

Iraq Situation Report: March 8 - 14, 2016

1 Peshmerga claim that ISIS fired chemical weapons shells at Sinjar. A Peshmerga commander stated on March 10 that ISIS fired 50 chemical weapon-filled rockets from villages south of Sinjar at Peshmerga forces in Sinjar district, west of Mosul. The report remains unconfirmed.



2 ISIS withdraws from western Anbar towns. Local sources stated on March 13 that ISIS withdrew from Hit District and Kubaisa, west of Ramadi, as well as Rutba in western Anbar. "Thousands" of civilians fled Hit and Kubaisa towards security forces to the north and south. ISIS forces returned to Rutba on March 14 with armored vehicles and re-established control over the town's entrances.



3 Security forces clear areas west of Ramadi. Security forces from the Iraqi Army (IA), Iraqi Police, and Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) with tribal fighters and Coalition airstrikes launched operations on March 8 on three axes and cleared areas west of Ramadi, including Zankurah. Security forces received "6,000 families" fleeing ISIS in Zankurah, Hit District, and al-Safliyah village on March 9. Operations began to officially recapture the Hit District area on March 12. A tribal fighter commander stated that security forces began clearing al-Muhammadi sub-district, six miles southeast of Hit District, on March 13.



4 Iraqi government reports unrest in Fallujah. Clashes reportedly broke out between ISIS and al-Muhammadah tribal members on March 8 in Fallujah after ISIS executed 50 people they had arrested previously.



5 Security forces interdict explosives shipment. Mid-Euphrates Operations Command, the Military Intelligence Directorate, and the Counter-Terrorism Service interdicted a truck on March 13 on its way to Baghdad transporting Suicide Vests (SVESTs) and explosives crafting materials in Nukhaib, southwest of Karbala.



6 Security forces clash with ISIS fighters near Saudi border. ISIS attacked a border outpost near Ar Ar border crossing, southwest of Karbala, but security forces repelled the attack and killed seven ISIS members.



7 Military reinforcements continue deploying to Makhmur. The Ministry of Defense stated that the 72nd Brigade of the 15th IA Division arrived in Makhmur to prepare for the recapture of Ninewa on March 8, followed by reinforcements with heavy weapons and rocket launchers on March 11 as well as three battalions of Ninewa police and the 34th Brigade of the 9th IA Armored Division on March 13.



8 Coalition airstrike reportedly destroys VBIEDs in western Salah al-Din desert. Joint Operations Command (JOC) stated on March 10 that a Coalition airstrike destroyed six Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) in al-Kasirat area southwest of Baiji.

