



Spotlight on Global Jihad
(July 28 – August 3, 2016)



Main events of the week

- The main event of this week was **the campaign over the city of Aleppo**, which is surrounded by the Syrian Army and its allies. The rebel organizations announced a campaign whose objective was to lift the siege on the city. According to the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, the Syrian Army with Russian air support has repulsed a massive attack led by the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al-Nusra Front) in northern Aleppo. The battles in northern Aleppo and the rural areas to the south are still ongoing.
- On July 28, 2016, **Abu Muhammad al-Julani, leader of the Al-Nusra Front** (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria), announced the establishment of a new framework called the **Fateh al-Sham Front**. The purpose of the name change is to blur the Al-Nusra Front's identification with Al-Qaeda, thus facilitating its cooperation with other rebel organizations and impeding cooperation against it between Russia and the United States (based on an agreement being formulated between the two countries). In the ITIC's assessment, the connection **between the new group and Al-Qaeda will actually continue. Al-Qaeda's leadership issued a statement of support for Al-Julani's action**. The initial responses of the US and Russia clearly indicate that they are not buying the new image that Al-Julani seeks to give his organization and do not believe that **he has really broken off with Al-Qaeda**.
- ISIS continued to carry out deadly terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare throughout Syria and Iraq: **In the Kurdish city of Qamishli**, in eastern Syria, an ISIS suicide bomber blew up a truck (14 dead); Several suicide bombing attacks were carried out **in the city of Baghdad and the Sunni Al-Anbar Province**; **In the Bai Hassan oil field** northwest of Kirkuk, two terrorist attacks by ISIS operatives were repulsed. The attacks included the use of suicide bombers.

The conduct of the Al-Nusra Front

Abu Mohammad al-Julani's announcement of the change in the Al-Nusra Front's name and the establishment of a new framework

- **Abu Mohammad al-Julani, leader of the Al-Nusra Front** (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria), announced the change of the name of the organization and the establishment of a new framework. **The new framework will be called the Fateh al-Sham Front¹** and it will fight alongside other rebel organizations against the Assad regime and the forces supporting it. In the announcement, Al-Julani made it clear that **the step was made “under the direction and on the instructions of this blessed leadership [the Al-Qaeda leadership], and out of a commitment to serve the residents of Al-Sham and their jihad”** (Al-Jazeera TV, July 28, 2016).
- In his announcement, Al-Julani spells out **two basic reasons** for changing the name of the Al-Nusra Front and establishing a new framework: one, **the desire not to give the international community** led by the United States and Russia an excuse to attack the rebel organizations in Syria on the grounds that the attacks are directed against the Al-Nusra Front, which is subordinate to Al-Qaeda (the Al-Nusra Front was Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria). **The second reason is the desire to promote unity among the rebel organizations in Syria** (“the jihad warrior factions”) and to create a **unified body that will liberate Syrian soil from the yoke of the Syrian regime and its allies**. Al-Julani doesn't explicitly state that he has broken off with Al-Qaeda, but claims that **the new framework is not affiliated with any foreign entity** (i.e., it is not affiliated with Al-Qaeda).

¹ **The term *Fateh*** indicates victory or conquest, and is used, inter alia, to describe the conquests of early Islam in the days of the Prophet Muhammad and in the period after his death. **The term *Al-Sham*** refers to both Syria and Greater Syria.



Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani flanked by two officials from his organization, in an interview with Al-Jazeera TV in which he announces that the organization has been renamed the Fateh al-Sham Front (Al-Jazeera TV, July 28, 2016). The insignia of the organization appears above, consisting of the name the Fateh al-Sham Front. In this interview with Al-Jazeera TV, Al-Julani appears unmasked for the first time.

