



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## March 1-7, 2018



### Main events of the week

- ▶ This week as well, **the fighting in Syria focused on eastern Al-Ghouta. In order to alleviate the pressure on Damascus**, the Syrian and Russian forces **are now prioritizing the takeover of eastern Ghouta** rather than the campaign to take over the Idlib area, which has been temporarily suspended. The Syrian forces **continued their ground operation** and have reportedly **taken control of several towns and villages and taken over about a third of the area of eastern Al-Ghouta.** Syria's progress in the ground operation, with Russian air support, continued despite the UN Security Council resolution on a ceasefire, and despite President Putin's order for daily "humanitarian pauses." **The media has reported numerous civilian casualties and a deterioration in the humanitarian situation.**
- ▶ This week, the **Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) continued its violent clashes with other rebel organizations in order to gain exclusive control of the Idlib area. In addition, **a jihadi group loyal to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri withdrew from the organization.** The disputes and rifts in the Idlib area are **weakening the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** and the other rebel organizations, and are compromising their ability to withstand the forces of Syria and its allies when the campaign recommences.
- ▶ **In Iraq**, the security forces continue to achieve successes in their activity against ISIS operatives and networks in the various provinces. **The Iraqi regime apparently considers the western part of the Al-Anbar Province as a weak spot** due to ISIS's intensive activity **near the Syrian-Iraqi border, north of Albukamal.** This week it was reported that the Iraqi prime minister had decided **to establish a new division comprising local soldiers from the Al-Anbar Province, in order to prevent the infiltration of ISIS operatives from Syria.**

## Russian and American involvement

### Russia claims that Russian targets in Damascus are being fired at

► According to a report by the Russian Center for Reconciliation in Syria, “armed groups” continue to violate the ceasefire in the area of eastern Al-Ghouta. According to the report, **the gunmen have been firing at the city of Damascus, especially the Russian Embassy, the Russian trade representation and the Russian Center for Reconciliation in the city.** Russia called on the leaders of the “armed groups” to stop fighting in the area and to allow civilians to leave. The Russian Center for Reconciliation said that **Russia would ensure safe passage for the armed operatives and their families who leave eastern Al-Ghouta,** and would even provide vehicles and security along the route (Russian Ministry of Defense website, March 6, 2018).

### Temporary suspension of ground operations in the Euphrates Valley

► **Pentagon spokesman Colonel Rob Manning said that the US-backed ground operations against ISIS in the Euphrates Valley had been temporarily suspended.** According to US officials, this is because the Kurds who are fighting against ISIS have shifted most of their efforts to the enclave of Afrin (in western Syria), to combat the Turkish forces that have invaded the area. According to the Pentagon spokesman, this is an “operational pause” pertaining to the ground operations, **while the airstrikes continue as usual.** For example, two of ISIS’s supply routes near Albukamal were attacked and destroyed on March 4, 2018 (The Washington Post, March 5, 2018).

## Main developments in Syria

### Fighting in eastern Al-Ghouta



Scenes of destruction in eastern Al-Ghouta (Twitter, March 1, 2018)

► **Colonel Suheil Hassan (“the Tiger”)** announced that on the sixth day of the ground operation, **the Syrian army had taken over from the rebel organizations 30% of the**

**territory of eastern Al-Ghouta.** According to Syrian media, the Syrian forces mainly attacked **targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (Note: The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham participates in the fighting in Al-Ghouta alongside the other rebel organizations. However, unlike the situation in the Idlib area, it does not enjoy a dominant position). According to Syrian media reports, the Syrian forces are now taking steps **to split eastern Al-Ghouta into two parts** (Aleppo Today, March 3, 2018).



**Illustration of the Syrian army ground operation to split eastern Al-Ghouta, updated to March 4, 2018**  
(Nibras Al-Ardh, a YouTube channel supporting the Syrian regime, March 3, 2018)

## Idlib area

► **The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues its violent clashes with other rebel organizations in the Idlib area,** attempting to impose its control on them. A group affiliated with **supporters of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri,** under the name of “**Guardians of the Religion Organization,**” **seceded from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham.** These disputes and clashes taking place at a time when the rebel organizations in Idlib were granted a temporary lull due to the campaign in eastern Al-Ghouta **weaken the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** and the other rebel organizations in the Idlib area **and impair their ability to withstand the Syrian forces upon resumption of the campaign.**

## Conflicts between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Front for the Liberation of Syria

► This week, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham took over **the city of Maarrat Misrin,** about 8 km north of Idlib, after confrontations between the Headquarters for the

Liberation of Al-Sham and the Front for the Liberation of Syria (a new organization recently established when the organizations of Ahrar Al-Sham and Nour Al-Din Zenki joined forces). The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham seized ammunition from Ahrar Al-Sham.



