# Threat Report:

## *Iraq and Syria Update*



**TRADOC G-2 ACE Threats Integration**

# Executive Summary

- Friction points in northern Iraq will be intra-Kurdish differences and conflicts with the Iraqi government over autonomy and oil rights.
- As the balance of power in northern Iraq shifts, Iran will attempt to counter Turkey's presence in Iraq through support of Shia militias, setting up future international points of tension between Iran, Turkey, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), and the Iraqi government.
- Central Iraq contentions will be over Sunni political and economic inclusion.
- Absent meaningful political reform pursuant to the ouster of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), conditions on the ground will continue to be conducive to another Sunni insurgency.
- Without a Sunni power-sharing strategy, the Shia government in Baghdad will find itself battling ISIS-like organizations for control of critical Anbar Province cities, such as Ramadi.
- Intra-Shia economic and political conflicts will continue to occur in southern Iraq.
- The political motivations behind the formation of the Shia militias may be a dividing force going forward, as the militias become the means of enforcement for factional alliances.
- Iraqi Shia militias will have expanded influence after successful military operations against ISIS.
- The Assad regime will continue to make incremental progress in eastern Syria with Russian, Iranian, and Shia militia support.
- Northern Syria will remain volatile as Turkey continues to object to any support of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arm, the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG), because of its affiliation with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).
- Water systems, oil facilities, and other infrastructure critical to Iraqis will likely be targets for attacks in the future.

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This (U) **Threat Tactics Report (TTR)** was produced in accordance with (U) *Intelligence Community Directive Number 203: Analytical Standards* (Effective: Jan 2015). This TTR was coordinated with:

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*Cover photo: Iraqi military forces movement to west Mosul, 20 February 2017.*

# Introduction

Currently, one of the most complex and challenging military operational environments is found in Syria and Iraq. Boundary-blurring conflict and competing interests from multiple different entities require a level of operational and tactical understanding unmatched in most other conflict areas. ISIS' ascendancy is now in decline, as Iraqi security forces continue to defeat its forces in Iraq and Syria. What is clear is that this very complicated operational environment will become even more complex. In Iraq, the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Shia militias have gained popularity with the Shia-majority population based on their success against ISIS. This popularity, within their respective spheres of influence, will create an array of effects in theater once ISIS has been pushed out of Mosul. The Kurdistan Regional Government will likely demand greater autonomy, based on the Peshmerga's successes against ISIS. The Shia militias, as proxies of their Iranian political patrons, will demand a greater voice in government and society in general. These armed groups, formerly united against the ISIS common enemy, are ideologically different and will pose a challenge to the Baghdad government and Iraq's stability.

In Syria, the Assad government will likely survive with the help of Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxy militias. The survival of the government, however, will mean a fractured country; with areas in the north ceded to the PYD and those in the east ceded to various disparate groups with conflicting agendas. A continuing Assad regime will also mean many years of insurgent and terrorist-organization attacks on Syria's fragile government infrastructure in the east. The price of a propped-up government will be a large, if not hegemonic, Iranian and Hizballah presence, while Russia will contribute enough air and naval power to sustain its strategic goals in the Mediterranean region.

## Overview

## Groups Operating in Iraq[1]

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) | Formed in the late 1970s, the PKK began violent attacks on the Turkish government as the group called for a Kurdish autonomous state in 1984. In July 2015, a two-year ceasefire ended.[2] | During its 1984–1999 campaign, the PKK occasionally conducted large-scale operations involving up to 500 militants. Since 2004, almost all operations have been single-unit operations. The PKK irregularly conducts multi-unit operations targeting fixed positions.[3] | The PKK has narrowed its ambitions to autonomy in southeastern Turkey. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) | YPG is the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The YPG has positioned itself as a multi-ethnic military organization, inclusive of regional Kurds, Arabs, Syrians, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Armenians. While it claims to defend these groups against aggressors, the Turkish government believes the YPG is a front for the PKK.[4] <br><br> In Iraq, the YPG trained Yazidi militias and participated in the Kurdish coalition that retook Sinjar from ISIS in November 2015. YPG remains in Iraq, causing tension between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and YPG. | The US considers the YPG the most militarily capable group fighting ISIS. US support of the YPG through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition is in response to that confidence. Support has included military advisors and air support. Some estimates put the YPG forces at 50,000 fighters. <br><br> Turkey objects to any support of the YPG because of its believed PKK affiliation. | YPG's primary focus is to unify the Kurdish cantons in northern Syria under its governance. It recaptured the cities of Kobane and Tal Abyad from ISIS in 2015, rolling the group back from the Turkish border at great cost. <br><br> The US has encouraged the YPG and others within the SDF to take the lead in taking back the Sunni-majority ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, which lies outside the YPG's territorial ambitions. This activity has caused concern with local Sunni Arabs and Turkey. |
| Peshmerga | The Peshmerga evolved from ad hoc groups of Kurdish tribal fighters to a viable nationalist military force. The 1998 reconciliation between two opposing Kurdish factions—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—brought these groups together in a united effort to create a Kurdish state within Iraq's borders. Most recently, the Peshmerga has enjoyed success in fighting against ISIS forces in northern Iraq.[5] | Since the ISIS invasion, Kurdish Peshmerga forces have operated independently of the Iraqi command structure; receiving funding, training, and equipment through international entities, particularly the United States.[6] | While the current focus is the ouster of ISIS, once Mosul is taken old tensions between the KRG and the Iraqi government will likely resurface. The Peshmerga has gained confidence in its fight against ISIS with recent successes on the battlefield. Increased military capability and confidence gained through this experience on the battlefield may bring about a clash between the Peshmerga and Iraq Security Forces (ISF). |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) | The forty or so principal PMF units include a variety of disparate Shia groups that range from the Abbas Division, controlled by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani but aligned with the government and trained by Iraq's special forces; to the Peace Brigades, aligned with the Iraqi cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr; to the Badr Group, an Iranian proxy militia.<br><br>PMF fighters often refer to their fight as a movement of national liberation or a crusade against evil. Others regard the group as Iranian-backed, and only tenuously controlled by the Iraqi government. The real situation is more nuanced, and reflects many of the fault lines in modern Iraq. The influences involve state and non-state actors and both private and foreign interests.[7] | Exact numbers of PMF fighters are hard to determine; however, some estimates put the PMF at over 60,000 fighters, with 35,000 supporting the fight in Mosul. The PMF played a critical role in the attacks on ISIS defenses in Fallujah, Ramadi, and Baiji.[8] | As with the Peshmerga, the PMF has gained success, confidence, and popularity with the Shia-majority population through its battlefield successes fighting ISIS. The PMF is only marginally controlled by the Iraqi government. This will be a point of future contention for the latter, particularly in places where the PMF militias occupy areas with Sunni populations. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) | As the successor to al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS' goal is to erase the border between Iraq and Syria and establish an Islamic caliphate. ISIS' claims to embody a restored Islamic theocracy initially attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from the Arab world and beyond. ISIS began as, and is primarily composed, of non-local Iraqis and foreign fighters.<br><br>As ISIS continues to lose its formerly captured territory, the influx of foreign fighters willing to join the cause has decreased. | ISIS failed to mount an effective defense in Mosul's rural outskirts and outer neighborhoods during its military operations in 2017; however, it did mount a more effective defense of the denser inner-city terrain using car bombs and drones. ISIS has demonstrated a strong preference for mobile defenses that allow its fighters to move to seize the tactical initiative, mount counterattacks, and infiltrate its enemy's rear areas. Yet, while it has stubbornly defended Mosul, it has also been out-fought and has resorted to using civilians as shields in its last remaining bastion in Mosul's northwestern quarter.[9] | ISIS is most prominent in Iraq's northeastern and eastern desert provinces contiguous with Anbar province. Some of its fiercest fighting has been against the Kurdish YPG in the north, as evidenced by the devastation wrought in Kobani, located on the Turkish border. ISIS has also clashed with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and other opposition groups.<br><br>Some analysts say that, in the uprising's early days, the Assad regime maintained a sort of nonaggression pact with the group. But as ISIS expanded its territory, the regime took action against it, particularly around Palmyra and Deir ez-Zour. Opposition groups declared war on ISIS in January 2014 as reports of atrocities against civilians mounted in areas controlled by the group. |

## Groups Operating in Syria[10]

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Syrian Pro-Government Organizations | Syria's armed forces and security services (mukhabarat) have been key to the Assad family's control of the country. Significant casualties and desertions have now forced the Syrian government to use local irregulars, foreign militiamen, and Russian air power in its defense. | The Syrian government may now be able to muster no more than 25,000 troops, down from a pre-war total of 225,000. Many of these fighters come from militias comprised of regime loyalists, including groups of neighborhood thugs called Shabiha, and more-professional national defense forces made up of military reservists. | The regime's leaders fight mainly against the Sunni-majority opposition, with an immediate goal of controlling the western coastal area of the country. The Syrian government has withdrawn its military forces from the northern Kurdish-majority areas and effectively ceded the eastern desert area to ISIS control.[11] |
| Hizballah | A Lebanese Shia movement formed during that country's civil war, and supported by Syria. Syria has served as a conduit of Iranian support for Hizballah, and has provided the group with locations within the country for training its recruits. | Hizballah first sent military advisors into the OE, followed by its elite forces and ground troops. Its forces in Syria numbered between 4,000–8,000 at the start of 2016. With Syria's infantry weakened due to significant losses, Hizballah has been critical in defeating opposition forces on the ground and holding Syrian territory cleared by Russian air strikes. | Hizballah has primarily fought Sunni opposition forces, particularly along the southwestern Syrian-Lebanese border. Hizballah was a decisive contributor in the 2013 battle for al-Qusayr, in which the opposition threatened to cut off a vital regime route between Damascus and the coast. In the same year, Hizballah was also essential in the recapture of the Qalamoun mountains and Zabadani on the Syria-Lebanon border. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Foreign Shia Militias | Recruits have come from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Some of the Iraqi militiamen are offshoots of the PMF fighting ISIS in Iraq. The Afghan fighters are mainly refugees who have long resided in Iran and were recruited by its Revolutionary Guard Corps with offers of citizenship or payoffs. The militias' original mission was to defend Shia holy sites they believed were endangered by the Sunni militants. | Some estimates of the number of foreign Shia militias fighters have been as high as 25,000. The Shia militants have proven vital to the Syrian regime's ground campaign, particularly in the battle for Aleppo. | The foreign Shia militias are in conflict with the Sunni-led opposition forces in contending for the western coastal area of Syria. Among these Sunni forces are US-backed groups arrayed against the Assad regime. |
| Iran | Syria is Iran's main ally in the Arab world. Iran initially feared a post-Assad Sunni government aligned with Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, Iran feared anarchy that would foster Sunni jihadi safe havens. An Assad Syrian regime also allows Iran to maintain its access to and support of Hizballah in that group's fight in Lebanon. | Iran provides Syria with economic support. It initially sent military advisors, then members of its elite Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard soldiers. Iranian military personnel numbered 2,000 at the beginning of 2016. Iranian casualties have been in the several hundreds. | Iranian fighters engage any ISIS and Sunni organizations fighting against the Assad Syrian government. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Russia | Russia provided a diplomatic shield for Syria at the United Nations at the beginning of the war by vetoing any attempts to intervene. In December 2015, Russia intervened militarily, particularly focused on Assad's campaign in the west and north. Though claiming to be fighting ISIS, most of Russia's operations have focused on other anti-government groups and civilian targets in opposition-held areas. After Aleppo was retaken from ISIS forces, Russia launched a diplomatic process to end the civil war.<br><br>Russia's interests include protecting its military bases on the Mediterranean and access to the deep-water port at Tartus for use by its naval ships and submarines. | Russia has deployed fighter jets and attack helicopters in population centers, providing Syrian ground forces with close air support to retake lost government territory. | Since Russia supports the Assad government, its adversaries are any Syrian anti-government forces, including those backed by the US. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Free Syrian Army (FSA) | The FSA is the main armed opposition group to emerge from the Syrian government's crackdown on protestors at the beginning of the war in 2011. Despite being led by defected Syrian army officers and comprised of former Syrian soldiers, the FSA leadership could never amass significant resources or centralize effective command and control for battlefield success. Some opposition brigades in the south fly the FSA flag, but FSA brigades in the north have mostly been effectively neutralized. | The FSA received light arms and artillery, including antiaircraft equipment, from regional backers. The US supplied mainly nonlethal aid, but feared giving the FSA heavy weaponry, as it might fall into the wrong hands. | FSA-aligned militias are the major opposition force in southern Syria. The loosely aligned FSA Southern Front has about 30,000 fighters. The FSA continues to hold captured territory from the Assad regime with US and Jordanian support. |
| Nationalist Jihadis | These are primarily Syrian Islamist militants who do not ascribe to the FSA's advocacy for democratic and pluralistic governance. They favor a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. These groups differ from al-Qaeda and ISIS in their provincial focus: they do not have transnational ambitions. These groups include Jaish al-Islam, located predominantly in the Damascus suburbs, and Ahrar al-Sham, active in northern Syria. | Comprised of tens of thousands of fighters, they are the most capable opposition group, reportedly armed with tanks, antitank missiles, and artillery. These Jihadi groups evolved in mid-2011 with the release from Syrian prisons of more than a thousand insurgents who had fought in Iraq after 2003. | The National Jihadis' primary focus is on fighting the Assad regime, mostly in northern Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama provinces, as well as Homs and Damascus. The Nationalist Jihadis have fought both against and with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. The Jihadis have also fought against, at times, FSA units, ISIS, and the YPG. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS; formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) | JFS changed its name in July 2016 when it dissolved its affiliation with al-Qaeda, hoping to convince others it did not have transnational ambitions. It broke with al-Qaeda in Iraq, the predecessor of ISIS, after ISIS tried to subordinate it. Most JFS fighters are Syrians. The US has targeted the group with air strikes and designated it a terrorist organization. In some areas of Syria, however, JFS is fighting the Assad Syrian regime alongside US-backed groups. | By some estimates, JFS is estimated to have a force of 7,000 personnel. Members gained experience fighting US forces in Iraq, using such learned techniques as suicide bombings on regime military installations. The group has benefited from both public and private funding from Gulf countries. | JFS is fighting the Assad regime and its allies, but may also clash with a variety of other anti-Assad opposition groups, depending on changing developments on the ground. JFS controls areas in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib Province. |
| Turkey | Turkey was an early backer of the Syrian opposition. Its primary interest, however, is blocking the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. Success on the battlefield by Syrian Kurdish fighters has allowed consolidation of territory under Kurdish control, making Turkey nervous about inspiring Kurdish nationalist ambitions inside Turkey. The main Kurdish armed group in Syria, the YPG, has links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US State Department-recognized terrorist group inside Turkey.[12] | Turkey has established a "safe zone" between the border towns of Jarablus and Azaz, driving out ISIS fighters while preventing two Kurdish cantons from connecting to form a continuous span of Kurdish territory contiguous with Turkey's southern border. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan gave permission in July 2015 for the US to use Incirlik Air Base in the fight against the Assad Syrian regime, and Turkey has deployed its own F16s against targets in Syria.<br><br>In July 2016, Erdogan purged the military following a coup attempt. He has also resumed counterinsurgency operations against the PKK in southeastern Turkey. | Turkey is against the continuation of the Assad regime, but will do anything possible to prevent the creation of a Kurdish state in Syria, Iraq, or anywhere else. Turkey will also fight against ISIS expansion as a secondary goal. |