■ Following Al-Julani's announcement, **the Fateh al-Sham Front published an announcement in English.** The announcement stresses that the Al-Nusra Front never advocated a policy of segregation [in contrast to ISIS] **but always fought alongside other [rebel] organizations and intensified its cooperation with them in all the battle zones.** According to the announcement, **joining forces between the various organizations is a top priority** (Fateh al-Sham Front-affiliated Twitter account, July 29, 2016). On July 31, 2016, **the Fateh al-Sham Front published its charter**, which centers around **the Salafist-jihadi worldview and the desire to implement *Sharia*** (Muslim law). The announcement stresses the opposition to divisiveness (a subtle hint at ISIS) and the desire for unity among Muslims, and in particular unity among jihad fighters, "according to the proper, healthy and stable elements of *Sharia*" (Twitter account of the Fateh al-Sham Front, July 31, 2016).



Right: The announcement in English on the establishment of the Fateh al-Sham Front (Fateh al-Sham Front-affiliated Twitter account, July 29, 2016). Left: The Fatah al-Sham Front's charter (Twitter account of Fateh al-Sham Front, July 31, 2016)

■ **Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputy Ahmed Hassan Abu Khayr** released an audiotape, apparently shortly before Al-Julani's announcement on Al-Jazeera, giving **the Al-Nusra Front's new move the green light**. According to Al-Zawahiri, **Al-Qaeda is ready to sacrifice its organizational and party ties with the Al-Nusra Front** for the sake of the unity of the organizations in the campaign against the Syrian regime and its allies: "Fraternity between us about Islam is stronger than any changing ephemeral organizational ties. Your unity and your association [i.e., of the Al-Nusra Front and its allies] surpass the organizational affiliation [to Al-Qaeda] and the party connections. **We are sacrificing the organizational and party ties if this runs counter to your unity and your association [...]**" (YouTube, July 28, 2016).

Changing the name of the Al-Nusra Front and blurring its ties with Al-Qaeda is **a move that was publicly welcomed by the leadership of Al-Qaeda and, in the ITIC's assessment, was carried out with its approval**. This move is **very much in line with the conduct of the Al-Nusra Front**, which has adopted a pragmatic policy of cooperating with other rebel organizations and joining coalitions with them (as opposed to ISIS's rigid and uncompromising separatist line). **The timing of the move is probably related to the reports about the upcoming agreement between the US and Russia regarding joint combat against ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front**, and the desire to "divert the fire" from the Al-Nusra Front by blurring its terrorist image. In addition, Al-Julani apparently believes that blurring the terrorist image will **help the new framework expand its cooperation with the rebel organizations, thereby strengthening the abilities of his organization and its allies in the campaign against the Syrian Army**.

Initial reactions

■ Based on the initial reactions of the various power centers operating in Syria, it is clear that **they are not buying the new image that the Al-Nusra Front seeks to display and they do not believe that it has really broken off from Al-Qaeda:**

- **US Department of State Spokesman John Kirby** said that the new organization is no different from its predecessor: “We certainly see no reason to believe that their actions or their objectives are any different, **and they are still considered a foreign terrorist organization**” (US Department of State website, July 28, 2016).

- According to a **statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry**, the Al-Nusra Front’s attempts to change its image by changing its name are useless. This is because, according to the statement, **the organization has been and remains an illegal terrorist organization and therefore the war against it will continue** (TASS News Agency, July 29, 2016).

- According to **Bahram Qassemi, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman**, the **change in the name of the Al-Nusra Front is a “play on words” and the organization’s terrorist activities will continue** (Fars News, July 28, 2016).

The US-led campaign against ISIS

■ During the week, the US-led coalition continued its intensive airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, most of the airstrikes were concentrated **in and around the city of Manbij**, where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are fighting against ISIS. Airstrikes were also carried out in the areas of Al-Raqqah and Deir al-Zor. In Iraq, the airstrikes were concentrated in the areas of Erbil, Mosul, Ramadi and Sinjar (US Department of Defense website).

■ In a speech, **US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter** said that the international coalition against ISIS was looking for opportunities to **expand its operations and put pressure on ISIS from southern Syria as well**. According to him, the activity in this part of the country will lead to a split in ISIS’s areas of operation in Syria and Iraq and will improve Jordan’s security (Hürriyet, July 27, 2016).

