



Spotlight on Global Jihad

May 24-30, 2018



Main events of the week

- ▶ After the takeover of the southern neighborhoods of Damascus from the hands of ISIS, and the mopping up of the entire Damascus area, **the takeover of southwestern Syria from the hands of the rebel organizations** (including ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) **is now on the agenda**. As part of the planned campaign, this week the Syrian army sent large-scale forces towards Daraa and the central Syrian Golan Heights. The rebel organizations, on their part, joined forces to form an umbrella framework called the “Rescue Army” in advance of the anticipated attack.
- ▶ The imminent campaign in southwestern Syria aroused many reactions at the political level, due to the proximity of the rebel forces’ control areas to the Syrian border with Israel and Jordan. **The United States** announced that it was concerned about the Syrian regime’s preparations for the takeover of southwestern Syria and warned Syria not to attack and break the delicate status quo. **The Russian Foreign Minister** noted that the original agreement to establish a de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria included **the withdrawal of all the “non-Syrian” forces**, so that on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Israeli border there would be forces of the Syrian regime [alone] (i.e., Iran and Hezbollah would not be allowed to deploy on the Syrian Golan Heights).
- ▶ In light of this, talks are apparently being held between Russia and the United States and other parties, with the aim of reaching **an arrangement in all matters pertaining to the situation in southwestern Syria**. The Russian news agency Sputnik reported that within a week at most, **a tripartite meeting between Russia, the United States and Jordan might take place**, to discuss all matters related to **the de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria**. The news agency cites an “informed source” as saying that **in order to ensure that no “militants” or Iran enter this area**, the Russian Military Police and the “local opposition” will maintain a presence there. The opposition (i.e., the rebel organizations) will hand over all of its heavy weapons to Russia (Russian news agency Sputnik, May 29, 2018).

The United States and Russia

American and Russian statements regarding the activities of the Assad regime in southern Syria

The United States

► The US Department of State announced that it was **concerned about reports of the Syrian regime’s preparations for the takeover of southwestern Syria. The US warned Syria not to attack the region for fear that the move would undermine the sensitive status quo and violate the ceasefire agreement reached around a year ago by the US, Russia and Jordan**¹. **US Department of State Spokesperson Heather Nauert** said that the United States was committed to maintaining stability in the de-escalation zones and to the underlying ceasefire, noting that the United States would take firm and appropriate measures in response to Assad regime violations. Nauert noted that Russia had pledged to the UN Security Council to maintain the ceasefire in the de-escalation zones that it had established. She added that **as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia is obligated to utilize its diplomatic and military advantage over the Assad regime in order to stop the attacks and force the regime to refrain from further military attacks** (US Department of State website, May 25, 2018).

Russia

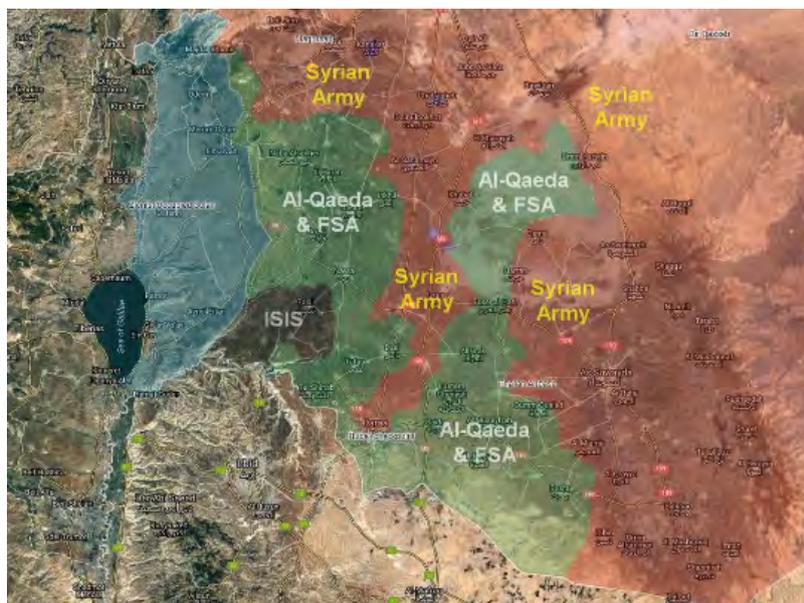
► Referring to southern Syria and the border with Israel, **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** said that the original agreement to establish a de-escalation zone in southwestern Syria **included a withdrawal of all non-Syrian forces from the region**. According to him, this withdrawal should result in a situation in which **[only] the forces of the Syrian regime** would be on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Israeli border. Lavrov added that **this approach underlies the agreement to establish the de-escalation zone** (Russian Foreign Ministry website, May 28, 2018). Lavrov did not explicitly mention Iran and Hezbollah.

