



Spotlight on Global Jihad
(February 25 – March 2, 2016)



Main events of the week

- The ceasefire in Syria between the Syrian regime and the non-jihadi (so-called moderate) rebel organizations, validated by a UN Security Council resolution, came into effect on the night of February 26-27, 2016. In the following days, there was a marked decline in the intensity of the fighting in the areas where the agreement is supposed to apply. **The violations to date have been few and local.** A Russian monitoring center (at Hmeymim airbase in Syria) and an American monitoring center (in Amman) are supervising the implementation of the ceasefire and trying to locate and contain the violations.
- However, in vast regions where ISIS operates in eastern and northern Syria, **fighting continued between ISIS on the one hand and the Syrian Army and Kurdish forces on the other.** This also included airstrikes carried out by Russia, the United States and the coalition countries, and the Syrian regime. The leader of the Al-Nusra Front, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, (an organization that was excluded from the ceasefire) called on rebel organizations to continue fighting against the Syrian regime and to increase their attacks.
- **This week, ISIS carried out a number of noteworthy offensive initiatives on the ground:** southeast of Aleppo, ISIS managed to take over **the town of Khanaser**, in cooperation with other rebel organizations, thereby cutting off the important supply line connecting Homs and Aleppo. **Near the border with Turkey**, ISIS attacked the Kurdish forces in the city of Tell Abyad (with indirect support of Turkish Army artillery fire directed at the Kurdish forces which, from Turkey's perspective, are not included in the ceasefire). **In the city of Al-Shadadi**, south of Al-Hasakah, ISIS initiated a counterattack against the Kurdish forces that had taken over the city, apparently without success. **In Iraq**, ISIS continued to carry out **murderous terrorist attacks** in the Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad (over a hundred deaths).

The ceasefire agreement

- **At midnight on February 26, 2016**, the ceasefire between the Syrian regime and its supporters and some of the rebel organizations entered into effect. The first phase of the agreement was **limited to two weeks**. The agreement does not include ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front and several other terrorist organizations. **This is the first time since the outbreak of clashes in Syria in 2011** that an overall ceasefire agreement has been signed between the Syrian regime and some of the rebel organizations under the auspices of the UN and international superpowers.

■ **The ceasefire has been validated by UN Security Council Resolution 2268.**

The resolution expresses full support for the joint statement by the United States and Russia from February 22, 2016, regarding the ceasefire in Syria¹. The UN Security Council demanded full and immediate implementation of Security Council Resolution 2254 (from December 18, 2015) in order to create conditions that would lead to a political dialogue on ending the crisis in Syria (UN Reports website, February 26, 2016).

■ **In order to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire, two monitoring centers have been set up: a Russian monitoring center, which operates at Hmeymim airbase in Syria, and an American monitoring center, which operates in Amman.** The center at Hmeymim airbase is staffed by Russian officers and is equipped with advanced communications equipment (RT, February 27, 2016). The center has **maps indicating the location of the rebel organizations** that have expressed their agreement to the ceasefire (Dimashq al-Aan, February 24, 2016). Russia uses drones and other intelligence means to supervise the implementation of the agreement (Sputnik, March 1, 2016). **The Russian center has begun publishing daily reports on the implementation of the ceasefire.** According to a Syrian senior officer, every violation is documented and sent to the center at Hmeymim airbase, and from there to the American side in Amman (Dimashq al-Aan's Facebook page, February 28, 2016).

On the eve of the ceasefire, all parties involved in fighting intensified their attacks throughout Syria. However, since the ceasefire entered into effect, **the intensity of the clashes has declined significantly. Apart from a few local violations, the ceasefire has been maintained in the areas where it is supposed to apply.** However, **the fighting continued in vast areas where ISIS is active** (see below). On the first day of the implementation of the ceasefire, nine violations were recorded, including artillery fire from the Turkish side of the border at the Kurdish forces in Tell Abyad (Sky News, February 28, 2016). The Russians asked the American center in Amman to handle the issue with Turkey² through diplomatic channels (Al-Manar TV, February 28, 2016). On February 29, 2016, the Red Crescent reported **the arrival of the first shipment of humanitarian aid from the UN to the besieged towns and cities in Syria** (AFP, February 29, 2016).

