



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## June 28 – July 4, 2018

### Main events of the week

- ▶ The main event of this past week **was the progress of the Syrian army in the eastern enclave of the rebel organizations (east and northeast of Daraa) with the support of the Russian and Syrian air forces<sup>1</sup>**. The Syrian army reported that it was now **7 km from the Al-Naseeb border crossing between Syria and Jordan**. A major fighting zone is **the city of Daraa**, which is of symbolic significance (it is where the uprising against the Assad regime began). The city is surrounded on the east, north and west, and the Syrian army is also striving to block the route leading southward to the border with Jordan.
- ▶ **The Syrian army is supported by Iraqi Shiite militias handled by Iran**, but their weight in the Syrian order of battle participating in the campaign appears to be insignificant. **According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Hezbollah sent its elite Radwan unit to the battlefield in southern Syria**.
- ▶ The advance of the Syrian army is **accompanied by negotiations with the rebel organizations (to which Russia is an important party) in order to reach local surrender agreements**. In addition, **Russia is also a party to negotiating a general surrender agreement**. As part of these agreements, the rebels are required to hand over their weapons and surrender to the Syrian army. At this stage, surrender arrangements have been achieved in several villages. However, contrary to descriptions in media outlets affiliated with the Syrian regime, **this is not yet a widespread phenomenon**. According to Syrian media reports, **a new round of talks between Russia and the rebel organizations has begun** (July 3, 2018).
- ▶ In the wake of the fighting, **there is a mass exodus of an estimated 270,000 displaced persons** (UN website, updated to July 2, 2018). Most of the residents fled to an area **near the Jordanian border**, and a small number (close to 90,000, according to the Syrian media) fled

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<sup>1</sup> According to a report in the Russian daily Kommersant, the Russian side **informs “its partners”** (a reference to the United States and Israel) in advance about the air support activities that it plans to carry out (Kommersant in Russian, June 25, 2018).

to the **Syrian Golan Heights** (mainly to the areas of Rafid and Quneitra in the central Syrian Golan Heights). **Israel and Jordan** provide displaced persons with humanitarian aid, but both have announced that they will not allow them to enter their territory.

► At this stage, the Syrian army offensive is focused on the eastern enclave controlled by the rebel organizations and the city of Daraa, **while in the Syrian Golan Heights no significant military operation involving political sensitivities has been carried out so far**. It can be assumed that **the issue of the Syrian regime's takeover of the Syrian Golan Heights and its stabilization along the border with Israel** is currently being discussed between Russia, the United States, and Israel **as part of a number of issues** related to the campaign being waged in southern Syria.

## Russian involvement in Syria

### UAV attack on the Russian base in Hmeymim

► On June 30, Russian surveillance systems identified a formation of UAVs northeast of the Hmeymim airbase, one of the main permanent bases of the Russian forces in Syria. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, **the UAVs were located far from the base and were destroyed by Russian air defense systems**. The Russian Ministry of Defense said that there were no casualties and no damage was caused to the Russian base (Zvezda TV website, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense, July 1, 2018).

► Since the retreat of most of the Russian forces from Syria (December 2017), the Hmeymim airbase and the Russian Navy logistics center in Tartus have been the target of attacks by the rebel organizations in the Idlib area (the most dominant of which is the jihadi Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). **This is the sixth attack on the Hmeymim base in the past six months**. The attacks were initially carried out with rockets and mortar shells and later by UAVs, some equipped with advanced technology.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For earlier information about several attacks on the Russian bases in Syria, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from January 10, 2018: "A series of attacks against the Russian bases in Hmeymim and Tartus (Updated to January 10, 2018)."

## Syria

### The campaign in southern Syria

#### Mopping up the rebel enclave northeast of Daraa

After dividing the rebel enclave northeast of Daraa **in the area of the village of Busra al-Harir, the Syrian army and the forces supporting it launched a coordinated attack to the south (main effort) and to the north (secondary effort). The attacking forces are supported by the Russian and Syrian air forces.** In the ITIC's assessment, the main operational target of the Syrian army forces advancing from north to south, along the main highway (M-5), **is the Al-Naseeb border crossing on the Syrian-Jordanian border.** According to an announcement by the Syrian army's information unit, the Syrian army is now **around 7 km from the Al-Naseeb crossing** (Central Military Information Network, July 1, 2018). However, in the northern part of the enclave, local fighting is still ongoing between the Syrian army and the rebel organizations, and its takeover has not yet been completed.