| Organization | Description | Capabilities | Enemy |
|---|---|---|---|
| Arab Gulf States | The primary concern of the Arab Gulf States is checking what they see as Iranian/Shia expansionism in the Sunni Arab world. Most of the Arab Gulf States seek the ouster of Assad, but are not concerned with replacing him with a democratic government. A secondary concern is counterterrorism; ISIS is believed to be responsible for several attacks inside Saudi Arabia. | Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been the chief supporters of the Syrian regime's opposition, supplying arms and funds to the FSA and jihadi groups. The US has urged Gulf countries to crack down on private funding of the most extremist groups, such as JFS.<br><br>The Gulf states facilitated the formation of the Army of Conquest, which includes JFS. The Arab Gulf States have supplied heavy artillery and antitank weapons to various anti-Assad groups. | The primary enemy for most of the Gulf States is Iran, and Assad's Syrian regime is seen as an Iranian proxy state. The Gulf States will continue to fund anti-Assad groups and provide arms to those groups wishing to overthrow the current Syrian government. |
| Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) | The YPG is the militia arm of Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD); the Kurdish party claims to govern the Kurdish-majority cantons of northern Syria, collectively known as Rojava. The YPG also operates in Iraq. The PYD seeks an autonomous Rojava within a decentralized Syria; however, Turkey suspects the PYD of having separatist ambitions, an aspiration that could jeopardize Turkey's fight with the Kurdish PKK. | The US considers the YPG the most militarily competent group fighting ISIS. US support of the YPG through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition is a reflection of US confidence. Support has included military advisors and air support. SDF personnel strength is estimated to be about 50,000.<br><br>Turkey objects to any support of the YPG because of its perceived affiliation with the PKK. | The YPG's primary focus in Syria is linking the Kurdish cantons in northern Syria. It recaptured the cities of Kobane and Tal Abyad from ISIS in 2015, rolling it back from the Turkish border at great cost.<br><br>The US has encouraged the YPG and others within the SDF to take the lead in taking back the Sunni-majority ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, which lies outside Kurdish territorial ambitions. This has caused concern among local Sunni Arabs and Turkey. |

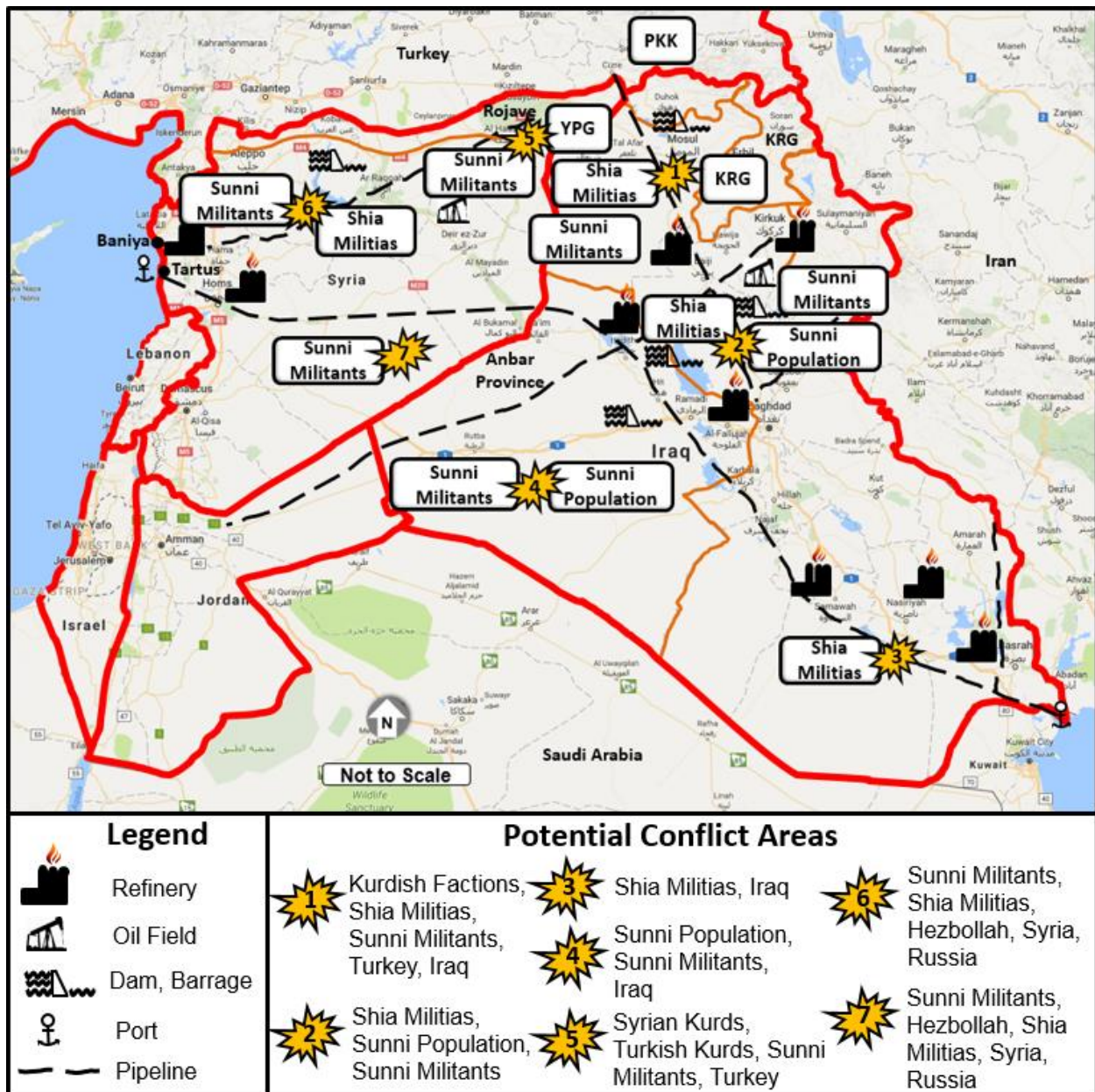**Figure 1. Map of Iraq-Syria operational environment**
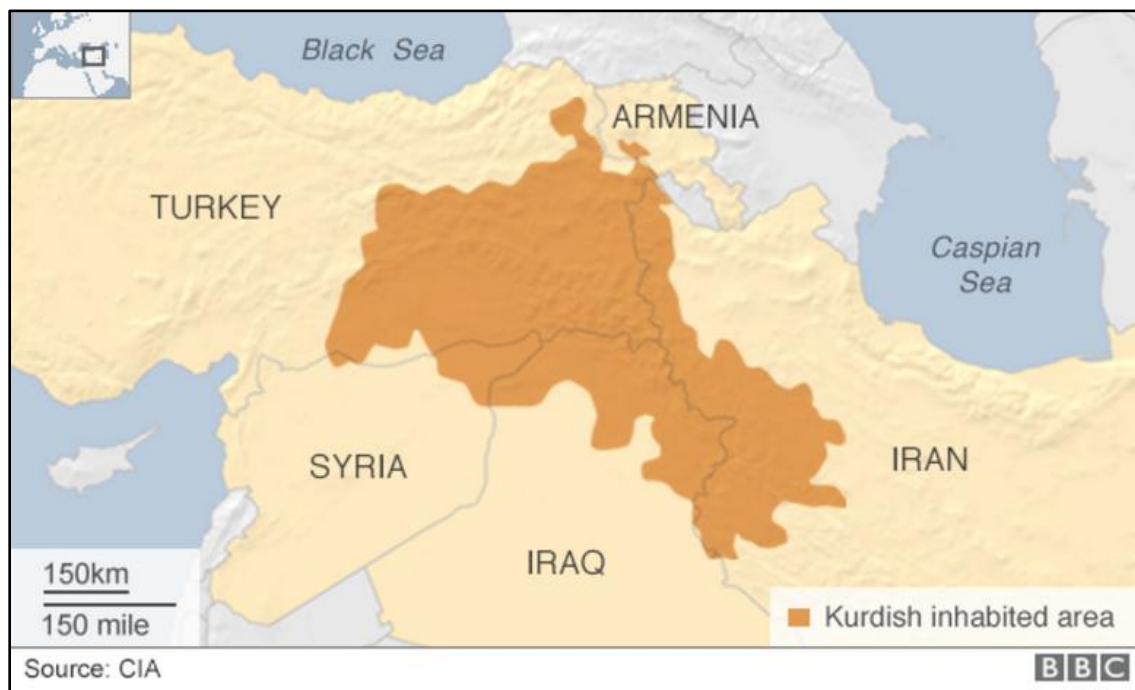
## Northern Iraq

## Kurds



**Figure 2. Kurdish inhabited areas**

The Kurds represent an ethnic group of between 25–35 million people inhabiting the mountainous region running through Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Armenia. While Kurds represent the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East, they have never been able to obtain their own permanent nation-state. This aspiration of autonomous statehood continues to play significantly into the politics of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. Kurds are united by a common race, culture, and language, although they do not have a standard dialect. While the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, other religions and creeds can also be found.[13]

At the conclusion of World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, Western allies provided for a Kurdish state in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres. Three years later, however, the Treaty of Lausanne set national borders that divided the Kurds between the regional countries. Any attempts by the Kurds to create an independent state have been put down in each of the countries, where they have only minority status.[14]

While the Kurds share many things in common, being separated by five country borders has created unique goals, capabilities, and interests. Over the past decades, a pan-Kurdish push for unification of all regional Kurds into a nation-state has devolved into much more limited goals of autonomy within existing Syrian, Turkish, Armenian, Iranian, and Iraqi borders. Three of the main Kurdish entities operating in the Iraq-Syria operational environment include Hezen Parastina Gel (HPG), the military wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey; Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) or People's Protection Units operating in Syria; and the Peshmerga, the military force operating under the auspices of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While facing a common enemy, these Kurdish factions have shown the capacity to

cooperate and work together. Each group has, however, its own agenda that often conflicts with that of other Kurdish groups. The following analysis of the battle for Sinjar in northern Iraq illustrates this ability to cooperate when fighting a common enemy and the potential for internal divisions and mistrust of the others' motives.

