



Spotlight on Global Jihad

March 29 – April 11, 2018



Main events of the week

► The Syrian army continued to attack the rebel organizations **in the city of Duma**, their last significant stronghold in eastern Al-Ghouta. The Syrian army's ground operation was accompanied by airstrikes, **one of which involved the use of a chemical** (possibly chlorine gas). **President Trump** and other Western countries condemned the use of chemical weapons and **held the Syrian regime responsible**. **President Trump** has publicly stated that he **expects to make significant decisions regarding the use of chemical weapons in the coming days and that the United States will be able to act in a variety of military ways**. On the agenda **is the possibility of an attack against targets of the Syrian regime by the United States and the International Coalition countries**.

► Meanwhile, the Syrian army **is about to complete its takeover of eastern Al-Ghouta**. On April 10, 2018, the evacuation of 8,000 operatives of the Army of Islam to the Idlib area was completed. The Army of Islam is the dominant force in Duma. The departing operatives were accompanied by 40,000 residents, mainly families of the evacuees (another expression of the mass displacement of residents that is causing a significant demographic change in the eastern suburbs of Damascus). The Syrian regime now has its sights on **the ISIS enclave on the southern outskirts of Damascus and the area of Daraa and the Yarmouk Basin in southern Syria** (which are controlled by the rebel organizations and ISIS). In the ITIC's assessment, when the Syrian regime finishes dealing with these two areas of resistance, most of its attention **will be diverted to the Idlib region**, the last stronghold of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations.

► Recently, there have been more and more reports of the **US intention to withdraw its troops from Syria** ("very soon," according to President Trump). The American forces, **which number about 2,000 combatants**, support the Kurdish forces (SDF), which control the area east of the Euphrates River and the city of Manbij, west of the Euphrates River. In the ITIC's assessment, the withdrawal of the American forces will lead to **the weakening of**

the control area of the (US-supported) Kurdish forces east of the Euphrates River, and the strengthening of the ISIS sector in the lower Euphrates River as a result of the weakening of the SDF. Moreover, the withdrawal of the American troops from Syria **would weaken the ability of the US to meet the many challenges posed by the Syrian crisis and would strengthen the status of Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria and the region as a whole.**

American involvement in Syria

► Following are some American statements, official and unofficial, on the issue of the removal of US soldiers from Syria:

- ◆ Speaking in Ohio, US President Donald Trump surprisingly announced that the US would soon withdraw from Syria, saying, “By the way, we’re knocking the hell out of ISIS. **We're coming out of Syria, like, very soon.** Let the other people take care of it now. Very soon – very soon we're coming out.” (The Washington Post, March 29, 2018).
- ◆ **US president Donald Trump ordered the US Armed Forces commanders to complete the military operation in Syria and all the preparations that would enable the US to withdraw from Syria in a few months.** The President waived his demand for an immediate withdrawal from Syria after military commanders told him they needed months to complete the mission (The New York Times, April 4, 2018). In addition, a senior official in the Trump administration said that the President **had ordered the Department of State to freeze the economic aid to Syria, in a sum exceeding \$200 million**, as long as the United States is reassessing its role and its involvement in the conflict in Syria (The New York Times, March 30, 2018).
- ◆ **A senior official in the US administration said that when President Trump announced a quick withdrawal from Syria, he effectively canceled plans to help restore stability in Syria and eliminate the Islamic State.** The New York Times reported that the Pentagon, the US Department of State and the CIA were concerned about the President’s intention to withdraw abruptly, due to the fear of a vacuum being created in Syria, which could be exploited by elements hostile to the United States (The New York Times, April 4, 2018).
- ◆ **A senior official in the Trump administration reported that President Trump had asked for the plans for the withdrawal from Syria**, and discussed the matter

with White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. The senior official added that **the President's advisers had persuaded him to remain in Syria at this stage in order to prevent the recovery of the Islamic State, and to prepare the ground for a future peace agreement that would benefit the US.** According to official reports, President Trump's announcement was apparently unplanned and preparations are being made for such a possibility (The Washington Post, March 30, 2018).

