Seven months after the beginning of the campaign to take over the city of Sirte, ISIS’s stronghold in Libya, the Libyan Government of National Accord announced that the city had been liberated (although sporadic exchanges of fire still continue). ISIS’s branch in Libya took over Sirte in February 2015 and established military and civilian infrastructure in the city. The takeover of ISIS’s territorial basis represents a severe blow to ISIS’s presence in Libya, in addition to the weakening of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, in the ITIC’s assessment, even after the fall of the Sirte area, ISIS’s terrorist activity and guerrilla warfare throughout Libya will continue (albeit in lower profile), due to the government and security vacuum in that country.

In Aleppo, the Syrian forces continued to retake additional neighborhoods, in the southeastern part of the city. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Syrian forces have taken over 52% of the territory of eastAleppo, held by the rebel organizations, including over 30 neighborhoods. At the same time, Russia is promoting political moves, with the involvement of the United States and Turkey. The objective of these moves (in Russia’s perspective) is to bring about the end of the fighting in Aleppo, based on a ceasefire achieved after the withdrawal of the rebel organizations from the east of the city. Such moves should serve to stabilize the situation in northern Syria and facilitate political arrangement. At this stage, it seems no agreement has been reached in the talks.

No significant progress has been achieved this week in the campaign for Mosul, due to ISIS’s stubborn fighting (with its ongoing extensive use of suicide bombers and car bombs). Stagnation persists in Mosul’s eastern neighborhoods and south of the city. Given the situation, the Iraqi Army opened an attack in west Mosul to alleviate the pressure on the other fronts.
The campaign for the city of Mosul continues. The Iraqi forces' main efforts still focus on the eastern neighborhoods of the city. Fighting also continues in the south and the west. There were no significant changes on the ground.

The UN published data, according to which, during the first month of the campaign for Mosul, a total of 2,000 Iraqi soldiers and about 1,600 Kurdish Peshmerga operatives had been killed. In response, the Iraqi Army counterterrorism apparatus announced that the figures were exaggerated (CNN, December 2, 2016; Facebook page of the Iraqi government counterterrorism apparatus, December 2, 2016). Even if the figures are exaggerated, they reflect (in the ITIC's opinion) the difficulties faced by the attacking forces in Mosul, mainly in the fighting in the east of the city and advancing toward it from the south.
The military effort in the south

- The Iraqi Army **continues to cleanse retaken areas south of Mosul**. This week as well, there was no significant advance towards the city. A senior Iraqi Army commander announced that an ISIS communications center in the city of Hamam al-Aloul (about 23 km south of Mosul) had been uncovered. Cameras, films, photography equipment, important documents and foreign currency were found there (Al-Arabiya; Al-Hurra; Press TV, December 4, 2016).
The military effort in the south

The Iraqi forces reported that the Iraqi Army had started attacking various areas in west Mosul so as to open a new front against ISIS. Commanders in the Iraqi Army expressed their hope that by opening the new front, it will be possible to increase the pressure on ISIS (Reuters, December 5, 2016). ISIS, on its part, claimed that it took over the area of Tel al-Zalat, about 20 km west of Mosul, while using a suicide bomber who detonated a car bomb. On the other hand, the Shiite militias announced that they had foiled an ISIS attack in the area of Tel al-Zalat and destroyed two car bombs (Al-Sumaria, December 3, 2016).

ISIS tactics

While defending Mosul, ISIS continues its extensive use of suicide bombers and car bombs:

- On December 5, 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for three suicide bombing attacks in the east Mosul neighborhood of Al-Bakr. The perpetrators of the attacks were Abu Mujahed the Moroccan, Abu Hamza the Iraqi and Saad the Dagestani. ISIS claimed that at least 30 Iraqi soldiers were killed (Haqq, December 5, 2016).

- ISIS claimed responsibility for carrying out yet another suicide attack by a car bomb in the neighborhood of Al-Bakr. According to the claim, 18 Iraqi soldiers
were killed in the attack, which was carried out by an operative codenamed Abu Omar the Russian (Haqq, December 4, 2016).

- On December 2, 2016, ISIS claimed responsibility for carrying out two car bomb attacks against the Iraqi Army in the east Mosul neighborhood of Al-Qadisiyah Al-Thaniya. According to ISIS’s claim, eighteen Iraqi soldiers were killed. The attacks were carried out by operatives codenamed Abu Ahmed the Syrian and Abu Ali the Iraqi (Haqq, December 2, 2016).

