



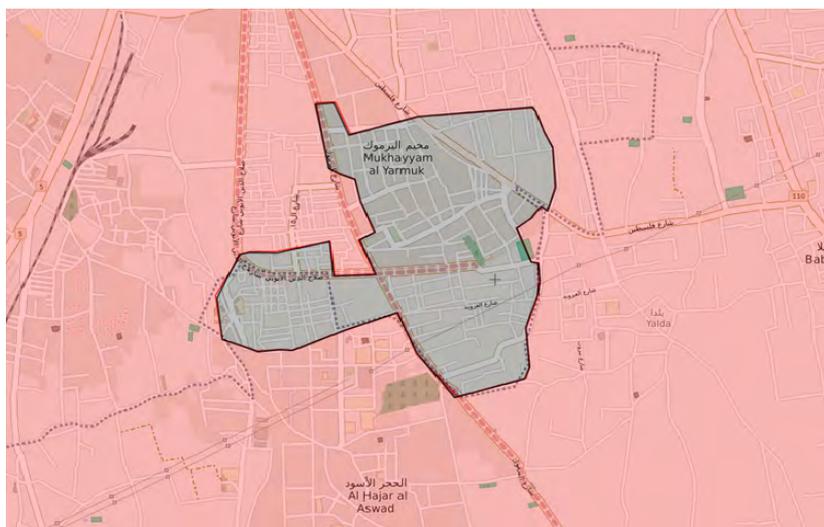
# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## May 3-9, 2018

### Main events of the week

- ▶ In Syria, **two campaigns against ISIS** continued this week **in two different arenas**: in the neighborhoods **south of Damascus**, the Syrian army took over some of ISIS's strongholds in the Yarmouk refugee camp and in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood to its south. **In eastern Syria, in the Euphrates Valley and along the Syrian-Iraqi border**, the Kurdish SDF forces are waging a campaign to eradicate ISIS's strongholds in the area, **with the support of the US and Coalition countries**, and in cooperation with the Iraqi army. **These campaigns are being waged against the backdrop of the increasing security tension between Israel and Iran in Syria and the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.**
- ▶ **ISIS continues its campaign aimed at disrupting the elections process in the countries in which it operates, by means of terrorist attacks against individuals and facilities**: **In Libya**, a suicide bombing attack was carried out in front of the headquarters of the High National Elections Commission in Tripoli (14 killed); **In Afghanistan**, a deadly terrorist attack was carried out in a mosque used as a voter registration center in the Khost District in the eastern part of the country (17 dead, no claim of responsibility by ISIS has been found to date); **In Iraq**, ISIS squads operated against two election centers in Baghdad and stabbed a candidate to death in the Nineveh Province. The campaign against the elections in the various countries demonstrates **that ISIS remains a fundamentally global organization whose goals and interests extend beyond Iraq and Syria, its two core countries.**





**Control area remaining in ISIS's hands (in grey) in the Yarmouk refugee camp (Enab Baladi, May 9, 2018)**

► On May 6, 2018, the Syrian army, with air support, **managed to take over part of the northern Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood and separate the neighborhood from the Yarmouk refugee camp. The Syrian army reportedly took over also the southern part of the neighborhood** (SANA, May 6, 2018). ISIS operatives still continue to barricade themselves in the northern part of the neighborhood (Al-Watan, May 6, 2018). The Syrian army found a network of tunnels in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood, and seized weapons, mines, explosives and IEDs (SANA, May 6, 2018). On May 7, 2018, the Syrian Air Force carried out airstrikes, during which barrel bombs were thrown in areas under ISIS control in the neighborhoods of Al-Hajar al-Aswad and Al-Tadamon.



**Smoke in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood following the Syrian army airstrikes and artillery fire (SANA, May 7, 2018)**

► Hezbollah apparently takes part in the fighting in the neighborhoods south of **Damascus alongside the Syrian army**. Khotwa News Agency reported that **Mohammad**

**Ahmad Horani**, a Hezbollah commander, was killed on May 6, 2018, in a battle between ISIS and the Syrian army and Shiite militias supporting it (Khotwa, May 7, 2018).

