



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

June 11-17, 2020



## Overview

- ▶ This week there was **an additional decline in the scope of ISIS's activity around the globe**, as part of a trend that has lasted for several weeks. The main reason for this appears to be ISIS's concentrated effort to carry out the wave of attacks in the second half of May (the Raids of Attrition). **Iraq** continued to be the focal point of ISIS's activity (18 attacks, about 40% of all the attacks), while attacks in **Nigeria** took the lead this week in terms of the number of fatalities.
- ▶ **In Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria**, ISIS's West Africa Province (reportedly) carried out a **series of multi-casualty attacks**: in a series of attacks against the Nigerian army (June 13, 2020), 23 soldiers were killed; in another attack against several Nigerian army headquarters, 90 soldiers were killed (June 9, 2020); in a raid on a village, more than 80 civilians were killed (June 9, 2020). According to a Nigerian army report, more than 40 ISIS operatives were killed in one of the attacks, and weapons and ammunition were seized (June 13, 2020).
- ▶ **ISIS's difficulties with its media network**: ISIS's Amaq News Agency has significantly reduced its publications. Routine reports from the various provinces have been significantly reduced, and Telegram (which serves as ISIS's central distribution platform) continues to shut down ISIS-affiliated accounts.
- ▶ **In the Idlib region** in northern Syria, **the erosion of the Russian-Turkish ceasefire continues**. This week as well, local incidents between the Syrian army and the rebel organizations continued, albeit at a lower intensity than the previous week.

## The Idlib region

### Overview

**The ceasefire in the Idlib region continued this week**, with local incidents between the rival sides. The joint patrols of the Russian and Turkish armies on the M-4 highway continue without unusual incidents. Two senior commanders in the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Guardians of Religion Organization were eliminated in a targeted killing carried out by a UAV (apparently American), which attacked their vehicle in the city of Idlib<sup>1</sup>.

### Main events on the ground

#### Ground activity

► **On June 13, 2020**, the rebel organizations halted a Syrian army infiltration attempt in the northeastern Al-Ghab Plain, about 40 km southwest of Idlib (Idlib Plus, June 13, 2020).

#### Artillery fire

► **On June 13, 2020**, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham reported that the Syrian forces had fired artillery at roads in the Turkmen Mountain, southwest of Idlib (Ibaa, June 13, 2020).

► **On June 12, 2020**, the Syrian forces fired artillery at an area 20 km south of Idlib (Idlib Plus, June 12, 2020).

#### Russian airstrikes

► **On June 13, 2020**, Russian fighter jets carried out an airstrike in the area of Jabal Zawiya, about 25 km south of Idlib (Idlib Plus, June 13, 2020).

► **On June 13, 2020**, Russian fighter jets carried out airstrikes in the rural area south of Idlib (Edlib Media Center – EMC, June 13, 2020).

#### Joint patrols on the M-4 highway continue

► This week, the joint patrols of the Russian and Turkish armies continued uninterrupted. **On June 10, 2020**, Turkey and Russia carried out their 16th joint patrol on the M-4 highway (Aleppo-Latakia), reaching an area about 14 km east of Jisr al-Shughur (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 14, 2020). It was reported that for reasons as yet unclear, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham had evacuated all its checkpoints on the M-4

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<sup>1</sup> So far, there was no formal US announcement on the targeted killing. Syrian media outlets, quoted by the US media, attributed the attack to the United States (Khotwa; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 14, 2020).

highway (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 14, 2020). On June 16, 2020, another joint patrol was carried out, without any unusual incidents (Anatolia, June 16, 2020).

