

US Air Strikes, Shia Militia Deployment Follow Iraqi Military's Rout in Ramadi

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In the wake of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) overrunning of Ramadi, the US military has stepped up air strikes, while the Iraqi government has taken the highly explosive decision to deploy Shia militias in an attempt to retake the largely Sunni city.

The fall of Ramadi, the provincial capital of the predominantly Sunni Anbar province, represents a debacle for both the Baghdad government and the US war strategy in Iraq.

The routing of government forces that had long kept a tenuous hold on Ramadi recalls the collapse of the US-armed and trained Iraqi security forces during the ISIS sweep through northern Iraq last June, which left Mosul, Iraq's largest city, in the hands of the Sunni Islamist militia.

The Pentagon, which since late last week had either belittled the significance of Ramadi's fall or suggested that it was too early to tell the final outcome of the battle, was compelled to admit Monday that the loss of the provincial capital represented a "setback."

"We've said all along that there are going to be ebbs and flows," Col. Steve Warren told Pentagon reporters. "This is a difficult, complex, bloody fight, and there's going to be victories and setbacks. And this is a setback."

Contradicting earlier statements by senior US military officers that the US bombing campaign had put ISIS on the defensive, Warren was forced to acknowledge that the Sunni Islamist militia "is obviously not on the defensive in Ramadi."

The US strategy for defeating ISIS in Iraq had consisted of the use of US airpower to strike its positions and the sending in of American "trainers" and "advisors" to build up and direct the operations of Iraqi army units. In Ramadi, this strategy has clearly failed.

US warplanes carried out 165 air strikes in and around Ramadi in support of Iraqi government forces just last month, according to Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Thomas D. Weidley, commander of the new US intervention in Iraq—"Operation Inherent Resolve." Even more intensified bombing has taken place in the last few days. The air war, however, has failed to fundamentally alter the situation on the ground.

Ramadi makes clear that nearly a year after the collapse of the Iraqi army, a force that Washington spent \$22 billion to organize, arm and train, nothing has been resolved in terms of building up a credible fighting force under the command of the central government in Baghdad.

The debacle in Ramadi led to demands from Republicans such as Arizona Senator John McCain, the chairman of the Senate armed services panel, for more US “boots on the ground.”

A US official speaking on condition of anonymity told Reuters, however, that the fall of Ramadi was not likely to lead the Obama administration to “change strategy.”

“The full power of Iraq, including the Shiite militias, wasn’t included in this battle. They need to be. I don’t see why the president’s strategy has to change, but clearly something has to change,” the official said.

Clearly, something has already changed. During the campaign last March to drive ISIS out of the city of Tikrit, Washington made a show of insisting that Shiite militias, which had borne the brunt of the fighting, be withdrawn before the US would lend air support. Now participation of these units, most of which are politically aligned with Iran, is seen as indispensable.

The decision to deploy these units represents a major crisis for the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who was brought to power in August of last year with US backing. He was ostensibly placed in office with a mandate to ease sectarian tensions in Iraq. US officials and the corporate media blamed these tensions on the government of his predecessor, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, who was himself installed by Washington. This scapegoating of Maliki’s corrupt and repressive regime served to divert blame from the eight-year US war and occupation in Iraq, which employed a divide-and-rule strategy that fomented a vicious sectarian conflict pitting Shia Iraqis against Sunnis.

Until now, Abadi had ordered Shia militias to stay out of the predominantly Sunni Anbar province, insisting that regular government troops alone be used to impose the rule of the central government. His backing off from this stand has dramatically weakened his position. Critics within his own Islamic Dawa Party, Maliki prominent among them, as well as within other Shia political organizations, had condemned his failure to send the militias into Anbar, charging that he had no strategy to secure the western province.

Now several thousand militiamen, including members of the Badr Corps, Ketaeb Hezbollah and other groups have massed outside Ramadi in preparation for a major battle.

“The government’s insistence on following the American vision made us go into Anbar to defend the people of Anbar and not let the situation drag on any longer,” Jaafar al-Husseini, a spokesman for Ketaeb Hezbollah told AFP.

While these fighters have been deployed under the umbrella of the so-called Popular Mobilization Units, which are formally a non-sectarian force under the command of the government security forces, the reality is that the Shia militias wield the power.

The deployment of these forces to Anbar, with open backing from Washington, poses the threat of a bloody sectarian civil war. The province had been in large part lost to the central government as a result of a Sunni rebellion that erupted well before the offensive launched by ISIS last June, fueled by resentment over repression at the hands of the Shia-dominated security forces.

Earlier campaigns launched by the Shia militia have been accompanied by the ethnic cleansing of Sunnis, who in many cases were treated as suspected ISIS supporters. Tikrit,

which was taken back by ISIS last March, has remained largely a ghost town, with Sunni residents afraid to return.

The atrocities and bloodletting that continue to unfold in Iraq are the outcome of the criminal US war begun in 2003, with the aim of imposing US hegemony over the region and its vast oil reserves. ISIS, whose power grew directly as a result of US support for Sunni Islamist proxy armies in the wars for regime change in both Libya and Syria, is Washington's Frankenstein's Monster.

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