



Spotlight on Global Jihad

August 23-29, 2018



Main events of the week

► **In the Idlib region, the warring sides continue their preparations for the campaign.**

The Syrian army continues to reinforce its troops while the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham reinforces its positions in the areas where it expects the Syrian attack to take place. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham has established an elite force whose operatives undergo rigorous training so they can be utilized to break through the enemy's lines of defense and operate behind the enemy lines.

► **Concurrently with the military preparations on the ground, intensive diplomatic talks are underway between Russia and Turkey**, examining ways to prevent friction between Russia and Syria, on the one hand, and Turkey on the other, during the takeover of the Idlib region. In the ITIC's assessment, the discussions center on the idea of driving a wedge between the "moderate" organizations (sponsored by Turkey), with which reconciliation arrangements can be reached, and the jihadi terrorist organizations, primarily the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, which must be fought with and eradicated.

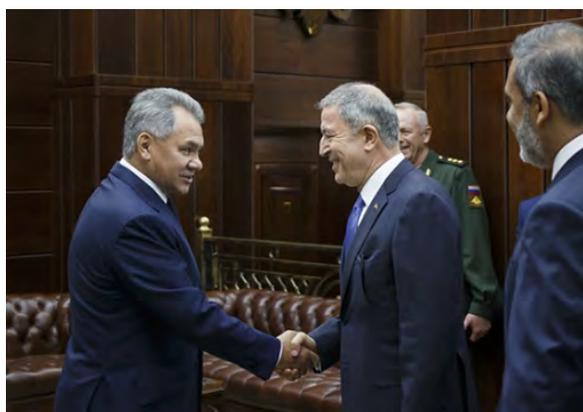
► **The Syrian army is also holding talks with the non-jihadi rebel organizations** in order to try to reach reconciliation (i.e., surrender) arrangements with them in the same format as those that were reached in southern Syria. **The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**, which is aware of this, is carrying out intensive activity against its opponents. This activity includes **large-scale arrests, attacks against operatives of organizations affiliated with Turkey, and the publication of public warnings not to surrender to the enemy and not to agree to reconciliation arrangements with it.**

► **The local leader (Emir) of ISIS's Khorasan Province was reportedly killed in a US airstrike in Afghanistan.** This is the fourth leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province killed since the summer of 2016. In retrospect, the killing of ISIS leaders did not have a significant impact on the intensive activities of the organization, **which actually increased the number of terrorist attacks in Afghanistan over the past year.**

Russian and American involvement in Syria

Talks between Russia and Turkey in preparation for the campaign for the takeover of Idlib

In the past few weeks, high-level **intensive talks have been held** between Russia and Turkey, as preparations for the takeover of Idlib go into high gear. In the ITIC's assessment, ideas proposed at these talks are aimed at **enabling the Syrian takeover of the Idlib region while safeguarding the interests of Turkey**, which supports the “moderate” rebel organizations. Another issue which, in the ITIC's assessment, is being discussed is how **to prevent friction between Russia and Turkey and organizations that they support** when the Syrian move to take over the Idlib region is carried out.



Right: Russian delegation (right) and Turkish delegation (left) at the Kremlin (Kremlin website, August 24, 2018). Left: Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu (left) and his Turkish counterpart in Russia (Russian Defense Ministry website, August 24, 2018)

- ▶ The key issue discussed in the talks is **how to drive a wedge between the rebel organizations supported by Turkey (the “moderate” rebel organizations) and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the jihadi organizations affiliated with it (terrorist organizations)**, which control most of the Idlib area. This is in light of the understanding that **it will be possible to reach regulation agreements (in the format of those reached in southern Syria) with the “moderate” organizations, whereas the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham must be eradicated.**
- ▶ **Russian media reports** in this context:
 - ◆ During the meeting between the defense ministers of Russia and Turkey, Russian military officials made it clear that Moscow expects **Turkey to take steps to separate the forces of the “armed Syrian opposition” from the forces of the Al-Nusra Front**

(i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham), which control about 60% of the Idlib Province (Kommersant, August 25, 2018).

◆ Bahjat Hajjar, activist and opponent to the Assad regime, said in an interview with the Russian news agency RBK that Turkey was trying to convince the rebel organizations affiliated with it that Idlib would continue to be a less tense area, but that to this end **they should start an armed struggle against the terrorist operatives** (i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). Another Syrian activist, Fawzi Abu al-Abd, said in the interview that the reason for the meeting between the foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey was **the Russian fear of Ankara's failure to separate the militants that are members of the "moderate" opposition and operatives of the Al-Nusra Front** (i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) (News website of the RBK news agency, August 25, 2018).

