



## Spotlight on Global Jihad (14-18 September 2017)

### Main events of the week

► This week's main developments in the **Syrian Arena**:

◆ **Syrian forces are deepening their grip on the Deir ez-Zor region in an effort to encircle the ISIS operatives in the city and sever their logistic supply channels.** At the same time the Syrian forces are working **to re-activate the Deir ez-Zor airport**, now that their forces have reached it. The Syrian army's activity is being conducted **with Russian assistance**, which among other things meant the **firing of seven cruise missiles from submarines in the eastern Mediterranean toward ISIS targets in the Deir ez-Zor region.**

◆ **In talks held in Astana between Russia, Turkey, and Iran another agreement on de-escalation was reached for the Idlib area.** The idea is to send Russian, Iranian, and Turkish observer forces to Idlib. **It is going to be very difficult to implement the new agreement** since the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al-Nusra Front) **is the dominant force in the Idlib region.** ITIC believes the Fateh al-Sham Front **will resist with force** any attempt to disarm its operatives or to weaken their control over the local population.

► **On the Iraqi arena** ISIS this week carried out a series of terrorist and guerilla attacks against Shiite civilians and the Iraqi security forces. The climax was **a combined mass-casualty attack in the area of Al-Nasiriya in the Shiite region of southern Iraq.** The attack killed 59 people and injured 96.

► **This week an IED was detonated on a passenger train in west London.** 29 people were injured, most of them lightly. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack although there is still **no evidence** of a link between the perpetrator/s and ISIS. The British security forces have so far arrested two suspects.

## Another Agreement on De-Escalation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran

► This week **talks continued between Iran, Russia and Turkey** as a part of the settlement process underway in Syria. Representatives from Iran, Russia and Turkey met for the sixth round of settlement talks, **which had begun on 14 September 2017 in Astana**. Meanwhile the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, met in Sochi, Russia, with Russian President Putin and discussed the developments in Syria.



**The talks in Astana between representatives of Russia, Turkey and Iran (Facebook page of the Russian embassy in Kazakhstan, 15 September 2017)**

► On 15 September 2017 **Russia, Turkey and Iran announced that the current round of talks in Astana had produced another agreement on de-escalating the Idlib area**. So far, de-escalation agreements have been concluded for **four areas in Syria**: southern Syria, eastern Al-Ghouta the region east of Damascus), Homs and Idlib. It was agreed that a Russian-Syrian-Turkish coordinating center would be set up to supervise the implementation of the agreement in these four regions. In a joint statement, issued at the end of the round of talks, it was emphasized that the agreement was for half a year, with the option to extend it if the three party countries agree to do so.

► The Russian president's special envoy on settlement in Syria announced that **it was agreed that a Russian, Turkish and Iranian supervisory force would be sent to Idlib (500 from each country)**, although the exact location of the supervisory forces would be decided at a later stage. **The Turkish Foreign Ministry** said that Russia, Iran and Turkey **had agreed to deploy observers at inspection points inside the Idlib region**. It was reported that the Turkish task force would prevent fighting between the Syrian regime and

the opposition forces and would enforce the ceasefire agreements (Reuters, 15 September 2017).

ITIC believes that **implementation of the new agreement concerning the Idlib region is fraught with difficulty. This is due to the fact that the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the Al-Nusra Front, affiliated with Al-Qaeda) is the dominant force in the Idlib region.** The agreement, like the previous agreements, does not recognize the Fateh al-Sham Front and its umbrella military framework (the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). ITIC believes therefore that the Fateh al-Sham Front, which may be joined by ISIS and other organizations, **will resist with force any attempt to disarm them or to weaken with their grip over the local population.** Based on this assumption, the **Idlib region may become the test case for the chances of implementing the de-escalation agreements, which were reached at the talks in Astana.**

## Main Developments in Syria

### The campaign to take over Al-Raqqah

The campaign to take over Al-Raqqah by the SDF forces continues, **with no significant changes on the ground.** ISIS operatives still control several neighborhoods, from the city center northwards, while the larger zone under their control lies in the north of the city (see map). The rest of the neighborhoods, which make up the majority of the city area, are under SDF control (Qasioun, 13 September 2017). ISIS forces are continuing their **intense fighting, causing SDF casualties** (Al Sawahem, 16 September 2017).



