

The ISIL's Stand in the Ramadi-Falluja Corridor

By Michael Knights

SINCE DECEMBER 30, 2013, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has sought to carve out an area of control in the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Falluja, as well as in the Euphrates River delta between these urban areas. These locations are replete with symbolic and strategic significance for the ISIL. The movement's forerunner, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI),¹ fought in the iconic twin battles for Falluja in March and November 2004, an event that fanned the flames of Iraq's Sunni insurgency for years afterwards. In late 2006, Anbar tribes turned decisively against AQI and its affiliates in the provincial capital of Ramadi, beginning the movement's near-fatal deterioration.² These cities and their outlying rural satellites continue to be key terrain: the Ramadi-Falluja corridor is just 22 miles from the capital's international airport and sits astride the country's main trucking highways to Jordan and Syria. Iraqi security forces have been excluded from Falluja—a city with a population of more than 300,000 on Baghdad's doorstep—for nearly five months.

This article recounts how the ISIL spread into Ramadi and Falluja, why it has failed to secure control of Ramadi, and the conditions that have led to its present control of Falluja. It finds that while the ISIL's activities in the Ramadi-Falluja corridor are

concerning, the extent of the movement's real control of the area is debatable. Furthermore, the ISIL may have overreached by committing itself to the defense of terrain, particularly in urban areas so close to the Iraqi government's logistical bases around Baghdad. If current trends continue, the ISIL's gambit in the Ramadi-Falluja corridor could bring a strategic reversal for the movement within the Iraqi theater.

Opening Moves

Throughout 2013, the Iraqi government had chafed at the existence of two "Arab Spring"-style Sunni Arab protest sites in Ramadi and Falluja.³ On December 28, 2013, the influential Iraqi cleric `Abd al-Malik al-Sa`di issued a statement from Jordan calling on Sunnis to defend the protest camp, which government forces were massing against.⁴ Armed tribal forces were fully mobilized by December 30, when Iraqi forces suspended local cellphone and internet communications and began to bulldoze the Ramadi and Falluja protest sites. Al-Sa`di called on security force members to defect and for all Sunnis to rise up.⁵ Tribal forces in northern Ramadi repelled Iraqi Army 1st division troops from the sit-in square. Tribal fighters also routed newly-arrived Emergency Response Brigade forces from various police stations in Ramadi city.⁶ The arrival of these predominately Shi`a forces from the southern city of Kut stoked tensions and contributed to the tribal backlash.⁷ To restore calm,

1 There has never been an organization with the name "al-Qa`ida in Iraq." This name, however, has referred to the fighters in al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad, Tanzim al-Qa`ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin, Hilf al-Muttaybin, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and now finally the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). During the first Falluja battle, these fighters fought under the name al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad, under the command of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi then declared his *bay`a* (oath) to Usama bin Ladin, and Bin Ladin accepted it in October 2004. At that point, the organization's name was changed to Tanzim al-Qa`ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn. This article refers to all these fighters as AQI.

2 For a good collection of first-hand Iraqi accounts of the tribal "awakening" in Anbar, see Gary Montgomery and Timothy McWilliams eds., *Al-Anbar Awakening Volume II: Iraqi Perspectives, From Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2009).

3 The Ramadi "sit-in" site is called the "Pride & Dignity Square" and is located north of Ramadi city at a major intersection on Highway 11. The Falluja site is immediately east of Falluja city on Highway 11.

4 On the same night, Iraqi special forces tried to enforce an arrest warrant in Ramadi on `Ali al-`Alwani, the brother of well-known Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) parliamentarian Ahmad al-`Alwani. When tribal bodyguards sought to resist, a firefight resulted in the death of `Ali al-`Alwani and his sister, as well as the arrest of MP Ahmad al-`Alwani. For a full account of the events leading up to and following December 28, 2013, see "Maliki Targets Ramadi Protest Site," *Inside Iraqi Politics*, January 8, 2014, pp. 2-8.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.