Russia’s involvement in the fighting

■ A Russian M18 helicopter with a crew of five on its way back to Hmeymim base **was shot down between Aleppo and Idlib** (northwestern Syria). According to the

Russian Defense Ministry, **three crew members and two officers from the Russian coordination center were killed in the crash** (RT, August 1, 2016). According to **Sergei Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff**, the helicopter was a military transport helicopter carrying out a humanitarian mission of delivering food and medical supplies to Aleppo. According to him, the helicopter was shot down in an area where the **Fateh al-Sham Front and other rebel organizations operate** (TASS News Agency, August 1, 2016).

Main developments in Syria



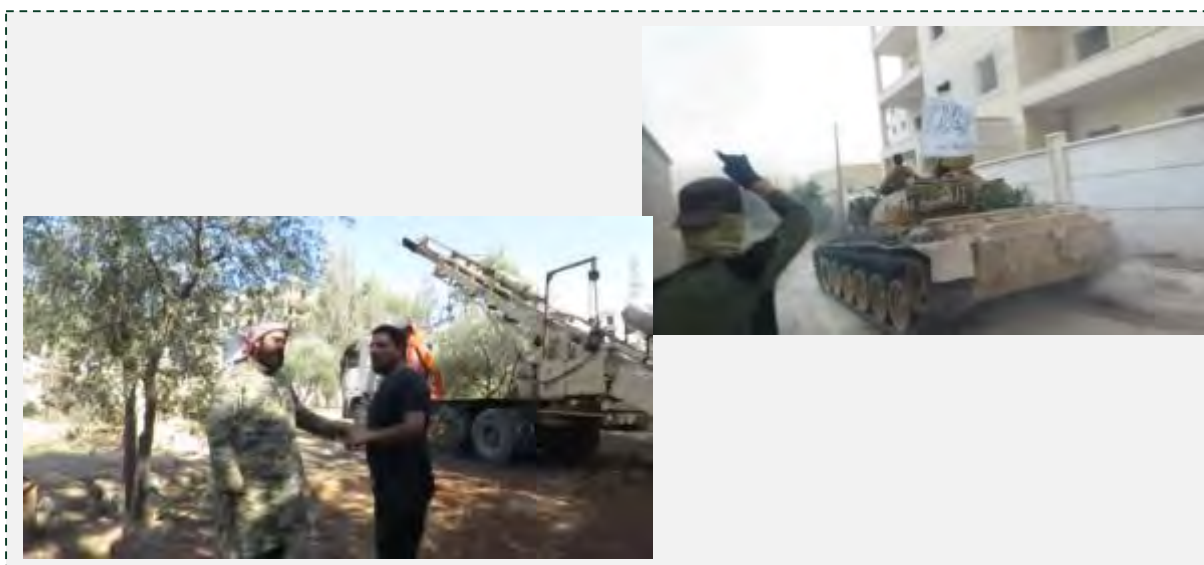
Map of Syria (www.nationsonline.org)

The campaign in Aleppo and its environs

■ On July 27, 2016, the **Syrian Army** published an official announcement stating that the **Syrian forces had completed their encirclement of the city of Aleppo** after taking over the neighborhood of **Bani Zeid**, in the north of the city (Dimashq al-Aan, July 27, 2016). On July 31, 2016, the **rebel organizations announced the start of a campaign called the Aleppo Raid**, which aims to lift the siege imposed by the **Syrian regime forces on neighborhoods of the city that are held by the rebels** (this refers to neighborhoods in eastern Aleppo). A

spokesman for one of the organizations (Ahrar al-Sham) announced that the lifting of the siege on the city of Aleppo was imminent (Al-Nashra, August 2, 2016). At the same time, the rebel organizations continued to attack the Syrian forces and their allies **in the rural area south of Aleppo**.

■ According to Sergei Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, the Syrian Army with Russian air support has repulsed a massive attack led by the Fateh al-Sham Front aimed at lifting the siege on Aleppo. According to him, the attack was carried out **by some 5,000 operatives led by the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al-Nusra Front) and other rebel organizations in northern Aleppo**. He added that more than 800 fighters were killed in the fighting and about 14 tanks and 10 armored vehicles were destroyed. **The campaign is still ongoing** (bussinessinsider.com, August 2, 2016).



