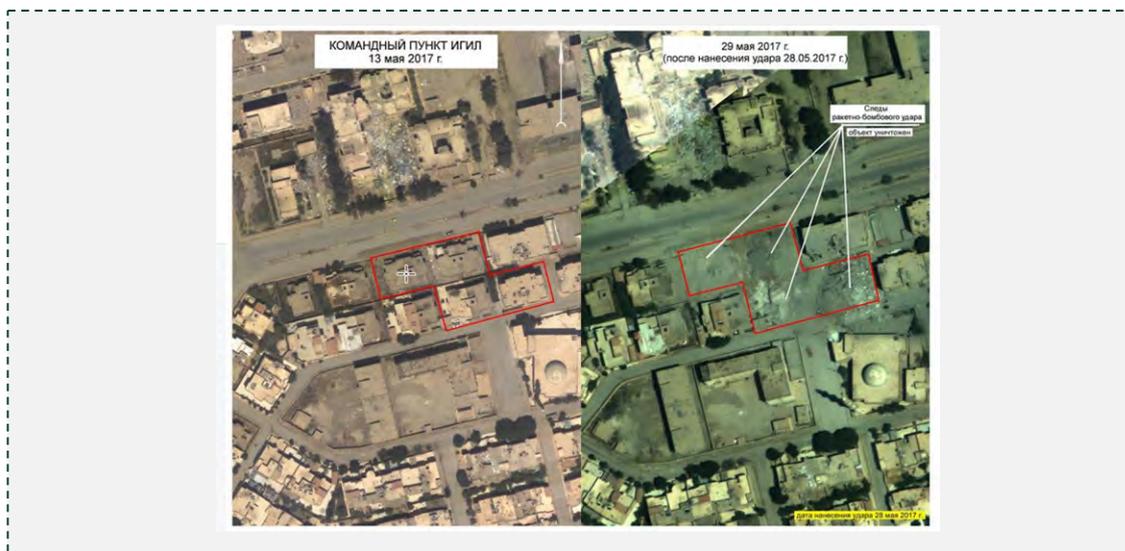


Russian involvement in Syria

Attack on a target where senior ISIS officials were meeting in Al-Raqqah

■ The Russian Ministry of Defense announced that on May 28, 2017, Russian forces carried out **an airstrike in Al-Raqqah**, on a target where a meeting was being held with the participation of senior ISIS commanders and field commanders. According to the announcement, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi may have been killed in the airstrike. The airstrike was carried out after the Russians learned about the meeting of ISIS leaders in a southern suburb of Al-Raqqah and after drones verified its existence. According to the Russian announcement, **some 30 ISIS field commanders and some 300 fighters** who had guarded the organization's leaders were killed in the attack. The Russians noted that according to the information in their possession, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in the airstrike. The operatives who were killed included **Abu al-Hajj al-Masri**, the Emir of Al-Raqqah; **Ibrahim al-Nayef al-Hajj**, the Emir of the area between Al-Raqqah and Al-Sukhnah; and **Suleiman al-Shawah**, ISIS's head of security (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, June 16, 2017).



Aerial photograph of the site of the meeting of senior ISIS operatives distributed by the Russian Ministry of Defense. Left: The site before the airstrike. Right: After the airstrike (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, June 16, 2017)

■ In response to the Russian statements, **the spokesman for the International Coalition for the War on ISIS** said that **the report could not be verified or refuted** at this stage (Al-Arabiya, June 16, 2017). **Pentagon Spokesman Jeff Davis** also said they had **no information to confirm the report** (The New York Times, June 16, 2017). **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** also stressed that Al-Baghdadi's death **could not be definitively confirmed** (RT, June 16, 2017).

■ The last public sign of life was heard from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on **November 2, 2016**, on an audiotape distributed by the Al-Furqan Media Foundation, one of ISIS's propaganda arms. On the tape, Al-Baghdadi addressed ISIS's supporters abroad and called on them to escalate their actions against the Coalition countries. Since then, there have been several reports of Al-Baghdadi's alleged death, **which have not yet been verified**.

