



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Battle of Tikrit: An Analysis



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The Tikrit offensive, carried out by a coalition of Iraqi security forces, Shia militias, Sunni tribal fighters, and the Iranian Quds force, with the support of US air strikes, resulted in a major setback for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This paper aims to analyse the offensive by studying the formations, the tactics used, the role of the media and the short and long-term implications of the offensive in the region.

### Background

The ISIS forces took over Tikrit, a predominantly Sunni town in June 2014<sup>1</sup> as they swept across large swathes of territory in Syria and Northern Iraq. This sent alarm bells ringing in Baghdad, as a handful of ISIS fighters had managed to capture large swathes of territory from the Iraqi Army which enjoyed numerical and technological superiority over the ISIS.

The previous attempts by the Iraqi forces to re-capture the city from the ISIS fighters had met with failure, resulting in heavy casualties.<sup>2</sup> The latest offensive by the Iraqi and Iranian security forces and the militias was a relatively more organised and coordinated effort.

### *Key Points*

1. Tikrit was the first major success for the coalition forces against the ISIS in Iraq. It may have an impact on the ISIS' physical presence in Iraq, the recruitment of foreign fighters as well as economic assets in the region.
2. The media played a major role for the coalition forces and was a force multiplier.
3. The role of Iran and the US in future operations cannot be neglected but, at the same time, a strong and ethno-sectarian(ly) balanced Iraqi security establishment with a 'nation- first' ethos is necessary to cope with future security threats in Iraq.
4. The ISIS' presence in Al Anbar province, west of Baghdad, poses a direct threat to the capital and should be the next objective for the Iraqi coalition forces rather than Mosul in the north.
5. Military gains must be supplemented by good governance by accommodating the Sunni and other minorities in order to prevent the resurgence of the ISIS or any other terrorist or radical organisation.
6. The Iranian influence, future role of militia formations, and extensive flow of weapons will pose serious challenges to the integrity of the country once the ISIS ceases to exist as a military threat.

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## Battle of Tikrit ...

### Units Involved

#### *Regular Iraqi Security Forces Formations*

The coalition forces had amassed a total strength of approximately 30,000 men. The exact distribution of the forces has been kept a secret for operational reasons; however, the Iraqi 66th Brigade<sup>3</sup> and certain elements of the Iraqi Special Operations Forces, trained and armed by the US forces, were also involved in attacks on crucial areas. Operations in the town of Al Alam, Saddam's palace, and the Shisheen district in the south of Tikrit saw actions by the Special Operations Forces. Besides these, several battalions of the Iraqi Federal Police were tasked with the rear area security operations in the towns and cities that fell to the coalition as the offensive progressed.<sup>4</sup> Iraqi fixed wing and rotary assets were also fielded to provide close air support to the ground forces.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Militia Forces*

The Shia militias numbering approximately 20,000 formed the backbone of the coalition forces. Fighters belonging to various groups like the Al-Badr Brigade, Kataib Hezbollah, Imam Ali Brigade, Asaib Ahl-haq, etc. together formed the Popular Mobilisation Unit (PMU).<sup>6</sup> In addition, approximately 1,000 Sunni tribesmen were also part of the coalition for the Tikrit offensive.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Iranian Special Operations Forces*

The Iranian operations were planned and executed under the command of Maj Gen Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force. Small units of the Iranian Quds Force specialising in urban combat serving as 'advisers' to the militias were also involved in planning and overseeing the offensive. Some estimates also suggest the contribution of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Ground Force by providing artillery fire as well as logistics support against the ISIS forces.<sup>8</sup>

### Operations

The operations to take back Tikrit from the ISIS were launched on March 02, 2015.<sup>9</sup> The operations can be broadly divided into three phases

- Encirclement.
- Attack on the city.
- Sanitising and area domination.

