



*Spotlight on Global Jihad*  
(March 30 – April 5, 2017)



## Main events of the week<sup>1</sup>

- The pressure on ISIS in Iraq and Syria is increasing:
  - Following the takeover of the Tabqa Dam and the airfield to its south, SDF forces operating with American support advanced to the **city of Tabqa, which is controlled by ISIS** (around 60,000 residents). **The city was almost completely besieged.** Its fall would symbolize the loss of another vital territory for ISIS, and the intensification of the pressure on ISIS's stronghold in Al-Raqqah.
  - After several weeks of fighting, the Syrian forces **took over the town of Deir Hafer**, located on the road from Al-Bab to Lake Assad and the Euphrates Dam. **At this stage, it is not yet clear whether the Syrian Army will try to take advantage of its success and continue to advance eastward**, in view of the pressure exerted by the rebel organizations on the Syrian regime in core areas of Damascus and Hama.
  - **Fighting in west Mosul continues to focus on the Old City**, with no significant change on the ground. ISIS is apparently displaying resolute fighting and its operatives, who are skilled in fighting in built-up areas, are making it difficult for the attacking Iraqi forces. In any case, the Iraqi political leadership publicly expresses optimism. Iraq's interior minister declared that the liberation of Mosul from ISIS would be achieved within a few weeks.
- **This week, Turkey announced the successful conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield.** During the operation, Turkey managed to create a security zone in the area west of the Euphrates River, formerly controlled by ISIS, and to create a buffer zone between the Kurdish control zone east of the Euphrates River and the Kurdish enclave in the west (the Ifrin region.) Turkey's success is overshadowed by its failure to take over the city of Manbij and its environs, which remained a sort of Kurdish-dominated enclave in the Turkish security zone, and by the US preference for the Kurdish-dominated SDF forces over Turkey.

<sup>1</sup>Due to the Passover vacation, Spotlight on Global Jihad will not appear next week. We wish all our readers a happy holiday.

## The Coalition countries

### Turkey announces the successful conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield

■ At the end of a meeting **chaired by Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish National Security Council announced the successful conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria** (which began in August 2016). The objectives of the operation, according to the announcement, were to ensure Turkey's national security, to return Syrian refugees to their homes, and to remove the threat of ISIS from the Turkish-Syrian border (Anatolia News Agency, March 29, 2017).

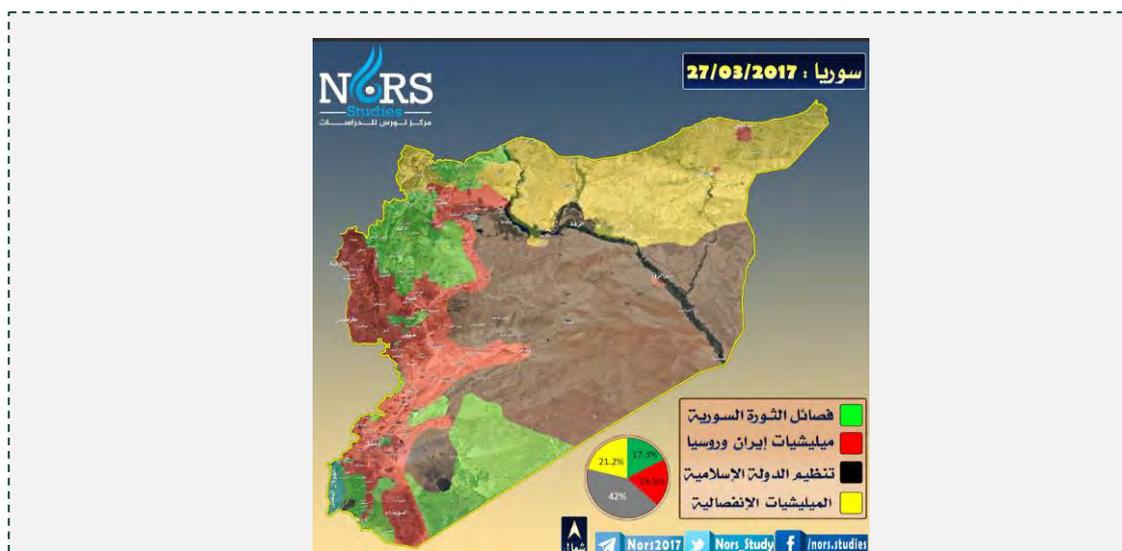
■ **Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu** announced that despite the successful conclusion of Operation EuphratesShield, **Turkish Army forces would not soon withdraw from the territories that they had taken over**. He said that before the withdrawal of the troops, **the urban areas in the region should be rehabilitated and the local security forces should be trained and equipped** (Anatolia News Agency; Hürriyet, April 1, 2017). **Turkish Defense Minister Fikri Işık** stressed that the Turkish forces were not about to withdraw since the threats against Turkey had not ceased. He added that **Turkey would not hesitate to launch another operation if it felt threatened** (Dimashq al-Aan, March 31, 2017).