**Tanks of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham which took over the city of Maarrat Misrin north of Idlib (Furat Post Facebook page, March 1, 2018)**

## **New organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda established in northern Syria**

► On February 17, 2018, several groups **in northern Syria which are affiliated with Al-Qaeda** announced their unification under the name of **“Guardians of the Religion Organization”** (in Arabic: Tanzim Hurras Al-Din). The leader of the new organization is **Abu Humam al-Shami**, a senior Syrian jihadist **who fought alongside Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan**. Other leaders of the organization are **Abu Julaybib the Jordanian and Sami al-Uraydi** (Al-Alam, February 28, 2018). The three men, **Abu Humam al-Shami, Abu Julaybib the Jordanian and Sami al-Uraydi were detained about four months ago by supporters of Abu Mohammad al-Joulani because of their affiliation with Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri.**<sup>1</sup>

► The new organization published an announcement entitled **“Save the Tent of the Muslims” [the jihad fighters in eastern Al-Ghouta]**. The announcement calls on the various groups in Syria (implicitly, in northern Syria) **to stop fighting among themselves and unite in order to repel the enemy in eastern Al-Ghouta**. A similar fate awaits the jihadists in the north once the Syrian regime is done with eastern Al-Ghouta (official Twitter account of the Guardians of the Religion organization, February 27, 2018).

<sup>1</sup>See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from December 10, 2017: “Fierce dispute between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda.”

► In the ITIC's assessment, the establishment of the new jihadi organization reflects **internal strife within the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and among supporters of Al-Qaeda in Syria**. The bulk of these conflicts are between operatives supporting **Ayman Al-Zawahiri and supporters of Abu Mohammad al-Joulani**, leader of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. Abu Mohammad al-Joulani chose **to lead his organization in a more pragmatic, independent Syrian path**, striving for cooperation with other Islamist rebel organizations and taking into account the severe constraints plaguing his organization. **In the ITIC's assessment, the establishment of the new organization may indicate the widening rift between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda's leadership led by Al-Zawahiri, at a time when the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham is expected to fight for its existence in the Idlib area.**

### Yarmouk refugee camp

► **Clashes continue** in the Yarmouk refugee camp between ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. **ISIS reportedly has about 2,000 operatives controlling 70% of the camp**, while the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham has nearly 170 operatives controlling 5% of the camp. About 25% of the camp is held by Palestinian organizations loyal to the Syrian regime (Watan, March 4, 2018).

► **ISIS's Damascus Province** released several photos showing an **ISIS sniper team** operating in southern Damascus. The photos show how a sniper position is being created by breaking a hole in the wall, adjusting telescopic sights, observing, and shooting at a man in civilian clothes on a rooftop (Nasher, March 6, 2018).



**Right: ISIS snipers cleaning their rifles. Left: ISIS sniper adjusting a telescopic sight (Nasher, March 6, 2018)**



**Right: ISIS sniper aiming at a target. Left: Man dressed in civilian clothes lying on a rooftop in southern Damascus after being shot by an ISIS sniper (Nasher, March 6, 2018)**

## Lower Euphrates River

► **North of Albukamal, clashes continued between ISIS operatives and SDF forces.** On February 27, 2018, ISIS's Al-Furat Province released several photos showing ISIS operatives in their vehicles on their way to attack SDF positions northeast of the village of Al-Sha'fah, about 10 km north of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 1, 2018).



**ISIS operatives in various self-manufactured armored vehicles, including trucks, on their way to attack SDF positions northeast of the village of Al-Sha'fah (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 1, 2018)**



**Right: Two SDF fighters surrendering to ISIS operatives at the position which they manned northeast of the village of Al-Sha'fah. Left: ISIS operatives shooting the SDF fighters who surrendered (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 1, 2018)**



**ISIS anti-tank rocket fired at a Syrian army position on the outskirts of Albukamal.  
Left: The rocket hitting the position (Nasher, March 3, 2018)**

## Yarmouk Basin

► On February 25, 2018, the ISIS-affiliated Army of Khaled bin Al-Waleed, which operates in the Yarmouk Basin, released a video documenting **its operatives fighting and training**. A masked operative of the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Army who appears on the video says that **new recruits from the area of the Yarmouk Basin and the Hawran area are joining the organization**. The video includes executions of operatives accused of collaborating with the organization's enemies (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 25, 2018).



