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Islamic State reportedly on Baghdad's outskirts after week of victories

By Mitchell Prothero

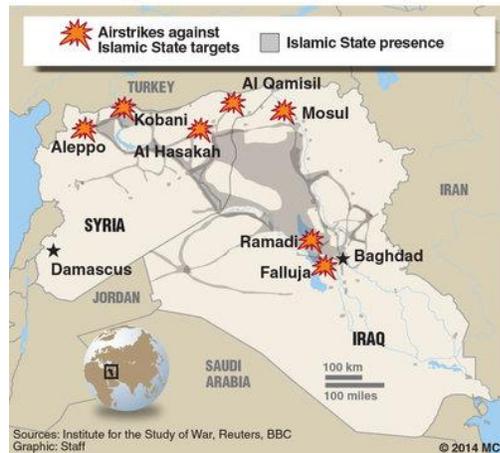
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An Iraqi Shiite militiaman stands alert after clashes with militants from the Islamic State group, near Qara Tappa, about 75 miles northeast of Baghdad in Iraq's Diyala province, Oct. 2, 2014.

Latest airstrikes

The U.S. military, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates conducted joint airstrikes against Islamic militants in Syria and Iraq Thursday.



Islamic State militants have taken control of key cities in Iraq's western province of Anbar and have begun to besiege one of the country's largest military bases in a weeklong offensive that's brought them within artillery range of Baghdad.

The Islamic State and its tribal allies have dominated Anbar since a surprise offensive last December, but this week's push was particularly worrisome, because for the first time this year Islamist insurgents were reported to have become a major presence in Abu Ghraib, the last Anbar town on the outskirts of the capital.

"Daash is openly operating inside Abu Ghraib," according to an Iraqi soldier, who used a common Arabic term for the Islamic State. "I was at the 10th Division base there two days ago, and the soldiers cannot leave or patrol," he said, asking that he be identified only as Hossam because Iraqi soldiers are barred from speaking with foreign reporters. "Daash controls the streets."

Hundreds of miles to the west, Islamic State forces continued their push into the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane, where it appeared unlikely that Turkey would intervene to stop the advance. Kurdish officials from the town said the Turkish government had yet to respond to their pleas for weapons, and reports from the Turkish-Syrian border said there was no evidence Turkey was preparing to take action.

Hossam, whom a McClatchy special correspondent interviewed in Baghdad, said he'd had a difficult time leaving Abu Ghraib for Baghdad to mark the Eid al Adha holiday Saturday. "I had to use a fake ID card that said I was Sunni," he said, reflecting the concern among Shiite Muslim Iraqi soldiers about the Islamic State's execution of Shiites it's captured. "Daash controls the entire area except the army bases and prisons. They're just a few (miles) from Baghdad."

His account was backed by Hamad Hussein, a resident of the Saadan section of Abu Ghraib, who said the Islamic State had taken control of virtually all the southern sections of the area, including the villages of Saadan, al Nuaymiya and Kan Tari.

A diplomat in Irbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan region, said an Islamic State presence in Abu Ghraib would put Baghdad International Airport within artillery range of the militants.

“We know they have captured substantial numbers of 155 mm howitzers,” said the diplomat, whose country is participating in the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition. The diplomat spoke only on the condition of anonymity, lacking permission to brief the news media. “These have a range of about (20 miles) and if they are able to hold territory in Abu Ghraib then the concern they can shell and ultimately close BIAP becomes a grave concern.”

The airport is a key lifeline for Western embassies and holds a joint operations center staffed by U.S. military advisers.

Anbar is a predominantly Sunni Muslim province that remains deeply suspicious of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, and the Islamic State has pressed to expand its control there since last winter’s initial offensive. In the past week, the militants have scored a string of other victories in the province.

Islamic State militants seized control of most of Hit, a key pipeline town north of the provincial capital of Ramadi, on Thursday and were pressing an assault on Ramadi itself, according to Iraqi news accounts. At least 74 soldiers were killed and dozens were missing after the militants overran Hit, state news media reported late Thursday.

Islamic State militants also captured an entire regiment of Iraqi tanks, the reports said, though it was unclear how many vehicles that represented. In a Western military, regiments generally have 38 to 55 tanks, but Iraqi regiments have long been undermanned due to corruption and problems with maintenance.

The advance on Hit may have been in preparation for an assault on the Asad air base nearby, Iraq’s largest military facility and the main base for American troops in Anbar during the U.S.-led occupation. Reports indicated the base had come under harassing attacks.

Islamic State militants also have besieged a military base that belongs to the 30th Mechanized Brigade at Albu Aytha, north of Ramadi. The outcome of the battle was unclear, with some reports saying the assault had trapped 300 to 600 soldiers, while government media reported that the base had withstood a major attack.

Two smaller outposts in Anbar have been overrun in a similar fashion in the last two weeks, and residents of Fallujah, which fell to the Islamic State last winter, have reported seeing militants parading hundreds of captured soldiers through that city’s streets as recently as last weekend.

Although the fate of those prisoners remains unknown, the Islamic State typically conducts mass executions of Iraqi army prisoners, particularly if the captured men are Shiites, whom the group considers apostates. The group has repeatedly released mass execution videos a few days or weeks after such events.

The biggest concern for Western military advisers was the report that Islamic State militants were moving freely in Abu Ghraib, which controls the western approaches to Baghdad from Anbar, Jordan and Syria. Its loss would severely limit the Iraqi government's ability to send reinforcements to a small number of bases in Anbar that remain in government control, including at Ramadi and Haditha as well as Asad air base, which lies north of Ramadi.

Already, Islamic State forces' influence stretches from Fallujah through Abu Ghraib to Yusufiya, Baghdad's westernmost suburb. So far, the highway that links those locations remains in government hands, as does the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, where U.S. soldiers abused Iraqi prisoners in the early years of the Iraq War. But while the government has dispatched more soldiers to reinforce its hold on the highway, the Islamic State's control of the surrounding areas makes the government's hold appear tenuous.

"If the Iraqis are unable to regain control of this area, this has the makings of a disaster," said the Irbil-based coalition diplomat.