



Spotlight on Global Jihad

August 30 – September 5, 2018

Main events of the week¹

- ▶ **In the Idlib region, preparations for the impending campaign continue.** The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations continue to reinforce the front lines opposite the Syrian army, with an emphasis on the **area south and southwest of Idlib**. The Syrian army is working to disrupt the rebels' preparations and is firing artillery at rebel posts and rebel forces on the move. In addition, **the Russian Air Force reportedly carried out airstrikes in Idlib and the area to its south**. However, **the Syrian Army's ground offensive has not yet begun**.
- ▶ **Russia and Turkey are in contact with the rebel organizations and local power centers.** The goal is to prevent friction and **prepare the ground for reconciliation arrangements (i.e., surrender arrangements) in the Idlib region**, similar to those achieved in southern Syria. At the same time, **Russia and the Syrian regime are carrying out intensive propaganda activities aimed at smearing the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and creating international legitimacy for the attack in the Idlib region**. On the other hand, **US President Donald Trump warned** the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran against a rash attack that could lead to a humanitarian disaster (hundreds of thousands of fatalities). The US ambassador to the United Nations said that **the Security Council would convene on September 7, 2018, to discuss the situation in the Idlib Province**.
- ▶ **In eastern Syria, ISIS carried out a series of attacks against Syrian army bases in the Euphrates Valley**, in the area between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal. In addition, **ISIS attacked the Al-Taym oil field** south of Deir ez-Zor. In the ITIC's assessment, these attacks, which were carried out from ISIS bases in the desert east of the Euphrates Valley, **indicate an increase in ISIS's level of competence, daring, and self-confidence in eastern Syria**.

¹ Due to the Rosh Hashanah holiday, the next issue of Spotlight on Global Jihad will be published on September 16, 2018. We wish all our readers in Israel and abroad a happy Jewish New Year.

Russian and American involvement in Syria

Russian contacts with the rebel organizations

- ▶ **Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu said that the Russian army was conducting complex negotiations at all levels with the rebel organizations belonging to the “moderate opposition.”** Shoygu also noted that the Russian Center for Reconciliation was holding talks with sheikhs who head tribes in the Idlib region. According to him, the purpose of the talks is to achieve reconciliation agreements in the Idlib area similar to those achieved in Daraa and in the eastern Ghouta region² (Russian Defense Ministry website, August 28, 2018).
- ▶ These talks are being held in the wake of diplomatic contacts between Russia and Turkey, which discussed the idea of separating the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, designated as a terrorist organization³, and the “moderate” rebel groups, with which an attempt should be made to achieve agreements like those achieved in southern Syria.

Russian propaganda campaign

- ▶ In anticipation of the attack in the Idlib area, **Russian and Syrian spokesmen intensified the propaganda campaign against the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, which was intended to prepare the ground for the ground offensive in Idlib.** For example:
 - ◆ Russian (and Syrian) spokesmen reiterated the allegation that **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham intended to stage a chemical attack in Idlib** and then to accuse the Syrian regime of using chemical weapons. In this context, **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** noted that the use of chemical weapons stems from the desire of the US to prevent the removal of the Al-Nusra Front (the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) from the Idlib area (TASS News Agency; Sputnik, August 28, 2018). **Spokesperson for the US Department of State Heather Nauert dismissed**

² **The Russian Ambassador to Syria, Alexander Kinshak**, stated in the past (July 19, 2018) that the possibility of reconciliation in the Idlib region was being examined, to be achieved in a similar manner to the reconciliation in the de-escalation zone in southern Syria. According to him, the campaign against terrorism in southern Syria achieved its goals mainly through negotiations. He noted that the residents of the area were interested in reconciliation and therefore had put pressure on the “militants.” According to Ambassador Kinshak, a similar process could take place in Idlib, but it would be complex and protracted (TASS News Agency, July 19, 2018).

³ The Presidential Office in Turkey recently issued an official statement **designating the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham as a terrorist organization.** The decision was made by President Erdoğan (Reuters, August 31, 2018).

the allegation of intent to stage a chemical attack as a “false flag reporting” (US Department of State website, August 30, 2018).

◆ **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** noted that the Al-Nusra Front (i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) is **designated as a terrorist organization** by the United States and the United Nations. He added that he hoped that Russia’s partners would meet their obligations to the war against terrorism (TASS News Agency website; Reuters, August 29, 2018). **Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov** said, **“Idlib is a hotbed of terrorism”** that threatens stability in the region. According to him, the UAVs launched by terrorist operatives (from the Idlib area) pose a danger to the Russian bases in Syria (Sputnik, September 4, 2018). The Kremlin spokesman also noted that **the Idlib campaign** would be a key topic at the **meeting of the leaders of Russia, Iran, and Turkey**, which is expected to take place in Tehran on September 7, 2018 (Reuters, September 4, 2018).

