
IRAQ SAYS AIR FORCE HAS HIT DOZENS OF IS FIGHTERS NEAR SYRIA BORDER

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Iraq's Joint Operations Command said on Thursday that Iraqi aircraft struck dozens of mostly foreign fighters from the Islamic State group near the border with Syria the previous day.

It confirmed that deadly strikes in the Al-Qaim area in the west of the country were carried out by the Iraqi air force but described allegations by officials that dozens of civilians were killed as IS propaganda.

The JOC issued a statement confirming that the Iraqi air force had carried out two strikes in the militant-held Al-Qaim area on Wednesday, saying they targeted hideouts used by IS members.

It said the first one was conducted at 0900 GMT and struck a two-storey building housing 25 mostly foreign would-be suicide bombers, led by a fighter it named as Abu Maysar al-Kawkazi, from the Caucasus.

It said another strike was carried out during a second mission at 0955 GMT, hitting a building hosting 30 to 40 IS fighters, also mostly foreigners.

Iraqi officials, including parliament speaker Salim al-Juburi, had said on Wednesday that dozens of civilians were killed or wounded in a strike on a market area in Al-Qaim.

They blamed the government and demanded an investigation.

The JOC denied striking a market area and said a blast there was caused by a car bomb that either went off accidentally or was detonated by IS for propaganda purposes.

Amaq, an IS propaganda tool, released a video late on Wednesday showing scenes of chaos in a market area, with bodies strewn across a street and wounded being treated.

Iraqi troops retreat after Mosul hospital battle

Meanwhile, Iraqi troops who seized a hospital deep inside Mosul believed to be used as an IS military base retreated after a fierce counter-attack, giving up some of their biggest gains in a hard-fought seven-week campaign to recapture the city.

The soldiers seized Salam hospital, less than a mile (1.5 km) from the Tigris river running through central Mosul, on Tuesday but pulled back the next day after they were hit by six suicide car bombs and "heavy enemy fire", according to a statement by the US-led coalition supporting Iraqi forces.

Coalition warplanes, at Iraq's request, also struck a building inside the hospital complex from which the militants were firing machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, it said.

Tuesday's rapid advance into the Wahda neighbourhood where the hospital is located marked a change of tactics after a month of gruelling fighting in east Mosul, in which the army has sought to capture and clear neighbourhoods block by block.

The soldiers are part of a US-backed 100,000-strong coalition of Iraqi forces including the army, federal police, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and mainly Shia Popular Mobilisation Forces battling to crush IS in Mosul.

Defeating the militants in their Iraq stronghold would mark a major step in rolling back the caliphate declared by the militants in parts of Syria and Iraq when they took over Mosul in mid-2014.

But with two years to dig themselves into northern Iraq's largest city, retreating fighters have waged a lethal defence, deploying hundreds of suicide car bombers, mortar barrages and snipers against the advancing soldiers and exploiting a network of tunnels to ambush them in residential areas.

Iraqi military spokesmen have said little about the fighting around the hospital, stressing instead gains they said were being made in other parts of east Mosul, including the Ilam neighbourhood a few districts northeast.

Kaynak/Source: