

Faces of Battle:

The Insurgents in Falluja

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Brief Analysis

The military outcome of the long-anticipated coalition operation to break the insurgents' control of the city of Falluja was never in doubt. Only the speed of the operation and the casualties inflicted and taken were in question. Ultimately, of course, it remains to be seen if Iraqi and coalition forces can prevent the insurgents from reestablishing a presence in the city. Nevertheless, the fight for Falluja tells us much about the maturing resistance that U.S. and Iraqi troops now face in Iraq. While there are unlikely to be any more battles like Falluja, there will be no cheap or easy victories over the resistance in the battles to come.

The Setting and the Odds

Falluja was a "set piece" battle, with both sides having time to carefully prepare both the forces and the ground for the fighting. Falluja covered about twenty square kilometers and consisted of some 1,000 city blocks, including 50,000 buildings ranging from simple homes to industrial facilities. Most, perhaps as much as 90-95 percent, of the city's estimated 300,000 people had left the city in the period before the beginning of operations.

The insurgents were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. Coalition forces numbered over 10,000 compared to perhaps 3,000 insurgents. Coalition troops could call on a wide range of air, artillery, and armor assets to reduce opposition. The insurgents had the advantages typically associated with defending urban terrain: cover and concealment provided by the buildings, knowledge of the terrain, and a dense network of streets and alleys (often narrow and therefore difficult for armored vehicles to negotiate) through which to move fighters.

According to coalition information, of the 100 mosques in Falluja, 60 served either as defensive positions or weapons caches, one out of every five city blocks had a weapons cache, and eleven improvised explosive device (IED) factories existed. Eyewitness accounts of the fighting also reveal that significant numbers of fighting positions had been created throughout the city, including bunker complexes, and that likely avenues of advance and positions for coalition forces had been pre-registered for direct or indirect fire. Falluja was prepared for battle, reflecting lessons learned by the resistance in nineteen months of combat with coalition forces.

Although foreign fighters were clearly active in Falluja, including the Zarqawi organization, most of the fighters in Falluja were native Iraqis as opposed to foreign jihadists, according to Iraqi government information. One element of

foreign fighters that was discovered was the so-called "Abu Hamza group," with some twenty-seven members, including individuals from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Morocco, and Algeria. Some resistance elements encountered by U.S. troops were highly organized, uniformed, and well equipped, including with flak jackets. One specific insurgent element noted in Falluja was the Jaish Muhammad, one of the oldest and best-established resistance organizations. Some accounts of insurgent actions in the fighting are reminiscent of the tactics of Fedayeen Saddam units during the war -- heavy reliance on hit-and-run tactics and near-suicidal attacks.

The insurgents probably understood that they had little chance of stopping the heavily armed U.S. troops and opted for decentralized resistance in depth. They seem to have fought from the beginning in relatively small groups, although in several cases tens of fighters were noted moving or fighting. They were armed with the weapons that have become icons of Iraqi resistance: automatic weapons, sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), mortars, recoilless rifles, and a variety of IEDs. U.S. troops reported that an improved type of RPG was employed at Falluja.

Performance

Insurgents in Falluja fought with some skill and marked determination. A number of factors contributed to this performance.

- By all accounts the insurgents who remained in Falluja for the battle were highly motivated. Whether imbued with Baathist notions, Sunni Arab nationalism, Islamist fervor, or simple desperation, many of them fought to their own end with the hope of only a kind of personal vindication. One account of the close-quarters fighting tells of a Marine unit calling on insurgents trapped in a house to surrender and getting the reply that "it is better to die fighting and go to paradise than surrender." To paraphrase a historian of the Pacific war against the Japanese, in Falluja U.S. troops "risked death for military objectives," while at least some insurgents "chose death to elevate physical defeat into moral triumph."
- Insurgent fighters demonstrated a certain measure of military professionalism. They had a notion of how they were going to defend the city. They reacted to U.S. actions, attempting to both maneuver and counterattack, although this was on a limited scale. They had pre-registered areas for fire and shifted fires in response to U.S. actions. They effectively employed snipers and countersniping tactics. They used multiple ruses to surprise coalition units and inflict casualties.
- Insurgent forces were cohesive at the small unit level. They stayed and fought in the face of overwhelming U.S. firepower and heavy casualties. They pressed home near-suicidal attacks, with little prospects for success other than inflicting a few casualties. And they kept coming back for more. Many insurgent elements had to be destroyed to the last man.
- They were tenacious, maintaining a significant level of resistance for ten days, with individuals and small groups of two or three still holding out and occasionally inflicting casualties. By "fighting to the death" they ensured greater physical destruction of the city's infrastructure, and have pushed back the reconstruction and re-peopling of the city. They were, however, ultimately defeated in a military sense. Of the perhaps 3,000 insurgents in the city, an estimated 1,200 were killed, and another 1,000 or so captured, according to U.S. commanders. Even if these figures are somewhat exaggerated, the insurgent forces that remained in the city to fight suffered punishing losses.

Implications

If these estimates are accurate, perhaps 10 percent of the active insurgents in Iraq were eliminated. Even given demonstrated resistance capabilities to replace losses, this is a substantial number of trained and committed fighters. More importantly, the so-called "Emirate of Falluja" no longer exists as a secure base for the insurgency within the country. No place in Iraq was as strongly held by the insurgents and the loss of this secure base has to be a

significant blow.

Falluja was a special case. The loss of the city to the insurgents in April allowed it to become a major center of resistance and a fortified locality that would require a major effort to reduce. Coalition forces for the November offensive were roughly five times stronger than those used in April and benefited from weeks of careful preparation. Nowhere else in Iraq is such a large, concerted effort likely to be required.

This does not mean that important and hard fights are not to come, only that they will be different in character. Mosul and Ramadi are significant centers of resistance. The scope of resistance control of areas south of Baghdad -- the so-called "triangle of death" -- is only now becoming clear. Baghdad itself has entrenched Sunni resistance elements, which all efforts so far have failed to eliminate. To the extent that resistance to operations in these cities reflects the character of the resistance in Falluja, these too will be difficult fights.

The second battle of Falluja will stand as a symbol of many things, but one of them is surely the willingness of the Iraqi government and the coalition to wage war against Sunnis resisting the new political order in Iraq. Continued military operations against other Sunni cities, even if not achieving the level of destruction wrought in Falluja, are likely to reinforce this image.

One element of this will be how the Sunnis tell the story of Falluja; what will be their narrative of the battle. Will they treat it as a historic stand against the crusader infidels and their apostate allies, as the mythmakers are already attempting, or will they see it as a foolish and self-destructive enterprise that hurt the Sunni community? If Falluja comes to represent a heroic myth then the fighting in Iraq stands to become still more difficult.

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