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THE RECAPTURE OF RAMADI AND THE FUTURE OF THE U.S. WAR AGAINST ISIS IN IRAQ

Othman Ali

Dr. Othman Ali is Professor of Modern History of Kurds at Salahaddin University in Erbil. He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees from University of Guelph and University of Toronto. He can read, write and speak English, Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish fluently, can read French, Farsi and Ottoman Turkish. He is currently a research fellow at the Middle East Institute of Sakarya University.

The recapture of Ramadi rehabilitated the reputation of the Iraqi army which suffered a great prestige loss after the fall of the city to the ISIS seven months ago. The recapture of Ramadi also came at a critical juncture for the US since Obama administration's policy in fighting against ISIS in Iraq was also under heavy criticism. The battle for Anbar, in this sense, has multiple implications for the future battles against ISIS. This study discusses the opportunities provided by and the challenges posed by the recapture of Ramadi for the US-led coalition and the Abadi government in Iraq.

The battle for Anbar in western Iraq has multiple implications and marks the beginning of a new era in the US-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The expulsion of the terrorist organization's militias from the city and its environs was achieved by a close coordination between the US air force, Iraqi Army and the employment of local Arab Sunni tribes known as Hashd Al-Ashairi (tribal mobilization force). The tactics used in this battle will have some impact within Iraq and Syria. It provides a workable formula for the fight against ISIS in Fallujah, a strong remaining base of ISIS in western Iraq, and it will release a significant portion of Iraq's regular army units to fight ISIS in Mosul, the last stronghold of ISIS. Besides, the success of the Iraqi army units in retaking the city of Anbar without a major involvement of Hashd Al-Shaabi, a Shiite militia force formed in 2014 to fight against ISIS, gives a significant psychological

and military boost to the US trained Iraqi regular army.

The Importance of Ramadi

Ramadi is the largest Sunni Arab city in Iraq and has a tribal population of martial character. This province in what is known as the Sunni-triangle is the largest province in Iraq and it borders many provinces including Baghdad, Salahadeen, Karbala, which houses Shiite holy places, and Mosul. It also has served as ISIS's main line of communication across desert. The loss of Ramadi has to be seen within the general context of the ongoing receding of the influence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq which started recently. It has lost several key towns since Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) started fighting back after the devastating offensive of ISIS 18 months ago.¹

It was the fall of Ramadi which alarmed the Shiite clerks to mobilize their resources to recapture territories in the province adjacent to the holy Shiite places. Consequently, the fall of

Ramadi seven months ago to ISIS was a blow to the already tattered reputation of the regular army and security forces, and it showed the flaws in the U.S. approach in supporting them. Both governments in Washington and Baghdad were under a lot of pressure to address this blow to their images. Just a week before the start of the operation to recapture the city, Maj. Gen. Ismail Mehlawi, head of the Anbar Operations Command, stated: “The army in the past has been an army of defeats, but now we will be the army of liberation... This had to be a battle using purely the Iraqi military, in order to return the prestige of the Iraqi army.”²

Iraq’s Prime Minister Hayder Al-Abadi, for his part, came under a lot of criticism by pro-Iranian circles for being inefficient and misled by US led-coalition and having no policy to end ISIS threat in Iraq, and there was a re-growth in the influence of ex-prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, in the political debate in Baghdad especially among the 60,000 strong Hashd

al-Shaabi forces. The US officials in Baghdad were watching these developments with a big concern.³ At the same time, Obama administration’s policy in fighting against ISIS in Iraq also had come under big criticism since the fall of Ramadi to ISIS. For instance, the Republican Senator John McCain referred to the administration’s strategy as “ineffective and reactive” in nature. The recapture of Ramadi came at such a critical juncture.