### Turkish army reinforcements

► On June 14, 2020, a Turkish army convoy entered Syria. The convoy, which included 20 trucks carrying cast concrete structures, made its way to the M-4 highway (Khotwa, June 14, 2020). In the ITIC's assessment, the concrete structures were intended to set up positions in areas where the Turkish army is deployed, **possibly due to Turkish concern over another outbreak of hostilities.**



Right: Turkish army armored vehicle. Left: Turkish army truck carrying concrete structures (Khotwa, June 14, 2020)

### Two senior Al-Qaeda-affiliated commanders killed

► On June 14, 2020, a UAV (apparently American) attacked a vehicle in the city of Idlib carrying **two commanders of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Guardians of Religion Organization.** They were both killed. The senior among them was **Khaled al-Arouri**, codenamed **Abu al-Qassem al-Urduni** (i.e., the Jordanian). He was a Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship **who served as the Guardians of Religion Organization's military commander** (he was formerly Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's deputy in Al-Qaeda). The other operative killed was another commander in the organization, **Bilal al-San'ani** (i.e., from Sana'a, Yemen). Another operative was severely wounded (Khotwa, June 14, 2020).



The vehicle carrying the two commanders of the Guardians of Religion Organization, which was hit by a missile (Moussa Al Hassan@MoussaNDT Twitter account, June 14, 2020)

## Setting up a new operations room affiliated with Al-Qaeda

- On June 12, 2020, five jihadi organizations **affiliated with Al-Qaeda** announced the establishment of a new operations room called “Stand Fast.” The operations room is led by the **Guardians of Religion Organization** and includes four other marginal jihadi organizations: **Jama’at Ansar al-Islam** (“the Group of Islam Supporters”), **Jabhat Ansar al-Din** (“the Front of Religion Supporters”), **Tansiqiyat al-Jihad** (“Coordination of Jihad”), and **Liwa al-Muqatileen al-Ansar** (“Brigade of Fighters-Supporters”) (Telegram, June 12, 2020).
- **Three jihadi organizations** which were members of the “Awaken the Believers” operations room **joined the new operations room**. Thus, the “Awaken the Believers” operations room, active since October 2018, has been shut down and replaced by the new operations room.



Notice No. 1, announcing the establishment of the “Stand Fast” operations room (Telegram, June 12, 2020)

## Northeastern Syria

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

- ▶ **On June 15, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle about 50 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. The passengers were killed or wounded (Isdarat, June 16, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 15, 2020**, ISIS operatives raided the headquarters of an SDF local council about 8 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. The head of the local council was killed by machine gun fire (Telegram, June 15, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 14, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle about 10 km north of Albukamal. The passengers were wounded (Isdarat, June 15, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 9, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle in the village of Al-Basira, about 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. The vehicle was damaged (Isdarat, June 10, 2020).

### SDF counterterrorist activity

- ▶ **On June 4, 2020**, the SDF forces launched **Operation Deterrence of Terrorism** in the region extending from the rural area south of Al-Hasakah to the Euphrates Valley. Ground forces of the SDF and the International Coalition countries operated in coordination with Coalition aircraft and the Iraqi forces near the Iraqi-Syrian border.
- ▶ **The first phase of the operation ended on June 10, 2020**. During the mopping up activity, which was accompanied by special commando operations, the forces detained **110 suspected ISIS supporters**. In addition, **large quantities of weapons** were seized, including handguns with silencers used to carry out targeted killings, and many explosives (SDF Press, June 10, 2020).



The press conference where the SDF forces announced the results of Operation Deterrence of Terrorism (Kurdistan 24, June 10, 2020)



## Eastern Syria (the area of Al-Sukhnah and Palmyra)

- On June 11, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked a Syrian army checkpoint in the rural area of Al-Sukhnah, about 60 km northeast of Palmyra. Five Syrian soldiers and fighters of the forces supporting them were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 11, 2020).
- On June 10, 2020, Syrian soldiers were targeted by machine gun fire northwest of Al-Sukhnah, about 60 km northeast of Palmyra. Three soldiers were killed and two motorcycles were seized (Isdarat, June 10, 2020). Photos released in the media show the bodies of three men in civilian clothes. ISIS claims that they were Syrian soldiers (Isdarat, June 10, 2020).

## The desert area east of Hama

- On June 11, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked positions of the Syrian army **in the area of Oqayrabat** (about 70 km east of Hama). Three fighters of forces supporting the Syrian army were killed and several others were wounded (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 11, 2020).
- In response, on June 11, 2020, Syrian fighter jets attacked sites where ISIS operatives are deployed in the Oqayrabat area. At the same time, the Syrian army fired artillery and carried out mopping up activity in areas east and northeast of Hama, searching for ISIS squads. In total, 21 ISIS operatives and 13 Syrian soldiers and fighters supporting them were killed in those incidents (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 14, 2020).