■ From Turkey's perspective, **Operation Euphrates Shield ended successfully**. The rebel forces (the Free Syrian Army), supported by the Turkish Army, **took over most of the area that had been under the control of ISIS west of the Euphrates River**, creating a **Turkish-influenced security zone**. Another achievement, from Turkey's perspective, is the **creation of a buffer zone between the Kurdish control zone east of the Euphrates River and the Kurdish enclave in the west** (the Ifrin region.) From Turkey's perspective, however, these achievements are **overshadowed by two failures**: one, due to the intervention of US and Russia, Turkey and its supporters **did not manage to take control of the city of Manbij and its environs**(which remains a sort of Kurdish-controlledenclave in the Turkish security zone west of the Euphrates River); and the second, **the Kurdish-dominated SDF forces, with US support, are conducting the campaign to take over Al-Raqqah**, while **Turkey remains (at least for the time being) out of the game**. Both of these issues are expected to be raised in talks between Turkey and the United States.

## US Secretary of State meets with senior Turkish government officials

■ The day after the Turkish announcement about the conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Turkey and met with senior government officials. At the meetings, the two sides discussed coordination in the continuation of the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. At a press conference held by Tillerson after his meeting with the Turkish foreign minister, he said that the two countries had examined a number of options and alternatives in order to continue fighting against ISIS and take over Al-Raqqah. However, Tillerson admitted that **the United States was facing tough choices about its partners in the struggle against ISIS** (cbsnews.com, March 30, 2017).

### Main developments in Syria



Map of the control areas in Syria: In brown, areas held by ISIS; In red, areas controlled by the Assad regime and the forces supporting it; In green, areas held by the rebel forces with the exclusion of ISIS (NORS Center for Strategic Studies, March 27, 2017).

## The Syrian Army's advance towards the Euphrates Valley

■ After several weeks of fighting, **on March 29, 2017, the Syrian forces took over the town of Deir Hafer, on the route leading from Al-Bab to Lake Assad and the Euphrates Valley.** They have also taken over several towns and villages in the Deir Hafer area. ISIS operatives began to retreat from the area (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, March 24, 2017). In the campaign for the takeover of Deir Hafer, hundreds of ISIS operatives were reportedly killed or wounded, and dozens of armored vehicles were destroyed. According to reports, there were ISIS headquarters in the town, as well as

military workshops and hospitals (all4syria, March 29, 2017). **At this stage, it is unclear whether and to what extent the Syrian advance will continue eastward toward the Euphrates Valley, in view of the pressure exerted on the Syrian regime in Damascus and Hama (see below).**

## The campaign for Al-Raqqah

### The encirclement of the city of Al-Tabqa

■ Following the takeover of the Tabqa Dam and the airfield to its south, **the SDF forces, with US support, advanced towards the city of Al-Tabqa. The city, which is held by ISIS, has 60,000 inhabitants.** On March 31, 2017, the SDF forces and US Special Forces advanced towards Al-Tabqa **from the military airfield south of the city.** At the same time, the forces also advanced from the Tabqa Dam northeast of the city. On April 3, 2017, **they reached the eastern entrance of Al-Tabqa and encircled it almost completely.** Battles are still ongoing in the area (ARA News, April 3, 2017).



