

## ISIS BATTLE PLAN FOR BAGHDAD

There are indications that ISIS is about to launch into a new offensive in Iraq. ISIS published photos of a military parade through the streets of Mosul on June 24, 2014 showcasing U.S. military equipment, including armored vehicles and towed artillery systems.<sup>1</sup> ISIS reportedly executed another parade in Hawijah on June 26, 2014.<sup>2</sup> These parades may be a demonstration of force to reinforce their control of these urban centers. They may also be a prelude to ISIS troop movements, and it is important to anticipate where ISIS may deploy these forces forward. Meanwhile, ISIS also renewed the use of suicide bombers in the vicinity of Baghdad. An ISIS bomber with a suicide vest (SVEST) attacked the Kadhimiya shrine in northern Baghdad on June 26, 2014,<sup>3</sup> one of the four holy sites in Iraq that Iran and Shi'a militias are most concerned to protect. ISIS also incorporated an SVEST into a complex attack in Mahmudiyah, south of Baghdad, on June 25, 2014 in a zone primarily controlled by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Shi'a militias on the road from Baghdad to Karbala.<sup>4</sup> These attacks are demonstrations that ISIS has uncommitted forces in the Baghdad Belts that may be brought to bear in new offensives. ISIS's offensive has not culminated, and the ISIS campaign for Iraq is not over. Rather, as Ramadan approaches, their main offensive is likely imminent.\*

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is formidable, but it is also predictable. ISIS has exposed many of the core elements of its strategy, and it is possible to anticipate their next steps. ISW assesses with confidence that ISIS's urban offensive begun in Mosul has not culminated, and its campaign for Iraq is not over. ISIS's next urban objective will likely be to clear the Haditha-Ramadi corridor along the Euphrates River in Anbar.<sup>5</sup> ISIS's ultimate military objective in Iraq is likely to destroy the government in Baghdad. This backgrounder will assess ISIS's next steps in Iraq in light of its broader strategic goals. To do so, the backgrounder will examine where ISIS had military strength prior to the fall of Mosul and inventory its uncommitted forces. Based upon observable elements of the ISIS style of warfare, this backgrounder will observe where ISIS may have headquarters and how ISIS has likely divided the fight in Iraq and Syria into sectors. It will evaluate ISIS's interim military objectives in each sector based on observed actions, because ISIS's strategy continues to be careful and deliberate.

### ISIS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

ISIS seeks to create an Islamic Emirate extending across Iraq and Syria. This vision is expansionist, and it is prosecuted through military conquest. ISIS's grand strategy depends upon military superiority to wrest control of terrain from modern states by overcoming state security. The ISIS style of warfare hybridizes terrorism, guerilla warfare, and conventional warfare. The presence of the last indicates that the ISIS likely possesses a cadre

of former Saddam-era military officers who know the military terrain in Iraq as their own. The military campaign design exhibited by ISIS over the last two years<sup>6</sup> bears the signature of multiple commanders, though successive campaigns in Iraq have consistently demonstrated scope, distribution, deception, and timing as overarching strategic characteristics. The logic of ISIS's recent urban campaign in Iraq exposes their likely next steps.

When facing such an enemy, it is prudent to begin by assessing the political objectives that the ISIS military campaign in Iraq must support:

1. Permanently break down political boundaries in Iraq, Syria, and the region by cultivating conditions for government failure and/or sectarian civil war.
2. Establish the Islamic Emirate by controlling terrain across Iraq and Syria, governing the population within, and defending against external threats.
3. Bring like-minded people to fight alongside and settle within the Islamic Emirate.
4. Expand the territory of the Emirate and connect it to the wider Muslim community, or the Ummah.

\* For more information on the current situation in Iraq, see ISW's daily "Iraq Situation Report," published at <http://iswiraq.blogspot.com/>.

Objectives 1 and 2 are high confidence assessments based upon how ISIS has prosecuted its Iraq campaign since announcing the “Breaking the Walls” campaign in July 2012. Objectives 3 and 4 are predictive assessments that derive from an understanding that ISIS is beaconing to the broader jihadist community through such means as social media and its new English-language Islamic State Report, a periodical that emphasizes the idyllic qualities of life and governance in the Emirate rather than solely the military victories of ISIS.<sup>7</sup> ISIS likely intends and will set conditions to expand its territory beyond Iraq and Syria. ISIS will also likely project and encourage terrorist attacks outside of the Middle East in order to claim leadership over the global jihadist cause.

