

# Judgment Day:

## The Second Battle of Falluja

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Nov 9, 2004

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### Brief Analysis

**C**oalition and Iraqi government forces are moving to retake Falluja from insurgents who have held the city since April 2004. On the evening of November 8, U.S. troops with large-scale air support began to penetrate at several points, encountering some resistance. The coalition and the Iraqi government are gambling that they can break the insurgents hold on the city with acceptable losses and without a protracted battle. The insurgents are hoping to avoid annihilation, inflict embarrassing losses, create an image of wanton destruction by the coalition and government forces, and force an inconclusive end to the fighting. Indeed, Falluja has become a kind of "Stalingrad on the Euphrates" -- a city imbued with political, military, and symbolic consequence, and a battle whose outcome will have long-term implications.

### Eve of Battle

In the months following the April stalemate, Falluja became both a symbol of the power of the resistance and a secure base for insurgent activities elsewhere in the country. This was a disaster for the coalition and Iraqi government; for both political and military reasons, they needed to recapture the city.

Falluja presents different problems today than it did in the spring. The military capabilities of both sides have increased. U.S. and Iraqi forces have had time to prepare for a deliberate offensive against the insurgents in the city, as opposed to the rushed action of April. They are also much stronger in terms of both firepower and numbers (with up to 15,000 combined surrounding Falluja). The Iraqi Security Forces in general have benefited from intensified training, and the best of these units (including the 36th Commando Battalion) are being employed in the Falluja offensive.

The insurgents also appear stronger and better prepared for a fight. Estimates vary widely, but the number of active fighters is probably between 1,000 and 3,000, with the possibility of other Falluja residents joining in the fighting. They are now entrenched, reportedly constructing multiple lines of defense. They have learned the lessons of urban warfare against the coalition and can be expected to exploit all of the opportunities afforded by fighting within the built-up confines of Falluja. They will also likely draw on the increasingly complex tactics employed throughout Iraq, including the use of multiple weapons systems in a coordinated fashion.

Major changes have also emerged in the political dimension since April. The government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi has proven stronger and more aggressive in dealing with the insurgency than its predecessor, the Iraqi Governing Council, providing political cover for coalition offensive operations that was not available in April. Even though it is still subject to political pressure from the Sunni community (including President Sheikh Ghazi al-Yawar and the Association of Muslim Scholars), it has so far remained committed to the retaking of Falluja and has used its political contacts to undermine and isolate the insurgents. It is critical that Allawi remain committed, as any hesitation will provide opportunities for the operation to lose steam and unravel. For its part, the coalition appears to have the will to see the Falluja operation through to a satisfactory military and political conclusion. The determination of both parties is likely to be tested.

#### Uncertain Partners

Efforts to fully train and equip the Iraqi Security Forces are underway but far from completed. Most of these forces will therefore remain in a secondary role during the Falluja operation, with U.S. forces doing the heavy fighting. Some Iraqi units, such as the aforementioned 36th Battalion, seem capable of limited offensive action with U.S. support. The bulk of the Iraqi units, however, will likely be employed in supporting roles -- assisting in isolating the city, providing security in areas taken by U.S. troops, and eventually extending and enforcing Iraqi government control over the city. Perhaps most important, they will have a symbolic role, demonstrating that Iraqi security is increasingly in Iraqi hands. Their missions will be given maximum publicity; coalition commanders will be reluctant to employ them for tasks in which they could suffer a public defeat.

#### Offensive Scenarios

There are three broad scenarios as to how the offensive will proceed:

- 1) Rapid operations aimed at quickly breaking resistance, inflicting maximum casualties on insurgent elements, and preventing their escape either from the city or within it. This implies days rather than weeks of major combat, to be followed by the introduction of Iraqi forces to secure the city, the reestablishment of a government presence, and the infusion of reconstruction assistance. Although this scenario raises the possibility of significant casualties to coalition forces and civilians in the immediate term, it minimizes the political and military consequences of protracted operations. This scenario would be similar to the Samarra operation of September 2004, but on a grander scale.
- 2) Deliberate operations featuring the methodical reduction of insurgent forces and positions, the use of precision firepower to destroy key targets with minimal collateral damage and risk to coalition forces, and the careful establishment of security in freed areas. This scenario implies weeks of action. Hence, it could allow the insurgents to portray the situation as a valiant stand, exploiting it to bring political pressure on the Iraqi government.
- 3) A sporadic operation, featuring periods of intense activity punctuated by pauses or ceasefires for negotiations. This would be similar to operations carried out in Najaf in August 2004. Such an offensive could be quite protracted; therefore it is a highly undesirable scenario for the coalition and the Iraqi government.

#### Resistance Response

Because insurgent forces in Falluja are a mix of tribal fighters, Baathists, Sunni fundamentalists, and foreign jihadists, the intensity of resistance is likely to vary. While some Islamist insurgents may resist until the last man, others (especially Baath and tribal elements) may choose to fight again another day. Both Sunni and Shiite insurgents have shown that they can recognize when further resistance is futile and can simply disappear into the population. In particular, key Baath and Islamist cadres can be expected to attempt to evade destruction or capture; some doubtless have already fled the city.

## Implications

Those anticipating that the battle of Falluja will constitute a decisive victory for either side should lower their expectations. Even if driven out of the city (or underground within it), the resistance will remain in the fight elsewhere in Iraq and will probably reemerge over time within Falluja. Nevertheless, the offensive will provide something of a judgment on many aspects of the Iraq situation, including the effectiveness of the coalition's approach to counterinsurgency operations, the strength and cohesiveness of both the Allawi government and the Iraqi Security Forces, and the robustness of the insurgency. Breaking the insurgents' hold on the city, even if imperfectly and with some resurgence of resistance, will show that coalition and Iraqi forces are capable of dealing with the most difficult challenges of the insurgency when employed properly and in an appropriate political framework. This will provide new confidence and create impetus for operations that will need to follow in Baghdad, Mosul, and other cities before the elections in January 2005. For the insurgents, a protracted Falluja battle in which they inflict significant casualties would represent a kind of victory, especially if the government is forced to negotiate an end to the fighting and emerges without clear control over the city. The insurgents are not hoping for an outright defeat of the coalition, but a long battle with an inconclusive end would serve their purposes well.

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Policy #913

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