

Iraq Situation Report: February 18 - 22, 2016

1 Peshmerga forces reportedly mass north of Mosul. A source from the Peshmerga Ministry stated on February 22 that Peshmerga deployed from Dohuk Province to the village of Hassan Jilad, north of Mosul, and will be inactive until the start of operations to recapture Mosul. Other Peshmerga were reportedly headed towards the village of Sharikhan, northwest of Mosul.

6 U.S. advisers present at northern base to advise and assist with Ninewa operations. Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Steve Warren stated on February 17 that U.S. advisers were present at the Ninewa Operations Command in Makhmour, southwest of Arbil. The U.S. presence was of unspecified size but included "force protection capabilities as well as advise and assist capabilities." Forces from the 15th IA Division also arrived on February 21.

2 ISIS continues probing attacks against Haditha. Forces under Jazeera and Badia Operations Command repelled six Suicide Vest (SVEST) attackers on February 18 from al-Sakran, northeast of Haditha.

7 Pipeline attack in Kirkuk temporarily halts Kurdish oil exports. An IED attack in Mari village in al-Dibis district damaged the pipeline between the Iraqi Kurdistan region and the Turkish port of Ceyhan on February 18. The Kurdish Ministry of Natural Resources stated that the KRG halted oil exports for two days to repair the pipeline.

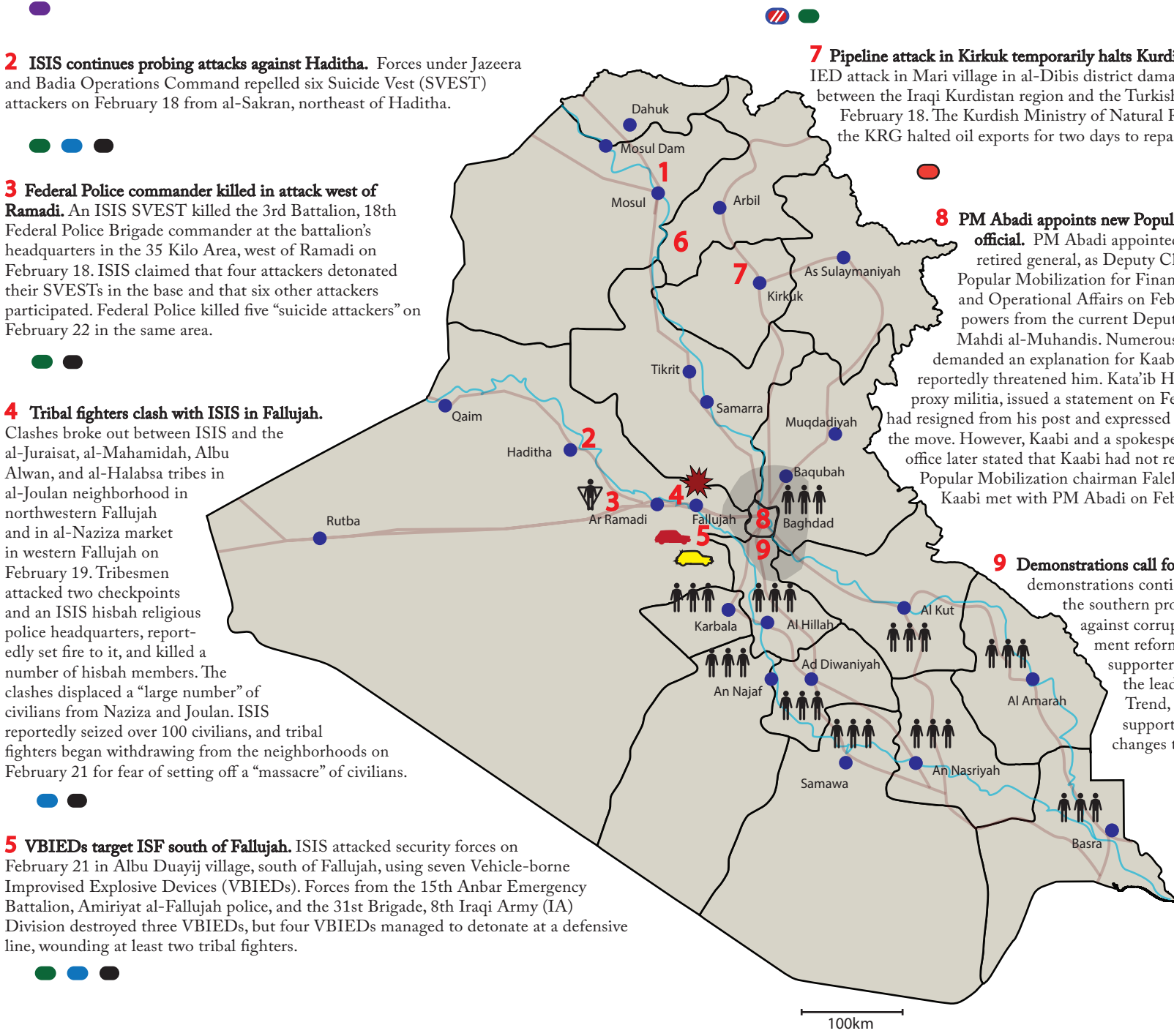
3 Federal Police commander killed in attack west of Ramadi. An ISIS SVEST killed the 3rd Battalion, 18th Federal Police Brigade commander at the battalion's headquarters in the 35 Kilo Area, west of Ramadi on February 18. ISIS claimed that four attackers detonated their SVESTs in the base and that six other attackers participated. Federal Police killed five "suicide attackers" on February 22 in the same area.