For the purposes of evaluating the next steps of the ISIS military campaign, it is vital to recognize that ISIS cannot proceed with its Islamic Emirate if the unitary state of Iraq still stands. A surviving Iraqi state can recover its former strength and pose an existential threat to ISIS if Iraq is allowed to preserve its capital, its military, and its alliances. ISIS likely intends to ensure Iraq’s permanent injury, by destroying the Iraqi military in the vicinity of Baghdad; by destroying the seat of government in Baghdad; by attacking core interests of her allies; or by destroying the capital. Destroying the seat of government in Baghdad is likely the primary target, though the others may be pursued in support or conjunction. It is important to note that the Council of Representatives gathering scheduled for July 1, 2014 to form Iraq’s new government may represent a Center of Gravity target that ISIS will attempt to exploit.<sup>8</sup>

ISIS has likely considered what conditions would transpire after such an attack, should they prove successful. The remnants of Baghdad, Diyala, and Karbala would form a new border exclusion zone between ISIS and a new Iranian protectorate comprised of Iraq’s southern provinces. The ISIS northern border may preserve Iraqi Kurdistan as a northern equivalent border exclusion zone separating ISIS from Iran to the north. ISIS would need to secure these zones through continued offensives. Alternatively, ISIS may try to undermine the defenses of Iraqi Kurdistan so it is no longer a military threat. ISIS would also need to manage adjacent fronts and synchronize for effect in Syria and other states in the Levant. Rather than hope that ISIS cannot achieve its objectives, it is prudent to evaluate whether they have the means and the strategic calculus to succeed by attacking and destroying the Iraqi government in Baghdad.

While this backgrounder will focus upon the imminent threat of an ISIS attack upon Baghdad, it is also necessary to regard the Syrian front as one that ISIS may prosecute with uncommitted military forces in Deir ez-Zour, Raqqa, and Aleppo. These forces grow stronger as ISIS acquires more firepower and manpower through its battlefield victories in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, as ISIS formulates attack scenarios for Baghdad, other ISIS forces in the north and east of Iraq will likely continue to operate in their respective zones.

## ISIS MILITARY SECTORS IN IRAQ

A year before ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq into al-Sham, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) had regenerated the capacity to sustain a nation-wide campaign of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attacks through ample human and material resources. ISI leadership at that time organized VBIEDs into waves of simultaneous attacks, demonstrating effective command and control over a distributed ground force. The VBIED attacks concentrated first in eastern Iraq, in the Hamrin ridge corridor leading to northern Diyala, demonstrating a renewed presence in a historic support zone near where Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had been killed in 2006.<sup>10</sup> The core military capacity of ISIS at this time was terrorism.

ISIS also regenerated the capacity to execute a combined arms attack against a fixed site, such as a prison. In September 2012, ISIS achieved its first victory on this front, breaking 38 former AQI leaders from Tikrit Tasfirat prison.<sup>11</sup> At the end of the “Breaking the Walls” campaign in July 2013, the newly expanded ISIS successfully broke 500 prisoners from Abu Ghraib prison.<sup>12</sup> The release of multiple generations of former AQI leaders, and also the geography of these attacks, indicate where and how ISIS developed additional leadership nodes. By the end of 2013, ISIS had likely developed military headquarters commanding operations in separate zones in northern Diyala, the Jazeera desert west of Tikrit, and the Thar Thar region north of Abu Ghraib.

All three commands were actively engaged in intimidation campaigns to degrade state security forces by the end of 2013, a prelude to establishing control of urban terrain.<sup>13</sup> In January 2014, ISIS executed a ground assault upon the Anbar cities of Fallujah and Ramadi.<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, separate ISIS forces in Syria consolidated western positions in Aleppo Province and established complete control in Raqqa.<sup>15</sup> Drawing the ISF into a main effort counter-attack in Anbar and fixing them there, ISIS engaged in separate attacks in northern Baghdad and Samarra, indicating that the forces required to engage in the Ramadi-Fallujah fight were distinct from those that could operate in the northern Baghdad Belts.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the ISIS eastern forces attempted several times to establish control of urban terrain between Suleiman Beg and Sadia, even attacking the southern Baquba suburb of Buhriz in March 2014.<sup>17</sup>

