



## ISIS military activity in northwestern Tunisia, possibly in advance of establishing a new province in this country

March 21, 2019

### Overview

- ▶ Recently, media outlets affiliated with ISIS reported on military activity carried out by ISIS in northwestern Tunisia. **The focus of this activity is Al-Qasrin Province in the western part of the country, near the border with Algeria.** The Tunisian security forces carry out counterterrorist activities against the ISIS networks, reportedly having killed the leader (emir) of ISIS in Tunisia in one of them (Tunisian News Agency, March 19, 2019). Photos disseminated by ISIS, documenting its activity, where the word Tunis (i.e., Tunisia) appeared, may indicate either the establishment of or the intention to establish a new province, albeit no official announcement was published to this effect.
- ▶ During the past year, ISIS carried out several terrorist attacks in Tunisia, so far without showing remarkable military capabilities. It is possible that the recent reports are an expression **of an effort made by ISIS to establish itself in Tunisia**, possibly due to the return of operatives from Syria to their countries of origin. It is also possible that the timing of those reports on the military activity is related to ISIS's interest **to demonstrate that in spite of the blows that it had sustained in Syria, its activity continues and has even expanded in the various provinces around the world.** At any rate, ISIS's activity in Tunisia is yet another expression of **Africa becoming a central arena for ISIS, contributing to chronic instability in northern Africa and the sub-Saharan countries.**

## ISIS's provinces around the world



### ISIS's activity in the Al-Qasrin Province

► On March 17, 2019, an ISIS-affiliated website released photos documenting ISIS operatives in Tunisia carrying out military activity. The operatives are shown carrying out patrols and assembling an IED (Shabakat Shumukh, September 17, 2018). The photos released include the inscription **Tunis** (i.e., Tunisia) on the right. The format of the photos and the type of inscription of the province name which appeared on them characterize the documentation format of other ISIS provinces.



ISIS operatives in Tunisia. Right: Patrolling in a desert area. Left: In a wooded area (Shabakat Shumukh, March 17, 2019)



The inscription “Tunis” (appearing on the right side of the photos) enlarged



Right: ISIS operatives preparing shrapnel for IEDs by chopping up an iron rod. Left: ISIS operatives making IEDs (Shabakat Shumukh, March 17, 2019)

### Executing an “agent” of the Tunisian security service

► ISIS’s Al-Furat Media Foundation recently released a video documenting **the execution of a so-called agent of the Tunisian security service**. The man, who presented himself as Mohammad al-Akhdar bin Salem al-Makhloufi, stated that he had been promised a large sum of money in return for capturing ISIS operatives alive. The “agent” was executed by slitting his throat in Mount Mughila, between the Al-Qasrin Province and Sidi Bouzid to the east (see map). The video ends with a threat to execute anyone who spies on ISIS operatives (Shabakat Shumukh, March 16, 2019). According to the SITE website, which monitors jihadi activity around the world, ISIS’s claim of responsibility for the execution of the “agent” refers to a person whose body, according to the Tunisian authorities, was found a month earlier (France 24, March 16, 2019).



**Right: ISIS operative holding a knife. An “agent” of the Tunisian security service is kneeling in front of him before being executed (Shabakat Shumukh, March 16, 2019). Left: Mount Mughila, where the “agent” was executed (marked with a red triangle) (Google Maps)**

## Areas of ISIS activity

- ▶ A map was published on Telegram, in which three areas of ISIS activity in the Al-Qasrin Province in northwestern Libya are marked. In the ITIC's assessment, these areas represent the focus of ISIS's activity (Telegram, March 18, 2019).



**Right: ISIS's areas of activity (Telegram, March 18, 2019). Left: The Al-Qasrin area in western Tunisia (Google Maps)**

## Counterterrorist activity of the Tunisian security forces

- ▶ The Tunisian security forces have recently been carrying out counterterrorist activity against the ISIS networks (referred to as “the Army of the Caliphate”) **focusing on the Al-**

**Qasrin Province.** Units of the Tunisian National Guard, specializing in counterterrorism, reportedly carried out security activity **on the hills of Mount As-Saloum, in the Al-Qasrin Province** (about 9 km southeast of the city of Al-Qasrin), killing three “terrorist operatives” operating there (Tunisian News Agency, March 19, 2019).

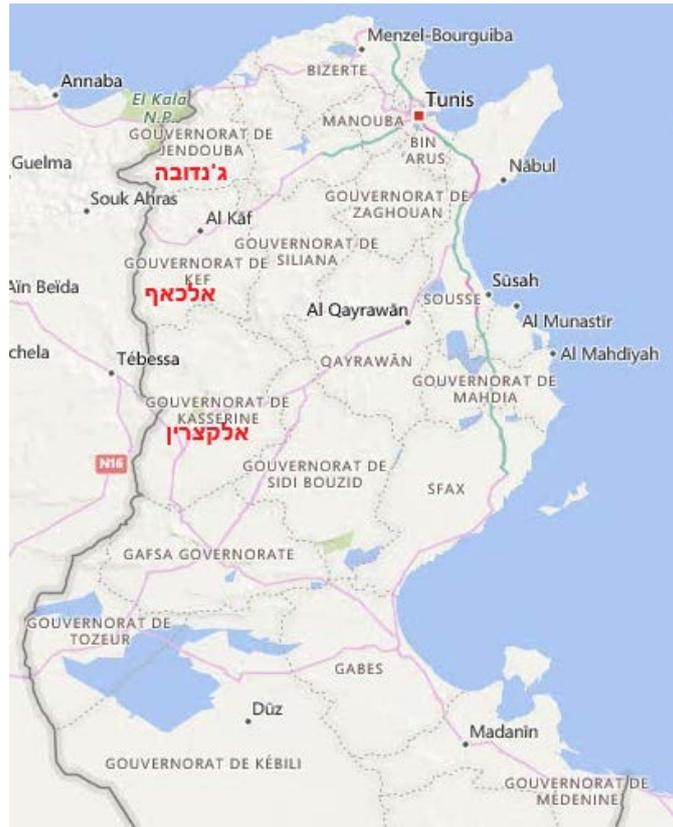
► On March 20, 2019, the Tunisian Interior Ministry announced that one of the three “terrorist operatives” who were killed was **ISIS leader (emir) in Tunisia**. It was further reported that the three men were killed in an ambush set up south of the As-Saloum hills. Weapons and explosives were found in their possession (Tunisian News Agency, March 20, 2019).



**Right: Weapons found in the possession of the three ISIS operatives who were killed south of the hills of Mount As-Saloum (Tunisian News Agency, March 20, 2019). Left: Mount As-Saloum (Google Maps)**

### Jendouba Province (northwestern Tunisia, north of Al-Qasrin)

► On March 17, 2019, the Tunisian Defense Ministry spokesman announced that the Tunisian army and the National Guard had fired at a “terrorist squad” in a wooded area in the western Jendouba Province, in northwestern Tunisia, near the border with Algeria (see map). The operatives of the “terrorist squad” retreated deep into the wooded area and activity against them is still ongoing. In this context, there are reports that **jihadi operatives affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and with ISIS are operating in the provinces of Al-Qasrin, Jendouba and Al-Kaf in northwestern Tunisia**, near the border with Algeria (Tunisia News Agency, March 16, 2019; Al-Shorouq, Egypt, March 18, 2019).



The provinces of Jendouba, Al-Kaf, and Al-Qasrin, where ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb are reportedly operating (Wikimapia; Bing Map)



Tunisian security forces operating against “terrorist operatives” in a wooded area in the Jendouba Province in western Tunisia, near the border with Algeria (Tunisian News Agency, March 16, 2019)