



June 30, 2016

The Liberation of Fallujah: What Next?



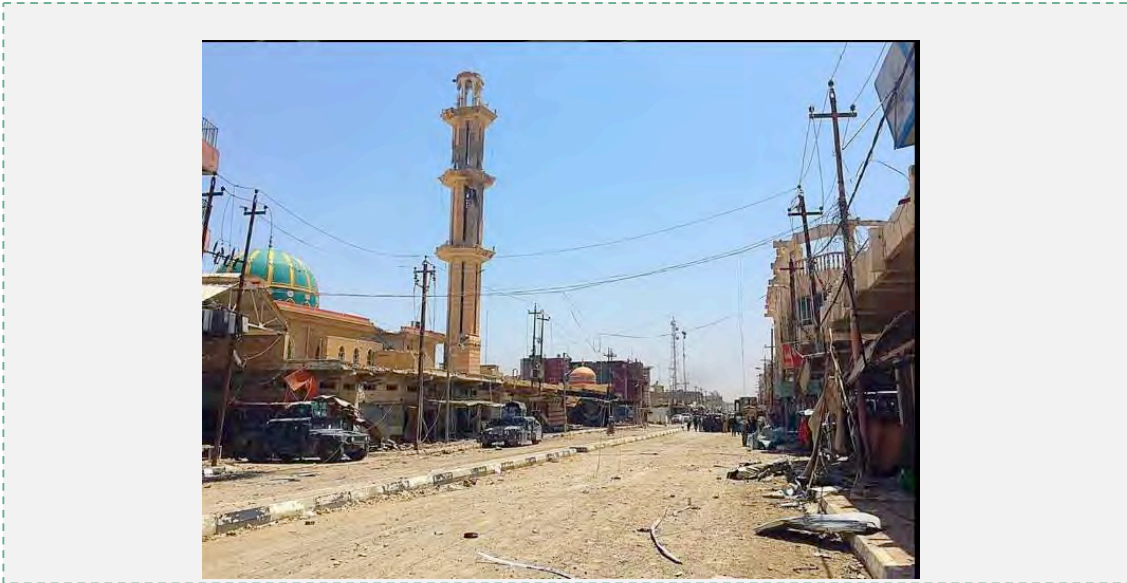
Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declares the liberation of Fallujah (Al-Iraqiya TV, June 26, 2016)

Overview

1. **On May 22, 2016**, a campaign began to liberate the Iraqi city of Fallujah from ISIS. The fighting was led by the Iraqi security forces with the support of Sunni and Shi'ite militias and American-led coalition airstrikes. On June 17 Iraqi army forces took control of the center of the city and its government buildings. **On June 25 the liberation of Fallujah was formally declared** when Iraqi forces took control of **the district of al-Julan** in the northwestern part of the city (ISIS's last stronghold). **On June 26, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared Fallujah liberated. The campaign for the city is probably not over**, because the Iraqi security forces will need a considerable amount of time to rid the city and its surrounding areas of ISIS operatives and of IEDs and booby traps.

2. The liberation of Fallujah is important for Iraq's **security**. The city served ISIS as a base for repeated terrorist and guerrilla attacks on Baghdad, which is only 54 kilometers (about 33 miles) away. Liberating Fallujah and ridding the surrounding areas of ISIS operatives **may help the Iraqi government stabilize Baghdad's security**, even if only gradually. The liberation of Fallujah is also **a blow to the**

image of ISIS and radical Islam in Iraq, because Fallujah has the reputation of being a stronghold of support for ISIS and a key point of Sunni resistance to the central Shi'ite-oriented Iraqi government in Baghdad and to the West.

