



Spotlight on Global Jihad

February 27 – March 4, 2020



Highlights of the events

- This week, **high-intensity battles took place in the Idlib region** between the Syrian army and the forces supporting it (including the Lebanese Hezbollah) and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations. The battles centered on two areas. In the northeastern Idlib region, the rebel organizations managed to retake the **city of Saraqeb** (the most significant achievement to date). However, three days later, the Syrian army retook the city and the surrounding rural area (relatively easily) **and regained control of the M-5 highway** (the Damascus-Aleppo highway). At the same time, battles took place **in the southern Idlib region**. Both sides recorded local successes, but **the general trend is to continue “gnawing away” at the areas controlled by the rebel organizations**.
- Against the backdrop of the intensive fighting in the Idlib region, **clashes between the Syrian army and the Turkish army escalated this week**. On February 27, 2020, 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in a Syrian airstrike. In response, the Turkish army carried out extensive attacks against Syrian targets. Following the killing of the Turkish soldiers, **the Turkish defense minister announced the start of Operation Spring Shield, a military operation against the Syrian army**. Turkish President Erdoğan stressed that the operation was directed against targets of the Syrian regime and that **Turkey was not targeting Russia and Iran**. At the same time, diplomatic talks between Russia and Turkey continue, during which it was agreed that **the Russian and Turkish presidents would meet in Moscow on March 5, 2020**.
- **In the Euphrates Valley**, ISIS's intensive attacks continued, while **in Iraq** there was a relative drop in the scope of its activity. **The intensive counterterrorism and preventive activity on the part of the Iraqi security forces** is noteworthy. This week, they located ISIS hiding places, arrested operatives, and seized weapons.
- Noteworthy activity in ISIS's provinces abroad over the past week: **intensive activity by the Sinai Province** (sniper fire, activating IEDs) in which an Egyptian army officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel was killed. **In Nigeria**, ISIS operatives repelled several attacks by the

Nigerian army; **In Yemen**, ISIS's attacks against the Houthi rebels continued; **In Bangladesh**, an IED was activated against police personnel; **In the southern Philippines**, East Asia Province operatives exchanged fire with the Philippine army; and in **Afghanistan**, ISIS operatives detonated two motorcycle bombs among a crowd of Shiites in the capital Kabul.

Idlib region

Battles on the city of Saraqeb

► **On February 27, 2020, the rebel organizations took over the city of Saraqeb**, which is situated 15 km southeast of Idlib, on the crossroads of M-5 (Damascus-Aleppo highway) and M-4 (Aleppo-Latakia highway). In addition, the rebel organizations took over several villages in the rural area of Saraqeb (Khotwa, February 27, 2020). **The takeover of Saraqeb and the blocking of the M-5 highway**, which has recently opened for traffic, **were the rebel organizations' most significant achievement over the last few weeks**. However, **on March 2, 2020**, the Syrian army, with Russian air support, managed **to retake Saraqeb**. **The Syrian army took over several villages and towns** in the Saraqeb rural area, thereby expanding its control area. It was reported that during its takeover of Saraqeb, **the Syrian army was supported by reinforcements of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, March 2, 2020).

