpredictable. There is a tendency to assume that because some of the bloodiest battles in history have occurred in cities, all such battles are bloody. In practice, many urban defenses collapse almost immediately, partly through inexperience but more often because the defender is not committed to an almost suicidal form of last ditch combat. The rapid fall of Baghdad in 2003 is a good example of a rapid collapse caused by both military incompetence on the part of defender (and high confidence on the part of the attacker) and a lack of commitment to final combat.

Fallujah seems far more likely to have a determined set of defenders, although this is not certain. It certainly has enough armed Islamists and potential diehards, and Zarqawi and others have already promised a bitter battle. At the same time, several issues must be considered:

- **The US has prepared the battlefield.** It has had months in which to create a mosaic of the insurgent strongpoints and lines of advance in the city, and to use sensors like UAVs, radars, night vision and mapping, SIGINT/COMINT systems, etc. It has had time to train with has encircled the city and taken the bridges to the West. It has been using air strikes for weeks and has sharply intensified them over the last few days. It has conducted initial AC-130 strikes. The Iraqi government has prepared the political groundwork for an attack through declaring a state of emergency; visibly arresting foreign insurgents, and beginning the first tactical operation on the ground by having Iraqi Special Forces get the credit for taking the hospital. The defenders have also had time to prepare, but there is nothing rushed about the US-led operation.
- **Insurgent numbers and “density” may well be low relative to the size of the city.** Fallujah is a medium sized city with a core population of around 150,000 and a greater urban population of up to 300,000. Reports indicate that some 50-80% of the population has left, and that the core insurgent strength is anywhere from 2,000 to 6,000 – more probably in the 2,000-3,000 range. The number of part timers and volunteers that will join them could be high or low, and is unknown. In any case, the number of insurgents is high enough to causes large numbers of clashes, but not large enough to defend a broad urban area.
- **The insurgents could be quickly driven out of the more open areas in the modern city and be forced to defend part of the more crowd and narrow old city.** If so, ambushes and booby traps would delay US forces but not defeat them. To succeed, it would have to be able to create various fortresses, but the US has already made it clear that it will attack such strongpoints from the air with precision-guided weapons. Armor and infantry could then penetrate into the area. The result would be considerable physical destruction in a limited area, but

become a death trap for the insurgents. Iraq troops could also follow up in sensitive target areas like Mosques.

- **The insurgents will know the ground, almost to the building, but the US has compensating advantages.** It is doubtful that the insurgents will have more than a few night vision devices, any counter to US standoff sensors and UAVs, and anything approaching effective communications. Many will have little or no realistic combat training and be very poor weapons operators and marksmen. They will have to use mortars and rockets, relatively low-grade anti-armor weapons like RPGs, and possibly relative obsolete MANPADs. This still can make them high lethal, but the US has fixed and rotary wing air supremacy, “owns the night” in terms of technology, has a monopoly of armor, has precision artillery and advanced ground sensors and fire control, real-time situational awareness based on systems like Blue Force Tracker, and vastly superior tactical experience and training. It should be stressed that the end result can still be very brutal and lethal combat, but this is not Hue. The insurgents can be highly lethal in tactical clashes, but cannot deal with a US-led force on anything like even terms.
- **The insurgents may be divided and have other objectives than a last stand.** Martyrdom is easy to call for, but better to inflict than suffer. There are no clear indications how many Sunni groups make up this number. Some 35 Sunni groups have claimed to exist during the fighting, but many are shell groups. The core elements in Fallujah seem to be native Sunni Islamists, FRLs and Sunni nationalists, foreign volunteers, and some core outside-led Islamists under Zarqawi. It is not clear how well these groups will unite, particularly as they come under intense pressure. It seems at least possible, that many native Sunnis will not fight to the last or even at all. It is also possible that any foreign or even local extremists who do stay behind will see scores settled and internal power struggles either by direct attacks by rivals or by informers turning their opponents into the Interim Government or US. Certainly, at least some of the targeting of US air strikes over the last few weeks seems to be based on such informers. As a result, insurgent tactics based on martyrdom and last stands is the best possible tactic for the US and Iraqi government if they act decisively and quickly. In contrast, putting up an initial battle, leaving low-level cadres to martyrdom, and dispersing to fight another day is by far the most sensible tactic for both local insurgents and outside cadres and leaders.
- **Collateral damage, civilian casualties, and religious buildings will be a constraint for Coalition forces, but the impact may be limited.** Insurgents are already using them as weapons – claiming the US attacked the main hospital to deny insurgents medical care, and using the bodies of children on television. The fact remains, however, that US commanders have to know that slow, methodical advances may reduce Collateral damage, civilian casualties, and religious damage in a given clash or day, but cumulatively produces far higher and more lasting damage and images of damage over time. It is also a grim reality of political

warfare that the same charges and edited TV coverage get made regardless of the actual level of combat. The US will need to show it is showing the maximum possible restraint in achieving decisive results; it will have to ask Iraqi troops to take over some attacks on sensitive targets, and it will have to both let Iraqi forces play a visible role and make it clear it will defer to the Iraqi government. Restrain, however, in no ways needs to be paralysis or ineffectiveness.

- **The battle outside Fallujah is already critical.** The insurgents have shown they can attack effectively outside the city and with the US forces encircling it and exerting nominal control on all males who enter or exit. This weekend, they were particularly effective in showing that a supposedly “retaken” city like Samarra is highly vulnerable and that the Interim Iraqi Government lacks the governance, security forces, and aid capabilities to conduct its own form of “stability” operations. The broader insurgent threat against Iraqi forces and their families may also help explain reports of major desertions among the supposedly elite Iraqi battalions integrated with Marine units. (Although, recruiting the financially desperate and some very poor USMC handling of such troops at the political level has not helped.)
- **A follow-on battle after the battle is a major risk for US and Iraqi Interim Government Forces.** As has been noted earlier, the insurgents have every incentive not to be destroyed in Fallujah *if* they can move outside into the rest of Al Anbar province, and the poor performance of the Iraqi government in following up US-led tactical victories, and weak performance of Iraqi military and security forces to date, makes infiltrating back into a post-battle Fallujah an attractive proposition. The same is true of the systematic killing of any Sunni Iraqis who join the election process, aid workers, Iraqi government security forces, etc. Why stand and die against professional US troops when you can live and win against weak Iraqi Interim Government officials and security forces?

The underlying irony inherent in all of these points is that stability operations and “nation building” will be just as critical in the “battle after the battle” in Fallujah, as in the “war after the war” in Iraq. At this point, however, the US can only assist the Iraqi Interim Government and the Iraqis. It will be Iraqi politics, governance, economic and aid activity, and military and security forces that ultimately win or lose.