The Oqayrabat area, site of clashes between ISIS and the Syrian army (Google Maps)

## The Iraqi arena

### Iraq's leading position in ISIS's activity

► **Iraq continues to be the hub of ISIS's activity:** on June 11, 2020, ISIS released an infographic entitled "The Harvest of the Fighters," summing up its activity in the various provinces **between June 4 and June 11, 2020**. A total of **44 attacks were carried out by ISIS around the world, a figure significantly lower than the number of attacks in the period preceding the Raids of Attrition**.

► A total of 18 attacks (about 41%) **were carried out in Iraq, which remained the center of ISIS's activity**. In addition, 9 attacks (about 20%) were carried out in ISIS's West Africa Province, 7 (about 16%) in Syria, 2 in Central Africa, 2 in the Sinai Province, 2 in the Somalia Province, 1 in the Libya Province, 1 in the Yemen Province, 1 in the East Asia Province (the Philippines), and 1 in the Khorasan Province (Al-Naba', as published in Isdarat, June 11, 2020). According to the infographic, **over 142 people were killed and wounded in ISIS's attacks around the globe. The largest number of fatalities and wounded was in the West Africa Province (40)**, followed by the provinces of Iraq (38), East Asia (18), Central Africa (15), Syria (14), Sinai (10), Somalia (4), Yemen (2), and Khorasan (1).

### Iraqi estimate of the number of ISIS operatives

► Hisham al-Hashemi, researcher of radicalism and terrorism, estimates that **over 7,000 ISIS operatives are currently operating in Iraq and Syria**. He notes that ISIS lacks both funds and a supportive environment (Al-Sumaria, June 15, 2020).

### Main activities carried out by ISIS in the past week

#### Diyala Province

► **On June 13, 2020**, civilians of the Kakaiya sect were targeted by sniper fire about 100 km northeast of Baqubah. Seven people were killed and others were wounded. When an Iraqi army force arrived at the scene to provide assistance, it was also targeted by sniper fire. Three soldiers were killed and five others were wounded (Telegram, June 14, 2020). **Note: The Kakaiya is an ancient monotheist sect**, mostly Kurdish. Its members, living mainly in northern Iraq, are considered infidels by ISIS and are persecuted by it (like the Yazidis).

### Salah al-Din Province

- ▶ **On June 14, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization fighter was targeted by machine gun fire about 25 km north of Baghdad. He was wounded (Isdarat, June 15, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 13, 2020**, the house of the deputy governor of the Salah al-Din Province, about 80 km north of Baghdad, was targeted by machine gun fire. Two of his security guards were wounded (Isdarat, June 15, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 10, 2020**, an Iraqi police compound was targeted by machine gun fire about 40 km southeast of Samarra. One policeman was killed (Isdarat, June 10, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 9, 2020**, an IED was activated against a mine sweeping vehicle of the Iraqi government counterterrorist unit west of Baiji. The passengers were killed or wounded (Isdarat, June 10, 2020).

### Baghdad Province

- ▶ **On June 9, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization commander was targeted by machine gun fire about 20 km southeast of Baghdad. He was killed (Isdarat, June 10, 2020).



**The equipment found in the possession of the Popular Mobilization commander killed by ISIS (Isdarat, June 10, 2020)**

### Nineveh Province

- ▶ **On June 15, 2020**, an IED was activated against the vehicle of a Tribal Mobilization fighter about 35 km southwest of Mosul. The passengers were wounded (Isdarat, June 16, 2020).

### Kirkuk Province

- ▶ **On June 15, 2020**, Iraqi soldiers were targeted by machine gun fire and an IED was activated against them about 40 km north of Kirkuk. Three soldiers were killed and four others were wounded (Isdarat, June 16, 2020).



### Al-Anbar Province

► **On June 14, 2020**, Iraqi soldiers were targeted by sniper fire about 3 km west of Hit. Two soldiers were killed and another was wounded (Isdarat, June 14, 2020).

