ISIS and Iranian-backed Militias Compete to Control Baghdad Region
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Key Takeaway: Iranian-backed militias are increasingly supplanting other Iraqi security forces and asserting control over Baghdad and surrounding areas, creating opportunities for ISIS to infiltrate Baghdad. Iranian-backed militias are also exerting control over populations and transit routes around Baghdad in hopes to eject US forces and set conditions to maintain a long-term demographic majority. Militia activity causes other Iraqi security forces to divide their attention between countering militias and countering ISIS, reducing the effectiveness of both efforts. ISIS is exploiting this gap to build durable support zones through the Baghdad Belts from which it can stage spectacular attacks. The Iraqi Security Forces must develop better local security strategies to more effectively counter both militia and ISIS campaigns in Baghdad and the Baghdad Belts.

Iranian-backed militias expanded control in the Baghdad Belts following US drawdowns in early 2020. The United States accelerated withdrawal plans from five bases outside Baghdad in spring 2020 in response to COVID-19.[1] The draw down marked the transition to the "normalization" phase of the coalition's counter-ISIS campaign.[2] Iranian-backed militias had set conditions to expand their presence around several bases with a US presence during their rocket campaigns in 2019 and 2020. Iranian-backed militias, including US-designated terrorist organization Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), then expanded their presence at the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing at Qaim, Anbar Province, following the US departure from that area in March 2020.[3] US-designated terrorist organization Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) maintained a presence in the northern Baghdad Belts near Balad, Salah ad-Din Province, since at least July 2018, from which it launched rocket attacks targeting Balad Air Base and Camp Taji until the United States transferred Taji to Iraqi Security Forces control in August 2020.[4] Iranian-backed militias filled the security gaps left by the base's transfer and now likely control checkpoints and road traffic around the base.[5]

Militias have also escalated improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on Iraqi-operated logistics convoys contracted by the US-led Coalition travelling through the southern Baghdad Belts and out toward eastern Anbar and southern Salah ad-Din in 2021. These attacks began in February 2020 and escalated dramatically in late 2020 and into 2021.[6] They are intended to intimidate Iraqi businesses out of cooperating with the United States, making continued US involvement in Iraq more costly and difficult to sustain. Iranian proxy militia IED attacks may increasingly oblige Iraqi Security Forces to protect Coalition-contracted convoys, drawing critical resources from other operations by those forces.[7]

Iranian-backed militias are also capitalizing on their counter-ISIS mission to expand their presence and profiteering in the northern Baghdad Belts. Militias use the cover of counter-ISIS operations in Baquba, Tarmiya, and Fallujah to expand their presence at key bases and along transit routes. Militias abuse their position as security providers to maintain financial control over lucrative border crossings and prevent local Sunni populations from establishing independent security forces.[8]

ISIS is fighting to maintain mobility along lines of control connecting Baghdad to ISIS safe havens in northern Iraq. ISIS aims to stage spectacular attacks in Baghdad and southern Iraq in order to recruit new fighters and to delegitimize the Iraqi Security Forces and Iraq's Shi'a-led government among Shi'a communities. ISIS maintains safe havens and conducts training in Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) to set conditions for

those attacks. The DIBs include areas of Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala provinces claimed by both the Kurdish Regional Government and federal Iraq, which are more haphazardly secured thanks to their disputed status. ISIS moves materiel from the DIBs and through the Baghdad Belts to reach Baghdad. ISIS developed multiple vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) production cells in northeastern Salah ad-Din Province before February 2021 to enable attacks in the Baghdad Belts which aimed to weaken local Iraqi Security Forces. VBIEDs are expensive and indicate that ISIS is prioritizing spectacular attacks around Baghdad over concurrent attack campaigns elsewhere in Iraq. The Iraqi Security Forces discovered three VBIED facilities in the Hamrin Mountains and al-Dour District, Salah ad-Din Province, between February 10 and March 10, 2021, possibly with the intent of targeting Samarra, a key transit node along the Tigris River Valley just north of the Baghdad Belts.[9] ISIS likely maintains several such factories throughout the southeastern Hamrin Mountains. ISIS also attempted to revive its VBIED network in Fallujah and Ramadi, Anbar Province, in October 2020, possibly to employ along lines of transit approaching Baghdad toward Abu Ghraib.[10]

