



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## April 2-6, 2020



### Overview<sup>1</sup>

- ▶ **In the Idlib region**, the ceasefire continued, with occasional exchanges of artillery fire. In the background is the rival sides' fear of an outbreak of COVID-19 in the Idlib region. So far, there are no known cases in the Idlib region, but it is quite possible that this is due to a lack of testing and information.
- ▶ **In the Euphrates Valley in Syria**, ISIS's intensive activity continued, despite the threat of COVID-19. The main forms of attacks were activating IEDs against vehicles, taking prisoners and executing them, and firing light weapons at SDF fighters.
- ▶ **In the Iraqi arena** as well, ISIS's intensive activity continues. The main forms of attacks were attacking camps of the Iraqi security forces, activating IEDs on traffic arteries, sniper fire, mortar shell fire, and targeted killings.
- ▶ **In Afghanistan, ISIS suffered a severe blow** with the capture of the Emir (leader) of the Khorasan Province along with senior commanders of the organization (according to a report issued by the Afghan National Intelligence Directorate). It appears that in order to raise the morale of ISIS operatives in Afghanistan, the organization released a video showing an Afghan senior officer with the rank of colonel who served as the Afghan national security chief. **He was captured by ISIS several months ago.** The officer is wearing the orange clothes worn by prisoners before being executed.

### The Idlib region

#### The situation on the ground

The ceasefire in the Idlib region has generally been maintained, with the exception of incidents of artillery fire sporadically taking place between the rival sides. It appears that the

<sup>1</sup>The publication of this issue of Spotlight on Global Jihad was advanced to April 7, 2020 due to the Passover holiday. The next issue will appear on April 22, after the holiday. The ITIC wishes all its readers a happy holiday.

Syrian army and the rebel organizations are now in a waiting position, first and foremost due to the fear of a widespread outbreak of COVID-19 in the Idlib region.

- ▶ On April 4, 2020, exchanges of artillery fire took place south of Idlib between the Syrian army and the rebel organizations. On the night of April 4-5, 2020, the Syrian army fired artillery at areas controlled by the rebel organizations south and southwest of Idlib. No casualties were reported (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, April 5, 2020).
- ▶ The head of the Russian Reconciliation Center in Syria reported that on April 1, 2020, “militants” fired at two Syrian villages in Saraqeb and the Latakia Province. In addition, he reported the continuation of the joint patrols of the Russian and Turkish armies (TASS, April 2, 2020). On the ground, Turkish army patrols on the M-4 highway continue without Russian participation (Khotwa, April 2, 2020).
- ▶ In early April, there was a report that the Turkish army had sent further reinforcements to the Idlib region (Khotwa, April 2, 2020). On April 5, 2020, Turkey announced that it would minimize its troop movements in Syria due to the threat of an outbreak of COVID-19 (Reuters, April 5, 2020).



**Turkish army convoy en route to the Idlib region  
(Khotwa, April 2, 2020)**

## The spread of COVID-19 in the Idlib region

- ▶ **So far, there are no known COVID-19 cases in the Idlib region.** However, such cases may well exist, although they are not reported. According to Syrian Health Ministry reports (whose reliability is doubtful), 16 COVID-19 cases were detected in Syria, two died as a result of the virus and the rest recovered (SANA, April 4, 2020).
- ▶ Syrian doctors in Idlib fight against time to prepare for the first COVID-19 patients in northern Syria for fear that the virus will cause an unprecedented disaster among the many refugees. According to an officer in the health department in Idlib, about 100,000 people may

die in Syria if the World Health Organization (WHO) does not take control of the situation. According to him, there is only one laboratory to analyze the tests (Wirefax, April 5, 2020).