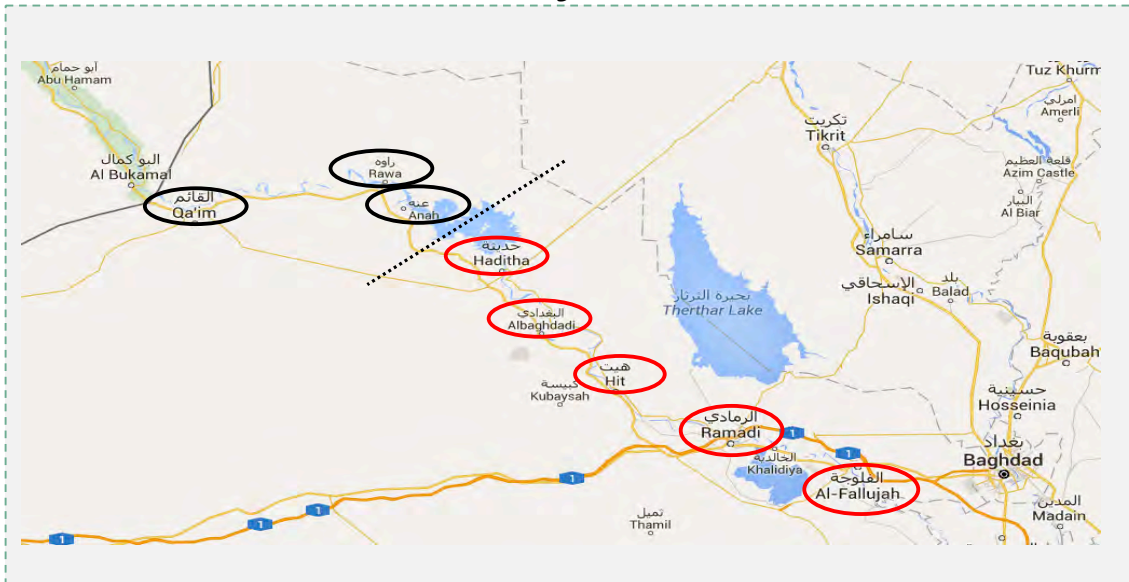


Fallujah after being liberated from ISIS (Twitter account of Victorious Iraq, June 28, 2016)

3. **Moreover, the liberation of Fallujah is another stage in the Iraqi effort to drive ISIS out of the large Sunni Anbar Province.** That effort intensified over the past six months, and with American air support the Iraqi security forces successfully **liberated a series of towns along the Euphrates River** conquered by ISIS in 2014 and the first half of 2015. On May 17, 2016, the Iraqi security forces also took control of the town of al-Rutbah, near the Iraqi-Syrian-Jordanian border.

4. ISIS still holds several towns along the upper Euphrates, among them Rawa, Anah and Qa'im near the Iraqi-Syrian border¹ (see map). As a result **ISIS operatives were pushed into rural and desert areas, from where they continue carrying out terrorist and guerilla attacks against the Iraqi forces, the Iraqi administration and the Shi'ite population.** In addition, **ISIS's control of the towns along the upper Euphrates in Iraq enables it to maintain a territorial continuum between Iraq and the regions of Deir al-Zur and Raqqah, its strongholds in Syria.**

¹ **On the Syrian side of the border, across from Qa'im, lies the town of al-Bukamal.** On June 28, 2016, fighters of the American-supported rebel organization "New Syrian army," tried to wrest control of al-Bukamal from ISIS. However, the attacking force withdrew from the area in the wake of an ISIS counterattack (Reuters, June 29, 2016). **Taking control of al-Bukamal can cut off ISIS's remaining strongholds along the upper Euphrates in Iraq from the regions of Deir al-Zur and Raqqah in Syria.**



Circled in red: towns along the Euphrates liberated by the Iraqi forces. Circled in black: ISIS strongholds along the upper Euphrates allowing it a territorial continuum with the areas it controls in eastern Syria (Google Maps)

5. From the internal Iraqi perspective, the takeover of Fallujah, a Sunni-jihadist stronghold and a symbol of opposition to the United States and the Shi'ite-oriented regime in Baghdad, **could potentially overcome the sectarian tensions between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq**, tensions which provided the fertile ground on which ISIS and radical Islam grew and thrived. Fallujah's great symbolic importance is crucial to **the Iraqi administration's ability to reconstruct the city and its infrastructure, absorb the residents who fled, foster local leadership and keep local Sunnis from being attacked in revenge by the Shi'ite militias** (accused of such acts when the population of Fallujah fled). If the Iraqi administration is successful, it will pave the way for taking control of Mosul. However, **if the administration fails, it might signal yet again that it is easier to take over a radical Islamic city like Fallujah than to effectively control it over time.**

