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The noose around ISIS's neck is slowly getting tighter

By Paul Iddon

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The Iraqi Army and its Shiite militia allies have reported significant progress in the nearly six-month old offensive on Anbar Province's provincial capital Ramadi. ISIS infamously overran that urban center last May much to the embarrassment of Baghdad, which is still trying to recuperate from its major territorial losses to that group in 2014 to the Islamic State's (ISIS) blitz in Mosul.

In Anbar another operation is transpiring simultaneously. It is aimed at clearing ISIS out of Fallujah and it is a Shiite militia effort. The leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi Al-Amiri, dismissed out of hand the notion, when these offensives began, that ISIS would be kicked out of these urban centers in a swift assault. Instead, he asserted, it would be a long drawn out effort aimed at cutting off their supply lines, encircling them and then slowly moving, increasing pressure and retaking small chunks of territory in an incremental fashion. This coincides with other slow advances against that terror group elsewhere in both Iraq and Syria. When evaluated together we see a clear pattern which indicates that ISIS is indeed being encircled and slowly strangled.

In the wake of the Kurdish Peshmerga's success against ISIS in Shingal (Sinjar) last month – which helped sever some of ISIS's main supply routes in that area – the Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG) have also been cutting off the group by continuing south along Syria's

eastern border with Iraq in the Deir ez-Zor Province, which is almost completely occupied by ISIS, aside from a small contingent of Syrian Army soldiers who have retained hold over some parts of the provincial capital of the same name. This is a smart strategy. Instead of smashing straight through ISIS's heavily-fortified, well-established dug-in positions in their Raqqa stronghold the YPG are coming at them from different sides, retaking ground until they have Raqqa surrounded and can even apply further pressure until they can successfully uproot the group from there.

To make matters worse for ISIS there are indications that the Russians are hoping to support a Syrian ground offensive aimed at wresting control of the ancient Palmyra site back from ISIS's control. Russian warplanes strafed ISIS positions around the site earlier this month.

Whether this will materialize into something larger has yet to be seen (Syria's Army is still stretched and more generally is a mere shadow of its former 300,000-strong self). Russia doubtlessly wants to showcase itself as being more effective at fighting ISIS than the U.S.-led coalition and Syria wants to reverse its humiliating loss at that site last May -- when captured Syrian forces were executed en masse by young teenagers in the ancient amphitheater along with the humiliating defeat the Syrian military suffered earlier, in August 2014 at al-Tabqa Air Base.

The rapid fall stunned many in the Syrian establishment who thought that base could hold its own. Its fall saw triumphant ISIS celebrations and was the moment when they consolidated their control over all of the Syrian province of Raqqa. Syria would also like to reinforce, if it could, its aforementioned outpost in Deir ez-Zor in order to retain, and possibly expand, that far-flung foothold.

In both Iraq and Syria Kurdish forces have played a major role in cutting off ISIS's ability to travel between Mosul and Raqqa and are gradually closing in on those cities. The Peshmerga can presently start surrounding Mosul on three sides -- from the north; east and west -- and the YPG are attaining a position which may soon enable them too to pressure Raqqa from more than one direction. In Iraq if ISIS in Anbar is neutralized Baghdad will likely want to undertake an offensive from the south against ISIS in Mosul which would then be completely surrounded and cut-off.

All of these ongoing events therefore suggest that the self-styled Islamic State is very slowly being encircled on nearly all sides and that the noose around its neck is gradually becoming tighter and tighter.