



Spotlight on Global Jihad

February 1-7, 2018



Main events of the week

- ▶ The Syrian forces continued their campaign to take over the Idlib Province, the most significant stronghold of the rebel organizations headed by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. **They continued mopping up the area of the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase** and advanced westward, **to take control of the Hama-Aleppo highway (M5)**. At the same time, **the Syrian forces took over villages controlled by ISIS southeast of Abu Ad-Duhur**. According to Syrian TV, it will soon be announced that the area between Hama and Aleppo has been mopped up from the presence of ISIS operatives.
- ▶ This week, **a Russian Sukhoi 25 plane was shot down in the area of Idlib**. The plane was shot down by a shoulder-fired missile. The pilot managed to bail out and was killed during combat. The pilot's body was returned to the Russians by Turkish Military Intelligence. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham claimed responsibility for shooting down the plane. In response, the Russian forces used precision weapons to attack the launch site of the shoulder-fired missile.
- ▶ **In the area between Albukamal and Deir ez-Zor**, east of the Euphrates River, ISIS is conducting intensive guerrilla activity against the SDF forces. ISIS's activity includes **hit-and-run attacks** with off-road vehicles and armored vehicles, and extensive use of **suicide bombers**. The military operations are accompanied by extensive media activity. Hence it appears that **ISIS is returning to high-level operational capability in this area**.

Main developments in Syria

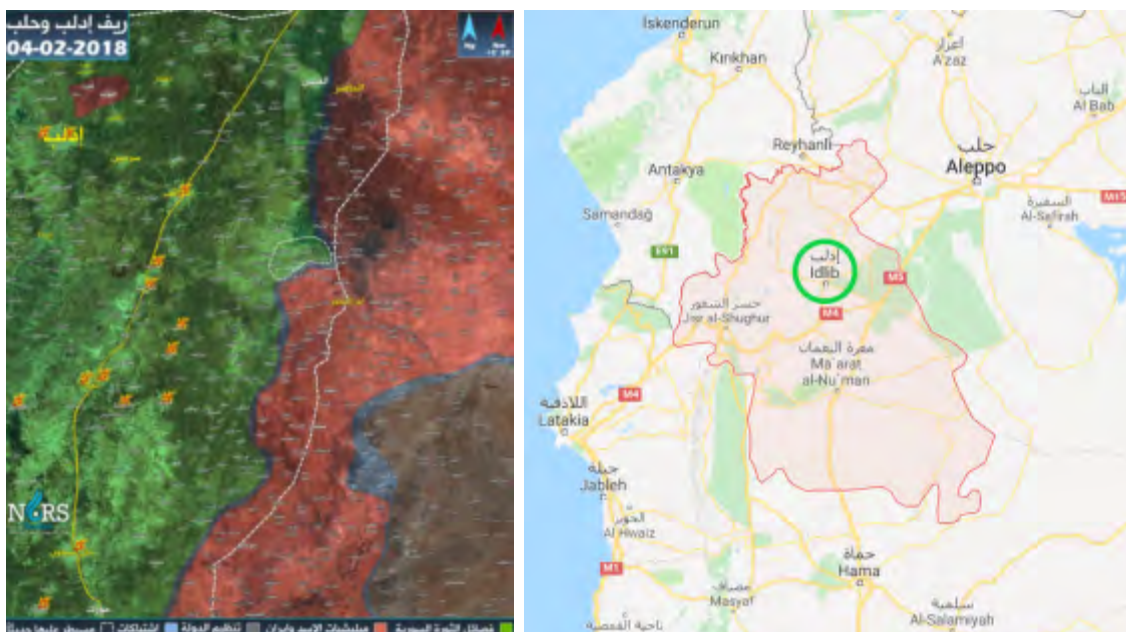
The campaign to take over Idlib

The Syrian forces continued to mop up the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase area from operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations. During the week, **the Syrian troops in the Abu Ad-Duhur area advanced westward to take control of the Hama-Aleppo highway (M5)**. At the same time, the forces operated **against the ISIS**

enclave southeast of Abu Ad-Duhur. The Syrian forces' takeover of the Hama-Aleppo highway and the end of the mopping up of the area will mark the end of the first stage in the campaign to take over Idlib.