¹**On July 9, 2017**, a de-escalation agreement in southwestern Syria (in the areas of Daraa, As-Suwayda and Quneitra) entered into effect. **The parties to the agreement were the US, Russia and Jordan**. On November 8, 2017, a Memorandum of Principles was signed in Amman between the United States, Russia and Jordan, establishing a mechanism for implementing the de-escalation agreement. **The Memorandum stated, among other things, that in order to strengthen the ceasefire in southwestern Syria, the foreign forces must be reduced and ultimately withdrawn from the area** (US Department of State website and Kremlin website, October 11, 2017).

► **Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, who was asked by the Russian media about Syria's stance on Russia's demands to remove all foreign forces from Syria (including Iran and Hezbollah), said that Iran, the advisers affiliated with it, and Hezbollah had come to Syria together with additional allies of Syria, including Russia, following the Syrian regime's request for assistance in the war against terror.** According to Mekdad, these forces are opposed to terrorism, are not interested in violating Syria's sovereignty, and are operating in coordination with the country's regime. According to him, when Russia spoke about the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria, it did not mean the forces that had arrived at the request of the Syrian regime, **since that is solely Syria's business.** He clarified that **this apparently referred to the forces that are in Syria illegally, such as the United States, France and Turkey.** These forces, according to him, are considered to be invaders that directly support terrorism (RIA, May 23, 2018).

Syria

After the takeover of the southern neighborhoods of Damascus from ISIS, **the Syrian regime shifted its main attention to the campaign to take over southwestern Syria. In the regions of Daraa and the central Syrian Golan Heights,** the rebel forces, including the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, are deployed, **while the ISIS-affiliated Khaled bin al-Walid Army is deployed in the Yarmouk Basin.** The preparations for taking over these regions **stir many reactions in the political level** due to the proximity of the rebels' control areas to the border between Syrian and Israel and to the border between Syria and Jordan and the impact of this proximity on the interests of Russia, the US, Israel and Jordan.



Deployment of the forces in southwestern Syria on May 28, 2018, before the beginning of the campaign: The Syrian army and the forces supporting it (in red); Al-Qaeda [i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, although it is not subordinate to Al-Qaeda] and the Free Syrian Army (in green); The Khaled bin al-Walid Army [affiliated with ISIS] (in black) (Twitter account of the Tiger [Col. Suheil Hassan], May 28, 2018)

The Syrian army and forces supporting it

► As part of the planned campaign, **the Syrian army has started to deploy large-scale forces in southwestern Syria**. Among the forces deployed mention was made of Division 4, Armored Division 5, Special Forces Division 15, and the “Tiger Forces” of Col. Suheil Hassan. These forces are supported by **the Iranian Revolutionary Guards**, the Palestinian Quds Brigade, and other militias (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, May 28, 2018).



Right: Column of forces containing Syrian army tanks moving towards Daraa (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, May 28, 2018). Left: Column of forces of the Syrian army en route to Daraa (Twitter, May 26, 2018)

► According to the Syrian media, for the first phase of the planned campaign in the regions of Daraa and the Syrian Golan Height, **the Syrian army has set itself three main goals** (Enab Baladi, May 27, 2018; Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, May 28, 2018):

- ◆ **Taking over the Nusaib border crossing between Syria and Jordan** (about 11 km southeast of Daraa). The Syrian army is located in the village of Khirbat Ghazalah,

about 20 km north of the Nusaib crossing. Division 4 is reportedly supposed to take over the border crossing (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, May 28, 2018).

