



Spotlight on Global Jihad

February 6-12, 2020



Highlights of the events

► This week, the Syrian army, with Russian air support, continued its attack on the Idlib region and **managed to take over the city of Saraqib**, located on an important crossroads from Damascus to Aleppo (M-5) and from Aleppo to Latakia (M-4). **The Syrian army also took over the rural area southwest of Aleppo and the section of the main highway (M-5) between Saraqib and Aleppo.** The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations **displayed no significant resistance.** The Syrian army is now preparing **to take over the city of Idlib**, stronghold of the rebel organizations and **the strategic target of the Syrian attack.** At the same time, large numbers of civilians continue to flee from the battle zones.

► **Violent friction continues between the Syrian army and Turkish forces** in the area where the Syrian forces operate. This week, **the Syrian army fired artillery at a Turkish force at the Taftanaz military airfield** (about 10 km northeast of Idlib), **killing five Turkish soldiers** and damaging Turkish weapons. The Turkish army responded with artillery fire against Syrian targets (according to Turkish media reports, more than 100 Syrian soldiers were killed or wounded).

► **The Syrian General Staff** announced that the **Turkish attacks would not prevent the Syrian army from continuing its military operation in the Idlib area and Aleppo**, with the goal of eliminating “the filth of armed terrorism.” At the same time, **diplomatic talks are underway in Ankara between a Russian delegation and senior Turkish officials.** In these talks, Turkey is **striving to obtain a truce, which will halt the Syrian army’s advance towards Idlib**, so far without an affirmative response from Syria and Russia.

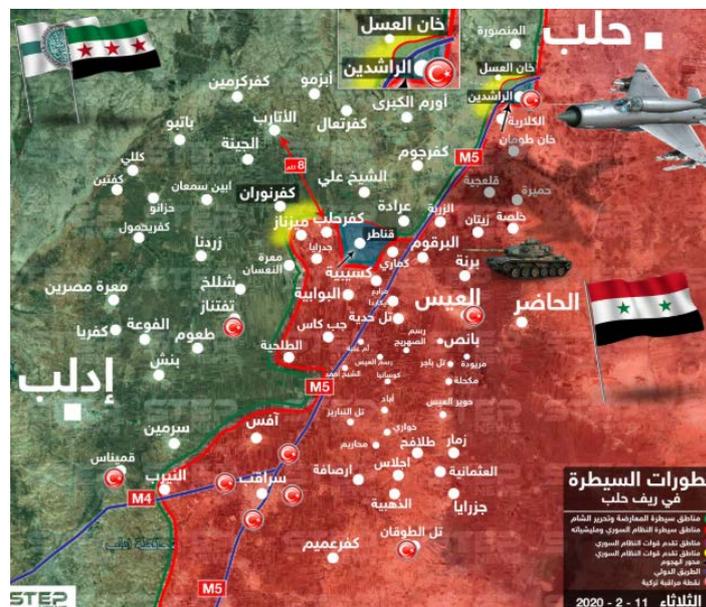
► This week saw an increase in ISIS’s attacks **in the Syrian arena**, as opposed to a decrease in its activity **in the Iraqi arena.** Outside of these two “core countries,” **ISIS’s Sinai Province carried out intensive activity.** ISIS’s military activity included an attack on an Egyptian army camp in Sheikh Zuweid and planting an IED near an Egyptian army post (about 20 Egyptian

army casualties). In ISIS's other provinces, "routine" activity continued (Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, the Kashmir region in India, and Yemen).

