

A LOOK AT IRAQ'S WAR AGAINST IS AFTER FALLUJAH

BAGHDAD: Iraqi forces say they have completely liberated the city of Fallujah from the Islamic State group after a monthlong operation, marking one of their biggest victories since the extremists swept across large parts of the country in 2014. But the IS group still controls parts of northern and western Iraq, including the country's second largest city, Mosul. And the militants have shown they can still launch large-scale suicide bombings and other attacks. Here's a look at what lies ahead for Iraq and the US-led military coalition battling the extremists.

Fallujah was the first Iraqi city to fall

to IS, in January 2014, and the group's last major stronghold in the sprawling Anbar province, a largely tribal Sunni region where distrust of the post-2003 Shiite-led government runs deep. A key task will be to prevent militants from returning to the city, as they did after two major US-led assaults on Fallujah in 2004, when American soldiers saw their deadliest urban combat since Vietnam.

Iraqi authorities will also need to ensure that residents can return to their homes and rebuild, and that powerful Sunni tribes in the area stay on the government's side. Those efforts could be complicated by the ballooning humani-

tarian crisis in Anbar and the presence of government-allied Shiite militias. The Iran-backed forces kept to the outskirts of Fallujah during the military operation, but could assert their power as the army moves on to other fronts.

The long road to Mosul

IS remains firmly in control of the northern city of Mosul, which was once home to a million people. Iraqi leaders have pledged to liberate Mosul this year, but US officials and analysts say that timetable may not be realistic. Iraqi forces are deployed in Makhmour, some 45 miles south of Mosul, but may need

to seize an airfield on the other side of the Tigris River before launching an all-out assault on the city. The US-led coalition has trained more than 23,000 Iraqi troops since December 2014, but thousands more are needed for the operation to retake Mosul, according to coalition and Iraqi officials. "Mosul can be a nastier fight than what we saw in Fallujah," said U.S. Army Col. Christopher Garver, a spokesman for the American-led military coalition. "If that's the Iraqi capital of the caliphate one would expect them to fight hard to maintain that."

Victory in Fallujah has given a major boost to Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi,

but his government is still crippled by political gridlock that has brought thousands of people into the streets in recent months. Supporters of Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr have twice stormed the Green Zone, the capital's heavily guarded government district, while demanding wide-ranging political reforms. Baghdad has also seen a series of deadly attacks in recent weeks despite the advances against IS in Anbar. That has raised fears that the extremists may fully revert to an earlier strategy of targeting security forces and the Shiite majority in order to stoke sectarian tensions. — AP

IRAQIS SUFFER IN DESERT CAMPS AFTER ESCAPING FROM FALLUJAH

AMIRIYAH AL-FALLUJAH: Khaled Suliman Ahmed fled Fallujah in a wheelchair. As Iraqi forces battled their way into the city and Islamic State militants melted away, he joined hundreds of others fleeing on foot into the desert. When the wheelchair broke down after 10 kilometers, his sons and wife took turns carrying him over their shoulders, and when they saw the tents in the distance, they assumed their nightmare was over.

"I thought we were going to be saved from hell and brought to heaven," Ahmed said, "but we were surprised by what we found here." What they found was a sprawling camp in the desert with little food or water, and nowhere near enough tents to shelter the tens of thousands of civilians who had descended on it. They joined thousands of people living out in the open, where midday temperatures approach 50 degrees Celsius.

Iraqi forces declared Fallujah "fully liberated" on Sunday. Months of planning went into the military operation to retake the city, which had been held by IS for more than two years and was the group's last stronghold in the vast Anbar province. Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi has hailed a recent string of victories against IS in Anbar, and last week proclaimed that Fallujah had "returned to the embrace of the nation."

But the government was ill-prepared to deal with the humanitarian crisis now unfolding less than an hour's drive west of Baghdad, where the UN estimates that 85,000 people have fled their homes in the past month. The conditions in the camps are reinforcing perceptions of a government that is hopelessly corrupt and ineffective. That could fuel unrest in the overwhelmingly Sunni province, which has a history of rebellion against the Shiite-led government going back to the 2003 US-led invasion.

High population density

A government spokesman acknowledged that authorities had been surprised

by the wave of displaced, and said an emergency allocation of another \$8.5 million in aid was approved earlier this month. "Given the high population density inside the city, we prepared four camps before the operation," government spokesman Saad al-Hadithi told The Associated Press. "But the large number of displaced people and the quick movement has made it very hard to meet their needs."

