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## The Fighting in Iraq: The Military Aspect

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In mid-May 2015, Islamic State (IS) forces occupied Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Anbar Province. It was the second occupation of Ramadi by the IS, and came after a long series of defeats in which the IS lost ground in the provinces of Salah al-Din (Tikrit) and Anbar (Garma, Amiriyat-Falluja). Much of the media coverage of the war against the IS in Iraq has focused on the specific battles in Ramadi and elsewhere, without a broader assessment of the fighting on the ground in Iraq. What follows is an analysis of recent developments, with the aim of placing the battle for Ramadi within a wider context of the current military stalemate in Iraq.

The Islamic State invested considerable efforts in its planning for the battle of Ramadi. Weeks before the IS offensive, explosives were smuggled into Iraq from Syria using ordinary automobiles,<sup>1</sup> and approximately fifty suicide bombers were recruited from as far away as Aleppo to take part in the initial attack<sup>2</sup> that included the largest number of suicide bomb attacks to date, including a garbage truck packed with 200 kilograms of explosives that targeted the military headquarters of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In comparison, the initial attack that led to the June 2014 conquest of Mosul was modest. Faced with these large-scale suicide attacks, Iraqi army and auxiliary forces withdrew to nearby villages and the IS flag was raised in the seat of government in Anbar.

This second occupation of Ramadi demonstrated that the Iraqi government is failing to fight the IS on two fronts: north and west of Baghdad. The international outcry over the loss of Ramadi, including a scathing critique of the Iraqi army by U.S. Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter,<sup>3</sup> added to the IS's prestige and

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<sup>1</sup> Aymenn al-Tamimi in Margaret Coker, "[How Islamic State Win in Ramadi Show New Weapons, Tactical Sophistication and Prowess](#)" *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Coker, "[How Islamic State Win in Ramadi Show New Weapons, Tactical Sophistication and Prowess](#)" *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Starr, "[Carter: Iraqis Showed no 'Will to Fight' in Ramadi](#)," May 24, 2015.

reportedly led to American pressure on Iraq to change its plans and retake Ramadi before setting its eyes on Mosul. This setback further humiliated Haydar al-'Abadi, Iraq's prime minister, who initially declared that the battle to retake Mosul would be launched in May 2015. Yet contrary to reports in the media, the results of the fighting between the IS and the Iraqi government and its allies in recent months were essentially a draw.

However, the focus on Ramadi, amplified by the IS's occupation of Palmyra in Syria, obscures other military developments in Iraq. First, in June 2015, Iraqi Security Forces recaptured the town of Baiji, north of Tikrit.<sup>4</sup> The Baiji oil refinery, the largest and oldest in Iraq, has changed hands several times during the war. On May 15, a military spokesman announced that the government now controls six out of eight administrative units (*qada'*) in Salah al-Din Province. The remaining two units (Baiji and Sharqat, the latter of which is still under complete IS control) are in the north of the province, facing Mosul.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the government is struggling to expand its control on the western fringes of Salah al-Din, a desert area connecting the province to Anbar. The government aims to break the IS's territorial contiguity with Syria and deepen the geographic wedge between the two regions under IS control, the northern Jazira and the western desert. The Iraqi government has two major bases, 'Ayn al-Asad and Habaniya, in the western desert, where American advisors are stationed. Official Iraqi press releases always stress the cooperation between all the forces fighting the IS: the army, the Shi'i militias, the local forces (Sunni tribes, locally recruited forces), and the international coalition.<sup>6</sup> Cooperation between the forces may not be perfect, but there is no reason to doubt that all of these forces are participating in the fight against the IS.

In addition to the northern front, another major front is in the area of Karma, a rural area north east of Falluja, in which the government announced some recent successes.<sup>7</sup> If the government could gain control of Karma, it would alleviate some of the pressure on Baghdad and allow government forces to besiege Falluja, which is only 60 kilometers from Baghdad and has been under the IS's occupation since February 2014. The fighting in Karma may indeed be a prelude to a battle for Falluja. A spokesman of the Shi'i militias recently announced that

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<sup>4</sup> Hamdi Al-Khshali, "Officials: Iraqi Forces control of Baiji City" CNN, June 8, 2015 <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/07/middleeast/iraq-forces-baiji/> Official sources declared that on June 29 the government had completely retaken Baiji. 'Ali al-Musawi, "[al-Quwat al-Mushtarika Tathar Bayji wa tatajih lil-tahrir al-sharqat wa dukhul al-Mawsil](#)," *Al-Zaman*, June 29 2015. On July 6 government forces had to pull back from some positions in this town following an IS counter attack using suicide bombers.

