

ISIS IN THE SOUTHWEST BAGHDAD BELTS

Throughout September and October 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) moved to consolidate its control of terrain in al-Anbar province, closing the gap in its Euphrates control between Haditha and Ramadi. While ISIS does not yet control either city, ISIS seized the midway point between at Hit on October 2, 2014.¹ This backgrounder will examine ISIS forces southwest of Baghdad, which have recently been the focus of a counter-offensive by the ISF. The expulsion of ISIS forces southwest of Baghdad may generate a strategic advantage for the ISF; but it may also initially heighten the threat to Baghdad.

The southwestern Baghdad Belts have been an ISIS stronghold for some time. ISIS reestablished itself in 2013 within the historic “Triangle of Death” comprised of a cluster of cities 20 km south of Baghdad, including Mahmudiyah, Latifiyah, and Yusifiyah. Shi’a militia groups have had control of these areas since 2013, whereas ISIS has been present in the countryside, particularly in the Karaghuli tribal areas, including Jurf al-Sakhar. ISIS presence in this area allowed the group to launch VBIED attacks in southwestern Baghdad in 2013, as well as to project influence over populated areas to the west in Anbar province.² These towns, including Jurf al-Sakhar, Farisiyah, Fadhiliyah, Abu Ghraib, and Amiriyat al-Fallujah, link ISIS in northern Babil with ISIS in Anbar. ISIS likely established a dominant presence in this area after the Abu Ghraib prison break in July 2013.³ ISIS announced this support zone in early 2014 through the establishment of a Twitter account for its “Wilayat Janoob,” or “southern” governorate which extends from southwestern Baghdad, towards northern Babil to the south, and west towards Amiriyat al-Fallujah on the other side of the Euphrates in Anbar province. From this zone, ISIS can project force not only upon Anbar, but also Babil, Karbala, and Baghdad.

This ISIS stronghold came under attack by the ISF and Shi’a militias in October 2014. Jurf al-Sakhar is now controlled by the ISF and Iraqi Shi’a militias as of October 24, 2014.⁴ ISIS has launched multiple attacks to seize Amiriyat al-Fallujah since the beginning of the Anbar clashes in late 2013. So far, however, these attacks have been repelled by the Iraqi Army (IA), Iraqi Police (IP), and Iraqi Sunni anti-ISIS tribes stationed in the sub-district. As of November 20, the anti-ISIS forces in the area have switched from defensive to offensive posture by launching an operation to clear the southern environs of the area.⁵ Given the significance

of this terrain to ISIS, it is necessary to estimate the remaining strength of ISIS forces between south of Amiriyat al-Fallujah and northern Babil. It is unclear at this time whether ISIS attacks on Amiriyat al-Fallujah in April 2014 were purely defensive measures to protect Fallujah, or whether they were offensive measures to consolidate territory in the northern “outer” ring. Closer examination of ISIS activities from January 2014 to October 2014 reveal that there are separate ISIS sub-



Quadrant Southwest of Baghdad.

systems within this southwest quadrant of the Baghdad Belts, forming an “Inner Ring” and an “Outer Ring,” which will likely react to the ISF clearing operations differently.

THE SOUTHWESTERN BAGHDAD RINGS

ISIS activity in the southwest zone can be dissected into a system of two interactive rings. The “inner” ring is anchored south of Baghdad in Mahmudiyah, Latifiyah, and Yusifiyah, and arches west and north in the direction of Abu Ghraib. The “inner” ring, which is composed of areas like Arab Jubur, Hour Rijab, Albu Itha, and other agricultural areas adjacent to Baghdad, is geographically proximate to Shi’a neighborhoods in Baghdad city’s southwest quadrant, including Jihad, Amil, Bayaa, Shurta, Risalah, and Shuhada al-Saydiyah. The “outer” ring is anchored in the south by the city of Jurf al-Sakhar and extends northward along the Euphrates River, through the areas of Farisiyah, Fadhiliyah, and towards Amiriyat al-Fallujah,

ISIS consolidated its presence in the southwest Baghdad Belts by moving within these two rings, as well as by moving between them. The two rings are connected by ground lines of communication running from Fadhiliyah in the outer ring to Yusifiyah in the inner ring. Yusifiyah in turn, sits on roads running east to Mahmudiyah and southeast to Latifiyah. This linkage allowed ISIS to route fighters and equipment interchangeably between the rings, and increased its ability to respond effectively to ISF operations in the southwest zone.

