



Spotlight on Global Jihad

February 15-21, 2018



Main events of the week

- ▶ **In the Euphrates River area** north of Albukamal, ISIS operatives continued intensive guerrilla warfare against the SDF forces and the local Syrian forces. **In the Idlib area**, the Syrian forces did not carry out any significant activity this week. This week the fighting was concentrated mainly in **the area east of Damascus (eastern Ghouta)**, where the Syrians and the Russians carried out **massive airstrikes** against the rebel organizations' strongholds (hundreds of fatalities). **In the Afrin area**, clashes between the Turkish forces and the Kurdish forces (YPG) continued.
- ▶ ISIS continues to conduct **guerrilla warfare against the Iraqi security forces and Shiite militias** (the Popular Mobilization) **in the various provinces in Iraq**. Although, in the ITIC's assessment, this is a terrorist and guerrilla activity that is generally carried out without central guidance, the Iraqi security forces are finding it hard to provide an effective response to ISIS's activity. The most noteworthy terrorist attack carried out by ISIS this week was **the killing of (at least) 27 fighters of the Popular Mobilization** southwest of Kirkuk by ISIS operatives disguised as policemen.
- ▶ **The Egyptian security forces continue their operation (Sinai 2018) against outposts of ISIS's Sinai Province**. The Egyptian operation is focused on northern Sinai. Egyptian spokespersons announced successes, stating that hundreds of wanted persons had been killed, wounded or arrested and that ISIS infrastructure had been destroyed. The ITIC is of the impression that the Sinai Province continues to function and the Egyptian announcements are exaggerated.

US involvement

- ▶ After a meeting with the Turkish president and Turkish foreign minister, **US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the United States intended to maintain a military presence in Syria**. As part of this presence, **the US will continue to train local security forces**. This is in order to ensure that the "local forces" are effective, professional and responsible, and that

they respect human rights. Tillerson noted the US concern over recent events in northwestern Syria (i.e., Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in the Afrin region). He called on all parties to remain **focused on defeating ISIS**, de-escalation, resolving the Syrian conflict, and defending innocent civilians. Tillerson noted that the United States recognized Turkey's legitimate right to secure its borders, but **called on it to show restraint in the attacks in the Afrin region and not to escalate the existing tension**. He also made it clear to Turkey that US support for the SDF forces would be limited (US Department of State website, February 16, 2018).

Main developments in Syria

The campaign to take over the Idlib area

This week, there were no reports of any significant activity of the Syrian forces in the campaign to take over Idlib. In the area of the village of Umm Al-Khalahil, about 30 km southwest of the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase, **clashes took place between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and ISIS**. Seven ISIS operatives were killed, and three turned themselves in (Ibaa, February 15, 2018).



Photos from a video released by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, documenting three ISIS operatives (marked in red) turning themselves in to the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the area southwest of the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase (Ibaa, February 15, 2018)



Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham preparing to continue the campaign (Ibaa, February 15, 2018)

