

APRIL 2014

JESSICA LEWIS

## MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 18

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# THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ RETURNS TO DIYALA



*Cover: Published by D.O.D. U.S. Army and Iraqi soldiers maneuver through a palm grove in pursuit of insurgents in Diyala province, Iraq, Sept. 13, 2010. The soldiers are assigned to the 25th Infantry Division's 2nd Advise and Assist Brigade. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Brandon D. Bolick*

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TO DIYALA



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 18 | THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ RETURNS TO DIYALA| JESSICA LEWIS | APRIL 2014

---

**INTRODUCTION ..... 07**

**DIYALA’S POLITICAL VACUUM ..... 07**

**AQI IN DIYALA IN 2012 - 2013 ..... 08**

**ISIS ATTACKS IN THE DIYALA RIVER VALLEY AND BAQUBA IN 2013 ..... 10**

**THE ISF REDISTRIBUTE TO BUTTRESS ANBAR ..... 11**

**ISIS GAINS IN THE DIYALA RIVER VALLEY AND BAQUBA IN 2014..... 13**

**ISIS ATTEMPTS TO TAKE BUHRIZ ..... 14**

**BEYOND DIYALA..... 14**

**CONCLUSION ..... 15**

**APPENDIX: ISIS GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN IRAQ ..... 16**

**NOTES..... 17**



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# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 18

## THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ RETURNS TO DIYALA

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By Jessica Lewis

Anbar is not the only front in Iraq on which al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), now operating as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), is fighting in 2014. ISIS has also established a governorate in Diyala. Its spokesman has named the province the central front in the sectarian conflict he has urged. The security situation and sectarian tension in Diyala province are grave. ISIS has returned to fixed fighting positions within Muqdadiah, Baqubah, and the Diyala River Valley. Shi'a militias are now active in these areas as well. Increasing instances of population displacement demonstrate the aggregate effect of targeted violence by both groups. It is important to estimate the effects of this displacement and the presence of armed groups within Diyala's major cities in order to understand how deteriorated security conditions in this province will interfere with Iraq's upcoming parliamentary elections. Furthermore, violence in Diyala has historically both driven and reflected inter-ethnic and inter-sectarian violence in other mixed areas of Iraq, including Baghdad. Diyala is therefore a significant bellwether for how quickly these types of violence will spread to other provinces.

### DIYALA'S POLITICAL VACUUM

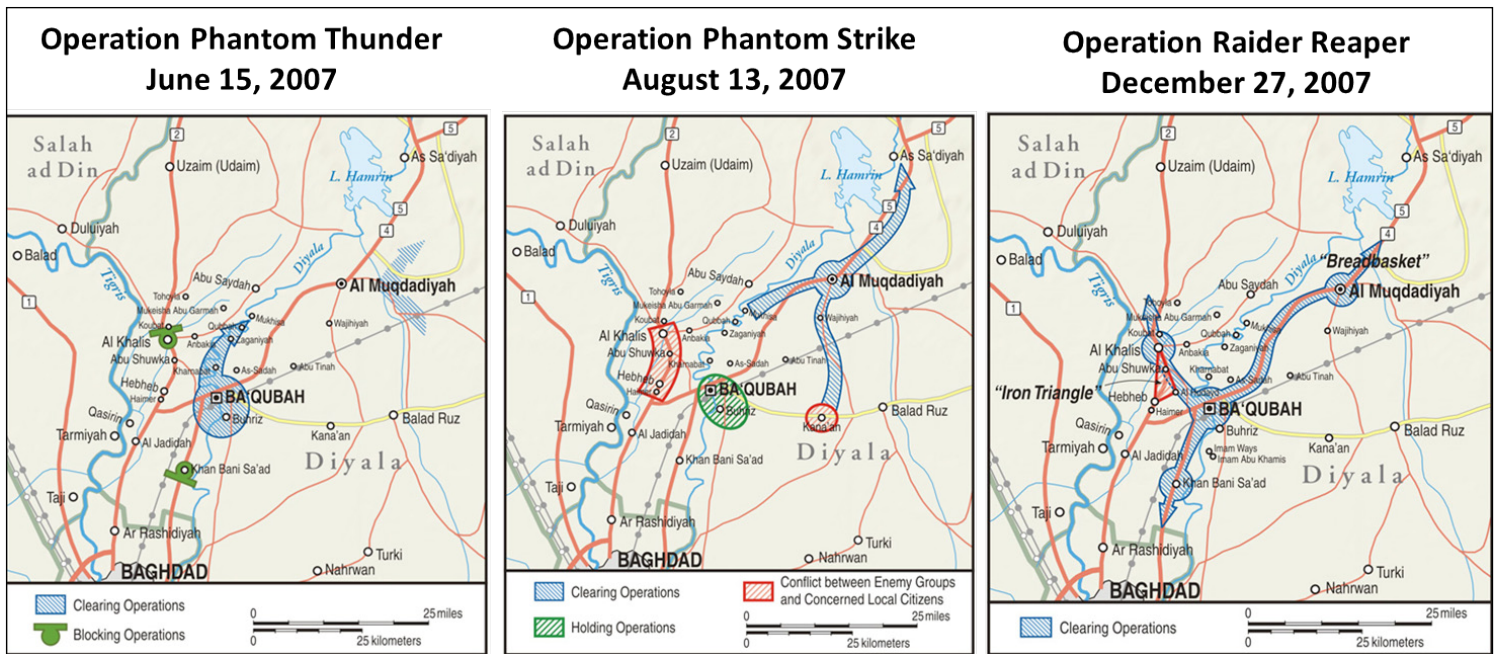
The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) nominally re-established its Wilayat, or Governorate, of Diyala in late December 2013, at the same time the organization captured positions in central Fallujah.<sup>1</sup> The announcement of an ISIS Diyala Wilayat signifies that ISIS's objective is ultimately to govern the whole of the province. Diyala is central to its campaign, and it is important to monitor the organization's progress on its eastern front while ISIS continues to fight in Anbar. ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani affirmed in 2013 that the war against the "Rafidah," a derogatory term for Shi'a, would be waged primarily in Diyala.<sup>2</sup>

The Diyala governor acknowledged the risk, stating that the intent of violent actors in Diyala is to create sectarian tensions and to disrupt the goals of the Diyala government.<sup>3</sup> The question in Diyala may no longer be one of resolving political disputes, but one of combating sectarian mobilization instigated by ISIS, and mitigating the effect that mutual violence may have on political opportunities on the eve of national elections. ISIS and Shi'a militias are on the rise in Diyala, and they are active in the heart of the province, the Diyala River Valley connecting Muqdadiah to the provincial capital at Baquba. This rise has been taking place over time. This report will document the movement of AQI and its successor, ISIS, from northern Diyala to Baquba from 2012 to the present day.