## The Euphrates Valley

### The area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal

- ▶ **On April 5, 2020**, there were exchanges of fire between ISIS and the SDF about 14 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. Three fighters were killed (Telegram, April 5, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 2, 2020**, a motorcycle bomb was activated against an SDF vehicle in the village of Al-Basira, 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. An SDF fighter was killed and two others were wounded (Telegram, April 2, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 2, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle in the village of Al-Sabha, about 20 km north of Al-Mayadeen. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, April 3, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 2, 2020**, ISIS operatives took an SDF intelligence operative prisoner about 50 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. He was interrogated and then executed (Telegram, April 4, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 1, 2020**, ISIS operatives took a member of the Syrian regime prisoner in the village of Al-Shahil, about 9 km north of Al-Mayadeen. He was interrogated and then executed (Telegram, April 1, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 1, 2020**, ISIS operatives activated an IED in the home of the head of the local council of the village of Al-Susah, 7 km northeast of Albukamal. The house was damaged (Telegram, April 1, 2020).

### Al-Hasakah area

- ▶ **On April 4, 2020**, an IED was activated against several SDF fighters while they were trying to deactivate it about 80 km south of Al-Hasakah. Three fighters were killed (Telegram, April 4, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 2, 2020**, ISIS operatives took an SDF fighter prisoner about 65 km south of Al-Hasakah. The prisoner was interrogated and then executed (Telegram, April 4, 2020).

## The Iraqi arena

**ISIS continues its high-intensity activity in Iraq.** The main forms of activity were attacks against camps of the Iraqi security forces, activation of IEDs on traffic routes, sniper fire, mortar fire, and targeted killings.

## Kirkuk Province

- ▶ **On March 31, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked two Iraqi army camps on the Tikrit-Tuz Khormato road (about 70 km south of Kirkuk). Several soldiers were wounded (Telegram, April 1, 2020).
- ▶ **On March 31, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Tribal Mobilization camp 40 km southwest of Kirkuk. Several soldiers were wounded (Telegram, April 1, 2020).

## Diyala Province

- ▶ **On April 5, 2020**, an IED was activated against a Tribal Mobilization foot patrol about 40 km northeast of Baqubah. Two fighters were wounded (Telegram, April 5, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 3, 2020**, an IED was activated against a Popular Mobilization vehicle south of Khanaqin, about 100 km northeast of Baqubah. A commander and one of his escorts were wounded (Telegram, April 3, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 3, 2020**, an Iraqi commando camp was targeted by sniper fire about 60 km north of Baqubah. One of the fighters was severely wounded (Telegram, April 3, 2020).
- ▶ **On April 3, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle about 80 km northeast of Baqubah. One officer and one of his escorts were killed, and three others were wounded (Telegram, April 4, 2020).
- ▶ **On March 31, 2020**, mortar shells were fired at Tribal Mobilization troops about 80 km northeast of Baqubah (Telegram, April 1, 2020).

## Salah al-Din Province

- ▶ **On April 2, 2020**, an IED was activated against a Tribal Mobilization commander about 75 km south of Mosul. The commander was killed (Telegram, April 2, 2020).
- ▶ **On March 31, 2020**, ISIS operatives broke into the house of a Popular Mobilization operative about 20 km north of Baghdad. He was interrogated and then executed (Telegram, April 1, 2020).



**The Popular Mobilization operative before he was executed  
(Telegram, April 3, 2020)**

## Al-Anbar Province

► **On April 5, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked an Iraqi army camp near the city of Al-Rutba, in western Al-Anbar Province. Eight soldiers were killed or wounded. In addition, large quantities of weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, April 5, 2020).



**Weapons and ammunition seized by ISIS in an attack against an Iraqi army camp near Al-Rutba  
(Telegram, April 5, 2020)**

► **On April 3, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle about 70 km west of Ramadi. An officer and three soldiers were killed (Telegram, April 3, 2020).

► **On March 31, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle west of Baghdad. An officer and five soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, April 1, 2020).

## Erbil Province

► **On April 4, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle south of Makhmur (about 60 km southwest of Erbil). The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, April 5, 2020).

► **On April 3, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle in the Makhmur area (about 60 km southwest of Erbil). Two soldiers were killed and three others were wounded (Telegram, April 5, 2020).

► **On April 3, 2020**, an Iraqi army camp in the Makhmur area was targeted by machine gun fire. One soldier was killed (Telegram, April 5, 2020).