With the Iraqi Security Forces engaged in the west and east, ISIS engaged its northern forces in early June 2014 to seize Mosul, Tikrit, Baiji, Hawija, and Tal Afar.<sup>18</sup> This campaign has since expanded to the upper Euphrates, with ISIS establishing control in Rawa, Ana, and Qaim.<sup>19</sup> Additional ISIS forces likely moved from these outer Anbar locations to take control of Rutba, near the Jordanian border on June 23, 2014.<sup>20</sup> The ISIS campaign in Iraq overcame the Iraqi Security Forces in the north and west, the combat readiness of which ISIS attacks and inattention by

the Iraqi government had degraded.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the ISIS eastern command seized control of Suleiman Beg and nearby villages in conjunction with the initial assault upon Mosul.<sup>22</sup> This confirms that ISIS can attack across multiple commands and multiple fronts simultaneously, while holding further positions in Fallujah and Ramadi.

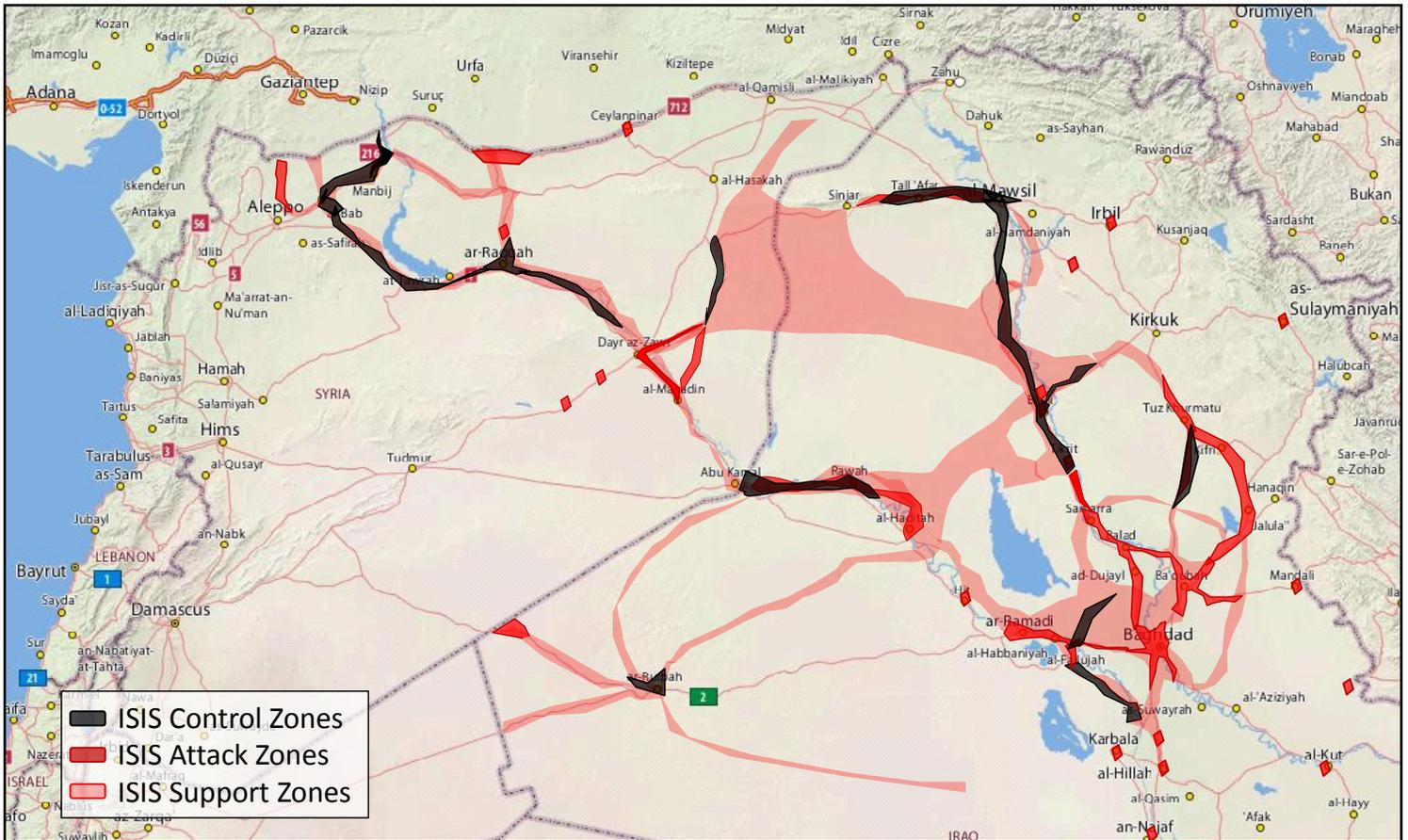
The forces north and south of Fallujah in the vicinity of Thar Thar and Jurf al-Sakhar have been quiet during this northern and eastern offensive. It is therefore necessary to regard the potential for ISIS forces north, west, and south of Baghdad, uncommitted at this time, to execute offensives near Baghdad. Given the campaign design sophistication evidenced by ISIS to date, and given the grand scale of their strategic endstate, it is likely that ISIS will develop a strategy to attack Baghdad for maximum effect to cripple Iraq and prevent a counter-attack by the Iraqi Security Forces. It is also important to recognize that ISIS likely draws historic memory from AQI former leadership released from prisons, such that the former AQI plan to occupy the Baghdad Belts in order to control Baghdad, may still be relevant to their current battle plan. It is also possible that ISIS had a strategy for Baghdad prior to the fall of Mosul that ISIS must now adjust, based upon unanticipated levels of Shi'a militia mobilization and Iranian involvement in Baghdad defenses. Nevertheless, there are ways that ISIS can pursue this