- ◆ **Taking over Tell Al-Hara**, in the central Syrian Golan Heights, about 12 km east of the Syrian border with Israel, dominating the region. According to reports, a force of Division 4 and a force of the Al-Quds Brigade recently arrived in the Quneitra Governorate to take part in the campaign (May 29, 2018).

- ◆ **Taking over the village of Basr al-Harir**, about 30 km northeast of Daraa, east of the highway between Daraa and Damascus.

► This report, if confirmed, indicates the Syrian regime's intention **to cut off the rebel organizations from the Damascus area, cut off the Free Syrian Army from the Jordanian hinterland, and isolate the rebels in Al-Lejah**. These objectives will be accomplished by taking over dominating sites and essential areas in the regions of Daraa and the central Syrian Golan Heights.



Three objectives which the Syrian army has set itself to achieve during the first phase of the campaign to take over the regions of Daraa and the central Golan Heights: Taking over the Nusaib border crossing between Jordan and Syria (1); Taking over Basr al-Harir (2); Taking over Tell al-Hara (3) (Google Maps)

The rebel organizations

► In southern Syria (the “Southern Front”), **about 35,000 rebel organization operatives are deployed** (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, May 29, 2018). Apparently, the two key organizations are

the Free Syrian Army and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front). In view of the preparations made by the Syrian army prior to the beginning of the campaign in southwestern Syria, **several rebel organizations operating in the governorates of Daraa and Quneitra decided to join forces under an umbrella framework called the “Rescue Army”** (*Jaysh al-Inqadh*) (Qasiyoun, May 27, 2018).

Khaled bin Al-Walid Army

► It is estimated that in the region, **there are about 1,200 operatives of the ISIS-affiliated Khaled bin Al-Walid Army controlling the Yarmouk Basin** (Al-Watan News, November 24, 2018). These operatives are in constant clashes with the other rebel organizations, mainly the Free Syrian Army. In the area of the Yarmouk Basin, ISIS established control over the civilian population, on which it imposes Islamic law (Sharia) according to its own strict interpretation. The organization claims that in the Yarmouk Basin, it operates 34 schools, with 6,000 students (Haqq, May 23, 2018).



Right: Operatives of the Islamic police of the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army beating cigarette dealers (Haqq, May 22, 2018). **Left: A man executed by an operative of the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army for “abandoning Islam” in the village of Al-Shajara** (Haqq, May 27, 2018)

Searching the neighborhoods taken over in south Damascus

► After taking over the south Damascus neighborhoods from ISIS and the other rebel organizations, units of the Syrian army started to search them. During the searches in the Yarmouk refugee camp, **an extensive network of tunnels** was found under residential buildings and schools, where ISIS operatives hid **weapons and ammunition** (SANA, May 24, 2018). At the same time, **Russian army sappers** neutralized improvised IEDs in the refugee camp and a large number of booby-trapped buildings (TASS, May 25, 2018).

Eastern Syria

Operation Al-Jazeera Storm continues

► As part of Operation Al-Jazeera Storm, the SDF forces have taken control of a broadcasting station previously held by ISIS near the village of Hajin, about 26 km north of Albukamal, ISIS's outstanding stronghold on the east bank of the Euphrates River. In a video which they released, SDF fighters are seen in the compound of the broadcasting station, which includes two buildings and two transmission towers, one of them overlooking the Euphrates (Twitter, May 24, 2018).



Right: Two transmission towers in the broadcasting station which was taken over from ISIS near the village of Hajin (Twitter, May 24, 2018). Left: The village of Hajin, ISIS's outstanding stronghold (Google Maps)

► On May 25, 2018, the Iraqi army reported that **Iraqi F-16 fighter planes had carried out airstrikes against ISIS targets around the village of Hajin** (about 26 km north of Albukamal, in Syrian territory). The targets destroyed were a headquarters and a rocket depot where several ISIS operatives were present, and a position of ISIS operatives in the area (Al-Sumaria, May 25, 2018). Recently, the Iraqi Air Force has conducted several airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syrian territory.

