

Falluja and the Forging of the New Iraq

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A defiant slogan repeated by residents of Falluja over the last year was that their city would be “the graveyard of the Americans.” The last two weeks has seen that chant become a reality, with most of the 88 US combat deaths falling in the intense combat around Falluja. But there is a bigger sense in which the slogan is true : Falluja has become the graveyard of US policy in Iraq.

Falluja : a Strategic Dilemma

The battle for the city is not yet over, but the Iraqi resistance has already won it. Irregular fighters fueled mainly by spirit and courage were able to fight the elite of America’s colonial legions—the US Marines—to a standstill on the outer neighborhoods of Falluja. Moreover, so frustrated were the Americans that, in their trademark fashion of technology- intensive warfare, they unleashed firepower indiscriminately, leading to the deaths of some 600 people, mainly women and children, according to eyewitness accounts. Captured graphically by Arab television, these two developments have created both inspiration and deep anger that is likely to be translated into hundreds of thousands of new recruits for the already burgeoning resistance.

The Americans are now confronted with an unenviable dilemma : they stick to the ceasefire and admit they can’t handle Falluja, or they go in and take it at a terrible cost both to the civilian population and to themselves. There is no doubt the heavily armed Marines can pacify Falluja, but the costs are likely to make that victory a Pyrrhic one.

As if one battlefield blunder did not suffice, the US sent a 2500-man force to Najaf to arrest the radical cleric Muqtad al-Sadr. Again, even before the battle has begun, they have created a fine mess for themselves. The threat of an American assault has merely brought over more Shiites, including the widely respected Ayatollah Sistani to the defense of al-Sadr. If the Americans do not attack, they will be seen by the Iraqis as being scared of taking on al-Sadr. If they attack, then they will have to engage in the same sort of high-casualty, close-quarters combat cum indiscriminate firepower that can only deliver the same outcome as an assault on Falluja : tactical victory, strategic defeat.

The Making of a Quagmire

The last few days have left us with indelible images that will forever underline the quicksand that is US policy in Iraq. There are the marines blaring speakers at Falluja insurgents taunting them for hiding behind women and children, when the reality is that women and children are part of the Iraqi resistance. There is Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld cursing telecasts by Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera claiming there are 600 women and children dead when even CNN has admitted that a high proportion of the dead and wounded in Falluja were indeed women and children. Then there is George W. Bush vowing not to “cut and run” but not offering any way out of the impasse except the application of more of the military force with which the Americans have ruled Iraq in the last year.

To some analysts, the problem lies in the miscalculations of Rumsfeld. The man, in this view, simply underestimated what it would take to have a successful military occupation of Iraq. Rumsfeld thought 160,000 troops would suffice to invade and occupy Iraq. The result, according to James Fallows in the latest issue of the Atlantic, is that “it is only a slight exaggeration to say that today the entire US military is either in Iraq, returning from Iraq, or getting ready to go.” 40 per cent of the troops deployed to Iraq this year will not be professional soldiers but members of the National Guard or Reserves, who signed up on the understanding that they were only going to be weekend warriors. To many it now seems that the estimates of military professionals like Gen. Anthony Zinni, who said that it would take 500,000 troops to secure Iraq, were more on the mark. But even Zinni’s figure—the high-water mark of the US troop presence in Vietnam—may now been outstripped by the wildfire speed of the insurgency racing through rural and urban Iraq.

To other observers, it has been the ineptitude of Paul Bremer, the American proconsul, that has created the crisis. In this view, Bremer made three big mistakes of a political nature, all during his first month in office : removing top-ranking Ba’ath Party figures, some 30,000 of them, from office ; dissolving the Iraqi Army, thus throwing a quarter of a million Iraqis out of work ; and making a handover of power indefinite and dependent on the writing of a constitution under military occupation. Add to these his recent closing of a Shiite newspaper critical of the occupation and his ordering the arrest of an aide of Muqtad al-Sadr—moves that, Canadian journalist Naomi Klein contends, were calculated to draw al-Sadr into open confrontation in order to crush him.