ultimate objective despite these circumstances, and ISIS is likely planning against these known constraints.

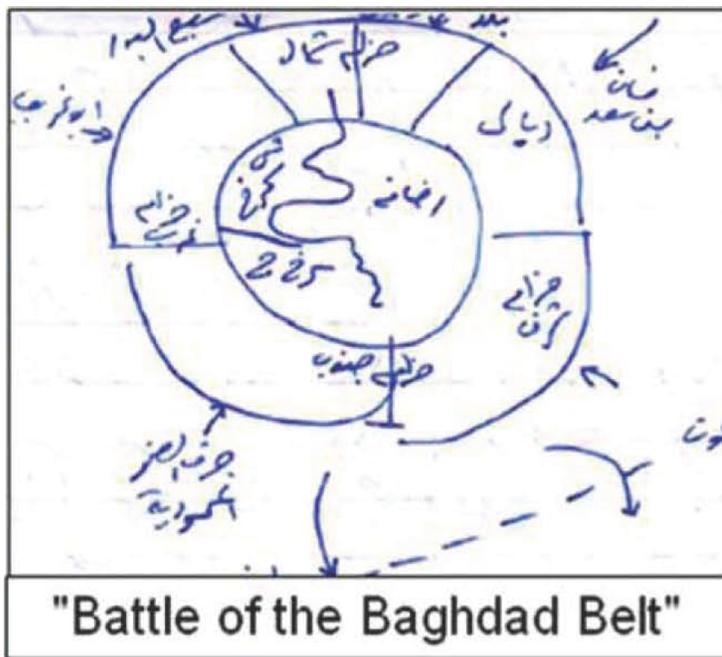
### HAS THE ISIS OFFENSIVE CULMINATED?

The ISIS urban offensive which began on June 10, 2014 in Mosul has not culminated. ISIS shifted the main effort of its urban offensive on June 21 to the Euphrates corridor that connects Anbar province to Syria, seizing the towns of Rawa, Ana, and Qaim along the Euphrates corridor. ISIS will likely continue its Euphrates main effort until its forces in these towns close the gap between Haditha and Ramadi, securing all of the towns in Anbar for ISIS control. ISIS will carry its momentum forward to wrest Anbar from the Iraqi Army completely. Seizing Ramadi may be the final objective of this campaign phase because the city is the symbolic and real home of the Anbar Awakening. The current offensives alternating between Anbar and northern Iraq are fundamentally linked and part of the same campaign design. We have already observed this alternation in early 2014, when ISIS conducted shaping operations for the Mosul campaign while placing its main combat effort in Fallujah.