► During the week, the Syrian army recorded **several achievements**:

- ◆ **On February 3, 2018**, the forces of Brigadier General Suheil Hassan took over the village of Tall Alloush, about 12 km north of Abu Ad-Duhur, as well as a number of additional villages in the area (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 3, 2018).
- ◆ **On February 4, 2018**, the Syrian army announced the launching of a military operation in two parallel routes: the first is towards the town of Saraqib, and the second towards the village of Al-Eis, about 28 km north of Abu Ad-Duhur (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 4, 2018). **During Syrian army airstrikes against the town of Saraqib, chemical substances were allegedly used.**
- ◆ **On February 5, 2018**, the Syrian army announced that its forces halted an attack of the rebel organizations under the command of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, whose objective was to stop their advance in the area west of the village of Abu Ad-Duhur. The Syrian troops fighting in the area **reached a distance of about 13 km east of the Hama-Aleppo highway (M5)** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 5, 2018).



Right: The Idlib Province and the Hama-Aleppo highway crossing it (Google Maps). Left: Deployment of the forces east and southeast of Idlib (updated to February 4, 2018): marked in red – the Syrian army and its supporting forces; marked in green – the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations; marked in gray – ISIS enclave; in light blue – areas of the recent clashes (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, February 4, 2018)



Right: Trenches and fighting positions of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham; they were abandoned north of the village of Abu Ad-Duhur and were captured by the Syrian army. Left: Soldiers of the Syrian army examining a position of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham abandoned north of the village of Abu Ad-Duhur (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 3, 2018)

► Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham released a video documenting their preparations for attacking positions of the Syrian army in Tell Sultan, about 12 km northwest of Abu Ad-Duhur (Ibaa, February 4, 2018).



Right: Armored vehicle manufactured by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, with the inscription “Defeater of the defiant.”¹ Left: Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham preparing for an attack against Syrian army positions in Tell Sultan (Ibaa, February 4, 2018)

Mopping up the ISIS enclave

► This week, the Syrian forces continued to mop up ISIS’s enclave southeast of Abu Ad-Duhur (northeast of Hama). According to Syrian sources, the Syrian army took over 11 villages in the enclave and thus, it will soon be announced that **the rural areas between Hama and Aleppo have been completely mopped up from ISIS presence** (Syrian TV, February 6, 2018).

¹ The Arabic word is *rawafid*, which is a derogatory term for the Shiites, used by jihadists.



Syrian army soldiers taking part in mopping up ISIS's enclave southeast of Abu Ad-Duhur (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 5, 2018)

Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham operatives shoot down Russian fighter plane

On February 3, 2018, **a Russian fighter plane was shot down near the town of Saraqib**, about 16 km southeast of Idlib, in an area controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham claimed responsibility for shooting down the plane.

► According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the plane was shot down while carrying out a reconnaissance flight over the de-escalation zone in Idlib. The pilot managed to bail out and landed in an area controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. He survived the crash and was killed in combat with “terrorist operatives.”² **The plane was shot down by a shoulder-fired missile.** The Russian Ministry of Defense said that the Russian Center for Reconciliation, in cooperation with Turkey, which supervises the de-escalation zone in Idlib, was taking steps to have the pilot’s body returned (Facebook page of the Hmeymim base, February 4, 2018; Zvezda TV website, February 3, 2018).

² A short video from the Idlib+ website, issued by the Russian army, attempts to prove Hmeymim base spokesman Alexander Ivanov’s claim that the pilot, Roman Filipov, was killed in an exchange of fire between him and operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Facebook, February 5) 2018).



Right: Russian Army announcement about the downing of the plane. The photo of the plane was taken before it was shot down. Its tail number is marked with a yellow square (Hmeymim base Facebook page, February 4, 2018). Left: The pilot, Major Roman Filipov, whose plane was shot down above Saraqib. According to the Russian announcement, Filipov was seriously injured in an exchange of fire with “terrorist operatives” and blew himself up with his hand grenade (Hmeymim base Facebook page, February 5, 2018)

► **The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham claimed responsibility for shooting down the plane.** According to the operative codenamed Mahmoud al-Turkemani, who was referred to as “a commander in the Air Defense Battalion of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham,” the Russian plane was shot down with a **shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile**. The video released by the organization documents the fighter plane and the missile being fired at it (Ibaa, February 3, 2018).



