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Victory in Fallujah: It's Far From Over

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

Synopsis

Iraqi government forces have retaken control of Fallujah, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) stronghold. The first city to fall to ISIS and situated so close to the capital Baghdad, the government victory has symbolic and strategic value. However the battle is far from over.

Commentary

FOLLOWING A month-long offensive, Iraqi government forces have announced the recapture of Fallujah, a key town in the Anbar province of Iraq, which has been under the control of ISIS since January 2014. Backed by Shia militia units belonging to the Popular Mobilisation Front (PMF), the government forces retook the city on 18 June 2016, signalling a major defeat for ISIS, which is also facing prospective losses in Mosul and Raqqa in Syria.

Fallujah has historically been an important catalyst for many of the military operations run by insurgents of Al Qaeda against the US military. Violence, destruction, evacuations, recapture and relocation are a familiar process for the city dwellers that are experiencing another phase of the same with the present offensive launched by the Iraqi government. The government's victory however is only the beginning. With battles to clear out pockets of fighters holed up in different districts still to be fought. The focus will now have to shift to many issues within the city that if left unchallenged will result in more instability.

Booby Traps and Recurring Violence

The first problem that will be faced by the Iraqi army will be military in nature. Due to

the usage of civilians as human shields to hamper the government's progress, ISIS militants would have had ample time to place improvised booby traps, mines and other explosives all over the city. This is a strategy used by the group in Ramadi where there is an estimated 5,000 land mines placed all over the city. This will not only create a problem for the military securing the city but it will make it difficult for those civilians who will inevitably return.

The second concern will be the reining in of Shia militia units that have assisted the military forces throughout the offensive. Led by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander, Qasim al Sulaymani, the militia units have been harsh in their treatment of civilians. Disturbing reports have emerged on the number of dead and tortured bodies found in areas where the Shia militia have taken control.

The militias have been fuelled by their hatred of ISIS' extreme Sunni ideology which also brands Shias as heretics. Since most of the civilians in the city are Sunnis, the spillover of hatred creates a potent problem for the Iraqi government. While Prime Minister Abadi has declared his intention to protect the Sunnis from these militia units, it remains to be seen if it will be carried out. This should be done as part of a larger drive to repair the Sunni-Shia relationship which has contributed significantly to the backlash against the government in the past.

Humanitarian Issues

Another problem posed by a fleeing ISIS is the difficulty of differentiating between a civilian and a militant posing as a civilian. This has been another reason for the brutal tactics of the Popular Mobilisation Front units present in the city. Many militants have chosen to hide or dispose their weapons and pose as civilians rather than be arrested.

This strategy also enables them to spy on the security situation of the city and report back to the group so as to organise counter offensives. This has the potential to create a security paradox as wrongly imprisoning any civilian will lead to increasing distrust of the government.

More urgently though is the problem of treating the civilians who have remained back in Fallujah. Hospitals at this time do not have any medical supplies, and many people requiring medical treatment have been turned away or have had to endure inadequate treatment. Failure to address this pressing need can lead to outbreaks of diseases which will undoubtedly be aggravated by the poor sanitation and inadequate water facilities.

Long Term Resilience a Necessary Strategy

While many ISIS militants fleeing Fallujah have been captured, many others still hold parts of the city trying to launch counter offensives. Although their chances of taking back Fallujah from the military are low, it is quite probable that any operation they launch will result in the killing of innocent people. Iraqi forces face the monumental task of clearing these remaining fighters and then securing the borders from any further attacks.

Looming large for the Iraqi government is also the issue of dealing with a population that has been exposed to war for more than a decade now. Without sufficient law and order in the city it is quite likely that battle-weary citizens with no incentive to follow the law will turn to crime or fall prey to ISIS subversions in the future. Being sufficiently accustomed to war means that these disgruntled citizens will be prone to violence, creating another problem for the military.

In the long run the Iraqi government will have to contend with issues of reconstruction, governance and resilience. Far too many reconstruction projects have led to deeper anger and mistrust of the government due to work being given to foreign contractors, the subsequent exclusion of the local population and mostly unfinished projects.

In the past, unemployment during times of rebuilding the city has been an active factor in driving youngsters frustrated with the government to join terrorist groups. This was exacerbated by the fact that extremist groups like Muqtada As Sadr's Mehdi Army have taken advantage of the vacuum to provide their own basic services and gain legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens. It remains to be seen if the Iraqi government, which has made many mistakes in the past, will take a strategic and comprehensive approach to secure Fallujah this time around.

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