



*Spotlight on Global Jihad*  
(March 24-30, 2016)



## Main events of the week

- On March 27, 2016, the city of Palmyra, located in the heart of the Syrian desert, was taken over by the Syrian Army and the forces supporting it. The takeover of Palmyra is a **military, political and image-related achievement of the Syrian Army and Russia**, which provides it with ongoing air support. The takeover of Palmyra gives the Syrian Army a **good starting point for further attacking ISIS's core areas in Deir al-Zor and Al-Raqqah**, while reducing the area under ISIS's control and impeding its communication with its operatives in Damascus, Homs and southern Syria.
- The Belgian government has carried out this week a series of arrests of ISIS operatives, some of whom were involved in the terror attack in Brussels. ISIS, however, embarked on a propaganda campaign with the participation of Belgian operatives, intended, among other things, to **frighten and terrify the Belgians and Europeans in general** ("We will invade London, Paris and Berlin, like we did in Paris before. The supporters of the Caliphate are determined this will happen soon"). In the ITIC's assessment, ISIS will respond to the increasing pressure on it by **continuing to increase terrorism in the West and in Arab and Muslim countries** (Turkey is in its sights), along with continuing its attempts to **establish itself in countries outside Syria and Iraq** (Libya is a key destination).

## The takeover of Palmyra - implications

On March 27, 2016, the takeover of the city of Palmyra was completed at the end of an operation lasting around three weeks (for details, see below). The takeover of the city is a **military and political achievement** for the Syrian regime and for Russia, who were quick to embark on a propaganda campaign **in order to reap image-related profits**. Following the takeover of Palmyra and its vicinity, the Syrian Army expanded its grip in eastern Syria and **took over an important crossroads between Deir al-Zor and Al-Raqqah, on the one hand, and Homs and Damascus on the other**. The area of Palmyra **provides the Syrian Army with a good starting point for continued military pressure on ISIS's core areas in Deir al-Zor and Al-Raqqah** (as Syrian spokesmen announced). In the future, Palmyra's proximity to oil and gas fields will enable the Syrian regime to regain control over them. Furthermore, the takeover of the Palmyra area disrupts **ISIS's logistical and operational communication with its forces in Damascus, Homs and southern Syria**.

■ From the perspective of the overall campaign against ISIS, **the takeover of Palmyra is the latest in a series of defeats suffered by ISIS since early 2015: in Syria, the Syrian Army managed to establish its control in the area of Aleppo while the Kurdish forces captured key cities from ISIS and established their presence along the Turkish border and in northeastern Syria. In Iraq, the Iraqi Army took over Ramadi. Now it is striving to expand its control in the Al-Anbar Province and is preparing for the subsequent takeover of the city of Mosul. In addition, the Iraqi Army took over the oil city of Baiji, while the Kurdish forces took over the city of Sinjar and its environs. ISIS, on its part, in view of the pressure on it, continues to maintain a defensive strategy with regard to the core areas of its regime in Mosul and Al-Raqqah, but the territory under its control is gradually shrinking.**

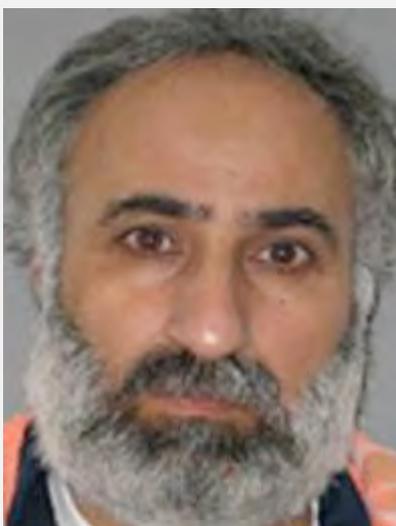
ISIS's response to this series of defeats is to **increase its terrorist activities in Arab and Western countries**. Prominent examples are the terror attacks carried out in recent months in **Paris, Istanbul, Brussels and Baghdad, and the interception of the Russian plane in the Sinai Peninsula**. These attacks are accompanied by a media campaign, **whose goal is to arouse terror and fear, mainly among the residents of Western Europe**, and to strengthen the attractiveness of the Islamic State among Muslim communities. In the ITIC's assessment, **as ISIS suffers more and more severe blows in Iraq and Syria, this is liable to increase its motivation to carry out terrorist attacks overseas in order to deter its enemies and try to preserve its image as a victorious organization and as the leading jihadi organization**.

## The ceasefire agreement

- The ceasefire agreement **has entered into its fifth week**. The agreement continues to be maintained with the familiar characteristics, i.e., a significant decrease in the intensity of the clashes, local and insignificant violations, and continued airstrikes against ISIS and other organizations that are not included in the agreement, during the ceasefire. During the ceasefire, the Syrian Army carried out an attack that led to the takeover of Palmyra, which was not included in the agreement.
  