Right: Tank belonging to Jaysh al-Fatah, an umbrella framework in which the Al-Nusra Front plays a major role, during the offensive in southwestern Aleppo. Left: One of the Jaysh al-Fatah commanders near a truck belonging to a heavy artillery battery (YouTube, July 31, 2016)

The battle for the city of Manbij

■ In the city of Manbij, the fighting between ISIS operatives and the SDF has been going on for nearly three months. SDF forces are apparently encountering strong opposition from ISIS. Although the SDF managed to take over part of the city, they are having difficulty removing the ISIS operatives from their outposts. According to Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), **the SDF forces have taken control of about 40% of Manbij**. Reuters reported that SDF troops had removed ISIS operatives from **about 70% of the area of the city** (Al-Jadeed, July 31, 2016).

Additional incidents

- Fighting continued in other areas in Syria, although the intensity was relatively low.

Noteworthy examples:

- **The city of Qamishli: 44 people were killed and 140 others were wounded by a truck bomb activated by a suicide bomber** in the western part of the Kurdish city of Qamishli. The intense blast created a large crater in the ground, destroying several apartments and causing great damage to infrastructure in the area (SANA, July 27, 2016). According to ISIS, a suicide bomber detonated a truck bomb against the headquarters of Kurdish forces in Qamishli (Haqq, July 27, 2016).



The destruction caused in Qamishli by a truck bomb detonated by an ISIS suicide bomber (SANA, July 27, 2016)

- **Southern Syria:** West of the city of Daraa, there were clashes between the ISIS-affiliated **Khalid bin Walid Army** and the rebel organizations. According to an announcement by the Fateh al-Sham Front, the organization carries out attacks in order to remove the siege from its besieged operatives in the Yarmouk basin (ARA News, August 1, 2016).

Main developments in Iraq



Map of Iraq (www.nationsonline.org)

ISIS continues its terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare

■ ISIS is continuing its terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare against the Shiites, the Iraqi security forces, and the Iraqi government. This week, there were several terrorist attacks in Baghdad and the Al-Anbar Province, some of them with car bombs and suicide bombers. Scores of civilians and members of the security forces were killed in these terrorist attacks. This week's noteworthy events:

- **July 31, 2016:** ISIS claimed responsibility for a double suicide bombing attack with truck bombs against an Iraqi Army base **northwest of the city of Rutba**, near the border with Syria. According to ISIS, 20 Iraqi soldiers were killed in the attack (Haqq, July 31, 2016).

- **July 31, 2016:** A car bomb exploded in the Akashat area, near the border with Syria, **some 80 km northwest of Rutba**, resulting in a total of 25 dead and injured policemen (Al-Jazeera, August 1, 2016).
- **On July 27, 2016, there were a number of terrorist attacks in and around the city of Baghdad:** Two government officials were killed in a shooting attack on the Al-Muthanna Bridge **in northern Baghdad**; Two people were killed and seven others injured in an **IED explosion in the area of Al-Yusufiyah, about 15 km south of Baghdad** (Al-Jazeera, July 27, 2016); An ISIS suicide bomber blew himself up at an **Iraqi police checkpoint in the Al-Shaala neighborhood in northwestern Baghdad**. Three people were killed and eight others were injured (Rusiya Al-Yaum, July 27, 2016).



A suicide bomber codenamed Abu Mus'ab al-Iraqi, who blew himself up with an explosive belt at an Iraqi police checkpoint in the Al-Shaala neighborhood in northwestern Baghdad (Haqq, July 28, 2016)

Kirkuk Province

- On July 31, 2016, ISIS operatives **attempted to attack two facilities at the Bai Hassan oil field, about 40 km northwest of Kirkuk** (CNN, July 31, 2016). Both attempts were thwarted by the Iraqi Army. The oil facilities were damaged (Al-Jazeera, August 1, 2016). Following is a description of the events:
 - ISIS operatives attacked one of the facilities at the Bai Hassan oil field. They threw hand grenades, fired rifles and activated IEDs. As a result, at least five people were killed. The anti-terror unit stormed the facility and restored order (Reuters, July 31, 2016).