Syria

Overview

The Syrian army continued **to attack Jaysh al-Islam** (The Army of Islam) **and other rebel organizations in the city of Duma, their last significant stronghold in eastern Al-Ghouta.** The Syrian army's ground operation was accompanied by airstrikes, **one of which involved the use of a chemical** (possibly chlorine gas), causing at least 70 deaths, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR, April 9, 2018). On April 10, 2018, the implementation of the **agreement for the evacuation of 8,000 Jaysh al-Islam operatives and 40,000 members of their families to the Idlib area was completed.** Hence the battle for the takeover of eastern Al-Ghouta is nearly over.

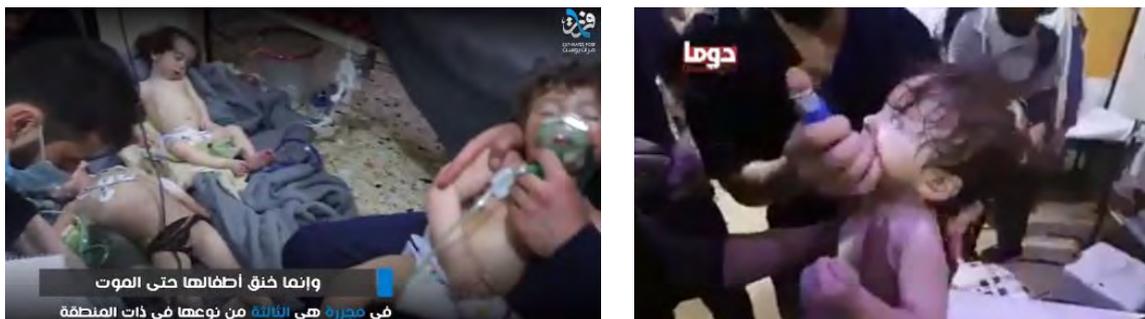


Right: The city of Duma being attacked by the Syrian Army. Left: Syrian army soldiers on the southern route leading to the city of Duma (Sama, April 8, 2018)

Use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in the city of Duma

► At the same time, Syrian media reported that the Syrian Air Force had carried out a **chemical attack against the city of Duma.** According to the SOHR, **at least 70 people died of suffocation** as a result of inhaling the toxic gas. According to additional reports in the Arab and Western media, the number of fatalities was higher, **between 150 and 200.**

The Syrian regime (with political and media support from Russia) denied its involvement in the attack.



Right: A child who was injured by a chemical weapon being treated with an inhaler (YouTube, April 7, 2018). Left: Syrian babies receiving treatment after the chemical weapons attack (Furat Post's Facebook page, April 8, 2018)

In the ITIC's assessment, the use of chemical weapons, at a time when **the rebel organizations in eastern Al-Ghouta are facing defeat, is intended to convey a message to the other organizations to lay down their arms and surrender to the Syrian regime.** **President Trump** and other Western countries strongly condemned the use of chemical weapons and **held the Syrian regime responsible.**

Agreement for the evacuation of the rebels from Duma

In the course of the attacks against Duma, negotiations were held to evacuate civilians and rebel operatives from the city, especially Jaysh al-Islam operatives. For various reasons (including internal rivalries in Jaysh al-Islam), no agreement was reached until April 8, 2018. **The use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime apparently expedited the process of reaching an agreement that led to the surrender of the rebels in Duma and will expedite the completion of the Syrian forces' takeover of the entire region of eastern Al-Ghouta.**

► On April 8, 2018, Syrian sources announced that **an agreement had been reached** whereby all the Jaysh al-Islam operatives would be evacuated to the cities of Jarabulus and Al-Bab in the Turkish security zone. In the wake of **Turkey's refusal** to accept them, it was apparently agreed to **transfer them to the Idlib area.** In return, Jaysh al-Islam will release its captives. As part of the agreement, 8,000 Jaysh al-Islam operatives and 40,000 members of their families were evacuated to the Idlib area (Mourasiloun, April 10, 2018). Jaysh al-Islam released 52 captives (Zaman Al-Wasl, April 9, 2018).