- Spokespersons for the United States and Russia continued to praise the survival of the ceasefire:
  - **According to the commander of the coordination center at Hmeymim base**, there were no significant violations of the ceasefire in Syria this week. Thirty-eight ceasefire violations were recorded in the daily reports published by the Russian Ministry of Defense last week, an average of 7-8 per day. The number of local ceasefire agreements signed with various organizations remains 43 (Russian Defense Ministry website, March 28, 2016).
  
  - At a meeting between **US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov**, Kerry said that the ceasefire agreement in Syria has led to a reduction of violence in the country, adding that he would like there to be a further reduction, as well as an increase in the transfer of humanitarian aid to Syria. Kerry expressed hope that the meetings in Russia would lead to a solution that would put an end to the crisis in Syria (Reuters, March 23, 2016).

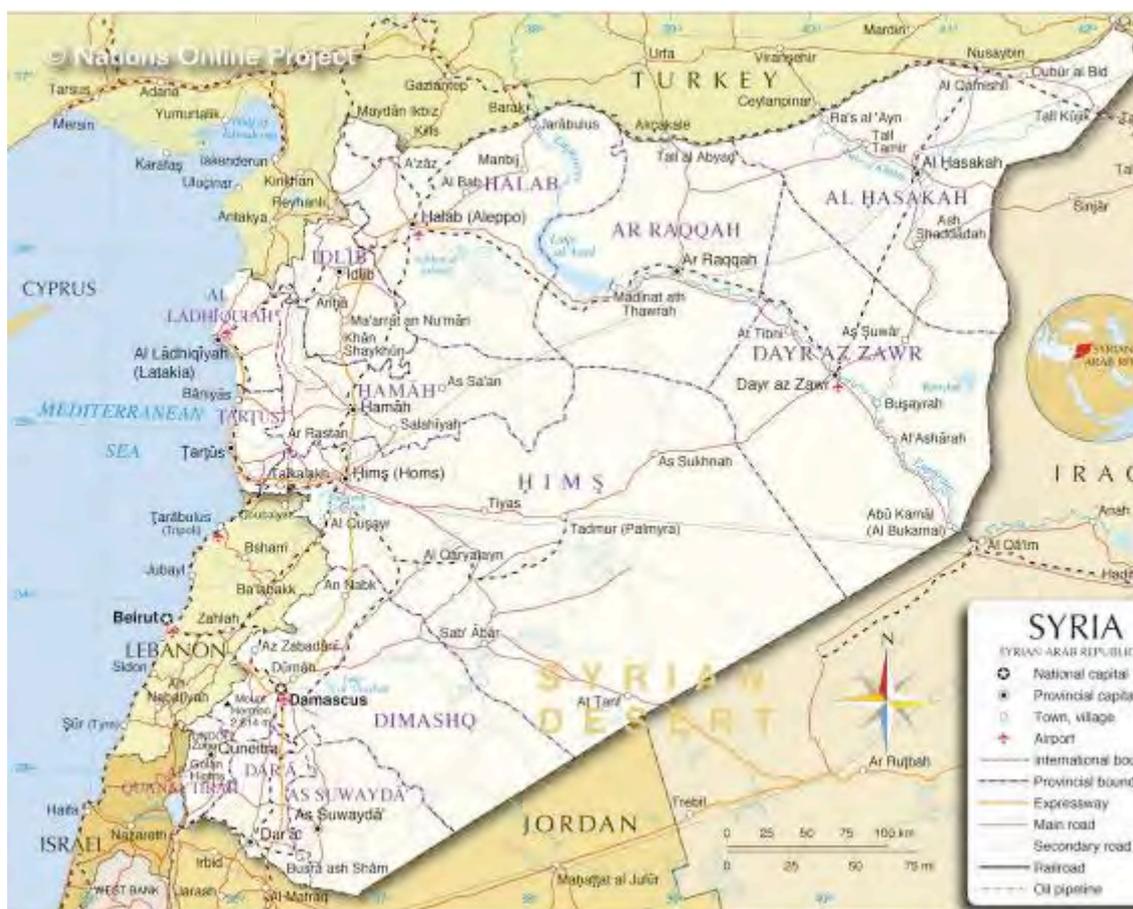
## Russian and US activity

- This week, the Russian airstrikes focused on supporting the Syrian Army in the battle to take over the city of Palmyra. Most of the airstrikes by the US and its allies focused on supporting the Iraqi Army in the various battle zones inside and outside the Al-Anbar Province, and only a small number were carried out in Syria.
- **On March 25, 2016**, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced that **a number of prominent ISIS terrorist operatives had been killed in US airstrikes** this week. Those killed include **Hajji Imam**, designated by the Americans as **a senior ISIS commander who headed the terror organization's economic system** ("finance minister"). According to an American source, he was killed by gunfire from a helicopter during an operation of US Special Forces, whose purpose was to catch him alive (Akhbar al-Aan, March 25, 2016).
- According to other reports, the dead man was **Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli**, of Turkmen descent, born in 1957 in the area of Tal Afar, in northern Iraq. He was a physics teacher until he started preaching in mosques. In 1988, he traveled to Afghanistan, where he met Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. He later returned to Iraq and fought in the ranks of Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's organization after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime (France 24, March 25, 2016; Al-Bawaba News, March 25, 2016). **His death is another blow to ISIS's senior command.**



Senior ISIS operative Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli, who was killed in a US airstrike (Al-Bawaba News, March 25, 2016).