- Four suicide bombers wearing explosive belts tried to break into another oil facility. The four were killed by the Iraqi security forces (Al-Sumaria, July 31, 2016).



The Bai Hassan oil field (Al-Sumaria, July 31, 2016)



The Bai Hassan oil field, about 40 km northwest of Kirkuk (Google Maps)

Senior ISIS operatives killed in airstrikes

- According to an Iraqi security source, the official in charge of ISIS's oil office was killed in a coalition airstrike southwest of Kirkuk. A total of 14 other ISIS operatives were killed along with him (Al-Sumaria, August 1, 2016).
- According to an Iraqi Army report, **dozens of ISIS operatives, including 13 senior officials, were killed** in an airstrike against an ISIS staging zone in the area of Al-Qaim, near the border with Syria. The dead reportedly included one of the deputies

of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, two governors of provinces (Fallujah and the Euphrates), and ISIS's Deputy War Minister. Foreign fighters from the Caucasus and Russia were also killed (Sky News, July 29, 2016).

The Sinai Peninsula

■ This week, the Egyptian security forces continued to carry out extensive military activity in the areas of Al-Arish, Rafah, and Sheikh Zuweid, supported by airstrikes by planes and helicopters. At the same time, **an operation to evacuate residents from southern Rafah and southern Sheikh Zuweid and house them in new villages in northwestern Sinai** has begun. The evacuation of the residents is part of an extensive operation to evacuate large areas on the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip and build a security fence along the border (Al-Akhbar, July 24, 2016).

Threats against Israel

■ A video distributed by ISIS's Sinai Province harshly criticizes the regimes of Egypt and the Gulf States, which are cooperating with the United States. ISIS accuses these regimes of serving the interests of the Jews and turning their soldiers into victims for the sake of the Jews. The speaker in the video threatens the Jews, noting: "Our account with you is heavy **and hard and soon you will pay a heavy price.**" Later in the video there is a quote from an audio recording of ISIS's leader (from the past) threatening the Jews (i.e., Israel) and saying: "We have not forgotten Palestine, and soon you will hear the noise of the jihad fighters [...] **We are getting closer to you every day and your account [with us] is hard [...] Palestine will be a grave for you**" (YouTube, August 2, 2016).

The conduct of the Islamic State

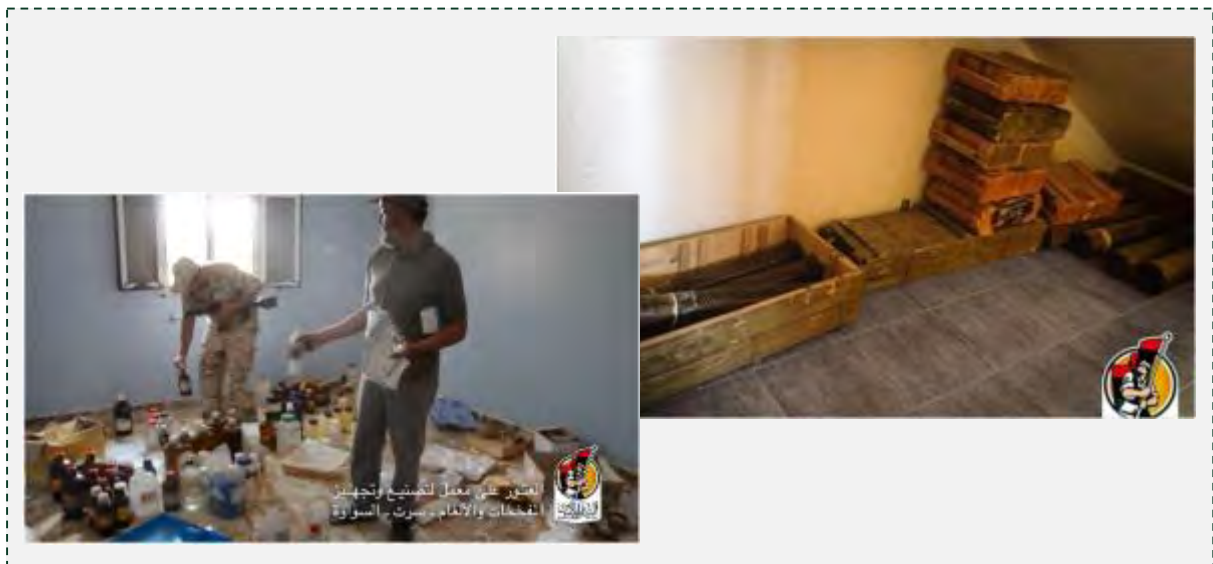
■ According to documents seized in the city of Manbij that came into the hands of the US Army, **the city served as ISIS's reception and guidance center for foreign fighters who came to fight in its ranks.** According to documents, fighters who came to Syria were sent to Manbij, where they were photographed and provided their personal details. Then they received their assignments and were sent to various destinations (ABC News, July 27, 2016). According to the US Army, more than 10,000 items of information in various formats (flash drives, laptops, books, records, etc.) came into its possession in the city of Manbij, including intelligence about ISIS's conduct (ABC News, July 27, 2016).