**Syrian soldier observing the Al-Naseeb crossing  
(Central Military Information Network, July 1, 2018)**

The situation on the ground –  
June 27, 2018



The situation on the ground –  
June 30, 2018



Right: The splitting of the rebel enclave in the area of Busra al-Harir, leading to further attacks to the north and south (Khotwa News Agency, June 27, 2018). Left: Syrian army attacks on the southern part of the eastern rebel enclave and local attacks northwest of Daraa to the west (Khotwa News Agency, June 30, 2018)



Right: Operation by Syrian army soldiers in the Daraa area (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, June 28, 2018). Left: Operation by Syrian army soldiers north of Daraa (Hezbollah's Military Information Office, June 29, 2018).

## Fighting in the city of Daraa

**The city of Daraa, which is of symbolic significance** (it is where the uprising against Assad began in 2011), **constitutes a key fighting zone.** The city is apparently surrounded on **three sides (east, west and north).** The northern part of the city (the Al-Sahari neighborhood and Panorama Square) **is in the hands of the Syrian army.** The rebel organizations **in the old city and the neighborhood to its north** are attempting to halt the Syrian army's attempted advances. The Syrian forces are now working **to block the road between Daraa and the border with Jordan, thereby completely surrounding the city** (Al-Jazeera, June 26, 2018).



**Right: Artillery fire by the rebel forces at the northern part of the city of Daraa, which is in the hands of the Syrian army (Twitter account of the central operations room of the rebel organizations, June 28, 2018). Right: Rocket fire by the rebel forces at the northern part of the city of Daraa, which is in the hands of the Syrian army (Twitter account of the central operations room of the rebel organizations, June 28, 2018)**



**Syrian Army artillery fire at areas in Daraa controlled by the rebels (Hezbollah's Military Information Office, June 30, 2018)**

## Local surrender arrangements and negotiations with the Russians

► **The advance of the Syrian army is accompanied by an attempt to reach local surrender agreements with the rebel organizations.** According to a report on the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese Al-Mayadeen channel, in many places agreements were reached **under the auspices of Russia** (Al-Mayadeen, July 1, 2018). According to media outlets affiliated with the Syrian regime, such agreements were reached in three prominent towns: **Abta** (around 17 km north of Daraa), **Da'el** (around 13 km north of Daraa), and **Tafas** (around 11 km north of Daraa)<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the rebels surrendered **in the village of Busra al-Harir**, in the center of the eastern enclave. Under these agreements, the rebels reportedly **handed over their weapons and surrendered to the Syrian army** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, June 30, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Fighting is still ongoing near the village of Tafas (Al-Mayadeen, July 2, 2018). Therefore, the Syrian report on the surrender arrangement that has been achieved may be inaccurate. The rebel organizations announced that they had killed 45 soldiers of the Syrian army and the militias supporting it in the area of Tafas (Khotwa News Agency, July 3, 2018).

According to a report from July 1, 2018 on the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese Al-Mayadeen Channel, **many villages have been restored to the control of the Syrian regime through reconciliation agreements rather than military activity.** Hezbollah's Al-Manar Channel also reported that several key towns in the Daraa area wanted to negotiate in order to avoid fighting (Al-Manar, June 30, 2018). These descriptions are apparently **exaggerated** and intended to harm the morale of the rebel organizations. In the ITIC's assessment, **this is not yet a widespread phenomenon, and the rebel organizations continue to fight, despite the achievements of the Syrian army and the loss of territory in the eastern enclave.**



**Right: Residents of the town of Abta, north of Daraa, welcoming the arrival of the Syrian army and waving a picture of Syrian President Bashar Assad (SANA News Agency, June 29, 2018).**



**Operatives of the rebel organizations in Basra Al-Sham handing over their weapons to the Syrian army (the Central Information Unit of the Syrian army, July 2, 2018)**

► Concurrently with the local surrender arrangements, negotiations are underway between representatives of villages and towns in the Daraa area and **Russian representatives to reach an agreement that will include the entire Daraa Province.** On July 1, 2018, negotiations were held on arrangements in villages east of Daraa and in the Daraa Province in general. At the request of the Russians, a three-hour lull was maintained throughout in the

entire province at the time (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, July 1, 2018). **These negotiations have yet to yield results.** According to Syrian media reports, **a new round of talks between Russia and the rebel organizations has begun.** According to the spokesman of the central war room of the rebel organizations, the participants in the negotiations represent the provinces of Daraa and Quneitra (Enab Baladi, July 3, 2018).