## Main developments in Syria



Map of Syria (www.nationsonline.org).

### The takeover of Palmyra - update (updated to March 30, 2016)

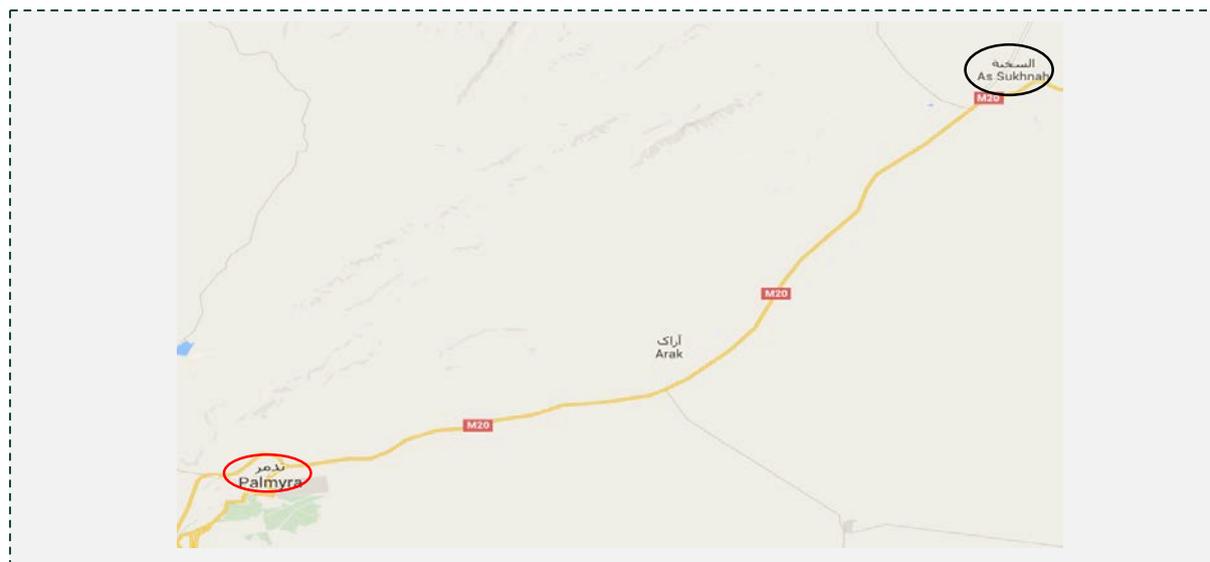
■ **On March 25, 2016**, at the end of the takeover of key areas dominating Palmyra, the Syrian Army and the forces supporting it began a military operation with the goal of taking over the city. After the fighting, which lasted until the morning of March 27, 2016, the Syrian Army had completed its takeover of the city. Syrian television broadcasts show that the city was deserted<sup>1</sup>. Following the takeover of the city, the Syrian Army took control of the airport, southeast of Palmyra. According to the Daily Telegraph, around 80% of the antiquities in Palmyra are in good condition.

<sup>1</sup> According to the Al-Bawaba News website, before the takeover of Palmyra by ISIS, the city was home to around 50,000 residents. During ISIS's rule, the number dropped to 15,000.



The city of Palmyra, an important crossroads in the heart of the Syrian Desert (Google Maps).