Map of the areas of control in Al-Raqqa (up-to-date as of 13 September 2017). Areas under SDF control are shaded yellow ; gray indicates neighborhoods from downtown northwards under ISIS control (Qasioun, 13 September 2017).



Right: SDF fighter next to a bulldozer used by the SDF forces in one of the streets in the Old City of Al-Raqqa. Left: The destruction on one of the streets in the Old City (Twitter account داعش عاجل@DaeshAjel10, 18 September 2017).

► On 14 September 2017 a video clip was released showing SDF fighters alongside starving women, children and injured. The release said ISIS had used them as “human shields” **near the national hospital in Al-Raqqa**. SDF fighters distributed food after they had not eaten for several days (Twitter account of قوات سوريا من الجبهة @QSD\_Jabha, 14 September 2017).

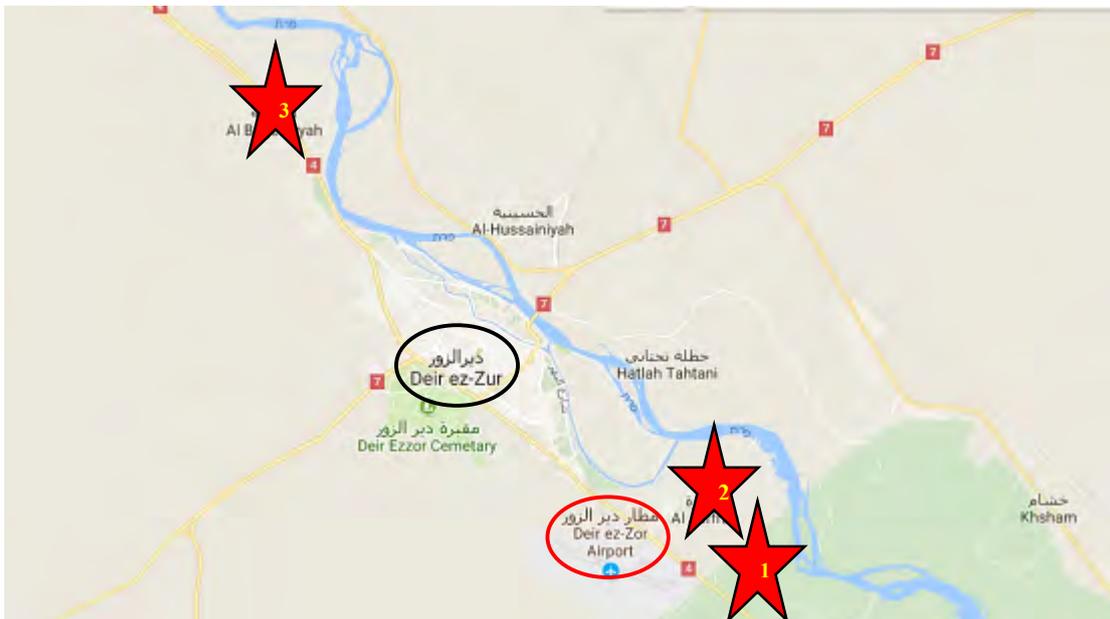


SDF fighters distribute food to women, children and injured used by ISIS as “human shields” (Twitter account of قوات سوريا من الجبهة @QSD\_Jabha, 14 September 2017).

## The campaign to take over Deir ez-Zor

The Syrian forces and their allies **have begun work to re-activate the military airport of Deir ez-Zor**, after Syrian forces reached it. As a part of the action, **several villages and areas near the airport were taken** in order to create a “security zone” around it. The Syrian forces also said they were **securing the runways at the airport to enable resumption of air traffic** (Syrian television, 16 September 2017). At the same time the Syrian forces are continuing **to establish themselves in the Deir ez-Zor region in an effort to encircle the ISIS operatives and to block their supply routes**.

► As a part of its efforts to establish itself in the Deir ez-Zor area, **the Syrian army took control this week of several villages and areas**: the village of **Huyjat Al Mri’iyah** near the airport; several positions near the village of **Al-Muri’iyah** southeast of the airport; the village of **Al-Bagh’iliya** northwest of Deir ez-Zor (Syrian television, 16 September 2017); and the **Jafra** area some six kilometers southeast of Deir ez-Zor, near the Euphrates River (Sputnik, 17 September 2017).



Villages taken over by the Syrian forces: Al-Muri’iyah (1), Al-Jafra (2), Al-Bagh’iliya (3) (Google Maps).



Map of the areas of control in the Deir ez-Zor area: Green - areas under SDF control; Red - areas under Syrian army control. Within it are yellow squares marking areas the Syrian army has recently taken over; black marks areas under ISIS control along the Euphrates River (YouTube account of the Syrian army's Combat Information Institution, 16 September 2017).



Right: a tank, an off-road vehicle carrying an anti-aircraft gun and Syrian army soldiers during the clashes with ISIS operatives in the village of Al-Bagh'iliya. Left: The village of Al-Bagh'iliya as it appears from a Syrian army observation post during the clashes with ISIS (SANA YouTube channel, 14 September 2017).

► Following are several other developments in the Deir ez-Zor area:

- ◆ A Syrian army force may have crossed the eastern bank of the Euphrates in the Deir ez-Zor region. On 15 September 2017 Maria Zacharova, spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that a Syrian army force had crossed the Euphrates River from its western bank to the east bank and has dug itself in at several positions in this area. This move challenges the assertion by SDF forces supported by the USA that the Euphrates is a “red line” and that they would not permit Syrian forces to cross over to the east bank of the river (Syria-Victory ,16 September 2017). The exact location where the Syrian army force crossed the Euphrates was not given but ITIC believes this refers to the Deir ez-Zor area.

- ◆ **ISIS has called upon the residents of the neighborhoods under its control in Deir ez-Zor to evacuate the city and declared them closed military zones** (Al-Nashra, 14 September 2017). The Syrian forces, which had previously been under siege, have now tightened their siege of ISIS and there is now no way for residents or operatives to escape the city. Syrian media reported that following the lifting of the siege on Deir ez-Zor **Russian soldiers, Shiite operatives from Iran, from Iraq, from Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Yemen, entered the city.** They were joined by **Sunni and tribal militias from Al-Raqqah, Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah** (Hutwa, 15 September 2017).
- ◆ In view of this, an **announcement from a body named the “Deir ez-Zor Council”** was issued warning against a takeover of the area by the Iranian militias together with Syrian forces. **According to the announcement, most of the residents of Deir ez-Zor are Sunni and that the take-over would provoke political and ethnic strife, destabilizing the area for the long term** (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, 13 September 2017).
- ◆ **Two Russian Submarines stationed in the eastern Mediterranean, fired at ISIS targets southeast of Deir ez-Zor.** A report from the Russian Defense Ministry said: “On 14 September two submarines, the Veliki Novgorod and the Kolpino fired Kalibr rockets at important ISIS targets: command centers, communication centers, weapon and ammunition depots. **The report said seven cruise missiles were fired at the targets”** (Tass, 14 September 2017).



**Right: Launching of a Kalibr cruise missile toward ISIS in Deir ez-Zor by the Russian forces. Left: Missile hits on ISIS targets in Deir ez-Zor (Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, 14 September 2017).**

- ▶ **Ryan Dillon, spokesman for the coalition forces said the militias supported by the USA in Syria do not intend to enter Deir ez-Zor.** He said this would reduce the chances of encounters between Syrian regime forces and coalition forces. Dillon noted that **the battlefield in Deir ez-Zor is already crowded and he added that the SDF forces were**

**expected to advance toward the center of the Euphrates valley** (Reuters, 14 September 2017).

### Mopping up the rural areas east of Homs and Hamma

► The Syrian forces were occupied this week mopping up the rural area east of Homs and Hamma. This effort is intended to complete the **removal of ISIS operatives from several areas still under their control**. It appears that the Syrian forces had the upper hand, despite localized ISIS pockets of resistance. Thus for example, ISIS succeeded in retaking the village of **Abu Al-Tababir** east of Homs, while inflicting casualties on the Syrian army **following detonation of a car bomb** by a suicide bomber. ISIS claims that as a result the Syrian army sustained more than 22 dead and that the organization had captured large quantities of weapons.