◆ The Sputnik News Agency reported that Turkey had approached the Syrian regime through Russia **and asked it to postpone the start of the campaign until September 4, 2018**. During this period, Turkey will work to persuade the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham to disarm and reach a political solution (Sputnik, August 26, 2018).

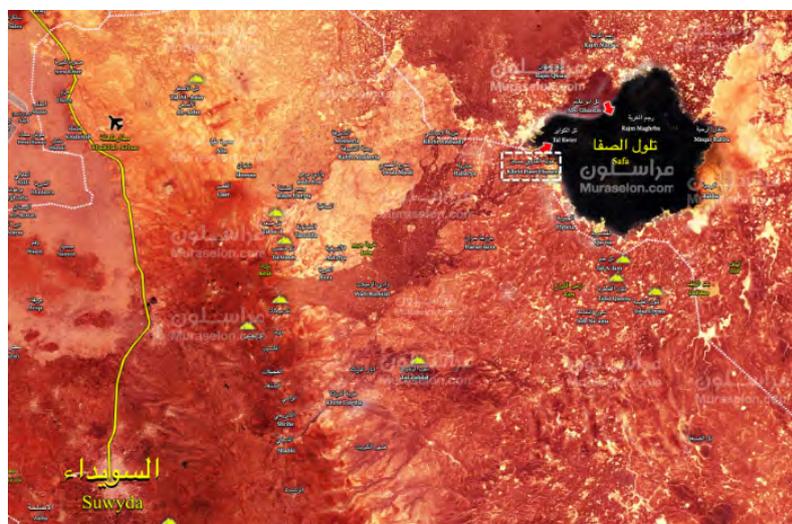
The exchange of accusations about the use of chemical weapons

► The US, Russian and international media published an exchange of accusations about intentions to carry out a chemical attack during the Idlib campaign. Senior US officials claimed that they had information that the Syrian president was planning another chemical attack in the northwestern part of Idlib. In consequence, the US threatened to respond with greater intensity than in the past (Radio Free Liberty; Bloomberg, August 25, 2018). On the other hand, **Russian Defense Ministry Spokesman Igor Konashenkov** claimed that the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham had sent chlorine gas tankers to the area south of Jisr al-Shughur, in order to stage the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians (Sputnik, August 25, 2018). A similar claim was made by media outlets affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran (Al-Mayadeen; Al-Alam, August 23, 2018).

Syria

Syrian army's attack against the ISIS enclave in As-Suwayda

Fighting in the As-Suwayda area is not over yet. The Syrian army continues to encircle the ISIS operatives in the area of As-Safa, ISIS's last stronghold, and to step up the pressure on them. The Syrian army and its supporting forces took over Khirbat al-Hawi, in the northern part of the Al-Safa area. On August 24, 2018, ISIS's operatives carried out a large-scale attack against the Syrian army positions on the outskirts of the Al-Safa area. Several Syrian soldiers were killed and 72 were wounded (Enab Baladi, August 25, 2018). It was reported that since the beginning of the fighting (about a month ago), at least 126 ISIS operatives were killed and 43 Syrian soldiers and operatives of the forces supporting the Syrian army (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 23, 2018).



**The Al-Safa area, where ISIS operatives are surrounded (marked in black).
The Khirbat Al-Hawi area, taken over by the Syrian army (marked in dotted white line) (Muraselon, August 24, 2018)**



Syrian army soldiers and operatives of the forces supporting it in the area east of As-Suwayda (Enab Baladi, August 25, 2018)

Idlib area

The Syrian army and the rebel organizations, primarily the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, continue their preparations in advance of the impending campaign for the takeover of the Idlib area. Concurrently with the negotiations between Russia and Turkey (with which some of the rebel organizations are affiliated), **the Syrian regime conducts negotiations with non-jihadi rebel organizations with the objective of convincing them to reach reconciliation arrangements** (i.e., surrender agreements similar to those reached in southern Syria). This is carried out in order to drive a wedge between the rebel organizations and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and facilitate the takeover of the Idlib area. This is the background for **the continued, stepped up activity of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham against rebel groups suspected of being inclined to join the organizations under Turkish sponsorship and accept the reconciliation arrangements.**

Syrian army preparations on the ground, along with negotiations with the rebel organizations

► **The Syrian army continued to reinforce its troops in the area northeast of Latakia.** This week, an armed force arrived in Jab Al-Ahmar, in the northern part of the Al-Ghab plain (about 17 km south of Jisr al-Shughur, the rebel stronghold). At the same time, the Syrian army **holds negotiations with the commanders of the rebel forces which were included in the reconciliation arrangements in the Daraa Province**, to have their operatives join the army's ranks during the campaign in Idlib (Facebook page of the Syrian Army's Military Information Network, August 23, 2018; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 25,

2018). In addition, **the Syrian General Headquarters was reportedly conducting negotiations with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**, the Turkestan Islamic Party, and other jihadi organizations. During the negotiations, these organizations are required to disband if they wish not to be attacked by the Syrian army (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 27, 2018).



