

Urban Warfare

The 2008 Battle for Sadr City

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Urban warfare has long been seen as perhaps the most difficult and demanding military task. Recent history features two approaches to it. The experiences of Russian forces in Grozny and U.S. forces in Fallujah illustrate one approach. In each case, noncombatants were told to evacuate in advance of the attack and anyone left was a de facto enemy fighter. Then these geographically remote cities were, in effect, besieged and then stormed, with attacks supported by massive firepower. The result: high casualties on both sides and rubble cities.

The 2008 battle for Sadr City offers a different model, in which the challenges were even more formidable than those posed by Grozny and Fallujah. Sadr City is part of Baghdad and has an estimated population of 2.4 million. Forcing noncombatants to evacuate was not an option: there was nowhere for them to go. However, the approach to ridding Sadr City of Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) fighters was quite different from that used in Grozny or Fallujah. The operation was essentially a wide-area security operation and focused on enemy fighters and their capabilities, rather than taking and clearing the city. Thus, the battle of Sadr City offers valuable lessons for future urban operations.

The trigger for the battle was JAM’s response to the Iraqi government’s offensive against insurgents in Basra. JAM launched its own offensive, overrunning Government of Iraq security forces and firing rockets and mortars into the International Zone, also known as the Green Zone.

In response, a U.S. Army brigade and Iraqi security forces (army and police), featuring Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, and Strykers, along with engineers, civil affairs, and psychological operations personnel and other support troops, took on JAM. Importantly, the command and control arrangements gave the brigade commander direct access to crucial intel-

Key Points

- The most effective approach to the challenges of urban combat in the future may be one that sees it as a wide-area security mission rather than as a “take and clear” mission.
- Decentralized decisionmaking is crucial to counter a fleeting enemy. Information and assets need to be pushed down to brigade level and below.
- Heavy forces (tanks and infantry fighting vehicles) are key elements of the ground fight in complex terrain: they are survivable, lethal, and precise.

ligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets and fire support, including attack helicopters, fighter aircraft, armed Predator Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UASs), and Shadow UASs. This arrangement gave the brigade commander a short decision-response time that enabled him to react promptly to JAM operations.

An early priority was to stop the rocket and mortar attacks on the International Zone. JAM could launch these attacks quickly and almost at will. It simply required pulling a vehicle into a firing position, unloading the rocket and its firing rail, firing off the rocket, and driving back to a hide position: the work of minutes. U.S. forces quickly realized that the International Zone was at the extreme end of the 107mm rocket’s range. Their solution was to push JAM fighters out of their firing positions and back into Sadr City. This approach did not stop JAM infiltration. The brigade then employed an innovative but straightforward approach: It walled off two neighborhoods south of Sadr City, including the

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Building the wall under fire in Sadr City

one containing the Jamilla market where JAM got much of its resources. The wall consisted of T-wall sections, each twelve feet tall and weighing 9,000 pounds. (See photo above.) The wall became an impenetrable, nearly five-kilometer barrier that denied JAM what had been terrain and avenues of movement crucial to its operations. The fighting was particularly intense and required the brigade commander to commit Abrams tanks and Bradleys to dislodge JAM fighters and protect the soldiers building the wall.

As soon as the wall started to go up, JAM instantly recognized the threat posed to its operations and launched numerous attacks to stop its construction. The wall, in the words of one U.S. commander, became a “terrorist magnet.” U.S. forces fought from a position of advantage and defeated the JAM assaults.

While the construction of the T-wall ultimately squelched the rocket attacks, by defeating JAM’s fighters, U.S. forces

waged an intense—and instructive—counter-fire campaign. Key to that campaign was giving the brigade commander direct access to ISR assets that he could direct almost immediately to identified firing locations without having to go through another headquarters. He could also pass intelligence rapidly and by secure communications down to the company level. He could attack enemy firing points around the clock with a formidable array of assets, including Apache helicopters, Air Force fighter aircraft, and armed Predator UASs. Brigade intelligence analysts honed their techniques over time and learned to follow JAM rocket teams to their source rather than attack them immediately. Then they could strike ammo dumps and more senior leaders, thus having a much more profound effect than they would by destroying a vehicle and a few foot soldiers.

The overall results impress. In about two months, U.S. and Iraqi forces crushed JAM, killing an estimated 700, won back significant numbers of the population, and re-established control of what had been an insurgent stronghold. U.S. killed in action numbered fewer than ten. Furthermore, the Multi-National Division Baghdad (MND-B) exploited the success of the combat gains in Sadr City with an intensive campaign of providing local security and reconstruction, all complemented by information operations.

In addition to the key lessons highlighted above, other key lessons emerged. First, persistent ISR, technical intelligence, and responsive precision strike are crucial to success, but they must be integrated at low levels. Second, ground maneuver was essential. It forced the enemy to react and enabled U.S. forces to seize control of the terrain south of Sadr City and to erect the barrier. Furthermore, capable indigenous forces were decisive in securing gains. Their presence signaled that Iraqis were in charge, not coalition forces who would eventually leave. Finally, forces must be able to transition from one type of task (counterinsurgency) to another (intense close combat) seamlessly and rapidly. ■

This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *The 2008 Battle of Sadr City*, by David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel, and Brian Shannon, OP-335-A, 2011 (available at http://www.rand.org/occasional_papers/OP335.html). This research brief was written by Jerry Sollinger. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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