The global jihad in other countries

Libya

The Sirte campaign

■ **The campaign to take over the city of Sirte, which began in late May 2016, continued.** Forces of the Government of National Accord continue to fight against ISIS operatives who are holding on to the city center. On July 30, 2016, the forces of the Government of National Accord announced the completion of the takeover of the Al-Dular neighborhood in the city center, except for a few remaining pockets of resistance. According to the forces' operations room, the takeover of the clinic compound in central Sirte has been completed. The forces also seized the headquarters of the Directorate of National Security and the Foreign Security Apparatus (Libyan intelligence), which ISIS had turned into a Quran study center (Al-Wasat Portal, July 25, 2016).



Right: ISIS ammunition storeroom seized in the Al-Dular neighborhood in central Sirte. Left: ISIS workshop for manufacturing IEDs and mines in Al-Sawawa neighborhood in eastern Sirte (Facebook page of the information center of the campaign over Sirte, July 30, 2016)

US support for the forces fighting against ISIS in Sirte

■ The US has officially announced that its aircraft had carried out airstrikes against ISIS targets in Sirte. According to US Department of State Spokesman Peter Cooke, the airstrike was approved by US President Barack Obama on the recommendation of the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. According to Pentagon Spokeswoman Michelle Baldanza, the airstrike was carried out at the request of the Libyan government (The New York Times, August 2, 2016). This is the first time that US planes have supported the forces of the Government of National Accord by attacking ISIS targets in the campaign to take over Sirte. The background of the Libyan request and the US consent is apparently the Government of National Accord's difficulty in cleansing Sirte from the presence of ISIS operatives.

■ According to Libyan media reports, the background for the American attack was a memorandum sent by the operations room for the fight against ISIS in the Misrata-Sirte area to the Government of National Accord. The memorandum called on the government to examine the need for US support in the airstrikes against targets in Sirte. The explanation given by the operations room is that the nature of the fighting in Sirte has changed from fighting on open ground to fighting in built-up areas, and there are ISIS targets in the city that can only be attacked by using advanced military technology which is not at the operations room's disposal (Libya Al-Mustaqbal, July 30, 2016; Twitter account of the ajwa.net website, July 30, 2016).