► **On April 1, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked an Iraqi army camp west of Makhmur. Several soldiers were wounded (Telegram, April 2, 2020).

## Nineveh Province

► **On April 4, 2020**, ISIS operatives ambushed a vehicle carrying Popular Mobilization fighters on the Baghdad-Mosul highway, south of Mosul. Several fighters were wounded (Telegram, April 5, 2020).

## Counterterrorism activities by the Iraqi security forces

### Diyala Province

► **On April 3, 2020**, during the night, a Popular Mobilization force thwarted an ISIS attempt to attack the oil fields about 80 km northeast of Baqubah. The force fired artillery at ISIS operatives who tried to infiltrate into the area. As a result, the ISIS operatives withdrew (al-hashed.net, April 4, 2020).

► **On April 3, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force located an ISIS guesthouse built inside a cave about 15 km south of Khanaqin. Logistic equipment was found at the site (al-hashed.net, April 3, 2020).



**Popular Mobilization operatives near the entrance to the cave where the ISIS guesthouse was found (al-hashed.net, April 3, 2020)**

► **On April 2, 2020**, the Iraqi security forces located a hideout of “terrorist operatives” (implicitly, ISIS operatives) northeast of Baqubah. Ten IEDs were found at the site. In

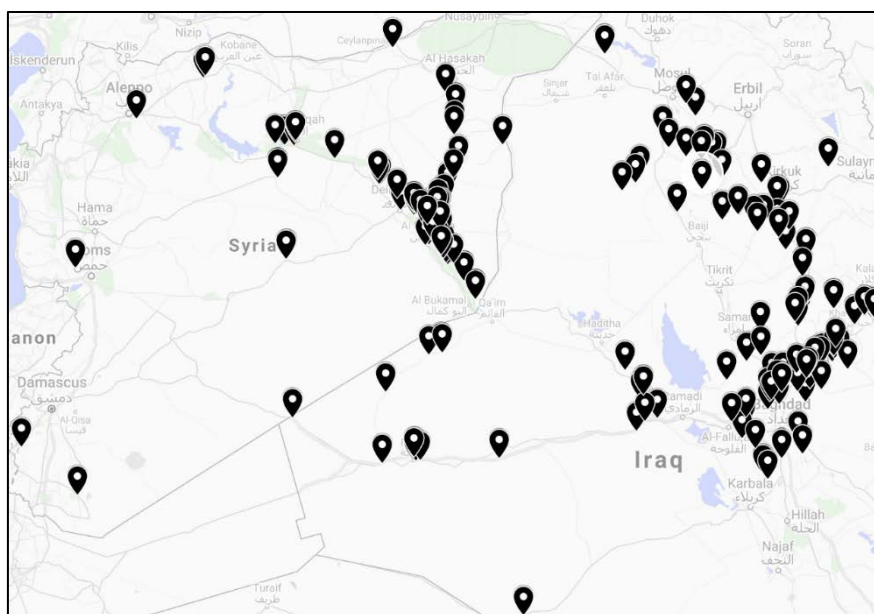
addition, another ISIS hideout was located in the area, containing explosives and equipment (Al-Sumaria, April 2, 2020).

### Nineveh Province

► **On April 3, 2020**, the Iraqi security forces apprehended two “terrorist operatives” (implicitly, ISIS operatives) about 120 km west of Mosul (Al-Sumaria, April 3, 2020).

### ISIS’s patterns of activity in Syria and Iraq in the first three months of 2020

► Terrorist organizations researcher Aaron Y. Zelin collected data on ISIS attacks in Syria and Iraq during the period between early 2020 until late March. The data indicates that ISIS’s activity in Syria and Iraq focused on guerrilla warfare along traffic routes. The center of activity in Syria was along the Deir ez-Zor-Albukamal road and the southern road of Al-Hasakah towards Deir ez-Zor. ISIS’s activity in Iraq focused on the provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Al-Anbar (@azelin, Aaron Zelin’s Twitter account, April 1, 2020).



**ISIS’s areas of activity in Syria and Iraq since early January until late March 2020 (@azelin, Aaron Zelin’s Twitter account, April 1, 2020)**

## The Sinai Peninsula

► **On April 4, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army minesweeping vehicle at the Port of Rafah. The vehicle was put out of commission (Telegram, April 4, 2020).