Diyala has experienced significant political turbulence over the last few months that have made it increasingly vulnerable to ethno-sectarian strife. This outcome seemed less likely immediately after the provincial elections in 2013, when Diyala witnessed a unique political accommodation in which the Sadrist Trend broke from the other Shi'a parties and aligned with the primarily Sunni Muthahidun bloc.<sup>4</sup> This arrangement was not regarded well by some parties and powerbrokers; Muthahidun governor Omar al-Humairi was nearly arrested in November 2013 on charges of corruption, which he claimed were politically motivated.<sup>5</sup> In December 2013, the Federal Administrative Court ratified a decision to dissolve the Diyala Provincial Government, claiming the session during which the governor and provincial council chairman were selected was illegitimate for lack of a quorum.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, a new governor, Amer al-Majmai, who split from his predominantly Iraqi Sunni list, was elected in December 2013, and member of the Iraqi Shi'a Badr organization, Muthana al-Tamimi was elected as chairman of the council.<sup>7</sup> These changes were condemned by Humairi, who accused Majmai of purging his opponents in the local government.<sup>8</sup> These actions demonstrate the challenges inherent in forming a local government in a mixed Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish province with many interlocking political and social rivalries.





Unfortunately, the politics of Diyala are now framed in the context of increasing levels of violence generated by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-sham (ISIS), the successor to AQI, which has centered its concept for an Islamic emirate around a capital in Diyala for many years. According to the biography distributed on jihadist forums, the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has close family ties to the Bobadri tribe in Diyala.<sup>9</sup> His aspirations for Diyala are likely consistent with that of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, given that Baghdadi's spokesperson announced its centrality to the campaign, as noted above.

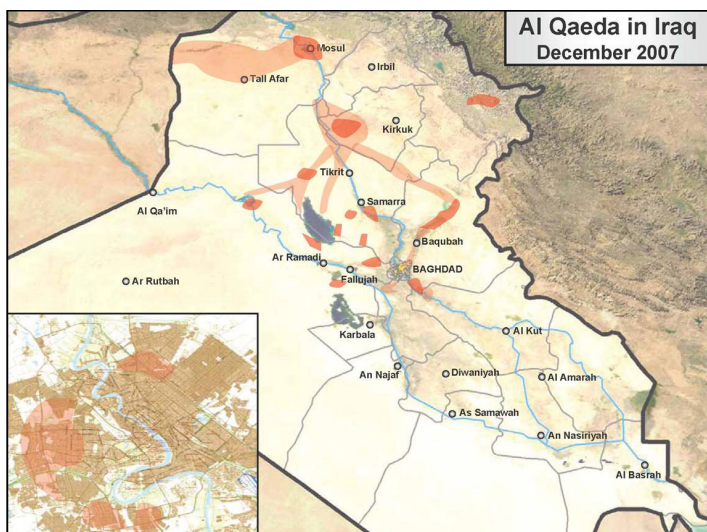
### AQI IN DIYALA IN 2012 - 2013

ISIS and its predecessor AQI have likely been consolidating strength in northern Diyala for several years. The swath of sparsely populated terrain north of Lake Hamrin had been an avenue of egress for AQI after U.S. Forces cleared the area in 2007.<sup>10</sup> U.S. Forces drove AQI from Baghdad to Baquba and north through the Diyala river valley to Muqdadiah from June 2007 to November 2007, conducting finishing operations north of Muqdadiah in late December 2007. AQI in Diyala fragmented as a result, and some elements dispersed into remote northern Diyala while others moved west to the Tigris river valley.<sup>11</sup> The remote areas of Diyala have historically been difficult to secure and likely provided AQI with an early opportunity to reestablish its lines of communication into the province after U.S. forces left Iraq. The area to the north of Lake Hamrin, including the towns of Saydiyah and Jalula, connect Muqdadiah to Suleiman Beg, an additional historic AQI support zone in eastern Salah ad-Din province. These towns also connect Muqdadiah to Khanaqin, an Iraq-Iran border crossing. The area is therefore conducive to AQI

facilitation. It is also charged with ethno-sectarian tension. This region falls within the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) of Iraq, containing a significant Kurdish population in addition to Shi'a and Sunni tribes.

AQI exerted a degree of control over the northern town of Saydiyah by July 2012, based upon isolated reports from Kurdish media.<sup>12</sup> Such reports suggest that AQI reestablished its presence within northern Diyala in 2012, and the pattern of attacks observed in Diyala throughout 2012-2013 supports this observation. The vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) waves observed in July-August 2012 skewed heavily toward Baquba and Muqdadiah, major cities along the Diyala River Valley southwest of Saydiyah and Jalula.<sup>13</sup> AQI's signature VBIED waves, involving six or more VBIEDs detonating on a single day in Iraq, proved to be a useful means to observe AQI's resurgence as an organized fighting force.<sup>14</sup> Six of the 30 VBIEDs comprising the inaugural VBIED wave of AQI's "Breaking the Walls" campaign on July 23, 2012 detonated in Diyala, indicating that Diyala has been a primary attack zone since the start of the campaign. Muqdadiah saw the greatest concentration of VBIEDs in Diyala during that wave, which also included a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) in Saydiyah.<sup>15</sup> This attack distribution sheds light on the early geography of AQI in Diyala. VBIED attacks never again concentrated in Muqdadiah, whereas attacks in Baquba increased; this shift illustrates the resumption of an AQI fixed fighting position near Muqdadiah, consistent with their history, from which further attacks into central Diyala may have launched. A cluster of suicide vest (SVEST) attacks in Muqdadiah a year later in July 2013 confirm the organization's enduring presence in the area and renewed intent to focus attacks there.<sup>16</sup>





