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Lessons Learned from Operation *AL FAJR*: the Liberation of Fallujah

Topic: Lessons Learned

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# Report Documentation Page

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**Problem or Issue:** Conflict termination and transition to post-hostilities operations has always been the most challenging aspect of modern conflict for the United States. Our pre-eminent military can be depended upon to secure victory against any foe; yet, we often face significant problems in the immediate post-conflict period. Operation *AL FAJR* in Fallujah, Iraq provides several insightful lessons from which we can improve future warfighting success. Among these are the employment of information operations, the full integration of civil affairs forces, and interoperability between forces of the United States and other coalition partners.

**Relevance to Command and Control:** Most of the critical lessons from the liberation of Fallujah from terrorists in Iraq pertain to innovative command and control techniques.

**Approach to the Topic:** This paper is based upon a case study of actual plans and lessons taken during execution by actual participants in Iraq during operation Iraqi Freedom.

**Results:** First Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) was able to formulate plans and employ forces in such a way as to significantly improve the transition from hostilities to post-hostilities operations. With a powerful, deliberate information wedge to split the terrorist forces from the population and deep penetration strikes, integrating convention forces with civil affairs teams, the I MEF was able to dominate the initial battle and maintain leverage through transition to the Iraqi government's resettlement of the city during phase IV of the operation. The battle not only validated the Marine "Three Block War" construct but also showed effective integration of coalition forces and multinational command and control.

Operation *AL FAJR* (New Dawn) had for its objective the destruction of the terrorist element in the Iraqi city of Fallujah and the peaceful restoration of the town to its residents. Fallujah was important to the overall campaign in Iraq because it had become a significant terrorist strongpoint and had large symbolic importance because it was the single city in Iraq that seemed to resist all efforts of the Multinational Force (MNF) and the Iraqi government to cleanse it of anti-Iraqi influence. As the planning for the battle proceeded, it also gained importance as the first major battle in Iraq that was directed and controlled by the newly installed Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Due to its scope and degree of success, *AL FAJR* provides a number of important lessons to be learned for any future multinational combat operation.

As the high intensity combat in Fallujah drew to a close in mid-December, 2004, it became clear that the battle had achieved many of its tactical objectives and served to illustrate a number of key facts that would be important for the future of the MNF campaign in Iraq. Among these were the importance of information operations, the critical nature of integrated (MNF-Iraqi) force structures and command and control, and the great value of conflict termination planning and civil military operations. With the

victory gained by operation *AL FAJR* and the subsequent successful election held in January 2005 the future course of the war in Iraq changed significantly.

### **Background on the Fallujah Area of Operations**

The city of Fallujah sits on the east bank of the Euphrates River only 35 miles west of Baghdad. Although population figures for Iraqi cities are imprecise at best, most analysts accepted that over 200,000 Fallujans lived in the city prior to the start of the 2003 war in Iraq. The city has no real natural resources, but does lay across the traditionally important lines of communication that link the Iraqi capital with Syria in the west and Jordan to the north. It is midway between Baghdad and the provincial capital of the Al Anbar province, the similarly restive Sunni city of Ramadi. By most accounts even Saddam Hussein had trouble dealing with Fallujah and bought the cities loyalty with passive acceptance of the smuggling trade, which brought it much of its prosperity.

Fallujah has a very ugly history with coalition forces, and much of this history is linked to its now-famous bridges. During the first Gulf War, one errant laser guided bomb from a British jet intended to destroy the bridges over the Euphrates failed to guide, and landed in the market area killing between 50 and 150 locals. This was only the first of several ugly incidents, which later heightened distrust between residents of Fallujah and multinational forces.

After portions of the Al Anbar province were taken under the control of special operations forces during the early weeks of operation Iraqi Freedom, the first American force to really control the area around Fallujah was an Army Armored Cavalry Regiment. After a short time, that unit was replaced by elements of a single brigade of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, which were encamped just outside the city. These early forces had

very few troops with which to control a huge, yet sparsely populated area along the strategically valuable Euphrates. Late in April of 2003 an incident where a small group of soldiers from the 82d fired on a crowd in the city again raised tensions significantly. During November 2003 a CH-47 helicopter of the 82<sup>nd</sup> was shot down by a shoulder fired anti-aircraft missile from the area north of Fallujah. This second confrontation set off a period of tension that caused the Army units to effectively withdraw from Fallujah. One of the key lessons of any insurgency is the absolute requirement to remain engaged with the local population – this in order to prevent the insurgent from freely swimming in the ocean of local support. Without regular access (and to be frank the 82d was far too over extended to be present in all the tense areas of the province), the influence of the MNF slowly but precipitously dropped in the passing months. When the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF)<sup>1</sup> assumed control of the region from the 82<sup>nd</sup> in March of 2004, relations with Fallujah were limited and constrained at best.