The Deir ez-Zor area

► On May 27, 2018, the Russian Defense Ministry reported that a number of groups of “terrorist operatives” (i.e., ISIS operatives) had attacked an artillery battery of the Syrian forces in the Deir ez-Zor area. Fighting ensued between the Syrian and Russian forces in the

area and the “terrorist operatives.” The Syrian and Russian forces killed 43 “terrorist operatives” and destroyed six vehicles carrying heavy weapons. **Four Russian soldiers (including two military advisers) were killed in the attack, and three others were wounded** (Zvezda website, owned by the Russian Defense Ministry, May 27, 2018).

► According to unofficial information published in the Russian media, **ISIS operatives (who may have been reinforced by operatives from the Yarmouk refugee camp) were the attack.** According to another version in the Russian media, it is possible that Free Syrian Army forces were behind the attack (in the past, the Free Syrian Army was not active in the area) (Komsomolskaya Pravda, May 28, 2018).

► According to unofficial information published in the Russian media, **91 Russian soldiers have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the Russian involvement. Most of them (50 soldiers)** were killed in the five months that passed since the announcement on the Russian forces leaving Syria (Kommersant, May 27, 2018).

The desert area in the Al-Mayadeen region

► **In the deserts west of Albukamal and Al-Mayadeen,** local clashes took place between ISIS and the Syrian army. A total of **76 Syrian army soldiers were reportedly killed in five days** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 27, 2018). Several soldiers **were captured by ISIS.** During the clashes, **ISIS made use of suicide bombers** who carried explosive belts and also detonated car bombs. ISIS also sustained losses during the clashes (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 26, 2018).

► **Photos of Syrian army low-ranking officers killed in an ISIS attack against a position in the Al-Mayadeen Desert appeared** in social media (Twitter, May 24, 2018). An officer with the rank of *Liwa* (major general) appeared in a video released by Syrian sources. The officer noted that in one of the attacks carried out by ISIS against a Syrian army position in the rural area of Al-Mayadeen, about ten ISIS operatives were killed and many others were wounded. Another officer, with the rank of *Amid* (brigadier general) noted that among the ISIS operatives killed were Arabs, Chechens, and operatives from other countries (SANA, May 23, 2018).



Right: Three Syrian officers, with the ranks of lieutenant and second lieutenant, killed in an attack by ISIS operatives against their position in the Al-Mayadeen Desert (Twitter, May 24, 2018). Left: Syrian army tank and position in the rural area of Al-Mayadeen (SANA, May 23, 2018)



Vehicle formerly used by ISIS, destroyed by the Syrian army in the rural area of Al-Mayadeen (SANA, May 23, 2018)

The Syrian-Iraqi border

► According to reports on the Arab media, **operatives of Hezbollah and forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards began to deploy in the area of the border between Syria and Iraq in order to repel ISIS attacks against the Syrian forces.** The forces deployed reportedly asked the support of the (Shiite) Popular Mobilization. As part of these efforts, joint Syrian-Iraqi checkpoints were manned in Albukamal (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, May 25, 2018).

Senior ISIS commander detained in the Al-Raqqah area

► The SDF forces reported that special units of the Military Intelligence had detained **several ISIS operatives, including a senior commander and his wife.** The commander, a **French citizen**, was about **to flee Syria on his way to Turkey**, and from there to Europe (SDF Press, May 24, 2018). The detainee is **Adrien Lionel Kayali**, codenamed **Adrien Guihal** or **Abu Osama the Frenchman.** He was involved in the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, and in the ramming attack in Nice on July 14, 2016, and has been

considered one of ISIS's most dangerous operatives. He was born in France in 1983, converted to Islam in 2003, and was influenced by the jihadi ideology. In 2010, he was detained in France for belonging to a terrorist organization, but was released. He entered Syria on March 6, 2015, through Turkey, and joined ISIS (SDF Press, May 24, 2018).