The Nature of the Ramadi Battle

The fight to recapture Ramadi went through several stages and coalition forces had to face several challenges. The operation started in last May but witnessed several setbacks and was put on halt until October. The challenge was so serious that the officer commanding the operations was replaced three times in a year and two top generals were killed in the battlefield. The US-led coalition had also a prominent role in these operations. In a statement issued by Steve Warren, the

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spokesperson for US-led coalition forces in Iraq, made it clear that US-led coalition launched 630 strikes to assist Iraqi troops to recapture Ramadi. Initially Iraqi forces have retaken several areas north and west of Ramadi, in an effort to close in on the Anbar provincial capital. This was an operation against only 1000 ISIS fighters, which involved 10,000 Iraqi troops backed by air strikes from the US-led coalition. The first phase of the operation led to

the recapture of several neighborhoods from ISIS. The second phase started by heavy bombing from air and no less 100 top cadres and ISIS fighters were killed including military commanders. ISIS was eventually forced to leave the city and has resettled its fighters in near-by regions.⁴

This operation can be differentiated from the ones which preceded it. The fighting in Ramadi was led by the Iraqi counter-terrorism force, backed by US-led coalition

air strikes and supported by fighters from the federal police, army and Sunni tribes opposed to the extremists. The mainly Shiite Hashd Al-Shaabi paramilitaries were heavily involved in the recapture of towns including Tikrit and Baiji, but they had to be kept on the fringes in the fight for Ramadi, as a result of the American pressure. This change in US policy, which was noted in Anbar operations, was also due to the appeals made by many Sunni Iraqi and regional leaders who raised this issue with Washington. For instance, Sheik Abdul Razak, a leader of the powerful Dulaim tribe from Anbar province, who was visiting Washington in December, warned US officials saying “If it stays like this, it’s going to lead to a civil war.... Sunni tribes would refuse to fight alongside Iranian-directed Shiite militias that are being sent to Anbar.”⁵

Opportunities and Challenges

The re-capture of Anbar provides new opportunities and poses new challenges for US-led coalition and Abadi

government. This big victory could boost the efforts to speed up the process of ending ISIS threat considerably. It may also serve as a good precedent to liberate Mosul provided that the Iraqi authorities make it easy for the local population to return to their hometown in Anbar. This requires repairing devastated ruins as soon as possible including the city’s infrastructure. The success of the operation might also challenge the Shiite-dominated Baghdad government’s policy of rebuilding its state security apparatus with the exclusion of Sunni local population in Anbar.

It appears the estrangement of the Sunni population and their disappointment with ISIS administration was also an added factor which led to this big loss for the latter. The allegiance of tribes in Anbar was at best fickle initially and waned as harsh administrative policies of ISIS began to unfold. ISIS leaders were trying to undermine the influence of the local sheikhs over the tribes. The population was also alienated by the

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harsh restrictive police state which has supplanted the existing administration.⁶

The growing discord between the ISIS and local populations needs to be capitalized on, as the discussions also shift on potential operations for the liberation of Mosul. According to reports from Mosul, the Baathist elements and the ex-top generals of the Iraqi army in the city from the Baathist era, who had initially welcomed the ISIS in Mosul, have been mostly alienated. The local population has begun to show increasing resentment to the restrictive puritanical Salafi doctrine which ISIS has enforced on them.⁷ This new situation provides an opportunity which could be utilized

by Iraqi government and US-led coalition.

If history is any guide to us, there is ground to suspect that Iranian-backed militias and politicians in Baghdad will not act differently in Ramadi than their earlier policies in other Sunni regions which fell back to the government control recently. The Abadi government being under a lot of pressure from Iranian-backed militias is not willing to accommodate Sunni elements of Mosul which have mobilized themselves as the Hashd Al-Watani militia forces. This latter force has the support of Turkey and the KRG. The latest row between Turkey and Iraq over the presence of 1,000 Turkish troops which have been stationed in



Bashiqa near Mosul to train the Sunni Arab and Kurdish forces to recapture Mosul is one indication that Abadi and Iraqi militias want to do it alone in Mosul⁸ and they have already prepared 20,000 strong predominantly Shiite militias for this task, supported with forces from Shabaks, Yezidis, and Turkmens of Telafar.⁹ It was partly for such plans that led Baghdad government to depose Atheel Nujaifi, the ex-governor of Mosul, who opposed to any role for Shiite militias in the liberation of Mosul.¹⁰

