



In Brief: Progress against ISIS December 2014

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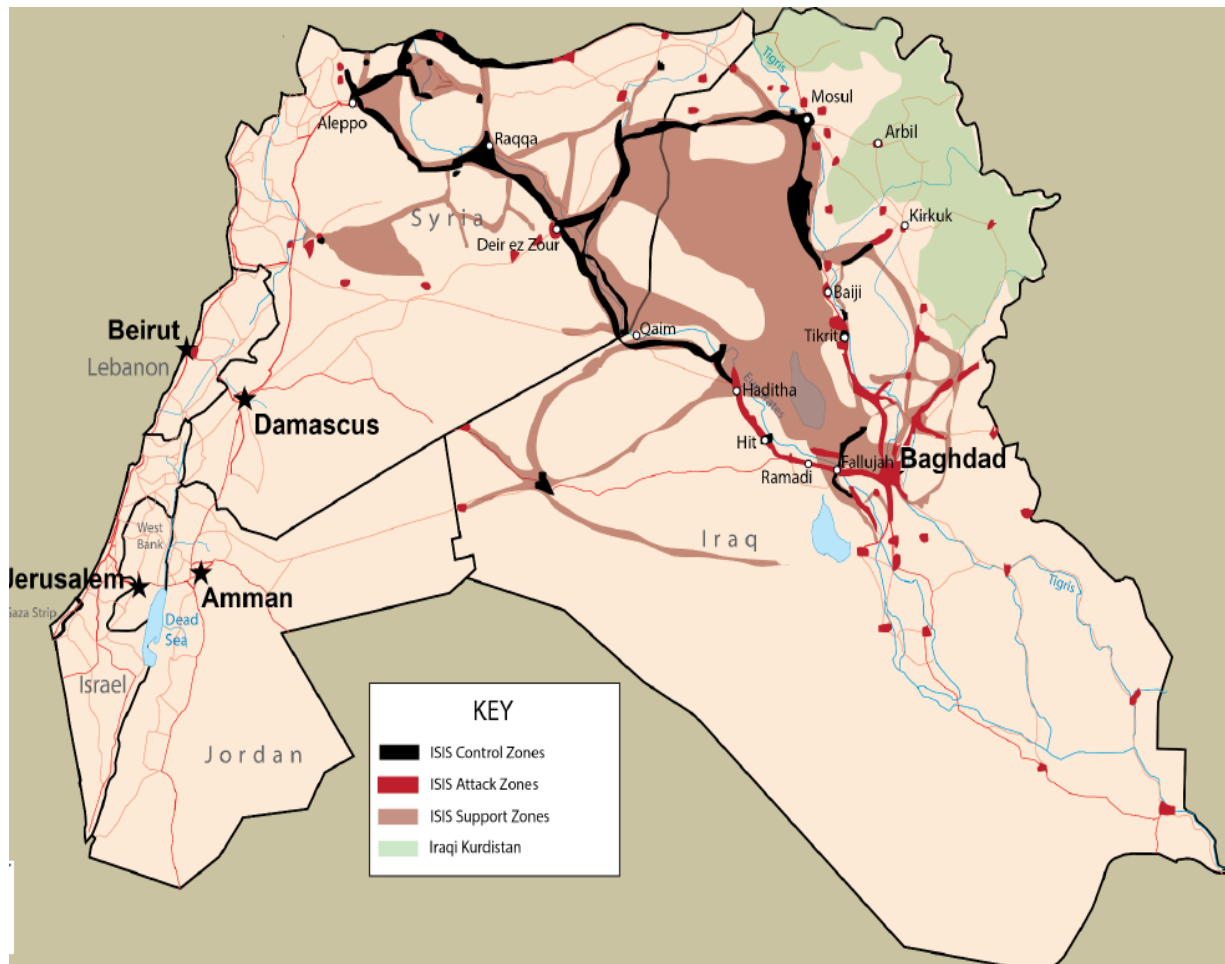
A brief summary of the progress of the military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

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1 Territory



Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#), 5 December 2014

1.1 Iraq

The rapid advances that ISIS made in summer 2014 have been slowed. It was the fact that ISIS had significant local support in the Arab Sunni-majority areas of central and northern Iraq that made such spectacular progress possible. In the Kurdish areas of the north east and the Shia areas of the south, ISIS encountered local resistance rather than support and has not attempted to take over large areas. However, ISIS continued to make territorial advances in the autumn particularly in the Anbar governorate, despite the international air campaign against its positions

There have been some smaller non-Sunni Arab targets for takeover, notably the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, but these cases have been the location of specific assets such as oil fields or have strategic value or, in the case of Kobane, have become significant in the public relations battle.

The rapid advances of the summer may be a thing of the past. Territory changes hands quite regularly at the margins but the Iraqi security forces show few signs of re-taking large areas that are fully under the control of ISIS.

In Iraq, it is in the north east, bordering the Kurdish area, and around Baghdad that the most serious clashes are taking place. In December it was reported that ISIS was building a

trench around the northern areas of Mosul to protect it from anti-ISIS forces (largely the Kurdish Peshmerga in that region). Iraqi security forces have been massing near Tikrit, a Sunni stronghold north of Baghdad, while ISIS clashed with the Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilisation Units, composed largely of Shia militias, just to the north of Baghdad.