President Putin praises the campaign in Syria

■ In an interview with Russian media, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that **Russia had acquired "invaluable" military experience** in the Syrian campaign. According to him, **innovative weapons systems were introduced for the first time during the campaign in Syria**. Putin also noted that "the campaign **was very beneficial to our defense industry**" (TASS News Agency, June 15, 2017).

Main developments in Syria

The campaign to take over Al-Raqqah

■ **Fighting inside the city of Al-Raqqah**, which started on June 6, 2017, **continues**. SDF forces, supported by the US-led International Coalition, attacked the city from the east and west **and took over additional neighborhoods**. They are now fighting near the wall surrounding the Old City. ISIS operatives are trying to curb their advance by sniper fire and mortar shells. According to reports, there are thousands of civilians trying to escape from the city, while **SDF forces and ISIS operatives have blocked all the exits** (Zaman Al-Wasl, June 19, 2017).

■ The situation in the various fighting zones is as follows:

- **In east Al-Raqqah:** Fighting continues on Al-Raqqah's eastern outskirts. In recent days, SDF forces took over the **Al-Sina'ah neighborhood** (Sham Network, June 15, 2017; Al-Jazeera, June 16, 2017). Clashes continue in the **Al-Batani neighborhood**. Sixteen SDF fighters were reportedly encircled by ISIS operatives **who infiltrated towards them through tunnels in Bab Baghdad, the southeastern Old City, close to the wall**. Contact with the fighters was reportedly lost (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 19, 2017).

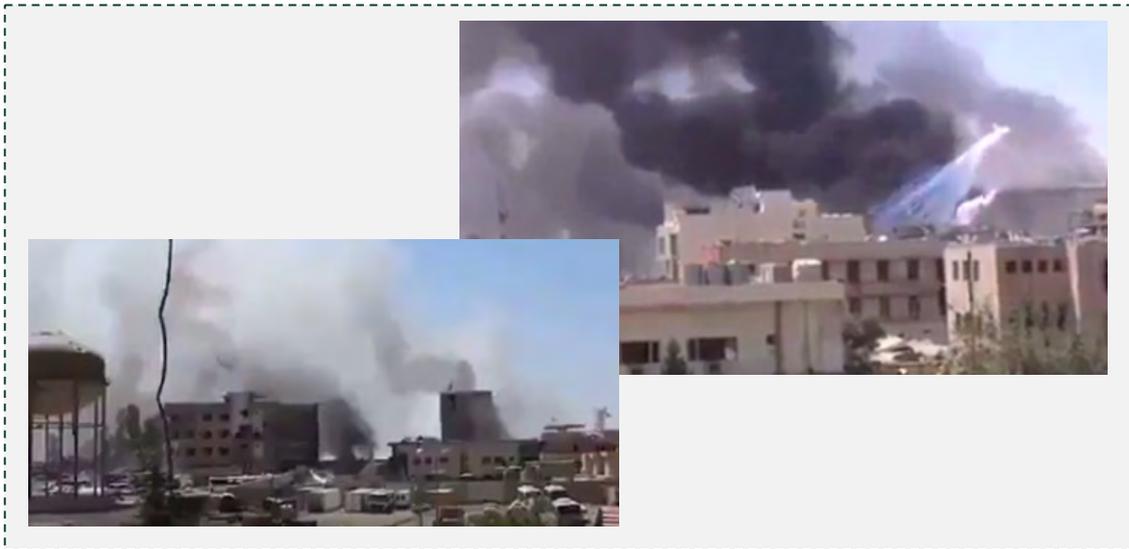


Two SDF fighters observing Al-Raqqah's eastern neighborhoods. One of them notes that they have reached the Bab Baghdad neighborhood (YouTube, June 17, 2017).

