The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
at the Israeli Intelligence & Heritage Commemoration Center

Spotlight on Global Jihad
(March 3-9, 2016)

Main events of the week

- The ceasefire in Syria, which came into effect on the night of February 26-27, resulted in a significant decrease in the intensity of the clashes in the areas where it is applied. These clashes were characterized by local incidents with no significant changes in the situation on the ground. The ceasefire was utilized to transfer humanitarian aid to part of the besieged Syrian population, as a respite for the fighters, and for preparations for the future.

- **Under cover of the ceasefire and with Russian air support, the Syrian Army carried out an attack on the city of Palmyra (east of Homs),** which has been controlled by ISIS since May 2015. Syrian infantry and armored forces managed to get close to the city, causing ISIS heavy losses and, according to the Syrian News Agency, took over **several neighborhoods in the southeast of the city.** The campaign for the city is still ongoing. If the Syrian Army manages to take over Palmyra, it will cut off ISIS from its strongholds in the areas of Damascus and Homs, **placing itself in a good starting point for further pressure on ISIS's core areas.**

- **Thus, ISIS is subject to increasing pressure on the core of its control areas in northeastern Syria** from the **Syrian Army** (from the south and the east) and from the **Kurdish forces** (from the north and the northeast). This is in addition to intensive airstrikes by the US-led coalition countries and Russia. ISIS responds to this pressure by **defending its strongholds, making extensive use of guerrilla warfare and carrying out terrorist attacks in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere** (this week, ISIS continued its terrorist attacks against the Shiite population in Baghdad and south of the city, and carried out a raid from Libyan soil on Tunisian security forces in the coastal town of Ben Gardane).

Implementation of the ceasefire on the ground – overview

■ **The ceasefire continued with its familiar characteristics:** in the areas included in the agreement there were no significant violations, **but there were ongoing local incidents**, with an emphasis on the area of Aleppo. On the other hand, **fighting continued in the areas controlled by ISIS**, with the principal attack of the week being **the Syrian Army attack on the city of Palmyra**; **in the areas controlled by the rebels, where the Al-Nusra Front operates, the decrease in the intensity of the clashes was maintained.** This is because the relevant sides generally maintained the agreement and because the Al-Nusra Front, which is not included in the agreement, usually managed to mingle with the rebel organizations and keep a low profile. **At the same time, airstrikes by Russian and the US-led coalition continued, focusing on ISIS targets in eastern and northeastern Syria, which constitute a legitimate target for attack.**

■ US Secretary of State **John Kerry** and Russian Foreign Minister **Sergei Lavrov** praised the existence of a ceasefire and stressed that it had led to a significant reduction in the level of violence (dw.com, March 5, 2016). In practice, however, the **civil war continues to take its toll, although it is lower than during the period before the ceasefire**. According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) from March 5, 2016, **in the first week of the ceasefire, 135 people were killed** in the areas included in the agreement. However, **in the same week, 552 people were killed** in areas not included in the agreement. The fatalities include civilians, rebel organization operatives and Syrian Army soldiers (Al-Jazeera, March 5, 2016).

■ **Russia is making efforts to include additional organizations in the ceasefire agreement:** the Russians reported that during the week, agreements had been signed with several other opposition groups and that the number of agreements was over 40 (Russian Ministry of Defense Facebook page, March 4-5, 2016). According to the head of the Russian monitoring center at Hmeymim airbase, since the beginning of the ceasefire, the center has held over 20 meetings with commanders of the opposition organizations and local leaders, culminating with signed ceasefire agreements with them (Sputnik, March 4, 2016). According to a Russian report, **Jaysh**

al-Islam, a prominent Islamic rebel organization[1], has joined the ceasefire agreement. Jaysh al-Islam has denied the report (Syria Mubasher, March 5, 2016).

- **The ceasefire was utilized for transferring humanitarian aid**, in an attempt to reach population centers under siege (the UN estimates that some 500,000 residents are under siege). According to reports, the humanitarian aid reached only a small portion of those in need. Russia has also joined the effort. According to the Russian Defense Minister, Russia sent 620 tons of humanitarian supplies to Syria, which was distributed in Hama, Homs, Latakia, Daraa, Deir al-Zor, Aleppo and Damascus (Sputnik, March 7, 2016). **The ceasefire also paves the way for further talks on the future of Syria between representatives of the Syrian regime** and representatives of the opposition, which are expected to resume in Geneva in the near future.

