



Endless War? Fallujah Revisited

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Summary

As the Chilcot Inquiry prepares to publish its long-awaited report on the lessons learned from the UK's intervention in Iraq, and as Western-backed Iraqi forces battle to recapture Fallujah, this briefing reviews ORG's fifteen-year critique of the War on Terror and its disastrous consequences. Hubris has characterised past declarations of victory in this conflict while the US, UK and allies have failed to learn the lesson that the Middle East can only be stabilised by addressing the root causes of its many revolts.

Introduction

The [April briefing](#) analysed the strength of the so-called Islamic State (IS) following a number of reversals in Iraq. Its conclusion was:

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“ While IS is under substantial pressure in Syria and Iraq, primarily because of an intense if largely unreported air war, it has retained considerable resilience and competence. What is more significant, though, is that the conflict is extending outwards, not just with developments in North Africa but, even more significantly, towards Western Europe. The problem of IS is still all too frequently seen as one depending primarily on a military solution but it may well be that political factors, not least domestic European politics, will turn out to be even more important. As IS targets community relations in Europe so it becomes far more important for European governments and communities to work intensively to maintain and enhance community relations. Furthermore, the refugee pressures from the Middle East may have abated a little in the past three months but this should in no way distract European governments from the need to recognise that much more coherent and

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human-orientated strategies will be vital in the future. ”

Since then, there have been further reversals for IS, not least the gains made by Iraqi government forces in taking control of much of the city of Fallujah, but also the rapid contraction of its areas of control in Libya, the steady erosion of its territory in Syria, and question marks over the sustainability of its outlying franchises in West Africa (Boko Haram) and Central Asia ('Khorasan'). There have also been serious IS-influenced attacks overseas, including the killing of 49 people at the *Pulse* nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and the murder of a police commander and his partner in a Paris suburb.

This briefing develops the earlier report but does it in a broader context, looking back on the work undertaken by Oxford Research Group since the 9/11 attacks as the war on terror has evolved over fifteen years.

Responding to 9/11

Immediately after the 9/11 atrocities, ORG produced an immediate analysis (Scilla Elworthy and Paul Rogers, *The United States, Europe and the Majority World after 11 September*) which argued that a forceful military response might not be the best answer, and that a movement such as al-Qaida gained from fighting a war with the far enemy of the West. It pointed to a contrary view expressed within days of 9/11 by [Walden Bello](#), who condemned the attacks but went on to argue that:

“ ...the only response that will really contribute to global security and peace is for Washington to address not the symptoms but the roots of terrorism. It is for the United States to re-examine and substantially change its policies in the Middle East and the Third World, supporting for a change arrangements that will not stand in the way of the achievement of equity, justice and genuine national sovereignty for currently marginalised peoples. Any other way leads to endless war. ”

Bello wrote this as an immediate response to the 9/11 atrocities and was joined by ORG and a few other analysts swimming against the tide of a widespread demand for a fully-fledged ‘war on terror’. From ORG’s perspective:

“ Today the majority view is of a world dominated by an elite that acts primarily in its own interests, seeking to maintain a global economic system that is deeply flawed, singularly failing to deliver economic justice, and demanding of radical change. In the context of the Bush administration, Western Europe lies somewhere in between, troubled by the seeming extremism of the current US approach, and just possibly receptive to an alternative view. It may not be a fundamental difference but it offers real prospects for positive change and certainly is the most important feature of the transatlantic divide. What is undeniable is that the disasters of 11 September are bringing this whole class of paradigms to the fore in a wholly unexpected and specific form, giving it an immediacy that is quite remarkable. There is little doubt that the outcome of the efforts of the United States and some close allies to regain control after the recent traumatic events will affect

international security for years to come. It is also clear that the present situation offers an opportunity for understanding the profound issues of our age, for wise action and for international political leadership of a high order. ”

The ORG position, Bello’s analysis and those of others along similar lines were among a very small minority at the time, and receded even further into the margins after the early dispersal of the Taliban in Afghanistan and President Bush’s January 2002 *State of the Union Address* which extended the war on terror to an ‘axis of evil’. These were ‘rogue states’, initially Iran, Iraq and North Korea, which were deemed to support terrorism and be determined to develop weapons of mass destruction. The leading contender was clearly Iraq and through 2002 the intention to terminate the Saddam Hussein regime became clear.