6. The takeover of Fallujah **has reduced the extent of ISIS's territorial control in Iraq. It raises logistic and operational difficulties** for ISIS and disrupts communications between ISIS in Iraq and ISIS in Syria. **ISIS is expected to prepare itself for a campaign in Mosul**, the "capital" of its Islamic caliphate, where **it will wage a fierce battle to continue the existence of the caliphate** (declared in the summer of 2014). The Iraqi security forces, the Shi'ite militias and the American-led coalition are currently preparing for a campaign to take control of Mosul, **expected to be far more difficult and complex than the campaigns undertaken in Iraq to date.**

Basic Information about Fallujah

7. **Fallujah**, lying 54 kilometers (about 33 miles) west of Baghdad, is a stronghold of ISIS and radical Islam and a symbol of Sunni Muslim opposition in Iraq to the Shi'ite-oriented central government and to the West. At the end of Saddam Hussein's era it had about 300,000 residents. When the American army withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, there were about 270,000 residents, despite extensive destruction to the city (see below).

8. It is estimated that after ISIS took control of the city, more than 80,000 residents fled (BBC, June 27, 2016). The displaced residents of Fallujah found refuge in three camps established by the Iraqi government west of Baghdad: in Amiriyat Falluja, al-Khalidiya and al-Habbaniya. They were not permitted to go to Baghdad for "security reasons," that is, fear that there might be ISIS operatives among them (BBC in Arabic, June 27, 2016). **During the recent campaign the city's population had dwindled to between 50,000 and 60,000.**



Left: Iraqis who fled Fallujah, detained and interrogated by the Shi'ite militias supporting the Iraqi army in order to prevent the infiltration of ISIS operatives disguised as displaced persons. Right: Civilians flee Fallujah during the current campaign (Al-Jazeera, June 20, 2016).



The camps set up for displaced persons from Fallujah (Al-Jazeera, June 20, 2016).

Historical Background of Fallujah

9. In **1920** (during the revolt against the British occupation of Iraq) and in **1941** (during the anti-British pro-Nazi revolt of Rashid Aali al-Kilani) **Fallujah symbolized opposition to the British**. In 2003, after the American army invaded Iraq, Fallujah became a **stronghold of Sunni-jihadist resistance** to both the invading Americans and the Shi'ite-oriented Iraqi regime established in Baghdad.

10. While the Americans were in Iraq a **branch of Al-Qaeda was established there, headed by the Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi**. The branch waged a terrorist-guerrilla war against the Americans, the Iraqi government and the Shi'ites. They focused on Baghdad in Anbar Province (western Iraq). The Sunni population of Anbar Province, which was hostile to the new Iraqi regime because of its Shi'ite orientation, became, at that time, a **power base for Al-Qaeda in Iraq**, and later paved the way for **ISIS**, which grew out of it.

11. **In 2004 there was fierce fighting in Fallujah between the Americans and the jihadists**. The American attack on Fallujah was launched in the wake of the killing of four American citizens (representatives of an American security company) and the desecration of their bodies. The Americans tried to conquer Fallujah in April 2004, failed, and in a series of battles, **at the end of 2004** they overcame strong resistance and took control of the city. The battles destroyed a large portion of the city. In **2008** there was another round of fighting to rid the city of jihadist operatives, but then as well the jihadists were only temporarily suppressed.

