Iraq Situation Report: May 24 - June 1, 2016

1. Peshmerga offensive recaptures territory east of Mosul. Peshmerga forces backed by Coalition airstrikes and advisers attacked ISIS on two sides on May 29; they breached the Khazar axis, east of Mosul, recapturing the Shakah village of al-Mufi, and surrounded Zahrat Khutan, reportedly under Iraqi Kurdistan Regional President Masoud Barzani’s direct supervision. The operation ended on May 30 leaving the Peshmerga in control of nine villages, including Wardak, Kultur, Karshun, and Tulubd. One Peshmerga Brigadier General was killed during the operation.

2. ISIS targets Peshmerga stronghold near Mosul. Gwer-Makhmur Peshmerga official Sirwan Barzani stated that five ISIS attackers wearing Suicide Vests (SVVEST) targeted Peshmerga forces on the Gower axis, southeast of Mosul on May 29. Five of the attackers were killed but one detonated his explosives, "slightly wounding" seven Peshmerga fighters.

3. ISIS explosive attack targets Iraqi Shi’a militia stronghold in Salah al-Din. An Iraqi Police source stated on May 31 that an ISIS Suicide Vehicle-Borne IED (SVBIED) detonated at a checkpoint in Suleimani Bek, east of Tikrit, killing at least three Popular Mobilization fighters and wounding at least nine others.

4. ISIS SVVEST attack targets Muqdadiyah. An ISIS attacker detonated his SVVEST on May 30 at a cafe in al-Muallimeen neighborhood of Muqdadiyah District, killing at least five people and wounding at least 25 others. ISIS claimed the attack targeted Iraqi Army and Shia’s Popular Mobilization fighters near the police station.

5. ISIS continues to target civilians in Baghdad with spectacular attacks. An ISIS attack on a bicycle or motorcycle VBIED failed to reach its target on May 30 and detonated his explosives while IA members attempted to arrest him in the Obeiba Market in Sadr City. The attack killed two people and wounded 10 others. A SVBIED detonated on May 30 at a checkpoint in al-Shaib in northeastern Baghdad, killing seven people and wounding 20 others. A SVBIED also detonated on May 30 at the government complex in Tarmiyah. ISIS claimed that the attack killed and wounded a total of 20 people and destroyed part of the building. A SVEST attacker attempted to enter Kadhimiya in northern Baghdad on May 25, but Federal Police interdicted the attacker.

6. Unrest continues with demonstrations in Iraq. PM Abadi called for Friday demonstrations to be postponed in light of operations in Fallujah and made a second visit to the Fallujah area to observe ongoing operations on May 26. PM Abadi stated that demonstrations are a constitutional right but asked for them not to use ‘‘pressure’’ security forces. Tight security did repulse an attempt by ‘‘hundreds’’ of protestors to enter the Green Zone with tear gas on May 27, reportedly wounding as many as 30 people before the protestors withdrew. Smaller demonstrations also occurred across the southern provinces. Meanwhile, a Sadrist Trend senior aide, Ibrahim al-Jabiri, stated that the Friday demonstrations would be limited to Tahrir Square and not enter the Green Zone, however he later stated that the Sadrist Trend is ‘‘not responsible’’ for any spontaneous demonstrations that arise, likely to distance the Sadrist Trend from the negative press resulting from the April 30 and May 20 protests which stormed the Green Zone.

Iraq’s political situation remains tenuous as security forces escalate a major military operation in Fallujah. Iraqi Shi’a militias, tribal fighters, and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continued recapturing territory around Fallujah and began probing attacks into the city of Fallujah. However, there are numerous reports that the Popular Mobilization engaged in sectarian violence in Garma sub-district, reportedly destroying a mosque with explosives, looting homes and buildings, and kidnapping and executing civilians. While the reports could not be confirmed, this conduct is not anomalous for many of the Iraqi Shi’a militias operating in the area. Continued sectarian violence will have serious consequences on the stability of the Fallujah area, providing a support base for Sunni extremist groups and increasing the stabilization force requirements to hold the area. The visit of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) - Quds Force commander Qassim Suleimani to the area and the prominent role of Iran’s proxy militias underscore the level of influence Iran has over the conduct of the operation; the Popular Mobilization appears content to let the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS) with Coalition airstrikes recapture Fallujah city itself while Iraqi Shi’a militias establish themselves in the area and take the credit. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani likely influenced this decision, who insisted on May 25 that security forces respect civilian lives and not to be ‘‘extreme.’’ Sistani’s statement indicates increasing concern among the Iraqi Shi’a religious establishment over Iran’s prominent role in the Fallujah operation.

ISIS also continued to launch spectacular attacks in Baghdad and the northern Belts in areas that have been repeatedly targeted in recent weeks. Despite increased levels of security forces in and around Baghdad, repeat attacks in areas such as Sadr City and al-Shaab suggest that ISIS retains access in Baghdad and underscores the failure of the security forces to address fundamental vulnerabilities in their security system. Similarly, an ISIS attack in Muqdadiyah comes amidst the largest deployment of forces to Diyala Province since 2008. The ISF, occupied with operations in Fallujah, does not have the reserves to increase its presence in these areas. The Fallujah operation in the short-term will drive an increase in ISIS attacks in retaliation for territorial losses; attacks in Baghdad will increase the burden on the security forces to preserve a standard of security with limited resources.