

US warplanes attack targets in center of Tikrit

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US warplanes began air strikes on Islamic State positions in the center of Tikrit Wednesday night, the first involvement of US forces in the bloody fighting in that Iraqi city, the hometown of the late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Military sources said at least 180 targets were struck in one of the most ferocious bombardments since the US resumed military operations in Iraq last August. Local Iraqi officials said dozens of ISIS fighters were killed Wednesday night, a significant proportion of those who are now surrounded and staging a last-ditch defense in Tikrit.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi formally requested the US intervention Wednesday morning, overriding objections from other Iraqi officials, including the leaders of Shiite militia forces allied with Iran, who have borne the brunt of the ground fighting around Tikrit.

US President Barack Obama agreed to the request, and the air strikes began within hours. The speed of the response indicates that the Pentagon had been planning attacks on Tikrit for some time, since the Iraqi forces became bogged down there earlier this month.

The political preparation for the air strikes also began days earlier, with a steady drumbeat of US pressure on the Iraqi government to distance itself from Iran, which played the major role in organizing and leading the attack on Tikrit. A “senior Obama administration official” told the *Washington Post* that Iraq was the scene of a “struggle between the United States and Iran for strategic influence and lasting influence.”

Qassem Suleiman, head of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Iran’s chief of operations in the Iraq-Syria region, left Tikrit Tuesday. This was the day when US air reconnaissance flights began over the city and one day before the beginning of

actual air strikes.

Military operations against Tikrit, under control by ISIS for the past nine months, began March 1, when more than 25,000 troops, the vast majority of them Shiite militia fighters, converged on the city from the north, east and south.

In only ten days, the flanking columns had completely surrounded the city and captured all its suburbs, trapping what was believed to be a few hundred ISIS fighters dug in at Saddam Hussein’s presidential palace and a few other locations in the center of the city.

There, however, the offensive stalled, in the face of suicidal resistance and tens of thousands of mines and improvised explosive devices. Casualties among the Iraqi forces mounted, and there was open conflict between Shiite militia leaders and the Abadi government over whether to seek American air strikes to incinerate the last remnants of ISIS.

Jassem Atiya, vice president of the governing council of Salahuddin province, which includes Tikrit, said that Prime Minister Abadi had notified the Shiite militias in writing that he was approving the US air strikes despite their objections. Atiya told the *Post* that Abadi gave the order, “because the Tikrit battle needed to be completed so that security forces could move on to Anbar and Mosul,” the main centers of ISIS in Iraq.

US military spokesmen presented the air strikes as “direct support to Iraqi Security Forces conducting operations to expel ISIL from the city.” However, press accounts of the fighting gave the breakdown of the pro-Baghdad forces as 20,000 Shiite militiamen, 1,000 Sunni tribal fighters, and only 4,000 Iraqi Army troops.

Lt. Gen. James L. Terry, commander of US military operations against ISIS, said the attacks “will further enable Iraqi forces under Iraqi command to maneuver

and defeat [ISIS] in the vicinity of Tikrit” and were coordinated with “renewed efforts on the ground.”

The US attacks on Wednesday night were followed by far more limited Iraqi air strikes during the day Thursday, in what was expected to be a series of alternating day-night raids. At least five Russian-built Iraqi Sukhoi-25 fighter-bombers carried out four strikes each on targets in Tikrit, according to Gen. Anwer Hamid, commander of the Iraqi Air Force.

Abadi went on national television Wednesday night to announce that the ground offensive in Tikrit would resume, saying the city’s “hour of salvation” had come. He did not mention the US air strikes, but thanked both the US and Iran indirectly, saying Iraq had “support from friendly countries and the international coalition.”

There is considerable evidence that US officials welcomed the transformation of the Tikrit offensive into a bloody morass, since a speedy victory would have redounded to the credit of Iran, which supplied weapons, intelligence and military advice to the Iraqi forces.

The *Washington Post* expressed this view openly, in an editorial March 22, headlined, “The militia menace in Iraq,” which described the stalemate in Tikrit as “half-bad news,” because it was a setback for Iran’s allies in Iraq. The editorial continued, “the checking of the Shiite militias in their attempt to overrun a Sunni territory might ultimately have some positive results.”



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