There was a major battle in the autumn for Baiji, a town between Mosul and Tikrit that has an oil refinery. In November government forces said that they had finally taken control of the town after an attack on ISIS positions that involved the Iraqi army and police, special forces and Shia militias, while the US Central Command said that it had carried out 35 air strikes in the Baiji area between 1 and 20 November.¹

ISIS attacked the city of Samarra, between Tikrit and Baghdad, successfully defeating the Badr Brigade Shia militia.² The Iraqi government has depended on Shia militias, heavily sponsored by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Qods Force, to defend towns between Tikrit and Baghdad, even though many of them are majority-Sunni. There were also clashes to the west of Baghdad near the town of Ramadi, where ISIS gained control of more territory.³

In much of Iraq, it is difficult to define exactly how much territory is controlled by the opposing factions because the conflict is highly mobile. The fortifications being created around Mosul suggest that this may be changing, as the areas held become more settled and boundaries become more fixed. This supports the view that, while ISIS may not want to occupy large areas of hostile Kurdish or Shia territory, expelling the group from its core areas is not likely to happen quickly.

1.2 Syria

ISIS has continued to make some progress in Syria, taking further territory. Some of the most conflicted areas in Syria are in the north, where IS has been fighting local Kurds for control, particularly along the border with Turkey and in the town of Kobane. There is also a struggle for control of Aleppo, Syria's commercial capital.

The situation in Syria is even more complicated than in Iraq. The radical group Jabhat al-Nusra, which has closer ties to al-Qaeda than does ISIS) has been competing for influence with ISIS and made significant gains recently, seizing at least 17 towns and villages between 26 October and 12 November. Despite their rivalry, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have often collaborated in fighting both Syrian government forces and secularist rebel forces of the Free Syrian Army.

The battle for Aleppo, which has been split between government and rebels since 2012, remains one of the most important struggles. The government has recently moved closer to cutting off a vital supply route for secularist rebels that control part of the city. Some suggest that US air strikes against Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS make collaboration between the two more likely. Jane's describes an ISIS-led takeover of Aleppo in the next few months as 'increasingly likely.'⁴

UN envoy Staffan de Mistura is arguing for a truce for Aleppo, to allow assistance to reach the long-suffering civilians in the city. De Mistura has warned that the fall of the city to the

¹ 'Iraqi forces relieve Baiji refinery', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 November 2014

² 'Islamic State overruns Badr Brigade position near Samarra', *Long War Journal*, 11 December 2014

³ Institute for the Study of War, [Iraq Situation Report: December 13-14, 2014](#)

⁴ 'Jihadist groups' likely co-operation in northern Syria raises risk of militant defections and encirclement of Aleppo', *Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 12 November 2014

government could result in another 400,000 refugees. Others have argued that a ceasefire would give an opportunity for government forces to re-deploy to battles in other parts of Syria.

2 Capabilities and strength

ISIS has continued to capture some military materiel from the Iraqi and Syrian governments. As its territorial expansion has slowed, this has become less important and, in any case, the group's main military capability is reported to be provided by civilian pick-up trucks with artillery mounted on the back.

After the fall of Mosul and the resultant publicity, recruitment seems to have accelerated rapidly. In September the CIA increased its estimate of ISIS strength by nearly three times as compared to a few months ago, saying that it might be as many as 31,000 people.⁵ That would make it twice the size of Kuwait's armed forces, but the numbers are very difficult to verify, especially since many fighters' adherence to one group or another is as much opportunistic as ideological, dependent on which force looks to be having the most success, access to resources and weapons. The groups are vulnerable to a turn in their fortunes and subsequent defections.

3 Effectiveness of the air strikes

The Syrian Observatory for human Rights says that air strikes in Iraqi and Syria killed 52 civilians and 785 Is fighters from the start of the campaign until mid-November.⁶ Many commentators have questioned how effective air strikes would be in the longer term, however. They have probably slowed the advance of ISIS in Iraq and helped local fighters fend off the ISIS threat to Kobane, for example, in Syria. However, most of the work has been done by boots on the ground belonging to Kurds, the Shia militias largely organised by the Iranians, and Iraqi official forces.

The air strikes have forced ISIS to adapt their tactics, however. One of their favourite tactics was to conduct lightning attack against targets using fast-moving convoys of pick-up trucks with artillery pieces mounted on the back ('technicals') and Humvees captured from the Iraqi security forces, but these convoys have been one of the main targets of the air strikes. ISIS has also had to decentralise its command centres and hide them in less obvious buildings.

With the official Iraqi security forces likely to remain in disarray for some time and Iraqi Kurdish forces being limited and fairly small, observers predict that dislodging ISIS from the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria will take time. Many also argue that a political settlement in Iraq is also required and that a change of government, while an improvement, will not on its own be enough to win over alienated Iraqi Sunnis.

If, as seems possible, airstrikes help to usher in a stalemate where neither side can finally declare victory, the political damage of air strikes would be exacerbated, causing civilian casualties and making the international coalition appear too close to the Iraqi and Syrian governments, without achieving their objective.

⁵ 'Islamic State fighter estimate triples – CIA', *BBC News Online*, 12 September 2014

⁶ 'Air strikes against IS 'not working' - is it true?', *Channel 4 News*, 29 November 2014