## The Battle for Sinjar[15]

The battle for Sinjar illustrates the sublevel of shifting relationships in the Iraq-Syria operational environment. Sinjar[i] is a strategically located Iraqi town in northwestern Nineveh province. It lies along a major ISIS east-west supply route that connects Mosul in Iraq with Raqqa in Syria—two important cities. Sinjar is approximately 52 km east of the Syrian border and 117 km west of Mosul. It is positioned at the foot of the Sinjar Mountains, an east-west mountain range rising 1,463 m above the surrounding alluvial steppe plains.

Sinjar is populated primarily by a Kurdish religious minority called the Yazidis. The Yazidis are particularly vulnerable to violence and persecution, having been the object of hatred for centuries because of their religious practices. Yazidis are ethnically Kurdish, but their religion combines elements of Islam, ancient Persian Zoroastrianism, and Eastern Mediterranean Mithraism. While Yazidis are monotheists, they believe in a fallen angel who serves as an intermediary between God and man. To Muslims, this intermediary resembles the Quranic devil. Yazidis are, therefore, considered devil worshippers by their Muslim neighbors. With isolated geography and a history of persecution, the Yazidis rarely intermarry with outsiders and do not accept converts, further distinguishing themselves.[16]

In June 2014, ISIS began an offensive in Nineveh province and captured Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, that same month.[17] This ISIS victory gave momentum to a push throughout Peshmerga-held Nineveh province. On 1 August 2014, ISIS attacked a Peshmerga unit in the town of Zumar, a small Kurdish-majority outpost 40 km northwest of Mosul. ISIS killed 14 Peshmerga soldiers while it sustained 100 casualties, and 38 members were taken as prisoner in the attack.[18] On 2–3 August, in a serious setback for Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers, ISIS succeeded in taking three strategic towns: Zumar, Wana, and Sinjar. Zumar is an oil-rich area that also lies on a road leading to Syria, and Wana is a town on the Tigris River within striking distance of the Mosul Dam.[19] The three towns form a triangle west from Mosul to the borders of Syria and Turkey. The capture of these towns gave ISIS both momentum and proximity to seriously threaten Iraqi Security Forces protecting the Mosul Dam, which was temporarily captured and then lost by ISIS between 7 and 18 August 2014.[20]
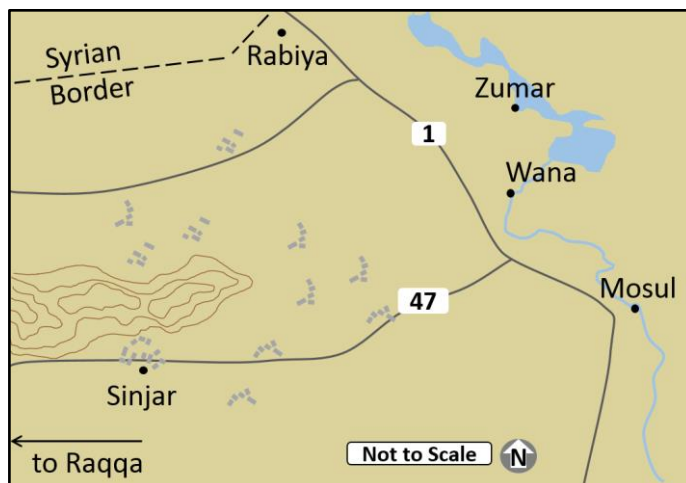


**Figure 3. Strategic cities of Zumar, Wana, and Sinjar**

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[i] Sinjar is the Arabic name; however, the Kurdish *Shingal* is also seen in some writings.

**Figure 4. Battle for Sinjar**

**Actions**

1. US-led allied bombing strikes ahead of ground assault.
2. Most of the ISIS inhabitants of Sinjar exfiltrated the city ahead of the attack.
3. Kurdish movement into the city, where it faced sniper teams in buildings and subterranean positions and suicide and planted IEDs.
4. Simultaneously, Kurdish forces attacked from the east and west toward Sinjar along Highway 47 where they faced sniper teams and suicide and planted IEDs.
5. Small sniper teams continued to harass Kurdish forces.
6. Most of the remaining sniper teams exfiltrated the city, leaving a few stay-behind fighters.

**Legend**

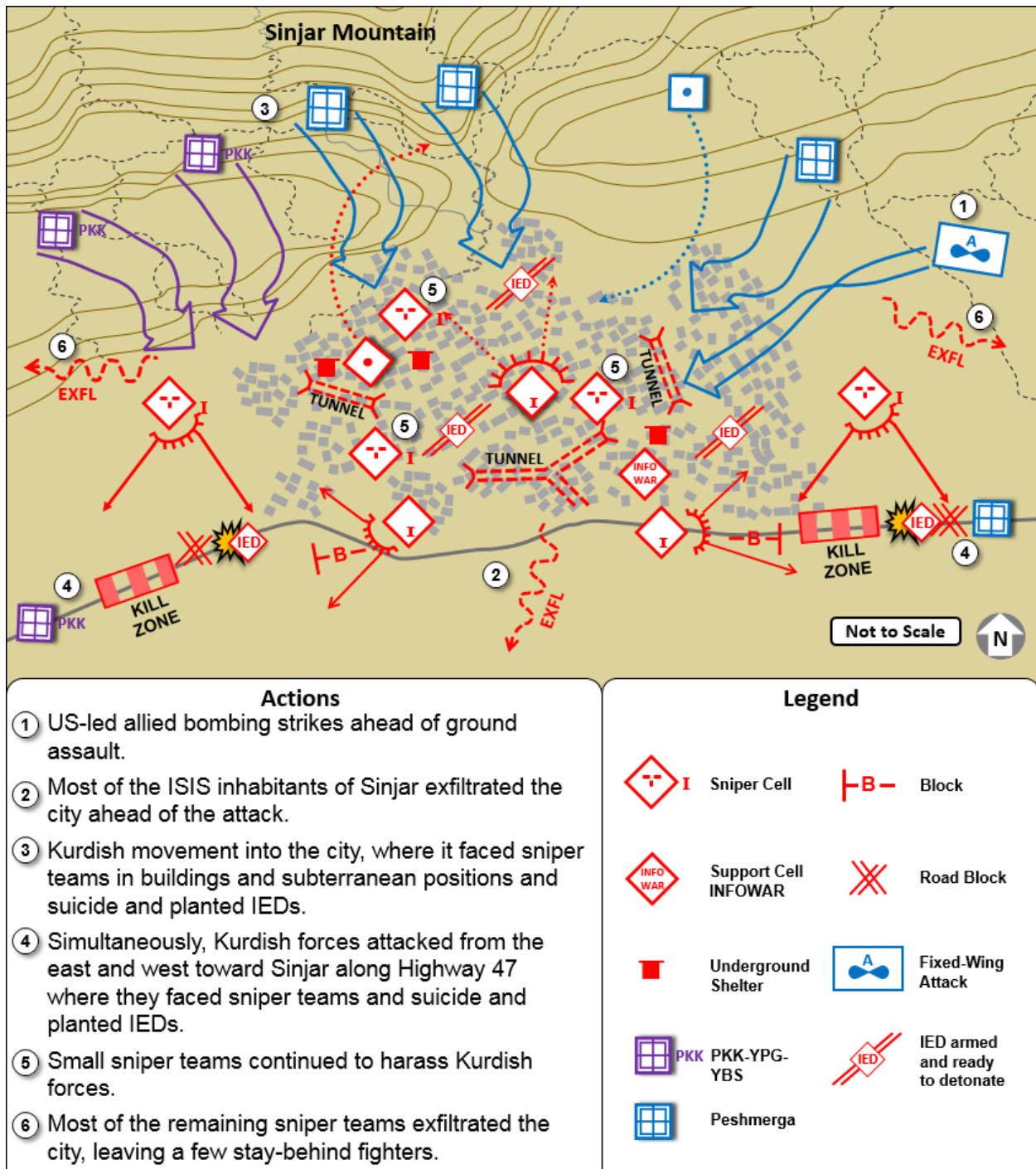| Symbol | Description |
|---|---|
| Sniper Cell | |
| Support Cell INFOWAR | |
| Underground Shelter | |
| PKK PKK-YPG-YBS | |
| Peshmerga | |
| B Block | |
| Road Block | |
| A Fixed-Wing Attack | |
| IED IED armed and ready to detonate | |

Throughout August 2014, ISIS forces continued to push Kurdish Peshmerga forces from positions in Nineveh Province. On 6 August, ISIS moved to within 49 km of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region, threatening US military and civilian personnel. On 8 August, the US began conducting airstrikes against ISIS positions, beginning around Erbil, to stop ISIS' advance on that city.[21] Starting on 9 August, the US began airstrikes around the Sinjar Mountains to relieve Yazidis and others trapped by ISIS.[22]

ISIS successes created a humanitarian crisis, with thousands displaced from their homes, kidnapped, injured, and killed by ISIS fighters. In the Sinjar area, ISIS gunned down 5,000 Yazidi men in a series of massacres, detained over 5,000 Yazidi women to be sold into slavery or given to jihadists as wives and sex slaves, and caused as many as 200,000 civilians to flee, 50,000 of whom retreated into the besieged Sinjar Mountains. Pictures of Yazidis surrounded and trapped by ISIS on Mount Sinjar put increasing international pressure on the US administration to act; and also on Peshmerga forces—who were stinging from multiple defeats at the hands of ISIS—to reclaim lost territory.[23]

The offensive to take Sinjar back began at dawn on Thursday, 5 November 2015, on three fronts. US-led coalition air attacks preceded the Kurdish ground attack. A coalition of PKK, YPG, Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), and Peshmerga fighters attacked south into Sinjar. Opening with a rocket attack, these Kurdish forces moved south from the mountain to reinforce fighters already in the city. Movement through the city was slow and difficult due to ISIS marksmen, snipers, suicide bombers, and planted improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Most of the ISIS fighters had already left the city under the heavy bombardment, leaving behind small sniper teams. These ISIS snipers, having been in the city for months, had the advantage of knowledge of the terrain, prepared positions, tunnels, underground shelters, and the element of surprise.[24]

While some Kurdish fighters attacked from the north, others moved in from the east and the west of Sinjar to cut off ISIS' supply line along Highway 47 between Mosul and Raqqa. Fighters, mostly PKK, attacked from the west while a predominately Peshmerga force attacked from the east. ISIS relied on practiced techniques in attempting to prevent its supply line from being cut and its units surrounded. ISIS used marksmen, snipers, ambushes, IEDs, and suicide bombers along the road and in the city to block movement. The coalition force eventually cleared the road after a few days of slow and cautious movement. Most of the ISIS fighters had already withdrawn under pressure as the Kurdish forces worked their way forward into the city. As the Kurds began to claim victory, a few snipers stayed behind to harass and prevent complete Kurdish freedom of movement. Additionally, clearing the city of booby traps and other kinds of IEDs slowed free movement within the city. In one mass grave, for example, ISIS rigged charges to explode when bodies were moved.[25]

### Kurdish Coalition Vulnerabilities

While successful in Sinjar, the coalition that defeated ISIS also presents an exploitable vulnerability. This coalition included Kurdish forces from the Peshmerga, PKK, YPG, and YBS. The major fault line lies between the PKK and its growing allies on the one hand, and the KRG with its Peshmerga fighters and their allies on the other. The KRG is particularly concerned about rival Kurdish groups permanently occupying Iraqi land around Sinjar. Questions of assigning responsibility for administering captured areas, mutual mistrust, and historical intramural disagreements have potential for eruption.