The Albukamal-Al-Mayadeen area

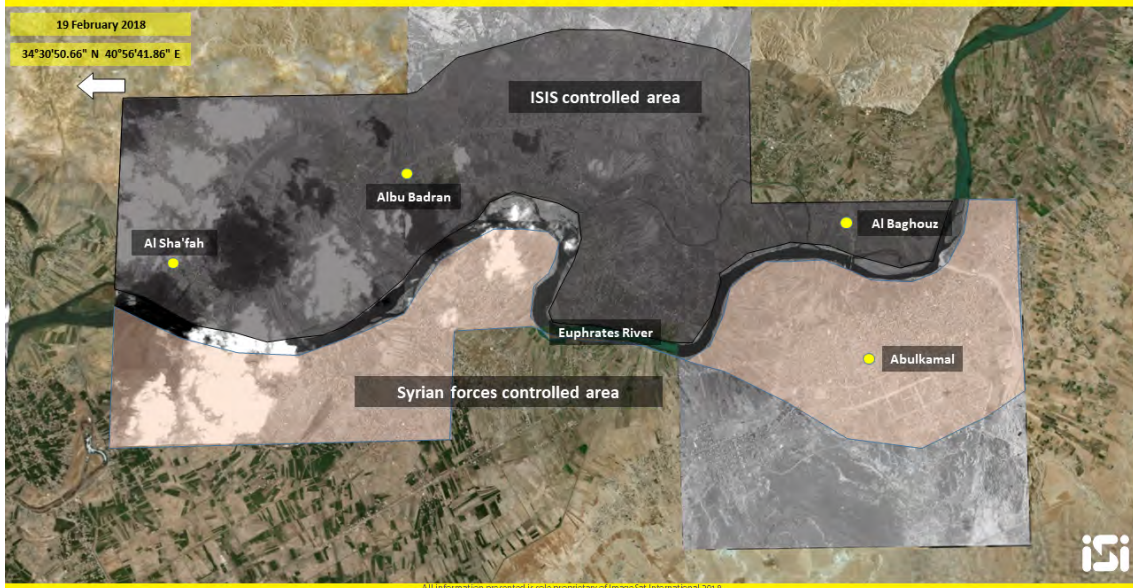
ISIS operatives **fired at Syrian army positions on the outskirts of Albukamal**. In the village of Hajin, about 23 km **north of Albukamal**, clashes continued between ISIS operatives and the SDF forces. International Coalition planes continued their airstrikes against ISIS targets in the area (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 16, 2018).

ISIS and Syrian forces deployment north of Albukamal, along the Euphrates River



Deployment of ISIS and the Syrian forces near Albukamal. Photography and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)

ISIS deployment in the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, north of Albukamal



ISIS's control area along the east bank of the Euphrates River north of Albukamal. Today, this is ISIS's most active operational area since the fall of the Islamic State. Photography and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)



ISIS operatives shooting at Syrian army positions on the outskirts of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 14, 2018)



Results of ISIS fire. Right: Smoke rising from Syrian army positions on the outskirts of Albukamal. Left: Syrian army vehicle on fire (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 14, 2018)

- **The Syrian army exposed a network of tunnels in a neighborhood in the village of Sabikhian** on the west bank of the Euphrates River, about 22 km **southeast of Al-Mayadeen**. The tunnels included sixteen internal spaces which were interconnected. Equipment, ammunition, and communications devices were found inside the tunnels (SANA YouTube channel, February 18, 2018; Syrian News Agency, February 15, 2018).



Right: Senior Syrian army commander inside the tunnel network. Left: Weapons found there (SANA YouTube channel, February 18, 2018)



One of the three entrances to the tunnel network
(SANA YouTube channel, February 18, 2018)

Deir ez-Zor area

Struggles over control of oil fields in the Deir ez-Zor area

► In the Deir ez-Zor area, concurrently with the competition over security control on the ground, there is also commercial competition over the control of the oil fields. **A local news Facebook page reports that ISIS is still in control of several oil wells in the desert area east of Deir ez-Zor. According to the report, crude oil produced from these oil fields is being sold by ISIS at a price which is lower than that of the SDF forces.** In response, **SDF forces put pressure on tanker owners** and they confiscate tankers which they have not licensed to transfer oil (Euphrates Post Facebook page, February 19, 2018). Apparently, **the attack on February 7, 2018, carried out by the SDF forces with Coalition air support on a Syrian force that crossed the Euphrates River, can be regarded as part of the power struggle over the oil fields in the area.**

International Coalition attack against a Syrian force (update)¹

► **According to several reports, Russian civilians who worked as private “military contractors” were killed in the airstrikes on February 7, 2018.** The reports were based, inter alia, on messages of families and acquaintances of the killed people in social media. Perhaps some of the Russian people killed or wounded belonged to the **“Vagner Group”**² (Facebook page of the Conflict Intelligence Team, a Russian research institute based in

¹ For details, see Spotlight on Global Jihad, February 8-14, 2018.