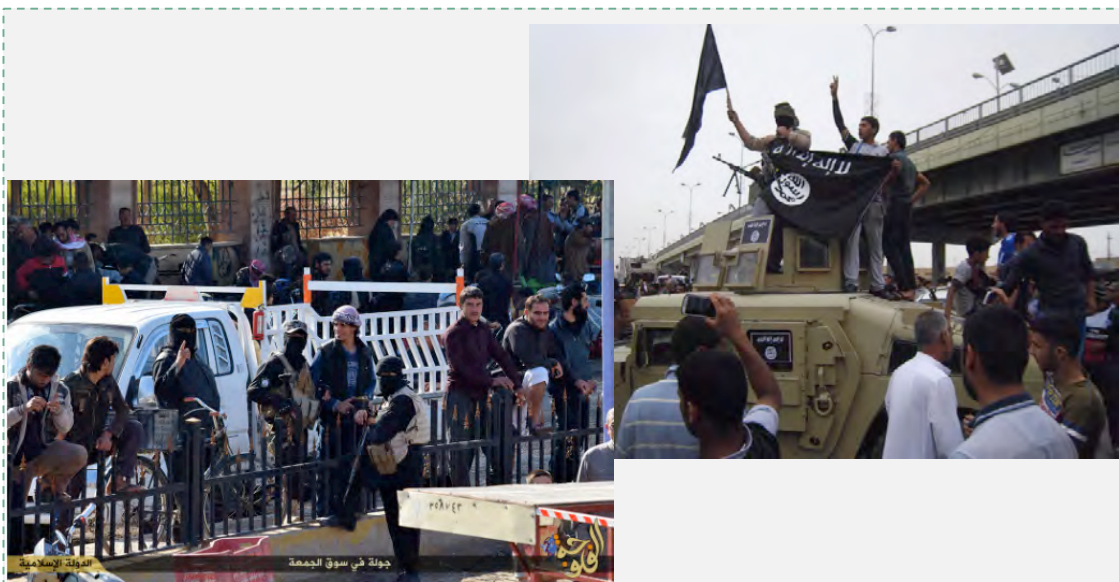


Left: Scene of an anti-American riot in Fallujah. Right: Riots protesting the American occupation of Fallujah in 2004. The sign reads, "Fallujah is a cemetery for Americans" (Yanbufuture.com forum April 11, 2004).



The American army pounds Fallujah with bombs, November 2004 (Al-Arabiya, November 12, 2004).

12. **On January 5, 2014, ISIS took control of Fallujah**, which became its main stronghold in Anbar Province, **threatening the security of nearby Baghdad**. However, during the past year, when ISIS has been on the defensive in both Iraq and Syria, the tables turned and the ISIS operatives who held Fallujah found themselves under siege, attacked by the Iraqi security forces and bombed by the American-led international coalition. The siege and bombing caused significant destruction throughout the city and residents fled.



Left: The park near the Friday market when ISIS controlled the city (Haq, December 5, 2014). Right: Fallujah under ISIS (Al-Alam al-Youm, May 31, 2016).

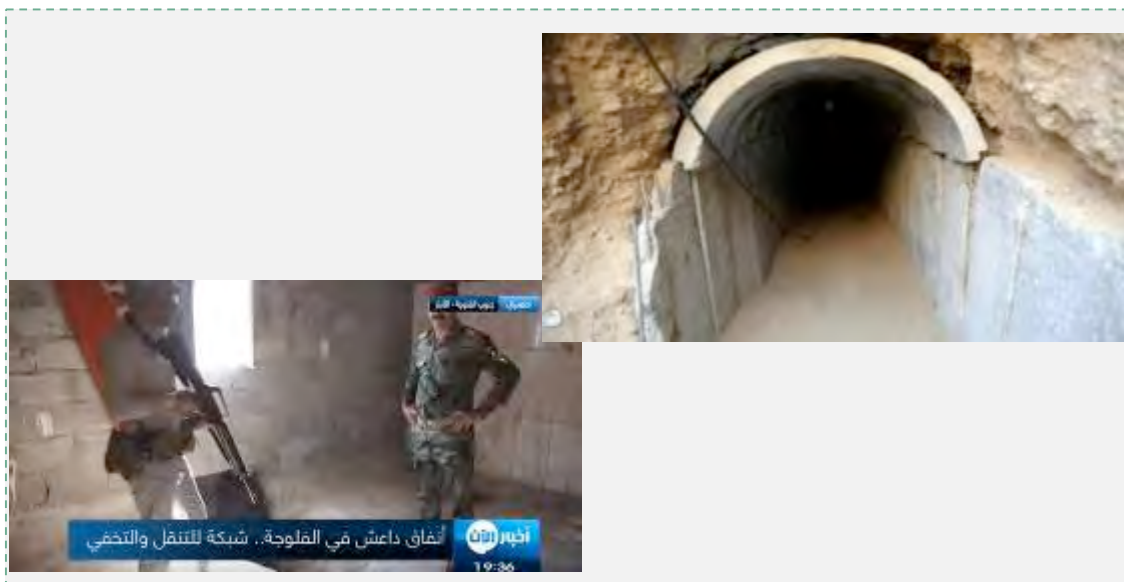
The Liberation of Fallujah – Overview

13. **On May 22, 2016**, a campaign was launched to liberate Fallujah from ISIS. It was waged by the Iraqi security forces, **especially the elite Iraqi counter terrorism force, with air support from the United States and the coalition**. An estimated 30,000 Iraqi fighters participated in the campaign (Russia Today, May 22, 2016; Al-Jazeera, May 29, 2016), **opposing almost 2,000 ISIS operatives**. The Iraqi army had the support of Sunni and Shi'ite militias. **The Shi'ite militias**, operating under the aegis of Iran and Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, **played a secondary role in the campaign**. Their main mission was to help the army seal off the city, despite Iranian propaganda which gave prominence to their role in the fighting.²

