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Battle for Sinjar, Iraq



TRADOC G-2 ACE Threats Integration

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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) occupation of Sinjar and the subsequent Kurdish retaking of the city by a variety of Kurdish forces.
- To report on tactics and techniques used by ISIL in the Sinjar area.
- To demonstrate the connectivity among the tactics, threat doctrine, and conditions present in other training materials such as the [Training Circular \(TC\) 7-100 series](#).

Executive Summary

- In the summer of 2014, ISIL forces pushed Peshmerga forces from key areas in Nineveh province, Iraq, threatening the government seat of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil and capturing Mosul.
- Pressure to respond to a growing humanitarian crisis, fueled by media coverage of Sinjar's Yazidis fleeing ISIL violence, led to calls for an international response that included US and allied bombing of ISIL positions.
- ISIL mitigated the effects of bombing by building a sophisticated network of tunnels that connected key buildings.
- ISIL used marksmen, snipers, ambushes, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombers to slow the Kurdish advance, but eventually conserved most of its force by exfiltrating the area and not engaging in a decisive battle.
- In November 2015, an alliance of Kurdish factions resulted in recapturing ISIL-held territory in Nineveh province—including Sinjar, which sits on ISIL's Highway 47 supply route connecting ISIL-held Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul Iraq.
- While successful in Sinjar, the alliance of the KRG's Peshmerga, Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), the Syrian Popular Protection Unit (YPG), and Yazidi militias (YBS) is fraught with ISIL-exploitable fault lines.

This (U) **Threat Action Report (TAR)** was produced in accordance with (U) *Intelligence Community Directive Number 203: Analytical Standards* (Effective: Jan 2015). This TAR was coordinated with:

- HQDA DCS G-2—Major Adam Clements
- FMSO—Mr. Tom Wilhelm
- Asymmetric Warfare Group— SFC Todd Agrimon

Comments and feedback are welcome.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon S. Cleaves".

Jon S. Cleaves
Director, ACE Threats Integration

Cover photo: [Sinjar Mountains](#).

Threat Action Report



Introduction

This Tactical Action Report (TAR) provides information on the capture and subsequent recapture of Sinjar, a town at the foot of the Sinjar Mountains. The Nineveh Offensive, of which Sinjar was a key target, led to the capture of a large part of northern Iraq and included the occupation of Mosul. ISIL pushed Peshmerga forces from the area and threatened Erbil, the government seat of the KRG in 2014. A growing humanitarian crisis developed as ISIL began purging villages in the Sinjar area of the minority group known as Yazidis. Thousands were killed, kidnapped, or forced to flee their homes. Many Yazidis retreated to the Sinjar Mountains where they were besieged by ISIL fighters. These circumstances led to President Barack Obama ordering air strikes to protect Erbil, where US military advisors were headquartered, and to relieve the displaced Yazidi civilians. Over a year later Peshmerga fighters, with the help of other Kurdish factions, pushed ISIL forces out of Sinjar and other surrounding areas and severed a key supply route connecting ISIL-held Raqqa, Syria, with Mosul, Iraq.

Operational Environment Background—Sinjar

Sinjar¹ is a strategically-located Iraqi town in northwestern Nineveh province. It lies along a major ISIL east-west supply route that connects Mosul in Iraq with Raqqa in Syria—two important ISIL-held cities. Sinjar is approximately 52 km east of the Syrian border and 117 km west of Mosul. It is positioned at the foot of the Sinjar Mountains, an east-west mountain range rising 1,463 m above the surrounding alluvial steppe plains.