The military airfield (1), the city of Al-Tabqa, also called Madinat Al-Thawra (2), Tabqa Dam (3), Al-Raqqah (4) (Google Maps)

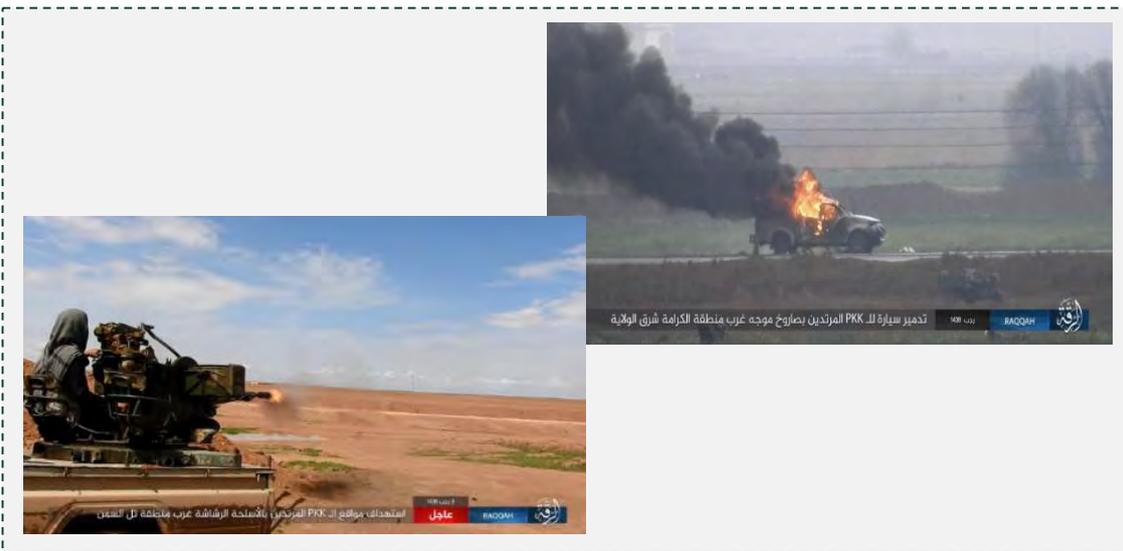
■ **Aircraft of the anti-ISIS international coalition scattered leaflets in Al-Raqqah calling on the inhabitants to evacuate and on ISIS operatives to surrender.** According to several sources, a “safe passage” was opened for the inhabitants through the Euphrates River Dam to allow them to flee Al-Raqqah to areas held by the SDF forces (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, March 31, 2017). At the same time, there are still reports that **ISIS evacuates its people from the city.** According to a website affiliated with ISIS opponents, **ISIS operatives evacuated their families taking advantage of**

**the flow of refugees coming out of the city.** The number of ISIS operatives that have left the city is estimated at several hundred. They were reportedly transferred to the city of Al-Mayadeen, down the Euphrates Valley, southeast of Deir ez-Zor (Raqqqa-sl.com, April 3, 2017).

### Recommissioning the military airfield south of Al-Tabqa

■ Following the takeover of the military airfield (March 26, 2017), **US engineers and technical teams started the recommissioning work on the airfield.** According to an SDF commander, the anti-ISIS international coalition forces **will use the airfield during the operation to liberate the city** (Sputnik, March 29, 2017). Kurdish senior officials noted that after the recommissioning of the airfield, it would be able to use it as a base for sending supplies, weapons and forces fighting in the campaign for the takeover of Al-Raqqah (Voice of America, April 2, 2017).

■ **ISIS operatives continue to wage guerrilla warfare against the forces in the airfield, even after it has been taken over.** On March 31, 2017, ISIS announced that thirty SDF operatives were killed and military vehicles were destroyed in an attack against SDF outposts near the military airfield of Al-Tabqa (Haqq, April 1, 2017). SDF forces reported that they had intercepted near the airfield an ISIS drone carrying bombs (Khotwa, April 3, 2017).



Right: SDF off-road vehicle on fire west of Al-Karamah area, southeast of Al-Raqqah, after being hit by an ISIS anti-tank missile (Haqq, April 1, 2017). Left: ISIS operative firing anti-aircraft guns at SDF operatives west of the Tal Al-Saman area, about 30 km north of Al-Raqqah (Haqq, April 2, 2017)

### Damascus area

■ This week as well, fighting continued in the eastern neighborhoods of Damascus. The rebel organizations' momentum subsided, and the Syrian forces

have managed to retake several sites taken over by the rebel organizations at the beginning of the attack. Although the Syrian Army declared that it had regained control of the Jobar neighborhood, the rebel organizations reportedly managed to repel an attack of the Syrian regime forces in the neighborhood's industrial area (Al-Sham Network, 2017). It was also reported that Syrian fighter planes supported by Russian aircraft had carried out intense airstrikes against targets in the Jobar neighborhood (Local Coordination Committees, April 3, 2017). **Fighting in the eastern neighborhoods of Damascus is still ongoing.**



