Spotlight on Global Jihad
(April 21 – May 4, 2016)

Main events of the week

■ **In Syria**, the fighting in the city of Aleppo and its northern rural area has escalated over the past two weeks. Syrian and Russian aircraft attacked targets in Aleppo neighborhoods controlled by the rebel organizations. The rebel organizations (including the Al-Nusra Front) fired rockets and mortar shells at neighborhoods controlled by the Syrian regime. Hundreds of civilians were killed in the fighting, and civilian infrastructure, including two hospitals, was damaged. The US and Russia are making diplomatic efforts to stop the escalation, revive the ceasefire and enable the resumption of the Geneva talks.

■ **In Iraq**, ISIS increased its terrorist attacks in Baghdad, using suicide bombers. The attacks are directed against the Shiite population and targets affiliated with the Iraqi regime. To strengthen the legitimacy of the terrorist attacks against the Shiites, ISIS distributed a video warning against Baghdad being turned into a Shiite center. Concurrently, ISIS continues its guerrilla warfare against the Iraqi Army, including in areas that were later supposedly liberated (suicide bombing attacks, attacks on convoys, and rocket fire).

■ According to reports from **Libya**, after lengthy battles ISIS has been ousted from the area dominating the city of Derna. If these reports are verified, this represents a blow to ISIS, weakening its status in eastern Libya. In the meantime, the Libyan media (hostile to ISIS) reported that the Libyan Army commanded by Khalifa Haftar was preparing for the liberation of the city of Sirte from the hands of ISIS and that ISIS was making preparations on the ground for the attack.

The ceasefire agreement

■ The severe clashes that have occurred recently in and around Aleppo between the Syrian regime and the rebel organizations have given rise to a feeling in Syria and internationally, that the ceasefire, which is being upheld to some degree and is now in its tenth week, **is in danger of collapse**. Following the escalation in Aleppo, the Geneva talks have been suspended. In light of the escalation, **international efforts**

have been made, mainly by Russia and the United States, **to maintain the ceasefire and possibly expand it to the Aleppo area**.

■ Efforts were made to stop the local clashes in the rural area east of Damascus (eastern Ghouta) and in Latakia, in order to prevent the spread of the escalation to other regions. On April 29, 2016, the United States and Russia agreed on a limited ceasefire (for 72 hours) in the rural area east of Damascus. This ceasefire was extended for an additional 48 hours (Syrian News Agency, May 2, 2016). However, attempts to expand the local ceasefires to the Aleppo region as well have so far proved unsuccessful, **and the fighting there still continues.**

The US-led campaign against ISIS

The ongoing airstrikes

■ The US-led international coalition continued to carry out attacks in Iraq and Syria against ISIS targets. During the past two weeks, aircraft of the coalition countries carried out dozens of airstrikes, mainly against ISIS targets in Iraq. The airstrikes in Iraq were concentrated in the areas of Hit, Kisik, Mosul, Ramadi and Baghdad. In Syria, airstrikes were carried out in the areas of Al-Raqqah and Marea (north of Aleppo).

The deployment of US troops in northern Syria

■ **US President Barack Obama announced the deployment of 250 troops in northern Syria** (in addition to 50 soldiers who are there). This reinforcement includes Special Forces and service personnel, who will be responsible mainly for recruiting Sunni fighters and supporting the fighting against ISIS (CNN, April 25, 2016). Around two days later, Syrian and Arab media reported **the arrival of the 150 members of the Special Forces in the town of Ramilan**, northeastern Syria, in an area controlled by the Kurds (Al-Jazeera; Syrian News Agency, April 28, 2016).

The US strategy against ISIS

■ Speaking at a hearing of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, **US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford** reviewed the combat strategy of the US against ISIS. The Secretary of Defense **rejected two alternative strategies against ISIS:** the first, using an American [ground] fighting force, and the second, establishing a significant international ground force to take over the areas controlled by ISIS. The strategy preferred by the US is to support the local forces and it is working to expand this

activity. According to the Secretary of Defense, the US continues its program for training Syrian forces outside Syria. The Secretary of Defense noted that the current program was different from the one that failed last year, and asked the committee to assist in the allocation of funds for it (US Department of State website, April 28 2016).

