



Battle over Fallujah Tests US-Iran Tacit Deal against ISIL

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As Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran's al-Quds Force, was reportedly spotted in the northern outskirts of the besieged city of Fallujah, the US and the Iraqi governments quietly shifted their focus to the southern front before Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced on June 1 a pause in the military operation to liberate the city from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This policy analysis paper examines the tactics of the battle over Fallujah, the role of the Iran-backed militias and how the US-Iran soft showdown in the city will evolve.

On May 23, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced a major military operation codenamed "Operation Breaking Terrorism" aimed at liberating Fallujah and end control of the city by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The joint operation under the command of the Iraqi government has been advancing at a slow pace while facing strong ISIL resistance and intense questions about the role of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). For the first time in two years of fighting against ISIL in Iraq, the US and Iran explicitly disagree on the priorities of the battle, as well as its military tactics. The course of the Fallujah battle in the coming weeks will not only test this tacit deal between the two countries but will have a significant impact as well on Iraq's political dynamics.

The slow advance toward Fallujah

The recent ISIL suicide attacks in Shiite areas of Iraq have challenged the ability of al-Abadi government to maintain security and led to accelerating the military preparations to retake Fallujah, where the extremist group is presumably plotting suicide attacks and car bombs. Talks about liberating Mosul and Fallujah have been going on since last year with no tangible military moves on both fronts until recent weeks. The Mosul operation, officially announced on March 24, is facing its own stalemate with the Kurdish factor adding another layer of complexity. Iran believes Fallujah, located roughly 69 kilometers (43 miles) west of Baghdad, poses a greater threat to the Iraqi capital while the US wants to keep the focus on Mosul instead as a strategic priority and the second largest city in Iraq. A US Army official at the coalition's headquarters in Baghdad's Green Zone said on May 29 that the Fallujah battle is driven by "political calculus for the civilian leadership of Iraq."¹ Furthermore, while Washington wants the Iraqi military's Special Forces to lead the operations, Iran insists on having the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) play a role in the battle.

Nearly 30,000 government and non-government troops are participating in the operation to liberate Fallujah. In addition to the Iraqi Armed Forces and the Anbar Province's federal police, the Iraqi government reserved the key role for the counterterrorism Special Forces known as the "Golden Brigade," which were trained in the US and Jordan. The significant advantage remains the US air

support that paved the way for the military campaign to advance in the early days of the operation. On the non-government side, the Iraqi government has instructed the PMF fighters to restrict their presence to the outskirts of Fallujah, not inside the city, while the role of the fighters from the Anbar province's Sunni tribes was envisioned to become even more critical when patrolling the liberated city.

Phase one and two of the operation imposed a long-lasting siege that began last year and advanced toward the outskirts of Fallujah since May 24, along with heavy aerial bombing of ISIL weapons storage facilities. In return, ISIL militants used all the defense tools available, most commonly snipers on buildings, network of tunnels, and local residents as human shields.

The main breakthrough in recent days was seizing control of al-Nuaimiyah town, a key supply line for ISIL on the southern front, paving the way to advance toward Fallujah's al-Shuhada district. On that same front, ISIL has deployed a significant number of the remaining 500-1,000 militants in the city. The nature of the battle in the southern front was one of the reasons behind the government's decision to deploy the "Golden Brigade" in order to provide a viable alternative to the PMF fighters who previously performed these missions instead of the Iraqi Armed Forces who lack counterterrorism skills.

On the northern front, in contrast, the progress has been slower as the extremist groups displayed better defense capabilities, utilizing completely different tactics with suicide and car bombs as well as rocket attacks. Iraqi forces managed to seize control of al-Saqlawiyah town on the outskirts of Fallujah. The recent decision of the Iraqi government to shift focus from the northern to the southern front was due to several reasons, mainly the fact that the southern front is flat and has an easier access road to the city center compared to the rural nature of the northern front.

The major shift occurred on June 1 when al-Abadi announced a slowdown in the military operations due to the need for a cautious approach in dealing with the nearly 50,000 civilians trapped inside the city and in minimizing casualties among Iraqi troops.² However, al-Abadi's decision was a concerted effort to diffuse the US-Iran showdown over setting the terms of the Fallujah battle as Washington decided to halt its aerial support after detecting a sectarian inclination. Since photos of General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's Quds Force, emerged on May 25 from al-Saqlawiyah on the outskirts of Fallujah's northern front, the dynamic of the battle has changed. It was even reported, yet not confirmed by the Pentagon, that on May 23, the US has targeted by air, as a warning signal, some PMF units attempting to move toward the city of Fallujah.

What will the PMF do?

The debate surrounding the role of the PMF in Iraq remains highly controversial. Even though it is under the direct command of al-Abadi, the PMF continues to display autonomous behavior in issuing their own statements about the Fallujah battle instead of allowing the government's "media war unit" to be the only source of official military updates. PMF also coined its own name for the operation, "15 Shaaban," in reference to the birth anniversary of Imam al-Mahdi.

Al-Abadi continues to support the PMF, in particular those loyal to him, in the context of his ongoing rivalry with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who also has his own support base among the Iranian-backed militias. The PMF leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandes said on June 1 that Iraq's national security forces are tasked to enter the city of Fallujah while the PMF will play a supportive role in the outskirts to prevent potential ISIL counter attacks.³ Sunni tribes from the Anbar province also reached an agreement with the PMF to coordinate plans to help the families who escape ISIL-controlled areas in order to prevent acts of revenge against civilians. Yet, there are lingering concerns that unruly PMF fighters might commit atrocities⁴ during the chaos following the liberation of Fallujah.

What to expect moving forward

As the military operations slowed down over the past few days, Iraqi troops were standing still on the outskirts of Fallujah, and subsequently suffered big losses as it became easier for ISIL to launch counter attacks. Even though the extremist group's militants are gradually running out of ammunitions, maintaining this status quo without Iraqi troops attempting to enter Fallujah will further damage the morale of the armed forces.

Meanwhile, al-Abadi is looking for a breathing space to mediate between Washington and Tehran or to convince the PMF to stick to the original agreement of staying away from Fallujah's city center. A hot line between the US and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad might also be critical to prevent any potential escalation on the ground in an increasingly dangerous environment. Until now, Iran does not seem keen to pick a fight with the US as it continues to enjoy greater influence over the course of events in Iraq. However, if the US continued its disengagement from the Fallujah battle, al-Abadi will be making a big gamble on his own and any failure to deliver victory will cast doubts once again on the credibility of his government and that of the Iraqi Armed Forces, and will allow Iran and its loyalists in Iraq to reaffirm that the role of the PMF is still a necessity to defeat ISIL. Most of all, this issue remains at stake in the Battle of Fallujah.

¹ Paul D. Shinkman. "The Iranian fingerprints on Iraq's Fallujah plan." *U.S. News and World Report*. June 2, 2016. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-06-02/the-iranian-fingerprints-on-iraqs-fallujah-plan>

² Qassim Abdul-Zahra. "Fallujah fight stalled by fierce fighting, civilian concerns." *Associated Press*. June 1, 2016. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/warns-20000-children-trapped-iraqs-fallujah-39519819>

³ "Reports that military operations in Falloujah have stopped are not true." *Al-Mayadeen*. June 1, 2016. <http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/36481/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9>

⁴ James Gordon Meek and Brian Ross. "Observers fear "dirty brigade" atrocities after ISIS fight in Fallujah." *ABC News*. June 1, 2016. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/observers-fear-dirty-brigade-atrocities-isis-fight-fallujah/story?id=39506548>