- **In west and northwest Al-Raqqah:** Clashes between the SDF forces and ISIS in **the Al-Qadisiyyah neighborhood** continue. The SDF reportedly took over several sites in the neighborhood (Sham Network, June 19, 2017). Fighting also took place in the western part of **the Al-Barid neighborhood**, in northwestern Al-Raqqah (Qasiyoun, June 18, 2017).



Neighborhoods in Al-Raqqah fully or partly taken over by the SDF forces: Al-Mashlab (1); Al-Sina'ah (2); Outskirts of the Old City (3); the Sugar Factory (4); former base of Division 17 (5); Al-Sha'abiyya (6); Al-Roumaniyya (7); Al-Jazra (8); Al-Barid (9); Al-Qadisiyyah (10), Al-Batani (11); Bab Baghdad (12) (Wikimapia)

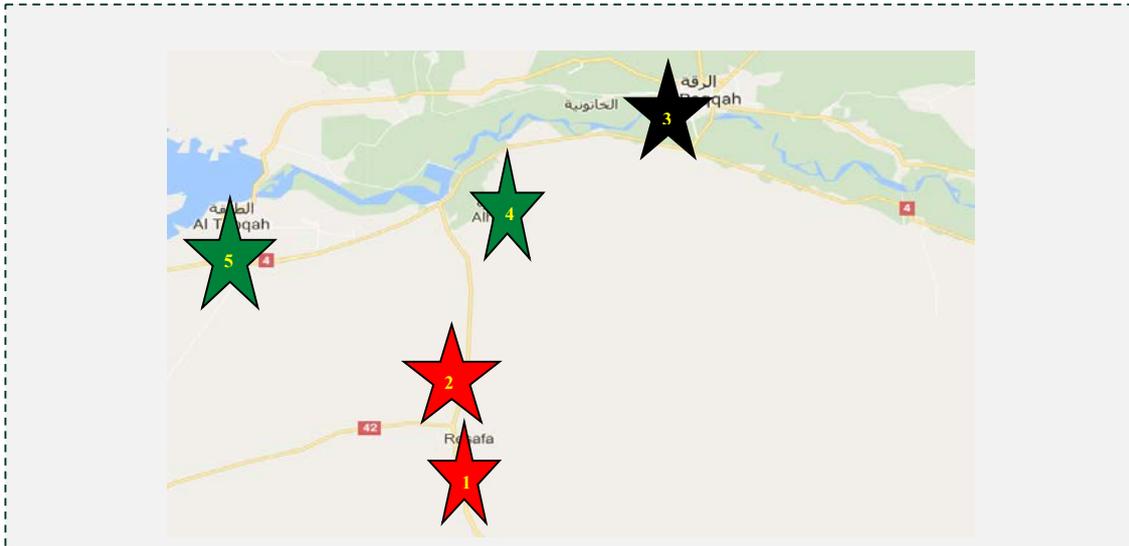


Photos from the city of Al-Raqqah (YouTube, June 19, 2017)

Syrian Army advances towards Al-Raqqah; Syrian fighter plane intercepted by the US and the Coalition

■ The Syrian Army also tries to make its presence felt in the Al-Raqqah region and its forces advance eastward, recognizing the importance of this region. This week, the Syrian Army took over the town of Al-Rasafah, about 40 km southwest of Al-Raqqah. The Syrian Army activity in a region where the US-supported SDF forces are operating led to friction between them, causing the interception of a Syrian fighter plane by the US and the Coalition (claiming that the plane was attacking the SDF forces). In response, Russia suspended the coordination of flights with the United States.

■ This week, the Syrian Army took over the town of Al-Rasafah, about 40 km southwest of Al-Raqqah. Al-Rasafah is situated south of an important crossroad, with one road leading eastward to Al-Raqqah and another westward to the SDF-held Tabqa. The Syrian Army also took over Jaidin, about 10 km northwest of Al-Rasafah (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 18, 2017).



