

Iraq Situation Report: October 21 - 26, 2015

1 Peshmerga and ISIS clash in Sinjar. Peshmerga advanced into Sinjar city on October 25 from several directions and made “significant” progress against ISIS in Sinjar, which has been contested since July 2014. DoD reported eight airstrikes “near Sinjar” between October 25 and 26, reportedly involving percussion munitions designed to clear IEDs ahead of the Peshmerga attack. ISIS members attacked a Peshmerga headquarters in Ismail Bek castle area in Sinjar, but Peshmerga repelled the attack.



2 ISIS SVBIED targets Shi’a mosque on eve of Ashura holiday. ISIS targeted a Shi’a memorial procession on October 22 in Tuz Khurmatu, south of Kirkuk, with an SVBIED, killing one and wounding 30. “Popular Mobilization” members detained 170 civilians following the attack as part of a security crackdown. Sunni tribal leaders accused the “Popular Mobilization” of executing some of the detainees and demanded that “Popular Mobilization” leaders be replaced.



3 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) rescue Sunni tribesmen in eastern Anbar. Jazeera and Badia Operations Command (JBOC) and Albu Nimr tribal fighters rescued 350 Albu Nimr tribe members on October 22 who had been captured by ISIS and held for execution in Al-Minakh village near Thar Thar Lake.



4 ISIS targets Shi’a processions with SVESTs. An ISIS attacker attempted and failed to target a Shi’a Ashura procession in Shaab area of northern Baghdad using a Suicide Vest (SVEST) on October 24; the SVEST detonated off-target, killing three Iraqi Police (IP) and six civilians. Another ISIS attacker successfully detonated an SVEST at a Shi’a procession in the same area on October 26, killing three people and wounding 11.



5 ISF reinforcements arrive in Ramadi. Anbar Operations Commander Maj. Gen. Ismail Mahlawi reported the arrival of “large military reinforcements” north of Ramadi on October 22, reportedly from Habaniya Air Base and Baghdad. IA, IP, and tribal fighters are approaching the ISIS-held Anbar Operations Command (AOC) headquarters and al-Warrar Dam north of Ramadi. The dam is also a bridge connecting ISF-held Albu Faraj area, north of Ramadi, and al-Warrar neighborhood in central Ramadi, held by ISIS. DoD reported 27 airstrikes “near” Ramadi and Habaniya between October 21 and 26.



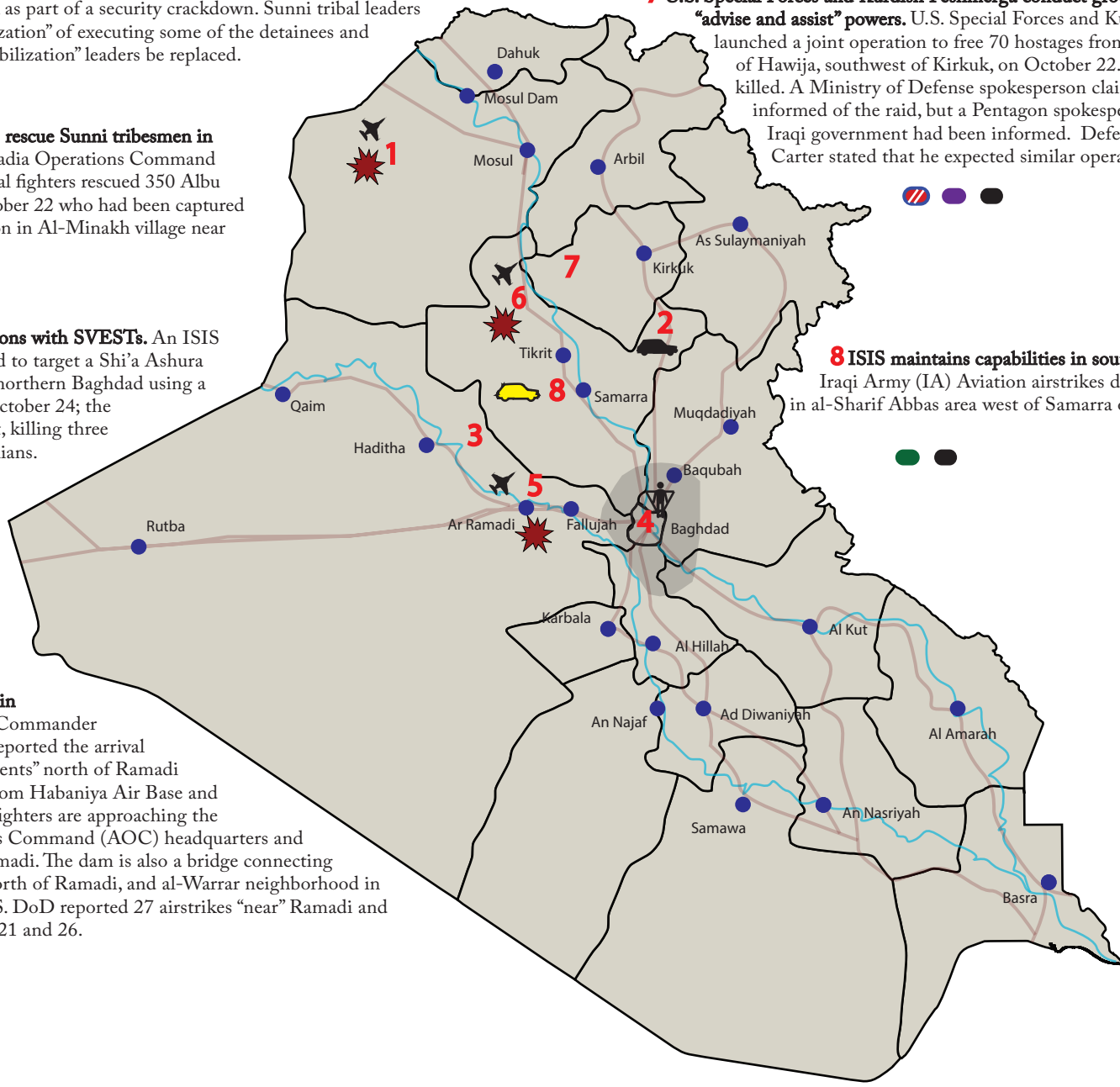
6 Security forces recapture Baiji oil refinery. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Coalition air strikes, and the “Popular Mobilization” recaptured Baiji oil refinery, north of Baiji, on October 21. PM Haidar al-Abadi visited Baiji city on October 23 and met with security leaders and proxy militia leaders Hadi al-Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. A “Popular Mobilization” spokesperson stated that the Baiji operation was “entirely Iraqi” and did not use information from the Russian coordination cell, though the CoR Security and Defense Committee chairman stated the Baiji operation used “simple” information from the cell.



