



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## August 3-9, 2017



### Main events of the week

► Following are the main developments in Syria and Iraq:

◆ **Syria:** The Syrian forces continued to advance towards Deir ez-Zor on two routes: from the town of Sukhnah (about 125 km from Deir ez-Zor), which they took over this week, and from Al-Raqqah, on Highway 4, along the Euphrates River. They fought battles in the area of the town of Maadan, about 70 km from Deir ez-Zor. The SDF forces are encountering difficulties in Al-Raqqah. On the Syrian-Lebanese border, the Lebanese army was deployed to take over the Ras Baalbek and Al-Qaa ridges in the northern Bekaa Valley, after Hezbollah had removed the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham from Aarsal ridges.

◆ **Iraq:** Iraqi forces and Shiite militias are preparing to take over the ISIS enclave in Tal Afar, some 70 km west of Mosul. The rehabilitation of Mosul and the return to daily life are still proceeding slowly. In various parts of Iraq, the fighting between the Iraqi forces and ISIS continues, still at low intensity.

► In view of the “success” (from ISIS’s perspective) of the attack on the Iraqi embassy in Kabul, ISIS called on its supporters to attack the embassies and diplomatic corps of the “infidel countries” around the world. ISIS’s Al-Nabā’ weekly published an editorial titled: “War on Embassies: the Greatest [Cause of] Fear and Pain for Infidel Countries.” The editorial says that attacking embassies and diplomatic staff is one of the best and cheapest ways to put pressure on enemy governments around the world. In the ITIC’s assessment, it is possible that ISIS operatives and supporters may try to implement this call in practice.

## Russia and the United States

### Expansion of the de-escalation agreements to additional locations in Syria

- ▶ As part of the fourth round of Syrian internal reconciliation talks in Astana, Russia, Iran, and Turkey decided to add **the Homs region to the existing de-escalation zones** (southwestern Syria, which includes the areas of Daraa, Quneitra, and As-Suwayda, and the area east of Damascus) (Russian Ministry of Defense website, August 3, 2017). **Relative calm has been maintained in the de-escalation zones, with the exception of a number of violations from time to time**, mainly by the forces of the Syrian regime (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 5, 2017).
- ▶ At a round of meetings held in Cairo on July 31, 2017, attended by representatives of the “moderate” rebel groups, it was decided to establish a **third de-escalation zone north of Homs**. This area includes 84 towns and has a population of around 147,000. In accordance with the decision, which entered into effect on August 3, 2017 at 12:00, a ceasefire began in this area.
- ▶ **Igor Konashenkov, Chief Spokesman for the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation**, stressed that similar to the two previous de-escalation agreements, **ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham were not included in the agreement**. He added that according to the agreement, **the “moderate” rebel groups were responsible for mopping up the Homs Province of all forces affiliated with ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (Russian Ministry of Defense website, August 3, 2017).



**Russian Ministry of Defense Spokesmen Konashenkov at a press conference, with a map of the control areas in Syria in the background (Russian Ministry of Defense website, August 3, 2017).**

► As part of the agreement, Russian Military Police forces have already been deployed along the contact lines in order to separate the sides. Two checkpoints and three observation points have been set up on the route between Homs and Hama. These forces are supposed to supervise the separation between the sides, monitor the implementation of the agreement, and ensure a regular supply of humanitarian aid to the residents of the area (Russian Ministry of Defense website, August 3, 2017). Some 15 representatives of the rebel organizations operating north of Homs are reportedly expected to meet with the Russian Military Police representatives in order to draw up a precise map of the borders of the de-escalation zone (Zaman al-Wasl, August 7, 2017).

## Russian casualties in Syria

► **Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov** criticized Reuters reports claiming that the number of Russian soldiers killed in Syria was four times the official figure published by the Russian authorities. According to him, this was not the first time that Reuters had tried to diminish the importance of Russia's activity to eliminate ISIS and achieve peace in Syria. Peskov stressed that the only reliable source for these figures was the Russian Ministry of Defense. He added, however, that **foreign fighters with Russian citizenship may also have been killed in Syria**, but they had no connection with the Russian government or the Ministry of Defense (TASS News Agency, August 2, 2017).