Map of the deployment of the forces southwest and west of Al-Raqqah: the town of Al-Rasafah, taken over by the Syrian Army (1); Jaidin, taken over by the Syrian Army (2); Al-Raqqah, under siege by the US- and Coalition-supported SDF (3); SDF-held Al-Hora (4); SDF-held Tabqa (5) (Google Maps)

■ The advance of the Syrian Army has apparently created friction with the SDF forces operating west and southwest of Al-Raqqah. It has been reported that a fighter plane of the US-led Coalition intercepted a Syrian fighter plane which allegedly attacked the SDF forces. The Syrians confirmed the interception of the plane. The Syrian Army headquarters claimed that the attack had been carried out in response to the advance of the Syrian Army and its allies **in the fighting against ISIS**, and that this action indicated the existing coordination between ISIS and the US (Facebook page of the Syrian Ministry of Defense, June 19, 2017). Syria dispatched messages to the UN secretary-general and the Security Council chairman denouncing the interception of the plane (Syrian News Agency, June 19, 2017).



Syrian Army in the Al-Rasafah area: the photo on the bottom right shows bodies of ISIS operatives killed in the fighting against the Syrian Army



The advance of the Syrian Army towards Al-Rasafah: ISIS's sign (right) reading "the Al-Raqqah Province" is still there (Syrian Al-Ittihad Press website, June 19, 2017)

Russia suspends the coordination of the flights

■ In response to the interception of the Syrian plane, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that **a US fighter plane attacked a Syrian plane which was carrying out a combat mission supporting Syrian Army units fighting against ISIS near Al-Rasafah.** The announcement states that the attack is a violation of Syrian sovereignty, "military aggression against Syria," and a "blatant violation of international law." According to the announcement, while the Syrian plane was intercepted, Russian planes were carrying out missions in Syrian skies. However, the Coalition forces did not use the existing communications channels between the US air command center in Qatar and the Russian Hmeymim base to coordinate the attack (Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, June 19, 2017).

■ According to the Russian announcement, **following the incident, the Russian Defense Ministry stopped its cooperation with the US forces as of June 19, 2017.** The US forces were required to carry out a thorough investigation into the incident. The announcement ends with the threat that as of now, in regions in Syria where the Russian Air Force is operating, any Coalition plane or unmanned aircraft flying west of the Euphrates River will be identified by the Russian air defense systems as targets (Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, June 19, 2017). **US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford** said in response that **the hotline between the US Central Command in Qatar and its Russian equivalent in Syria was still open and functioning.** However, he noted that he had not spoken with the Russians since the interception of the plane (Defence News, June 19, 2017).

Iranian missiles launched at ISIS targets in the Deir ez-Zor area in response to the attacks in Tehran

■ In response to ISIS's attacks in the Majles building and the Khomeini Tomb (June 7, 2017), the Iranian Revolutionary Guards launched six surface-to-surface missiles at ISIS targets in the area of Deir ez-Zor. The Iranians reported that the attack killed terrorist operatives and destroyed equipment and weapon systems (Tasnim News Agency, June 18, 2017). According to reports by Syrian sources, **Saad al-Husseini**, a senior ISIS commander from Saudi Arabia, was killed in the attack (Tasnim, June 19, 2017).



Right: One of the missiles being launched at an ISIS target. Left: One of the missiles hitting an ISIS target in the area of Deir ez-Zor (Al-Alam, June 19, 2017)

■ Iranian Revolutionary Guards Spokesman General Ramazan Sharif said that the Iranian attack had been coordinated with the Damascus regime and that the missiles had been launched from the Iranian Air Force base in western Iran. He said that Iran had fired six Iranian-made Dhu al-Fiqar¹ medium-range (650-700 km) ballistic missiles. According to him, the missiles had successfully hit their targets, including ISIS headquarters, ammunition, and logistic depots.² Ramazan Sharif added that this was a “warning” operation following the terrorist attacks in Tehran (ISNA, June 19, 2017).