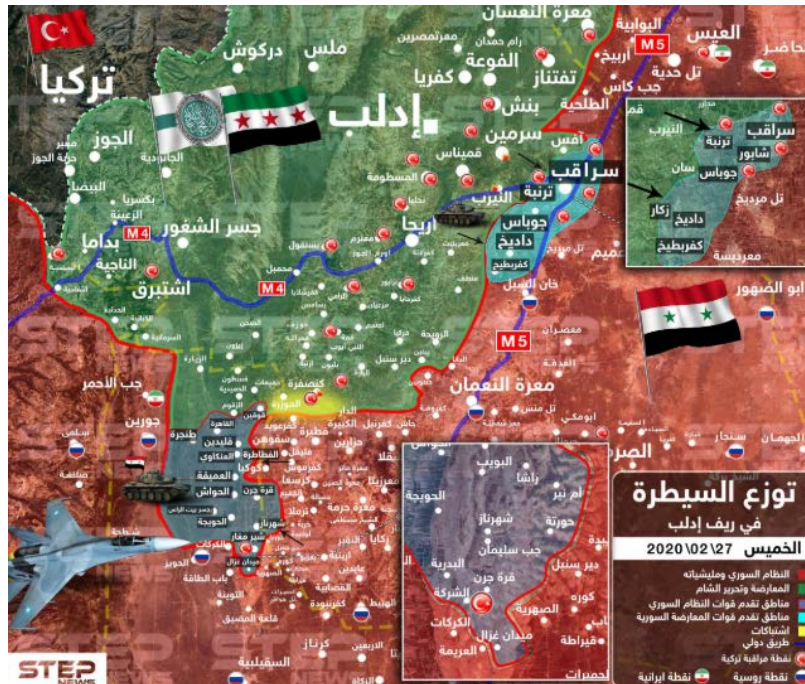
► In the ITIC's assessment, **the takeover of Saraqeb once again by the Syrian army was carried out relatively easily**, without any significant effort on the part of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations to defend the city. Upon retaking it, **the Syrian army regained control of the M-5 highway section passing through the eastern part of the city** (Khotwa, March 3, 2020).



Syrian army tank entering Saraqeb (SANA, March 2, 2020)

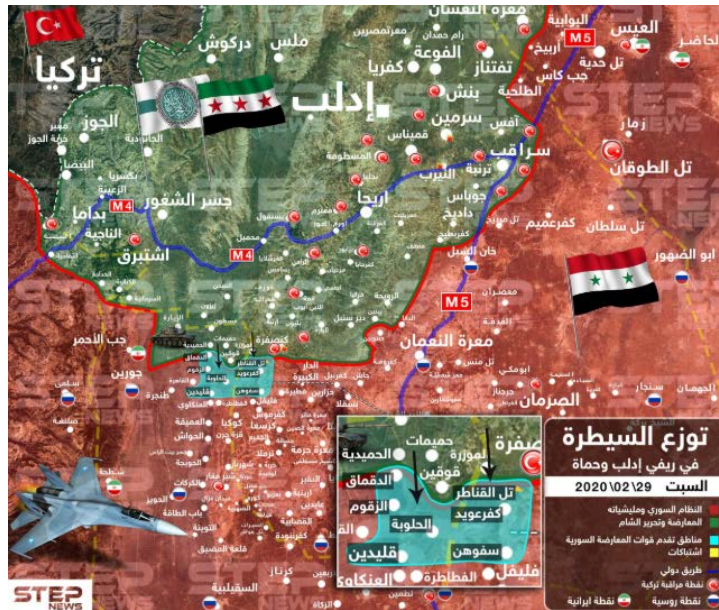
The battles in the southeastern part of the Idlib region

► On February 27, 2020, the Syrian army took over an area in the southwestern Idlib region, on the eastern part of the Al-Ghab Plain. In total, the Syrian army took over some 18 towns and villages in this area (Khotwa, February 27, 2020).



Battle zones between the Syrian army and the rebel organizations (February 27, 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. Turquoise: The city of Saraqeb and its environs, taken over by the rebel organizations and liberated three days afterwards. Purple: The area in the southwestern Idlib region, taken over by the Syrian army. Yellow: An area where fighting continued. The M-5 and M-4 highways are marked with a blue line. Turkish flag: Turkish observation post (Khotwa, February 27, 2020)

► On February 29, 2020, operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham took over an area in the southern Idlib region (northeast of the area taken over by the Syrian army on February 27). In total, six towns and villages were taken over (Khotwa, February 29, 2020). The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced that its operatives had taken over the area from the Tiger Forces under the command of Col. Suhail Hassan and that dozens of Syrian soldiers had been killed (Ibaa, February 29, 2020). According to the Syrian News Agency, during the attack, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham received artillery support from the Turkish army (SANA, February 29, 2020).