Peshmerga forces are the military arm of the KRG. Of the groups who fought to retake Sinjar, the Peshmerga was the largest and best-resourced. The KRG considers Nineveh province part of its territory.[26]

It has consistently played down the role of other participants, to the annoyance of those who continued to fight on after ISIS forced an earlier Peshmerga withdrawal from the area.[27]

The major rival to the Peshmerga forces is the PKK. Formed in the 1970s, the PKK is an armed separatist group fighting to gain Kurdish independence from Turkey. Designated by the US and Turkey alike as an international terrorist organization, it cannot coordinate directly with the US, so needed to transmit target locations and friendly position coordinates through the Peshmerga during the Sinjar operations. The PKK maintained a forward base at a northern entry point to the city, at the foot of Mount Sinjar, during the months preceding the final attack.[28]

A smaller group allied with the PKK is the Syrian YPG, the military arm of the Democratic Union Party. The YPG has emerged from the Syrian civil war with fighting tactics and techniques that enabled it to perform well against ISIS. Relying on speed, stealth, and surprise, the YPG has been able to quickly redirect attacks to outflank and ambush its enemy. Over time, the YPG has trained over 1,000 Yazidis in week-long courses, giving it influence and loyalty in areas where its fighters are now occupying Iraqi ground previously held by Peshmerga forces. Meanwhile, Iraqi Kurds view any permanent occupation by the YPG as a violation of its territorial sovereignty.[29]

The Yazidis formed the Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS) when ISIS forced them out of their city. Allied primarily with the PKK and the YPG, the YBS remained after the Peshmerga withdrew from Sinjar in the summer of 2014. The YBS conducted urban attacks in the city and protected displaced Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountain. Increased Yazidi confidence in its own protection forces after the military training, experience, and alliances developed with other Kurdish groups during the Sinjar battles needs to be factored into any future KRG dealings with the Yazidis. In part, the Yazidis blamed the Peshmerga for the ISIS atrocities perpetrated after its withdrawal from Sinjar in 2014. This has left the Yazidis with anger toward and mistrust of the Peshmerga fighters.[30]

## Kurds and the Iraqi Government

Iraq's 2005 Constitution recognizes an autonomous Kurdistan governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This compromise embodies the culmination of decades-long efforts to create an independent government in Kurdistan. One estimate puts the Iraqi Kurdish minority at six million people, making up about 17–20% of the total Iraqi population. The KRG federal state is the only officially recognized, successful, and stable government among the several Kurdish minorities that reside in Iraq and neighboring countries.[31]

In July 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani declared his intention to call for a referendum on full independence. This was particularly disturbing to the surrounding countries, who feared it would inspire minority uprisings that would endanger the sovereignty of existing nations. Haider al-Abadi's election defeat of Nuri al-Maliki as Prime Minister of Iraq in September 2014 brought some relief from internal tensions between the KRG and the Iraqi government. This has been largely due to the need to unite against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[32]

Tensions over the status of the Kurdistan region and disputed territory continue to simmer under the surface. One friction point relates to claims to the Kirkuk area, claimed by both the Kurds and the Iraqi government. Beginning in 1930, exploitation of the Kirkuk oil fields significantly changed the demographics of the area populated mainly by Turkmen. Jobs in the oil fields attracted Kurds from the

mountains to the north who inhabited the cultivable rural areas surrounding Kirkuk. In March 1970, the Autonomy Agreement, sanctioned by the Iraqi government, recognized Kurdish participation in government and allowed use of the Kurdish language in schools. The agreement deferred formally defining the geographic extent of Kurdish borders, pending completion of a new census.

A statute unilaterally adopted by the Iraqi government in March 1974 laid down geographic borders intended to limit Kurdish autonomy and guarantee Iraqi access to oil resources. The statute excluded from the Kurdish autonomous area the oil-rich areas of Kirkuk, Khanaqin, and Sinjar. The Iraqi government further redefined and, in some cases, renamed, the country's sixteen provinces. The province of Kirkuk was split in half, and the boundaries redrawn in a way that gave the area around Kirkuk an Arab majority population. From 1991–2003, the government expelled an estimated 500,000 Kurds and Assyrians from Kirkuk and other towns and villages in the oil-rich areas, and replaced them with Arab families.

In the wake of the ISIS takeover of areas around Mosul in 2014, Kurdish Peshmerga forces seized control of Kirkuk city and the surrounding area. In 2016, oil pumping stopped for several months because of conflict between Baghdad and the KRG over revenue sharing. Prior to that interruption, Kirkuk oil flows were managed independently by the Kurdish authorities. Iraq's state-run North Oil Company (NOC) now operates the oil fields in the region, pumping around 120,000 barrels per day. In March 2017, a special police force loyal to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party stormed an oil facility located about 16 km west of Kirkuk, ostensibly to search for ISIS-planted explosives. PUK officials, however, later admitted the group had seized the facility to put pressure on Baghdad to share more equitably the oil revenues with the Kirkuk area. The seizure was linked to an agreement signed by the KRG on 19 August 2016, but not accepted by the PUK. PUK forces withdrew after the Iraqi government in Baghdad agreed to increase production from the Kirkuk facilities that would improve fuel distribution and create jobs in the PUK-held areas of Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya. The event points to fissures not only between Baghdad and the Kurds, but to disagreements within the KRG.[33]

At the end of March 2017, the Kirkuk Provincial Council voted to fly the Kurdish flag over state buildings. Fearful of Kurdish designs to further assert a Kurdish identity over the city, Arab and Turkmen representatives boycotted the vote. On 2 April 2017, the Iraqi Parliament responded by voting to repeal the decision by the Kirkuk Provincial Council. The Kirkuk Provincial Governor stated that he would not honor the Baghdad decree, setting the stage for another battle over Kurdish claims to Kirkuk, based on the premise that the impending seizure of Mosul by Kurds would significantly lessen any future ISIS threat.[34]

Absent meaningful political reform pursuant to the ouster of ISIS, conditions on the ground will continue to be conducive to another Sunni insurgency.[35] Unresolved issues concerning the Kurdistan Regional Government's borders—particularly with regard to who controls Bashiqa and Kirkuk and how Nineveh Province is governed—could lead to a future clash between Iraqi security forces and Kurdish Peshmerga.[36] Kurdish territorial expansion will be a point of contention between the KRG and the Iraqi government in Baghdad. Military gains by the Peshmerga include 1295 square kilometers of territory that formerly belonged to the central government in Baghdad. The Kurds will use this newly acquired territory and their sacrifice in the fight against ISIS as leverage when negotiating a redrawing of the KRG's borders.[37]

## Shia Militias

The Shia militias are something of a mixed bag. The most senior cleric in Shia Islam, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, created a call for Shia militias to join the fight against ISIS via a *fatwa* or religious decree. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a coalition of disparate Shia militias formed in response to the fall of Mosul in 2014, resulted from this call to arms. Sistani mobilized the Shia militias with this sacred call to arms using language that applied martyr status to those who died defending their country, their family, and their honor.

The PMF is estimated to number over 60,000 fighters, with 35,000 supporting the fight in Mosul. The PMF also played a critical role in the attacks on ISIS defenses in Fallujah, Ramadi, Tikrit, and Baiji. Despite its mainstreaming efforts, the role of the PMF and associated militias remains unclear. In November 2016, the various Shia militias, operating generally under the umbrella of the PMF, gained more legitimacy when the Iraqi parliament by a 208–119 margin passed a bill recognizing the PMF as a government entity operating alongside the military. This official recognition of the militias after a number of military successes against ISIS has Sunnis concerned, particularly in areas where they have traditionally been the majority. The law gives Prime Minister Abadi command of the militias while conferring on the militiamen the additional legitimacy of salaries and pensions similar to those given to military and police personnel. The Iraqi government, however, does not completely control the Shia militias.[38]

PMF fighters often refer to their fight as a movement of national liberation or a crusade against evil. Others refer to the group as Iranian-backed and tenuously controlled by the Iraqi government. The real answer is more nuanced, embodying many of the fault lines in modern Iraq. The players include state and non-state actors and private and foreign interests. The forty or so principal PMF units reflect a variety of interests that range from the Abbas Division, controlled by Sistani but aligned with the government and trained by Iraq's special forces; to the Peace Brigades, aligned with the Iraqi cleric and politician Moqtada al-Sadr; to the Badr Group, an Iranian proxy militia. Pre-existing Iraqi militias make up approximately half of the PMF units, some of which fought against coalition forces after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The remaining militias are new formations, created by Sistani or Iraqi politicians. The political motivations behind the formation of the militias may be a dividing force, going forward, as militias become the means of enforcement of factional alliances.[39]

Faleh al-Fayad, Iraq's national security adviser, is technically in charge of the PMF units; however, the disparate nature, interests, and goals of the Shia militias underscores his need to more accurately negotiate cooperation. It is a complex and difficult environment to move through. Five of the largest units in the PMF receive money and support from Iran: Kataib Hizballah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq were significant Iranian proxies during the coalition occupation of Iraq and are now major units in the PMF; Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada has openly fought in Syria for the Assad government; the Badr Organization is commanded by Hadi al-Amiri, who fought for Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, and Amiri is a close friend of Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force—a branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for covert warfare beyond Iran's borders. [40]

One area where a confluence of interests collide—illustrating the complexity of the operational environment—is the town of Tel Afar, southwest of Mosul. Tel Afar is a town located on a major supply

and communication route between Mosul and ISIS-held Raqqa in Syria. Pressure on Mosul has been directed from the east, north, and south, leaving a western corridor open for ISIS to escape to its strongholds in Syria. The Shia militias seized upon closing the western side of Mosul as an opportunity to become involved in the Mosul fight. The militias had agreed to allow the other Iraqi Security Forces to take the lead in liberating Mosul, as they did in Tikrit, but at the end of 2016, the PMF moved to take the town of Tel Afar.[41]

Tel Afar, prior to ISIS occupation of the city, was a Sunni-majority city made up of Turkmen with a minority of Shia Turkmen. Carrying a stigma of committing atrocities in towns it occupied and Iranian backing, PMF movement on Tel Afar caused great concern, particularly among the Sunni Turkmen. The movement also caused public statements from the Turkish government threatening military action if the PMF occupied Tel Afar.[42]

In April 2017, Turkey pressured Iraq's Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to redirect the Iranian-backed PMF from Tel Afar, using threats of military action if the PMF occupied the town. Abadi was able to get PMF leaders to move operations to villages southwest of Sinjar, nearer to the Iraq-Syria border. The diversion of the PMF operations avoided the threat of a Turkish-Iranian showdown at Tel Afar that could have threatened the success of the final phase of the Mosul operation and further strained relations between the Baghdad government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Abadi is also walking a very fine line as he concerns himself with the upcoming elections where former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is threatening to take away his pro-Iranian support base.[43] As the balance of power in northern Iraq shifts, Iran will attempt to counter Turkey's presence in Iraq through support of Shia militias, setting up future international points of tension between Iran, Turkey, the KRG, and the Iraqi government.[44]
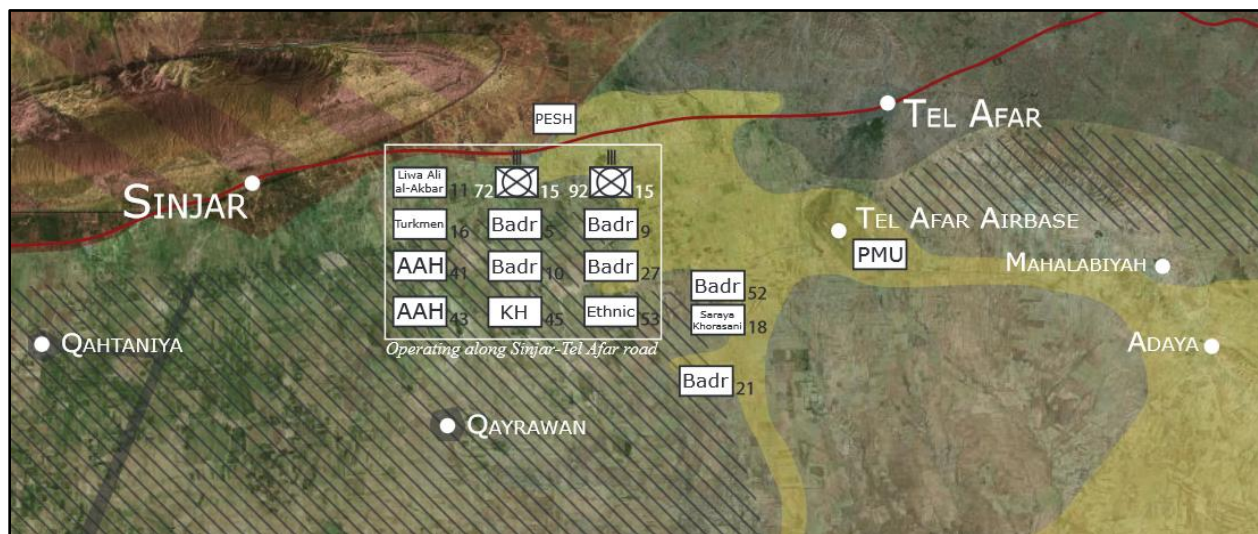


**Figure 5. PMF positions outside of Tel Afar, 28 April 2017**

## Infrastructure Targets

### Mosul Dam

Water and water infrastructure is critical to Iraqis, providing mobility, irrigation, and needed drinking water. For this reason, ISIS has used and targeted water-related infrastructure in order to shape the battlefield in its favor. ISIS will use this control of infrastructure to exert control over the local population and threaten the Iraqi government.