Ahmed, who escaped Fallujah in a wheelchair, described the harrowing final days of IS rule, when his family huddled indoors as the city was bombed by airstrikes and artillery. They lived off stale bread and dates, and prayed for liberation. After months of fierce clashes on the city's southern edge, Iraqi forces punched into central Fallujah last week as IS defenses crumbled. Tens of thousands of civilians - who had previously been used as human shields - fled south. In just three days, more than 30,000 people had descended on a cluster of already overcrowded camps on the edge of Amiriyyah al-Fallujah.

Now, days after their dramatic escape, Ahmed and his family are once again living on little food or water. A few dozen families huddle in the shade under the frames of half-finished caravans. Hundreds more spend the daylight hours in the courtyard of a mosque before unrolling bed mats to sleep out in the open once the sun sets. "We saw it as a good sign that the government came to liberate Fallujah," said Bayda Mohammad, who walked through the desert for six hours with her four young children after fleeing the city a week ago. Now they share a tent with 10 other people in an open plot of desert fenced off with razor-wire.

"What kind of a government treats its people like this?" she asked, holding a scarf up to cover her face as a hot gust of wind whipped up dust and garbage. Behind her a crowd of women waving identification documents formed around a group of aid workers distributing water. "It's the same as always," she said. "This is a rich country, but our politicians only look after themselves." — AP



ANKARA: Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim delivers a speech during a press conference after a Turkish-Israeli meeting, at the Cankaya Palace. — AFP

NETANYAHU PRAISES DEAL TO RESTORE ISRAEL-TURKEY TIES

SIX YEARS AFTER RAID ON AN AID FLOTILLA

ROME: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday lauded a highly anticipated deal reached the previous day to restore ties with Turkey, six years after a deadly raid on an aid flotilla soured relations. Netanyahu, speaking after meeting US Secretary of State John Kerry in Rome, said the agreement would have major implications for the Israeli economy, with his country seeking export partners for its natural gas. "I think it's an important step here to normalize relations," Netanyahu told reporters. He said he would lay out the deal in detail later in the day, but described it as having "immense implications for the Israeli economy, and I use that word advisedly." "I mean positive, immense implications," he said. Kerry also hailed the deal as a "positive step." Netanyahu and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim were scheduled to hold separate press conferences in Rome and Ankara on the deal at 1000 GMT.

A senior Turkish official also confirmed the agreement, saying in a reference to the Israeli raid that it "represents a diplomatic victory for Turkey, which assumed a principled and determined stance after the Mavi Marmara attack." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas spoke by phone overnight, with the Turkish leader explaining the agreement's main points, a statement from the Palestinian presidency said. Erdogan also met with Doha-based Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal on Friday in anticipation of the agreement.

'Spitting in our face'

Previously close relations between Israel and Turkey were significantly downgraded after Israeli commandos staged a botched pre-dawn raid on the six-ship flotilla in May 2010 as it tried to run the blockade on the Gaza Strip. Nine activists aboard the Turkish-owned Mavi Marmara ferry were killed, with a 10th person later dying of his wounds. All of those killed were Turkish nationals.

Both sides have been pushing to complete the deal in recent months, with Israel in search of a potential customer for its offshore gas exports and NATO member Turkey wanting to restore its regional clout, analysts say. The United States has also pushed for the two countries to resolve the dispute as it seeks cooperation in the fight against extremists from the Islamic State group. Within Israel, the deal was given a mixed response, with one newspaper quoting a soldier from the Mavi Marmara raid as saying "it's nothing less than spitting in our face."

The deal includes Israel paying some \$20 million into a fund for compensation for the Turkish victims' families. "We were sent to stop a terrorist flotilla. That was the mission," Maariv quoted the anonymous soldier as saying. "How is it possible today to pay compensation to terrorists who tried to murder us on board the ship? What message does that send to the rest of the troops?"

Compromise on blockade

The deal is to result in the restoration of ambassadors, an Israeli official said on condition of anonymity. Two of Turkey's key conditions for normalization - an apology and compensation - were largely met earlier, leaving its third

demand, that Israel lift its blockade on the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, the main obstacle. Reports in recent days described a compromise on the issue. Under the reported terms of the deal, Israel will allow the completion of a much-needed hospital in Gaza, as well as the construction of a new power station and a desalination plant for drinking water. Turkey's aid to Gaza would also be channelled through the Israeli port of Ashdod rather than sending it directly to the Palestinian enclave, the reports said. Turkey has also committed to keeping Islamist movement Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, from

carrying out activities against Israel from its country, Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported Sunday. Hamas would continue to be able to operate from Turkey for diplomatic purposes, the paper said. Netanyahu has also come under pressure within Israel not to agree to the deal if it does not include provisions for Hamas to hand over four missing Israelis, including the remains of two soldiers presumed dead and two civilians believed held alive by Hamas in Gaza. The Israeli official said Erdogan agreed to instruct "all relevant Turkish agencies to help resolve the issue of Israel's missing citizens." — AFP