6 Personal interview, Iraqi National Intelligence Service official, May 9, 2014.

7 Personal interview, Jaber al-Jaberi, Iraqi MP and Falluja negotiator, Baghdad, March 11, 2014. The use of southern Shi`a SWAT teams in northern Sunni areas is a common cause of localized tensions. On April 23, 2013, southern SWAT teams killed more than 50 protes-

the Ramadi-based Anbar provincial council negotiated a withdrawal of Iraqi Army and Emergency Response Brigade forces from Ramadi on December 31.⁸ Entering Ramadi from multiple directions on January 1, 2014, ISIL fighters opportunistically exploited the breakdown of government control to ransack police stations in the city.⁹

The dynamic was markedly different in Falluja where (even before the crisis) Iraqi Army forces were normally only located on the outer edges of the city. From the night of December 30, armed locals also came to the streets, massing at the main Falluja protest site (on the highway east of the urban center), appearing to answer earlier calls by `Abd al-Malik al-Sa`di and Grand Mufti Sheikh Rafi` al-Rifa`i to block the road to prevent reinforcements from reaching Ramadi and western Anbar.¹⁰ Local residents also fortified the entry checkpoints to the city to exclude Iraqi government forces from entering Falluja.¹¹ After some days of inconclusive skirmishing around the edges of Falluja city, Iraqi government forces settled down for a prolonged siege. Inside the city, ISIL convoys paraded in Falluja's streets, ransacking local police stations and using megaphones to call on residents to repent and pledge allegiance.¹² The ISIL unilaterally declared Falluja an Islamic state at Friday prayers on January 3, 2014.¹³

tors at the Hawija protest site near Kirkuk. On March 23, 2014, Shi'a SWAT killed a further 27 civilians at Buhriz, Diyala Province. See Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Implications of the Hawija 'Massacre' and Kirkuk Protest Movement," *Today's Zaman*, May 12, 2013. Also see Ghaith `Abdul-Ahad, "Iraq Election Holds Little Hope of Change for Town Scarred by Decade of War," *Guardian*, April 29, 2014.

8 Personal interview, Iraqi National Intelligence Service official, May 9, 2014.

9 "Anbar: The Road to Catastrophe," *Inside Iraqi Politics*, January 8, 2014, p. 6.

10 "Baghdad Adrift as Deadlock Continues," *Inside Iraqi Politics*, March 6, 2014, p. 3.

11 The International Crisis Group's well-sourced account described non-ISIL groups of armed residents taking control of the entry checkpoints. See "Falluja's Faustian Bargain," International Crisis Group, April 28, 2014, p. 13, fn 32.

12 Ahmed Ali, "Iraq Update #42: Al-Qaeda in Iraq Patrols in Fallujah," Institute for the Study of War, January 5, 2014.

13 Ibid.

The ISIL in Ramadi

In Ramadi, the provincial government and key tribal groupings were loosely aligned with the government against the ISIL until the government arrest and military operations of December 28-30, 2013. Almost immediately after the late December clashes, the government and most of Ramadi's tribes once again made common cause against the ISIL, seemingly in reaction to the ISIL's alarming expansion into Ramadi city neighborhoods.¹⁴ The ISIL's northern effort failed in January 2014. The ISIL fighters from the Western Euphrates River Valley towns and the Western Desert reinforced the ISIL in the rural areas north of Ramadi such as Abu Sha`ban and `Ali Jassim, and to the `Alwan and Abu Fahad tribal areas to the northeast of Ramadi.¹⁵ By the end of January, locally-recruited police paramilitaries, tribal fighters and the military pacified the urban areas of Ramadi north of the Euphrates collectively known as Abu Faraj or Jazira.¹⁶

The situation in southern Ramadi evolved very differently, with the ISIL mounting a costly multi-month effort to dominate the southern neighborhoods of al-Mal`ab, Fursan, Hayy al-Dhubat

14 This is hardly surprising: key Ramadi tribal leaders such as Shaykh Ahmad al-Rishawi (Ahmad Abu Risha) risked everything to defeat the terrorist movement in Ramadi in 2006-2007. The return of the ISIL to Ramadi's streets is inimical to almost all of Ramadi's shaykhs. Key provincial leaders including Governor Ahmad Khalaf al-Dhiyabi and Provincial Council Chairman Sabah al-Halbusi worked to rapidly soothe tensions between the Iraqi government and most of the local tribes, excepting elements of Ahmad al-`Alwan's clan and Shaykh `Ali Hatem Sulayman's Military Command of Anbar Tribal Revolutionaries—both marginal military forces. See "Falluja's Faustian Bargain," p. 13, fn 29; "Anbar: Security Forces Fight Insurgency to a Standstill," *Inside Iraqi Politics*, April 19, 2014, pp. 7-8.