Iraq depends on its intricate system of dams and barrages to control the flow of water from the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers to ensure crops are irrigated and water flows throughout the country. The key difference between a dam and a barrage is the purpose for which it is created. A dam is built for water storage in a reservoir, raising the water level significantly. A barrage is used primarily for irrigation, raising the water only a few feet, and for diverting water. Barrages are usually built on flat terrain across meandering rivers.[45] Barrages are often referred to as dams, but their distinction points to different reasons why they might be attacked.

The Mosul Dam, the largest dam in Iraq, was a key strategic target once ISIS captured Mosul. Located about 50 kilometers north of the city, the dam controls the water flow and power supply to most of Iraq. Its generators can produce 1,010 megawatts of electricity. Behind the dam is over 12 billion cubic meters of water. Capturing the dam offers ISIS both a target and a means to generate more cash through controlling critical infrastructure.[46]

That the Mosul Dam was briefly captured by ISIS forces in 2014, then recaptured by Peshmerga units within only a few days, underscores its strategic importance to ISIS; however, occupying it may not be the only means of using the dam to the group's advantage. Questions remain about the extent of needed repairs and ongoing maintenance to the dam. The Iraqi government built the dam in the 1980s on a friable gypsum layer on the Tigris River, and it needs constant repairs to avoid a catastrophic breakage. The riverbed is composed of unstable soft soil and gypsum, a mineral that dissolves as water runs through it. In 2006, the US Army Corps of Engineers called it the most dangerous dam in the world. Since its construction, engineers have injected the dam with grout, a liquefied mixture of cement and other additives. Cracks now form daily in the structure, requiring constant grouting to keep it from collapsing. More than 50,000 tons of grout material had already been pumped into the dam as of 2007.[47]

On 29 February 2016, the US Embassy-Baghdad issued a "Security Message to U.S. Citizens," warning of the potential for the collapse of the Mosul Dam. It warned that some models estimate that, within hours of collapse, Mosul could be 70 feet underwater. Within 24–72 hours, downriver cities such as Tikrit, Samarra, and Baghdad would see significant levels of flooding in the event of a breach. The warning pointed to the disruption of maintenance operations in 2014. Even after the dam was recaptured by Kurdish Peshmerga forces, starting up again required months of regular maintenance. The neglect that occurred during the ISIS occupation may have exacerbated existing weaknesses in the structure. The government of Iraq has recognized the seriousness of the situation and signed a contract with an Italian company to assess, repair, and maintain the dam.[48] Capitalizing on the inherent weaknesses in the dam, ISIS-like organizations could exploit these flaws to create a significant crisis.

### Oil Infrastructure

Oil fields, pipelines, and refineries are particularly vulnerable to attacks by terrorists. The difficulty in adequately guarding oil industry infrastructure, and the economic importance of Iraqi oil, make these targets inviting and productive. As the options available to ISIS and other terrorist organizations narrow, attacks on these targets will remain an effective and cost-effective means of damaging the operating governments in Iraq.
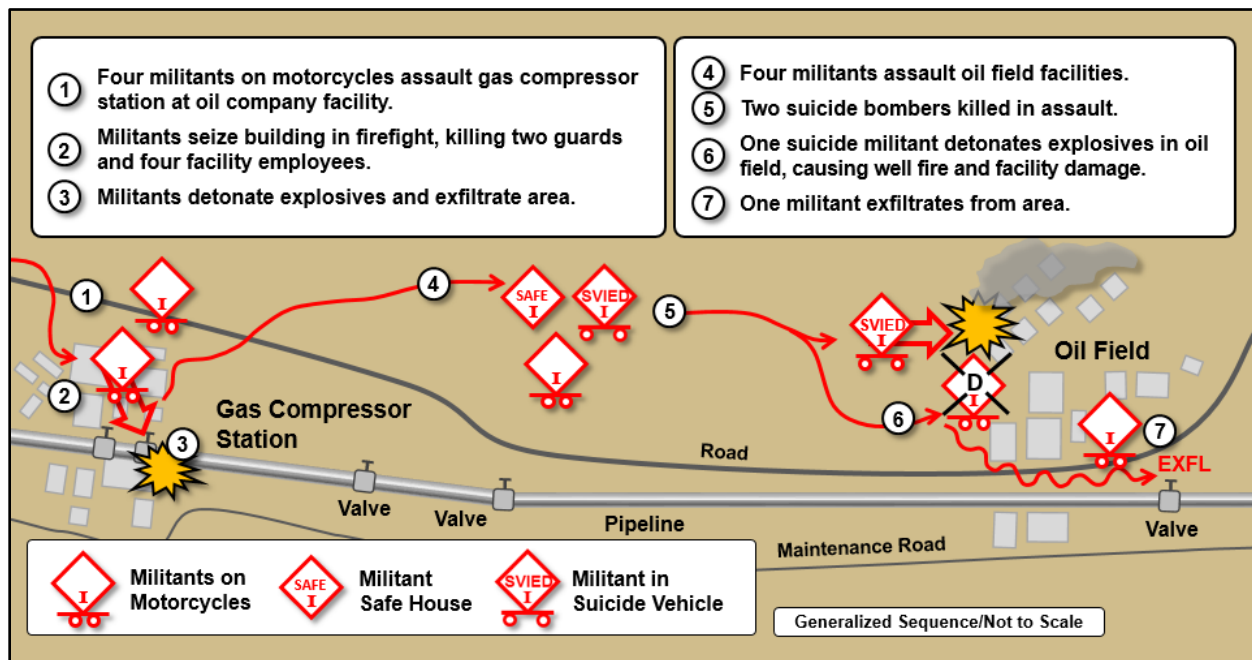


**Figure 6. Complex attack on oil infrastructure**

On 31 July 2016, militants conducted an attack on a gas facility and a nearby oil field in a Kurdish-controlled area within Kirkuk Province. Officials with Iraq's North Oil Company and the Kurdish Peshmerga reported that the gunmen attacked the facility on motorcycles. The four attackers carried out the first attack at a gas compressor station. They broke through an external door, wounding two guards and then killed four employees in a control room. They then planted explosives. Counterterrorism units freed 15 other employees who had taken cover in another room; however, the attackers escaped to the nearby Bai Hassan oil field for a follow-on attack.

The Bai Hassan oil field is 25 kilometers to the northwest of the gas compressor station. Either the same four gunmen or additional attackers conducted an attack on the oil field. Security forces killed two of the suicide bombers before they detonated their explosives, while a third detonated explosives that ruptured the oil tanks. A fourth attacker escaped. The attack resulted in the death of an engineer and the injury of seven other people.[49]

The attack damaged key infrastructure and caused oil production to halt for 20 days. Even after the oil production resumed, however, critical infrastructure remained damaged and a residual well fire caused by the attack still blazed over three weeks later. This case shows how a few suicide bombers delivered a

significant economic blow to the cash-strapped KRG, which depends on oil exports to fund the government and service a debt burden amounting to billions of dollars.[50]

# Central Iraq

## Diyala Province

Diyala Province, in east-central Iraq, is a diverse region with Turkmen, Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds inhabiting the area. Historically, however, it was a majority Sunni Arab province. Shia militias recaptured Diyala Province from ISIS on their way to supporting the March 2015 ouster of the group from Tikrit. There have been widespread allegations of sectarian violence perpetrated by some of the Shia militias during their occupation of large portions of Diyala Province. Some of the reports document raiding, looting, kidnappings, Sunni mosque burnings, and other sectarian-inspired violence associated with these militias. In 2015, Sunni lawmakers walked out of Iraq's parliament to protest what they viewed as unchecked sectarian attacks in the province after the militias expelled ISIS. Two Sunni Members of Parliament (MPs), Raad al-Dahlaki and Nahida al-Daini from Diyala, complained of 43 people being killed and nine mosques bombed during a one-week period, and demanded the dissolution of what they characterized as Iranian-backed militias. The Shia militias, for their part, say they are rooting out ISIS elements, to include sleeper cells that are increasingly infiltrating the area as ISIS-held territory shrinks in size.[51]



**Figure 7. Iranian corridor to the Mediterranean Sea**

A much more complex and potentially Iranian-inspired plan is coalescing to create a corridor across Iraq and Syria, with a start point in Diyala Province. The route runs through Baquba, the capital of Diyala Province, only 97 km north of Baghdad. Shia militia control road networks and the surrounding areas within Diyala Province. The route continues north through Shirqat and Sinjar, areas where the PMF has moved in deference to concerns about occupying Tel Afar. Since participating in the liberation of Sinjar, the PKK have remained in the area, being paid by the Iraqi government and incorporated into the PMF. The route continues through Rabia, the border crossing town on the Iraq-Syria border, which has ties to

both the PKK and the Syrian regime. The towns of Qamishli and Kobani are controlled by the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia. The YPG has hedged its bets, siding with the US against ISIS at times and at other times siding with the Syrian government. Iran has focused its major effort on the city of Aleppo. Up to 6,000 militia fighters, mostly from Iraq, were concentrated there ahead of the effort to retake the anti-Assad forces' east side of the city. The route then runs through Homs, then north through the Alawite heartland of Syria, where Russian airpower has assisted the Assad regime. The final city on the route is Latakia, firmly held by the Syrian government throughout the war. The route would give Iran access to the Mediterranean Sea and also a land connection with Lebanon.[52]

## Anbar Province

The majority Sunni Anbar Province has always been problematic for the Shia-led Iraqi government. It is where ISIS evolved from al-Qaeda in Iraq and moved into Syria, and then back into Iraq in 2014 to capture Mosul and a large part of Iraq. Anbar will continue to be a place where a significant proportion of the local populace sympathizes with Sunni terrorist organizations, who will attempt to retake major cities such as Ramadi and Fallujah. Without a Sunni power-sharing strategy, the Shia government in Baghdad will likely find itself battling ISIS-like organizations for control of critical Anbar Province cities, such as Ramadi. The following account of the most recent ISIS takeover of Ramadi provides some insights into how the group might do so again, perhaps employing a smaller force.