The area in the southern Idlib region (turquoise) which was taken over by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations on February 29, 2020 (Khotwa, February 29, 2020)



Rockets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham launched at targets of the Tiger Forces under the command of Col. Suhail Hassan in the southern Idlib region (Ibaa, February 29, 2020)

► On March 1, 2020, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations took over two additional areas **in the south and southwest of the Idlib region** (see map). Turkish drones reportedly attacked Syrian army reinforcements which were sent to the battle zones. In the drone attacks, Syrian army APCs were destroyed and several soldiers were killed (Khotwa, March 1, 2020).



The areas in the south and southwest of the Idlib region which were taken over by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations on March 1, 2020.
Yellow: An area where fighting continued (Khotwa, March 1, 2020)

Escalation in the fighting between the Turkish and Syrian armies

Due to the intensive fighting in the Idlib region, which focused on the Saraqeb area, **there has been an escalation in the clashes between the Syrian and the Turkish armies.** Fighting between them included **drone airstrikes and artillery fire, with dozens of soldiers being killed on each side.** The Syrian media reported that **the Turkish army had given air support to attacks initiated by the rebel organizations.** During the fighting, **several Syrian fighter jets and a number of Turkish army drones were downed.**

► On February 27, 2020, the Turks announced that **at least 33 Turkish soldiers had been killed and dozens of others had been wounded in an airstrike on the border between Syria and Turkey** (Reuters, February 27, 2020). According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the airstrike was carried out although the location of the Turkish soldiers had been coordinated with senior Russian officials (Hürriyet Daily News, February 27, 2020). **The Russian Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry denied this claim.** According to the Russian version, no airstrike was carried out in the area where the Turkish soldiers were killed (TASS, February 29, 2020).

► In response, on February 27 and 28, 2020, the Turkish army attacked targets of the **Syrian regime and the forces supporting it.** The Turkish defense minister said that over 300 Syrian soldiers had been killed in those attacks. The Turks released videos **documenting Turkish army rocket fire and airstrikes against tanks, APCs and forces of the Syrian army in the Idlib region** (Anadolu; Reuters, February 28, 2020). During the Turkish attacks, **a Hezbollah command post was bombarded near Saraqeb. Ten Hezbollah operatives, including two commanders, were reportedly killed in the attacks** and several dozens

were wounded (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; Zaman Al-Wasl; Araby 21, February 28, 2020).



Right: Syrian army Russian anti-aircraft system in the battle zone (SANA, March 1, 2020). Left: Turkish army drone on fire after being hit by Syrian army fire in the airspace over Saraqeb (SANA, March 1, 2020).

Following the killing of the Turkish soldiers, the Turkish defense minister announced (March 1, 2020) **the opening of a military campaign against the Syrian army, called Operation Spring Shield**. The minister pointed out that Turkey would act against the attacking regime by virtue of its right of self-defense. However, **Turkey has no desire to confront Russia** (TRT World, March 1, 2020; Anadolu, March 2, 2020). Turkish President Erdoğan announced that **Turkey would not target Russia and Iran and would not attack them**. The purpose of the operation is **to destroy targets of the Syrian regime**, whose forces were attacking the Turkish forces (TRT World, March 1, 2020). **At the same time, it was agreed to hold a meeting between the Russian and Turkish presidents in Moscow on March 5, 2020.**

► The Turks announced that as part of Operation Spring Shield, the Turkish army had targeted 2,557 Syrian soldiers, destroyed 135 tanks, over 40 armored vehicles, 45 guns, 44 rocket launchers, 12 antitank systems, 29 anti-aircraft systems, two fighter jets, eight helicopters, and one drone (Anadolu, March 2, 2020). On the other hand, the Syrian army announced that it had downed five Turkish army drones on March 1 and 3, 2020 (SANA, March 3, 2020).

The Euphrates Valley

Highlights of ISIS's activity

This week as well, ISIS's activity in Syria focused on the Al-Mayadeen-Albukamal area, in the Euphrates Valley. Prominent attacks this week included the planting of IEDs, shooting attacks at checkpoints and vehicles, and targeted killings. Following are highlights of ISIS's activity (according to ISIS's claims of responsibility).