This ISIS northern offensive broke Iraq into three rings of control. This was likely part of the ISIS overall battle plan, because ring-shaped sector designation is characteristic of the



This map depicts ISIS support, attack and control zones as of June 23, 2014. While the ISIS urban offensive that began in Mosul has primarily secured cities deep within the Sunni heartland, there are also ISIS forces positioned near to Baghdad that may present future threats.



This image was recovered from an AQI operative in Iraq in 2006. The sketch demonstrates how ISIS's predecessor organization conceptualized sectors of control around Baghdad from which a strategy could be launched to control the city. The Baghdad Belts are a historic support zone for ISIS, and ISIS has a long history of designating campaigns to achieve effects upon Baghdad.

previous style of warfare exhibited by AQI. Their original plan for controlling Baghdad by controlling its surrounding belts is shown above in a picture captured from AQI by U.S. forces in 2006. It is important to observe that ISIS likely organizes its Iraq campaign in terms of sectors that stretch in rings that are progressively near to Baghdad, because the Iraqi Security Force Operations Commands had been mismatched to fight them, organized instead by province.<sup>23</sup> A counter-offensive against ISIS must account for how ISIS organizes and synchronizes its subordinate commands in order to counter their strategy effectively.

In the far north, from Sinjar passage to Kirkuk and Khanaqin, the Kurdish Peshmerga are now in control. ISIS controls the urban territory within, including Tal Afar, Mosul, Baiji, Tikrit, Hawija, and the outer cities of Anbar. ISIS's control of this Sunni heartland sector is not yet entrenched. ISIS is still fighting for control of the Baiji oil refinery, where the ISF have been fighting. The ISF are also concentrating air power in Tikrit. ISIS is clashing with other Sunni forces in Hawjiah and the southern Hamrin ridge. ISIS is also still chasing pockets of fleeing Sunni governance outside of Tikrit. ISIS may yet face sturdy resistance from the Sunnis in this zone. But the Iraqi Army has withdrawn from areas along the Euphrates, even destroying a bridge west of Haditha in the hope of halting the ISIS advance toward Ramadi. Along with Shi'a militias, the ISF are engaged with ISIS in the east in what will be a knife fight for control of the Diyala River Valley and Baquba.