The capture of Ramadi, the provincial capital of Anbar Province, lies 129 km west of Baghdad and has always been part of an ISIS strategy to take control of Anbar province. Among other reasons, ISIS control of Anbar Province gives it a jumping-off point for threatening or attacking Baghdad. There are several reasons why Ramadi is important to the Iraqi government. The city is positioned on significant routes between Baghdad, Jordan, and Syria; important resupply routes for ISIS. The Ramadi Dam and the reservoir south of the city on the Euphrates River control the flow of both drinking and agricultural water to much of southern Iraq.[53] Ramadi is the largest population center in the Sunni-dominated province and the home of the Dulaymi tribe, a group whose support ISIS will need in order to effectively govern the area.[54]

ISIS has been a long-term presence in Anbar province, taking advantage of Sunni discontent with the Shia-controlled government. ISIS openly presented itself in Ramadi as early as 2013. During a 28 October 2013 anti-government protest in Ramadi, two masked ISIS



**Figure 8. Pro-ISIS Twitter posting depicts members with distinctive banners**

members stood on either side of the group's flag. In the latter part of 2013, ISIS increased attacks in the southern part of Ramadi. From September–December 2013, attacks in Ramadi's southern urban center doubled to 20 per month. From January–April 2014, ISIS attacks more than doubled to 44 a month. On 3 January 2014, ISIS launched simultaneous attacks on Ramadi and Fallujah. During these attacks, ISIS captured municipal buildings and the police headquarters in Ramadi. Before the end of January 2014, local militias and Iraqi Security Forces pushed ISIS out of Ramadi's city center.[55]

ISIS's strategy, over a period of months, included offensive operations that captured key cities and neighborhoods surrounding Ramadi. By October 2014, ISIS had captured the cities of al Qaim, Haditha, and Hit along the route between Ramadi and the Syrian border.[56] On 12 February 2015, ISIS fighters took the town of al Baghdadi, a town less than 16 km from the al Asad Airbase. The airbase, the home of the Iraqi 7th Infantry, had for several months been the target of mortar fire. About 0720 on 13 February 2015, 20–25 ISIS fighters wearing Iraqi Army uniforms attacked the al Asad Airbase in two waves. The first attackers, the assault element, detonated suicide vests followed by an exploitation element of 10–15 fighters who briefly penetrated the perimeter. Iraqi soldiers killed the attackers before they could do any damage. Iraqi military reinforcements that would be needed to support an attack on Ramadi would likely come from al Asad. With pressure on the airbase through repeated attacks, ISIS effectively fixed Iraqi forces there, significantly improving its odds for a successful attack on Ramadi.[57]

From its controlled villages south of Ramadi—Albu Jabr and al Humayra—ISIS launched attacks into al Hawz, al Malaab, Fursan, and al Hayy Dhubat. By November 2014, it controlled Hawz, Tamim, and Anbar University—areas south of Ramadi's government complex. By the start of 2015, ISIS either controlled or was seriously contesting more than half of the area around Ramadi. During the period 11–14 March 2015, ISIS conducted eight suicide bombings in and around Ramadi. By mid-April, ISIS executed attacks on neighborhoods in the southeast suburb of al Sufiyah. On 27 April 2015, ISIS called for fighters in Syria to join the fight for Ramadi, implying the need for suicide bombers in the coming attack. ISIS continued attacks into Ramadi on 10 April, 14 April, 5 May , and 9 May 2015.[58]

The stage was then set for a final ISIS offensive to take Ramadi. Iraqi Security Forces were concentrated in three main areas, with a few small security contingents scattered throughout the city. The Anbar Operations Command Center (AOCC) was a corps-level command post located in northwestern Ramadi. Camp Ar Ramadi, the home of the 8th Iraqi Army Brigade, was located west of the city. The Ramadi Government Center complex, which also contained provincial government offices, was located inside Ramadi.[59]

Before and during the attack on Ramadi, ISIS was able to fix Iraqi forces in three ways. As mentioned previously, ISIS fixed Iraqi forces positioned at al Asad Airbase through numerous direct attacks and capturing surrounding towns. In addition, an early morning sandstorm on 14 May 2015 allowed ISIS to get an upper hand on Iraqi Security Forces. Without fear of air attacks by Iraqi and US air assets, ISIS began the attack on Ramadi unimpeded. By the time the sandstorm cleared, Iraqi and ISIS units were too closely intertwined for pro-Iraqi forces to effectively engage ISIS targets from the air. Lastly, ISIS fighters attacked police stations and other security units to fix them in place and prevent them from supporting Iraqi forces defending the three primary ISIS objectives.[60]

ISIS first targeted the Ramadi Government Center complex. On 14 May 2015, a single armored bulldozer worked without opposition for nearly an hour to clear defensive concrete barriers blocking the road to the police station located next to the governance building complex. When the bulldozer reached the police station, the driver detonated it as a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED). ISIS also targeted two other buildings within the complex with vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). Once the way was cleared, ISIS utilized six 15-ton trucks with payloads capable of demolishing portions of neighborhoods. ISIS fighters detonated a total of at least 27 vehicles loaded with explosives during the attack. Utilizing SVBIEDs as an initial assault force with a follow-on exploitation force, ISIS took the Government Center complex, causing security forces to withdraw under pressure.[61]
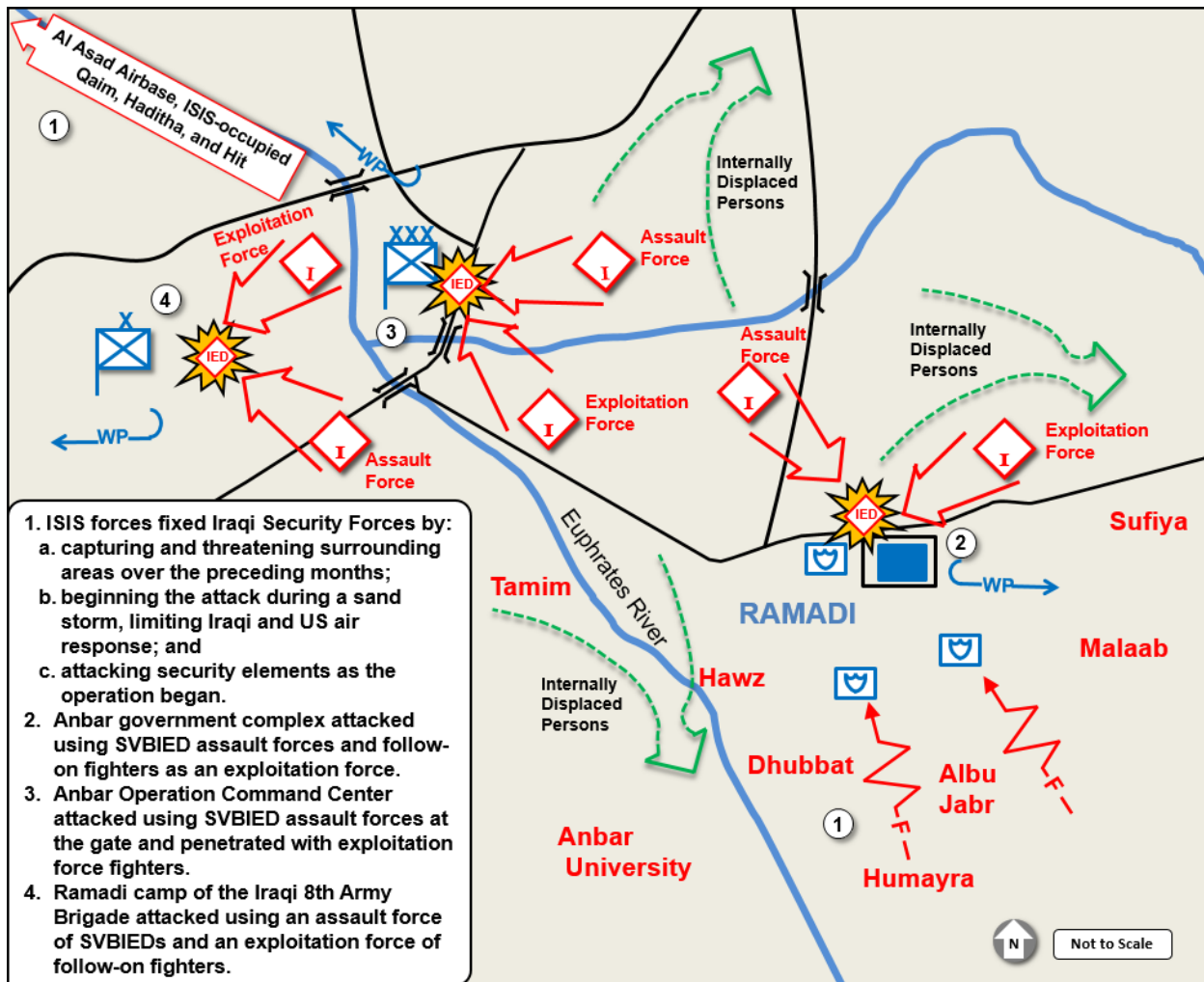
**Figure 9. Tactical sketch of ISIS attacks on Ramadi**

On 17 May 2015, ISIS fighters attacked the AOCC. The attack began with three SVBIEDs detonating explosives at the front gate, killing five Iraqi soldiers and wounding twelve. ISIS fighters followed the SVBIEDs, penetrating the perimeter. Iraqi forces retreated from the center, leaving ISIS in control of the command post.[62] ISIS used the familiar technique of sending SVBIEDs as an assault force to open a window of opportunity that allowed the exploitation force to achieve the primary mission, which in this situation was the capture of the AOCC.

After capturing the AOCC, ISIS captured the Ar Ramadi camp of the 8th Iraqi Army Brigade using similar techniques. During the days leading up to the attack on Ar Ramadi, ISIS had shown no interest in taking prisoners. ISIS fighters brutally killed Iraqi security personnel as well as local leaders. An information operations campaign that emphasized ISIS' brutality worked effectively as ISIS captured Ramadi and then turned its attention to the Ar Ramadi camp. Those who could escape did so, leaving equipment, weapons, and ammunition in their wake.[63]

During and after the Ramadi attacks, thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled the battlefield, stressing a Shia-led government in Baghdad. For many, fears about potentially embedded insurgents among people leaving Ramadi caused bottlenecks at checkpoints, denial of passage into safe areas, and security forces bogged down with IDP operations. An already large humanitarian crisis was amplified as the number of Iraqis in need of support increased by thousands. In addition to the distraction and diversion of Iraqi Security Force resources to IDP operations, ISIS could use the Iraqi government failures in its ongoing information operations narrative to attack the latter's credibility.[64]

ISIS has regularly used offensive tactics consistent with Hybrid Threat doctrine outlined in Training Circular 7-100.2, *Opposing Force Tactics*. During the Ramadi operation, ISIS utilized enabling and action forces, with the former consisting of fixing forces and assault forces. The fixing forces prevented Iraqi security units from effectively maneuvering to support the defense of ISIS' three primary objectives. Assault forces, consisting of SVBIEDs, attacked vulnerable perimeter positions. Exploitation forces followed the assault forces, taking advantage of the window of opportunity created to achieve the primary mission.

## Baghdad

As the capital of Iraq and the symbolic seat of power, Baghdad will remain a target for a variety of attacks from both external and internal threat actors. For example, from 11–16 February 2017 Baghdad witnessed increasing protest movements and ISIS attacks. A large Sadrist-led protest, demanding electoral reforms, tried to move from Tahrir Square into the Green Zone on 11 February 2017. Iraqi Security Forces used force to stop the movement, which resulted in casualties. After the protesters dispersed, unidentified attackers launched three rockets into the Green Zone from eastern Baghdad. The Sadrist-aligned militia that had protested corruption in the government earlier, denied responsibility. Iranian proxy militias, with a history of attacking US infrastructure, may have been responsible. Interspersed with multiple attacks, on 16 February 2017, ISIS carried out the deadliest attack of 2017 up to that point, a bombing that killed about 50 people. Struggling to contend with the ever-present and ongoing threats to the capital city, Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi convened an emergency meeting on 16 February to consider the issues and promulgate guidelines for meeting the internal and external threats. Baghdad will continue to be a contentious and fragile area as ISIS seeks to destabilize and weaken the government and rival political factions posture for power. This will be particularly challenging as Iraq moves into parliamentarian elections scheduled for 2018.[65]

## Infrastructure

### Water Infrastructure

The Haditha Dam in Anbar Province provides water for farms and millions of people and is the second-largest hydroelectric energy producer in Iraq. The Haditha Dam, the second-largest behind the Mosul Dam, became the focus of US air strikes in support of Iraqi troops protecting it in 2016. Between 7 August–7 September 2016, the US conducted 143 air strikes. Coalition and Iraqi leaders believed the capture or catastrophic failure of the dam threatened facilities in and around Baghdad, as well as thousands of Iraqi citizens. The Haditha and Mosul Dams provide much of Iraq's water and electricity. For that reason, the Haditha Dam will be a lucrative target for insurgent and terrorist organizations.[66]

In April 2014, ISIS began using the Fallujah Barrage to shape the battle in its favor. The Ministry of Water Resources announced that ISIS gunmen closed eight of the ten gates of the Fallujah Barrage on the banks of the Euphrates River, effectively shutting off the supply of water into the southern Iraqi provinces.[67] Closing the gates also caused flooding upstream and forced the evacuation of families. By 10 April 2014, ISIS re-opened five of the barrage's gates, fearing the flooding in its own stronghold in Fallujah.[68] These water systems, critical to southern Iraqis, could be a target for attacks in the future.

