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Obama's war in Iraq and the third battle of Fallujah

By Thomas Gaist

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The American and Iraqi governments proclaimed the “full liberation” of the Iraqi city of Fallujah this week, bringing to an end, at least officially, the Third Battle of Fallujah.

“Fallujah has returned to the bosom of the country, and Mosul is the next battle,” Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi proclaimed Sunday, while touring the front dressed in the uniform of the Iraqi Counter Terror Services (CTS).

In a US Defense Department statement released Tuesday, Secretary Ashton Carter “congratulated Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the Iraqi people for their progress in freeing the city of Fallujah from the grip of ISIS.”

“It was really a heavy fight along the front line. Once they got through the hard-candy shell and into the chewy center, things went much more quickly,” US Defense Department spokesman Jeff Davis said, praising the US-backed Iraqi forces.

The triumphant celebrations by US and Iraqi officials, issued over the smoking ruins of a city that has become emblematic of the worst crimes of 21st century imperialism, stand in glaring contradiction to the nightmarish scenes on display in and around Fallujah. Months of siege and

bombardment, spearheaded by elite Iraqi death squads and backed by American air strikes, have produced yet another humanitarian catastrophe in Fallujah.

The joint US-Iraqi government assault on Fallujah, about 40 miles west of Baghdad and held by some 4,000 ISIS fighters, codenamed “Operation Breaking Terrorism,” was launched May 22, following a three-month siege. While Iraqi troops seized 11 villages on the outskirts of the city on the first day, and entered the city at the end of the first week, Fallujah’s city center was retaken only after more than a month of continuous fighting, supported by more than 100 US bombing missions.

Some 90,000 civilians remain trapped inside the city, according to the United Nations. More than 14,000 families have abandoned their homes and sought to flee during the past week alone. The flood of displaced has become “overwhelming” and is producing “total chaos” according to the Norwegian Refugee Council.

“A human catastrophe is unfolding in Fallujah. Families are caught in the crossfire with no safe way out,” the council reported.

Prior to this year’s assault, Fallujah was already shattered by US assaults in April and November 2004. During those operations, carried out as acts of collective punishment against the population in retaliation for the killing of four Blackwater mercenaries, US forces deployed illegal and highly toxic weapons including white phosphorus and depleted uranium, indiscriminately. As a result, Fallujah now sees record levels of birth defects, cancer, infant mortality and higher levels of radioactivity than those found after the atomic bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The re-saturation of Fallujah with ordinance, including IEDs and land mines, requires that the city be evacuated for a period of months before it is inhabitable again, UN representatives said. Numerous reports have already surfaced of atrocities and abuse by Iraqi government forces and sectarian militias. Iraqi forces have detained tens of thousands of civilians fleeing the city, including “boys over 12 years old,” supposedly to screen for ISIS fighters.

Hundreds of thousands of civilians were already displaced by the Ramadi offensive launched last November, which retook the central Iraqi city after an assault that dragged on for more than five months and left more than 60 percent of the city in rubble. The planned US-Iraqi offensive against Mosul is anticipated to displace an additional 500,000, who will join the more than 3.4 million Iraqis forced from their homes by violence since 2014.

Waged in the name of stabilizing the Baghdad government, it is already clear that the violent seizure of Fallujah has only intensified the sectarian divisions ripping apart Iraq. The political shockwaves of the Fallujah assault are fueling sectarian conflict between Sunni sectarian forces and the Abadi government. The storming of Fallujah itself was ordered amid mass demonstrations, organized by the Shia-based Sadr movement, that saw hundreds of protesters flood into the central government compound in Baghdad.

The Abadi government “faces an unprecedented challenge by Shiite and Sunni political blocs calling for the overhaul of Iraq’s political and security structure,” the *Wall Street Journal* noted Monday.

The appearance of top Iranian general Qassim Suleimani on the front lines in Fallujah, where the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have played a leading role, has prompted ferocious denunciations of alleged PMF abuses by Sunni leaders.

In a further omen of intensified sectarian violence, an Iraqi high court rejected Abadi’s plan to restructure the Baghdad cabinet along technocratic lines Tuesday. Abadi has pursued the cabinet reforms in an effort to dampen the influence of sectarian divisions within the central government, which currently disburses portfolios based on ethno-national criteria, in an effort to mediate between Sunni, Shia and Kurdish factions.

Since invading the country in 2003, Washington has relentlessly promoted and manipulated Iraq’s factional struggles in a strategy of divide-and-rule. US policies have been deliberately crafted to amplify the centrifugal tendencies within Iraq and advance the carve-up of the country by an array of military bands, as a means to exert leverage over the Baghdad government, which is subject to heavy Iranian influence.

Warning of “the need to control the population once conventional operations are over,” US colonel Steve Mansoor called for American and Iraqi forces to rule the country by employing the “lessons” derived from the 2003-2011 occupation.

“So the force on the ground should not disregard the lessons of the past 13 years,” Mansoor said, referring to the counterinsurgency waged by US forces against the Iraqi population since 2003.

