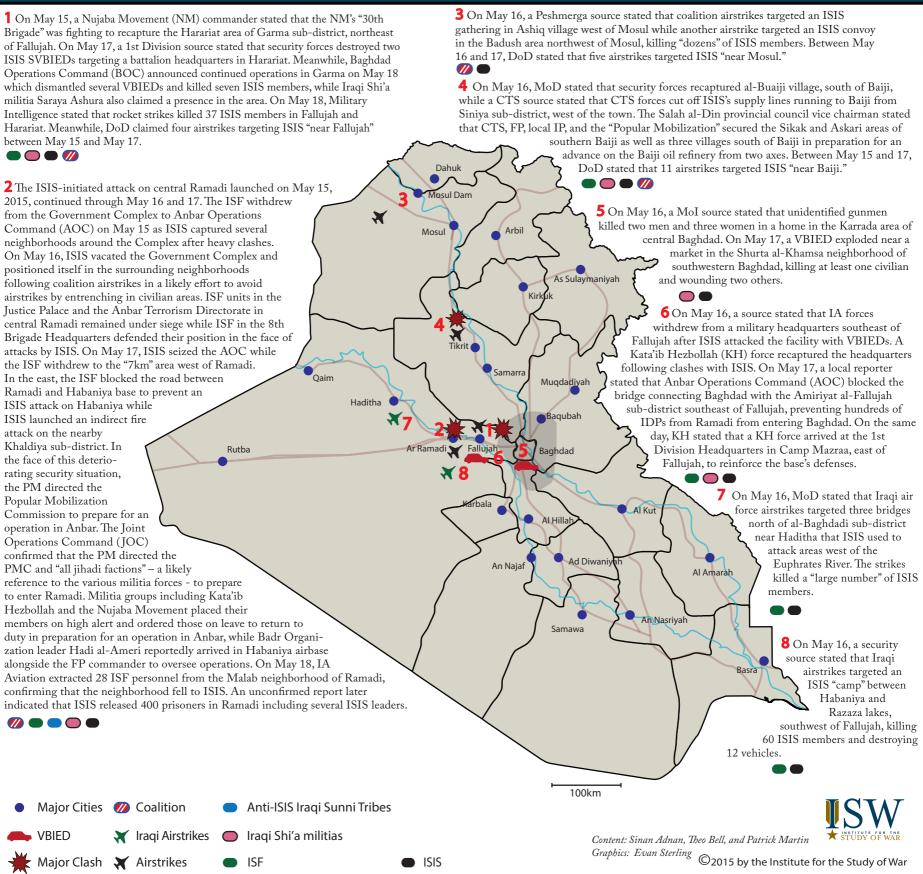
Iraq Situation Report: May 16-18, 2015



Ramadi, the birthplace of the Sunni tribal Awakening, has fallen out of government control after resisting ISIS for over a year. Although ISIS had seized southern neighborhoods in Ramadi in early 2014, joint ISF-Sunni tribal forces held the key terrain within the city including the Government Complex and Anbar Operations Command (AOC) until May 15-17. Ramadi therefore became a symbol of joint ISF-Sunni resistance to ISIS in Anbar. The fall of the city thus represents a major blow to the security of Iraq in general and of Anbar Province in particular. Ramadi strengthens ISIS's military posture in western Iraq and places ISIS in a position to dictate the terms of battle elsewhere in Anbar province. ISIS's presence in Ramadi severs supply lines connecting Baghdad to ISF-controlled districts in western Anbar, such as Haditha, the Haditha Dam, and al Asad Airbase, which houses U.S. personnel, making them more susceptible to attacks by ISIS. Furthermore, it reinforces the perception of Anbari political leaders of minimal government support from Baghdad. This grievance exists despite the fact that the ISF in Anbar remained intact after ISIS's aggressive 2014 campaign, which caused other ISF units to dissolve or succumb to the dominant influence of Shi'a militias. The PM's call for support from Iraqi Shi'a militias in Anbar thus represents a significant blow to efforts by the Iraqi government and U.S.-led coalition to sideline the Iranian-backed militias following their failure to clear Tikrit in March 2015. This announcement bolsters the narrative that the militias are the true defenders of Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition irrelevant. The fall of Ramadi, coupled with recent successes near the Baiji oil refinery, will likely generate momentum for ISIS that ameliorate its defeat in Tikrit. The risk of follow-on offensives by ISIS elsewhere in Iraq is high, particularly near Baiji, as the ISF determines how to confront the loss of Ramadi. ISIS may launch attacks to reclaim or contest territory in eastern Iraq and the Baghdad belts, which it lost to the ISF and militias in late 2014. ISIS may also seek to leverage its gains to launch an attack on Baghdad itself. ISIS's attack on the 1st IA Division base near the western Baghdad belt indicates that ISIS has reserve forces in eastern Anbar capable of challenging the ISF and militias near the capital, which will further challenge ISF operations to reclaim Ramadi.