In this picture taken Saturday, June 25, 2016, internally displaced civilians from Fallujah, who fled their homes during fighting between Iraqi security forces and Islamic State group, receive humanitarian aids at a camp in Amariyat Fallujah. — AP

VATICAN AND TURKEY LOCKED IN ARMENIAN GENOCIDE ROW

KHOR VIRAP, Armenia: Pope Francis on Sunday released peace doves on the Armenia-Turkey border in a gesture of reconciliation as Ankara slammed the pontiff for denouncing the mass killings of Armenians by Ottoman forces as "genocide". Standing on a terrace of the Khor Virap monastery, Francis and the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church Karekin II released the two white birds in the direction of Mount Ararat - the Biblical final resting place of Noah's Ark - now in modern-day Turkey.

The long-planned gesture at the end of a three-day visit to ex-Soviet Armenia came in the face of fresh Turkish ire after Francis used the word "genocide" to refer to the century-old slaughter that Ankara furiously rejects. The Vatican was forced to refute claims from Turkey that Pope Francis showed a "mentality of the Crusades" over his use of the term. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Nurettin Canikli late on Saturday labeled the pope's declaration "very unfortunate" and said it bore traces of "the mentality of the Crusades." "It is not an objective statement that conforms with reality," Canikli said.

'Bridges not wall'

The Vatican rejected the allegations and said the pontiff was trying to build "bridges

not walls" and had nothing against Turkey. "If you listen to the pope, there is nothing that evokes a spirit of the Crusades," spokesman Federico Lombardi told journalists in the Armenian capital Yerevan. "Francis prayed for reconciliation of all and did not say one word against the Turkish people. The pope does not conduct Crusades, is not looking to organize a war."

The pope himself defended his use of the word, admitting that he had strayed from his pre-prepared remarks by saying it but that it had been right to do so. "After feeling the tone of the speech by the (Armenian) president and having already used the word last year at St Peter's, I thought it would have sounded odd not to use the same word," he told reporters on the flight back to Rome Sunday evening. "I did not use the word with an offensive intention, but objectively," he added.

When Francis first used the term "genocide" in 2015, on the centenary of the 1915-1917 killings that Armenians say wiped out some 1.5 million of their people, Ankara angrily recalled its envoy from the Holy See for nearly a year. Armenians have long sought international recognition for the World War I killings as genocide. Turkey - the Ottoman Empire's successor state - argues that it was a collective tragedy in which both Turks and Armenians died. — AFP

BAN TELLS PALESTINIANS TO 'STAND AGAINST VIOLENCE'

JERUSALEM: UN chief Ban Ki-moon yesterday urged Israelis and Palestinians not to allow extremists on either side to fan violence, as he arrived as part of a Middle East tour. "Do not allow the extremism on either side to fuel the... conflict," he said in remarks at Tel Aviv University. "Palestinians and Israelis leaders must stand firm against violence, terror and incitement."

Ban continued the theme at a meeting with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem. "Stabbings, bombings and shootings will not achieve anything because violence is never a solution," he said. The United Nations Secretary General is to hold talks with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday, as part of a packed schedule in which he will also visit the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, occupied by Israel since the 1976 Six Day War.

"Nearly 50 years of occupation has had a devastating impact on Palestinian lives undermining the belief in a peaceful resolution to the conflict," Ban said in Jerusalem. "It also has

not brought security to the Israelis. "I firmly believe that a negotiated two-state solution remains the only viable option to prevent a perpetual conflict," he added.

Netanyahu was originally expected to meet Ban on Monday but he was in Rome for talks with US Secretary of State John Kerry on stalled peace efforts with the Palestinians. That meeting came ahead of a report by the Quartet - the United Nations, the European Union, the United States and Russia - on the peace process. The review by the diplomatic contact group is expected to be critical of Israeli policies in the occupied West Bank.

"I encourage Israeli and Palestinian leaders to engage with the Quartet on its recommendations and on creating the conditions for the resumption of meaningful negotiations," Ban said. He kicked off his Middle East tour in Kuwait on Sunday. On Tuesday he goes to Gaza to inspect a UN-run girls primary school, then on to Ramallah in the West Bank for talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and prime minister Rami Hamdallah. — AFP



JERUSALEM: Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, right, and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon shake hands before their meeting at the presidential compound. — AP