<sup>5</sup> *Al-Zaman*, June 15, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: 'Ali al-Musawi, "[al-Quwat al-Mushtarika Tathar Bayji wa tatajih lil-tahrir al-sharqat wa dukhul al-Mawsil](#)," *Al-Zaman*, June 29, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad al-Salihi, "[Al-Qata'at tatahashid li Fakk al-Khanaq 'an Haditha wa-dukhul al-Falluja](#)," *Al-Zaman*, July 7, 2015.

Falluja is now surrounded on all sides by government forces. He also stated that Falluja should be taken before Ramadi, so as to avoid leaving government forces exposed from the rear.<sup>8</sup> This logic may also be a manifestation of an indecisiveness among certain government officials and/or a reflection of the pressure the government is feeling from the Shi'i militias, which influences how it prioritizes its military tactics.

If the Iraqi government is finding it difficult to fight on two fronts simultaneously, it is important to remember that the IS is fighting on multiple fronts in Iraq alone (excluding Syria) and appears to lack the same amount of money, manpower, and arms it had six to eight months ago. It is taking defensive steps to prepare for the eventual showdown in Mosul, fortifying its presence in the southern flanks of the city. Reportedly, the IS is also transferring equipment from Mosul to al-Raqqa in Syria, which is considered safer. The IS prohibits Mosulawis from leaving the city, apparently because it plans on using residents as "human shields" and their homes as operation centers in the event of an Iraqi government offensive on Mosul.

The IS is suffering from dwindling resources and serious shortages of manpower. Recently, the organization began publishing instructions on how to manufacture homemade mortars, which may indicate that it is also suffering from a lack of ammunition.<sup>9</sup> With the decline of its financial resources, the IS is now mainly relying on the collection of taxes and fees.<sup>10</sup> This dictates a preference for taking large population centers, such as Ramadi in May or Haditha in the near future, that provide access to cash, as well as more weapons and ammunition from the local government stockpiles.

As noted above, the IS conquest of Ramadi ended a long series of IS defeats, most of which were immediately forgotten by the Western media in the aftermath of Ramadi. The IS perceived the shift in the media coverage, and used it to reconstruct its image of invincibility. Taking Ramadi also served to consolidate its hold on the region along the Euphrates River, stretching from Ramadi to the Syrian border (approximately 275 kilometers). Controlling the Euphrates, along which most of Anbar's population lives, is another asset which might be used to affect other cities further down the river, in the Shi'i provinces of southern Iraq. A few days after its conquest of Ramadi, IS forces took the town of Husayba, 85 kilometers from Baghdad, raising concerns in Baghdad and neighboring Shi'i