Video released by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham: Sniper fire at the Syrian forces in the Jobar neighborhood (Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, April 2, 2017)

## Hama

- In the area north of Hama, the momentum of the rebel organizations' attack also subsided. The Syrian forces reportedly retook several towns and villages from the rebel organizations. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **the Syrian forces, supported by Iran and Hezbollah, managed to retake 75% of the territory taken by the rebel organizations north of Hama** (Al-Arabiya, April 1, 2017).
- A Twitter account released a photo of **Iranian Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani visiting the Hama area**. Soleimani reportedly met with the commander of the Syrian forces in the area (Al-Hadath News, April 2, 2017). His visit was apparently made as part of **Iran and Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian effort to halt the rebel attack north of Hama** (in late March, Iranian media reported the death of two IRGC commanders in battle in the area of Hama).



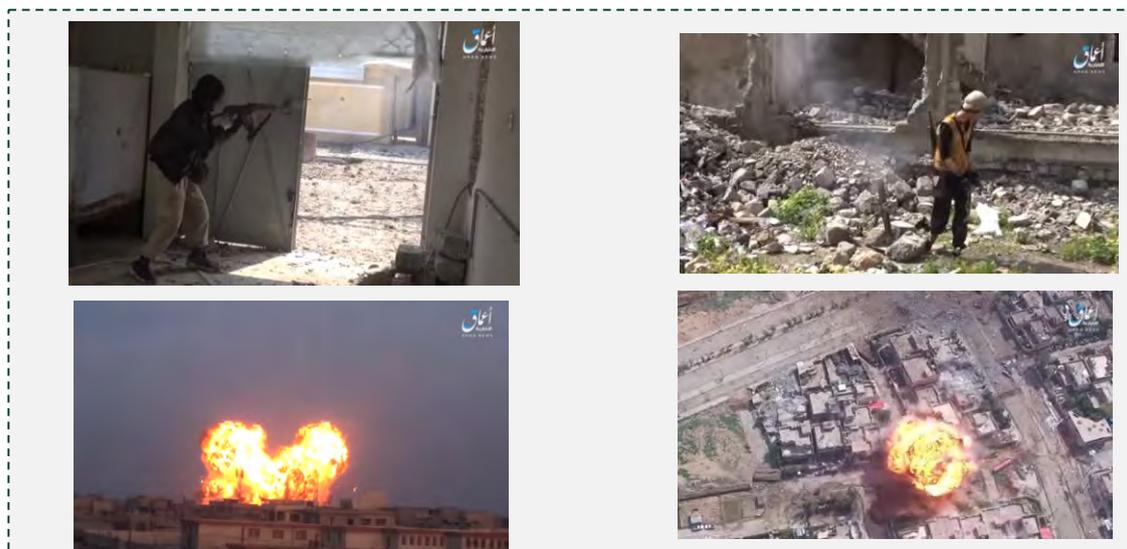
Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani visits the Hama area (Al-Hadath News, April 2, 2017)

## Main developments in Iraq

### The campaign for the takeover of Mosul

- **Fighting in west Mosul continues, focusing on the Old City**, with no significant change in the situation on the ground since last week. The Iraqi Army continues to fight in the streets near Al-Nuri Mosque, which is a site of symbolic importance for ISIS. The Iraqi interior minister declared that Mosul would be liberated from ISIS within a few weeks. According to him, **ISIS currently holds only about 25%-30% of the territory of west Mosul** (Sputnik, April 1, 2017).
- **ISIS continues making widespread use of car bombs**. A video released on March 29, 2017, shows two suicide bombing attacks carried out one after the other in the west Mosul neighborhood of Al-Yarmouk. According to ISIS, they were carried out

by two of its female operatives (Aamaq, March 29, 2017). Another video, released by ISIS on March 30, 2017, shows another suicide bombing attack in the western part of the city (Aamaq, March 30, 2017).