Right: Documentation of the launching of an anti-aircraft missile (in a red circle) at the Russian fighter plane over the town of Saraqib. Left: The burning wreckage of the fighter plane in the area south of Saraqib (Ibaa, February 3, 2018).



One of the two jet engines of the Russian fighter plane that was shot down by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Ibaa, February 3, 2018)

► In response to the downing of the plane, the Russian forces used precision weapons to attack the launch site of the shoulder-fired missile that shot down the plane (Ibaa, February 3, 2018). According to the Russian media, more than 30 operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham were killed in the attack (Zvezda TV website, a government television channel owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense; TASS News Agency, February 3, 2018). The Ministry of Defense ordered its planes to fly at an altitude of 5,000 meters or more in order to avoid similar incidents (Reuters, February 5, 2018).

On February 6, 2018, **the Russian Ministry of Defense reported that the body of Roman Filipov, the Sukhoi pilot who was shot down, had been returned to Russian Military Intelligence by Turkish Military Intelligence** (Russia Today, February 6, 2018).

Clashes continue in the Albukamal area

Clashes between ISIS operatives and SDF forces with US and Coalition air support continued this week in the area north of Albukamal. It seems that **in the area north of Albukamal and southeast of Deir ez-Zor, ISIS returned to a high-level operational capability, reflected in intensive guerrilla operations against the SDF forces.** ISIS's guerrilla operations include **hit-and-run attacks** against SDF staging zones, using car bombs and suicide bombers. ISIS's operational activity in the area **is accompanied by extensive media activities** carried out by local media personnel and disseminated by ISIS's central media platforms, Amaq News Agency and the Akhbar Al-Muslimeen website.

► **This week, clashes took place mainly in the area of the village of Al-Bahrah, about 30 km north of Albukamal.** During the week, ISIS claimed responsibility for **three suicide bombing attacks**, allegedly carried out by ISIS operatives against the SDF forces:

- ◆ **On February 2, 2018:** ISIS's Al-Barakah Province released photos documenting two (Syrian) suicide bombers, one of them confined to a wheelchair, who carried out a

suicide bombing attack against an SDF staging zone in the village of Al-Bahrah, about 30 km north of Albukamal (on the east bank of the Euphrates River). The two operatives were driving in an off-road vehicle, and one of them fired a machine gun while approaching the target (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 2, 2018).



The two suicide bombers. Left: Abu Yazan Al-Shami (i.e., the Syrian). Right: Abu Youssuf Al-Shami (i.e., the Syrian), wheelchair bound (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 2, 2018)



Right: The vehicle on its way to the target. Left: The explosion (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 2, 2018)

- ◆ **On February 3, 2018:** ISIS announced that four SDF fighters had been killed and their vehicle destroyed when an IED was detonated near the village of Al-Bahrah (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 4, 2018).
- ◆ **On February 5, 2018:** Fifteen SDF fighters were killed in the explosion of a car bomb near Al-Bahrah (Khotwa, February 5, 2018). A suicide bomber codenamed Abu Khalil Al-Halabi blew himself up with a car bomb against an SDF headquarters near the village of Al-Bahrah (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 5, 2018).



Abu Khalil Al-Halabi, who detonated a car bomb against an SDF headquarters; note his relatively old age compared to other ISIS suicide bombers (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 5, 2018).

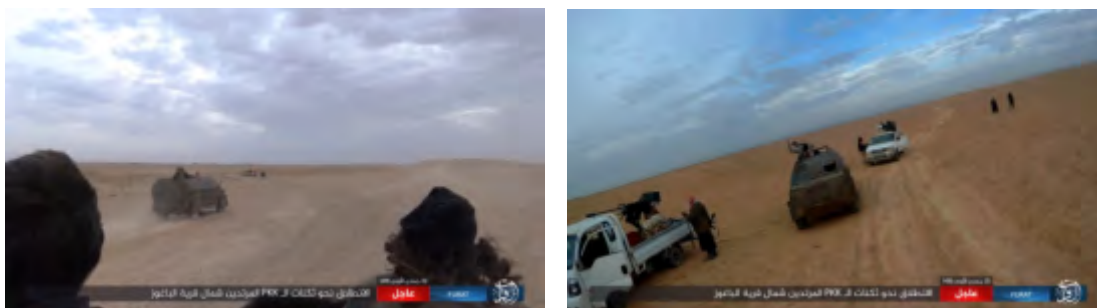


The explosion of the car bomb. Right: The car approaching the target. Left: The explosion of the car (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 5, 2018)