> Hence the US strategy in the fight against ISIS continues to be based on carrying out **airstrikes** in Syria and Iraq**, and supporting the local forces** by training and supplying weapons, while **avoiding massive ground fighting**. **In the Syrian arena**, the Kurds have proven themselves as the most effective local force while the US attempts to establish an effective Sunni military force from among the rebel organizations have so far failed.

Germany's involvement in the fighting

■ Germany is apparently about to set up a separate compound for its Air Force at Incirlik Air Force Base in southern Turkey, which is used by the coalition forces in the war against ISIS. Around 400 soldiers will be permanently stationed in the compound, along with an air traffic control center and a Tornado squadron. The new force will reinforce the German troops who have been there since December 2015, mainly on aerial refueling and reconnaissance missions. Construction of the complex is scheduled for completion in the summer of 2017 and its cost is around EUR 65 million (Hürriyet, April 26, 2016).

Russia's involvement in the fighting in Syria

■ Russian Air Force planes continued to attack targets of ISIS and additional organizations throughout Syria. The Russians attacked targets in and around Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and elsewhere. According to the **Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Lt. Gen. Sergei Rudskoy**, since the fighting in Syria began, Russian forces destroyed more than 29,000 targets of terrorist organizations, **including more than 200 oil facilities and more than 2,000 oil tankers** (TASS News Agency, April 27, 2016).

■ According to **Vitaly Churkin, Russian Ambassador to the UN**, Russia and the UN Security Council's War on Terrorism Committee wished to include two rebel organizations, **Ahrar al-Sham** and **Jaysh al-Islam**, in the list of terrorist
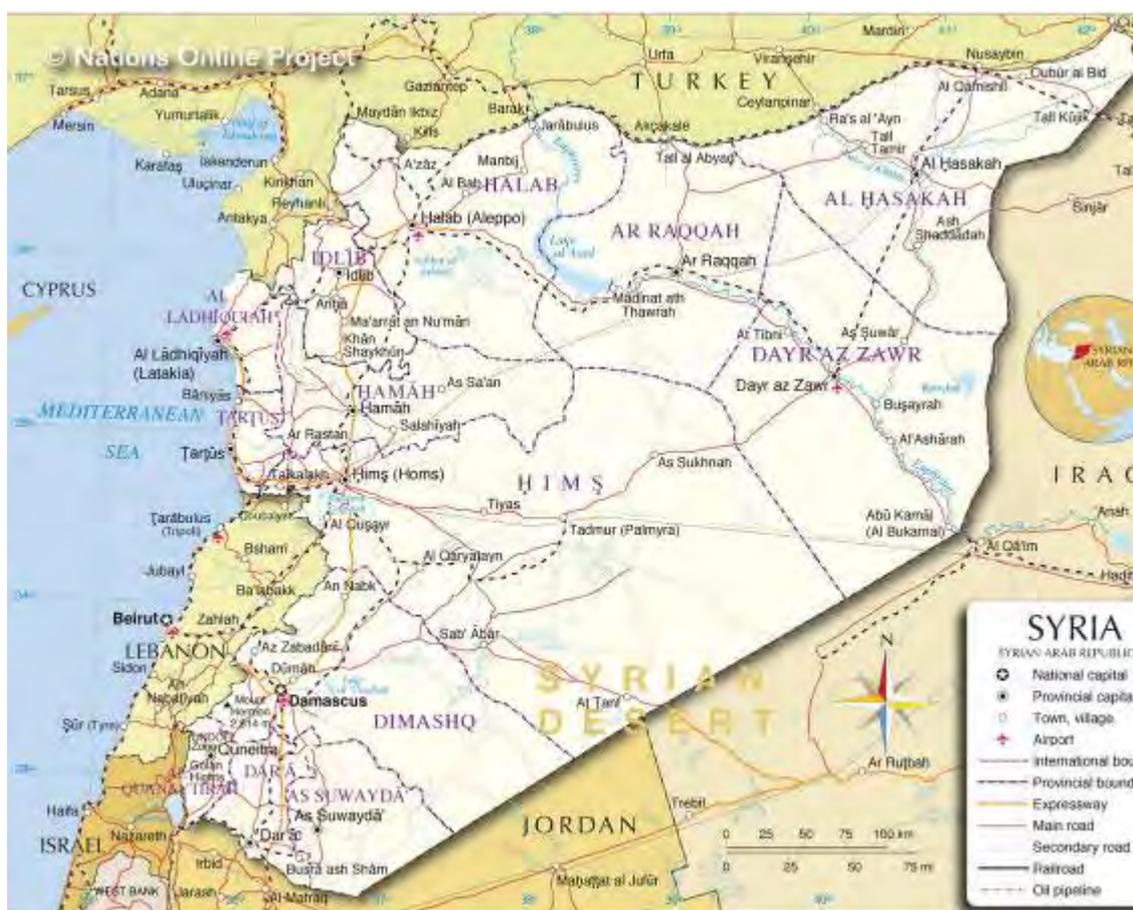
organizations[1]. This was in the wake of several reports that these organizations were affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS and were violating the ceasefire in Syria on a regular basis (TASS News Agency, April 27, 2016). **Adding these important organizations to the category of "terrorist organizations" may, in the ITIC's assessment, expand the fighting and hamper the chances of maintaining the ceasefire.**