ISIS and Iran-backed militias perpetuate ethnic conflict and displacement in the Baghdad Belts to exert control over the Sunni and Shi'a populations, respectively. ISIS aims to ignite tensions between Shi'a militias and local Sunni populations in the Baghdad Belts in order to exacerbate Sunni disillusion with and isolation from the Iraqi state.[11] ISIS militants conducted a complex attack targeting a holy Shi'a site in Khazraj, 10 km northeast of Balad, Salah ad-Din Province, on August 19, 2020.[12] The attack killed three soldiers from the 1st PMF Brigade, which is affiliated with the Iranian-backed Badr Organization, and sparked renewed tensions between the local Sunni and Shi'a communities. ISIS similarly assassinated a high-ranking Iraqi Army officer in Tarmiya, Salah ad-Din Province, in July 2020, triggering statements by Sunni Iraqi parliamentarian Dhafer al Ani that retaliatory PMF activity would displace Sunni residents of Tarmiya.[13] ISIS also accelerated attacks in late 2020 and early 2021 targeting Iranian-backed militias in Jurf al-Sakhar, a previously majority Sunni area that is now majority Shi'a and dominated by Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH).[14] KH prevents the previous Sunni inhabitants from returning and excludes other Iraqi security forces from operating in Jurf al-Sakhar to mask their activities from the Iraqi government. ISIS may intend to provoke KH into lashing out against and displacing additional nearby Sunnis.
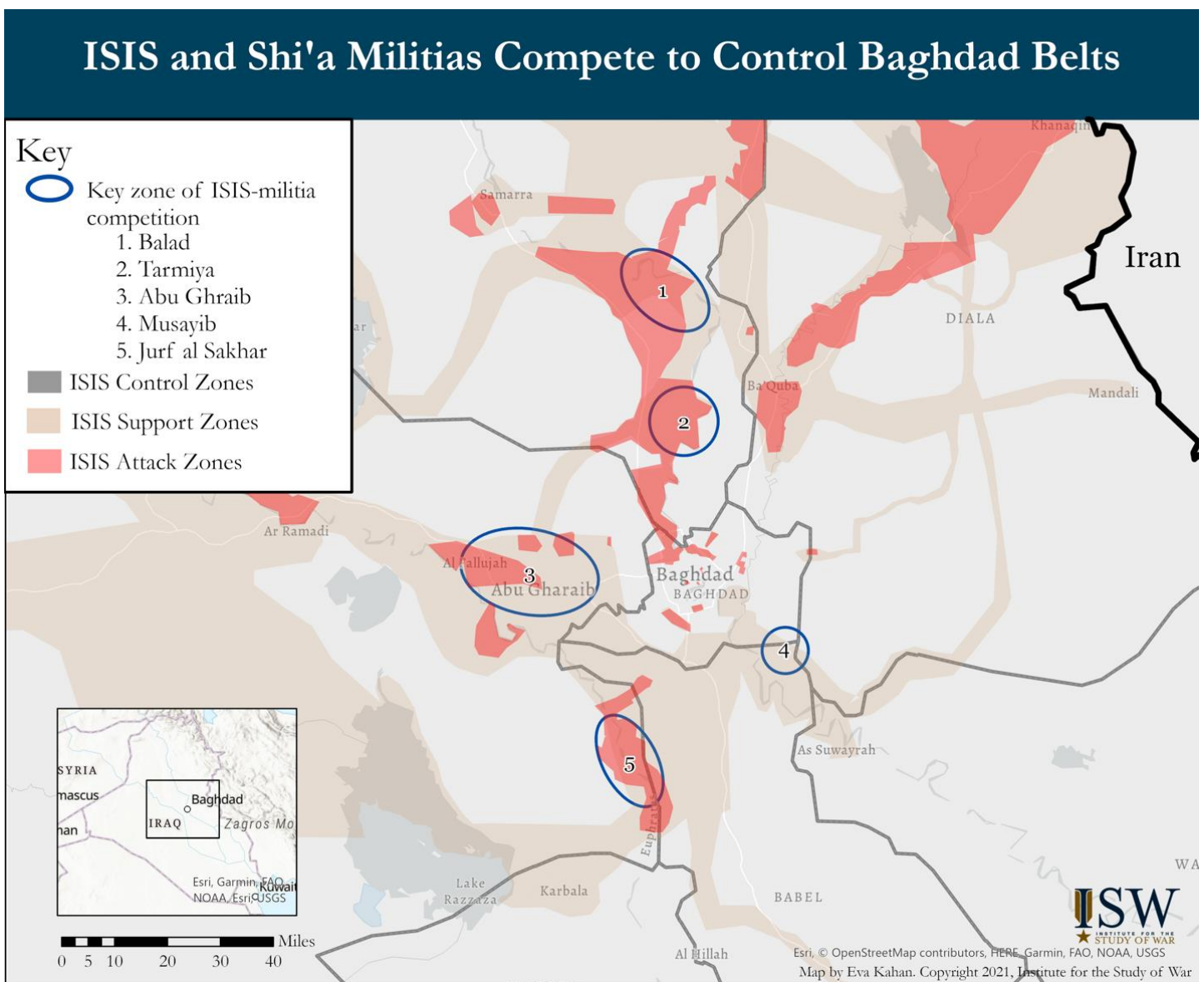
