Why the Islamic State Is Losing

by **Michael Knights (/experts/michael-knights)**

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The pundits have it wrong -- the group's move toward Baghdad is a sign of desperation.

Many in the world media seem to be concluding, with alarm, that the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is at the gates of Baghdad. ISIL has made dramatic gains in Anbar province, Iraq's perennially troubled "wild west," and Anbar is next to Baghdad. Ergo, Baghdad must be next to fall. It was probably no accident that, on Tuesday, President Obama convened an urgent conference of defense officials from 21 countries at Andrews Air Force Base to coordinate strategies and tactics.

Everyone should calm down. The reality is that ISIL and its forerunners have always been in Baghdad. The Iraqi capital and its rural exurbs – the "Baghdad belts" -- have been a desperate battleground since 2003.

True, ISIL has been posing much more of a direct threat to Baghdad since the beginning of 2014, when the movement took control of Fallujah, a city of 300,000 that is located just 25 miles west of Baghdad International Airport. But Baghdad won't fall to cascading panic the way that Mosul did in June 2014, no matter how many towns and cities ISIL overruns in the Euphrates River Valley to the northwest of the capital.

Here's why. Mosul was a predominately Sunni city of one million people where the Shia-led security forces were despised and where the bulk of Iraq's security forces were hundreds of miles away. Baghdad is a predominately Shia city of more than seven million and the hub of a gargantuan popular mobilization of Shia militias and regular security forces. Mao Zedong said that the guerrilla "must swim among the people as the fish swims in the sea," but ISIL would be swimming with piranhas if it tried to recreate Mosul in Baghdad.

In truth, the threat posed to Baghdad this autumn is emerging less because ISIL is winning the war in Iraq and more because it might be slowly but steadily losing it. All across north-central Iraq, ISIL is being challenged by joint forces comprised of Sunni tribes, Shia militias, Iraqi soldiers, Iranian advisors and U.S. airpower. ISIL is struggling to

maintain its grip on this battlefield of strange bedfellows, and it could be moving on Baghdad now out of a desperate need for a big victory more than anything else. Even as ISIL appears to be making progress in marginal places like Kobane, the Syrian Kurdish border town, inside Iraq the group has been faltering and needs a new front to rejuvenate its campaign.

Among the less-noted victories against ISIL recently: In early October, Kurdish peshmerga forces and local Sunni tribesmen of the Shammar confederation -- usually bitter rivals -- cooperated in a three-day blitzkrieg that recaptured the vital Rabiya border crossing that links the ISIL territories in Iraq and Syria. In Dhuluiya, 45 miles north of Baghdad, Sunni tribesmen of the Jabouri confederation are pushing ISIL back from their lands in collaboration with both Iraqi Army forces and, stunningly, Iranian-backed Shia militiamen from the Kataib Hezbollah movement.

Near Kirkuk, the Obeidi confederation, another conglomeration of Sunni tribes, is starting to cooperate with Shia Turkmen tribes and Kurdish security forces against ISIL. For the first time since June, the Iraqi government is able to drive tanks and supply columns all the way from Baghdad to Kirkuk, allowing the security forces to open a new front on ISIL's eastern flank.

This is not to say that ISIL is just rolling over. The Islamic State certainly landed some good punches in early October, overrunning a handful of small garrisons in Anbar, capturing parts of the 100,000-strong city of Hit and driving security forces out of much of Ramadi city, Anbar's provincial capital.

But overall, ISIL's reaction to Sunni tribal uprisings -- suicide bombings and assassinations against the tribes -- will only reinforce tribal resolve. ISIL still needs to relieve pressure on its northern Iraqi territories and open a new front.

Which is where Baghdad comes in. Regardless of what happens in Anbar, ISIL needs to punch back somewhere vital, somewhere sensitive, if it is to regain the initiative in Iraq. Iraq-watchers have been waiting for an ISIL thrust against Baghdad for many months, and many are scratching their heads as to why it has not landed yet.

It is not for lack of opportunity. ISIL was well-established in the inner suburbs of Baghdad even before June 2014: With great fanfare, Islamic State militants held a 75-vehicle parade in Abu Ghraib, just 15 miles from the U.S. Embassy, in May. Terrifyingly, there's little to prevent missile attacks closing down Baghdad's sole international airport. So what is ISIL waiting for?

They cannot capture the Shia metropolis of Baghdad outright and have been putting their effort into consolidating control of Sunni areas in northern and western Iraq. As counterterrorism analyst Daveed Gartenstein-Ross adroitly notes, they also seem to have become fixated on Kobane, perhaps at the expense of higher-priority missions in Iraq and Syria.

One option could be an uprising in the Sunni neighbourhoods of west Baghdad, areas that are open to the ISIL-dominated Jazeera desert to the northwest of Baghdad. The uprising need not succeed or get much backing from Baghdad's Sunnis: ISIL's gambit would rely upon sparking sectarian cleansing by Shia militias, thus dragging all Sunni men in Baghdad into the fight.

ISIL could also try a spectacular terrorist attack like its July 22, 2013, assault on the heavily defended Abu Ghraib prison, when 800 inmates were freed. Baghdad International Airport (BIAP), nestled in vulnerable west Baghdad and adjacent to insurgent-infested farmlands, would be a prime target. On Oct. 12, Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, told ABC's *This Week* that Apache gunships flew strike missions from the airport in early October because ISIL had come "within 20 or 25 kilometers of BIAP" and had "a straight shot to the airport."

But most likely, ISIL is simply readying for its annual killing spree against Shia pilgrims during the Ashura and Arbaeen religious festivals. In the week before Ashura begins on Nov. 3, Baghdad will swell with millions of pilgrims

making their way to Karbala, just southwest of the capital. Many of these pilgrims make the 50-mile walk from Baghdad to Karbala, which passes within seven miles of Jurf as-Sakr, a heavily-contested ISIL stronghold to the south of Baghdad. We can expect mortar attacks, car bombings and suicide-vest detonations inside the crowds.

This is the real meaning of ISIL being at the gates of Baghdad -- that the movement is poised perilously close to key religious and transportation hubs, and may be intent on mounting sectarian outrages at the most sensitive moment of the year for the Shia. The Iraqi security forces view Ashura and Arbaeen as an annual trial -- and in recent years they have achieved significant success in limiting the mayhem caused by ISIL and its forerunners.

This year the Iraqi military and allied Shia militias have been fighting hard, with U.S. air support, to clear ISIL back from the pilgrim routes between Baghdad and Karbala -- and with some success. Protecting the pilgrims and blunting ISIL's gambits in Baghdad will be the next great test for Iraq's recovering security forces -- because the enemy is truly at the gates of the Shia world.

Michael Knights, a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute, regularly travels to Iraq and has worked in all of the country's provinces. ❖

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