Unfortunately, very soon after taking over responsibility from the 82<sup>nd</sup>, the newly arrived 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was directed to execute operation *VIGILANT RESOLVE*<sup>2</sup>, the destruction of the insurgency in Fallujah. This was in direct response to the killing of four Blackwater contract employees who ventured into Fallujah in a convoy during the morning of 31 March 2004. These contract employees were ambushed and killed on the main street of Fallujah; their bodies were burnt and later hung from the girders of the old bridge leading west out of the city. This incident horrified the world and directly affected the pace and conduct of counter-insurgency operations by the MNF in Iraq.

The irony was that the Marines had arrived with a very different and more integrated approach to their mission in mind, yet this chilling act quickly drove them into

a much more traditional assault on the city, which began on 5 April – within a few weeks of their arrival. As with any combat operation in urban terrain, the toll on the civilian population was nearly unavoidable and its effects had a profoundly negative effect on the international media and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) – the national authority in Iraq at the time. By 8 April, with bombs being dropped in the city, senior officials were questioning some of the tactics used in the fight. Very quickly the Iraqis near the seat of government in Baghdad urged restraint and began negotiations with the insurgents. Soon, the CPA, under the leadership of Paul Bremer, directed that some halt to the operation be developed in order to reduce the perceived civilian damage. At noon on 9 April, the momentum of the operation was stopped through a “temporary halt to offensive operations.” By 13 April high-level negotiations had started and the operation to destroy the insurgents was effectively on hold. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of April negotiations on Camp Fallujah<sup>3</sup> between the locals and the MEF developed the idea of a Fallujah Brigade to clean up the city, under the command of a local, retired Iraqi General. By April 22 a cease-fire was in effect in the city.

By that time a post-combat concept had been developed (21 April) to provide immediate humanitarian aid to the city. This included a Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC) to work with NGOs to provide relief supplies. Over the course of the battle most of the civilian population had been caught inside their homes and as many as 150,000 people<sup>3</sup> were trapped in the isolated city, without regular supplies of food and fuel. The humanitarian plan was envisioned to be put into action preceding renewed combat operations in the city. It addressed aid, as well as work and clean up projects for the residents of Fallujah and some road and building repair. Of note, by the end of April,

Public Affairs and Information Operations figured much more prominently in the planning than they had in the initial operations order, showing some of the lessons had already been learned.

Still, from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April the situation was very uncertain. The fighters inside Fallujah were reinforcing their positions. They were using mosques and hospitals as defensive positions and some analysts believed they would use the local residents as human shields when combat resumed. The insurgents clearly understood that civilian casualties and MNF attacks on mosques and other normally restricted targets played very well in their favor in the international media. Great political pressure began to be applied to cease and further combat and seek a negotiated settlement. The result of this pressure was the creation of the Fallujah Brigade, an element constructed from former Iraqi army soldiers with the sole purpose of restoring order to the city in the Marine's stead. The idea was presented by a group of former Iraqi generals directly to the Marine leadership – it appeared to be an ideal Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem.

The Fallujah Brigade was a unique and tenuous construct; its conceptual leader Major General Salah, but it was commanded in the field by Brigadier General Latif. It was formed in the last week of April and began effective operations with nearly 600 members by 1 May. The ideal for the Fallujah Brigade was to isolate the foreign fighter element of the insurgency in Fallujah and destroy it while protecting the local population. Unfortunately the leadership of the Fallujah Brigade was heavily influenced by the city leaders and was in fact playing both sides of the confrontation. It was also infiltrated by insurgents.