#### *Encirclement*

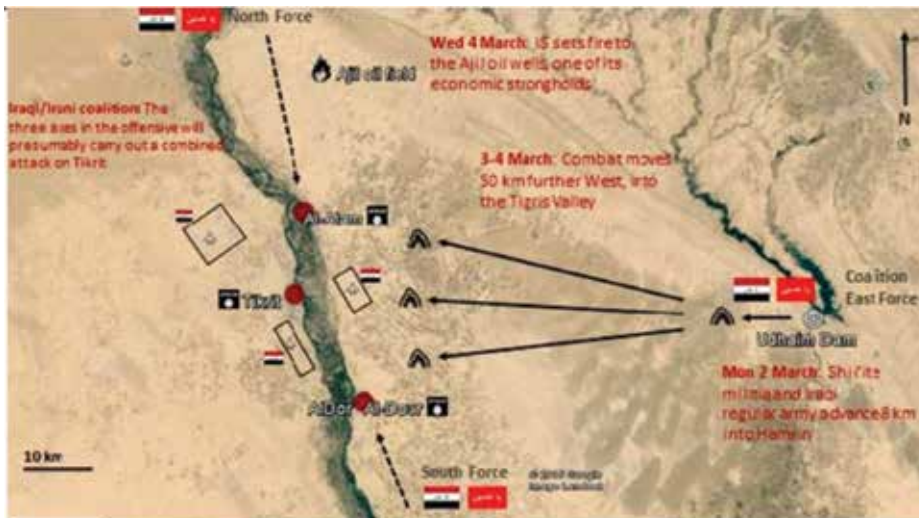
Following textbook military strategies, the first stage of the offensive involved preventing ingress into the city by the ISIS by cutting off its supplies and reinforcements. Thus, the primary goal was blocking all the routes to Tikrit and taking control of important towns nearby which, in turn, served as a launch station to conduct the offensive in the city. The offensive was launched from three sides: north, east and south. The operations were carried out in flat terrain which enabled the Iraqi forces to make good use of the overwhelming numerical and logistical superiority they enjoyed. The initial phases saw conventional manoeuvre warfare tactics as the forces eventually succeeded in laying a siege on the city in a matter of days. The well coordinated ground assaults and superior firepower provided by the artillery units as well as the Iraqi Air Force, absent in the previously failed offensive, proved crucial for quickly neutralising the ISIS resistance in the area outside Tikrit.

It can also be argued that the ISIS concentrated the main body of its fighters in the city where the terrain suited the defender. The city was under the ISIS for more than nine months and considering its strategic relevance, a major attack on it was imminent and so the defences had been planned elaborately in advance.

#### *Assault on the City*

The urban terrain, dug in and embattled forces and extensive use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) greatly nullified the numerical superiority of the coalition forces. These served as force multipliers for the ISIS, which succeeded in inflicting heavy

Fig 1



Source: K Brink, <https://twitter.com/kristianbrink/status/573644043546202113/photo/1>, accessed on March 7, 2015.

casualties on the coalition forces.<sup>10</sup> In order to prevent extensive collateral damage, the forces had to resort to close quarter engagements in built up areas involving house to house and street to street battles, denying the attacking forces an opportunity to use armour, aerial assaults or heavy artillery. Heavy machine guns were mounted on pick-up trucks or tactical vehicles to provide suppressing fire in built-up areas. Underground networks of tunnels and bunkers,<sup>11</sup> sniper fire, suicide attacks and booby trapped locations and lack of specialised troops to fight in an urban set-up all combined led to the offensive proceeding at a snail's pace.

The Iranian and Iraqi forces lacked Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) in their arsenal, leading to the request to the US for aerial intervention. It resulted in difference of opinion between the regular Iraqi forces and some of the militia leaders which led to the latter's sudden withdrawal from the field.<sup>12</sup> This, to an extent, affected the ground offensive. The US led coalition air strikes, however, proved vital as the ground assault finally gained momentum and by April 04, the Battle of Tikrit was declared a success by the government in Baghdad.<sup>13</sup>

### *Sanitising and Area Domination*

This involved clearing some of the remaining pockets of resistance and dismantling the vast numbers of

IEDs that were planted around the city, numbering several thousands. It also involved area domination exercises as well as adopting measures to prevent an ISIS counter-attack on the city.