## US ties with Syrian rebel organizations

► According to **Col. Ryan Dillon, Spokesman for the International Coalition against ISIS**, the Al-Qaryatayn Martyrs Brigade has returned the heavy weapons and additional equipment that it received from the Coalition countries. The Brigade also agreed not to

carry out offensive operations against the forces of the Syrian regime within a range of 55 km from the safety zones near the Al-Tanf crossing. Col. Dillon said that **the US would continue to train and support** the partners of the US in southern Syria, which are striving to defeat ISIS (US Department of Defense website, August 3, 2017). As may be recalled, the US announced that following a military operation carried out by operatives of the Al-Qaryatayn Martyrs Brigade outside the de-escalation zone, without coordinating it with the US and the Coalition, the US would stop supporting it (US Department of Defense website, July 27, 2017).

## Main developments in Syria

### The campaign to take over Al-Raqqah

► **In Al-Raqqah, the SDF forces are still waging a fierce battle to take over the city from ISIS.** This week, the forces, which sustained heavy losses, continued their efforts to advance in the Old City and mop up neighborhoods which they have already taken over (where ISIS still operates). The SDF forces receive air support by Coalition aircraft, which attacked targets in the neighborhoods held by ISIS (Al-Sham Network, August 5, 2017).

► One of the focuses of the fighting was the **Al-Mashlab neighborhood** in the southeastern part of the city. During the fighting on the outskirts of the neighborhood, a total of 33 SDF soldiers were killed (Al-Sham Network, August 2, 2017). ISIS also attacked SDF outposts in **Al-Hal open market** in the south of the city. As a result, forty SDF soldiers were killed (Al-Sham Network, August 3, 2017). On August 3, 2017, a suicide bomber detonated a truck bomb against an SDF force staging area **in southeast Al-Raqqah** (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, August 3, 2017).



**ISIS fighting against the SDF forces in Al-Raqqah (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, August 4, 2017)**



An ISIS rocket hits an SDF outpost (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, August 4, 2017)



The explosion of an ISIS truck bomb (marked in green) driven by a suicide bomber codenamed Abu Samia the Tajiki. The explosion occurred at an SDF force staging area southeast of Al-Raqqah (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, August 3, 2017)

## An interview with an ISIS commander

► In an interview given by **ISIS's military commander in the Al-Raqqah area** to the Rumiya magazine, he referred to the campaign taking place in Al-Raqqah. He noted that **beyond the military and strategic aspects, the importance of Al-Raqqah's region stems from the fact that this is one of the first regions captured by ISIS, and it is from here that its operatives set out for further conquests.**

► As for the tactics of fighting in Al-Raqqah, the commander said that ISIS operatives resort to **activities designated to wear down by counter-attacks, including attacks deep in enemy territory.** They make **use of snipers** positioned in dominant areas such as **high-rise buildings.** In addition, they use **car bombs.** According to him, Al-Raqqah has been divided **into small sections which should function autonomously in case of emergency.** **Workshops for repair and maintenance of weapons** were set up in the city. He concluded by saying that **"the Al-Raqqah campaign will not be a picnic"** for the enemy (Rumiya, August 6, 2017).

## Hezbollah's Arsal campaign

Hezbollah's Military Information Office announced **the end of the evacuation of the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and their families from the area of Arsal**. They have been evacuated probably to the Idlib area. This was carried out as part of the ceasefire agreement that started on July 27, 2017. About 160 buses reportedly set out from the Arsal area, **carrying about 7,500-10,000 operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and their families, as well as refugees** (Al-Arabiya, August 2, 2017; Al-Jazeera, August 4, 2017). The operation was carried out under the supervision of the Lebanese General Security Service (Al-Nashra, August 2, 2017). According to Hezbollah, all the objectives of the operation have been achieved: **There is no longer any presence of operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham on the ground, and the terror threat on Lebanon's eastern border has been removed** (Al-Ahed, August 2, 2017).



**Right: Buses ready to evacuate inhabitants from the Arsal area (Al-Arabiya, August 2, 2017). Left: Evacuated refugees. Those dressed in purple are probably those monitoring the implementation of the deal (Al-Jazeera, August 4, 2017)**

► Hezbollah spokesmen **lavished praises on Hezbollah's achievement in the Arsal campaign**, claiming that it is a **Lebanese achievement** (“national achievement”). According to **Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general**, the fighting took place with the approval of the Christians, who also suffered from the activity of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Al-Alam, August 6, 2017). **Hezbollah senior leader Nabil Qaouq** said that the liberation of the Arsal ridges had demonstrated once again (Hezbollah's) equation “**army, people, resistance**” (i.e., Hezbollah) (Al-Ahed, August 6, 2017).

