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In Ramadi, a Test of Iraqi Forces

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Two weeks after thousands of U.S. and Iraqi forces established a series of combat outposts, called "strong points," surrounding Ramadi, residents are returning to the unruly city, hoping to find relative normalcy.

As the strong points were being occupied, residents had fled or braced for a full-scale Fallujah-style assault that never happened. Instead, they are seeing a "soft offensive" that is emblematic of the new face of the U.S.-led counterinsurgency effort.

Despite the similarities between the insurgent stronghold of Fallujah two years ago and Ramadi today, the current offensive will be slow and deliberate, and will focus on rebuilding local infrastructure, not destroying it. One U.S. commander said of the effort, "It is not a push; it is a slow squeeze."

Ramadi, a city of 400,000 on the banks of the Euphrates, is now Iraq's most dangerous city. Insurgents battle U.S. and Iraqi troops on a near-hourly basis. It is the poster-child of a third-world, war-ravaged community. The streets serve as landfill, sewage system and battlefield all in one.

It is the job of Army Col. Sean MacFarland, commander of the "Ready First Brigade Combat Team," to neutralize the insurgents, reestablish a municipal government, and rebuild the city's infrastructure. He hopes to duplicate the "clear, hold and build" strategy successfully employed in the Syrian border town of Tal Afar.

The strong points in Ramadi, cohabitated by U.S. and Iraqi troops, are designed to cut off the insurgents from supplies and reinforcements from the outside. They also serve as small satellite bases from which to launch highly focused, company-level operations. While Americans still lead the effort to neutralize the insurgency, it is becoming increasingly incumbent on the thousands of Iraqi soldiers in Ramadi to win over the local population.

Coalition forces, along with Iraqi army units, hope for an "oil spot" effect at each strong point. The fortified outposts are a foothold from which they can take back and rebuild neighborhoods one block at a time. Every week, U.S. and Iraqi

soldiers will expand the influence of their strong points until all efforts are widespread and interconnected with neighboring strong points.

What distinguishes MacFarland's mission from previous operations is that its success - or failure - will be largely dependent on the Iraqi army. Previous operations, including Fallujah, Samarah, and Baghdad's Sadr City, have put American grunts at the tip of the spear, with Iraqis in rear-area security roles. The Ramadi effort puts Iraqis shoulder to shoulder with Americans, with Iraqis often in the driver's seat.

With both the American and Iraqi public growing weary of the war, the next few months may be a bellwether. If the Iraqis can pacify the country's most dangerous city, optimism and support for the mission may increase. If the Iraqis fail, it will hasten the calls for U.S. withdrawal.

We recently had a chance to evaluate Iraqi infantrymen on the front lines. During the day, they led security patrols and managed checkpoints on the main thoroughfares. In the evening, one Iraqi company painstakingly worked on a census of the people in their area of operations. This survey allowed the Iraqi soldiers to gather intelligence in their neighborhoods, but just as important, to build relationships with the people. These operations were Iraqi-led, with Iraqi soldiers taking on the cultural and interpersonal challenges that Americans simply cannot and should not do.

If Ramadi's citizens can be assured that Iraqi soldiers can provide protection, they will be more forthcoming with information on the enemy.

One recent evening, coalition forces were notified by a local Iraqi police chief that he had arrested three insurgents based on tips from residents. By the time we arrived with U.S. forces, local police had found two AK-47s, a sniper rifle, and several explosive devices in the suspected insurgents' vehicle. As the Iraqi police and U.S. troops prepared to transport the suspects, a crowd of children swarmed our vehicles. The children cheered and I could hear the adults saying, "Sukran" - meaning thank you - to those who carried out the arrest.

These citizens, at least, had had enough of the insurgents and the violence they brought upon the community. Both the Iraqi government and U.S. military are hoping that the rest of Ramadi, and other regions in Iraq, have had enough as well.

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