¹ For details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin, Spotlight on Global Jihad (February 18-24, 2016).

² Turkey objected to the inclusion of the Kurdish forces in the ceasefire agreement. The Turkish Prime Minister said that if Turkey identified a threat to its security, it would not hesitate to act against ISIS, against the Kurdish forces and even against the Assad regime (RT, February 25, 2016).

Al-Nusra Front leader calls to refuse the ceasefire agreement in Syria

■ An audiotape **attributed to Abu Muhammad al-Julani, leader of the Al-Nusra Front**, Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria, was released on February 26, 2016. The tape is entitled: "This is what Allah and his Messenger had promised us". Al-Julani **strongly condemns the ceasefire agreement** (in which his organization is not included). He says it will lead to the end of the revolution and to Bashar Assad's remaining in power. He addresses the Syrian people, calling on them to refuse the ceasefire agreement. **He calls on the rebel organizations to continue fighting against the Syrian regime and to increase their attacks.** He calls on **the residents of Syria** not to believe the promises made by the US which, for the past five years, "has presented changeable positions and lies." **He says that the only negotiations take place through fighting** (Orient, February 26, 2016).

The American campaign against ISIS

■ The US-led coalition **continued to carry out attacks in Iraq and Syria** against ISIS targets and those of other terrorist organizations that are not included in the ceasefire agreement. During the week, aircraft of the coalition countries carried out dozens of airstrikes, concentrating on the areas of Mosul and Ramadi, where fighting is ongoing between the Iraqi Army and ISIS. In Syria, there has been an increase in the number of airstrikes against ISIS targets, especially in the area of Al-Hasakah, where there are clashes between the Kurdish forces and ISIS, which is trying to recapture the town of Al-Shadadi from the Kurds (see below).

■ **US President Barack Obama** said that the United States would do everything in its power for the success of the agreement, despite the doubts about the prospects of its implementation. Obama reiterated **that the agreement does not pertain to ISIS or the Al-Nusra Front and that the international coalition against ISIS would continue to fight against it until it is defeated.** He said that President Assad must be ousted and that there is no alternative. He added that Assad's fate remains a source of controversy between the US and Russia and Iran (Sky News, February 26, 2016).

Russian involvement in the civil war in Syria

■ After a 24-hour suspension of flights, **the Russian Air Force resumed carrying out airstrikes throughout Syria.** The head of the operations division of the Russian Army General Staff stressed that the Russian Air Force had ceased its airstrikes in

areas under the control of “opposition groups” that had signed the ceasefire agreement (Sputnik, February 27, 2016). **However, Russian aircraft continued to attack targets of organizations that were not included in the agreement, though the intensity of the airstrikes has apparently decreased.**

