

Iraq after Fallujah

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THE Americans have, it seems, been able to gain control over much of Fallujah. Sporadic resistance continues in some parts of the city. The Americans lost some 38 soldiers, but they estimate that 1,200 fighters were killed in the city, which originally had a population of some 300,000 inhabitants but reduced to about one third of that by the time the American offensive was launched.

It is conceded that the main leaders of the insurgency — Abu Musab Zarqawi, Abdullah Janabi, and Omar Hadid — escaped and are probably in other parts of Iraq seeking to foment the uprising against the Americans in both the Sunni belt and in the north.

American observers take comfort in the fact that the attack on Fallujah did not provoke an outcry in other Arab countries and that even in Iraq there was no outpouring of sympathy for the Fallujah defenders from the Shia or Kurdish leaders. The more optimistic among them also believe that by wiping out this "viper's nest" and asserting American control, a message has been sent out to other resistance groups that American military might will prevail. But at the moment, Fallujah has provided the spur for the intensification of the insurgency in the Sunni-dominated areas and even in the north.

A second front has been opened in Mosul, where some 1,200 US soldiers are battling to retake parts of the city from guerilla fighters. Insurgents are staging attacks in majority Sunni cities in central and northwest Iraq, as well as in the Sunni-dominated neighbourhoods of Baghdad. In addition, some deadly attacks are occurring in the quieter Shia majority

ated Iraqi military units in the taking of Fallujah, it is generally conceded that most of the units performed badly and that it will be many months if not years before the Iraqi army can become an effective fighting force or even a force for maintaining order in rebellious cities.

The Americans now concede that more troops will be needed and there appear to be plans to induct more American troops to have a better control over the cities in the Sunni belt and elsewhere. Whether they can afford to induct a large number of troops is a question lacking a satisfactory answer at the moment. Some observers believe that this can be managed by extending the service of the reservists and postponing rotations while others have raised fears expressed during the presidential elections that the draft would have to be reintroduced.

The security situation remains charged. Sunni leaders have consistently called for a postponement of the elections. This has been endorsed by a close aide of the prime minister. Most importantly, at a gathering

expect to register will turn out for the vote giving it the sort of credibility that the UN and the international community and the Iraqi people will be looking for.

These, however, are theoretical possibilities. In practice, it is much more likely that the announcement of a firm date for elections will prompt further violence. The Americans very likely will be able to maintain partial control but unless troop levels are increased drastically there seems to be little prospect that the conditions will be created particularly in the Sunni belt in which elections can be peacefully held.

There may be the feeling that like the Afghans the Iraqis too will turn out in large numbers and will ignore the threat of the insurgents exactly as the Afghans ignored the threats of the Taliban. Unfortunately the situations are qualitatively different. In Afghanistan, many Pushtuns while unhappy with Karzai and sympathetic to the Taliban saw the presidential election as an opportunity to reassert Pushtun influence in Afghanistan.

Secondly, the Americans had the ability to coerce or persuade the Tajik and Uzbek warlords who had the capacity to disrupt the elections to acquiesce, no matter how reluctantly in the holding of the elections, with the implicit promise being that they would have a fair share of the power and would be able to get some political clout through parliamentary elections scheduled for early next year.

The elections will sound a death knell to Sunni dominance of the power structure in Iraq. The Sunnis also seem to fear that, given the resent-

Under the circumstances, a total boycott of the elections by the Sunnis would not affect the formation of the National Assembly. Most parties would include in their slate of candidates individuals from other ethnic groups. Therefore, there will still be some representation of the Sunnis in the assembly. About seven to eight million of the 14 million voters are expected to turn out to cast their vote.

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ments of the past, they will have little hope of even retaining the degree of political power that they can rightfully claim. They have been told that the Sunni Arabs form no more than 25 per cent of the population while Shias constitute 60 per cent. In Saddam's days, while never publicly acknowledged, it was privately conceded

some 1,200 US soldiers are battling to retake parts of the city from guerilla fighters. Insurgents are staging attacks in majority Sunni cities in central and northwest Iraq, as well as in the Sunni-dominated neighbourhoods of Baghdad. In addition, some deadly attacks are occurring in the quieter Shia majority areas, south of Baghdad as well as in the Kurdish-dominated zone in the northeast.