## Removal of ISIS from the northern Bekaa Valley

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered a speech, noting that ISIS holds a territory of about 296 square kilometers **in the ridges of Ras Baalbek and Al-Qaa**, half of them in Syrian territory and the other half in Lebanon. He added that **the Lebanese army would liberate the ridges of Ras Baalbek and Al-Qaa, and that Hezbollah would be at its service** (Al-Manar, August 4, 2017).

► On the ground, the Lebanese army **started preliminary actions in advance of the campaign to mop up the areas of Al-Qaa and Ras Baalbek of ISIS presence**. As part of these preparations, the army began deploying its forces on the outskirts of the town of Aarsal and manned positions which had served the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and had been captured by Hezbollah (Al-Manar, August 6, 2017). Special Forces of the Lebanese army advanced **towards ISIS positions in the Ras Baalbek hills** (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, August 6, 2017).



The Lebanese army prepares for the campaign to mop up the areas of Ras Baalbek and Al-Qaa (Al-Manar News Twitter account, August 6, 2017)

## Takeover of the town of Sukhnah

**Last week, the Syrian army entered the western neighborhoods of the town of Sukhnah** (northeast of Palmyra) after having taken over Tantour Mountain, which dominates that city from the west. In some of the city neighborhoods, **fighting continues** between the Syrian forces and ISIS (Syria Victory, August 5, 2017). **The takeover of the town paves the way for the advance of a Syrian force towards the city of Deir ez-Zor, situated at a distance of about 125 km from Sukhnah.**



**The town of Sukhnah taken over by the Syrian forces, representing a crossroad leading to Deir ez-Zor and Al-Raqqah (Google Maps)**

► The town of Sukhnah is situated about 125 km northeast of Palmyra and **has a population of 30,000**. It is located in an area rich in natural gas resources, on a traffic artery leading to Deir ez-Zor and Al-Raqqah. The town is inhabited by tribal clans belonging to various tribes in the areas of Al-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor (Al-Arabiya, July 30, 2017; Wikipedia).

► According to ISIS reports, **the area of Sukhnah witnessed fierce battles where the Syrian forces sustained many casualties:**

- ◆ Over twenty soldiers were killed in a Syrian army headquarters west of Sukhnah when **a car bomb** driven by a suicide bomber exploded (Haqq, August 5, 2017).
- ◆ Two Syrian army tanks as well as a Shilka self-propelled anti-aircraft system (ZSU-23-4) **were destroyed west of Sukhnah** by anti-tank missile fire (Haqq, August 5, 2017).
- ◆ On August 5, 2017, ISIS released a video showing a Syrian army infantry force being hit by a drone attack **east of the Al-Hail gas field** (Haqq, August 5, 2017).



Photos from a Syrian army video, showing scenes of the fighting in the Sukhnah area (YouTube account of the Syrian Army Spokesperson's Office, August 5, 2017)

### Advance of another Syrian force towards Deir ez-Zor

- ▶ According to Syrian media reports, Russian and Syrian aircraft attacked targets in the rural area east of Al-Raqqah. The airstrikes focused on the **town of Maadan**, in the Euphrates Valley, **about 60 km southeast of Al-Raqqah**. The Syrian forces reportedly **took control of a pumping station in the Maadan area** (Al-Sham Network, August 7, 2017).
- ▶ At the same time, there were battles between ISIS operatives and Syrian troops **trying to advance towards the eastern part of the town of Ghanem Al-Ali**, about 37 km southeast of Al-Raqqah (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 5, 2017). The importance of Ghanem Al-Ali stems from **its location on Highway 4 from Al-Raqqah to Deir ez-Zor**.



The towns of Ghanem Al-Ali and Maadan, situated near Highway 4 from Al-Raqqah to Deir ez-Zor, along the Euphrates Valley (Google Maps)

## Main developments in Iraq

### The rehabilitation of Mosul

According to Iraqi media reports, the open markets in the west Mosul neighborhood of Mosul Al-Jadida resumed normal activity. This was made possible as this neighborhood sustained less damage than the area of Mosul's Old City, which has been completely destroyed (Nineveh Information Center, August 6, 2017). At the same time, clearing and neutralizing weapons left behind by ISIS throughout the city continued. The explosion of IEDs and ammunition claimed the lives of dozens of people among families returning to the city (Shafaq News, August 6, 2017). A groundwater pumping facility was opened in west Mosul to supply water to some neighborhoods (Nineveh Information Center, August 4, 2017).