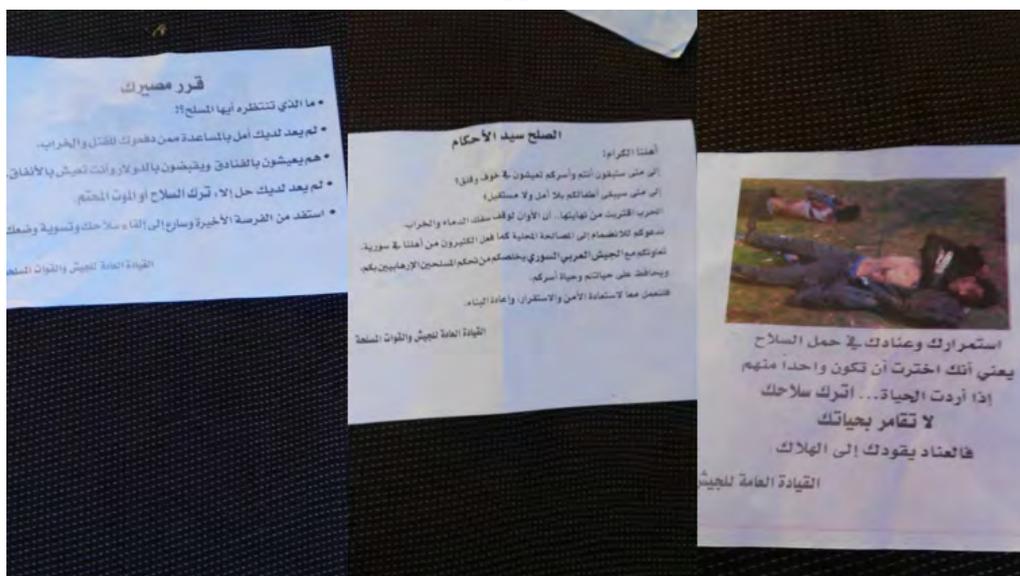
French ISIS operative, Adrien Lionel Kayali, detained by the SDF forces in Syria (SDF Press, May 24, 2018)



SDF forces conducting a check by a face recognition device, trying to locate ISIS operatives trying to flee from Syria to Turkey (Al-Masdar News, May 22, 2018)

Idlib area

- ▶ On May 27, 2018, it was reported that **a car bomb had exploded near a headquarters of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**, on the western outskirts of Idlib. Seven people were killed and 30 wounded (Mourasiloun, May 27, 2018).
- ▶ On May 27, 2018, it was reported that Syrian Air Force planes had dropped leaflets over the rural area north of Idlib, calling on the “militants” in Idlib [i.e., operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations] **“to determine their own fate”** [i.e., to surrender themselves]. Some of the leaflets show bodies of armed operatives killed in clashes with the Syrian army (Mourasiloun, May 27, 2018).



Leaflets calling on armed operatives in Idlib to surrender
(Mourasiloun, May 27, 2018)

Main developments in Iraq

ISIS showcase attacks in Iraq

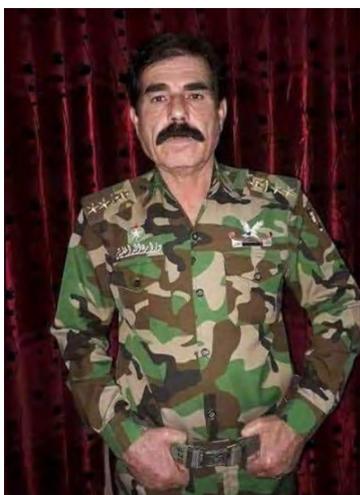
► Following are some of the most prominent attacks carried out this week by ISIS, **including suicide bombing attacks:**

- ◆ And ISIS operative codenamed **Abu Omar al-Ansari** **blew himself up with an explosive belt** among a gathering of Shiites and members of the security forces in the area of **Al-Shu'lah (northwest Baghdad)**. As a result, **according to ISIS, 15 people were killed, including a military intelligence officer**. At least 19 others were wounded (Haqq, May 24, 2018). According to Iraqi sources, a suicide bomber tried to enter a park where there were families but was stopped by police. According to the sources, two people were killed in the attack, including a military intelligence officer, and 17 people were wounded (Al-Sumaria News, May 24, 2018).



