



Spotlight on Global Jihad

February 8-14, 2018



Main events of the week

- ▶ The Syrian forces continued to mop up the rural areas east of the Hama-Aleppo Highway, **as part of the campaign to take over the Idlib area**. This week, it was reported that hundreds of ISIS operatives had surrendered to the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations. If these reports are verified, then this is **one of the greatest surrenders of ISIS operatives** during the fighting and might indicate their demoralization and loss of fighting spirit in the Idlib area.
- ▶ **In the eastern sector of the Euphrates River, north of Albukamal**, clashes continued between SDF operatives (with Coalition air support) and ISIS operatives. **ISIS has apparently returned to high-level operational capability** in this sector, while the SDF fighters are finding it hard to provide a suitable response to the intensive guerrilla operations that ISIS is carrying out against them.
- ▶ **In the Deir ez-Zor area, there was a violent confrontation between the SDF forces (with Coalition air support) and a Syrian tribal militia force operating on behalf of the Syrian regime. The Syrian force**, which numbered several hundred fighters, crossed the Euphrates River **and advanced toward the oil wells on the east bank**. The advancing force attacked an SDF base on the east bank. US and Coalition aircraft attacked the Syrian force. According to reports from Syria and the United States, **100 operatives loyal to the Syrian regime were killed in the attack**. The Americans made it clear that **they were not interested in a confrontation with the Syrian regime** but would continue to support the SDF forces in their attempt to defeat ISIS. In the ITIC's assessment, this incident might signal the start of the **struggles over the control of the oil and gas fields east of the Euphrates River, which used to be an important source of income for ISIS**.

Involvement of Russia and the United States

Russia

► A report on a TV channel owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense reviewed the **situation of the Russian forces in Syria**. Highlights of the report (Zvezda TV website, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense, February 7, 2018):

- ◆ After the end of the Russian operation in Syria, **most of the Russian forces were evacuated from the country**. The Russian forces permanently stationed in Syria are now situated in two locations: the Hmeymim airbase and the logistics center of the Russian Navy in the Port of Tartus.

- ◆ One of the main missions of these forces is **to supervise the de-escalation zones in Syria**, a mission that is carried out on a regular basis by the Russian Military Police forces (deployed in the de-escalation zones) and the Russian Air Force.

- ◆ According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, **the main source of instability in Syria** in general and in the de-escalation region in Idlib in particular is **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**.¹ The organization's operatives strive to disrupt the peace process in de-escalation zones while driving the moderate opposition elements out of the region.

- ◆ In the eyes of the Russians, the greatest threat against them in Syria is the **mobile anti-aircraft systems recently acquired by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham operatives**. These systems can be used by the operatives not only in the fighting in Syria. The Russian Ministry of Defense continues its efforts to identify the type of anti-aircraft systems and discover how they are being transferred to the terrorist operatives.

► Summing up the fighting in Syria at a conference in St. Petersburg, **Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Vladimir Korolev** said that the navy had been involved in the fighting since the start of Russian anti-terror operations in Syria and that during this period it had acquired experience mainly in launching long-range cruise missiles from ships and submarines. According to him, during the operation in Syria, the navy carried out more than ten attacks using more than 100 long-range cruise missiles fired from warships and

¹ When the de-escalation zones were established in Syria, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov stressed that ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham were not included in the agreements (Russian Ministry of Defense website, August 3, 2017).

submarines. These attacks destroyed more than 80 operating sites of “illegal armed groups.” Korolev added that at the same time, forces operating out of the naval base carried out more than 400 sorties and attacked more than 1,300 “terrorist targets” (Russian Ministry of Defense website, February 9, 2018; Sputnik, February 8, 2018).



Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Vladimir Korolev speaking at a conference at the Central Naval Museum in St. Petersburg (Russian Ministry of Defense website, February 9, 2018)

The United States

► **Lt. Gen. Paul Funk, Commander of the 3rd Armored Division of the US Army**, visited the American force **in the city of Manbij in Syria**, west of the Euphrates River, which is held by the Kurds (and which Turkey has set its sights on). During his visit, he told reporters that despite the tension with Turkey, **the US would continue to support the SDF fighters in Syria. According to him, the US presence in Syria would continue until ISIS is defeated.** Funk also noted that the goal of the American presence in Syria was to reduce tension in the region (AP, February 7, 2018).



Right: Armored US Army vehicles during the visit by Lt. Gen. Paul Funk (Lt. Gen. Paul Funk's official Twitter account, February 9, 2018). Left: Lt. Gen. Paul Funk (left) visiting Manbij (Lt. Gen. Funk's official Twitter account, February 9, 2018).

It seems that, in view of the Turkish operation in Afrin (Olive Branch) and Turkey's implicit threats to Manbij, Funk's visit is a signal to Turkey by the United States, indicating that it will continue to support the SDF forces operating as its proxies, including the force located in Manbij, west of the Euphrates River.

Main developments in Syria

The campaign to take over Idlib

The Syrian forces, with air support, **continued to mop up the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase area from operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and ISIS**. During the clashes, the Syrian army has taken over a territory of over 1,100 km² of **ISIS's enclave** in the area southeast of the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 10, 2018). In these battles, at least 47 ISIS operatives were reportedly killed as well as six operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham.



Syrian army soldiers waving the Syrian flag in one of the villages taken over from ISIS southeast of the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 10, 2018)

Mass surrender of ISIS operatives

► In the meantime, **signs of disintegration are evident among ISIS operatives fighting in the enclave.** A total of **300-400 operatives reportedly turned themselves in with their weapons to the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations** in an area situated about 22 km southeast of the town of Ma'rat Al-Nu'man, on the Hama-Aleppo highway (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Enab Baladi, February 13, 2018). **This is one of the major surrenders of ISIS operatives** during the fighting, and it may indicate **demoralization and loss of fighting spirit among operatives fighting in the Idlib region.**



ISIS operatives who have turned themselves in to the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations (Enab Baladi, February 13, 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**. The main fighting zone has been **the village of Al-Bahrah**, on the east bank of the Euphrates River, about 30 km north of Albukamal.



Poster of ISIS's Al-Furat Province, showing an ISIS sniper aiming his weapon at the city of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 7, 2018)



ISIS operatives deployed against Syrian army positions in Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 7, 2018)



ISIS operative firing at the SDF forces in the village of Al-Bahrah Gharbi, north of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 9, 2018)



Right: ISIS operatives attacking SDF positions. Left: SDF fighter captured by ISIS (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 11, 2018)



**Destruction in the village of Al-Bahrah
(Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 13, 2018)**

Deir ez-Zor

► According to a report from February 8, 2018, **a force of the Popular Defense Committees numbering about 500 fighters** (mainly Sunni tribal militias comprising local residents loyal to the Assad regime²) **crossed the Euphrates River around Deir ez-Zor and moved in a convoy towards the oil wells east of the river** (Al-Diyar, February 8, 2018). These wells **were once an important source of income for ISIS and are situated in an area now controlled by the SDF** (operating as American proxies) **east of the Euphrates River**. According to Russian media, **Kurdish units took over a large refinery** “without any justified reason” (Komsomolskaya Pravda, February 13, 2018). The force that crossed the Euphrates River besieged an SDF base (official website of the US Central Command, February 9, 2018). Syrian media reported that the popular militias affiliated with the Syrian regime **had fought against the SDF forces southeast of Deir ez-Zor**, about 12 km southeast of Deir ez-Zor.

² According to Russian media, this force also included fighters belonging to the Russian private military company Vagner. The Russian fighters sustained 15-30 fatalities.