The real test of the Fallujah Brigade began on 4 May when General Latif agreed to take over remaining Marine positions around the city and to reassert control over the city center the following day. By the following week, the MNF had already begun limited humanitarian assistance to the residents of Fallujah and had even developed a claims process for battle damage in the city. The cease-fire was holding and the MNF was planning to conduct a major convoy through the heart of the city on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, but the city had yet to give up any crew served weapons systems – one of the essential preconditions of any continued cease-fire from the MNF perspective. Although the convoy was conducted on the 10<sup>th</sup>, as a joint effort with Iraqi forces as well as the MNF, signs were evident that the Brigade leadership was not going to make good on its claims. On June 28 the CPA turned over full sovereignty to the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) in a surprise move two days prior to the announced date of turnover of sovereignty.

The interposition of the Fallujah Brigade, which effectively ended *VIGILANT RESOLVE*, proved in the end to disappoint everyone. The Brigade quickly showed itself unable to oppose the Sunni anti-Iraqi forces in the town and soon thereafter dissolved as an effective military force. At the same time, the police in Fallujah, which were never very supportive of the coalition, began to side more and more with the insurgent and AIF forces that gathered in the city. By June it was clear that the city was no longer open to the MNF and its patrols. Insurgents increasing controls the daily life of the residents of Fallujah and communications with the MNF leadership in the area became strained and then infrequent. The Fallujah Liaison Team site had been opened outside Traffic Control Point 1 (TCP-1) to facilitate dialog between the city and the MEF leadership, but TCP-1

itself became one of the most dangerous locations in the world, taking daily indirect fire and small arms attacks.

Through July and August insurgent forces had an increasingly free run of the city, and over time Fallujah became an area restricted from MNF ground and air movement effectively blocking military transportation from using Route 10 from Baghdad to the provincial capital of Ramadi. Over time the insurgency in the city expanded its influence to surrounding areas and troop movement anywhere near Fallujah became risky. In August anti-Mahdi Militia<sup>4</sup> fighting in nearby Najaf took the attention of the world off of Fallujah for a few weeks, but the influence of the insurgency that “turned back the Marine assault” only grew.

The next major shift in the situation in Fallujah occurred when Lieutenant Colonel Sulimann of the Iraqi National Guard was kidnapped and killed by insurgents in the city. He was a local national guard battalion commander and the first aggressive Iraqi officer to really stand out in his efforts to return order to Fallujah. When he was kidnapped in August and tortured to death, the MNF leadership saw that no local success was likely in the city. From that point forward the focus of effort was to restore the peace through military means. A concurrent operation in the Shia city of Najaf that same month demonstrated for the first time that some Iraqi forces would fight against insurgents, but only if they were recruited from other areas of Iraq and only if they were closely integrated with MNF units.

### **Lessons from First Contact**

For the MNF in general and the Marines in specific, *VIGILANT RESOLVE* was very instructive. The enemy was extremely smart and adaptable and would fight under all

conditions. In the face of such an enemy, the Iraqi leaders were as yet uncertain in their commitment to intense combat in cities. Such an enemy had to be separated from its base of support in the local population. Even more importantly, the MNF realized that the public affairs fight was just as important as the tactical battle. The objectives and benefits of any future operation had to be clear to all concerned. Civil-military activities had to be planned and integrated from the outset. Finally, a fully integrated command structure and capable Iraqi forces were required for any future operation.

### **Shaping Operations prior to the Assault**

With the clear lessons of *VIGILANT RESOLVE* in mind the MEF realized that continued pressure on Fallujah might not be soluble by negotiations and that plans for a second military assault needed to be refined. One key difference in any future attack would be the effort to split the AIF from their popular support base and a parallel reinforcing effort designed to draw the civilian population out of the city in advance of the fighting. If the population voluntarily left their homes, it would benefit the MNF in three critical ways. First the incidence of civilian casualties would be reduced, and that would protect the MNF leadership from efforts to stop the assault. Second, the AIF forces would be increasingly less well hidden and sheltered by innocent civilians and precision targeting could take greater effect in the city. Finally the shaping forces had a tendency to draw out enemy forces so that they could be positively identified and attacked. On many occasions ground forces would make feints along the south and eastern sides of the city to draw out the enemy defensive forces and allow us to identify their key forces, defensive structures and C2 nodes. Finally, the shaping actions of the MNF helped deceive the enemy as to the actual point of the attack. The insurgent leadership could have no doubt that the attack

would come, but the constant probing of the shaping phases helped convince them that the main attack would come again from the south and east, as had been the case in *VIGILANT RESOLVE*.

