



Spotlight on Global Jihad

October 3-18, 2017



Main events of the week

► Over the past week, **the rapid collapse of the Islamic State, which is about to lose its last remaining strongholds in Syria and Iraq**, has accelerated. Following is an overview of the current situation:

- ◆ **Al-Raqqah:** The predominantly Kurdish SDF forces, with US air support, almost completely liberated the city of Al-Raqqah after four months of fighting. The SDF forces declared a victory. The Coalition announced that 95% of the territory of Al-Raqqah had been taken over. In the wake of an agreement that was reached, 275 ISIS operatives and their families left the city. Around 250-300 operatives, mainly foreign fighters who were not included in the agreement, still remain in the city.
- ◆ **Deir ez-Zor:** Most of the city (about 80%), where ISIS operatives are besieged, fell into the hands of the Syrian forces. They continue to advance in the city and, at the same time, are moving towards the southeast, along the Euphrates River, with the aim of completely mopping up the area from the presence of ISIS operatives. The Syrian army forces recommissioned the military airfield in Deir ez-Zor.
- ◆ **Al-Mayadeen:** This city, which was considered an ISIS stronghold, **was taken over by the Syrian forces with relative ease** after several days of fighting. The Syrian forces **created territorial contiguity** under their control, on both banks of the Euphrates River, from Deir ez-Zor to Al-Mayadeen. It can be assumed that the Syrian forces will continue to move along the Euphrates River towards the Syrian-Iraqi border, where **the city of Abu Kamal remains** ISIS's last significant stronghold in the Euphrates region (and in Syria in general).
- ◆ **Al-Qaim:** This city is on the Iraqi side of the border with Syria. The Iraqi forces and the Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias (the Popular Mobilization) are now preparing for an attack to take it over.

- ◆ **Al-Hawija:** The city of Al-Hawija and the surrounding area, the site of a prominent ISIS enclave in northeastern Iraq, fell into the hands of the Iraqi forces and the Popular Mobilization. As a result, the Iraqi forces and the Popular Mobilization are expected to move their efforts to the cities of Rawa and Al-Qaim, along the Euphrates River, near the border with Syria, in order to complete the mopping up of the Anbar Province.
- ▶ In the face of ISIS's defeats in Syria and Iraq, **the operational capabilities of ISIS's Sinai Province are noteworthy. Over the past few days, it carried out a series of complex attacks against the Egyptian security forces.** These operations included the use of suicide bombers who, in at least two cases, were wearing Egyptian Army uniforms. These operations included rocket fire at Egyptian targets and at the Eshkol region in southern Israel. In one of the operations, **ISIS operatives reportedly stole around USD 1 million from the National Bank in central Al-Arish.**

Russian involvement

Press conference held by the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff

- ▶ Speaking at a press conference, **Col. Gen. Sergei Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff**, summed up the fighting in Syria over the past month, during which he said **a significant change took place in the situation in Syria.** Following are the main points that he made (Russian Ministry of Defense website, October 13, 2017):

- ◆ During the past month, the Syrian Army liberated an area of 5,481 square kilometers and 142 cities and towns. In central Syria, ISIS operatives were driven out of 57 cities and towns in the liberated areas.
- ◆ A Syrian assault force under the command of Suheil Hassan, with Russian air support, **completely liberated the area along the Euphrates River**, northwest and north of Deir ez-Zor.
- ◆ A Syrian force advanced 37 km southeast of Deir ez-Zor **and took over the city of Al-Mayadeen, which ISIS had planned to turn into a fortified stronghold.**
- ◆ **The number of airstrikes increased by 50%.** During the past week, Russian aircraft **carried out 383 sorties and hit 993 targets near Deir ez-Zor.** In addition, three attacks were carried out during the past month using Kh-101 air-to-surface cruise

missiles launched from strategic bombers and Kalibr cruise missiles launched from submarines. The long-range missiles **hit 37 targets**, including ammunition depots, personnel, facilities, communications infrastructure and “terrorist” control positions.

◆ **Special attention was paid to the elimination of the leadership of the terrorist organizations**, and a total of **31 leaders** were killed over the past month. He noted that on October 3, 2017, in light of intelligence about a meeting of the leaders of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, Russian fighter planes attacked the meeting place. According to the Russians, Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani was seriously wounded in the airstrike and several other senior members of the organization were killed. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham denied reports of Al-Julani’s injury and the killing of senior members of the organization (Al-Jazeera, October 4, 2017).



