



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Battle for Fallujah: Winning the Battle, Losing the War

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2016

The Battle for Fallujah: Winning the Battle, Losing the War

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## Introduction

In a televised address he delivered on June 17, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced the re-capture of the city of Fallujah by Iraqi government forces. The declaration came just one month after he announced the launch of an operation to retake the city from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) through a broad coalition of forces. With ISIL forces now pushed out of most of the city, and wide indications that the battle is coming to an end, this paper examines the social and political struggles brought to the fore by the battle for control of Fallujah. In particular, the paper addresses the burgeoning role of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Militia in Iraqi political and security affairs.

## The Battle for Fallujah: Who gave the Orders?

The United States today leads an international coalition aimed at destroying ISIL known as "Operation Inherent Resolve", and provides logistical and other multifaceted support in aid of this effort. With Iraqi Shia political forces stalling the formation of a "National Guard" force across Iraq's many provinces, US military planners have been engaged in building the military forces to tackle ISIL across the Anbar Province. Tasked with leading the military campaign against the extremist group, this force allegedly includes former members of Iraq's Awakening Forces (*Sahwa*), tribal fighters from the Anbar Province and elements of Iraq's formal armed forces. Primarily, the intended aim was for this international coalition to retake Mosul immediately after it had pushed ISIL out of Ramadi back in December 2015, before political infighting diverted the allies' attention. Conspicuously absent from all these plans were the combat units of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Militia, whose participation within the international effort was blocked by Washington.

Abadi's vaunted battle for Fallujah, meanwhile, contravenes America's conditions, with the Popular Mobilization forces playing a prominent role in Baghdad's efforts to re-capture the city. This is further evidence that the decision to take Fallujah was taken in Iraq and, specifically, by the country's Prime Minister, a suggestion that is further corroborated by Abadi's unilateral and singular declaration of the launch of a major offensive to retake Fallujah. The timing of the battle and the decision to prioritize Fallujah over the ongoing battle to take back Mosul, has more to do with Abadi's political fate than with the US-led campaign against ISIL. A victory for Baghdad's forces in Fallujah will focus Iraqi public attention on a rare victory for their government, one

that has long been awaited since former Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki announced military operations against ISIL forces in the Houran Plains in early 2014. As noted by Iraqi parliamentarian Abdulrahman Luwaizi, a victory in Fallujah would give the Iraqi ruling Shia political parties the chance to reinvent Haidar al-Abadi and turn the balance of powers to his favor. This would help the ailing prime minister, hitherto seen as weak and lacking initiative, overcome a political crisis that has plagued him since last February<sup>1</sup>.

## The Popular Mobilization Militia

Any role played by the Popular Mobilization Militia (PMM) was bound to be controversial. The Iraqi prime minister could scarcely deny the importance of the American contribution to Iraqi efforts against ISIL. It was aerial support from the Pentagon that allowed Baghdad to finally push the group out of Tikrit in March of 2015. As such, Abadi would have found it difficult to go against Washington's insistence that the PMM would not be involved in the battle against ISIL. Equally, however, the Iraqi prime minister found it hard to resist the PMM's enthusiasm to involve itself in the battle surrounding Fallujah in particular, a city of unique strategic value. Regardless of the considerations involved with the anti-ISIL military effort more generally, involvement in the battle to rid Fallujah of ISIL forces would give the PMM the political capital it needs to play a more active political role. A successful military campaign in Fallujah would also empower the PMM in its intra-Shia political feuds.

In theory, the PMM was supposed to be given a limited role in the liberation of Fallujah: the group would be allowed to help Baghdad's forces recapture small towns scattered in the environs of Fallujah but would not be allowed to enter the city proper. Addressing the terms of this conciliation, Hadi al-Ameri, the head of the Badr Militia — the largest constituent group within the PMM — stated that the Popular Mobilization forces would only enter the city if a failure of government forces to take it back necessitated such a move<sup>2</sup>. Even the US-led international anti-ISIL coalition was prepared to countenance the limited participation of PMM forces in military activities on the outskirts of Fallujah,

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<sup>1</sup> See "Iraqi parliamentarian claims that battle for Fallujah engaged to save ruling coalition", *Sumer News*, June 11, 2016 (in Arabic): <http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/170883/%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8>

<sup>2</sup> See "The Battle for Fallujah", Musa Keilani, *Jordan Times*, May 28, 2016: <http://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/musa-keilani/battle-fallujah>

as admitted by coalition Spokesman Col. Steve Warren—who also claimed that the PMM would remain outside of the city limits<sup>3</sup>.

