

More problems ahead for Abadi despite progress recapturing Falluja

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Amman

The victory over Islamic State (ISIS) militants in Falluja provides a window of opportunity for embattled Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to mend fences with powerful Shia clerics who have grown increasingly disgruntled with the premier dragging his feet on long overdue reforms.

Abadi is generally seen as a bashful politician hesitant to pursue serious reforms, anxious that he would hit a wall if he digs deep into state corruption that allegedly involves top serving and ex-government officials, including some affiliated with the Shia clergy.

In the wake of angry street protests, Abadi took shaky steps to

tackle corruption, enraging the clergy who publicly cast doubt on his ability to run the country. They were specifically irked by his hesitation to press ahead with tangible reforms to ease street rage and ultimately protect the interests and continued survival of the clerics in the political hierarchy.

In an impromptu address June 17th on state television, Abadi rushed to announce victory in Falluja.

"We promised you the liberation of Falluja and we retook it. Our security forces control the city except for small pockets that need to be cleared within the coming hours," Abadi said, surrounded by four security officials.

"Falluja has returned to the nation and Mosul is the next battle," Abadi later said in a tweet that went viral. He was referring to Iraq's second largest city in the north, which

remains under ISIS control.

"Daesh will be defeated," he added, using the jihadists' Arabic acronym.

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Political scientist Jawad al-Tae said Abadi "wants to capitalise on the victory in Falluja to prove he's tough enough and a hero liberating Iraqi land of the enemy".

"The gains will soon be forgotten if he fails to address other hot issues

awaiting him," observed Tae, a retired University of Baghdad professor

The stakes are high for Abadi. Oil revenues are off because of receding oil prices, depriving a country that sits atop the world's second largest known oil reserves of desperately needed cash. It is rumoured that corrupt officials have squandered billions in oil revenues.

With a record deficit and high borrowing, capital expenditure is squeezed. Therefore, infrastructural projects are expected to remain on hold, contrary to Abadi's promises to protesters that electricity blackouts will stop, streets will be paved and maintained and the quality of water, health care and education will improve.

Falluja, one of the first Iraqi cities that the jihadists captured in January 2014, is especially important. It lies 60km west of Baghdad, Abadi's

seat of power.

The area, part of the vast western Anbar province, is a bastion for insurgents among Iraq's rival Sunni minority, which accuses successive Shia-dominated cabinets of ostracising it since the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Some of Falluja's tribal leaders sided with ISIS due to previous mistreatment by the government. Previously, the area was a hotbed for ISIS's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq. The city, which had a population of 300,000 before ISIS captured it, is called the "City of Mosques" for the 200 places of worship in the area. Falluja's Sunni Muslim scholars are highly influential but known for their tendency for a more hard-line interpretation of Islamic doctrine.

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Iraqi security forces celebrate as they hold an ISIS flag they captured in central Falluja, on June 17th.

The battle for Falluja is between US and Iran proxies

Viewpoint



Tom Regan

If you thought that the nuclear agreement between the United States and Iran meant that relations would improve in other areas between the two countries, what is happening in Iraq should disabuse you of that notion.

US-trained and -backed Iraqi troops and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (known as the PMF and made up of Shia militias supported by Iran) are in the midst of a battle to free the Iraqi city of Falluja from the Islamic State (ISIS).

And therein lies the problem. The Obama administration and US military leaders are extremely suspicious of the PMF because

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some of the militias fought against the United States a decade ago. The feeling of distrust is mutual. Neither side would trust each other for a moment but are thrown together by the circumstances of the battle against ISIS.

Caught in the middle is the Iraqi government of Haider al-Abadi. It cannot afford to alienate the United States, which provides financial and military aid, but it also cannot alienate the main power in the region and a significant player in Iraq – Iran.

PMF fighters are situated on the northern border of the city and US-backed forces are approaching from the south. This situation has been made worse by allegations of torture, summary executions, beatings and kidnapping against the PMF.

A report from Human Rights Watch illustrated in graphic detail how some of the Sunni residents fleeing Falluja had been mistreated or killed by militias. It was so bad that Abadi condemned the killings and called for an investigation, say-

ing he would punish those found responsible.

Also, after reports of brutality and torture by the PMF leaked, Iran's highest Shia religious authority Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called for "restraint" – but not actually for the acts of revenge to stop.

The steps to curtail the PMF and refocus on the battle have done little to improve the relationship between the two forces. The US administration is worried that acts of revenge by Shia militias against Sunni citizens will lead to civil war. Many of the US-trained Iraqi troops, in particular the elite counterterrorism service, tend to see the PMF as an opposing force – perhaps a force that one day they will have to face themselves.

It is not that the PMF is particularly interested in running Sunni-dominated cities in the central and northern Iraq but Iran does not want to let the US forces control everything that is happening in the fight against ISIS and is also interested in using the struggle in

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Falluja and the one to come in Mosul as propaganda tools to enhance its support in the country.

The Obama administration is determined not to hand Iran any easy victories that can be used to undermine its support in Iraq. This sentiment will probably intensify in the next administration.

After a slow start created by fleeing refugees, hundreds of hidden bombs and poor planning, the combined Iraqi forces have made steady progress.

In the end, however, the conflict between proxies of the United States and Iran will prolong the battle to defeat ISIS. Neither side will be willing to allow the other side to get too far ahead, which means it will probably be a very long time before their mutual enemy can be totally defeated.

Tom Regan, a columnist at factsandopinion.com, previously worked for the Christian Science Monitor, National Public Radio, the Boston Globe and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.