The renewal of the war has itself been brought on by the catastrophic failure of the “lessons” hailed by Colonel Mansoor. After taking office in 2008, having come to power largely by manipulating mass hatred of the Iraq war, the Obama administration genuinely sought to minimize the US presence in Iraq, as a tactical move aimed at freeing up resources for military buildups against Russia and China. This strategy was disrupted by the outbreak of renewed civil war in 2014 and the seizure of large areas by ISIS.

The neocolonial regime built up under the tutelage of the US occupation now clings to power amid a cauldron of Sunni, Kurdish, and Shia militias, maintaining control over its own capital only with hefty fire support from American forces. In a desperate series of improvisations aimed at stabilizing its position, Washington has supported and cultivated ever more reactionary political and social formations. The Iraqi Special Forces and its elite CTS units have emerged as the main forces defending the Baghdad regime.

US media have touted the successes of the units, which were trained, armed, and led by America’s Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), and which have played the central role in ground offensives in central and western Iraq.

Amid the deepening sectarian chaos, the US-backed government in Baghdad relies increasingly on the Iraqi CTS, whose menacing images have become a regular feature in US media during the past year. The CTS units were originally developed by US Special Forces cadres working in Jordan from 2004-2005 onward, as the US Coalition Provision Authority sought to fill the security vacuum opened up by de-Baathification and the abolition of the Iraqi Army.

The Iraqi CTS units received “the most continuous US attention of any unit in Iraq,” closely modeled on US Special Forces and armed with the latest in American-made weaponry, including High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs).

The CTS, typically photographed wearing all-black fatigues adorned with icons from American horror movie culture, show in concentrated form the nature of the US-backed puppet government in Baghdad.

The CTS exists “outside of the nation’s traditional security structure,” the Brookings Institution noted.

“The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) is an independent, quasi-ministerial level organization separate from the Iraqi Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of the Interior (MoI),” Brookings wrote. The “liberal” think tank went on to praise the CTS as “a model for the development of effective forces for nations with military cultures similar to Iraq’s,” and noted that “the CTS has retained its cohesion and effectiveness while other Iraqi Security Forces have collapsed.”

There are plentiful signs that the Obama administration will spend its final months in office providing political cover for and attempting to deaden public consciousness of the new Iraq escalations planned for next year. While posing as a force for restraint against the military, the Obama White House is signing off on the groundwork for a still larger US military role in Iraq.

The White House has indicated that it will approve Pentagon requests for the further buildup of US forces in the coming months, beginning with deployments of hundreds of additional American troops to Iraq this fall.

“The Pentagon’s proposals have not yet been formally submitted to the White House for approval, but key generals have already told many in Washington they need hundreds more US personnel to do the job right,” the *Washington Post* noted Monday, in a telling characterization of the real decision-making processes in Washington.

According to the unofficial White House line, the administration is “not ruling out the possibility” of the major ground deployments demanded by the Pentagon. General Sean MacFarland, commander of US operations in both Iraq and Syria, has publicly claimed authority to deploy at least 400 additional troops, even without presidential approval.

Timeline of Obama’s Iraq war (June 2014-present):

* On June 15, 2014, President Obama ordered first wave of new deployments to Iraq, just days after ISIS fighters seized 70 percent of Anbar Province, including Abu Ghraib, Al Qaim, and Fallujah, along with the cities of Mosul, Samarra and Tikrit.

* On June 26, at least 180 US military advisers were on the ground in Iraq. By June 30, US troops totaled nearly 500, and by early July more than 800 American soldiers were securing key locations around the country.

* On August 7, Obama publicly committed to a major renewal of US operations in Iraq, seizing on the plight of the Yazidi ethnic minority as a pretext. On August 13, the Pentagon begins winding down humanitarian rescue mission of the Yazidis, and simultaneously deploys another 130 military advisors and dozens of US Marines to northern Iraq.

* On August 16, US warplanes began providing air support for Kurdish offensive against Mosul Dam. On September 3, Washington deployed an additional 350 personnel to Baghdad. On September 10, President Obama vowed that US forces will not engage in combat in Iraq. On October 1, US air forces began assault around Kobani, in support of Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

* In January 2015, US-Kurdish forces began a joint offensive against Mosul, as 1,000 paratroopers from US Army's "Panther Brigade" deployed to Iraq.

* In March 2015, a US-Iraqi force launched the Second Battle of Tikrit. In April, US-Iraqi forces launched their offensive against Anbar Governorate.

* In January 2016, Obama White House officials told US media that the president was preparing to green light Pentagon plans for major escalations in Iraq, Syria and Libya. In February 2016, US Defense Secretary Carter announced deployment of a "special expeditionary targeting force" to Iraq. In March, the combat death of a US Marine near "Firebase Bell" exposed the previously undisclosed presence of hundreds of US Marines, deploying for combat operations in northern Iraq. In April, the White House approved deployment of 200 more troops to Iraq.

* More than 4,000 US Marines and soldiers were sent to Iraq between October 2015 and March 2016 alone.