The American response

► In view of the preparations on the ground and the accompanying propaganda campaign, **US President Donald Trump warned Russia, the Syrian regime, and Iran against a reckless attack on the Idlib Province**, which could lead to a humanitarian disaster (hundreds of thousands of people could be killed). Following is the text of President Trump’s tweet:



(President Trump’s Twitter page, September 3, 2018)

► **United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley announced that the Security Council would convene on September 7, 2018, to discuss the situation in Idlib. She warned the Assad regime against the use of chemical weapons**, noting that “if there

are chemical weapons that are used, we know exactly who's going to use them" (Reuters, September 5, 2018).

Main developments in Syria

The campaign against ISIS in As-Suwayda

This week, the Syrian army and forces supporting it divided the Al-Safa area, the last stronghold in the ISIS enclave, into two parts (Muraselon, August 30, 2018). At the same time, the Syrian army fired artillery and carried out airstrikes against headquarters, fortifications and traffic routes in the Al-Safa area (SANA, September 1, 2018). The Syrian army took over the ISIS headquarters in the Al-Safa area and found an ammunition and weapons cache in its vicinity (Syrian TV, September 2, 2018). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 193 ISIS operatives were killed in the area since the beginning of the fighting. According to the SOHR, 75 Syrian army soldiers and operatives of the forces supporting it, including Lebanon Hezbollah operatives, were killed in the area (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 2, 2018).



ISIS's enclave in the Al-Safa area (in black), which was divided into two parts. The area recently taken over by the Syrian army is marked with a white dotted line (Muraselon, August 30, 2018)



Right: The Syrian army firing mortar shells at the Al-Safa area, which is under ISIS's control. Left: Syrian army anti-aircraft gun firing at the Al-Safa area (Syrian Army Military Information Office, August 30, 2018)



Right: Syrian army guns mounted on trucks attacking the Al-Safa area. Left: Firing rockets at the Al-Safa area (Syrian Army Military Information Office, August 30, 2018)

Hezbollah operatives killed in the clashes in Al-Safa

► On August 31, 2018, it was reported that four Hezbollah operatives, including a **commander named Hajj Tareq Ibrahim al-Haidar**, were killed in the Al-Safa area (As-Suwayda Desert) in clashes with ISIS (www.imlebanon.org, September 1, 2018; Al-Badiyah 24 Facebook page, August 31, 2018).



Right: Hajj Tareq Ibrahim al-Haidar, a Hezbollah commander killed in the clashes with ISIS in the Al-Safa area. Left: The funeral of Hajj Tareq Ibrahim al-Haidar in his village, in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon (www.imlebanon.org, September 1, 2018)

The Idlib area

Reinforcement of the front line

► The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and rebel organizations affiliated with it continued to reinforce the friction zones with the Syrian army north of Hama and west of Idlib. This week, these areas were reinforced by **operatives of the Turkestan Islamic Party**.⁴ These forces reportedly finished fortification work and finalized their combat plans (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, August 30, 2018).



**The rebel forces preparing for the campaign in Idlib
(Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, August 30, 2018)**

Artillery fired by the Syrian army at the rebel organizations

► In order to disrupt the rebel organizations' movements, **the Syrian army fired artillery at their staging zones north of Hama and at rebel forces on the move**. In addition, artillery was fired at **villages south of Jisr al-Shughur**, an outstanding stronghold of the rebel organizations (Khotwa, September 2, 2018). The forces which were fired at belong to the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and rebel organizations affiliated with it. As part of this activity, the Syrian army **fired artillery at positions, weapons and traffic routes of the Turkestan Islamic Party south of Jisr al-Shughur**. Several operatives of the Turkestan Islamic Party were killed, and several positions were destroyed (SANA, September 2, 2018; Syrian TV, September 9, 2018).

⁴ **The Turkestan Islamic Party** is a Salafist-jihadi rebel organization consisting of Muslim operatives of **the Uygur minority** residing in the Xinjiang Province (Turkestan), **western China**. These operatives arrived in Syria at the beginning of 2012 and operated as part of the Al-Nusra Front (currently, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). It was formerly reported that most of them were situated in the Jisr al-Shughur area, southwest of Idlib. According to a report in the Asharq al-Awsat newspaper (August 30, 2018), they number **about 1,500 fighters**. In the past (2015), it was estimated that they numbered about 3,500 fighters.