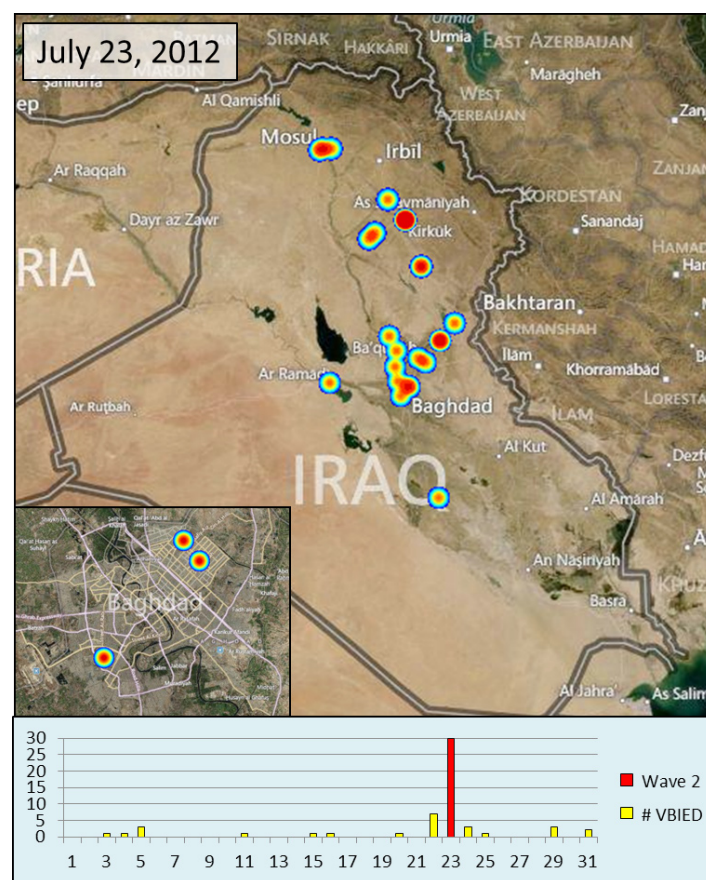
*After the Surge, MNF-I reported that AQI remained concentrated in several areas in northern Iraq, including northern Diyala.*

Moving beyond April 2013 requires acknowledgement of the formalization of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the erstwhile leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq. This paper will speak of ISIS rather than AQI for events after March 2013. Additional inflections in the early summer of 2013 likely affected the whole of ISIS, including its Diyala contingent. In late March 2013, the Syrian provincial capital of ar-Raqqa fell to the opposition,<sup>17</sup> and it subsequently became a stronghold for ISIS. On April 23, 2013, clashes occurred between armed gunmen and elements of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) at the protest site at Hawija in Iraq, an important inflection in the radicalization of some Iraqi Sunni individuals and communities.<sup>18</sup> On July 22, 2013, ISIS successfully attacked the prison at Abu Ghraib and released 500 prisoners.<sup>19</sup> These milestone events enhanced the operating environment and set conditions for ISIS to begin to push into priority urban centers it had occupied in 2005-2007.

Population displacement has been an indicator of AQI/ISIS movement into a civilian area.<sup>20</sup> Population displacement from Saydiyah to Khanaqin was reported as early as March 2013.<sup>21</sup> By July 2013, reports of population displacement also arose in Muqdadiah, attributed to an increase in sectarian infighting among Shi'a and Sunni tribes.<sup>22</sup> A suicide bombing at a Shi'a funeral in Muqdadiah in July 2013 demonstrated the role of ISIS in stoking sectarian violence.<sup>23</sup> The governor of Diyala called for a Muqdadiah Crisis Cell to address the needs of displaced communities at this time.<sup>24</sup> Shortly afterward, Iraqiyya leader Iyad Allawi and Speaker of the Council of Representatives (COR) Osama al-Nujaifi both made public remarks about population displacement at the hands of terrorist elements in Diyala and the need to avoid inciting sectarianism.<sup>25</sup>

The mixed demographic of Muqdadiah, and of Diyala as a whole, carried with it the possibility of Shi'a militia remobilization in the face of population displacement by ISIS within urban centers. Reports also began to emerge in July 2013 that referred to "militia" activity in Diyala, likely a reference to Shi'a militias.<sup>26</sup> On July 30, 2013, a new Sahwa force was announced in Diyala specifically to protect Sunni neighborhoods and mosques and to counter Shi'a militia activity.<sup>27</sup> The effects of sectarianism and the degraded security situation in Diyala upon provincial politics also became visible in July 2013, as members of the provincial council from the Diyala National Alliance and the Iraqiyyat Diyala suspended their membership in protest against the security situation.<sup>28</sup> It is important to recall this inflection when interpreting subsequent trends in attacks in Diyala.

By October 2013, some 400 families had reportedly been displaced from Muqdadiah, setting the stage for an escalation of mutual sectarian violence, further population displacement, and further projection of ISIS control within urban centers.<sup>29</sup> ISIS targeted the Sunni Abu al-Qasim mosque on September 13, 2013, possibly because of recent efforts to promote joint Shi'a-Sunni prayers and conciliation.<sup>30</sup> ISIS also distributed leaflets in November 2013 in several locations throughout Diyala deterring Shi'a celebration during Muharram.<sup>31</sup>



