IRAQ

Besieged population in Fallujah

Crisis overview

Fallujah, located 50km west of Baghdad in Anbar governorate, has been under Islamic State (IS) control for more than two years. Since January 2016, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have surrounded the city. The military siege, which has tightened in the past three months, is preventing any food and medical supplies from reaching between 30,000 and 60,000 Iraqi civilians trapped in Fallujah. Military operations are ongoing in surrounding areas, but it is unconfirmed whether an attack on the city itself is imminent.

Need for international assistance

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Expected impact

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Key findings

Anticipated scope and scale

Between 30,000 and 60,000 Iraqi civilians are suffering from severe food and medical aid shortages. The situation is likely to deteriorate as the siege goes on and no humanitarian aid is provided.

Priorities for humanitarian intervention

- **Food**: severe food shortages have been reported and prices of basic foodstuffs are extremely high.
- **Health**: Civilians are increasingly being killed or wounded by bombing or military clashes but severe medical aid shortages have been reported. Provision of health assistance is urgently required.
- **Protection**: Fallujah’s residents are prevented from fleeing areas under IS control. The inability of civilians to access safety is a major protection concern.

Humanitarian constraints

Supply routes have been cut off since government forces recaptured Ramadi in December 2015 and tightened their control of the Al Jazira desert area north of Fallujah in March 2016. Government forces are restricting essential food and medical supplies from entering the city. Road supply corridors remain unsafe to humanitarian actors. IS, who control Fallujah, have limited access to food and medicine, and prevent people from leaving to access protection and humanitarian assistance.

Limitations: Severely restricted access to IS controlled Fallujah inhibits the collection of reliable information on population in need. There are information gaps particularly in terms of health, WASH (potential waterborne diseases outbreak), and shelter needs.
Crisis impact

It is estimated that between 30,000 and 60,000 Iraqis are trapped inside the Islamic State-held city of Fallujah with no safe route to escape. The humanitarian situation is rapidly deteriorating due to ongoing military operations around the city, and the limited access of populations to assistance and of relief actors to the besieged population (WFP 05/02/2016). Fallujah has been under siege for over a year, and is currently surrounded by Iraqi forces. The humanitarian situation has worsened in the last three months (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; Middle East Eye 25/02/2016; WFP 05/02/2016). Since January 2016, escalation of armed conflict has resulted in extreme food, fuel, and medical aid shortages in the city and high prices of food in local markets (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; WFP 05/02/2016). In March, government forces in the desert areas around Fallujah further disrupted IS supply lines (HRW 07/04/2016; ISW 07/03/2016).

Food insecurity: People in Fallujah are experiencing acute shortage of food supplies. As of early April 2016, there had been no re-supply of food since early January 2016 (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; Al Jazeera 07/04/2016). People have been reportedly reduced to eating expired or inadequate food, such as bread made from ground date seeds and soup made of grass (HRW 07/04/2016; Al Jazeera 07/04/2016).

Food availability: Reports indicate that there is no availability of food items in local markets including wheat, sugar, rice, vegetable oil and lentils. Shops have exhausted their food stocks and people are reportedly mainly depending on food produce they collect from farms in rural areas close to the city, including potatoes, lettuce and eggplant (WFP 23/03/2016; 05/02/2016). Sub-districts of Hay Almoalmin and Hay Alwahda report inadequate supply of basic food stuffs (WFP 11/04/2016).

Food access: The price of basic food in Fallujah’s local markets has skyrocketed. Between December 2015 and January 2016, the price of food commodities increased by between 500% and 800% in the city (WFP 05/02/2016). At the end of March, flour was reported to be 30 times more expensive in Fallujah than in Baghdad, a sack of flour being sold for USD 500 in Fallujah compared to USD 15 in the capital (Al Jazeera 07/04/2016). Rice is also nine times more and sugar 10 times more expensive in Fallujah than in Baghdad (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016). Bakeries have begun rationing bread (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016). Local shops still providing goods are run by IS militants who are reported to charge extortionate rates (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016). IS has also been reported to use food as a weapon, distributing food to sympathisers while depriving others believed to have links with Iraqi forces or local tribesmen (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016). Although small amounts of food are grown in rural areas close to the city, access to farmland and produce is constrained (WFP 04/2016).

Lighting and cooking: Fuel has become scarce during the cold winter months when temperatures drop close to freezing in December 2015 (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016). Since January 2016, zero availability of fuel or cooking gas has been reported in Fallujah (WFP 05/02/2016).

Health: Since the beginning of the year, no medicine had been brought inside Fallujah (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; Middle East Eye 25/02/2016). Medical supplies have been reportedly growing scarcer by the day (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016). As a result, hospitals in Fallujah have been operating with minimum capacities, hindering for instance surgical operations for people wounded by the conflict. Cases of suicide due to hunger have been reported (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; Sputnik 30/03/2016). Cases of intestinal diseases have been reported due to inadequate nutrition (Aawsat 29/03/2016; Al Arabiya 05/04/2016). An increasing number of severely food insecure children in local hospitals have been reported, as well as baby food shortages (HRW 07/04/2016). Bombings have reportedly damaged medical infrastructure, including Fallujah’s children’s hospital (Reuters 15/07/2015; HRW 07/04/2016).