14. The **first stage** of the campaign, considered the most important by the Iraqi army, focused on **taking control of the villages and towns around Fallujah**, ridding them of ISIS operatives and reinforcing the closure of the city. At the same time the American and coalition forces bombed ISIS targets inside Fallujah and in the surrounding areas, (a tactic used successfully in liberating other cities from ISIS control). The **second stage** began about a week later, during which **Iraqi forces entered the city itself from several directions** and advanced towards the center, where the administration buildings were located.

² For further information, see the May 30, 2016 [bulletin "Iranian Participation in the Liberation of Fallujah – Dr. Raz Zimmt,"](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/21012) <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/21012>.

15. **The second stage lasted about a month, during which ISIS fought fiercely against the Iraqi forces** (which were superior to them in number and weapons, and enjoyed aerial cover). ISIS based its fighting on sniper fire, ambushes, IEDs, suicide bombing attacks, and using civilians as human shields. ISIS also had **a network of underground tunnels** used for hiding, command and moving operatives from place to place both inside and outside the city.

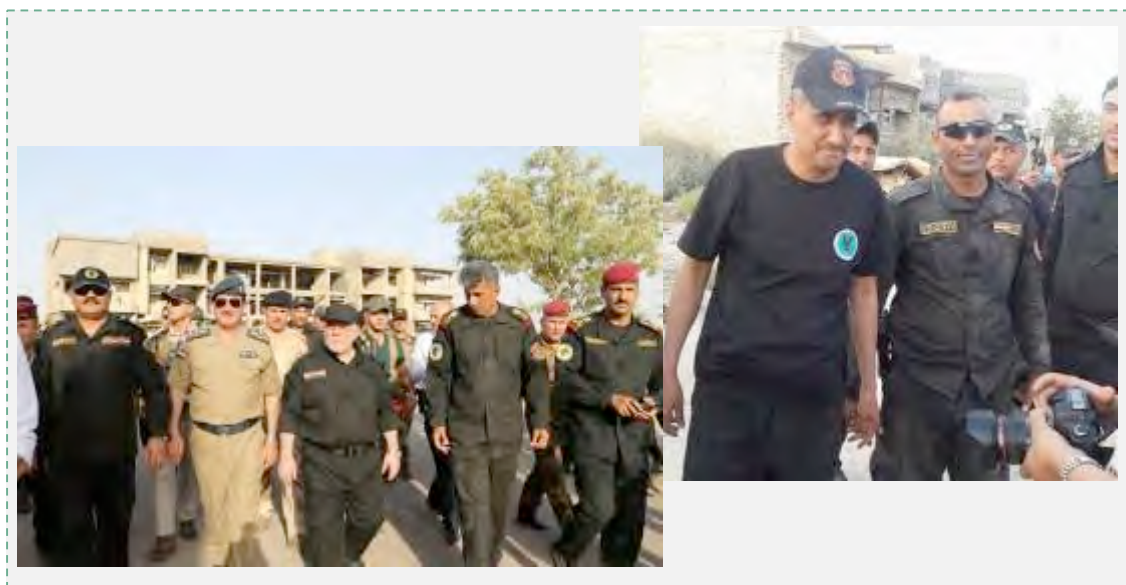


Left: Entrance to a tunnel shaft located in a house south of Fallujah. Right: The opening to a long tunnel discovered by the Iraqi army in northeastern Fallujah (Al-Aan TV, May 14, 2016).

