

Iraqi troops in southern Fallujah for first time in 2 years

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Naymiah: A column of black Humvees carrying Iraqi special forces rolled into southern Fallujah today, the first time in more than two years that government troops have entered the western city held by the Islamic State group.

The counterterrorism troops fought house-to-house battles with the militants in the Shuhada neighborhood, and the operation to retake the city is expected to be one of the most difficult yet.

"Daesh are concentrating all their forces in this direction," said Gen. Haider Fadel, one of the commanders of the counterterrorism forces, using the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State militants.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi promised a swift victory when he announced the start of the operation on May 22 to liberate Fallujah, about 65 kilometers west of Baghdad. But the complexity of the task quickly became apparent.

Although other security forces from the federal and provincial police, government-sanctioned Shiite militias and the Iraqi military have surrounded the city, only the elite counterterrorism troops are fighting inside Fallujah at this stage of the operation. And they are doing so under the close cover of US-led coalition airpower.

"We expect to face more resistance, especially because we are the only forces entering the city," Fadel said.

The Islamic State group has suffered setbacks on several fronts in the region where it captured large swaths of territory two years ago.

In northern Syria, US-backed rebels made a final push today in the town of Manbij a key waypoint on the IS supply line to the Turkish border and its self-styled capital of Raqqa. And in Libya, forces loyal to a UN-brokered government have advanced deep inside the coastal city of Sirte, the main stronghold of the IS group's local affiliate.

Fallujah is one of the last IS strongholds in Iraq. Government forces have slowly won back territory, although IS still controls parts of the north and west, as well as the second-largest city of Mosul.

The sky above Fallujah's Shuhada neighborhood today filled with fine dust and thick gray smoke obscuring minarets and communication towers as artillery rounds and volleys of airstrikes cleared the way for Iraqi ground forces.

At a makeshift command center, Iraqi forces coordinated the operation via hand-held radios, with Australian coalition troops stationed at a nearby base. One of the Australians listed the casualties among the militants.

"Two KIA (killed in action), one wounded with a missing arm his right arm," the unidentified Australian radioed after calling in an airstrike on Islamic State fighters.

- AP