Sinjar is populated primarily by a Kurdish religious minority called the Yazidis. The Yazidis are particularly vulnerable to violence and persecution, having been the object of hatred for centuries because of their religious practices. Yazidis are ethnically Kurdish, but their religion combines elements of Islam, ancient Persian Zoroastrianism, and Eastern Mediterranean Mithraism. While Yazidis are monotheists, they believe in a fallen angel who serves as an intermediary between God and man. To Muslims, this intermediary resembles the Quranic devil. Yazidis are, therefore, considered devil worshippers by their Muslim neighbors. With isolated geography and a history of persecution, the Yazidis rarely intermarry and do not accept converts, further distinguishing themselves.¹

In June 2014, ISIL began an offensive in Nineveh province and captured Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, that same month.² This ISIL victory gave momentum to a push throughout Kurdish Peshmerga-held Nineveh province. On 1 August 2014, ISIL attacked a Peshmerga unit in the town of Zumar, a small Kurdish-majority outpost 40 km northwest of Mosul. ISIL killed 14 Peshmerga soldiers, while the group sustained 100 casualties and 38 members were taken prisoner in the attack.³ On 2–3 August, in a serious setback for Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers, ISIL succeeded in taking three strategic towns: Zumar, Wana, and Sinjar. Zumar is an oil-rich area that also lies on a road leading to Syria; Wana is a town on the Tigris river within striking distance of the Mosul dam; and Sinjar is a town on a major supply line that connects ISIL-held Mosul in Iraq with ISIL-held Raqqa in Syria. The towns form a triangle west from Mosul to the borders of Syria and Turkey. The capture of these towns gave ISIL both momentum and proximity to

¹ Sinjar is the Arabic name; however, the Kurdish *Shingal* is also seen in some writings.

Threat Action Report



seriously threaten those protecting the Mosul dam, which was temporarily captured and then lost by ISIL between 7–18 August.⁴

ISIL forces continued throughout August 2014 to push Kurdish Peshmerga forces from positions in Nineveh province. On 6 August, ISIL moved to within 49 km of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish autonomous region, threatening US military and civilian personnel. On 8 August, the US began conducting airstrikes against ISIL positions, beginning around Erbil, to stop ISIL's advance on that city.⁵ Starting on 9 August, the US began airstrikes around the Sinjar Mountains to relieve Yazidis and others trapped by ISIL.⁶

ISIL successes created a humanitarian crisis, with thousands displaced from their homes, kidnapped, injured, and killed by ISIL fighters. In the Sinjar area, ISIL gunned down 5,000 Yazidi men in a series of massacres, detained over 5,000 Yazidi women to be sold into slavery or given to jihadists as wives and sex slaves, and caused as many as 200,000 civilians to flee, 50,000 of whom retreated into the besieged Sinjar Mountains. Pictures of Yazidis surrounded and trapped by ISIL on Mount Sinjar put increasing international pressure on the US administration to act and on Peshmerga forces—who were stinging from multiple defeats at the hands of ISIL—to reclaim lost territory.⁷