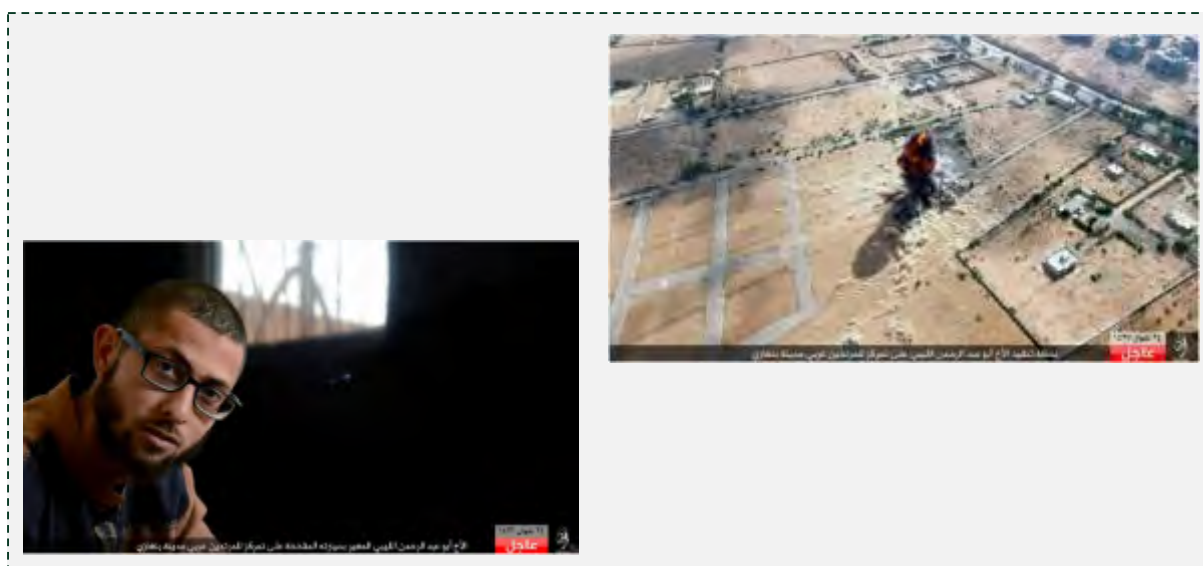


The memorandum from the operations room in the Misrata-Sirte area, advising the government to examine the need for American air support (Twitter account of the ajwa.net website, July 30, 2016)

■ In an interview given by **Amid (Brigadier General) Mohammad al-Ghasri, spokesman for the operations room**, he made similar statements. According to him, the forces fighting in Sirte need air support that will lead to precise hits in order to win the Sirte campaign. This is in view of the presence of extensive fortifications in the area of the Ouagadougou Convention Center (ISIS's headquarters in Sirte), which the forces of the Government of National Accord and the Libyan Air Force are having difficulty overcoming.

Benghazi

■ In Benghazi, the battles continue between the forces of the Khalifa Haftar and the various jihadi organizations. This week, the battles were concentrated in the western entrance of Benghazi (Al-Guwarsha gate). ISIS's Barqa Province claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack against Haftar's forces by a suicide bomber codenamed **Abu al-Rahman the Libyan**, who detonated a car bomb that he was driving. The terrorist is **Ziad Fawzi Qarqum**, a resident of Benghazi who returned from Syria after fighting there in the ranks of ISIS (addpost.it, July 29, 2016; Bawabat Ifriqiya al-Ikhbariya, July 30, 2016).



Right: The car bomb explosion. Left: The suicide bomber (addpost.it, July 29, 2016)

Yemen

■ On July 30, 2016, a police officer named **Sameh al-Husni** was killed when his car exploded in the **Khur Maksir city center, south of the international airport of Aden**. Sameh al-Husni served in the police force in Sheikh Othman, north of Aden, and was one of the police officers who supervised the arrest of those suspected of involvement in assassinations and activating IEDs in Aden (Al-Yamani al-Youm, July 30, 2016). ISIS's Aden-Abyan Province in Yemen claimed responsibility for the attack

and posted photos showing the explosion of an IED attached to the police officer's car (Haqq, July 31, 2016).

