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. The operation was led by ISF, with the Popular Mobilization and tribal forces playing key roles.

The ISF recaptures Rutba District and its environs. The ISF retook Rutba and its environs, including the four villages of Kasab, Nukhaib, Rumaitha, and Samawah, located on the northern outskirts of Fallujah. This was one of the first major victories in the operation, as Rutba is a key area that ISIS has used as a base for attacks.

Three ISIS gunmen disguised as Popular Mobilization members opened fire on a café in al-Balad District, southeast of Samarra on May 12, killing 13 and wounding 25. The attackers fled, and one later detonated a Suicide Vest (SVVEST) during an ISF clearing operation west of Balad, killing two Popular Mobilization members and two Federal Police members. A second SVVEST attacker was killed and found before he could attack. The Federal Police also reported that four additional ISF SVVEST attackers were killed attempting to detonate explosives at a shrine in Balad. On May 21, an ISF SVVEST attacker on a motorcycle detonated his explosives near a police station in Diyala District, south of Balad, killing five people and wounding 20.

ISIS attacks Taji Gas Plant. ISIS carried out a complex attack on the Taji Gas Plant near Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, on May 15 in order to disrupt its operation and damage the facilities. ISIS detonated a Suicide Vehicle-Borne IED (SVBIED) at the gate of the plant before storming the facility with six SVVEST attackers and another VBIE. The ISF killed the attackers, but three gas tanks were set on fire and at least 14 people were killed.

ISIS conducts spectacular attacks in Baghdad. Between May 11 and May 23, ISIS conducted a wave of spectacular attacks against civilian targets across Baghdad, including deadly attacks in northern Baghdad’s Sadr City and Shaab areas on May 11 and May 17. At least three ISIS attackers were killed attempting to detonate explosives at a shrine in Balad. On May 21, an ISF SVVEST attacker on a motorcycle detonated his explosives near a police station in Diyala District, south of Balad, killing five people and wounding 20.

The ISF and Popular Mobilization forces repelled the attack but the assault left at least one Iraqi Police (IP) member dead and four others wounded.

ISIS attacks police station in Abu Ghraib. The Ministry of Interior reported that three SVBIED attackers and gunmen, attempted to storm a police station in al-Zaidan in Abu Ghraib District, west of Baghdad on May 12. Security forces repelled the attack but the assault left at least one Iraqi Police (IP) member dead and four others wounded.

ISF north of Ramadi, breached terrain. ISIS detonated a suicide truck at an ISF checkpoint in Baiji on May 6, killing at least 17 Iraqi Army soldiers. A security source stated that ISIS militants “surrounded an army regiment, seized a bridge, and cut a key supply route” between Ramadi and Thar Thar in order to sever the ISF’s supply routes to Fallujah before reinforcements arrived and cleared the area.

ISF announces start of Fallujah operation. PM Abadi announced the start of ground operations in Fallujah on May 23, visiting the operation’s headquarters while Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaidi visited an ISF headquarters north of Fallujah. The ISF and Popular Mobilization continued deploying forces to the Fallujah area, including “20,000” members of the “federal forces,” according to the Federal Police commander. However, the Resolve spokesman confirmed that the ISF and Popular Mobilization forces have deployed around the Green Zone and closed all entrances.

Sadrist protesters storm the Green Zone, clash with security forces. Thousands of Sadrist demonstrators stormed the Green Zone on May 20 despite security forces attempting to prevent their entry by launching tear gas. Protesters attacked the headquarters of the Council of Representatives, Council of Ministers, and PM Abadi’s office before withdrawing under heavy attack from security forces. At least 89 people were wounded during the demonstration and three others killed. Federal Police deployed across the Green Zone and in Tahrir Square while the elite Golden Division secured the Green Zone and closed all entrances.

Sadrist leader Muqtada al-Sadr praised the “spontaneous peaceful nature of the protest.” PM Abadi condemned the protests as “unacceptable.” Smaller Sadrist demonstrations broke out across southern Iraq. Demonstrators attempted to storm the Dhi Qar and Basra provincial council buildings and kidnapped the chairman of the Barada Organization headquarters in Amarah, Maysan.

Security forces reorganize, shuffle forces. Security operation commands in Basra, Diyala, Muthanna, and Babil Provinces significantly increased security measures in response to increased ISIS attacks. ISF deployed an armored force deployed to northern Basra on May 17 to contain tribal conflicts. The Diwaniyah Provincial Council requested that the Interior Ministry stop transferring Federal Police forces out of the province towards Anbar due to the uptick of ISIS attacks in southern Iraq.

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-Shia’s conflict, its attacks have generated friction between the Sadrist, rival Iranian-backed proxy militias, and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The Sadrist are exacerbating tensions by putting thousands of unruly demonstrators out on the streets against Iraqi 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 and Shaib areas on May 21, and carried out a large attack targeting at.detonated explosives at a shrine in Balad. On May 21, an ISF SVVEST attacker on a motorcycle detonated his explosives near a police station in Diyala District, south of Balad, killing five people and wounding 20.

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