Right: Rockets fired by the Syrian army at a staging zone of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the woods surrounding the villages south of Jisr al-Shughur (Syrian TV, September 2, 2018). Left: Artillery fired by the Syrian army at the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the rural area north of Hama (SANA, September 2, 2018)

Russian airstrikes

► According to the Syrian media, **Russian fighter planes carried out about 30 airstrikes in the Idlib area.** The airstrikes were reportedly concentrated in the areas of the cities of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur and in the Al-Ghab plane, south of Jisr al-Shughur. Seven people were killed and property and infrastructure sustained damage (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Khotwa; Al-Hadath; Enab Baladi, September 4, 2018). The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham reported on airstrikes by Russian fighter planes in the rural area of Jisr al-Shughur (Ibaa, September 4, 2018).



Airstrike by Russian fighter planes in the rural area of Jisr al-Shughur (Ibaa, September 4, 2018)

Propaganda campaign by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

► In response to the propaganda campaign conducted against it, **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham launched a propaganda campaign intended to increase the local population's support** in the Idlib area, entitled "Together to the Fronts." As part of this campaign, senior figures in the organization's propaganda machine held a meeting with local

leaders in the village of Sarmada (north of Idlib). The meeting was intended to raise the morale of the residents, the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations, **and prevent surrender and handing over of weapons as part of reconciliation agreements** (i.e., surrender arrangements). The imam Abu al-Fadl, who was responsible for the meeting in Sarmada, said that **those attending the meeting had undertaken to halt the advance of the Syrian army and its allies** (Ibaa, September 4, 2018).



Right: Ahmad al-Qa'qa', who was responsible for the campaign entitled "Together to the Fronts," preaching in a mosque in the village of Sarmada, north of Idlib. Left: Ahmad al-Qa'qa' during a meeting with local leaders and imams of mosques in the village of Sarmada (Ibaa, September 4, 2018)

Eastern Syria

Large-scale ISIS attack against the Syrian army in the Euphrates Valley

► On the night of August 31 – September 1, 2018, **ISIS operatives carried out a large-scale attack against the Syrian army and the forces supporting it in the Euphrates Valley, in the area between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal.** At the same time, ISIS attacked **the Al-Taym oil field south of Deir ez-Zor.** In the clashes that occurred in the Euphrates Valley, the Syrian army used fighter planes which carried out airstrikes against the ISIS forces. Both sides sustained dozens of casualties (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 2, 2018). **In the ITIC's assessment, the attack indicates an improvement in the military capability of the ISIS operatives, who operate from the desert west of the Euphrates Valley, and an increase in their level of daring and self-confidence.**



ISIS attack directions against the Syrian army bases and the Al-Taym oil field (Twitter, September 1, 2018)

The Syrian army and the SDF forces intend to attack ISIS

► In view of the increased daring of ISIS operatives in eastern Syria, **the Syrian army and the SDF forces (each of them separately) prepare for an attack against the ISIS strongholds:**

- ◆ **The Syrian army and the Iranian-handled militias reportedly prepare for an attack against ISIS in the deserts of Deir ez-Zor and Homs.** As part of the preparations for the attack, reinforcements of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it arrived in Al-Mayadeen and Al-Bukamal (Al-Badiyah 24 Facebook page, September 1, 2018).
- ◆ SDF forces reportedly concentrate their troops in advance of **an attack on ISIS's enclave between Hajin and Al-Sha'fah, in the Euphrates Valley.** The attack will be carried out with the support of the International Coalition (Al-Badiyah 24 Facebook page, September 1, 2018). The Coalition planes reportedly dropped leaflets in the town of Hajin calling on ISIS operatives to surrender, and on the local residents to stay away from the organization's outposts (Khotwa, September 4, 2018).



ISIS's enclave between Hajin (1) and Al-Sha'fah (2) (Google Maps)

ISIS threatens to kill anyone related to the production of oil

► **ISIS continues to threaten people involved in the production of oil in the Deir ez-Zor area.** ISIS operatives distributed leaflets southeast of Deir ez-Zor, threatening to kill anyone connected with the SDF forces and the Syrian army engaging in oil production. ISIS operatives also shot at people trading with the SDF forces in oil products (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, August 31, 2018). **At the same time, ISIS operatives attacked the Al-Taym oil field, south of Deir ez-Zor**

Senior Syrian army officer killed in the explosion of an IED

► ISIS operatives killed a senior Syrian officer with **an IED which they detonated against his vehicle on the outskirts of the city of Albukamal.** The officer killed is *Aqid* (Col.) Hassan Mohammad Yusuf, from the 11th Division (armor division) (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, August 31, 2018).



