



Since the publication of ISW's last sanctuary map on July 1st, 2016, ISIS militants lost control of the city of Manbij and the town of Al-Rai in Northern Aleppo Province in a series of victories for the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces recaptured Manbij from ISIS militants on August 15 after over two months of heavy clashes. The protracted fight for the city demonstrates that ISIS retains that capability to mount a stiff defense of urban terrain that it considers to be of strategic importance, suggesting that coalition forces will face similar tough fights for the strongholds of Ar-Raqqa City in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. ISIS also lost the town of Al-Rai on the Syrian-Turkish border to opposition forces backed by Turkey and the U.S. on August 17, severing a key cross-border smuggling route for fighters and supplies. The loss of border access through Manbij and Al-Rai will disrupt the ability of ISIS to reinforce its core terrain or dispatch cells to conduct external attacks. ISIS may respond to these losses by seeking to secure cross-border access in other regions, including Lebanon and Western Syria. For example, ISIS conducted an SVEST targeting opposition forces at the Atmeh Border Crossing in Idlib Province on the Syrian-Turkish Border on August 14. ISIS could also take advantage of ongoing infighting between pro-regime forces and the Syrian Kurdish YPG to mount local counterattacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces in Northern Syria. Meanwhile, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continued to set conditions for future operations to retake Mosul. The ISF recaptured the Qayyarah Airfield in Southern Ninewah Province on July 9. The U.S. later announced the deployment of over 500 personnel to the strategic installation to serve as a staging ground for an offensive on Mosul. The ISF also severed the ground line of communication between the ISIS-held towns of Shirqat and Qayyarah in an operation from July 2 - 13 and recaptured the Waleed Border Crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi Border in a separate operation on August 3. ISIS nonetheless retains limited freedom of movement in both areas and will likely conduct local counterattacks to pressure its opponents, as demonstrated by an attack on the Waleed Border Crossing on August 8 - 9. ISIS may also mount a resurgence in previously-cleared areas, in particular Southern Baghdad and the Southern Provinces.