Inept, Rumsfeld and Bremer have certainly been, but their military and political blunders were inevitable consequences of the collective delusion of George Bush and the reigning neoconservatives at the White House. One element of this delusion was the belief that the Iraqis hated Saddam so much that they would tolerate an indefinite political and military occupation that had the license to blunder at will. A second element was persisting in the illusion that that it was mainly “remnants” of the Saddam Hussein regime that were behind the spreading insurgency when everybody else in Baghdad realized the resistance had grassroots backing. A third was that the Shiite-Sunni divide was so deep that their coming together for a common enterprise against the US on a nationalist and religious platform was impossible. In other words, it was the Americans themselves who spun their own web of false fundamental assumptions that entrapped them.

The Bushites are hopelessly out of touch with reality. But so are others in Washington’s hegemonic conservative circles. An influential conservative critic of the administration’s policy, Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek*’s international editions, for instance, has this to offer as the way out : “The US must bribe, cajole, and coopt various Sunni leaders to separate the insurgents from the local population... The tribal sheiks, former low-level Baathists, and regional leaders must be courted assiduously. In addition, money must start flowing into Iraqi hands.”

Nationalism and Islam : Fuel of the Resistance

The truth is, the neoconservative scenario of quick invasion, pacification of the population with chocolates and cash, installation of a puppet “democracy” dominated by Washington’s proteges, then withdrawal to distant military bastions while an American-trained army and police force took over security in the cities was dead on arrival. For all its many fractures, the cross-ethnic appeal of nationalism and Islam is strong in Iraq. This was brought home to me by two incidents when I visited Iraq along with a parliamentary delegation shortly before the American bombing. When we asked a class at Baghdad University what they thought of the coming invasion, a young woman answered firmly that had George Bush studied his history, he would have known that the Americans would face the same fate as the countless armies that had invaded and pillaged Mesopotamia for the last 4,000 years. Leaving Baghdad, we were convinced that the young men and women we talked to were not the kind that would submit easily to foreign occupation.

Two days later, at the Syrian border, hours before the American bombing, we encountered a group of Mujaheddin heading in the opposite direction, full of energy and enthusiasm to take on the Americans. They were from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Palestine, and Syria, and they were the cutting edge of droves of Islamic volunteers that would stream into Iraq over the next few months to participate in what they welcomed as the decisive battle with the Americans.

As the invasion began, many of us predicted that the American invasion would face an urban resistance that would be difficult to pacify in Baghdad and elsewhere in the country. Famously, Scott Ritter, the former UN arms inspector, said that the Americans would be forced to exit Iraq like Napoleon from Russia, their ranks harried by partisans. We were wrong, of course, since there was little popular resistance to the entry of the Americans to Baghdad. But we were eventually proved right. Our mistake lay in underestimating the time it would take to transform the population from an unorganized, submissive mass under Saddam to a force empowered by nationalism and Islam. Bush and Bremer constantly talk about their dream of a “new Iraq.” Ironically, the new post-Saddam Iraq is being forged in a common struggle against a hated occupation.

Steep Learning Curve

The Americans thought they could coerce and buy the Iraqis into submission. They failed to reckon with one thing : spirit. Of course, spirit is not enough, and what we have seen over the last year is a movement traveling on a steep learning curve from clumsy and amateurish acts of resistance to a sophisticated repertoire combining the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), hit-and-run tactics, stand-your-ground firefights, and ground missile attacks.

Unfortunately, these tactics have also included strategically planned car bombings and kidnappings that have harmed civilians along with Coalition combatants and mercenaries. Unfortunately, too, in the resistance’s daring effort to sap the will of the enemy by carrying the battle to the latter’s territory, it has included missions that deliberately target civilians, like the Madrid subway bombing that killed hundreds of innocents. Such acts are unjustified and deeply deplorable, but to those quick to condemn, one must point out that the indiscriminate killing of some 10,000 Iraqi civilians by US troops in the first year of the occupation and the current targeting of civilians in the siege of Falluja are on the same moral plane as these methods of the Iraqi and Islamic resistance. Indeed, the “American way of war” has always involved the killing and punishing of the civilian population. The bombing of Dresden, the firebombing of Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Operation Phoenix in Vietnam—all had the strategic objective of winning wars via the deliberate targeting of civilians. So, please, no moralizing about the West’s “civilized warfare” and Islamic “barbarism.”