### Oil Infrastructure

As with oil infrastructure in other areas of Iraq, much will depend on the ability of the Iraqi government to protect these sites from attacks. Central Iraq has a number of small oil fields. It also has almost the entire length of the only substantial pipeline, which eventually crosses the border into Turkey. The area includes a significant refinery in Haditha (Anbar Province) and the Baiji petroleum complex (Salah al-Din Province), which contains an electrical power plant serving the northern provinces. In 2014, the complex's refineries processed 310,000 barrels of oil per day.[69]

## Southern Iraq

The situation in southern Iraq is much different than other areas of the country. The predominately Shia population has not seen ISIS-related violence due to its disparate militias. There have not been any major ISIS attacks, despite having some of the most important oil and logistics infrastructure in Iraq. Southern Iraq's main contribution to the war against ISIS has been in supplying Shia militias. These militias represent the varied political and ideological ambitions of their respective leaders, and attest to the intra-Shia complexity of southern Iraq and the country in general. The sizes of the militias are difficult to ascertain and may vary depending on the popularity of a particular leader. While some of the militias are well-established, others are no more than neighborhood watch groups. The militias have little in common beyond the unifying influence of the ISIS threat. Once the ISIS fight is over, these differences will come to the fore.[70]

The primary threat from southern Iraq is political. With provincial elections in September 2017 and parliamentary elections in 2018, Shia militias returning from the ISIS fight—along with their affiliated politicians—have the potential to be a destabilizing force after ISIS is defeated in Mosul. Muqtada al-Sadr, a leader in the Sadrist movement, has been a leading agitator. He has been able to stage large protests in Baghdad, busing in and mobilizing thousands of demonstrators on 11 February 2017, and again on 14 February 2017. He rallied similar support in 2016 when protests spread from Baghdad to the southern provinces. That Sadrist protesters are often undisciplined was shown in 2016 when they targeted the political offices of the Dawa party and other pro-Iranian party headquarters in southern Iraq. As the election seasons approach, these kinds of attacks and counterattacks will likely fuel increased intra-Shia conflict in the southern provinces. Basra could be a significant future flashpoint for violence, as has too often been true of past election cycles.[71]

## Eastern Syria

Syria is a country torn apart by years of civil war; much less a country than a land divided by groups unlikely to relinquish territory easily. The Assad regime has depleted its own resources and has only been able to hold on and recapture areas in eastern Syria with the help of Russia, Iran, and recruited Shia militias.

Repeated bombings and ground warfare have left Syria with little, if any, infrastructure. The war has caused thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons, creating crises in surrounding countries and Europe and affecting the politics of European countries and the United States. Those left behind in Syria are suffering the effects of violence from the ground and from the air. Putting Syria back together again, even in a fractured way, will take generations. To gain the trust of a Syrian government by its people may take even longer.[72]

In Syria, choosing partners to work with is problematic and has contributed to the dysfunction and challenge inherent in seeking a peaceful resolution. At a minimum, it will require an agreement between Russia, Iran, Gulf State countries, and the United States, with all parties concerned realizing that the myriad players on the battlefield cannot be completely bound by the outcome of negotiations.
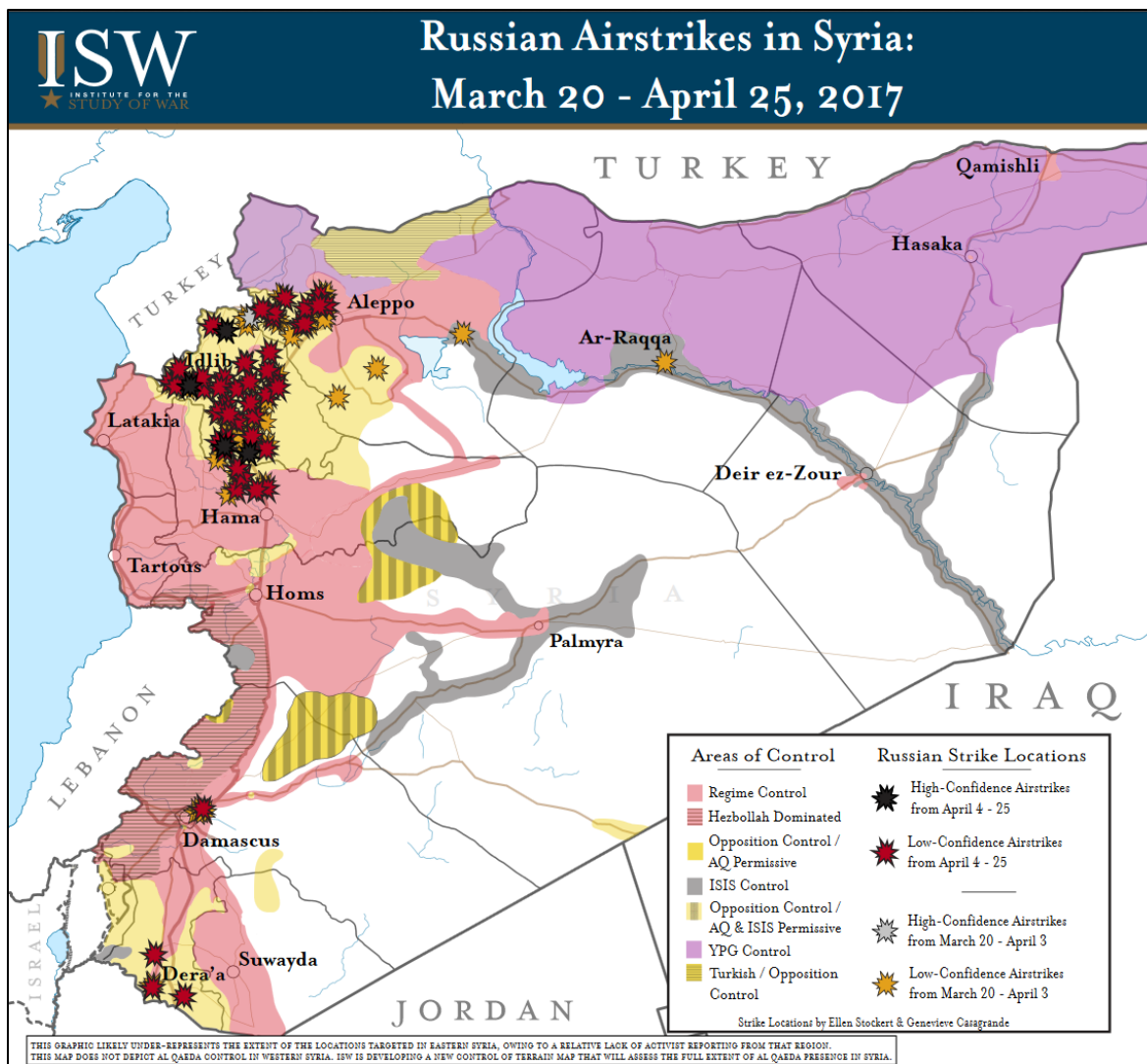


**Figure 10. Alignment of groups in Syria**

## Syrian Pro-Government Organizations

Syria's armed forces and security services (Mukhabarat) have been key to the Assad family's control of the country. Significant casualties and desertions have depleted the Syrian security forces, leaving the Syrian government with the support of local irregulars and foreign militiamen supplemented by Russian air power. Potentially as few as 25,000 troops, from a pre-war total of 225,000, can be deployed. On the one hand, many of the Assad regime forces include militias comprised of regime loyalists, including groups of pro-Assad family neighborhood thugs called Shabiha; while on the other hand, more-professional National Defense Forces made up of military reservists are also in play.[73]

In August 2013, a large-scale attack using chemical weapons set in motion a series of events intended to destroy all of Assad's chemical weapons. With little US congressional will to conduct air strikes on Syria in response, Russia proposed an international effort to document and destroy Syria's chemical stock. The process mandated that Syria voluntarily provide a list of its chemical weapons inventory. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inspectors, due to security concerns, only visited 21 weapon-making sites, believing the two other sites had been destroyed. In January 2016, the OPCW declared the last of the Syrian stocks had been destroyed. Shortly thereafter, reports emerged of scattered attacks involving Syrian regime use of chlorine and other suspected chemicals. In April 2017, an attack on Syrian civilians included the nerve agent sarin. This points to two possibilities: either the sarin was in stocks held back from inspectors, or Syrian weapons specialists are able to manufacture the nerve agent. Either way, this is concerning for future operations against the Syrian military. The chemical attack spurred the US to launch Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian-regime airbase.[74]

## Hizballah

Hizballah is a Lebanese Shia movement formed during that country's civil war and supported by Syria. Syria has served as a conduit for Iranian support to Hizballah and has provided the group with areas in which to train. Hizballah first sent military advisors, and then its elite forces and ground troops, to Syria. Its forces numbered between 4,000–8,000 at the start of 2016. With Syria's infantry weakened, Hizballah has been critical to defeating opposition forces and holding territory cleared by Russian air strikes.[75]

Beginning in early 2013, Hizballah's mission in Syria shifted from an advisory capacity to one in which it assumed a direct combat role. This shift saw Hizballah operating in large numbers with Syrian military and paramilitary forces. The group also increased its efforts to train a reorganized pro-Assad paramilitary force. This larger role began in April 2013 when Hizballah led the ground assault on al-Qusayr, a majority-Sunni town in Homs Province near the border with Lebanon. In the al-Qusayr offensive, Hizballah units operated in larger and more-concentrated numbers and controlled the planning and execution of the operation. This increased commitment and involvement in support of the Assad regime has been one of the critical reasons the Syrian government has been able to regain important cities in western Syria. Syria is important to Hizballah for at least two reasons. First, Syria is part of the pipeline needed to provide it with Iranian arms and other support. Secondly, should Assad fall, Hizballah needs to prevent the emergence of a Sunni-dominated regime. Given these goals, Hizballah is not likely to cede control of areas it deems critical to achieving them.[76]

## Foreign Shia Militias

The foreign Shia militias are primarily from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. Some of the Iraqi militias are offshoots of the Iraqi PMF fighting ISIS in that country. The Afghan fighters are largely refugees who have long resided in Iran, and were recruited by its Revolutionary Guard Corps with offers of citizenship or payoffs. The original mission was to defend Shia holy sites the militias believed would be destroyed by the Sunni militants; however, their success and necessity in supporting a depleted Syrian military force is projecting Iranian influence and an extremist ideology that will persist in Syria for many years after the current conflict has ended. Their ranks have been estimated to be as high as 25,000. They have proven vital to the regime's ground fighting, particularly in the battle for Aleppo.[77]

## Nationalist Jihadis

Nationalist Jihadis are Islamist militants who do not subscribe to the FSA's advocacy for democratic and pluralistic governance, favoring instead the fundamentalist principles of militant Islam. These groups differ from al-Qaeda and ISIS in their rejection of transnational ambitions. These groups include Jaish al-Islam, operating predominantly in the Damascus suburbs, and Ahrar al-Sham, operating in the north. In 2013, shortly after the founding of Jaish al-Islam, the group helped found the Islamic Front, an umbrella organization of 40,000–70,000 fighters. The Islamic Front fell apart in 2014 due to disagreements between Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. In January 2017, Mohammad Alloush, Jaish al-Islam's political leader, led a delegation representing Syrian opposition groups in Kazakhstan. Subsequent talks were held in May 2017 with another delegation led by Alloush. Despite its current disagreements with the Assad government, it is possible that the nationalist aims of these groups will eventually allow them to agree to peace terms with a weakened Assad government at the urging of Russia and Iran.[78]

## Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS)

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is a Sunni militant Islamist group that operates in Syria as part of the country's anti-government insurgency. JFS adopted its current name in July 2016 when it dissolved its affiliation with al-Qaeda, hoping to convince other organizations it did not have transnational ambitions. The United States has designated it as a terrorist organization and targeted the group with air strikes; however, in some areas, it is fighting the Syrian regime alongside US-backed groups. JFS has an estimated force of 7,000. The group has benefited from public and private funding from Gulf countries. It controls areas in northern Syria, particularly in Idlib Province. After an initial reliance on insurgent-style stand-off, area attacks, and ambushes, JFS transitioned alongside the broader Syrian insurgency to a more-conventional military force that has incorporated VBIEDs and suicide bombers into coordinated assault tactics, and has held and administered territory.[79]

## Free Syrian Army (FSA)

The FSA is the main group to emerge from the Syrian crackdown on protestors at the beginning of the war. Despite being led by defecting Syrian army officers and comprised of former Syrian Arab Army soldiers, FSA leadership was never able to amass significant resources or implement an effective centralized command and control system. Opposition brigades in the south fly its flag; however, their counterparts operating in the north have been mostly marginalized. The FSA received light arms and

artillery, including anti-aircraft equipment, from regional backers. The US supplied nonlethal aid, but hesitated to provide heavier weapons that might fall into the wrong hands. FSA-aligned militias are the major opposition force in Syria's south. The loosely aligned Southern Front has about 30,000 fighters. It is holding territory captured from the regime with US and Jordanian support.[80]

## Iran

Syria is Iran's main ally in the Arab world. Iran initially feared a post-Assad Sunni government aligned with Saudi Arabia; it subsequently feared anarchy that might potentially foster Sunni jihadi safe havens. An Assad Syrian regime also allows Iran to maintain its access to and support for Hizballah. Iran has provided Syria with critical and essential economic support. It initially sent military advisors, then members of its elite Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard soldiers. At the beginning of 2016, Iranian military personnel numbered 2,000, with casualties believed to be in the several hundreds. Iran has directed an extensive, costly, and integrated effort to keep Assad in power, while setting conditions favorable to Shia control of Syrian territory should Assad fall. Recruiting and funding foreign Shia militias and Hizballah are part of a larger strategy to project Iranian influence in Syria for many years to come. As Assad's resources have been depleted, Hizballah and the foreign militias recruited by Iran have stepped into the breach, providing military training, direct combat support, planning expertise, and military supplies.[81]

## Russia

At the beginning of the war, Russia initially provided a diplomatic shield for Syria at the United Nations. Russia intervened militarily in December 2015, focusing its support to Assad's campaign in the west and north. Russia has deployed fighter jets and attack helicopters in population centers, providing Syrian ground forces with close air support to retake territory and causing international humanitarian complaints. Though claiming to be fighting ISIS, most of its operations have focused on a broad spectrum of anti-government groups and civilian targets in opposition-held areas. The deployed Russian forces have not been sufficient to secure Syria, suggesting other motives for Russia's involvement. A geopolitical agenda that projects naval and air power permanently into the Mediterranean and Middle East surfaces as a viable possibility. This has the added benefit of constraining US freedom of movement while raising the cost of US involvement in Syria.[82]

Russia has emerged as a key power broker in Middle East peace talks. After an abortive attempt in October 2016, Russia was unable to live up to its commitments to enforce a Syrian cease-fire agreement. Russia enlisted the support of Iran and Turkey in arranging indirect negotiations in Kazakhstan between Syrian rebel factions and government representatives. Finessing a cease-fire, let alone a peace agreement, presented a daunting diplomatic challenge for the Russians. Accordingly, Moscow invited all opposition groups except ISIS and JFS to these indirect talks. Meanwhile, Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sham refused to attend, leaving tens of thousands of fighters unrepresented. In the past, cease-fire violations have been notoriously common for causing the failure of tentative peace agreements. It is hard to see how, with so many fighters uninvolved in the peace process, a lasting agreement will materialize anytime soon.[83]

## Arab Gulf States

The Gulf states' primary concern is checking what they see as Iranian/Shia expansionism in the Arab world. They seek the ouster of Assad, but are not concerned with replacing his regime with a democratic

government. Their secondary concern is counterterrorism, as ISIS is believed to be responsible for several attacks inside Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been the Syrian opposition's chief supporters, supplying arms and funds to the FSA and Sunni jihadi groups. The Gulf states facilitated the formation of the Army of Conquest, which includes JFS. The US has urged Gulf countries to crack down on private funding of extremist groups like JFS.

## Northern Syria

## Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG)

Focused on retaining control of urban centers in western Syria, Assad has effectively ceded the northern part of the country, primarily to the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) and its estimated 50,000 fighters. The YPG is the militia arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdish party that claims to govern the Kurdish-majority cantons of northern Syria, an area called Rojava by the Syrian Kurds. The PYD claims to seek a Syrian Kurdish autonomous region within a decentralized Syria. Turkey, however, suspects the PYD of separatist inclinations that could prove problematic in its own fight against the Kurdish PKK. Turkey fears an autonomous Kurdish group on its southern border might further motivate the PKK in its struggle for greater autonomy. Meanwhile, the US considers the YPG the most militarily capable group fighting ISIS. The support given to the YPG through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition reflects this confidence and has included US military advisors and air support. SDF forces are estimated to number about 50,000 personnel. Some of the members of the SDF have used the Free Syrian Army (FSA) label and fought under its banner, leading to some confusion as various organizations shift alliances.[84]

## Conclusion

Iraq after the fall of Mosul will unleash an even more complicated operational environment than now exists. Iran will attempt to influence Iraqi politics in its favor through its funded militias. These armed militias, fresh from their recent military victories, will likely demand a greater voice in the government. Since the militias are not a united voting bloc, there is great potential for generating multiple destabilizing paramilitary forces supporting a variety political agendas. Iran will attempt to use the militia-controlled areas as a corridor for supplying Hizballah and other proxy militias in Syria and Lebanon. In Iraq, the KRG, with the support of the militarily confident Peshmerga fighters, will demand greater Kurdish autonomy. Disputes over KRG boundaries will bring the KRG into conflict with security forces backing the central government in Baghdad. This will all be swirling around in the run-up to parliamentary elections scheduled for 2018.

The future Syria is likely to be politically and geographically fractured for many years to come. Even with support from Russia, Iran, Hizballah, and the foreign militias, the country's government simply does not have the capacity to occupy more than its eastern coast. The north has been ceded to the YPD and its military arm, the YPG. The eastern desert will be left to anti-government groups as a safe haven. The major cities will be targets of an ongoing insurgency, with different groups finding refuge and safe havens in pockets in the rural areas. Iran has projected its influence into Syria through its proxy, Hizballah, and a host of Shia militias. With these assets, Iran can probably maintain its supply route to Lebanon and have sufficient presence to deter a Sunni threat should the Assad government fail. Russia will continue to do

what is necessary to protect its naval and air bases on the Mediterranean. This will include brokering a peace agreement if it feels the Assad government is sufficiently robust to protect Russia's geopolitical interests.

## REAL-WORLD CONDITIONS APPLIED TO TRAINING

The TC 7-100 Hybrid Threat series, the Decisive Action Training Environment (DATE), and the Worldwide Equipment Guide provide training resources for applying real-world conditions to training. The tactics used by all of the players in the Iraq-Syria operational environment can be replicated within parameters established in the composite threat model codified in the Hybrid Threat Doctrine series. For example, ISIS used marksmen and sniper teams effectively in the Sinjar urban environment as described in *TC 7-100.2, Opposing Force Tactics,* to create casualties; impede movement; instill fear; influence enemy decisions, actions, tactics, and techniques; lower morale; damage or destroy materiel; and disrupt enemy tempo.[85] The players in the Iraq-Syria operational environment use principles of offense and defense outlined and explained in the same document. Additionally, the operational environment outlined in the DATE also incorporates selected characteristics of the Iraq-Syria OE. The DATE provides a number of irregular organizations for use in the countries of Ariana, Atropia, Donovia, Gorgas, and Limaria.

## Replication in Training

| TC 7-100.2 Tactics | |
|---|---|
| **Annihilation Ambush** | 3-151. The purpose of an *annihilation ambush* is to destroy the enemy force. These are violent attacks designed to ensure the enemy's return fire, if any, is ineffective. Generally, this type of ambush uses the terrain to the attacker's advantage and employs mines and other obstacles to halt the enemy in the kill zone. The goal of the obstacles is to keep the enemy in the kill zone throughout the action. Using direct, or indirect, fire systems, the support element destroys or suppresses all enemy forces in the kill zone. It remains in a concealed location and may have special weapons, such as antitank weapons. |
| **Integrated Attack** | 3-64. *Integrated attack* is an offensive action where the OPFOR seeks military decision by destroying the enemy's will and/or ability to continue fighting through the application of combined arms effects. Integrated attack is often employed when the OPFOR enjoys overmatch with respect to its opponent and is able to bring all elements of offensive combat power to bear. It may also be employed against a more sophisticated and capable opponent, if the appropriate window of opportunity is created or available. |
| **Maneuver Defense** | 4-62. In situations where the OPFOR is not completely overmatched, it may conduct a tactical *maneuver defense*. This type of defense is designed to achieve tactical decision by skillfully using fires and maneuver to destroy key elements of the enemy's combat system and deny enemy forces their objective, while preserving the friendly force. Maneuver defenses cause the enemy to continually lose effectiveness until he can no longer achieve his objectives. They can also economize force in less important areas while the OPFOR moves additional forces onto the most threatened axes. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Area Defense** | 4-85. In situations where the OPFOR must deny key areas (or the access to them) or where it is overmatched, it may conduct a tactical area defense. Area defense is designed to achieve a decision in one of two ways:<br><br>• By forcing the enemy's offensive operations to culminate before he can achieve his objectives.<br>• By denying the enemy his objectives while preserving combat power until decision can be achieved through strategic operations or operational mission accomplishment. |

## Related Products

Follow these links to view related products:

- Threat Action Report: Battle for Sinjar, Iraq, April 2016
- Threat Tactics Report: Hizballah, January 2017
- Threat Tactics Report: Iran, June 2016
- Threat Tactics Report: ISIL, February 2015
- Threat Tactics Report: Russia, July 2015
- Threat Tactics Report: Syria, February 2016
- Red Diamond: Bifurcating War: The US, Turkey, and the Anti-ISIL Alliance (part 1), March 2016
- Red Diamond: Bifurcating War: The US, Turkey, and the Anti-ISIL Alliance (part 2), May 2016

See also the Red Diamond Newsletter, which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians, ranging from enemy tactics and techniques to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the Worldwide Equipment Guide.

To see more products from TRADOC G2 ACE Threats Integration, visit the Army Training Network (ATN) with CAC access: https://atn.army.mil/dsp_template.aspx?dpID=377.

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# Iraq and Syria Update

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> **Note:** Not all references listed in this publication are readily available to the public; some require a government common access card (CAC) to view.

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## Figure Credits

Figure 1. Map of Iraq-Syria Operational Environment. Source: Google Maps, modified by TRADOC G2-ACE-TI.

Figure 2. Kurdish Inhabited Areas. Source: BBC News. 14 March 2016.

Figure 3. Strategic cities of Zumar, Wana, and Sinjar. Source: TRADOC G-2 ACE-TI.

Figure 4. Battle for Sinjar. Source: TRADOC G-2 ACE-TI.

Figure 5. PMF positions outside of Tel Afar, 28 April 2017. Source: Institute for the Study of War. 11 May 2017.

Figure 6. Complex attack on oil infrastructure. Source: TRADOC G-2 ACE-TI.

Figure 7. Iranian corridor to the Mediterranean Sea. Source: TRADOC G-2 ACE-TI.

Figure 8. Pro-ISIS Twitter posting depicts members with distinctive banners. Source: Express. 2 December 2015.

Figure 9. Tactical sketch of ISIS attacks on Ramadi. Source: TRADOC G-2 ACE-TI.

Figure 10. Alignment of groups in Syria. Source: Institute for the Study of War. 25 April 2017.

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