

Iraq Situation Report: March 1 - 7, 2016

1 ISIS launches large attacks against Peshmerga near Mosul. ISIS attacked Peshmerga on March 4 in the areas of Kisik, Mount Badush, and Iski Mosul, west of Mosul. Conflicting reports indicated that the attack involved three Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) or six "suicide attackers," and the number of attackers remains unclear. Later in the day, ISIS attacked Peshmerga positions in Tel al-Rim village, southeast of Mosul, but were repelled.   

2 Militia-led operation clears Salah al-Din desert areas. Joint Operations Command (JOC) announced the launch of a large named operation on March 1 to clear Jazeeraat Samarra. The JOC stated that the operation included forces from the Iraqi Army (IA), Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), and Federal Police (FP), with support from Iraqi and Coalition airstrikes, though Popular Mobilization spokesperson Ahmed al-Asadi insisted on March 6 that there were no Coalition airstrikes during the operation. The Popular Mobilization was heavily involved, including the Sadrist Saraya al-Salam, as well as major Iranian proxy militias, including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Popular Mobilization Commission deputy chairman Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was reportedly leading the operations. Security forces repelled ISIS attacks involving up to three SVBIEDs and three Suicide Vests (SVESTs) during the initial operation, though at least one SVBIED successfully detonated. Muhandis announced the success of the operation on March 3 as PM Abadi visited Khat al-Lein area west of Samarra, and IA Aviation claimed to destroy 17 VBIEDs.    

3 ISIS spectacular attacks target Haditha.

Four ISIS SVEST attackers dressed in army uniforms targeted a headquarters of the Jazeera and Badia Operations Command (JBOC) near the Haditha Dam, north of Haditha, on March 1, killing the JBOC Chief of Staff, the commander of a support company, and four other soldiers while wounding seven.  

4 Anbar Operations Command launches clearing operations north of Ramadi. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) sent reinforcements north of Ramadi on March 4 and 5 to assist the 10th IA Division in clearing Jazeeraat Ramadi, Abu Obeid, and Abu Bali areas, reportedly including CTS and FP elements. On March 6, the 8th and 10th IA Divisions with tribal fighters, artillery, and Coalition airstrikes began clearing operations.    

5 National Alliance leaders meet, disagree over reform program. PM Abadi met in Karbala on March 6 with State of Law Alliance senior member Ali al-Alaq, Sadrist Trend leader Muqtada al-Sadr, Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq leader Ammar al-Hakim, National Reform Trend leader Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Education Minister Hussein al-Shahristani, and Badr Organization deputy leader Abdul-Karim al-Ansari. The meeting resulted in a statement expressing support for reforms and the need for demonstrations to remain peaceful. However, Sadr denounced the final statement, stating that it was made when Sadr and Hakim were not present.

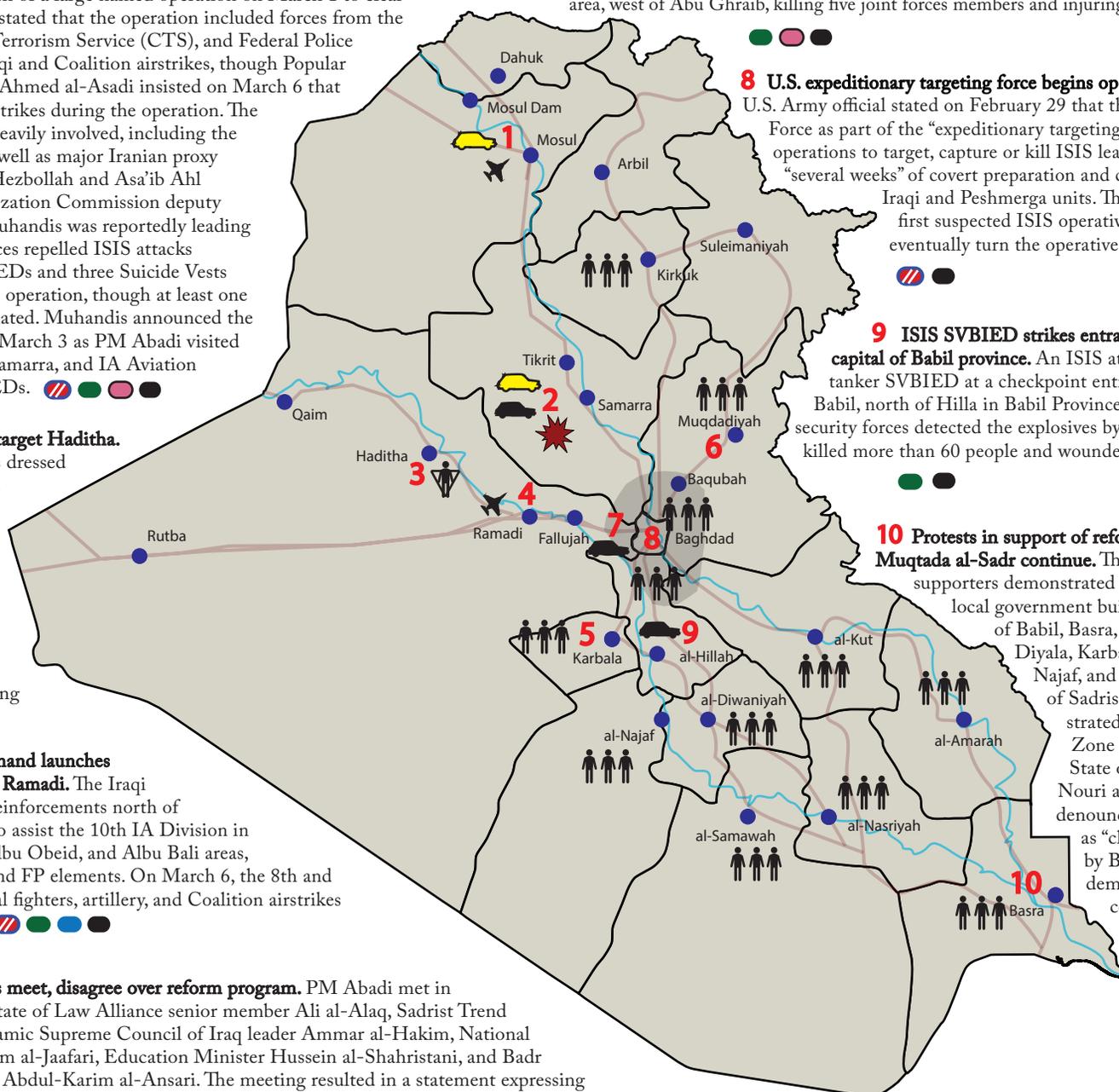
6 Demonstrators block major road in Diyala in protest over security situation. "Thousands" of Bani Tamim tribal members blocked the road connecting Diyala with Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran in Muqdadiyah, northeast of Baquba, demanding an investigation into the February 29 SVEST attack in Muqdadiyah and the removal of leading security and provincial government officials.