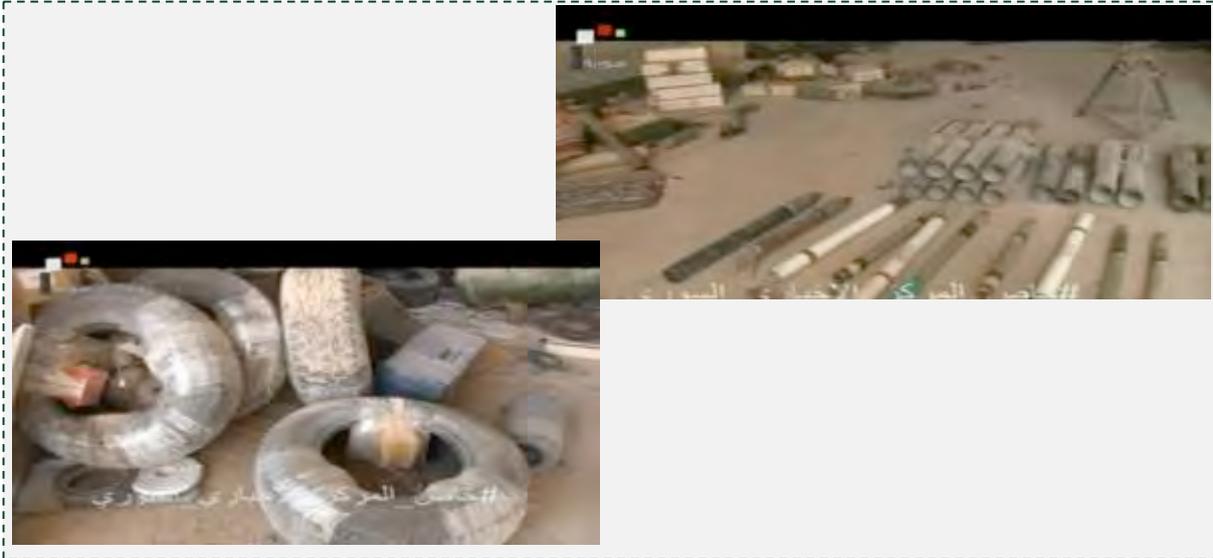
- According to some reports, **400-450 ISIS operatives were killed during the battle for Palmyra** (RT; SOHR, March 27, 2016). The remaining ISIS operatives **retreated to the desert city of As-Sukhnah, located about 64 km east of Palmyra**. The city of As-Sukhnah was reportedly attacked from the air and its residents fled (Syria Mubasher, March 28, 2016). **At least 180 Syrian Army soldiers were killed** (SOHR, March 27, 2016). **Twenty Hezbollah operatives were killed**, members of an elite unit that supported the Syrian Army in the battle for Palmyra (Okaz, March 27, 2016).



The city of As-Sukhnah, east of Palmyra, to which ISIS operatives fled (Google Maps).

- At the end of the takeover of Palmyra, the Syrian Army engineering teams dismantled mines and IEDs planted by ISIS operatives in the city and its surroundings. The engineering teams also dismantled mines and IEDs left by ISIS in the airport, to the east of the city. At the airport, large quantities of weapons were seized and tunnels

used by ISIS were uncovered. **Workshops for manufacturing rockets, mortars and IEDs were discovered in the hangars at the airport** (Syrian TV, March 27, 2016). According to reports, in the next few days, Russia will send experts and equipment to Palmyra, for dismantling the remaining mines (RT and Syrian TV, March 28, 2016).



**Right: Weapons manufactured in hangars at the airport in Palmyra. Left: IEDs planted in tires, apparently intended for use in car bombs (Syrian TV, March 27, 2016).**



**Right: Syrian helicopters, which have resumed landing at the airport at Palmyra. Left: The destruction in Palmyra after the takeover (Syrian TV, March 28, 2016).**



Right: One of the houses in Palmyra, which served as the ISIS headquarters. Left: A form of ISIS's "finance ministry" (*Diwan Beit al-Mal*) seized by the Syrian Army in one of the headquarters in Palmyra (Syrian TV, March 28, 2016).

## The campaign for taking over the city of Al-Qaryatayn

■ With the takeover of Palmyra, **Syrian Army forces have been directed to the city of Al-Qaryatayn**, to its southwest. On March 27, 2016, Syrian Army forces seized control of strategic areas west of Al-Qaryatayn, after clashes with ISIS operatives. The clashes are still ongoing in the area of Al-Qaryatayn, and Russian planes have attacked ISIS targets in the city. **The takeover of Al-Qaryatayn will enable the Syrian Army to maintain territorial contiguity between the Damascus-Homs route and the city of Palmyra and to establish its control over the region.**

## Initial reactions to the takeover of Palmyra

### Syria and Russia

■ Following the takeover of Palmyra, the Syrian regime and Russia were quick to **launch a propaganda campaign**, with the aim of leveraging the military achievement to **advance political goals**. Following are some notable statements:

- **The takeover of Palmyra is proof of the efficiency of the Syrian regime's war against terrorism.** This is in contrast to the meager achievements and "lack of seriousness" of **the US-led international coalition** since its inception (Bashar Assad, speaking to a French delegation, the Syrian News Agency, March 27, 2016). Bashar Assad was quoted by Syrian TV, saying that the takeover of Palmyra is **an important achievement** indicating the **success of the strategy of the Syrian Army and its allies in the war against terrorism.**