The area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal

- **On March 3, 2020**, an IED planted in the house of an SDF intelligence operative was activated in Al-Susah, about 6 km northeast of Al-Mayadeen. The house was damaged (Telegram, March 3, 2020).
- **On March 2, 2020**, an SDF checkpoint was targeted by machine gun fire in Bariha, in the Al-Basira area, about 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. One SDF fighter was killed and three others were wounded (Telegram, March 3, 2020).
- **On March 1, 2020**, a bus carrying SDF fighters was targeted by machine gun fire in Diban, about 5 km east of Al-Mayadeen. Several SDF fighters were killed or wounded (Telegram, March 1, 2020).
- **On March 1, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF intelligence vehicle in the village of Al-Izba, about 10 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. Three of the passengers were killed and another was wounded (Telegram, March 2, 2020).
- **On February 29, 2020**, a sticky bomb was activated against a vehicle in Hajin, 25 km north of Albukamal. The vehicle was carrying one of the Hajin local council members and two SDF fighters. All three were wounded (Telegram, March 1, 2020).
- **On February 29, 2020**, several IEDs were activated in the house of one of the SDF fighters in Darnaj, about 14 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. The house was damaged (Telegram, March 1, 2020).
- **On February 25, 2020**, an SDF intelligence operative was targeted by machine gun fire in the Al-Basira area, about 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. The intelligence operative and a woman who was with him were wounded (Telegram, February 27, 2020).
- **On February 26, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 10 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 26, 2020).

► **On February 27, 2020**, a Syrian army intelligence operative was targeted by machine gun fire in Darnaj, about 14 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. He was killed (Telegram, February 27, 2020).

► **On February 27, 2020**, the SDF fighter in charge of checkpoints was targeted by machine gun fire in Al-Izba, about 10 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. He was killed (Telegram, February 27, 2020).

SDF and International Coalition counterterrorism activity

► **On March 1, 2020**, SDF Special Forces in collaboration with International Coalition forces attacked an ISIS hideout in Abu Hamam, about 30 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. Two ISIS operatives who had recently carried out attacks against civilians and SDF fighters were detained. Light arms, a laptop, and documents belonging to ISIS were found there (SDF Press, March 1, 2020).



Right: Two ISIS operatives detained by the SDF (SDF Press, March 1, 2020). Left: Light arms and documents found in the possession of the two ISIS operatives (SDF Press, March 1, 2020)

Al-Raqqah area

► **On February 26, 2020**, an IED was activated against the house of a commune leader in west Al-Raqqah. The house was damaged (Telegram, February 26, 2020).

The Iraqi arena

ISIS's activity during the week

This week, a relative decrease was evident in ISIS's activity in Iraq compared to last week. At the same time, the Iraqi security forces were evidently making a large-scale effort to locate weapons and "guesthouses" used by ISIS in the various provinces of Iraq.

Kirkuk Province

► **On February 28, 2020**, ISIS operatives fired machine guns at two Iraqi army camps, one about 30 km south of Kirkuk and the other about 60 km west of Kirkuk. Four soldiers were killed in the two incidents (Telegram, March 1, 2020). In addition, an ISIS operative was wounded (Al-Sumaria, February 28, 2020).

► **On February 25, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi police vehicle about 40 km southwest of Kirkuk. The vehicle was damaged (Telegram, February 27, 2020).

Diyala Province

► **On March 1, 2020**, an Iraqi army *aqid* (colonel) was targeted by machine gun fire about 40 km northeast of Baqubah. He was killed (Telegram, March 2, 2020).

► **On February 26, 2020**, an Iraqi army camp was targeted by machine gun fire about 60 km north of Baqubah. One soldier was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, February 27, 2020).

Salah al-Din Province

► **On March 2, 2020**, the house of an officer in the Iraqi federal police was set on fire about 20 km north of Baghdad. The house sustained damage (Telegram, March 3, 2020).