**Isolation:** In the immediate hours prior to the start of the assault on Fallujah the MEF concentrated its efforts on isolating the city from the insurgency. This isolation was critical to prevent to escape of the insurgents in the city and to ensure that AIF forces would not be able to reinforce their forces. Using the “Blackjack Brigade” from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, the Division cut and controlled all the roads leading to Fallujah, then moved a light armored task force including the Iraqi 36<sup>th</sup> Commando battalion up the peninsula west of the city to effectively seal it off. Once the city was surrounded<sup>5</sup> the main combat forces of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division moved into place all along the northern edge of Fallujah.

Meanwhile attack air support continued to attack known locations of enemy forces and to strike any AIF units that posed a direct threat (these included berms designed to aid the AIF attack and weapons caches, as well as crew served weapons.) Using intelligence gathering capability the MEF also attacked positively identified enemy locations when collateral damage could be minimized. The overall effect was to break up the AIF command and control structure in the city and to destroy force and positions that could threaten our forces.

### **Combat Operations**

**Integrated operations:** The fight for Fallujah employed American tenets of overwhelming force to best advantage integrating the capabilities of army and Marine battalions with embedded Iraqi forces. Attacking with two Regiments side by side, the

Division led its assault with Army mechanized and armored battalions followed closely by Marine infantry battalions with Iraqi army companies integrated inside their structure. This enabled the shock effect of the armor to combine with the large numbers of “boots on the ground” required for urban combat and facilitated clearing of sensitive Iraqi sites, such as mosques with Iraqi soldiers. The MEF also fully integrated airpower from all four US services as well as numerous tactical sensors (such as Pioneer, Scan Eagle and Predator), intelligence sources (HUMINT, COMMINT and SIGINT), and special operating forces (whose snipers were particularly valued.)

With the exception of the technologies available urban combat hasn't changed very much since the Second World War. The fighting in Fallujah was up-close, vicious, unpredictable and very manpower intensive. Some buildings in the city were cleared multiple times. The tank was used often and with telling effect. Indirect fires from 155mm artillery positioned less than 5 kilometers away in Camp Fallujah were used on a daily basis before during and after the heaviest period of fighting. Frequently small unit leaders would push “stacks” of Marines or soldiers into buildings while employing laser-guided bombs, artillery and tank main gun rounds on adjoining structures. The combat bulldozer was used by combat engineers and SeeBees on several occasions to push the walls of buildings in on stubborn defenders. Insurgents used uses, armor piercing bullets and even sewed grenades inside their clothing to kill and maim US troops at any opportunity.

Most of the fighters in the northern sections of the city were quickly overrun. They were locally recruited thugs and criminals with little stomach for the horror of urban warfare; in the southern half of the city though, MNF forces found much more

determined defenders, dug in in-depth with reinforcing positions. These were manned by the hard-core members of the insurgency, most of whom still lay buried in or near Fallujah. Due to the MEF's shaping operations, the enemy expected an attack from the south and it was in that section of the city that they fought hardest. As a consequence most of Fallujah south of the main avenue was severely damaged.

Operation *AL FAJR* employed traditional tactics as well as some very innovative procedures and command structures. The MEF planners understood well the discontinuous nature of the modern battlefield and the need for flexibility in execution. It was planned that civil affairs teams and combat engineers would follow in trace of the lead combat battalions to begin assessment of critical infrastructure and to facilitate population of resource control for any civilians in the city. Because Vigilant Resolve had been halted due to widespread negative media attention, the planners of *AL FAJR* wanted to ensure that collateral damage was minimized and civilians could be cared for or evacuated as soon as possible. This was one reason that the city general hospital was one of the first objectives of the attack. The tactical CA teams were also used with effect to manage detainees captured in the fighting and to facilitate burials for local fighters who were killed. An aggressive public affairs (PA) stance was also critical to the maintenance of popular support. This in turn helped assure the maintenance of Iraqi government resolve to conduct the fight. This was after all, the first major battle authorized and directed by the Interim Iraqi Government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

The initial objectives of the attack were secured early and the entire city was under MNF control after four days of very hard fighting. Although small pockets of determined, even suicidal insurgents would continue to fight for nearly a month, the MEF

staff began to focus on the vitally important transition to local control during the first week of combat. The city needed to be secure and made safe, essential services had to be restored to minimal levels and the residents of the city had to have some semblance of normalcy in their lives before the promise of freedom from insurgents would have any meaning. This was the real test of *AL FAJR*.

