

US-backed offensive to seize Iraqi city of Fallujah

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The US-backed regime in Iraq announced on Monday it was launching a military offensive to retake the city of Fallujah, which has been held by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias since early 2014. The operation is part of the intensification of the US-led war in Iraq and Syria to ensure continued American dominance in the Middle East.

Flanked by senior military commanders, Prime Minister Haider al Abadi declared in a nationally televised announcement that Iraqi forces would “tear up the black flags of the despicable strangers who abducted this dear city.” Fallujah, which is just 65 kilometres west of Baghdad in Sunni-dominated Anbar province, has been under siege by government troops for months.

Abadi has launched the military offensive in a desperate bid to shore up his fragile government. In dramatic protests in late April, thousands of demonstrators stormed Baghdad’s heavily-fortified Green Zone and invaded the parliament building to denounce corruption and demand improved security and social services.

Yesterday’s announcement came just three days after thousands of people again took to the streets in Baghdad to join anti-government demonstrations. Security forces were mobilised in large numbers, using tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets to suppress the protesters.

Abadi indirectly acknowledged that the protests were a factor in launching the Fallujah offensive. “It was supposed to start earlier, but unfortunately political disputes and the events in Baghdad, which threatened security ... all this delayed some of the preparations for this battle,” he said.

Other analysts were more pointed. The *Wall Street Journal* cited Kirk Sowell, publisher of the *Inside Iraqi*

Politics newspaper, who declared that the Fallujah operation was “just what Abadi needed.” Sowell added: “If Abadi wanted to have any future at all as a political leader, he had to do this.”

The Iraqi military is mounting a massive operation to retake Fallujah from an estimated 800 to 1,000 ISIS fighters entrenched in the city. Around 10,000 regular army troops, supported by 8,000-10,000 Iraqi national police, as well as Shiite militias and tribal fighters, are involved in the offensive.

The assault is being spearheaded by 1,500 members of the elite Counter Terrorism Services. There are largely Shiite special forces units that are notorious for carrying out sectarian murders and terrorising the Sunni population in areas where they have been deployed.

American and allied warplanes in Iraq conducted two strikes in Fallujah yesterday, making a total of 21 in the city since May 17. The Iraqi military has also carried out its own strikes using US-supplied F-16 war planes. In addition, the US military is making available long-range artillery based at the Taqaddum air base, west of Fallujah, and Apache helicopter gunships. US advisers have been intimately involved in planning and preparing the attacks.

Abadi, who is also the Iraq government’s commander in chief, toured the Fallujah front dressed in the all-black uniform of the counterterrorism forces—an ominous warning of what is to come. He hailed the “big successes” being made, declaring: “The enemy is collapsing. Our message to civilians is that these operations are to save you from Daesh [ISIS].”

The limited reports of fighting painted a different picture. By late Monday, government forces had taken over two districts on the city’s outskirts. They claimed to have killed 34 ISIS fighters and destroyed a communications centre. Local sources told Al Jazeera

that six civilians were killed in shelling and 14 soldiers died in fighting, but neither figure has been officially confirmed.

Up to 75,000 civilians remain trapped in Fallujah, lacking food and other essential necessities of life. As a result of the blockade of the city, the UN's World Food Program has not been able to deliver aid since September. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "numerous people have died of starvation." Denunciations of ISIS for using civilians as "human shields" are designed to justify a massive assault on the city that results in widespread devastation and death.

Katharina Ritz, head of the International Red Cross delegation in Iraq, declared yesterday: "Civilians must be spared and allowed to leave Fallujah safely, while houses and other civilian infrastructure must not be targetted." While ISIS has been blamed for not allowing civilians to leave, the Sunni residents undoubtedly fear their fate at the hands of Shiite militias.

"Fallujah must not be allowed to become another Ramadi," Ritz said. The government offensive to retake the city of Ramadi in December led to the destruction of thousands of homes and buildings, and basic infrastructure such as water and electricity. The city is still uninhabitable, with buildings not cleared of booby traps. More than 100 civilians have died trying to return to Ramadi since ISIS was driven out.

The destruction, social dislocation, death and ongoing fighting are the direct consequence of the US-led criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003. The levelling of Fallujah by the US military in 2004 was one of its worst crimes. A city of some 300,000 people was reduced to rubble in a bloody siege that lasted months. About 10,000 of the city's 39,000 homes were completely destroyed and many more damaged. An unknown number of civilians were killed. Embedded journalists who entered the city with US troops found bodies lying in the streets.

The tragedy of Fallujah helped drive segments of the Sunni population into the anti-government insurgency that spawned Al Qaeda in Iraq. It crossed over the border into Syria and became one of the main ground forces for the US-orchestrated regime change operation against President Bashar al-Assad. Formed as a breakaway from Al Qaeda, ISIS was greatly strengthened by the money and guns funnelled into

Syria by the US and its allies. ISIS then crossed back into Iraq during 2014 and inflicted a series of devastating blows on the US-trained and equipped Iraqi security forces, including the capture of Mosul, the country's second largest city.

Mosul's recapture has been the main US objective. Hudson Institute analyst Richard Weitz told Al Jazeera: "The American military has been pushing them [Iraqi military forces] to reconquer Mosul as the decisive battle, not Fallujah." Mosul's conquest would strike a devastating political and military blow against ISIS, setting the stage for an escalation of the US-backed war in Syria, not only against ISIS but also the Assad regime, the chief US target.



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