**Sergei Rudskoy at the press conference
(Russian Ministry of Defense website, October 13, 2017)**

ISIS’s claim about the capture of Russian soldiers

► On October 3, 2017, ISIS released a video which it claims shows **two Russian soldiers who were taken prisoner** in the village of Shula, about 31 km southwest of Deir ez-Zor. One of the captives in the video **says in Russian that his name is Zabolotny Roman Vasilyev, and that he was born in 1979 in the village of Rassvet, in the Aksaysk District of the Rostov Oblast.** The prisoner also says that he was taken prisoner by ISIS in the village of Shula during a counterattack against ISIS, along with Tsurkanov Gregory, who was born in 1978 in the Domodedovo area (Haqq, October 3, 2017).



**The two Russian prisoners in the video released by ISIS. Left: Tsurkanov Gregory.
Right: Zabolotny Roman Vasilyev. (Haqq, October 3, 2017)**

► **The Russian Ministry of Defense was quick to publish a denial.** According to the announcement, no Russian soldiers have been abducted or taken prisoner by ISIS in the Deir ez-Zor Province or in any other province in Syria (Russia Today, October 3, 2017). Despite the denial, Russian paramilitary organizations announced that they knew the two Russian prisoners. The Boyevoye Bratstvo (Battle Fellowship) veterans association noted that one of the prisoners was Gregory Tsurkanov, a member of the association. At the same time, another paramilitary organization of Russian Cossacks noted that Roman Zabolotny was a cook who had worked at many cafés and restaurants in the Rostov region and that they did not know how he traveled to Syria. Another organization published a photo of Roman Zabolotny in an army uniform (Swissinfo, October 4, 2017).

Main developments in Syria

ISIS strongholds along the Euphrates River: Overview



- ▶ **Al-Raqqah:** SDF forces have almost completely taken over the city and they are neutralizing last remaining resistance pockets.
- ▶ **Deir ez-Zor:** About 80% of the city is in the hands of the Syrian forces.
- ▶ **Al-Mayadeen:** The city fell relatively easily into the hands of the Syrian forces.
- ▶ **Abu Kamal:** The city is still under ISIS's control.
- ▶ **Al-Qaim, on the Iraqi side of the border:** The city is still in the hands of ISIS and is currently in the crosshairs of the Iraqi forces.

End of the campaign to take over Al-Raqqah

After about four months of intense fighting, the city of Al-Raqqah has been liberated from ISIS. The SDF forces took over Al-Naim Square in central Al-Raqqah, which served ISIS operatives as an execution site (the residents called it Hell Square). SDF forces took over additional ISIS outposts, including the national hospital and the stadium in central Al-Raqqah (Qasiyoun; Reuters, October 17, 2017). Some ISIS operatives still remain in the city, but they do not represent a major force of resistance. On October 17, 2017, the SDF forces announced

that they had taken over the entire city and that the last ISIS operatives had left the city along with their families towards Deir ez-Zor (Al-Quds Al-Arabi, October 17, 2017). Coalition Spokesperson Col. Ryan Dillon said that 95% of the city fell into the hands of the SDF and mopping up activities still continue.



**SDF fighters and their allies on an APC in Al-Raqqah
(Twitter account, October 17, 2017)**

► Photos from Al-Raqqah clearly show the extensive destruction **caused to the city due to the fighting**, as a result of explosions of ISIS car bombs and mines and the International Coalition airstrikes (Twitter account, October 16, 2017).



Left: Self-manufacture mines planted by ISIS operatives around Al-Raqqah (local Twitter account from Al-Raqqah, October 16, 2017). Right: Massive destruction in Al-Raqqah (local Twitter account from Al-Raqqah, October 16, 2017)

► On October 17, 2017, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights published data on the losses in Al-Raqqah: A total of **1,117 civilians were killed** and hundreds were wounded, including at least 1,101 fatalities due to Coalition airstrikes; An **additional 155 civilians** were killed while trying to escape from areas controlled by ISIS; **At least 1,331 ISIS operatives were killed**. The dead include five foreign fighters of American, Georgian, British and Turkish nationalities. A total of **600 fighters** were killed among the SDF forces.