² Vagner Group is the largest private military organization in Russia. As a contractor, the organization carries out military projects around the globe, and is even involved in the fighting in conflict zones. The organization is active in Syria in various ways, inter alia, in the protection of oil fields. The relationship between the organization and the Kremlin is not clear, but its leaders allegedly received prizes in the Kremlin, and its fighters are trained in the facilities of the Russian Defense Ministry (Wikipedia; New York Times, February 13, 2018).

Moscow, February 12, 2018; Bloomberg, February 13, 2018; RT, February 15, 2018; New York Times, February 13, 2018). It seems that several dozen Russian fighters were killed and wounded in these airstrikes (according to another version, only a few civilians were killed). However, the ITIC believes that the reports on hundreds of Russian fatalities are exaggerated.



Some of the posts on social media about Russian civilians killed in the airstrike in Syria (February 10-11, 2018)

- ▶ Official US and Russian comments on the incident that took place on February 7, 2018:
 - ◆ **According to US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Russia informed the US that its fighters were not present in the confrontation zone in Deir ez-Zor.** He also added that it wasn't likely that the attack carried out by the forces affiliated with the Syrian regime against the SDF base was coordinated with Russia (US Department of Defense website, February 13, 2018).
 - ◆ **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova** said that the information that hundreds of Russian civilians were killed in the attacks was incorrect. She said that according to preliminary information, five people, apparently Russian citizens, were killed in an armed confrontation whose causes should be further investigated (Russian Defense Ministry website, February 15, 2018).
 - ◆ **According to Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov,** the possibility that there are Russian citizens in Syria who are not soldiers in the Russian army cannot be ruled out. However, he said, the Kremlin had no information on their number (TASS; RIA, February 14, 2018).

Damascus

► During the week, confrontations escalated between ISIS operatives and operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham **in the area of the Yarmouk refugee camp (south of Damascus)**. ISIS attacked outposts of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the western part of the refugee camp. Websites affiliated with ISIS reported that following the confrontations, ISIS operatives had managed to take control of several neighborhoods and streets (Khotwa, February 16, 2018). The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham reportedly suffered casualties, also losing some of its senior commanders (Enab Baladi, February 17, 2018). After five days of fighting, **ISIS was reportedly in control of 50% of the southern part of the refugee camp, while the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham was in control of 30%**. In addition, **ISIS is reportedly controlling neighborhoods south of the refugee camp, including Al-Assali, At-Tadamon, and the city of Al-Hajar Al-Aswad** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, February 18, 2018).



The area of the Palestinian Al-Yarmouk refugee camp, south of Damascus. At-Tadamon neighborhood is north of the camp. South of it is the city of Al-Hajar Al-Aswad. West of the camp is the Assali neighborhood, which is part of the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Google Maps).

This area is partly controlled by ISIS.



Photos from a video documenting ISIS operatives fighting against operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the Yarmouk refugee camp (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 17, 2018)



ISIS flag (in a red circle) waving on a building taken over by ISIS operatives from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the refugee camp (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 17, 2018)

Main developments in Iraq

Activity of the Iraqi security forces against ISIS networks throughout Iraq

► Clashes between the Iraqi security forces and local ISIS networks continued throughout Iraq. Following are several prominent incidents:

- ◆ **Mosul area:** Based on prior intelligence, the Iraqi security forces together with International Coalition planes **killed 19 ISIS operatives** in the Aski area, about 35 km northwest of Mosul (Iraqi News Agency, February 15, 2018).



**The Iraqi army during the security activity
(Iraqi News Agency, February 15, 2018)**

- ◆ **Diyala (Baqubah area):** Three ISIS operatives in a car **were killed by Popular Mobilization fighters** about 66 km north of Baqubah. The rest of the operatives who were in the car fled towards Baqubah (Iraqi News Agency, February 15, 2018).



