Overview

The ceasefire is being maintained in the Idlib region of northern Syria, but there has been an increase in the number of local incidents between the warring sides. At the same time, there were violent clashes between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Guardians of Religion and other Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadi organizations. This is in view of the effort by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham to impose its control over the other jihadi organizations (with Turkish support?) coupled with the fear of an imminent attack by the Syrian army.

The Iraq Province continues to be ISIS’s most active province, but there has also been a resurgence in the activity of the Syria Province. ISIS’s activity in these two provinces was “routine” (activating IEDs, attacking positions, and targeted killings). This week, ISIS continued its attacks in the Turkish control zone in northern Syria (the site of Operation Euphrates Shield), north and northeast of Aleppo. The attacks consisted mainly of activating IEDs and targeted killings. In the ITIC’s assessment, what triggered ISIS’s resurgence was a targeted killing of two ISIS senior operatives, which was carried out by a drone.

According to a report in the newspaper Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, a joint military operation against ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula carried out by the Egyptian army and Bedouin tribesmen failed. This led to the termination of the operation after over one month of activity. The reasons for the failure were heavy losses by the Egyptian army and the tribal forces, internal tribal disputes, and the success of ISIS’s Sinai Province in maintaining its survival by setting up underground hiding places. The Egyptian army and the tribal forces collaborating with it recently suffered losses in Jabal al-Maghara (June 24, 2020) and south of Rafah (June 19, 2020).

In Africa, ISIS continued its “routine” activity in Nigeria, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia (activating IEDs, attacking army camps and outposts, and firing mortar shells).
The Idlib region

Incidents in the Idlib region between the jihadi organizations

- **On the night of June 30, 2020**, the Syrian army and the forces supporting it attempted to advance in an area 20 km south of Idlib. The Syrian forces took control of several buildings and military positions of the rebel organizations. The rebel organizations subsequently regained control. The Syrian forces sustained casualties (Khotwa, June 30, 2020).

- **On the night of June 28-29, 2020**, the rebel organizations fired antitank rockets at the Syrian forces south of Idlib. Two soldiers were killed and several others were wounded. In response, the Syrian forces fired artillery at the rebel forces. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham sustained several casualties (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 29, 2020).

- **On June 29, 2020**, the Syrian army and the forces supporting it attempted to advance toward positions of the rebel organizations about 35 km south of Idlib. The sides exchanged artillery fire (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 29, 2020).

- **On June 29, 2020**, the Syrian forces fired artillery at a village about 20 km south of Idlib (Edlib Media Center – EMC, June 29, 2020). The artillery was reportedly fired at a Turkish observation post in the village (Idlib Plus, June 29, 2020).

- **On June 28, 2020**, Syrian army forces fired artillery at an area about 40 km southwest of Idlib and at the area of Jabal Zawiya, about 25 km south of Idlib (Idlib Plus, June 28, 2020).

- **On June 28, 2020**, Syrian army forces fired artillery at an area about 20 km south of Idlib (and 7 km northwest of Maarat Nu'man) (Idlib Plus, June 28, 2020).

**The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to fortify itself in Jabal Zawiya**

- The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to fortify itself in Jabal Zawiya, south of Idlib (Ibaa, June 30, 2020). In addition, the organization sent reinforcements to this region (June 8, 2020). In the ITIC's assessment, the activity carried out in the region is due to the organization’s concern about an imminent Syrian army attack.
Clashes between jihadi organizations continue

Clashes between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Guardians of Religion Organization and other Al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadi organizations continued in the Idlib region. In the ITIC’s assessment, the main reason for these clashes is an effort made by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham to impose its control on the jihadi organizations, being concerned about an imminent attack by the Syrian forces. This activity is possibly supported by Turkey, which is interested in weakening the jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

Following are the main events of the last week:

- On June 25, 2020, there were exchanges of fire west of Idlib between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and operatives of the “Stand Fast” operations room. The operations room, headed by the Guardians of Religion Organization, includes four other jihadi organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Edlib Media Center – EMC, June 25, 2020).

- On June 26, 2020, the military wing of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham released a leaflet calling for the unification of all military forces in the Idlib region. The leaflet bans the establishment of an additional operations room or an additional network, so that all military activity will be conducted by the “Obvious Victory” operations room controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Ibaa, June 26, 2020).

- The other jihadi organizations refused to accept the dictate of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. Therefore, operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham attacked two command posts and checkpoints of the operations room of the Guardians of Religion and the other jihadi organizations. A total
of 18 operatives of the Guardians of Religion Organization, including a foreign commander, were killed in the attack, as well as 11 operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 26, 2020).