► **On April 1, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army vehicle south of Bir al-Abd. Two soldiers were killed (Telegram, April 2, 2020).

## The activity of ISIS's provinces

### Africa

#### Study of Islamic terrorism in the Lake Chad area

► On March 19, 2020, the **Institute for the Studies of International Politics (ISIP)** published an article entitled “**Jihadi Proto-State in the Lake Chad Basin.**” Following are a number of insights from the article:

- ◆ **Characteristics of the activity of ISIS's West Africa Province (ISWAP):** ISIS's West Africa Province consists mainly of former operatives of Boko Haram, led by Abubakar Shekau. These operatives left Boko Haram in mid-2016. The operatives have forged ties with the population of the Lake Chad basin, with its abundant natural resources. Since then, their activity has concentrated on attacks on military targets, especially large army bases. During 2019, Nigeria and its regional partners attempted to cope with the challenge, but with limited success, because ISIS's West Africa Province initiated attacks with increasing frequency. Beginning in October 2018, the Nigerian army began to differentiate and distinguish between ISIS's West Africa Province and Boko Haram. This was mainly after December 2018, when ISIS's West Africa Province temporarily took over the city of Baga, on the shores of Lake Chad. Part of the headquarters of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is located in this city. The MNJTF coordinates the operations of the military units of the four countries located on the coast of Lake Chad – Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria.

- ◆ **How countries in the region are coping with ISIS's West Africa Province:** Nigerian army units, which had been fighting against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad area since 2015, returned to Borno State in February 2019 to fight against ISIS's West Africa Province. On the other hand, in January 2020, Chad decided to withdraw its military forces from Borno State, in response to the step taken by Nigeria. Despite talks between the heads of state in the region, which are intended to improve their coping with ISIS's West Africa Province. Thus, regional cooperation in the fight against ISIS is limited. In August 2019, General Olusengun Adeniyi was appointed head of the Nigerian army's operations division in Borno State. He transformed small army units into so-called super-camps in order to reduce the number of Nigerian army fatalities and improve its performance. It remains to be seen whether this goal will be achieved.



- ◆ **The plans of ISIS’s West Africa Province in the region of Borno and Yobe states in Nigeria:** ISIS’s West Africa Province is attempting to maintain a country being formed between Borno and Yobe states. It is establishing projects in order to establish its governance, including medical assistance for residents, price regulation and tax collection. It is managing to attract displaced persons who consider life under ISIS preferable to life in displaced persons camps. On the other hand, some of its operatives are committing crimes due to the lack of means (fuel, money, vehicles and weapons). The shortage was caused by airstrikes by the countries bordering on Lake Chad, coupled with a decrease in financial aid from ISIS’s leadership after the death of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIS operatives are attempting to examine the Nigerian army’s offensive and the effectiveness of its “super-camps” through the use of rocket launchers, car bombs, raids, ambushing convoys and IEDs. They also make use of roadblocks, abducting army personnel traveling in military vehicles, and abducting NPO employees, police and Christian residents. This is done either for ransom or in order to organize ISIS-style (widely publicized) executions.
- ◆ **The prospects of the unification of ISIS’s West Africa Province and Boko Haram:** given the bad blood between ISIS’s West Africa Province and the fickle and tyrannical character of Boko Haram’s leader Abubakar Shekau, reconciliation between the two sides appears unlikely.

## Nigeria

► **On April 6, 2020**, ISIS’s West Africa Province announced that its operatives had killed at least 70 soldiers and wounded dozens of others in a series of attacks carried out in the Lake Chad area, on the border between Nigeria and Chad. The casualties were members of the African “crusader” coalition operating in the region (Telegram, April 6, 2020).

