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# **Al Qaqaa and the Military Realities in Iraq**

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A military analyst approaches an election year subject like Al Qaqaa at his peril. At the same time, it is almost tragic-comic to see a debate over the Iraq War acquire such a narrow and largely irrelevant issue. Al Qaqaa is at best a minor symptom of far deeper problems, some of which the Bush Administration can be blamed for and some of which it cannot.

### **Putting Al Qaqaa in Perspective**

There is something truly absurd about focusing on 377 tons of rather ordinary explosives, regardless of what actually happened at Al Qaqaa. No one really has the faintest idea of how many munitions were left at the time of Saddam's fall and the regime collapse. One thing is brutally clear, however, and that is that the 377 tons at Al Qaqaa are part of total stockpiles that were probably in excess of 650,000 tons -- figure made public by Senator Biden and which may well sharply understate the holdings of one of the most militarized nations in the world.

It is now unclear that there actually were 377 tons at the site. Some IAEA figures indicate that the actual holdings were 3 tons of RDX, 3.5 tons of Petn and 194.741 tons of HMX or 201.5 tons. The confusion lies in the fact that 125 more tons of RDX were stored at the nearby facility at Al Mahaweel, which fell under the jurisdiction of Al Qaqaa. Including this in the total for Al Qaqaa seems dubious at best since this site does not seem to have ever been visited by US troops and bypassing it meant no more than bypassing all of the other sites in the area of the US advance on Baghdad.

Even if there were 377 tons, however, this means there were some 1,724 other equivalents of the Al Qaqaa site in Iraq at the time of Saddam's fall. Put differently, it means that the munitions at Al Qaqaa were at most around 0.06% of the total. Furthermore, Al Qaqaa was only one of some 900 actual sites that had been identified before the war for later investigation, and the US has found some 10,000 actual weapons caches in the years that have followed.

The quality of the explosives is largely unimportant. No proliferator is ever going to be short of enough HMX to carry out a nuclear weapons program, and the volume of the amounts stored shows clearly that the explosives were held for other military purposes. There is no shortage of plastic explosive in Iraq and many other munitions work as well or better for IEDs and other forms of improvised attacks.

### **The Department of Defense Case**

Seen from this perspective, the fact US units bypassed the site is no more relevant than the fact so many other sites were bypassed. The Department of Defense also makes a reasonable case that there was little military point in securing this particular site during a

period the US was rushing forward with limited forward deployed strength to seize Baghdad before Saddam's forces have any chance to regroup.

The Department of Defense makes these points in the following talking points (Issued on 27-10-04) on the timeline of US operations in 2003:

- **According to the Duelfer report, as of mid-September 2004 Coalition forces have reviewed and cleared more than 10,000 caches of weapons.**
  - This includes 240,000 tons of munitions that have been destroyed and another 160,000 tons secured and awaiting destruction.
  - The 377 tons of munitions from the Al-Qaqaa facility is less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> of one percent of the 400,000 tons of total munitions Coalition forces have destroyed or have lined up to destroy.
- **On March 19, Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched.**
  - Shortly before that date the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had left Iraq.
  - The initial goal of Coalition forces was to collapse Saddam's regime and go after its command and control elements. This was done with an emphasis on speed in order to minimize the loss of life.
- **The 3-15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division arrived as part of the Coalition push to Baghdad on April 3-4.**
  - Their mission was to secure the bridge crossing site so follow-on troops from the 3<sup>rd</sup> ID could continue to cross the bridge and move into Baghdad.
- **The Al-Qaqaa facility is one of dozens of ammunition storage points the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division encountered on its march toward Baghdad from the Iraq-Kuwait border.**
  - Former chief weapons inspector David Kay noted on Oct. 26, 2004, "The Iraqi behavior when they believed they were going to be attacked would be to empty the bunkers and scatter the material around the site."
  - U.S. troops reported hundreds of caches of weapons from Kuwait to Baghdad.
  - U.S. forces discovered dispersed weapons in countless locations, including schools, mosques and hospitals and even zoos.
- **When the U.S. forces arrived, the Al-Qaqaa facility was not secure.**
  - Fedayeen Saddam, Special Republican Guard and other Iraqi military units were at the facility defending it.
  - These enemies were firing from inside the facility. The 3-15th engaged them and found that the gates to the facility were open.
- **IAEA acknowledged in January 2003 that it could not account for 32 tons of HMX.**
  - The IAEA apparently accepted Saddam's contention that the missing explosives were used for industrial purposes.
- **Al-Qaqaa is a large industrial complex.**
  - Al-Qaqaa was just one of more than 900 designated sites of interest for post-hostilities WMD exploration.
  - The facility had streets that stretched city blocks, more than 80 buildings, and dozens of bunkers traditionally built to store weapons. There were six designated sensitive sites on the facility.
- **At Al-Qaqaa, the 2d Brigade uncovered ordnance, material believed to be possible biological or chemical agents, and other weapons-related material.**
  - The material was tested and found not to be biological or chemical agents.
- **The 2d Brigade commander was aware that following standard procedure, a follow-on unit of experts (the 75<sup>th</sup> Exploitation Task Force) would arrive to perform an inspection/analysis of the site.**