► **On February 28, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Tribal Mobilization checkpoint about 15 km northwest of Baghdad. Three fighters were killed. Weapons were seized (Telegram, February 29, 2020).

Erbil Province

► **On March 1, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle in the Makhmur area, about 50 km southwest of Erbil. Two soldiers were killed (Telegram, March 2, 2020).

► **On February 26, 2020**, IEDs were activated against two Tribal Mobilization vehicles about 60 km southwest of Erbil. Four fighters were wounded (Telegram, February 28, 2020).

Counterterrorism activities by the Iraqi security forces

Kirkuk Province

► **On February 26, 2020**, an Iraqi Interior Ministry force located two ISIS “guesthouses” in the Kirkuk Province. An ISIS operative was wounded in the operation. Rockets, small arms ammunition and walkie-talkies were found (Al-Sumaria, February 26, 2020).



**Rockets found by an Iraqi Interior Ministry force in ISIS “guesthouses” in the Kirkuk Province
(Al-Sumaria, February 26, 2020)**

Al-Anbar Province

► **On February 28, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force captured five wanted “terrorist operatives” (presumably ISIS operatives) in Al-Anbar Province, about 30 km southeast of the Iraqi-Syrian border (al-hashed.net, February 28, 2020).



**Motorized Popular Mobilization force during an operation against ISIS
(al-hashed.net, August 28, 2020)**

► **On February 29, 2020**, a joint force of the Popular Mobilization and the Iraqi army surrounded an ISIS “guesthouses” where several of the organization’s operatives were entrenched, about 15 km northeast of Fallujah. Five ISIS operatives were killed. Weapons, ammunition and explosives were found there (al-hashed.net, February 29, 2020).



Joint force of the Popular Mobilization and the Iraqi army during activity against ISIS northeast of Fallujah (al-hashed.net, August 29, 2020)

Salah al-Din Province

► **On February 28, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force located an ISIS hiding place west of Samarra (about 100 km northwest of Baghdad). Weapons were seized. The hiding place was used as a starting point for carrying out attacks against the Iraqi security forces and civilians (al-hashed.net, February 28, 2020).



Popular Mobilization operatives removing a plastic container, inside which ISIS weapons were hidden (al-hashed.net, February 28, 2020)

► **On February 29, 2020**, Iraqi security forces operating west of Samarra (about 100 km northwest of Baghdad) located 38 IEDs inside containers. The IEDs were detonated in a controlled manner (Facebook page of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, February 29, 2020).



The Iraqi forces near the IEDs that were hidden in plastic containers (Facebook page of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, February 29, 2020)

Diyala Province

► **On February 29, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force located and destroyed two ISIS “guesthouses” on the outskirts of Khanaqin (about 100 km northeast of Baqubah). They found materials for making IEDs, weapons and logistics equipment (al-hashed.net, February 29, 2020).

The Sinai Peninsula

► **This week, the scope of activity of ISIS’s Sinai Province increased. The main activity was as follows:**

- ◆ **On March 3, 2020**, Egyptian soldiers were targeted by sniper fire at two checkpoints west of Rafah. One soldier was killed and the other was wounded (Telegram, March 3, 2020).
- ◆ **On March 2, 2020**, Egyptian soldiers were targeted by sniper fire at a checkpoint south of Rafah. One soldier was killed and the other was wounded (Telegram, March 3, 2020).
- ◆ **On March 2, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army foot patrol west of a checkpoint south of Rafah. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, March 3, 2020).
- ◆ **On February 25, 2020**, ISIS operatives activated an IED against Egyptian commandos in Karam al-Quadis, east of Al-Arish. Four soldiers were killed, including an officer with the rank of *muqaddam* (lieutenant colonel). Two other soldiers were wounded (Telegram, February 26, 2020).