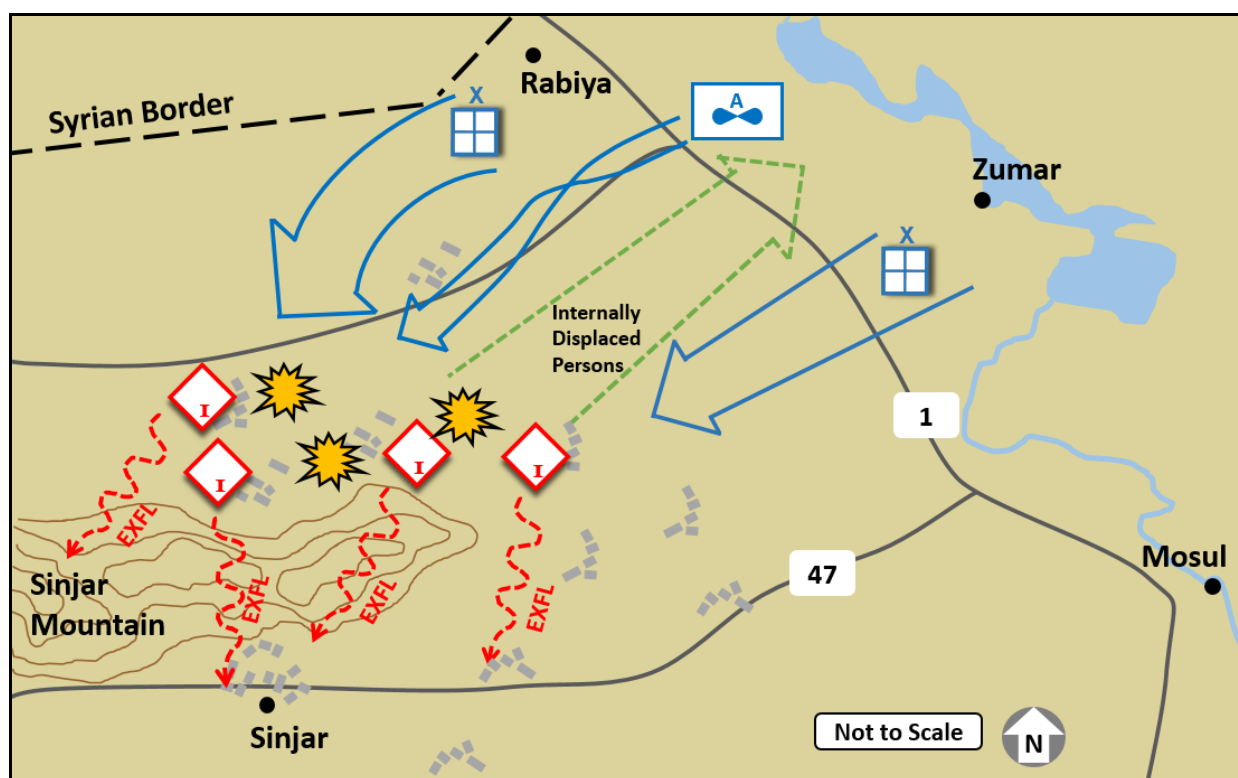


Figure 1. Peshmerga offensive against ISIL

By October 2014, Peshmerga forces began winning back territory lost in the ISIL offensive. Kurdish Peshmerga attention then turned to rescuing the Yazidis trapped in the Sinjar area. The Kurdish offensive against ISIL began with US air strikes. Launching from the recaptured cities of Rabiya and



Zumar, 8,000 Kurdish fighters opened a corridor from Mount Sinjar northeast into Kurdish-controlled areas. This broke the siege, but still left Sinjar in the hands of ISIL. Kurdish fighters were able to capture part of Sinjar, but settled into a stalemate with ISIL fighters in the city.⁸

ISIL encountered little resistance from Kurdish Peshmerga forces when it attacked Sinjar and the surrounding area in August 2014. It immediately took control of the population. Residents were told to either convert or be killed. While most Sinjar residents escaped, evidence of the extreme brutality brought to bear on those who remained has been found in mass graves uncovered after Kurdish soldiers recaptured the city. Forensic evidence indicates ISIL adherents executed hundreds of Yazidis and buried them in mass graves.⁹ The massacres served to both reduce the number of those not willing to adhere to ISIL's interpretation of Islam and, through fear, increased compliance in those who remained.

Soon after ISIL took control of the city of Sinjar, US air strikes began to attack its positions. ISIL responded to this by building a network of tunnels that connected houses. These tunnels provided protection for fighters and served as a means of subterranean command and control. The sandbagged tunnels, about the height of a person, contained ammunition, prescription drugs, blankets, electrical wires leading to fans and lights, and other supplies. In total, there were at least 30–40 tunnels.¹⁰

During the next fifteen months, ISIL emptied the city of most of its inhabitants and prepared battle positions in anticipation of an inevitable major Kurdish attack to retake the city. Kurdish forces entered and captured parts of Sinjar, but were unable to gain complete control. From positions within the city,



Figure 2. [ISIL tunnels in Sinjar](#) (video link)

ISIL utilized marksmen, small sniper teams, IEDs, rocket propelled grenade launchers, and mortars to keep the Kurdish soldiers at bay. Repeated air attacks by the US-led coalition pummeled the city, but ISIL still prevented the Kurdish fighters from declaring victory in Sinjar.¹¹

Kurdish Coalition Vulnerability

While successful in Sinjar, the coalition that defeated ISIL is an exploitable vulnerability. This coalition included Kurdish forces from the Peshmerga, PKK, YPG, and YBS. The major fault line lies between the PKK and its growing allies and the KRG with its Peshmerga fighters and its allies. The KRG is particularly

Threat Action Report



concerned about other Kurdish groups permanently occupying areas around Sinjar. Questions of which group will administer the captured area, mistrust, and historical disagreements have potential for eruption.

