



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

May 7-13, 2020



## Overview

- ▶ **In the Idlib region** in northern Syria, the ceasefire is still surviving but **the intensity and severity of the incidents have recently been increasing**. This week, jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda attacked Syrian army positions. This was the most serious incident since the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Turkey. Both sides reportedly sustained dozens of fatalities.
- ▶ **In Iraq, ISIS is continuing its intensive activity**, taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reduced activity of the US-led International Coalition. **One noteworthy attack this week was carried out among the Shiite population in Baghdad, when five IEDs were simultaneously detonated**. The attack constitutes **additional evidence of ISIS's improved operational capabilities and the increase in its boldness**, enabling it to carry out showcase attacks along with its routine guerrilla attacks.
- ▶ **The most noteworthy incident** in ISIS's provinces abroad was a **suicide bombing attack in the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan**. A suicide bomber blew himself up with his explosive vest among Afghan security forces and a militia that supports them during the funeral procession of a local commander. According to ISIS, over 100 security personnel were killed or wounded.

## The Idlib region

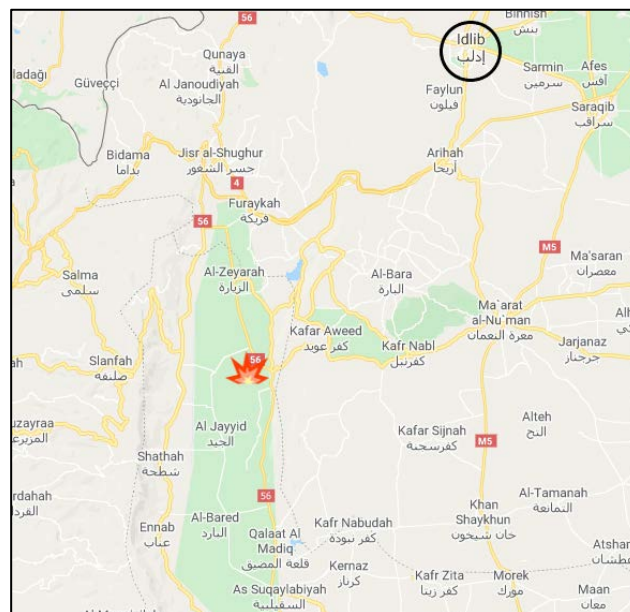
### Overview

The ceasefire in the Idlib region **was violated this week by an attack of jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda against positions of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it. This was the most serious incident since the Russian-Turkish ceasefire agreement**. There were also exchanges of artillery fire between the Syrian army and rebel organizations. However, **the joint patrols** of the Syrian and Turkish armies continued in accordance with the ceasefire agreement between them (March 5, 2020). **The**

ceasefire is still maintained but the intensity and severity of the incidents have recently been on the rise.

## Jihadi organizations' attack against Syrian army positions

► On May 10, 2020, the “Awaken the Believers” operations room, affiliated with Al-Qaeda<sup>1</sup>, announced that **its operatives had attacked positions of the forces supporting the Syrian army in the northern Al-Ghab Plain** (southwest of Idlib). Among others, operatives of the **Turkestan Islamic Party** (Uyghurs from China) took part in the attack. The attacking operatives seem to have taken control of several positions of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it.



**The area in the northern Al-Ghab Plain attacked by jihadi organizations (marked with an icon of an explosion) (Google Maps)**

► On the evening of May 10, 2020, **the Syrian army and the forces supporting it mounted a counterattack and regained control of the positions taken over by the jihadi operatives.** In the wake of the attack, the Syrian army fired artillery at several villages in the Al-Ghab Plain. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (May 10, 2020), at least 37 Syrian soldiers were killed in the clashes, as well as 24 operatives of the jihadi organizations (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 11, 2020).

<sup>1</sup> The “Awaken the Believers” operations room includes four jihadi organizations led by the Guardians of Religion Organization, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda.