- **The Syrian chief of staff** issued a statement that **the Syrian Army is the only force that can fight terrorism**. According to the statement, the takeover of Palmyra is a serious blow to ISIS and could severely harm the morale of its operatives. **The Syrian Army, with the support of the Russian Air Force, will continue its operations against ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front and will expand its military operations eastward, toward Deir al-Zor and Al-Raqqah** (Syrian News Agency, March 27, 2016). **Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi** said that “the takeover of Palmyra opens the gateway to an **advance toward additional targets, including Deir al-Zor and Al-Raqqah**” (Al-Alam TV, March 29, 2016).
- **President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman** cited Bashar Assad’s appreciation of the **Russian air support**, without which the takeover of Palmyra would not have been possible (Sputnik, March 27, 2016). According to the **Russian defense minister**, on the eve of the takeover of Palmyra, the Russian Air Force carried out 40 sorties, in which 158 airstrikes were carried out in and around the city of Palmyra. As a result, according to the defense minister, over 100 ISIS operatives were killed and weapons and ammunition were destroyed (RT, March 26, 2016). According to the **Russian Foreign Ministry**, Syria sees the takeover of Palmyra as **a real opportunity to promote the political process in Syria**.

## ISIS

■ This time ISIS’s propaganda machine, which generally does not comment at length on ISIS’s failures, attempted to offset the damage to its image caused by the takeover of Palmyra. ISIS’s media channels denied reports of the takeover of the city, claiming that the soldiers of the Caliphate had managed to halt the Syrian Army. They emphasized the many losses sustained by the Syrian forces and resorted to vehement rhetoric against the Shiites, infidels and “atheistic Russian” participants in the attack.

## The United States and Britain

■ According to **John Kirby, Spokesperson for the United States Department of State**, the United States supports the takeover of Palmyra, but the future of the Syrian president is not clear **The British Foreign Office spokesman** also praised the takeover of Palmyra, but added that the Syrian regime was responsible for the crisis in Syria.

## Clashes in other provinces throughout Syria

■ In other provinces in Syria, including provinces where the ceasefire applies and areas where it does not, local clashes continued between the various forces, with no significant changes on the ground:

- **The area of Aleppo:** There were clashes in the city between the Syrian Army and rebel forces in the area of the Hananu army base north of the Aleppo Citadel, in the Ancient City of Aleppo. In the rural area north of Aleppo, fighting continued between ISIS operatives and the rebel organizations. In the area of Jarabulus, there were clashes between ISIS operatives and the Kurds. The Turkish Army reportedly attacked Kurdish targets north of Aleppo.
- **The area of Deir al-Zor:** In the Al-Sina'ah neighborhood in southeastern Deir al-Zor, there were clashes between the Syrian Army and ISIS operatives.
- **The southern Syrian Golan Heights:** Clashes continued between the rebel forces, including the Al-Nusra Front, and the ISIS-affiliated Al-Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade. The fighting is still ongoing. The Al-Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade **announced the death of Abu Hadi al-Nabulsi**, a senior military commander in the Brigade, in clashes with the Al-Nusra Front (Khatwa; Suriyati, March 24, 2016).

## Main developments in Iraq



Map of Iraq (nationsonline.org).

### Al-Anbar Province

#### Hit

■ The operation for the liberation of the city of Hit continues. The city is located on the west bank of the Euphrates River, about 70 km northwest of Ramadi. The Iraqi Army, with the support of local tribes, is surrounding the city, which is controlled by ISIS. On March 26, 2016, the Iraqi Army completed the takeover of the town of Kabisa, located east of the city. The Iraqi Army received air support from the US and the coalition countries (Fars News; Hamrin, March 27, 2016).