**Open markets in the neighborhood of Mosul Al-Jadida resume normal activity (Nineveh Information Center, August 6, 2017)**



**Right: Neutralizing ammunition left behind by ISIS in Mosul (Shafaq News, August 6, 2017). Left: Opening a facility for pumping groundwater in west Mosul (Nineveh Information Center, August 4, 2017)**

## Preparations for taking over Tal Afar

The Iraqi army troops and the Shiite militias (Popular Mobilization) are preparing to **remove ISIS from the enclave in Tal Afar** (about 70 km west of Mosul). **Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS**, said that **the next campaign in Iraq against ISIS would be in Tal Afar**. He estimates that there are **currently about a thousand ISIS operatives in the area**. Further sites where the activity against ISIS will be focused, according to him, will be **the area of Al-Hawija**, south of Mosul (where he says there are about a thousand operatives), and **Al-Qaim** near the Iraqi-Syrian border (Aranews, August 7, 2017).

► **The Iraqi Defense Ministry announced the end of the preparations in advance of the new campaign to take over the Tal Afar area by the Iraqi army with the assistance the Popular Mobilization militias** (Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias). As part of these preparations, it was reported that Division 9, which was so far deployed in Mosul, is preparing to advance towards Tal Afar (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, August 7, 2017).

► On the ground, **Popular Mobilization forces operating in the area announced that they had liberated 17 villages southeast of Tal Afar** (Press TV, August 2, 2017). In addition, there were airstrikes against bridges serving ISIS (Sputnik, August 7, 2017). **Abu Ismail, the head of ISIS's training camps in Tal Afar**, was reportedly killed in an Iraqi Air Force airstrike against an ISIS training camp (Sputnik, August 3, 2017). On the other hand, ISIS operatives reported that they had fired rockets against outposts of the Shiite militias west of Tal Afar (Haqq, August 4, 2017).



**ISIS operational activity in the area of Tal Afar (Haqq, August 4, 2017)**

## Further fighting in other areas of Iraq

- Fighting continues in various areas of Iraq:
- ◆ **Diyala Province:** The Iraqi army launched a new offensive against ISIS forces in the Diyala Province (Anatolia News Agency, August 2, 2017).
  - ◆ An Iraqi military source reported that 12 ISIS operatives had been killed in an International Coalition airstrike **near Jordan** when they tried to attack the **Tarbil border crossing between Iraq and Jordan** (Khaberni, August 2, 2017).
  - ◆ An airstrike by the Iraqi Air Force in the **Salah al-Din Province** against ISIS bases killed 170 operatives (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, August 7, 2017).
  - ◆ ISIS reported that its operatives had attacked an Iraqi army outpost **south of Shirqat** (about 70 km south of Mosul), took control of it, captured weapons and set the outpost on fire (Haqq, August 6, 2017).



Iraqi army outpost attacked by ISIS. Left: Weapons found there (Haqq, August 6, 2017)

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

### The Sinai Peninsula

- ▶ The Egyptian army announced that it had **uncovered a tunnel in the northern Sinai Peninsula, on the border between Egypt and Israel, which according to the Egyptian army had served ISIS operatives**. The Egyptian security forces destroyed the tunnel (official Facebook page of the Spokesman for the Egyptian Armed Forces, August 6, 2017). Constructing such a tunnel and concealing it from the Egyptians require considerable logistic and financial capabilities, and therefore the ITIC believes that **it is more likely that the tunnel was dug by Hamas**.



ISIS tunnel exposed and destroyed by the Egyptian army on the Egyptian-Israeli border in northern Sinai (official Facebook page of the Spokesman for the Egyptian Armed Forces, August 6, 2017)

- ▶ The Egyptian Interior Ministry announced that **Ahmed Hassan Ahmed al-Nashu, AKA Ghandar al-Masry (i.e., the Egyptian), who had served as ISIS's senior operative in charge of recruitment in the Sinai branch**, was killed in an exchange of fire with Egyptian police forces in Al-Arish. According to Ahmed Ban, an expert on Islamist movements, Ghandar al-Masry was appointed after several ISIS commanders had been killed. In his

office, he was in charge of providing ISIS operatives with weapons and food. Ban noted that Ghandar al-Masry's death represented yet another blow to ISIS **after many of its commanders had been killed** (Al-Mashreq, July 19, 2017).

## Other countries

### Afghanistan

- ▶ **ISIS claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack in the Shiite Jawadiyah Mosque**, in the city of Herat in west Afghanistan. A total of 32 people were killed and more than 60 others were wounded. According to the authorities in Afghanistan, it is unclear whether it was one or two terrorists who carried out the attack (tolonews.com, August 1, 2017).
- ▶ Aamaq News Agency announced that the attack had been carried out by two ISIS operatives. **This is the fifth terrorist attack against Shiite mosques in Afghanistan this year** (four were carried out in the city of Herat, while one has been carried out in the capital Kabul). ISIS's Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for carrying out two of these attacks (Afghanistan Times, August 2, 2017).