In Mosul, a largely Sunni Arab city in a Kurdish dominated area, it is said that the Americans may call upon the trained fighters of the Kurdish *peshmergas* to restore order in the city and to retake the many police stations that the insurgents had taken over on the day after the American assault on Fallujah was launched. So far, not much has been heard of the actions that Kurdish forces have taken against the Arab insurgents or their supporters in Mosul but if the Kurds do become part of the American effort to restore order and control, new ethnic fissures will be added to the dangerous schism that is already in existence.

In Baghdad, on a single day there were as many as 66 assaults on American troops. The Americans moved on to a mosque in Adhamiya, a predominantly Sunni area in Baghdad, and a location where Saddam had appeared for a while to boost people's morale as the US invasion was under way. It is undoubtedly an area in which Saddam sympathizers could be found. The mosque was probably one that was being used as an arms cache and a haven for the insurgents, but these factors would in no way reduce the rage and frustration such raids caused among the Iraqi Arab Sunnis.

A partial listing of the Iraqi cities in which the Iraqi interim government maintains only a tenuous control would include Mosul, Baghdad, Baiji, Baquba, Ramadi, Sammara, Tal Afar and Suweira. Some of these are cities in which the Americans had mounted operations and had theoretically cleaned up before handing over control to the Iraqi government forces. This control had obviously failed to be effective. The intrinsic or deliberate incompetence of the new Iraqi army was apparent also in the Fallujah operation.

Even while the American command has praised the role played by the newly cre-

of Iraqi political leaders meeting in the northern resort city of Dukan, a five-point charter was drawn up with regard to the elections including a proposal to extend the time for the drawing up of election lists within Iraq and for registering expatriate Iraqis.

There seemed to be disagreement on the timing as some Shia parties insisted that the elections go ahead as scheduled while others argued that no elections could be held until peace was restored in the Sunni areas. The Dukan gathering included the two largest Shia parties — Dawa and Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the two main Kurdish parties — the Iraqi National Accord and Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress; representatives of the president, Sheikh Ghazi al-Yawar; and the Iraqi Islamic party, which withdrew from the interim government in protest at the Fallujah offensive.

It seems that the Sunni political leaders are calling for a postponement and believe that if an election is held despite the threat of a Sunni boycott there is every prospect of civil war. Being certain that they would win a majority, most Shia parties, and notably Ayatollah Sistani, are in favour of early elections.

It has now been announced by the theoretically independent Election Commission that elections will be held on January 30, within the January 31 deadline that had earlier been agreed upon. The election officials have said that some 198 political parties and individuals have applied for registration and some 162 have been approved. Under the current Iraqi law, the entire country is being treated as one constituency with seats in the 275 member national assembly being divided among the parties on the basis of the percentage of the total vote that they obtain.

Theoretically, under these circumstances, even a total boycott of the elections by the Sunnis would not affect the formation of the National Assembly. Most parties would include in their slate of candidates individuals from other ethnic groups. Therefore, there will still be some representation of the Sunnis in the assembly. Theoretically again, the election commission is estimating that seven to eight million of the 14 million voters that they

to fear that, given the resentments of the past, they will have little hope of even retaining the degree of political power that they can rightfully claim. They have been told that the Sunni Arabs form no more than 25 per cent of the population while Shias constitute 60 per cent. In Saddam's days, while never publicly acknowledged, it was privately conceded that the Shias were in the majority but that they were not more than 52 or 53 per cent of the population while the Sunni Arabs formed at least 30 per cent of the population. It is not known whether the parties, in drawing up their slate of candidates, will use the right percentages in determining how many Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs and Kurds they put on their list.

In Iraq, therefore, the insurgency has not only the anti-American component, which all Iraqis may say they share, but also an ethnic or sectarian component. The ethnic component has a particular salience because the Sunnis fear that the Americans have a pro-Shia bias. The fact that this apprehension is shared by large swathes of the population living in neighbouring Arab states adds another level of complexity to the equation.

The successful conclusion of elections in Iraq would help in restoring some semblance of order in Iraq and mitigate the present sufferings of the Iraqi people. For this, if for no other reason, one would like the elections to be held successfully and in a manner that gives the exercise credibility. Under the present circumstances, this appears difficult unless the Americans can broker an agreement between the main Shia parties — specially Ayatollah Sistani — and the Sunni leadership for an equitable power sharing arrangement.

The Kurds have a reason to be happy with the degree of regional autonomy they have been promised and will probably be able to work out in a democratic Iraq a more equitable sharing of the income generated from energy resources located in the Kurdish areas without necessarily getting the unfettered control of Kirkuk that they are now demanding. In the past, the main threat of Iraqi disintegration came from Kurdish demands. Now it may well be a Sunni-Shia divide.

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