



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## February 28 – March 6, 2019



### Main events of the week

► **On March 1, 2019, the SDF forces began the decisive battle in the village of Al-Baghouz,** in the Lower Euphrates Valley. There are currently around 1,000 ISIS operatives in the village. The attacking forces enjoy air support from the US and Coalition countries. Fierce battles are being waged in the village. ISIS operatives made frequent use of car bombs and suicide bombers to repel the attack. **On March 3, 2019, a lull was agreed upon,** during which thousands of people were evacuated from the village, most of them civilians (the evacuees also included around 200 ISIS operatives who surrendered to the SDF). **The fighting resumed on March 4, 2019.**

► Following are additional incidents that took place this week in the battle zones in Syria:

◆ **Idlib:** The Syrian army continued to fire artillery at the targets of the rebels (mainly the jihadi organizations). The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham carried out a nighttime attack against Syrian army positions north of Hama. According to the organization, dozens of Syrian soldiers were killed in the attack. The Syrian ambassador to the United Nations said that the Syrian army was ready for the campaign and that it would begin when the diplomatic contacts that are currently underway have failed.

◆ **Al-Raqqah:** ISIS continues its intensive terror and guerrilla activity in the city of Al-Raqqah (ISIS's former so-called capital) in the Upper Euphrates Valley. This week, ISIS carried out a suicide bombing attack east of Al-Raqqah. Another suicide bombing attack was thwarted.

◆ **The Al-Sukhnah Desert:** There were clashes in the village of Al-Sukhnah between ISIS and the Syrian army. In addition, the Syrian Air Force attacked ISIS targets. The Syrian army is reportedly about to launch a search operation in the desert area east and southeast of Al-Sukhnah. In the ITIC's assessment, many ISIS operatives who fled from other combat zones have found refuge in this area.

► **Concurrently, ISIS’s Iraq Province continued its intensive terror and guerrilla activity.**

This week’s activity included attacks against positions of the Iraqi security forces, executions, ambushes, planting IEDs and launching rockets. The Iraqi security forces carried out a relatively small amount of counterterrorist activity.

## The Idlib area

### Incidents continue between the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations

► This week as well, incidents continued between the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations in the Idlib area. Syrian army forces fired artillery at the rebel targets in the Idlib area. The forces fired at the Al-Ghab Plain, south of Aleppo, and the rural area of Idlib (the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 4, 2019; SANA, March 4, 2019). According to a report by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, the Syrian army fired artillery at the village of Zeita, north of Hama (Ibaa, March 1, 2019). On March 5, 2019, the Syrian army fired at targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham near the city of Khan Shaykhun (SANA, March 5, 2019).



**Right: Syrian army fire in the south of an enclave in Idlib (SANA, March 4, 2019). Left: Syrian army artillery fire hits in the village of Zeita (Ibaa, March 1, 2019).**

► According to reports of media outlets affiliated with the Syrian regime, **on the night of March 2-3, several squads of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham attacked Syrian army positions** some 16 km north of Hama. The Syrian army announced that it had repelled the attack and killed 22 operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham who had come from the southern part of the Idlib enclave. According to the version of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, its operatives carried out a “showcase operation,” infiltrating into Syrian army positions at night under cover of artillery fire. According to the same version, dozens of soldiers were killed and wounded (Telegram, March 4, 2019). On March 3, 2019, **the Syrian Air Force attacked concentrations of rebel forces in**

**the southern part of the enclave** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, March 3, 2019; SANA, March 3, 2019).



**Bodies of “terrorist operatives” killed attacking Syrian army positions north of Hama (SANA, March 3, 2019)**

### **Remarks made by the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations about the campaign in Idlib**

► **Bashar Jaafari, the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations**, said in an interview to the Al-Mayadeen Channel that the Syrian leadership had decided to use weapons to liberate the Idlib Province. He added that the regime’s most senior officials were waiting for the appropriate timing when it is clear that the diplomatic contacts that Syria's allies are conducting with Turkey were not bearing fruit. According to him, **the Syrian army is ready and waiting for a political decision, and there is no doubt that when the political effort fails, the campaign will begin** (Al-Mayadeen, March 2, 2019).

### **ISIS suicide bombing attack and response of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham**

► On May 1, 2019, an ISIS operative entered the Fusion Restaurant in the western part of the city of Idlib and started shooting indiscriminately. Subsequently, he detonated his explosive belt (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, March 1, 2019). Seven people were killed in the attack, and over ten were wounded (Enab Baladi, March 2, 2019). According to an eyewitness, there were families with children inside the restaurant and not military personnel (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, March 1, 2019).

