

Beyond Fallujah: The Battle for Iraq

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On June 18, after a nearly month-long siege, Iraq's Prime Minister Haydar al-'Abadi announced the liberation of Fallujah,¹ almost two and half years after it had been seized by Islamic State (IS) forces. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), composed of elite counter-terrorism units, regular army and police, entered the besieged city from the south and raised the Iraqi flag over its municipality building. On June 26, 'Abadi visited the city dressed in the uniform of the counter-terrorism force that played a leading role in the operation.² In general, the IS defenders did not offer serious resistance: according to Iraqi sources, they suffered between 350 and 500 casualties in Fallujah and many of its men either fled or joined the convoys of displaced Fallujans, reaching shelters in Ameriyat al-Fallujah (a city 30 kilometers south of Fallujah).³ The battle for Fallujah coincided with a serious political crisis in Baghdad, in which demonstrators forced their way into and temporarily occupied the "Green Zone," the heart of the governmental apparatus. It is possible that 'Abadi's Fallujah offensive was designed to silence the political outcry and steal the limelight from Muqtada al-Sadr, who organized the street demonstrations against 'Abadi's government. Indeed, the Fallujah offensive temporarily marginalized widespread complaints against corruption and political incompetence.

'Abadi considered the achievement a "strategic victory" and a turning point in the battle against the IS. In the run-up to the battle for Fallujah, Iraqi Security Forces were retaking vast areas in western Iraq, including Ramadi (December

¹ ["Iraq PM Abadi Declares Victory over ISIL in Fallujah,"](#) *Al Jazeera* (English), June 19, 2016.

² ["al-'Abadi Yad'u al-Ihtifal fi Tahrir al-Falluja:Sanarfa' al-Alam al-'Iraqi fi al-Mawsil Qariban"](#) [Abadi calls for celebrating the liberation of Fallujah: We shall raise our flag over Mosul soon], *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 27, 2016.

³ ["Maqtal 377 Da'ishian Baynahum 40 Qanasan fi Falluja"](#) [Killing of 377 IS men among them 40 Snipers in Fallujah], *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 20, 2016.

2015), Hit (May 2016), Kubaisa (April 2016) and Rutba (May 2016). Yet the western parts of Anbar province, including the towns of Rawa, ‘Ana and al-Qaim (on the Syrian border) are still controlled by the IS, and Haditha, situated near an important dam, is still under a partial IS siege.