Idlib region

Overview

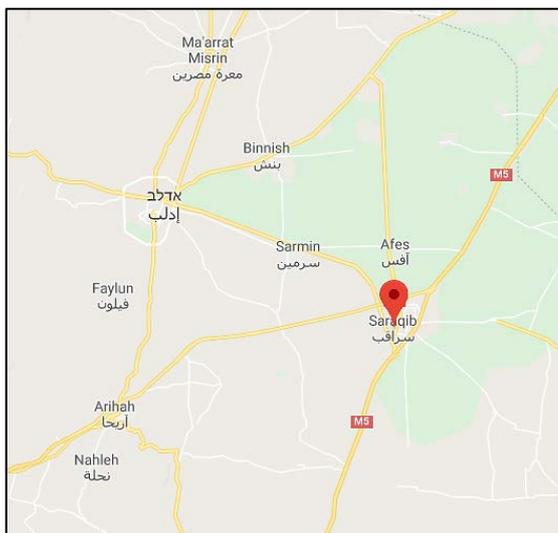
Syrian army forces operating in the Idlib region continued their advance, with Russian air support. The Syrian army took over the city of Saraqib, southeast of Idlib, on an important crossroads of the Damascus-Hama-Aleppo highway (M-5) and the Latakia highway (M-4). In addition, the Syrian forces took over **a vast area southwest of Aleppo and completed their takeover of dozens of villages and the section of the M-5 highway between Saraqib and Aleppo**. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations **displayed no significant resistance so far**. The attacks of the Syrian army in an area where Turkish forces are also present **continued to create violent friction**, which was so far contained by both sides and did not escalate into a large-scale confrontation. At the same time, **diplomatic negotiations were taking place in Ankara between Turkey and Russia**. Turkey is trying (so far without success) to bring about a truce that will halt the advance of the Syrian army and prevent the fall of Idlib, the stronghold of the rebel organizations.



Map of the control zones southwest of Aleppo (updated to February 11, 2020). Red: Area controlled by the Syrian army. Green: Area controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations. Blue line: M-5 – the Damascus-Aleppo highway and M-4, the Aleppo-Latakia highway. Yellow: Areas where fighting is currently taking place. Turkish flags: Turkish observation posts (Khotwa, February 11, 2020)

The takeover of Saraqib

► On February 6, 2020, the Syrian army took over the city of Saraqib, which lies about 15 km southeast of Idlib. The army entered the city after surrounding it in all directions. After entering the city, they began to search for and neutralize IEDs and mines planted by the rebel organizations (SANA, February 6, 2020).



The city of Saraqib (Google Maps)



The Syrian army in Saraqib
(SANA, February 6, 2020)

► Before the takeover of the city, a suicide bomber of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham detonated a car bomb against Syrian army troops (Ibaa, February 6, 2020). Apart from that, no unusual incidents were reported. Apparently, **during the takeover process, the Syrian army did not encounter any significant resistance on the part of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations. The Turkish army observation posts spread around the city did not prevent its takeover by the Syrian army.** These posts remained in place after the city was taken over and the Turks announced that they did not intend to evacuate them although some of them are in areas controlled by the Syrian army (Reuters, February 7, 2020).

The village of Nayrab taken over by the rebels

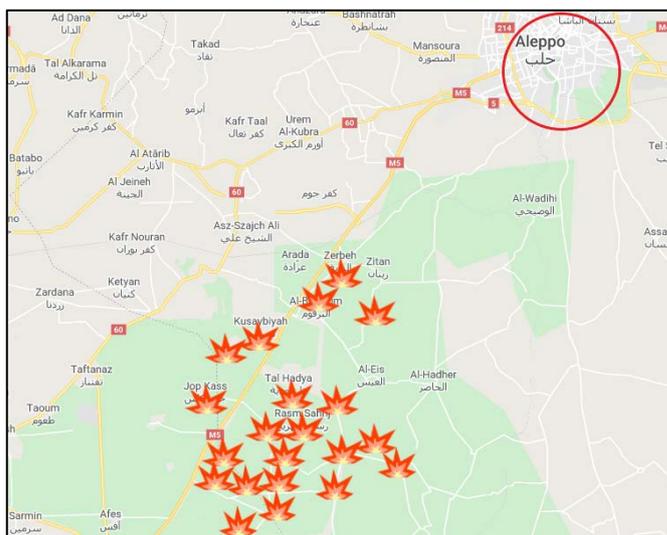
► **On February 11, 2020**, the rebel organizations attacked the Syrian army advance force in the village of Nayrab (about 8 km southeast of Idlib). The rebel forces took over the village (Khotwa, February 11, 2020). In the ITIC's assessment, this was a tactical, local achievement of the rebel organizations, which will not hinder the advance of the Syrian army in the rural area of Idlib. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham reported that during the battles, **its operatives had downed a Syrian army helicopter over Nayrab**. According to another version, **the helicopter was downed by the Turkish army**. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham released a video showing the helicopter on fire. Both of the pilots were killed.



