

## **Backed By U.S. Airstrikes, Kurds Reverse an ISIS Gain**

*The New York Times*

December 19, 2014

BAGHDAD — Kurdish forces, backed by a surge of American airstrikes in recent days, recaptured a large swath of territory from Islamic State militants on Thursday, opening a path from the autonomous Kurdish region to Mount Sinjar in the west, near the Syrian border.

The two-day offensive, which involved 8,000 fighters, known as pesh merga, was the largest one to date in the war against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and ISIL, according to Kurdish officials. It was also a successful demonstration of President Obama's strategy for battling the extremist group: American air power combined with local forces doing the fighting on the ground.

A statement released Thursday night by the office of Masrour Barzani, the head of the Kurdistan Regional Security Council, called the operation "the single biggest military offensive against ISIS, and the most successful."

In August, a siege of Mount Sinjar, where thousands of people from the Yazidi religious minority were stranded and at risk of being slaughtered by the Islamic State, prompted Mr. Obama to begin the air campaign against ISIS. The airstrikes, as well as humanitarian aid drops, helped lift the siege, and thousands of Yazidis escaped the mountain, some to Kurdish areas of Syria.

But more recently, Kurdish officials said, some of those refugees had been pushed out of Syria by ISIS and were again stranded in the area, although Kurdish forces and other militias have maintained control of the mountain.

The offensive was backed by 53 airstrikes from the American-led coalition, Lt. Gen. James L. Terry, the overall commander of the anti-ISIS campaign, who is based in Kuwait, told Pentagon reporters in a teleconference Thursday. The strikes near Sinjar have destroyed ISIS storage units, bulldozers, guard towers, vehicles and three bridges, according to the Pentagon. Some of the strikes were conducted by low-flying A-10 attack jets, which were recently shifted from Afghanistan and are typically used to target tanks and other armored vehicles.

"We will relentlessly pursue Daesh in order to degrade and destroy its capabilities and defeat their efforts," he said, referring to ISIS by an Arabic acronym.

In a separate statement, the Pentagon spokesman, Rear Adm. John F. Kirby, confirmed that in the last few weeks, the international airstrike campaign had also killed several senior or midlevel leaders within ISIS. He would not give details about their identities or roles within ISIS other than to say that their deaths hurt the group's command capabilities.

Referring to the Kurdish offensive near Sinjar, he said, “Combined efforts like these are having a significant effect on Daesh’s ability to command and control, to resupply, and to conduct maneuvering.”

The Obama administration’s strategy of combining American air power with local ground forces has worked well in northern Iraq, partnering with the Kurds. But lately, it has been less successful in other areas of the country where the embattled Iraqi Army is struggling to push back against ISIS. The United States has about 1,700 troops here to train Iraqi forces, and that figure is expected to rise to roughly 3,000.

While the Iraqi Army, along with Shiite militias, has racked up some victories — including in Jurf al-Sakr, south of Baghdad, and in eastern Diyala Province — it has continued to lose territory in western Anbar Province, despite recent efforts to begin a major offensive there. North of Baghdad, the government recently took back the city of Baiji — an important town that is home to the country’s largest oil refinery — only to lose it after just a few weeks, although fighting continues and the refinery itself remains in government hands.

In the territories it occupies, the Islamic State has continued its reign of terror. On Thursday, the group released yet another gruesome set of pictures, this time of a public beheading near Tikrit of a man whom the group called a sorcerer.