THE “OUTER RING”

ISIS activity in the outer ring was anchored in the south by the city of Jurf al-Sakhar. A previous al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) stronghold in 2006, Jurf al-Sakhar functioned as a strategic location for ISIS in the south. ISIS prisoners who escaped during the Abu Ghraib prison break on July 21, 2013, likely made their way south to Jurf al-Sakhar using the network of roads connecting Abu Ghraib to both the inner and outer rings of the southwest Baghdad Belts.⁶ The challenging terrain of the area, its locations adjacent to the troubled province of Anbar, the historical presence of AQI, and a mainly Iraqi Sunni population, made it very difficult for the ISF to control or gain foothold there. Several major operations were launched throughout 2014 to clear the area but none were successful. These challenges led former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to order the creation of the Babil Operations Command in March of 2014, and then replace its commander several times in order to make a difference.⁷

ISIS was able to capitalize on historical AQI networks, safe havens, and weapons caches in the area. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)

discovered a training camp in Jurf al-Sakhar on October 6, 2013.⁸ Two days later, the Iraqi “Scorpion” Special Forces Unit clashed with 300 ISIS gunmen in Jurf al-Sakhar.⁹ These events preceded a large ISF operation in Farisiyah, 11 miles northwest of Musayyib, 12 miles southeast of Jurf al-Sakhar on October 9, 2013, when ISF discovered multiple ISIS training camps, weapons caches, and a VBIED factory, and arrested an ISIS leader.¹⁰ Additional clashes with ISIS and ISF raids near Amiriyat al-Fallujah on October 9, 2013, prove that ISIS maintained a significant presence in the “outer ring” at this time, a presence that the ISF struggled to uproot.¹¹

The ISF continued its attention to this area when it launched a major urban offensive in Anbar in January 2014.¹² ISIS seized control of Fallujah around January 3, 2014, also attacking into Ramadi city center.¹³ Meanwhile, in the “outer belts” southwest of Baghdad, the ISF shelled a gathering of 150 “terrorists” in Jurf al-Sakhar on January 3, 2014.¹⁴ A joint Iraqi Army (IA), Iraqi Police (IP), Iraqi Intelligence, and Quick Response Brigade operation followed on January 6, 2014 that targeted ISIS in Jurf al-Sakhar, Fadhiliyah and Farisiyah.¹⁵ This operation followed actions by ISIS that aimed at displacing Iraqi Shi’a families from the area, but it is also possible that the operation was in support of Anbar operations. ISIS activity in both the “outer” and “inner” rings effectively halted until February 8, 2014. The decrease in ISIS activity could be evidence that the ISF raid was temporarily successful in disrupting ISIS movement within the belts. However, ISIS attacks increased shortly thereafter.

The security threat in the outer ring began to increase again slowly in February 2014, with evidence that ISIS began targeting the ISF directly. On February 8, 2014, clashes occurred between ISIS and the IA in Jurf al-Sakhar, during which 31 IA members were wounded.¹⁶ On the same day, an IED targeted¹⁷ an IA patrol and an IA captain was killed¹⁸ by sniper fire in Farisiyah. In response to these events, the 31st Brigade, 8th IA division destroyed a “terrorist” shelter in Farisiyah on February 9, 2014, and killed three ISIS leaders that had reportedly fled to Babil province from Amiriyat al-Fallujah.¹⁹ These indicate that ISIS presence in the “outer ring” of the southwest Baghdad belts had not relocated from the area. Further, it provides evidence of a significant ISIS contingent in Farisiyah that was capable of executing successful targeted attacks on Iraqi Security Forces, with the intent to disrupt ISF control of checkpoints and entrances to the city.