Protection: The number of casualties and injured people has been increasing owing to multiple aircraft and artillery attacks by government forces (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; HRW 07/04/2016; Al Arabiya 05/04/2016). Though the information is not confirmed, between January 2014 and April 2016, 5,769 combatants and civilians have been injured and 3,455 killed, approximately one-fourth of them women and children (HRW 07/04/2016). Fallujah civilians are prevented from fleeing areas under IS control. The inability of civilians to access safety is a major protection concern (UNHCR 29/02/2016). Dozens of people reportedly have been executed by IS fighters for trying to leave Fallujah or because they were accused of being Iraqi government spies. IS has also jailed more than 100 men for protesting the execution of family members (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016; HRW 07/04/2016; ihtimes 17/03/2016). On 25 March, the Iraqi government opened three exit routes for civilians in Fallujah to flee the city, but as of 7 April IS was still blocking civilians from leaving (HRW 07/04/2016).

WASH: Water shortages have been reported in Fallujah (RT 01/04/2016).

Shelter: Since July 2015, Fallujah has been bombarded by the Iraqi forces supported by the US-led coalition, leading to destruction of property and damage to medical infrastructure (Reuters 15/07/2015).

Impact on critical infrastructure

Continuous bombing by Iraqi forces has led to the destruction of buildings. On 13 August 2015, aerial bombs struck Fallujah’s children’s hospital (HRW 07/04/2016). IS military tactics have previously included using the Fallujah dam to induce flooding and power shortages (Reuters 11/04/2014).
Vulnerable groups affected

**Elderly people, people suffering from chronic illness and young children** have no means of getting healthcare and are vulnerable given the lack of medicine. Children are especially vulnerable to malnutrition and dehydration [Al Jazeera 30/03/2016]. At least 140 people, mostly children and elderly, have reportedly died over the past few months because of lack of food, milk and medicine [Al Jazeera 07/04/2016; Albawaba 07/04/2016; Middle East Eye 25/02/2016].

**Women** are vulnerable to slave trade and gender-based violence. In July 2015, reports mentioned women being sold daily in a Fallujah sex slave market [VoA 24/07/2015]. In 2015, thousands of cases of kidnapping, captivity and rape committed by IS against Syrian and Iraqi women were reported across Iraq [Aranews 03/07/2015].

Humanitarian and operational constraints

Aid has not reached Fallujah since the government forces recaptured nearby Ramadi from IS in December 2015, cutting off supply routes [Al Jazeera 07/04/2016]. IS controls the city and some rural areas around the city. It has restricted access to land, food and medicine. Government forces have cut off road access to the city, preventing essential food, fuel and medical supplies from entering [WF 05/02/2016; HRW 07/04/2016]. Road supply corridors remain unsafe for humanitarian actors [WF 05/02/2016].

**Electricity supplies**: Poor electricity supplies are reported in Fallujah [Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit 30/11/2010].

Contextual information

**Development of the current conflict**

In June 2014, IS, after seizing control of large parts of Iraq, declared the creation of a caliphate, covering the area between Aleppo in northern Syria and Diyala in eastern Iraq, controlling nearly 300,000 km² of territory [Al Jazeera 01/06/2015; UN 16/02/2016; Middle East Eye 27/03/2016]. Since May 2015, IS has lost multiple key positions in Iraq, including Ramadi, Tikrit and Sinjar. They retain control of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, and large swathes of Anbar and Ninewa governorates [Wilson Centre 14/01/2016; BBC 02/12/2015; ISW 2006; Global Security 2016].

Fallujah, located 50km west of Baghdad in Anbar governorate, was the first city to fall to IS and has been under IS control since January 2014. Iraqi security forces and Shia militia launched a military offensive to drive IS out of Anbar province in July 2015. A number of supply routes were subsequently rendered inaccessible [Al Jazeera 30/03/2016]. In December 2015 and January 2016, ISF backed by US-led coalition air strikes, pro-government Shia troops, and local Sunni tribal fighters, drove IS from Ramadi, located 40km west of Fallujah, and gained territory around the city. Since then, Fallujah's siege has been severely tightened [Middle East Eye 25/02/2016]. However, since recapturing Ramadi, Iraqi authorities have not made clear whether they will attempt to take Fallujah soon or leave it contained while the bulk of their forces head north towards Mosul [Vice News 07/04/2016].

**Displacement in Anbar governorate**

Since July 2015, areas in Fallujah, Ramadi and Haditha districts have been targeted by numerous coalition airstrikes, leading to displacement [IOM 31/08/2015]. 57,000 people have been displaced in Anbar in 2016, including some 36,000 in and around Heet, which has been contested in recent weeks [OCHA 10/04/2016; ECHO 22/03/2016].