Right: Syrian army reinforcement arriving in Jab al-Ahmar, south of Jisr al-Shughur (Facebook page of the Syrian Army's Central Information Network, August 23, 2018). Left: Syrian army vehicle carrying a double-barrel anti-aircraft gun arriving in the Latakia rural area (Muraselon, August 23, 2018)

Preparation of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham for the imminent campaign

► **The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to fortify its positions in the areas where it expects the Syrian army to attack.** This week, fortification work continued **in the rural area north of Hama** (Ibaa, August 26, 2018).



**Fortification work by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham
(Ibaa, August 26, 2018)**

Training of an elite force of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

► The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham released a video documenting the training of the “Red Bands,” an elite force established in the Idlib area. According to the video, the Red Bands operatives **are equipped with explosive vests to carry out suicide bombing attacks**. One of the force commanders said that the most important mission of his operatives is **activity behind enemy lines and breaking through the enemy’s lines of defense**. The video warns the residents of the Idlib area (“the liberated areas”) not to hand over their land and weapons because the Alawi regime will expel them, as happened in the areas where reconciliation agreements were reached (Ibaa, August 27, 2018).



**Right: Red Bands fighters of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham during training. Left: Abu al-Nur al-Shami (i.e., the Syrian), fighter of the Red Bands elite force, warning against handing over land and weapons as part of the reconciliation arrangements
(Ibaa, August 27, 2018)**

The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to operate against its opponents in the Idlib area

► Concurrently with the efforts to drive the rebel organizations in the Idlib area to switch sides to the Syrian regime, **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continued its preemptive actions against its opponents** among the ISIS operatives and rebel organizations. Following are the highlights of its activity during the past week:

- ◆ Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham took over **headquarters and weapons of Ansar Al-Sham** in the Latakia Mountains. This was carried out based on information on their intention to join a rebel force supported by one of the countries in the region (implied reference to Turkey¹) (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 23, 2018).
- ◆ The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham **arrested twenty ISIS operatives** in the rural area west of Idlib, near the Syrian-Turkish border (Ibaa, August 26, 2018).



ISIS operatives arrested by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the rural area of Idlib (Ibaa, August 26, 2018)

- ◆ The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham **arrested 37 people on charges of “Treason and reconciliation with the Syrian regime.”** The arrests were made northwest of Idlib, near the Turkish border.

¹ Ansar Al-Sham is a jihadi rebel organization established in the northern part of the Latakia Province in 2012. Between 2012 and early 2017, the organization joined various frameworks operating in the areas of Latakia and Idlib. In February 2017, Ansar Al-Sham joined the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham.



The area (marked in red) where the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham arrested 37 people on charges of “treason and reconciliation with the Syrian regime” (Google Maps)

Main developments in Iraq

ISIS attacks

This past week, ISIS’s activity continued to concentrate mainly on **detonating IEDs along the routes used by Iraqi security forces**: the army, the Federal Police, the Popular Mobilization and Tribal Mobilization. **The focal points of ISIS’s activity were the areas of Baghdad and Kirkuk.**

- ▶ Following are the main operations carried out by ISIS:
 - ◆ Detonation of an IED against a vehicle in **the Hawija district**, about 55 km southwest of Kirkuk. Three members of the Iraqi Federal Police, including an officer with the rank of *aqid* (colonel), were wounded (Al-Sumaria News, August 25, 2018).
 - ◆ Detonation of an IED in the Al-Dura area, in southern Baghdad. ISIS’s Amaq News Agency reported that five Popular Mobilization fighters had been wounded and their vehicle had been destroyed (Twitter, August 27, 2018). On the other hand, the Iraqi media reported that an IED had exploded in the evening inside a minibus, and three of its passengers had been wounded (Al-Sumaria News, August 26, 2018).

Counter-terrorism activity by the Iraqi security forces

► This week, the Iraqi security forces carried out a large-scale operation to capture ISIS operatives in the Al-Anbar Province, **near the border between Syria and Iraq**. As part of the operation, all the roads leading to the area were blocked. Sapper teams deactivated many IEDs planted in the area (Al-Sumaria News, August 24, 2018).