**Right: Firing an anti-aircraft gun mounted on a Syrian army vehicle at the jihadi operatives (Sisar1@Sisar110 Twitter account, affiliated with the Syrian and Russian armies, May 10, 2020). Left: Syrian army tank seized by the jihadi operatives (@abdallhhrfan Twitter account affiliated with the rebel organizations, May 11, 2020).**

### Joint patrols of the Russian and Turkish armies continue

► Since the Turkish army enforced the Russian and Turkish joint patrols (April 26, 2020), **these patrols continued on a regular basis. On May 7, 2020**, Turkey and Russia carried out **the ninth joint patrol** on the M-4 highway (Anatolia, May 7, 2020). The patrol reached the outskirts of the city of Ariha, about 12 km south of Idlib. **On May 12, 2020, the tenth joint patrol was carried out** (Edlib Plus Facebook page, May 8, 2020). The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced its objection to the joint patrols and support of the protest watches of the residents (Ibaa, May 8, 2020). In practice, there were crowds of demonstrators in the Ariha area while the tenth patrol was carried out but they did not prevent it (Edlib Plus Facebook page, May 12, 2020).



**Armored vehicles of the Turkish army and the Russian Military Police during the tenth joint patrol (Idlib Plus Facebook page, May 12, 2020)**

## Northeastern Syria

### The area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal

- ▶ **On May 10, 2020**, SDF fighters were targeted by machine gun fire about 10 km north of Al-Mayadeen. Two fighters were killed (Telegram, May 11, 2020).
- ▶ **On May 9, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 45 km south of Al-Mayadeen. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, May 11, 2020).

### The Al-Hasakah area

- ▶ **On May 7, 2020**, an “agent” of the SDF forces was shot and killed about 30 km south of Al-Hasakah (Telegram, May 7, 2020).
- ▶ **On May 6, 2020**, an SDF fighter was shot and killed about 30 km south of Al-Hasakah. According to ISIS’s statement, he was an operative of the Kurdish Internal Security forces (Telegram, May 7, 2020).

## Eastern Syria (Al-Sukhnah-Palmyra region)

- ▶ **On May 7, 2020**, ISIS attacked a convoy of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it in the desert area northeast of Al-Sukhnah. A total of 11 officers and soldiers of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it were killed and others were wounded (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 7, 2020).

## The Iraqi arena

**Iraq continues to be the main arena of ISIS’s global activity**, while ISIS takes advantage of the spread of COVID-19<sup>2</sup> and the decrease in the scope of activity of the US-led International Coalition. This week, ISIS’s activity continued in the forms characterizing past weeks: activation of IEDs, mortar shell fire, sniper fire, and targeted killings. The most prominent attack was the detonation of five IEDs in Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad. In addition, **this week, ISIS set fire to wheat fields as part of a modus operandi which it calls the “economic war” against its enemies.**

<sup>2</sup> According to the Iraqi Health Ministry, the total number of people who have been infected with COVID-19 in Iraq is **2,818** (updated to May 11, 2020). **The number of active cases is 918. A total of 110 died of the disease while 1,790 recovered** (Facebook account of the Iraqi Health Ministry, May 11, 2020).

## ISIS's Iraq Province taking the lead in ISIS's activity

► On May 7, 2020, ISIS released an infographic entitled “The Harvest of the Fighters,” summing up **its activity in the various provinces around the world between April 30 and May 6, 2020. A total of 88 attacks were carried out around the world during this time, 72% of them (64 attacks) in Iraq. Syria** follows (with only 10 attacks) and then **West Africa** (seven attacks). The number of casualties caused by ISIS also reflects **Iraq's leading position**: the number of casualties in Iraq was 109, compared to 39 in Syria and 30 in West Africa (Telegram, May 7, 2020).

## Background and reasons for the increase in the scope of ISIS's activity in Syria and Iraq

► Charles Lister, a senior fellow and director of the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Program of the Washington based Middle East Institute (MEI), **recently wrote an article addressing the significant increase in the scope of ISIS's activity in Syria and Iraq**<sup>3</sup>:

- ◆ **In Syria**, there has been an increase in the scope of ISIS's activity due to a combination of a severe shortage of manpower in the army and the Syrian regime focusing on fighting against other enemies [i.e., against the rebel organizations, mainly the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the Idlib region, which is currently the regime's top priority].

