

# Massive military escalation looms as ISIS advances in Iraq

Niles Williamson  
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The Pentagon announced Thursday that it will rush 2,000 AT-4 anti-tank rockets to the Iraqi military following the capture of Ramadi, capital of Iraq's western Anbar province, by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS fighters have seized control of tanks, artillery and large caches of ammunition abandoned by the Iraqi military as they fled. More than 40,000 civilians have been forced from their homes by the ISIS advance.

US president Barack Obama, in an interview with the *Atlantic* published Thursday, described the loss of Ramadi as a "tactical setback," but said that he did not think that the US was losing the fight against ISIS. "There's no doubt that in the Sunni areas, we're going to have to ramp up not just training, but also commitment, and we better get Sunni tribes more activated than they currently have been," Obama stated.

The fall of Ramadi last weekend, just 70 miles west of Baghdad, is a major defeat in the campaign against ISIS, with approximately 7,000 Iraqi soldiers completely routed. ISIS deployed at least 30 car bombs in the successful offensive, 10 of which were reportedly equivalent in size to the truck bomb used in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, annihilating whole city blocks.

Military spokesman Colonel Steve Warren told reporters that the rockets were to be used by the Iraqi military to destroy possible car bombs from a much further distance than was possible with automatic weapons. "This is a good counter to that [type of bombing]," Warren stated.

Warren denied reports that the United States was considering training Iraqi soldiers to call in American airstrikes against ISIS targets. "If the JTAC [Joint Terminal Attack Controller] says, 'Put a bomb there,' no questions are asked," he stated. "That is not

something we are going to delegate to anyone other than Americans. Period." Instead, Warren said, the US will train the Iraqi forces in better ways to call in air support by formatting their radio calls and identifying their positions to avoid being hit by American bombs.

The announcement of the expedited rocket deliveries came as ISIS continued to make advances towards Habbaniyah, 24 miles east of Ramadi. Iraqi Police major Khalid al-Fahdawi told Reuters on Thursday that ISIS forces had breached defensive positions in the city of Husaibah, six miles outside of Ramadi.

Far from activating the Sunni tribes, as suggested by Obama, the Iraqi government with US support is deploying approximately 4,000 Shiite militiamen to a military base outside Habbaniyah in preparation for an eventual counterattack against ISIS.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Iraqi military in Anbar, Iraqi prime minister Haidar Al-Abadi has dispatched the Iranian-backed Shiite militias to spearhead the effort to retake the Sunni-dominated province. The militias have been ordered to coordinate with whatever remains of the Iraq military units that were routed and at least 2,000 police officers.

The deployment of the Shiite militias to retake Ramadi, a largely Sunni-populated city, will only serve to stoke sectarian tensions. American-supported Shiite militias and Iraqi Special Forces deployed in previous offensives against ISIS in Sunni areas have operated as death squads torturing and executing Sunni prisoners.

According to Human Rights Watch, the Shiite militias went on a rampage of retribution, looting and burning at least 3,200 buildings, including civilian homes, after pushing ISIS out of the city of Amerli in September 2014. Photos and videos have emerged showing men in the uniforms of Iraqi Special Forces posing with severed heads and dragging corpses behind

their Humvees (see: “America’s ‘dirty brigades’ in Iraq”).

The logical outcome of the developments on the ground in Iraq is the reintroduction of thousands of American combat troops and an escalation of the air campaign. President Obama has already deployed approximately 3,000 troops to Iraq to serve as trainers and advisers for the Iraqi military.

Republican senator John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, criticized the White House on Monday and said that more US troops would be necessary as a result of the latest debacle in Iraq. “We will have to have more people on the ground and this is really serious, the fall of Ramadi,” McCain stated in an interview on MSNBC.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Forces Committee on Thursday, Frederick Kagan, one of the architects of the 2007 “surge” in Iraq, called for the deployment of as many as 20,000 American troops to assist the Iraqi military in any eventual effort to retake Ramadi.

Kagan reported that the fall of Ramadi had “completely derailed” plans announced at the beginning of the year to retake from ISIS the northern city of Mosul. “I think the fight for Ramadi will be hard enough,” Kagan said. “I think that these operations in and around Ramadi demonstrate that the Iraqi security forces at current levels of U.S. support are not capable of defending even their territory against determined ISIS attack, let alone clearing a major ISIS safe haven.”

Marine general Gregory Newbold, who retired in 2002 in opposition to plans for war with Iraq and advised Obama’s campaign for president in 2008, told NPR on Thursday that he disapproved of the White House’s strategy against ISIS in Iraq.

He called for an escalation of the air campaign and an overwhelming use of force by US ground troops. “What we need to do is become the single most effective and welcome option for those local governments,” Newbold said. “And when we do that, our engagement can’t be timid. It has to be so decisive in employment and so overwhelming an effect that ISIS as an idea, as well as a force, is humiliated.”

As the United States and the Iraqi government prepared a counterattack, ISIS made a second strategic advance on Thursday, seizing control of the Syrian city of Palmyra, some 400 miles northwest of Ramadi. ISIS

has made significant advances in Syria at the same time that the United States has initiated a new program to train and equip so-called moderate rebels.

While framed in the context of fighting against ISIS, which developed as an outcome of the US policy of fomenting civil war in Syria, the operations undertaken by the CIA and US client states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar are aimed ultimately at the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad, a key ally of both Iran and Russia. Despite continuous airstrikes by the US and allied forces since June of last year, ISIS now controls at least 50 percent of the territory in Syria and a third of the territory in Iraq.

Even as it drops bombs on Islamic State targets and launches Special Forces raids against ISIS members in Syria, the United States is in a de facto alliance with Al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate against Assad. The Islamist fighters have proven to be much more effective in advancing America’s goal of ousting Assad than the so-called moderates. Weapons funneled into Syria by the United States, including anti-tank missiles, have often ended up in the hands of Al Nusra and ISIS fighters.



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