

Armed Clashes Erupt Around Besieged Iraqi City of Fallujah

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Fresh fighting was reported around the besieged Iraqi city of Fallujah on Thursday, as the Obama administration moved to rush new military aid to the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The armed clashes between Iraqi troops backed by tanks and what the security forces referred to as Al Qaeda militants took place in the Alubali area between Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's western Anbar province, and Fallujah, its second-largest city.

The renewed fighting came amid multiple reports of civilian casualties and war crimes on the part of the Iraqi security forces, which have laid siege to Fallujah and parts of Ramadi since the two cities were taken over by armed Sunni militants, who drove out the police and seized control ten days ago.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported Thursday that Iraqi government troops "appear to have used indiscriminate mortar fire in civilian neighborhoods in Anbar province," while "a government blockade of Fallujah and Ramadi has resulted in limited access to food, water and fuel for the population."

An employee at Fallujah's main hospital told HRW that the army's shelling had killed 25 city residents and wounded 190 more over the past week. The victims, he added, had all been hit in areas where there was no Al Qaeda presence. Another one of the dead was said to be a four-year-old child who was killed when the security forces fired on a family trying to flee the Zobia area on the city's outskirts.

"Fallujah is a ghost town," a resident of the city's eastern al-Shorta neighborhood told HRW. "Those who haven't left hide in their homes because we are constantly hearing mortar fire from the army, and most of the time they shoot houses. I have friends all over Fallujah, and at least 30 people told me that their houses were hit." Other residents reported that their houses had been fired upon by helicopters.

The security forces reportedly blockaded the main eastern, northern and southern approaches to Fallujah, turning back shipments of food and medicine coming in as well as people trying to get out. At two other checkpoints, families with children have been allowed to flee for safety, but only with "extreme difficulty," HRW reported. Single men are forced back into the city. It is estimated that as many as 20,000 troops and paramilitary police have surrounded Fallujah.

Ramadi has likewise been surrounded, but residents there have had less difficulty attempting to flee. The United Nations estimated that at least 11,000 families have been

displaced by the fighting. Officials in Ebril, meanwhile, reported on January 8 that this province alone had taken in some 13,000 refugees from the embattled areas of Anbar.

On Thursday, Fallujah residents reported that despite the siege, some banks and state offices had reopened along with the city's central market, and traffic police had returned to the streets.

The Iraqi security forces have apparently decided to hold off on an all-out assault on the city out of concern both that the resulting civilian casualties will trigger a full-scale civil war between the Shi'ite-dominated government and the predominantly Sunni population of Anbar, and that it may not fare so well in an armed confrontation with the forces holding Fallujah.

While the Maliki government and military spokesmen routinely refer to these forces as "Al Qaeda," the real situation is more complex, with most of the fighters apparently belonging to tribal militias and local groups led by former army officers, cashiered in the US-imposed "de-Baathification" that followed the US invasion of 2003. Some of these same groups waged a determined resistance to the two sieges of Fallujah mounted by the US military in 2004, and others later became part of the "Awakening" movement, in which the US occupation armed and paid Sunni fighters to combat Al Qaeda forces.

The Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), which has been a key element in the US-backed war for regime change across Iraq's western border in Syria, apparently is a distinct minority among the armed groups controlling the Anbari cities, some of which have aligned themselves with the ISIS, while others have combated both it and the Iraqi security forces.

These indigenous forces rose up amid popular outrage triggered by the Maliki government's arrest of a prominent Sunni parliament member—killing his brother and five bodyguards in the process—followed by the forcible dispersal of a year-old protest encampment, killing 17 people in Ramadi.

A senior Iraqi intelligence officer, explaining why the military has yet to take back Fallujah and Ramadi, told the Associated Press: "We have enough soldiers, but we are waiting for the American drones and missiles. These weapons will have a big role in the coming battle."

A military commander in Anbar told the news agency, "The battle in Anbar ... is a kind of a guerrilla war, and the Iraqi army and police do not have experience in these kinds of wars."

Indeed, it is far from clear how well the Iraqi military will perform. After the army was disbanded by the US occupation authorities, the security forces were rebuilt based on the militias of various Shi'ite parties. They have not been tested in any serious fighting and, because of their sectarian makeup, are largely seen as a hostile force in Anbar.

The Obama administration has rushed shipments of Hellfire missiles and surveillance drones to Iraq. It also appears to have made headway in its campaign to pressure the US Senate to approve the dispatch of dozens of Apache attack helicopters, a potent counterinsurgency weapon.

One of those who had delayed the Apache deal, New Jersey Democrat Bob Menendez, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, appeared Wednesday to be dropping

his opposition, which was based in large measure on Iraq's ties to Iran. Following a personal letter from Maliki and an "urgent call" from the State Department, a spokesman for Menendez said that, given that his concerns had been addressed, the senator "will be ready to move forward."

Meanwhile, the Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, criticized the Obama administration Thursday for failing to be "engaged" with the Iraq crisis and insisted that the US "will continue to have vital interests in Iraq." While echoing administration officials in declining to call for the deployment of US troops there, he advocated the provision of "equipment and some services that would be very helpful" to the Maliki regime.

Critics of the arms deal had warned that the attack helicopters could easily be turned against sections of the civilian population, both in Anbar and elsewhere.

Even as the fighting was escalating in Anbar, a new confrontation was shaping up between the Maliki government and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government, after KRG officials announced a unilateral move to begin selling crude oil extracted from its territory, and to be delivered via pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan.

The KRG's ministry of natural resources said that 2 million barrels of petroleum would be sold by the end of this month, with exports rising steadily to a projected 12 million barrels by the end of this year.

The central government has denounced any such unilateral deals by the Kurdish region as illegal, insisting that it alone has the authority to strike deals with foreign energy conglomerates and export crude. "No approval is given," Baghdad's Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Hussain al-Shahristani said in an email to Reuters in relation to the KRG's announcement.

The Maliki government has waged a public campaign to dissuade major oil companies from making any direct deals with the KRG, but ExxonMobil did so anyway in 2011 and has since been followed by Total and Chevron as well as smaller firms.

The central government fears that such arrangements will lead to Kurdistan seeking outright independence, as well as a potential war over borders and, particularly, control over the oil-rich and multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk.

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