

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نياشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.macon.com/2015/03/12/3635114/shiite-victory-in-tikrit-would.html>

Shiite victory in Tikrit would cement Iran's influence in Iraq

By Mitchell Prothero

March 12, 2015



Smoke rises after clashes at the Qadisiyah neighborhood of Tikrit, 80 miles north of Baghdad, Iraq, March 12, 2015. The forces that appeared Thursday to have cornered the last Islamic State fighters in central Tikrit are dominated by Iranian military advisers. The offensive itself is led by Iran's most influential general, Qassem Suleimani, who's been a thorn in American efforts to pacify Iraq since the early days of the U.S. occupation.

Iraqi security forces and Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim militias appeared Thursday to be on the verge of victory in a two-week effort to recapture Saddam Hussein's hometown from the Islamic State, which has held the symbolically important city since June.

But the seemingly certain triumph of a force with little Sunni Muslim participation in the center of Iraq's Sunni heartland has raised another troubling issue: the extension of Iran's influence in a country where the Shiite Muslim neighbor is already the most significant outside player.

The forces that appeared Thursday to have cornered the last Islamic State fighters in central Tikrit are dominated by Iranian military advisers. The Iraqi Shiite militias are all Iranian trained. And the offensive itself is being directed on the ground by Iran's most influential general, Qassem Suleimani, who's been a thorn in American efforts to pacify Iraq since the early days of the U.S. occupation of this country.

To add to American unease, there are credible reports that Iranian troops and fighters from Lebanon's Hezbollah movement are participating in the Tikrit operation, and other reports that the Shiite militias and even U.S.-trained Iraqi troops have engaged in retaliatory attacks against Sunni residents. Those reports have convinced many Sunnis that the long-frayed relationship between Iraq's Sunni and Shiite sects is now completely broken.

"It's a Persian-led invasion of the Sunni triangle," said one prominent leader of a Sunni tribe who has fled both the central government and the Islamic State for the safety of the Kurdish capital of Irbil. "We see Iranian troops and generals leading the fighting and the only Iraqi army units – which once represented all Iraqis – now only represent the Shiite parties and their Iranian leadership."

He asked not to be identified because of fears he could be targeted by both sides of the increasingly bitter conflict.

"Look around Baghdad now and what do you see?" he asked rhetorically. "Posters dedicated to militia leaders, Iranian generals and even Khamenei," referring to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"Daash is a poison to all Muslims, but the Persians have become a cancer to Iraq," he said, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State. Then, referring to the eight-year-long war Iraq under Saddam fought against Iran in the 1980s, he summed up: "What they could not do in the 1980s they have done now with American help, which is enslave Iraq."

The tribal leader pointed out that tens of thousands of Sunnis have offered to help the central government in Baghdad fight the Islamic State, but that the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a Shiite, has rejected requests for arms from the Sunni tribes.

Even the populist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose Mahdi Army battled Americans troops throughout the U.S. occupation, has refused to allow his militia to join the Tikrit operation because of what he claims is a constant pattern of innocent Sunnis being murdered or abused by

other Shiite militias and the security forces. He's been a vocal advocate for a government investigation into allegations of abuse.

But in Iraq's tribal culture, the abuses of the Islamic State, most famously with the execution in Tikrit of at least 1,000 Shiite air force cadets and soldiers, are likely to make such an investigation impossible. The past becomes prologue as partisans recall events dating back decades, including the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War, when Shiites rose up after U.S. troops expelled Iraq's army from Kuwait, only to discover the Americans unwilling to join their assault on Saddam.

"Blood for blood," said Abu Barazan, a Sunni from Tikrit who fled the fighting for the safety of Irbil last month. "Saddam crushed the Shiites in 1991, so when the Americans crushed Saddam it was the Shiites' turn to take Baghdad. And of course they did it with Iran's help then as they do with Iran's help today. Any Sunni support for the Islamic State was revenge for the behavior of the Shiites towards the Sunnis after the Americans came, and now we see the Shiite taking their revenge."

"When the Americans came, not all of us, even in Tikrit, were unhappy Saddam was removed, but we didn't know they'd hand us over to Iran when they did come," he added.

Inside Tikrit itself, the operation appeared to be slowly drawing to a conclusion, although the lack of any real Sunni tribal support is likely to make it difficult for the Shiite militias to establish true authority over an area that, like much of the Middle East, tends to prefer to be policed by locals well known to the community.

Col. Salah al-Obeidi, a special operations commander in the Salahuddin Operations Center that oversees the Tikrit operation, said in an interview that Iraqi forces had pushed into the city center from the south and the west, trapping the remnants of the Islamic State inside the city against the Tigris River. Still, he said, the risk from roadside bombs, snipers and suicide bombers had slowed their progress.

The United States has remained on the sidelines. Not a single American plane has flown a combat mission in support of the push, though the Iraqi air force has flown more than 1,300 helicopter gunship and air-support missions in the last two weeks, al-Obeidi said. He said recently acquired Russian-made Mi-35 attack helicopters had made a tremendous difference in the fighting.