The international 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. **Syria** - the airstrikes were concentrated in the areas of Al-Hasakah, Palmyra and Marea (north of Aleppo). **Iraq** - the airstrikes were concentrated mainly in Ramadi and Mosul. At the same time, the **Russian Air Force** continued to carry out airstrikes, mainly against ISIS targets. Airstrikes were carried out against targets in the areas of Palmyra and Al-Qaryatayn as support for the Syrian Army, which is carrying out a military action against ISIS there (see below).

- According to **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova**, the Ministry of Defense publishes complete daily updates on the ceasefire from the Russian monitoring center at Hmeymim airbase (Russian Foreign Ministry Twitter page, March 2, 2016). According to **Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov**, violations can be monitored with technical aids such as drones, space observation devices and more. He expressed satisfaction with the cooperation between Russia and the United States. According to Bogdanov, the two countries are operating cooperation centers, and channels of communication for exchanging information exist between the two armies (TASS News Agency, March 7, 2016).

[1] **Jaysh al-Islam** is an Islamic rebel organization ideologically affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is one of the most prominent rebel organizations in the civil war in Syria. It is supported by Saudi Arabia and is hostile to ISIS.

The Russian monitoring center at Hmeymim airbase (Steve Rosenberg's Twitter page, March 4, 2016).

