Spotlight on Global Jihad
(December 10-16, 2014)

Main events of the week[1]

✓ One of the main events of the week was an incident in which an armed man (born in Iran, with a criminal record) took people hostage in a café in Sydney, Australia. The perpetrator and two hostages were killed during the Australian rescue operation. At this stage, the connection between the perpetrator and ISIS is not clear. One of his demands was to bring an ISIS flag to the café, a possible indication that his actions were inspired by ISIS. Online jihadi networks presented the attack as an act of retaliation for Australia's participation in the US campaign against ISIS.

✓ Fighting in Iraq and Syria continued in the major battle zones without significant changes on the ground. Worthy of special attention are ISIS's efforts to expand its sphere of influence to the rural area south of Damascus and to southern Syria, where the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria) is the dominant organization among the rebel groups.

The international campaign against ISIS

Attacks by the US and the coalition in Syria and Iraq

■ The Central Command of the US Army (CENTCOM) reported that during the week, the coalition forces carried out **around 15 attacks in Syria.** These attacks were directed at battle positions, fortifications and buildings controlled by ISIS in the cities of Kobani, Aleppo and Al-Qaim (CENTCOM website).

■ **In Iraq**, the coalition forces carried out around 20 attacks in the area of Sinjar, Ramadi, Rutba, Mosul and Samarra. The attacks in Iraq destroyed vehicles, including heavy machinery, battle positions, warehouses, watchtowers and buildings controlled by ISIS (CENTCOM website).

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[1] The weekly publication Spotlight on Global Jihad will monitor developments among ISIS and global jihad organizations and networks in the Middle East. The publication will also deal with global jihad terrorist activities originating in the Middle East.

Statements by senior US officials about the campaign against ISIS

■ In a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, **US Secretary of State John Kerry** discussed the campaign in Syria and Iraq against ISIS, among other things. He said that the coalition attacks against ISIS are managing to weaken the leadership of the organization, undermine its propaganda efforts and damage its operational and logistical capabilities. Referring to the US President's authorization to conduct the campaign, he said that in his opinion, **the authorization should remain valid for three years**, and that it must provide the US President with the authority and flexibility he needs in order to conduct the campaign. He added that **the US operations should not be limited to the territory of Syria and Iraq alone**, and stressed that the US does not intend to incorporate ground troops as part of the current campaign (US State Department website, December 9, 2014).

■ **Brett McGurk, Deputy Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL**, made it clear at a hearing before the Foreign Relations Committee of the House of Representatives on December 10, 2014, that the international campaign against ISIS is still in its early stages. He said the efforts to stop the advance of ISIS have succeeded, but efforts to turn the clock back will require more time. According to **Ed Royce**, **Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee**, ISIS is still controlling the same territories that it controlled in the summer of 2014, when the US attacks against it began (www.stripes.com, December 10, 2014).

Cooperation between Britain and Turkey in the campaign against ISIS

■ At a joint press conference held in Britain by the Turkish Prime Minister and his British counterpart, the two countries agreed on close cooperation in order to **stop foreign fighters from traveling through Turkey to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS.** The Turkish Prime Minister promised to tighten the intelligence cooperation, which is essential for the success of their joint efforts (British Foreign Office website, December 10, 2014).

Main developments in Syria

Kobani (Ayn al-Arab)

■ At present, the principal conflict arena between ISIS and the Kurdish militias is still the city of Kobani and the Kurdish region that surrounds it. At the end of July 2012, the YPG's Kurdish militias took control of Ayn al-Arab (called Kobani by the Kurds). The Kurds consider Kobani part of Syrian Kurdistan, whereas ISIS strives to impose its control over the Kurdish region surrounding Kobani. Against this background, in the summer of 2014, ISIS was involved in clashes with Kurdish militias near the Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn border crossings near Ayn al-Arab. These clashes also spread to the Kobani area and are still ongoing.

■ On December 9, 2014, ISIS published photos that it claimed were taken by an **unmanned aircraft from Kobani.** The photos show an area in the city of Kobani where, ISIS claims, a suicide bombing attack was carried out. The photos also show ISIS operatives firing at the city (Independent.co.uk, December 11, 2014). ISIS has unmanned aircraft, which the organization uses in intelligence collection missions and for propaganda purposes as well.

