



Spotlight on Global Jihad

March 15-21, 2018



Main events of the week

- ▶ **In eastern Al-Ghouta**, the Syrian army continued to attack the three enclaves of the rebel groups, **whose territory is shrinking**. According to Syrian sources, **around 75% of the area of eastern Al-Ghouta** has been taken over by the Syrian Army. In light of these successes, Syrian President Bashar Assad conducted a well-publicized tour among Syrian army troops in eastern Al-Ghouta. ISIS, on its part, which controls **the area of the Yarmouk refugee camp south of Damascus**, initiated an attack against the **Al-Qadam neighborhood west of the camp and took it over** (or at least most of it). This may be a move designed to take advantage of the fact that the attention of the Syrian forces and the rebel organizations is focused on eastern Al-Ghouta, **in order to expand ISIS's control area south of Damascus**.
- ▶ On March 18, 2018, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the Turkish army and the Syrian forces cooperating with it **had completed the takeover of the city of Afrin, in northwestern Syria**. He added that most of the “terrorist operatives” (i.e., the Kurdish operatives) had fled the city (AP, March 18, 2018). In another announcement, Erdoğan said that after the victory in Afrin, **Turkey would expand its activity to other areas under Kurdish control** in both Syria and Iraq. According to him, **Turkey will focus on the cities of Manbij and Ayn al-Arab** (the city of Kobane, on the Syrian-Turkish border). He added that if the Iraqi government fails to remove the terrorist forces (i.e., the Kurdish forces) from the Sinjar region, Turkey will enter it as well (AP, March 19, 2018).
- ▶ Kurdish fighters from the SDF forces have moved **from the lower Euphrates Valley to the enclave of Afrin** in order to take part in the fighting against the Turkish army. According to an American official, the pace of their fighting against ISIS (which has established a presence in the Euphrates Valley, in the area north of Albukamal) has slowed down. After the takeover of Afrin, **there remains the question of whether the SDF forces will resume fighting against ISIS in the Euphrates Valley** (which is what the Americans would like) or whether they will be transferred to defend areas under Kurdish control, either in the city of Manbij (which is Turkey's crosshairs) or in the area under Kurdish control east of the Euphrates River.

Russian involvement

Russia

► The Russian Ministry of Defense has **accused the United States of delaying the arrival of representatives of humanitarian organizations and a UN delegation to Al-Raqqah, which is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis**. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, **there remain IEDs there that have not yet been neutralized** and pose a threat to the residents. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, **a similar situation prevails in the Rukban refugee camp in the Al-Tanf area, on the Iraq-Syria border¹**, which is also under American control. This despite the US commitment to send a humanitarian aid delegation to Al-Tanf (TASS News Agency; Zvezda TV website, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense, March 17, 2018).

In the background of the Russian accusations lies the difficult situation in Al-Raqqah, the capital of the former Islamic State, which fell into the hands of the US-supported Kurdish forces around five months ago (October 17, 2017). Today there is still a great deal of destruction in Al-Raqqah, the city's infrastructure has not yet been repaired, and there are many IEDs that have not yet been neutralized. The repair work has already begun but it appears to be minimal, is proceeding slowly and will take a long time. Many of the city's residents **are afraid to return** to the devastated city and therefore prefer to remain in refugee camps outside the city where they claim that the situation is better (Jorf News, March 28, 2018; Smart News, February 28, 2018; the Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently Facebook page).

Pictures from the city of Al-Raqqah



Right: Devastation in the city of Al-Raqqah (Smart News, February 28, 2018). Left: The Al-Raqqah city center (Jorf News, March 16, 2018)

¹ **Rukban** is a Syrian refugee camp located in Jordanian territory about 25 km southwest of the Al-Tanf crossing.



