

## **Airstrikes as Iraqi Military Tries to Halt ISIS Advance**

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Reports of fight-back come as Iraq's most senior Shia cleric calls for volunteers to fight insurgents.

The Iraqi armed forces say they have inflicted serious casualties on insurgents of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who have been advancing on Baghdad after their dramatic takeover of Mosul earlier this week.

Iraqiya TV said on May 14 that government airstrikes killed more than 200 insurgents who had gathered in an orchard area in Baiji, a city some 200 kilometres north of Baghdad. The same channel reported that helicopter gunships killed about 50 insurgents in Tikrit the previous afternoon. One of the dead was reportedly the son of Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, who served as vice-president under Saddam Hussein prior to the 2003 invasion.

Both Baiji and Tikrit are part of the mainly Sunni province of Salahuddin.

These reports that the armed forces had rallied after what appeared to be disarray in Mosul came as thousands of Shia volunteered to join up in response to a fatwa issued by their top spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Sistani issued his call to arms as the ISIS-led force took Mosul without a fight and stormed into Salahuddin and Kirkuk provinces.

Samarra, a major pilgrimage site for Shia Muslims, lies about 120 kilometres north of Baghdad in a part of Salahuddin province the insurgents have not reached. This major city is still under government control, and troop reinforcements are being sent in to hold off any attack.

In areas already overrun by ISIS, large numbers of people are fleeing north to the Kurdish region, fearing both the insurgents and the expected ground and aerial counterattack from government forces.

Ahmed, who asked for only his first name to be given, left Tikrit with his family on May 13. He describes the situation there as a "disaster" both because of the insurgents and because of the airstrikes.

"I saw insurgents everywhere in the city. They move around freely because of the complete absence of security forces," Ahmed said.

He added that many of the locals welcomed the incomers. He himself spoke to one of the fighters, who said he was from Saudi Arabia and urged him to remain in the town as the insurgents would defend them to the last.

Large numbers of Mosul's residents have also fled, although some like a man who gave his name as Ibrahim are sticking it out.

In Ibrahim's view, life in Mosul has actually got better as a coalition of 17 insurgent groups imposes order and organisation.

"They have prevented chaos and asked all employees to work as normal. They have removed all the blast walls," he said.

Further east, the police chief of Diyala province, Jamil al-Shimmari told Al-Sumaria TV that his men had killed a senior ISIS cleric and five assistants in an area outside the city of Baquba.

In Baquba itself, residents are watching and waiting nervously as news arrives of fighting in their province.

"We hear about clashes in Jalawlaa and Sadiyah towns, but they are very far from Baquba," city resident Omar said. "We've recently heard that Kurdish troops are completely in control of Jalawlaa."

In Diyala, the national army is being assisted by "peshmerga" forces from Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Laith Hammoudi is IWPR's editor in Iraq.**

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