

# The Battle for Falluja and Sunni Resistance

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## Brief Analysis

**T**he battle for Falluja, in which U.S. forces have been fighting to break Sunni resistance elements in that city, has been one of the most sustained fights of the Iraq war and subsequent occupation. Significantly, Sunni insurgents are not only fighting in Falluja, but also across the Sunni heartland. Militarily, the battle suggests that the resistance maintains substantial capabilities despite a year of counterinsurgency operations, and that more tough fights lie ahead. Politically, it points to expanded Sunni opposition to the occupation.

### The Resistance on the Eve of Falluja

By the time of the March 31, 2004, killing of the four U.S. contractors in Falluja, resistance elements had already become embedded in Sunni society. The resistance had rebounded from reverses inflicted by U.S. forces and extended itself into all areas of the Sunni Triangle. Persistent attempts by coalition leaders and commanders to portray the resistance as "a small minority" "on its knees" or "broken" were repeatedly frustrated by resistance actions.

Over time, resistance elements broadened their operational scope to include attacks on coalition forces, Iraqi "collaborators," the Shi'i population, Sunni clerics, and Westerners and other foreigners assisting in reconstruction efforts. The resistance adapted its tactics to suit its targets, exhibited improved command and control, and recruited to replace losses inflicted by the coalition. It also proved adept at surprising coalition forces, especially in the context of the U.S. troop rotation which by April 2004 had replaced three seasoned divisions with three new ones.

### Harbingers of Falluja

Several resistance incidents prior to the Falluja operation suggested that the resistance was capable of significant military action. On November 30, 2003, a three-and-a-half-hour fight in the city of Samarra took place between U.S. troops of the 4th Infantry division and approximately 100 insurgents. This sustained battle indicated that resistance elements were capable of conducting complex actions and were willing to engage in close combat with coalition troops when necessary. In February 2004, several incidents in Falluja before the April battle itself pointed to the presence of substantial resistance capabilities in or around the city. These incidents also demonstrated the unreliability of Iraqi security forces, and suggested some degree of popular support for the resistance.

### The Battle for Falluja

The timing of the operation in Falluja was driven by the need to react relatively quickly to the killing and mutilation of the four contractors. The fighting began on April 6. For three days, the Marines and insurgents slugged it out indecisively on the ground, with the resistance staying in the fight while its story was covered by the media as the "siege of Falluja." (Even U.S. commanders used the term "siege" to characterize the fighting.) Resistance tactics of closely engaging U.S. forces in an urban environment with automatic weapons, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades; operating within the civilian population; and using mosques for cover maximized their tactical advantage while reducing the coalition's firepower advantage. It does not appear that the Marines expected significant sustained resistance, much less popular resistance. Statements suggest that they were anticipating a series of precise raids into the city to capture "high value targets," while drawing out insurgents who could then be destroyed by coalition firepower. Lacking overwhelming force and unwilling to act too aggressively on the ground for fear of civilian and Marine casualties, U.S. forces got bogged down in inconclusive fighting.

Instead of a rapid and well-contained pacification action in Falluja, the coalition found itself facing active and aggressive resistance elements across Sunni areas. The slow pace of operations in Falluja allowed Sunni resistance elements in other areas to take action. The deadly April 6 ambush in Ramadi and the upsurge of incidents in other traditional trouble spots were subsequently accompanied by hostage-taking and attacks on U.S. supply lines between Falluja and Baghdad. In fact, more than 80 percent of those U.S. personnel killed in action so far in April have been killed in Sunni areas.

#### Implications

The battle for Falluja and the widespread fighting have important military, political, and psychological implications for U.S. Iraq policy. Militarily, the fighting highlights several realities:

- The resistance is capable of conducting sustained operations against the coalition and inflicting significant casualties, despite coalition advantages in firepower and mobility. A bright spot for the coalition is the high number of casualties inflicted on resistance elements that came out of hiding to fight.
- Falluja, and, to a lesser extent, Ramadi, could be considered resistance "victories." In these places, insurgents stood and fought against the coalition, inflicting losses as well as taking them. Both battles will likely go down in resistance mythology as heroic stands.
- The resistance continues to surprise the coalition with innovative tactics, the latest examples being hostage-taking and attacks on coalition supply lines.
- The resistance is capable of acting in a cooperative, if not coordinated, way across the Sunni Triangle. The battle for Falluja was indirectly supported by increased resistance activity in Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, Tikrit, Ba'quba, Balad, Bayji, Abu Gharib, Ramadi, and Samarra. If these areas had not already witnessed recurrent clashes this would probably have been seen as a Sunni "uprising."

The fighting has also been important politically:

- The battle for Falluja may prove politically pyrrhic for the coalition. The casualties and damage to the city, the strain on the Governing Council, and the negotiations with the insurgents that the coalition set out to destroy make whatever tactical gains were achieved in battle seem minimal. The coalition is likely to continue to pay a price in more determined and deeper Sunni resistance and a more problematic Governing Council. Will any future "sovereign" Iraqi government acquiesce to another operation like that conducted in Falluja?
- The coalition also seems weakened with respect to Sunni resistance and opposition. It set out to pacify Falluja but has not done so. In all likelihood, the population of the city, and perhaps that of other areas, has been further radicalized by the fighting. The coalition is now entangled in a ceasefire brokered by politicians and tribal leaders,

which will be seen as diminishing its prestige and power.

There are also potential psychological effects:

- The April fighting may represent a watershed or "defining moment" for the Sunnis -- the moment when the Sunnis stood against the occupiers and began to shape their own future in the new Iraq. A clear set of Sunni political objectives has yet to develop, but Falluja is providing the kind of myth that every defeated people needs to begin retaking their destiny.
- Confidence in the new Iraqi security forces is likely at an all-time low, both from the coalition and Iraqi perspectives.

## Conclusions

The outcome of the April fighting will be emergent, not linear. It will likely take weeks for some semblance of the uneasy pre-April order to return and for the real implications to emerge. All of this will occur against the backdrop of a highly unsettled political and military situation across Shi'i Iraq. More surprises should be anticipated along the path to the June 30 power transition. The situation's complexity puts a premium on understanding and wisdom, at the same time making those qualities more difficult to achieve.

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