■ **General Sergei Afanasyev, deputy head of the Russian General Staff's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)**, mentioned ISIS at the Fifth Moscow Conference on International Security. According to him, in their assessment, **about 33,000 ISIS operatives currently operate in Syria and Iraq, 19,000 in Iraq and about 14,000 in Syria.** They possess weapons including tanks, armored vehicles, anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft missile systems (RT, April 27, 2016). General Afanasyev also noted that the level of the terrorist threat to Europe rose **following the return of some 800 ISIS operatives to Germany over the past four years**. He also stated that some 4,500 operatives affiliated with ISIS were operating in Central Asia (RT, April 27, 2016).

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[1] According to a report from the Russian coordination center at Hmeymim base, the ceasefire agreement now includes 72 organizations, including 52 armed groups that have been declared illegal (TASS News Agency, April 25, 2016).

Main developments in Syria

Map of Syria (www.nationsonline.org)

The Aleppo area

■ Over the past two weeks, **the fighting in the city of Aleppo and its northern rural area has escalated**. Syrian and Russian aircraft attacked targets of the rebel organizations in Aleppo, while the rebel organizations fired rockets and mortar shells at neighborhoods controlled by the Syrian regime. According to Arab and Western media reports, **hundreds of civilians were killed in these clashes[2] and the civilian infrastructure was damaged, including two hospitals[3]**. The airstrikes and shelling of Aleppo have been described in the media as the most severe since the outbreak of the civil war.

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[2]According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), **606 people were killed in the city of Aleppo** between April 22 and April 28, 2016. They were killed in Syrian Air Force airstrikes on areas controlled by the rebels, and in the massive shelling by the rebels at areas controlled by the Syrian Army in the city's western neighborhoods (SOHR, April 29, 2016). According to The New York Times, at least 202 people were killed in Aleppo recently, two thirds of them in areas held by the rebels in the eastern Aleppo and the rest in western Aleppo, in areas controlled by the Syrian regime.

[3] On May 3, 2016, the Al-Dabit hospital in Aleppo was damaged by rocket fire. Reportedly, 21 people were killed and about 32 others were injured (Al-Mayadeen, May 3, 2016). The Syrian Army accused the rebel organizations of attacking the hospital (SANA News Agency, May 3, 2016). US Secretary of State John Kerry condemned the attack on the hospital and called on all parties to stop the fighting before the situation got out of hand (Al-Arabiya, May 3, 2016).