The Loyal Opposition Problem

The resistance is on the ascendant in Iraq, but the balance of forces continues to be on the American side. The Iraq war has developed into a multi-front war, with the struggle for public opinion in the United States being one of the key battles. Here, there has been no decisive break so far. The liberals are hopeless. At a time that they should be calling for a fundamental reexamination of US policy and pushing withdrawal as an option, their line, as the liberal Financial Times columnist Gerard Baker, expresses it, is, "Whether or not you believe Iraq was a real threat under Saddam Hussein, you cannot deny that a US defeat there will make it one now." It does not help to point out to Baker and others that this is a non-sequitur. For the liberals are not responding to logic but to baiting from the same frothing right wing that, three decades ago, predicted chaos, massacre, and civil war should the US withdraw from Vietnam.

For presidential contender John Kerry and the Democrats, the alternative is stabilization via greater participation by the United Nations and the US' European allies, which, of course, hardly distinguishes them from George Bush, who is desperate to bring in the UN and more troops from the Coalition of the Willing to relieve US troops in frontline positions.

One of the reasons Democratic leaders do not call for withdrawal is their fear that this could harm them in the November elections—despite the fact that, according to the Pew Research Center, 44 per cent of Americans now say that troops should be brought home as soon as possible, up from 32 per cent last September. But an even more fundamental reason is that they agree with Baker's position that while the invasion of Iraq may not have been justified, a unilateral withdrawal cannot be allowed since this would strike an incalculable blow to American prestige and leadership.

Where is the Peace Movement ?

The paralysis that has gripped the Democrats on Iraq can only be broken by one thing : a strong anti-war movement such as that which took to the streets daily and in the thousands before and after the Tet Offensive in 1968. So far that has not materialized, though disillusion with US policy in Iraq has spread to more than half of the US population.

Indeed, at the very time that it is needed by developments in Iraq, the international peace movement has had trouble getting in gear. The demonstrations on March 20 of this year were significantly smaller than the Feb.15 marches last year, when tens of millions marched throughout the world against the projected invasion of Iraq. The kind of international mass pressure that makes an impact on policymakers—the daily staging of demonstration after demonstration in the hundreds of thousands in city after city—is simply not in evidence, at least not yet. Which raises the question : Was the *New York Times* premature in calling international civil society the world's "second greatest superpower" in the wake of the Feb. 15 demonstrations ?

All this indicates that the dramatic April events in Iraq do not yet add up to an Iraqi equivalent of the Tet events in Vietnam in 1968. At most, they are a dress rehearsal. Domestic opposition to the war in the US has yet to escalate to a critical mass. Without this domestic challenge from below, the Bush administration will most likely continue to send in more troops to the Iraq meat-grinder in pursuit of an elusive military solution that would turn the conflict into a long-drawn war of attrition until the level of casualties finally ends public tolerance in the US for a policy headed nowhere but more body bags.

Iraq and the Global Equation

Paradoxically enough, while the rise of the Iraqi resistance has not yet altered the correlation of forces within Iraq, it has contributed mightily to transforming the global equation in the last 12 months. It has discouraged a militarily overextended Washington from carrying out efforts at regime change in other countries, like Syria, North Korea, and Iran. It has deflected the attention and resources needed by the Washington for a successful occupation of Afghanistan. It has prevented the US from focusing on its backyard, thus allowing the consolidation of anti-free-market and anti-US governments in Latin America, such as those of Norberto Kirchner in Argentina, Luis Inacio da Silva or Lula in Brazil, and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. It has deepened the rift in the political, military, and cultural alliance known as the Atlantic Alliance, which served as a potent instrument of Washington's global hegemony during and immediately after the Cold War.

Without the example of the defiant challenge posed by the Iraqi resistance, the developing countries might not have gotten their act together to sink the World Trade Organization ministerial in Cancun last September and the US plan for a Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami in November.

Anti-hegemonic movements the world over, in short, owe the Iraqi resistance a great deal for exacerbating the American empire's crisis of overextension. Yet its face is not pretty, and many on the progressive movement in the United States and the West hesitate to embrace it as an ally. This is probably one of the key obstacles to the emergence of a sustained peace movement in the US and internationally—that the organizing efforts of progressives have been incapacitated by their own qualms about the Iraqi resistance.

But there is never any pretty movement for national liberation or independence. Many Western progressives were also repelled by some of the methods of the Mau Mau in Kenya, the FLN in Algeria, the NLF in Vietnam, and the Irish Republican Movement. National liberation movements, however, are not asking for ideological or political support. All they seek is international pressure for the withdrawal of an illegitimate occupying power so that internal forces can have the space to forge a truly national government. Surely on this limited program progressives throughout the world and the Iraqi resistance can unite.

P.S.

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