**ISIS’s propaganda campaign**

ISIS continues to release photos of the city of Mosul intended to lend credence to the propaganda message that life in Mosul continues as usual. This week, ISIS released photos of a crowded open market. The market name and its location were not mentioned (Haqq, December 2, 2016).
In a speech given by **US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter** at the National Security Forum, he said that the US and the international coalition forces must continue to prevent attempts by terrorist operatives to escape and reestablish ISIS. He added that American forces and other troops must stay in Iraq even after ISIS is defeated, to continue training the local security forces. According to US Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, once the president-elect takes office, the US Army will present him with a new program to accelerate fighting against ISIS (Press TV, December 5, 2016).
Main developments in Syria

Map of Syria (www.nationsonline.org)

The campaign for Aleppo

- This week, fighting continued between the Syrian Army forces, with Russian air support, and the rebel organizations. The Syrian Army continued to tighten the siege on the rebel organizations. The Syrian forces advanced towards the southeastern part of the city and retook further neighborhoods. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, the Syrian forces retook 52% of the territory of east Aleppo, including over 30 neighborhoods (RT, December 5, 2016). The rebel organizations still control parts of southeast Aleppo.

Fighting in Aleppo’s eastern neighborhoods

- This week, the regime forces managed to retake several more neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city, including Karm al-Qaterji, Bab al-Nayrab, Al-Hilwaniyah and the Tariq al-Bab neighborhoods (Al-Mayadeen, December 2, 2016). Subsequently, the Syrian forces retook the Al-Jazmati and Al-Sakan al-Shababi neighborhoods, as well as the Studies and Scientific Research Center (Al-Jazeera, December 3, 2016). It has also been reported that the regime forces are now in full control of the road to the
Aleppo airport (Al-Alam, December 3, 2016). On December 4, 2016, it was reported that the neighborhoods of Karm al-Maysar and Karm al-Tahan were retaken (Syrian TV, December 4, 2016). On the other hand, the rebel forces reported they had several successes and claimed that they had regained control of most of the Al-Maysar neighborhood, the Al-Qaterji neighborhood, and the pumping station in Bab al-Nayrab (Al-Duraral-Shamiya; Suriya Mubasher, December 5, 2016).

Neighborhoods and areas in the southeast of Aleppo retaken by the Syrian Army during the recent week (marked by a green asterisk): Bab al-Nayrab (1); Tariq al-Bab (2); The Airport Road (3); Sakan al-Shabab (4); Karm al-Qaterji (5); Karm al-Tahan (6); Karm al-Maysar (7); Karm al-Jazmati (8).

Neighborhoods in the northern part of east Aleppo retaken by the Syrian Army during the recent weeks (marked by a red asterisk): the Haydariyah neighborhood (1); the Indharat neighborhood (2); the Al-Sakhour neighborhood (3); the Jabal Badru neighborhood (4); the Hananou neighborhood (5). Neighborhoods with partial control of the Syrian Army: the Baidayn neighborhood (6), the Al-Hulluk neighborhood (7) (Wikimapia).

neighborhoods will be allowed to do so (Dimashq al-Aan, December 4, 2016). Senior operatives in the rebel organizations expressed their objection to the Russian proposal, according to which they had to leave the eastern part of Aleppo. However, they announced that they would welcome the opening of crossings to allow civilians to leave the city (Orient, December 4, 2016).

Establishing the Aleppo Army

As they find themselves under mounting pressure on the part of the Syrian forces, the rebel organizations announced the establishment of a joint military framework called the “Aleppo Army” to fight the Syrian army (Halab Today TV,
December 3, 2016). The Aleppo Army Headquarters announced general mobilization of men who can carry arms to stop the advance of the Syrian forces in the east of the city.

Political negotiations

At the same time of the fighting, political negotiations took place behind the scenes, led by Russia, with the intention of looking into possibilities to end the fighting in Aleppo:

- Western and Russian media reported that leaders of the rebel organizations were holding talks with Russia, with Turkey as a mediator, with the objective of reaching an agreement that will terminate the fighting in Aleppo (AFP, November 30, 2016). According to Russian media, no agreement seems to have been reached during these talks, and the forces besieged in Aleppo decided to fight resolutely until the end and not to leave the city (Sputnik, December 1, 2016).