15 Personal interview, Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 12, 2014.

16 Jazira, a block of neighborhoods north of the Euphrates and south of Highway 11, is not to be confused with the desert area of the same name abutting Syria. The westerly Jazira and easterly Aetha areas make up the Abu Faraj area of Ramadi, which includes Ramadi's protest site on Highway 11. During 2013, this area usually suffered 3-4 attacks per month according to The Washington Institute's Iraq violence database. With the exception of a spike of 24 attacks in January 2014, the average returned to four attacks per month in February-April 2014.

and al-Hawz.¹⁷ This effort was launched from al-Humayra and Albu Jabr, a belt of rural suburbs south of the train line that marks Ramadi city's southern edge. The area is physically linked to similar ISIL "support zones" south of Falluja and stretching down to the Jurf as-Sakhar area in northern Babil Province. The ISIL has been strident in its defense of its southern launch-

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pads. In al-Humayra, for example, an Iraqi Army probe was decimated on April 20, 2014, by wire-guided anti-tank missiles, with the loss of an entire mixed platoon of T-62 tanks and MTLB armored vehicles.¹⁸ ISIL forces have used titanium-coated, armor-piercing ammunition in Dragonov-model rifles to shoot out the engine blocks on large numbers of Iraqi Hummers in an apparent effort to reduce Iraqi Security Force (ISF) mobility.¹⁹ When security forces began searches for ISIL workshops in late March 2014, a car bomb damaged the bridge linking Ramadi city to the al-Ta`mim suburb, the historic site for ISIL bombmaking workshops in Ramadi.²⁰

17 A useful Radio Free Iraq tracker for Ramadi incidents can be found at www.anbardaily.blogspot.com.

18 Personal interview, Omar Nidawi, Iraq analyst, Washington, D.C., May 21, 2014. See the useful stream of Tweeted imagery and updates from @MemlikPasha, "#ISIS ambushed a large ISF armored column in the al-Humayra area in the southeastern outskirts of Ar Ramadi," April 21, 2014, available at www.twitsy.com/i/7pun9e#1pISWIZCp6MaRPzW.99.

19 Personal interview, U.S. government official, May 20, 2014.

20 Personal interview, Iraqi National Security Advisory official, May 6, 2014. AQI historically hid car bomb workshops in the mechanics areas of al-Ta`mim, an industrial and worker suburb on the west side of the canal, southwest of the city. The ISIL appears to use the same area for car bomb fabrication today. Before the current

The determination of the ISIL's efforts to destabilize southern Ramadi are quite exceptional, even by the violent standards of today's Iraq. Prior to the late summer of 2013, the ISIL conducted around eight to ten attacks per month in Ramadi's urban center south of the Euphrates.²¹ This increased to an average of 20 attacks per month from September-December 2013, reflecting an intensification of attacks on police forces and tribal leaders.²² From January-April 2014, the average number of monthly attacks surged to 44 in the southern Ramadi neighborhoods.²³ The destructiveness of the attacks also increased, causing significant material damage and major outflows of internally displaced persons. In 2013, there was an average of one attempted mass casualty attack in Ramadi per month: in the first four months of 2014, the monthly average increased to 9.25.²⁴ In April 2014, the ISIL launched 13 attempted suicide vest attacks and six attempted suicide car bombings in southern Ramadi.²⁵

The ISIL has invested significant numbers of suicide militants to keep the fight active in Ramadi,²⁶ despite the low probability that the ISIL will eventually control the city. Ramadi city was the heart of the tribal "awakening" in Iraq and the ISIL appears determined to keep fighting in this area. It has succeeded, in so far as ongoing violence is a distraction to the government and prolongs the sense that the city is contested. Yet Ramadi is essentially under government control, albeit with a significant "commuter insurgency"²⁷

crisis, Iraqi security forces discovered a car bomb factory in al-Ta'mim on September 1, 2013, that contained three tons of ammonium nitrate, 50 kilograms of C4 and large stores of specialized equipment to make car bombs.