Deir al-Zor

■ On December 10, 2014, ISIS distributed a video on Islamic forums detailing the progress of its forces in the province of Deir al-Zor in eastern Syria. ISIS claims that its forces took control of several villages in the area and advanced towards Deir al-Zor's military airfield (near an area where battles were fought last week). Syrian forces continued to repel ISIS's attacks on the airfield and attacked an armored vehicle belonging to ISIS which was intended for use as a car bomb.

Left: Documentation of the destruction in al-Masmaka (video distributed by ISIS on Islamic forums, December 10, 2014) Right: Arrival at the walls of the military airfield in Deir al-Zor.

The rural area south of Damascus

■ ISIS announced that as part of the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate, it is establishing an Islamic emirate in the **Hajar Aswad** neighborhood south of Damascus. This step was taken after a number of groups of combatants announced that they were pledging allegiance to ISIS (Al-Akhbar, December 10, 2014). According to the ISIS Facebook page, on December 14, 2014, several rebel organizations in the province of Damascus pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Announcement on an ISIS-affiliated Facebook page stating that several organizations have pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi.

Evacuation of casualties in Al-Raqqah following the Syrian Air Force bombing (YouTube)

The province of Idlib

■ Al-Nusra Front forces in cooperation with other jihadi groups took control of the Syrian Army base in **Wadi al-Deif**, in the province of Idlib (northwestern Syria). Control of the area is important because it is close to the main road from Aleppo to Damascus (syriahr.com, December 14, 15, 2014).

Videos distributed on YouTube by the Al-Nusra Front about the takeover of Wadi al-Deif. Left: captured Syrian Army tank (YouTube, December 15, 2014) Right: armored vehicle belonging to the Al-Nusra Front near a Syrian Army headquarters building

Main developments in Iraq

The Samarra area (north of Baghdad)

■ This week ISIS's efforts to cleanse the pockets of resistance in areas north and west of Baghdad continued. One battle zone was the Shiite city of Samarra, which is defended by the Iraqi Army and Shiite militias. The battles were accompanied by **a series of suicide bombing attacks carried out by ISIS foreign fighters from France, Saudi Arabia and Syria.** The foreign fighters who carried out the suicide bombing attacks were **Abu Anas, a Frenchman** who blew himself up in a car bomb attack targeting Shiite militiamen; **Abu Naif** from Saudi Arabia, who blew himself up against a similar target; and **Abu Umar** from Syria, who blew himself up against Iraqi military personnel (Longwarjournal.org, December 11, 2014).

Suicide bombing attacks in Syria and Iraq, carried out during military clashes, are a modus operandi that ISIS specializes in. To carry out suicide bombing attacks, ISIS usually utilizes foreign fighters, both Arabs/Muslims and Westerners. The preference for using foreign fighters stems from the ideological fervor that some of them possess and possibly also from their lack of skill in military combat. All of the above makes them suitable candidates for suicide bombing attacks.

The foreign fighters from France, Saudi Arabia and Syria who carried out the suicide bombing attacks (Photos via the SITE Intelligence Group)

■ On December 13, 2014, Iraqi military sources revealed to CNN that on the day before (December 12, 2014), ISIS managed to shoot down an Iraqi helicopter in a village near the city of Samarra. Eyewitnesses confirmed the report. In the