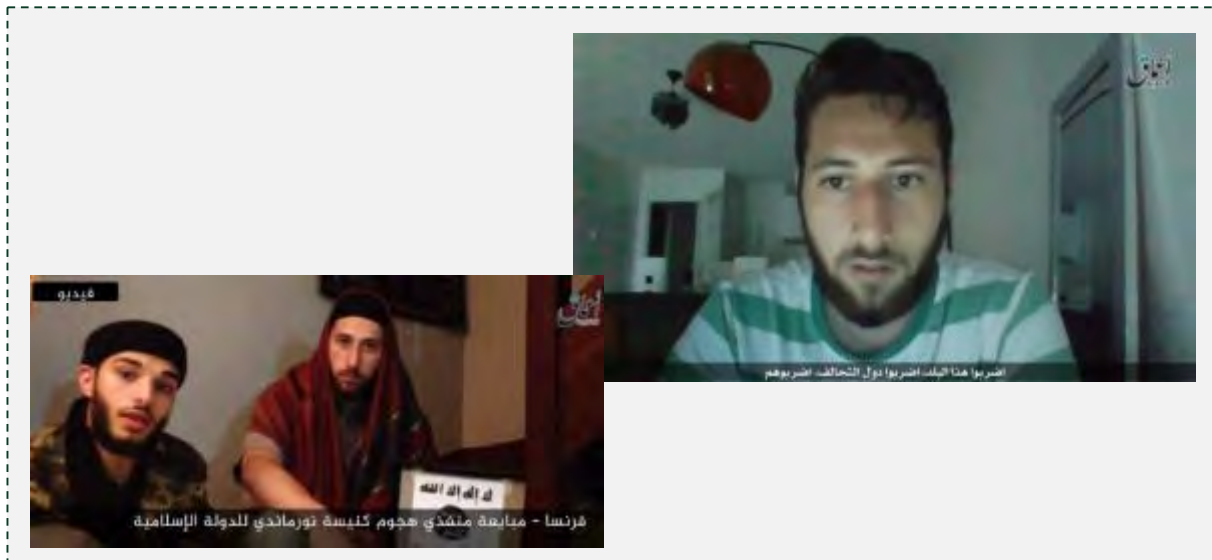


Explosion of the IED attached to the police officer's car (Haqq, July 31, 2016)

Attacks inspired by ISIS

The murder of the priest in the church in Normandy (update)

- This week, it was reported that the two perpetrators of the terrorist attack at the church in the town of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray were **Abdel Malik Petitjean (Ibn Omar)** and **Abu Jalil al-Hanafi**. Both were residents of the town. On July 28, 2016, ISIS's Amaq News Agency released a video in French with Arabic subtitles, **taken by Abdel Malik Petitjean, apparently with his cell phone**. The video is a sort of “will” before leaving for the attack.
- **In the video, Petitjean calls on Muslims to attack targets in France and in the countries of the international coalition.** He addresses French President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls directly, saying: “We are determined. You will see the proof clearly before your eyes” (Amaq, July 28, 2016). At the same time, **a video was posted showing the two men before the attack, with one of them holding a sheet of paper bearing the ISIS insignia and the other pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** (ISIS blog that has since been removed, July 28, 2016; Al-Arabiya in English, July 27, 2016).



Right: Abdel Malik Petitjean in a video made before the attack, calling on Muslims to attack targets in France and in the coalition countries (Aamaq, July 28, 2016). Left: Abu Omar [right] and Abu Jalil al-Hanafi [left] pledging allegiance to ISIS's leader (ISIS blog that has since been removed, July 28, 2016; Al-Arabiya in English, July 27, 2016)

The battle for hearts and minds

Call by ISIS to carry out jihad in Russia

- **ISIS's Al-Furat foundation released a Russian-language video** showing a masked Russian-speaking operative calling for jihad in Russia. The speaker also threatens Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying that ISIS operatives will go to Russia and harm civilians (YouTube, July 31, 2016).
- **Russia Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov** responded by saying that ISIS's threats would not affect Russia's policy against international terrorism. According to Peskov, the Russian President is paying close attention to the video threatening Russia, as are Russian air forces in Syria, which are taking the appropriate steps (Sputnik, 1 August 2016).



ISIS operative calling for a “jihad operation” in Russia and threatening President Putin (YouTube, July 31, 2016)