■ According to a report by the Russian Foreign Ministry, **the Russian Consulate General building in Aleppo was attacked by operatives of the Al-Nusra Front and its allies.** According to the report, an IED exploded inside the Consulate and three other IEDs exploded near the building. No casualties were reported (Sputnik, April 29, 2016). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the Al-Nusra Front of firing mortar shells at the Russian Consulate building in Aleppo (TASS News Agency, April 29, 2016).
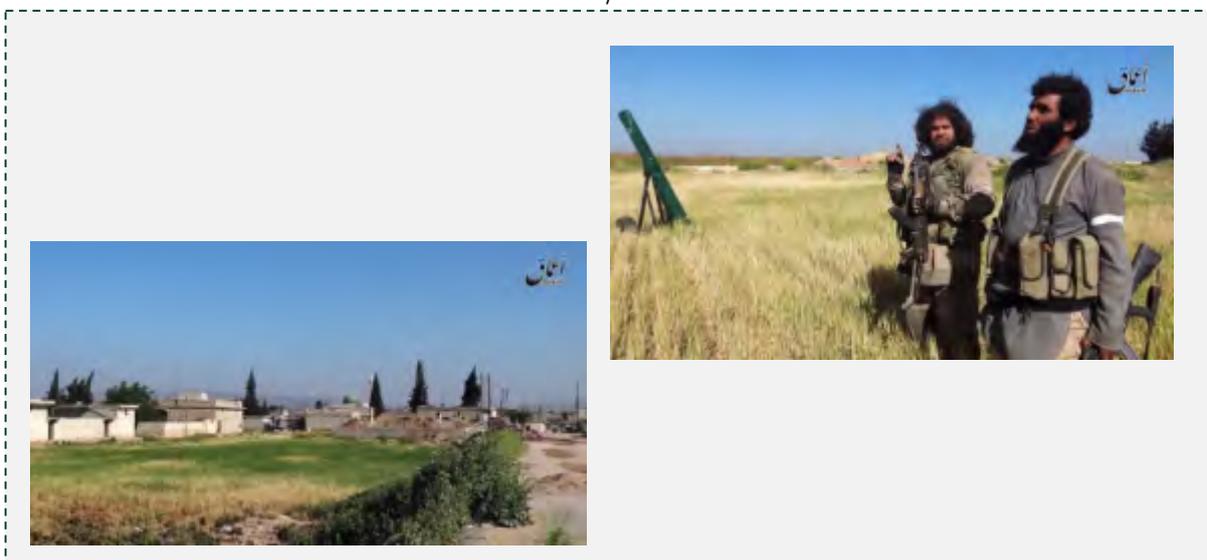
■ Southeast of Aleppo, the Syrian Army seized a truck carrying 3.5 tons of ammonium nitrate, which is used for making explosives. The cargo was intended for ISIS or Al-Nusra Front operatives in the area southeast of Aleppo (SANA News Agency, April 28, 2016).

Right: The truck seized by the Syrian Army. Left: Sacks of ammonium nitrate that were on the truck (SANA News Agency, April 28, 2016)

Clashes between ISIS and the Turkish Army

■ Clashes continued this week between ISIS and the Turkish Army north of Aleppo, near the Syrian-Turkish border. ISIS reportedly transferred forces from eastern Syria (the areas of Al-Hasakah and Al-Raqqah) to the area north of Aleppo. According to a report by ISIS, its operatives have taken over several villages near the Syrian-Turkish border, including the village of Doudyan, about 18 km southeast of Kilis (Aamaq, April 27, 2016).

The village of Doudyan, one of the villages taken over by ISIS near the Syrian-Turkish border (Aamaq, April 27, 2016)

■ During clashes between ISIS and the Turkish Army, rockets were fired from Syria at the Turkish city of Kilis[4]. In response, the Turkish Army attacked outposts and weapons in areas controlled by ISIS (Al-Durar al-Shamiya, May 1, 2016). Turkey announced that 50 ISIS operatives were killed in this attack (Sky News, May 2, 2016). On the other hand, ISIS announced that its operatives had destroyed three Turkish Army tanks (Aamaq, April 28, 2016).

■ Other areas in Syria where there were local clashes involving operatives of ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front:

• **The area of the Al-Yarmouk refugee camp south of Damascus:** Clashes continued there between ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front. According to reports, ISIS now controls a significant portion of the refugee camp (Al-Ghad, April 23, 2016).

• **The rural area east of Damascus:** In this area, clashes between the rebel organizations continued. Jaysh al-Islam reportedly besieged armed Al-Nusra Front operatives (Dimashq al-Aan, May 2, 2016).

• **The area of the Shrine of Al-Set Zaynab, south of Damascus:** ISIS carried out an attack against a military checkpoint using a car bomb driven by a suicide bomber. Around 20 people were reportedly killed and around 60 injured (Khatwa News Agency; Aamaq, April 25, 2016).