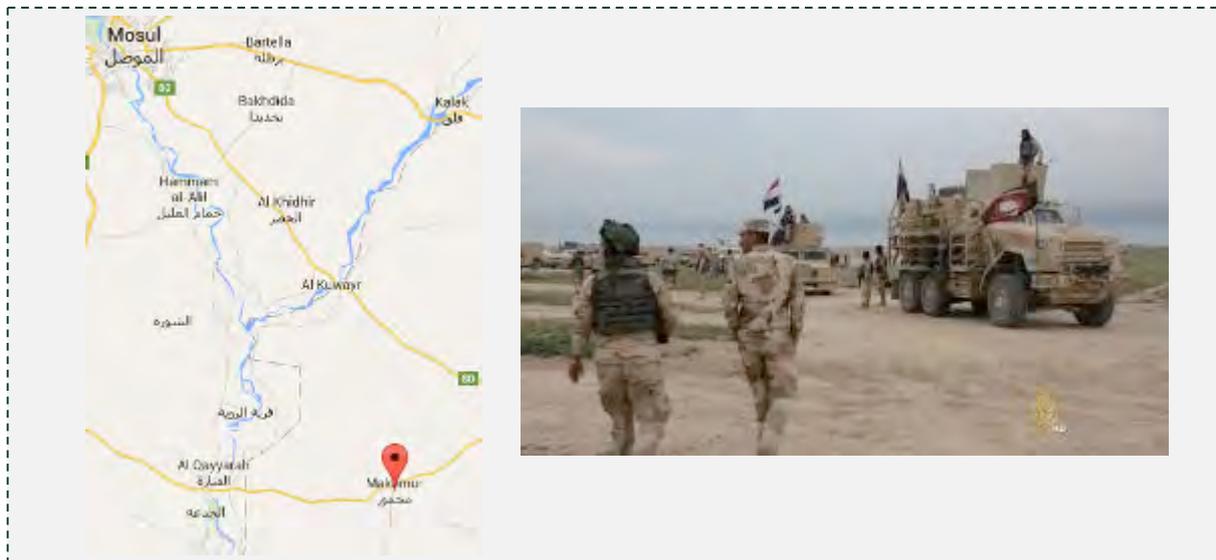
## Ramadi

■ A senior ISIS media operative was reportedly killed in an airstrike east of the city of Ramadi (Sky News, March 26, 2016). The chief of weapons and explosives was also killed in the airstrike (Al-Alam TV, March 26, 2016).

## The city of Mosul

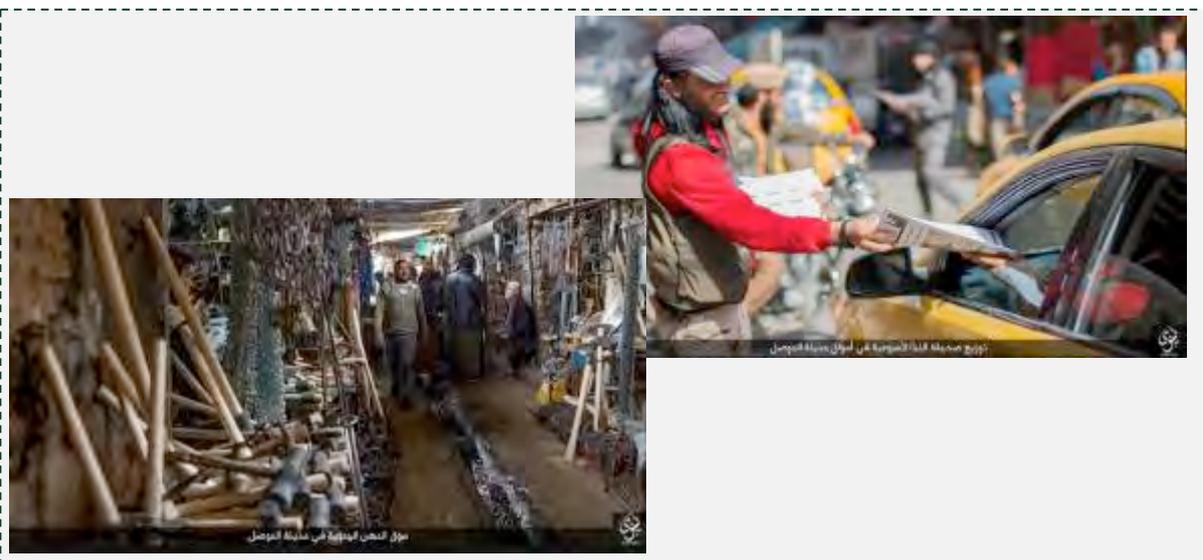
■ Coalition aircraft reportedly attacked the University of Mosul, destroying ISIS storerooms located inside tunnels on the university premises. After the airstrike, ISIS began to evacuate its operatives and equipment from the storerooms in the university and transfer them to another location (Al-Sabah, March 23, 2016).

■ On March 24, 2016, the Iraqi Army announced that **it had begun an operation for the liberation of the Nineveh Province and the city of Mosul from the hands of ISIS.** The Iraqi Army acted with the support of the US Air Force and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Battles are reportedly taking place southeast of Mosul. **The city of Makhmur**, about 70 km southeast of the city of Mosul, serves as the home base of the Iraqi forces (Al-Jazeera, March 24-27, 2016).



**Right: The Iraqi Army preparing to advance toward Mosul (Al-Jazeera, March 26, 2016) Left: The city of Makhmur, the Iraqi Army's home base, about 70 km southeast of Mosul (Google Maps).**

■ According to Arab media reports, ISIS is carrying out mass executions in the city of Mosul, and thousands of its residents are fleeing from the battlefields in the Nineveh Province (Akhbar Alan, March 28, 2016). In response, ISIS's media channels claims that daily life in the city of Mosul is proceeding normally and published photos designed to reinforce that message (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 26, 2016).



Right: Distribution of ISIS's weekly magazine Al-Naba in the city of Mosul. Left: Traditional artisans market in the city of Mosul (Akbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 26, 2016).

## The area south of Baghdad

■ On March 25, 2016, an ISIS suicide bomber blew himself up on a football stadium in the city of Al-Iskandariya, around 70 km south of Baghdad. **At least 29 people were killed in the attack** and about 60 others were wounded. **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack** (BBC in Arabic, March 25, 2016; Aamaq News Agency, March 25, 2016). The city of Al-Iskandariya has a population of around 320,000, mainly Sunni tribespeople. The attack was apparently carried out because many of the locals have joined the Iraqi security forces (Uruba, March 28, 2016).