The main oil wells in the Deir ez-Zor region: 1 – Conoco gas field;
2 – Al-Omar oil field; 3 – Al-Tanak oil field; 4 – Al-Tim oil field
(Al-Alam, Iran, August 13, 2017)

► In response, on the night of February 7-8, 2018, Coalition aircraft attacked targets of the Syrian force in the Deir ez-Zor region. The attack was carried out in cooperation with local organizations supported by the US (i.e., SDF), **concurrently attacking on the ground. A hundred operatives loyal to the Assad regime were reportedly killed in the attack** (Al-Diyar; Enab Baladi, February 8, 2018; Washington Post, February 9, 2018). The International Coalition released an official statement saying that it **was forced to carry out the attack in response to an artillery attack by the Syrian regime troops against SDF bases** (official website of the US Central Command, February 9, 2018).



International Coalition airstrike against a Syrian force which tried to approach an SDF force (Kurdistan_net Twitter account, February 9, 2018)

► **US Pentagon spokesperson** said that officials in the US army had informed their Russian counterparts about the American airstrike. According to her, **the US has the right to defend its forces and its allies against aggression**. However, she added, **the US is not interested**

in a confrontation with the Syrian regime. The US Secretary of Defense's Chief Spokesperson Dana W. White expressed her satisfaction with the coordination with the Russian forces prior to the operation and noted as well that **the US was not interested in confrontation with the Syrian regime.** She added that **the US was supporting the SDF forces** in Syria **whose operatives were still on the ground**, working to defeat ISIS (The Independent, February 8, 2018).

According to a report by the Russian Ministry of Defense, **near Deir ez-Zor**, an area to which many inhabitants are now returning, **ISIS's attacks against the Syrian army have recently increased.** According to the Russian ministry, based on tracking of transmissions, it was determined that **the attacks had been carried out by an ISIS sleeper cell which had resumed its operation in the area** (website of Zvezda Channel, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense, February 8, 2018).

Main developments in Iraq

Activity of the Iraqi security forces against ISIS networks throughout Iraq

- ▶ The Iraqi security forces continue to conduct military activity against ISIS networks throughout Iraq. Following are several prominent incidents:
 - ◆ **The city of Kirkuk:** On February 10, 2018, **ISIS's official in charge of security in the Al-Anbar Province** was reportedly detained when attempting to enter Kirkuk. The senior official had fled to Syria at the time, and then to Turkey. He returned to Iraq and was detained immediately upon entering the city. The official, who had false ID papers, admitted his affiliation with ISIS and gave his real name (Al-Sumaria News, February 10, 2018).
 - ◆ **The city of Mosul:** The Iraqi army announced that the intelligence and security forces had found a cache of weapons and 90 barrels of diverse military equipment in Mosul.



Light arms and ammunition seized in Mosul (Twitter, February 7, 2018)

- ◆ **The Ramadi area:** A suicide bomber riding a motorcycle blew himself up at a police checkpoint in Ramadi, west of Baghdad, killing one man and wounding ten others. According to a senior Iraqi official, this is the first suicide bombing attack in the city since the Iraqi security forces had taken over the city two years ago (Al-Bawaba, February 8, 2018).
- ◆ **Diyala Province:** The Iraqi army thwarted an ISIS attack against positions of the Tribal Mobilization forces near the village of Albubakr, **about 60 km northeast of Baqubah**. The Iraqi forces traced the vehicles of the ISIS operatives and ambushed them. The operatives retreated (Al-Sumaria News, February 10, 2018).
- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** The Iraqi Military Intelligence Directorate in the 15th Division found a cache with eight IEDs, 15 explosive belts, 24 82mm mortar shells, and two hand grenades. The cache was found **61 km west of Mosul** (Al-Sumaria News, February 11, 2018).
- ◆ **Salah Al-Din Province:** ISIS reported that its operatives had attacked a Popular Mobilization position near Tikrit, killing three Popular Mobilization fighters and killing several others. A vehicle was destroyed, and weapons were seized (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 10, 2018).



