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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Destroying a City to Save it: Ramadi and a New Model for the Tackling of ISIL

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Feb 2016

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Introduction

Some neighborhoods in the Iraqi city of Ramadi, in the Anbar Province, remain under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a full two months since the Iraqi military, with extensive aerial support from the United States, began a campaign to re-take the city. In other districts, hit-and-run attacks and small skirmishes prevail. This hasn't prevented US spokespersons from suggesting that the battle to liberate Mosul—which it admits will be complicated and arduous—is imminent.¹

What Lies Ahead?

In recent weeks, there has been an intensification of official American statements announcing an impending military offensive against ISIL². Of particular interest is the announcement that the US Army's 101st Airborne Division will be deployed to Iraq during February.³ Some Iraqi military spokespersons have announced that 1,800 soldiers from the 101st Airborne are already active in the country, stationed at the Ain Al Assad and Habbaniya airbases, both of which are in Anbar Province.⁴ Despite assurances from the Pentagon that those members of the 101st Airborne Division deployed to Iraq will continue to focus purely on consultative and training tasks, and that the overall number of US military personnel deployed to Iraq will remain constant as other soldiers are rotated out of the country⁵, the deployment of this particular elite group is heavy with significance in the fight against ISIL. Seasoned with fighters who

¹ See: "After Ramadi, Anti-ISIS Coalition Shifts Focus to Mosul", Jack Moore, *Newsweek*, December 30, 2015

² "US, allies agree to intensify fight against ISIS", CTV News, available online: <http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/u-s-allies-agree-to-intensify-fight-against-isis-1.2745333>

³ "US plans to 'further accelerate' ISIS fight: Momentum or mixed messages?", Anna Mulrine, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 22, 2016, available via Yahoo! News: <http://news.yahoo.com/us-plans-further-accelerate-isis-fight-momentum-mixed-224023222.html>

⁴ "US Embassy Denies Numbers of Military Personnel to Increase", *Al Rafidayn News Network*, January 22, 2016 (in Arabic) at: <http://alrafidayn.net/?p=5017>

⁵ "Ash Carter on American strategy to defeat ISIS and Benjamin Netanyahu discusses Iran nuclear deal with", Fareed Zakaria GPS, CNN, January 24, 2016, at: <http://podcast.cnn.com/fareed-zakaria-gps/episode/all/18sTUA2NUKkqH3/fzgps-2016-01-24.html>

took part in the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, the 101st Airborne is often involved in combat and support operations, usually supported by helicopters.

In addition, the international coalition assembled to fight ISIL has announced that it has trained 20,000 fighters drawn from a segment of the population which the US occupation forces have long referred to as the "Sunni tribesmen", who are intended to act as a military counterbalance to ISIL.⁶ There is no clear understanding of what role these informal forces played in the "Battle for Ramadi", but the phrasing of official statements from the Iraqi government indicates very clearly that they played a role in the "combined forces" which brought them together with the official Iraqi army. Further, the exact nature and composition of these tribal forces remains unknown: are they the remnants of the "Iraqi Awakening" first formed in 2007 as part of General Petraeus' plan? Or were they drawn from the "New Awakening", formed under the guidance of Nuri Al Maliki in early 2013 as part of his campaign to counter both the growth of a Sunni protest movement and the capture of wide swathes of the Anbar Province by ISIL?⁷ Do they accurately reflect the tribal/clan composition of the Anbar province? Are they the result of a voluntary recruitment drive?

It appears that the American military avoided making these forces a subject of partisan debate for Iraqi politicians by helping to assemble these forces without any fanfare. This fact also reflects that the US differs fundamentally from the Iraqi government in its view of the conflict with ISIL, with Washington believing wholeheartedly that any successful campaign to tackle the group will necessarily be based on fighters from within the same Sunni community on which ISIL relies. Previously, this idea already gave rise to the Iraqi "National Guard", an idea which formed a plank of Haider Abadi's platform and was intended to come into existence within three months of his cabinet being sworn in in September 2014.⁸ Political infighting, coupled with the ambiguity surrounding the purpose of this force and its mission, including how it would fit into the wider Ministry of Defense structure and interact with other military forces in Iraq, has

⁶ "US-Coalition to Train at Least 10 Iraqi Brigades to Retake Mosul from Daesh", *Sputnik*, January 29, 2016: <http://sptnkne.ws/a6YR>

⁷ "Maliki Integrates the Awakening Fighters back into the Military; Approves 2,000 Enlistments", *Akad News*, January 31, 2013: <http://www.akadnews.org/2013/01/31/المالكي-يعيد-ربط-الصحوّة-بالقوات-البري/> .

⁸ See, Iraqi Cabinet Agenda, General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Iraq, September 16, 2014 (in Arabic): <http://cabinet.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=5240>

thus far stalled its birth. In reality, however, these are all smokescreens to hide the overarching fact that Shia political forces which are in charge of Iraq fear that such an armed group could mature into a militia which bolsters the bargaining power of Sunni political forces, perhaps to be used by regional powers, or which otherwise threatens the central government in Baghdad. In essence, it is the anxiety of one group of armed sectarian militia that a second, counterweight to their monopolization of armed, sectarian power will emerge. With the Abadi government incapable and unwilling to push forward the plans to create the National Guard, the job of creating it was left to the Americans, who had to carry out their work in an undeclared fashion. It is likely that the Guard's nucleus was drawn both from the "Iraqi Awakening" force originally created by the Americans in 2007, as well as the force formed by Maliki in 2013, along with volunteers from the Anbar Province.