► **On June 13, 2020**, two IEDs were activated against two Iraqi army vehicles, about 20 km west of Hit. The passengers of both vehicles were killed or wounded (Isdarat, June 14, 2020).

### Babel Province

► **On June 11, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization fighter was targeted by sniper fire about 40 km southwest of Baghdad. He was killed (Isdarat, June 11, 2020).

► **On June 11, 2020**, an IED was activated against a Popular Mobilization vehicle about 40 km southwest of Baghdad. One fighter was killed and another was wounded (Isdarat, June 11, 2020).

## Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

### Al-Anbar Province

► **On June 16, 2020**, Iraqi security forces apprehended three ISIS operatives in Al-Qaim (near the Iraqi-Syrian border). One of them was in charge of ISIS's billing activity and the other two were fighters who took part in the fighting against the Iraqi security forces during the battles for the liberation of Iraq (Iraqi Ministry of Defense, June 16, 2020).

### Nineveh Province

► **On June 16, 2020**, an Iraqi Interior Ministry Intelligence force apprehended six ISIS operatives in various parts of the Nineveh Province (Al-Sumaria, June 16, 2020).

### Diyala Province

► **On June 15, 2020**, an Iraqi Interior Ministry Intelligence force apprehended three "terrorist operatives" (implicitly ISIS operatives) about 40 km east of Baqubah (Al-Sumaria, June 16, 2020). The three had planted IEDs and activated them recently. Three IEDs were also seized (Al-Sumaria, June 15, 2020).

## ISIS's activity around the globe

### Africa

#### Nigeria

► **On June 13, 2020**, operatives of ISIS's West Africa Province attacked Nigerian army forces and forces supporting it in the city of **Monguno**, about 100 km northeast of Maiduguri, the

capital of Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria). **According to ISIS, 23 Nigerian soldiers were killed**, one soldier was taken prisoner, and others were wounded. ISIS operatives released detainees who had been held at a police station. They raided the police station and other government facilities, destroyed tanks, an armored vehicle and other vehicles. They also seized weapons and ammunition (Isdarat, June 14, 2020).

► According to a German media report, **at least 20 Nigerian soldiers were killed** in the attack in Monguno (Deutsche Welle, June 14, 2020). According to Nigerian media reports, **20 operatives of ISIS's West Africa Province were killed** in a counterattack carried out by Nigerian air and ground forces (Press Release Nigeria, June 14, 2020). On the other hand, the Nigerian army claims that two soldiers were killed and three others were wounded. According to a Nigerian army report, **41 bodies of ISIS operatives** were found in the area of the attack. The Nigerian army also seized weapons and ammunition (Nigerian army website army.mil.ng, June 15, 2020).



**Right: ISIS weapons seized by the Nigerian army in the city of Monguno (Nigerian army website, June 15, 2020). Left: The city of Monguno, where the Nigerian forces were attacked (Google Maps)**



**Right: ISIS vehicles moving in a square in the city of Monguno (Press Release Nigeria, June 14, 2020). Left: ISIS operatives in the city of Monguno during the attack (Telegram, June 14, 2020)**

► **On June 10, 2020**, ISIS operatives ambushed Nigerian soldiers on the road between the cities of Maiduguri and Damboa. One soldier was killed and several others were wounded (Isdarat, June 10, 2020).

► **On June 9, 2020**, ISIS operatives **attacked a number of headquarters where forces supporting the Nigerian army** were stationed, near the town of Gubio, about 80 km northwest of Maiduguri. According to ISIS, **90 fighters were killed and others were wounded** (Telegram, June 12, 2020). A commander of the forces supporting the Nigerian army was taken prisoner by ISIS and then executed (Isdarat, June 16, 2020).



**Execution of the commander of the forces supporting the Nigerian army  
(Isdarat, June 16, 2020)**

► **On June 9, 2020**,

◆ Operatives of ISIS's West Africa Province **on motorcycles** raided a village where shepherds live in Gubio, a Local Government Area of Borno State. The operatives fired in all directions and ran over the residents as they tried to flee. More than 80 people were killed in the raid (Premium Times, Nigerian news website, June 12, 2020). In addition, **more than 1,000 head of cattle were reportedly stolen** (OCHA – UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 10, 2020).