Peshmerga forces are the military arm of the KRG. Of the groups who fought to retake Sinjar, the Peshmerga was the largest and best-resourced. The KRG considers Nineveh province part of its territory.¹² It has consistently played down the role of other participants, to the annoyance of those who continued to fight ISIL after the Peshmerga was forced out of the area.¹³

The major rival to the Peshmerga forces is the PKK. Formed in the 1970s, the PKK is an armed separatist group fighting to gain Kurdish independence from Turkey. Designated by the US as an international terrorist organization, it cannot coordinate directly with the US and needed to rely on passing targets and friendly position coordinates through the Peshmerga during the Sinjar operations. The PKK maintained a forward base at a northern entry point to the city at the foot of Mount Sinjar during the months preceding the final attack.¹⁴

A smaller group allied with the PKK is the Syrian YPG, the military arm of the Democratic Union Party. The YPG has emerged from the Syrian civil war with fighting tactics and techniques that allow it to perform well against ISIL. Relying on speed, stealth, and surprise, the YPG has been able to quickly redirect attacks to outflank and ambush its enemy. The YPG has trained over 1,000 Yazidis in one-week courses, giving it influence and loyalty in areas where its fighters are now occupying Iraqi ground previously held by Peshmerga forces. Iraqi Kurds view any permanent occupation by the YPG as a violation of Kurdish sovereignty.¹⁵

The Yazidis formed the Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS) when ISIL forced them out of their city. Allied primarily with the PKK and the YPG, the YBS remained after the Peshmerga left Sinjar in the summer of 2014. The YBS conducted urban attacks in the city and protected displaced Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountain. Increased Yazidi confidence in its own protection forces after the military training, experience, and alliances developed with other Kurdish groups during the Sinjar battles need to be factored into any future KRG dealings with the Yazidis. The Yazidis blamed, in part, the Peshmerga's retreat from Sinjar in 2014 for the ISIL atrocities that occurred in its absence. This has left the Yazidis with anger toward and mistrust of the Peshmerga fighters.¹⁶

Tactical Action

The offensive to take Sinjar back began at dawn on Thursday 5 November 2015 on three fronts. US-led coalition air attacks preceded the Kurdish ground attack. A coalition of PKK, YPG, YBS, and Peshmerga fighters attacked south into Sinjar. Opening with a rocket attack, the Kurdish forces moved south from the mountain to reinforce fighters already in the city. Movement through the city was slow and difficult due to ISIL marksmen, snipers, and suicide and planted IEDs. Most of the ISIL fighters had already left the city under the heavy bombardment, leaving behind small sniper teams. ISIL snipers, having been in the city for months, had the advantage of knowledge of the terrain, prepared positions, tunnels, underground shelters, and the element of surprise.¹⁷