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[4] According to the SOHR, **around 40 rockets fired from areas** controlled by ISIS near the Syrian-Turkish border **have fallen in Kilis since the beginning of 2016**. This has caused the deaths of at least 17 of the city's residents (SOHR, April 26, 2016).

- **Deir al-Zor:** Clashes continued between ISIS operatives and the Syrian Army in the area of the military airbase. Russian cargo planes dropped food packages to residents of the city in neighborhoods that are under siege by ISIS (Dimashq al-Aan, April 30, 2016).

- **Palmyra:** The Russian Defense Ministry reported that during sweeps to detect IEDs in the city, the Syrian Army found and neutralized a large ISIS arms depot containing a large quantity of explosives and shells (TASS News Agency, April 22, 2016).

■ The body of a Russian officer killed by ISIS in battle in the city of Palmyra was returned to the Russians. The body was returned after a prisoner exchange deal mediated by Kurdish forces (YPG) was agreed on. Two senior ISIS operatives were released in exchange for the body of the officer (Syria Mubasher, April 27, 2016). The Kurds announced that they transferred the body of the officer to representatives of the Russian authorities in Syria (April 29, 2016).

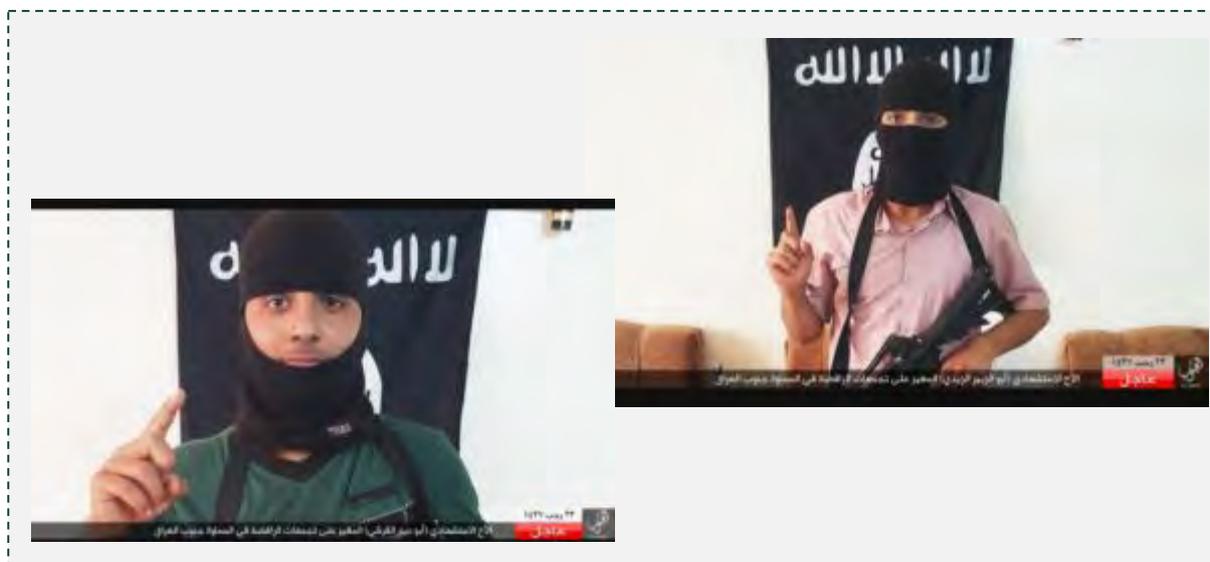# Main developments in Iraq

Map of Iraq (nationsonline.org)

Baghdad

■ **ISIS recently increased its terrorist attacks against targets in Baghdad, mainly those affiliated with the Shiites and with the Iraqi regime.** In response, the Iraqi security forces have declared a state of emergency (Al-Sumaria, April 30, 2016).

■ Following are a number of noteworthy terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS in Baghdad and in the Shiite area to its south:

• **April 25, 2016 –** An ISIS operative carried out a suicide bombing attack with an explosive belt in downtown Baghdad. The attack was carried out against a concentration of Shiite militiamen, which support the Iraqi regime. According to ISIS, dozens of militiamen were killed and injured in the attack (Aamaq, April 25, 2016).