Right: Buses that arrived to evacuate the Jaysh al-Islam operatives from Duma (Syrian TV, April 8, 2018). Left: The buses, with ruined buildings in the background (Al-Hadath Suriya, April 8, 2018)

The uprooting of the residents of eastern Al-Ghouta

► According to the Russian Center for Reconciliation, **around 161,000 residents have been evacuated from eastern Al-Ghouta with the help of the Russians since the beginning of the humanitarian lull in the region** (Russian Ministry of Defense website, April 10, 2018). The departure of the residents from eastern Al-Ghouta **is still ongoing**. Most of them are being transferred to **northern Syria, mainly to the rebel-controlled area of Idlib**. On the eve of the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, the number of residents of eastern Al-Ghouta was estimated **at 400,000** (Al-Jazeera, February 21, 2018).

In addition to the physical devastation and the many victims, **the population of the eastern suburbs of Damascus quickly dropped by half**. It is by no means certain that **the Syrian regime will allow this population to return to its home**, partly because, from the perspective of the regime, this population is not loyal to it and supports the rebel organizations. In the ITIC's assessment, **the Syrian regime may prefer to populate the Damascus suburbs with residents that are loyal to it, thereby making a significant demographic change** in the area east of the Syrian capital.

Preparation for the takeover of ISIS's control area south of Damascus

► According to Syrian media reports, **the Syrian army and forces supporting it started about a week ago to concentrate forces to take over** the area held by ISIS in the southern suburbs of Damascus. Most of the reinforcement sent to the area comprises **Palestinian forces fighting alongside the Syrian army**, the Al-Quds Brigade, the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA), and other Palestinian militias (Zaman Al-Wasl, April 7, 2018). **ISIS's Damascus Province** reported that **ISIS in southern Damascus was preparing for the attack by the Syrian forces**. ISIS reportedly proposed to the rival jihadi organization, the Headquarters

for the Liberation of Al-Sham (which is clearly outnumbered) to collaborate in fighting against the Syrian army.



Right: ISIS operatives digging a trench and manning in positions in the Al-Qadam neighborhood in south Damascus, as part of the preparations for the attack of the Syrian army (ISIS's Damascus Province as quoted by the "Al-Yarmouk Camp in our Heart" Facebook page, April 7, 2018). Left: ISIS operative with a Kalashnikov rifle at a fortified position in the Al-Qadam neighborhood, south Damascus (Nasher, April 7, 2018)

► In the meantime, the Free Syrian Army withdrew one of its forces located in the Al-Tadamoun neighborhood, held by ISIS. The force (called *Jaysh Al-Ababil*) was **transferred to southern Syria** following an agreement reached with **Russian officials**. The evacuation started on the morning of April 7, 2018. **About 1,500 operatives with their personal arms set out for the town of Jassem** (about 40 km north of Daraa) (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, April 8, 2018). In the town of Jassem, the operatives joined the rebel organizations encircling the ISIS enclave in the Yarmouk Basin. **In the ITIC's assessment, their evacuation from the Al-Tadamoun neighborhood is due to their reluctance to fight alongside ISIS.**



One of the buses arriving to evacuate the Free Syrian Army group from the Al-Tadamoun neighborhood in south Damascus to the town of Jassem (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, April 8, 2018)

◆ **Nineveh Province:**

- Twenty Three ISIS operatives were arrested in a security activity taking place in the Nineveh Province. According to Iraqi federal police, fifteen ISIS operatives who had planned to attack security forces deployed in western Mosul were arrested in a tunnel, with their weapons (Iraqi News, April 7, 2018).
- The Nineveh Province police arrested eight ISIS operatives in the northern Mosul neighborhood of Al-Saddiq (Iraqi News Agency, April 8, 2018).