Shi'a militias maintain a vested demographic interest in perpetuating Sunni displacement in Diyala Province as well, particularly along lines of control between Baghdad and the Iranian border.[15] Non-Shi'a populations in Diyala Province often complain that Iranian-backed PMF militias fail to adequately protect their communities, thereby enabling further displacement.[16] Shi'a militias have also facilitated the relocation of displaced persons from federally controlled Iraq, including in Baghdad and Diyala provinces, to overcrowded camps in the Kurdistan Region, to create an electoral advantage for Iranian-backed parties in Baghdad and Diyala and a Shi'a demographic majority for decades to come.[17] Although Iran-backed militias likely engage in this behavior throughout Iraq, it is particularly visible in the historically mixed region in the Baghdad Belts and Diyala Province. Unidentified, likely Iranian-backed actors within Iraq's Independent High Election Commission manipulated the voter registration information of thousands of displaced Sunnis from Jurf al-Sakhar to reregister them in the majority-Kurdish region where they currently reside, rather than allowing them to vote in Jurf as mandated by law.[18] Iran-backed election manipulation may formalize Jurf as a Shi'a-majority district, granting Iran-backed parties additional seats in Iraq's 2021 elections and cementing militia control of the southwestern Baghdad Belts. Iranian-backed militias are likely to continue aiding, perpetuating, and taking advantage of ISIS-initiated ethnic population displacement in order to gain a demographic and electoral advantage, as they did in 2016.[19]