On June 29, 2020, the Directorate of the Liberated Areas, which manages all civilian matters in the Idlib region, released a leaflet ordering the closure of all military command posts in the Idlib region except for those belonging to the “Obvious Victory” operations room (Telegram, June 28, 2020).

Northeastern Syria

The area of Deir ez-Zor, Al-Mayadeen, and Albukamal

On June 30, 2020, an SDF checkpoint was targeted by machine gun fire about 30 km north of Al-Mayadeen. Three SDF fighters were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 30, 2020).

On June 28, 2020, an SDF intelligence operative was targeted by machine gun fire about 4 km northeast of Al-Mayadeen. He was killed (Telegram, June 29, 2020).

On June 27, 2020, an IED was activated against a tanker carrying oil for the Syrian regime on the road leading to the Al-Omar oil field, about 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. The tanker belonged to Al-Qaterji, a Syrian MP and commander in the Homeland Defense Forces (Telegram, June 28, 2020).

On June 25, 2020, two SDF fighters were targeted by gunfire about 7 km northeast of Albukamal. One fighter was killed and the other was wounded (Telegram, June 26, 2020).

On June 24, 2020, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle 5 km east of Al-Mayadeen. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

On June 24, 2020, an IED was activated against a tanker belonging to Al-Qaterji on the road leading to the Al-Omar oil field, 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. The tanker was damaged (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

Al-Raqqah area

On June 27, 2020, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 10 km west of Al-Raqqah. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 27, 2020).
Northern Syria (the Turkish control zone)

Recently, ISIS has begun to issue claims of responsibility for attacks carried out by its operatives against the Turkish army and Turkish-backed rebel organizations operating in the region of Al-Bab and Manbij. The region is situated in northern Syria, near the Syrian-Turkish border, in the Turkish army control zone (the site of Operation Euphrates Shield). Apparently, ISIS carries out its activity and issues claims of responsibility due to a targeted killing carried out near the city of Al-Bab, in which two senior ISIS operatives were eliminated (June 20, 2020).

► On June 25, 2020, two operatives riding a motorcycle shot and killed the man in charge of the real estate offices in the city of Al-Bab, about 30 km northeast of Aleppo (Baladi, a Syrian news website affiliated with the rebel forces, June 26, 2020). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. According to ISIS’s statement, machine guns were fired at an “intelligence agent” belonging to the National Liberation Front (a Turkish-sponsored umbrella organization fighting against the Syrian army in the Idlib region alongside the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). He was killed (Telegram, June 25, 2020).

► On June 24, 2020, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle in the city of Manbij, about 75 km northeast of Aleppo. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

► On June 23, 2020, an IED was activated against a Turkish army armored vehicle on the road between Al-Raee (about 40 km north of Aleppo) and Al-Bab. The crew members were wounded (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

Turkish army armored vehicle hit by an ISIS IED on the Al-Raee-Al-Bab road (Telegram, June 24, 2020)

1 For details, see the ITIC’s Spotlight on Global Jihad from June 18-24, 2020. No claim of responsibility for the targeted killing was issued.
Al-Hasakah area

► On June 24, 2020, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle on the road between the villages of Abu Rasin (about 60 km northeast of Al-Hasakah) and Tal Tamar (about 35 km northwest of Al-Hasakah). One fighter was killed and others were wounded (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

Video of ISIS in the Al-Sham Province, Al-Hasakah region

► ISIS’s Al-Sham Province in the Al-Hasakah region released a video entitled “Campaign of Attrition 3.” This is yet another video in a series which includes reports on attacks carried out by ISIS as part of the “Raids of Attrition” campaign of last month. The videos include footage from attacks carried out by ISIS against the Kurdish forces (SDF) in the Al-Hasakah area last year. The video warns residents and local tribes not to collaborate with the SDF forces or else they will be eliminated by ISIS. In addition, the video shows preparations for firing rockets against the Al-Shadadi military camp allegedly used by the Americans. The video conveys a threatening message to the Kurds that ISIS has an “unsettled account” with them, which will be addressed after the Americans withdraw from the area (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

Right: Detonation of an ISIS IED against SDF fighters (Telegram, June 24, 2020). Left: Leaflet distributed to local residents by ISIS operatives, warning them not to collaborate with the SDF (Isdarat, June 28, 2020).
Revolt of ISIS prisoners

On June 29, 2020, ISIS prisoners held in a prison in south Al-Hasakah revoluted (Halab Today TV Twitter account, June 29, 2020). Among other things, the ISIS prisoners demanded to be tried by an international court. Their demand was forwarded to the International Coalition forces, which have not yet responded (Twitter account of Serdar Mehmoud, a Kurdish commander in the SDF and resident of Kobani, in northern Syria, June 30, 2020).