- ◆ **In Iraq**, the escalation in ISIS's activity was made possible due to the combination of the withdrawal of the US forces from strategic key points, abandoning frontline posts to less capable, often divided, and poorly resourced Iraqi security forces; along with the spread of COVID-19, leading to a decrease in the scope of activity of the Iraqi security forces.

► In these two arenas, **the more significant escalation is in Iraq**. It occurred in two stages: **In the first stage**, following the Iraqi government's announcement on “ISIS's defeat” in 2017, ISIS operatives temporarily retreated to remote, largely unpopulated areas in order to regroup in advance of resuming action. **In the second stage**, which is currently underway, ISIS has increased the number of its operatives and the scope of its activity mainly in the governorates of Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah al-Din. Its operatives have also increased the use of sophisticated night-time tactics, suicide bombings, and multi-pronged coordinated assaults.

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Lister, ISIS's dramatic escalation in Syria and Iraq, May 4, 2020 (<https://www.mei.edu/blog/isiss-dramatic-escalation-syria-and-iraq>).

The Iraqi army, on its part, has failed to come up with a proper response due to lack of relevant intelligence.

### ISIS's “economic war” against Iraq

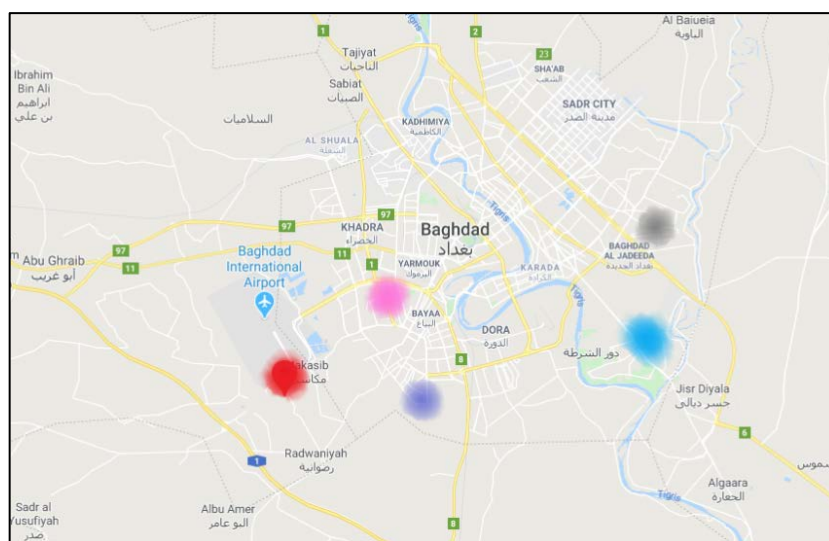
► According to a report by an Iraqi “security source,” on May 9, 2020, **ISIS burnt over 40 dunams of agricultural land** in the Khanaqin region, the Diyala Province. On the following day (May 10, 2020), ISIS operatives abducted farmers who were harvesting the wheat (Iraqi News Agency; Al-Sumaria, May 10, 2020).

ISIS did not claim responsibility for setting fire to the fields and abducting the farmers. However, in the ITIC's assessment, **this can be viewed as part of the “economic war” waged by ISIS against its enemies.** As part of this war, **ISIS recently blew up IEDs to sabotage high voltage lines**, including lines supplying electricity from Iran to Iraq.

### Detonating IEDs in Baghdad

► On May 10, 2020, ISIS simultaneously detonated **five IEDs among Shiite crowds** in south and southeast Baghdad (see map). According to ISIS, **36 Shiites were killed and wounded as a result** (Telegram, May 11, 2020).

► An Iraqi “security source” reported that the Iraqi security forces had neutralized another IED planted in a car in an open market in northeast Baghdad. **Thus, a sixth terrorist attack which was supposed to take place on the same day was thwarted.** According to the Iraqi version of the events on that day, there were far fewer casualties than stated by ISIS (one killed and about 10 wounded) (Al-Sumaria, May 10, 2020).