Unless US-led coalition, Turkey, and the KRG take an assertive role, the fiasco and widespread devastation which were witnessed in Tikrit will be revisited in Mosul. If Kurds and the Sunni elements were excluded from the coming Mosul operation, the Baghdad government and Iran might use the regions which will be regained in the area to send supplies to Syrian regime forces and to the fighters loyal to Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Therefore, Turkey cannot afford to be indifferent to any future plan for

retaking of Mosul from ISIS. In addition, the future presence of the Hashd al-Shaabi militia forces in Mosul will also give rise to possible new confrontation with KRG. The latter has been at odds with Baghdad government which wants to give an insignificant role to them in the liberation of Mosul. This is yet another reason that explains why the central government is very sensitive to any direct delivery of weapons to the KRG.

The victory in Anbar has also created many challenges. The ISIS will retain formidable forces in the surrounding districts of Ramadi, especially in Fallujah town which is encircled by the Iraqi Army and Hashd Al-Shaabi militias. If the operation is left completely to the militia forces, there is a danger that they may engage in revenge actions and further destruction on this town. Since the pro-Iranian circles in Baghdad are already resentful of their exclusion from Anbar gain, they may seek to play a larger role in Fallujah.

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Analysts think that it is highly unlikely that Iraqi forces will be able to sustain or even contemplate an assault on Mosul unless Ramadi, in particular, and Anbar province, in general, are secure in their rear. The people of Mosul will see which example will prevail in Anbar: The devastations of Tikrit revisited there or a new model in which Sunni local population rule themselves.¹¹

All statements issued after the victory in Anbar by Iraqi and allied forces viewed it as prelude for the end of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, for the US to be able to build on the momentum achieved in Anbar it may need to confront the growing Iranian influence

on Iraqi administration. The Hashd Al-Shaabi militias, over which Tehran exercises major influence, have already put 90,000-strong and well-equipped fighters for the battle against ISIS and according to some analysts it would undermine the power of the regular army.¹²

Finally, the increasing American involvement in Anbar front has come at a time when Russia has inserted itself into the multi-sided Syrian civil war on Bashar Al-Assad's side as well as supporting Iran's allies in the region including Baghdad government. If the US-led coalition builds on their victory in Anbar, the Russian attempts to involve themselves in Iraq

at the expense of the US and its allies will be considerably weakened. It is noteworthy that Russia has already established a joint operations center with Iraqis and asked explicitly to exclude pro-Turkey Sunni forces and KRG from this joint effort. The pro-Iranian circles in Baghdad have recently voiced a strong support for Russian involvement in the fight against ISIS.¹³ For instance, Hakim al-Zamili, a leading Shia politician, and the head of Iraqi parliament's Defense and Security Committee told Reuters news agency: "In the upcoming few days or weeks, I think Iraq will be forced to ask Russia to launch air strikes, and that depends on their success in Syria."¹⁴

While many Iraqi Shiite groups have been calling for an increased role for Russia in the fight against ISIS in Iraq, they have been resisting any increased role for the US-led coalition in Iraq. Abadi have already declined to accept a recent Pentagon offer to speed up the fight against ISIS with the help of

American attack helicopters and in deploying American advisers with Iraqi brigades on the battlefield instead of restricting them to bases inside Iraq.¹⁵ On the contrary, some militia leaders have threatened that they would fight any additional American presence in Iraq. For some analysts, this refusal on the part of Iraqi militias was echoing the earlier Iranian statements to the effect that US and its allies are covertly assisting ISIS to divide Iraq.¹⁶

Conclusion

It is true that Anbar victory has created new opportunities to be utilized to end ISIS rule in Iraq. However, this development has also given birth to a multitude of challenges which need to be addressed. Without an increased role for US-led coalition in Iraq, and Baghdad government's refusal to allow any effective role for the Sunni and Kurdish groups, it is hardly possible to see an imminent plan to end ISIS rule in Mosul, which will prove the main battle to determine the fate of Iraq.

If Kurds and the Sunni elements were excluded from the coming Mosul operation, the Baghdad government and Iran might use the regions which will be regained in the area to send supplies to Syrian regime forces and to the fighters loyal to Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

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Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)
Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara
Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48
www.orsam.org.tr