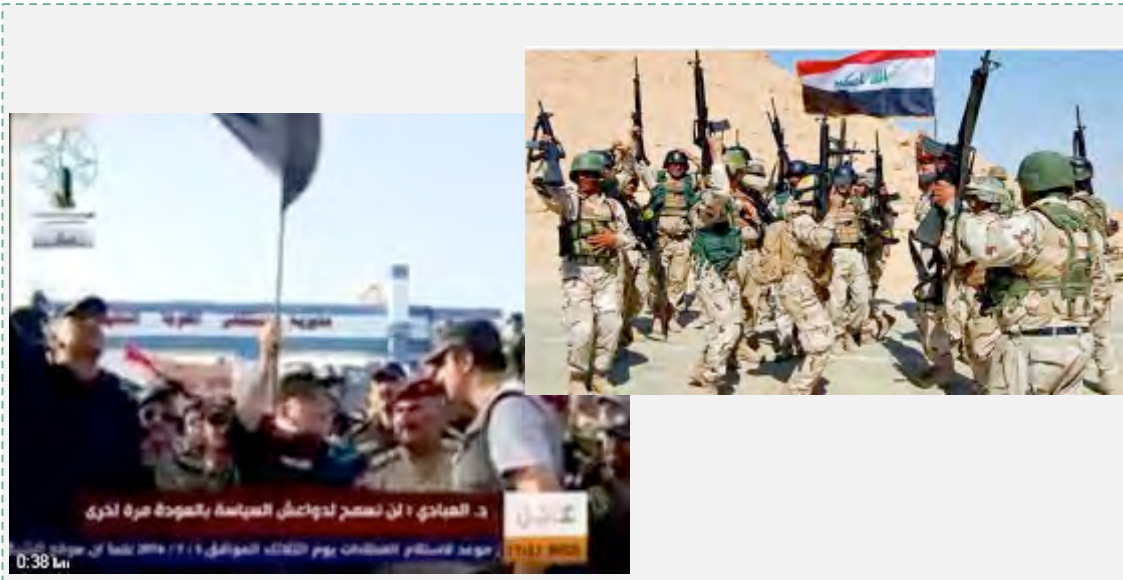


Entrance to one of the tunnels used by ISIS near Fallujah (Al-Mayadeen, May 29, 2016).

16. On **June 17, 2016**, the Iraqi army announced **its forces had taken control of the center of Fallujah and its administration buildings, and had flown the Iraqi flag over them**. Fighting continued in several districts even after the announcement. **The main resistance to the Iraqi forces came from the neighborhood of al-Julan** in the northwest of the city, where ISIS operatives had concentrated. On **June 24, 2016**, Iraqi army forces entered al-Julan from the northwest. On **June 25, 2016**, operational headquarters in Baghdad announced that al-Julan had been liberated and that the Iraqi flag was flying over its medical center. **On June 26, 2016, Abdel Wahab al-Sa'adi, commander of Fallujah operations, declared the liberation of Fallujah from ISIS as complete**. He said that **1,800 ISIS operatives had been killed** (Twitter account of the special operations department of the Iraqi army, June 26, 2016). The same day Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi visited Fallujah and declared its liberation.



Left: Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi (center) visits Fallujah accompanied by senior Iraqi army officers. Right: Abdel Wahab al-Sa'adi (left in black T-shirt) announces the complete liberation of Fallujah (Twitter account of the special operation department of the Iraqi army, June 26, 2016)



Left: Al-Abadi victoriously waves the Iraqi flag in Fallujah (Al-Iraqiya TV, June 26, 2016). Right: Iraqi army soldiers celebrate the victory at Fallujah (Twitter account of the special operation department of the Iraqi army, June 26, 2016).



Iraqi army vehicles drive through the ruins of Fallujah (Al-Arabiya, June 26, 2016)

17. Al-Jazeera TV, basing its information on sources close to ISIS, reported that after the takeover of Fallujah **ISIS abandoned the posts it held around the city without fighting** (Al-Jazeera, June 27, 2016). According to reports, on June 27 a mechanized infantry division of the Iraqi army began **an operation to complete ridding the western bank of the Euphrates, west of Fallujah, of ISIS operatives**. The objective of the operation was to take control of the region of Halabsa, west of Fallujah (Iraqi Media Network, June 27, 2016). In all probability **ridding the area of ISIS operatives will take a significant amount of time**.