**Right: two Syrian army anti-tank missiles captured by ISIS operatives in Abu Al-Tababir. Left: Syrian army rockets captured by ISIS operatives (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 17 September 2017).**

## Main developments in Iraq

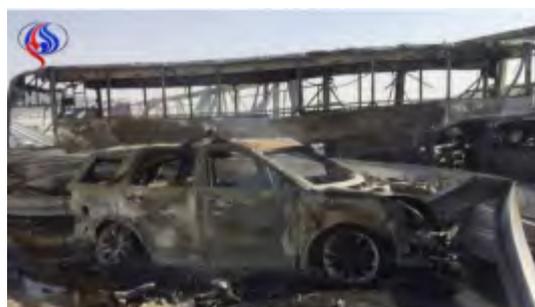
This week ISIS carried out a **series of terrorist and guerilla attacks against Shiite civilians and the Iraqi security forces all over Iraq**. The climax of this terror offensive was a **combined mass-casualty attack in the area of Al-Nasiriya in the Shiite region of southern Iraq**. According to Iraqi sources, **59 people were killed in the attack**. **These attacks demonstrate that ISIS continues to retain its high level of operative capabilities in Iraq even after the fall of Mosul, Tal Afar and other strongholds in the west of the country.**

► On 14 September 2017 armed ISIS operatives arrived in two vehicles at **a restaurant in the city of Al-Nasiriya**. The operatives opened fire on those present in the restaurant. From there they continued as far as a nearby roadblock belonging to the Iraqi security forces. The driver of one of the cars detonated a vest he had been carrying. More people were killed as a

result. According to Iraqi sources, **59 people were killed in the attack, of whom at least seven were Iranian citizens.** In addition **96 people were injured** (Al Sumaria, 14 September 2017; Al-Arabiya, 14 September 2017).



**Right: Scene of the attack in the restaurant (Zahrat Al-Haleej, 14 September 2017). Left: Scene of the attack at the Iraqi security forces roadblock (Al-Arabiya, 14 September 2017).**



**Right: Scene of the attack at the roadblock 14 September 2017). Left: Casualties being evacuated from the scene of the attack (YouTube, 14 September 2017).**

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** In its claim ISIS mentioned that three groups of ISIS operatives, equipped with explosive vests, attacked three Shiite targets in the city of Al-Nasiriya and its environs. The message also said that **a day earlier ISIS operatives had ambushed members of the Popular Mobilization** (an umbrella framework of Shiite militias operating under Iranian auspices) near the city of Al-Musayib in the Shiite region of southern Iraq. According to ISIS, more than 200 Shiites were killed or injured in these attacks (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 14 September 2017).

► **Besides that, ISIS carried out a series of terror and guerilla attacks throughout Iraq:**

- ◆ **Tal Afar area:** ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack against a position of the Popular Mobilization in the Tal 'Abtha area, some 50 km southeast of the city. Popular Mobilization operatives fled the area and the positions were abandoned at the time of the attack (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 12 September 2017).



**Right: ISIS operatives during the attack against the Popular Mobilization position Left: Torching the position (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 12 September 2017)**

- ◆ **District of Diyala:** ISIS reported that five policemen were killed in the Al-Sa'adiya area, 120 km northeast of Baghdad. This was following **detonation of an IED planted against a convoy in which a senior Iraqi police officer was traveling** (ISIS' Mutah agency, 17 September 2017).
- ◆ **Attack in the city of Al- Miqdadiyah:** on 17 September ISIS announced that **28 Shiites were killed in an attack carried out by two of the organization's operatives**, who were carrying machine guns, hand grenades and suicide vests **in the city of Al- Miqdadiyah**, some 85 km northeast of Baghdad (Amaq, 17 September 2017). Official Iraqi sources said that ten people were hurt, some of whom were killed in the ISIS attack, which was intended to be much bigger (Al Sumaria, 18 September 2017).
- ◆ **Al-Anbar province:** the Iraqi army announced on 17 September 2017 that it had **foiled an ISIS attack aimed at a command center of the Iraqi army**, southeast **of the city of Al-Rutba** (Al Sumaria, 17 September 2017).
- ◆ **Makhmour:** ISIS announced on 17 September 2017 that four of its operatives, wearing suicide vests, **attacked a new American army base set up southwest of the town of Makhmour**, destroyed several artillery pieces and killed several Americans. In another message, ISIS said that at least forty Americans were killed in the attack (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 17 September 2017).



**The five ISIS operatives who took part in the attack in Makhmour before setting out** (Google Plus account of يحيى البغدادي, 17 September 2017. Originally: ISIS' Amaq agency).

- ◆ **Hawijah area:** Ryan Dillon, International Coalition spokesman, said that **four ISIS suicide attackers were killed near the town of Al-Hawija** about 130 km southeast of Mosul. According to the announcement there were no casualties on the Iraqi forces side or on the international forces side (Washington Post, 17 September 2017).

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

- On 13 September 2017 ISIS operatives attacked an Egyptian police force at a roadblock at the entrance to Rafah (Al-Bawaba News, 13 September 2017). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. The notice from ISIS said that an ISIS suicide bomber broke through an Egyptian army roadblock in South Rafah and detonated a suicide vest against a soldier gathering point (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen 13 أيلول 2017, Amaq, 13 September 2017).

## The Global Jihad in Other Countries

### Detonation of an IED on a passenger train in London

- In the morning hours of 15 September 2017, **an improvised explosive device exploded in a passenger train while it was at the Parsons Green railway station in west London**. 29 people were injured, some suffered from burns and others were hurt in the commotion as people fled the scene. According to a report from the British National Health Service, there were no serious injuries. An initial investigation found that **the IED did not fully explode, apparently due to a malfunction which prevented a greater number of casualties**.



**Right: A policeman treating an injured woman at the scene of the attack (Twitter, 15 September 2017). Left: The improvised device that exploded on the London underground (Twitter, user account PRICEY1983AA ,15 September 2017)**

► On 16 September 2017, a day after the attack, **British police arrested an 18-year-old man in Dover** on suspicion of involvement in the attack. His name and identity have not yet been made public. **Another suspect was arrested in Surrey** in southeast London. A new video obtained by ITV News shows a man carrying a large pack on the morning of the attack. The man was filmed near the home of one of the suspects in Surrey 90 minutes before the explosion (Independent, 17 September 2017).

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack** in a message it posted the organization said that the device which exploded **is one of several that were laid around the city**. The message said some thirty people (“crusaders”) were injured in the attack. It **concludes with a threat** that “what is in store is a much greater, bitter catastrophe” (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 15 September 2017).



**ISIS claim of responsibility for the IED explosion in the London underground (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 15 September 2017)**

The brief message is typical of announcements following attacks inspired by ISIS<sup>1</sup>. This being said, **at the moment ITIC has no further information to verify that ISIS or anyone inspired by it, were indeed the perpetrators of this attack.** The announcement that the device which exploded is one of several that were laid around the city **was false. It was intended to raise the levels of fear and confusion among the British public and within the British security forces** (which were indeed concerned that further attacks were imminent and raised the alert level to the highest possible).

► It must be mentioned that several weeks ago the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula organization published an article **in the Al-Qaeda journal INSPIRE** (issue No. 17). The article called the Al-Qaeda operatives **to carry out attacks in the United States and Europe. The article emphasized the importance of attacks on trains.** Since according to the article, attacking trains is a “simple yet highly effective means”. The article even described the modus operandi the attackers can employ: **a direct attack on the train, from inside it or from outside it; sabotaging the railway tracks and attacks on crowded train stations,** which would result in multiple casualties<sup>2</sup>. At this stage **it is not clear whether this call was the inspiration for the west London attack.**

### **ISIS suicide attack and execution of “agents” in Afghanistan**

► On 13 September 2017 **a suicide bomber blew himself up at an inspection station near the international cricket stadium in Kabul.** At least three people, including one policeman, were killed and three were injured (Afghanistan Times, 13 September 2017). ISIS said that forty Afghan security personnel were killed and injured as a result of the detonation of a suicide vest worn by a terrorist codenamed Abbas the Khorasani.