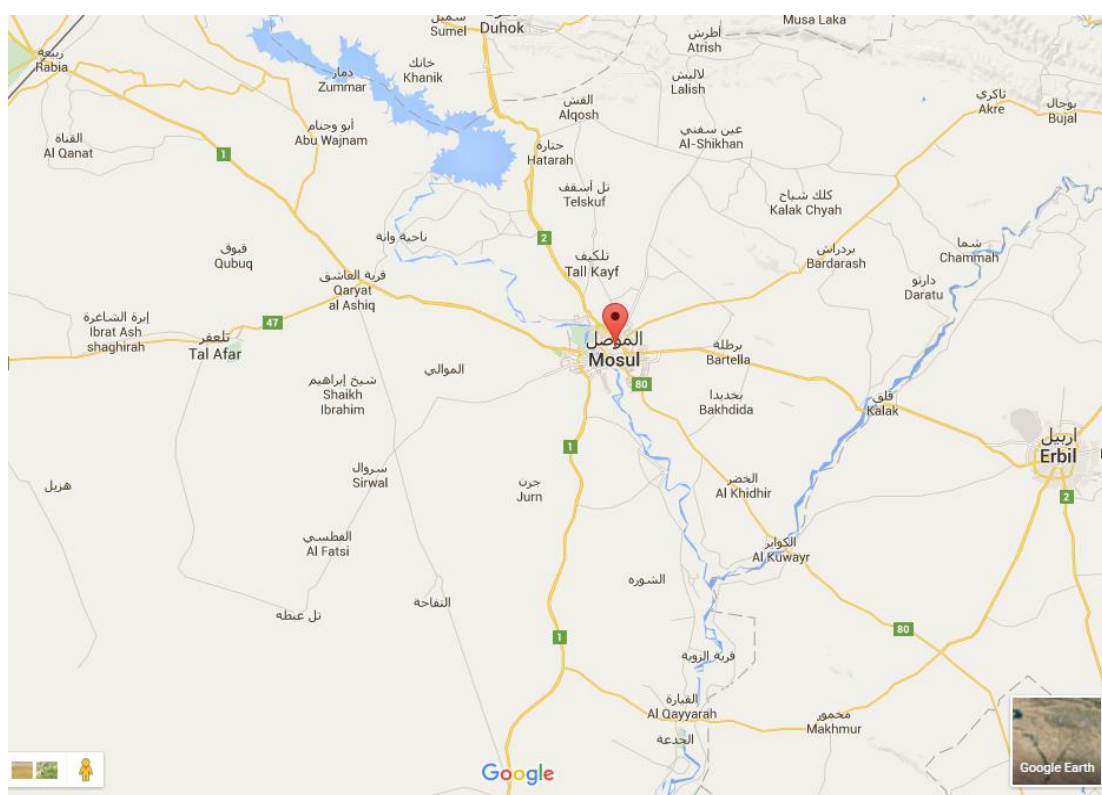
Source: Google Maps

Fallujah was the first Iraqi city to be lost to the IS, in early 2014. Its proximity to Baghdad had made it an attractive target. Subsequently, Shi'i militias repeatedly requested that the Iraqi government prioritize retaking Fallujah, but were turned down. As recently as April 2016, following the swift conquest of Rutba, Iraqi military spokespersons reiterated that the ISF would focus on targeting the remaining IS enclaves along the Syrian and Jordanian borders.⁴ This statement, and others, may have been a form of subterfuge intended to lull the Islamic State into a false sense of security regarding Fallujah.

Following the victory in Fallujah, Iraqi troops were sent north to prepare for the operation to retake Mosul, Iraq's second city and the capital of the Islamic State's

⁴ [“al-Jaysh Yuharir al-Rutba bil-Kamil wa-Yabda’ Ta’mīn al-Tariq al-Sari’ ma’a Urdun”](#) (The Army Liberates Rutba and begins securing the highway to Jordan) *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], May 19, 2016.

so called “Caliphate.” The 9th armored division was sent to join the 15th infantry division in capturing villages to the south and southeast of Mosul. The plan is to occupy the town of Sharqat, 100 kilometers south of Mosul, and the last outpost of the IS in the Salah al-Din Province (capital: Tikrit), and from there to approach Qiyara (60 km south of Mosul), which has an airport that will be used in the operation to retake in Mosul.⁵ However, the Iraqi forces are still a long way from Mosul as well as a few other important IS strongholds in the region, such as Hawija and Tal ‘Afar. The Kurdish Peshmerga are also expected to participate in the military operation to retake Mosul, and have already begun a limited operation in Khazir, east of Mosul. Local Mosuli and tribal militias as well as a small Turkish military force and American Special Forces are also expected to take part in the operation.



Source: Google Maps

The Islamic State does not appear to be actively resisting the progress of the Iraqi Security Forces and their allies. Other than minor, and usually unsuccessful, offensives in the areas of western Iraq or in hilly areas south of Kirkuk, which are aimed at distracting the ISF from its main operations, there seems to be little the IS can do. It recently tried reestablishing a presence in northern Ramadi, but was

⁵ “[al-Jaysh ‘ala bu’d 20 Kilumitran min al-Sharqat](#)” [The Army within 20km of Sharqat], *Reuters in al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 20, 2016.

easily driven out by the ISF.⁶ The IS also failed in a recent attempt to occupy Haditha in response to its defeat in Fallujah. Its forces are suffering from low morale, and there are reports of fighters deserting the IS's ranks. Some of the recent battles with the IS were embarrassingly easy for the ISF. Iraqi officials have argued that because many of the IS fighters in beleaguered cities are local Iraqis, they prefer to surrender rather than bring devastation on their towns.⁷ Yet, for others in the IS, there is an alternative to surrendering or deserting, which is the renewal of large scale terror attacks.