## Violation of Civilians' Rights

Once events began to unfold, however, it became clear that the real role of the PMM was much wider, and more sinister. Reports indicate that forces loyal to the Shia armed coalition played a role in the capture and detention of large numbers of Iraqi civilians who tried to flee the fighting. A number of international bodies had earlier estimated that the civilian population of Fallujah numbered between 50,000 to 90,000 people—many of whom, it is claimed, were being exploited as human shields by the extremist group<sup>4</sup>. Commenting on the situation, UN Human Rights Commissioner Zeid Ra'd Al Hussein expressed dismay at eyewitness accounts that "have described how armed groups operating in support of the Iraqi security forces are detaining the males for 'security screening' ... [which] in some cases degenerates into physical violations and other forms of abuse, apparently in order to elicit forced confessions."<sup>5</sup>

Iraq's Sunni political forces have also been quick to condemn what they call the "systematic killing" of civilians fleeing the violence in Fallujah. Suhaib Al Rawi, the Governor of the Anbar Province, citing findings of a governorate-level investigative committee formed to look into violations perpetrated by the PMM, estimated that 49 civilians fleeing Fallujah were killed by the Shia militia while another 643 were unaccounted for. Al Rawi added that those Fallujah civilians who had been released

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<sup>3</sup> See "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Warren via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq", US Department of Defense Press Briefings, May 27, 2016: <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/784055/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-warren-via-teleconference-from>

<sup>4</sup> See "Fear for civilians as Islamic States halts Iraqi army at gates of Fallujah", Maher Nazeh and Saif Hameed, *Reuters*, June 1, 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-fallujah-idUSKCN0YM0OW>

<sup>5</sup> See "UN: Civilians fleeing Fallujah face extreme abuse", *Al Jazeera*, June 7, 2016: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/civilians-fleeing-fallujah-face-extreme-abuse-160607170116953.html>

from detention by the PMM offered testimonies of physical abuse, humiliation and the illegal seizure of money and personal belongings, including jewelry<sup>6</sup>.

Notably, these incidents did not take place in the aftermath of ISIL's defeat, as was the case in Tikrit, but whilst the battle continued to rage. These actions on the part of constituent militia of the PMM also demonstrate that the group's pledged adherence to the guidelines governing their participation in the battle for Fallujah was insincere. The savagery subjected on civilians fleeing Fallujah, and the eagerness to share images of this torture on social media, evidence that for the PMM—or at least, for many of the groups and individuals which make it up—sectarian hatred was a prime motive for their willingness to enter battle with ISIL in Fallujah.

## Conclusion

The behavior of PMM forces in the battle for Fallujah has served to underscore the militia's image as primarily a sectarian warhorse. It has also worked to depict the present battle for Fallujah not as a confrontation between the Iraqi state and ISIL, but rather as one of a series of pitched sectarian battles between Sunni and Shia Muslim forces across the entire Fertile Crescent. This will itself weaken wider resolve to tackle ISIL. Indeed, Prime Minister Abadi, citing concern for the safety of Fallujah civilians, has been forced to take measures to slow down the intensity of the battle<sup>7</sup>.

Abadi's decision to later move units from the Iraqi Army from the area surrounding Fallujah to Makhmour, which sits on the road that links Erbil with Mosul, in preparation for a showdown with ISIL in the North of Iraq, was later met with strong condemnation from PMM leaders who described the move to shift attention away from Fallujah as treachery.

More worrying, and with longer lasting impacts, are the repercussions of these policies by the PMM and the Iraqi government among the Iraqi population. While the Sunni Arab communities in which ISIL finds its home are growing disenchanted with the group, they cannot be expected to warmly welcome Baghdad's forces if they feel that these are forwarding a sectarian agenda. In short, unless the Sunni Arab communities

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<sup>6</sup> See "Fallujah civilians: Militias take turns to torture us", Salam Khoder, *Al Jazeera*, June 16, 2016: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/iraq-civilians-recall-days-hell-militia-160616060343081.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Nazeh and Hameed



of Iraq can be convinced that their government is not out to further a vendetta of sectarian revenge, then neither the reconciliation of the Iraqi population nor victory against ISIL will be possible.