- In fact, the 75<sup>th</sup> inspected the facility on May 8, May 11 and May 27 and reported no IAEA material. The facility had been looted and stripped and vandalized. The 75<sup>th</sup> recommend no further exploitation of the facility.
- **On April 6 the 3-15<sup>th</sup> battalion departed the facility.**
  - The 3-15<sup>th</sup> then joined the rest of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade for the push to Baghdad.
- **On April 10 the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne (an NBC news team was embedded with the brigade) arrived at Al-Qaqaa, but stayed on the perimeter.**
  - The brigade halted their advance temporarily near the facility. They continued on their mission the next day.
  - While occupying their temporary position, the brigade only secured the immediate area around the unit. Soldiers found bombs and other munitions, but no chemical weapons in their immediate area.
- **To date, there is no evidence of any large-scale movement of explosives from the facility from April 6 when the 3-15<sup>th</sup> battalion departed to the arrival of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne.**
  - The movement of 377 tons of heavy ordnance would have required dozens of heavy trucks and equipment moving along the same roadways as U.S. combat divisions occupied continually for weeks subsequent to the 3<sup>rd</sup> I.D.'s arrival at the facility.

### **The Other Side of the Story**

To say that Al Qaqaa was in the “noise level” of a much broader problem, and is largely militarily irrelevant as an individual site, is the understatement of the year. The issue then arrives, however, that the Department of Defense has said that it has destroyed or secured some 402,000 tons out of a total of at least 650,000 tons. This leaves some 148,000 tons unaccounted for, or 393 Al Qaqaa equivalents. (377 tons = 0.3% of the total).

The real issue, therefore, is whether the US should have planned to secure all of the munitions in some 900 sites during its advance or immediately afterwards, as well as all of the 10,000 weapons caches it could find.

The answer may seem to be yes, and this would argue for providing higher troop levels and for much better Phase IV planning – something for which the Bush Administration can be legitimately criticized. In fact, a failure clearly recognized by Secretary Rumsfeld and the Joint Staff in developing the FY2006 Strategic Planning Guidance, as well as by the Defense Science Board examination of the US problems in stability operations and nation building.

Here, however, several offsetting facts need to be considered:

- **More troops may well have been needed, but securing munitions was only one mission.** There was the problem of looting, securing government offices, advancing more rapidly into the Sunni triangle, and providing security throughout the country. It is far from clear that any credible war plan could actually have deployed enough troops on a timely basis to perform all of these tasks during the advanced and the critical weeks following Saddam's fall.

It is all very well to call for more troops in vague terms, and ignore time, space, and real-world force availability vs. the required tasking. This, however, is

military drivel. Triage is inevitably in military tasking. No credible force can do everything at once, and this particular task has to have been lower in terms of priority than issues like preventing looting, establishing security, etc.

- **Boots on the ground after the fighting are not boots on the ground during the fighting.** It is one thing to criticize the Bush Administration for its lack of overall planning and follow up for stability and nation building operations – complaints which are all too valid – but it is far from clear that the US could have achieved anything like the same overall results during the war –even with much higher troop levels – if it had diverted forward deployed combat troops to all of the rear area missions just discussed.

The issue is not total manpower in theater. It is total supportable manpower forward deployed in battle and the levels that could have been sustained forward. Looking at the US Army and USMC histories of battle, it would have taken far larger forward deployed forces – probably several division equivalents – to perform all of the projected rear area mission or the advancing combat troops would have had to slow down enough to give Saddam a credible chance to regroup his defense of Baghdad.