The IS demonstrated this capability on July 3, the eve of *'Eid al-Fitr* (which marks the end of Ramadan), by carrying out a massive suicide attack in the heart of Baghdad, resulting in more than 290 deaths. In recent months there have also been major IS attacks in places rarely targeted by IS terror, deep in the Shi'i south of Iraq. ISF disclosed that an IS branch, "*Wilayat al-Janub*," (the Southern Province) renewed its activity but this time not as a "state" entity, but as a terrorist network.⁸ These attacks perpetuate the ubiquitous sense of insecurity that has become a trademark of life in Iraq since 2003. However, these attacks also further alienate IS from the rest of the Iraqi population.

During the battle for Fallujah, the Shi'i militias played a supporting role alongside the ISF. Despite claims to the contrary, the militias reluctantly accepted their auxiliary role. The Iraqi leadership insisted that the army and other state agencies would be solely responsible for the liberation of settled areas in the region. Thus, rather than participating in the offensive, the militias stayed behind, manning checkpoints and helping the displaced population. It was agreed that the Shi'i militias would not be permitted to enter Fallujah even after the city's full liberation. However, in their encounters with the displaced Sunni populations fleeing the city, the militias allegedly committed grave violations of human rights. The governor of Anbar, Sahib al-Rawi, accused the militias of executing 49 civilian men and "disappearing" over 600 others. Since IS men sought to hide among the displaced civilians, locals escaping from IS controlled areas are separated at checkpoints and all the men are taken for interrogation. Some indeed were IS men,⁹ which may be a source of the allegations. According to Iraqi sources, more than 20,000 Fallujan men were interrogated, and, of them,

⁶ "[Tashatut al-Juhd al-'askari yu'id Da'ish ila Shimal al-Rammadi](#)" [The IS military effort north of Ramadi is crumbling], *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 20, 2016.

⁷ Wa'il Ni'ma, "[Quwa Amrikiya Tusharik fi 'Amaliyat al-Sharqat](#)" [American force will take part in the Sharqat operation], *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 19, 2016.

⁸ *al-Ghad Press* [Arabic], "[Federal police announce the arrest of the amir of the southern province of Da'esh west of Baghdad](#)," March 4, 2016.

⁹ See, for example, [the arrest of Rafi' Mishhin al-Jumaily](#), a senior IS military commander, by the "Hashd," *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 18, 2016.

2,185 were arrested for presumed connections to the IS.¹⁰ The confirmed human rights violations by the militias were condemned by all Shi'i leaders, and in some cases militiamen were punished.¹¹

Preparing for the Post-IS Period in Iraq

The upcoming battles in northern Iraq will be decisive for the IS in Iraq. While the organization is certainly preparing for them, it is uncertain whether it is capable of fending off the expected offensive against it. Hence, the post-IS period in Iraq, and possibly also in the Middle East and North Africa, may be within sight. The IS was overly ambitious in creating its caliphate and promoting its apocalyptic ideology. At the peak of its success, it attracted thousands of adventurers from more than a hundred countries. It is the nature of such religious movements to leave an ideological void after their collapse. Even if the IS transforms itself into a terrorist organization, it is difficult to see it reviving a modified version of a caliphate.

In Iraq, the prospect of a post-IS period has raised many questions in the media, so many in fact that commentators forget that the country will have survived the most serious challenge to its unity. The Iraqi army, a cross-sectarian state agency, proved capable of retrieving lost territories and improving its combat performance. To a large extent, the lessons of its defeat in June 2014 were learned. Other military forces, primarily the Sunni and Shi'i "*Hashd*" (popular mobilization forces) militias, expressed widespread patriotism that is not often associated with the Iraqi state. The military victories against the IS were Iraqi: foreign intervention was minimal and auxiliary, more American than Iranian. The "boots on the ground" were Iraqi.