### Syrian army activity in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood



وحدات الجيش توسع نطاق سيطرتها على شمال منطقة الحجر الأسود  
خلال عملياتها على بؤر التطورات الإرهابية جنوب دمشق



Army expands control over southern Damascus and regains control over the district vicinity and the clubhouse of Quneitra workers in al-Hajar al-Aswad

Right: Syrian army armored force in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood. Left: Syrian army APC in the neighborhood (SANA, May 4, 6, 2018)



Right: ISIS weapons seized in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood. Left: ISIS hand grenades and gas masks (SANA, May 4, 2018)



Right: Syrian army tanks in a staging zone near damaged buildings in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood. Left: Syrian army soldiers in the neighborhood (SANA, May 7, 2018)



Right: Syrian army soldier in an ISIS tunnel found in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood. Left: The opening of one of ISIS's tunnels (SANA, May 6, 2018)



**Right: Mines seized by the Syrian army in the Al-Hajar al-Aswad neighborhood. Left: ISIS explosive receptacles (SANA, May 6, 2018)**

### Losses

- ▶ On May 6, 2018, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that since April 19, 2018, the beginning of the campaign to take over south Damascus from ISIS, **at least 142 Syrian army soldiers and operatives of the militias supporting it had been killed**. The fatalities include 18 officers in various ranks. **A total of 118 ISIS operatives** were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 6, 2018). In addition, **since the beginning of the campaign in south Damascus, 47 civilians who were not involved in the fighting have been killed** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 7, 2018).
- ▶ ISIS reported that **dozens of Syrian army soldiers and operatives of the militias supporting it had been killed in the fighting**. On May 4, 2018, **ISIS reported over 65 fatalities in the Yarmouk refugee camp**. On May 5, 2018, ISIS reported that **27 Syrian army soldiers had been killed in the battles in the neighborhoods of Al-Hajar al-Aswad and Al-Tadamon and in the Yarmouk refugee camp** (Haqq, May 4, 6, 2018).

### Evacuation of operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and their families completed<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ On May 6, 2018, **the evacuation of nearly 5,000 operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and their families was completed**. The evacuation was carried out from the neighborhoods of Yalda, Babila and Beit Sahm, east of the Yarmouk refugee camp. It was carried out in three phases, by dozens of buses in each one. **The evacuees were transferred to the Idlib area (controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) and the Jarabulus area (controlled by Turkey)**.

<sup>1</sup> Follow-up on Spotlight on Global Jihad from April 25 – May 2, 2018.



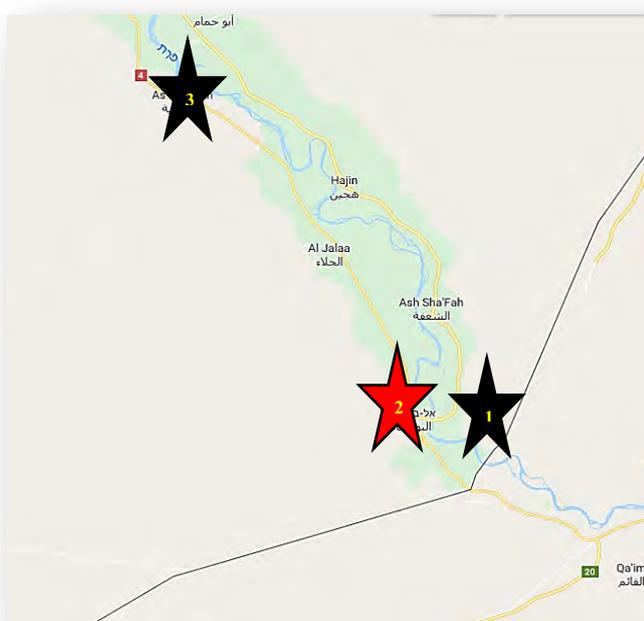
**Right:** Two of the buses that evacuated the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and their families in the first phase (SANA, May 4, 2018). **Left:** Some of the buses which evacuated operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and their families in the third phase (SANA, May 5, 2018)

## Eastern Syria

In the lower Euphrates Valley, Operation Island Storm continued this week. The operation is carried out by the (predominantly Kurdish) SDF forces, with US-led International Coalition support (see below). The objective of the operation, which is scheduled to last for several weeks, is **to mop up the Euphrates Valley and the Syrian-Iraqi border area from the presence of ISIS operatives**. The operation was **coordinated with the Iraqi government**, so that ISIS operatives would not be able to find refuge on the Iraqi side of the border.

► According to reports on Syrian media, the SDF forces are advancing and have taken control of an area of 18 square kilometers, which was held by ISIS **north of Albukamal**. The operation is carried out **on the east bank of the Euphrates River**. One of the main sites of clashes was the **village of Al-Salehiya**, northwest of Albukamal. Another site was the **village of Al-Baghouz**, about 6 km southeast of Albukamal.