Militias and ISIS use Iraq's muddied information environment to avoid responsibility for their attacks, thus evading legal consequences and provoking popular discontent against the Iraqi Security Forces. Militias exploit their networks in Iraqi media and politics to falsely attribute militia attacks to ISIS and create a culture of militia impunity.[20] This behavior is most evident when ISIS and Shi'a militia campaigns overlap in and around Baghdad. Pro-militia media faked an ISIS claim for the killing of security analyst and political advisor Husham al-Hashimi in Baghdad's Zaiyouna neighborhood on July 6, 2020.[21] The falsified claim allowed Iranian proxies to deflect blame for the assassination. Similarly, likely members of Iranian proxy Asa'ib Ahl al Haq (AAH) abducted and killed eight Sunni civilians in Farhatiya, 10 km northwest of Balad, Salah ad-Din Province, on October 17, 2020. The Iraqi government refused to publicly acknowledge militia responsibility for the Farhatiya attack, likely due to militia pressure on government stakeholders. General Yahya Rasool, the spokesperson for the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, initially asserted that ISIS was responsible, in contrast with the US State Department assertion of Iranian proxy
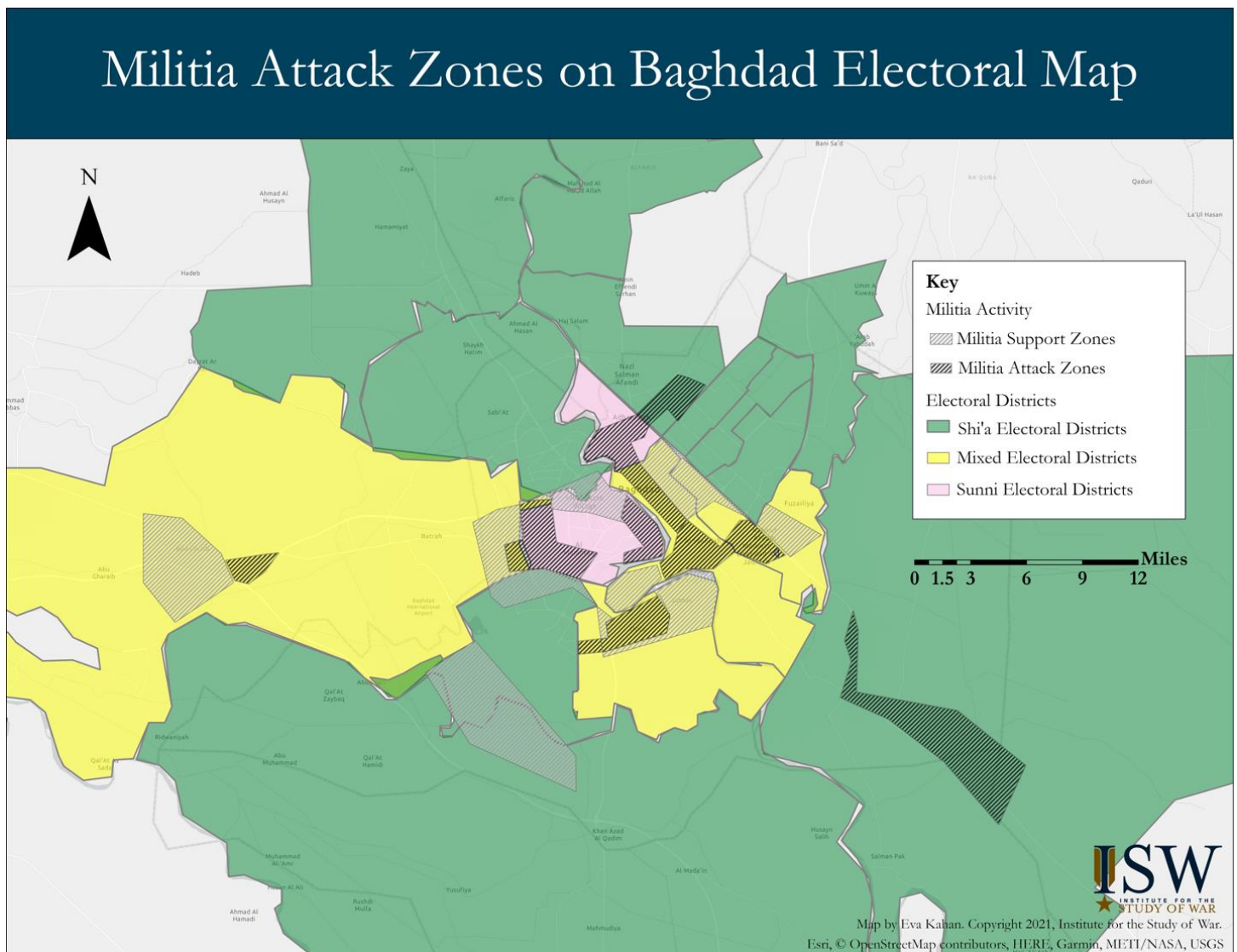
responsibility.[22] Rasool withdrew his accusation shortly thereafter but refused to reallocate blame to Iranian proxies.[23] Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi ordered AAH to leave the Farhatiya area and be replaced by unidentified Iraqi Army units, but ISW cannot confirm that such a replacement ever took place.[24]