Kalashnikov rifles, uniforms, battle vest, mobile phone and ID documents seized by ISIS operatives east of Tikrit (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 10, 2018)

- ◆ **Iraqi-Syrian border:** Troops of the Popular Mobilization 29th Brigade halted an ISIS attack **in the area of Tell Safouk, about 38 km southwest of Mount Sinjar**, in northeastern Syria (Al-Sumaria News, February 9, 2018).
- ◆ **Baghdad:** The Iraqi security forces **foiled an intended suicide bombing attack in Baghdad**. They located a female terrorist about 25 km north of Baghdad and opened fire at her. As a result, her explosive belt exploded.



The remains of a female terrorist who intended to carry out a suicide bombing attack in Baghdad and was killed by the Iraqi security forces (Twitter, February 7, 2018)

New source of income for ISIS in Iraq

- **Abd al-Khaliq al-Azawi, member of the security committee in the Diyala Province**, said that in recent months, ISIS had received **income amounting to several million dinars** by

attacking **shepherds, stealing the flock and selling it through scalpers collaborating with ISIS**. This is a relatively new source of income because most of the cases of stealing flocks had taken place in the Al-Azeem district in the northern Diyala Province (Al-Sumaria News, February 10, 2018).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Large-scale operation by the Egyptian security forces

On February 11, 2018, the Egyptian army announced “Sinai 2018,” a large-scale operation to eradicate terrorism throughout Egypt. According to Egyptian media, the scope of the operations conducted in Sinai is the largest since October 1973. **Ground, air and naval forces are taking part in it, as well as about 10,000 policemen.** Due to the operation, alert in the Egyptian security forces has been raised to the highest level. **The Egyptian Health Ministry** raised the level of alert in hospitals in the Ismailiya Province following a request by the Defense Ministry (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, February 7, 2018). **The governor of the Northern Sinai Governorate decided to cancel studies** at all schools in the governorate (Sky News, February 9, 2018).

► According to Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman Tamer al-Rifai, **the plan is to eradicate terrorism completely.** The operation started on **February 9, 2018, upon instruction by Egyptian President El-Sisi** to the General Command of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior. The Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman said that the forces would operate **in the northern Sinai Peninsula and in the east and west of the Nile River, as well as in various regions in Egypt proper.** It is intended to strengthen control within the borders of the country and mop up the areas where terror squads are operating (YouTube account of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 9, 2018). President El-Sisi wrote in his Twitter account that he was following the activity of the army and police, who are mopping up Egypt from terrorist operatives (February 9, 2018).

► According to an announcement by the Egyptian army spokesman (updated to February 11, 2018), **the Egyptian Air Force attacked about sixty terror sites, and 12 terrorist operatives were killed.** Weapons were seized, and **92 wanted operatives were detained.** **Vehicles and motorcycles used by the terrorist operatives were destroyed, IEDs were found and neutralized,** and the army also found communications devices and weapon

depots. In addition, a tunnel had been destroyed (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 11, 2018).



The Egyptian army preparing for the operation (official Facebook page of the Spokesman for the Egyptian Armed Forces, February 9, 2018)

ISIS's Sinai Province warns Egyptians not to vote in the presidential elections

► **ISIS's Sinai Province released a video entitled "Defenders of the Shi'ah,"** documenting various terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS against the Egyptian army. The speaker in the video lashes out against the Muslim clergymen serving "Arab tyrants" and attacks Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi who he says collaborates with Israel. He praises jihad and martyrdom **and calls on the Egyptian public not to vote in the forthcoming presidential elections in Egypt. In addition, he promises that ISIS will carry out terrorist attacks in Egypt on the day of the elections, for "democracy and elections are infidel actions."** Addressing the Egyptian security forces operation to eradicate terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula, **he threatens to go to war against the Egyptian army** (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 11, 2018).



