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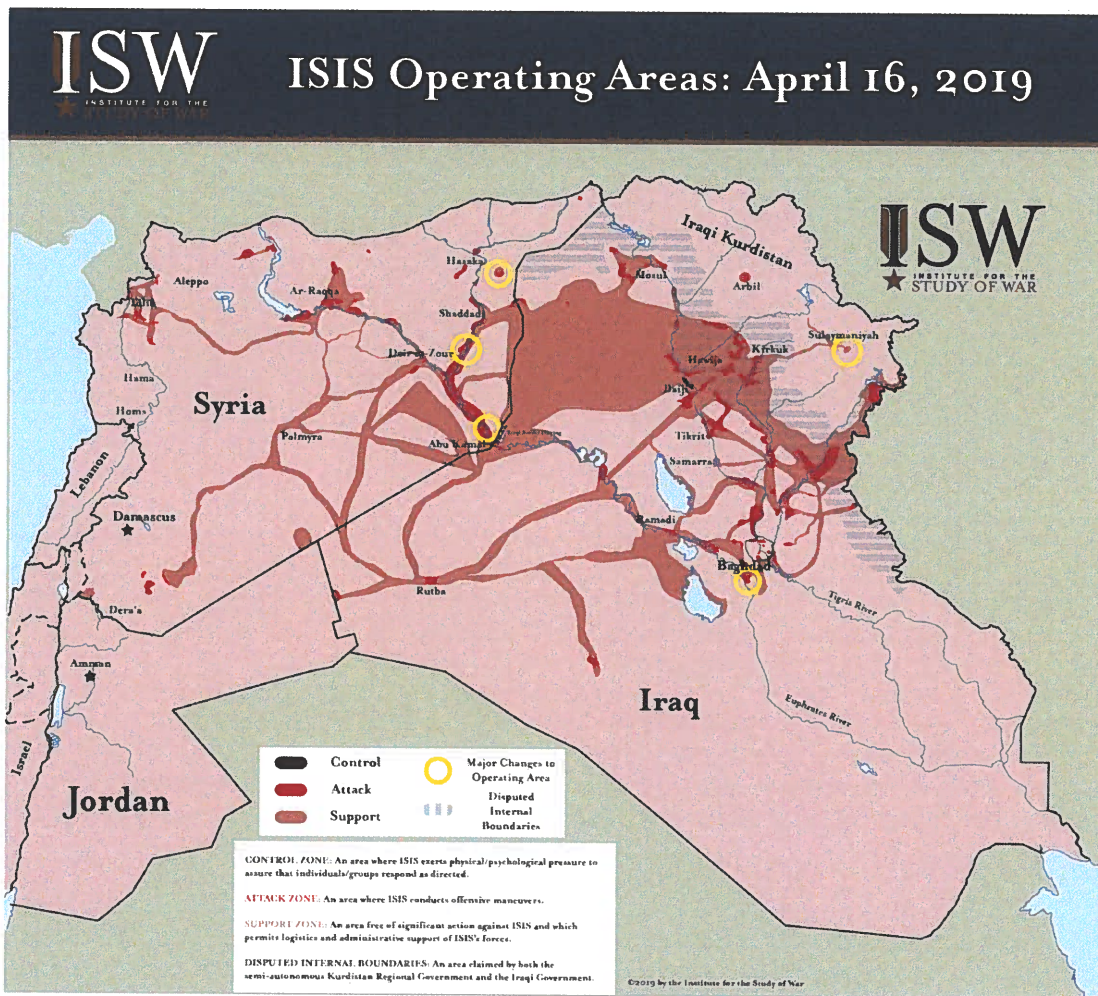
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ISIS Resurgence Update - April 2019

By Brandon Wallace

Key Takeaway: ISIS lost its last zone of territorial control in Syria on March 23, 2019, but its resurgent campaign continues to gain momentum across Iraq and Syria. ISIS is expanding its support zones and scaling up its attack campaign in key cities including Ar-Raqqa City, Mosul, and Fallujah as well as rear areas in Northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan.