■ Iranian government spokesmen **praised Iranian capabilities** as demonstrated by the missile fire, stressing that **the missile launch was only an initial warning:**

¹ **Dhu al-Fiqar:** A two-blade sword given by the Prophet Muhammad to his son-in-law Ali bin Abi Taleb on Allah's orders, before one of the first battles of Islam. For the Shiites, the sword is a symbol of jihad and the fighting spirit of Imam Ali on behalf of Islam.

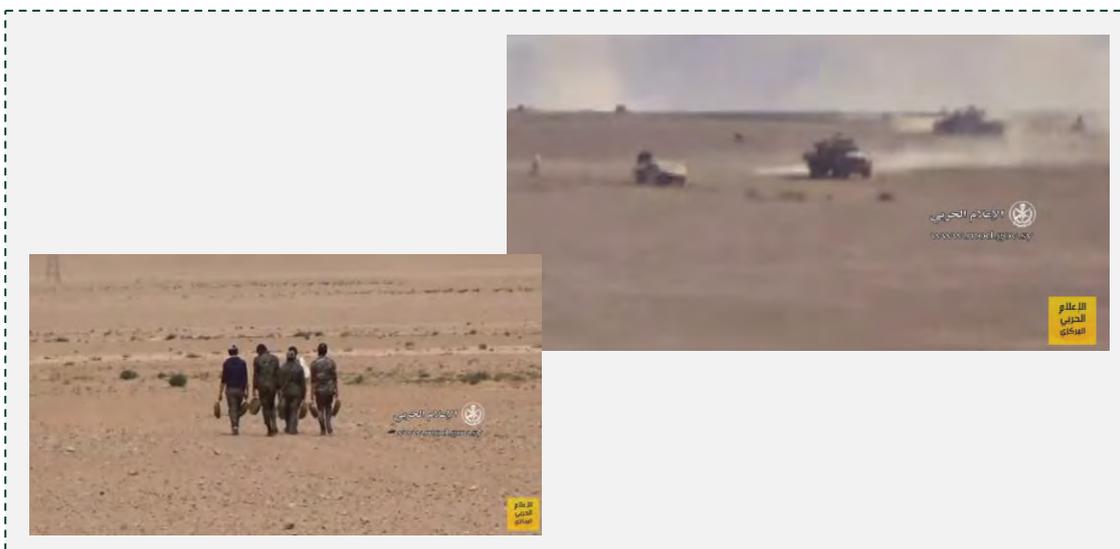
² The degree of accuracy of the Iranian missiles that were launched is still unclear. Military sources in Israel told Israeli daily Haaretz that “the operational results of the Iranian missile attack were far less impressive than the media buzz that Iran is making with regard to the launch” (Haaretz, June 20, 2017).

- **Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi** said that Iran had dealt a “fatal blow” to the “terrorist groups” and their control centers in Deir ez-Zor. He said that Iran had used all its defensive, military, intelligence and security capabilities in order to protect its citizens from the threat of terrorism. He added that the missile attack was only a “minor blow” and a warning for the future (Mehr, June 19, 2017).
- **Iranian Air Force Commander Ali Haji Zadeh** said that the missile launch was a message to ISIS and that it was “one of the minor operations that were carried out.” He said that **the enemies (ISIS) should know that Iran is not like Paris or London**, and if they continue their policy, they will be severely harmed. According to him, the targets of the missiles were command bases, construction centers, and car bomb manufacturing sites in Deir ez-Zor. He noted that **at the same time that the missiles were launched, drones were launched at the targets from Damascus. The drones transmitted photos from the target areas to Iran in real time** (Fars, June 19, 2017).
- In an Instagram post, **Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian leader on international affairs**, wrote that Iran’s attack on ISIS outposts in Syria was an example of Iran’s deterrent defense capabilities (Asr-e Iran, June 19, 2017).