Syrian army helicopter on fire after being hit over Nayrab. Left: Parts of the helicopter crashing on the ground (Ibaa, February 11, 2020)

The Aleppo front

► **On February 7-9, 2020**, the Syrian army took over a vast area about 20 km southwest of Aleppo. It took over dozens of villages without significant resistance on the part of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations. **On February 11, 2020, the Syrian army completed its takeover of the section of the M-5 highway from the city of Saraqib up to Aleppo**. The army also took control of the Al-Rashidin neighborhood southwest of Aleppo (see map) **and surrounded another Turkish observation post**. In addition, it took control of another area west of the M-5 highway **and east of the Taftanaz military airfield** (Khotwa, February 11, 2020).



Villages taken over by the Syrian army southwest of Aleppo on February 7-9, 2020 (Google Maps)



Right: Syrian soldiers in Al-Barkum, southwest of Aleppo, one of the villages taken over by the Syrian army on February 9, 2020. Left: Syrian soldiers and maybe also militia men in Al-Barkum (SANA, February 10, 2020)

Another incident between the Syrian and Turkish armies

► Turkey continued its attempts to halt the advance of the Syrian army in order to prevent the fall of Idlib, the rebel stronghold (including Turkish-backed organizations). In the past week, Turkey continued to reinforce its troops in the Idlib region (sending, inter alia, armored forces and commandos). It appears that the reinforcements strengthened the Turkish observation posts or joined the rebel organizations, but at this stage did not join them in the fighting.

The advance of the Syrian army continued to create violent friction with the Turkish forces in the Idlib region. Syrian media outlets (affiliated with the rebel organizations) reported that **on February 10, 2020, the Syrian army fired artillery at a Turkish observation post which was reinforced by an armored force, in the Taftanaz military airfield** (about 10 km northeast of Idlib). **Five Syrian army soldiers were reportedly killed and five others were wounded.** In addition, tanks and trucks were damaged.



The Turkish force in the Taftanaz military airfield (indicated by a Turkish flag) which was targeted by Syrian army artillery (Google Maps)



Turkish army tank destroyed by Syrian artillery fire at the Taftanaz military airfield. Left: Two Turkish trucks which were destroyed (Khotwa, February 10, 2020)

► **Turkish Presidential Communications Director Fahrettin Altun** announced that in response to the Syrian attack, the Turkish army had destroyed positions of the Syrian army (Fahrettin Altun’s Twitter account, February 10, 2020). **The Turkish Defense Ministry announced** that the Turkish army had **attacked 115 targets of the Syrian regime**. According to the statement, about a hundred Syrian soldiers were neutralized (i.e., killed or wounded) and weapons (tanks, artillery, and a helicopter) were destroyed. According to the statement, the Turkish response was legitimate, based on Turkey’s right of self-defense (Anadolu, February 11, 2020; Al-Jazeera, February 10, 2020).