## Iraqi Shiite militias handled by Iran and a Hezbollah force are participating in the campaign to take over southern Syria

### Overview

**Iraqi Shiite militias handled by Iran are participating in the campaign in southern Syria.**

The Iraqi Shiite militias **are giving their involvement in the fighting media coverage**, possibly as an act of **public defiance**<sup>4</sup>, against the backdrop of media reports on Israel's objection to the presence of Iran and the militias that it handles. In the ITIC's assessment, **from a military perspective, the weight of the Shiite militias in the large order of battle deployed by the Syrian regime is insignificant.** In addition, according to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, **Hezbollah sends its elite Radwan unit to the battlefield in southern Syria.**

### Hezbollah sends an elite unit to southern Syria

► According to an article published on June 29, 2018, by the **Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Hezbollah is sending its elite Al-Radwan unit to Syria.** The article notes that when this unit is sent to fight, it usually means that intensive fighting is expected and that the unit forces will be heavily involved (as was the case in the bloody battles in Al-Qusayr, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor). The article adds that according to sources on the ground, **Iran has been deploying its Shi'a militia proxies to fight in southern Syria since April 2018, in the areas of As-Suwayda, Daraa and Quneitra.** According to the article, **Hezbollah units are integrated with the forces of the 4th Division and with the forces of the Syrian army's Republican Guards. In addition, the fighters of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade** are integrated into the forces of Suheil Hassan ("the Tiger") and even wear their uniforms (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Hanin Ghaddar and Philip Smyth, June 29, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> There are no references to the Shiite militias **in the Iranian media.** Iranian media reports about the offensive in southern Syria are informative.

## The Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade

► One of the militias participating in the fighting is a Shiite-Iraqi militia called the **Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade**.<sup>5</sup> This militia **took part in the important takeover of the village of Busra al-Harir from the rebel forces** (which led to the division of the rebel enclave northeast of Daraa). The involvement of the **Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade operatives was documented in photos posted on the Brigade’s Facebook page** (June 26, 2018).



**Right: Fighters from the Syrian army and the Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade in a victory photo in Busra al-Harir. Left: Syrian army and Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade fighters in the area of Busra Al-Harir (Facebook page of the Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade, June 26, 2018).**

**The Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade is an Iraqi-Shiite military framework handled by the Iranians.** It was established in June 2013 to assist another Iraqi-Shiite brigade, the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, in protecting the compound of the sacred tomb of Al-Set Zaynab, south of Damascus<sup>6</sup> (see below). The brigade is composed mainly of Iraqi operatives who formerly operated in the Iraqi-Shiite militias handled by Iran<sup>7</sup>.

## Operatives from the Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade

► In addition, in early June 2018, operatives belonging to the **Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade** were photographed **in the Quneitra area**. This is **another Iraqi Shiite militia**, handled by the Iranians. The brigade operatives are shown in the photo wearing Syrian army uniforms, near their commander, Maher Ajeeb (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, June 6, 2018; Enab Baladi, June 7, 2018). The photos were taken **while the Syrian army was making preparations to take over the south**.

<sup>5</sup> **Dhu al-Fiqar** is the name given to a two-edged sword which, according to Muslim tradition, was given to Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb by the Prophet Mohammed.

<sup>6</sup> See the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from March 13, 2014: “Shiite Foreign Fighters in Syria.”

<sup>7</sup>Al-Set Zaynab was the beloved daughter of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, founder of Shi’a Islam and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. The tomb is a pilgrimage site for Shiites from around the world.



