

Iraq Situation Report: January 12 - January 19, 2016

1 Turkey fires artillery at ISIS in northern Ninewa. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated on January 14 that Turkish forces fired “500 times” at ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq, killing “about 200 ISIS members” in response to an ISIS attack in Istanbul on January 12. ●●

2 Large SVBIED attack repelled near Tikrit. A Salah al-Din security source reported that ISIS attacked security forces on January 12 in the Jazeera area, west of Tikrit, using eight Suicide Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs), but that the attack was repelled. ●●

3 ISIS launches VBIED attack near Tikrit. Up to three VBIEDs targeted security forces in Mkaishifah, south of Tikrit on January 14. Iraqi Army (IA) and Federal Police (FP) reportedly thwarted the attack. ●●

4 Large ISIS attack captures village near Tikrit. ISIS launched a large attack against Tel Gusayba and Mabdhil villages east of Tikrit, using at least one SVBIED and briefly capturing Tel Gusayba on January 14 before the ISF and Popular Mobilization recaptured the area. FP also claimed to kill four “suicide bombers” during clashes at the Alas and Ajil oil fields east of Tikrit. ●●●

5 Militia and Kurdish representatives meet to address tensions in disputed town. Popular Mobilization, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Peshmerga, Shi’a and Kurdish Council of Representatives (CoR) members, and representatives from the three presidencies met in Baghdad on January 13 and 14 to discuss strengthening security coordination and compensation for clashes between the Peshmerga and Popular Mobilization in Tuz Khurmato that occurred in November 2015. ●●

6 ISF continue to clear Ramadi area. Between January 13 and 17, the 10th Iraqi Army (IA) Division conducted clearing operations in Albu Aitha and al-Jazeera areas, north of Ramadi. Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) and the 8th IA Division cleared and evacuated civilians from areas east of Ramadi from January 13-19 amid Coalition airstrikes. ●●●

7 Security forces clash with ISIS near Fallujah. Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)-affiliated Popular Mobilization militias and the ISF conducted operations in the Thar Thar and Nadhim al-Taqsim areas north of Fallujah between January 12 and 16, killing up to three “suicide bombers.” ●●●

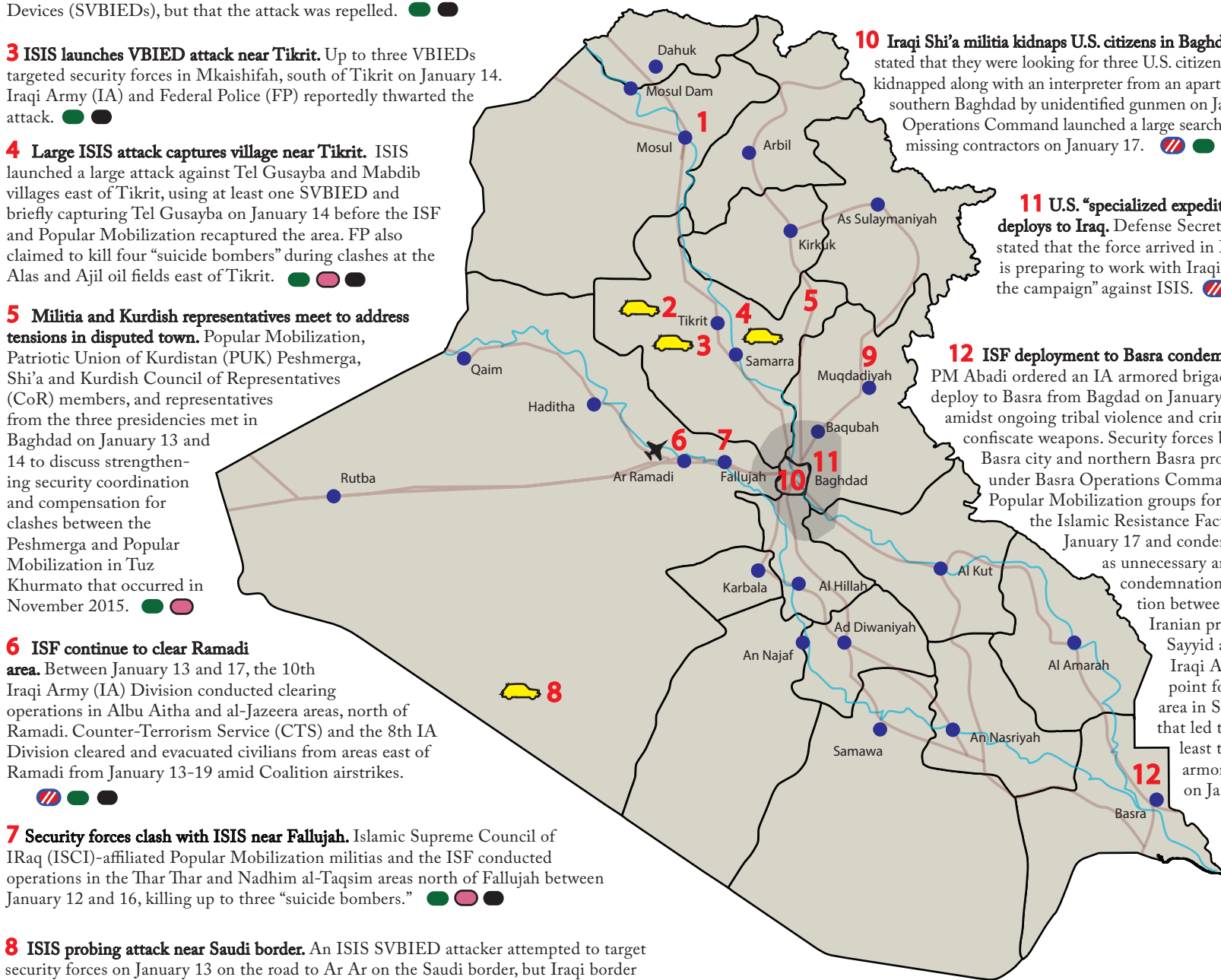
8 ISIS probing attack near Saudi border. An ISIS SVBIED attacker attempted to target security forces on January 13 on the road to Ar Ar on the Saudi border, but Iraqi border guards killed the attacker. ●●