**Popular Mobilization fighters during a security activity in Iraq
(Iraqi News Agency, February 16, 2018)**

- ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** ISIS operatives **disguised as policemen** attacked a Popular Mobilization force engaged in observation activity several dozen kilometers southwest of Kirkuk. **At least 27 Popular Mobilization fighters were killed** in the attack, most of them Shiite residents of Basra, southern Iraq. **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.**



**Obituaries of the Popular Mobilization operatives killed
in the attack by ISIS**

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Operation Sinai 2018 to uproot terrorism continues

► The Egyptian security forces continued their security operations in the Sinai Peninsula as part of Operation Sinai 2018. Statements issued by the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman reported many achievements: many terrorist targets hit by the Air Force, the arrest of hundreds of wanted persons (both suspected terrorists and criminals), destruction of bunkers, destruction of hundreds of hiding places and weapons depots, deactivation of nearly 200 IEDs, destruction of vehicles and motorcycles, demolition of tunnel openings in order to create a barrier between the Sinai and the Gaza Strip, and seizure of large quantities of drugs. **The operation is being carried out mainly in northern Sinai**, and the Egyptian forces report that the residents of Sinai are cooperating with them.



Right: Terror site destroyed by an Egyptian Air Force aircraft in Sinai as part of Operation Sinai 2018. Left: Egyptian security forces during security activity (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 16, 2018)



Egyptian security forces during security activity (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 16, 2018)

During the campaign, the Egyptian security forces located a so-called **Information Center of ISIS's Sinai Province**. The Information Center is located in a temporary structure made of tin in a desert area. A laptop, two wireless communications devices, audiotapes, CDs, Islamic religious texts and cash were found at the center (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 18, 2018).



The Information Center of ISIS's Sinai Province, which was taken over by the Egyptian forces (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, February 18, 2018)

- An article in the newspaper **Al-Araby al-Jadeed**, which reviewed the first week of the operation, stated that **the Egyptian military forces had tried to impose their control over**

new areas south of Rafah, but the military readiness of ISIS's Sinai Province operatives surprised them. As a result, **the Egyptian forces sustained casualties**, and the army entered only some of the areas west and north of Rafah. According to sources at the military hospital in Al-Arish, **15 military and police personnel were killed** (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, February 16, 2018).

The response of ISIS's Sinai Province

In response to the intensive activity of the Egyptian security forces, ISIS's Sinai Province issued a statement claiming that in the second week of the operation, **which focused on the areas of Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid, Sinai Province operatives continued to resist the Egyptian forces, destroying 14 military vehicles and killing and wounding a number of Egyptian soldiers** (Twitter, February 17, 2018).



ISIS operatives fighting against the Egyptian forces south of Sheikh Zuweid (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, February 17, 2018)

- The editorial published in ISIS's weekly Al-Nabā' was devoted to the fighting in the Sinai Peninsula. The editorial states that Islamic State operatives in all areas of Sinai **intend to escalate their attacks against all those fighting against them**. The editorial notes that **the jihad of the holy fighters in Sinai against the regime of President El-Sisi will not stop**. The editorial expresses the hope that the end of the regime will come at the hands of the soldiers of the Caliphate, who are attacking it in its home and are turning Cairo into a land of Islam, where Sharia will rule (Al-Nabā', Issue 119, February 15, 2018).
- **Al-Qaeda also expressed support for ISIS's fighting against the forces of the Egyptian regime**. In an audiotape released by Al-Qaeda's Al-Sahab media arm, **Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri calls on Muslims in Egypt to wage jihad against the regime in order to establish Sharia rule**. According to him, the revolution of the Egyptian people ended with nothing, because the "corrupt tyrannical" regime came back with even greater strength. Al-Zawahiri **calls for attacks, ambushes, raids, demonstrations, strikes, and gatherings**

aimed at rescuing the prisoners. He says that this should be a new beginning in which every Muslim will oppose the “agreements of surrender” with Israel and Egypt’s security cooperation with the United States (Al-Qaeda’s media arm, February 14, 2018).