ISIS sometimes impersonates militia forces to further obscure attribution. ISIS militants stole Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) uniforms and wore them in two attacks in southern Salah ad-Din Province in March 2021.[25] ISIS networks posted photos of the victims of the first attack, indicating likely ISIS responsibility.[26] However, Sunni Member of Parliament Quteiba al-Jibouri blamed Iranian-backed "factions" for the crime, asserting that the ISIS claims were covering up for a militia-run money-making scheme.[27] ISIS is more likely to be responsible than Iran-backed factions; ISIS's use of PMF uniforms in both attacks effectively aggravated local resentment borne from legitimate concerns about militia abuses of power. ISIS also claimed two Katyusha rocket attacks that were more likely perpetrated by militias in August and September 2020.[28]

By masquerading ISIS members as militiamen and falsely claiming militia activity, ISIS reduces popular willingness to cooperate with the PMF and renders identification and pursuit of perpetrators for a given attack increasingly difficult for the Iraqi Security Forces. Non-PMF Iraqi security forces cannot safely confront most militia groups, which operate with relative impunity under the protection of powerful political networks. The inability of non-PMF security forces to protect local populations from Iranian-backed militias deepens mistrust between Sunnis and the Iraqi government and risks radicalization of the Sunni population.

ISIS and Shi'a Militias Compete to Control Baghdad Belts

Key

Key zone of ISIS-militia competition
1. Balad
2. Tarmiya
3. Abu Ghraib
4. Musayib
5. Jurf al Sakhar

ISIS Control Zones
ISIS Support Zones
ISIS Attack Zones

Map by Eva Kahan. Copyright 2021, Institute for the Study of War

Shi'a extremist militias escalated social control efforts in Baghdad in late 2020, further degrading Iraqi Security Forces control. Iranian-backed militias maintain support zones in Baghdad City from which they have been conducting an on-again off-again rocket campaign since at least 2018, targeting major US-led Coalition assets including the US Embassy and Baghdad International Airport. The militias expanded attacks targeting local businesses from Baghdad's Karrada neighborhood to widespread support zones, from which it had previously launched rockets, in November 2020. Rab'allah, a Shi'a vigilante group likely sponsored and coordinated by Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), concentrated attacks on liquor stores in mixed sectarian neighborhoods. Rab'allah's activities may be aimed at controlling voter behavior or intimidating political rivals in advance of the upcoming parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for October 2021, while setting the framework for KH to control Baghdad politics in the longer term. Militia attacks are concentrated in mixed or Christian neighborhoods in election districts 8 and 12, which are visibly gerrymandered in contrast with municipal district lines, likely to ensure that Shi'a voters can electorally overwhelm Sunni and Christian voters and candidates.[29] Rab'allah's attacks likely also intend to restrict population collaboration with the Iraqi Security Forces, establishing militias as the dominant security force in central Baghdad. Rab'allah escalated its behavior with an ISIS-style armed parade through eastern Baghdad on March 25. The parade's posters threatened major stakeholders in the Iraqi government, including the prime minister, and challenged ISF authority in Baghdad.