ISIS continued to target the ISF and expanded their operations in the southern end of the “outer” ring near Jurf al-Sakhar in March 2014. On March 19, 2014, nine IEDs detonated targeting members of the 31st Brigade, 8th IA Division in areas of

Farisiyah, Fadhiliyah and Sindij.²⁰ This attack indicates both that ISIS was still present in the vicinity of Farisiyah at that time and that the zone in which ISIS could conduct attacks against ISF in the southwest Belts quadrant had expanded north to Fadhiliyah and south to Sindij, just outside of Hilla. The synchronization of IED attacks on a single day across these geographically disparate locations indicates that the ISIS cells were well established in these areas by March 2014 and capable of successfully coordinating with each other to execute attacks. It also indicates that ISIS was aware of the ISF reinforcements to the Anbar campaign that were moving from southern Iraq, likely through the southwest quadrant of Baghdad province.

In response to ISIS incursions in northern Babil, the Babil Operations Command (BOC) launched an operation against ISIS in Jurf al-Sakhar on April 16, 2014, directly targeting areas near Abid Wayes, Hajir, Farisiyah, and Fadhiliyah from which the ISF had withdrawn on April 14, 2014.²¹ Although the BOC operation was large in scale, a Babil Provincial Council member admitted that the withdrawal of the IA was a “strategic mistake” that allowed ISIS to infiltrate these areas.²² Although the degree to which ISIS infiltrated the “outer ring” following this event is unclear, it did launch a mortar attack on the headquarters of the 31st Brigade, 8th IA Division in Fadhiliyah on May 2, 2014.²³ This is the first documented use of mortars by ISIS in the southwest Baghdad Belts in 2014, and it is a particular concern as a threat to Baghdad. Furthermore, this event indicates that ISIS was not in full control of Fadhiliyah at this time, but rather was launching the mortars from nearby controlled terrain.

At the same time, ISIS began launching attacks against Amiriyat al-Fallujah from its stronghold in Fallujah on April 23, 2014.²⁴ Amiriyat al-Fallujah is key terrain for both sides. ISIS seeks to gain control of Amiriyat al-Fallujah in order to protect Fallujah from ISF attacks. Conversely, the ISF seeks to maintain control of Amiriyat al-Fallujah in order to protect Baghdad and Karbala from ISIS attacks and to maintain the ability to project force upon Fallujah.

It is important to note that ISIS attacks on Amiriyat al-Fallujah at this time originated exclusively from Fallujah. This suggests that ISIS activity in Jurf al-Sakhar and in Amiriyat al-Fallujah are conducted by the same ISIS elements. Following an initial attack on April 23, 2014, ISIS then launched a large-scale attack against ISF forces on May 15, 2014 in four villages northwest of Amiriyat al-Fallujah, further underscoring this geographic split.²⁵ When ISF repelled the attack, ISIS members reportedly retreated to a warehouse base in Fallujah’s Sinai district. The origin of these attacks from Fallujah is not surprising considering that ISIS maintains a stronghold there. But it is a significant metric of the

ISF counter-offensive against Fallujah at this time, which was not succeeding in isolating ISIS within Fallujah. Rather, ISIS was able to project force upon Amiriyat al-Fallujah and threaten to buttress its links into Jurf al-Sakhar. A large-scale ISF operation on May 15 targeted Fadhiliyah and Farisiyah, likely intending to prevent this.²⁶

ISIS halted its activity in Amiriyat al-Fallujah in late-May 2014, and all activity in the “outer ring” effectively paused from May 28, 2014, to June 16, 2014. This time period aligns with a major shift in the ISIS urban offensive elsewhere in Iraq, particularly the seizure of Mosul and rapid advance south. On the eve of the Mosul offensive, ISIS attacked into Samarra on June 5, 2014, and Haditha on June 7, 2014.²⁷ These events may have drawn forces from adjacent ISIS elements in outer Anbar and the northwest Baghdad Belts, but did not likely directly involve ISIS ground forces southwest of Baghdad. Likewise, the ISIS attack upon Mosul, Tikrit, Baiji, and Hawija beginning on June 10 did not likely draw strength from ISIS southwest of Baghdad. The pause in ISIS activity southwest of Baghdad leading up to the fall of Mosul could indicate deliberate de-confliction by ISIS campaign planners in order to preserve the surprise of the Mosul attack.

The resumption of ISIS activity southwest of Baghdad in mid-June 2014 suggests that the pause before the fall of Mosul was not due to a lack of ISIS capacity. Shortly after the fall of Mosul, ISIS activity resumed in the “outer” ring with increased levels of mortar attacks and ground clashes. On June 16, 2014, ISIS launched mortars on the city of Musayyib, 12 km southeast of Jurf al-Sakhar.²⁸ This is the first report of ISIS activity in Musayyib noted in 2014, and indicates that ISIS launched the mortars from an area nearby that they controlled, potentially the Jurf al-Sakhar area. Clashes between ISIS and the ISF continued in Fadhiliyah on June 19, 2014, and were followed by a mortar attack on an IA checkpoint in Fadhiliyah on June 27, 2014, the second mortar attack on Fadhiliyah in 2014.²⁹ Possible launch locations for ISIS mortar attacks on Fadhiliyah include the nearby city of Farisiyah. The ISF also arrested ISIS members and discovered an IED cell in Jurf al-Sakhar on June 25, 2014, indicating that it was still an ISIS stronghold in June 2014, but also that the ISF counter-offensives in this zone had weakened as compared to April 2014.³⁰

ISIS and the ISF continued to clash in Jurf al-Sakhar, Fadhiliyah and Farisiyah throughout the month of July 2014, with indications that the ISF was reacting to increased ISIS successes in the area. On August 17, 2014, ISIS expelled the ISF and Shi’a militias from Karaghul, a tribal area north of Fadhiliyah that historically supported AQI.³¹ Shortly thereafter, ISIS targeted a strategic bridge on the Euphrates River near Fadhiliyah with a Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (SVBIED)

truck on August 17, 2014.³² This bridge linked Fadhiliyah north to Amiriyat al-Fallujah (35 km), south to Jurf al-Sakhar (18 km) and east to Yusifiyah (11 km). The significant damage to the bridge, which functioned as a strategic supply route for the ISF and likely also for ISIS, disrupted the ISF's ability to support ground operations in both rings. However, despite losing the bridge, ISF operations continued throughout the "outer ring" in late August 2014.

ISIS operations in the "outer ring" of the southwestern Baghdad Belts fluctuated in September 2014. An SVBIED detonated in Amiriyat al-Fallujah on September 4, 2014, and a VBIED detonated there on September 5, 2014.³³ These were the first VBIEDs seen in Amiriyat al-Fallujah in 2014, and these events indicate a devolution in ISIS tactics in the Fallujah area of the northern "outer" ring. Also, the ISF intercepted an ISIS boat moving between Amiriyat al-Fallujah and Fadhiliyah on the Euphrates River on September 11, 2014 and arrested 18 ISIS members onboard.³⁴ ISIS thus appears to have been using the rivers in order to avoid the roads and bridges. Shortly thereafter, ISF intercepted three ISIS boats moving between Amiriyat al-Fallujah and Jurf al-Sakhar on September 15, 2014.³⁵ These events are evidence that ISIS is moving fighters and materials from one end of the "outer" ring to the other, between northern Babil and eastern Anbar.

ISIS will most likely continue its attempts to seize Amiriyat al-Fallujah given its strategic significance to the defense of Fallujah.