► Following the Turkish response, the Syrian army’s General Staff announced that **the Turkish forces had fired artillery at Syrian army forces and population centers**. According to the statement, **the Turkish attacks will not divert the Syrian army from the continuation of its military activity in the regions of Idlib and Aleppo. This is carried out to eliminate the “filth of armed terrorism” and restore stability and security all over**

Syria. The announcement further states that the Turkish regime continues its aggressive activity while violating Syrian sovereignty in an attempt to stop the advance of the Syrian army and prevent the collapse of the rebel organizations (the “armed terrorist organizations”) (SANA, February 11, 2020).

Diplomatic negotiations

► Concurrently with the Syrian army’s advance toward Idlib, **a Russian delegation held talks with senior Turkish government officials in Ankara.** In these talks, **the Turks demanded a declaration of a truce that would enter into effect on February 12, 2020.** Furthermore, the Turks demanded that the Syrian army refrain from attacking their forces and threatened that **the Turkish army would defend itself if it was attacked once again** (Anadolu, February 8, 10, 2020; Sputnik; TASS, February 8, 2020). **On February 10, 2020,** the Turkish presidency stated that senior Turkish officials had informed the Russian delegation negotiating in Turkey that the Syrian army attacks **had to stop immediately and that such assaults would not remain unanswered** (Reuters, February 10, 2020). In the ITIC's assessment, **in spite of the Turkish diplomatic pressure, so far, the Syrian army continued its advance in the Idlib region, backed by Russia.**

UAV attack against the Russian airbase in Hmeymim

► On February 10, 2020, the Russian army reported that **two UAVs which took off from the Idlib region attempted to attack the Russian airbase in Hmeymim.** Head of the Russian Reconciliation Center in Syria Major General Yuri Borenkov claimed that the first aircraft had arrived from the northeast and was intercepted by the airbase air defense system at a distance of 2 km from the Hmeymim airbase. The second aircraft arrived from the northwest and was also intercepted by the air defense system. During the past few months, **the rebel organizations launched dozens of UAVs at the Hmeymim base, but they were all intercepted** (Sputnik; TASS, February 10, 2020).

Residents continue to flee the fighting zones

► According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **residents continue to flee en masse from the city of Idlib and dozens of towns and villages in its vicinity. Over 340,000 residents reportedly fled their homes since January 24, 2020.** Since mid-January 2020, about **440,000 residents** reportedly fled their homes in [the provinces of] Aleppo and Idlib. In total, since early December 2019, **about 870,000 residents were displaced from**

their homes. It was also reported that many of the displaced residents were trying to secretly enter Turkish territory by paying smugglers \$2,000-3,500 per person and \$200 for children under the age of 9 (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 11, 2020).

The Euphrates Valley

► This week, **an increase was evident in the number of attacks** in ISIS's areas of activity throughout Syria. Following are noteworthy attacks by region (mainly according to ISIS's claims of responsibility).

Al-Raqqah area

► **On February 4, 2020**, ISIS operatives carried out **three IED attacks in the Al-Raqqah area**. Following are the details:

- ◆ An IED was activated against the house of the head of a commune in west Al-Raqqah. The house was damaged (Telegram, February 5, 2020).
- ◆ An IED was activated against the house of the head of a commune in the rural area north of Al-Raqqah. The house was damaged (Telegram, February 5, 2020).
- ◆ An IED was activated against the house of an SDF fighter about 5 km southwest of Al-Raqqah. The house was damaged (Telegram, February 5, 2020).

► **On February 10, 2020**, two IEDs were activated. One was activated against the house of the mukhtar of one of the villages about 10 km west of Al-Raqqah. The house was damaged (Telegram, February 10, 2020). The second was activated against an SDF vehicle about 10 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 11, 2020).

The area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal

► In the area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal, ISIS operatives carried out two noteworthy attacks: **On February 7, 2020**, an SDF intelligence operative was taken prisoner in a village about 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. He was interrogated and then shot to death (Telegram, February 7, 2020). **On February 8, 2020**, a motorcycle bomb was detonated against an SDF vehicle in Hajin, 25 km north of Albukamal. Eight SDF fighters were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 8, 2020).