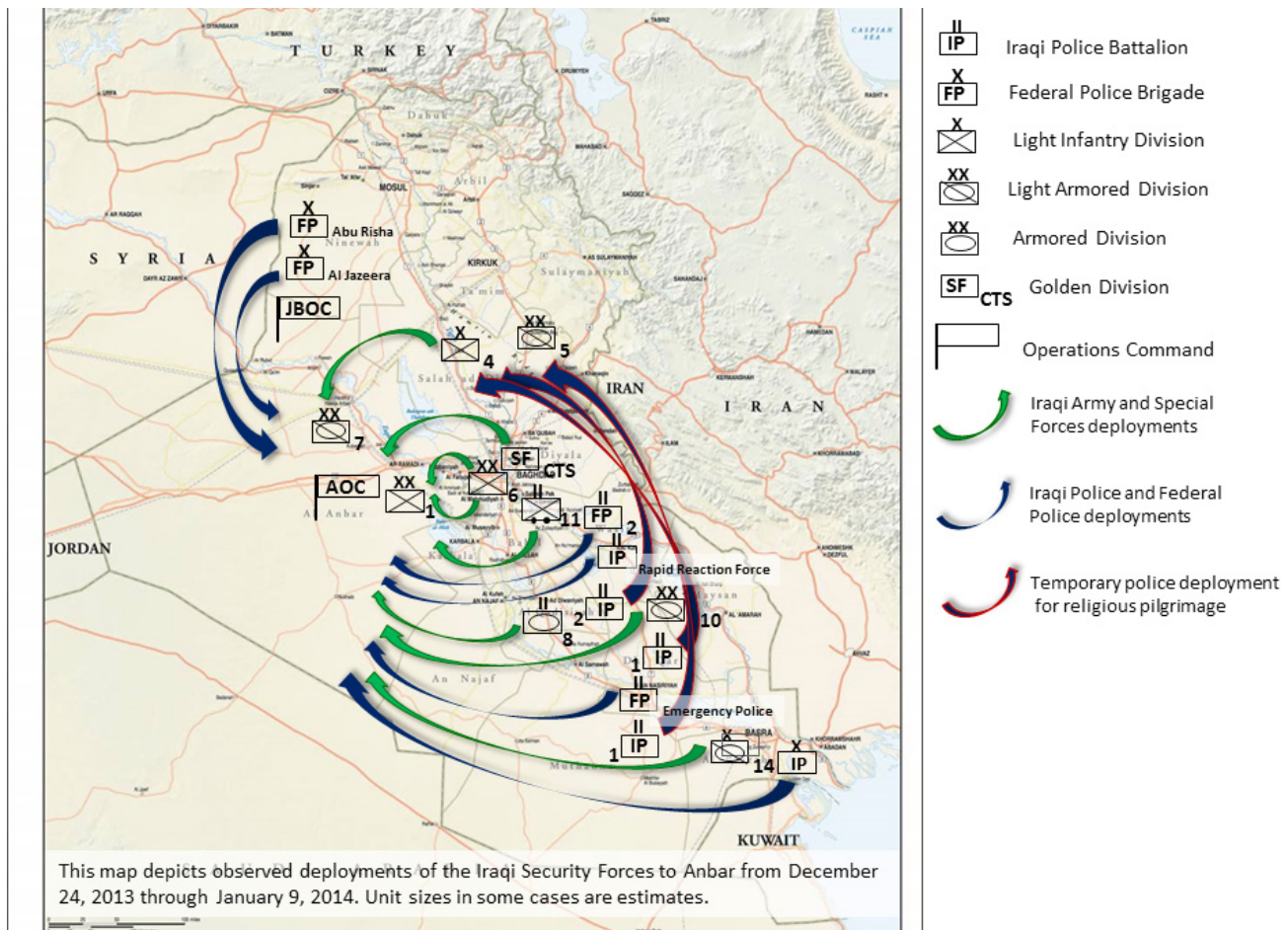
Shi'a militia mobilization became overt around this time. Unsanctioned elements of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) held a parade in Muqdadiyah in November 2013,<sup>32</sup> which Prime Minister Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr condemned.<sup>33</sup> On November 21, 2013 the governor of Diyala reported that 12 unidentified bodies of young adult males were found in the Diyala River in central Baquba, shot in the head and chest.<sup>34</sup> He also warned about the reemergence of false checkpoints.<sup>35</sup> These are operational signatures of Shi'a militias. ISIS attacked an Ashura procession in Saydiyah with an SVEST on November 14, 2013, inflicting 90 casualties.<sup>36</sup> While it is important to note that ISIS is likely not the only violent group now conducting attacks in Diyala, it is also important to recognize that ISIS cultivates and thrives in these conditions.

### ISIS ATTACKS IN THE DIYALA RIVER VALLEY AND BAQUBA IN 2013

ISIS expanded its activities further south in the province, operating along the Diyala River Valley (DRV) in late 2013. The DRV is key terrain for ISIS, not only because the orchards of the DRV provide effective concealment, but also

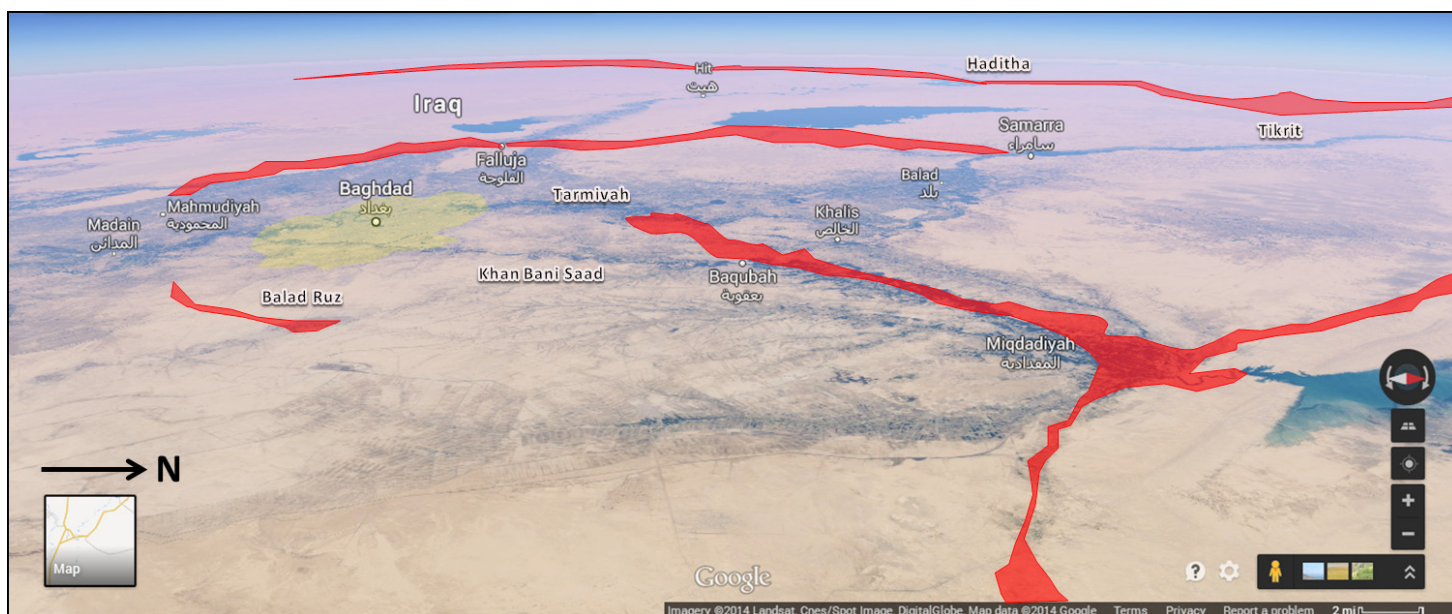
because they provide east-west access to southern Salah ad-Din and the northern Baghdad belts, especially Tarmiyah, another assessed ISIS support zone. Attacks against farmers in Abu Saida and other places along the DRV were reported on September 24, September 25, and October 6, 2013.<sup>37</sup> Five more direct fire and IED attacks against civilians were reported in Abu Saida specifically in October 2013.<sup>38</sup>

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) conducted operations into the DRV in October and November to clear ISIS positions;<sup>39</sup> however, the Iraqi Police (IP) in Diyala are generally regarded as pro-Shi'a, and this presents a hindrance to security operations in mixed regions like the DRV. Military forces reportedly detained the Imam of a Sunni mosque in Muqdadiyah on November 7, 2013,<sup>40</sup> releasing him nine days later.<sup>41</sup> The Dijla (Tigris) Operations Command conducted joint operations with the Diyala IP in November 2013 to deny terrain to ISIS.<sup>42</sup> The deployment of Iraqi Army (IA) forces into the DRV signifies an important escalation of security response to the terrorist threat in Diyala before the crisis in Anbar began in December 2013.