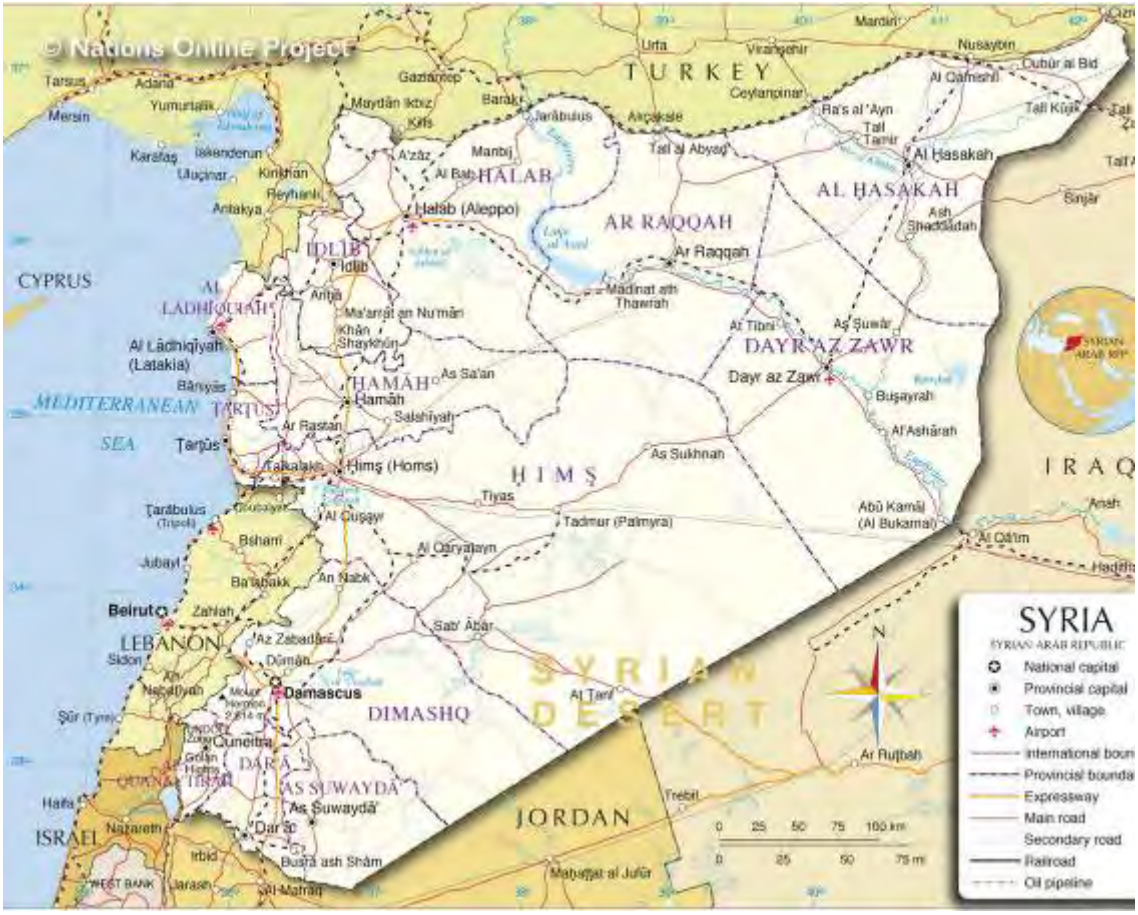
Turkey

- **This week, Turkey carried out artillery fire along its border with Syria.** Some of the targets attacked by the Turks were **ISIS and Al-Nusra Front targets** (both of which are not included in the ceasefire agreement) and some of them were **the Kurdish forces** (Turkey objects to their inclusion in the ceasefire agreement, even though they are fighting against ISIS). Turkey's border police reportedly **closed the Bab al-Hawa border crossing** between Turkey and Syria, and its forces fire at anyone who tries to approach the crossing (Dimashq al-Aan, March 4, 2016).

Bab al-Hawa is an international border crossing between Syria and Turkey. It is located on the main road between Alexandretta and Aleppo. The border crossing is **controlled by the Al-Nusra Front** but managed by **Ahrar al-Sham**, through a civil administration apparatus that was established there. It is a very busy crossing used for smuggling weapons, oil and gas. It is also used by large numbers of refugees. **The crossing is of great importance to the rebel organizations, especially the Al-Nusra Front**, because it remains the main logistical route leading from Turkey to the areas of Aleppo and Idlib (after the main logistical route leading from Aleppo northward to the Bab al-Salama crossing was cut off).

The Bab al-Hawa crossing (Google Maps).

Main developments in Syria



Map of Syria (www.nationsonline.org).

Homs Province

Syrian Army offensive against ISIS under cover of the ceasefire

Under cover of the ceasefire, the Syrian Army began an offensive, with Russian air support, **with the intention of taking over two important ISIS strongholds: the city of Palmyra, east of Homs, which was taken over by ISIS in May 2015, and the city of Al-Qaryatayn**, southeast of Homs. According to Syrian and Arab media reports, **the offensive proved successful, and the Syrian Army has surrounded the two cities.** However, the fighting is still ongoing.

■ **On March 4, 2016**, the Syrian Army began an offensive **aimed at taking over the city of Palmyra**. To this end, **infantry and armored forces** were concentrated in the area east of Palmyra. In the ITIC's assessment, these forces were transferred there from other regions, **taking advantage of the ceasefire agreement and the fact that ISIS is not included in it.** The attack was two-pronged: one Syrian force moved eastward **toward Palmyra** and another force southeastward toward **the city of Al-Qaryatayn**. The force headed for Palmyra took over the **area of Al-Dawa**, the rural area west of Palmyra (Russia Insider, March 5, 2016). According to a report by the Syrian News Agency (March 7, 2016), the Syrian Army managed to take over a few neighborhoods in the southeast of the city. It also seized control of important areas west of Al-Qaryatayn.

■ According to Iranian media reports, dozens of ISIS operatives were killed and wounded in a Syrian Army ambush at the Palmyra junction (Al-Alam, March 7, 2016). According to ISIS-affiliated media reports, **Amr al-Absi** (aka Abu al-Athir), **governor of ISIS's Palmyra Province**, was killed in an airstrike on March 3, 2016, (The Long War Journal, March 4, 2016).

The cities of Palmyra and Al-Qaryatayn, targets of the Syrian Army offensive. At the same time, a rebel force tried to take over the Al-Tanf border crossing (Google Maps).