Gas and oil facilities taken over in the Palmyra area

■ **In the Palmyra area, the Syrian forces recorded several successes:** On June 15, 2017, the Syrian Army took over **the Aarak gas field** and key areas dominating it (about 20 km northeast of Palmyra). This area, which has so far been held by ISIS, is where the **Aarak oil and gas field** is situated. ISIS reportedly sustained many fatalities and lost a lot of equipment. It also lost control of the **T3 Pumping Station for Crude Oil**, located about 42 km east of Palmyra. Before ISIS operatives retreated from the pumping station, they destroyed it and blew up oil and gas wells (SANA, June 15, 2017).

■ **The Syrian News Agency reported that the recapture of the Aarak gas field is an achievement for the Syrian regime** since this field is of **major economic importance**. For ISIS, the loss of the gas field represents further damage to its sources of income. Furthermore, as a result of the takeover of the area, ISIS’s supply routes east of Palmyra were reportedly cut off, **and the ground has been prepared for taking over the Syrian Desert from ISIS** (SANA, June 15, 2017).



The Syrian forces operating near the Aarak oil and gas field (YouTube account of the Syrian Army Spokesperson's Office, June 13, 2017)

Main developments in Iraq

The campaign for the takeover of Mosul

- **The campaign for the takeover of Mosul is nearing its end.** A small enclave, including the Old City and the Al-Shifa neighborhood, currently remains in the hands of ISIS. On June 18, 2017, **the Iraqi Army announced that it had launched a military move to liberate the Old City**, and that army forces and forces of the Iraqi government's Counterterrorism Apparatus take part in this campaign (Nineveh Information Center, June 18, 2017; Al-Sumaria, June 18, 2017).



Forces of the Iraqi government's Counterterrorism Apparatus on the outskirts of the Old City (right) and inside it (left) (Nineveh Information Center, June 17, 2017)

- The Iraqi Army announced that Iraqi Air Force planes had destroyed an ISIS main headquarters, where Arab and foreign operatives were staying, in the **Al-Mahlabiyya area**, about 35 km southwest of the city of Mosul. In addition, an ISIS hostel was destroyed in the attack, as well as a weapons and ammunition depot in the Tal Afar area, about 60 km west of Nineveh (Al-Sumaria, June 17, 2017).

Iraqi Army takes over the Al-Waleed border crossing

- This week, the Iraqi Army announced that its border police forces, with International Coalition air support, **had taken over the Al-Waleed border crossing between Iraq and Syria** (Reuters, June 17, 2017; Al-Sumaria, June 19, 2017). The crossing, which is situated on the Iraqi side of the Al-Tanf crossing, had been held by ISIS since May 2015. After the takeover of the crossing by the Iraqi Army, **the Al-Qaim crossing remains the only crossing under ISIS control on the border between Syria and Iraq** (Baghdad News, June 17, 2017). Iraqi forces reportedly took control of an area of about 40 km between the Al-Waleed crossing and the Al-Qaim crossing (Al-Sumaria, June 19, 2017).