Al-Sukhnah-Palmyra area

On June 22, 2020, ISIS operatives exchanged fire with the Syrian army in the city of Al-Sukhnah, about 60 km northeast of Palmyra. Two soldiers were killed and another was wounded. In addition, ISIS operatives seized a vehicle with a heavy machine gun (Telegram, June 24, 2020).

The Iraqi arena

Iraq and Syria’s leading positions in ISIS’s attacks

On June 25, 2020, ISIS released an infographic entitled “The Harvest of the Fighters,” summing up its activity in the various provinces between June 18 and June 24, 2020. According to the infographic, a total of 44 attacks were carried out by ISIS around the world (compared to 52 attacks in the preceding week). A total of 16 attacks (about 36% of all the attacks carried out by ISIS around the globe) were carried out in Iraq. In addition, 15 attacks were carried out in Syria (about 34%). Four attacks (about 9%) were carried out in West Africa (mainly in Nigeria), three in Central Africa, four in the Sinai Province, one in East Africa, and one in Egypt.
Asia (the Philippines), and one in Somalia (Al-Naba' weekly, as published on Telegram, June 25, 2020).

Over 193 people were killed and wounded in the attacks. The largest number of casualties (65) was in Iraq. The other casualties were in the provinces of West Africa (49), Syria (31), Sinai (25), East Asia (i.e., the Philippines) (10), Central Africa (9), and Somalia (4).

Attacks according to ISIS’s claims of responsibility

Diyala Province

- **On June 27, 2020**, Iraqi soldiers were targeted by sniper fire about 20 km northeast of Baqubah. Four soldiers were killed and four others were wounded. In addition, two antitank rockets were launched and hand grenades were thrown at an Iraqi force arriving at the scene. Three soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 28, 2020).

- **On June 26, 2020**, a vehicle carrying an Iraqi policeman was targeted by machine gun fire about 25 km northeast of Baqubah. He was killed (Telegram, June 28, 2020).

- **On June 24, 2020**, mortar shells were fired at a Shiite village about 20 km northeast of Baqubah. Damage was caused (Telegram, June 25, 2020).

- **On June 24, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle about 100 km northeast of Baqubah. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 25, 2020).

- **On June 24, 2020**, an IED was activated against two Shiites in a village about 35 km northeast of Baqubah. Both were wounded (Telegram, June 25, 2020).

Salah al-Din Province

- **On June 28, 2020**, ISIS operatives activated several IEDs planted in an Iraqi army observation tower about 40 km north of Baghdad. The tower was destroyed (Telegram, June 29, 2020).

- **On June 27, 2020**, two Iraqi soldiers were targeted by machine gun fire about 30 km north of Baghdad. One soldier was killed and the other was wounded. In addition, a thermal camera was destroyed (Telegram, June 28, 2020).

- **On June 27, 2020**, machine guns were fired and hand grenades were thrown at an Iraqi army compound about 30 km north of Baghdad. One soldier was killed and another was wounded. In addition, there was an exchange of fire with another force arriving at the scene to provide assistance. Two soldiers were killed and two others were wounded (Telegram, June 27, 2020).
On June 25, 2020, an IED was activated against a Tribal Mobilization vehicle about 15 km north of Baiji. One fighter was wounded (Telegram, June 26, 2020).

**Kirkuk Province**

On June 27, 2020, an Iraqi federal police compound was targeted by machine gun fire about 35 km west of Kirkuk. Three policemen were killed and another was wounded (Telegram, June 27, 2020).

On June 26, 2020, an IED was activated against an Iraqi police vehicle about 65 km southwest of Kirkuk. The passengers were wounded (Telegram, June 26, 2020).

**Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces**

**Al-Anbar Province**

On June 27, 2020, a joint force of the Popular Mobilization and the Iraqi army, operating on the basis of intelligence, captured two ISIS operatives about 30 km northwest of Baghdad (al-hashed.net, June 27, 2020).  

![One of two ISIS operatives captured northwest of Baghdad](al-hashed.net, June 27, 2020)

**Kirkuk Province**

On June 28, 2020, two “terrorist operatives” (implicitly ISIS operatives) attempted to attack Iraqi security forces 40 km southwest of Kirkuk. An Iraqi police force mounted a counterattack. Both operatives were killed (Al-Sumaria, June 28, 2020).