*ISF reinforcements to Anbar. Note the deployment of elements of the 5th IA from Diyala to Anbar.*





*ISIS moved into the Diyala River Valley, and Baquba in the late 2013. ISIS is positioned to connect across northern Baghdad to Anbar, and to project force upon Baghdad from many directions.*

ISIS demonstrated its intent to move into positions in Baquba, Diyala's capital, in late 2013. On September 30, 2013, 30 families in the western Baquba suburb of Tahrir received threats and displaced north of Baquba.<sup>43</sup> On October 1, members of the Shi'a Shammar tribe also received threats to leave their homes in Gatun, west of Baquba.<sup>44</sup> One week later, reports indicated that 60 families displaced themselves from western Baquba to Khalis.<sup>45</sup> ISF operations to capture the ISIS elements responsible for the attacks in Tahrir, Gatun, and al-Mohandiseen neighborhoods in Baquba occurred in direct response to ISIS's attacks in October 2013.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, on October 22, 2013, Mukhtars in western Baquba resigned in response to targeted threats by ISIS.<sup>47</sup> Consistent with observations elsewhere in Iraq, the Gatun displacement followed house-borne improvised explosive device (HBIED) attacks, a consistent tactic by ISIS to intimidate security forces or residents ahead of ISIS movement into an area.<sup>48</sup> HBIEDs also occurred in the eastern Baquba neighborhood of al Mohandiseen on October 25 and November 19-20 and the western Baquba neighborhood of al-Mualimeen on December 30, 2013, indicating ISIS's intent to occupy these neighborhoods as well.<sup>49</sup>

In conjunction with increased ISF operations to counter ISIS in November 2013, ISIS increased direct attacks against the ISF and other high profile targets. On November 3, 2013, ISIS attacked the Emergency Police Headquarters in Baquba with an SVBIED, IEDs, and Direct Fire.<sup>50</sup> On the eve of the Anbar crisis on December 13, 2013, ISIS attacked Iranian pipeline workers in Imam Wes, killing several and destroying their vehicles.<sup>51</sup> On December 15, 2013, ISIS executed a second complex attack upon a military outpost in Muqadadiyah.<sup>52</sup> ISIS

also conducted HBIED attacks in Muqadadiyah on December 26, 2013 and December 30, 2013, including against the home of a Jabouri tribal leader.<sup>53</sup> These attacks demonstrate that ISIS in Diyala was in fact becoming more emboldened and capable in Diyala as the ISF shifted its focus to Anbar.

### THE ISF REDISTRIBUTE TO BUTTRESS ANBAR

The disposition of Iraqi Security Forces nationwide changed drastically with the onset of the security crisis in Anbar in late December 2013.<sup>54</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> IA Division, which had been assigned to northern Diyala as well as Tuz Khurmatu and Suleiman Beg in eastern Salah ad-Din, was ordered to reinforce the ISF in Fallujah in January 2014.<sup>55</sup> Only a few elements remained behind.<sup>56</sup> Simultaneously, the Peshmerga took up new positions in the DIBs from northern Diyala to Ninewa in security cooperation with the ISF.<sup>57</sup> The Peshmerga positions extended as far south as Jalula in Diyala, potentially disrupting ISIS main access to Suleimaniyah and applying pressure to ISIS positions in Saydiyah.<sup>58</sup> On January 8, 2014, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Federal Police sustained an attack in Jalula, likely also the work of ISIS.<sup>59</sup> Some sources indicate that the attack was an attempt by ISIS to divert ISF attention and resources from the fight in Anbar. But this attack also demonstrates that ISIS continues to have freedom of maneuver and attack in Jalula despite the redistribution of the Peshmerga. The announcement by the counter-terrorism office in Diyala on January 30, 2014 that Saydiyah might fall to AQI suggests that security conditions in the area have declined while all eyes are focused on Anbar.<sup>60</sup>



Also in January 2014, the Mayor of Khalis, Uday al-Khadran, declared that the village of Udham to the west of this location had become an ISIS concentration point. Udham is situated along another north-south corridor connecting Tuz Khurmatu to Baghdad.<sup>61</sup> Udham historically served as AQI's east-west waypoint, connecting AQI's Anbar system through Tarmiyah and Samarra before AQI's original move into Diyala in 2005.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, AQI regenerated its strength along its eastern front early in the 2012 campaign, such that the organization may have moved itself from Udham through Samarra and Tarmiya in 2013 before establishing itself in Fallujah at the end of the year. Regardless, Udham represents a critical juncture for AQI to connect its operations across fronts within the interior of Iraq. Udham therefore represents key terrain on which the ISF could in principle disrupt AQI's interior facilitation. The Mayor of Khalis claimed in January 2014 that elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> IA deployed to Udham to interdict an ISIS cell, affirming the terrain's importance.<sup>63</sup> It is possible that the deployment of Peshmerga to Jalula and 5<sup>th</sup> IA elements to Udham could isolate ISIS elements in Suleiman Beg from those in Muqdadiyah. It is not clear, however, that the Peshmerga and the 5<sup>th</sup> IA elements have had this effect, nor that they realized this operational imperative.

The 12<sup>th</sup> IA Division also reportedly engaged in kinetic operations against two ISIS camps in the Hamrin mountains northwest of Diyala in late January 2014.<sup>64</sup> These operations likely centered on the Tuz Khurmatu and Suleiman Beg, but the effects of the operation were likely felt by ISIS and the population in northern Diyala. As of February 7, 2014, residents of villages surrounding Saydiyah continued to displace themselves due to ISIS efforts to control the villages,



*Photo published by U.S. Army December 11, 2008: A group of Iraqi army soldiers scout the Udaim River Valley from a high vantage point.*

which appeared to persist or increase throughout February.<sup>65</sup> ISF operations north of Diyala increased on February 13, 2014, when armed gunmen took up fighting positions within a number of villages near Suleiman Beg.<sup>66</sup> It is still unclear if the gunmen in Suleiman Beg were ISIS or Ba'athist elements, but the Iraqi Security Forces spent the latter part of February 2014 engaged in operations to retake the town.<sup>67</sup>

ISIS and the Iraqi Security Forces subsequently escalated their campaign for northern Diyala. Four ISIS VBIED engineers were reportedly detained in the vicinity of Hamrin on February 16, 2014.<sup>68</sup> Armed gunmen attacked a security facility in Saydiyah on February 20, 2014, possibly in response.<sup>69</sup> On February 21, 2014, the Diyala Operations Command announced an increase to its force posture north of Saydiyah in order to isolate ISIS elements in northern Diyala from elements in Suleiman Beg.<sup>70</sup> Gunmen then attacked checkpoints of the Emergency Police in Imam Wes on February 22, killing the commander of the IP regiment, Colonel Farouq Adnan.<sup>71</sup> The Diyala Police Chief General Jamil al-Shammari announced the operation, "Revenge of the Martyr Farouq," in response.<sup>72</sup>