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

■ During the week, the Egyptian security forces continued their intensive activity against ISIS's Sinai Province in the areas of Sheikh Zuweid, Al-Arish and Rafah. At the same time, ISIS operatives continued their guerrilla activities against the Egyptian security forces, mainly by planting IEDs. Following are a number of noteworthy incidents:

- According to a report from **March 26, 2016**, the Egyptian Army killed seven terrorist operatives in an exchange of fire south of Sheikh Zuweid. In addition, 10 terrorist operatives were killed in an Egyptian Air Force airstrike (Al-Masry al-Youm, March 26, 2016).
- According to a report from **March 25, 2016**, 60 ISIS operatives were killed and 40 others were injured in airstrikes directed at more than 50 targets (homes and shacks) south of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah (Al-Masry al-Youm, March 25, 2016).

- **On March 24, 2016**, ISIS's Sinai Province announced that its operatives had detonated an IED against an Egyptian Army minesweeper. The explosion occurred on the main road between Al-Arish and Rafah (Akhbar Dawlat al-Khilafah, March 24, 2016).



**Right: Egyptian Army vehicle just before the IED was detonated against it. Left: Fire and black smoke rising from the left side of the Egyptian vehicle after the explosion (Akhbar Dawlat al-Khilafah, March 24, 2016).**

- **On March 27, 2016**, the Egyptian security forces carried out patrols in northern Sinai, during which 20 terrorist operatives were arrested, over 100 people were killed and a large quantity of equipment was destroyed (Al-Masry al-Youm, March 27, 2016).

## The global jihad in other countries

### Turkey

Following the attack in Istanbul, the Turkish security forces carried out arrests of ISIS operatives. Sky News reported (March 29, 2016) that six ISIS operatives had been arrested a week ago in the city of Gaziantep, in eastern Turkey. Their interrogation revealed **that ISIS was planning to carry out attacks at Jewish youth centers, schools and kindergartens in Turkey.** One of the possible targets is the Buyoglu Synagogue complex in Istanbul, which also includes a school and community center. According to intelligence sources, this is a **real and immediate threat**, and the Turkish authorities have intensified their security measures in order to thwart it. The synagogue mentioned in the report is the main synagogue in Istanbul (Neve Shalom), which was a target for attacks in the past<sup>2</sup>.

■ **The Israeli Counter-Terrorism Bureau has issued a travel warning for Turkey,** stating that “The threat of more attacks by terrorist elements has increased, with an emphasis on the Islamic State, **on tourist targets including Israeli tourists.**” The Counter-Terrorism Bureau’s recommendation is “to refrain from visiting the country and [those who are currently there should] leave as soon as possible” (Israeli National Security Council website, March 28, 2016).

### Libya

#### Sabratah

■ The city of Sabratah is located west of Tripoli. ISIS has a presence there, but does not control it. In the past, Tunisian operatives who were sent on terrorist missions inside Tunisia were trained at ISIS training camps in the city. According to a recent report to the UN Security Council by a team of experts on Libya, in December 2015, ISIS entered into an agreement with the Sabratah Municipality. According to the agreement, ISIS operatives would refrain from appearing in public in the city and, in return, the municipality would overlook the presence of the operatives in the city. The agreement was drawn up after the publication of photos showing displays of power by ISIS in Sabratah. The mayor of Sabratah was quick to deny the report (Al-Wasat Portal, March 26, 2016; alarabiya.net, March 26, 2016; diwanfm, December 26, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> On September 6, 1986, an attack was carried out against the Neve Shalom Synagogue in which 21 Jews attending Sabbath services were killed. On October 15, 2003, terrorist attacks were carried out at Neve Shalom Synagogue and another synagogue in Istanbul (Beth Israel). The two attacks killed 18 people, some of them worshippers and some of them passersby.

## Yemen

■ This week, three car bombs exploded at a checkpoint in the city of Aden. The attack **killed 22 people, including 10 civilians** (AFP, March 25, 2016). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack (Conflict News, March 25, 2016).