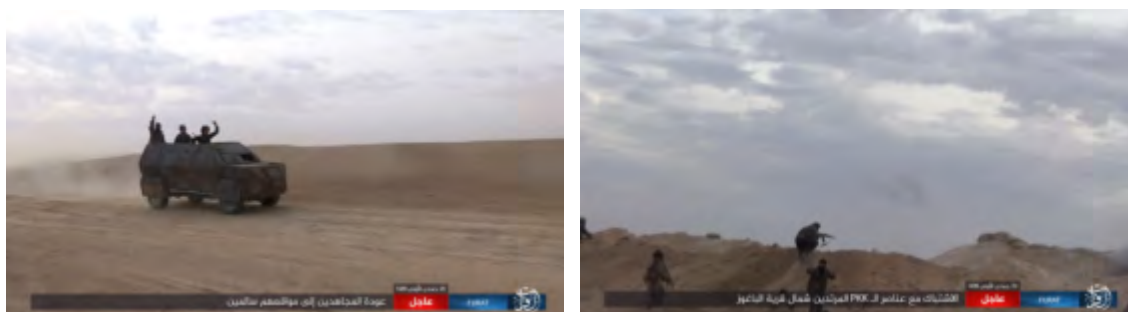


The village of Al-Bahrah, where ISIS and SDF forces clashed this week (Google Maps)

- ISIS's Euphrates Province announced that **on February 5, 2018, its operatives attacked SDF positions about 1.5 km east of the city of Albukamal**, on the east bank of the Euphrates River. The province disseminated photos of the attack.



Right: ISIS operatives preparing for the attack against SDF positions east of Albukamal. Left: ISIS operatives moving towards the positions (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 6, 2018)



Right: ISIS operatives storming one of the SDF positions on February 5, 2018. Left: ISIS operatives returning to their base after the attack (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 6, 2018)

The Yarmouk Basin

► The Free Syrian Army/Southern Front distributed a leaflet announcing **the launch of an attack against ISIS operatives in the Yarmouk Basin** (i.e., **the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Army**). The attack, **codenamed “Allahu Akbar,”** is managed from the Al-Fatiheen operations room, and is conducted by ten organizations of the southern front of the Free Syrian Army (Twitter account, February 1, 2018). Its objective is to drive ISIS operatives away from the rural area west of Daraa (Enab Baladi, February 1, 2018). On February 6, 2018, sources of the Free Syrian Army said that the attack had been stopped and it had not been decided yet whether it would be resumed (Enab Baladi, February 6, 2018).



Wording of the Free Syrian Army leaflet announcing the opening of the Allahu Akbar campaign against ISIS operatives in the Yarmouk Basin (Twitter account, February 1, 2018)

- ▶ According to a report on an Arab website, **the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Army controls 15 villages in the Yarmouk Basin, with over 150,000 civilians.** These civilians are suffering from a siege, shortage of food and medications, and lack of shelter from bombardments. **The only crossing that was open for civilians has been closed due to the attack by the Free Syrian Army** (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, February 2, 2018).

Main developments in Iraq

Activity of the Iraqi security forces against ISIS networks throughout Iraq

- ▶ Iraqi security forces continued to conduct military activity against ISIS networks throughout Iraq. Following are several prominent incidents:
 - ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The Iraqi army, police forces and tribesmen, with International Coalition air support, launched **an operation to mop up the Western Desert up to the border between Iraq and Saudi Arabia.** An ISIS base was reportedly destroyed in the operation, 15 operatives were killed, and vehicles were destroyed (Al-Sumaria News, February 3, 2018).
 - ◆ The Iraqi army, with tribal support, destroyed two ISIS bases and detained seven suspects in Wadi Houran, south of Haditha (Al-Sumaria News, February 5, 2018).

- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** Based on intelligence, the Iraqi security forces apprehended **Abd al-Ghani Dhirgham Abd al-Samad, who had served as the Islamic State’s oil minister.** He was caught in the village of Al-Mas’adah (about 140 km west of Mosul), while trying to escape through the Nineveh Desert to the Iraqi-Syrian border (Sot Al-Iraq, February 2, 2018).
- ◆ **Diyala Province:** Six Popular Mobilization fighters were killed when “armed operatives” attacked their position northeast of Baqubah. The “armed operatives” fled the scene (Al-Sumaria News, February 5, 2018).

The border between Iraq and Iran

► On January 27, 2018, a Revolutionary Guards force clashed with a group of ISIS operatives who arrived from Iraq. Kurdish internal security forces in the Kurdistan region said that before the clash, **their troops had detained several ISIS operatives.** The operatives were detained at the foot of Mount Bemu, in the Halabja District. Searching the area, Kurdish internal security forces found two hiding places of the operatives, which contained weapons, equipment, explosives and cellular phones. The interrogation of one of the detainees revealed that **20 ISIS operatives (including a number of Kurds and Arabs) arrived from the Balkanah area, about 18 km southeast of Kirkuk, seeking shelter in the Kurdish zone. The Kurdish forces’ preemptive activity forced the ISIS operatives to flee to Iranian territory.** The Kurdish internal security forces reported the crossing of the squad to the Iranians, who detained the operatives.

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

The activity of the Egyptian security forces

► The Egyptian security forces continued their activity against ISIS bases in the northern Sinai Peninsula, with an emphasis on the area of Al-Arish, with Egyptian air support. On February 2, 2018, the forces reported that people suspected of assisting terrorist elements had been detained, and IEDs, off-road vehicles, motorcycles and materials used to manufacture IEDs had been found and destroyed. Terrorist bases where “terrorist operatives” were hiding were also destroyed. The Egyptian forces reported the discovery of a tunnel opening on the northern Sinai border (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 2, 2018; Al-Masry al-Youm, February 6, 2018).

► According to an announcement by the Egyptian army from **February 5, 2018**, a terrorist operative was killed and six suspects were detained in a security operation carried out in northern Sinai. In addition, two off-road vehicles and six motorcycles used by “terrorist elements” were found and destroyed. Two depots containing spare parts for motorcycles **and 51 IEDs** were destroyed in the attacks. In addition, the forces destroyed a large number of terrorist bases used for storing supplies, communications devices, ammunition and materials for manufacturing IEDs (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 5, 2018).



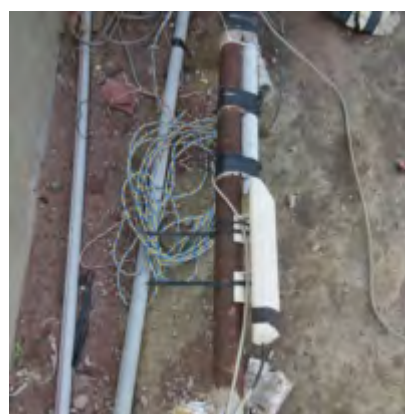
Right: Off-road vehicles of “terrorist operatives” which were set on fire by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai. Left: Spare parts of vehicles and motorcycles found by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 2, 2018)



Right: The entrance to a tunnel discovered by the Egyptian army in the border area of the northern Sinai Peninsula. Left: An off-road vehicle belonging to “terrorist elements,” which was found by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 5, 2018)



Right: A motorcycle belonging to “terrorist operatives” going up in flames after being found and set on fire by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai. Right: A “terror base” going up in flames after being set on fire by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 5, 2018)



Right: An IED belonging to “terrorist operatives,” which was found by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai. On the left: Dozens of electric circuits for detonating IEDs, which were found by the Egyptian army in northern Sinai (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 5, 2018)

ISIS’s response

ISIS continues to carry out guerrilla operations against the Egyptian security forces in northern Sinai, **mainly planting roadside IEDs.**

- ISIS reported that **its operatives had detonated a number of IEDs against the Egyptian security forces in northern Sinai:** A number of Egyptian policemen were killed and wounded in the explosion of an IED against police vehicles. A bulldozer used for clearing land in southern Al-Arish was also destroyed. Another IED was activated against an Egyptian police APC, killing and wounding several policemen. Other policemen were killed and wounded by an IED that was detonated at the same site against a foot patrol. In addition, two Egyptian army soldiers were shot to death by ISIS sniper fire at the checkpoint at the 17th kilometer

west of Al-Arish (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, February 6, 2018). IEDs were found and neutralized on the road from Al-Arish to east Al-Qantara (Al-Masry Al-Youm, February 6, 2018).