[CLICK IMAGE TO ENLARGE MAP](#)



Major Changes to ISIS's Operating Areas

Timeframe: December 19, 2018 - April 16, 2019

In Syria:

- The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) **seized** the last terrain controlled by ISIS in Syria on March 23, 2019. The area included a network of caves and tunnels housing tens of thousands of suspected fighters, their family members, and other civilians, posing an unexpected humanitarian challenge for the SDF. U.S. President Donald Trump **issued** a formal statement on the same day announcing the full liberation of "all ISIS-controlled territory in Syria and Iraq - 100% of the 'caliphate'."

- The SDF transferred more than **55,000** women and children captured in the operation to the Al-Hawl Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in Northern Syria near the Syrian-Iraqi Border. Many of the detainees are ISIS family members who **publicly remain** committed to the ideology. Some of them claimed that ISIS Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi **ordered them to surrender** to the SDF in February 2019. ISIS likely intended to exploit this displacement to infiltrate, destabilize, and recruit from the camps in order to create opportunities for its resurgence. Hardcore female followers have **attacked** guards and other displaced persons and **burned** the tents of less committed families since entering the Al-Hawl IDP Camp. ISW has thus mapped the camp as both an attack and support zone.
- ISIS has intensified and expanded its resurgent attack campaign targeting the rear areas of the SDF in Northern Syria. ISIS is concentrating its attacks along two primary sections of the ground line of communication between Deir ez-Zour Province and Hasaka Province in Eastern Syria. ISIS has conducted repeated ambushes near **Suwar** along Khabur River Valley including two failed assassination attempts targeting SDF Spokesperson Laila al-Abdullah on February 14 and SDF Deir ez-Zour Military Council Head Abu Khawla on February 15.[1] ISIS is also attacking convoys in transit northwest of Shaddadi (the location of a major logistics hub for the SDF and U.S.-Led Coalition) in Southern Hasaka Province. ISIS **detonated** SVBIEDs targeting convoys of the U.S.-Led Coalition and SDF near Shaddadi on January 21 and April 9.[2]

In Iraq:

- ISIS is reestablishing a support zone in the southwest quadrant of the Baghdad Belts in order to link its operations in Anbar Province to Baghdad and Southern Iraq. ISIS is working to rebuild its networks in Northern Babil Province. ISIS will likely use this zone to project force into Baghdad and south towards soft targets in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) 46th Brigade - a branch of Kata'ib Hezbollah - thwarted an ISIS SVBIED in Jurf al-Sakhar in Northern Babil in January 2019.[3] The target of this attack remains unclear but it marked the first such incident since the PMF **cleared** ISIS from Jurf al-Sakhar in October 2014. ISIS likely **staged** the SVBIED from its support zone south of Fallujah in Anbar Province. Babil Police arrested an ISIS fighter at a checkpoint in Iskandariya between Baghdad and Karbala on February 19.[4] The PMF 47th Brigade - also a branch of Kata'ib Hezbollah - later clashed with ISIS during an attempted clearing operation in Jurf al-Sakhar on April 9.[5] ISIS temporarily withdrew from the area but Kata'ib Hezbollah did not properly clear the terrain. ISIS will likely leverage its presence in the region to stage increasingly sophisticated attacks as it develops its attack capabilities and cells in the Southwest Baghdad Belts. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) historically operated from this area to **stage** **VBIEDs** into Baghdad.
- ISIS is expanding its networks in Iraqi Kurdistan and may be connecting them to its resurgent footprint in Kirkuk and Diyala Provinces. Iraqi Kurdish Asayish Internal Security Forces claimed to detain three separate cells of Arab ISIS members in Sulaymaniyah Province since January 2019 including cells in Sulaymaniyah City, Chamchamal between Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk City, and Kalar northwest of the Diyala River Valley.[6] ISIS likely is attempting to transit north and east from its support zones in Kirkuk Province to Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdish Asayish also arrested an ISIS militant in Southern Sulaymaniyah Province on April 11 allegedly responsible for transiting fighters between Kirkuk City, Hawija, and Dibis in Kirkuk Province.[7] AQI historically **conducted** regular attacks along Highway 2 stretching from Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan through Kirkuk Province to Tuz Khurmatu in Eastern Salah ad-Din Province.
- The Iraqi Special Forces (ISOF) First and Second Brigades began a major clearing operation against ISIS in the Hamrin Mountains of Northern Diyala Province on 11 April.[8] The operation is the largest to date against the support zone held by ISIS in the Hamrin Mountains to date and if successful could disrupt its reconstitution throughout Northern Iraq. The operation will likely fail to eliminate the support zone, however. The Hamrin Mountains are favorable terrain for insurgents and even the U.S. did not attempt to clear them completely during the Surge. ISW will publish updates on the operation as necessary.