Egyptian army Muqaddam (Lieutenant Colonel) Ahmed Shahata, killed by an IED detonated by ISIS (Anbaa Sinaa Facebook Page, February 25, 2020)

- ◆ **On February 25, 2020**, an Egyptian army APC was targeted by gunfire near the Port of Rafah. The APC was put out of commission. In addition, a rocket was launched at an Egyptian army camp (Telegram, February 27, 2020).
- ◆ **On February 27, 2020**, ISIS operatives took an Egyptian army “agent” prisoner east of Sheikh Zuweid. After being interrogated, he was executed (Telegram, February 28, 2020).
- ◆ **On February 27, 2020**, an Egyptian soldier was targeted by sniper fire at a checkpoint south of Rafah. He was killed (Telegram, February 28, 2020).

The activity of ISIS’s provinces in Africa and Asia

Africa

Nigeria

► On February 25, 27 and 29, 2020, **ISIS operatives repelled several Nigerian army attacks** in Baga, about 25 km southwest of the Nigeria-Chad border (in Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria). During the attacks, exchanges of fire took place between the Nigerian army and ISIS operatives, and ISIS operatives activated IEDs. According to ISIS, several Nigerian soldiers were killed or wounded in the attacks (Telegram, February 26, 27, 29, 2020).

Somalia

► **On February 28, 2020, ISIS’s Somalia Province released a video** entitled Answer to Call [Number] Three. **The video is intended to recruit new operatives, especially Somalis and Ethiopians.** It includes documentation of the training of Somalia Province operatives, including physical fitness training, light arms training, assault, and mountaineering (Telegram, February 28, 2020). The video shows a masked operative codenamed Abu Mus’ab the Ethiopian, who emphasizes the importance of jihad in Islam, as perceived by ISIS. Another operative, a Somali codenamed Jibril of Mogadishu, calls on Muslims around the world to join ISIS (Telegram, February 28, 2020). The video ends with documentation of attacks carried out against the Somali government and the execution of security personnel and collaborators with the Somali authorities (Telegram, February 28, 2020).

► **In the ITIC’s assessment, the special mention of Ethiopian operatives in the video stems from the Somalia Province’s interest in recruiting them** to expand ISIS’s influence to new areas and to cope with the sparse number of ISIS supporters and operatives in Somalia (where the jihadist organization is Al-Shabab, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda).



Right: Physical training of ISIS's Somalia Province operatives. Left: Light weapons training of Somalia Province operatives (Telegram, February 28, 2020)



Execution of a Somali security forces operative (Telegram, February 28, 2020)

Yemen

- **On February 25, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a camp of the Houthi rebels in Qifah, in the northwestern Al-Bayda Province (about 100 km southeast of Sana'a). One Houthi fighter was killed and three others were seriously wounded (Telegram, February 26, 2020).
- **On February 25, 2020**, an IED was activated against a vehicle of the Houthi rebels in Qifah, in the northwestern Al-Bayda Province. The passengers were wounded (Telegram, February 27, 2020).

Bangladesh

- **On February 28, 2020**, an IED was activated against Bangladeshi police in the city of Chittagong, about 200 km southeast of the capital Dhaka. Three policemen and two police officers were wounded (Telegram, February 29, 2020).

The Philippines

- **On February 25, 2020**, operatives of ISIS's East Asia Province exchanged fire with the Philippine army on Jolo Island, in the southwestern Philippines. Two Filipino soldiers were killed (Telegram, February 26, 2020).

Afghanistan

- ISIS's Khorasan Province **detonated two motorcycle bombs among a crowd of Shiites in the capital Kabul**. According to ISIS, three Shiites were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 27, 2020). According to the Afghan Interior Ministry, one person was killed and six others were wounded when an IED attached to a bicycle was detonated in the city (Khaama Press, February 27, 2020).
- According to a spokesman for the US forces operating in Afghanistan, **US forces eliminated 18 ISIS operatives in the Kunar Province between February 27 and March 3, 2020. Another 42 operatives handed themselves in to the Afghan government forces** (March 3, 2020). On March 2, 2020, six ISIS operatives, including senior commanders, were reportedly killed in a US airstrike in the Kunar Province (Khaama Press, March 2, 2020). The operation against ISIS is being carried out in light of the renewal of ISIS's activity in the Kunar Province after several months of inactivity in Afghanistan.