**Top: ISIS operatives fighting against the Iraqi security forces in west Mosul (Haqq, April 2, 2017).  
Bottom: Two suicide bombing attacks against the Iraqi security forces in the western part of the city (Aamaq, March 30, 2017)**

## Killing senior ISIS operatives

- This week, it's been reported that several ISIS operatives have been killed:
  - **The Iraqi Air Force commander** announced that **Ayad Al-Jumaili**, described as ISIS's "war minister" and the deputy of ISIS leader, had been killed in an Iraqi forces' airstrike in the **Al-Qaim area** (near the border between Iraq and Syria).
  - **The US Army** reported that on March 25, 2017, **Ibrahim al-Ansari**, who headed ISIS's propaganda apparatus, had been killed in the **Al-Qaim area**. Four of his aides were reportedly killed along with him. According to US officials, Al-Ansari had played a major role in recruiting foreign operatives to ISIS and instigating terror attacks against the United States and Turkey (US Department of Defense, March 30, 2017).
  - **The Iraqi Federal Police commander** said that its forces had killed ISIS's "health minister" **Saad Abu Shoeib**. He was shot dead by police forces when they targeted his vehicle near a hospital in the Old City of Mosul (Sputnik, March 29, 2017).

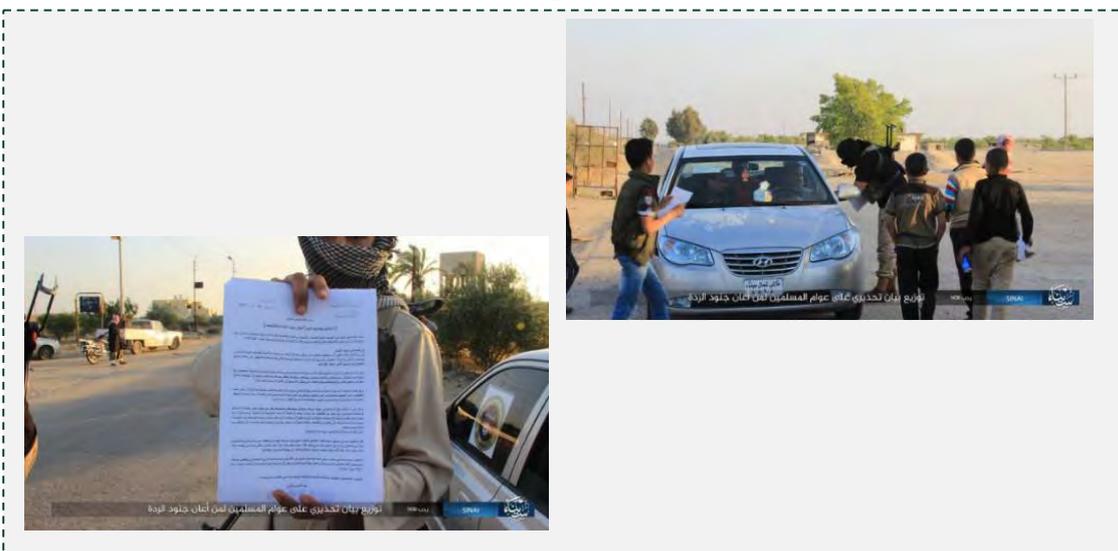
## Sinai Peninsula

- In early April 2017, the Egyptian security forces carried out a widespread “security operation” in the Al-Arish neighborhood of Al-Samran with the objective of detaining wanted men and terrorist operatives (Al-Watan, April 2, 2017). In the ITIC’s assessment, the operation was intended to restore security and strengthen Egyptian governance in Al-Arish, which has recently been the main target of terrorist activity for ISIS’s Sinai Province.
- The Egyptian security forces reported that 18 ISIS operatives had been killed in airstrikes. One of the dead was **Salameh al-Ansari, one of the founders of ISIS’s Sinai Province**, who had been in charge of training operatives and equipping them with weapons (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces, April 2, 2017).
- ISIS’s Sinai Province announced the death of Salameh Abu Adhan al-Tarabin al-Ansari, senior ISIS operative and one of its founders, in an airstrike (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, April 1, 2017).



**Salameh Abu Adhan al-Tarabin al-Ansari, one of the founders of ISIS’s Sinai Province, killed in an airstrike (Haqq, April 1, 2017)**

- Operatives of ISIS’s Sinai Province stopped a bus carrying female teachers working in Rafah, ordered them to put on veils and threatened that they would be punished (Sola Press, March 28, 2017). ISIS’s Sinai Province spread leaflets threatening the inhabitants not to collaborate with the government. ISIS operatives also **executed several inhabitants accused of spying**.



Spreading leaflets on behalf of ISIS's Sinai Province threatening the inhabitants not to collaborate with the Egyptian government (Haqq, April 1, 2017)

## Other countries

### The Philippines

- On March 31, 2017, ISIS claimed responsibility for the detonation of an IED against a vehicle of the Philippine Army, killing six soldiers and wounding others. The terrorist attack occurred in Mamasapano, an autonomous region in the Muslim Mindanao, south of the Philippines (Haqq, April 1, 2017).