► **On February 9, 2020**, ISIS operatives broke into the house of an "agent" of the SDF and the Syrian regime in the village of Hawajj, 5 km northeast of Al-Mayadeen. The "agent" was taken prisoner, interrogated, and then executed (Telegram, February 9, 2020).

► **On February 10, 2020**, two SDF intelligence operatives were targeted by machine gun fire 8 km north of Al-Mayadeen. They were both killed (Telegram, February 10, 2020).

► **On February 10, 2020**, a roadside bomb was activated against the SDF forces on the road leading to the Al-Tanak oil field (about 30 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen). Five SDF fighters were killed (Telegram, February 10, 2020).

Northeastern Syria

Al-Hasakah area

► In two separate incidents, ISIS operatives fired machine guns at SDF vehicles south of Al-Hasakah. The passengers were wounded (Telegram, February 7, 8, 2020).

The region of Palmyra and Al-Sukhnah

► **ISIS operatives attacked a Syrian army outpost near the T-3 Pumping Station**, about 40 km east of Palmyra. Several soldiers were killed or wounded. Some time later, **ISIS operatives ambushed the Syrian army** in the Al-Sukhnah Desert, about 60 km northeast of Palmyra (no further details were reported). Because of these attacks, the Syrian army reportedly increased security measures in the region east of Homs (Al-Masdar News, February 9, 2020).

The Iraqi arena

ISIS activity

This week, there was a decrease in the scope of ISIS's activity in Iraq. Most of the attacks carried out by ISIS operatives were planting IEDs, firing at Iraqi army positions, and killing members of the Iraqi security forces. Following are the main attacks for which ISIS claimed responsibility:

Diyala Province

► **On February 10, 2020**, Iraqi Interior Ministry commandos were fired at in two separate incidents, about 60 km north of Baqubah. In one incident, a commando was shot and killed. In the second incident, a commando vehicle was fired at (Telegram, February 10, 2020).

Erbil Province

► **On February 7, 2020**, two sticky bombs were activated against vehicles. A sticky bomb was activated against a vehicle carrying an Iraqi soldier about 5 km south of Baqubah. The soldier

was killed (Telegram, February 7, 2020). In addition, a sticky bomb was activated against a bus carrying Shiites about 60 km south of Baqubah. Several Shiites were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 8, 2020).

► **On February 7, 2020**, a camp of the Iraqi Interior Ministry commando unit was targeted by gunfire about 60 km north of Baqubah. One fighter was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, February 8, 2020).

► **On February 6, 2020**, collaborators (“agents”) with the Iraqi government were targeted by sniper fire west of the Khanaqin region, about 100 km northeast of Baqubah. Two of them were killed and the third was wounded (Telegram, February 7, 2020).

Al-Anbar Province

► **On February 8, 2020**, ISIS operatives abducted a member of the Iraqi Interior Ministry’s National Security Apparatus west of Rutba. After being interrogated, he was executed (Telegram, February 9, 2020).

Nineveh Province

► **On February 8, 2020**, ISIS operatives took a Tribal Mobilization intelligence operative prisoner about 90 km southwest of Mosul. He was executed (Telegram, February 8, 2020).

Salah al-Din Province

► **On February 8, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked an Iraqi army position east of Samarra. One soldier was killed and another was wounded. According to an announcement by the Iraqi army, two ISIS operatives were killed in the exchange of fire (Al-Sumaria, February 8, 2020; Kurdistan 24, February 8, 2020).

► **On February 7, 2020**, a rocket was launched at an Iraqi army vehicle about 30 km southwest of Baqubah. One soldier was killed (Telegram, February 7, 2020).

► **On February 7, 2020**, an IED was detonated against a vehicle carrying Tribal Mobilization fighters about 30 km southwest of Baqubah. Three fighters and their commander were killed. Two other commanders were wounded (Telegram, February 7, 2020).

Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

Nineveh Province

► **On February 10, 2020**, Popular Mobilization forces mounted an operation to mop up the southwestern Nineveh Province. During the operation, the forces located ISIS “guesthouses”

and carried out a controlled explosion of a car bomb (Twitter page of the Popular Mobilization, February 10, 2020).



Right: Popular Mobilization operatives during the operation. Left: Controlled explosion of the car bomb (Twitter page of the Popular Mobilization, February 10, 2020)

► **On February 9, 2020**, Iraqi security forces apprehended three ISIS operatives south of Mosul (Al-Sumaria, February 9, 2020). Five more ISIS operatives were apprehended at the southwestern entrance to the city, on the Mosul-Baghdad Road. Two of them were former members of ISIS's morality police and three were former operatives in the organization's soldiers office (Al-Sumaria, February 9, 2020).

► According to Kurdish media reports, the Iraqi government is currently setting up **a detention camp in the Nineveh Province for ISIS operatives and their families who have Iraqi citizenship and are due to arrive in Iraq from the Al-Hol camp in Syria**. The new camp will include about 4,000 tents, which are supposed to house 31,400 ISIS operatives and their families. It can be assumed that the camp will soon be ready for use (Kurdish website BASNEWS, February 9, 2020).

Al-Anbar Province

► **The Popular Mobilization forces** announced that they had **established positions near Al-Qaim** (in western Iraq) **along the border between Iraq and Syria**. According to them, the establishment of the positions is intended to help defend the border between Iraq and Syria against ISIS activity (Al-Sumaria, February 9, 2020; Popular Mobilization website, February 9, 2020).

The Sinai Peninsula

During the week, ISIS's Sinai Province continued its intensive activity. The main event was **an attack carried out by ISIS operatives against Egyptian army forces south of Sheikh Zuweid, in northern Sinai**. Two officers and five soldiers were killed in the attack.

► **On February 9, 2020**, ISIS’s Sinai Province announced that **four of its operatives, equipped with weapons and explosive belts, had attacked an Egyptian army camp south of Sheikh Zuweid. Eight soldiers were killed and at least seven others were wounded** in the exchange of fire (Telegram, February 10, 2020).

► The Egyptian army spokesman said that “terrorist operatives” had attacked Egyptian soldiers. As a result of the exchange of fire, **seven soldiers** were killed, **including two officers**. In addition, **10 ISIS operatives** (“terrorist operatives”) **were killed**. The spokesman commended the soldiers’ vigilance, which prevented a more serious attack (Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces spokesman, February 9, 2020).



**The scene of the attack in Sheikh Zuweid
(Egyptian channel Tafasil al-Akhbar, February 9, 2020)**

► **On February 6, 2020**, ISIS operatives planted an **IED** near an Egyptian army position east of Al-Arish. The IED exploded during the Egyptian army’s attempt to neutralize it. **A total of 10 soldiers were killed or wounded** (Telegram, February 6, 2020). According to another report, **three soldiers were killed in the explosion, including an officer. Several other soldiers were wounded** (Shahed Sinaa; Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed, February 6, 2020).

The activity of ISIS’s provinces in Africa and Asia

Nigeria

► **On February 10, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army camp in the town of Rann, about 6 km from the border between Nigeria and Cameroon. There was an exchange of fire. Several Nigerian soldiers were killed and several others were wounded (Telegram, February 11, 2020).

► **On February 10, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army camp in Borno State. The forces exchanged fire. Several soldiers were killed and several others were wounded. In addition, weapons, ammunition, and vehicles were seized (Telegram, February 11, 2020).

► **On February 10, 2020**, ISIS operatives set fire to 20 Nigerian government offices about 130 km northeast of Maiduguri, capital of Borno State (Telegram, February 11, 2020).

► **On February 5, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army camp near Maiduguri. The forces exchanged fire. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 5, 2020).