The Fall of Fallujah – A Blow to ISIS's Image

18. Both the Iraqi regime and ISIS considered the campaign for Fallujah as greatly important, and both accompanied the fighting with an **extensive media campaign**. ISIS propaganda had two main themes: ISIS was determined to **remain in control** of the city, and **ISIS operatives were victorious** over the Iraqi army. However, **both were completely contrary to the situation as it developed, which strengthened the blow dealt to ISIS's image with the loss of Fallujah.**

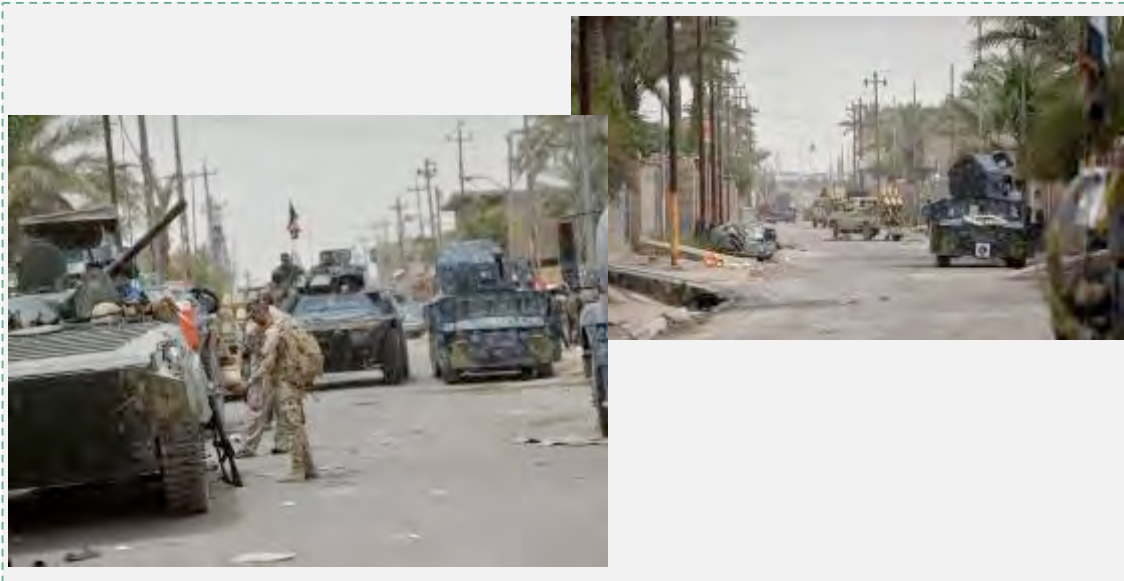
19. On June 25, 2016, when the Iraqi administration announced the liberation of Fallujah, ISIS issued an infograph of its **alleged achievements** during the campaign. ISIS claimed that during the previous month it had killed more than 1,840 Iraqi soldiers and Shi'ite militiamen, destroyed more than 239 armored vehicles, and attacked three helicopters and three drones (Haq, June 25, 2016). The loss of the control of Fallujah and ISIS's heavy losses in personnel were **not mentioned**. **Falsely representing the results of the campaign was intended to offset the damage done to its image with the loss of the city**, but the true picture will probably become apparent to ISIS operatives in Iraq and Syria, and beyond.



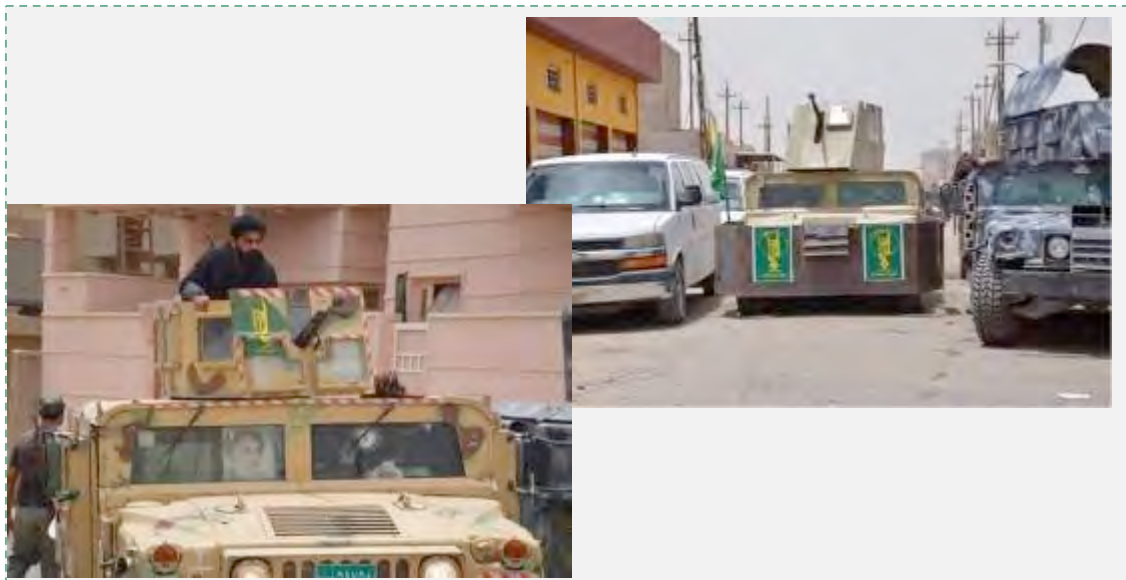
An ISIS infograph of its purported successes in Fallujah: a false representation of the situation issued after the liberation of Fallujah to obscure the extent of ISIS's defeat (Haq, June 25, 2016).