Updates to ISW's December 2018 Assessment

ISW routinely updates and refines its assessment of the operating areas held by ISIS in Iraq and Syria based on openly available sources. ISIS's activity since December 2018 strengthens our prior assessment of its support zones and demonstrates its further consolidation in these areas.

ISIS's recent consolidation has included its leveraging of existing support networks across Syria and Iraq to shift fighters and material out of its final zone of territorial control in Syria:

- ISIS increased its transit across the Jazeera Desert between Eastern Syria and Western Iraq to exfiltrate fighters and materials to Iraq. Anonymous U.S. and Iraqi officials **stated** in February 2019 that more than 1,000 ISIS fighters had crossed the Iraqi-Syrian Border through the Jazeera Desert since September 2018. ISIS is likely moving these fighters into its **established sanctuaries** in Iraq including the Badush Mountains west of Mosul. ISW has represented this cross-border movement with its support zone in the Jazeera Desert.
- ISIS also transferred resources and fighters from its final pocket of control in the Middle Euphrates River Valley to support zones across Syria. Local media activists accused the SDF's Zaza Regiment (affiliated with the Manbij Military Council) of smuggling ISIS fighters and families from Eastern Syria to Manbij in Aleppo Province on March 18.[9] ISIS likely also relocated militants to other support zones in Syria including Idlib Province.

ISIS's resurgent campaign is accelerating in the urban centers of Ar-Raqqa City, Mosul, and Fallujah. ISW previously depicted support and attack zones in these cities. It is now expanding these attack zones to account for increased activity by ISIS since December 2018.

- The SDF are failing to contain an attack campaign by ISIS in Ar-Raqqa City. Local security forces lack the training to properly counter an insurgency and frequently conduct large-scale arrests of suspected militants based on limited evidence.[10] These arrests undermine the population's confidence in the SDF but have little effect on ISIS. ISIS is directly targeting this seam between the local population and the SDF. ISIS **assassinated** prominent Raqqa Civil Council Member Sheikh Bashir al-Huwaydi in Ar-Raqqa City on November 1. Huwaydi was an important voice of support for the SDF among Arabs in Northern Syria.[11] ISIS later **detonated** an SVEST targeting an SDF Civil-Military Relations Headquarters in the Karama District east of Ar-Raqqa City on March 2. ISIS has also conducted a series of low-level attacks involving small arms and IEDs targeting internal security forces, patrols, and checkpoints in Central Ar-Raqqa City. ISIS most recently detonated an IED and VBIED targeting a patrol in Ar-Raqqa City on April 9.[12]
- Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have also failed to defeat an attack campaign by ISIS in Mosul. ISIS has **detonated** two VBIEDs in Mosul since December 2018, both targeting cafes and restaurants near Mosul University in Eastern Mosul. It is likely staging VBIEDs from the industrial Gogjali District in Eastern Mosul adjacent to Highway 2. Iraqi Counter Terrorism Services (CTS) previously **identified** Gogjali as the main cluster of manufacturing workshops for VBIEDs during the Battle of Mosul. ISIS also operates a dense support network of safe houses across Eastern Mosul. Ninewa Police seized \$170,000 in a safe house used by ISIS in the Zahra District of Eastern Mosul on April 1.[13]
- ISIS also retains a robust network in Fallujah despite its lack of major visible operations in Eastern Anbar Province. ISIS is conducting sporadic low-level attacks to eliminate local resistance, including the assassination at least three village mukhtars (local leaders) south of Fallujah between January and February 2019.[14] Repeated clearing operations in the area have also uncovered an extensive support network in and around Fallujah. The ISF and PMF discovered and destroyed a sophisticated tunnel network in the southern outskirts of Fallujah in January 2019.[15] ISIS likely operates other such tunnels near Fallujah. ISIS also maintains a networked presence inside the city that provides a range of support functions. The ISF disrupted a counterfeiting operation in Fallujah's Risala District on February 11.[16]

Comparing ISW's Map to the Unclassified DIA Assessment

U.S. President Donald Trump **shared** a map generated by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) of the "residual" presence of ISIS on March 20. The map is similar to ISW's assessment of ISIS's support zones in Iraq and Syria with several major differences.