► On March 2, 2019, **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham retaliated by executing ten ISIS operatives in front of the restaurant where the suicide bombing attack took place** (Telegram, March 2, 2019; Syrian@SyriawatanNews Twitter account

affiliated with the Syrian regime and operating from Latakia, March 2, 2019). The execution at the very scene of the attack was an act of revenge on ISIS and a deterrent message.



**Right: Ruins of the restaurant in Idlib in the wake of a suicide bombing attack carried out by an ISIS operative (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya YouTube channel, March 1, 2019). Left: The ten ISIS operatives before being executed (Telegram, March 2, 2019)**

► Commenting on the execution, the ISIS-affiliated Mu'ta news agency reported that the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham had executed ten Sunni Muslims in the city of Idlib (the news agency did not mention that they were ISIS operatives). According to the report, the execution took place in front of the restaurant where there was an explosion targeting commanders of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. The news agency noted that although the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham was holding dozens of prisoners of Shiite and Alawite militias, it did not dare to kill any of them, although those militias had killed hundreds of Idlib residents (Mu'ta news agency, March 2, 2019).

## Eastern Syria

### Decisive battle in Al-Baghrouz Fawqani (updated to March 5, 2019)

► **On March 1, 2019, the SDF spokesman announced the beginning of the attack to mop up the “pocket” remaining in the hands of ISIS in the village of Al-Baghrouz Fawqani** (northeast of the city of Albukamal). The SDF forces advanced in two routes leading to the village. On March 2, 2019, the spokesman announced that the SDF had recorded a significant achievement and taken over many ISIS positions (Twitter account of Mostafa Bali, head of the SDF Press Center, March 1, 2, 2019). The attack was supported by artillery fire and US and Coalition airstrikes.

► **On March 2 and 3, 2019, fierce fighting took place in Al-Baghrouz.** The SDF reportedly killed dozens of ISIS operatives, and ISIS used suicide bombers to repel the SDF (SANHA, March 3,

2019). The SDF spokesman admitted that the Kurdish forces were forced to slow down their attack in Al-Baghrouz due to ISIS's use of civilians as human shields. According to the spokesman, **the takeover of ISIS's last stronghold "will soon be completed"** (Mostafa Bali's Twitter account, March 3, 2019).



**Right: SDF force in the village of Al-Baghrouz Fawqani (Al-Aan channel, March 5, 2019). Left: Smoke rising from the fighting zone in Al-Baghrouz Fawqani (ANHA, March 3, 2019)**



**SDF fighter during the fighting in Al-Baghrouz Fawqani (www.furatfm.com, March 5, 2019)**

► **On March 3, 2019, there was a lull in the fighting for several hours, during which about 3,000 people, mostly civilians, were evacuated from the village.** About 300 ISIS operatives who were part of this group surrendered to the SDF forces. **About 1,000 ISIS operatives** reportedly remain in the "pocket" in Al-Baghrouz and civilians are still trapped in the village (Reuters; Furat Post; Mostafa Bali's Twitter account, March 4, 2019). It was reported that the SDF had carried out a "showcase operation" and managed to liberate five of their men who had been held prisoner by ISIS (ANHA, March 5, 2019).



**Right: Civilians released from the ISIS “pocket” in Al-Baghrouz (Al-Aan channel, March 5, 2019).**

**Left: Some of the ISIS operatives (Al-Aan channel, March 5, 2019)**

► **On March 4, 2019, battles resumed between ISIS the SDF. ISIS made extensive use of car bombs and suicide bombers.** Mostafa Bali, the head of the SDF Press Center, reported that several ISIS car bombs had been destroyed in Coalition airstrikes. The SDF also destroyed three car bombs. International Coalition Spokesman Col. Sean Ryan said on March 4, 2019, that two ISIS arms depots had been hit in International Coalition airstrikes in the village of Al-Baghrouz Fawqani. Big fires reportedly broke out as a result of the explosions (Military Times, March 4, 2019).

### **French-born ISIS operative connected to the Paris attacks killed**

► According to an announcement on behalf of the Coalition countries, an airstrike against an ISIS building in the village of Al-Baghrouz Fawqani (on the night of February 20-21, 2019) killed **Fabien Clain**, a French-born senior ISIS operative from Toulouse who converted to Islam in the 1990s and became a radical jihadist. His brother Jean Michel, who was also in the building along with him, was severely wounded.

► **Fabien Clain, whose codename was Abu Anas the Frenchman**, was related to the combined terrorist attack carried out by ISIS in Paris at six different sites on November 13, 2015, killing at least 132 people and wounding 352. He was the one who claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of ISIS (France 24, February 28, 2019; Akhbar Al-Aan, March 1, 2019; Washington Post, March 5, 2019).

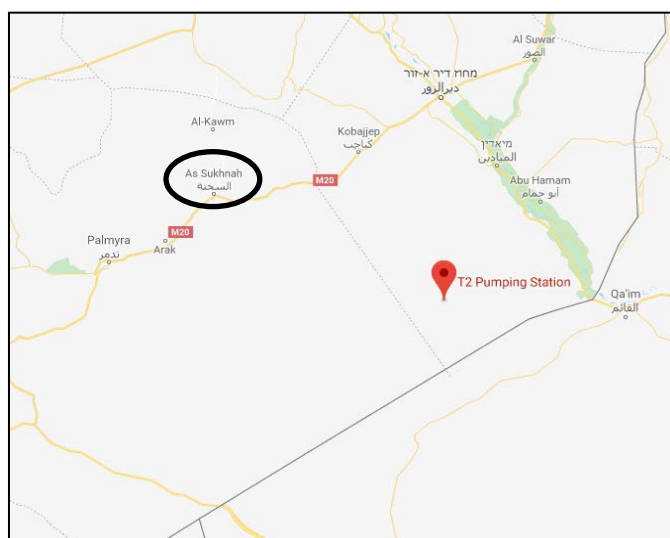


**French-born senior ISIS operative Fabien Clain who was killed in a Coalition airstrike in the village of Al-Baghouz Fawqani (Akhbar Al-Aan, March 1, 2019)**

## Syrian army preparing for an anti-ISIS operation in the Al-Sukhnah Desert

► **On March 3, 2019**, Syrian fighter jets carried out airstrikes against ISIS vehicles in and around the village of Al-Sukhnah. In addition, there were exchanges of fire between ISIS operatives and the Syrian army (Al-Watan, March 5, 2019).

► According to a report by a “Syrian military source,” the Syrian army and the forces supporting it **are about to launch an operation against ISIS in the Al-Sukhnah Desert**. The area where they will operate is located about 36 km from the T2 Pumping Station (about 104 km west of Albukamal). They intend **to search the desert area, locate hideouts of ISIS operatives and impede their freedom of movement** (the Lebanese Al-Nashra, based on the Syrian Al-Watan news website, March 4, 2019).



**The village of Al-Sukhnah and the T2 Pumping Station  
(Google Maps)**

## Northeastern Syria

### ISIS's terrorist attacks continue in the vicinity of the city of Al-Mayadeen

► This week, ISIS reported that a motorcycle bomb had been detonated in the village of Al-Basira, about 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. According to the report, 13 SDF fighters were killed (Telegram, March 2, 2019). According to another report, four SDF fighters were stabbed to death by persons unknown who are believed to belong to an ISIS network, near the water pumping station in Al-Basira (Deir ez-Zor 24, March 2, 2019).

### ISIS's terrorist attacks in the Al-Raqqah area continue

► ISIS reported that on March 2, 2019, an operative wearing an explosive belt had broken into an SDF headquarters about 21 km east of Al-Raqqah. The headquarters in question is apparently responsible for relations between the SDF and the local population. The ISIS operative entered the headquarters, opened fire and killed three SDF fighters and seven tribal dignitaries. The exchanges of fire lasted for about half an hour and the operative was finally killed (Shabakat Shumukh, March 2, 2019; Furat Post, March 2, 2019).

► On the night of March 2, 2019, ISIS operatives broke into an SDF headquarters situated about 21 km east of Al-Raqqah and **shot to death** two security guards (Shabakat Shumukh, March 3, 2019).

► Local Al-Raqqah sources reported that on March 5, 2019, **a suicide bombing attempt by an ISIS operative** in the Al-Raqqah rural area had been thwarted. The SDF forces detained the operative while he was riding his motorcycle, wearing an explosive belt and carrying a machine gun (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 5, 2019).



**Suicide bombing attack in Al-Raqqah thwarted: neutralizing the explosive belt**  
(Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 5, 2019)



► The SDF forces released 24 people from the Al-Raqqah area. These people, who are suspected of being ISIS operatives but with no Syrian blood on their hands, were allowed to join their relatives (SDF Press, March 4, 2019).



**Twenty-four people suspected of belonging to ISIS who were released by the SDF forces (SDF Press, March 4, 2019)**

### ISIS's terrorist attack southeast of Deir ez-Zor

► ISIS claimed responsibility for killing five SDF fighters in the Al-Basira area, about 30 km southeast of Deir ez-Zor (Shabakat Shumukh, March 2, 2019).