**Fitness training by operatives of the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Army  
(Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 25, 2018)**



**Weapons training by operatives of the Khaled bin Al-Waleed Army  
(Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 25, 2018)**

## Main developments in Iraq

### Iraqi security activity near the Iraqi-Syrian border in Al-Anbar Province

► According to reports on Arab media, the Iraqi forces recently began to carry out searches on the ground and from the air in the western desert area of Al-Anbar Province., near the border between Iraq and Syria. In this context, **Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced the formation of a new division** which will comprise residents of Al-Anbar Province, to defend the province and prevent the infiltration of “terrorist operatives” from Syria (Al-Hayat, March 5, 2017).

► Prime Minister Abadi reportedly met recently with senior commanders of the security forces. The meeting was held following reports that **3,000 ISIS operatives are concentrated in the area of Hajeen, about 25 km north of Albukamal, near the Syrian-Iraqi border.** The Iraqis are concerned that these operatives **will infiltrate various regions in western Iraq** (Al-Hayat, March 5, 2018). **The area north of Albukamal is where ISIS is most active today in Syria and Iraq.** The Iraqis are concerned that ISIS operatives in this area **may infiltrate the Sunni Al-Anbar Province**, where ISIS traditionally enjoyed local support, **with the aim of trying to resume ISIS’s activity.**<sup>2</sup>

### Clashes between the Iraqi security forces and ISIS

► Iraqi security forces’ activity against local ISIS networks continued this week throughout Iraq. ISIS operatives were killed or arrested, and many weapons were seized. **ISIS still finds it difficult to adequately respond to the Iraqi activity**, settling for local guerrilla operations lacking media impact. **Following are highlights of the Iraqi security forces’ activity:**

- ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** A Popular Mobilization (Shiite militias) force surrounded and killed six ISIS operatives about 55 km south of Kirkuk (Al-Sumaria News, March 3, 2018).
- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** Seventeen ISIS operatives, including two ISIS commanders, were arrested by the Rapid Deployment forces of the Nineveh Province Headquarters about 10 km west of Mosul (Al-Sumaria News, March 2, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from February 28, 2018, “The Establishment of ISIS in Syria, in the Lower Euphrates Valley.”

- ◆ **Diyala Province:** The Iraqi security forces destroyed two caches and three vehicles belonging to ISIS in the area of Lake Hamrin, about 65 km northeast of Baqubah (Al-Sumaria News, March 1, 2018).
- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The Iraqi army reported that Military Intelligence personnel **had located a car bomb and killed two suicide bombers who were on their way to carry out a terrorist attack** at a checkpoint on the old Baghdad-Al-Anbar road (Twitter, March 3, 2018).



**The car bomb which was detonated by Iraqi Military Intelligence  
(Twitter, March 3, 2018)**

- ◆ **Western part of the city of Mosul:** The Iraqi army reported that the Iraqi security forces located a cache with weapons in Wadi ‘Ekab, in west Mosul. The weapons included, among other things, 12 explosive belts, 30 IEDs, and 30 detonators (Army\_Iq@ Twitter account, March 1, 2018).



**Weapons and equipment found by the Iraqi security forces in west Mosul  
(Army\_Iq@ Twitter account, March 1, 2018)**

- ◆ **South Mosul:** The Iraqi army and the Iraqi security forces arrested 11 ISIS operatives in the south Mosul neighborhood of Soumar. In addition, two ISIS commanders were arrested about 16 km south of Mosul.

► **Main ISIS attacks:**

- ◆ **Mosul area:** ISIS's Nineveh Province announced that its operatives had killed six members of the Iraqi security forces who had manned the main checkpoint at the entrance to the village of Badoush, about 10 km west of the northern neighborhoods of Mosul (Nasher, March 2, 2018).

- ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** ISIS's Kirkuk Province announced that one member of the Iraqi Federal Police was killed and three others were wounded in an ISIS ambush in Al-Rashad District, about 45 km southwest of Kirkuk (Nasher, March 3, 2018).

- ◆ **The area of the city of Baiji:** A group of ISIS operatives attacked the federal police station in Al-Abbassi District, northeast of the city of Baiji. Eight operatives were killed during the attack. The Iraqi forces had no casualties (Al-Sumaria News, March 4, 2018).

## The Sinai Peninsula and the Egyptian-Libyan border

### Interim Summary of Operation Sinai 2018

► **Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman *Aqid* (Colonel) Tamer al-Refai** reported on the results of Operation Sinai 2018 (announcement no. 14). Among other things, he noted that the air force had destroyed two car bombs and killed 10 “terrorist operatives.” According to the statement, the following were destroyed: 145 caches and storehouses of terrorist operatives, an underground fuel reservoir containing over 10,000 liters of gasoline, 28 motorcycles, a workshop for manufacturing IEDs, and 39 IEDs that had been buried in the ground (Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, March 4, 2018).