◆ In the opinion of a local village leader, **this attack was carried out by ISIS in retaliation for the killing of ISIS's operatives by local security guards in charge of protecting the herds from theft** (The Telegraph, June 10, 2020). According to an eyewitness who survived the massacre, **at least 80 local civilians were killed in the attack**. The attack was carried out by operatives masquerading as teachers of Islam who asked the residents to gather for a lesson on Islam. They ordered them to hand over the weapons and then began shooting at the residents (CNN, June 10, 2020).

## Democratic Republic of the Congo

- ▶ **On June 14, 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 (about 50 km from the border with Uganda). The soldiers fled from the compound. Weapons and ammunition were seized and the compound was set on fire (Isdarat, June 15, 2020).
- ▶ **On June 14, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Congolese army compound in the area of Beni. An officer was killed (Isdarat, June 15, 2020).

## Mali

- ▶ **On June 3, 2020, Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of Al-Qaeda in North Africa**, was killed in an operation by French forces in northeastern Mali. Now that he has been killed, **there remain three prominent jihadist leaders of Islamic terrorism in the Sahel region** (the sub-Saharan region). Droukdel's death occurred at a time of **violent internal struggles between Al-Qaeda-affiliated fighters and ISIS-affiliated fighters, along with an increase** in the scope of ISIS's activity against the Nigerian army.
- ▶ Following are details of the three prominent jihadist leaders in the Sahel region, based on an article published on The Defense Post website <sup>2</sup>:

◆ **Iyad Ag Ghaly**: a member of the Tuareg tribe, whose members recently took over the city of Timbuktu, in central Mali, in order to establish an independent Islamic state there (AP, April 2, 2020). Ghaly heads a jihadist alliance by the name of **the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM)**. In 2012, Ghaly established a group of jihadist fighters by the name of **Ansar al-Din**, which participated in the separatist uprising of the Tuareg tribe which took place in extensive parts of northern Mali. This bloody revolt spread to central Mali and to the neighboring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger. The Ansar al-Din group split from these separatists in 2013, and temporarily took control of several towns in northern Mali until its operatives were driven out of the area later that year. According to Jean-Pierre Filiu, a historian at the Paris Institute of Political Studies (commonly referred to as Sciences Po), **Iyad Ghaly is considered the sole representative of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in the Sahel region.**

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<sup>2</sup> Staff Writer, Three Top Jihadist Dominate Sahel After Al-Qaeda Leader Death, *The Defense Post*, 8 June 2020: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/06/08/three-top-jihadists-dominate-sahel-after-al-qaeda-leader-death/>

◆ **Amadou Koufa:** Koufa is described as a “firebrand Islamic preacher” who **operates in Al-Qaeda and is subordinate to Iyad Ghaly**. His influence has increased since the establishment a jihadist organization called the Macina Liberation Front in 2015. He is a member of the ethnic Fulani shepherds community and has been accused of fanning the flames of tension between it and other local ethnic farmer groups. This tension has led to massacres between the Fulani group and the other local ethnic groups. **The ethnic tension that he intensified in central Mali has made it one of the key jihadist areas in the Sahel.**

◆ **Adnan Abou Walid Sahraoui:** considered the most wanted jihadist in the Sahel region. **He heads the ISIS province that is the most active in the region connecting Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.** He is a former member of the Polisario Front, the [secular] national movement for the liberation of Western Sahara [from Morocco]. His status rose gradually, as northern Mali fell into the hands of the rebels in 2012. At the time, he was a member of a jihadist group called **the Movement for Oneness [of Allah] and Jihad in West Africa** (MUAJO – which is the acronym for the movement’s name in French). **In 2015, Adnan Sahraoui pledged allegiance to ISIS.** The militia that he heads is very active and has been accused of carrying out a series of attacks in 2019 and 2020. **This year, it also began fighting against Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the Sahel region, for the first time in the region’s history.**