assessment of the Iraqi Army, **a Strela missile was apparently fired at the helicopter**. ISIS has portable shoulder-fired missiles, including SA-7 (Strela) missiles, which were used to shoot down an Iraqi helicopter near the city of Baiji.
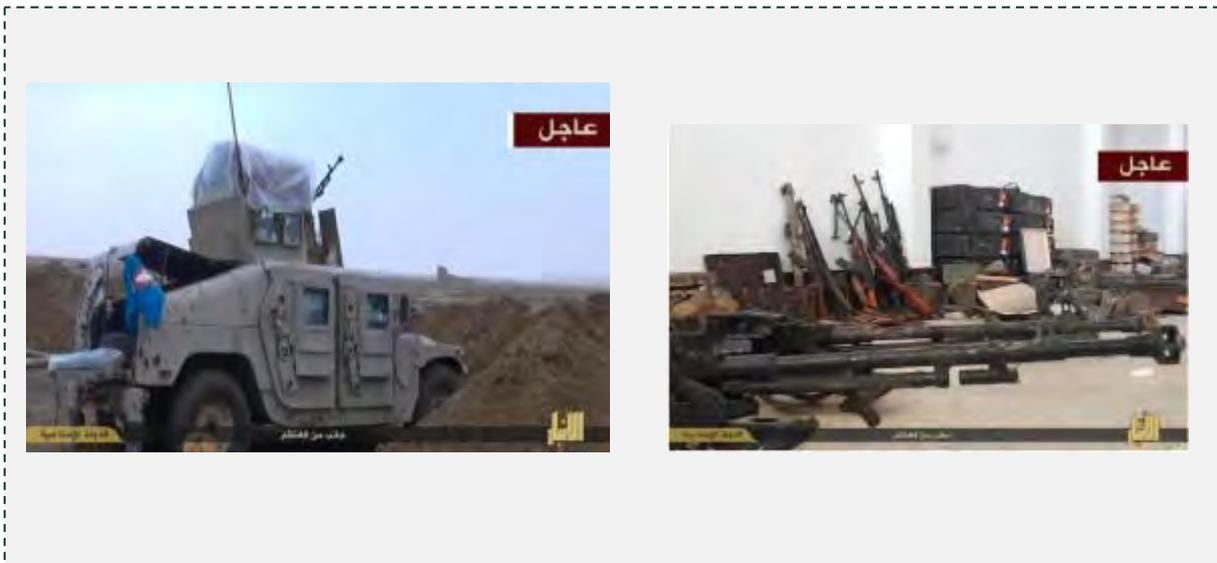

Iraqi helicopter shot down by ISIS, on fire (distributed on YouTube)

The province of Al-Diyala (northwest of Baghdad)

■ On December 12, 2014, ISIS operatives attacked a Kurdish government building in a town in the northern part of the province of Al-Diyala. According to ISIS, **three suicide bombers** were sent to carry out the mission: **a German, a Saudi Arabian and a Turk.** In total, **28 people were killed** in the suicide bombing attack, including Kurdish fighters and civilians. More than 90 people were wounded.

The province of Al-Anbar (western Iraq)

■ This week as well, ISIS continued to cleanse pockets of resistance in the Sunni province of Al-Anbar. Fighting in the province has been underway for several months and is still ongoing. On December 12, 2014, ISIS operatives executed 21 Iraqi military men captured two days earlier at the Al-Assad airfield. ISIS's Al-Anbar unit published photos of the dead soldiers and seized weapons. The Arab media reported that **most of the province of Al-Anbar is under the control of ISIS**, except **the provincial capital of Ramadi and the city of Haditha**, which are in the hands of the Iraqi Army, local Sunni tribal fighters and Shiite militias supported by Iran (Al-Jazeera, December 13, 2014).

Weapons captured by ISIS in the province of Al-Anbar (Al-Anbar unit website, December 13, 2014)
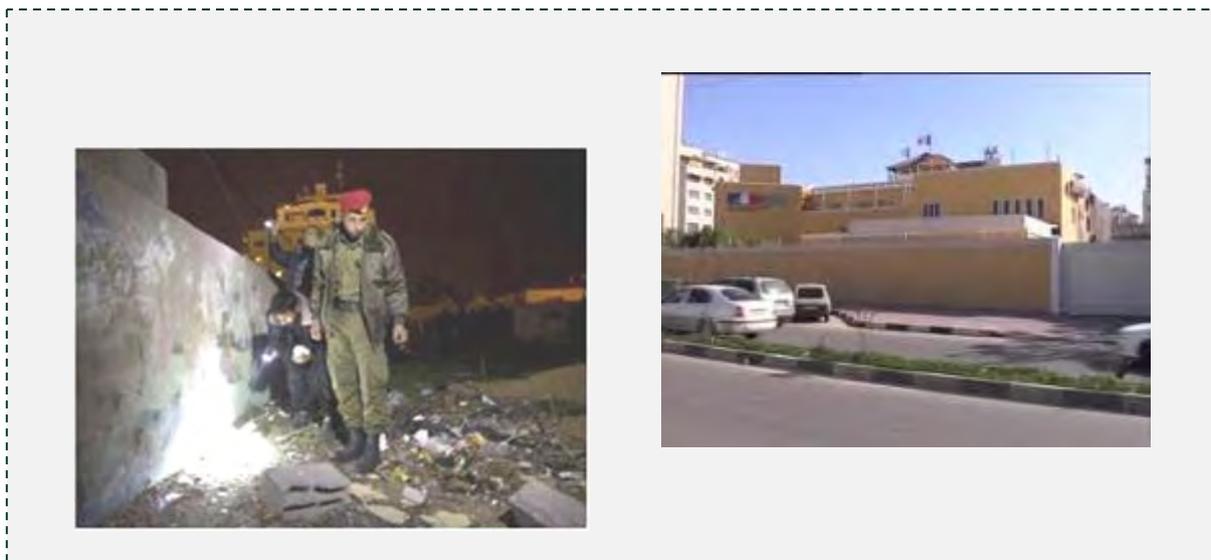
The area of Tikrit (north of Baghdad)