**Operatives of the Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade in the Quneitra area, near their commander, Maher Ajeeb (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, June 6, 2018)**

**Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade is a Shiite Iraqi military framework operating in Syria**, with relatively high-level military skills. Its operatives are skilled in guerrilla warfare tactics which they acquired when fighting against the US army and the Coalition in Iraq. The brigade was established probably in late 2012/early 2013. Its first mission was to protect the compound of the Al-Set Zaynab Tomb against jihadists' attacks, but during the civil war, more missions were added. **The brigade is subordinate to the Syrian army and is part of the Iranian strategy of handling Shiite militias in Syria.**



The insignia of the Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade. It includes the name of the brigade, a hand holding a gun above it, and a Quranic verse on top: "Indeed, they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in guidance" (Al-Kahf, 13). Part of this verse also appears in the insignia of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, another Iraqi Shiite militia handled by Iran. Waving a gun and a Quranic verse above it is a symbol shared by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shiite organizations established by them, including Lebanese Hezbollah.

## Casualties of the Syrian army and the rebel organizations

► According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least **79 soldiers from the Syrian army** and the forces supporting it were killed during the fighting in the Daraa region. In addition, **57 operatives of the rebel organizations and 99 civilians** were also killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 29, 2018). The fatalities include **two senior Syrian army officers**, who were killed in the beginning of the campaign in the Daraa rural area. The officers are ***Liwa* (Maj. Gen.) Imad Adnan Ibrahim** and ***Liwa* (Maj. Gen.) Yusuf Mohammad Ali** (Enab Baladi, July 1, 2018). The two officers were reportedly killed by rebel forces' artillery fire against Syrian army positions in the Daraa Province (Twitter, July 1, 2018).



**Liwa (Maj.-Gen.) Yusuf Mohammad Ali and Liwa (Maj. Gen.) Imad Adnan Ibrahim from the Syrian army who were killed in the fighting against the rebel forces in the rural area of Daraa (Enab Baladi, July 1, 2018)**

## Residents fleeing en masse due to the fighting

► Following the Syrian army attack in the Daraa area, there were reports on **a large number of residents fleeing the fighting zones. Most of them fled to the area adjacent to the border with Jordan, and some of them to the area adjacent to the border with Israel, in the central Syrian Golan Heights.**

► According to UN data updated to July 2, 2018, **about 270,000 people were driven out** of their homes since the beginning of the campaign in southern Syria (the UN website, July 2, 2018). According to the Syrian media, **about 86,000 displaced persons fled to the Syrian Golan Heights; about 30,000 of them are south of the village of Rafid and near the UN post adjacent to Quneitra, in the central Syrian Golan Heights** (Iqtisad, Syrian economic website, July 1, 2018). **The displaced persons are suffering from dire humanitarian conditions. Israel** provided humanitarian aid (food and medical care) to hundreds of displaced persons who arrived near its border with Syria, but it announced that it would not

let them move into Israeli territory. **Jordan** is providing humanitarian aid (medical care), but it also announced that it would not accept any more Syrian refugees in its territory.



**Right: Displaced persons fleeing their villages in the Daraa area (Orient News, June 30, 2018).**  
**Left: Displaced persons' camp in the Daraa area (Iqtisad, a Syrian economic website, July 1, 2018)**

## Displaced persons arriving in the territory of the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army in the Yarmouk Basin

► According to an ISIS report based on Syrian sources, a ceasefire agreement has been reached between the Free Syrian Army and the ISIS-affiliated Khaled bin Al-Walid Army. The agreement reportedly **eases the transfer of the displaced persons to the Yarmouk Basin** controlled by the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army (Haqq, June 27, 2018). In reality, **the agreement made it possible for dozens or even hundreds of displaced persons, and maybe even for operatives belonging to the rebel organizations, to reach the Yarmouk Basin** (Enab Baladi, June 30, 2018; Haqq, July 1, 2018; www.k1falh.ga, website affiliated with ISIS, June 30, 2018). ISIS took advantage of their arrival into its territory **for propaganda purposes.**