ISIS took over the city of Palmyra and its environs on May 21, 2015, using a dedicated force transferred from areas under its control in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian Army withdrew from the city without a real battle. **This was ISIS's most significant achievement in the Syrian arena during 2015.** After taking over Palmyra, ISIS took control of financial assets throughout the city (phosphate deposits and gas fields). The occupation of Palmyra by ISIS was characterized by the destruction of archeological treasures in the city, which triggered fierce protests in the international community. If the Syrian Army manages to take over the city of Palmyra, **this would be a military blow for ISIS, as well as a blow to its morale and its image.** This is because taking over the city **would cut off the route leading from Deir al-Zor and Al-Raqqah to Damascus and Homs** and would impair ISIS's operational and logistical link with its forces in the areas of Damascus and Homs. Moreover, **the takeover of Palmyra would place the Syrian Army in a good starting point for continued military pressure on ISIS's core areas.**

The Al-Tanf border crossing

- With the start of the military operation towards Palmyra, **the rebel force made an attempt to take over the Al-Tanf border crossing** on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The attempt was reportedly made with international coalition air support (Khatwa, March 5, 2016). According to reports from around 24 hours later, **ISIS managed to regain control of the crossing** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), March 6, 2016). ISIS's news agency (Aamaq) reported that the crossing was under its control. However, the battle for control of the crossing area is apparently still ongoing.

The Al-Tanf border crossing (called **Al-Waleed** on its Syrian side) is located in the southeast of Homs Province, near the Jordanian border. After ISIS took over the city of Palmyra (May 2015), the Syrian regime forces had to withdraw from the crossing. It now appears that a rebel organization is trying to take advantage of the Syrian Army attack on Palmyra to regain control of the crossing. The situation there is still unclear. The Syrian side of the crossing is apparently (still) held by ISIS, which continues to use the crossing for its logistical and operational needs.

Local clashes in other provinces

■ **The ceasefire was violated in other provinces in Syria and local clashes took place between the various forces**, without any significant changes on the ground:

• **Aleppo Province:** There were clashes in the province involving operatives of ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front, the Kurdish forces and the Turkish Army (which fired artillery at targets of ISIS and the Kurdish forces on Syrian soil).

• **Al-Hasakah Province:** The Kurdish forces continued to establish their control over the rural area south of the city of Al-Hasakah and in and around the city of Al-Shadadi (including the oil and gas fields in its vicinity). ISIS, on its part, detonated three car bombs and carried out a suicide bombing attack against a convoy of the Kurdish forces.

• **Deir al-Zor:** Clashes continued between the Syrian forces and ISIS operatives. This week, there were clashes in several residential neighborhoods in the city of Deir al-Zor, controlled by the Syrian regime.

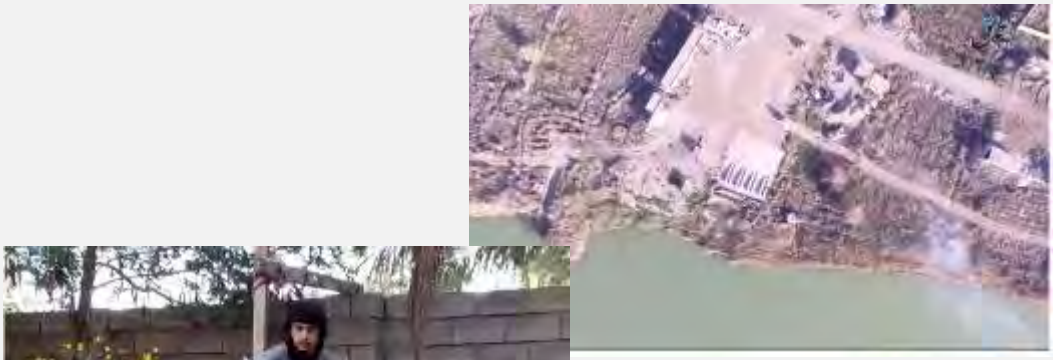
• **The area of Tell Abyad, near the Turkish border:** In this area, ISIS continues to carry out guerilla warfare against the Kurdish forces. This week, ISIS detonated a car bomb at a checkpoint of the Kurdish forces at the entrance to the city.

Main developments in Iraq

Map of Iraq (nationsonline.org).