Main developments in Syria

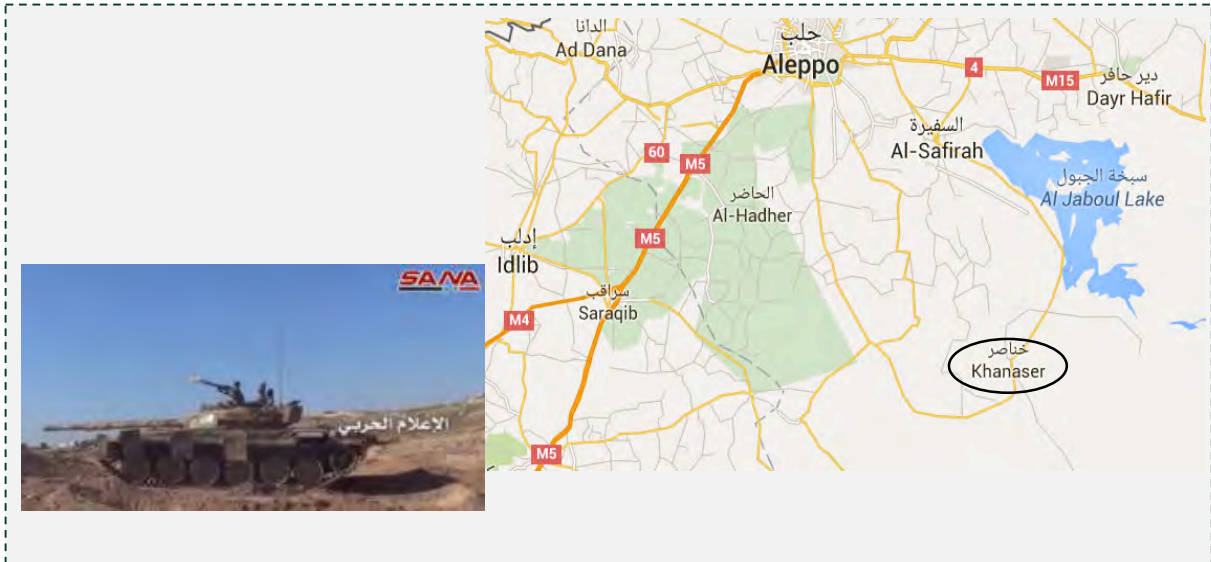


Map of Syria (www.nationsonline.org).

The area southeast of Aleppo

■ **ISIS’s fighting efforts in and around the town of Khanaser (southeast of Aleppo), which began on February 22, 2016, continued. According to reports from this week, ISIS, in cooperation with other rebel organizations, managed to take over the town of Khanaser. Following its achievements in the area of Khanaser, ISIS managed to cut off the Syrian regime’s important supply route connecting Homs and the Syrian forces in Aleppo Province. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), ISIS and a number of other organizations carried out an extensive operation against the Syrian Army. Fighters from Turkmenistan and the Caucasus region participated in the attack. ISIS also carried out suicide bombing attacks. The**

attacks reportedly killed several dozen Syrian Army soldiers (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat; As-Safir, February 24, 2016).



Left: Syrian Army tank firing at ISIS operatives in the area of Khanaser (SANA News Agency, February 26, 2016). Right: The town of Khanaser (Google Maps).

Al-Hasakah Province

■ **ISIS operatives in the area of Al-Hasakah initiated a counterattack on the city of Al-Shadadi**, which was taken over by Kurdish forces on February 19, 2016. There were fierce clashes in the area of the city, and ISIS detonated car bombs against positions of the Kurdish forces. It is not yet clear who controls the town, but the Kurds appear to have the upper hand (Al-Mayadeen; Khatwa, February 28, 2016).



The city of Al-Shadadi (Google Maps).

Deir al-Zor

■ Syrian regime forces attacked concentrations of ISIS operatives near the Deir al-Zor airbase and in several villages in the area (Hussein Mortada's Twitter page, February 24, 2016). Over 20 ISIS operatives were reportedly killed. It was also reported that the Syrian forces had destroyed a tunnel belonging to ISIS in the Al-Sina'ah neighborhood, southeast of Deir al-Zor (Dimashq al-Aan, February 28, 2016).

Al-Raqqah Province

■ The week ISIS attacked the Kurdish forces **in and around the city of Tell Abyad**, which fell into the hands of the Kurds in early 2015 (along with the cities of Kobani and Al-Hasakah). In the area of Tell Abyad, near the border with Turkey, there were clashes between ISIS and the Kurdish forces, which received air support from the US and the international coalition. On the other hand, the Turkish Army fired artillery at the Kurdish forces. According to Turkish media reports, the Kurdish forces (YPG) are cleansing the area from ISIS operatives. Over 70 ISIS operatives and over 20 Kurdish fighters were killed in these battles (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), February 27, 2016).



The city of Tell Abyad (Google Maps).

Main developments in Iraq



Map of Iraq (nationsonline.org).

Al-Anbar Province

Ramadi

■ **The Iraqi Army continues its efforts to cleanse the city of Ramadi and its environs.** ISIS claimed responsibility for the killing of 44 Iraqi Army soldiers in two attacks carried out west of Ramadi. ISIS reported that one of its operatives had detonated a car bomb near an Iraqi headquarters (Amaq, February 27, 2016). ISIS operatives also fired artillery at the eastern part of Ramadi, killing nine people (Al-Sumaria, February 28, 2016).