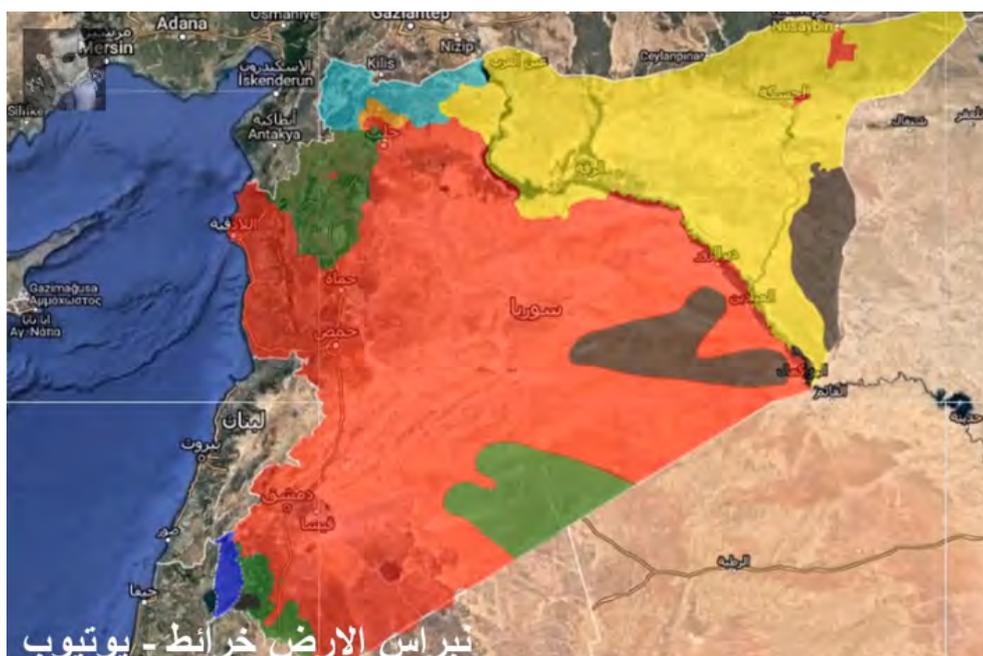


**Right: Displaced persons arriving in the area controlled by the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army in the Yarmouk Basin, where the organization operatives stop them for checking. Left: Displaced persons arriving in the area controlled by the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army (www.k1falh.ga, website affiliated with ISIS, June 30, 2018)**

## Eastern Syria

### The Syrian army finishes mopping up the desert area between Deir ez-Zor and Palmyra. ISIS continues its guerrilla attacks in the Albukamal area

► On June 27, 2018, the Syrian army announced that **it had finished mopping up the ISIS enclave in the desert area between Deir ez-Zor and Palmyra**. According to the Syrian army, the size of the mopped up area is about 5,800 square kilometers. However, **there still remain ISIS pockets of resistance** in the mopped up area (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, July 3, 2018).



The desert area between Deir ez-Zor and Palmyra (marked in grey), which the Syrian army alleges to have mopped up from ISIS's presence (Nabras al-Ard, June 26, 2018)

► **ISIS continues its guerrilla attacks against the Syrian army in the Albukamal area.** According to Syrian media, on June 28, 2018, ISIS attacked Syrian army positions near the border with Iraq, in the Albukamal area. Four ISIS operatives were killed, and equipment and weapons were seized (Al-Masdar News, June 29, 2018; Syrian Ministry of Defense website, June 28, 2018). On June 30, 2018, ISIS reported that its snipers had killed a Syrian soldier in the Al-Sakariyah area, about 2 km north of Albukamal (Haqq, July 1, 2018).



Rocket launched by ISIS hits a Syrian army position in the Al-Sakariyah area, north of Albukamal (Haqq, July 1, 2018)

## ISIS reports: leader's son killed in fighting in the Homs Province

► **ISIS announced the death of Hudhaifa al-Badri**, the son of the organization's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the announcement, he was killed while ISIS operatives attacked forces of the Syrian army and Russia at the power station east of the Homs Province (Haqq, July 4, 2018).



The notice on the death of Hudhaifa al-Badri, son of ISIS's leader (Haqq, July 4, 2018)

## Main developments in Iraq

### ISIS activity

#### Detonating a car bomb in southern Kirkuk

► On July 1, 2018, a suicide bomber driving a car bomb tried **to break into the government depot compound in the south of the city of Kirkuk**. The terrorist blew up the car bomb. One man was killed and 20 were wounded, most of them Iraqi security personnel (Iraqi News

Agency; Sky News, July 1, 2018). So far, ISIS hasn't issued a claim of responsibility, but it is reasonable to assume that ISIS was behind the attack. **In the depot compound there were ballots** which were intended for a recount due to allegations of rigged parliamentary elections (Sky News, July 1, 2018). Therefore, **it seems that the attack was intended to undermine the government system in Iraq** following ISIS's (unsuccessful) attempts to disrupt the elections.