◆ **Kirkuk Province:**

- Iraqi security sources announced that a senior ISIS operative codenamed Abu al-Waleed the Chechen had been killed in the Kirkuk area. The operative had been described as ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's right-hand man. On his body, the Iraqi security forces found important documents on ISIS operatives (Al-Sumaria News, April 9, 2018).
- ISIS operatives set up a checkpoint about 30 km northwest of Kirkuk. The operatives at the checkpoint killed four Tribal Mobilization fighters and attacked federal police force which arrived as reinforcements (file-sharing website, April 8, 2018).

ISIS activity

Suicide bombing and shooting in the city of Hit

► On April 7, 2018, two ISIS suicide bombers carried out **a suicide bombing and shooting attack against the headquarters of the Iraqi Al-Hall Party.**¹ The attack was carried out in **central Hit**, in the Al-Anbar Province. The terrorists tried to enter a building where municipal election candidates were present. According to the ISIS version, the operatives shot and killed the security guards using weapons with silencers. Next, one of the operatives entered the headquarters and blew himself up with an explosive belt. Yet another operative entered the building, exchanged fire with those inside, and blew himself up with an explosive belt (file-sharing website, April 8, 2018).

¹ *Al-Hall*, i.e., the solution, is a Sunni national reform party.



Right: Two brothers, ISIS suicide bombers, who carried out the suicide bombing and shooting attack against the headquarters of the Al-Hall Party in the city of Hit (file-sharing website, April 8, 2018). Left: The headquarters of the Al-Hall Party which was attacked (Al-Alam, April 8, 2018)

► According to an announcement by the Al-Anbar Province, seven security guards and army personnel were killed in the attack. Additional 13 people were wounded, including election candidates and two senior officials in the Iraqi government (file-sharing website, April 8, 2018). According to an Iranian source, two security guards were killed and five other people were wounded, including a candidate for the parliament elections (Al-Alam, April 8, 2018).

Additional ISIS activity

► ISIS media reported on several attacks carried out by ISIS operatives against the Iraqi security forces, mainly against Popular Mobilization fighters (the Shiite militias):

- ◆ On April 4, 2018, ISIS operatives killed three Popular Mobilization fighters about 46 km southwest of Kirkuk. Two off-road vehicles were destroyed and an APC was hit by the explosion of IEDs (Amaq, April 5, 2018).
- ◆ ISIS announced that it had fired machine guns and rockets at a Popular Mobilization position in the Daqouq area, south of Kirkuk (Nasher, April 6, 2018).
- ◆ Amaq News Agency announced that four Popular Mobilization fighters had been killed and three wounded in an ISIS “security activity” west of Kirkuk (Amaq, April 8, 2018).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

► **Operation Sinai 2018 continues.** Following are highlights of the activity recently carried out, as reported by Col. Tamer Refai, spokesman of the Egyptian Armed Forces (April 8, 2018): The Egyptian Air Force destroyed two hiding places of “terrorist operatives” and some of them were killed; Three “terrorist operatives” were killed and two others were arrested in central Sinai; A “terrorist operative” was killed in northern Sinai – cash, cellphones and marijuana were found in his possession; Forty-six vehicles of various types used by “terrorist operatives” were seized; A total of 114 motorcycles without license plates

were destroyed; A total of 386 hiding places and depots with weapons and equipment for the detonation of IEDs were destroyed. In addition, 30 IEDs were found and detonated (Spokesman for the Egyptian Armed Forces, April 8, 2018).