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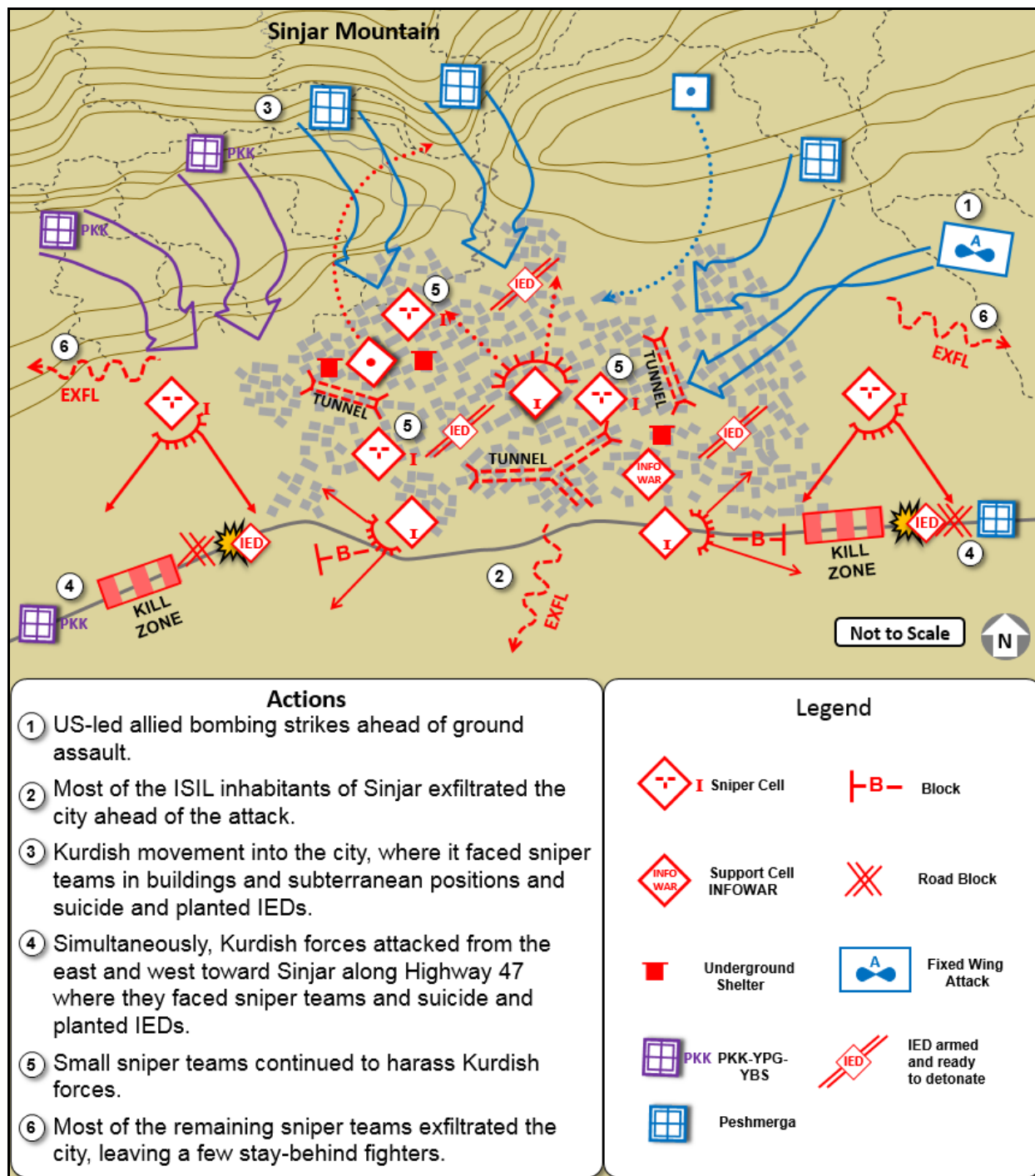


Figure 3. Battle for Sinjar

Threat Action Report



While some Kurdish fighters attacked from the north, others moved from the east and the west of Sinjar to cut off ISIL's supply line along highway 47 between Mosul and Raqqa. Fighters, mostly PKK, attacked from the west while a predominately Peshmerga force attacked from the east. ISIL utilized practiced techniques in attempting to prevent its supply line from being cut and its units surrounded. ISIL used marksmen, snipers, ambushes,



Figure 4. [Peshmerga attack from East](#) (video link)

IEDs, and suicide bombers along the road and in the city to block movement. The coalition force eventually cleared the road after a few days of slow and cautious movement. Most of the ISIL fighters



Figure 5. [View of the City of Sinjar](#) (video link)

had already exfiltrated from the area as the Kurdish forces made gains. A few snipers stayed behind, as the Kurds began to claim victory, to harass and prevent complete Kurdish freedom of movement. Additionally, clearing the city of booby-traps and other kinds of IEDs slowed free movement within the city. In one mass grave, for example, ISIL rigged bodies to explode when moved.¹⁸

Analytical Assessment

- In the summer of 2014, the ISIL Nineveh Offensive resulted in the capture of a large swathe of northern Iraq, to include still-held Mosul, embarrassing both the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga.
- The abandonment of the Sinjar area in 2014 under ISIL pressure created a lingering Yazidi distrust of the Peshmerga. During the Peshmerga absence in Sinjar, the Yazidis developed closer alliances with the PKK and YPG. This will complicate future relationships between the KRG and returning Yazidis.