**The Shiite areas where IEDs were detonated in Baghdad: Al-Amin neighborhood (marked in pink), Al-Amel neighborhood (marked in black), Al-Za'franiyah (marked in blue), Abu Dashir neighborhood (marked in red), and the Al-Ma'alef area (marked in purple).**



**Explosion of the IED in the Al-Ma'alef area, in south Baghdad  
(glgamesh.com, May 10, 2020)**

In the ITIC's assessment, the combined attack in Baghdad was intended to cause as many casualties as possible among the Shiite population, undermine security in the Iraqi capital, and signal to the Iraqi regime and the entire Iraqi public **that ISIS's audacity was growing stronger and its operational capabilities were improving**. Even if these goals were not achieved in full, the attacks indicate that concurrently with its "routine" guerrilla activity, **ISIS strives to carry out showcase attacks with political and media repercussions in the Iraqi arena.**

## **Additional activity carried out by ISIS's Iraq Province during the past week**

### **Diyala Province**

- ▶ **On May 11, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force was targeted by machine gun fire. Two Popular Mobilization operatives were killed and another was wounded (Telegram, May 12, 2020).
- ▶ **On May 10, 2020**, an IED was activated against a Popular Mobilization vehicle about 4 km north of Khanaqin. Two Popular Mobilization fighters were killed and two others were wounded (Telegram, May 12, 2020).
- ▶ **On May 7, 2020**, a policeman was targeted by sniper fire about 20 km northeast of Baqubah. He was killed (Telegram, May 7, 2020). The policeman who was killed reportedly served in the Iraqi government's counterterrorism unit (Al-Sumaria, May 7, 2020).
- ▶ **On May 7, 2020**, an IED was activated against a vehicle of the Iraqi government's counterterrorism unit about 50 km northeast of Baqubah. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, May 8, 2020).

### Kirkuk Province

- ▶ **On May 11, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi police vehicle about 40 km southwest of Kirkuk. All the passengers were wounded (Telegram, May 11, 2020).
- ▶ **On May 4, 2020**, ISIS operatives ambushed a Tribal Mobilization vehicle about 40 km southwest of Kirkuk. During the attack, they fired machine guns and activated an IED. Four Tribal Mobilization operatives were killed and others were wounded. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, May 6, 2020).

### Baghdad Province

- ▶ **On May 7, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization commander was targeted by gunfire about 20 km southeast of Baghdad. He was killed (Telegram, May 8, 2020).

### Babel Province

- ▶ **On May 7, 2020**, a sticky bomb attached to an Iraqi policeman's car was detonated about 20 km southwest of Baghdad. He was killed (Telegram, May 9, 2020).

### Salah al-Din Province

- ▶ **On May 10, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force was attacked. Three Popular Mobilization fighters were killed (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

### Erbil Province

- ▶ **On May 11, 2020**, a Kurdish Peshmerga fighter was targeted by machine gun fire about 50 km southwest of Erbil. He was killed (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

### Al-Anbar Province

- ▶ **On May 10, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle in an area west of Hit, about 140 km northwest of Baghdad. Two soldiers were killed (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

## Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

### Nineveh Province

- ▶ **On May 11, 2020**, the Popular Mobilization announced that it had attacked 15 ISIS operatives during a security operation throughout the province (Al-Sumaria, May 11, 2020).

## The Sinai Peninsula

### ISIS activity

- ▶ **On May 10, 2020**, an ISIS sniper fired at an Egyptian army checkpoint south of Rafah. An Egyptian soldier was wounded (Telegram, May 10, 2020).

## ISIS explains why its operatives are killing Egyptian soldiers

► On May 7, 2020, ISIS published an **infographic, entitled “Why Did We Kill Them?”** detailing the reasons for its fight against the Egyptian army and attacks on its soldiers. The reasons were cited from an audiotape of Abu Osama al-Masri, the leader of ISIS’s Sinai Province who was killed in an airstrike (June 2018). The main reasons: These are “soldiers of the tyrant,” i.e., Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi; Egyptian soldiers are allies of the Jews and Christians; They rejected Islamic law (sharia) and obey laws enacted by human beings instead of the laws of Allah; They destroyed mosques, exiled Muslims, killed innocent people and tortured them (from ISIS’s Al-Naba’ weekly, published on Telegram, May 7, 2020).