- **April 30, 2016 –** 63 people were killed in a suicide bombing attack in eastern Baghdad (BBC in Arabic, April 30, 2016; Al-Qurtas News, May 1, 2016). According to an announcement by ISIS, a suicide bomber activated a truck bomb against Shiite pilgrims, and around 100 of them were killed in the attack (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, May 1, 2016).

- **May 2, 2016 –** A car bomb exploded in southern Baghdad. Fourteen people were killed. ISIS claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing attack. According to ISIS, 40 people were killed as a result of the attack (Aamaq, May 2, 2016).

- **May 1, 2016 –** A total of 38 people were killed and 86 were injured in the explosion of two car bombs activated by suicide bombers in **the Shiite city of Samawa, about 250 km south of Baghdad**. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks (Al-Sumaria, May 1, 2016; Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, May 1, 2016).

The two suicide bombers who carried out the attack in the city of Samawa. Left: Abu Diyar al-Qurashi. Right: Abu al-Zubair al-Zaydi (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, May 1, 2016).

On May 2, 2016, ISIS's Baghdad Province released a video warning against Baghdad becoming a Shiite city. The video shows both Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, warning against Baghdad being turned into a Shiite center, and a suicide bomber, speaking before carrying out an attack in a Shiite house of prayer. **The purpose of the video may be to legitimize ISIS's terrorist attacks, which are directed mainly against Shiite targets.**
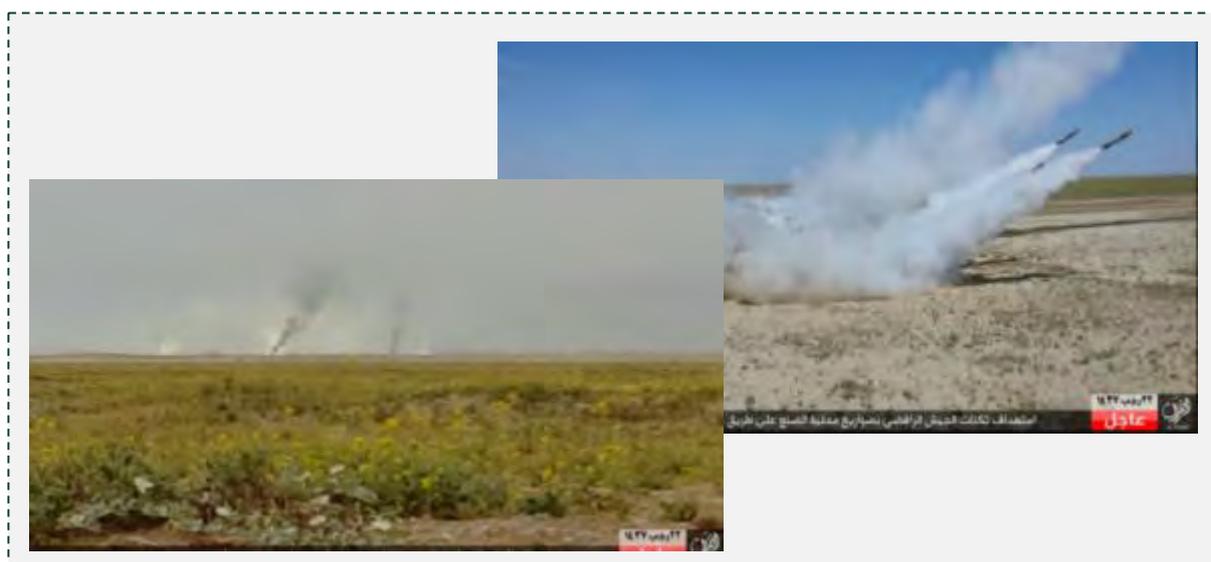
ISIS guerrilla warfare

■ **ISIS continues to carry out its guerrilla activity in areas that were ostensibly captured and cleansed by the Iraqi Army. In the area of the city of Hit,** ISIS

claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack at a police station. According to ISIS, the attack killed over 50 members of the Iraqi security forces. ISIS also attacked an Iraqi Army convoy **on the Haditha-Baiji road and fired rockets at Iraqi Army bases along this road**. According to ISIS, it is currently engaged in combat at the **Alas oil field** east of Tikrit, in an attempt to regain control of the field.

