



Fallujah is the Iraqis' fight: Opposing view

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Twice in 2004, the U.S. military fought bitter campaigns to conquer Fallujah, a Sunni city that became a stronghold for former Baathists, Sunni insurgents and al-Qaeda. Alas, rule by the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad felt like an occupation. When the Islamic State targeted Fallujah two years ago, the terrorist group easily gained control of the city.

Fallujah needs to be retaken, but by Iraqi forces.

Direct U.S. involvement is likely to create significant political problems. Already, Iraqi Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, rather like Goldilocks, has complained that he never found U.S. airstrikes to be quite right. The commander of the Fallujah operations observed: "I don't think they trust Iraq's government or military."

Yet air power is of limited value in an urban campaign while the risk of civilian casualties is great. Washington already has been criticized for killing Iraqi civilians elsewhere. Given the American military's history in Fallujah, the U.S. is at risk of being charged, fairly or not, with causing civilian deaths there.

Worse, participation in the Fallujah operation will appear to give America's imprimatur to the involvement of Shiite militias. Most are allied with Iran, and some are headed by figures designated as terrorists by the U.S.

Their taking part might be necessary, given the generally poor performance of the Iraqi armed forces. Nonetheless, the militias have been accused of atrocities, reinforcing Sunni antagonism toward the central government.

The U.S. has little leverage to force Baghdad to adopt a more inclusive policy. Nor is the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi strong enough to enforce such an approach.

Sunni leaders already have accused the U.S. of allying itself with terrorists and sacrificing human rights. Should the “liberation” of Fallujah be followed by Shiite forces brutalizing the Sunni population, Washington will be blamed.

Washington has proved that it cannot control events in Iraq. Only the Iraqis can resolve political problems that led to military losses. Fallujah is the Iraqis’ fight.

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