

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

The Fallujah Conundrum ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

A bit belatedly, perhaps, I have become a great fan of instant messaging. From the safety of Amman I find it is the best possible tool for keeping an eye on Iraq.

This afternoon my friend and former colleague Abdel Salam popped online with the sort of grim greeting to which I have become accustomed:

"Situation is too bad regarding security. Baghdad turns totally dangerous day by day. Yesterday at night there were attacks on two churches in Al-Durra."

Abdel Salam is the main assignment editor for Iraqi television. He went on to note that the reporter and crew sent to cover the attacks on the churches was shot at when she arrived in the neighborhood ("thanks God they are OK").

After determining that none of my friends at Iraqi TV had been hurt recently we moved on to Fallujah.

The Americans and the pseudo-independent government of Iyad Allawi, I suggested, have put themselves in a box. Control of one's own territory is a basic test of sovereign government. In the middle of last summer Iraq's then-National Security Advisor, Mowaffaq Al-Rubaie, was one of several Iraqi officials who told me Fallujah had become a cesspool that needed to be cleaned up sooner rather than later.

The decision to halt the Marine assault on the city in April has allowed it to turn into a set of quasi-independent fiefdoms where hard-core Baathists, tribal leaders and (probably) foreign jihadis rule. Allawi can no more allow this to stand than the Clinton administration could let the Montana Freeman set up their own independent state. It challenges the basic credibility of sovereign government – and Allawi, just now, needs all the credibility he can get.

Fallujah's petty warlords, however, make the Montana Freeman look like Boy Scouts. Fallujah is a city of 250,000 people, at least 50,000 of whom – and maybe a lot more – have not fled the city.

You can make a coherent argument that what is happening in Fallujah is necessary. But here are some things to bear in mind:

1. There is absolutely no way it is going to be pretty. A lot of people are going to die.
2. The numbers of the dead will be minimized by the western media and exaggerated by the Arab media. Wherever the truth may lie the vast majority of the broader world (not the Arab or Islamic world, the *World*

) will tend to credit the higher numbers.

3. Even if the operation is clean and surgical, the narrative that will burn itself into the World's consciousness in general and the Middle East's consciousness in particular, will be of a callous war-mongering United States indiscriminately killing women and children and blowing up mosques. In PR terms the fact that the Baathists and jihadis kill a lot of women and children themselves will not matter, nor will the basic principal that if you shoot at me from a mosque, church or synagogue I have every right to shoot back at you.

4. When all is said and done Fallujah may be pacified in no small part because the hard core Baathists, crazy jihadis etc., etc have simply pulled up stakes and moved somewhere else (if recent press reports are accurate, probably to Mosul).

One of the things I've noticed in the last month or so is that my Iraqi friends take an ever grimmer view of the future, and my western journalist friends look ever more shaken when they get to Jordan after a tour of duty in Baghdad. Don't kid yourselves: we are stuck in Iraq for the foreseeable future. And Fallujah is only the beginning.

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