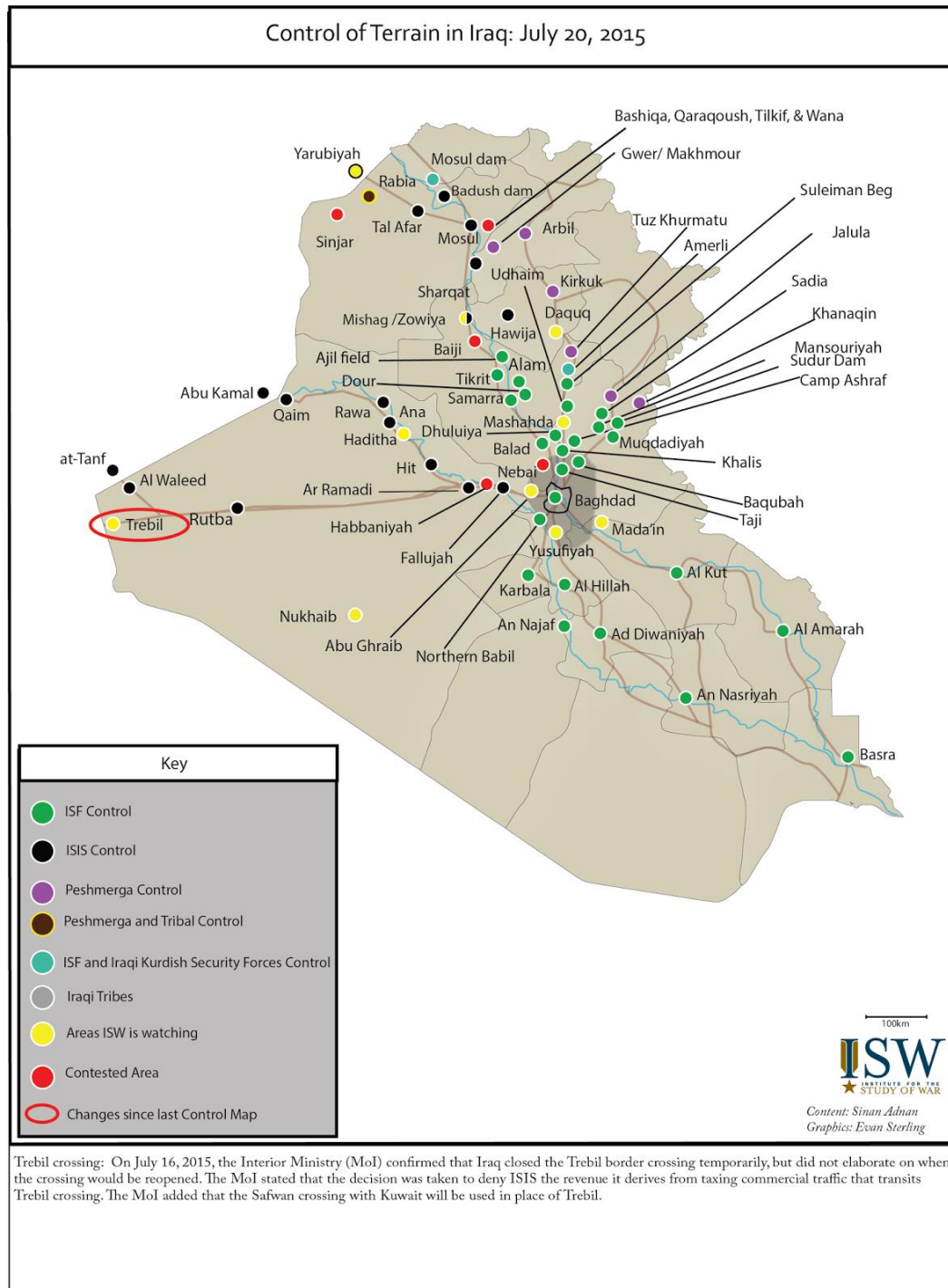
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<sup>8</sup> Karim 'Abd Zair, "[al-Milishiyat tuhasir al-Falluja min Thlath Jihat Wa Da'esh Yaqtahim al-Khalidiya](#)" *Al-Zaman*, July 10, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> *Al-Zaman*, June 16, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Khales Joumah, "[Let them Eat Bread: Extremists in Mosul Ban Grain Exports, Ensure Food Security](#)," *Niqash*, June 4, 2015.

provinces. The Iraqi army confirmed that the IS is planning to expand in the direction of Baghdad, beginning with Baghdad International Airport.<sup>11</sup> This may seem unlikely, given that the IS appears to be overstretched, but the Iraqi government believes that the plans are being made.



Source: [The Institute for the Study of War](http://www.instituteforthe studyofwar.com) – Sinan Adnan

<sup>11</sup> Mustafa Habib, “[Nasty Neighbors: How Close will Extremists get to Baghdad ?](#),” *Niqash*, May 28, 2015.