This mission tasking also would only have covered the munitions sites, weapons caches, and other missions in the zone of the US advance – still leaving some 60-70% of the overall problem in the country as a whole unaddressed. Most of the south, north, and east, and key parts of the West were not in the US line of advance.

- **No one knew at the time Baghdad would fall so easily.** Much of the argument also assumes on the basis on hindsight that the US could plan on the rapid fall of Baghdad. Virtually all prewar planning saw the defense of Baghdad as a critical problem that could easily end in a siege. No one planned on “thunder runs” and rapid, sudden armored advances and their success. No one believed US forces could suddenly advanced into the city and secure its offices and facilities, or that cohesive resistance would disappear almost immediately in the Sunni triangle.

Reassigning forces and missions on the basis on hindsight is not analysis, and the Bush Administration can scarcely be blamed for the fact that none of the US military staffs planning for the war estimated exactly how the war would develop or that Saddam’s forces would be so fragile.

- **The Bush Administration war plan did call for a much larger ground presence than could actually be deployed.** In fairness, it is also important to note that the war plan called for the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and some two brigade equivalents to come down from the North. The Bush Administration may be vulnerable to criticism for fundamentally misreading Turkish politics, but any analysis of its planned manpower levels must include the forces that Turkey would not allow to be deployed.

In short, it is far from clear that a different war plan or troop level would have made that radical a difference in dealing with cases like Al Qaqaa during the actual advance or immediately after the war.

## **The Real Issues**

This is not to excuse the Bush Administration for major failures in the war, or the US military for underestimating the need for stability operations and Phase IV planning. Al Qaqaa, however, is virtually a mindless tempest in a teapot compared to the broader debate that should have taken place.

If one looks back on the overall history of the war and its aftermath, America's "neoconservatives" had a grand strategy for transforming Iraq and the Middle East was at best ridiculous.

Their strategic assessment of Iraq was wrong in far more important ways than their assessment of the potential threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. They were fundamentally wrong about how the Iraqi people would view the US invasion. They were equally wrong about the problems of governance, and in underestimating the difficulties in creating a new government that was legitimate in Iraqi eyes.

They misjudged the relevance and influence of Iraqi exiles. They misjudged the scale of Iraq's economic, ethnic, and demographic problems. They failed to see the need for serious stability operations and nation building; they did not see the risk of insurgency; and they assumed that we were so right that our allies and the world would soon be forced to follow our lead.

As a result, they did not foresee the impact of the war on our overall structure of alliances and world opinion. They did not foresee its impact on the Middle East and the Islamic world, or the decline in support for the war on terrorism. They fundamentally misread the linkages between the invasion of Iraq, the Arab-Israel conflict, and the fighting in Afghanistan.

They saw military action by the Department of Defense as a workable substitute for effective coordination and action by all the agencies of government.

There was no real grand strategy beyond Saddam's fall, and their strategic assessments were horribly slow to improve. "Neoconservatives" wasted a year after our apparent military victory, living in a state of ideological denial. We occupied Iraq as proconsuls, rather than rushing to create a legitimate government. We delayed in creating effective Iraqi military and security forces. Our aid efforts faltered in a mix of uncoordinated, ideologically-driven plans to make the Iraqi economy "American," and bureaucratic fumbling.

What realism there is in our present approach to the "war after the war" in Iraq has been thrust upon "neoconservatives" after the fact. To the extent we may be evolving a

workable approach to a grand strategy, that evolution has been shaped largely by the people that “neoconservatives” chose to ignore in going to war in the first place. The adaptation to the political and military facts in Iraq has come from military, State Department and intelligence professionals

Moreover, we have also seen that our grand strategy for force transformation was flawed and has also had to changed in ways that go far beyond the fighting in Iraq. We have shifted from a technology-driven version of a “revolution in military affairs” and “netcentric warfare,” to a human factors-driven counterinsurgency campaign dominated by boots on the ground, old technologies, area expertise, and asymmetric warfare. In forgetting the full range of grand strategic lessons from recent wars, we also failed to take account of lessons we should have used in shaping many aspects of our military future.

It would have been nice to have a meaningful debate over these issues, but this is an election year. Like energy, budget deficits, and most serious issues, politics just isn't serious until the campaign is over.