Right: A store that opened in Al-Raqqa (Jorf News, March 16, 2018). Left: A refugee camp outside the city (Jorf News, March 20, 2018)



Right: Reconstruction of the bridge leading to the northern periphery of Al-Raqqa, which began in early March 2018 and is scheduled to end on April 3, 2018 (Jorf News, March 19, 2018). Left: The reconstruction work in Al-Raqqa, which is proceeding slowly (Smart News, February 28, 2018)

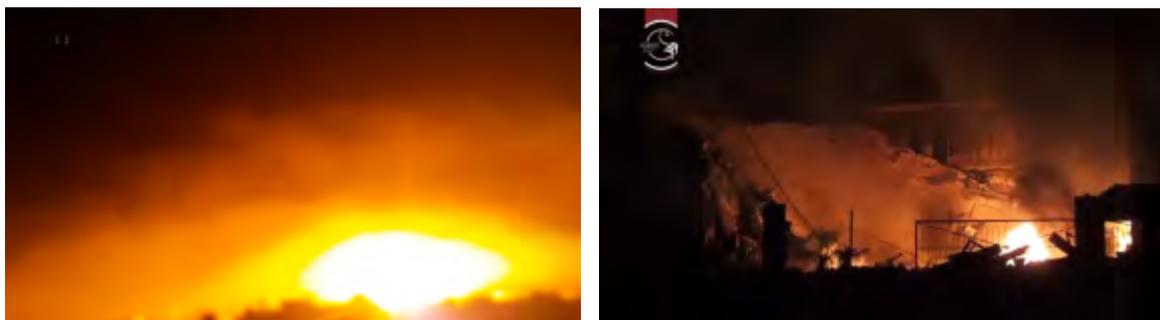
Main developments in Syria

The campaign in eastern Al-Ghouta

This week, the Syrian forces, with air support, continued to advance and take over territory in eastern Al-Ghouta. The control areas of the rebels are now split into three enclaves, **whose territory is shrinking**. This week, the Syrian troops apparently focused on the southern enclave, which includes the towns of **Duma and Harasta**. According to Syrian sources, **more than 70% of the territory of eastern Al-Ghouta had been taken over by the Syrian forces**. The Syrian regime has already started to leverage its achievements in the campaign by a well-publicized visit of Syrian President Bashar Assad among his troops in eastern Al-Ghouta.

► This week, it has been reported that Syrian war planes and helicopters carried out airstrikes against rebel strongholds. In these airstrikes, combat helicopters threw barrel bombs and the Syrian troops fired artillery at areas in **the city of Duma**, northeast of Damascus, **held by Jaysh al-Islam** (the Army of Islam). The town of **Harasta**, northeast of Damascus, was also attacked (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 18, 2018). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, since the beginning of the operation in eastern Al-Ghouta, **1,517 people were killed, including 311 children under the age of 18**

and **191 women** (February 18, 2018). Most of them were killed **in airstrikes and by Syrian army artillery fire** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 20, 2018).



Right: A building on fire in Duma after an airstrike by a Syrian aircraft. Left: The explosion of a barrel bomb thrown from a Syrian Air Force aircraft on one of the neighborhoods of Duma (Kumait Agency, March 19, 2018)



Deployment of the forces in eastern Al-Ghouta (updated to March 20, 2018): The Syrian army and its supporting forces are marked in red; Territories recently taken over by them are marked in blue; The rebel enclaves are marked in green (Mourassiloun, March 20, 2018)

- ▶ On March 15, 2018, **the Syrian army secured the departure of about 12,000 residents from eastern Al-Ghouta through the Hamouriyah crossing**, which is situated about 7 km east of Damascus, adjacent to **the city of Saqba**, which has been taken over this week by the Syrian army (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 15, 2018). **Apparently, this is a preliminary stage before a military operation to completely take over the region.** The Russian coordination center in Hmeymim reported that since the beginning of the humanitarian pauses, **about 77,000 civilians had left eastern Al-Ghouta** (website of the Russian Defense Ministry, March 19, 2018).



Right: Crossing for civilians in Hamouriyah, in the southern enclave of eastern Al-Ghouta (website of the Russian Defense Ministry, March 20, 2018). Left: Departure of Syrian residents through the Hamouriyah crossing (Al-Ghad YouTube channel, March 15, 2018)



Syrian army soldiers in the city of Saqba, which was taken over from the rebels (SANA YouTube channel, March 18, 2018)

► In view of his army's success in eastern Al-Ghouta, Syrian President Assad carried out a well-publicized visit among Syrian army soldiers and residents in the area. A video documenting the visit has been posted on YouTube (PresidentSy, Syrian president's YouTube channel, March 18, 2018).