The IS controls a large part of Iraq's western desert, which presents it with a strategic choice. Should it strike the western Sunni outskirts of Baghdad first or should it turn south and attack the Shi'i holy city of Karbala? The latter is a very attractive option for the IS and its spokesmen have repeatedly threatened to take Karbala.<sup>12</sup> This city is much smaller than Baghdad, and smaller than Mosul as well, and as such seems like an easier target. The main problem is that Iran has promised to send troops to defend Karbala if it is attacked. If the IS decided to attack Karbala, it would first have to take the Sunni town al-Nukhayb, which lies halfway between Ramadi and Karbala and is located in Anbar Province. Al-Nukhayb is still under government control, and is astride a strategic crossroad between Ramadi, Karbala, and the Saudi border, and the road which is used by Iraqis for the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. To date, it has been defended by the Iraqi army and Shi'i militias.<sup>13</sup> A more immediate target may well be IS-besieged Haditha, a town in the western part of Anbar and the only town west of Ramadi not under the IS's control.<sup>14</sup> By conquering Haditha, the IS would consolidate its hold on the western region close to the Syrian border. Unlike the completely depopulated Tikrit and Baiji, cities in the western part of Iraq (Ramadi and Falluja) remain populated under the IS occupation, increasing their attraction as sources of revenue for the organization.

The Kurdish-IS fronts are relatively calm. Each side maintains its positions without initiating any major moves. The Iraqi government indicated that its forces would try to recapture Hawija, an Arab town in the Kirkuk Province, which is held by the IS, in advance of its offensive on Mosul. There have been some clashes in Hawija between the IS, and local tribal militias fighting with the government. However, if the Iraqi army moves closer to Tikrit and Baiji, it would oblige the Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces in Kirkuk to defend the territory they control. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) leadership has promised to help Baghdad to recapture Mosul, and a Kurdish official recently reiterated that the *Peshmerga* would be among the major participants in retaking of Mosul, disclosing that the plan to recapture the city is being completed.<sup>15</sup> On June 29, a spokesman for the Shi'i militias disclosed that a war room had been established to prepare for the retaking of Mosul, which includes the Shi'i militias, the ISF and Mosulawis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For example : "[Takfiri Terrorists Threaten to Attack Karbala, Najaf](#)," *The Shia Post*, June 12, 2014, quoting IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani

<sup>13</sup> Ibrahim Turki, "[City of Sunni vs Shia: Battle for the Iraqi Outback Town on a Cultural Crossroads](#)," *Niqash*, June 4, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad al-Salihi, "[Al-Qata'at tatahashid li Fakk al-Khanaq 'an Haditha wa-dukhul al-Falluja](#)," *Al-Zaman*, July 7, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> 'Ali al-Musawi, "[Khatat Tahrir al-Mawsil bi Musharakat al-Bishmarga wal-Mushtarika wal-Tahaluf al-Duwali](#)," *Al-Zaman*, June 21, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ali al-Musawi, "[al-Quwat al-Mushtarika Tathar Bayji wa tatajih lil-tahrir al-sharqat wa dukhul al-Mawsil](#)," *Al-Zaman*, June 29, 2015.

As noted, the recent fighting between Iraqi government forces and the IS has been a stalemate. The Iraqi government controls almost all of the inhabited areas in Salah al-Din along the Tigris river up to Baiji and is trying to expand to the north and west, while protecting Baghdad and the southwest from attacks by the IS. The latter is unable to use the northwest - southwest desert axis and bring reinforcements from Mosul to Ramadi, or vice versa. This is probably due to the exposure of its convoys to U.S. air strikes in the open desert. Consequently, the IS relies almost completely on the cross-border west-east and west-southeast axis from Syria to Iraq.

In recent weeks, the two sides have been busy trying to anticipate each other's next move: the IS expects a major attack on Mosul, Falluja, and Ramadi and the Iraqi government is preparing for an IS offensive on Baghdad or Karbala. In the future, the IS might try to surprise the government's forces by outflanking the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala and moving through the southwestern desert to attack other major Shi'i cities (Nasiriya for example). One possible reason why it has not done so thus far is because it is incapable of maintaining long supply lines through the desert. The ISF are also straining to maintain their supply lines, adding to the fragility of their hold on recently recaptured territories.

Encouraged by their victory in Ramadi, the IS might take Haditha and try and score another big victory. This will further weaken the Iraqi government's hold on Anbar Province. However, it still may be too early to write off the ISF. These groups enjoy superiority in numbers and benefit from American air support. They still control most of the settled areas in Iraq, and are backed by both the U.S. and Iran. Although suffering from shortages of weapons, Iraqi government forces receive training from American advisers and new supplies of much needed weapons are arriving from the U.S., Iran, and Europe, including F-16 airplanes, anti-tank missiles and surface-to-surface missiles.

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