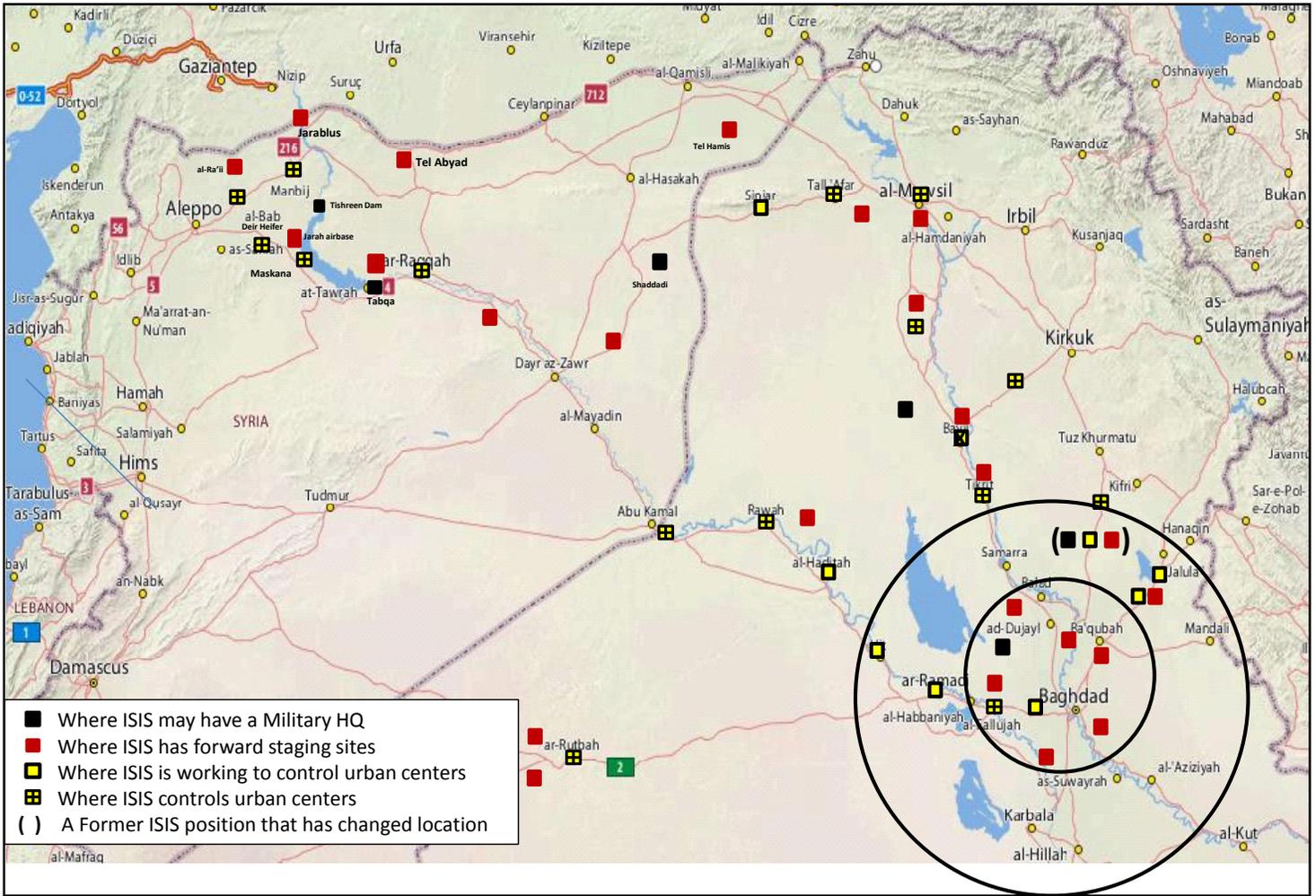
Inside this barrier wall of Iraqi Security Forces is an unsettling truth. ISIS is already inside the ring of IA defenses at Haditha, Samarra, and Muqadiyah. From the west, ISIS is already in control of Fallujah and poised to attack Ramadi and Abu Ghraib. Abu Ghraib is only 30 km from Baghdad. From the Thar Thar region west of Taji and the Udham corridor east of Balad, ISIS may project force south of Samarra, isolating Samarra from Baghdad. ISIS has already attacked south of Baquba in the city of Buhriz, indicating their presence and opportunity to open lines southeast of Baghdad, especially in the vicinity of Mada'in. ISIS is also positioned in northern Babil and remote Anbar to project a threat to Karbala. ISIS established control in the Baghdad Belts before the Mosul offensive began.

The Iraqi Army strongholds at Balad Airbase, Taji Base, Camp Ashraf, and Baghdad International Airport constitute a hard inner ring of state control to protect the capital. Baghdad is also now densely patrolled by Shi'a militias. However, ISIS has uncommitted forces on their doorstep that pose a real threat to Baghdad. Balad Airbase is under attack by armed gunmen as of June 25, 2014. The Iraqi Army will fail if it hides behind a falsely-perceived defensive line set at Samarra, Haditha, and Baquba. Instead, the IA must consider how to array forces to prevent the fall of Ramadi, to disrupt the consolidation of ISIS northern control, and to counter any ISIS strategy to isolate and neutralize IA defenses and offensive capabilities such as the air assets at Balad Airbase near Baghdad.

## THE ISIS BATTLE PLAN FOR BAGHDAD

ISIS seeks to create an Islamic Emirate that overcomes the modern states of Iraq and Syria. The Syrian war began without ISIS, but ISIS succeeded in instigating a sectarian war in Iraq in order to destabilize the state. ISIS has systematically targeted sectarian fault lines in Iraq over the past two years in order to precipitate a civil war, but ISIS also intends to break the Iraqi state permanently so that it cannot recover. This is essential in order to protect the Islamic Emirate from external attack. ISIS may not seek to make Baghdad its capital; Baghdad is far from the center of Iraq's Sunni heartland and sits along the contested corridor that separates the Sunni and Shi'a majority lands in Iraq. Rather, ISIS likely seeks to destroy the government of Iraq, to destroy the Iraqi Army, and to ensure that Baghdad does not remain a viable Shi'a capital. It is more reasonable to expect that ISIS has a battle plan for Baghdad than to presume that ISIS would not create one because they recognize how difficult the task of controlling the city.