■ On December 14, 2014, it was reported that the Iraqi Army had begun to concentrate its forces in the Tikrit area in preparation for cleansing the city of ISIS forces (ISW, December 14, 2014). In addition, an Iraqi Army force came from Baghdad to the city of Balad (south of Tikrit) to cleanse ISIS pockets in the area. In the city of Tikrit, there were clashes between ISIS and the Iraqi Army and Sunni and Shiite militias in the region.

Judea, Samaria, the Gaza Strip and Israeli Arabs

Detonation of an IED on the French Cultural Center in Gaza

■ On the evening of December 12, 2014, **an IED was detonated at the French Cultural Center** in Gaza City. The exterior wall of the center was damaged. Two Salafist-jihadi organizations claimed responsibility for the attack. The Hamas Interior Ministry announced that it had mounted an investigation to determine the circumstances of the explosion. Preliminary findings indicated that the IED was activated remotely by a cellphone. Two policemen were slightly injured. Two months ago, a similar explosion occurred at the same Cultural Center (Ma'an News Agency, December 13, 2014). In recent years, there have been several cases of harassment against Western institutions and individuals in the Gaza Strip by Salafist-jihadi elements, presenting a challenge to Hamas's control.

Left: Hamas security forces at the scene (Al-Watan channel, December 13, 2014) Right: The French Cultural Center in Gaza (Ma'an News Agency, December 13, 2014)

Operatives from the Gaza Strip killed in the ranks of ISIS

■ **The Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center (ITMC)**, which is used by the Salafist-jihadi networks in the Gaza Strip, recently published posters in memory of four of its operatives, residents of the Gaza Strip, who were killed in Iraq while fighting there in the ranks of ISIS (Twitter page of the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center, October 28 and November 17, 2014).

Top: Death notice of Nour Zuheir Abu Issa (Abu Bakr). Bottom: Death notice of Shadi Mutleq al-Dahoudi (Abu Anas), who was killed in the province of Al-Diyala in Iraq, the site of recent fighting between ISIS and its opponents (Twitter page of the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center, November 17, 2014).

Top: Death notice of Mohammad Samir Abu Awn (Abu Anas), who was killed in the province of Al-Diyala in Iraq. Bottom: Death notice of ISIS operative Moussa Hassan Jihadi (Abu Mou'men), who was killed in the city of Fallujah in Iraq (Twitter page of the Ibn Taymiyyah Media Center, October 28, 2014)

In the Gaza Strip, there are expressions of support for ISIS on the part of Salafist-jihadi elements influenced by the organization's achievements in Syria and Iraq. These elements once held a rally in support of ISIS in Rafah and distributed a video on YouTube supporting the organization. There are also several dozen Palestinian operatives in Syria, some of whom probably operate within a separate unit in ISIS named after Sheikh Abu Nour al-Maqdisi (a Salafist-jihadi sheikh in the Gaza Strip who was killed in 2009 by Hamas following his announcement of the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Palestine).

Hamas perceives Salafist-jihadi activity as a potential threat and as a practical and ideological challenge to its rule in the Gaza Strip. At this stage, the Salafist-jihadi infrastructure in the Gaza Strip still does not pose a real threat to the control of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Hamas possesses the tools to suppress any operational or ideological activity that deviates from the rules of the game set by Hamas. Recent expressions of support for ISIS in the Gaza Strip have been dealt with aggressively by Hamas up to now, even though it generally avoids outright confrontation with Salafist-jihadis.[2]

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[2] For details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 16, 2014: "Expressions of support in the Gaza Strip for the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), which is affiliated with the global jihad. During Operation Protective Edge, Salafist-jihadi elements who identify with ISIS fired a number of rockets at Israel."