Iraq/Syria | ISIS Physical Caliphate 2019

ISW modified this image by adding numbered, red circles depicting identified ISIS operating areas in Iraq and Syria. The original fails to account for these key areas.

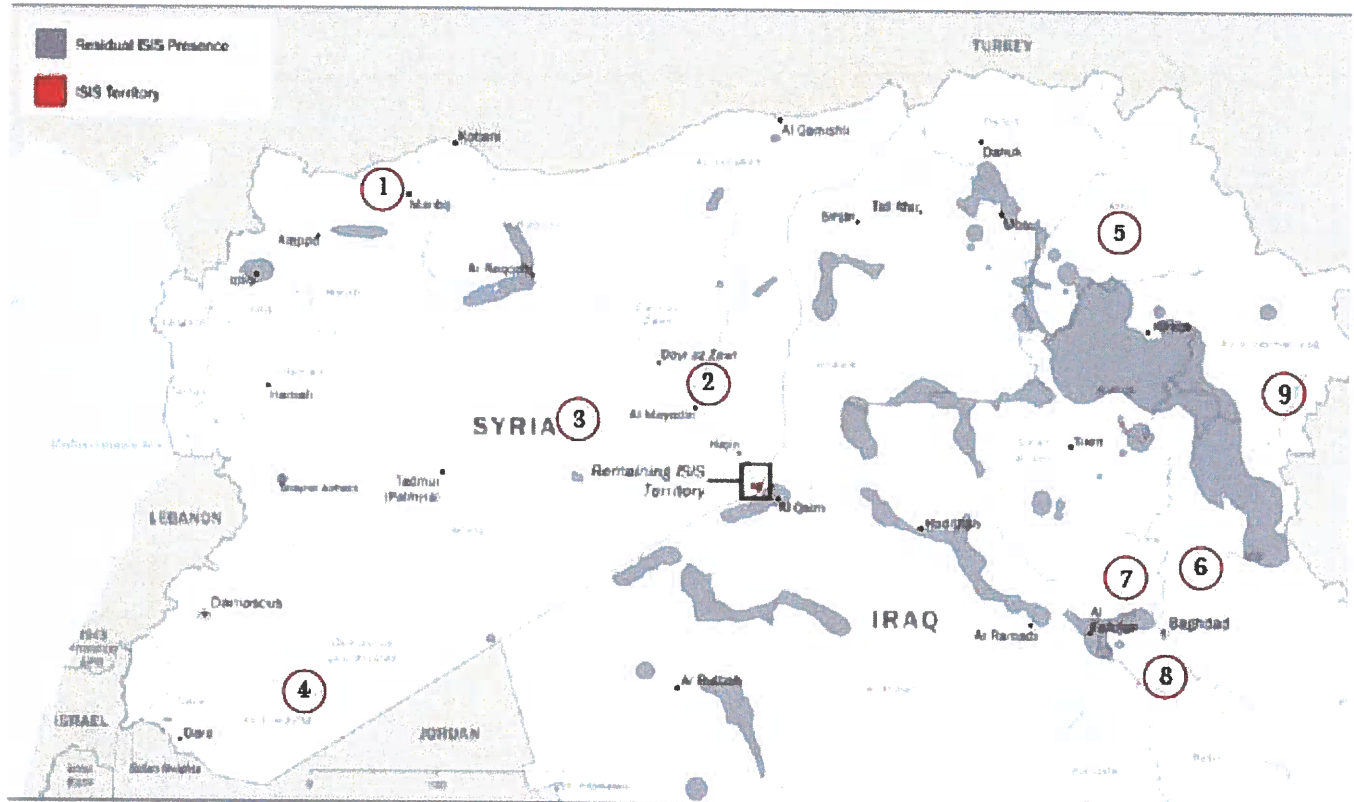


Image: Defense Intelligence Agency Map with ISW markings associated with the nine zones discussed below.

