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## Fallujah: Obama's Newest Headache

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1/9/2014

Guernica in the Spanish civil war, My Lai in the Vietnam War, Guantanamo Bay in the war on terror – these have been powerful symbols. The siege of Fallujah in May 2004 stands out in the Iraq War as the bloodiest battle that the United States fought since the Vietnam War. The US Marines suffered 40 deaths in the siege, while Iraqi civilian casualties were in the hundreds. The US forces reportedly used F-16 warplanes to blitz residential areas in Fallujah with cluster bombs. The majority of prisoners were executed...

As the US Marine Corps announced a ceasefire and withdrew in May 2004, mosques proclaimed the victory of insurgents and Fallujah's transformation began as a sort of Islamic mini-state with Sharia law. So, in the fall of that year, in late October, the US military returned with another major offensive with aerial attacks and precision-guided missiles followed by a full-blooded assault by the Marines backed by artillery and armor in early November – Operation Phantom Fury.

This is how CNN's Karl Penhaul reported on November 9: «The sky over Fallujah seems to explode as U.S. Marines launch their much-trumpeted ground assault. War planes drop cluster bombs on insurgent positions and artillery batteries fire smoke rounds to conceal a Marine advance». According to Washington Post, white phosphorous grenades and artillery shells were used to create «walls of fire» in the city. Doctors later reported seeing melted corpses. No one

knows the casualty figures; as of November 18 US military claimed 1200 ‘insurgents’ had been killed and 1000 captured...

A Guardian report said over 70 percent of the city’s homes were destroyed along with sixty schools and sixty-five mosques and shrines. There has been anecdotal evidence of large increases in cancer, infant mortality, etc. among the survivors, triggering speculation that there was use of depleted uranium leading to environmental contamination.

It is extremely important to recollect the horrendous living memory of Fallujah to understand what happened last week when the centre of the city fell into the hands of fighters from the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State in Iraq and Levant [ISIL]. Fallujah, along with the capital of Anbar province, Ramadi, was a stronghold of Sunni insurgents during the US occupation of Iraq and al-Qaeda militants largely took over both cities last week. Hundreds of ISIL fighters have entered Fallujah.

Pundits have begun analyzing the factors behind. The dominant narrative is that the Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki failed to reach out to the Sunnis and alienating them during the period since the US troops pulled out in 2011. Indeed, the latest flare-up happened after Maliki dispatched troops last week to break up an year-old Sunni protest in Ramadi to voice their grievances of political exclusion. Almost all Sunnis have turned against the government and are opposed to the Iraqi security forces, although not all have aligned themselves with the ISIL.

Meanwhile, the turmoil in Syria in which ISIL is playing a lead role has compounded the security situation in Iraq. The ISIL has been targeting Shi’ites, which at once gives the conflict in Anbar a sectarian overtone. Also, Iraq is heading for parliamentary poll in April and there are conspiracy theories that Maliki is calibrating a confrontation with Sunnis and raising the spectre of the al-Qaeda threat that might help him rally the Shi’ite opinion to support his re-election.

However, Maliki’s decisions are also prompted by the real fear that his Shi’ite-led government is besieged and faces the threat of being overrun Sunnis. To say he contrived the al-Qaeda takeover in Fallujah stretches credulity. The ISIL comprises hardened fighters coming in from Syria where the US’ regional allies in the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, have been inducting foreign fighters and supporting them financially and with weapons. Also to be factored in is the so-called Sahwa, the Awakening, which the US created as surrogate force to fight the al-Qaeda and was abandoned when the American troops withdrew in 2011. Most of its leaders have been assassinated.

Suffice to say, in terms of political morality or strategy, the Barack Obama administration cannot wash its hands off the emergent situation in Fallujah. The blame for the Iraq’s unraveling as a nation should lie with the George W. Bush presidency. Bush’s forecast of ‘mission accomplished’ in Iraq and Gen. David Petraeus’ brag about the Awakening sound hollow today.

To be sure, how Obama responds to the situation in Fallujah has wider implications for the US’ regional strategies. Secretary of State John Kerry said, «We’re not contemplating putting boots

on the ground. This is their [Iraqis'] fight, but we're going to help them in their fight».

The White House spokesman Jay Carney said Washington is «accelerating» its deliveries of military equipment to Iraq and «looking to provide an additional shipment of Hellfire missiles» in the coming months as well as ten surveillance drones in the coming weeks and another 48 later this year. Carney added that Washington is «working closely with the Iraqis to develop a holistic strategy to isolate the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups», but ultimately Iraq must handle the conflict itself.

The point is, US fought ferociously in 2004 to keep al-Qaeda out of Fallujah and now they've returned and may create a base there and this is every bit the US' fight and Maliki government is a quasi-ally of Washington. The US' interests in the region will be seriously hurt if al-Qaeda establishes another foothold in the region. And, of course, the whole region is watching Washington's grit to take on al-Qaeda.

The Republican hawks like Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham blame Obama for the situation insofar as he didn't try hard enough to reach an agreement with Maliki to keep US troops in Iraq beyond 2011. However, the criticism won't gain traction as the domestic attitudes in the US favor the idea that despite the upheaval in the Middle East, the US will do well to seek a diplomatic and political engagement with the region rather than a military settlement.

The choices that lie ahead for Obama can be viewed from three perspectives. First, the Fallujah situation sails into view at an awkward time – when the Obama administration proposes to maintain anywhere around ten to twelve thousand US troops in Afghanistan. That plan lacks support within the US and the Fallujah situation is a timely warning about the dangers of maintaining a large residual force in Afghanistan.

Second, Fallujah highlights that the wars in Syria and Iraq and the dangerous slide in Lebanon have morphed. At the same time, Fallujah is not an al-Qaeda problem alone. It is a city that became irreconcilably alienated in the brutal violence of US occupation and it no longer feels it's a part of Iraq. Thus, Fallujah calls attention to a far more fundamental question regarding the future of Iraq itself. This, again, holds some stark lessons for Afghanistan where too the US occupation hastened the fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines. A response to the crisis by accelerating weapons deliveries to the Iraqi government will not solve the problem and may even make it worse.

A third stunning aspect is that the Fallujah situation finds the US and Iran on the same side. Their respective interests in Iraq vary but they share the profound concern that an international movement of Sunni fighters fired by Wahhabi ideology is raising the black flag of al-Qaeda along sectarian fault lines. Neither is willing to intervene and Tehran too promises military aid but shows reluctance to put 'boots on the ground'.

The Obama administration could be edging close to acknowledging Iran's influence on regional issues – Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen – and this hastens regional realignments. Saudi Arabia accuses the Obama administration of strengthening Iran's regional at the expense of Washington's traditional allies and also alleges that Tehran is pursuing a clever strategy to

undermine the US-Saudi alliance.

Indeed, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said at a meeting with a visiting delegation of Italian lawmakers on Sunday in Tehran that the spread of radicalism in the Middle East would pose unpredictable threats to other parts of the world as well unless countered through effective international cooperation. The Intelligence Minister Seyed Mahmoud Alavi claimed that the western powers realize that international cooperation is needed to counter the «threat of terrorism by Takfiri groups».

Significantly, a bipartisan a group of influential figures in the US foreign policy establishment addressed a letter to the US Senate on Monday urging that no new sanctions be passed against Iran, warning that it would potentially move the US closer to war. Ryan Crocker who was a former ambassador to Iraq, led the initiative.