Fallujah

■ **The Iraqi Army has begun a campaign to conquer the city of Fallujah, which has been controlled by ISIS since early 2014.** The Iraqi Army reportedly attacked the city from three roads simultaneously. According to the reports, the Iraqi Army managed to take over several areas in the city's southern suburbs (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, February 28, 2016). The Iraqi Army forces reportedly reached a distance of about six kilometers from the western entrance to the city (Al-Mada, February 29, 2016). In an effort to take over Fallujah, the Iraqi Army is supported by **local tribal forces** and air support from the member countries of the international coalition against ISIS (Sky News in Arabic, February 27, 2016).

Baghdad

■ This week, ISIS continued to carry out terrorist attacks in the Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad:

- **On February 25, 2016**, ISIS carried out a double suicide bombing attack on a Shiite social and religious facility in the Shaala neighborhood in northwestern Baghdad. The attack **killed at least 15 people**. The attack was carried out by two suicide bombers: one blew himself up with an explosive belt among a group of Shiites and the other blew himself up when the Iraqi forces arrived on the scene. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.
- **On February 28, 2016**, ISIS carried out a suicide bombing attack with two suicide bombers on motorcycles. The attack was carried out in an open market in the Shiite neighborhood of Madinat Sadr. **Around 90 people were killed and about a hundred others were injured** (Al-Sumaria, February 29, 2016; Al-Jazeera, February 28, 2016). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.



The scene of the attack in the Shiite Madinat Sadr neighborhood (mangish.net, February 28, 2016).

The area of Samarra

■ An Iraqi officer, whose identity is unknown, said that on March 1, 2016, around 7,000 Iraqi soldiers began an operation aimed at cleansing the territory from Samarra to Baiji (north of Baghdad) from the presence of ISIS operatives. According to the officer, the Iraqi forces are receiving air support from the Iraqi Air Force and from the coalition countries (AFP, March 1, 2016). We have no further details about the Iraqi operation at this point.

Nineveh Province

Mosul

■ On February 26, 2016, ISIS published photos of the Friday market in the city of Mosul, which is under its control. The photos also show a new mosque, named after ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, probably located near the open market (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, February 23, 2016). The photos are **part of an ISIS propaganda campaign designed to prove that daily life in the major cities under its control is running smoothly.**



Left: Operatives of ISIS's morality police (*Hisba*) at the market in Mosul. Right: The bustling Friday market in Mosul (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, February 23, 2016).



The new mosque named after ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, February 23, 2016).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

- During the week, the Egyptian security forces continued their activity against ISIS's Sinai Province, mainly in the areas of Sheikh Zuweid, Al-Arish and Rafah. The Egyptian security forces detained dozens of operatives, swept roads for detecting and neutralizing IEDs and also confiscated large quantities of weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles (Al-Masry Al-Youm, February 24, 2016).
- Operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province continued to carry out guerrilla activity against the Egyptian forces, mainly planting roadside IEDs. The Egyptian security forces suffered a number of losses. ISIS's Sinai Province claimed responsibility for a number of incidents, including blowing up of an Egyptian Army armored vehicle in southern

Rafah, killing two soldiers and wounding two others (Misr Al-Ikhbariya, February 27, 2016).

- ISIS claims to have set up, for the first time, “temporary checkpoints” in the area of Jisr al-Wadi, in central Al-Arish. The identity cards of passersby are checked at these checkpoints, in order to identify individuals wanted by ISIS for collaborating with the Egyptian security forces (Amaq, February 27, 2016). On the other hand, according to an Egyptian “security source,” armored vehicles were deployed in the main streets of Al-Arish after terrorist operatives killed two civilians in a public square. The security forces reportedly combed the area in search of a terrorist squad (Dot Misr, March 1, 2016).

The global jihad in other countries

Libya

Involvement of Western countries in anti-ISIS activity

- On February 28, 2016, **aircraft attacked a convoy of ISIS operatives near Bani Walid, in northern Libya** (about 115 km southwest of the city of Misrata). No one claimed responsibility for the airstrike. A senior Pentagon official said that the US was not involved in the airstrike (Reuters, February 28, 2016). According to an article in the British newspaper The Telegraph, **a small number of security advisers from Britain and US Army Special Forces** are working together in the war against ISIS in the area of Misrata, in northwestern Libya. According to the article, the American forces are providing tactical training to a number of local militias. The British government has declined to comment (The Telegraph, February 28, 2016).