Aqid (Col.) Hassan Mohammad Yusuf, killed when an ISIS IED exploded on the outskirts of Albukamal (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, August 31, 2018)

Main developments in Iraq

ISIS attacks

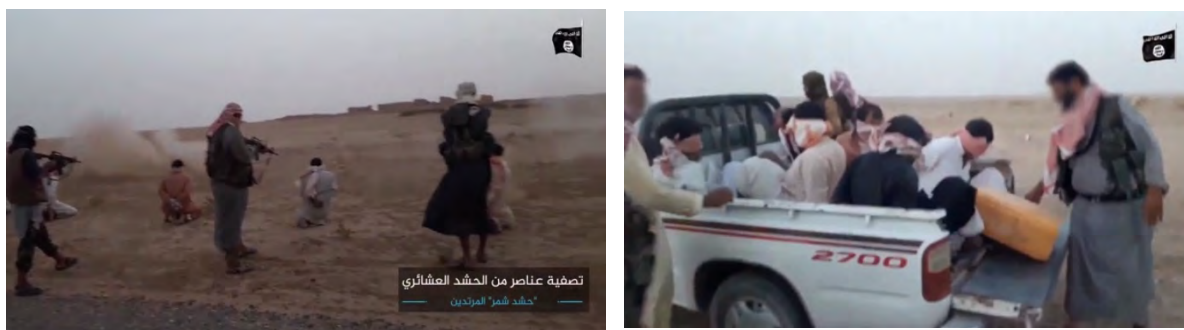
- ▶ Following are the main operations carried out by ISIS:
 - ◆ Detonation of two IEDs in two Iraqi police compounds **about 43 km southwest of Kirkuk**. According to ISIS, the two facilities were destroyed completely. In addition, an Iraqi police vehicle was destroyed (Buraq News, September 2, 2018).
 - ◆ Detonation of an IED against an Iraqi army vehicle **west of Al-Rutba**. Three of the passengers, including an officer, were killed (Buraq News, September 2, 2018).

ISIS threats against Sunnis in Iraq

- ▶ ISIS's Salah al-Din Province in Iraq distributed a video entitled "**You Had Better Stop**." The video shows an ISIS operative who refers to attacks carried out by ISIS against the Sunnis in Iraq, mainly against the Sunni tribespeople, including the Shammar tribe (the largest tribe in western Iraq). According to the operative, the reason for these attacks **is the collaboration with the Iraqi army, the police and the Tribal Mobilization forces in fighting against ISIS. The speaker threatened the Sunnis in Iraq not to cooperate with the "infidel Shiite regime.**" The video includes archive sections showing the execution of Shammar tribespeople, operatives of the Tribal Mobilization, caught by ISIS (archive.org file-sharing website, August 31, 2018).



Poster of the video “You Had Better Stop,” distributed by ISIS’s Salah al-Din’s Province (archive.org, August 31, 2018)



Right: People of the Tribal Mobilization, Shammar tribespeople, led by an ISIS operative to the place where they will be executed. Left: Tribal Mobilization operatives, Shammar tribespeople, being executed by ISIS operatives (archive.org, August 31, 2018)