Evacuation of ISIS operatives and families from Al-Raqqah

At the same time with the final stages of the campaign to take over Al-Raqqah, negotiations were conducted between Syrian ISIS operatives and the Al-Raqqah civilian council and dignitaries of the local tribes. The negotiations culminated in an **agreement to evacuate 275 Syrian ISIS operatives and their families**, which was implemented on October 15, 2017).

► As part of the agreement, **275 Syrian ISIS operatives and their families** left Al-Raqqah on October 15, 2017. **About 250-300 operatives, mainly foreign fighters**, remained in the city and are prepared to fight until the end (Reuters, October 14, 16, 2017; BBC in Arabic, October 15, 2017). **Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights**, said that the operatives who are still left in the city include an **ISIS operative who planned the terror attack in France** where dozens of people were killed and wounded (November 2015). He said this operative is a north African national with either French or Belgian citizenship.



Some of the busses and trucks which served to evacuate ISIS's operatives from Al-Raqqah (Twitter, October 16, 2017)

The takeover of the city of Al-Mayadeen and its environs

After only a few days of fighting, on October 14, 2017, **the Syrian forces under the command of Suheil Hassan and with Russian air support took over the city of Al-Mayadeen, one of ISIS's last strongholds in Syria**. The Syrian army conducted a manhunt after ISIS operatives who retreated from the city, while sapper teams neutralized mines and IEDs planted in the city (Syrian TV, October 14, 2017). The Syrian troops are now mopping up two neighborhoods in the city which remained in the hands of ISIS, and they advanced towards the Omar oil field

on the east bank of the Euphrates River (Syrian Army Spokesperson's Office, October 14, 2017). **The quick fall of Al-Mayadeen**, one of ISIS's last strongholds remaining in Syria, **may indicate severe damage to ISIS operatives' military capability and morale.**



Syrian army fighting to take over Al-Mayadeen (Syrian TV, October 16, 2017)



ISIS's weapons hit during the Syrian army fighting to take over the city (Syrian TV, October 15, 2017)

► **The Russians used the fall of Al-Mayadeen for propaganda purposes vis-à-vis the US and the Coalition countries.** The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that the Syrian army's success in eliminating ISIS's last enclave in eastern Syria is in stark contradiction **to the Coalition forces' lack of progress in the fighting in Al-Raqqah.** The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that the so-called Coalition forces' carpet bombing of residential areas, while deliberately destroying all water sources, caused many casualties among the population (Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, October 14, 2017).

Deir ez-Zor area

The Syrian forces continue to take over neighborhoods controlled by ISIS in the city of Deir ez-Zor, which is completely encircled. On October 16, 2017, it was reported that **the Syrian army was in control of 80% of the city's territory.** In recent days, the Syrian troops launched a massive attack against several neighborhoods, mainly those situated in southeast Deir ez-Zor. At the same time, the forces continue **mopping up the area around the city and advance along the Euphrates River.** They also continued to take over territories on the

southeast bank of the Euphrates and created a territorial contiguity between Deir ez-Zor and Al-Mayadeen (Syrian Army's Spokesperson's Office, October 17, 2017).

► On October 18, 2017, the Russian Sputnik news website released a video **showing a jet plane landing in Deir ez-Zor's military airfield and a cargo aircraft taking off from the airfield**. A Syrian senior official noted that the cargo aircraft carried large amounts of supplies for the Syrian army. He added that **civilian and commercial planes can take off from the airfield and land there without any problem**. The Syrian army has started to operate the airfield on October 17, 2017, after nearly a year in which it was not used (Qasiyoun, October 18, 2017).

Daraa area and the Yarmouk Basin

► **Khaled bin Al-Walid Army, which controls an ISIS-affiliated enclave in the Yarmouk Basin, continues to undergo pressure by the rebel organizations**. On October 14, 2017, it was reported that the rebel forces had fired artillery at areas in the Yarmouk Basin which are under Khaled bin Al-Walid Army's control (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 14, 2017). On October 15, 2017, there were clashes between operatives of the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army and rebel forces on the outskirts of the town of Adwan, about 23 km northeast of the tri-border area of Syria, Jordan and Israel.



