

Attack on Fallujah police highlights lack of US control in Iraq

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The circumstances surrounding the events in Fallujah on February 14 indicate that US control over the Iraqi city is tenuous at best. Apparently unconcerned about the presence of hundreds of American troops just 10 kilometres away, dozens of heavily armed men laid siege to the US-trained Iraqi security forces, stormed the police station and freed as many as 87 prisoners before melting away in the city streets.

By all reports, the operation was carried out with military precision. At about 8 a.m., a number of police were drawn out of the city by a false report that a group of foreign Islamists had gathered on the city's outskirts. The phone lines to the station were then cut. An assault team of approximately 20 to 30 men with automatic weapons, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers approached the station from four sides on foot, using the concrete bunkers set up to prevent suicide bombers as cover.

At the same time, another group of 20 to 30 with machine guns, mortars and RPGs took up positions outside the Iraqi Civil Defence Corp (ICDC) barracks about 1.5 kilometres away. Others established a roadblock on the main road to the station to prevent reinforcements. More took up positions outside the nearby Fallujah mayor's office.

At about 8:30 a.m., the attackers simultaneously unleashed a hail of gunfire and RPGs on both the ICDC compound and the police station. Blowing open the police station gate, they rushed in and cleared the building in military style—going room-to-room, throwing in grenades and gunning down police officers.

In less than 15 minutes, at least 15 police were killed and over 30 wounded. A survivor told the *Washington Post*: "It was a massacre."

Two more police were gunned down outside the mayor's office. At the ICDC barracks, an intense

firefight took place for as long as 30 minutes. While the troops inside did not suffer any casualties, they were pinned down and prevented from rendering any assistance to the police. When they withdrew, the attackers left behind four dead and one wounded. Eyewitnesses reported seeing dozens of released prisoners running down city streets.

US troops from the 82nd Airborne Division did not enter the city until several hours later. Colonel Jeffrey Smith told *Stars & Stripes* they had not come to the assistance of the Iraqi security forces because the ICDC commander told them they were not wanted: "I asked if he wanted us to send an element but he said they had it under control... He almost demanded we not put forces into Fallujah at that time because it would damage their credibility with the people there if they could not protect themselves."

Initial reports gave conflicting accounts of the identity of the attackers. The *Washington Post* cited an officer alleging they spoke with Persian [Iranian] accents. Other police alleged that three of the dead attackers were carrying Jordanian and Iranian passports. An ICDC officer declared one of the attackers "looked like he was Kurdish". A local Islamic student even told Associated Press he believed the American military was involved. "The Americans want to get back at the Iraqi police because they wouldn't inform on Iraqi *mujahidin*," he claimed.

By February 15, however, the US military had told the media that the dead attackers were local Fallujah men, including a former major in the Iraqi army. The apparent motive for the attack was to free four men who had been arrested earlier in the week on suspicion of being involved with the guerilla resistance. It was then announced that the Fallujah mayor had been taken into custody.

US Brigadier General David Rodriguez told the press on February 19: “He was an interim mayor anyhow, and he’s actually been replaced since then... The mayor was suspected... and the people on the ground determined it. They thought he might have something to do with it, so they detained him and like I said we’re interrogating him and trying to get to the bottom of it.”

US officials repeatedly claim the anti-occupation resistance is primarily the work of foreign terrorists or die-hard supporters of the former Baathist regime. Indications are that in Fallujah, as in most of Iraq, the attacks on US forces and Iraqis working for the US are fuelled by deeply-felt resentment and hostility toward the American occupation of Iraq among ordinary people. Fallujah, an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim city, has been one of the most dangerous places in Iraq for American troops. Justin Haggart from the British *Independent* noted this month: “Almost everyone in the town appears to back the resistance.” Apparently, this even includes the US-installed mayor.

The hostility to the US stems in part from events immediately following the conquest of Iraq. Last April 28, US troops opened fire on a demonstration in the city centre, killing at least 13 people. Resistance fighters have since killed 35 Americans in the city and wounded hundreds more. In November, Fallujah insurgents shot down a Chinook helicopter, killing 16 US troops. Two other US helicopters have also been downed.

In retaliation, the US military has carried out massive raids and killed, wounded or detained hundreds of local men in the area. The American actions have fueled hatred and hostility, which has no doubt assisted guerrilla groups to recruit new forces.

The assault on the police station was the second major security incident in the city this month.

On February 12, guerillas fired three RPGs at a vehicle convoy arriving at the ICDC compound carrying General John Abizaid, the commander of US troops in the Middle East, and Major General Charles Swannack, the commander of the 82nd Airborne.

While both Abizaid and Swannack were uninjured, the attack highlighted the freedom of movement that resistance fighters have in the city. The attackers were able to gain access to the rooftops of buildings adjacent the compound, fire on the convoy and reportedly escape via a nearby mosque.

There was speculation in the media that the resistance’s apparent knowledge of Abizaid and Swannack’s movements was a sign that the Iraqi security forces had been infiltrated. That appears to be the case. As well as the mayor, two personnel from the local civil defence unit have been seized on suspicion of being involved in the attacks on the police station.

Fallujah’s volatility underlay the decision of the US military to pull its troops out of the city proper late last year and leave security in the hands of the local government and security forces. The result, the *Washington Post* reported, has been that “Iraqi resistance groups move in and out of the city with ease, and foreign infiltrators opposed to the US presence have taken up residence, people here say.”

In early February, a group calling itself “Mohammed’s Army” issued a leaflet in Fallujah warning the police it would take over the city once the US occupation was ended. Over the weekend, another group calling itself the Iraq Liberation Front put up posters around the city announcing the formation of an underground Iraqi government and calling for attacks on the US.

The Bush administration insists that the situation in Iraq is stabilising and that the US military will soon be able to hand over most security roles to the Iraqi police and civil defence troops. In Fallujah, however, the vacuum left by the pull back of American troops has been filled by the anti-occupation insurgency. As the first anniversary of the invasion approaches, it is an indication of just how weak is the US grip over Iraq.



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