²¹ These figures are derived from The Washington Institute's Iraq violence dataset.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. The ISIL used such weapons to try to penetrate the Anbar Operations Center and the compound of Shaykh Ahmed Abu Risha. In another case, a captured Iraqi Army Hummer was used to conceal a car bomb.

²⁶ Of 34 attempted suicide attacks in eastern Anbar in January-April 2014, 25 were in Ramadi city, according to The Washington Institute's Iraq violence dataset.

²⁷ The "commuter insurgency" refers to an urban fight in which insurgents travel in each day, like suburban commuters, from support zones on the outskirts. Coined

still able to penetrate the city's southern flank and repeatedly draw the government into destructive clearance operations. This is arguably a limited payoff for a significant investment of ISIL effort and presumably considerable losses as well. If the ISIL downgrades its effort or loses its southern Ramadi support zone, the government and its tribal allies may be able to claim a partial victory.

The ISIL's Stand in Falluja

The background to the ISIL's creeping takeover of Falluja is rooted in the city's isolated status within Anbar Province. Falluja is an insular town renowned for its rebelliousness and links to Salafism.²⁸ The tribal uprising that gathered momentum in Ramadi never achieved the same result in Falluja, and al-Qa'ida affiliates have enjoyed far greater ongoing freedom of movement in Falluja, including at the city's protest camps.²⁹ Throughout 2013, the ISIL sought to expand its profile inside Falluja city. Militant attacks claimed by the ISIL in Falluja city rose from an average of 16 per month in the first quarter of 2013 to 31 in the last quarter of that year, with an apex of 39 incidents in December 2013.³⁰ The ISIL's preferred tactics in Falluja throughout the year were drive-by shootings, under-vehicle bombings and car bombings of houses belonging to local leaders and police forces. The ISIL also targeted electrical generator operators, shopkeepers and clerics in a slow-building campaign of fundraising and influence-building.³¹

Throughout 2013, the ISIL also strengthened its hold on the southern neighborhoods and southern rural outskirts of Falluja city. The Euphrates River communities south of Falluja

by U.S. forces in Iraq, the concept is explained further in David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 142.

²⁸ For discussions of Falluja's reputation for rebellion and piety, see John R. Ballard, *Fighting for Fallujah: A New Dawn for Iraq* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), pp. 2-5. Also see "Falluja: Embattled City of Mosques and Minarets," BBC, January 9, 2014.

²⁹ Marisa Sullivan, Stephen Wicken, and Sam Wyer, "Iraq Update 2013 #4, Fallujah Protests Turn Violent," Institute for the Study of War, January 25, 2013.

³⁰ All insights in this paragraph are drawn from The Washington Institute's Iraq violence dataset.

³¹ Ibid.

such as al-N`imiya and `Amiriy were important AQI support zones in 2006 until the local Albu `Issa tribes sought U.S. support to break al-Qa'ida's stranglehold.³² Since then, the ISIL has gradually clawed its way back into these areas. An ISIL suicide bomber killed the key anti-ISIL tribal leader, Shaykh `Aifan al-`Issawi, in January 2013.³³ The consolidation in 2013 of the ISIL's "Wilayat al-Janub" in the Jurf as-Sakhar area of northern Babil has placed another contiguous support zone to the southeast.³⁴ By October 19, 2013, the ISIL was confident enough to hold a 50 vehicle rally in daylight in the southern Falluja mechanics area of al-Shuhada', a historical car bomb manufacturing hub.³⁵ An ISIL sniper killed Falluja's mayor, `Adnan Hussein al-Dulaymi, in al-Shuhada' on November 13, 2013.³⁶

One of the most interesting aspects of the Falluja stand-off in 2014 has been the state of relations between the ISIL and other insurgent factions within the city.³⁷ On the surface, the groups have cooperated, with non-ISIL forces manning many of the city's perimeter defenses and with the ISIL providing military support and advice. The relationship, however, is more complex: Fallujans never rejected al-Qa'ida and its spin-offs to the extent that Ramadi's tribes did. Even so, memories of the

³² For a detailed account of this period and these geographies, see Bill Ardolino, *Fallujah Awakens: Marines, Sheikhs, and the Battle Against al Qaeda* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013). Also see Montgomery and McWilliams eds., pp. 84-105.