- Russia’s Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev met with Turkey’s Prime Minister Binali Yildirim to discuss the situation in Syria. Medvedev noted that they had a “fruitful dialog” both regarding the humanitarian situation in Aleppo and the struggle against terror in Syria (TASS, November 6, 2016).

- According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Russian and American experts will start working jointly on the issue of Aleppo to bring about the withdrawal of the armed operatives from the east of the city. According to Lavrov, a ceasefire will be declared after the finalization of dates and routes for
the retreat of the armed operatives.\footnote{Syrian media published a statement on behalf of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, according to which Syria rejects any attempt to negotiate a ceasefire in Aleppo unless all the terrorist organizations completely withdraw from the city (Reuters, December 6, 2016).} He added that Russia would regard armed operatives refusing to leave east Aleppo as terrorist operatives and assist the Syrian government in fighting them (Sputnik, December 5, 2016).

**Senior ISIS commander killed in Al-Raqqah**

- Syrian operatives from the city of Al-Raqqah reported the death of Abu Bakr bin al-Habib al-Hakim, a French jihadist who had served as a senior commander in ISIS. He was killed in a coalition airstrike in Al-Raqqah on November 16, 2016 (Libération, December 3, 2016).

- Abu Bakr bin al-Habib al-Hakim was one of the first French operatives who had taken part in Al-Qaeda terrorist activities before the establishment of ISIS. He was born in Paris in 1983, fought in Al-Fallujah along with Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, and had previously served as one of the leaders of the Tunisian branch of Al-Qaeda. He fled to Syria where he joined ISIS, stayed in Al-Raqqah and recruited dozens of Tunisians to the ranks of ISIS. He was reportedly responsible for many terrorist actions in France and elsewhere, including the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo (January 7, 2015) and the Bardo National Museum in Tunis (March 18, 2015) (RT; the raqqa.SI Facebook page, December 3, 2016).

**Southern Syrian Golan Heights**

- During the week, clashes continued between the Free Syrian Army and the ISIS-affiliated Khaled bin Al-Walid Army in the Al-Yarmouk basin. Khaled bin Al-Walid Army
The Israeli security forces detained a young Israeli resident of the Israeli-Arab town of Jaljulia due to his support of ISIS and intention to join the ranks of the organization in Syria. In his interrogation, it turned out that recently he radicalized, began to support ISIS and made contacts with ISIS operatives in Syria. He revealed to the operatives that he wanted to go to Syria and join the ranks of ISIS. He had in his possession an Uzi submachine gun and a Glock pistol and had his picture taken shooting these weapons. Many photos attesting to his support of ISIS were found at his home (the Israeli Security Agency website, November 20, 2016).

**The global jihad in other countries**

**Libya**

Seven months after the Libyan forces started the campaign to take over Sirte, the spokesman for the Libyan security forces announced on December 5, 2015, that the city had been completely liberated. According to the spokesman, Sirte is still being searched for ISIS operatives, and sporadic exchanges of fire still take place there (Al-Jazeera, December 6, 2016). The official Facebook page of the campaign for Sirte also reports the collapse of ISIS’s defense in Sirte, although there are still exchanges of fire with operatives barricaded in several houses (france24, December 5, 2016; Al-Arabi al-Jadid, December 5, 2016; the Facebook page of the campaign for Sirte, December 5, 2016).
The Libyan security forces, operating in the Marine neighborhood, detained Turki Al-Binali, a senior ISIS operative of a Bahraini descent. The detainee was presented in several media outlets as the leader (emir) of ISIS in Sirte and as the one who had issued a fatwa allowing to rape Yazidi women in Iraq (Al-Wasat, December 5, 2016; Russia al-Youm, December 5, 2016).

ISIS’s branch in Libya took over Sirte, Muammar Qaddafi’s birthplace, on February 18, 2015. After its takeover, ISIS established in the city and its environs a military, civilian and government infrastructure, which served the organization as a launching pad to control other areas throughout Libya. Sirte has a harbor, an international
airport, a military base, oil facilities and various industries. Controlling these facilities strengthened ISIS’s position in Libya.²

The fall of Sirte after seven months of fighting represents a severe blow to ISIS’s presence in Libya and symbolizes its weakening in this country. In the ITIC’s assessment, ISIS may continue to maintain presence in various cities and regions throughout Libya. However, it now lacks a territorial basis of control, which has been the only one of its kind outside Iraq and Syria. The fall of Sirte into the hands of the Libyan Government of National Accord occurs at the same time as the weakening of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, where ISIS’s main strongholds (Mosul and Al-Raqqah) are under heavy pressure. However, in the ITIC’s assessment, even after the fall of Sirte, ISIS’s terrorist activity and guerrilla warfare in various regions and cities throughout Libya will continue, due to the government and security vacuum prevailing in this country.