**Stakeholders**

**Islamic State (IS)** declared the creation of a Sunni caliphate, covering the area between Aleppo in Syria and Diyala in Iraq. According to US officials, IS has an estimated 30,000 troops in Syria and Iraq, with foreign fighters accounting for about two thirds [NBC 28/02/2015]. Although government and Peshmerga forces took some villages southeast...
of Mosul in January and February 2016, IS retains control of large territories in Anbar and Ninewa (16/02/2016).

**Government forces:** Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) number around 48,000 troops, compared to pre-crisis estimates of 250,000. Many personnel have fled or joined other armed groups, both opposed to and allied with the ISF (Vox 17/11/2015; Foreign Policy 28/03/2015).

**International forces:** Since August 2014, a US-led Combined Joint Task Force of over 30 countries has been conducting airstrikes against IS in support of Iraqi government forces (Business Insider 09/12/2016; Business Insider 21/12/2014). In late July 2015, Turkey joined the coalition, but also stepped up airstrikes in northern Iraq against the PKK (The Economist 01/08/2015).

**Shia militias** have been supporting government forces against IS, as part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). PMF number between 80,000 and 120,000 fighters (Foreign Policy 28/03/2015). While the PMF operationally support Abadi’s government, they have also described themselves as loyal to Iran’s supreme leader (Reuters 21/10/2015).

**Sunni tribal fighters** who oppose IS have played an increasingly important role in military operations since 2015, particularly in Anbar province (UN 16/02/2016).

### Key characteristics of host population and area

**Demographic profile:** Total population of Iraq: 37,056,169. Urban population: 70%. Fallujah: 80,000–100,000 (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016). Anbar governorate makes up a third of Iraq’s territory and is populated mainly by Sunnis (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016).

**Gender and age distribution:**
- 0-14 years: 40%; 15-24 years: 19%; 25-54 years: 34%; 55-64 years: 4%; above 65 years: 3% (Wall Street Journal 09/06/2015; CIA Factbook 2015).

**Food security:** 2.4 million people in need of food assistance across Iraq (OCHA 14/12/2015).

**Health statistics:** More than 10.1 million people need health support (OCHA 14/12/2015). Infant mortality: 38 deaths/1,000 live births; under-5 mortality: 32 deaths/1,000 live births; maternal mortality: 50 deaths per 100,000 live births (CIA Factbook 2015; World Bank 2015).

**WASH statistics:** Improved drinking water source in urban areas: 94%; rural areas: 70%. Improved sanitation facility access in urban areas: 86%; rural areas: 84% (CIA Factbook 2015).

**Literacy levels:** Male: 86%; female: 74% (CIA Factbook 2015).

### Response capacity

**Local and national response capacity**

Iraq’s institutional disaster management capacity is limited on both national and sub-national levels after decades of conflict and security concerns (ODI 11/2015). The Iraqi Red Crescent Society is active in responding to conflict and natural disasters; but has limited access to Fallujah (IFRC 2016).

Local response capacity within the city of Fallujah is unknown due to access constraints. In March, the Government of Iraq has requested humanitarian partners to prepare a plan for Fallujah displacement (ECHO 11/03/2016). Iraqi authorities and the US-led international military coalition have rejected repeated requests from the governor of Anbar and local tribal chiefs to airdrop in humanitarian supplies, as they fear the aid would fall to the hand of IS fighters and help them sustain control over the population (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016).

**International response capacity**

There are no international humanitarian actors present inside Fallujah due to insecurity. WFP has not been able to access or distribute food inside Fallujah since IS took control of the city in January 2014 (WFP 05/02/2016). Several UN agencies and INGOs are present in Anbar governorate, such as NRC, but they are mainly limited to accessing IDP camps and areas near border points (NRC 12/02/2016). The International Red Cross has been leading negotiations with the aim of IS allowing aid teams into the city to provide basic assistance; however, as of end March negotiations are ongoing (Middle East Eye 25/02/2016).

**Population coping mechanisms**

Fallujah inhabitants have been reported growing vegetables in their backyards as they do not have enough money to buy food, or because food is not available for purchase (Al Jazeera 30/03/2016; WFP 23/03/2016). They have also reportedly been reduced to eating expired or inadequate food (Al Jazeera 07/04/2016; IRIN 07/03/2016).

**Information gaps and needs**

Due to severely limited access to Fallujah, and IS prohibitions on the use of mobile phones and Internet, there are major information gaps on the humanitarian needs across all sectors, especially in terms of health, WASH (potential waterborne diseases outbreak), and shelter needs (HRW 07/04/2016).
Lessons learned

- There are feelings of mistrust between Fallujah's largely Sunni population and Iraq's Shiite-dominated central government and forces. This complicates the impartial delivery of aid. Military operations, including any operations to recapture Fallujah, risk worsening sectarian tensions. (IRIN 07/04/2016).

- Devastated and or dilapidated health services and WASH infrastructure have heightened Anbar governorate's vulnerability to waterborne diseases outbreaks (WHO 26/11/2015).

- Besieged cities that have been successfully relieved in recent months in Iraq and Syria offer lessons. WFP delivered food assistance to Haditha in Anbar governorate in December 2015 and the government managed to distribute rations in January 2016 (WFP 02/2016).

Source: ISW 02/03/2016