Al-Anbar Province

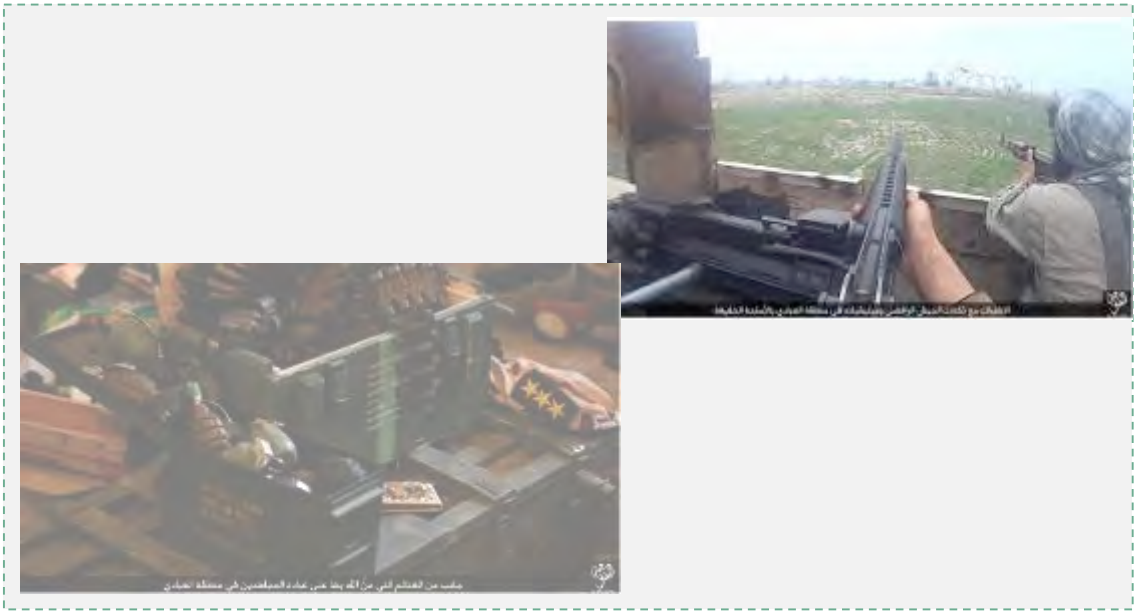
- **The Iraqi Army's efforts to cleanse the city of Ramadi and its surroundings continue.** This week, the fighting was concentrated in the area of Al-Hamidhiyah, northeast of the city. On March 5, 2016, ISIS attacked an Iraqi Army base. The attack was foiled (Al-Sumaria, March 5, 2016). ISIS claimed responsibility for hitting two Iraqi Army vehicles in the area of Al-Hamidhiyah. ISIS also claimed responsibility for firing mortar shells at an Iraqi Army base in the area (Aamaq, March 6, 2016).



Left: ISIS operative firing mortar shells (csns.tk, March 5, 2016). Right: Aerial photograph documenting one of the Iraqi Army vehicles going up in flames (Aamaq, March 6, 2016).

Fallujah

- According to a report by Iraqi government sources, the first stage of the operation for the liberation of Fallujah, whose objective was to **tighten the encirclement around it**, has been completed successfully (Al-Arabi al-Jadeed, March 6, 2016). On the other hand, ISIS published photos documenting its takeover of an Iraqi Army base northeast of Fallujah (csns.tk, March 5, 2016).



Left: Some of the weapons seized by ISIS. Right: ISIS operatives shooting at an Iraqi Army base (csns.tk, March 5, 2016).

Salah al-Din province

The area of Samarra

- **The Iraqi security forces continued to cleanse the city of Samarra and the surrounding areas from the presence of ISIS operatives.** Iraqi Army forces, with the assistance of local tribes, took over vast areas that had been controlled by ISIS west of Samarra (Iraqi Prime Minister's Twitter account, March 5, 2016). ISIS claimed responsibility for three suicide bombing attacks against Iraqi Army positions along the highway between Baiji and Haditha (csns.tk, March 5, 2016).