Right: Security vehicle at the scene of the suicide bombing attack in the Al-Shu'lah area of Baghdad. Left: The man in charge of military intelligence in the Al-Ghazaliyah area (northwest Baghdad), who was killed in the suicide bombing attack (Haqq, May 24, 2018)

- ◆ According to the Amaq News Agency, ISIS operatives **ambushed a military vehicle about 15 km southeast of Samarra**. An officer and two Popular Mobilization operatives were killed in the attack. Another operative was wounded (Haqq, May 26, 2018).
- ◆ According to a “security source” in the Salah al-Din Province, **two senior police commanders were killed when an IED was detonated**. The explosion occurred during searches carried out in the area of Al-Mutaybijah, **some 66 km north of Baqubah** (Al-Sumaria News; Islam Chali @IslamPeshmerga Twitter account, May 26, 2018).



The two police commanders killed by ISIS. Right: Mohammad Hamash al-Jabouri, Police Commander of the Al-'Elem District (Islam Chali @IslamPeshmerga Twitter account, May 26, 2018) Left: Police Commander Samir Salih al-Hizaei, (Islam Chali @IslamPeshmerga Twitter account, May 26, 2018)



Convoy of Iraqi police during a security operation (Iraqi News Agency, May 26, 2018)

► **Kirkuk Province:**

- ◆ ISIS's Amaq News Agency reported the killing of a policeman and the wounding of an officer and two policemen in an ambush set up by ISIS near the village of Al-Safrah, **about 55 km southwest of Kirkuk** (Haqq, May 26, 2018).
- ◆ Eight ISIS operatives blew themselves up near the village of Al-Ja'fariya, **some 45 km southwest of Kirkuk**, after being encircled by the Popular Mobilization forces. As a result, four Popular Mobilization operatives were wounded (Al-Sumaria News, May 24 2018).

ISIS-initiated attacks on infrastructure and wheat fields

- On May 24, 2018, ISIS operatives cut off the electricity grid supplying electricity to the cities of Hawija, Tikrit and Baiji **after its operatives attacked two main power lines**. An Iraqi army engineering team was able to repair only one of the power lines supplying electricity to Tikrit (Al-Sumaria, May 25, 2018; Kurdistan 24, May 25, 2018).
- According to Ahmad al-Zarkoushi, director of the Al-Saadiya District (around 60 km northeast of Baqubah), ISIS operatives **attempted to set fire to wheat crops**. Iraqi security forces and Popular Mobilization forces, along with civilians and firefighters, managed to put out the fire within a short time (Al-Sumaria News, May 26, 2018).

Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

- On May 24, 2018, the Iraqi army announced that three ISIS operatives had been killed in clashes with Iraqi military intelligence while they were on their way to infiltrate one of the villages in the Jalawla District, about 76 km northeast of Baqubah. A fourth operative blew himself up. As a result, two civilians were killed (Twitter, May 24, 2018)



The body of one of the ISIS operatives killed in the Jalawla District northeast of Baqubah (Twitter, May 24, 2018)

► Iraqi security forces carried out extensive security operations against ISIS **in the area of Al-Mutaybijah, some 66 km north of Baqubah**. The operation ended two days later, and all objectives were reportedly achieved. According to reports, hiding places and an explosives workshop were destroyed and IEDs were neutralized (Iraqi News Agency, May 28, 2018).