**Nineveh Province**

On June 27, 2020, an Iraqi Interior Ministry Intelligence force apprehended seven wanted ISIS operatives. These operatives took part in attacks against the Iraqi security forces and forced the residents to pay protection money during the time when the Nineveh Province was under ISIS’s control (Telegram, June 27, 2020).
Diyala Province

On June 27, 2020, a Popular Mobilization force located an ISIS guesthouse containing logistics equipment about 90 km northeast of Baqubah (al-hashed.net, April 27, 2020).

The importance of the Iraqi-Syrian border region for ISIS

Iraqi scholar Husham al-Hashimi, a research fellow at the Center for Global Policy (CGP), recently published an article on the importance of the Iraqi-Syrian border for ISIS. The article ends with recommendations for improving the Iraqi administration’s methods of action in the border region. Following are the main points of the article:

ISIS’s establishment in the Iraqi-Syrian border area

After ISIS took control of Mosul in Iraq in 2014 and announced the establishment of the caliphate, it released a video entitled “The End of [the] Sykes-Picot [Agreement],” i.e., the cancellation of the border between Iraq and Syria. Through this video, and another video entitled “Removing the Barriers,” ISIS promoted the idea of the so-called borderless caliphate. This concept contributed to the flow of jihadist operatives from around the world to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. The Iraqi-Syrian border region has served as a springboard for the establishment of ISIS and for its takeover of vast territories in Syria and Iraq. It also constituted ISIS’s last stronghold after the downfalls that it had suffered. The reasons that made it possible for ISIS to control the Iraq-Syria border region include: internal disputes

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Dr. Husham Al-Hashimi is a nonresident research fellow at the Global Policy Center, an American institute dealing with the interface between US foreign policy and countries with a Muslim majority. His study is the 10th part of ISIS 2020, a series of studies on ISIS’s current status written by various authors.
between extremist organizations, ethnic and tribal splits, social schisms and considerable support for the idea of abolishing the border between the two countries.

ISIS did not choose to operate in the Iraqi-Syrian border region because it enjoyed popularity there but rather in order to take advantage of the prevailing feelings among local Sunni Arabs that they are being denied political and economic rights. ISIS’s clerics have taken advantage of the spread of Salafist ideas in the region among the Sunni population, which constitutes a majority in the region, to disseminate jihadist ideas and promote the idea of the reestablishment of the historical caliphate. To that end, they recruited local tribespeople and turned them into extremist preachers, who recruited supporters for them from local villagers and towns.

**The Iraqi-Syrian border region as a source of manpower for ISIS**

Since ISIS abolished the border between the two countries, the border region has become a vital region used for transferring funds, managing military operations, and recruiting operatives. Three main motives led members of the population to join ISIS: there were those who adopted its ideology and supported the caliphate that it established; and there were those who shared its political goals and objectives and fought against the local security forces without actually believing in the caliphate, simply because they felt marginalized and discriminated against. In addition, there were opportunists who joined ISIS for pragmatic reasons, including financial reasons.

**The economic and military importance of the border region**

The border region is of economic and military importance. There are abundant farmlands in some places near the border, producing various grains, wheat and hashish. In addition, there are deserts in the region that can be utilized for military purposes, including finding hiding places, and for logistical purposes. The control of security forces on both sides of the border was loose, enabling the existence of professional smuggling networks that took advantage of the lack of control of the two countries in the region. As a result, ISIS grew in the region and effectively organized its forces from there. Even today, the border area remains a thriving smuggling site, yielding profits for ISIS.

Reports by Iraqi security sources confirm that ISIS networks continue to smuggle goods, human beings, oil, weapons and drugs through the easily crossed border between Iraq and Syria. Their profits from the smuggling business are estimated at about $100,000 per day. The revenue that ISIS generates from the border economy enables it to
continue to finance its terrorist attacks, including against the Shiites. The profits that ISIS generates from the border region enable it to obtain weapons, food, medicine, vehicles and manpower. Local residents who opposed ISIS’s activity suffered considerably: between June 2014 and November 2017, ISIS operatives killed 3,400 people, wounded 10,000, and caused 250,000 to flee from their homes in the border region.

Recommendations for improving the Iraqi government’s methods

Today, the Iraqi-Syrian border region gives ISIS the breathing room that it needs to survive and rehabilitate its capabilities. One of the harsh methods by ISIS to achieve this is to force residents in poor rural areas that were liberated by the Iraqi army to support it. It does this by burning their crops and imposing taxes on farmers and shepherds. In consequence, Iraq’s interior and defense ministries, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the (Shiite) Popular Mobilization forces have begun to adopt a policy aimed at reinforcing the weak control over the border with Syria. They do so, for example, by improving coordination [among the forces operating near the border] and through the use of advanced technology including unconventional means of surveillance. Reinforcing the control will greatly reduce the considerable benefit that ISIS is reaping from the border region.