President Bashar Assad's visit to Syrian army soldiers and officers in the Jisrin area, eastern Al-Ghouta (Mourassiloun, March 18, 2018)

The Yarmouk refugee camp, south of Damascus

► On March 19 and 20, 2018, ISIS operatives launched an attack against the Al-Qadam neighborhood, west of the Yarmouk refugee camp, south of Damascus. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, as well as other media outlets, reported that **the entire Al-**

Qadam neighborhood had been taken over by ISIS. The ITIC believes that by this move, **ISIS intends to take advantage of the fact that the attention of the Syrian forces and the rebel organizations is focused on eastern Al-Ghouta to expand its control areas south of Damascus, in the neighborhoods adjacent to the Yarmouk refugee camp** (most of which is controlled by ISIS).



Right: ISIS operatives in the Al-Qadam neighborhood in south Damascus after clashes with Syrian army soldiers. Left: Syrian army tank destroyed by ISIS operatives in the Al-Qadam neighborhood (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 17, 2018)

Al-Qadam neighborhood →



Map of the control areas in the Yarmouk area, released by ISIS. The red color marks areas controlled by ISIS in south Damascus, including more than 90% of the Al-Madhaniya neighborhood, a large neighborhood in south Al-Qadam (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 20, 2018).

In the meantime, it was reported that the whole of Al-Qadam fell into the hands of ISIS (Al-Marsad and other media outlets, March 20, 2018)

- ▶ According to an ISIS announcement released on March 16, 2018, **173 Syrian army soldiers were killed and two tanks and an APC were destroyed** in an attack carried out by ISIS operatives against the Syrian army headquarters in the neighborhood of Al-Qadam (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 20, 2018). In the ITIC's assessment, the number of fatalities cited in the

announcement was **exaggerated**. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (March 19, 2018), the Syrian army and the forces supporting it had lost **at least 23 fighters and over 43 were wounded or taken prisoner by ISIS**.

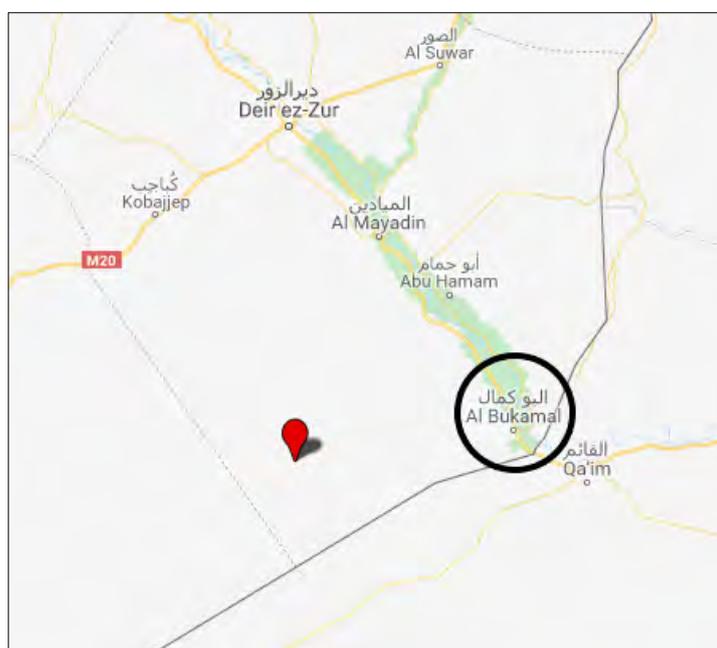


Al-Qadam neighborhood, west of the Yarmouk refugee camp, in south Damascus (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 15, 2018)

The Albukamal-Deir ez-Zor area

The attack on the T2 pumping station

► This week, it was reported that **ISIS operatives had taken over the T2 oil pumping station, about 70 km west of Albukamal, which had been held by the Syrian army**. ISIS detonated four car bombs there, **causing 23 fatalities among the Syrian forces**. Seventeen Syrian soldiers were taken prisoner. ISIS sustained nine fatalities and over 15 wounded. The Syrian troops, with Syrian Air Force support, failed in their attempt to retake the T2 station (Akhbar Al-Souriyeen, March 19, 2018; Enab Baladi, March 18, 2018).



T2 oil pumping station and the city of Albukamal (Google Maps)

The issue of the return of SDF operatives who were transferred from the lower Euphrates to the area of Afrin

► According to Russian media reports, a commander of the SDF forces said that **the operation against ISIS in the Deir ez-Zor area has been suspended in order to continue the fighting in Afrin. According to him, this is in contravention of the request made by the US.** According to the commander, the US is aware of the great contribution of the SDF forces in fighting against ISIS, but **now they have to take care of Afrin** (Sputnik, March 14, 2018).