The basic concept of the operation depended upon a series of transitions, from combat, to restoration of security and essential services to resettlement and return to local control by an Iraqi municipal government. Minimum requirements for conflict termination were identified prior to beginning combat operations. These included a non-local police force to enter the city, a civilian or military mayor to manage essential services in the city and a package of reconstruction projects designed to restore the city's infrastructure to pre-conflict levels rapidly after the terrorist influence was destroyed. These pre-requisites were briefed all the way up the chain to the Prime Minister of Iraq. The transition from combat operations to restoration of essential services and humanitarian assistance was envisioned to be spatial not time based. In other words while fighting was continuing in some areas of the city, where possible MNF and Iraqi forces would be rebuilding pump houses and electrical substations in an area not far away, and in other location within the city military forces would also be providing humanitarian relief supplies to the remaining Fallujah residents.

In practice, this conditions-based conflict termination process worked rather well, but it did suffer from some significant challenges. First of all, the essential agreed upon pre-requisites were never completely met. The Interim Iraqi Government of Ayad Allawi did appoint a military governor, then Major General Abdul-Qater, but his authority in the

city was never clearly explained. Perhaps more importantly the Minister of the Interior flatly failed in his commitment to bring in police forces from outside the city and coalition soldiers, to include two battalions of newly formed public order battalions, were used instead to provide police function in the city for several months. Finally, both the MNF and the IIG did commit funds for the city's restoration, but at least initially there was no coordinating mechanism to determine who should accomplish which essential project and in what order projects were to be completed. It will surprise no one to know that the MNF and Iraqi priorities for restoration were different.

What became crucial to the successful resettlement of the city was the formation of several multifunctional working groups that served as control mechanisms for the return of stability in Fallujah. These were working coalition command and control (C2) processes that facilitated unity of effort at tactical and operational levels. The first of these mechanisms was a coalition C2 node giving the MNF operational command new authority over Iraqi units and institutions. It was formed when General Abdul-Qater arrived at Camp Fallujah to assume responsibilities as the military governor of Al Anbar province. As such he had authority over all MNF forces in the province and more importantly the city of Fallujah. He was hosted by and his meager staff was supported by the I MEF headquarters. The newly combined headquarters arrangement made complete integration of the Iraqi Security Forces within the MNF structure possible. General Abdul-Qater proved to be a brave and cooperative commander who soon was a strong advocate for the operation with his government and spokesman for the operation's success in the international media.



The second mechanism was an interagency working group that operated at both the tactical and operational levels and linked issues in Fallujah with intergovernmental support through the MNF military headquarters and the US and UK Embassies. This Inter-ministerial Fallujah Working Group operated through twice weekly meetings. The first was always held in Fallujah, initially on Camp Fallujah while combat operations continued, and then later within the old Fallujah Mayor's complex at the MEF Civil-Military Operations Center (CMOC). The second was always held in Baghdad, normally at the Ministry of Industry and Minerals, whose minister was appointed as the lead agent for Fallujah reconstruction. Though many individuals attended both these meetings there focus and authorities were quite different. The local Fallujah meeting was designed to provide the administration and technical expertise to manage the city's affairs. It was led by Engineer Basil Mahmoud of the Ministry of Industry and Minerals, who for several months was in effect the city manager of Fallujah. He had the authority to establish priorities and direct local reconstruction activities by the various Iraqi government institutions. He was assisted everyday by the MEF Municipal Support Team. During November MEF Civil Affairs officers effectively directed the affairs of the city while combat operations were the focus of effort, but by January, as the residents were beginning to return Engineer Mahmoud had grown to be the key Iraqi figure in the city and the manager of daily activities.

The Baghdad meeting was normally chaired by the Deputy Minister of Industry and Minerals Mohammed Abdullah Mohammed. Minister Mohammed Abdullah was a career bureaucrat of real skill, who had survived under Saddam Hussein and into the Interim Iraqi Government. He ensured that the policy makers within the council of

Ministers were executing the work and following the priorities required in Fallujah. Using personal authority alone, he managed to gain resources from many of the resource poor ministries in Iraq to help the reconstruction in Fallujah. Military representatives attended both these meetings and acted as a sort of connecting file at the local and national level.