ISIS regrouped by late September 2014. ISIS launched a series of concerted attacks to seize Amiriyat al-Fallujah beginning on September 29, 2014, when ISIS attacked the city from the direction of al-Yatama and al-Falahat near Fallujah.³⁶ ISIS then surrounded Amiriyat al-Fallujah beginning on October 15, 2014, and launched multi-axis attacks on October 22-24, 2014 but failed to seize the city.³⁷ From October 27-30, 2014, ISIS entrenched its positions around Amiriyat al-Fallujah, and the ISF reinforced with members of the IA, IP, Popular Mobilization Forces, and local tribal fighters in preparation for an ISIS attack.³⁸ The ISF and supporting forces successfully repelled ISIS's most recent attack on the city on November 4, 2014, and Amiriyat al-Fallujah remains controlled by the ISF.³⁹

While ISIS attacked into Amiriyat al-Fallujah, the Iraqi Army and Popular Mobilization Forces, including Shi'a militias, carried out an operation in Jurf al-Sakhar led by the Minister of the Interior

and member of the Badr Organization Mohammed al-Ghaban, as well as head of the Badr Organization Hadi al-Ameri, on October 24, 2014.⁴⁰ This operation effectively cleared ISIS from Jurf al-Sakhar, and reportedly began clearing the area of Fadhiliyah.⁴¹ After clearing these areas, ISF forces began clearing the road between Fadhiliyah and Musayyib on October 24, 2014 as well.⁴² Additionally, Iraqi Police and forces from the Badr Organization and Popular Mobilization executed an additional operation on October 27, 2014 led by Hadi al-Ameri to clear the Fadhiliyah area and its strategic bridge that ISIS damaged with a SVBIED on August 17, 2014.⁴³ The recapture of this bridge as of October 27, 2014, would allow the ISF increased freedom of movement and the ability to resupply forces in both the inner and outer ring.

ISIS had been relatively quiet, as indicated by records of attacks, in Jurf al-Sakhar and the inner ring for over a month before the ISF operation on October 24, 2014. Since ISIS did not appear to actively draw or provoke the ISF operation, it is possible that the ISF chose to attack Jurf al-Sakhar knowing that ISIS forces in the area were depleted. It is likely that some fighters were pulled north to support ISIS attacks against Amiriyat al-Fallujah during this time, thus lowering their presence in the outer ring. While this operation was a huge strategic success for the ISF, it is still unclear where the ISIS fighters in Jurf al-Sakhar fled. Likely possibilities include northwest to Amiriyat al-Fallujah (72 km), where ISIS forces are now concentrated, southeast to Musayyib (12 km), or into the "inner" ring using ground lines of communication that run east out of Fadhiliyah into Yusifiyah.

THE "INNER RING"

Similar to ISIS in the "outer ring," ISIS in the "inner ring" also capitalized on historic AQI networks directly south of Baghdad in order to seize and consolidate control of strategic cities there. From 2004-2006 Mahmudiyah functioned as an AQI stronghold in the south and served as the cornerstone of AQI control in northern Babil province. AQI control of Mahmudiyah allowed it to project influence over areas directly to the west and north, including Yusifiyah. This area, nicknamed the "Triangle of Death" by U.S. troops during the 2003-2010 occupation of Iraq, contains a mixed Sunni and Shi'a population, and historically witnessed heavy sectarian violence from 2003-2007. After U.S. forces cleared Mahmudiyah of AQI in 2006, the ISF resumed control of the city and currently maintains a strong presence there.

No ISIS activity was reported in the "inner ring" of the southwest Baghdad Belts in January 2014. The only reported event in February 2014 was a double VBIED attack upon Mahmudiyah on February 3, 2014, before a VBIED wave

struck south of Latifiyah in Hilla, Musayyib, al-Mahwil, and Iskandaria on February 18, 2014.⁴⁴ These events demonstrated the likely presence of an ISIS VBIED cell in Latifiyah at this time. This assessment was reinforced on March 1, 2014, when a force from Babil Intelligence arrested a number of ISIS leaders in Latifiyah.⁴⁵ The BOC claimed that these ISIS leaders were responsible for the earlier VBIED wave. This indicates that ISIS most likely maintained a presence in Latifiyah by February 2014, and possibly earlier.