²For details, see the ITIC research from January 21, 2016: “ISIS in Libya: a Major Regional and International Threat.”
ISIS claimed responsibility for a vehicular and stabbing attack carried out on November 28, 2016, at the Ohio State University. A Somali immigrant ran down and then stabbed eleven people with a butcher knife before he was shot to death. The perpetrator was identified as Abdul Razak Ali Artan, 18, who had been a student in the university. ISIS’s Aamaq News Agency announced that the attacker was a “soldier of the Islamic State” who responded to the calls to attack residents of the international coalition. So far, the ITIC has no information linking the perpetrator to ISIS.

Senior officials of the local police testified that the attack had apparently been planned some time in advance. The authorities are checking a Facebook page which they estimate was written by the perpetrator a day before the attack, with a statement in which he protests what he deems the unfair treatment of Muslims. The investigators believe that Artan may have been a “lone wolf” who had radicalized. However, no evidence was found linking him to known operatives or terrorist organizations (Reuters, November 30, 2016).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Russia

Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) announced the killing of Rustam Magomedovich Aselderov, codenamed Abu Mohammad al-Qadari, ISIS’s emir in North Caucasus. He was killed along with four other operatives in a raid by Russian security forces in the town of Talgi, about 11 km south of the capital of Dagestan. The Russian security forces raided a house where Aselderov and some of his men were
hiding. During the negotiation, in which the jihadi operatives were offered a chance to surrender, they opened fire. The Russian security forces returned fire and killed them. They found in the house a large cache of weapons, including automatic rifles, ammunition, and explosives (the FSB website, December 4, 2016).

Aselderov was born in 1981. The Russian security services first ran into him when he was an active member of a Dagestani insurgent group in the spring of 2007. During the summer of 2010, he was appointed as a replacement for Daudov, the head of the group. After Daudov died in 2012, Aselderov became the head of the Caucasus emirate. In 2014, Aselderov pledged allegiance to ISIS. He had been involved in many terrorist attacks, including the suicide attack in the Russian city of Volgograd, where eighteen people were killed and twelve others were wounded (Russian Wikipedia; Sputnik, December 3, 2016).

Propaganda activity

ISIS calls on its operatives and supporters to carry out attacks throughout the world

- Al-Furqan, ISIS’s official media foundation, officially announced the appointment of Abu Hassan al-Muhajir as its spokesman. Abu Hassan al-Muhajir replaces Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, ISIS’s official in charge of information, who was killed in an airstrike in Syria in August 2016.

3There are three ISIS provinces in the Caucasus. They include Salafist jihadi networks that are supported by operatives who came back from Syria and Iraq after fighting in the ranks of ISIS.
Concurrently with the announcement of his appointment, ISIS’s propaganda arm released an audiotape in his voice (Al-Nashra, December 5, 2016). In a 25-minute speech, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir calls on ISIS’s operatives to carry out terrorist attacks against Turkish targets everywhere, including Turkey’s embassies and consulates around the world. With the aim of lending legitimacy to attacking Turkish targets, the speaker stresses Turkey’s fighting against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. He also encourages ISIS operatives in Iraq and Syria and calls on them to fight against the Turks in the city of Al-Bab (west of the Euphrates River) and not to retreat from Tal Afar (west of Mosul).

The background of the audiotape, noting this is the message of the “official spokesman of the Islamic State.” The audiotape is entitled, “Rembember what I am telling you” (Haqq, December 5, 2016)

The speaker on the audiotape notes that ISIS would soon attack the “infidels” on their territory. He calls on Muslims throughout the world to assist their brethren in the Islamic State through jihad, prayer, donations, and propaganda. He calls on ISIS operatives throughout the world to carry out terrorist attacks in their countries of residence because they can “tip the balance.” Such attacks, he says, will force the “infidel” countries to “focus on the events taking place in their own countries” and they will not be able to focus on fighting ISIS (Haqq, December 5, 2016).