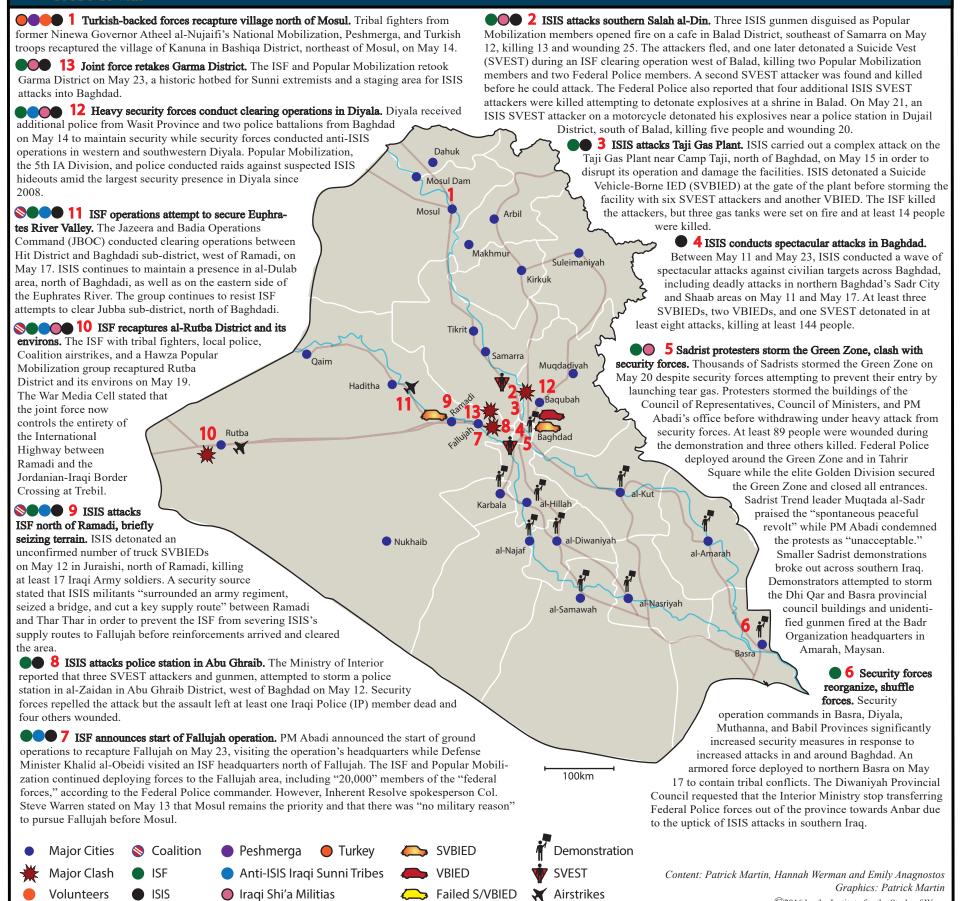


## Iraq Situation Report: May 11 - 24, 2016



The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Popular Mobilization, and tribal fighters launched a major operation to retake Fallujah on May 23. The joint force quickly recaptured northern terrain on the first day, including Garma District, a historic hotbed for Sunni extremists including ISIS's predecessor Al Qaeda in Iraq. The joint force continued to consolidate surrounding terrain on May 24 as it advances towards central Fallujah. Security concerns, already heightened by an increase of ISIS attacks in Baghdad, could intensify as the Fallujah operation increases the likelihood of sectarian violence. The ISF must ensure that civilians fleeing Fallujah are not exposed to sectarian violence from Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias both during and after the operation.

Baghdad's political and physical security are facing grave threats from ISIS, the Sadrist demonstrators, and Iraq's own politicians. Sadrist demonstrators stormed the Green Zone on May 20 and broke into major government buildings, including the facilities housing the Council of Ministers (CoM), Council of Representatives (CoR), and Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi's office, before Interior Ministry security forces ejected protestors. The chaos follows a significant increase in ISIS activity in Baghdad and the Baghdad Belts. Deadly attacks targeted civilians in northern Baghdad on May 11 and 17, prompting the Sadrist militia Saraya al-Salaam to briefly deploy across Baghdad's Shi'a neighborhoods before Sadr ordered their withdrawal on May 18. ISIS's activity is significantly increasing in Baghdad's northern Belts area. The group launched spectacular attacks in the districts of Balad on May 12 and 13 and Dujail on May 21, and carried out a large attack aimed at damaging the Taji Gas Plant near Camp Taji on May 15. Increased ISIS activity in the northern Belts and Baghdad could deteriorate the security situation to levels not seen since late 2014.

The deadly attacks indicate that ISIS is taking advantage of Iraq's unstable political situation. ISIS has demonstrated intent to both exacerbate sectarian tensions and increase the possibility of intra-Shi'a conflict; its attacks have generated friction between the Sadrists, rival Iranian-backed proxy militias, and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The Sadrists are exacerbating tensions by putting thousands of unruly demonstrators out on the streets against Iranian proxy militia forces and units from the Interior Ministry, controlled by the rival Badr Organization, who have little interest in seeing the Sadrists succeed. ISIS will have opportunities to increase its attack capabilities while the ISF and the Popular Mobilization are engaged in operations on multiple fronts, including recent successful operations which regained control over Rutba District on May 19 and the Ramadi-Jordan highway on May 20. However, both the ISF and Popular mobilization have also committed significant forces towards completing the encirclement of Fallujah and clearing ISIS from western Diyala Province. These efforts have required further forward deployments of Baghdad and southern-based security forces away from their bases in southern Iraq. Forces shifting in southern Iraq leaves the area vulnerable to a resurgence in ISIS attacks and opens avenues for ISIS to launch attacks into Baghdad from the South.