ISIS's control of Latifiyah apparently increased on March 27, 2014, when ISIS detonated ten "house-borne improvised explosive devices" (HBIEDs, effectively explosives set to demolish buildings) on houses under construction in Latifiyah.⁴⁶ Historically, HBIED attacks were a prominent ISIS signature during its "Soldiers' Harvest" campaign in late 2013. ISIS most likely used the HBIEDs in Latifiyah to intimidate the local population.⁴⁷ Additionally, ISIS militants stormed the house of a political opponent and his family in Latifiyah on April 6, 2014 and stabbed the family to death.⁴⁸ These examples of intimidation and targeted violence in Latifiyah indicate that ISIS was attempting to subdue and assert control over the population by early 2014.

In April 2014, ISIS began attacking checkpoints and initiating ground clashes with the ISF in areas of Yusifiyah. On April 3, 2014, ISIS attacked an IA checkpoint near the Doliba area of Yusifiyah, and then the 17th Iraqi Army Division clashed with ISIS and killed 25 members near a checkpoint in Doliba again on April 8, 2014.⁴⁹ These attacks depended upon ISIS ground forces, and they indicate that Yusifiyah became a significant attack zone for ISIS by April 2014. Yusifiyah is a geographic waypoint between the "outer ring" and the "inner ring" of the southwest Baghdad Belts, and this may further indicate the encroachment of ISIS forces from the outer belts to the inner belts by that time. ISIS continued to initiate monthly attacks on IA checkpoints on May 29, 2014, and again on June 23, 2014.⁵⁰

Although ISIS had been visibly active in Latifiyah and Yusifiyah from March – June 2014, it had been notably absent in Mahmudiyah during this period. As we recall, Mahmudiyah has strategic significance as both a historic AQI stronghold and a geographic gateway into southern Baghdad. ISF control of this city is critical for the protection of southern Baghdad, and ISIS would most likely need to control this city in order to facilitate decisive attacks on Baghdad city proper. Accordingly, ISIS began launching attacks in Mahmudiyah in June 2014, almost four months after its last VBIED and SVBIED attack there on February 3, 2014. ISIS launched a complex attack on June 25, 2014, when an IED, followed by a suicide vest (SVEST) detonated

in a market in Mahmudiyah.⁵¹ Mortar shells then landed on civilians who were helping victims of the first two attacks. Each element of this attack indicates a new posture for ISIS in Mahmudiyah. ISIS used the initial IED as a tactic to injure and intimidate civilians and incite panic. ISIS most likely chose the SVEST as a secondary attack method because the wearer could infiltrate the busy market area and inflict maximum damage and civilian casualties. The third attack by mortars indicates that ISIS was launching them from nearby, with enough precision to effectively target the first responders in the market. Yet these spectacular attacks illustrate that ISIS was encroaching on terrain controlled by the Iraqi Security Forces and Shi'a militias.

ISIS shifted their attack strategy in mid-July to include launching mortars in Yusifiyah on July 15, 2014.⁵² ISIS most likely launched mortars into Yusifiyah from nearby controlled terrain in order to disrupt internal security and in preparation for more direct attacks within the city. This attack also indicates the movement of mortars to within 20km of Baghdad International Airport by July 2014. At the same time in the "outer ring," ISIS launched mortars on Musayyib on July 16, 2014, raising the same concern for the proximity of Musayyib to the holy city of Karbala. ISIS detonated a roadside IED near an IA patrol in Yusifiyah on July 20, 2014.⁵³ A week later, the IA and IA Aviation clashed with ISIS in Yusifiyah and Latifiyah on July 28, 2014.⁵⁴ Directly following these clashes, ISIS attacked an IA checkpoint in Yusifiyah also on July 28, 2014.⁵⁵ This pattern of ISIS oriented attacks followed by ISF retaliation attacks suggests not only that ISIS is now physically present in Yusifiyah, but that the ISF is capable of responding to these attacks and launching engagements against ISIS in Yusifiyah and Latifiyah simultaneously.