► Pentagon Spokesperson **Dana W. White** and US Director of the Joint Staff **Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie** held a joint press conference in which McKenzie noted the **connection between the SDF fighting in Afrin and the fighting in the Euphrates Valley**. The main points that he made are as follows:

- ◆ **In light of the fighting in the area of Afrin in northern Syria, the pace of fighting against ISIS in the Euphrates River area has slowed down.** This is because some of the SDF forces that have been fighting against ISIS up to now have moved to fight in the area south of Afrin. According to him, there are now several SDF leaders in the Afrin area.
- ◆ **The transfer of forces is affecting the ability of the US-led Coalition forces to end the fighting against ISIS in the area of the Euphrates River** and is significantly slowing down the progress of the forces. However, McKenzie noted that ISIS is not affected by this slowdown and its operatives are not taking advantage of it (US Department of Defense website, March 15, 2018).

In the ITIC's assessment, the takeover of the Afrin enclave by the Turkish army and the Free Syrian Army is expected to pose a dilemma for the SDF forces. As Kurdish forces, their main interests **are the city of Manbij west of the Euphrates River, which is in the crosshairs of the Turks, and the area controlled by the Kurds east of the Euphrates River.** In the ITIC's assessment, under these circumstances it is not at all clear whether the SDF forces that moved to Afrin will be enthusiastic about returning to their previous fighting zone against ISIS in the lower Euphrates Valley, although they can be expected to face US pressure to do so. **ISIS, on its part, took advantage of the depletion of the SDF forces in order to expand its activity in the area north of Albukamal.**

The killing of a French ISIS operative (it is unclear where)

- ▶ A French ISIS operative named **Maxime Hauchard** AKA **Abu Abdullah the Frenchman** was killed in Syria in unknown circumstances. Maxime Hauchard was documented in November 2014 in a video in which he is shown holding the severed head of Peter Kassig, an American hostage who had been held captive by ISIS since October 2013. He also participated in the execution of 18 Syrian army captives.
- ▶ There is a pending international arrest warrant against Hauchard, which was issued by France on December 26, 2014. On September 15, 2015, his name appeared on the blacklist of foreign terrorist operatives issued by the US. He was born and raised as a Christian in a small town in Normandy, in northern France, and converted to Islam in 2009. He then underwent a process of radicalization. Between October 2012 and May 2013 he made two trips to Mauritania, staying at Salafist study centers. On August 17, 2013, he traveled to Syria via Turkey (Al-Nahar, March 15, 2018).



Maxime Hauchard AKA Abu Abdullah the Frenchman who was killed in Syria in unknown circumstances (Al-Arab Al-Youm, March 15, 2018)

Main developments in Iraq

Mopping up Iraq from ISIS presence continues

- ▶ Iraqi security forces' activity against local ISIS networks continued this week throughout Iraq. ISIS operatives were killed or arrested, and weapons were seized. The Iraqi Air Force carried out, in coordination with the Counter-Terrorism Service, a large-scale landing operation, the largest of its kind in the past year and half, **in the desert west of the Al-Anbar Province**. The forces, which arrived in ten aircraft, landed near the target, about 87 km northwest of Ramadi, where they arrested several wanted operatives (Iraqi News Agency, March 19, 2018).



Right: Counter-Terrorism Service fighters boarding helicopters before their flight to the operation area in the desert west of the Al-Anbar Province. Left: The fighters arresting suspects (Iraqi News Agency, March 19, 2018)

► Following are additional counterterrorism and preventive activities by the Iraqi security forces throughout Iraq:

- ◆ **In the Kirkuk Province**, a local Popular Mobilization commander reported that over 80 ISIS operatives, including suicide bombers, had been killed during 20 days of security activity (Al-Sumaria News, March 15, 2018).
- ◆ **Major General Maan al-Saadi, head of Kirkuk security**, reported that six ISIS operatives, including two commanders, had been killed in two International Coalition airstrikes. One of the dead was ISIS's military commander in the district, and the other had been in charge of preparing car bombs and sending them to Kirkuk and its suburbs (Al-Sumaria News, March 15, 2018).
- ◆ The Iraqi Military Intelligence Directorate announced that around **the city of Ramadi in the Al-Anbar Province**, a hideout of ISIS operatives had been found, with three explosive belts ready for activation (Iraqi News Agency, March 15, 2018).
- ◆ **North of Mosul**, Iraqi Military Intelligence personnel arrested ISIS's former Nineveh police commander (Iraqi News, March 17, 2018).
- ◆ Based on precise intelligence, the Iraqi army located an ISIS ammunition depot **in the Al-Shura area, about 34 km south of Mosul**. The depot included, among other things, several hundred self-manufactured mortar shells, which were ready for use as IEDs, IEDs, and gas cylinders used for making IEDs (Iraqi News Agency, March 19, 2018).
- ◆ The Iraqi Defense Ministry reported that an ISIS training camp had been found **in the Al-Anbar Province desert area**, where explosives were also found (Iraqi News Agency, March 19, 2018).



Weapons found by the Iraqi security forces in an ISIS training camp in the Al-Anbar Province desert area (Iraqi News Agency, March 19, 2018)

► It seems that ISIS has increased the scope of its activity this week and has managed to hit the Iraqi security forces several times:

- ◆ A source in the Al-Anbar Province reported that seven Iraqi army soldiers had been killed and seven others wounded in clashes with ISIS operatives **southeast of Rutba**. ISIS also sustained several fatalities (Al-Sumaria News, March 15, 2018).
- ◆ **ISIS's North Baghdad Province** announced that its operatives had carried out several attacks against the Iraqi security forces, including attacks against houses of Iraqi army senior officers in Al-Dejail, **about 50 km north of Baghdad**. ISIS reported that four soldiers had been killed in this activity and eight had been wounded. ISIS operatives also blew up an observation tower of the Tribal Mobilization about 30 km north of Baghdad.
- ◆ An ISIS suicide bomber codenamed **Abu Furqan al-Ansari** blew up an explosive belt at an Iraqi army staging zone **in the area of Al-Tarimiyah, about 30 km north of Baghdad**. Several soldiers were wounded, including a brigade commander. On March 15, 2018, ISIS operatives blew up the apartments of several office holders in the Iraqi Interior Ministry, in the Iraqi army, and the federal police in Al-Tarimiyah (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, March 17, 2018).

Mass grave of Indian workers exposed northwest of Mosul

► **According to India's Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj, a mass grave was found, containing the bodies of 39 Indian workers who were abducted from Mosul in 2014 and killed by ISIS. The mass grave was found in Badush, about 10 km northwest of Mosul.** DNA tests verified the identity of the victims. Their bodies will be flown to their families in India. In total, forty workers had been abducted. One of them, named Harjit Masih,

managed to escape from ISIS disguising himself as a Bangladeshi Muslim. Masih claimed that he had witnessed the massacre of the workers on June 15, 2014, but the Indian government did not believe him (Hindustan Times, March 20, 2018).

► **Several mass graves were found** in the Mosul area, containing bodies of civilians executed by ISIS after the takeover of Mosul in June 2014. **One of these mass graves is a deep pit called Al-Khasfah** (in Arabic, a pit, a hole in the ground), **situated in a desert area south of Mosul**. A retired military man said that he had witnessed six executions at that site (Al-Sumaria News, March 7, 2018).



Right: Two of the Indian abductees who were killed by ISIS. Left: Indian worker Harjit Masih, who claimed that he had managed to escape from ISIS after disguising himself as a Bangladeshi Muslim (Hindustan Times YouTube channel, March 20, 2018).



Al-Khasfah, a deep hole in a desert area south of Mosul, which served as a mass grave for ISIS victims (Al-Basha Al-Iraqi YouTube channel, January 21, 2015)

The Sinai Peninsula

Operation Sinai 2018

► The Egyptian security forces continue to report successes in the campaign against the presence of ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula as part of Operation Sinai 2018. The main achievements of the operation as announced by **Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman Col. Tamer al-Refai** (March 19, 2018): The Air Force destroyed car bombs, including a car that tried to enter a staging zone of the Egyptian forces southwest of Al-Arish; 30 ISIS operatives

were killed in northern and central Sinai in clashes with the Egyptian security forces; a squad of six “terrorist operatives” was killed by Egyptian police in Al-Arish; a wireless broadcasting station was found in Rafah; 345 people were arrested for involvement in terrorism or criminal activity; 386 storehouses containing weapons, ammunition, IEDs and equipment were destroyed; 93 IEDs were blown up in a controlled manner; and 17 cars and 67 motorcycles were destroyed. “Security sources” reported the death of **Awad Abu Dan, a senior ISIS operative in the Sinai Province**, in an operation carried out by the Egyptian army forces in the central Sinai Peninsula where he was hiding (Al-Bawaba News, March 16, 2018).