Appendix

Pictures from the Liberation of Fallujah



Iraqi forces in the streets of Fallujah (Alhurra, June 20, 2016).



Shi'ite militias in Fallujah. In the front window of the vehicle at the left there is a picture of Ali Sistani, a senior Shi'ite cleric in Iraq, considered a supreme religious authority (Facebook page of Fallujah News, June 25, 2016).



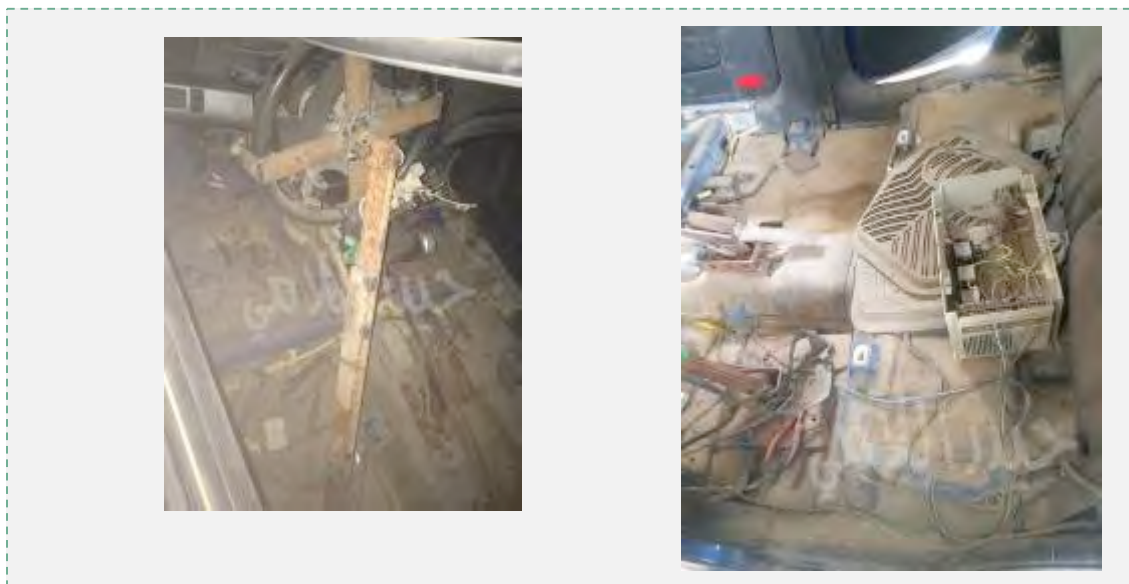
An Iraqi force captures an ISIS weapons workshop and holds and ISIS flag (Twitter account of @kanari313, June 25, 2016).



Left: Some of an ISIS stockpile of shells found in the al-Risala district (Twitter account of the special forces branch of the Iraqi army, June 25, 2016). Right: ISIS ammunition found in houses in Fallujah (Twitter account of a war media group, June 22 and 24, 2016).



The Iraqi army fighting in al-Julan neighborhood, ISIS's last stronghold in Fallujah (Al-Alam website, June 25, 2016).



A driverless car bomb found in Fallujah (Twitter account of the special operations department of the Iraqi army, June 25, 2016).



Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force (center, in gray) in the Fallujah region. In reality Soleimani and the Shi'ite militias played a secondary role in the campaign for Fallujah (Twitter account of Fallujah, June 20, 2016).