³³ Bill Ardolino, "Al Qaeda Claims Assassination of MP Aifan Sadoun," *The Long War Journal*, January 20, 2013.

³⁴ Personal interview, Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 12, 2014.

³⁵ Personal interview, Iraqi National Security Advisory official, May 6, 2014.

³⁶ "Fallujah Mayor Assassinated While Anbar Council Tries To Replace Provincial Police Chief," Musings on Iraq blog, November 14, 2013.

³⁷ This relationship is explored in some depth throughout "Falluja's Faustian Bargain." Among a dizzying array of resurrected nationalist and Salafist insurgent factions in Falluja's military council, the key non-ISIL group appears to be Hamas al-Iraq. All others appear to have limited military clout in Falluja. Further insight into the tactical formation of non-ISIL company-sized militias within Falluja is given in Matt Bradley and Ali Nabhan, "Iraqi Officer Takes Dark Turn to al Qaeda: Alliance Against Maliki Government Develops After Armed Militants Overtook Fallujah," *Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 2014.

destruction that al-Qa`ida brought upon the city in 2004 are still fresh. There is also considerable bitterness between former AQI fighters and Fallujans who cooperated with the government, notably tribal groups like the Albu`Issa and the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) with its militant wing in Falluja, Hamas al-Iraq.³⁸ Initially, the ISIL struck a

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conciliatory note, promising not to attack the locally-recruited police forces and merely chiding Fallujans for backing the government against AQI from 2007 onwards.³⁹ Very quickly, however, the ISIL escalated its contest with the IIP and Hamas al-Iraq. In early January 2014, most of the Falluja police force ceased wearing uniforms and police stations associated with former Hamas al-Iraq members were abandoned to ISIL looting.⁴⁰ From January 3 onwards, ISIL patrols cruised Falluja city in captured police vehicles using megaphones to call policemen to repent.⁴¹ The ISIL reacted aggressively when the Iraqi government and Ramadi shaykhs negotiated the appointment of

38 One example of the blood feud between the ISIL and local shaykhs was the aforementioned revenge assassination of Shaykh `Aifan al-`Issawi, which came over seven years after he turned on AQI. In January 2014, Shaykh Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, the ISIL's spokesman, claimed that the ISIL would “award whoever takes the head of the traitor, Ahmed Abu Risha.” See Ahmed Ali, “Iraq Update #5: ‘The Time to Harvest is Coming’ – ISIS Statement,” Institute for the Study of War, January 8, 2014.

39 Since the start of 2014, the ISIL has pushed the message in Falluja that “we warned you when you joined the Sahwa and it turned out just as we predicted. So join us in making a Sunni region.” See personal interview, Jaber al-Jaberi, Iraqi MP and Falluja negotiator, Baghdad, March 11, 2014.

40 Ahmed Ali, “Iraq Update #42: Al-Qaeda in Iraq Patrols in Fallujah,” Institute for the Study of War, January 5, 2014.

41 Ibid.

a new mayor and police chief for Falluja on January 12:⁴² throughout the latter half of January, the ISIL detained and harassed the new mayor, damaged the mayor's office with multiple improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and bombed the new police chief's home.⁴³

Although the ISIL agreed not to hold rallies or try to govern the city when it joined the Falluja Military Council⁴⁴ on February 8, 2014, the movement has consistently overstepped the reported restrictions placed upon it by other Fallujan rebels.⁴⁵ For example, on March 20, the ISIL held a major rally in Falluja's government center that included ISIL flags carried on captured police vehicles and Iraqi Army Hummers.⁴⁶ In the April 24-30 period, the ISIL undertook house demolitions against the Falluja homes of three Anbar provincial council members and one member of parliament.⁴⁷ National elections proved impossible to hold in Falluja on April 30.⁴⁸ The ISIL has also sought to take over distribution of critical supplies including food and cooking gas bottles.⁴⁹ At the start of May, the Falluja Military Council publicly complained that the ISIL was disarming rival militias inside Falluja rather than focusing fully on the defense of the city against the common enemy, the Iraqi

42 The Ramadi-based provincial council sought to appoint Mohammed `Allawi al-`Issawi, a cousin of Ahmed Abu Risha, as the new police chief for Falluja. See “Falluja's Faustian Bargain,” p. 13.

43 “Falluja Mayor Assassinated,” Musings on Iraq blog, November 14, 2013.

44 “Anbar: Disunity Undermines Fight Against Insurgency,” *Inside Iraqi Politics*, February 18, 2014, p. 4. *Inside Iraqi Politics* lists the factions as “ISIS and eight other groups: al-Jaysh al-Islami, Jaysh Muhammad Brigades, Jaysh al-Murabitin, Asad-Allah al-Ghalib Brigades, Hamas al-Iraq, Faylaq Omar, Falluja Revolutionaries, and Sons of Fallujah. The council, which meets twice a week, has 15 members, some of whom are dignitaries or religious scholars rather than militia leaders.”

45 According to “Falluja's Faustian Bargain,” p. 15, the ISIL was “forbidden from imposing their views and promoting the imposition of Sharia (Islamic law), from targeting state officials or former sahwa members as well as their properties, and from raising al-Qaeda flags.”

46 All insights in this paragraph are drawn from The Washington Institute's Iraq violence dataset.

47 “Security In Iraq 2 Weeks Before National Elections,” Musings on Iraq blog, April 17, 2014.

48 Ibid.

49 Personal interview, Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 12, 2014.

government.⁵⁰ The tone of the council's complaints indicates that the ISIL is increasingly in charge within Falluja.⁵¹

The federal government was initially willing to contain the ISIL within Falluja rather than risk a political and military setback during the electoral and government formation processes. This option has been undermined by the porous cordon around Falluja city and by the ISIL's determination to launch strategic high-impact attacks toward Baghdad.

One theme touted by the ISIL has been a renewed battle of Baghdad, a city where the Sunni minority and its militias were roundly defeated and purged in many areas by Shi'a militias in 2006-2007. On January 19, 2014, ISIL *amir* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi urged fighters to “creep toward Baghdad,”⁵² a call that was later echoed on April 12 in a communiqué to slip “as soft as fog” into Baghdad.⁵³ With surprising mobility, the ISIL appears to have moved forces from its Ramadi-Falluja corridor and the shores of Lake Tharthar to Baghdad's outskirts via Saqlawiya, Karma and Abu Ghurayb.⁵⁴ On March 31, the ISIL held a large parade in an outer suburb of Abu Ghurayb comprising between 70-100 vehicles, including Iraqi Army Hummers and even an M113 tracked armored personnel carrier.⁵⁵ On April 9, the U.S. government warned about a threat to Baghdad International Airport, adjacent to Abu Ghurayb.⁵⁶

50 The Falluja Military Council accused the ISIL of “attacking the Council and factions stationed on the frontlines including the kidnapping of a large number of them and confiscation of their weapons.” See “Fallujah, The Military Council' calls 'Daash' to Stop his Actions,” Shafaq News, May 2, 2014.

51 The author would like to thank the Institute for the Study of War team led by Ahmed Ali for its provision of data on ISIL-military council disputes in late April and early May 2014.

52 “ISIL Chief Urges Fighters to ‘Creep Toward Baghdad,’” *Daily Star*, January 19, 2014.

53 See tweeted data on this issue from journalist @Danieleraineri at <http://pic.twitter.com/JqJcdrtS4U>.

54 Personal interview, Aymenn al-Tamimi, May 12, 2014.

55 Bill Roggio, “ISIS Parades on Outskirts of Baghdad,” *The Long War Journal*, April 1, 2014.

56 “Emergency Message for the U.S. Community in Iraq: Heightened Risk of Violence on and Around 9 April,” U.S. Embassy Baghdad, April 8, 2014.