Top right, clockwise: Cash, cellphones, and marijuana found in the possession of an ISIS operative who was killed in northern Sinai, light arms ammunition, eight mortar shells, and the body of a “terrorist operative” (Spokesman for the Egyptian Armed Forces, April 8, 2018)



Top right, clockwise: Egyptian army combat engineering personnel during searches for mines and IEDs; a broadcasting station of “terrorist operatives”; three detainees; Egyptian army armored vehicles during a security activity (Spokesman for the Egyptian Armed Forces, April 8, 2018)

ISIS activity in other countries

Libya

ISIS suicide bombing attack on the outskirts of the city of Ajdabiya

► ISIS’s Barqa Province in Libya claimed responsibility for an attack in which a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb at a checkpoint of Haftar’s forces at the eastern entrance to the city of Ajdabiya. According to the claim of responsibility, 19 people were killed and wounded in the attack (Haqq, March 31, 2018). According to Libyan sources, five people

were killed and ten others were wounded, all of them soldiers and policemen. It should be noted that three weeks earlier, ISIS carried out in an attack against a checkpoint south of the city of Ajdabiya, wounding three people.

Afghanistan

The activity of ISIS's branch in Afghanistan

► **On April 8, 2018**, ISIS's Amaq News Agency announced that a US military agent had been shot dead by the organization's operatives **in the city of Jalalabad** in eastern Afghanistan (Amaq News Agency, April 8, 2018.) ISIS announced that five Afghan army soldiers, including a colonel, had been killed and wounded when an IED was detonated at an arms center belonging to the Afghan Defense Ministry **in Kabul** (Amaq News Agency, April 4, 2018). ISIS announced that two Afghan policemen had been shot dead by the organization's operatives **in the city of Jalalabad** in eastern Afghanistan (Amaq News Agency, April 4, 2018).

Summary of ISIS's activity in Kabul

► On April 4, 2018, ISIS's weekly Al-Nabā' included an infographic summarizing ISIS's activity in Kabul between September 21, 2017, and March 16, 2018. According to the infographic, during this period ISIS carried **out 13 suicide bombing attacks and detonated three IEDs and one car bomb**. As a result, at least 1,239 people were killed and wounded, **about half of them Shiites** (539). In addition, **members of the security forces** were killed and wounded, including **intelligence and police personnel** (360), **Afghan army soldiers** (129), **political figures** (110), **media personnel and their security guards** (76) and **Christians and foreign consular officers** (25) (Haqq and a file-sharing website, April 6, 2018). **The infographic reflects the intensive activity of ISIS's Khorasan Province** (Afghanistan/Pakistan).

The number of ISIS operatives in Afghanistan

► **According to a report by Zamir Kabulov**, the Russian Defense Ministry's envoy to Afghanistan, **at least 7,000 ISIS operatives are currently active in Afghanistan, along with a reserve force of around 3,000**. Kabulov added that the operatives in Afghanistan maintain a network of bases in the country, recruit new operatives, **and expect to gain access to drug trafficking** in order to solve the organization's financial problems after having lost its strongholds in Syria and Iraq (TASS News Agency, March 29, 2018). **Sergei Smirnov, deputy head of the Russian Federal Security Service** (FSB), reported that

around 8,000 fighters from Syria had moved to northern Afghanistan (TASS News Agency, April 5, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Libya

► On April 2, 2018, the Libyan Government of National Accord announced Operation Nation's Storm, **for mopping up Libya from the presence of ISIS operatives**. The operation is intended to target ISIS groups that remain in the desert and to expose sleeper cells in several cities in the Tripoli area. **Mohamed al-Salak, Spokesman for the Chairman of the Presidency Council**, said that this would lead to the final removal of ISIS operatives from Libyan soil. The operation will be led by the Libyan government's counterterrorism forces and will begin in the wadis east of Misrata (Akhbar Libya 24, April 3, 2018).



The main area of the operation against ISIS: from Tripoli in the west to Misrata in the east and Bani Walid in the south (Google Maps)

Morocco

► According to a report from March 29, 2018, the Moroccan security forces uncovered a terrorist squad comprising eight ISIS operatives operating in the cities of Wadd Zimm and Tangier. Weapons, electronic equipment and documents related to ISIS were found in the possession of the squad operatives. According to the authorities, **the security forces have exposed dozens of terrorist squads since 2002, as part of their counterterrorism activity** (Reuters, March 29, 2018).