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Publication of a warning against Iranian activity

■ **Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis,** a terrorist organization, which has become the Sinai District of the Islamic State, published a warning on December 11, 2014, against attempts by "hostile Shiite Iranian elements" to expand their influence in Greater Jerusalem (i.e., throughout the entire Land of Israel) by means of charities and military operations. The organization said that it would fight these Shiite elements **and threatened to continue to harm Iranian interests in the region.** The background of the announcement may be the Hamas delegation's visit to Iran and Hamas's military wing's praise of the Iranian aid that it received during Operation Protective Edge.[3]

The warning about activity by "the Iranian elements" (ISIS's ALPLATFORMEDIA forum)

Appointment of an emir for ISIS's Sinai District

■ "Jihadi sources" reported to Al-Watan that ISIS has appointed one of its commanders in Iraq to serve as **Emir of the Sinai District** after Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis pledged allegiance to it. This is contrary to the customary practice whereby the Emir is chosen from among the locals. It was also reported that the Emir came to Sinai with a team of assistants and began to carry out his job. It was also stated that the organization's operatives who hold foreign citizenship either fly to the airport in Sharm el-Sheikh as tourists and go to northern Sinai to join the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis or

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[3] See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from December 15, 2014: "News of Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (December 10-16, 2014)."

travel via the Suez Canal (Al-Watan, December 9, 2014). The ITIC cannot verify this report.

The battle for hearts and minds conducted by ISIS

Detention of an Indian citizen who ran an ISIS English-language Twitter account

■ Indian police detained a suspect a few days after it was revealed by the British Channel 4 that he was in charge of running ISIS's English-language Twitter account. The detainee is **Mehdi Masroor Biswas**, a 24-year-old resident of West Bangalore, an engineer by profession. He was detained by the Indian police on December 13, 2014, at his home. Police said he was close to English-speaking ISIS operatives and became a source of information for new foreign fighters who wanted to join the ranks of the organization (Dailymail.com.uk, December 13, 2014). The detainee admitted that he is the one behind the @ShamiWitnwss English-language Twitter account, which is a source of information about ISIS (thelogicalindian.com, December 13, 2014)

Mehdi Masroor Biswas (http://thelogicalindian.com, December 13, 2014)

Expressions of support and solidarity in the West

Terrorist attack in Australia, possibly inspired by ISIS

■ On December 15, 2014, an armed man took over the Lindt café in the business center of Sydney, Australia, and held some 20 people hostage. He made two demands: **to have an ISIS flag brought to the café** and to talk with Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott. The hostages were forced to hang a jihadi flag (not an ISIS flag) in the shop window of the café. Videos appeared online, showing the hostages in the café using their cellphones (apparently under duress) to text the Australian and global media. After the armed man held the hostages for over 16 hours, the police stormed the café. The gunman and two of the hostages were killed in the exchange of fire. In addition, four people were injured, one of them a police officer.

■ The gunman was identified **Haroun Munis**, age 50, born in Iran, with a criminal record. At this stage, the connection between the perpetrator and ISIS is still unclear. The attack may have been inspired by ISIS and designed to express solidarity with ISIS. Another possibility is that the attack was not related to ISIS and the demand for an ISIS flag was made in order to ensure that the attack receives international media attention.

Reactions

■ Many social networks of jihadi organizations expressed satisfaction with the fact that Australia was attacked on its own soil. They noted that the attack was carried out in retaliation for the participation of Australia in the fighting against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. On some networks, it was claimed that the attack was carried out in response to ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's call on Muslims in the West to carry out terrorist attacks against civilians in their native countries.

Comments on Twitter pages affiliated with ISIS. Left: "Today is the day of the hostages. Hostages in Australia, hostages in Belgium and hostages in Riyadh. Allah, add [to everything] and bless [us]." The ISIS insignia is visible on the right. Right: A person calling himself Umar the Iraqi: "Far away from their aircraft that bomb our territory in Iraq - this is the situation of the Muslims in Australia. The sheikhs [i.e., Muslim clerics] who shame [the Islamic nation] are crying about hostage-taking in Sydney." (Twitter, December 15, 2014)

Australia is one of the countries that have announced that they are joining the coalition led by the US against ISIS. As such, **Australia has become a potential target for terrorism** for jihadists who support ISIS and are inspired by it. In recent months, Australian authorities have expressed concern about Islamic terror attacks in the country. On September 18, 2014, security forces arrested 15 jihadi operatives in Sydney, in light of information ISIS was planning to carry out mass terror attacks in Australia. The indictment filed against one of the detainees, Omarjan Azari, 22, states that he was involved in a plan to carry out random executions of people to terrorize the Australian public. According to Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, the detainees planned to carry out random public beheadings of passersby in Sydney (AP, September 18, 2014).