## Fighting sites in the lower Euphrates Valley



Right: The city of Al-Bukamal controlled by the Syrian army (2), the villages of Al-Baghouz (1), and Al-Salehiya (3), where there were clashes this week between SDF forces and ISIS (Google Maps).  
 Left: The area held by ISIS east of the Euphrates River and on the border between Iraq and Syria (marked in brown) (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, April 30, 2018)



SDF fighters in the Al-Bukamal area (YPG Press Office, May 6, 2018)

► The Deir ez-Zor Military Council, local militia operating under the command of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), set up a joint operations room with the Iraqi army to fight against ISIS in eastern Syria and secure the border between Syria and Iraq (Kurdistan 24, May 1, 2018). In addition, Syrian media reported that a **force of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization** (Iraqi Shiite militia, most of it handled by Iran) **had entered Syria in coordination with the SDF**. The **Popular Mobilization force reportedly fought against ISIS east of the village of Al-Baghouz** (Khotwa, May 7, 2018).

## The operation in eastern Syria from the perspective of Western countries

**Maj. Gen. Felix Gedney of the British Army, Deputy Commander – Strategy and Support, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve**, held a teleconference briefing in Baghdad for Pentagon correspondents, mentioning the operation in eastern Syria. He said that the US-led Coalition forces had launched **Operation Roundup, which aims to mop up ISIS’s last remaining outposts and prevent its operatives from fleeing to other parts of the region** (US Department of Defense, May 8, 2018).

► Following are the main points that he made (according to the US Department of Defense website):

- ◆ **The first phase of the operation is to secure the southeastern region of the Iraqi-Syrian border, which is being carried out by the SDF forces.** According to Maj. Gen. Gedney, SDF forces are preventing ISIS’s resistance and are establishing defensive positions **in coordination with the Iraqi security forces, which are operating simultaneously on the Iraqi side of the border.** According to him, since the operation began on May 1, 2018, **a total of 40 attacks have been carried out by SDF ground forces, supported by airstrikes, artillery and mortar fire from the Coalition forces.** The operation is accompanied by intelligence, observation, and fire support provided by the Coalition forces.
- ◆ ISIS now has **two main pockets of resistance: a pocket of resistance near Hajin** (approximately 26 km north of Albukamal on the east bank of the Euphrates River<sup>2</sup>); **and a pocket of resistance in Al-Dashisha**, near the Syrian-Iraqi border (about 77 km south of Al-Hasakah, see below). According to him, **several senior ISIS figures were killed** in an attack in Al-Dashisha, including Nur al-Din, the official who directed cross-border financial operations for ISIS in Iraq and Syria, who was killed on April 29, 2018.
- ◆ **The morale of the ISIS operatives is apparently low.** Many of them, including leaders, are fleeing and leaving the fighters in the field without effective leadership. **There are many foreign fighters** in ISIS’s strongholds who cannot assimilate into the local population. ISIS operatives are making their way through the lines of the Coalition

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<sup>2</sup> For further details about the establishment of ISIS in the lower Euphrates Valley, see the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from February 23, 2018: “The establishment of ISIS in the lower Euphrates Valley: a model of the renewal of the organization’s proactive military activity and the change in its character after the fall of the Islamic State”

forces to secure areas. **Some of them have fled to the west bank of the Euphrates River to areas controlled by the Syrian regime**, where they enjoy relative freedom of action (since they are not attacked by Syrian regime forces). In the assessment of Maj. Gen. Gedney, a fierce battle will be waged in these areas. He also noted that **the Coalition forces would continue to support the SDF forces and would pursue ISIS operatives wherever they may be.**

## Main developments in Iraq

### ISIS's attempts to disrupt the elections

► **ISIS continues its attempts to disrupt the general elections in Iraq, scheduled for next month:**

- ◆ On May 4, 2018, ISIS's Baghdad Province announced that an ISIS squad had killed two security guards of an election center in the **Al-A'azamiya neighborhood, northern Baghdad**. At the same time, another ISIS squad threw several hand grenades at an election center **in the neighborhood of Baghdad al-Jadida, eastern Baghdad** (Haqq, May 6, 2018). Apparently, there were no casualties in the second incident. The Iraqi media reported both incidents only briefly.
- ◆ **Farouq Mohammad Zarzour**, candidate of the Nationality Coalition list in the Nineveh Province, **was stabbed to death in his house in the village of Al-Lazakah, about 53 km south of Mosul** (Al-Sumaria News, May 7, 2018). **ISIS claimed responsibility for the assassination** in a message that it published on the Telegram app (al-Arabiya, May 7, 2018).