Militia Attack Zones on Baghdad Electoral Map

ISIS exploits security vacuums in Baghdad neighborhoods where militias have pushed out the Iraqi Security Forces. ISIS conducted two successive suicide attacks in Tayaran Square in Baghdad's Bab al-Sharqi neighborhood

on January 21, 2021, killing at least 32 and wounding 110.[30] The attack marked the first mass-casualty ISIS attack in the capital since June 2019. Iraqi security forces uncovered an extensive ISIS network in Baghdad in the lead-up to the attack but were unable to prevent it.[31] The ISIS threat in Baghdad persists despite a spate of Counter-terrorism Services (CTS) arrests in Baghdad and Abu Ghraib in late January as well as the killing of ISIS Wali in Iraq, Abu Yassir al Issawi, on January 27 with coalition support.[32] ISIS conducted a smaller-scale grenade attack on Shi'a pilgrims in Kadhimiya, Baghdad, on March 8.[33]

Militias used the January 21 ISIS attacks to escalate their rhetoric against other regional actors.[34] Kata'ib Hezbollah and its associated front groups blamed Saudi Arabia for funding ISIS and used the January 21 attack to justify a drone attack launched from Iraq into Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on January 23, expressly stating that "[one suicide bombing] in Baghdad = [one] drone in Riyadh."[35] Kata'ib Hezbollah-linked channels threatened the United Arab Emirates with retaliation for alleged Saudi and Emirati funding of ISIS operations in Iraq.[36]

Security in Baghdad will continue to degrade to the advantage of both ISIS and Iranian-backed militias without an integrated counter-militia/counter-ISIS approach. The Iraqi Security Forces' efforts to counter militias in Baghdad have been largely unsuccessful. CTS counter-militia efforts have focused on arresting representatives of those militias, who are frequently freed by their political allies hours later, but have left victims of everyday intimidation unprotected. CTS made symbolic deployments to Baghdad's Green Zone and Karrada neighborhood following the March 25 Rab'allah parade, but does not have the manpower to address the threat that militias and ISIS pose to the greater Baghdad population. Prime Minister Kadhimi's regular use of CTS forces to counter militia aggression with limited effectiveness may strain the bandwidth of that small force, limiting its ability to counter ISIS in other areas.[37] In a concerning development, the Badr Organization-infiltrated Ministry of Interior has worked to push the Iraqi Army away from the capital and other major cities.[38] If successful, these efforts could cement militia control over populations in urban areas and further limit the effectiveness of more formalized counter-ISIS forces. In the most dangerous scenario, PMF units could restrict Iraqi Army mobility in urban areas; militias have already conducted high-profile attacks targeting other Iraqi security officials in Shula and al-Mansour.[39] Militias additionally continue to contest the Iraqi Security Forces' control over key routes in the Baghdad Belts, opening space for ISIS to operate. The Iraqi Security Forces will likely be unable to reclaim the southern approach route through Jurf al-Sakhr, but may be able to secure Tarmiya and Abu Ghraib by focusing on protecting the population from militia and ISIS intimidation.

US-led coalition forces providing security force assistance in Iraq can offer potentially pivotal assistance to the Iraqi Security Forces' counter-militia/counter-ISIS security campaign. US CJTF-OIR advisors can share intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance from assets already focused on monitoring militias with security forces. Coalition advisors can also offer operational-level guidance on how best to provide local security. Simultaneously, US advisors can support the Iraqi government in supplanting the levers of social control currently administered by the militias and their political wings: namely, the public sector employment and PMF positions that are often the only jobs available to Iraqis.[40] Efforts to diversify the Iraqi economy and reduce dependence on militia employment, while encouraging reforms to minimize PMF expansion and independence, could reduce the degree to which militias control the population.[41] The Iraqi population needs political and economic security to withstand militia intimidation and strengthen local security in and around Baghdad.

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