ISIS video distributed in June 2014 on Islamic forums and on YouTube. The video shows an Australian calling himself Abu Yahya al-Shami who was apparently killed recently in Syria. In the video, he called on Muslims to wake up in the face of the humiliation experienced by Muslims in Palestine and in Fallujah, Iraq. The video then shows a masked man known as Abu Nour Al-Iraqi who, according to the video, is also an Australian, who called on Muslims in Australia, Europe and America to join the jihad in Syria.

Recruitment of operatives in Austria

■ An Islamic preacher was recently detained on charges of recruiting operatives in Austria to join ISIS, including young girls. The detainee is **Ebu Tejma**, who lives in Vienna. According to the Austrian security services, Ebu Tejma's real name is **Mirsad Omerovic**. He recruited the young people, **was also involved in sending them to fight in Syria and provided them with financing.** According to the security services, he is one of the jihadi leaders of the so-called "Bosnian cell," based in Vienna. According to a newspaper in Bosnia Herzegovina, the cell is one of the main logistical and financial support centers for jihadi activity in Europe (The Daily Mail, December 10, 2014).

On October 30, 2014, a 14-year-old boy was detained on suspicion of planning to plant IEDs in crowded places in Vienna. It was reported that ISIS offered the boy the sum of USD 25,000 to carry out the attacks. According to the Austrian media, the boy is Mertkan G., the son of a Turkish immigrant who has been living in Austria for the past eight years. According to Austrian media reports, he was recruited for his mission via the Internet. Other youngsters were also recruited, and were supposed to carry out similar attacks (according to another version, the boy was a "lone wolf", acting on his own) (Telegraph, October 30, 2014). One of the sites in Vienna where

the IEDs were supposed to be planted was one of the busiest train stations in Austria (Vienna's Westbanhof Station, which is frequented by 40,000 people every day).

Expressions of support for ISIS in Vienna, Austria (YouTube, June 23, 2014)

Al-Qaeda's activity in other locations in the Middle East

Jordan

■ **According to reports, large numbers of civilians in the city of Maan in southern Jordan have joined the ranks of ISIS to fight in Syria.** According to **Muhammad Al-Shalabi (Abu Sayyaf),** a senior Salafi activist in Jordan, following the coalition's attack against ISIS, the number of supporters of ISIS has surpassed the number of supporters of the Al-Nusra Front. Maan Mayor **Majed al-Sharari** said that if things continue at this rate, there would be a disaster in Jordan. The Jordanian government, in an attempt to reduce the severity of the phenomenon, claims that it is in control of the situation (Al-Mayadeen Channel, December 8, 2014).

Expressions of support in Jordan for the Salafist-jihadi worldview are not a new phenomenon and date back to the 1990s. Jordan is the birthplace of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq, which later became ISIS. Support in Jordan for the Salafist-jihadi worldview has increased in recent years, in the wake of the civil war in Syria and ISIS's successes.

The principal centers of support for ISIS today are mainly in outlying cities in Jordan. The most prominent is Maan, in southern Jordan, a longtime center of agitation against the Hashemite regime; other prominent cities are: Al-Salt, Irbid, Russeifa and Zarqa. This support has increased with the return of the "veterans" from the fighting in Syria (in the ITIC's assessment, more than a thousand Jordanian operatives went to fight in Syria) and in the wake of ISIS's activities aimed at the Jordanian target audience. Nevertheless, at the moment, ISIS presumably does not have an extensive organized infrastructure of operatives in Jordan, although the potential threat of ISIS gaining in strength remains.