## Summary of the activity of ISIS’s Central Africa Province

► **On April 2, 2020**, ISIS published an infographic summing up two months of activity (January 25 – March 24, 2020) in ISIS’s Central Africa Province. During this period, 13 attacks were carried out. As a result, 148 people were killed or wounded: **89 in Mozambique and 59 in the Democratic Republic of Congo**. In addition, eight camps and three houses were set on fire and nine vehicles were destroyed (ISIS’s Al-Naba’ weekly, issue 228, quoted on Telegram, April 2, 2020).

## Afghanistan

### Capture of the Emir of ISIS's Khorasan Province in Afghanistan

► On April 4, 2020, the Afghan National Directorate of Security announced that its Special Forces had captured the Emir of ISIS's Khorasan Province, Abdullah Orakizai, AKA Aslam Farooqi. Nineteen senior ISIS commanders were captured along with him (Khaama Press, April 4, 2020). Their capture represents a severe blow to ISIS's Khorasan Province.



**Emir of ISIS's Khorasan Province captured by Special Forces of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (Khaama Press, April 4, 2020)**

### ISIS captures senior official of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS)

► On April 5, 2020, ISIS released a video showing Col. Ghulam Sakhi, commander of Afghan National Security 156<sup>2</sup>. The officer is wearing the orange clothes worn by prisoners that ISIS intends to execute. In the video, Sakhi says that he was captured by ISIS four months ago. He adds that he worked for about 29 years in various branches of the Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) and that most of the commanders of the NDS had been under his command (Telegram, April 5, 2020). ISIS's capture of such a senior officer **would be liable to serve as an intelligence gold mine for ISIS in Afghanistan.**

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<sup>2</sup> I.e., National Directorate of Security (NDS), Afghanistan's main intelligence agency, which is subordinate to the Afghan President's Office.



**Col. Ghulam Sakhi, held prisoner by ISIS**  
(Telegram, April 5, 2020)

## Condemnation of the agreement between the Taliban and the United States

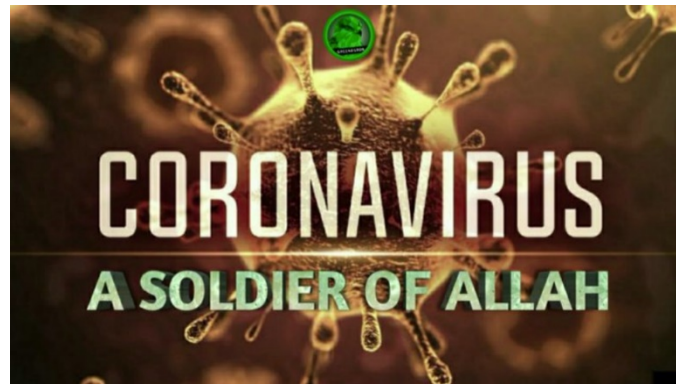
► ISIS’s Al-Naba’ weekly published an article dealing with the agreement between the United States and the Taliban and in Afghanistan. The article is entitled “The US has been defeated and Islam has not yet won.” The article explains that Muslims have defeated their enemies in the past through jihad, but these defeats did not lead to the implementation of Islamic law [Shariah] around the world and that various types of infidel behavior have only been replaced by other types. Thus, for example, the defeat of the Russians in Afghanistan brought about the withdrawal of the Russians, but led to the rise of infidel rulers, followed by the Taliban, which the article also refers to as “those who have abandoned Islam.”

► **The article condemns the agreement between the Taliban and the US.** The agreement did not lead to a complete withdrawal of the Americans, who continue to fight against the Muslims, in collaboration with the Taliban. The article stresses that victory will be achieved with the establishment of Islam in Khorasan (i.e., Afghanistan and Pakistan) and elsewhere, without a hint of infidel conduct. On the other hand, changes in the nature of the regime will only result in the renewal of jihad and the fighters’ determination to continue along their path (Telegram, April 2, 2020).

## The battle for hearts and minds

### ISIS’s supporters and the COVID-19 pandemic

► ISIS’s supporters recently disseminated a poster about the COVID-19 pandemic. The poster shows COVID-19 as “**a soldier [operating in the service] of Allah,**” which is designed to strike the “infidels” (Telegram, April 2, 2020).



**The poster disseminated by supporters of ISIS  
(Telegram, April 2, 2020)**