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The DIA's assessment lacks nine key support zones assessed with moderate confidence by ISW:

1. **Manbij**: ISIS retains a networked presence in Manbij in Aleppo Province in Northern Syria that it is using to attack the SDF and U.S.-Led Coalition. ISIS **detonated** an SVEST killing nineteen individuals including four U.S. military and civilian personnel in Manbij on January 16. ISIS also **detonated** a SVBIED **targeting** a marketplace southwest of Manbij on March 8. ISIS **attacked** a checkpoint of the SDF west of Manbij on March 26. The DIA does not depict this operating area for ISIS.
2. **Northern Deir ez-Zour / Southern Hasaka**: ISIS is mounting an attack campaign against the ground line of communication used by the SDF and U.S.-Led Coalition in Northern Deir ez-Zour and Southern Hasaka Provinces (as discussed above). The DIA does not depict this operating area for ISIS.
3. **Central Syria**: ISIS operates in uninhabited desert areas west of the Euphrates River Valley. ISIS transits through support zones across the Homs Desert and frequently attacks pro-regime forces

deployed to secure oil and natural gas infrastructure in areas ranging from Palmyra to the Syrian-Iraqi Border.[17] ISIS's Amaq News Agency, for example, **released** a video filmed at an unidentified location in the Homs Desert showing militants with two dead Russians and one live Syrian on April 7. Other reporting corroborated claims that ISIS ambushed pro-regime forces between the T2 Station and Mayadin in Central Syria.[18] ISIS tends to attack convoys rather than fixed positions in this area, demonstrating that its goal is likely a limited disruption of pro-regime freedom of movement and the generation of propaganda highlighting its anti-regime operations. The DIA has underrepresented this operating area for ISIS.

4. **Southern Syria:** ISIS retains a residual support zone east of Suwayda Province. Pro-regime forces frequently clash with ISIS in the Al-Safa Region in Eastern Suwayda Province, most recently on March 26.[19] Pro-regime forces claimed to clear ISIS from Al-Safa on November 19, 2018.[20] ISIS nonetheless remains active in the area, likely exploiting extensive natural tunnels. The DIA does not depict this operating area for ISIS.
5. **Arbil:** ISIS retains a support zone in Arbil City. Three Kurdish high school students **stormed** the Arbil Province Governor's Building in Arbil City on July 21, 2018 and temporarily held two hostages before security forces killed the assailants.[21] Kurdish security forces later arrested an Iraqi Kurdish cleric who radicalized the attackers on July 24, 2018. Kurdish security forces **arrested** eight members of a financing network **linked** to ISIS in Arbil City in October 2018 and later arrested eight other ISIS militants in Arbil City on January 16.[22] The DIA does not depict this operating area for ISIS.
6. **Southern Diyala Province:** ISIS holds a durable support zone in Southern Diyala Province. ISIS began conducting hit-and-run attacks in the Buhriz Subdistrict south of t Baqubah in mid-2018.[23] ISIS increased its attack tempo against security forces, local tribal figures, and commercial sites in Buhriz in January 2019 and Buhriz Subdistrict was reportedly "almost under the control of ISIS" by February 2019.[24] ISIS also conducts attacks on civilians and security forces from safe havens near Muqdadiyah northeast of Baqubah. A municipal official claimed that ISIS controls several rural villages west of Muqdadiyah in January 2019.[25] The DIA does not depict these operating areas for ISIS.
7. **Northern Baghdad Belts:** ISIS is present in the Northern Baghdad Belts despite clearing operations by the ISF and PMF. ISIS has repeatedly attacked security forces along the highways north of Baghdad. ISIS most recently ambushed the ISF in Tarmiyah north of Baghdad on March 19.[26] The DIA has underrepresented this operating area for ISIS.
8. **Southwest Baghdad Belts:** ISIS is expanding its support zone in the southwestern quadrant of the Baghdad Belts (as discussed above). The DIA does not depict this operating area for ISIS.
9. **Khanaqin:** ISIS retains both a support and attack zone along the Iraqi-Iranian Border stretching into Halabja Province in Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS is likely using mountain routes in Northern Khanaqin District to cross between Iraq and Iran. Its activity in the area has prompted multiple deployments by the PMF. PMF Diyala Axis Command deployed forces to secure Khanaqin District in early February 2019.[27] The 20th PMF Brigade also deployed members to provide additional security Khanaqin District in early March 2019.[28] It remains unclear whether these deployments have affected ISIS. Similar PMF deployments elsewhere in Diyala and Kirkuk Provinces have consistently **failed** to disrupt ISIS and it is unlikely that the PMF will be more effective in Khanaqin.