### *Battle Assessment*

The exact number of fighters fielded by the ISIS is unknown. However, the casualties accounted for hint towards the number being approximately 2,000-3,000.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that the coalition forces overwhelmed the defenders

with a ratio of almost 10:1. The low capture/surrender rate indicates that either the ISIS fighters opted to offer a last ditch stand or bore the brunt of revenge killings at the hands of the militias and security forces for their brutality at Camp Speicher.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the coalition casualty figure is unknown. But indicators like the stalled offensive, and ill-trained militias operating in an extensively rigged urban set-up all indicate that the casualty figures may be high.

### *Media as a Force Multiplier*

While the operations were being launched on the ground and in the air over Tikrit, a parallel operation was launched on the social networking sites as well through an extensive media campaign. The Battle of Tikrit being the first major assault on the ISIS' 'Caliphate' received a lot of media attention.

### *Iranian Media*

The Iranian media had virtually 'hijacked' the operations as an Iranian led venture and Maj Gen Qasseim Suleimani, commander of the elite Iranian Quds Force was made the face of the "Iran led" operations.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, a lot of Iranian equipment fielded in the battle received sizeable media coverage, further reinforcing the deep Iranian involvement in the offensive.

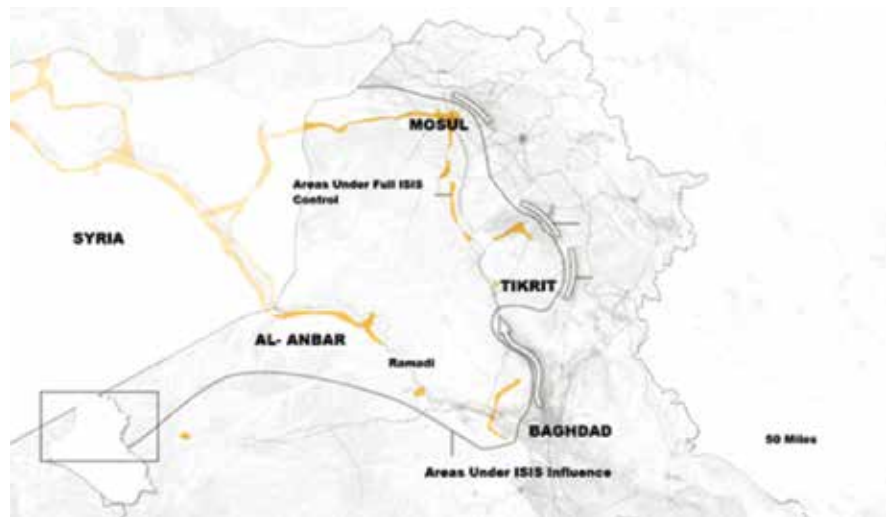
### *Iraqi Media*

Both the Iraqi regular forces as well as the militia fighters also made extensive use of the media and allowed foreign media to cover the operations in Tikrit. The Iraqi forces did not fall short in creating their own ‘rambos’ with the help of the media to attract more recruits into their ranks. The regular and Special Operations Forces of Iraq were dubbed the “Golden Brigade” all over Twitter, stating their exploits on the battlefield. Extensive psychological operations were launched via the media by the display of mutilated and dismembered bodies of ISIS fighters, extensive artillery and air assaults,<sup>17</sup> etc.

### *Immediate Consequences of the Tikrit Operations*

- The success at Tikrit has dealt a great blow to the myth of invincibility of the ISIS and with each success, the willingness of foreign fighters to join the ranks of the ISIS will certainly diminish. Oil sales were one of the main sources of ISIS funding, and an attack on Baiji refinery, a major refinery in the ISIS controlled territory, has put severe economic strain, making it difficult to fund operations.
- The success at Tikrit has been a morale booster for the operations against the ISIS in Iraq. Despite the media reports of the next target being Mosul, the largest city in the north, the best alternative is an attack on the Al Anbar province which lies to the west of Tikrit. A counter-attack on Baghdad from Anbar province will greatly stall the offensive in the north. Anbar, being one of the first Iraqi territories to fall to the ISIS, coupled with its borders with Syria, thus, presents a major threat to the capital. In addition, Anbar can be used as an additional front from which to launch an offensive into the north.