Conditions for civilians in northern Diyala worsened throughout this exchange. Mutahidun COR member Mohammed al-Khalidi exclaimed on February 10, 2014 that the roads surrounding Muqdadiyah are now controlled by "roving death squads."<sup>73</sup> Khalidi condemned al-Qaeda as well as the "militias," likely referring to Shi'a militias, demonstrating that sectarian violence had emerged in Muqdadiyah. In late February 2014, the head of the Municipal Council in Muqdadiyah explained that the security situation was deteriorating on account of a rise in assassinations and kidnappings.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, a string of murders including Sheikh



*Baqubah provides easy access to Baghdad from the north through the Khalis corridor and Khan Bani Saad. Additionally, central Diyala provides access from Kan'an and Balad Ruz to eastern Baghdad.*

Qais al-Jabouri occurred in Muqdadiyah between December 2013 and March 2014.<sup>75</sup>

Some of these targeted killings may have been the work of Shi'a militias in retaliation for ISIS attacks. Some were likely the work of ISIS, reflective of an assassination and intimidation campaign designed to compel and displace civilian populations. The Chairman of the Khanaqin Local Council estimated the number of displaced persons from Saydiyah and Jalula to Khanaqin, a predominantly Kurdish area, at 3,000 as of February 22, 2014.<sup>76</sup> By March 8, 2014, four Saydiyah local officials had been assassinated, most likely by ISIS.<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately, when viewed in the context of previous ISIS operations, the redistribution of ISF and Peshmerga in northern Diyala has not effectively suppressed ISIS activities in the area. Instead, ISIS distinctly demonstrated the ability to maintain operations in multiple zones in eastern Iraq while engaged with the ISF. ISIS effectively neutralized the ISF's operations in Diyala while other ISIS elements simultaneously fought in Anbar.

## ISIS GAINS IN THE DIYALA RIVER VALLEY AND BAQUBA IN 2014

ISIS continued its campaign to take up positions in the DRV in 2014. Reports from the Dijla Operations Command and the Diyala IP indicated that 60 ISIS gunmen had returned to the villages of Mukhisa and Shikhi in Abu Saida,<sup>78</sup> which featured prominently in AQI's early history.<sup>79</sup> On January 13, 2014 ISIS detonated three HBIEDS belonging to local residents in Abu Saida.<sup>80</sup> ISIS also attacked two mosques in Zaganja and a third mosque in Abu Karma, nearby villages in the river valley around the same time.<sup>81</sup> On January 15, 2014 ISIS gunmen reportedly clashed with Sahwa at a checkpoint in Abu Karma, seizing the checkpoint and posting an ISIS flag.<sup>82</sup> The chairman of the Abu Said security committee indicated shortly afterwards that ISIS has reestablished safe havens in Abu Khnazir, Skhikha, and Mukhisa villages in Abu Saida.<sup>83</sup>

Civilian murders and isolated attacks against security checkpoints in the DRV continued into March 2014, and the Sahwa and ISF responded.<sup>84</sup> On January 25, 2014 suspected terrorists were arrested in Abu Saida.<sup>85</sup> Shortly thereafter, on January 31, the Iraqi police found three bodies near the river northeast of Baquba with gunshot wounds to the head and chest, suggesting Shi'a militias were responsible.<sup>86</sup> It is likely that both ISIS and Shi'a militias are active in the orchards of the river valley. This was particularly visible in early February 2014. One reported indicated that a close relative of ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in Abu Saida on February 3, 2014,<sup>87</sup> and residents of Mukhisa village reported that ISIS conducted a brutal attack on February 5 against an IA element, possibly in retaliation.<sup>88</sup>

The civilians in Mukhisa also reported that the IA returned to the village afterwards with a contingent of armed civilians, likely Shi'a militias.<sup>89</sup> According to the village report, the militia killed seven residents, including an 80-year-old man, and the IA complement did not intervene. The militia also burned a number of vehicles. On February 6, the governor of Diyala replaced the IP in Mukhisa with an IA element, which adds confusion about which security force had been complicit in the militia activity.<sup>90</sup> He also agreed to supply the residents of the village with light weapons.

The Director of Intelligence and National Investigations in Diyala was targeted with an IED just northwest of Baquba on February 6.<sup>91</sup> On February 9, the Chairman of the security committee of Abu Saida stated that several villages near Abu Saida were targeted by ISIS with mortar rounds.<sup>92</sup> Specific mention of violence within the DRV has not continued in reporting between February 10, 2014 and March 23, 2014. It is important to understand whether this silence indicates that ISIS transferred its positions and control into the DRV, or whether ISF operations in Diyala or Suleiman Beg have drawn in or suppressed ISIS activity.

Attacks south of Suleiman Beg along the western passage were on the rise as of March 21, 2014. Clashes between ISIS and elements of the IA were taking place near the town of Sarha on the road from Baghdad to Kirkuk, which runs through Udham.<sup>93</sup> ISIS's activities during this clash included an attack upon a mobile Federal Police headquarters near the town, which consisted of SVESTS and an SVBIED comprised of an oil tanker. The Federal Police sustained a number of significant casualties, including the Federal Police commander in Diyala and multiple battalion commanders. The fighting is ongoing as of the time of this report.



Original source: ARCENT, accessible through Wikimedia Commons  
Soldiers from 3rd Stryker BCT, 2 ID, BUHRIZ, Iraq (March 27, 2007)





ISIS Wilayat Diyala preparing to attack Buhriz on 22 March 2014, posted to Twitter.

The apparent lull in attacks in the DRV after February 20, 2014 also occurred in Baquba. As compared to attacks trends in late 2013, attacks reported in Baquba between January 2014 and March 2014 have been less notable. If one were only to evaluate attacks since January 2014, security in Baquba might look promising. ISF reports of defused VBIEDS and IEDs outnumber effective attacks. Public announcements of successful raids are common. For example, on February 19, 2014, the Diyala Chief of Police General Jamil al-Shammari announced that the IP had uncovered and arrested three terrorist cells affiliated with ISIS that had been targeting Mukhtars in Baquba.<sup>94</sup> Shammari also stated on March 5 that a special security team had captured an ISIS courier who connected with “sleeper cells” throughout Diyala.<sup>95</sup>

It is possible that ISF operations in Diyala are achieving the aggregate effect of limiting ISIS activities in the capital city. But the cumulative effective of ISIS attacks against civilians at cafes in Baquba has also been great.<sup>96</sup> It is possible that this lull in attacks signifies something worse, such as the movement of ISIS into new areas within Baquba or the planning of a more significant attack. It is therefore difficult at this time to determine from these statements whether ISIS has yet established fortified positions within Baquba, but this is likely an enduring strategic objective.<sup>97</sup> It would be false to assess with confidence that security within Baquba is improving. This concern was justified on March 22, 2014 when ISIS launched an assault to seize the town of Buhriz, just south of Baquba.