## The conduct of the Islamic State

- ▶ As part of ISIS's desire to convey "business as usual," it published photos documenting the punishments imposed on civilians in the Deir ez-Zor Province who did not observe Islamic law. Among other things, the photos include "someone who abandoned Islam" (*murtadd*) being executed, a person accused of theft having his hand cut off, a man who committed adultery being stoned, and a man accused of homosexuality being thrown off the roof of a building (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, August 5, 2017).



Left: Man accused of theft having his hand cut off. Right: Execution of “someone who abandoned Islam” (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, August 5, 2017)

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### UN Security Council adopts counterterrorism resolution

► On August 2, 2017, the UN Security Council unanimously approved **Egypt’s proposed Resolution 2370**. The resolution called on all countries to prevent the supply of weapons to terrorist organizations such as ISIS, **including weapons purchased through the Internet and social media**. Among other things, the resolution proposes taking legal steps against arms suppliers in order to increase the ability to monitor them. According to Egypt’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Amr Abul Atta, who is also President of the UN Security Council, this is one of the first resolutions intended to prevent terrorist operatives from obtaining weapons (The Washington Post, August 3, 2017).

### Details about the thwarting of an ISIS attack in Australia

► On August 3, 2017, an indictment was filed against **Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat, a father and son who were arrested on suspicion of planning to carry out an attack in a passenger plane**. The indictment includes additional details about the planned attack (Australian Federal Police website, August 3, 2017; Fox News, August 4, 2017):

- ◆ **The two men planned to blow up a plane belonging to UAE airline Etihad Airways**, which was supposed to take off from Sydney airport. According to the plan, the son was supposed to give his brother (who did not know about the attack) a meat grinder in which an IED was concealed. He was supposed to board the plane with it.
- ◆ **The high-quality explosive** was sent to the planners of the attack in Australia by mail in several rounds.
- ◆ **The detainees were handled by ISIS operatives in Syria**. Senior ISIS operatives in Syria were the ones who sent the explosives and they were the ones who instructed the

perpetrators of the attack on how to assemble the bomb that would be taken on board the aircraft.

## The battle for hearts and minds

### ISIS calls for attacks on embassies and members of the diplomatic staff around the world

An editorial in the **Islamic State's Al-Nabā'** weekly mentions the lessons learned from the attack on the Iraqi embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan (July 30, 2017). The editorial says that **attacking embassies and members of the diplomatic corps is one of the best and cheapest ways to put pressure on governments**. According to the editorial, **the Islamic State attaches great importance to such actions and encourages every Muslim in every country to attack embassies or embassy employees by killing them or taking them hostage**. The editorial states that killing an embassy employee outside his or her home country is preferable to killing dozens of civilians in their home country. This is because **the impact of an attack on an embassy is even greater** than the impact of an attack on a security or military headquarters in the same country. The editorial calls on Muslims to **take the initiative and attack the embassies and members of the diplomatic corps of the "infidel countries"** (Al-Nabā', August 3, 2017).



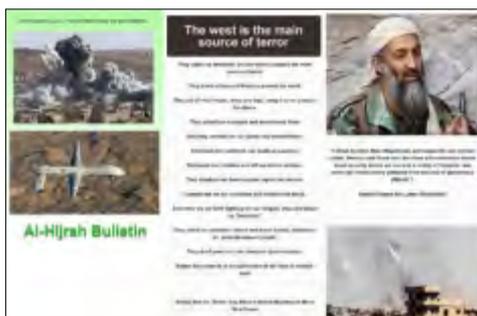
Headline of the editorial titled: "War on Embassies: the Greatest [Cause of] Fear and Pain for Infidel Countries" (Al-Nabā', August 3, 2017)

## Al-Qaeda's battle for hearts and minds

► Al-Qaeda began publishing a **new English-language bulletin called Al-Hijrah**. Each issue of the bulletin consists of a single page focusing on one topic. The topic is explained in brief, including quotes from senior figures in the organization. Five issues have appeared to date.

Some of the topics of the issues:

- ◆ The West is the main source of terror
- ◆ Why do we perform jihad?
- ◆ The necessity of digging trenches
- ◆ Oh Muslims, Jerusalem calls you



**Left: Issue 2, “The West is the main source of terror”**  
**Right: Issue 3 of the bulletin, which deals with the question “Why do we perform jihad?”**