7 U.S. Special Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga conduct ground operation under “advise and assist” powers. U.S. Special Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga launched a joint operation to free 70 hostages from an ISIS prison north of Hawija, southwest of Kirkuk, on October 22. One American was killed. A Ministry of Defense spokesperson claimed that it was not informed of the raid, but a Pentagon spokesperson stated that the Iraqi government had been informed. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated that he expected similar operations in the future.



8 ISIS maintains capabilities in southern Salah al-Din. Iraqi Army (IA) Aviation airstrikes destroyed five VBIEDs in al-Sharif Abbas area west of Samarra on October 24.



- Major Cities
- SVBIED
- Anti-ISIS Iraqi Sunni Tribes
- ★ Major Clash
- Failed S/VBIED
- Iraqi Shi’a militias
- SVEST
- ISF
- Peshmerga
- Airstrikes
- Coalition
- ISIS

Content: Patrick Martin, and ISW Iraq Team
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The U.S. escalated its role in the anti-ISIS fight by having U.S. special operators participate in a Peshmerga-led raid under “advise and assist” powers near Hawija in southwestern Kirkuk. The operation freed 70 hostages from an ISIS prison but resulted in the death of one American serviceman, the first U.S. combat casualty in Iraq since December 2011. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated that he expected similar operations to occur in the future. The Hawija operation will likely serve as a model for additional operations, though the U.S. is unlikely to support the ISF in a similar fashion because of the heavy integration of Iranian-backed Shi’a militias on most fronts. Prominent Sunni figures, including Etihad bloc leader Osama al-Nujaifi and CoR Speaker Salim al-Juburi, praised the operation in Hawija nevertheless. Proxy militia leaders condemned the attacks as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, including proxy militia leader and designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who suggested that proxy militias would target “lackeys who hide in offices,” likely referring to pro-Coalition Iraqi politicians. Additional joint raids may push proxy militias to harass Coalition personnel in bases in Baghdad or eastern Anbar and deploy assassinations and kidnappings against pro-Coalition figures. The proxy militias are likely to escalate their rhetoric against the U.S.-led Coalition and to push PM Haidar al-Abadi to request increased Russian support.

The ISF and “Popular Mobilization” recaptured Baiji and the nearby Baiji oil refinery as part of an operation that saw heavy participation by Iranian proxy militias and visits by the leaders of all major proxy groups to the area since operations began on October 14. Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Amiri and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis played prominent roles in the operation and PM Haidar al-Abadi met with them when he visited Baiji on October 23. Success in Baiji allows proxy militias to turn their attention to other areas of the country, including Sharqat, the last ISIS-held district in northern Salah al-Din, to complete their stated objective of securing Salah al-Din province announced in June 2015. Proxy militias could also advance towards Hawija in southwestern Kirkuk, limiting ISIS’s access to the Hamrin Mountains that stretch into Diyala province as well as southern Salah al-Din province. Finally, proxy militias may turn their attention to Fallujah to secure Baghdad and its environs. These options will compound the intense pressure on PM Abadi to rely on the proxy militias and to request Iranian and Russian assistance in Iraq if the ISF does not successfully complete its operation in Ramadi soon. Sputnik News, a Russian state media outlet, reported that the CoR Security and Defense Committee chairman stated that Baghdad and Moscow had agreed to allow Russian airstrikes on Iraqi territory to target ISIS fighters entering Iraq from Syria. This report is unconfirmed, and there is no indication that PM Abadi has made any move towards accepting additional Russian support or airstrikes at this time. The appearance of a statement by an anti-American Iraqi official within Russian official media nevertheless indicates that Russia is using the statement for misinformation purposes.