**Fig 2: ISIS Area of Influence**



Source: Institute for the Study of War, International Crisis Group.<sup>18</sup>

- Despite the success, the current offensive has highlighted many loopholes in the conduct of operations, including poor coordination among the ground forces—<sup>19</sup> supply lines and reinforcements arrived late at times, stalling the offensive.
- It also became clear that until the Iraqi Air Force becomes a competent force, the US support will remain crucial in future operations in Iraq.
- Most of the civilians had left Tikrit before the offensive, thus, making it relatively easy for the Iraqi forces to capture it. The ISIS in all certainty has learnt from its mistakes and may forcefully retain more civilians in the next target city, making it a hindrance in conducting operations.
- The ISIS offered stiff resistance in Tikrit, stretching the offensive to more than a month. This certainly has boosted the morale of the ISIS fighters as well. As the attacks in the north and west continue, the likelihood of resistance being stiffer is anybody’s guess, pointing towards the fact that operations in Iraq may continue for the next few years.

### *Long-Term Consequences*

#### *Governance and Sectarian Issues*

Military gains must be supplemented by good governance in order to prevent the resurgence of

the ISIS or any other terrorist organisation. This will require adopting measures to deal effectively with sectarian strife. The local Sunni population has been uncomfortable with the presence of Shia forces in their neighbourhood and the fear of persecution looms large. The actions of the militia fighters post the operations in the city will determine the future of the trust levels among the sectarian groups. The image of the security forces as 'liberators' or as a 'national force' and not 'Shia' or 'Sunni' must be emphasised in order to deal with such a situation.

### *Iranian Influence*

The Shia militias, belonging to various groups, formed the single largest component of the ground offensive in Tikrit and will continue to be so in the forthcoming operations in Iraq. There was a tolerance for such a formation by Baghdad as well as by the US, citing a weak Iraqi Army and refusal of the US and Western powers to deploy ground troops. Amidst all the chaos, Iran turned out to be the single largest beneficiary in the current scenario, as it was an open secret that a majority of the Shia fighters look to Iran for support. This gave Tehran unhindered influence and power in Iraq. Iran, in all likelihood, will not relinquish its power and leverage by raising a strong Iraqi Army, thereby, leaving Iraq at the mercy of Tehran for its security.

### *Role of the US*

Keeping in mind the US' aversion to getting entangled in another Middle East crisis, Washington will possibly avoid sending 'boots on the ground' and will continue to be involved in operations against the ISIS by training the Iraqi security forces, providing logistics support, intelligence inputs and carrying out air strikes in support of ground operations. This is in line with the US' strategy of "empowering partners approach".

### *Future of Militia Formations*

The major question remains about the future of the militias once the ISIS ceases to exist as a military

threat in Iraq. Will this further fuel militancy in the country? This might be even further exacerbated when the sectarian strife is factored in. It is a valid threat as Baghdad has limited control over the militias.

Iraq does not enjoy the option of absorbing these fighters in the regular army. This might lead to the Iraqi forces again becoming a predominantly Shia force,<sup>20</sup> further triggering sectarian strife in the country. The power enjoyed by various Shia militia leaders is too important for them to relinquish and they would continue to bargain hard for sizeable benefits in return for disarming.

### *Flow of Weapons*

A sizeable chunk of the advanced weaponry supplied by the West has made its way to the militias, enabling them to carry out operations against the ISIS. Amidst all the chaos, the likelihood of keeping track of the overwhelming volumes of equipment that is being flown from the US, Europe and Asia is very difficult. In the short to mid-term, in all probability, they may enable the militias to carry out insurgency in Iraq and beyond. The increasing engagements against the ISIS are providing the fighters with 'hands-on experience,' gravely hampering the fragile security of the region.

### *Conclusion*

The Battle of Tikrit was a much needed boost to the morale of the Iraqi forces which have faced some serious reversals against the ISIS since 2014. It is a major step in the larger strategy drawn up to defeat the ISIS by attacking its recruitment channels, territory and economic installations. Despite the fact that the coalition formed for the Tikrit offensive coupled with the US air campaign, attained success, a strong and balanced Iraqi security establishment is necessary in the long-term, with a 'nation first' ethos being the primary motto. Military gains ought to be supplemented by good governance, catering to the relevant demands of the Sunni minority in order to prevent the rise of extremist elements in Iraq.

## ... An Analysis

### Notes

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