Counterterrorism activity by the Iraqi security forces

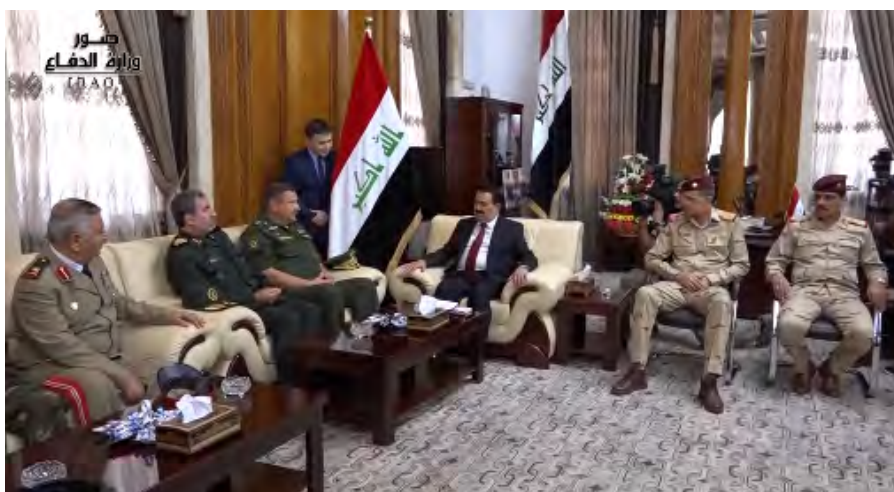
- ▶ Following are the main activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces against ISIS:
 - ◆ **Targeted killing of an ISIS commander:** Iraqi planes attacked a vehicle with an ISIS commander inside, **in western Al-Anbar Province**. The commander and one of his escorts were killed (Iraqi News Agency, September 1, 2018).
 - ◆ **Detention of commanders:** Iraqi police detained two ISIS commanders **in the Kirkuk Province**. Their interrogation led the police to ISIS hideouts, where a large quantity of IEDs and ammunition was found (Al-Sumaria News, August 30, 2018).
 - ◆ **Detention of operatives:** The Nineveh Province police detained four ISIS operatives. One of them had worked in a workshop for manufacturing car bombs **on the west bank of the city of Mosul** (Iraqi News Agency, August 30, 2018).
 - ◆ **Locating IEDs:** Iraqi police located 28 IEDs in the **Kirkuk Province** (Iraqi News Agency, August 31, 2018). In another operation, the Iraqi security forces located 450 IEDs which were hidden, **49 km northwest of Ramadi** (Iraqi News Agency, August 31, 2018).



Iraqi police force during security activity (Iraqi News Agency, August 31, 2018)

Conference of the Deputy Chiefs of Staff of Iraq, Syria, Iran and Russia

► On September 1, 2018, a meeting was held in the office of the Iraqi defense minister, attended by the deputy chiefs of staff of Russia, Iran, and Syria, and the assistant to the Iraqi chief of staff. The meeting took place on the margins of the quadripartite security conference, held in order to increase security and intelligence coordination between the countries in the war against ISIS (Facebook page of the Iraqi Defense Ministry, September 1, 2018; Enab Baladi, September 1, 2018). The participating countries reportedly set up a joint operations room against ISIS, which is still operating in the desert region on the Iraqi-Syrian border (Al-Nahar, September 1, 2018).



Iraqi Defense Minister Erfan Mahmoud al-Hiyali (in the middle, wearing a suit), during his meeting with the deputy chiefs of staff of Russia, Iran, and Syria (Iraqi Defense Ministry Facebook page, September 1, 2018)

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Operation Sinai 2018

► The Egyptian security forces issued a statement on the results of the security activity that was recently carried out as part of Operation Sinai 2018. According to the statement, jihadi operatives were recently eliminated in Sinai; dozens of IEDs were neutralized; various weapons and explosive belts were seized, vehicles were destroyed, and hiding places, money and uniforms were revealed.

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Two ISIS commanders in Afghanistan turned themselves in to the Afghan security forces

► Two commanders in ISIS's Khorasan Province recently surrendered, together with their families, to the Afghan security forces in the Nangarhar District. One of the two, codenamed Naqibullah, made contact with the Afghan Intelligence, which led to the capture of the two commanders. Both are from a tribal region in northern Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan. They have lived in the Nangarhar District since 2014 (www.khaama.com, September 2, 2018).



Two ISIS commanders who surrendered to the Afghan Intelligence in the Nangarhar District (www.khaama.com, September 2, 2018)

► Naqibullah told Afghan security officials that **he had joined ISIS in 2014 along with a group of Pakistani Taliban operatives led by Hafiz Said, the first leader of ISIS's Khorasan Province.** Naqibullah admitted that both of them were involved in killing civilians and carrying out attacks against government entities. **He said that ISIS had paid their salaries and supplied weapons, ammunition and the necessary materials** (apparently a

reference to explosives), **which were sent from Pakistan**. According to him, there are **operatives from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Chechnya, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan and other countries in the ranks of ISIS's Khorasan Province** (www.khaama.com, September 2, 2018).

Ties between ISIS in Afghanistan and ISIS networks in Britain and other West European countries

► The British government has revealed that **ISIS operatives in Afghanistan are in contact with the ISIS networks in Britain and other West European countries**. As a result, attacks may be carried out (Sky News, September 3, 2018). British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson said during a visit to the British forces in Afghanistan that this was a real threat and that Britain must act to prevent attacks similar to the suicide bombing attack in Manchester⁵ (Sky News, September 3, 2018).

⁵ On the night of May 22, 2017, after a performance by an American pop singer, an ISIS operative carried out a mass killing attack among the audience. A total of 22 people were killed in the attack, many of them teenagers, and 59 were wounded. The explosion was carried out by one person, who detonated an IED at the scene of the attack. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.