Iraqi army soldiers during a security operation (Al-Sumaria News, May 26 2018)

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Operation Sinai 2018 continues

► On May 29, 2018, the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesperson announced (“Notice No. 23”) that eight “terrorist operatives” had been killed in clashes in northern and central Sinai; Egyptian Air Force planes destroyed two vehicles containing weapons and ammunition that had tried to enter Egypt illegally on the western border (with Libya); 64 people were

detained on criminal charges and on suspicion of terrorism; ammunition, army uniforms, cash, wireless communications devices, a laptop, a camera, and containers containing explosives were found in central Sinai. A total of 20 vehicles of various types and 79 motorcycles without license plates were found and destroyed; 15 IEDs were detected and neutralized; 80 hiding places containing IEDs, ammunition and supplies were destroyed; in a desert area south of Matrouh in northwestern Egypt, Egyptian border patrol forces found a cache of 544 pistols, three assault rifles and sniper rifles, three shotguns and ammunition (Al-Masry al-Youm, May 29, 2018).

A senior Egyptian journalist: Operation Sinai 2018 has reached a decisive stage

► **Senior Egyptian journalist Karam Gaber wrote an article in the daily Al-Akhbar** (May 29) claiming that **Operation Sinai 2018 has reached a decisive stage**. According to him, terrorists can no longer carry out “effective attacks” but only random explosions, in which a few victims are killed. **According to him, the mopping up of Sinai is going well and is bringing about good results on the ground**. He also noted that the “security plan” implemented during the operation included the creation of a safe and “sterile area” around strategic places such as the airport in Al-Arish. The army’s actions are carried out slowly due to the desire to ensure the security of the civilians among whom the terrorists are hiding. He stressed that the situation in the Sinai Peninsula would only be calm when it has been completely mopped up from the presence of terrorists.

Jihadi activity in other countries

Stabbing and shooting attack in Belgium

► On May 29, 2018, at around 10:30 in the morning, **a man approached two policewomen** in the Belgian city of Liège, **stabbed them with a knife**, grabbed their handguns and shot them to death. He then shot and **killed a 22-year-old** who was sitting in his parked car and fled to the nearby school. The counterterrorism force called to the scene exchanged fire with the attacker. He was killed and several policemen were wounded. The Belgian Federal Prosecutor said that **it was treating the incident as a terrorist attack** (AP, May 29, 2018; The Guardian, May 29, 2018).

► The attacker, **Benjamin Herman**, 31, a native of Belgium, was videotaped **shouting “Allahu Akbar.”** He had served time in prison for theft, assault and drug offenses **and underwent radicalization during his incarceration** (AP, May 29, 2018; The Guardian, May

29, 2018). **So far no one has claimed responsibility for the attack, but it is possible that this was an ISIS-inspired attack.**

Recruitment of foreign fighters to the Turkistan Islamic Party

► According to reports, the **Turkistan Islamic Party** has recently begun to emulate ISIS and Al-Qaeda and **recruit foreign fighters into its ranks. Until recently, all the organization's members were Uyghurs.** Approximately two years ago, a small battalion framework was established, called "Supporters of Turkistan," which included fighters from what remained of the Al-Aqsa Army, mostly Syrians, and a small number of foreign nationals. **It now appears that the organization is about to follow in the footsteps of the globalization of jihad and expand the recruitment to its ranks.** On May 21, 2018, the organization's media foundation **Sawt al-Islam** released a video entitled "The Migration to Allah," **which addresses operatives in the West.** The video shows Canadian and Moroccan fighters and three Frenchmen praising jihad. In the past, the videos produced by the organization addressed only Uyghurs and Turks. According to Le Figaro, the video is very similar to ISIS's propaganda videos calling on Frenchmen to join its ranks (Al-Akhbar, Lebanon, May 23, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

The detention and release of ISIS operatives and women who joined ISIS with their husbands

- Ten Egyptian women who had joined the ranks of ISIS in Iraq and Syria together with their husbands arrived in Turkey and contacted the Egyptian Embassy in Ankara, asking to return to Egypt. The Egyptian authorities questioned them and released them, allowing them to return to their homes. The women are part of a group of Egyptian citizens who fled from ISIS to Turkey (Al-Dustour, May 21, 2018).
- The Turkish police in Istanbul detained 51 foreigners suspected of belonging to ISIS. The suspects reportedly intended to travel to the battle zones in Syria (Reuters, May 25, 2018).