Using a different approach, the ISIL also manipulated its on-off control of the regulating dams downstream of Falluja to flood the Euphrates delta from April 6 onwards, causing extensive displacement of rural residents and threatening to flood metropolitan Baghdad.⁵⁷ These gambits, alongside the well-publicized execution of Iraqi special forces, appear to have been designed to lure the Iraqi military into a hasty assault on Falluja, a potential spark for a wider Sunni Arab uprising against the government.⁵⁸ With Iraqi forces tightening the siege and clearing Falluja's rural outskirts on all sides during May 2014, the ISIL may have succeeded in speeding up the government's plans for Falluja.

Conclusion

The ISIL, and its predecessor the ISI, has been remarkably successful in recovering its position in Iraq since 2011,⁵⁹ yet the movement's Iraqi successes cannot yet compare to its development of a secure capital city in al-Raqqa, Syria. Iraq is still a financial powerhouse for the ISIL, particularly its third-largest city, Mosul, but the ISIL's political center of gravity is undoubtedly in Syria. The ISIL's ambitions in the Ramadi-Falluja corridor represent a potential shift in this dynamic, with the movement seeking to establish long-term control over liberated zones at the heart of Iraq. If successful, the development of a defensible ISIL caliphate just outside Baghdad would be a historic achievement on par with anything the movement has achieved in Syria. Such success would be doubly sweet, taking place on iconic terrain where the ISIL's predecessors experienced great success

in 2004 and crushing defeat in 2006-2007.⁶⁰

This intoxicating vision comes with a warning: the ISIL has now committed itself to a battle for terrain, and the fight is taking place at a point where the Iraqi military can easily concentrate and supply its forces and where local allies may be willing to enable the government's offensive. At the present time, there are reportedly 13 Iraqi military brigades with extensive artillery and air support deployed in the Ramadi-Falluja corridor.⁶¹ Baghdad International Airport provides a secure resupply route for the significant U.S. military aid being provided to Iraq's forces. The ISIL may have placed itself on an anvil. If the hammer falls and the government mismanages its offensive, causing significant civilian casualties or failing to evict the ISIL, the militant group will score an important victory. Yet the ISIL now faces the same strategic puzzle as forerunners such as AQI: it needs to either control territory or it may begin to fade away in the face of local pushback. If the government can pacify Ramadi and Falluja, particularly with local tribes in the lead, then the ISIL could experience a very public strategic setback. For the ISIL project in Iraq, the Ramadi-Falluja conflict could be a fulcrum point.

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⁵⁷ "Iraq Insurgents Turn Seized Dam into Weapon," *Daily Star*, April 12, 2014.

⁵⁸ On January 20, 2014, the ISIL video-recorded the executions of four captured Iraqi SWAT soldiers near Ramadi. See "Execution of SWAT Forces Furthers Crimes Against Humanity," Human Rights Watch, February 5, 2014. In 2004, the first assault on Falluja was prompted by the ambush, slaying and public dismemberment of Blackwater private security guards in the city. The ISIL may have been seeking an echo of this scenario, which ended with a propaganda victory for AQI when the hasty offensive was suspended.

⁵⁹ For an early review of the ISI's recovery in Iraq from 2011 onwards, see Michael Knights, "Back with a Vengeance: Al-Qaeda in Iraq Rebounds," IHS Defense, Security & Risk Consulting, February 24, 2012.

⁶⁰ ISIL spokesman Abu Muhammad al-`Adnani made a statement on Falluja in April 2014 in which he claimed: "We have returned to the cities, and controlled the ground, and we will be killed a thousand times before we think of going back. In the cities and provinces that are under our control, on top of them Falluja...there will be no place in it for the secularists. For Falluja is Falluja of the Mujahidin and Anbar is Anbar of the Mujahidin." See Memlik Pasha, "ISIS Insurgents Have Almost Surrounded Baghdad," *Vice*, April 29, 2014.

⁶¹ See DJ Elliot, "Iraq Order of Battle," Montrose Toast blog, available at www.home.comcast.net/~djyae/site/?/page/Iraq_Order_of_Battle.