► **On February 5, 2020**, ISIS operatives halted an advance by army forces about 3 km south of the border between Niger and Nigeria. The forces exchanged fire. Several Nigerian soldiers were killed. In addition, an APC and a vehicle were destroyed (Telegram, February 5, 2020).

Algeria

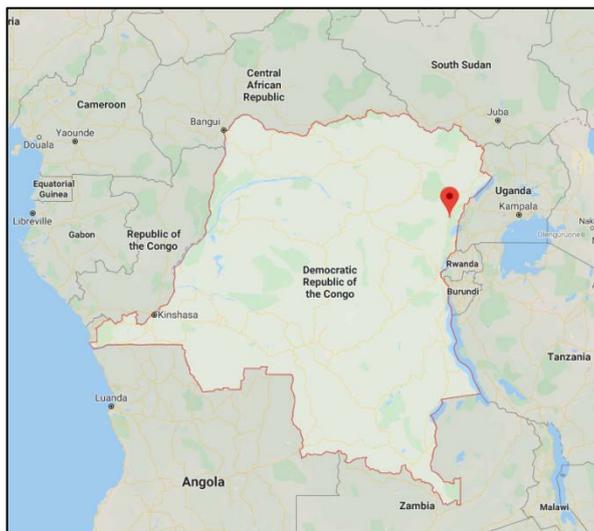
► **On February 9, 2020**, an ISIS operative blew himself up with a car bomb in the middle of an Algerian army base in the south of the country, near the border with Mali. According to ISIS, dozens of soldiers were killed and wounded in the attack, several vehicles were destroyed, and the base was damaged (Telegram, February 11, 2020). The Algerian Ministry of Defense reported that one soldier had been killed in the incident (France 24, February 9, 2020).



**Site of the incident in the area of Botembo, near the border between Congo and Uganda
(Google Maps)**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo)

► **On February 4, 2020**, Congolese soldiers were targeted by machine gun fire in the area of Botembo, near the Congo-Uganda border. A soldier and an officer were killed. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, February 5, 2020).



The area near the Algeria-Mali border, the site of the ISIS suicide bombing attack (Google Maps)

Mali

► France is reportedly considering sending about 60 more soldiers as part of the struggle against the “militants” in the Sahel region (the region south of the Sahara, where local jihadist organizations affiliated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda operate). A counterterrorism task force numbering about 4,500 soldiers is currently operating in this area, as part of Operation Barkhan¹. It was reported that France, the UN and the US had invested billions of dollars to stabilize the Sahel region, with little success (Reuters, February 7, 2020).

India (the Kashmir region)

► **On February 5, 2020, three armed men on motorcycles attacked an Indian police checkpoint on the outskirts of Srinagar, in the Kashmir region.** One policeman was killed. In the exchange of fire between the forces, two of the attackers were killed and the third was wounded and taken prisoner. Director General of Police (DGP) Dilbagh Singh noted that there were active “militant” cells in Srinagar (The Kashmir Monitor, February 6, 2020).

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** According to the claim of responsibility, ISIS’s India Province operatives fired at Indian police in the Kashmir region. The forces exchanged fire and the policeman was killed (Telegram, February 5, 2020).

¹Operation Barkhan began on August 1, 2014 and is focused on the Sahel region. About 4,500 French soldiers are taking part in the operation. Their permanent headquarters is in N’jamena, the capital of Chad. The operation was planned with five countries, all former French colonies: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. These countries are collectively referred to as G5 Sahel (Wikipedia).



The city of Srinagar in Kashmir, where the attack was carried out (Google Maps)



The three operatives of ISIS's India Province who carried out the attack
(Kashmir Source Twitter account, February 5, 2020)

Yemen

► **On February 9, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Houthi camp in Qifah, in the northwestern Al-Bayda Province (about 100 km southeast of Sana'a). The forces exchanged fire. The camp was set on fire and the Houthis fled (Telegram, February 10, 2020).