There are multiple possible explanations for why the DIA does not depict these operating areas held by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The DIA may be unable to assess these operating areas through unclassified means. ISW may also have misattributed attacks conducted by other insurgents such as former Ba'athists operating outside the control of ISIS. ISW is actively looking for indicators to parse these groups as of April 2019. The DIA also mapped operating areas for ISIS near Aleppo City, Qamishli in Northern Syria, and Rutbah in Western Iraq not depicted by ISW. ISW does not possess sufficient evidence from the open-source to assess these zones as of April 2019. ISW routinely reevaluates its assessments and plans to publish a refined assessment as needed.

[1] ["Deir ez-Zour Military Commander Survives Assassination Attempt in Rural Deir ez-Zour,"] Deir ez-Zour 24, February 15, 2019, [https://deirezzor24\(.\)net/archives/9356](https://deirezzor24(.)net/archives/9356); ["Spokesperson for Jazeera Storm Campaign Survives Assassination Attempt,"] Deir ez-Zour 24, February 15, 2019, [https://en.deirezzor24\(.\)net/the-spokesperson-for-al-jazeera-storm-campaign-survives-an-assassination-attempt/](https://en.deirezzor24(.)net/the-spokesperson-for-al-jazeera-storm-campaign-survives-an-assassination-attempt/).

[2] Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "At Least Eight People, Including SDF Members, Killed in Explosions in

%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9/ar.

[16] ["The Arrest of a Forging Ring Turning Elements of Daesh Dead and Victims of Terrorism in Fallujah,"] Al-Ghad Press, February 12, 2019,

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[17] "U.S. Commandos and Special Coalition Forces Sweep Baghuz Tunnels and Caves Searching for Abductees and ISIS Riches and Leaders," SOHR, March 27, 2019, [http://www.syriahr\(.\)com/en/?p=122398](http://www.syriahr(.)com/en/?p=122398).

[18] ["Detecting the Identity of Two Dead Assad Militia in Deir ez-Zour After Ambush,"] Orient News, February 24, 2019, [https://orient-](https://orient-news(.)net/ar/news_show/162982/0/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%83%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4)

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[19] ["Two People Killed and Wounded by ISIS in Combing Operations by Regime Forces East of Suwayda,"] SMART, March 23, 2019, [https://smartnews-](https://smartnews-agency(.)com/ar/wires/372865/%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B7-%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82)

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[20] Leith Aboufadel, "Daesh Suffers Devastating Defeat as Syrian Army Liberates Entire Al-Safa Region," Al-Masdar News, November 19, 2018, [https://www.almasdarnews\(.\)com/article/daesh-suffers-devastating-defeat-as-syrian-army-liberates-entire-al-safa-region](https://www.almasdarnews(.)com/article/daesh-suffers-devastating-defeat-as-syrian-army-liberates-entire-al-safa-region).

[21] "Update: 3 Gunmen Who Attacked Erbil Governor's Building Named," Rudaw, July 23, 2018, [http://www.rudaw\(.\)net/english/kurdistan/23072018](http://www.rudaw(.)net/english/kurdistan/23072018).

[22] "Two Alleged ISIS Members, Six Suspects Arrested in Erbil," Rudaw, January 17, 2019, [http://www.rudaw\(.\)net/english/kurdistan/170120191](http://www.rudaw(.)net/english/kurdistan/170120191).

[23] ["7 Civilians Shot Dead in Diyala,"] Rudaw, July 6, 2018, [http://www.rudaw\(.\)net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/060720189](http://www.rudaw(.)net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/060720189).

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