
SLOW PROGRESS, WORST TO COME IN BATTLE FOR ISIS STRONGHOLD

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-- Iraq's elite counterterrorism forces on Wednesday pushed deeper into ISIS-held Fallujah, more than two weeks after the operation to retake the city from the militant group started, a senior military official said.

After securing the southern edge of the city on Sunday, Iraqi special forces entered the neighborhood of Shuhada on Wednesday morning, Maj Gen Hadi Zayid Kassar, deputy commander of the counterterrorism forces in Fallujah told The Associated Press.

The operation to retake Fallujah is expected to be one of the most difficult yet - this city in Iraq's western Anbar province is symbolically important to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and has been a bastion of support for anti-government militants since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

Artillery and rocket fire cleared the way and a single column of black Humvees was seen moving in between the low rise buildings of Shuhada, a southern neighborhood in Fallujah. After Iraqi forces began their advance, a quick succession of coalition airstrikes followed, filling the sky above Fallujah with dark grey smoke.

Just before the Wednesday morning push, Lt Gen Abdel Wahab al-Saadi drove up to the edge of the territory that Iraqi forces control on Fallujah's southern part.

Surrounding buildings have been shredded by artillery fire and the simple dirt roads running through the largely agricultural neighborhood have been churned by Iraqi troops' heavily armored vehicles - a testimonial to the ferocity of the fighting.

The main roads leading to and from the front line are marked with craters from airstrikes, roadside

bombs and defensive trenches dug by both ISIS and Iraqi forces.

While a number of different Iraqi forces are participating in the fight for Fallujah, only Iraq's counterterrorism troops are actually entering the city. Paramilitary troops, made up mainly from Shiite militias, have been tasked with pushing the militants from the outskirts and tightening the siege around Fallujah.

"We expect to face more resistance, especially because we are the only forces entering the city," said Gen. Haider Fadel with the counterterrorism forces, one of the commanders overseeing the Fallujah operation.

"The Daesh are concentrating all their forces in this direction," Fadel said, referring to ISIS by its Arabic language acronym.

Fallujah is one of the last ISIS strongholds in Iraq. The Sunni militant group has controlled the city, located about 40 miles west of Baghdad, for more than two years.

Iraqi forces have already faced stiff resistance in the fight for Fallujah. Extensive use of tunnels, well trained snipers and roadside bombs placed by the militant group slowed the initial push into the city proper.

After a blitz across the country in the summer of 2014, territory has slowly been clawed back from ISIS militants. But ISIS still controls patches of territory in Iraq's north and west, as well as the country's second largest city of Mosul.

Kaynak/Source: