
ANTI-IS FORCES ADVANCE ON IRAQ, SYRIA MILITANT STRONGHOLDS

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BAGHDAD - Islamic State has come under fierce attack on three fronts stretching from Iraq to Syria.

Iraq's elite counterterrorism forces on Monday entered the IS stronghold of Fallujah, a city in central Iraq that the extremists have controlled for more than two years.

An array of Iraqi security forces, including the army and Shiite militias have surrounded the city, further squeezing a siege cordon put in place six months ago.

Overhead, U.S. airstrikes hit two IS tactical units, destroyed two IS fighting positions, two tunnel entrances, three foot bridges and denied the group access to further terrain.

Human shields

Families escaping Fallujah say that civilians are being used as human shields in the fighting and that IS is threatening those who try to leave.

My nephew is there, and he says there are attacks by mortars and heavy weapons, and he is hiding in his house, said one man who fled from Fallujah earlier and gave his name to VOA as Jabar Odaa.

The fight for the traditionally Sunni city of Fallujah is expected to be a difficult one, with hard urban battles and potentially high casualties.

IS militants are well entrenched in the city and many believe if Iraqi forces manage to take the city it will be a significant defeat for extremist group.

Fallujah holds hard memories for the U.S. military, which suffered hard losses in its operations to try to wrest control of the city from IS' predecessor, al Qaida, in 2004.

Losing control

IS has steadily been losing control of territory it captured in 2014 and anti-IS forces appear to be capitalizing on that.

In northern Iraq, Kurdish peshmerga forces, reportedly accompanied by coalition forces, stormed eight villages east of IS-controlled Mosul and pushed the militants back by 23 kilometers to a new frontline less than 10 kilometers from the city.

Brig Gen. Kurdo Zebari told VOA it had been a hard fight, but a successful one. Hopefully soon it will be Mosul, he said.

Mosul would be the last IS stronghold inside Iraq after Ramadi and Fallujah. Ramadi fell to Iraqi forces in February after fierce fighting leveled much of the city.

Yesterday there were 10 suicide vehicles, five of them were killed by airstrikes and five were blown up by the peshmerga, Zebari said in a telephone interview from the Kurdish frontline.

Underground defenses

U.S. Central Command said in a statement Monday that airstrikes near Mosul had destroyed a total of seven vehicle-borne IEDs, hit three IS tactical units, a weapons storage center, destroyed three IS fighting positions, five IS command and control nodes, seven weapons caches, artillery pieces, mortar positions, and damaged an anti-air artillery piece.

On the ground, Zebari said a tour of one of the villages showed what has become a signature IS tactic: complex underground defenses.

I personally took pictures of the bunkers and tunnels. It was a like a house, a tunnel with four bedrooms, he said.

Zebari said all the IS fighters had been killed after they refused to give themselves up.

"There is nobody left - they are either dead or gone," he said, but added that IS had left behind bombs in houses and on the roads.

The peshmerga offensive comes on the heels of an Iraqi army push from the south towards Mosul, an assault that appeared to falter after strong push back from the IS militants.

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