

US-Backed Iraqi Forces Recapture Ramadi from ISIS

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The Iraqi government and its prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, have announced that its troops, backed by US air strikes, have driven Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) out of Ramadi, the capital of the country's western province of Anbar.

Abadi's boasting on Twitter of the "liberation" of Ramadi, combined with celebrations on state media, follows months of intense bombardment by US war planes and weeks of street-to-street fighting by US armed and trained Iraqi special forces units.

US military spokesman Colonel Steven Warren revealed in a press statement that at least 630 air strikes had been launched against ISIS targets in Ramadi since July. More than 30 were carried out in the past week to support Iraqi troops as they pushed toward the main government complex in the city centre.

No official estimates have been released of either government or ISIS casualties, or the death toll among the Ramadi residents who had not fled. As few as 400 ISIS fighters were estimated to be defending the city, seeking to prevent the government advance with little more than explosives and sniper fire. Reuters was told that 93 government troops were admitted to Baghdad hospitals on Sunday alone.

The city itself is in ruin. Even the sanitised media footage shows utter devastation to blocks of residential housing. A spokesman for the government-endorsed Anbar provincial council, Eid al-Karboly, told the *Washington Post*: "All the infrastructure of the city has been destroyed. It will take years to return life to the city." Karboly estimated that 80 percent of all homes are damaged to some degree.

Many of the buildings that have been destroyed in the current efforts to retake Ramadi were only rebuilt in the last seven years, after being reduced to rubble during the US occupation of Iraq.

Anbar province was one of the centres of resistance to the US invasion. Both Ramadi and Fallujah, the other major city in the province, were bloody battlefields between American troops and Iraqi insurgents on repeated occasions between 2004 and 2007. Fighting was only brought to an end by the so-called "Awakening" policy of the US military, which effectively involved buying off the tribal leaders of many of the insurgents and placing tens of thousands of resistance fighters on the US-funded Iraqi government payroll.

The growth of support for ISIS in western Iraq stemmed in large part from the decision by the Baghdad government, which is dominated by religious-based Shiite parties, to systematically reduce support for the predominantly Sunni militias in Anbar after the US withdrawal at the end of 2011. Sunni-based political parties and Anbar tribal leaders were

subsequently persecuted.

Amid hostility toward the sectarian policies of the Shiite government, areas of Fallujah and Ramadi were taken over by fighters declaring allegiance to ISIS in early 2014. At the time, the actions of the extremist Sunni movement against the Baghdad regime enjoyed the tacit sympathy, if not overt support, of many of the tribal leaderships that had enlisted into the US “Awakening.” Former US-funded tribal fighters provided much of the manpower and military expertise that ISIS employed to capture most of Anbar and the key northern Iraqi city of Mosul in July 2014, where they routed tens of thousands of poorly-motivated, US-trained government troops.

The last sectors of Ramadi came under complete ISIS control in May 2015. As in Mosul, government forces retreated in disarray, provoking US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter to publicly denounce the Iraqi Army for “a lack of will to fight.”

The recapture of the city appears linked to a new set of deals and pay-offs that US officials have struck with the Anbar tribal leaderships, who either have been alienated by ISIS or have concluded it is a lost cause. Daniel Byman, an American analyst of Islamic extremist movements, told the *New York Times* yesterday that the Anbar tribes “want a high degree of independence, but they also want to be on the side of the winners.”

The Iraqi government has stressed that the forces used to assault Ramadi were not made up of the largely Shiite troops, some commanded by Iranian officers, which have borne the brunt of defending Baghdad and surrounding areas from ISIS over the past year. Instead, they were a combination of units that have been “retrained” over recent months by US and Australian advisors and what the *Wall Street Journal* described as a US-backed “thousands-strong force of local Sunni tribal fighters.”

Preparations are now underway for offensives by the same forces to seize back control of Fallujah, as well as, ultimately, Mosul and other ISIS-held towns and villages in the northern province of Nineveh.

Reports indicate that the Sunni tribal force will be handed control of Ramadi once it is fully cleared of ISIS fighters and that the Iraqi Army will withdraw. Such a policy dovetails with the widespread discussion in US and European military and strategic circles that the only way to maintain control over the oil-rich Middle East—after more than a decade of military setbacks and debacles for US policy—is the partition of Iraq and Syria into Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish mini-states.

US-Israeli strategist Barak Mendelsohn bluntly headlined a comment in the November edition of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, “Divide and Conquer in Syria and Iraq: Why the West Should Plan for a Partition.” Mendelsohn declared that the US and the European powers should carve out an “independent Sunni state that would link Sunni-dominated territories on both sides of the border,” while leaving the Russian and Iranian-backed Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad in control of a small Shiite and Christian enclave centred on Damascus.

Other proposals include carving out the majority Kurdish-populated northern provinces of both Iraq and Syria into another statelet—a prospect that is ferociously opposed by the Turkish and Iranian governments, which fear an upsurge of separatist sentiment in their Kurdish regions.

The divisions that were fomented by the US occupation in Iraq to weaken resistance, and then to provoke civil war in Syria against the Assad government, are already responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands and forcing millions in both countries to flee their homes. The fact that American and European strategists are contemplating redrawing borders, entrenching sectarian and ethnic conflicts and, most likely, triggering new wars, is testimony to the sheer criminality of imperialist policy in the Middle East.

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