Iraqi security forces during a large-scale operation to capture ISIS operatives near the Syrian-Iraqi border in the Al-Anbar Province (Al-Sumaria News, August 24, 2018)

► Following are additional activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces during the past week:

- ◆ The Nineveh Police Rapid Deployment Force, with Coalition aircraft support, surrounded and mopped up a cave where ISIS operatives were hiding, about 36 km south of Mosul. Ten ISIS operatives were killed (Iraqi News Agency, August 25, 2018).
- ◆ Five ISIS operatives were killed by the Iraqi security forces while attempting to plant an IED in the Rutba district, west of the Al-Anbar Province (Iraqi News Agency, August 23, 2018).
- ◆ Based on intelligence, the Iraqi security forces arrested a commander of an ISIS force in the Hawija area, about 55 km west of Kirkuk. In his interrogation, he admitted that he had planned to detonate IEDs against the Iraqi security forces and blow up high-voltage pylons. He also disclosed the whereabouts of an ISIS hideout where 12 IEDs were found (Al-Sumaria News, August 25, 2018).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

ISIS attack against an Egyptian checkpoint west of Al-Arish

► On August 25, 2018, **four ISIS operatives wearing explosive belts attacked an Egyptian police checkpoint west of Al-Arish**. According to the Egyptian media, policemen at the checkpoint repelled the ISIS operatives. One operative was killed and three managed to escape (according to another version, all four were killed). Four Egyptian policemen were killed, and several were wounded. An explosive belt was found on the body of one of the operatives killed. Three additional explosive belts were found not far from the checkpoint. The Egyptian security forces found and deactivated four IEDs near the checkpoint. ISIS's Amaq News Agency reported that 15 Egyptian army soldiers had been killed and wounded in an attack carried out by ISIS operatives west of Al-Arish (Twitter, August 26, 2018).



ISIS's weapons found after the attack on the checkpoint of Egyptian police (Al-Masry Al-Youm, August 26, 2018)

Jihadi activity in other countries

Stabbing attack in Paris, ISIS claims responsibility

► On August 23, 2018, on a street in the town of Trappes, west of Paris, a 36-year-old man **stabbed his mother and sister to death with a knife**. Another man was seriously wounded. The stabber fled to a house and hid there. He was later shot to death by police. Eyewitnesses told the media that the assailant shouted “Allahu Akbar” and was armed with a number of knives.

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack**. The claim of responsibility stated that “The perpetrator of the terrorist attack in the city of Trappes, southwest of Paris, **is one of the**

soldiers of the Islamic State, who carried out the attack in response to calls to attack the citizens of the International Coalition countries” (Annika H Rothstein@truthandfiction Twitter account, August 23, 2018). According to French Minister of the Interior Gérard Collomb, the stabber was known to support terrorism but was apparently mentally ill and did not act in response to ISIS’s call (Reuters, August 23, 2018).

Young ISIS operatives carried out three nearly simultaneous attacks in Chechnya

On August 20, 2018, **three attacks were carried out nearly simultaneously in Chechnya: a stabbing attack, a suicide bombing attack, and a ramming attack.** The attacks were carried out by **youths between the ages of 11 and 16, who had pledged allegiance to ISIS’s leader.** Four of the perpetrators of the attacks were killed by the local security forces and the fifth was arrested. Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, said that the terrorists may have been influenced by ISIS publications on social media (Russia Today, August 20, 2018).

► Following is a brief description of the three attacks:

- ◆ On August 20, 2018, at around 10:30 in the morning, two terrorists carried out a **stabbing attack** in a police station in the Shalinsky Province, some 36 km south of the capital city of Grozny. They wounded two policemen and were shot to death.
- ◆ At the same time, **a suicide bomber blew himself up** near a police post in a nearby village. There were no casualties. The suicide bomber was injured and taken to the hospital. **In the ITIC’s assessment, the IED was prepared amateurishly, and therefore the terrorist survived the explosion.**
- ◆ Shortly after, **two terrorists ran over two traffic policemen in central Grozny.** Police chased the vehicle and killed the driver and his 11-year-old brother, who was sitting next to him.

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** The claim of responsibility stated that Islamic State fighters attacked Chechen police officers and policemen in Grozny and in two other places (Neil Hauer@NeilPHauer Twitter account, August 20, 2018). The Amaq News Agency released a video showing four young ISIS operatives pledging allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They include an eleven-year-old boy who is seen holding a knife and a mobile phone with an ISIS flag (Melisa@cmellaniac Twitter account, August 21, 2018).



