

JIC Assessment, 8 December 2004

IRAQ SECURITY: THE IMPACT OF FALLUJAH

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 8 December 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. Fallujah has been removed as a symbol of the impotence of the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) and of resistance to the Multinational Force (MNF). The small number of Iraqi security forces performed better than expected when supported by the MNF. The city will continue to require a significant MNF presence for a considerable time.
- II. Fallujah is no longer a major insurgent base. Significant arms caches have been recovered. The discovery of 3 rudimentary chemical laboratories reflects the continuing insurgent interest in using chemicals as weapons.
- III. Details of how the insurgency operated in the city, and in particular the relationship between the various insurgent elements, are yet to emerge. But it is clear that the large majority of insurgents in Fallujah were Sunni Arab Iraqis.
- IV. Fallujah has suffered substantial damage to homes, infrastructure and services. There is no humanitarian crisis but reconstruction work is needed urgently before the population returns.
- V. Fallujah has been a setback for the insurgents, but in response they demonstrated a high level of capacity to mount attacks across Sunni Arab areas of Iraq and they are far from defeated. The present lull in violence is unlikely to last. Further surges in violence should be expected, particularly to disrupt the electoral process. Intimidation of voters and attacks on election and other infrastructure will be key objectives.
- VI. The immediate outcome in Fallujah has boosted the authority of the IIG. But in the longer-term substantial Sunni participation in the election remains vital. If a significant number of Sunni Arabs fail to vote, the elections will at best lack international credibility and at worst could be destabilising.
- VII. The muted Shia response to the violence in Fallujah and Sunni areas has reinforced Sunni sectarian hostility towards Shia.

Policy Implications:

- Rapid implementation of reconstruction projects and the positioning of key supplies will prevent further deterioration in the humanitarian situation and help shore up support for the election.
- An opportunity to publicise the arms caches kept in mosques, the torture chambers and other human rights atrocities in Fallujah has been missed.
- With Fallujah dealt with, there is a renewed opportunity and need for the IIG to reach out to Sunni Arabs.

IRAQ SECURITY: THE IMPACT OF FALLUJAH

This paper was commissioned by OD Sec and looks specifically at the impact of recent operations against the insurgents in Fallujah.

Operation Al Fajr (Dawn)

1. The Multinational Forces (MNF), supported by Iraqi security forces (ISF), are now in control of most of Fallujah. Some isolated pockets of resistance remain and sporadic attacks are continuing. As anticipated, the operation led to a surge of attacks across Sunni areas in central and northern Iraq - nearly 900¹ at the height of the fighting in the second week of November. This was the highest total so far recorded, exceeding the previous spikes in April and August when Sunni violence coincided with Shia "uprisings".

2. Fallujah has been removed as a symbol of resistance to the MNF and of the impotence of the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG). The city has suffered substantial damage to homes, infrastructure and services, although the number of civilian casualties has been far fewer than many feared. In January this year the population was estimated at over 200,000; a large majority fled before the fighting. Many Fallujans are staying in nearby towns and villages, but numbers involved are not clear. There is no humanitarian crisis but reconstruction work, particularly to improve water and electricity supplies, is needed urgently before the population returns after restrictions are lifted on 15 December.

The Military Impact on the Insurgency

3. In the short-term Fallujah has been removed as a major insurgent base to mount operations across Anbar province and elsewhere, including Baghdad. Over 300 arms caches have been cleared so far and some 20 bomb-making facilities discovered (including 3 rudimentary chemical laboratories reflecting a continuing insurgent interest in using chemicals as weapons). Arms dumps, some containing sophisticated anti-tank weapons, were found in over half of the mosques in the city. [...] A number of Iraqi and other hostages, were rescued by the MNF; some had been tortured.

4. Detailed intelligence of how insurgents operated in the city, and in particular the relationship between the various insurgent groups, is yet to emerge. It is likely that key members of the Resistance Council left the city before the attack. Their absence could explain the uncoordinated and largely ineffective defence of the city. Some did stay and may have been killed or wounded. Al-Zarqawi's movements remain unclear: although probably in Fallujah before the attack, he has since been reported variously in Mosul, Baqubah, Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq.

5. Over 2000 insurgents were reported killed by MNF-I. We cannot verify this figure. A further 1900 suspects were detained; but over half have been released. Only 40 detainees have been identified as foreign nationals (including 1 Briton who has since been released), according to preliminary MNF-I reports.

¹ According to MNF-I statistics.

We may never know how many foreign jihadists were in Fallujah: many of the dead or detained had false or no documentation. But it is clear that the large majority of the insurgents were Sunni Arab Iraqis.