► On 13 September 2017 ISIS posted pictures of the beheading of two people alleged to have been “agents” of the International Coalition. The beheadings took place in the Kunar province, on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

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<sup>1</sup>See the Information Center’s publication of 15 August 2017: “Analysis of ISIS’s Claims of Responsibility for Terrorist Attacks Carried Out Abroad”.

<sup>2</sup>See Spotlight on Global Jihad, 16-10 August 2017.



ISIS operatives standing behind two people who were beheaded in Afghanistan  
(Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, 13 September 2017)

## The Conduct of the Islamic State

### Signs of disintegration in the functioning of the “Islamic State”

► British and Russian media have reported recently of **symptoms of disintegration of the Islamic State following the defeats ISIS has suffered:**

◆ The British Guardian reported **that hundreds of ISIS operatives**, who have fled the areas under the organization’s control, **have arrived in the Idlib district intending to cross the border into Turkey and from there back to their countries of origin (in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe).** It has been reported that **several dozen fighters have already managed to cross the border.** Four Saudi operatives arrived in Saudi Arabia in early September after having each paid \$2000 to people smugglers. “Abu Saad”, a Saudi origin ISIS operative who fled Syria in late August told that **there are about 300 operatives in Idlib trying to escape**, many of them Saudis (The Guardian, 12 September 2017).

◆ **Dmitry Feoktistov, Deputy Director of the Department on New Challenges and Threats of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, said in a press conference in Rome, that **ISIS has begun transferring money from its areas of control in Syria and Iraq to third countries, including European countries.** Feoktistov stressed that this was the first time **a reverse flow of money is observed** (in the past the money was transferred to areas under ISIS control, rather than away from them). He said the reason for this was apparently ISIS’ territorial losses and its impending defeat. **These funds are, according to him, supposed to support the organization’s networks outside Syria and Iraq and for use in launching terrorist attacks.**

◆ Feoktistov said that following its loss of revenues from the sale of fuel in Syria, **ISIS is now seeking new sources of funding**, for example - profiting from currency conversions within the areas under its control; smuggling ancient cultural treasures out of its territory to be sold; attempts to take over control of the drugs trade in northern Afghanistan and control of the sale of petroleum products, which has not yet been completely extinguished, although ISIS has lost 90% of its oil wells (RIA, 12 September 2017).

### Statement from Hamza Bin Laden may indicate distress within the Fateh al-Sham Front in Syria

► **Hamza Bin Laden recently gave a speech entitled “Al-Sham’s Distress - Islam’s Distress”**. He opened with praise for the jihad in Al-Sham (Syria, or Greater Syria) while expressing support for the fighters and empathy for their suffering. Later Hamza Bin Laden went on **to warn the Jihad fighters against disputes and rifts among themselves and explained that this was an enemy “conspiracy”**. He also **warns the fighters not to agree to “half-way solutions” offered by countries around the world**. He called on Muslims in Indonesian, north Africa and other regions, saying the **distress in Al-Sham is the distress of all of Islam** and that it was their duty to help them before it was too late. He said the jihadists in Al-Sham were in desperate need of help from fellow Muslims “as badly as air to breath” (Al-Sahab Institute, 15 September 2017).

This statement, in our opinion, reflects the **distress the Fateh al-Sham Front is in, al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria**. The military successes of the Syrian forces and the Astana agreements, the last of which dealt with the Idlib region (“half-way solutions”, in Hamza Bin Laden’s words), **are challenging the Fateh al-Sham Front, the bulk of whose military force is concentrated in the Idlib region**. It seems also that there are **internal divisions** within the organization, which were at the root of Hamza Bin Laden’s warning against “disputes and rifts”.