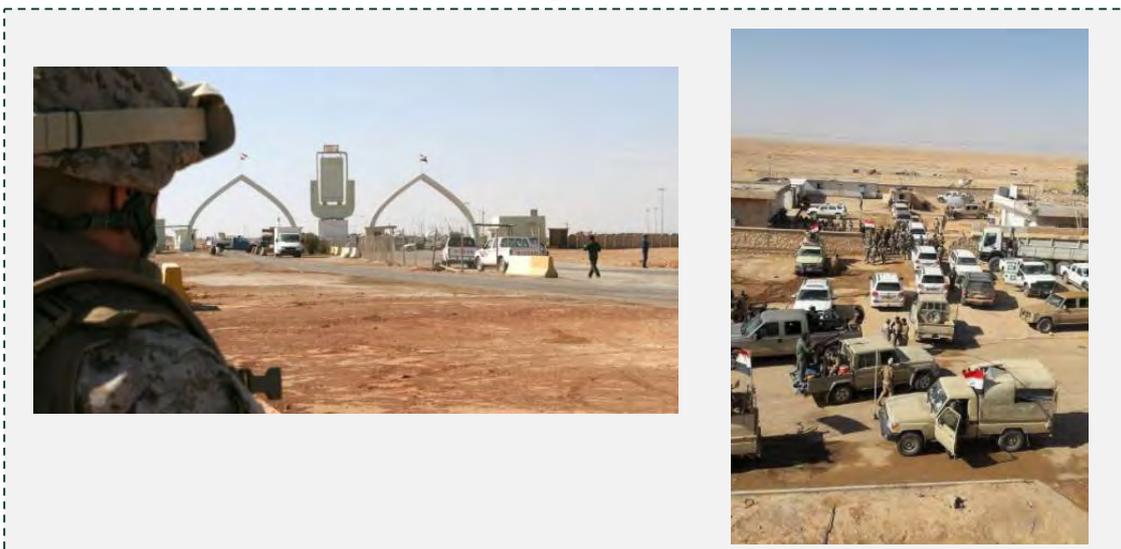


The Al-Tanf crossing (1); The Al-Waleed crossing (2); The Al-Qaim crossing (3) (Google Maps)



Iraqi border police soldiers on the Iraqi-Syrian border (Al-Sumaria, June 19, 2017)

- The Iraqi Army declared that the takeover of the Al-Waleed area **put an end to the presence of ISIS on Iraqi soil, near the US base in the Al-Tanf area, on the Syrian side of the border** (Reuters, June 17, 2017). One of the commanders of the Shiite Popular Mobilization Units, pro-Iranian Iraqi militias cooperating with the Iraqi government against ISIS, reported that a meeting was held with the forces on Syrian territory. According to that commander, the militia operatives **are waiting for the zero hour to attack ISIS in the city of Abu Kamal** (Al-Hadath, June 18, 2017). **The city of Abu Kamal in Syria is the target of the Commandos of the Revolution rebel force, which is supported by the US and International Coalition.**



Left: Iraqi forces at the Al-Waleed crossing (Baghdad News, June 17, 2017); Right: Meeting of the Iraqi forces with the Syrian forces at the Al-Waleed border crossing (Al-Hadath, June 18, 2017)

■ Before the takeover of the Al-Waleed crossing, the Iraqi Defense Ministry reported that a **high-ranking Syrian delegation had come to Baghdad and discussed with Iraqi Army senior commanders issues pertaining to the security of the common border**. This visit was the first of its kind for years, and its purpose was to establish cooperation in the war against ISIS. The Iraqi Army chief of staff said that the parties agreed to cooperate in the area of intelligence (Zaman Al-Wasl, June 14, 2017).

ISIS's suicide bomber terrorism

■ An international report of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)³ revealed that between December 2015 and November 2016, ISIS established a “**suicide bombing industry**.” According to the report, most of the organization’s major operations **were carried out in Iraq and Syria**. **The percentage of foreign fighters** who carried out suicide bombing attacks is 20%, while the **percentage of the Iraqis** (i.e., suicide bombers whose codename was Al-Iraqi) and the Syrians (i.e., suicide bombers whose codename was Al-Shami) is 74% (the ICCT could not define the rest). Iraq was the scene of 62% of the suicide bombing attacks, while 24% of the attacks were carried out on Syrian soil. About 3% of the attacks were carried out in Libya, while 1.7% took place in Yemen. Noteworthy among the foreign fighters who carried out suicide bombing attacks are **Tajiks, Saudis, and North-Africans** (Al-Suriya, June 15, 2017).

³ An independent research center located in The Hague.

Global jihad activity in other countries

Attack thwarted in Belgium

■ On June 20, 2017, around 20:30, a suicide bombing attack was thwarted **at Brussels central train station**. According to initial reports, a man aged 30-35, **wearing an explosive belt**, was shot and killed by soldiers at the scene. There were no other casualties. An explosion was heard at the station, and a fire broke out. So far, no organization has claimed responsibility.

Indonesia

■ **Indonesia Army commander said that ISIS is present almost in all the country's provinces**. According to him, ISIS sleeper cells are set up throughout the country and can easily join other radical cells. **Marawi**, the Philippine city where government troops are fighting against ISIS forces, is only a short distance from several Indonesian islands (Time, June 13, 2017).