- Closing the Highway 47 supply line between Mosul and Raqqa will not completely cut off routes between those cities, but will make it more expensive and difficult to move personnel and supplies between the two cities.
- Kurdish factional solidarity combined with overwhelming numbers defeated ISIL in Sinjar and the surrounding area.
- Adaptive techniques such as tunnels allowed ISIL to maintain command and control and protect its forces from the effects of air attacks.
- Utilizing successful INFOWAR techniques, snipers, marksmen, and IEDs, ISIL maintained control of a portion of the city for 15 months and slowed the advance of Kurdish forces in the final attack, all at a small cost compared to its opposition.
- ISIL leadership concluded growing Kurdish forces would eventually overwhelm the group and withdrew most of its forces before the combined Kurdish attacks. With small units and teams, ISIL bogged down Kurdish attackers, eventually ceding control of a destroyed town.

TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

- ISIL uses violence against indigenous populations to both further its interpretive narrative of strict adherence to and protector of Islamic truth, and as a means of creating compliance through fear. The result is depopulation of whole towns and creation of humanitarian crises from fleeing, displaced people. A humanitarian crisis diverts attention and resources away from the hybrid threat, provides the enemy with human shield opportunities, and creates internal and external political and humanitarian pressures on its enemies.
- Air strikes significantly limited ISIL's ability to maneuver and were critical to Kurdish success in regaining lost territory from ISIL. ISIL responded to this new threat by going underground in Sinjar. Building a sophisticated network of tunnels that connected key buildings and provisioning those tunnels with supplies allowed the group to mitigate some of the effects of the bombing. Given time, the hybrid threat will continue to improve its subterranean expertise and find other ways to mitigate the effects of superior technology.
- ISIL used marksmen and sniper teams effectively in the Sinjar urban environment as described in [TC 7-100.2](#) to create casualties; impede movement; instill fear; influence enemy decisions, actions, tactics, and techniques; lower morale; damage or destroy materiel; and disrupt enemy tempo.¹⁹
- ISIL uses suicide and planted IEDs to impede progress, kill, and instill fear in its enemy.
- ISIL may choose to conserve most of its force by exfiltrating an area and not engage in a decisive battle when presented with overwhelming force.

Related Products

Follow these links to view related products:

- [Threat Tactics Report: ISIL](#)
- [Threat Tactics Report: Syria](#)
- [Red Diamond—Threat Tactics Report: ISIL Update](#)
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Threat Action Report



- [Red Diamond—HAMAS' Tunnel Vision: Recent Experiences in Gaza](#)
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- [Red Diamond—ISIL's Use of Social Media](#)
- [Red Diamond—ISIL Attack on the Tabqa Airbase](#)

See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy tactics and techniques to the nature and analysis of various threat actors.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).

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POC

Author

Rick Burns
913-684-7897 (COMM)
552-7897 (DSN)

TRADOC G-2 Analysis and Control Element Threats Integration (ACE-TI)
803 Harrison Drive, BLDG 467
Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027

Jon Cleaves, ACE-TI Director
Jennifer Dunn, ACE-TI Deputy Director
Jon Moilanen, ACE-TI Operations

Note: Not all references listed in this publication are readily available to the public; some require a government common access card (CAC) to view.

Figure Credits

Figure 1. Peshmerga offensive against ISIL in Nineveh province. Source: ACE Threats Integration. 2016.

Figure 2. ISIL tunnels in Sinjar. Source: [YouTube](#). 25 November 2015.

Figure 3. Battle for Sinjar. Source: ACE Threats Integration. 2016.

Figure 4. Peshmerga Sinjar attack from the East. Source: [YouTube](#). 19 November 2015.

Figure 5. View of the city of Sinjar. Source: [YouTube](#). 16 June 2015.

Threat Action Report



Endnotes

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- ¹³ Mohammed A. Salih. [“With the Islamic State Gone from Sinjar, Kurdish Groups Battle for Control.”](#) Al Monitor. 10 December 2015.
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