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Fallujah, Sadr, and the Eroding US Position in Iraq

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The Eroding US Position on Iraq

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It may not be as apparent in the US as it is in the Arab world, but several weeks of travel in the region indicate that the course of the fighting in Fallujah and Najaf is being perceived in much of Iraq and the Arab world as a serious US defeat. This is not simply a matter of shattering any aura of US military invincibility, but this is a critical factor.

Why the US Has Already “Lost” Some Aspects of its Battles in Fallujah and with Sadr

As was the case in 1973, the Iraqi insurgents do not have to win, they merely have to put up a determined enough resistance, with enough skill and courage, to send a signal they are capable of a determined, strong and well-organized effort. The totals of US, allied, and friendly Iraqi killed and wounded already reach the point where they act as a virtual road map for future battles in Iraq and the rest of the world. The end result is to show that an Arab asymmetric force can delay and possibly check mate the strongest Western military power in the world, that Arabs are not weak or passive, and that Arabs can “take back their homeland.”

It will take a new public opinion poll to determine just how much these events have changed opinion inside Iraq, but it seems likely that support for the US has dropped sharply, and that this drop is compounded by the flood of Arab images of Iraqi civilians suffering, and newscasts that claim every US use of a modern weapon is a careless use of excessive force. Certainly, these images are having a powerful impact throughout the Sunni world -- strongly reinforced by Israeli military action and statements that make the constant Arab media linkage between the US and Israeli occupations steadily more damaging. Similar images are being portrayed in Iran, although their impact is far harder to read.

The second message is equally important. The last few weeks of resistance have effectively challenged the legitimacy of the CPA, the US approach to nation building, and the Interim Governing Council. The US has been “forced” to turn to the UN. The “American” Iraqis have been divided and weak, and unable to rally the Iraqi people. The end result is that the US ability to convey “legitimacy” has been sharply undercut precisely at the time the US needs legitimacy for its June 30 turnover. In addition, US ties to the IGC are becoming steadily more damaging--particularly the image of US ties to “losers” like Chalibi.

The third message is that Iraq has become a natural battleground for Islamic insurgents and “volunteers” of all persuasions. There is no meaningful evidence that Iraq was a focus of terrorism before the war, or a primary focus early in the fighting. Over the last few months, however, the outside presence and support for insurgents has increased. Over the last few weeks, it has become all too clear that such support is paying off well in

terms of American and allied casualties in terms of the image of Islamic resistance as being able to take on the US. Iraq was never a magnet for terrorism before the war, and only a limited magnet before Fallujah and Sadr. It has become a major magnet now.

The fourth message is less overt, but also real. Much of the aid program has been paralyzed. The US use of contract security has created the image of mercenary forces, and efforts to win hearts and minds in troubled areas have essentially collapsed, as they have in some formerly “friendly areas” as well. The flood of aid that should have helped win hearts and minds during this critical period is often little more than a trickle.

A Negotiated Solution Means Limiting the Scale of Defeat

The end result is virtually a no win situation for the US: Any negotiated solution effectively legitimizes the Sunni and Shi'ite hard-line opposition, while weakening the IGC—exposing the fact the US is still trying to turnover power to “mystery men” on June 30, who cannot have legitimacy because they have no identity. This compounds the problems inherent in the Ibrahimi approach, which effectively says that the government of June 30 will not have legitimacy until a popular council takes place and a real government and constitutional base must come from the Iraqis and not from the legacy left by the CPA/IGC.

No Military Solution Can Now Work

The US can of course defeat the Iraqis. However, any military solution is now likely to be the kind of “victory” that creates a new firestorm over excessive force, civilian casualties, and collateral damage. At the same time, the US cannot hope to kill or arrest all of the Sunni and foreign insurgents that exist now and is almost certain to create far more than it destroys.

Any US arrest or killing of Sadr at this point means creating an instant martyr that will have a powerful impact on many young Shi'ites in Iraq, and militant Shi'ites all over the world -- pushing them towards some form of alignment with Sunni insurgents. A serious fight from a now cold start against a well organized resistance in Najaf would be a disaster, triggering much broader Shi'ite alignments against the US.

Ironically, the US might have been far better off to act decisively in hot pursuit. Certainly, the military effort and the casualties would have been far smaller, and any criticism would have been tempered with reluctance to challenge the US again.

What the US Should Do Now

At this point, the US lacks good options other than to turn as much of the political, aid, and security effort over to moderate Iraqis as soon as possible, and pray that the UN can create some kind of climate for political legitimacy.

Other options are:

- --Rush aid to the Iraqi security forces and military seeking more friendly Arab aid in training and support, and to provide as broad a base of Iraqi command as possible. Forget contract regulations on buying equipment. Deliver everything necessary and worry about the details later.
- Zero-base the failed contracting effort for FY2004 aid to put Iraqi Ministries and officials in charge. Reprogram funds for a massive new CERF program to enable US military commanders to use dollars instead of bullets at every opportunity. Make the focus of US control over aid whether Iraqis spend the money honestly and effectively, and not on US control, plans, and objectives.
- Walk firmly and openly away from the losers in the IGC like Chalibi.
- Make it clear that the US can and will leave Iraq if the Iraqis do not reach agreement on an effective interim solution and proceed with unity to implement the UN plan and move towards real democracy. Drag in as many non-IGC leaders as possible, and give Ibrahimi's council idea the strongest possible support.
- Accept the fact that a universal, nation-wide "security first" policy is simply stupid and impractical, and that the US needs to isolate and bypass islands of resistance, and focus on creating a legitimate Iraqi government that can unify Iraqis and allow nation building to work. This means relying on containment in the case of truly troubled and high insurgent areas, and focusing on security in friendly areas.
- Accept the fact there is no way to "drain the swamp." At this point, there simply is no way to eliminate cadres of insurgents or to disarm the most threatening areas. Fallujah and similar areas have too much popular support for the insurgents, there are too many arms that can be hidden, and too many points of vulnerability. This does not mean the US should give up fighting the insurgents or its efforts to disarm them. It does mean the US must accept that it cannot win in the sense of eliminating them or turning hostile areas into secure and disarmed areas.
- Continue expanding the role of the Iraqi security forces. Understand that their loyalties will be divided, that putting them in charge of hostile areas does not mean they can be expected to do more than work out a modus vivendi with the insurgents, and that the end result will often be to create "no go" or limited access areas for Americans. The US cannot afford to repeat the Israeli mistake of assuming that any Iraqi authority in hostile areas can be counted on to provide security for Americans.
- Zero-base the US embassy plan to create the smallest staff practical of proven area experts, with the clear message to the Iraqis that not only are they going to be in charge, but non-performance means no US money and no continuation US troops and support. End the image of a US end of an occupation after the occupation.

- Stop giving all CPA/CJTF-7 press conferences, and put an Iraqi on the stage with the US spokesmen. Stop all procounsel-like press conferences where the US seems to be dictating. Make an Iraqi spokesman part of all dialogue.