According to confessions of ISIS operatives taken prisoner, in the first nine months of 2019, about 1,200 ISIS operatives crossed the border with the help of local smugglers, corrupt security personnel and tribal leaders. Since ISIS operatives take advantage of the local residents’ lack of a sense of security, and since they exploit the instability in the areas where they live, the preferred way to put an end to ISIS’s attacks, in the long term, is to help the local residents and create social equality in the region; to find a solution to the displaced persons issue, including the closure of the displaced persons camps; and to treat local and tribal recruits equally. The Iraqi government must invest in those living in the border region, creating economic opportunities for them, along with a sense of security and trust in the government, and must stop marginalizing them lest they find themselves forced to collaborate with ISIS.

The Sinai Peninsula

ISIS activity

On June 28, 2020, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army vehicle in Rafah. The passengers were wounded (Telegram, June 30, 2020).
On June 28, 2020, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army tank southwest of Sheikh Zuweid. The members of the tank crew were wounded (Telegram, June 30, 2020).

On June 28, 2020, an IED was activated against an Egyptian armored vehicle southwest of Sheikh Zuweid. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 30, 2020).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

According to tribal sources in Sinai, the joint military operation by the Egyptian army and tribespeople in the Sinai Peninsula against ISIS’s Sinai Province, which began on May 25, 2020, has failed to achieve its objectives. This led to a drop in the intensity of the operation and even its complete termination in some areas. According to reports, the Egyptian army forces participating in the operation were sent back to their bases, and the tribal forces returned to their staging zones.

According to the same sources, the operation failed for several reasons: the killing of the commander of the operation in central Sinai and the killing of officers and soldiers in the Al-Maghara region in central Sinai; the vulnerability of those who cooperate with the Egyptian army in the attacks carried out by ISIS in Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid; internal disputes among the tribes and families cooperating with the Egyptian army; the ability of the operatives of ISIS’s Sinai Province to minimize the damage caused by airstrikes by constructing underground hiding places (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, June 24, 2020).

ISIS’s activity around the globe

Africa

Nigeria

On June 28, 2020, ISIS operatives ambushed Nigerian soldiers and fighters of the forces that support them on the road from Maiduguri (the capital of Borno State) and Damboa (about 85 km southwest of Maiduguri). Nine soldiers and fighters were killed and other soldiers were wounded. In addition, weapons, ammunition and vehicles were seized (Telegram, June 30, 2020).

On June 27, 2020, ISIS operatives activated an IED against a Nigerian army vehicle near the border between Nigeria and Niger. Six soldiers were killed (Telegram, June 27, 2020).

On June 25, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army camp about 45 km west of the Nigeria-Chad-Cameroon tri-border area. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 26, 2020).
On June 24, 2020, ISIS operatives fired mortar shells at a Nigerian army camp near the border between Nigeria and Niger. According to ISIS, accurate hits of the target were observed (Telegram, June 25, 2020).

On June 24, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army outpost near the border between Nigeria and Niger. Several Nigerian soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, June 25, 2020).

Democratic Republic of the Congo

On June 28, 2020, operatives of ISIS’s Central Africa Province attacked a Congolese army compound in the area of Beni, in the northeastern part of the country. Three soldiers were killed. Weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, June 28, 2020).

Mozambique

On June 27, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked two compounds in Cabo Delgado, in the northeastern part of the country. About 10 soldiers were killed and several others were wounded. Weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, June 28, 2020). According to local media reports, in the early morning, Islamist operatives mounted an attack on a city south of the region where there are natural gas projects worth about $60 billion. Several members of the Mozambican security forces were wounded (CTGN Africa, June 27, 2020).

Somalia

On June 25, 2020, an IED was activated against a Somalian police vehicle in Mogadishu. Seven policemen were killed (Telegram, June 26, 2020).
Asia

Yemen

On June 28, 2020, Houthi rebels were targeted by sniper fire in the area of Al-Zahra in Qifah (in the northwestern Al-Bayda Province). One Houthi rebel was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, June 30, 2020).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

The United States increased the monetary reward for anyone providing information about an ISIS

On June 24, 2020, the US Department of State announced a reward of up to $10 million to anyone providing information about ISIS leader Amir Muhammed Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla AKA Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi: About three weeks previously, on June 4, 2020, the US Department of State announced a reward of up to $5 million to anyone providing information about him (Rewards for Justice@RFJ_USA Twitter account, June 24, 2020)

Announcement of the increase in the amount of the reward of up to $10 million for anyone disclosing information about ISIS’s leader (Rewards for Justice@RFJ_USA Twitter account, June 24, 2020)