The Haditha-Baiji road, along which ISIS is engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Iraqi forces (Google Maps)

Rockets being fired by ISIS at Iraqi Army bases along the Haditha-Baiji road (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, April 30, 2016)

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

■ During the past two weeks, the Egyptian security forces continued their activity against ISIS's Sinai Province in the areas of Sheikh Zuweid, Al-Arish, and Rafah. Dozens of suspects were detained and cars, motorbikes and weapons stores were seized. On the other hand, ISIS operatives continued their guerrilla activities against

the Egyptian security forces, mainly by planting IEDs. Some of them were neutralized by the Egyptian security forces. ISIS's Sinai Province claimed responsibility for several attacks in what it called the "new wave of attacks" directed against the Egyptian security forces and those who support them (ISIS-affiliated Twitter account, April 28, 2016).

Left: Vehicle of "terrorist operatives" destroyed by the Egyptian Army. Right: Attack against a "terrorist target" by the Egyptian Air Force south of Sheikh Zuweid (Al-Youm al-Sabea, April 27, 2016; YouTube account of the Egyptian Defense Ministry, April 25, 2016)

The global jihad in other countries

Libya

Derna

■ On April 20, 2016, the Shura Council of the Jihad Fighters of Derna and its Suburbs (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) **completed the takeover of the city of Derna and the mountainous region that dominates it. ISIS operatives reportedly withdrew from the important area of Al-Fataeh to the desert areas south of Derna** (Al-Wasat Portal, April 20, 2016; Twitter account of the Al-Sabil media foundation of the Shura Council of the Jihad Fighters of Derna, April 21 2016; Aamaq, April 21, 2016).

Celebrations in Derna following the withdrawal of ISIS operatives from the city and the region that dominates it (Twitter, April 20, 2016)

■ In the second half of June 2015, operatives of the Shura Council and other organizations opposed to ISIS managed to oust ISIS operatives from the city of Derna. Most of the ISIS operatives took refuge in Al-Fataeh, a mountainous region south of Derna which dominates the city. Since that time they have been fighting against their opponents in Derna. If the Shura Council has indeed managed to oust the ISIS operatives from Al-Fataeh (this requires verification), then this represents a **blow to ISIS, weakening** its status in eastern Libya. ISIS may lose its presence in the **city of Benghazi, where it is under heavy pressure by the Libyan Army, which has taken over most of the city's neighborhoods.**

Sirte

■ According to the anti-ISIS Libyan media, **the Libyan Army under the command of Khalifa Haftar is preparing for the liberation of the city of Sirte from the hands of ISIS.** According to the Libyan Army spokesman, ground, air and sea forces will participate in the so-called "great campaign over Sirte". **According to the spokesman, the Army's infantry forces are already deployed south of Ajdabiya and are waiting for the order to begin the operation** (Akhbar Libya 24, April 23 and 28, 2016; Al-Wasat Portal, April 26, 29 and 30, 2016, May 1, 2016).

■ According to these reports, **ISIS in Sirte prepares itself for the Libyan Army's attack.** ISIS has evacuated its camps in Sirte, built embankments and planted mines around the city. It has also set up a field hospital and transferred prisoners to an unknown location. According to **Abu Hamza the Senegalese**, one of the ISIS's senior operatives in Sirte, **ISIS has declared a general mobilization** and intends to carry out

suici**de bombing attacks "very soon" at the oil ports east of Sirte and in various cities such as Misrata and Tripoli** (Akhbar Libya 24, April 23 and 28, 2016; Al-Wasat Portal, April 26, 29 and 30, 2016, May 1, 2016).

The Caribbean Islands

■ According to a recent report on BBC, **the Caribbean Islands have become fertile ground for recruiting foreign fighters into the ranks of ISIS.** According to official figures, **89 operatives from Trinidad are currently fighting in the ranks of ISIS.** This figure is relatively high for a country whose population is 1.3 million. ISIS recently released a video intended for the residents of Trinidad, featuring fighters speaking in the local language. There is a Muslim community in Trinidad, but those who joined the ranks of ISIS are mainly young men of Afro-Caribbean descent who converted to Islam (BBC in Arabic, May 1, 2016).