- French President François Hollande reportedly **ordered French elite units and senior intelligence officials to take part in a covert military activity in Libya**. The French Defense Minister declined to comment on the report (RT, February 24, 2016). **A commander in the Libyan Army under the command of Khalifa Haftar confirmed the presence of French military advisers who are assisting Haftar’s forces in Benghazi** (Al-Wasat Portal, February 25, 2016; Reuters, February 24-25, 2016; The Libyan News Agency, February 25, 2016).

Sabratah

- **Power struggles continue between ISIS and its opponents in the city of Sabratah**. According to media reports, ISIS managed to take over the city center for a

few hours, including the security directorate building. Later, after fighting with militia operatives, aided by military forces from Tripoli, ISIS operatives withdrew from the city, after executing 12 employees of the security directorate (Newsweek, February 24, 2016; Bawabat Ifriqiya Al-Ikhbariya, February 27, 2016; aljazeera.net, February 23-24, 2016).

■ According to an announcement published by the Sabratah Municipality, ISIS operatives took advantage of the “security vacuum” created in the city center. However, the security forces carried out searches in the city’s suburbs and managed to push the ISIS operatives out of the city (Sabratah Municipality website, February 24, 2016). According to a later report, **the activity against ISIS operatives in Sabratah and its suburbs is still ongoing**. The Sabratah Municipality website also expressed surprise that the Tripoli Government’s Ministry of Defense had issued a statement announcing the liberation of the entire city and the elimination of the remaining ISIS operatives there (Sabratah Municipality website, February 27, 2016).



The city of Sabratah, located between Tripoli and the Libyan-Tunisian border (Google Maps).

Benghazi

■ **The Libyan Army continues its operations against ISIS in an attempt to stabilize the security control of the city of Benghazi.** Haftar’s army reported on the liberation of some neighborhoods where fighting took place. ISIS, on its part, claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack against Haftar’s forces in the Al-Hawari neighborhood, south of the city center. According to ISIS, over 25 soldiers were killed in the attack. In the Al-Saberi combat zone, in the west of the city, the army encountered resistance. ISIS announced that it had repelled an attempted advance by

the Libyan Army (Al-Hayat, February 23, 2016; alarabiya.net, February 27, 2016; Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, February 23 and 26, 2016).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

The killing of senior Al-Qaeda operatives in Mali

■ According to social networks affiliated with **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb** (AQIM), Al-Qaeda's branch in North Africa, over the past few days, French forces carried out two separate raids against Al-Qaeda operatives in Mali. **Three senior AQIM operatives were killed in these raids.** One of the dead was a Spanish operative codenamed **Abu al-Nur al-Andalusi** (i.e., the Andalusian), from Spanish Morocco. Abu al-Nur al-Andalusi previously released a tape in Spanish calling on Muslims in Spain to join jihad. The French Foreign Ministry has not yet issued an official statement on the matter (Al-Jazeera; The Long War Journal, February 29, 2016).

The battle for hearts and minds

The cyber campaign

■ According to American officials, **the US Army has begun a new campaign of cyber attacks against the operatives of the Islamic State.** The purpose of the campaign is to harm ISIS's propaganda capabilities through the Internet and social networks that it uses to spread its messages and recruit operatives. According to the Americans, part of the activity will make it harder for ISIS operatives to carry out online financial transactions or logistical activity (AP, February 26, 2016). **US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter** said that the United States had begun carrying out cyber attacks in northern Syria as an additional measure within the campaign against ISIS.

■ ISIS, on its part, **posted a video about Facebook and Twitter's attempts to block its activity on social networks.** The video shows ISIS operatives hacking into Twitter and Facebook accounts. The video also shows ISIS operatives going to carry out suicide bombing attacks. **At the end of the video, there are photos of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter founder Jack Dorsey surrounded by flames.** These photos are accompanied by ISIS statistics about the number of Facebook and Twitter accounts hacked by its operatives (pro3explain.com, February 25, 2016).



Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter founder Jack Dorsey being shot at in an ISIS video (pro3explain.com, February 25, 2016).