The one gap in coverage of this two meeting process was the operational level. Like most nations, Iraq has a provincial government level. For the operation in Fallujah, the provincial government was in Ramadi and the appointed Governor there was never very well integrated into the coordination process. Initially, the civilian governor was so repressed and intimidated by insurgent threats that he played no visible role; afterwards Prime Minister Allawi appointed a new Governor Sheik Fassel al-Goud, but he only attended one meeting in Fallujah and did nothing to assist in the reconstruction effort. His provincial Directors-general could have added much to the recovery process but were effectively absent from the process.

### **Post-conflict Actions**

Using these processes, and under significant pressure from a minority of government personnel in Baghdad the city was opened for resettlement on December 23 2004, only 6 weeks after the assault. Resettlement required careful planning to match security concerns with available resources. Residents were anxious to return to the city, for many had been living in surrounding cities or in transient camps for months, winter weather had turned cold and their children were missing school. Unfortunately, combat operations had destroyed the rail line outside the city, one of the key power transformers that provided electricity to homes and businesses and the most crucial of 10 water pumps

stations in the city was also destroyed, flooding large segments of the most populated neighborhoods. The Iraqi Government and the MNF were both very concerned about re-infiltration of insurgents with residents, so the MEF decided to establish 5 entry control points (ECPs) that restricted all access to Fallujah, in much the same way as airport screening is done. ECPs made for long lines on the roads leading back to Fallujah but also significantly reduced the number of insurgents who returned. Most who returned were quickly identified by other Iraqis and detained, killed by security forces at weapons caches or reintegrated and changed their approach towards the insurgency.

The return of the residents had to be conditions-based because the infrastructure was so strained that it could not support the full population. Therefore the MEF proposed and the Iraqi Government approved a district-by-district schedule for the reopening the city matched to essential services restoration. The entire resettlement schedule extended for only three weeks, but by limiting the returns to specified districts the minimal needs of the people could be met as the residents returned across the city.

Because *AL FAJR* was an Iraqi Government directed operation the host nation was had primary responsibility for the restoration of power, and supply of fuel, food and potable water. Fallujah was a city in significant distress and returning residents required immediate humanitarian assistance while to government began to difficult process of restoring essential services. Immediate humanitarian assistance had been planned in advance by the civil affairs group of the MEF. With the construction engineering help of the Navy SeaBees, three large parks in the city were used to store and dispense essential supplies (food, water, blankets and health items.) Maneuver battalions with Iraqi security forces support provided security in each site (lessons learned the previous year

concerning food riots drove the MEF to use multiple protective measures including wire, search machines and security over watch. Luckily, and most likely due to the strong security posture, no incidents occurred at any of the distribution sites.

There was some significant political pressure to resolve the Fallujah issue quickly. Prime Minister Allawi wanted to show the Sunnis that they would be cared for at least as well as the Shia populations in other areas of Iraq. The United Nations and the Iraqi Ministry of Migration had valid concerns about the residents who had displaced prior to the fighting. Finally the government had to allocate and distribute millions of dollars of reconstruction funds under difficult circumstances. But even with these pressures, it was the MNF that most frequently pushed for relief in Fallujah and it was the US government that provided the first and bulk of the funds that reached residents in 2005. Humanitarian pressures did bear on decision making, both during and after the battle. The displaced people did receive a great deal of aid, to include discounted fuel from the Iraqi government, for months. Luckily, most of this was planned in advance.

Still, *AL FAJR* required significant host nation leadership. The Prime Minister had to be personally involved on many occasions due to the sensitive nature of the fighting in the Sunni Triangle<sup>6</sup> and the massive amount of funding required to rebuild and repair the city. Fundamental questions of emergency law and re-establishment of police capability also required a high level of governmental involvement, particularly as several of the Ministers were reluctant to cooperate with each other. Still, reconstruction of essential civic service sites, battle damage compensation, compensation for damaged homes and new economic development initiatives were apparent by March 2005. Funding the hug

cost of restoring the city was a problem initially, however Iraqi funding augmented by \$100 Million US eventually began to flow into the city.

### **Voting: a Measure of Success**

Many people ask if the effort in Fallujah made a difference in the campaign against the insurgency or improved the lot of the Iraqi people. There can be no doubt that the tempo of the insurgency was slowed by the battle; that the price of weapons increased significantly and that the number and types of attacks in the west of Iraq was reduced. Even more significant however was the symbolic effort of the returned Fallujah residents to vote in the national election in January 2005. In the immediate aftermath of resettlement Iraq held national elections for a transitional government, this was in effect a semi-plebiscite for the Allawi government and a big indicator of popular sentiment in the city. In Fallujah, where little or no significant reconstruction had begun at the time of the election, nearly one third of the residents stood in long lines to vote. Elsewhere in Al Anbar province there Sunni neighbors were intimidated and fewer than 18,000 people went to the polls, but in Fallujah a significant percentage felt safe enough to gain the purple finger.<sup>7</sup> The residents of Fallujah had bridged the past and committed to a new future.

### **Lessons learned**

**Information operations.** Information operations (IO) shaped the battle in ways few people understood at the time. Perhaps most importantly, proper information techniques convinced the residents of the city to leave prior to the battle, reducing civilian casualties and permitting the assault forces much greater freedom of action. Almost as important, information tools help the MNF split to insurgents from their base

of support (the remaining residents) to reduce their freedom of action. There is even evidence that our information campaign turned many of the insurgents on one another as they grew fearful of informants within their ranks. There is no doubt that information could be employed as a weapon adding significant non-kinetic fires within the battlespace.

Information also played an important role outside the battlespace. Wide-ranging, aggressive, public affairs activities helped inform the people of Iraq and the American people about the real issues of the battle. The huge number of weapons caches and numerous improvised explosive device (IED) factories, as well as multiple incidents when mosques were found to have been used as weapons storages sites all helped reveal the techniques of the enemy. The real horror of the terrorist killing houses in the city only magnified the extent of insurgent guilt for crimes against innocents. Making these facts well known helped justify the risk and cost of the battle. The cumulative effect of these facts reduced pressure on the Iraqi Prime Minister to curtail the fighting. In the end it also made the residents more willing to accept their own culpability as unwilling supporters for these acts after they returned to survey the destruction of the city.

**Military operations in urban terrain.** Fighting in cities has always been extremely challenging; historically many of the most devastating battles in American history have been high casualty producers due to the complex nature of urban terrain. Fallujah was clearly an urban fight and it showed us much about the current state of military operations in urban terrain (MOUT). First of all, mechanized and armored vehicles were critical to the MEF's success in Fallujah. Both assaults into the city were spearheaded by tanks, allowing rapid penetration to break up and get behind enemy

defensive positions and break through the multiple layers of IEDs that were nested at key locations in Fallujah.

Still, the fight for Fallujah also proved the need for boots on the ground in significant numbers to clear through the nearly 20,000 structures in the city. Current tactics and building assault techniques serviced the MNF forces well, even when pitted against a determined enemy fighting to the death. Insurgents booby-trapped themselves, used armor piercing rounds, established internal ambushes in homes and worked through a network of interconnected defensive positions to hold off the MNF infantry attack, without success.

Many felt that the risk of “blue on blue” friendly casualties from the use of artillery in urban operations was too high to accept, however *AL FAJR* clearly demonstrated that well controlled fires, in combination with good target identification and well trained forces made artillery invaluable. Though only supported by one battery of Marine howitzers and one battery of Army Paladin artillery the division attack employed artillery to great effect. Firing nearly continuously during the assault and on-call ready to rapidly respond for weeks afterwards artillery fires made a huge contribution to the fight and produced no friendly casualties.

**Civil military operations.** Civil military operations (CMO) include population and resource control, humanitarian assistance and many forms of coordination with the host nation. For *AL FAJR*, civil affairs forces were integrated within the assault echelon of the force so that the needs to the population could be addressed immediately and throughout the battle. Even in the first days of the attack, civil affairs units were dealing with the local population to compensate them for damages, help them bury the dead, and

provide them food and water. They also helped clarify the real goals of the operation for those living in Fallujah so that they could help protect themselves. As the operation progressed, the civil affairs forces turned their attention to the construction and management of sites providing humanitarian assistance.

