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Nov 04, 2016 by [Justin Rashid](#)

The Public Diplomacy of Doing Nothing: Iraqi Government Inaction on the Siege of Fallujah ^[1]

The Anbar province in west Iraq has been home to a Sunni-inspired insurgency in the country for some time now. In December 2012, a series of sit-in demonstrations by Sunni Arabs, who dominate the province, began after staff working for Sunni Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi were arrested. The arrests were defended by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the head of Iraq's Shia-led government, who is constantly (and fairly) accused of seeking nefarious ways to sideline his political opponents.

Inspired by the tens of thousands who camped out in the Ramadi-Fallujah corridor, other protests sprung up all over the country. In April 2013, Iraqi Security Forces stormed a protest camp in Kirkuk province, after a previous clash with demonstrators killed an Iraqi soldier. Dozens of people were killed and the incident sparked a Sunni backlash across the country, embodied by a spike in violence levels. Twelve months after their sit-in began, by the end of 2013, protestors in the original Ramadi camp agreed to disband. Over the course of that year, everyone's best enemy al-Qaeda had infiltrated the camp, using it as cover and sowing the seeds of discontent among the legitimate and mostly peaceful Sunni citizens. The Sunni tribal leaders eventually acknowledged this infiltration and agreed to let in Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to dismantle the camp.

ISF moved in, though, they were met with gunfire. Al-Qaeda militants, who in Iraq and Syria fought under the franchise brand of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), rose up in coordinated assaults to eventually take control of Ramadi and Fallujah as well as some of the surrounding towns. This was on January 1st 2014 and the situation in the Anbar province has been dominating security and political headlines in Iraq ever since.

Ramadi and Fallujah are no strangers to sieges or bloody battles. In 2004, insurgents controlled Fallujah and were under siege by coalition forces that were searching for the extremists responsible for the killing of four U.S. contractors. The insurgents tried to counter the siege by launching an offensive of their own on Ramadi, which they saw as the center of gravity for the coalition. The U.S. Marines launched their assault in what would come to be known as the First Battle of Fallujah, but they would eventually withdraw from the city amid criticism of the civilian casualties. The U.S. handed over Fallujah to the Iraqi Fallujah Brigade, which ultimately collapsed leaving the city in the hands of the insurgents. This led to the Second Battle of Fallujah in November 2004.

The 2014 Siege of Fallujah

The current siege of Fallujah involves not U.S. or coalition troops, but the Iraqi Army. Meanwhile, the insurgents in control of the city comprise a complicated mix. On the one hand, there are armed Sunni-aligned militant groups, of which ISIL are the most notorious and most violent. On the other hand, there is a "council" of Sunni tribal leaders and their respective followers. The Sunni tribal council had been interested in talking with the government in Baghdad about their issues. In a nutshell, the Sunnis feel disenfranchised by the Shia-led government and some want Anbar to break away into a semi-autonomous region similar to what the Iraqi Kurds have in the north (The Kurdistan Regional Government). Ostensibly due to the Sunni willingness to dialogue and reach a solution diplomatically, the government prohibited any ground offensive by the Iraqi Army. The reality, though, is that there are not any viable diplomatic solutions that Baghdad would consider. This is due to the fact that the government is driven by Prime Minister Maliki's thirst for power consolidation – there is no way he would concede any level of autonomy to the Sunnis.

In the meantime, the Iraqi military has been impatient. So, while they have been politically directed to not assault Fallujah on the ground, they have kept their trigger fingers happy with a continuous bombardment of the city. Civilians are naturally the main casualties – since the crisis started, over 250 have been killed and Iraqi Army bombing operations have injured over 1,100. Tens of thousands of families have been displaced from the region due to the conflict.

However, the Iraqi Army has not only used military power. ISIL have been engaging the insurgents on the outskirts of Falluja, leading to some heavy clashes and significant losses on both sides. In early April, insurgents took control of the Falluja Dam and closed its gates, cutting off water supply to central and southern parts of the country. This was actually a smart power move by the insurgents, who are constantly trying to undermine the government's inability to provide adequate security for its citizens. However, the closing of the dam caused flooding in dozens of villages along the Euphrates River Valley, as well as the poisoning of the water supply. Adding to the woes of the Fallujah residents who have not managed to escape are power, communication, and food shortages.

The Art of Doing Nothing

The Iraqi Government never actually engaged in any meaningful diplomacy with the Sunni tribal leaders because they did not have any reason to do so. And it is too late for the government to employ an effective military solution to the crisis. There are national parliamentary elections in Iraq on April 30, 2014, and Prime Minister Maliki has calculated that he does not need the votes of Anbar residents to win another term. Indeed, the citizens in Fallujah feel abandoned altogether by the government and this is fair on their part. For the government, a military offensive now would be too late to reap any political benefits.

Since the Anbar crisis started, Maliki appears to have gotten away with doing nothing at all. The "Four-Stage Strategy" – the satirical standard British Foreign Office response in a time of crisis, espoused by the 1980s British comedy *Yes, Minister*, describes this art of inaction superbly.

Stage 1: We say nothing is going to happen.

Stage 2: We say that maybe something is going to happen, but we should do nothing about it.

Stage 3: We say that maybe we should do something about it, but there's nothing we *can* do.

Stage 4: Well, maybe there was something we could have done, but [shrug] it's too late now.

(*Yes, Minister*, BBC Television, 1980-1988)

The Price of Doing Nothing

Maliki's inaction was a valid political strategy. He strung along the Sunni tribal leaders with the promise of a diplomatic resolution while there was still time for them to disrupt his re-election. But then he stalled on delivering any actual diplomacy, letting the situation on the ground deteriorate organically in the meantime. Now, much of the province is not stable enough to participate in the elections, in which the majority would vote against Maliki. The price that Maliki paid for this strategy was the loss of respect by Sunni citizens – poor public diplomacy – but this was an acceptable price, especially since they did not respect him originally.

Politics will always take precedence over public diplomacy. And public diplomacy will always have a political cost because you can't please all of the people all of the time. Sometimes, perhaps even more often than not, that political cost will be too high to pay.