Yemen

Report of an attempted attack on an airbase where Western forces were staying
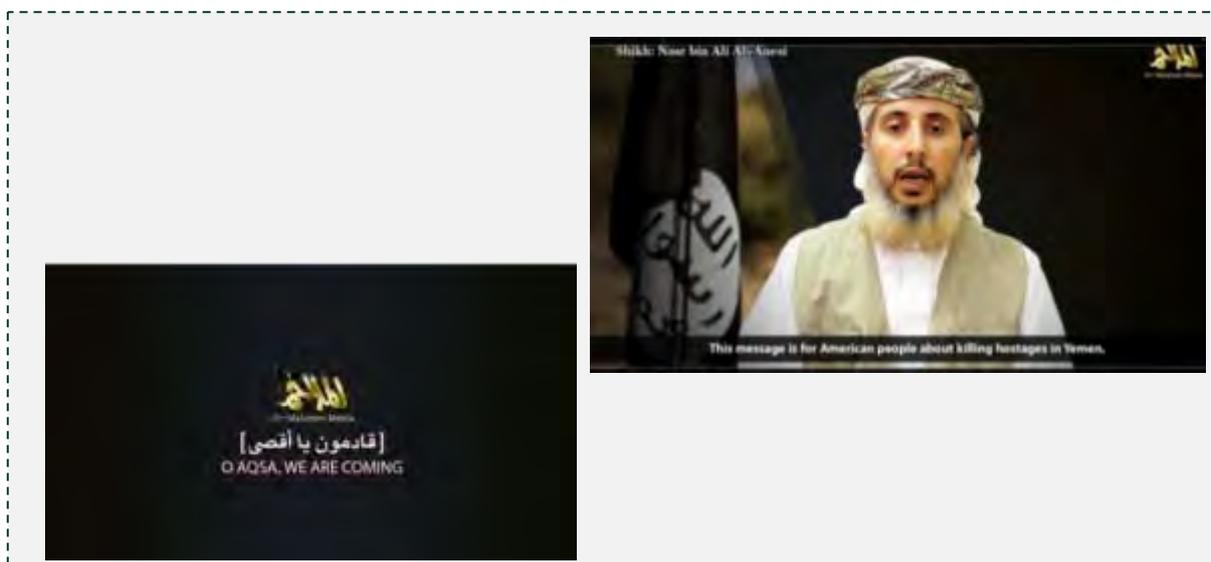
■ On December 11, 2014, **Ansar al-Sharia** (which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda) reported that it had fired six rockets at an airbase in southern Yemen, where US and European troops were staying. According to the statement, the attack was carried out in response to the (failed) attempted rescue of the American hostage by US Army Special Forces (the American hostage and another hostage from South Africa were killed in the attempted rescue). Military officials in Yemen confirmed that some soldiers were injured, but did not provide more information. Another source claimed that the rockets missed their target (Northafricapost.com, December 12, 2014).

Ansar al-Sharia's claim of responsibility for the attack on the airbase in Yemen on its Twitter page (December 11, 2014)

Al-Qaeda's response to the failed rescue attempt by the US

■ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) issued a video addressing the American public, stating that the death of the American hostage, Luke Somers, during the failed rescue attempt last week, was unnecessary. The speaker who appeared in the video added that the organization has the right to **seek the release of Sheikh Omar bin Abd al-Rahman** (the blind sheikh who is in prison in the US for his involvement in the World Trade Center bombing in New York in 1993) **and the release of detainees held in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp and elsewhere.** He added that the US government continues its fight against the Islamic nation, helping the "Zionist occupiers of Palestine" and violating "the rights of Muslims." The video ended with the words "Al-Aqsa, we are coming [to you]".

Left: The video ended with the subtitle: "Al-Aqsa, we are coming [to you]".
Right: A spokesman for AQAP addresses the American public under English subtitles.

The killing of a senior operative in the Houthi rebel organization by Al-Qaeda

■ According to Yemeni media reports, **Salem Ghufayna Raqib**, a senior operative in the Shiite Houthi movement, was killed by Islamic operatives from **Ansar al-Sharia**, an organization affiliated with Al-Qaeda, **by means of an IED attached to his car in northern Yemen.**

Since 2004, there has been a rebellion against the central Yemeni government in the province of Saada, in northern Yemen, which borders on Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni Army finds it difficult to act and suppress the rebellion. The rebels, numbering several thousand, are members of the Al-Houth clan and belong to the Shiite Zaidi population. According to a large quantity of circumstantial evidence, **the Houthi rebellion is receiving military aid from Iran.** Yemeni government spokesmen (supported by American sources) have repeatedly accused Iran of supporting the Houthi rebellion.