9 Militia abuses in Diyala spark outrage among Sunnis, Shi’a religious authority. Unidentified armed groups burned six mosques and killed at least four Sunnis in Muqdadiyah, northwest of Baquba, on January 11. Unidentified gunmen in a car shot and killed a reporter and cameraman in Muqdadiyah on January 12. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani’s representative and CoR Speaker Salim al-Juburi on January 15 condemned the violence and called for preventing non-state armed groups from operating in populated areas. PM Abadi visited Muqdadiyah on January 19 and denounced the use of weapons outside of the framework of the state. ●

10 Iraqi Shi’a militia kidnaps U.S. citizens in Baghdad. U.S. authorities stated that they were looking for three U.S. citizens who reportedly were kidnapped along with an interpreter from an apartment in al-Dora area in southern Baghdad by unidentified gunmen on January 15. Baghdad Operations Command launched a large search operation for the missing contractors on January 17. ●●●

11 U.S. “specialized expeditionary targeting force” deploys to Iraq. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated that the force arrived in Iraq with 200 men and is preparing to work with Iraqi forces to “accelerate the campaign” against ISIS. ●●

12 ISF deployment to Basra condemned by proxy militias. PM Abadi ordered an IA armored brigade and police forces to deploy to Basra from Baghdad on January 12 to impose order amidst ongoing tribal violence and criminality and to confiscate weapons. Security forces began operations in Basra city and northern Basra province on January 13 under Basra Operations Command. Iranian proxy and Popular Mobilization groups formed the Council of the Islamic Resistance Factions in Basra in January 17 and condemned the deployment as unnecessary and provocative. The condemnation followed a confrontation between members of the Iranian proxy group Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and an Iraqi Army unit at a checkpoint force in al-Tanoumah area in Shatt al-Arab district that led to gunfire, wounding at least two people. The armored brigade withdrew on January 19. ●●



- Major Cities
- Major Clash
- ✈ Airstrikes
- Coalition
- ISIS
- Failed S/VBIED
- ISF
- Anti-ISIS Iraqi Sunni Tribes
- Turkey
- Iraqi Shi’a Militias

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Iraqi Shi’a militias significantly escalated their confrontation with the U.S. by kidnapping three American contractors and an interpreter in southern Baghdad on January 15, reportedly from the apartment of the interpreter. While no group has claimed responsibility, Iraqi Shi’a militias proliferate both the neighborhood of abduction, al-Dora, as well as Sadr City, the northeastern neighborhood to which the contractors were reportedly taken. Iranian proxy militias were responsible for kidnapping American servicemen before the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. Iraqi Shi’a militias carried out similar kidnappings of Turkish citizens in Baghdad in September 2015 and Qatari citizens in Muthanna Province in December 2015. The kidnapping of the American citizens came just one day before the release of four American prisoners by Iran and two days before the imposition of additional sanctions on Iran in response to an Iranian ballistic missile test in October 2015. The timing of the kidnapping suggests that Iranian proxies did not kidnap the contractors in response to the additional sanctions, but did so in order to secure future leverage over the U.S. However, the possibility remains that an Iranian proxy militia may have conducted the kidnapping without a direct order from their supervisors in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF). Regardless of intent, the kidnapping underscores the impunity with which Iranian proxies operate as well as the persistent threat they pose to U.S. personnel and interests.

The impunity of Iraqi Shi’a militias also undermines the cohesion and sovereignty of Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi’s government. The Basra offices of major Iranian proxy militias, including Badr Organization, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSAS), Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, and Nujaba Movement, rejected the presence of an armored brigade on January 17 that PM Abadi ordered to Basra to clamp down on rising criminality and tribal violence. The rejection came after a confrontation in Shatt al-Arab district in southeastern Basra Province, when gunfire was exchanged between KSAS members and an Iraqi Army unit at a checkpoint. A combination of the need for ISF units on the front lines against ISIS along with protests from proxy militias likely led to the brigade’s withdrawal from Basra on January 19. Iraqi Shi’a militia abuses against Sunnis in Muqdadiyah on January 11 also infuriated the Sunni Etihad bloc, who decided to boycott the government for at least two parliamentary and cabinet sessions and demanded the disarmament and disbandment of unspecified militias in Diyala province. Sunni boycotts of the government have led to little more than stalled draft laws in the past, and this one is unlikely to result in the passage of either priority legislation or reduced impunity of the Popular Mobilization due to the relative strength of the Iranian proxy militias. Nor will it result in a collapse of the government, as this would not assist Sunnis in passing important legislation. Nevertheless, the threat of a boycott is a serious demonstration of Sunni dissatisfaction with PM Abadi’s government, the persistent marginalization of Sunnis within government, and the ability of Iraqi Shi’a militias to operate nearly unchecked in Sunni areas of the country. Moreover, Sunni politicians may escalate their demands if human rights violations by Iraqi Shi’a militias continue or if Shi’a parties continue to block legislation prioritized by Sunni parties in the Council of Representatives.