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Pro-Iran militias take upper hand after U.S.-backed forces crumble in Anbar

By Loveday Morris
May 30, 2015



Shiite militias are taking the lead in the battle for the Iraqi city of Ramadi, in a sign of lessened U.S. influence

Iraqi forces have seized from Islamic State militants a string of hamlets and villages in the dust-choked desert southeast of Ramadi in recent days, closing in on the key city for a counteroffensive.

But the yellow-and-green flags that line the sides of the newly secured roads and flutter from rooftops leave no doubt as to who is leading the fighting here: Kitaeb Hezbollah, a Shiite militia designated a terrorist organization by the United States.

Iraq's two main allies — Iran and the United States — have vied for influence over Iraq's battle to retake ground from Islamic State militants in the past year. While Iranian-linked Shiite militias have spearheaded the fight elsewhere, the U.S.-backed Iraqi army and counterterrorism units had been on the front lines in Anbar province, supported by an eight-month American-led air campaign.

But with the fall of Ramadi, the province's capital, this month, paramilitary forces close to Iran are now taking the upper hand. They include groups such as Kitaeb Hezbollah, responsible for thousands of attacks on U.S. soldiers who fought in Iraq after the 2003 invasion.

Until recently, the Iraqi government had held back from ordering Iraq's so-called popular mobilization units, a mix of Shiite militias and volunteers that formed last summer, to Anbar. Authorities were concerned that sending them to battle in a Sunni majority province could provoke sectarian conflicts. But Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi dispatched them when regular forces crumbled in Ramadi and local politicians asked for the units' help.

Now Shiite militias including the Badr Organization are pressing toward the city from the northeast, in an operation its commanders claim to be planning and leading. Meanwhile, a push to flank Ramadi from the southeast is dominated by Kitaeb Hezbollah.

At the Iraqi army base in Habbaniyah, about 20 miles from Ramadi, Maj. Gen. Qasim al-Mohammadi, the head of Anbar Operations Command, explained that the Iraqi army and the militias are fighting "side by side." Outside, Kitaeb Hezbollah flags flew just feet from his office.

Although army commanders in Anbar say they are still leading the fight, militiamen contend otherwise. Tribal forces in the area are also being armed, with 800 fighters attending an

enrollment ceremony in Habbaniyah last week. But they complain that the process has been slow.

“We liberated this area five days ago, and now the army is helping us hold the ground,” said Zaid Ali Sudani, a turbaned Kitaeb Hezbollah fighter from Basra in southern Iraq, who was guarding a defense line last week near the village of Ankour, south of Ramadi. “We wish the army could be at the same level as the [popular mobilization units],” he said. “In reality, they are much weaker.”

Kitaeb Hezbollah boasts an arsenal of rockets, surface-to-air missile systems and heavy weaponry.

more vehicles of the Iraqi Army and popular mobilization units patrol the area near Habbaniyah lake in Anbar province on May 28, 2015. (Ahmad Mousa/The Washington Post)

“We’ve had Grad rockets and Katyushas for many years,” said Abu Mustafa, a Kitaeb member who uses a nom de guerre, referring to rocket-launch systems. “But the army are only beginning to get weapons like that now.”

U.S. credibility had risen in Iraq when Islamic State forces were driven from the city of Tikrit earlier this year, thanks in part to coalition airstrikes, Kenneth Pollack, a Middle East expert at the Brookings Institution, noted in a recent article. But the fall of Ramadi has damaged Iraqis’ confidence in the United States, he said. If Shiite militias play a role in retaking Ramadi, “that can only bolster Tehran’s influence in Baghdad at the expense of Washington’s,” he wrote.

Disillusionment with the U.S. government is evident in Habbaniyah. Falih al-Essawi, deputy head of Anbar’s provincial council, was waiting to meet the army chief Thursday. He was still seething about the fall of the city.

“I was the first ally of the United States in Anbar,” he railed. “But the big man lied and said Ramadi wouldn’t fall.”

Anbar had two choices on an ally, he said — the United States or Shiite Iran — the latter not a natural ally in the Sunni majority province.

“We chose America, we chose a strong country, but we were wrong,” Essawi said.

‘We will get back on our feet’

The continuing shift toward Iran leaves the United States struggling to assert influence in the Iraqi military it spent \$25 billion to build.

After the fall of Ramadi, the U.S. government is rushing 2,000 portable anti-tank missiles to Iraqi forces to help them fend off Islamic State car bombs.

Last week, on an Iraqi army base in Besmaya, 55 miles southeast of Baghdad, a company of Iraqi army soldiers showed off the results of nine weeks of training by the U.S.-led coalition.

A group of engineers blasted concrete T-walls, opening the way for infantry soldiers to dash through in a complex live-fire exercise, as helicopters buzzed overhead. The men are part of the 15th and 16th divisions of the Iraqi army, formed to replace units that collapsed last summer when Islamic State militants seized chunks of the country’s northwest. The new divisions contain a mix of recruits and soldiers who fled during last year’s assault.

Amjad Idris, a 30-year-old soldier, said if he had known a year ago what he knows now , he wouldn’t have abandoned his position in Tal Afar, just outside Mosul, when the Islamic State fighters attacked. “We learned our lesson,” he said. “It’s either victory or death.”

Nearly 9,000 members of the Iraqi security forces have graduated from training programs run by the U.S.-led coalition since late last year, with just over 4,000 more currently in boot camp.

“We’ll see after they go into combat whether it was enough,” said Maj. Manuel Lourenco, a Portuguese army trainer with the coalition.

Brig. Gen. Sabah al-Azawi, commander of the Iraqi army’s 16th division, said his work is akin to that of a psychologist as he tries to restore the men’s confidence. But while the training is helping to rebuild the army, he said, the popular mobilization units are now a national institution.

‘Become a real army’

“The Iraqi army has a good history and will get back on its feet again,” he said. “It might take a year or two, but we will get back on our feet and become a real army.”

Mohammadi, of the Anbar Operations Command, said he had been warning since November that Ramadi would fall unless U.S. airstrikes increased or the Shiite militias were sent.

Now Anbar may get both. The U.S. government has been wary of working with the Iranian-backed militias, and the U.S. military had insisted they withdraw from Tikrit before it stepped up its bombing campaign in the city. But Pentagon officials now say they will provide air cover to all forces in Ramadi under the control of the Iraqi government.

Mohammadi claims that includes Kitaeb Hezbollah. “The coalition will provide air support for everyone,” he said. “It’s the best solution.”