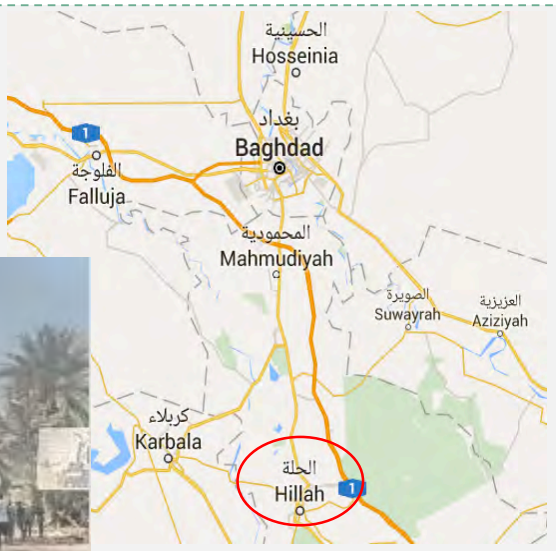
The three terrorists who carried out a suicide bombing attack against the Iraqi Army: Left: Muhibb Allah al-Ansari. Center: Abu Talha al-Ansari. Right: Abu Aisha al-Ansari (csns.tk, March 5, 2016)

Baghdad and the area to its south

- ISIS continues to carry out terrorist attacks **against the Shiite population in Baghdad and its environs.**

- On March 6, 2016, the Iraqi Army announced that it had managed **to thwart an attack in a crowded open market in central Baghdad** (Shafaq News, March 6, 2016). Crowded places in the Shiite areas of Baghdad are a target for ISIS terrorist attacks.

- A car bomb exploded at a checkpoint **north of the city of Hillah, capital of the Shiite Babil Governorate (south of Baghdad). Over 60 people were killed in the attack and many were injured** (Dimashq al-Aan, March 6, 2016). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack (Aamaq, March 6, 2016).



Left: The scene of the attack in the city of Hillah (Al-Sumaria, March 6, 2016). Right: The city of Hillah, about 90 km south of Baghdad (Google Maps).

The conduct of the Islamic State

Tension in Al-Raqqah, ISIS's so-called capital

■ According to a recent report by a Syrian media source, **there is internal tension between ISIS operatives in the city of Al-Raqqah**, due to power struggles and disputes over the distribution of funds. On March 6, 2016, a group of ISIS operatives assassinated an operative codenamed **Abu Ali al-Tunisi (i.e., the Tunisian)**, commander of military operations in northern Al-Raqqah. After he was killed, clashes broke out among the operatives, and the local police had to intervene.

■ It was also reported that a group of ISIS operatives had protested against the leadership of ISIS for promoting foreign fighters to senior leadership positions. There is also resentment among the operatives due to the decision to cut their salaries in light of ISIS's deteriorating financial situation (aranews.net, March 7, 2016). The reliability of this information is unclear, **but it appears that recently, following the blows that ISIS has suffered, its governance in the city of Al-Raqqah has begun to erode.**

ISIS is grooming children to become terrorist operatives

■ A study sponsored by the UN and conducted by the Quilliam Institute **deals with how the children of the Islamic Caliphate are raised**, starting from birth. Many of them are separated from their families at an early age and sent to training camps. They play with toy weapons from an early age and are shown pictures of executions.

When they are very young, the children learn how to be spies, soldiers, executioners, and suicide bombers. They are also used for propaganda purposes. According to the study, the present generation of fighters sees these children as better fighters than those of the previous generation because they have grown within ISIS's ideological system and absorbed its values from the day they were born (Guardian, March 7, 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. A few dozen operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province were killed by the Egyptian security forces (Al-Bawaba; Sky News, March 5, 2016). The Egyptian security forces also detained dozens of operatives, swept roads for detecting and neutralizing IEDs, and foiled attacks.

- **In Egypt itself**, an IED exploded in a neighborhood **in the city of Giza**, near the Consulate of Oman. There were no casualties (Al-Youm al-Sabea, March 5, 2016). **ISIS in Egypt claimed responsibility for detonating the IED.** According to the announcement, the IED killed and wounded many members of the Egyptian security forces.

Left: IED explosion near an Egyptian Army jeep carrying soldiers in central Sinai. Right: IED explosion against an Egyptian Army truck (csns.tr, March 6, 2016).

Palestinians and Israeli Arabs

■ Charges were filed in Nazareth against two local residents for unlawful organization and conspiring with a foreign agent. The two men are **Bahaa al-Din Ziyad Hassan Masarwa**, 19, from Yafia, a college student in Jenin; and **Ahmed Nabil Ahmed Ahmed**, 21, from Nazareth. The two have been charged with expressing support for ISIS's ideology and **planning to buy weapons and carry out attacks**. The interrogation revealed that in recent months, they have been praying at the Al-Aqsa mosque once a week. On one of their trips to the mosque, **they planned to carry out a shooting attack against the Israeli security forces.** They planned to carry out the attack **in Afula and at the Jalama border crossing** (between Israel and northern Samaria). As part of the preparations, the two men collected funds for purchasing weapons.