8 PM Abadi appoints new Popular Mobilization official. PM Abadi appointed Mohsen al-Kaabi, a retired general, as Deputy Chairman of the Popular Mobilization for Financial, Administrative, and Operational Affairs on February 18, removing powers from the current Deputy Chairman, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Numerous Iranian proxy militias demanded an explanation for Kaabi's appointment and reportedly threatened him. Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy militia, issued a statement on February 21 that Kaabi had resigned from his post and expressed their appreciation for the move. However, Kaabi and a spokesperson for PM Abadi's office later stated that Kaabi had not resigned. Muhandis, Popular Mobilization chairman Faleh al-Fayadh, and Kaabi met with PM Abadi on February 22.

4 Tribal fighters clash with ISIS in Fallujah. Clashes broke out between ISIS and the al-Juraisat, al-Mahamidah, Albu Alwan, and al-Halabsa tribes in al-Joulan neighborhood in northwestern Fallujah and in al-Naziza market in western Fallujah on February 19. Tribesmen attacked two checkpoints and an ISIS hisbah religious police headquarters, reportedly set fire to it, and killed a number of hisbah members. The clashes displaced a "large number" of civilians from Naziza and Joulan. ISIS reportedly seized over 100 civilians, and tribal fighters began withdrawing from the neighborhoods on February 21 for fear of setting off a "massacre" of civilians.

9 Demonstrations call for reforms. Popular demonstrations continued in Baghdad and the southern provinces on February 19 against corruption and for government reform. Large numbers of supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadrist Trend, also demonstrated in support of Sadr's suggested changes to the government.

5 VBIEDs target ISF south of Fallujah. ISIS attacked security forces on February 21 in Albu Duayij village, south of Fallujah, using seven Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs). Forces from the 15th Anbar Emergency Battalion, Amiriyat al-Fallujah police, and the 31st Brigade, 8th Iraqi Army (IA) Division destroyed three VBIEDs, but four VBIEDs managed to detonate at a defensive line, wounding at least two tribal fighters.



- Major Cities
- Coalition
- Peshmerga
- VBIED
- Major Clash
- ISF
- Anti-ISIS Iraqi Sunni Tribes
- Failed S/VBIED
- Parade
- ISIS
- Unknown Gunmen
- SVEST

Content: Patrick Martin and ISW Iraq Team
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Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi made his boldest move against Iranian proxy militias yet by appointing a retired Federal Police general, Mohsen al-Kaabi, as Deputy Chairman for Financial, Administrative, and Operations Affairs in the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC), the government body that officially has authority over the Popular Mobilization. The move attempts to undermine one of the most senior Iranian proxy leaders and PM Abadi's most prominent opponents, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a designated U.S. terrorist who serves as the more senior Deputy Chairman of the PMC. Unspecified infuriated proxy militias threatened Kaabi in response to the appointment. Kata'ib Hezbollah, one of the most lethal proxy militias that Muhandis helped create, sent a thinly veiled threat to Kaabi through a statement expressing gratitude for Kaabi resigning from his post despite Kaabi making no indication of stepping down. Muhandis and Faleh al-Fayadh, the PMC chairman and another proxy militia figure, later visited PM Abadi with Kaabi present on February 22, likely another threat against both Kaabi and PM Abadi. The confrontation comes at a time when tensions are high, particularly as PM Abadi and the U.S. attempt to exclude the Popular Mobilization from joining the forces deploying to southwestern Arbil Province in preparation for a future Mosul operation. Iranian proxy militias will likely continue to threaten and may even attempt to assassinate Kaabi to protect their access to the PMC's resources. These militias may also place greater political pressure on PM Abadi during the ongoing cabinet reshuffle to further limit his power or remove him from his post. The Popular Mobilization could also withdraw their fighters from the frontlines in areas like northern Salah al-Din and eastern Anbar, forcing the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to redeploy away from forward operations in order to re-secure these areas. PM Abadi's appears to be undertaking a bold attempt to undercut the proxy militias, but he remains extremely weak and beholden to the whims of the political blocs. His survivability in office will rapidly diminish if his actions convince the proxy militias to move against him in earnest.