6. Intelligence suggests that many insurgents left before and during the assault. MNF estimates the number who dispersed as up to 1000; but we cannot verify this figure. Some moved west along the Euphrates valley to Ramadi and Hit. Many headed to Baghdad and some north to Mosul, Baqubah, Samarra and elsewhere (possibly including Basra). Intelligence suggested that a number of insurgent groups across the country had planned to carry out attacks in response to MNF operations against Fallujah; they may have been joined and assisted by some who dispersed from Fallujah. These did not have a significant impact on MNF operations in and around Fallujah.

7. Since the fall of Fallujah the number of attacks has reverted to pre-Ramadan levels of some 50 attacks a day. This is partially explained by the insurgents' defeat in Fallujah, and by the continuing momentum of MNF operations, in particular in and around Baghdad and Mosul – although Mosul remains fragile. But the insurgents are reconstituting and the serious attacks in Baghdad last weekend show they are recovering. Fallujah has been a serious setback, but in response the disparate insurgent groups demonstrated a high level of capacity to mount attacks and they are far from defeated. They remain capable, determined and resilient in the Sunni Arab areas of Iraq.

The Political Impact

8. The immediate outcome in Fallujah has boosted the authority of the IIG. There has been domestic and international criticism, but much less than anticipated. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani remained quiet. The Independent Electoral Commission for Iraq (IECI) has kept the election process on track and the IIG has been able to announce 30 January 2005 as the day of the election. The Sharm el-Sheikh conference was not derailed and helped build regional consensus to encourage broad Iraqi participation in the elections. The UN remains engaged.

9. The long-term political consequences of Fallujah are yet to be seen. Substantial Sunni participation in the election remains vital: if a significant number of Sunni Arabs fail to vote, the elections will at best lack international credibility and at worst could be destabilising. The most influential Sunni Arab body, the Muslim Ulema Council (MUC), reacted to Fallujah by announcing a boycott of the elections. This position seems unlikely to change, and has probably been reinforced as a result of a series of MNF/ISF raids and arrests of MUC officials. Among other Sunni groups, the Iraqi National Constituent Conference has not completely shut the door on participation and the Iraqi Islamic Party still seems likely to contest the elections despite pressure to withdraw.

10. Prime Minister Allawi and some members of the IIG have been inclined to seek postponement but have so far, at least in public, ignored calls from Sunni groups to do so. More progress in stabilising security in Sunni areas is needed to maximise the turnout. Poor security has prevented voter registration in Anbar and delayed it in Ninawa provinces. There have already been many cases of intimidation of Iraqis working for the IECI and three were killed in an attack in Baghdad on 6 December. Intimidation and attacks will become much more widespread in Sunni Arab areas as the election approaches.

The Shia Response

11. Shia areas in Baghdad and central and southern Iraq remained calm during the Fallujah operation. Support for the insurgents from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and other Shia militants was confined to public statements. [...] some leading Shia political leaders provided assurances to the IIG of support for a state of emergency prior to the Fallujah operation. Al-Sistani [...] his silence was criticised by leaders of the MUC, and has been a focus for wider Sunni hostility to the Shia.

12. The muted Shia response has reinforced already strong Sunni fears of Shia retribution post the election. Shia/Sunni sectarian tension is increasing. Following a spate of [...] Sunni extremist attacks on Shia, [...] some Shia militants – led by the Iranian-backed Badr Corps – have joined forces to mount sectarian attacks in retaliation: targets include Sunni insurgent groups and members of the MUC. (Two MUC officials were murdered in late November, although it is not clear whether these attacks were sectarian or linked.) The suicide bombing of a Shia Mosque in Baghdad on 3 December - claimed by al-Zarqawi - will exacerbate the situation.

Prospects

13. Fallujah will continue to require a significant MNF and ISF presence for a considerable time. Local government needs to be re-established urgently: finding effective candidates for key posts in the face of intimidation will present a challenge. Although no longer an insurgent haven, attacks will continue both by insurgents who have remained in the area, and others who will seek to return.

14. In the short term, Fallujah and the follow up operations in Mosul and Baghdad have partially disrupted the insurgency. The insurgents will learn from the experience. Attempting to hold a large urban area was costly and failed: in future they are less likely to present such static and concentrated targets. But temporary localised seizures such as the recent examples in Tall Afar, Samarra, Ramadi and Mosul, if carefully publicised, will have some effect in damaging the credibility of the IIG. Such attacks also expose the frailty of the ISF. Theatre reporting suggests the best Iraqi units performed better than expected in Fallujah supporting the MNF. But elsewhere, notably in Mosul, they largely melted away when under pressure.

15. The present lull in violence is unlikely to last. Further surges in violence should be expected, particularly to disrupt the electoral process. Intimidation of voters, attacks on election infrastructure, as well as other infrastructure (oil and power supplies) will be key objectives.