**Right: Motorized column of Egyptian security forces during a security activity. Left: Egyptian army soldiers during security activity**  
**(Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, March 4, 2018)**



**Egyptian Army soldier near the entrance to a cave during a security activity**  
**(Official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, March 4, 2018)**

## ISIS attacks on tanks and armored vehicles

- ▶ On March 1, 2018, operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province detonated an IED against an Egyptian army tank (M-60) in southern Al-Arish. ISIS released a video showing the tank on fire and the ammunition inside it exploding (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 3, 2018).



**Egyptian army tank going up in flames after being hit by an IED deployed by ISIS in southern Al-Arish (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 3, 2018)**

- ▶ On March 3, 2018, ISIS's Sinai Province reported that its operatives **had damaged or destroyed nine Egyptian army armored vehicles**. According to ISIS's announcements,

these attacks occurred in various parts of Sinai: **south Sheikh Zuweid** (two tanks hit by IEDs); **south Al-Arish** (tank destroyed); **the area of Sabikah**, west of Al-Arish (two armored vehicles hit by IEDs). ISIS also reported that its snipers had killed and wounded at least six Egyptian soldiers (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 4, 2018).



**ISIS operative firing a heavy machine gun mounted on a motorcycle at an Egyptian Army staging zone south of Al-Arish (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 4, 2018)**

## The Egyptian-Libyan border and eastern Libya

- ▶ According to **Egyptian Chief of Staff Major General Mohammed Farid Hegazy**, large Egyptian army forces are **securing the western border with Libya**, which is 1,200 km long. These forces comprise 15 battalions, numbering over 5,000 soldiers. **This is in light of reports that ISIS is gaining strength in Libya and moving operatives there.** According to Arab media reports, **ISIS instructed foreigners interested in joining its ranks to travel to Libya in the near future** (Al-Hayat, March 3, 2018).
- ▶ In this context, ISIS announced in its weekly Al-Nabā' (February 21, 2018) that **“the soldiers of the Islamic State are starting a new war of attrition”** against the “Haftar militias” and the Government of National Accord in Libya (Al-Nabā', Issue No. 120, February 21, 2018, as quoted in Akhbar al-Muslimeen, February 22, 2018).

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### Four Iraqis arrested on suspicion of plotting to attack the US Embassy in Ankara

- ▶ On March 5, 2018, **Turkish police arrested four Iraqi nationals on suspicion of plotting to attack the US Embassy in Ankara.** All four live in the Samsun Province, near the Black Sea (329 km northeast of Ankara). At the same time, **police in Ankara arrested 12 ISIS operatives and are looking for eight other operatives.** According to Turkish media reports, **US sources provided intelligence that led to the thwarting of the attack.** The US

Embassy in Turkey announced that it would suspend its activity on March 5 and 6 because of a “security threat” (Reuters; Hürriyet; Anatolia News Agency, March 5, 2018).

## ISIS squad exposed in Dagestan

► On March 5, 2018, the Russian Federal Security Service, together with the Russian Interior Ministry, arrested **five operatives of an ISIS-affiliated squad** (including the head of the squad) in the city of Makhachkala (the capital of the Republic of Dagestan). **The squad was engaged in recruiting and sending operatives from Dagestan to Syria to fight alongside “terrorist organizations.”** The squad recruited at least four Russian citizens who underwent training at ISIS camps and became fighters in the organization. Raids by Russian security forces revealed large quantities of explosives, weapons and ammunition that were intended to be used for carrying out attacks in the Federal District of the North Caucasus (Russian Federal Security Service website, March 6, 2018).

## Afghanistan

### Attack on ISIS operatives in eastern Afghanistan

► The Afghan army announced that at least four ISIS operatives had been killed in an attack by armed drones **in eastern Afghanistan**. Two of them were killed in the Achin District of the Nangarhar Province, and two others in Watapur District in the Kunar Province (Khaama Press News Agency, March 6, 2018).

### Arrest of senior ISIS operatives

► Senior Afghan security officials reported the arrest of ISIS’s commander of operations in Kabul, whose codename is Omar, and the organization’s recruitment officer in Afghanistan, whose codename is Ihsan Allah. The Afghans have released videos showing the two men admitting their affiliation with ISIS. They were arrested for their connection with an attack on a Shiite mosque in Kabul in October 2017, in which 40 people were killed (BBC in Arabic, March 4, 2018).