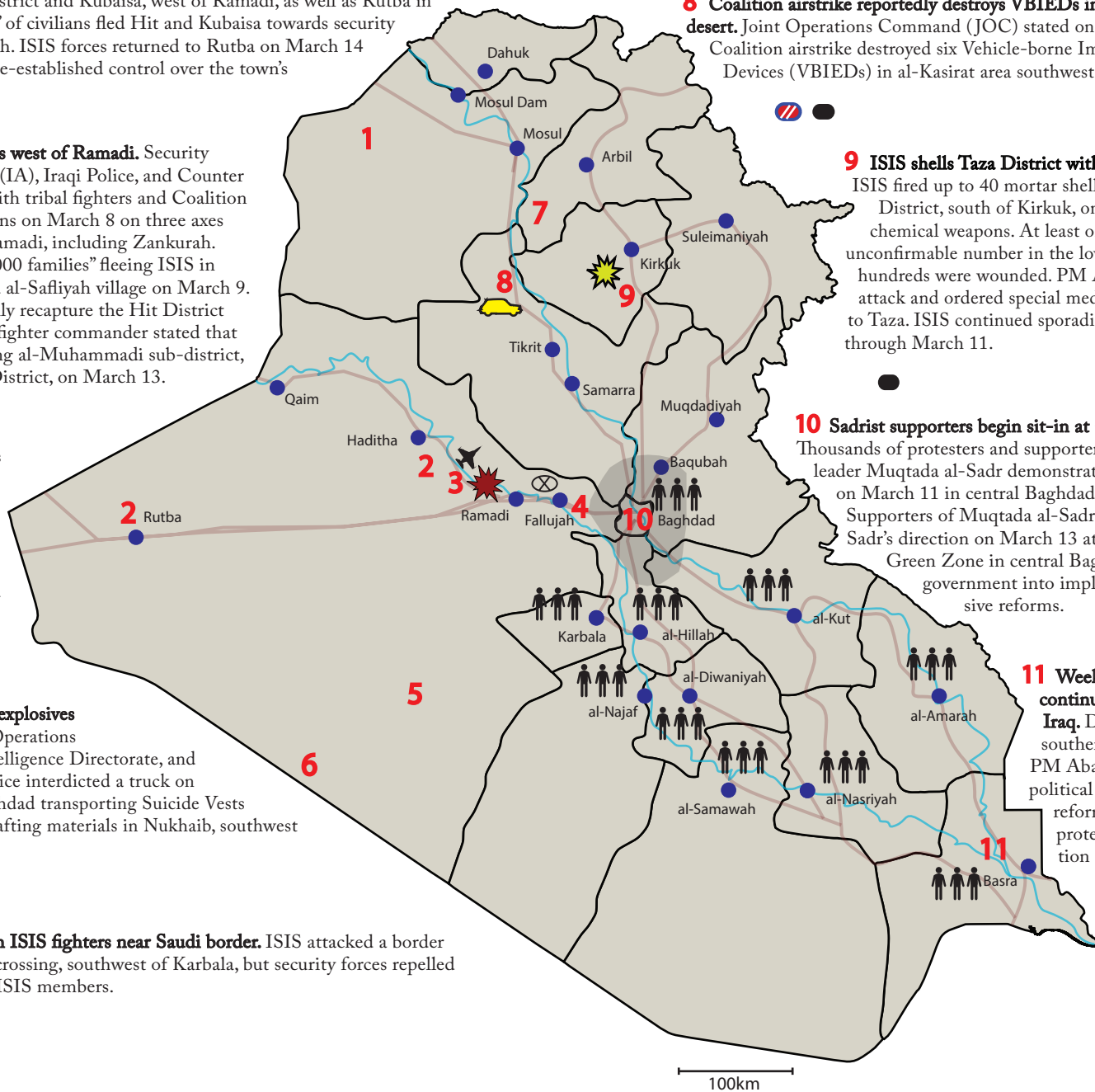


9 ISIS shells Taza District with chemical weapons. ISIS fired up to 40 mortar shells and rockets at Taza District, south of Kirkuk, on March 9 using chemical weapons. At least one person died and an unconfirmable number in the low- to mid- the hundreds were wounded. PM Abadi denounced the attack and ordered special medical teams to deploy to Taza. ISIS continued sporadic shelling of Taza through March 11.



10 Sadrist supporters begin sit-in at Green Zone. Thousands of protesters and supporters of Sadrist Trend leader Muqtada al-Sadr demonstrated in Tahrir Square on March 11 in central Baghdad amid heavy security. Supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr also began a sit-in at Sadr's direction on March 13 at the entrance to the Green Zone in central Baghdad to pressure the government into implementing comprehensive reforms.

11 Weekly demonstrations continue across southern Iraq. Demonstrators across southern Iraq also called for PM Abadi not to give in to political pressure during the reform process and protested against corruption on March 11.



- Major Cities
- Coalition
- Peshmerga
- Alleged CW Attack
- Major Clash
- ISF
- Anti-ISIS Iraqi Sunni Tribes
- Failed S/VBIED
- Airstrikes
- ISIS
- Execution
- Demonstration

Content: Patrick Martin and ISW Iraq Team
Graphics: Emily Anagnostos



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ISIS reportedly withdrew its forces from Hit District, west of Ramadi, ISIS's first reported withdrawal from a major urban center in Iraq. Between March 8 and March 14, security forces west of Ramadi have made rapid progress in recapturing villages from ISIS and are reportedly less than seven miles from Hit District's southern perimeter. Hit District is a critical town for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) as it lies on the Euphrates River's banks as well as the main ground line of communication between Ramadi and Haditha District, which relies on supplies delivered by air to the nearby Ain al-Asad Airbase. Its recapture will increase the capabilities of the ISF and tribal fighters in Haditha as well as humanitarian conditions in the besieged district by opening supply lines. Recapturing the Euphrates River Valley is a critical step in defeating ISIS, as opening fronts against ISIS in both western Anbar and in Ninewa Province will push ISIS further on the defensive. Reports indicate that "thousands" of civilians have fled north and south from Hit towards security forces, an indication of weakened ISIS social control over the town. ISIS's force numbers in Hit remain unconfirmed, but the rapid advance of the ISF suggests either a low ISIS force presence or an intentional decision by ISIS not to defend villages south of Hit. Even if ISIS fighters do remain, which is a strong possibility, then there may not be enough for ISIS to hold civilians in the area to act as human shields for protection against airstrikes. ISIS had previously conducted a series of spectacular attacks across eastern Anbar, Baghdad, and Diyala between February 25 and February 29, likely to compel the ISF to delay operations in Hit and to exacerbate sectarian tensions that would have required security forces to redeploy away from front lines. ISIS likely calculated that Hit District was not defensible enough to resist a major ISF offensive. If true, the ceding of Hit District is an indicator that ISIS is on the defensive and withdrawing in order to defend higher priority areas or to muster the manpower for a major attack in either Iraq or Syria, where it has faced significant pressure particularly following the fall of Shaddadi, south of Hasakah City.