

# Retaking Ramadi: U.S. Assistance and Shiite-Sunni Cooperation

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

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**Washington can help by providing additional airpower and advisory assistance, but Iraqis must take the lead in combining various Sunni and Shiite forces into an effective Anbar counteroffensive.**

**T**he May 17 retreat of Iraqi government forces from Ramadi represents the most severe setback for the fight against the "Islamic State"/ISIS since Mosul fell nearly a year ago. Ramadi is the provincial capital of Anbar -- the huge desert governorate linking Baghdad to Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia -- and was the cockpit of the U.S.-backed Sunni tribal "awakening" that defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2006-2007. But one lost battle does not mean the loss of a war. The Iraqi government needs to launch an immediate counteroffensive before ISIS can consolidate its power, both for symbolic reasons and because of Ramadi's proximity to Baghdad.

## WHY RAMADI FELL

**T**he ISIS campaign to control major cities began in Ramadi and nearby Fallujah in late December 2013. While Fallujah fell and remains under the group's control, the Iraqi security forces (ISF) maintained the upper hand in Ramadi until recently. The city's overstretched collection of Iraqi army, police, and Sunni tribal militia forces have fought a brutal, nonstop battle with little reinforcement. In the eleven months since Mosul fell, only a tiny number of new local forces have been raised in Ramadi -- a weak brigade of 2,000 Federal Police and a new 1,000-strong unit of tribal paramilitaries. The army forces dotted around the city are among the most heavily damaged and exhausted units in Iraq.

The government will also have to contend with Ramadi's geography. As with Bayji refinery, another area where ISIS is surging, Ramadi is adjacent to uncontrolled rural and suburban belts that have enabled the group to gather attack

forces close to embattled locations. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the ISF in Ramadi finally cracked when struck with a hammer blow -- namely, twenty-eight suicide car bombs in three days, including at least six massive fifteen-ton armored truck bombs in a single attack.

## THE "ANBAR FIRST" MODEL

**H**istorically, Ramadi and Anbar have long been neglected by successive Iraqi governments. The province was always a stronghold for powerful Sunni tribes, and Baghdad struggled to control it even under Saddam Hussein. Over the past decade, Iraq's Shiite-led government has stacked the western defenses of Baghdad and Karbala specifically to guard against the perceived threat of attack from Anbar. At the same time, the almost complete absence of Shiite citizens in the province has given the federal government little direct stake in securing it or protecting its citizens. As a result, Baghdad has tinkered with Anbar politics like a neighboring state, sometimes providing economic and military aid but more often manipulating security appointments and meddling in local power struggles. It was American forces rather than the Iraqi government that ensured Anbar received the attention it deserved in 2006-2007.

If there is a silver lining to Ramadi's fall, it is that Anbar's security has emerged as the clear priority for Baghdad and its international allies. This was not the case for much of the past year, when opinions differed over whether Anbar or Mosul should be the focus. Mosul won out for a while: last October, for example, Moslawi candidate Khalid al-Obeidi was chosen over an Anbari alternative as Iraq's new defense minister. And as recently as February, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was describing the ISIS threat in Anbar as "contained."

Since then, however, Abadi has gradually moved away from that position and begun emphasizing Anbar over Mosul as the focus of the government's next major offensive. The fall of Ramadi is the nail in the coffin for the rush to retake Mosul and marks the ascendance of the "Anbar first" model. This may ultimately be a positive development. As long as counteroffensive operations are mounted rapidly and surefootedly, ISIS will not be able to consolidate control of Ramadi as it did when left unchecked in Fallujah, Tikrit, and Mosul. Government forces still hold nearby bases such as Habbaniya (twenty miles east of Ramadi), and larger units are only eighty miles away in Baghdad.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**S**hocks to the system are often required to bring about positive change in Iraq. If Ramadi's fall opens up room for fresh options and intensified international support, it may ultimately shorten the war against ISIS. The U.S.-led coalition and Baghdad now have an opportunity to adjust the campaign in important ways:

*Commit resources to Anbar.* The Iraqi government needs to put ISIS on the defensive in eastern Anbar before Ramadan begins in mid-June, when the terrorist movement will no doubt try to surge attacks against Shiite religious and civilian targets in Baghdad and the shrine city of Karbala. Federal Police forces from the capital area have already been committed -- a welcome step after many months of Baghdad husbanding its units and refusing to reinforce the main combat theatres to the north and west. Seventeen relatively intact army brigades and brigade-size Federal Police units (or roughly one-fifth of Iraq's total combat brigades) remain in Baghdad city. If the government draws carefully on some of these experienced units and new forces being raised, it will have the manpower required to retake Ramadi while continuing its active battles in northern Salah a-Din province (Bayji and Hamrin).

*Partner Sunni paramilitaries with ISF.* New al-Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Units) should be quickly raised among Anbar's Sunni tribes, provided with small arms and body armor, and closely partnered with existing ISF and Shiite Hashd units in combined formations -- much as Emergency Police battalions were often embedded with Iraqi army brigades in the past. Sunni tribal groups simply will not be able to operate independently against armored ISIS suicide truck bombs without antitank capabilities, and the quickest and least controversial way to protect them is by embedding them in existing units. This is more achievable than it may sound: the lesson of the past two years is that

Shiite-dominated forces can work successfully in Anbar when they behave sensitively toward the local population. Southern army units made the mistake of excessively displaying Shiite flags on their vehicles when they first arrived in western Anbar in winter 2013, but they learned to stop this practice. Moreover, Shiite SWAT teams have been successfully operating in Ramadi since January 2014, while Shiite Hashd units have been serving in various Sunni Arab areas of Anbar at the request of desperate local tribes.

*Intensify U.S. combat advising.* To match Iraq's added commitment to Anbar and signal that the coalition recognizes the gravity of the moment, the United States and its partners will need to devote more airpower to the battle. Selective lower-level embedding of U.S. Special Forces in battalions and brigades may also be necessary to provide coordination and intelligence at key points in Anbar. This may require careful Iraqi deconfliction to maintain separation between U.S. forces and anti-Western, Iranian-backed elements of the Hashd.

*Focus on the rural belts, not just the city.* A key lesson from the past year is that regaining firm control of towns from ISIS requires securing the rural belts surrounding them. Accordingly, U.S. advisors should ensure that Baghdad is allocating sufficient forces to Ramadi's northern, southern, and eastern suburbs; otherwise, a cosmetic retaking of the city center may leave open the possibility of another ISIS return.

## CONCLUSION

If Iraq and its international partners can grasp the nettle in Ramadi, the battle could provide valuable experience in complex, cross-sectarian coalition warfare. Forging disparate forces -- army, police, tribal, Hashd, and international -- into one team will challenge the commitment of the Iraqi government, local allies, the United States, and Iran. A successful coalition effort at Ramadi would prepare the anti-ISIS alliance for recapturing Mosul in 2016, restoring confidence and interest in that prospect. Perhaps most important, Iraqi leadership will be key -- the U.S.-led coalition cannot want a victory in Ramadi more than the various Iraqi constituencies want it themselves.

*Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute and has worked extensively with local military and security agencies throughout Iraq.* ❖

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