Russia

■ According to the Russian media, a mosque built illegally near the city of Samara, on the banks of the Volga, was blown up by the Russian security forces. Explosives were stored at the mosque. Fifty-three Salafist Islamist operatives were detained there, including a number of ISIS operatives. According to the spokesman of the FSB (the Russian Federal Security Service), the detentions led to the arrest of additional suspects and the discovery of weapons sources. According to the spokesman, the members of the Salafist community who were detained fought in Syria alongside terrorist organizations (RT April 30, 2016).

The conduct of the Islamic State

The killing of a senior ISIS operative

■ In late March 2016, a senior ISIS operative was killed in an airstrike in the area of Deir al-Zor (Al-Ahed, May 1, 2016). The operative was **Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli** aka **Abu Ali al-Anbari**. ISIS has not officially announced his death, but admitted it indirectly: **attacks carried out by ISIS on April 30, 2016, were named for "Sheikh Abu Ali al-Anbari," with a request from Allah to welcome him [as a *shahid* in Paradise].**

■ **Abu Ali al-Anbari,** born in Mosul, was about 60 at the time of his death. He was a physics teacher and wrote a number of religious books. **In 1998, he traveled to Afghanistan, where he met with Osama bin Laden.** He returned to Iraq in 2000, and in 2004 joined forces with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the founder of the organization from

which ISIS emerged (Al-Bawaba, May 1, 2016). In November 2015, he reportedly went from Syria to Sirte, Libya, apparently to establish ISIS's branch in Libya. In December 2015, he was reported killed in an airstrike near the Syrian border, but it subsequently turned out that he was only injured (securitymiddleeast.com, December 21, 2015).

Archive photo of Abu Ali al-Anbari, circled (Al-Bawaba, May 1, 2016)

The killing of Abu Ali al-Anbari, part of the "hard core" of ISIS operatives, **is another in the series of killings of senior ISIS operatives mainly in US and Russian airstrikes.** In the ITIC's assessment, this may have an **ongoing negative effect on ISIS's military and governmental capabilities**, albeit not necessarily in the near future.

The cyber campaign

■ A study of ISIS's cyber capabilities conducted by Flashpoint shows that in the past, ISIS's cyber activity was performed by at least five different groups, each of which carried out separate campaigns. On April 4, 2016, ISIS announced the establishment of a **unified cyber caliphate** incorporating all of ISIS's entities operating in the cyber field. According to the study, in the past, attacks were carried out mainly against governments, banks and media outlets. However, despite the global attention generated **by these attacks, their effectiveness was limited and they were carried out on an occasional basis** (Flashpoint website, April 28, 2016).

It now appears that ISIS's cyber system is subject to pressure from the US-led coalition. Speaking at a hearing before the US Senate Armed Forces Committee, **US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter** said that the US Army Cyber Command plays an important role in the international coalition campaign against ISIS. According to Carter, the US cyber activity is designed to immobilize ISIS's Internet. According to **Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, the goal is to cut off ISIS's lines of communication and bring about its isolation in cyberspace** (AFP, April 28, 2016).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Italy

■ **Maurizio Romanelli, the public prosecutor of Milan,** reported that Italian police had arrested four Moroccans affiliated with ISIS. According to documents filed in court, **they planned to carry out attacks in Rome, including against the Israeli Embassy and the Vatican.** In addition, arrest warrants were issued against two other suspects, a husband and wife, who had left Italy for Syria. According to intelligence obtained by the investigators, the couple in Syria **ordered one of the detainees to attack both the Israeli Embassy in Rome and the Vatican** (Haaretz Israeli daily, May 1, 2016).

Left: Abd al-Rahim Mutaharrek (on the right) and Abd al-Rahman Khashi', who were arrested by the Italian police. Right: Abd al-Rahim Mutaharrek, one of the detainees, wearing a shirt with the ISIS logo (Alyaoum24, April 29, 2016)

■ In the meantime, **ISIS continues to threaten Italy.** A video released by ISIS's Nineveh Province **again threatens that ISIS will conquer Rome.** This is based on the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad that the Muslims will conquer Rome in the future. The speaker in the video notes that ISIS intends to realize the promise of the

Prophet Muhammad and calls on Muslims to await the promised day (Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, April 30, 2016).

From the video: The Colosseum in Rome seen from the edge of the North African desert
(Akhbar Dawlat al-Islam, April 30, 2016)