Iraq's political leadership is preparing itself for what lies ahead. The fate of the recaptured Sunni towns serve as a barometer for what may come next. In most of these towns, it is too early for the population to return. One prominent exception is the city of Tikrit: recaptured in April 2015, it has seen the return of over 90 percent of the population and is run by its former authorities, while Shi'i militias were removed from the city.¹² The equilibrium in Iraq is being

¹⁰ "[Al-Quwat al-'Iraqiya Tahtajiz 20000 Nazih min Falluja Man'an liFirar 'Anasir al-Tandhim](#)," [Iraqi forces arrest 20,000 refugees from Fallujah to prevent IS men from escaping], *Azzman* (UK) [Arabic], June 27, 2016.

¹¹ "[Wazir al-Dakhiliya: al-Intihakat fi Falluja ghair mumanhaja wa-'Agabna ba'd al-Mutawaritin](#)" [The Minister of Interior: The violations in Fallujah are not part of policy and we punished some of the perpetrators], *Reuters in al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], June 16, 2016. See, also: "[They Survived ISIS, Then Disappeared](#)," *The Daily Beast*, June 28, 2016.

¹² "[Tikrit Tahtafil bi-Murur 'Aam 'ala al-Tahrir wa 'Audat 90% min Nazihiha](#)" [Tikrit celebrates one-year since its liberation and the return of 90 percent of the displaced persons], *al-Mada* (Baghdad) [Arabic], April 2, 2016.

maintained by ethno-sectarian territorial separation, which the government is planning on maintaining: thus far, there is no indication that Shi'is are planning to settle in Sunni areas and imperil the status quo.

Whenever the guns fall silent, Iraq will need a great deal of foreign aid for its reconstruction. Most of it will go to the most devastated areas, which are Sunni. This would help to assuage Sunni claims of marginalization and disinvestment in the Sunni provinces of Iraq. It would also provide Baghdad with leverage over the Sunni provinces, which would become completely dependent on the central government as the source of its funds, thus mitigating Sunni claims for further decentralization from Baghdad.

Sunnis were the IS's biggest victims. The IS, often with local support, occupied most of the Sunni provinces of Iraq and displaced approximately 4 million Sunnis. Demographically, the Sunni population of Iraq has dwindled. This major calamity will have an impact on the Sunnis and the vision of their role in a post-IS Iraq. They may become more apathetic to Iraqi politics, in which they are only a bit player. They may also initiate a process by which they adapt to their minority status in a Shi'i-dominated state.

The political mayhem in Baghdad creates the illusion that the marginalization of the Sunnis is yet another threat to the political system: according to this view, the weak state, paralyzed parliament and practically dissolved cabinet will not sustain the return of Sunni dissent and would finally collapse. Yet, it is possible that 'Abadi's Fallujah offensive was designed to silence the political outcry and steal the limelight from Muqtada al-Sadr, who organized the street demonstrations against 'Abadi's government. Whatever happens in Baghdad takes place within the sphere of the majority Shi'i political camp. Shi'is have a vested interest in the preservation of Iraq's democratic and parliamentary political system, based on universal suffrage. This system insures the maintenance of their political hegemony, as the majority. It is therefore highly unlikely that Shi'is would change the political system and establish an Iranian style "Islamic Republic," an idea which is rejected by the great majority of Iraqi Shi'a.

The greatest challenge to Iraq's unity is likely to come from the Kurdish provinces. While the probability of a unilateral Kurdish declaration of independence is beyond the scope of this piece, suffice it to say that confrontations between Kurdish forces and Arab forces in disputed areas recently captured from the IS reveal the tensions between the two sides, which are not likely to dissipate when the Islamic State is finally defeated in Iraq.

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