## Activity of ISIS’s other provinces

### Africa

#### Nigeria

► **On May 11, 2020**, operatives of ISIS’s West Africa Province ambushed a Nigerian army convoy about 100 km northeast of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. One soldier was killed and others were wounded. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

► **On May 7, 2020**, operatives of ISIS’s West Africa Province ambushed a Nigerian army convoy about 80 km southwest of Maiduguri. Several soldiers were killed or wounded. In addition, a Nigerian army tanker, truck and another vehicle were seized (Telegram, May 7, 2020).



**Nigerian army tanker and another vehicle seized by ISIS operatives  
(Telegram, May 8, 2020)**

► **On May 6, 2020**, five mortar shells were fired at a Nigerian army camp about 50 km southeast of Damaturu, the capital of Yobe State. According to ISIS, accurate hits of the target were observed (Telegram, May 7, 2020).

## Niger

► **On May 11, 2020**, operatives of ISIS's West Africa Province halted an attempted advance by the Nigerien army near the border with Borno State in northeastern Nigeria. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

## Mozambique

► **On May 11, 2020**, operatives of ISIS's Central Africa Province set fire to two Mozambican army compounds and homes of Christian residents in the area of Cabo Delgado in the northeastern part of the country (about 100 km southeast of the border between Mozambique and Tanzania). The compounds and houses were damaged (Telegram, May 11, 2020).

## Somalia

► **On May 9, 2020**, two Somali policemen were targeted by machine gun fire in the suburbs of Mogadishu. One policeman was killed and the other was wounded (Telegram, May 9, 2020).

## Asia

### Afghanistan

#### ISIS suicide bombing attack in the Nangarhar Province

► **On May 12, 2020**, a suicide bomber carried out an attack during the funeral procession of a local police commander in the Nangarhar Province, in eastern Afghanistan. At least 24 people were killed and 68 were wounded (khaama.com, May 12, 2020).

► **ISIS's Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for the attack.** According to the claim of responsibility, a suicide bomber blew himself up with his explosive belt among Afghan security forces and fighters of a militia that supports the Afghan army. The attack was carried out during the funeral procession of an Afghan militia commander in the Nangarhar Province. According to ISIS, over 100 security operatives were killed or wounded (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

#### Additional ISIS operations

► **On May 11, 2020**, a Taliban fighter was targeted by gunfire southwest of Jalalabad. He was killed (Telegram, May 12, 2020).

► **On May 11, 2020**, an IED was activated against the vehicle of **General Nadir, a senior officer in the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS)**. The officer and his escorts were wounded. When the Afghan security forces arrived at the scene of the attack, three IEDs

were activated against them. At least 11 security personnel were killed or wounded (Telegram, May 11, 2020).



**IED activated against the vehicle of a senior officer in the Afghan NDS  
(Telegram, May 11, 2020)**

► **On May 6, 2020**, an IED was activated against a motorcycle carrying two Taliban fighters southwest of Jalalabad. Both of the fighters were wounded (Telegram, May 7, 2020).

### Counterterrorism and preventive activity

► **On May 11, 2020**, the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) announced that Special Forces of the Afghan police **in Kabul had apprehended Sheikh Abu Amar al-Khorasani, the ISIS commander in charge of the organization’s activity in South Asia and the Far East**. Two other senior ISIS officials were apprehended together with him: Abu Ali, who is in charge of intelligence, and Suheib, who is in charge of public relations (khaama.com, May 11, 2020).

### Pakistan

► **On May 10, 2020**, a man accused of “witchcraft” was targeted by gunfire in the city of Peshawar, about 40 km east of the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was killed (Telegram, May 11, 2020).

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### Spain

► The counterterrorism unit of the Spanish police, in collaboration with the security services of Morocco and the United States, detained a Moroccan citizen in Barcelona suspected of planning ISIS terrorist attacks. In the past two weeks, Spanish police have arrested two other ISIS operatives, possibly because of ISIS’s intention to increase its activity in Europe (Reuters, May 8, 2020; The Daily Mail, May 9, 2020).

## Poland

► According to a spokesman for the Polish Special Forces, four ISIS operatives from Tajikistan have been arrested in Poland on charges of attempting to recruit Polish converts to Islam to the ranks of ISIS. This is a third or fourth arrest of Tajikistani ISIS operatives in Europe in recent months (Reuters, May 11, 2020; The New York Times, May 11, 2020).