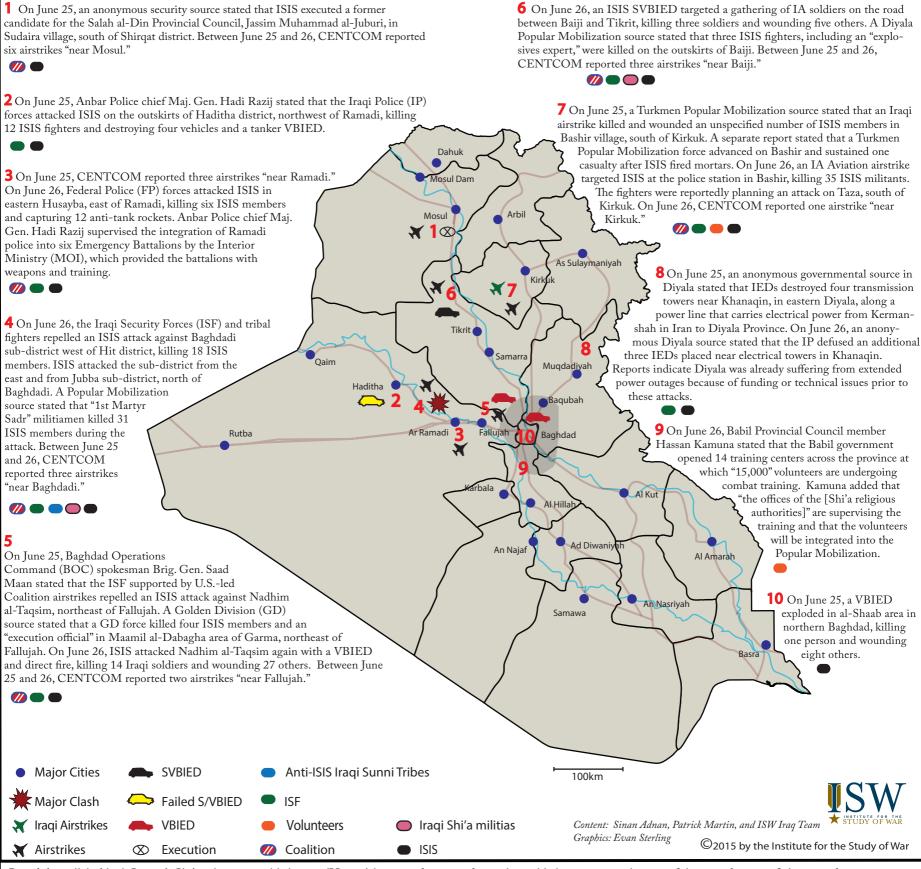
Iraq Situation Report: June 25 - 26, 2015



Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's Shi'a religious establishment (Hawza) has issued new guidance that is likely to increase the size of the armed groups fighting under its supervision and ultimately its base of popular support. A new program supervised by an armed group affiliated with the establishment aims to provide military training to students during summer break in provinces throughout southern and central Iraq. The establishment initially supervised the formation of armed groups to protect holy sites following Sistani's religious ruling calling for the mobilization of Iraqis in June 2014. Since then, such groups have expanded in both size and area of operation. Currently, Firqat al-Abbas al-Qitaliyah, affiliated with the Imam al-Abas Shrine, maintains deployed forces around Karbala in addition to forces that are forward-deployed in southern Salah ad-Din Province. Liwa Ali al-Akbar, affiliated with the Imam al-Hussein Shrine, also has forces deployed around Karbala and Baiji, in northern Salah ad-Din. On June 5, 2015 a representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Karbala issued guidance for Iraqi students to enroll in "intellectual, cultural, ... and weapons training." Shortly after, Firqat al-Abas al-Qitaliyah began to open training centers to conduct 15-day military training cycles in Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, Diyala, Muthana, Babil, Diwaniya, and Karbala. The leader of the group continues to emphasize the need to work under the command of the ISF according to Sistani's ruling. This requirement stands in a stark contrast to the behavior of the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias such as the Badr Organization that operate outside the ISF command, weakening the Iraqi state. It will be important to watch for an increase in the size of groups such as Firqat al-Abas al-Qitaliyah or the formation of additional groups, which would likely indicate that students have chosen to remain out of school to fight. Additional recruits from these areas would further expand the influence of both the armed group and th