**Election poster of Farouq Mohammad Zarzour, who was stabbed to death in his house by ISIS operatives (Al-Marjie, May 7, 2018)**

## Further ISIS attacks

- ▶ Following are additional terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS throughout Iraq:
  - ◆ **Baghdad:** According to an ISIS report, ISIS operatives killed an Iraqi army officer and a Popular Mobilization operative **in the Madinat al-Sadr Shiite neighborhood** (Haqq, May 6, 2018). The Iraqi Security Information Center denied this report.
  - ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** Iraqi media reported that an ISIS squad **had carried out a shooting attack north of Al-Tarmiyah, about 32 km north of Baghdad**. A total of 13 people were killed, including seven civilians.
  - ◆ **The area of the Tharthar Lake:** An ambush of ISIS operatives killed three Popular Mobilization fighters and wounded four others (Haqq, May 4, 2018).
  - ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** ISIS reported that it had killed three Popular Mobilization fighters by detonating two IEDs, **about 27 km west of Kirkuk** (Haqq, May 3, 2018).
  - ◆ **Diyala Province:** ISIS reported that its operatives had detonated an IED **south of Al-Miqdadiya**, about 75 km northeast of Baghdad. Three Popular Mobilization fighters were killed (Haqq, May 4, 2018).
  - ◆ **Diyala Province:** An Iraqi security source reported that one policeman had been killed and three others wounded in an ISIS attack against a security force position about 70 km northeast of Baqubah (Al-Sumaria News, May 3, 2018). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, noting that its operatives had killed five Iraqi policemen.



**ID certificates of Iraqi policemen who were allegedly killed by ISIS operatives northeast of Baqubah (Nasher, May 3, 2018)**

## Iraqi security forces' activity against ISIS

► The Iraqi security forces continue to operate against ISIS operatives and local ISIS networks throughout Iraq:

- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The Iraqi security forces found two ISIS hiding places in the **Al-Anbar Province**. They found there Grad rockets, IEDs, explosives and other weapons (Iraqi News Agency, May 5, 2018).



**ISIS weapons found in the Al-Anbar Province  
(Iraqi News Agency, May 5, 2018)**

- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** Popular Mobilization forces thwarted an infiltration attempt by ISIS operatives from Syria to Iraq **at the Tal Safouq border crossing, west of Mosul** (about 38 km southwest of Jabal Sinjar). The operatives were trying to infiltrate into the area under cover of bad weather (Al-Sumaria News, May 5, 2018).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** Several ISIS operatives riding motorcycles were killed in an ambush by a Popular Mobilization force about 120 km north of Baqubah (Iraqi News, May 5, 2018).
- ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** Several ISIS operatives were killed and others wounded in an Iraqi Air Force airstrike against ISIS hideouts in the Daqouq district, about 45 km south of Kirkuk (Al-Sumaria News, May 4, 2018).



**Popular Mobilization fighters during security activity  
(Iraqi News, May 5, 2018)**

### **Iraqi Air Force attacking ISIS targets in Syria**

► On May 6, 2018, **Iraqi Air Force planes attacked a position in Syrian territory where ISIS commanders were present.** The airstrike was carried out **south of Al-Dashisha, about 77 km south of Al-Hasakah** (about 49 km west of the border between Syria and Iraq). According to an Iraqi News Agency report, the airstrike **was carried out on the direct orders of Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi** (Iraqi News Agency, May 6, 2018). This airstrike is part of the campaign of the US-led International Coalition against ISIS, in cooperation with the SDF forces (and with Iraq, as detailed above).



**The area of the Iraqi airstrike in Al-Dashisha, in Syrian territory  
(Google Maps)**



**Right: Building in Al-Dashisha where ISIS commanders were present before the attack by the Iraqi Air Force planes. Left: The airstrike on the building (Euphrates Post, May 6, 2018)**

## ISIS Activity in other countries

### Libya

#### ISIS suicide bombing attack in Tripoli in an attempt to disrupt the upcoming elections

- ▶ **On May 2, 2018, ISIS carried out an attack in Tripoli in an attempt to disrupt the upcoming elections in Libya next month.** A car with three ISIS operatives arrived at the headquarters of the High National Elections Commission (HNEC)<sup>3</sup>. Two operatives who got out of the car and were wearing explosive belts **exchanged fire** (apparently with the security guards at the headquarters) **and then blew themselves up** (Akhbar Libya, May 2, 2018). According to the Ministry of Health of the Government of National Accord, **the number of casualties in this attack is 14 dead and six wounded** (Akhbar Libya, May 3, 2018).
- ▶ **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** The claim of responsibility stated that **the attack was carried out in response to a call by ISIS Spokesman Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir to attack the election centers in the country.** In addition, it stated that two operatives of the organization went to the headquarters of the High National Elections Commission in Tripoli, exchanged fire with the security guards outside the building and entered it, shooting at those present. After they ran out of ammunition, **they detonated their explosive vests.** **At least 15 security guards and employees were killed** (Haqq, May 3, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> The supreme body that administers and supervises the elections in the country.



