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Elite Iraqi units abandon Ramadi in biggest Islamic State win since Mosul

By Mitchell Prothero

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Displaced Iraqis from Ramadi rest before crossing the Bzebiz bridge after spending the night walking towards Baghdad, as they flee their hometown, 65 km west of Baghdad, Iraq, May 16, 2015. Islamic State militants seized the center of Ramadi in western Iraq and raised their black flag over the government compound, local officials said

IRBIL, Iraq — Iraqi security forces attempting to retake control of the western city of Ramadi were routed in heavy fighting Sunday, the worst defeat for Iraq's central government since Islamic State militants stormed across the country last June.

In a replay of last year's military debacle, elite units abandoned their U.S.-provided equipment to Islamic State fighters and fled the area, leaving several hundred soldiers surrounded in the last government-held enclave in the city.

Multiple security sources, none of whom agreed to be identified, speaking from both within the besieged Anbar Operations Center as well as with the units fleeing the city, described the fight for control of the capital of Iraq's largest province as essentially over after reinforcements sent on Saturday to retake the city were crushed by Islamic State fighters.

“Only God can save us,” said one officer speaking by phone from inside the Anbar operations center, where officers had been coordinating the operation. The officer said that several hundred policemen and soldiers were surrounded inside the command center, which was repeatedly struck by suicide bombers and heavy artillery fire as militants cut off their last routes of escape.

Social media accounts credibly associated with the Islamic State announced hours later that the operations center had been overrun, a claim that could not be immediately confirmed. Efforts to reach sources inside the facility were unsuccessful.

The units that had been attempting to retake Ramadi, which was attacked late Thursday evening and had fallen mostly into militant hands by Saturday, were in the process of fleeing the city and had abandoned dozens of U.S.-supplied armored vehicles, as well as artillery, heavy machine guns and other military gear as they fled mostly on foot from the fighting.

The elite Golden Brigade, Iraq’s premier special forces unit, which had withdrawn to the “Stadium” neighborhood south of the city on Friday to await reinforcements and prepare a counterattack had also abandoned its positions and was retreating from the area under heavy attack by Islamic State forces, according to two officers within the unit reached by phone Sunday.

“Ramadi has fallen to Daash,” one officer said. “There were many suicide bombers and many soldiers and officers are dead.”

Ramadi Mayor Dalaf al Kubaisi confirmed the collapse of the city’s defenses in a statement in which he said at least 90 percent of the city was in the hands of the Islamic State. He said the small portions still in government control were likely to fall quickly unless help arrived in the form of government ground forces and U.S. air strikes.

U.S. officials in Washington declined to confirm the turn of events, insisting, as they have for several days, even as it became clearer that the Islamic State was advancing aggressively in Ramadi, that nothing unexpected was taking place.

“We’re continuing to monitor reports of fighting in Ramadi and the situation remains fluid and contested. It is too early to make definitive statements about the situation on the ground,” Pentagon spokesman Army Col. Steven Warren said in an email. “The loss of Ramadi would not mean the tide of the campaign has turned . . . If lost, that just means the coalition will have to support Iraqi forces to take it back later.”

Warren said he also could not confirm that Army Gen. Lloyd Austin, the head of the U.S. Central Command, which has responsibility for the Middle East, was in Iraq, despite the appearance on Twitter of a photo of Austin meeting with President Marsoud Barzani of Iraq’ autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government.

On Friday, the White House announced that it was rushing shoulder-fired rockets to Iraq that were especially useful for destroying car bombs before they could reach their targets, and there was no doubt in Iraq of the seriousness of the developments.

One police officer confirmed that at least 30 U.S. supplied armored Humvees, which had been sent as reinforcements on Saturday, had been abandoned in the neighborhood of Malaab alone. Those vehicles were part of three regiments of Iraqi soldiers sent to the city on Saturday to confront the surprise offensive on one of the last government held population centers in Anbar, Iraq's largest province.

The officer said that at least 500 soldiers and police were fleeing from that area, mostly on foot, with the main highway linking Ramadi to the capital of Baghdad, about 60 miles away, completely controlled by the Islamic State.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi, responding to the unfolding crisis, went on state television Sunday evening to announce that he'd authorized the deployment of Iranian-backed Shiite militias to the area, though it remained unclear if any part of Ramadi will remain under government control by the time those troops can be deployed.

State television said that Anbar's government council had voted Sunday to ask for the deployment, a move both the local Sunni tribes and the central government had resisted because of sectarian tensions between the mostly Shiite central government and the predominately Sunni residents of the area.

The Iraqi federal police claimed it would quickly mount a new operation. In a statement, Brig. Gen. Raid Shakir Joudat said he would head to Ramadi "commanding a huge force . . . to cleanse Anbar province from terrorist gangs."

But with government forces in a full rout, that pledge seemed likely to prove empty, and all sides appeared to agree that the deployment of the militias was a necessary last resort. "We no longer have a choice," said one civilian fleeing Ramadi.

How effective Shiite militiamen deployed far from their home areas in an overtly hostile environment would be remained an open question. The militia played the leading role in the government's effort to recapture Tikrit two months ago. But the militias took heavy casualties in the predominantly Sunni area and were unable to take the city despite overwhelming numbers. Tikrit fell only after the militias withdrew, and the United States launched air strikes against the Islamic State positions to back regular Iraqi army ground forces.

Those forces, however, were the very ones that fled Ramadi on Sunday.

The capture of Ramadi, a city whose population is given as between 500,000 and 900,000, is by far the largest Islamic State victory since the militants' June 10 capture of Mosul, which with 2 million people is Iraq's second biggest city. It comes after nine months of U.S. bombing in Iraq and offers a counter to American military officials' arguments as recently as last week that those strikes have put the militants on the defensive.

Ramadi was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting during the U.S. occupation of Iraq – more than 1,300 American soldiers and Marines dies in Anbar. But unlike Fallujah, which was

the subject of two bloody American offensives, Ramadi never fell completely into the hands of the extremists who were the predecessors of the Islamic State.

The city has been besieged since January 2014, but had remained contested until Thursday night's blitz of car bombs marked the beginning of the Islamic State's push.

The debacle unfolded despite at least seven air strikes by U.S. and coalition warplanes overnight Saturday to Sunday, with a statement from the U.S. military listing targets in and around Ramadi that had been destroyed by air strikes – including six units of Islamic State fighters and several command and control facilities used by the group – but apparently the strikes were unable to change the outcome of the battle.

Adding to the stress was word that the town of Baghdadi to the north was itself surrounded and likely to fall in the coming days or hours without significant outside help. Although not a large town, Baghdadi had remained in government control because it is a key supply line to the government garrison at the Haditha Dam, one of Iraq's largest infrastructure facilities that controls both agricultural water flow and produces hydro-electric power. The loss of Baghdadi would mean the garrison was surrounded and cut off.

"We call the Iraqi government to send helps to us immediately we are surrounded from all axis by Daash," said Hussein al Dulami from inside the town. "Send food for our families send ammunition and guns to us from the U.S."