**The scene of the car bomb explosion in southern Kirkuk (Al-Nujaba, July 1, 2018)**

### **The killing of prisoners by ISIS (update)**

► Contrary to the previous report, it turned out that **the six men abducted by ISIS on the Salah-Kirkuk road were executed rather than released.**<sup>8</sup> On June 27, 2018, it was reported that the bodies of eight of the abductees were found on the Diyala-Kirkuk highway (Al-Sumaria News, June 27, 2018). The report also included a photo showing Iraqi security personnel standing near the bodies of the abductees (BasNews, June 27, 2018).

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<sup>8</sup> See Spotlight on Global Jihad, June 21-27, 2018.



**Iraqi security personnel near the bodies of the abductees who had been executed by ISIS on the Diyala-Kirkuk highway (BasNews, June 27, 2018)**

## The activity of the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi regime

### ISIS attempt to blow up a water project and high-voltage poles foiled

► On June 30, 2018, a security source in Kirkuk reported that the Iraqi security forces neutralized IEDs planted by ISIS **which were intended to blow up a water project and high-voltage poles** about 55 km southwest of Kirkuk. The source noted that after ISIS's defeats on the battlefield, **ISIS was now attacking water and electricity projects** (Al-Sumaria News, June 30, 2018).

### ISIS operatives executed

► On June 29, 2018, the Iraqi Justice Ministry reported that **twelve terrorist operatives**, including the Mosul governor during ISIS's control of the city, **had been executed in Al-Nasseriya prison in southern Iraq** (Iraqi News Agency, June 29, 2018).

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

### Egyptian security forces activity as part of Operation Sinai 2018

► On July 3, 2018, the General Headquarters of the Egyptian Armed Forces released a video which included "Announcement No. 25" on the campaign against ISIS ("Sinai 2018"). According to the announcement, the Egyptian security forces detained terrorist operatives and people suspected of terrorist activity, hit vehicles (including a booby-trapped oil tanker) and destroyed 285 depots and hideouts which included weapons, explosives, IED activation

mechanisms, communications devices, army uniforms, and Salafi-Jihadist materials. In addition, **several tunnels were found and destroyed in Rafah** (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, July 3, 2018).



**Right: Terrorist operatives' off-road vehicle destroyed by Egyptian security forces in Sinai. Left: Booby-trapped tanker on fire (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, July 3, 2018)**



**Right: Hideout of terrorist operatives. Left: Weapons seized by the Egyptian security forces (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, July 3, 2018)**



**Right: Body of a "terrorist operative" killed in Sinai. Left: Tunnel found and destroyed by the Egyptian security forces in Rafah (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, July 3, 2018)**

## Jihadi activity in other countries

### ISIS suicide bombing in Jalalabad, Afghanistan

► On July 1, 2018, a suicide bomber blew himself up in Jalalabad. Seventeen Hindus and Sikhs and two security operatives were killed in the attack (Khaama Press, July 1, 2018).

**ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** According to ISIS's claim of responsibility, a suicide bomber penetrated into a concentration of Afghani soldiers, Hindis and Sikhs, in central Jalalabad, and blew up his explosive vest. As a result, according to ISIS, over 40 people were killed, including a candidate for the Afghan parliament (www.k1falh.ga, website affiliated with ISIS, July 1, 2018).



**Scene of ISIS's suicide bombing attack in central Jalalabad**  
(Khabarnama@khabarnamaaf, Twitter account of an Afghan media website, July 2, 2018)

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### Iraq builds fence along its border with Syria

► On June 30, 2018, the Iraqi Border Police Headquarters announced that **a fence would be built along the Iraqi-Syrian border** in order **to put an end to the infiltration of “terrorist operatives” into Iraqi territory**. A metal fence, barbed wire fence and concrete watchtowers will be built along the border. **The fence will be patrolled and equipped with heat-sensitive cameras** (Iraqi News Agency, June 30, 2018).