It is unlikely that conditions are optimally set for an ISIS offensive against Baghdad. ISIS will need to decide whether to commit to a strategy of destroying military installations or whether to destroy the Iraqi government through violent means, such as targeting the July 1, 2014 gathering of the Council of Representatives. Either way, ISIS will need to thin Baghdad's defenses by drawing the ISF and Shi'a militias out of Baghdad in order to protect other targets, such as the Samarra, Kadhimiya,



This map is a situation template to estimate where ISIS may have forward positions and military headquarters relative to urban centers that comprise ISIS objectives in Iraq and Syria. Within Iraq, ISIS likely has three operational commands that control their operations in the Sunni heartland, in the eastern provinces, and in the Baghdad Belts.

and Karbala shrines. ISIS is likely aware of the widespread disposition of Shi'a militias within Baghdad; they are also likely aware that there are Sunnis communities in Baghdad under duress that present support opportunities. ISIS will also likely consider that any battle plan launched from outside Baghdad at this point will require a plan to clear a maneuver corridor, given that Baghdad's roads are not likely passable due to Shi'a militia checkpoints. But the attack on Baghdad does not need to mimic the attack on Mosul. The attack may not involve a convoy of 40-50 vehicles. There are other ways to strike the capital.

ISIS now has artillery and other indirect fire capability, in addition to heavy machine guns. This is visible in their social media coverage of their acquisitions in Ninewa. ISIS can induce a surface-to-air threat against IA aircraft at Balad Airbase, Taji Base, and Baghdad International Airport that effectively neutralizes Iraq's air assets. ISIS can also attack fortified positions in downtown Baghdad through medium-range direct fire via the artillery pieces it has seized. ISIS likely intends to strike the Green Zone and other fortress targets that have adequate

ground protection. ISIS likely has presence inside Baghdad that can facilitate accurate fire through visual observation, and the emergence of SVESTS on June 26 in lieu of the more detectable SVBIEDs likely illustrates its adaptation to the new Shi'a militia environment. ISIS may also layer explosive attacks through SVBIEDs against checkpoints or infrastructure in order to open temporary movement corridors that will permit ground assault against targets in Baghdad. ISIS may still be designing and sequencing its plan for Baghdad, but from a threat perspective, the most dangerous outcomes that ISIS could precipitate against U.S. interests in Baghdad are feasible. ISIS's revived capability for spectacular attacks in Baghdad and its ability to harness medium range artillery comes just as the U.S. has placed 300 personnel in country, in addition to those essential personnel already stationed at the Embassy. There is no safe place in Baghdad against the threat of ISIS.

**THE NEXT ISIS URBAN OFFENSIVE**

ISIS is most likely to seize Ramadi, the home of the Sunni Awakening, and complete its northern offensive before



*This image, posted to Twitter by ISIS after a military parade through Mosul on June 24, 2014, demonstrates that ISIS has access to U.S. artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers, and other equipment. It also illustrates that ISIS can move this equipment, which may give ISIS offensive capability outside of their present zone of control.*

launching into a new campaign phase. ISIS is also likely to engage its uncommitted forces north and south of Fallujah and set new objectives that facilitate an offensive main effort in Baghdad. The ISIS forces north of Fallujah in the Thar Thar region may launch attacks upon Samarra, Dujail, and Taji in order to neutralize Taji Base. ISIS in the Udham corridor may also support efforts to neutralize Balad Airbase with some crossover along this ISIS seam. Meanwhile, ISIS elements in Jurf al-Sakhar will likely continue to engage the ISF in northern Babil. Meanwhile, ISIS elements in Mada'in and remote Anbar may project force upon Karbala in order to draw the ISF and Shi'a militias away from Baghdad, which may prioritize the protection of the shrines to its south. These offensives are likely to precede an attack upon Baghdad, but the timing and the symbolism of Ramadan is also a consideration for ISIS.