The Battle for Ramadi: a New Model for the War on ISIL?

While the battle to recapture Ramadi has yet to be fully completed, the Pentagon is already working to distill the lessons learned into a new model for its general war to tackle ISIL. The extent of American involvement in that battle can thus be taken as an indication of what is to come, with 700 American sorties contributing to the effort to quash ISIL in the Anbar Province city. In a sense, it can be said that the Battle for Ramadi was an American mission *par excellence*, reflecting the three pillars of the US military doctrine announced by President Obama: intense air strikes; reliance on special forces, leaving open the possibility of "pinpoint" operations by ground troops; and the training and equipping of "local partners" to take the place of the American military⁹. This is quickly becoming the template which the US uses in its battles with ISIL across the globe, even suggesting it as a means of tackling the group in its nascent growth in Libya.¹⁰

On a regional level, the US is putting its own model forward in a competition with another approach, championed by Moscow, in the battle to tackle ISIL. The as-yet unsuccessful Russian approach, in contrast, while not targeted primarily at ISIL, is also

⁹ "From Oval Office, President Obama Vows U.S. Will Defeat ISIS", *National Public Radio* (online version), December 6, 2015: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/12/06/458714749/from-oval-office-president-obama-vows-u-s-will-destroy-isis>

¹⁰ "ISIS pushed back in Iraq, Syria, but a Threat in Libya: Kerry", *Reuters*, February 2, 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-coalition-idUSKCN0VA3RE>

based on a combination of air strikes and reliance on foreign fighters to take control on the ground. Within Iraq in particular, there is the approach of relying on the Shia armed militia which Iran helped to form, and which participated in the battle to “liberate” Tikrit and the Salahaddin Province. This was spearheaded by the Popular Mobilization militia, and saw Iraq’s regular military forces as well as local fighters sidelined, but still relied on US air support to defeat ISIL in Tikrit during April 2015. Shortly after they routed ISIL from the city, the Popular Mobilization militia began a massive campaign of vindictive measures against the people of Tikrit.

In contrast to the sectarian, pro-Iranian approach described above, US military commanders look to isolate sectarian militia members who could inflame tensions with the local community in Sunni areas of Iraq. Learning from the lessons of the battle for Tikrit, the paramilitary groups which they formed to recapture Anbar are composed of both the regular armed forces of Iraq and local volunteers. Building on its own experience of countering Al Qaeda in Iraq, the Americans have learned that a decisive—perhaps *the* decisive—element in the fight against armed extremist groups such as ISIL is winning over the local communities on which they rely. In this regard, they are working to drive a wedge between ISIL and the communities in which the group is embedded.

Equally, the US is also looking to invest the Battle for Ramadi with political, as well as military, significance. By relying on the official Iraqi military—as opposed to the Popular Mobilization Forces—the Pentagon avoids the fallout of sectarian tensions. The defeat of ISIL in Ramadi will also prove a boon for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Abadi and his “moderate Shia” camp of political supporters, which at the moment is dwarfed by the Shia politicians associated with Iran. By leaving the Popular Mobilization Militia out of the equation, the US has served to help strengthen PM Abadi. This reflects America’s wider commitment to a strong central government in Baghdad, led by “moderate” Shia politicians such as the current premier, who can build alliances with other sectors of the Iraqi population across confessional lines. It should be noted, however, that 18 months into his term, Abadi’s ability to build such alliances remains unproven. Indeed, the support base which had initially made the Abadi premiership possible through public support, political organizations and religious institutions, is slowly disintegrating due to the prime minister’s inability to deliver on any of his promises.

The Triumph of the Armed Solution

Despite all of the positive impacts of a blended political-military approach, and the role it could play in strengthening both moderate Shia political forces and the enhanced participation of Sunni Iraqis in the administration of their communities and of the country, the US appears today to be favoring a security approach to confronting ISIL. This new way of thinking appears to be ascendant even within the Obama administration, otherwise known for its hermetic reluctance to be involved in the Middle East's military conflicts. This would explain the Americans' moves to create a new military force which is parallel to the National Guard but which serves the same purpose.

A military-security approach to the problem of ISIL, however, can only ever be a partial, stop-gap measure. It cannot replace fully earlier American approaches, which saw the rise of ISIL as the symptom of a political malady that could only be remedied politically; that is to say, only with the participation of Iraq's Sunni political forces in the government will the country be stabilized. In lieu of that, even military victories will be piecemeal solutions which can never truly secure peace. Just as ISIL was born out of the ashes of Al Qaeda, any purely military victories against ISIL will simply pave the way for the re-emergence of ISIL, albeit possibly in new guises.

In fact, even the ability to continue to defeat ISIL militarily appears to be in doubt. Following the putative liberation of Ramadi from ISIL, 80% of the city's buildings and infrastructure are seemingly destroyed.¹¹ This repeats a pattern first seen in Kobane, in which a city might be won for the central government, but not before it is completely devastated. Some parts of the Iraqi Sunni community are beginning to regard the vindictive destruction of their cities by ISIL as essentially indistinguishable from their destruction at the hands of the military forces coming to "liberate" them. Leaving aside the necessity of a political process for a true liberation of Iraq from ISIL, the question remains: can the citizens of Mosul be persuaded to embrace a new military campaign, if

¹¹ "Iraq: 80 percent of Ramadi in ruins after fighting", *Aljazeera*, December 31, 2015:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/iraq-80-percent-ramadi-ruins-fighting-151231114030408>

it revisits upon their hometown the same kind of bitter, pyrrhic victory realized in Ramadi and Kobane?