The speaker in the video, an ISIS operative codenamed Abu Mohammad al-Masri (i.e., the Egyptian) (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 11, 2018)

ISIS's activity around the world

Australia

► An ISIS-inspired stabbing attack was carried out in Melbourne, Australia. The attack was carried out by Momena Shoma, a 24-year-old Bangladeshi student who had come to Melbourne on a scholarship to study at a university. She arrived on February 1, 2018, and was staying at the home of a family that hosts students from abroad, located in a northeastern neighborhood of Melbourne. Around 24 hours after her arrival, Momena stabbed the owner of the apartment in the neck and shoulder while he was sleeping, severely wounding him. **According to the Australian police, the attack was inspired by ISIS**, and the stabber had no accomplices. Prior to her arrival in Australia, Momena had attended North South University, one of the best private universities in Bangladesh (The Sydney Morning Herald, February 11, 2018).



Passport of Momena Shoma, who carried out the ISIS-inspired stabbing attack in Melbourne (The Sydney Morning Herald, February 11, 2018)

ISIS's financial system

- ▶ Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya said at a UN Security Council meeting that ISIS's crude oil revenues had shrunk to a maximum of \$2 million a month by the end of 2017 and that its total revenues in the Middle East amounted to \$3 million a month. For purposes of comparison, Nebenzya cited a United Nations report for 2016, where ISIS's revenues amounted to \$260 million from the sale of crude oil. According to him, thanks to the activities of the Syrian army and the Russian Air Force, ISIS lost access to oil and gas fields and to sales channels for fuel products.
- ▶ The Ambassador noted that for this reason, ISIS is seeking new sources of funding, and has begun to look for revenues **by means of online casino websites**. The organization's operatives are using **Hawala, an informal money transfer system in the Middle East, Africa and Asia**. According to experts, the system is closely linked to money laundering and terror financing³ (TASS News Agency, February 8, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

The United States

- ▶ As part of the US government's efforts to identify and expose individuals and entities providing support for ISIS, **the United States Department of the Treasury revealed new details about an ISIS network that purchased miniature UAVs used by ISIS in the fighting in Iraq and Syria**. The Department of the Treasury announced that **three factories in the Philippines, Somalia and Turkey were aiding terrorism**. According to the Americans, one of the companies, which has a branch in the Ankara region of Turkey, sold ISIS UAVs and related equipment worth around \$500,000. **The company also operated in the city of Al-Mayadeen, near Deir ez-Zor** (United States Department of the Treasury website, February 9, 2018).
- ▶ At the same time, the Department of the Treasury added **three terrorist operatives from Pakistan** to the terrorist list, on the grounds that they had provided **logistical assistance**,

³ Hawala is a popular and informal money transfer system **based on a network of moneychangers rather than interbank money transfers via computer systems**. These moneychangers are called Hawaladars **and are spread around the world**, mainly in the **Middle East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Indian Subcontinent**. Hawala operates according to Muslim tradition but is not limited to the exclusive use of Muslims. The system originated as long ago as the eighth century CE, when Arab and Muslim traders on the Silk Road and elsewhere used it as a defense against robbery by not having cash in their possession (Wikipedia).

IEDs and technological assistance to Lashkar-e-Taiba, an organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda, as well as to other terrorist groups (United States Department of the Treasury website, February 7, 2018). **Lashkar-e-Taiba (the Al-Madina Army) is a Salafist-jihadi terrorist organization that maintains close ties with Al-Qaeda. The organization was responsible for the attack in Mumbai, India (2008), in which 177 people were killed**, most of them foreign nationals.

Afghanistan

► **Eight ISIS operatives were detained in Kabul by the Afghan National Directorate of Security.**⁴ The operatives who were detained had been involved in a series of terrorist attacks, including assassination attempts, planning terrorist attacks and recruiting operatives to the ranks of the organization, mainly adolescents. **They admitted that they had joined ISIS long ago and had raised money on the pretext of building mosques and religious schools.** In addition, they were involved in sending ISIS operatives to the Nangarhar District in Eastern Afghanistan, planting mines and carrying out assassination attempts (Afghanistan Times, February 11, 2018).

Turkey

► Turkish security forces in Istanbul and Ankara detained several dozen people suspected of affiliation with ISIS, most of them foreign nationals (Anatolia News Agency, February 10, 2018).

⁴ National Directorate of Security (NDS)