Over the last two years, ISIS has punctuated its named campaigns with spectacular offensives during Ramadan. ISI, not yet expanded to ISIS, inaugurated the "Breaking the Walls" campaign in July 2012 with a wave of car bombs across northern Iraq and Baghdad. ISIS concluded the "Breaking the Walls" campaign in July 2013 with another car bomb wave that included the attacks upon Abu Ghraib and Taji base prisons. ISIS immediately announced the new "Soldiers Harvest" campaign, which is likely still underway. ISIS may seek a symbolic target in order to close the campaign during Ramadan 2014, though the Ramadan targeting strategy may obscure ISIS's actual campaign objectives. The ISIS style of warfare involves strategic deception, and although Ramadan is likely a key attack window, it may not be the period in which ISIS main attacks take place. Ramadan begins on Saturday, June 28, 2014 and lasts until July 28, 2014.

## FLAWS IN THE ISIS CAMPAIGN DESIGN

Despite their core strengths and potential to target Baghdad, there are notable flaws in the overall ISIS battle plan for Iraq.

First, ISIS may not have the right force composition to project a suitable attack upon Kirkuk city. The ISIS forces that executed the northern offensive will be committed in place for some time. ISIS would weaken its position in northern Iraq to attack from Mosul, Baiji, or Tikrit into Kirkuk city, which lies behind a defensive berm and is now protected by the Kurdish Peshmerga. Separate ISIS elements in eastern Diyala province, south of Kirkuk, present an alternate fighting force, but this contingent is more likely to remain engaged in Diyala. ISIS may therefore consider trading space with the Peshmerga, guaranteeing Kirkuk as a border exclusion zone in return for concessions at the Syria border, such as the Peshmerga controlled cities of Sinjar and Rabia. ISIS could also designate these border downs as tactical military objectives and commit resources to seize them the way they seized Tal Afar. Finally, ISIS could maneuver against Kirkuk in order to break the Peshmerga and accept risk on other fronts.

ISIS also has the classical challenge of overcoming gaps between its forces in the eastern and western Baghdad Belts. ISIS forces in the Thar Thar region do not connect directly to ISIS forces in the Diyala River Valley, though ISIS may be able to project threats upon Balad Airbase, Taji Base, and Samarra from both directions. In some respects, Samarra, which lies between these ISIS forces and Tikrit, is made more vulnerable by the fact that ISIS can attack this target from the north, from the west, and from the east. However, ISIS is also made vulnerable by this seam. The conundrum of Samarra is one that ISIS has tested ways to overcome. Before the Mosul offensive, on June 5, 2014 ISIS attacked Samarra with ground forces, seizing control of several neighborhoods and attempting an attack on the al-Askari mosque. Samarra is vulnerable, but it may not be the campaign priority for any of these three contingents of ISIS.

ISIS has also opened a wide area of urban control in Iraq within a short period, requiring the organization to consolidate control in the Sunni heartland of Iraq. ISIS likely intends to consolidate and insulate recent gains from any counter-offensive by the Iraqi Army. ISIS has to balance its plan to repel external threats with the requirement to maintain control of recently seized territory. ISIS faces internal threats, especially suppressing resistance from the Sunnis in Iraq or Syria; ISIS will also have to figure out how to transition from military control to political control in order to realize its Islamic State. These are strategic vulnerabilities for ISIS; however, they do not preclude further ISIS offensives. Rather, ISIS is incentivized to drive forward with its military strategy in order to perpetuate the message of victory. Culmination or withdrawal would also generate cascading vulnerabilities for ISIS therefore. ISIS must keep winning in battle, or their control over the Sunni population in Iraq and Syria will unravel.

## CONCLUSION

A ground campaign to deny Ramadi and Baghdad to ISIS in the near term and to begin to retake lost territory is critical to overcome the offensive spirit and message of victory that are currently fueling ISIS. The Sunni population in Iraq may very well unite in order to counter ISIS deep within the Sunni heartland if they perceive that ISIS can be defeated, and that their tribes will be protected from ISIS and Iran. The Sunnis are not looking to the government of Iraq for these assurances right now, because they perceive more than ever that Maliki's government is part of an Iranian axis. Syrian air strikes into Iraq's Sunni lands only underscore this point. With no army to protect them, and no army that can outmatch ISIS on the ground, the Sunnis are faced with an existential crisis on two-fronts: the threat of ISIS, and the threat of Iran, both assaulting Iraq's Sunnis with military force. The war in Iraq and the war in Syria have the potential to engulf the region, while ISIS usurps the terrain lost by states that may never recover their former likeness.

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## NOTES

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