Egyptian army spokesman's response to an article in the New York Times

► **Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman Tamer al-Rifai** denied the New York Times³ report that Israel had attacked ISIS forces in northern Sinai from the air. He said that the Egyptian army was fighting terrorism in the northern Sinai Peninsula without assistance from other elements (Akhbar Al-Youm, February 3, 2018). Another Egyptian senior military official said that the report was unfounded and that the article “was not worthy of a response” (Al-Masriyoun, February 3, 2018).

The conduct of ISIS and the jihadists in the various provinces

Libya

► On February 3, 2018, **clashes broke out between the Libyan security forces and ISIS operatives in the area of the Al-Dahra oil field** (approximately 227 km southeast of the city of Sirte). Two Libyan army soldiers were killed and five others were wounded in the clashes, which lasted for two days (Reuters, February 3, 2018). It should be noted that since 2016, after ISIS lost control of the city of Sirte, ISIS operatives have been staying in a number of small enclaves. These operatives are engaged in terror and guerrilla activity, mainly against the Libyan security forces (Al-Bawaba, February 3, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Russia

► The Russian Federal Security Service announced that it had killed a man suspected of belonging to ISIS, who was planning to carry out an attack in the city of Nizhny Novgorod (the fourth largest city in Russia, which lies on the banks of the Volga). The attack was planned to take place on the day of Russia's presidential elections (March 18, 2018). The suspect, who had resisted arrest, was shot and killed. A powerful IED, components for making IEDs,

³ According to an investigative report published in The New York Times (February 3, 2018), over the past two years Israeli fighter planes, helicopters, and UAVs have carried out over 100 airstrikes in the northern Sinai Peninsula against ISIS operatives, with whom Egypt has found it difficult to cope.

weapons and ammunition were found at the home of the suspect, a citizen of one of the countries bordering on Russia (Russian Federal Security Service website, February 1, 2018).

Turkey

► According to a Turkish police source, 82 people were arrested in Turkey as part of a large-scale operation in Istanbul on suspicion of involvement in ISIS activities in Turkey or in the organization's combat zones in Syria and Iraq. Of those arrested, 77 are foreigners who came from outside Turkey (Anatolia News Agency, February 3, 2018). The Turkish authorities announced that they had arrested Omar Yetek, the Islamic State's information minister. Yetek was detained in Ankara. According to them, he was detained after information about his presence in the city was received. According to the Turkish news agency, Yetek was in charge of managing ISIS's media entities and was behind several terrorist attacks in Turkey (RT, February 5, 2018).

North African countries

► **The Moroccan Interior Ministry** announced that the security forces had uncovered an ISIS terrorist squad comprising seven operatives. The squad operated between the city of Tangier in northern Morocco and the city of Meknes. The operatives had planned to carry out attacks in Morocco. During the course of their arrest, electronic equipment and cold weapons were found, along with ideological books and manuscripts (Assabah Moroccan news website, February 1, 2018).

► **Bilal al-Qobi, the right-hand man of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM)**, was killed in an ambush by the Tunisian army. Qobi, who was Algerian, was in Tunisia in order to reorganize the local branch of Al-Qaeda. He was also in charge of coordination between the AQIM commanders and the organization's branches in Tunisia and Libya (Arabic.rt.com, January 21, 2018).

► The Al-Andalus media foundation issued a statement on the death of **Adel Seghiri**, AKA **Hisham Abu Ruwaha al-Qasantini**, who was in charge of media for AQIM. According to the statement, he was killed on January 30, 2018, in clashes with the Algerian army in the Jijel region, 400 km east of the capital Algiers (Al-Andalus Foundation Archives, February 3, 2018).