Afghanistan

■ On June 15, 2017, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the entrance to the Al-Zahra Mosque in southwest Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. Four people were killed and eight were wounded (Afghanistan Times, June 16, 2017). ISIS announced that 17 Shiites were killed and dozens were wounded in a suicide bombing attack carried out by its operatives in Kabul (Al-Sawarim, June 16, 2017).

■ **Afghan government officials reported that ISIS had taken over the Tora Bora area in Nangarhar Province, eastern Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan**. It happened after battles with Taliban operatives, which lasted for a week. This region, where there are many caves, **had been used in the past as the stronghold of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden**. ISIS released an announcement in Pashto, stating that its black flags were flying on the mountain range in the region. It also called on fleeing residents to return to their homes (Rai Al-Youm, June 15, 2017).

■ **Abu Omar al-Khorasani, one of ISIS's commanders in Afghanistan**, said that his operatives had taken over Tora Bora and that they were fighting against Afghan government forces which are assisted by US ground and air support. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid confirmed that ISIS had taken over several villages, **but denied that it had occupied Tora Bora** (Reuters, June 15, 2017).

The battle for hearts and minds

ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack in Jerusalem⁴

- On the evening of June 16, 2017, three Palestinians armed with knives and improvised weapons arrived at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem and carried out attacks in two sites simultaneously. One female Border Police combatant was killed in the attack. Another policeman was slightly wounded and two civilians were moderately wounded. The three terrorists were shot and killed. The attacks were carried out by three terrorists aged 18-19, residents of Deir Abu Mash'al (south of Ramallah).
- **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack via the Amaq News Agency.** The heading of the claim of responsibility: "Attack by the soldiers of the Caliphate on a gathering of Jews in the city of Jerusalem." The announcement says that the attack in Jerusalem was carried out by "Lions of the Caliphate" from ISIS's Palestine Province. The announcement names the three perpetrators of the attacks as Abu al-Baraa al-Maqdisi, Abu Hassan al-Maqdisi, and Abu Rabah al-Maqdisi. The announcement also includes a threat that this is not the last operation and that the Jews should expect their country to be destroyed by the "Soldiers of the Caliphate."

■ This is the first time that ISIS has claimed responsibility for carrying out an attack in Israel. According to information in the ITIC's possession, **this is a false announcement.** The attack at the Damascus Gate was carried out by a **local network from the village of Deir Abu Mash'al**, whose operatives are affiliated with the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Hamas.** Residents of the village, as well as the Popular Front and Hamas, **have vehemently denied ISIS's claim of responsibility.** The false claim of responsibility may indicate **ISIS's interest in demonstrating "successes" in a symbolic place like "Palestine," precisely in view of the severe pressure exerted on it in Syria and Iraq.**⁵

ISIS's attempt to raise the morale of its operatives

- **An editorial in ISIS's organ Al-Naba** noted that three years have passed since the war against ISIS broke out and that the leaders of the Coalition countries ("the leaders of the Crusaders") **admit that they cannot say when the campaign will**

⁴For details about the attack, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin: "News of Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, June 14-20, 2017."

⁵The weaker ISIS becomes, **the greater the discrepancy between its public announcements and the reality on the ground.** For example, on June 19, 2017, ISIS published an infographic summing up its "achievements" in Mosul in the past month. In reality, however, the only area still under its control is an enclave in the Old City of Mosul, where it is conducting the "last battle" against the Iraqi forces.

end. Therefore, according to the editorial, every day in which the holy warriors stand firm in their war against the Coalition may exacerbate the struggle between the allies of the United States. The editorial also stresses that time is an important factor in dismantling coalitions and that the continuation of the campaign will cause unrest among the ranks and the desire of some parties to withdraw from it. All this will happen through forbearance, patience, jihad, and steadfastness (Al-Naba, June 16, 2017).