Smoke rising from the headquarters of the High National Elections Commission in Tripoli, where the ISIS attack took place (Al-Mutawasit, May 3, 2018)



The headquarters of the High National Elections Commission in Tripoli. The building looks sooty after the attack, but it is still standing (Bawabat Al-Youm al-Awwal, May 2, 2018)

### Significant increase in the number of ISIS operatives in Libya

The Libyan media reported that according to a Western intelligence report, **the number of ISIS operatives in Libya has risen in the past three months from 150 to 800.** These figures include operatives who hold **foreign citizenship.** In addition, the report **estimates that there are also hundreds of local extremists who collaborate with ISIS and provide it with means of transportation and safe houses** (Akhbar Libya 24, May 6, 2018).

► The report explains that **the increase in the number of operatives in the past three months stems from the arrival of “extremists” who fled from Syria and Iraq and came to Libya.** The report notes that **ISIS squads are deployed in Tripoli, in the northwestern region of Libya and in the south of the country** (Akhbar Libya 24, May 6, 2018). The report adds that lately, 140 ISIS operatives from Iraq and Syria entered the country in small groups **through Libya’s open southern border.** In addition, 130 ISIS operatives **entered from the countries of central Africa** (Akhbar Libya 24, May 6, 2018).

## Afghanistan

► On May 6, 2018, seventeen people were reportedly killed and 36 wounded in an explosion at a mosque **used as a voter registration center in the Khost Province in eastern Afghanistan** (near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border). It was noted that mosques in Afghanistan serve as voter registration centers (Afghanistan Times, May 6, 2018). At this stage, no claim of responsibility by ISIS has been found, but it is known that ISIS has set itself the goal of disrupting the elections process in Afghanistan and elsewhere.



**Khost Province in East Afghanistan (Google Maps)**



**The scene of the attack in Afghanistan (Akhbar Libya, May 7, 2018)**

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### ISIS network exposed in Russia

► On May 3-4, 2018, **the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested five operatives belonging to an ISIS squad in the city of Yaroslavl** (about 250 km northeast of Moscow).

The operatives had planned to carry out attacks in a number of areas in Russia. The preparations for the attacks were made through closed communities on the Telegram app, whose members included “foreign elements” among others. **IEDs, explosives, weapons and ammunition were found in their possession** (Russian Federal Security Service website, May 4, 2018). On May 7, 2018, the detention of three of the operatives was extended by two months. The interrogation of the other two operatives is continuing (TASS News Agency, May 7, 2018).

### ISIS’s use of Facebook

► According to British media reports, researchers who analyzed the activities of 1,000 ISIS-affiliated Facebook account owners in 96 countries concluded that **ISIS uses Facebook to connect thousands of ISIS-affiliated operatives through the “People You May Know” option on the website.** According to the researchers’ findings, **these connections led to the development of new terrorist networks and even to the recruitment of operatives.** The findings of the study will be published later in May 2018 by the Counter Extremism Project (The Telegraph, May 5, 2018).

## The battle for hearts and minds

► On May 7, 2018, a new ISIS poster with the inscription “Be Patient America” was published on Telegram. **The poster shows US President Donald Trump in an orange jumpsuit about to be beheaded,** with the sooty, smoking skyscrapers of New York City in the background. At the top of the poster there is a threat in English that reads: “Be patient America. War is not over yet and you have not won. By the permission of Allah, you will be defeated, just wait for it. **Our swords are not broken, our arms are not tired, our passion did not fade away and we did not feel bored or weak!** But, by the grace of Allah we are much more stronger than we have been in the beginning of your war. With each passing day, we become stronger by the grace of Allah and you become weaker [...]” (MEMRI, May 7, 2018).



**New ISIS poster in English, published on Telegram, showing President Trump just before being beheaded, with the sooty, smoking skyscrapers of New York City in the background (MEMRI, May 7, 2018)**