## Main developments in Iraq

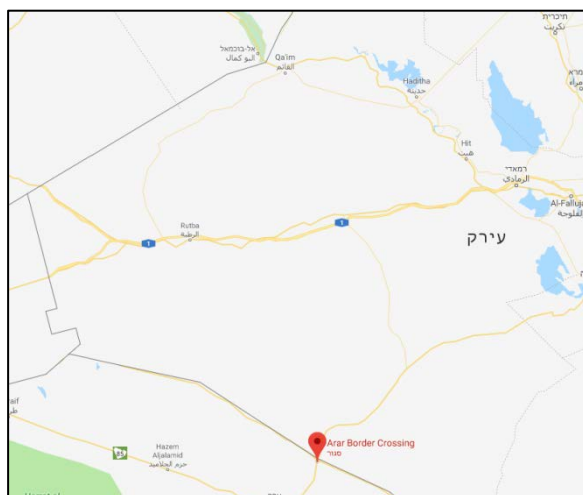
### ISIS's terrorist and guerrilla activity

► Following are the main operations carried out by ISIS in the past week (mainly according to ISIS's reports):

- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** ISIS reported that it had attacked Iraqi army soldiers in the area of the **Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia** (Note: the attacked operatives apparently belonged to the Popular Mobilization). In addition, a Popular Mobilization operative was taken prisoner and subsequently executed (Shabakat Shumukh, March 2, 2019).



**Popular Mobilization operatives killed in an attack by ISIS on the Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and documentation seized by ISIS (Shabakat Shumukh, March 2, 2019)**



**Right: The Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia (Google Maps). Left: Popular Mobilization operative who was taken prisoner being executed by ISIS (Shabakat Shumukh, February 28, 2019)**

◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** An operative of the Iraqi National Security Agency was taken prisoner by ISIS operatives. He was executed near Rutba, in the western part of the Al-Anbar Province (Shabakat Shumukh, March 1, 2019).



**Execution of an Iraqi National Security Agency operative taken prisoner by ISIS (Shabakat Shumukh, March 1, 2019).**

- ◆ **Dijla (Tigris) Province:** ISIS operatives set up an ambush against a Popular Mobilization force around 90 km southwest of Mosul. One vehicle was destroyed (Shabakat Shumukh, March 1, 2019).



**Popular Mobilization vehicle destroyed in an ISIS ambush  
(Shabakat Shumukh, March 1, 2019)**

- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** ISIS operatives set up an ambush around 60 km north of Baghdad. A Popular Mobilization (or Tribal Mobilization) commander was killed (Shabakat Shumukh, March 3, 2019).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** ISIS detonated an IED against an Iraqi army off-road vehicle around 27 km north of Baghdad. All the passengers were killed and the vehicle was destroyed (Shabakat Shumukh, March 3, 2019).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** ISIS detonated an IED around 27 km north of Baghdad. Two Iraqi army soldiers were killed and two others were wounded (Shabakat Shumukh, March 3, 2019).
- ◆ **Diyala Province:** On March 2, 2019, ISIS operatives fired a rocket at a Shiite population in the center of the city of Al-Miqdadiya, around 34 km northeast of Baqubah (Shabakat Shumukh, March 3, 2019).

### Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

- ▶ According to a report by the Iraqi News Agency, Iraqi army intelligence teams managed to capture **Abu Samia**, one of ISIS's senior commanders. Abu Samia reportedly has four

brothers who are also ISIS operatives, one of whom was a prominent participant in the Camp Speicher massacre in June 2014<sup>1</sup>.

► Following are additional operations by the Iraqi security forces:

- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** Iraqi security forces opened fire on infiltrators trying to cross the border to Iraq from Syria (Al-Sumaria News, March 2, 2019). They were apparently ISIS operatives who had fled from the ISIS “pocket” in the village of Al-Baghouz Fawqani.
- ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** A Popular Mobilization force that set up by an ambush around 36 km southwest of Kirkuk killed four ISIS operatives (al-hashed.net, March 3, 2019).
- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** An Iraqi army force that had set up an ambush 8 km north of Fallujah detained two ISIS operatives who had previously served in the military ministry of the former Islamic Caliphate (Iraqi News Agency, March 2, 2019).

## Jihadi activity in other countries

► ISIS announced that its operatives had planted mines against Tunisian army soldiers on Mount Arbata, in central Tunisia. According to the announcement, one soldier was wounded (Shabakat Shumukh, March 2, 2019). A spokesman for the Tunisian Ministry of Defense announced that a Tunisian army soldier had been killed (Shems FM, Tunisian radio station and news website, March 1, 2019).



**Mount Arbata, in central Tunisia  
(Google Maps)**

<sup>1</sup> On June 12, 2014, ISIS operatives murdered around 2,000 Iraqi Shiite soldiers being trained at Camp Speicher, an Iraqi Air Force camp near Tikrit under US supervision. The ISIS operatives documented the atrocities on their mobile phone cameras and used them for propaganda purposes (Wikipedia).

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### **Prison sentences for Russian citizens, ISIS operatives, who planned to attack the French Embassy in Moscow**

► The military court of the North Caucasus sentenced five Russian citizens of the Republic of Ingushetia to between 12 and 20 years of imprisonment. The five were accused of planning a terrorist attack at the French Embassy in Moscow in January 2017, illegal possession of weapons, and membership in ISIS (TASS News Agency, February 28, 2019).