Right: The four boys who carried out the attacks in Chechnya. Left: The young ISIS operatives pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before carrying out the attacks (photo from a video released by the Amaq News Agency, Melisa@cmellaniac Twitter account, August 21, 2018).

Attack on a Libyan checkpoint east of Tripoli

► On August 23, 2018, Libyan security operatives were attacked at the main checkpoint located between the cities of Zliten and Al-Khoms (118 km east of Tripoli). The attack was carried out by means of **small arms fire from a moving car** (Ayn Libya, August 23, 2018). According to Maj. Gen. *[liwa]* Mohammad Hussein Abuhjar, the security chief of Zliten, the perpetrator was liquidated and four Libyan security operatives were killed. **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** According to the claim of responsibility, the organization's operatives attacked the checkpoint, killing seven Libyan security operatives and injuring 10 others (Reuters, August 25, 2018).



Right: The location of the checkpoint that was attacked (marked in red) (Google Maps) Left: The checkpoint area after the ISIS attack (Ayn Libya, August 23, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Leader of the ISIS's Khorasan Province killed in an airstrike

► According to an announcement by the Afghan Intelligence Directorate, **Abu Saad Erhabi, AKA Abu Sayed, leader (Emir) of ISIS's Khorasan Province**, was killed in an airstrike on the night of August 25, 2018. The airstrike was carried out by American UAVs southeast of Jalalabad, in the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. **Nine other ISIS operatives who accompanied him were also killed in the attack** (Khaama Press, August 26, 2018; Afghanistan Times, August 27, 2018).



The city of Jalalabad, near the site where the leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province was killed (Google Maps)

The ISIS leader who was killed is from a tribal region in northern Pakistan near the border with Afghanistan (about 90 km southwest of Jalalabad). **He is the fourth ISIS leader killed in Afghanistan since the summer of 2016.** The three other leaders who were killed were Hafiz Saeed Khan, Abdul Hasib Logari, and Abu Saad Bajuri.² In retrospect, **the killing of ISIS leaders in Afghanistan did not have a significant impact on the intensive activities of the organization**, which actually increased the scope of its terrorist activity in Afghanistan over the past year.



Right: Hafiz Saeed (in red), the first leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province, who was killed on July 26, 2016 (Bawabat Al-Sharq, July 13, 2015) Left: Abdul Hasib Logari, the second leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province, was killed in late April 2017 (Al-Sakinah, May 8, 2017)

The battle for hearts and minds

Public statement by ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the first in a year³

► On August 22, 2018, ISIS's Al-Furqan Media Foundation released a 55-minute audiotape of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This is Al-Baghdadi's **first statement in about a year. In the ITIC's assessment, the tape is authentic and up-to-date.**

² **Hafiz Saeed Khan**, the first leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province (2015), was killed on July 26, 2016, along with other commanders and senior officers in an airstrike by an American UAV (Al-Arabiya, August 13, 2016). **Abdul Hasib Logari**, the second leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province, was killed on April 29, 2017, during an operation by Afghan and American forces (Al-Sakinah, May 8, 2017). **Abu Saad Bajuri**, third leader, was killed on July 11, 2018 in an American airstrike (Afghanistan Times, August 27, 2018; Al-Khaleej Online, July 15, 2017).

³ For more details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from August 26, 2018: "In a public statement by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the first in a year, he calls on his supporters to carry out terrorist attacks worldwide, mainly in Western countries. He mentions shooting, stabbing and ramming attacks as well as detonation of IEDs."



The audiotape with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's speech, entitled "Give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere" (Vimeo, a website similar to YouTube for sharing videos and soundtracks, August 22, 2018)

Al-Baghdadi's public statement **was intended, in the ITIC's assessment, to encourage ISIS operatives and supporters in Syria, Iraq and the various provinces around the world.** The statement was made in the context of **the serious defeats suffered by ISIS in the past year.** In this context, Al-Baghdadi calls on his supporters in Syria, Iraq and around the world **to adhere to their faith, carry on with jihad, and be ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of Allah.** In his speech, **he prompts his operatives and supporters abroad to step up their attacks mainly against Western countries ("Crusader countries").** Al-Baghdadi finishes by stressing that attacks abroad constitute support for the operatives fighting in Syria and Iraq: "A bullet fired, stabbing, detonation of an IED in your country, are tantamount to a thousand attacks here [in Syria and Iraq], and don't neglect [also] the ramming attacks on the roads."