### The battle for hearts and minds

#### ISIS propaganda campaign following the Brussels terror attacks

■ Following the terror attacks in Brussels, ISIS launched a propaganda campaign **intended to arouse terror and fear among the inhabitants of Belgium, and the Europeans in general**, and to strengthen the attractiveness of the Islamic State. The propaganda campaign **features ISIS operatives of Belgian descent**. Here are some examples:

- The ISIS-affiliated **Al-Battar media foundation** issued a video glorifying the Brussels terror attacks. At first, the video reviews the attacks, based on Western media. Then ISIS explains that the attacks were carried out due to Belgium's part in the coalition airstrikes, killing Muslims in Iraq and Syria and destroying mosques and schools. In the video, ISIS calls on its audience to fight the "Crusaders" (i.e., the Christians), the infidels of Islam (Isdarat, March 24, 2016).
- **ISIS's Al-Raqqah Province in Syria** posted a video on March 27, 2016, in which the residents of Al-Raqqah express their satisfaction regarding the terror attacks in Brussels, noting that the Brussels attacks are a result of the international coalition airstrikes against Muslim cities. Among other things, the video features an ISIS operative of Belgian descent, codenamed **Abu Khalifa al-Baljiki** (i.e., the Belgian), praising the "good life" in Al-Raqqah versus Europe, where the residents now live in fear (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 27, 2016).



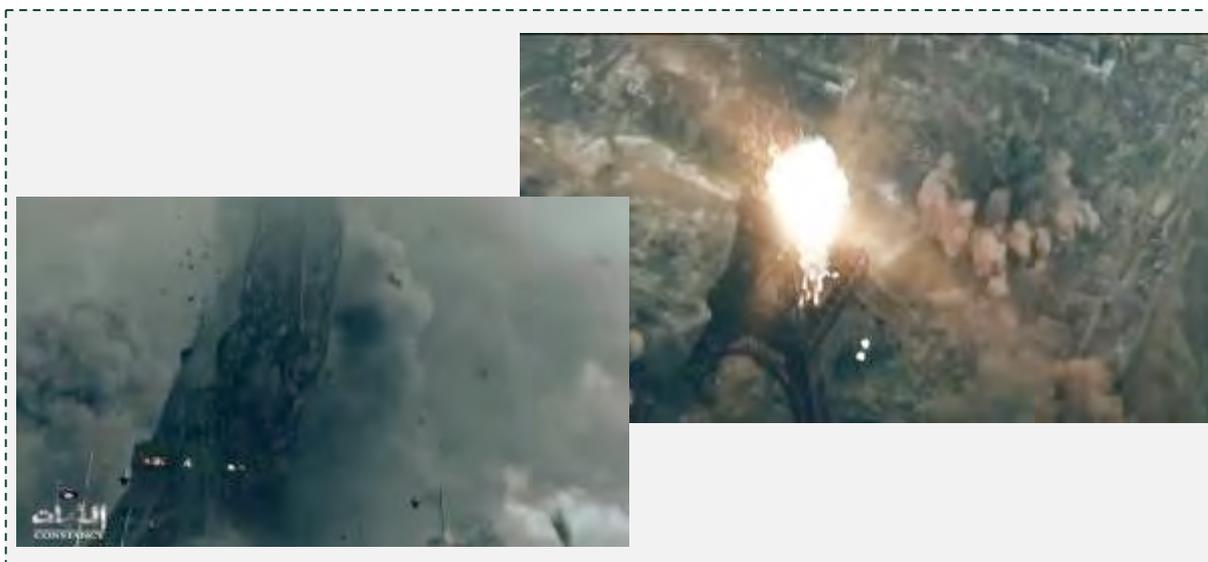
Right: Abu Khalifa al-Baljiki. Left: The Al-Raqqah city center, bustling with people (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 27, 2016).

- On March 25, 2016, **ISIS's Nineveh Province in Iraq** released a video showing **two ISIS operatives with Belgian citizenship** expressing support for the Brussels terror attacks. The first, codenamed **Abu Abdullah al-Baljiki**, expresses sympathy with the terrorists who carried out the attacks. The second operative, codenamed **Abu Mujahed al-Baljiki**, threatens the West, saying “You entered the era of war, whereupon you will see blood flowing in your streets. [The Brussels attacks] are only the beginning of your nightmare” (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 25, 2016).



Left: ISIS operative of Belgian descent, codenamed Abu Abdullah al-Baljiki. Right: ISIS operative codenamed Abu Mujahed al-Baljiki (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 25, 2016)

- Following the terror attacks in Brussels, **ISIS-affiliated social media accounts** posted a threat to the Belgians and the West: **“Brussels – here we are. What is about to happen will be more terrible, more bitter, worse, deadlier and more painful. O, slaves of the cross...”** (Masrawy, March 22, 2016).
- **On March 25, 2016, ISIS released an English-language video** entitled “A Message to the Western *Kafir* [Disbelievers] from the Supporters of the Caliphate”. The video includes a threat that **revenge will come**. It includes a **simulation of an airstrike on Paris and a verbal threat against the “Crusaders”**: **“We will invade London, Brussels and Berlin, like we did in Paris before”**. The narrator says: “We will come to you and terrify you everywhere. We will come after you from where you don’t expect” and “fill your streets with blood” (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 25, 2016).



**Right: Simulation of Paris and blowing up the Eiffel Tower. Left: Simulation of the Eiffel Tower collapsing (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, March 25, 2016)**