

## **Success or Failure in the Fighting in Iraq?**

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It now seems unlikely that either the draft Constitution, or the election that may follow, will persuade a large number of Sunnis to support the government more actively, or reduce Iraqi Sunni support for the insurgency in the near term.

If political developments do have a positive effect, it will be more out of compellance than persuasion. It will be because a substantially larger number of Iraqi Sunnis feel they have no real chance of winning, and see the military balance shifting decisively in favor of Iraqi government forces that can largely suppress a civil war and which -- unlike Coalition forces -- cannot be driven out of the country.

For this to happen, US and Iraqi forces must win both an urban battle -- centered in Baghdad, Mosul, and their environs -- and a battle for the rural areas and towns and smaller cities in the West. In both cases, military victories will be largely unimportant unless they can be followed up by an enduring Iraqi government presence in terms of both effective governance and effective police forces.

### **Empty Tactical Victories?**

The article by Jonathan Finer in the September 13th issue of Washington Post -- "Informants Decide on Fate of Iraqi Detainees" -- is both excellent reporting and a confirmation of warnings I have heard from both US officers and Iraqi officials.

The usual official claims are being made about tactical victories. For example, Iraqi officials made the following statement about Tal Afar:

- Six Iraqi civilians have been killed and eight others were injured.

-Voting centers have been opened in the town of Tal-Afar.

-The combat operations are over now and reconstruction missions are due to start throughout the town.

- In the last 24 hours there has been no resistance of any kind in Tal-Afar.
- Total of terrorists killed is 157 and 440 others were arrested.
- Search and sweep operations are ongoing at this stage.
- Terrorists attached explosives to the body of an Iraqi child then sent him to his family before blowing him up in the town of Tal-Afar.
- A peacekeeping force will be deployed in the town.
- I agree that the government was late in responding to what was happening in Tal-Afar.
- Eight Iraqi servicemen were martyred and six others were injured in the operations.

### **Losing by Winning?**

The problem with such claims is that they do not necessarily indicate that this kind of fighting does more to end the insurgency than it does to provoke it. In fact, the fighting in Western Iraq is again raising some of the key problems exposed in Fallujah:

--The US seems to be conducting broad sweeps without adequate intelligence or "targeting," plays a highly intrusive role in urban areas, and cannot really distinguish friend from foe. Enemies and civilian mix as they flee and disperse, most real insurgents get away, and inexperienced US troops create hostility in dealing with already politically hostile Iraqis in the area.

--The Iraqi combat forces are still clearly in a support role, and could not operate without US airpower, artillery, armor, and support.

--Some of the key Iraqi combat forces have a strong ethnic and sectarian character (Pesh Merga), have no better intelligence than US forces, and if anything, do more to alienate an already largely hostile population.

--There is no evidence of Iraqi police forces and governance coming in to rapidly provide non-military security, aid, and "legitimacy" on the ground. Talk and token visits, but not the kind of action necessary to actually secure a military victory.

--The US is talking a level of aid it cannot really execute, an open-ended series of new detentions, and an extend presence as a substitute for an Iraqi government presence that can breed further hostility.

### **Tactical Operations versus Meaningful Victory**

The US and Iraqi both still seem to have serious problems in following up tactical operations with the kind of stability operations that are the key to any meaningful kind of victory.

A combination of US and Iraqi forces can win virtually any battle or clash, but this is largely irrelevant. What they have not demonstrated is that they can give such victories

meaning in terms of governance, political support, security, or even enough lasting damage to the insurgents to compensate for the hostility its actions create.

Moreover, as the bombings in Baghdad and constant threat to the airport road illustrate all too clearly, the government has not secured hostile Sunni urban areas in Iraq's two largest cities, much less their environs. It is also all too possible that the debate over the constitution may make things worse, and not better.

As was the case with pacification in Vietnam, nothing is actually “won” where the government cannot safely operate with officials and police on a day-to-day basis, where citizens are not safe, and where the night makes so-called secure areas into “no go” zones.

Unfortunately, neither the Coalition nor the Iraqi government seems to provide any meaningful reporting on this aspect of operations. There are countless press releases on what essentially are tactical trivia, but no convincing report on the measures of progress that actually count.