The policy had strong public support in the United States and by the governments of the UK, Italy and Spain, but was viewed with greater suspicion by governments in Paris and Berlin and faced more general public opposition across Western Europe. Even so, the war went ahead in March 2003 and within three weeks the regime had been terminated. Three weeks later, on 1 May, President Bush gave his “mission accomplished” speech, and this and the previous *State of the Union Address* represented the high points of success, or hubris, in the fifteen-year war on terror.

Over 2002-03, ORG published a series of reports that argued that even at a time of presumed success against al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the military response would ultimately fail if the wider context was ignored. The conclusion of a report (*A Never-Ending War? Consequences of 11 September*) six months after 9/11 was that:

“ As in Afghanistan, so across much of the world, if further rebellions and paramilitary and terrorist organisations are to be countered, then responding with violence will do no more than make the situation worse. Unless core issues of marginalisation and disempowerment are addressed, the end result will be an increased support for such groups, and an expanded cycle of violence. ”

Later that year ORG published two reports. In September, *The ‘War on Terrorism’: 12-month audit and future strategy options* developed proposals for avoiding an escalating war and one month later *Iraq: Consequences of a War* suggested that regime termination in Iraq stood the risk of incurring considerable civilian casualties, inciting an insurgency and stimulating support for al-Qaida. We didn’t get everything right – for one, even our warnings of potential civilian casualties were far too low – but our analysis of the

destabilising regional impact of the invasion, and the potential for local al-Qaida affiliates to benefit from the chaos stood in stark contrast to the mainstream predictions of an easy military victory. The first two battles of Fallujah in 2004 were early evidence of this, as another [ORG report from 2005](#) laid out, and we should be wary of any claims that a new conquest of that city augurs a much more strategic victory.

Fifteen Years On

Over the past fifteen years there have been three periods when the war against al-Qaida and related manifestations such as IS appeared to be easing. By early 2002 the Taliban had apparently been terminated in Afghanistan but, in practice, had melted away only to return four years later, leading to a protracted and violent insurgency which persists. At its peak in 2012 there were 140,000 foreign troops in the country and while most have been withdrawn Taliban and other armed opposition groups control much territory and threaten the government in Kabul.

Then, in May 2003, President Bush could report on successful regime termination in Iraq but an insurgency developed which was complicated by increasingly bitter inter-confessional violence and led to the presence of well over 150,000 Western troops trying to maintain control.

Five or six years later there appeared to have been a diminishing of the violence in Iraq and the incoming Obama administration could contemplate withdrawal of forces by 2011. Moreover, that year also marked the killing of Osama bin Laden.

In practice, though, al-Qaida evolved into ISIS then IS and a new war developed in Iraq and Syria, hugely complicated by the civil war in the latter country. That

element of the war continues with great human costs but there is now a view that IS is in retreat, and that new methods of warfare predicated on the remote control of threats (Special Forces, armed drones, private military companies and the like) are proving effective.

Looked at overall, the past fifteen years have been disastrous. In addition to the devastation in Syria, the death toll has certainly exceeded 250,000 across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, many hundreds of thousands of people have been wounded and many millions have been forced to flee their homes. There is palpable anger against the United States and its coalition partners and a particular resentment at the manner in which so much of European public opinion is antagonistic to the needs of desperate people who are met with razor wire, teargas and water cannon.

This appears to count for little among most Western governments where there is a belief that the war against IS is now being won, but there are problems with this at two levels. One is that even if IS loses most of its territory in the coming year, it is clear that one of the main means of control in Iraq will be through Shi'a militias, heavily backed by Iran. Unless the Iraqi government can reach out fairly to the Sunni minority, this will aid Sunni support for IS or some successor group, in continuing its violent campaign, albeit underground. On current evidence the Iraqi government will not be able to do this. Furthermore, IS retains support within other countries in the region and has proved increasingly capable at fostering overseas attacks, not least in Western Europe and the United States.

Conclusion

At the more general level it has to be recognised that there have been the previous instances when Western states appeared to be winning the war against al-Qaida, IS and other radical groups. As before, it is highly likely that the position we are now in is essentially little different to the earlier periods of optimism. Instead, we would do well to recognise that the underlying circumstances that allow these extreme groups to gain and maintain support have not been addressed. Unless they are, new movements will arise, much as did IS, and war will continue.

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About the Author

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