The global jihad in other countries

Libya

Attack on oil fields southwest of Ajdabiya

■ **On March 5, 2016**, ISIS made another attempt **to attack oil fields southwest of Ajdabiya.** ISIS's force advanced from the area of Nofaliya (controlled by ISIS) to a desert area about a 100 km southwest of Ajdabiya. Seven of the operatives had foreign citizenship (Tunisia, Chad, Niger, and Sudan). ISIS's force clashed with a Libyan Army force (which is loyal to the Tobruk government) and 11 of its men were killed (Akhbar Libya 24, March 7, 2016).

Cleansing the city of Benghazi

■ The Libyan Army, which is loyal to the Tobruk government, continues to cleanse Benghazi from the presence of ISIS operatives and those of other jihadi organizations. According to reports, there are still pockets of resistance in some of the city's neighborhoods. In the Al-Hawari neighborhood (in southeastern Benghazi), documents about the involvement of Libyan Army officers in planning assassinations of government officials were seized. Documents naming operatives who were supposed to be appointed as the emirs of ISIS's provinces and lists of Libyan businessmen who gave financial assistance to ISIS were also seized (Akhbar Libya 24, March 7, 2016).

Attempted attack in Tunisia from Libyan territory

- **On March 7, 2016**, an ISIS force from Libya entered the Tunisian town of Ben Gardane (about 33 km from the border). **The force attacked a Tunisian Army base and other security facilities in the coastal town of Ben Gardane.** In the exchange of fire, **at least 53 people were killed**, including 35 ISIS operatives and 18 members of the security forces and civilians. Six ISIS operatives were captured. Following the attack, Tunisia closed its border crossings with Libya (alarabiya.net, March 7, 2016; aljazeera.net, March 7, 2016).

The town of Ben Gardane and the Ra's Ajdir border crossing (Google Maps).

ISIS's Caucasus Province

- **ISIS's Caucasus Province** has posted a video showing an ISIS operative addressing the Muslims in ISIS's Islamic State and ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The speaker is surrounded by operatives who, so he claims, recently joined ISIS. **The speaker calls on Muslims in Russia to join ISIS.** He notes **that the operatives of the Caucasus Province have no problem obtaining weapons and fighting a jihad against the "infidels" in Russia.** He goes on to **threaten that attacks will be carried out against Russia** and expresses the hope to "liberate Russia from tyranny" (csns.tk, March 5, 2016).

The speaker is sitting on the right, surrounded by armed operatives of ISIS's Caucasus Province (csns.tk, March 5, 2016).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Jordan

- In early March 2016, the Jordanian security forces carried out a raid against **a number of targets in Irbid**, northern Jordan. In the clashes between the security forces and the militants, who had barricaded themselves in a residential building, **seven wanted men wearing explosive belts were killed. Thirteen wanted men were detained** and weapons were confiscated. In this operation, Jordanian intelligence managed **to thwart ISIS's plan to attack civilian and military targets in Jordan** (Al-Ghad; Jordan News Agency, March 3, 2016).

- On February 25, 2016, **ISIS released a video entitled "Message to Jordan". In the video, an ISIS speaker calls on the tribes in Jordan to break away from the Kingdom of Jordan, to stop serving in its security apparatus, and to support the Islamic State.** The speaker threatens the Jordanian government, saying that ISIS will soon overthrow it and behead its leaders (archive.org, February 25, 2016).

From the video "Message to Jordan," released by ISIS (archive.org, February 25, 2016).

Spain

- **Spain's Interior Minister** said that the Spanish authorities had **seized three shipping containers containing 20,000 uniforms intended for ISIS and Al-Nusra Front operatives in Syria and Iraq.** The clothes were sent by networks around the world that support ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. Seven people were detained. One of them is known to be a clothing importer (Sputnik, March 4, 2016).

Uniforms discovered by the Spanish security forces (Spanish Police Twitter page, March 3, 2016).