## Counterterrorism activity

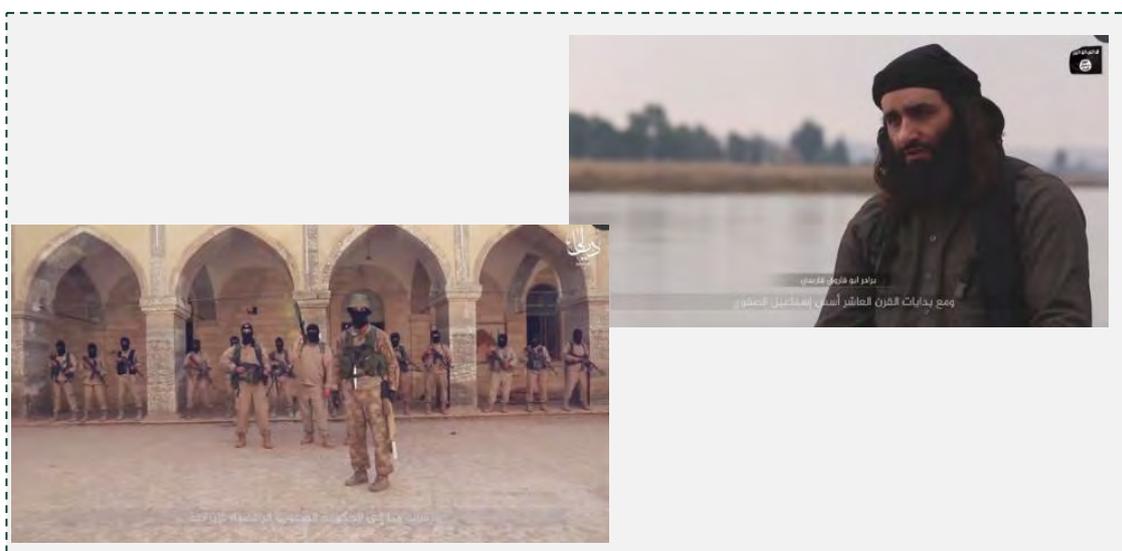
### Turkey

- A joint operation of the Turkish security forces led to the arrest of **Safwan Qahwati**, a Syrian citizen suspected of being a senior ISIS operative who recruited foreign fighters from European countries to the ranks of ISIS and trained them. His wife was arrested along with him. According to reports, on March 15, 2017, the two illegally entered from Syria into the Hatay Province in southern Turkey. They traveled to Istanbul in order to reach Europe from there. The Turkish authorities discovered a connection between the operative and two other senior ISIS operatives: **Mohammad Laban**, a Danish citizen who was arrested in Adana on February 10, 2017; and a Swedish citizen named **Mohammad Tawfiq Saleh** (Anatolia, March 29, 2017).

## Propaganda activity

### ISIS threats against Iran

■ On March 27, 2017, ISIS's Diyala Province (in Iraq) released a 35-minute video **containing threats against Iran**. The video is in Farsi with Arabic subtitles. It shows a Farsi-speaking ISIS operative codenamed **Abu Faruq the Persian**, who notes that the Safavid dynasty, which embraced Shia in the 16th century, encroached on territories of Iraq, Azerbaijan and Khorasan (today's Pakistan and Afghanistan) and forced many of the Sunni Muslims to become Shiite. Another speaker in the video, codenamed **Abu Mujahed the Baluchi**, who also speaks Farsi, notes that “infidel” Iran serves as a center for concocting schemes against Sunni Muslims in the world. **Yet another speaker calls (in Arabic) on the Sunnis in Iran to initiate jihad against the Iranian regime** (Haqq, March 27, 2017).