ISIS’s activity around the world

Concern that ISIS operatives who fled from Syria and Iraq will reach Libya and the sub-Saharan countries

► In a meeting held on the margins of the Munich Security Conference, **Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry** met with **UN Envoy to Libya Ghassan Salamé**. **Shoukry warned against attempts by ISIS operatives to flee from Syria and Iraq to Libya and African countries** (Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso). According to him, **Egypt is concerned** over this issue, which poses a threat to security and stability in the region (Al-Quds Al-Arabi, February 17, 2018).

► Sky News interviewed an ISIS operative codenamed **Abu Saqr**, who served as the “police chief” of Al-Raqqah when the city was under ISIS’s control. In the interview, he noted that **Libya was ISIS’s new destination and the gateway for its operatives to reach European countries**. Abu Saqr also noted that there were a number of ISIS networks in Libya and surmised that it would become the organization’s main headquarters (Al-Youm al-Sabea, February 17, 2018).

Dagestan

► On February 18, 2018, a man armed with a hunting rifle and a knife opened fire outside a church in the city of **Kizlyar in Dagestan** (near the border with the Chechen Republic). He fired at **worshippers who were leaving the church**. The perpetrator of the attack was shot to death by police after a struggle. **At least five people were killed and four others were wounded, including two security personnel**. According to the Russian authorities, the shooter was **Khalil Khalilov**, 22, a local resident. They said that an investigation had begun and that all the possibilities were being examined, including a terrorist attack (Russian Commission of Inquiry website, TASS News Agency, February 18 and 19, 2018).

► **ISIS’s Amaq News Agency was quick to issue an official announcement stating that an ISIS operative was behind the shooting attack**. According to an additional announcement **issued by ISIS’s Caucasus Province**, the shooter’s name was **Khalil the Dagestani** (Twitter, February 18, 2018). According to unofficial reports, **the perpetrator joined ISIS last year** and

belonged to an ISIS sleeper cell (RBC, February 18, 2018). The Telegram channel Directorate 4 released a video ostensibly showing the suspect pledging allegiance to ISIS against the background of the organization's flag, with a hunting rifle beside him (lenta.ru, February 18, 2018).



**Right: ISIS operative Khalil the Dagestani, who carried out a shooting attack at the church.
Left: The hunting rifle that he used (ICS News Twitter account, February 18, 2018)**

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Tunisia

► The Tunisian National Guard reportedly uncovered a network for smuggling young women to join the ranks of ISIS in Syria. The network recruited young women in four Tunisian governorates and the organization's operatives moved freely from one governorate to another despite the strict security measures of the Tunisian security forces. The Tunisian authorities are unable to estimate how many young Tunisian women are serving in the ranks of ISIS, but claim that 40% of them are college graduates. Security experts and NGOs estimate that they number several hundred and that most of them are in Syria and Libya (Al-Youm al-Sabea, February 15, 2018).

Morocco

► The Interior Ministry in Morocco reported the arrest of three ISIS operatives in the cities of Al-Ayoun (controlled by Morocco in the northwestern part of the Western Sahara), Sala (near Rabat), and Marrakech. The three men, ranging in age from 24 to 30, have pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They engaged in incitement to murder and attempted to

acquire know-how and experience in making explosives and assembling IEDs. One of them had made preparations to carry out attacks throughout the country (assabah.me, February 15, 2018).

Lebanon

► The Lebanese army announced that **seven Lebanese citizens and one Syrian citizen had been tried** on charges of setting up an ISIS-affiliated network in Lebanon (The Lebanese army's official Twitter account, February 15, 2018). The squad operatives, who were arrested in the Aarsal area in northeastern Lebanon, had planned to carry out terrorist attacks in Beirut. **The squad received instructions from an ISIS commander in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp near Sidon.** The squad included another operative who was killed during an attempted arrest in Tripoli, northern Lebanon (Sana News Agency, February 15, 2018).