► **Referring to Egyptian Army announcements, “tribal sources,”** said that it was true that the army carried out dozens of attacks and that Egyptian artillery fired hundreds of shells at various areas. However, according to them, **most of the targets were agricultural and mountainous lands and abandoned houses.** According to them, ISIS has no stable footholds and no organized centers or weapons caches as the army claims. According to sources at the military hospital in Al-Arish, **around 65 members of the Egyptian security forces were killed and dozens were wounded**, more than the official Egyptian figures (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 16, 2018).



Right: Car bomb destroyed by an Egyptian Air Force aircraft. Left: Car bomb destroyed while attempting to enter a staging zone of the Egyptian forces southwest of Al-Arish (official Facebook page of the Egyptian armed forces, March 18, 2018)



Right: Egyptian police breaking into a building in Al-Arish used as a hiding place by a “terrorist squad” that was eliminated. Left: Wireless broadcasting station found by the Egyptian army (official Facebook page of the Egyptian armed forces, March 18, 2018)



Right: ATV going up in flames after being set on fire by the Egyptian army. Left: Motorcycles going up in flames after being set on fire by the Egyptian army (official Facebook page of the Egyptian armed forces, March 18, 2018)

ISIS's response

► ISIS's Sinai province operatives continued to carry out attacks against the Egyptian security forces. Medical sources at the Al-Arish hospital reported that an Egyptian army officer and soldier were killed and several soldiers were wounded in an attack on an Egyptian army vehicle west of Al-Arish (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 14, 2018). Medical sources at the military hospital in Al-Arish reported that on March 16, 2018, seven soldiers, including four officers, were killed in the explosion of a booby-trapped apartment in Rafah. Ten other soldiers were wounded in the incident (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 16, 2018).



Right: ISIS operative shooting a policeman and an Egyptian army soldier to death after they were stopped at a temporary checkpoint set up by the organization's operatives in west Al-Arish. Left: Police ID card in the name of Muhammad al-Sayyid Hassan Suleiman, one of the two members of the Egyptian security forces killed by ISIS operatives in west Al-Arish (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, March 16, 2018)

The extensive involvement of foreign fighters in ISIS's Sinai Province

► In an article published on the website of the **Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies**, Iman Rajab, a regional security researcher, claims that northern Sinai is one of the most attractive areas for foreign fighters leaving Iraq and Syria. This is mainly due to the continuing intensive activity of the Sinai Province in comparison to the relatively sparse activity of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The researcher mentions estimates that the number of foreign fighters in the Sinai Peninsula by the end of 2017 **was 500-1,000**. She also addresses

the announcements made by the Egyptian army spokesman during Operation Sinai 2018 regarding the detention of foreign fighters during the operation. It is evident from the announcements that ISIS does not base its infrastructure solely on local residents, **but also on foreign fighters who come from outside Sinai**. It is also evident from her study that **Palestinian operatives hold senior positions in the ranks of the organization**, and that there exists information indicating that **ISIS operatives from Libya** have managed to infiltrate into Egypt and carry out attacks there (Al-Ahram, March 13, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Russia

- ▶ The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested four operatives of an ISIS sleeper cell in the Kaluga Oblast (about 150-200 km southwest of Moscow). They are residents of the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, located in the northern part of the Western Siberian plain. The leader of the cell is an ISIS operative who spent time in Syria and was trained by the Islamic State. The operative came to Russia to organize terrorist activity. Under interrogation, they admitted that they had been planning a terrorist attack. The investigation is still ongoing (Russian Federal Security Service website, March 15, 2018).
- ▶ The Russian Federal Security Service and the Russian Interior Ministry thwarted the activity of a squad **in the Moscow area that was recruiting operatives and sending them to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside ISIS**. In addition, the squad helped immigrants from Central Asia obtain legal status. During the operation, 17 residences were searched and 60 foreign residents were detained. In addition, during the operation, three forged document workshops were found, with a large quantity of rubber stamps (including border crossing stamps), immigration forms, and foreign passports (Russian Federal Security Service website, March 13, 2018).