## ISIS ATTEMPTS TO TAKE BUHRIZ

Controlling the town of Buhriz and its neighbors to the south, Khan Bani Saad and Balad Ruz, has historically been important for AQI. These towns have served as facilitation

nodes for AQI’s attacks from Diyala into eastern Baghdad, particularly into the predominantly Shi’a Sha’ab and Ur districts bordering on Sadr City. Accordingly, ISIS began to escalate violent activity in southern Diyala in January 2014. Scattered IED, Direct Fire, and VBIED attacks occurred in eastern and southern Diyala, including Buhriz, Balad Ruz, and stretching farther east to Mandali in 2014.<sup>98</sup> Buhriz witnessed most of this activity. On January 15, an IED targeted the funeral tent of a pro-government Sahwa member south of Baquba in Buhriz.<sup>99</sup> On February 25, an IED detonated on a bus carrying primary school teachers in Buhriz.<sup>100</sup> The following day, a VBIED detonated on a local market in Khan Bani Saad, south of Buhriz.<sup>101</sup> These attacks demonstrate that ISIS was able to project attacks south of Baquba and near to eastern Baghdad, and probably intended to reestablish lines of communication into Baghdad from Diyala.

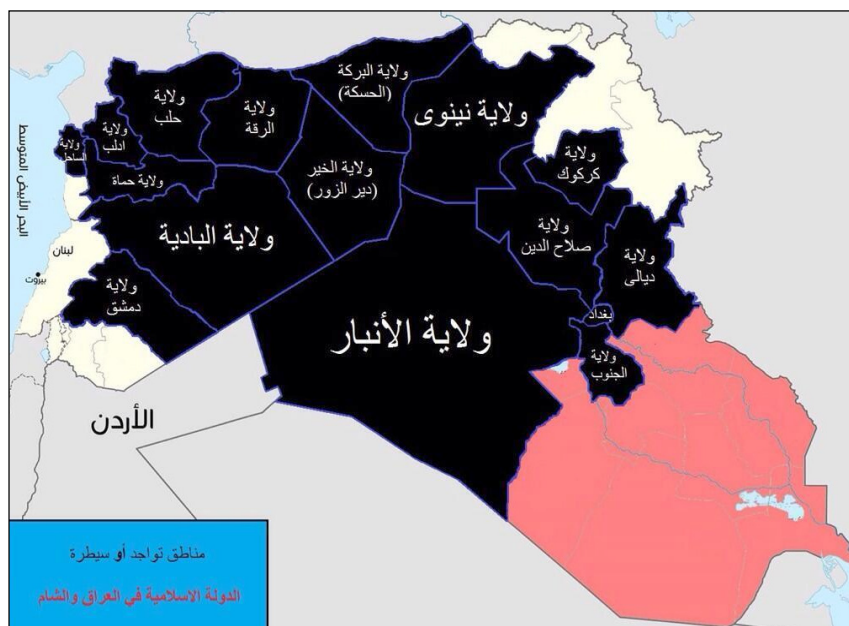
ISIS launched an urban assault into Buhriz, seizing the city center, on March 22, 2014.<sup>102</sup> ISIS seized the mosques and released messages through the loud speakers.<sup>103</sup> The IA quickly launched a counteroffensive to retake Buhriz. Heavy clashes ensued, and hundreds of residents reportedly fled the area.<sup>104</sup> Clashes apparently stopped by March 24, 2014, with the ISF reestablishing control of the town. On March 24, 2014, the IP Commander in Diyala, the Commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> IA, and the governor of Diyala held a joint press conference, announcing that they had killed 25 members of ISIS and had formed a new Sahwa force.<sup>105</sup> They called for displaced residents to return. On March 25, 2014, news sources indicated that Shi’a militias moved into Buhriz and began to conduct attacks. One report indicated that Shi’a militias burned three mosques conducted targeted killings.<sup>106</sup> Another report indicated that Diyala officials now regard Buhriz as a “humanitarian disaster,” not for ISIS activity, but for devastation at the hands of Shi’a militias.<sup>107</sup>

Given these recent security developments, the cross-sectarian politics of Diyala are not promising on the eve of parliamentary elections, even though the Diyala provincial council achieved a quorum at its meeting on March 12, 2014.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Shi’a militia mobilization in Diyala may accelerate Shi’a militia revival elsewhere in Iraq, and Diyala’s security situation may therefore broadly undermine national elections.

## BEYOND DIYALA

Shortly after the ISIS attack in Buhriz, ISIS launched additional attacks west of Baquba in the Nebai and Balad region of southern Salah ad Din on March 26, 2014.<sup>109</sup> This attack, proximate to Diyala, may be the work of a separate ISIS military contingent associated with an adjacent ISIS Wilayat of Northern Baghdad, nominally established by February 2014.<sup>110</sup> Like Buhriz, this area has a mixed Shi’a-Sunni demographic. Spillover from sectarian violence in Diyala will likely expand into this area as ISIS wages further





*The Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, depiction by jihadists posted to Twitter, March 2014.*

offensive campaigns and provokes Shi'a militia response. Diyala's displaced civilian population may be caught in the crossfire in the cross-provincial and increasingly vulnerable Khalis corridor. ISIS in northern Baghdad may also draw strength from ISIS elements in the Thar Thar region of Anbar province, uniting their contiguous military operating areas north of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, ISIS also waged a separate ground offensive against in Jurf al-Sakhar, southwest of Baghdad beginning in February 2014.<sup>111</sup> Clashes with ISF were first reported in this area in November 2013.<sup>112</sup> ISIS sustained operations in this area throughout March 2014.<sup>113</sup> This area of northern Babel may comprise yet another ISIS Wilayat.<sup>114</sup> ISIS's governance and military campaigns are now widely dispersed in areas surrounding Baghdad on every side.