Before the attack, civil affairs planners had helped to identify locations in the city that should have been protected from MNF fires. During the fighting they moved to assess the status and functioning of the many essential services areas (most were municipal government facilities such as water purification and sewage) so that any immediate repairs could be started. Without these actions the city would have been under water for months and largely uninhabitable. Finally, after the most severe fighting was completed and the residents were returning to the city, the major civil military effort was designed to restore the city public works, food water and fuel distribution and traffic police to prior fighting levels.<sup>8</sup>

**Coalition Command and Control (C2) Issues.** None of this could have been accomplished without the development of effective host nation C2 structures. The value of having General Abdul Qater and his deputy Brigadier General Kassim on site during the fight was critical for the proper integration and motivation of the Iraqi forces within the 1st Marine Division. It was even more important during the immediate post-hostilities phase, when General Abdul Qater approved rules for Fallujah residents within the city and the timing of the resettlement plan. Once the citizens began to return to their homes, having Engineer Mahmoud and his team available in the city not only helped immensely to restore the functioning of Fallujah public works, but also added much to the confidence and morale of the returned residents. By February Mahmoud and his team



were conducting town hall meetings in the center of the city (facilitated by civil affairs personnel) dealing with a multitude of problems, but successfully meeting residents needs. None of this could have been done without the full involvement of Iraqis in and out of uniform. In a particularly xenophobic part of the world, local tribal, religious and cultural influence was critical.

**Resettlement.** Many thought the city of Fallujah could not be resettled without a return of the insurgents. Although it is certainly true that insurgents did flow back in the city, they did so in such reduced numbers and with so little resident tolerance for their activities that their capability within Fallujah remained insignificant through the early spring of 2005. The elections proved that Fallujans wanted to be a functioning part of the future Iraq. Lack of tolerance for insurgent activity for the three months following the assault demonstrates that the local residents were no longer providing support. The return of a fully professional and effective police force in the city by mid-summer of 2005 will signify the real victory of *AL FAJR*.

The fight for Fallujah was important to the overall campaign in Iraq because it eliminated a significant terrorist strongpoint that had symbolized insurgent power in the face of an MNF attack; it had been the single city in Iraq that had stood against the MNF, and the Iraqi government had to cleanse it of its anti-Iraqi forces. It was the first major battle in Iraq directed and controlled by the sovereign Iraqi Government. Because of its success, *AL FAJR* marked a turning point in the campaign and set a new tone for future operations in Iraq. It not only achieved its tactical objectives but also illustrated numerous techniques that would be important for the MNF campaign in Iraq.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The First Marine Expeditionary Force was composed on one Marine Division, one Marine Aircraft Wing, one Marine Force service Support Group, and additional attachments, including one brigade of US Army soldiers. Later other units would augment the MEF, however, the Division remained the primary ground combat unit of the MEF.

<sup>2</sup> Operation Vigilant Resolve was directed on short notice, to be executed in less than 5 days, with the goal of capturing or killing the insurgents responsible for the killing of the American contractors. It was also designed to re-establish law and order and prevent Fallujah from acting as a sanctuary for the anti-Iraqi forces. Vigilant Resolve was essentially a two-battalion attack, although four Iraqi battalions had been requested in support.

<sup>3</sup> Camp Fallujah, not to be confused with the city itself, was a former Iraqi army training center designed for the use of an Iranian unit loyal to Saddam Hussein. It was a well-designed and organized military camp, located on the main highway less than 5 miles from the city.

<sup>4</sup> The Mahdi Militia was the military arm of the followers of Muqtada Al Sadr a young Shia religious leader. They effectively took control of the central part of the holy city of Najaf and began to conduct sharia courts and kill accused violators of religious law. This began only days after the arrival in theater of the 11<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, commanded by Colonel Tony Haslem.

<sup>5</sup> It was impossible to completely surround the city because it was bordered by the Euphrates River. Some insurgents undoubtedly escaped by the river at night.

<sup>6</sup> Sunni minority interests were always important and the Prime Minister understood well the fine line he needed to work to gain inclusion, yet resist a negative reaction from other parties.

<sup>7</sup> Every Iraqi who voted had his/her right index finger marked with blue dye. Insurgents had claimed all such fingers would be cut off. It took commitment and bravery to gain the purple finger.

<sup>8</sup> Fallujah sits on the banks of the Euphrates River, but much of the city is under the water level. Fallujah flooded significantly during the fighting (due to broken water mains and pumps) and immediate action was required to get 10 large pump stations back up in operation to keep the water off the streets.