At the same time that ISIS began launching mortars on Yusifiyah in mid-July 2014, it began launching mortars on Mahmudiyah as well. ISIS launched mortars again on July 20, 2014, and detonated IEDs near a restaurant on July 23, 2014, and in a popular market on July 24, 2014.⁵⁶ Unlike ISIS's use of mortars and IEDs in Yusifiyah during this time, which specifically targeted security forces, ISIS attacks in Mahmudiyah appeared to target the civilian population. These attacks were likely designed to intimidate the local population and degrade their confidence in the ISF. Months earlier, ISIS in Mosul used similar methods of intimidation to soften their advance into Mosul.

On August 11, 2014, ISIS detonated simultaneous IEDs in Mahmudiyah, Yusifiyah, and Latifiyah.⁵⁷ These attacks targeted a combination of security forces, civilian and Shi'a militia targets, and are the first time in 2014 that ISIS coordinated attacks across all three cities in the "inner ring." Activity in the "inner ring" effectively halted until September 2014, when ISF announced

that Latifiyah was an ISIS stronghold on September 1, 2014.⁵⁸ Although ISIS had most likely maintained a stronghold here since the beginning of the year, the announcement by the ISF is an indicator that ISIS completely controls this area. Two VBIEDs that detonated north and south of Hilla on September 30, 2014, support the assessment that ISIS in Latifiyah has a cell manufacturing VBIEDs.⁵⁹ Two VBIEDs in Mahmudiyah on September 25, 2014, and a VBIED in Yusifiyah on September 27, 2014, suggest that ISIS was most likely routing VBIEDs out of Latifiyah at this time.⁶⁰

ISIS resumed its mortar attacks on Yusifiyah on October 3, 2014.⁶¹ Clashes initiated by unidentified gunmen against the ISF in Latifiyah on October 14, 2014, suggest perhaps that the ISF is contesting ISIS control of that area at this time.⁶² A VBIED in Mahmudiyah on October 16, 2014, and an SVBIED in Yusifiyah on October 29, 2014, suggest that ISIS is most likely routing these VBIEDs out of Latifiyah.⁶³ ISIS control of Latifiyah would have likely allowed it to detonate an IED against Ashura pilgrims in Latifiyah on November 4, 2014, as well.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

As of early November 2014, ISIS gunmen are most likely still present in the vicinity of Latifiyah in the “inner ring,” and using control of this terrain to launch attacks north to Mahmudiyah. Recent VBIED and SVBIED activity in Mahmudiyah and Yusifiyah in late-October 2014 indicates that ISIS does not yet control these two areas, but that it is launching sectarian, reprisal attacks against Shi’a militias and security forces in the area. Mortar attacks in Yusifiyah in early October 2014 are also likely reprisal attacks against an area that is valuable to Shi’a militias. The ISF’s continued control of Amiriyat al-Fallujah is critical for the security of Baghdad.

The full impact of the loss of Jurf al-Sakhar for ISIS remains unclear. In the short term, the loss of this historic stronghold will most likely hamper ISIS’s ability to execute attacks south of Jurf al-Sakhar into Karbala and Hilla, as well as degrade their ability to launch effective counter-attacks on the ISF and Shi’a militia forces currently in Jurf al-Sakhar and areas of Fadhiliyah and Farisiyah. As the contingent of ISF and Shi’a militia forces currently in Jurf al-Sakhar continue to clear terrain northward along the Euphrates River, ISIS may respond to this pressure with increased and intensified attacks on Amiriyat al-Fallujah in order to protect its stronghold in Fallujah.

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NOTES

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