## CONCLUSION

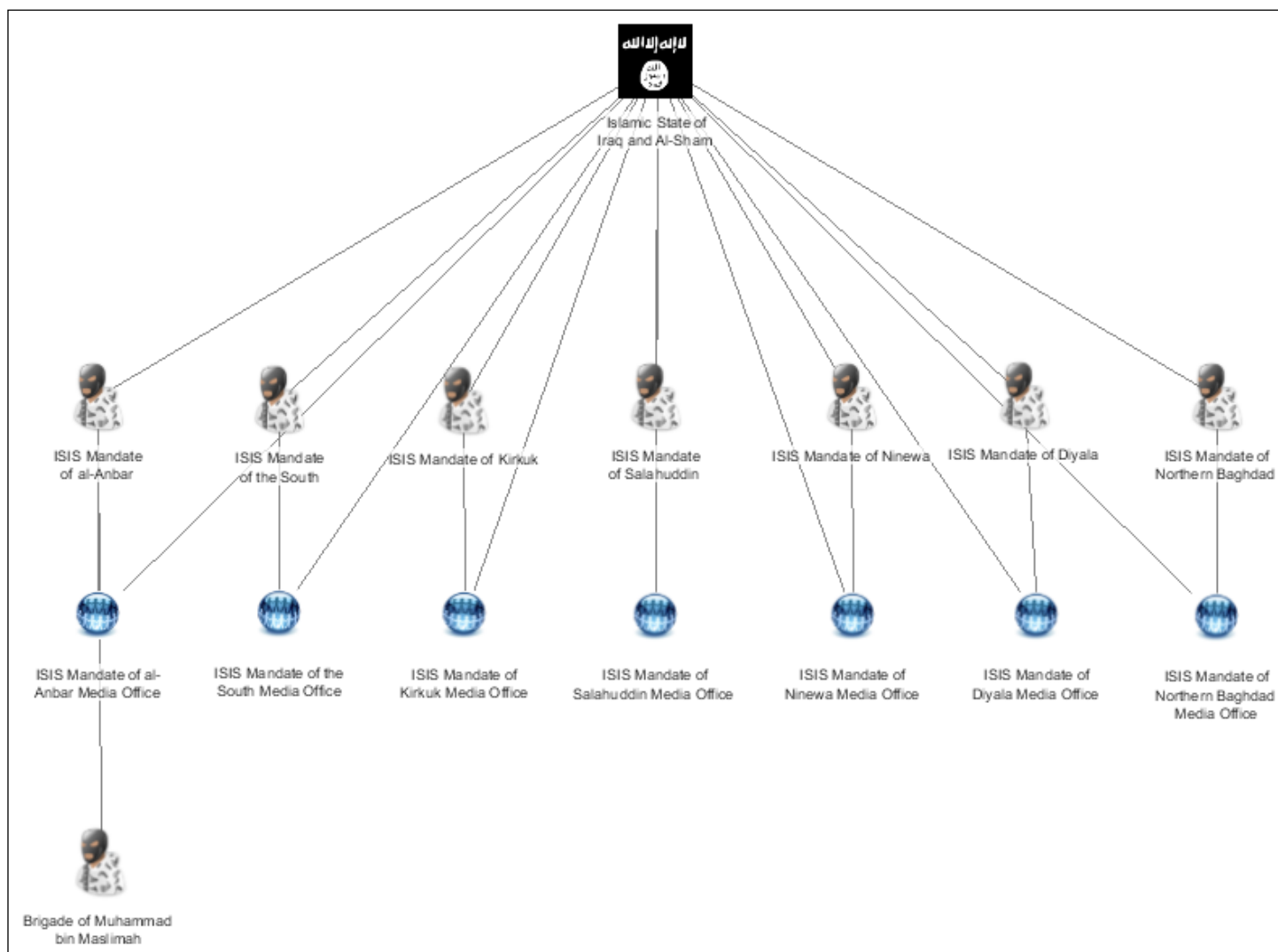
The Islamic State of Iraq and al-sham is by no means confined to Fallujah. The terrorist organization has returned to Diyala with vigor as part of a campaign to control the Baghdad Belts. ISIS operations also appear to be synchronized, with ISIS gaining the initiative and controlling the terms of battle in these areas. The full extent and synchronization of ISIS activities across Iraq, including Anbar, Ninewa, and Kirkuk, will be the subject of future study. As of late March, ISIS is synchronizing effects to disrupt Iraq's national elections.<sup>115</sup>

The military operations in Diyala and the Belts showcase the geographic breadth of ISIS, as well as the sophistication of its military command. ISIS operations in Iraq in 2014 demonstrate the integrity of the ISIS military apparatus and

the enduring ability to design sophisticated campaigns in multiple sectors. ISIS recently acknowledged the death of a senior military commander, Haji Bakr, in northern Syria in early January 2014,<sup>116</sup> leading some to suspect that ISIS had lost its military mastermind. This assessed limitation now appears unlikely, because ISIS has expanded its military campaign in Iraq since January 2014. ISIS still possesses the ability to synchronize operations across multiple provinces in Iraq and to direct them to occur at specific times, in this case, to disrupt Iraq's national elections. The designation of a main effort to penetrate government buildings in the Baghdad city center or to conduct a spectacular attack in one of Iraq's Shi'a holy cities is their most dangerous course of action. The further targeting of Shi'a population centers in East Baghdad is the most likely course of action.

Reestablishing fortified positions in Baquba and its surrounding suburbs is one way for ISIS to exacerbate sectarian conflict. From Baquba, ISIS may project west to Tarmiyah and gain access to northern Baghdad; ISIS may also proceed from Buhriz south to Khan Bani Sa'ad to open lines into eastern Baghdad. It is not clear that the ISF has the capacity to block these avenues of approach while also concentrating forces in Fallujah. These threats are therefore projected to increase. Additionally, Baghdad faces threats of social mobilization along sectarian lines. The Sunnis may continue to mobilize under the Tribal Military Councils in rejection of ongoing ISF operations in Sunni areas. Shi'a militias may also feel the effects of Diyala's escalation and launch more aggressive campaigns in Baghdad. The organization's presence in Diyala has heightened this threat to Baghdad. The ability of ISIS to disrupt political process on the eve of elections is therefore high.

# APPENDIX : ISIS GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES IN IRAQ



The above graphic, design by Alex Bilger, depicts the emerging structure of the ISIS Wilayats in Iraq. The Wilayats are visible through the messages, announcements, and photos they post on Twitter. Their Twitter content, in particular their messaging strategy to intimidate Sunni voters in Iraq, appears to be part of an organized outreach campaign by ISIS. For more information, see “ISIS Condemns Elections, Posts Warnings in Kirkuk, Diyala Ninewa, and Northern Baghdad,” March 28, 2014, available at <http://www.iswiraq.blogspot.com>.

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