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FALLUJAH

Context

Islamic extremist Foreign Fighters (FF) and Sunni Former Regime Elements (FRE) continue to control Fallujah, using it as a safe haven from which to operate across Iraq. The US believes that an offensive operation against Fallujah is a prerequisite to controlling the security situation and holding successful elections. The UK view, based on the lessons from the operations in Fallujah in April 04, is that offensive operations carry a very high risk of unifying the insurgency and alienating Sunnis from the political process, thus undermining the elections. this week to limited operations on the outskirts of Fallujah together with a tighter cordon on the town to take place before the start of Ramadan.

US Perspective

General Casey recently briefed the Iraqi Ministerial Committee of National Security on operational planning for Fallujah, recommending early offensive operations to restore the city to Iraqi Interim Government control. The US military view is that if Fallujah is not dealt with, MNF-I will be unable to control the level of violence in the run up to elections. There is also a desire to build on recent successes such as Samarra. The US intends that full offensive operations in Fallujah should: destroy the remnants of the former regime; kill or capture Zarqawi; wrest the initiative back from the insurgents; and demonstrate campaign progress and the resolve of the IIG. They expect the operation to last for 6-7 days. Timing is uncertain, but is now unlikely before Ramadan (starting around 15 October). The second half of November is more likely.

UK Perspective

While we agree that Fallujah is a stronghold for insurgency, we do not believe that 'solving' Fallujah is a prerequisite for holding successful elections. Successful elections in Fallujah are unlikely and Sunni participation overall is at risk, but in the current security climate elections could happen elsewhere and mitigating measures could be taken in Sunni communities to ensure their overall participation reaches critical mass.

The UK view, based on lessons from the MNF operations in April 04, is that a ground offensive in Fallujah carries a very high risk of unifying the insurgency and acting as a trigger for opportunistic Shia violence; alienating Arab Sunni, with the potential to undermine the legitimacy of elections; over-facing the Iraqi Security Forces and seriously delaying the overall Iraqisation programme; threatening UN support for the January elections; and undermining Coalition cohesion.

Our perspective is that a measured, containment approach should be adopted towards Fallujah. We judge that the key to defeating the insurgency is to drive wedges between the FF and FRE – in particular differentiating between

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hard-line Baathists and Islamists, and those who could be co-opted - and between the FF/FRE and the local population. This is already happening to an extent, with growing splits between the local population and insurgents - particularly Zargawi's Islamic extremist group (al-Jamat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad) who they blame for drawing US firepower. Wolfowitz acknowledged this in his meeting with Kevin Tebbit on October 6. Our judgement is that the US approach using offensive military action against Fallujah is likely to reverse this process and draw these groups together again and redirect local anger towards MNF, as happened during the operation in April.

Iraqi Interim Government Perspective

Allawi, although approving limited operations against Fallujah, remains somewhat cautious about a full-scale attack and is being briefed further on 16 October. Allawi would prefer any military action to be Iraqi led - this would require enough time from now for the ISF to build up the necessary capability.

Engagement with the US/IIG

We are continuing to make the case with the US and the IIG for a more measured approach using the arguments detailed above. Allawi's attitude will clearly be key, particularly on timing. If, however, we are not able to persuade the US or the IIG against offensive operations in Fallujah, we should at least persuade them to take mitigating actions to:

- Continue separating FF and FRE groups from each other and from their support bases,
- Safeguard the political process, ensuring the continued engagement of the UN in the electoral process,
- Maintain consent and cohesion of the IIG (particularly the Sunni members),
- Maintain regional consent (the regional conference in November would provide a forum for this)
- Preserve the confidence, credibility and capability of the ISF,
- Take proactive measures to address broader Shia concerns in order to deter violence in the Shia hotspots,
- Provide for effective local governance in order to better manage the aftermath of a successful operation to gain control of Fallujah.

A UK Contribution

We have received an informal request from the US Commander in theatre to provide a battle group (around 1200-1500 personnel) from MND(SE) to take the place of a US unit in North Babil, in order to release the unit to participate in operations against Fallujah. The MOD is looking at this request to evaluate the military tactical and politico-strategic risk/benefit balance. It will also be considered in the context of what Ministers decide about our overall view of the Fallujah options.

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