Photos from the video. Right: ISIS operative codenamed Abu Faruq the Persian describes the persecution of the Sunni Muslims by the Safavid dynasty, which embraced Shia in the 16th century. Left: Battalion of Persian born ISIS fighters ready for jihad against Iran (Haqq, March 27, 2017)

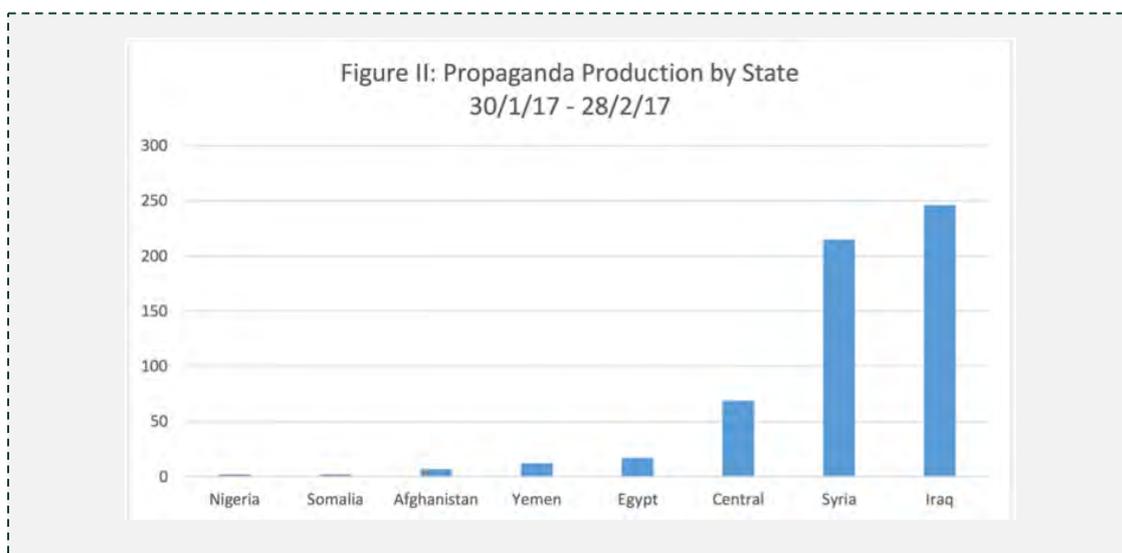
■ **Mohsen Rezaee**, Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, referred in his Instagram page to ISIS's threat against Iran. Rezaee threatened that if ISIS carries out any step, even the smallest one, or acts against the Iranian interests, **Iran would retaliate forcefully**. He pointed out that the lesson that ISIS would learn from that would be even greater than the defeat it incurred in Mosul and Aleppo (Fars, April 2, 2017).

## Findings of a study in a British research center: decrease in the scope of ISIS propaganda and changes in its content

■ **Charlie Winter, a senior researcher at the ICSR British research center,** conducted a comprehensive study on propaganda publications on ISIS's media outlets. The study covered the propaganda publications during February 2017 (January 30 – February 28) in comparison with the period of July 17 – August 15, 2015 (when ISIS was in its heyday). **The study reveals that recently there has been a significant decrease (about 36%) in the scope of propaganda activity by ISIS and there have been changes in the propaganda content.**

■ Following are several insights from the study:

- **The vast majority of ISIS propaganda materials were produced in Iraq and Syria.** The scope of propaganda materials produced in ISIS's other provinces is limited.



Propaganda production by state

- **Emphasis was placed on publications dealing with the fighting:** ISIS completely changed the narrative on which its propaganda focused. **Recently, mainly prominent are propaganda materials dealing with the fighting (80% in February 2017), overshadowing the descriptions of life in the Caliphate, which represented a significant part of ISIS's publications in the past (53%).**
- **Change in the content of the propaganda regarding the campaign for Mosul:** During the first months of the fighting in Mosul, ISIS disseminated videos

showing daily life in the city, which, as the organization claimed, was not adversely affected by the fighting. **Recently, the dissemination of such videos decreased.** Currently, ISIS disseminates mainly videos **that focus on the destruction of the city and the suffering of its inhabitants.**

■ In the ITIC's assessment, the changes in the scope and content of ISIS's propaganda **result from the heavy pressure under which ISIS finds itself in Iraq and Syria.** The death of senior operatives in ISIS's propaganda network, the loss of vital territories, along with the decrease in the revenues of the terror organization, **adversely affected ISIS's capabilities in the battle for hearts and minds.** The utopian vision of idyllic life in the Islamic Caliphate was replaced by military-oriented propaganda, intended to deter ISIS's enemies and raise the morale of the operatives in the various combat zones, first and foremost in Mosul. The ITIC believes that the videos showing destruction and suffering of inhabitants were intended to strengthen the Sunni-Muslim population's support of ISIS, instill hate among the local population against the US and the international coalition, and at the same time evoke internal criticism among the Western countries with the hope that this will affect the airstrikes on ISIS.