7 ISIS continues explosive attacks against Abu Ghraib area. An ISIS attacker detonated an SVBIED on March 1 at a joint Iraqi Army-Popular Mobilization checkpoint in Subayhat area, west of Abu Ghraib, killing five joint forces members and injuring 10 others.

8 U.S. expeditionary targeting force begins operations in Iraq. A U.S. Army official stated on February 29 that the U.S. Army Delta Force as part of the "expeditionary targeting force" started operations to target, capture or kill ISIS leaders in Iraq after "several weeks" of covert preparation and coordination with Iraqi and Peshmerga units. The force captured its first suspected ISIS operative on March 2 and will eventually turn the operative over to Iraqi officials.  

9 ISIS SVBIED strikes entrance to provincial capital of Babil province. An ISIS attacker detonated a fuel tanker SVBIED at a checkpoint entrance to the old city of Babil, north of Hilla in Babil Province on March 6, after security forces detected the explosives by sonar. The explosion killed more than 60 people and wounded at least 70 others.  

10 Protests in support of reforms proposed by Muqtada al-Sadr continue. Thousands of Sadrist supporters demonstrated on March 4 in front of local government buildings in the provinces of Babil, Basra, Dhi Qar, Diwaniyah, Diyala, Karbala, Kirkuk, Muthanna, Najaf, and Wasit while thousands of Sadrist supporters demonstrated in front of the Green Zone in central Baghdad. State of Law Alliance leader Nouri al-Maliki strongly denounced the Sadrist protests as "chaotic" and infiltrated by Baathists. Other popular demonstrations also continued separate from the Sadrist demonstrations across southern Iraq.



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

-  Demonstration

Content: Patrick Martin and ISW Iraq Team
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Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias spearheaded major operations to recapture desert terrain west of Samarra and Tikrit in Salah al-Din Province. The operation, announced and initiated by the Joint Operations Command on March 4, involves the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilization, and aims to secure the Jazeera desert area northwest of Baghdad and prevent its use by ISIS as a support zone. ISIS has freedom of access and attack in these areas which it uses to target Baghdad, areas west of Samarra, and Baiji. The Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) also announced the operation, and the PMC deputy chairman, U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, played a leading role in coordinating the operation. Major Iranian proxy militias, including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, deployed forces as part of the operation, and the PMC spokesperson denied that Coalition airstrikes played any role; the Coalition reported no airstrikes in Salah al-Din during the two-day operation. The Popular Mobilization and security forces lack the capacity to hold desert terrain and prevent ISIS from freely accessing the area, however. The Popular Mobilization and security forces have struggled to secure the Thar Thar desert area north of Fallujah, and multiple militia-led clearing operations have failed to secure these areas since June 2015. The high-profile militia operation bolsters the Iranian proxy narrative that the Popular Mobilization is the essential ally of the Iraqi government in the fight against ISIS. It also underscores the need for the U.S. and the Coalition to increase its support for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in order for the ISF to successfully recapture and secure territory from ISIS as a means of undermining the militia narrative. Meanwhile, an ISIS attacker detonated an explosives-laden fuel tanker at a checkpoint north of Hilla in Babil Province on March 6, killing more than 60 people and wounding more than 70 others. It was the first successful spectacular attack in Babil since 2013, and a provincial security official called it the largest attack in Babil to date. ISIS last detonated a VBIED in Babil in August 2015 in a failed attack that caused minimal casualties. The attack demonstrates that ISIS has the logistical capacity to launch spectacular attacks in Babil, a province that ISIS has not controlled terrain in since October 2014. The March 6 attack is likely a continuation of a series of suicide vest attacks between February 25 and February 29 intended to incite sectarian tensions and force the Popular Mobilization and ISF to redeploy for defensive measures away from forward operations.