Right: Vehicle with operatives of the rebel forces, as seen from a Khaled bin Al-Walid Army observation point on the outskirts of the town of Adwan. Left: Khaled bin Al-Walid Army operatives shooting at the rebel forces (Haqq, October 15, 2017)

Main developments in Iraq

Takeover of ISIS's enclave in Al-Hawija

► **On October 5, 2017**, after two weeks of fighting, **Iraqi army forces supported by Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias took over the city of Al-Hawija, ISIS's prominent stronghold in northeastern Iraq**. **Amid (Brigadier General) Yahya Rasool**, spokesman for the Iraqi Defense Ministry's Joint Operations Headquarters, said that **1,316 ISIS operatives had been**

killed in Al-Hawija and that ISIS had lost a territory of 7,199 square kilometers. Rasool noted that during the campaign, International Coalition planes had carried out 284 sorties in support of the attacking forces (Al-Bawaba, October 12, 2017).



Iraqi forces in the Al-Hawija area (Al-Aan Arabic Television YouTube account, October 11, 2017)

► **Jabbar al-Maamouri, a commander in the Popular Mobilization** (the Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias) claimed that about 800 ISIS operatives who had fled Al-Hawija turned themselves in to the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in the Kirkuk Province. According to Al-Maamouri, among those operatives, there are thirty commanders from four provinces of ISIS. The Peshmerga forces did not disclose where the operatives had been taken (Al-Sumaria, October 15, 2017).

Al-Anbar Province

► **After the takeover of Al-Hawija, the Iraqis shifted their effort to the takeover of Al-Qaim and Rawa, ISIS's last strongholds in the Al-Anbar Province which are situated near the border between Syria and Iraq.** The operation will be carried out by Iraqi army forces, police forces, the counterterrorism apparatus, and popular militias (Al-Sumaria, October 12, 2017).

► **Qassem Mosleh, the commander of the Popular Mobilization's 13th Brigade¹,** is currently the commander of the western sector of the Al-Anbar Province. **He said that the operation to take over Al-Qaim would start in the forthcoming days.** According to him, for this purpose, the Popular Mobilization headquarters of the western sector is now coordinating with the headquarters of the Iraqi army's 1st Division (Popular Mobilization website, October 15, 2017).

¹ The operation of the Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias in the framework of brigades may indicate that they are undergoing a process of institutionalization and turn into a paramilitary force.



Qassem Mosleh, Commander of the Popular Mobilization's 13th Brigade who now serves as commander of the western sector of Al-Anbar Province (Al-Sumaria YouTube account, June 20, 2017)

ISIS's activity

- ▶ ISIS operatives **continue to carry out terror and guerrilla activities throughout Iraq:**
 - ◆ **Al-Hawija district:** ISIS suicide bombers detonated three car bombs against Iraqi forces during clashes east of the town of Riyadh, about 13 km southeast of Al-Hawija (Al-Sawarim, October 10, 2017).
 - ◆ **Hit:** An ISIS suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt in a café in central Hit, about 70 km west of Ramadi. Official Iraqi sources reported that ten people had been killed and fifteen wounded (Al-Sumaria, October 11, 2017).
 - ◆ **Kirkuk area:** ISIS claimed responsibility for carrying out two suicide bombing attacks against a staging zone of the Popular Mobilization in the village of Arsim Darb, about 40 km south of Kirkuk (Al-Sawarim, October 5, 2017).
 - ◆ **Diyala Province:** Three Iraqi army soldiers were killed and two wounded when shot from an ISIS ambush at the village of Al-Lahib, about 4 km north of Al-Muqdadiyah, about 85 km northeast of Baghdad.

These attacks indicate that ISIS still has **local networks throughout Iraq, with considerable operational capabilities**. However, it seems that so far, the activity of such networks is sporadic and not coordinated, and cannot impact the conduct of the Iraqi forces in the campaign against ISIS or the stability of the Iraqi regime.

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Egypt

► **Over the past few days, operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province carried out a number of attacks, some of them complex, against Egyptian facilities and the Egyptian security forces:**

◆ **October 16, 2017 – ISIS operatives robbed the safe of the National Bank branch in central Al-Arish.** The operation was carried out **by three squads**, which also attempted to attack St. George's Church and the Al-Arish municipality building, apparently in order to **divert attention from the bank robbery**. The operatives also planted IEDs near the bank. Seven people were killed, including three Egyptian policemen. The ISIS operatives reportedly **stole around USD 1 million** from the bank (Al-Youm al-Sabea; Twitter account of Sinai Now TV, October 16, 2017).

◆ **On October 15, 2017**, ISIS operatives carried out **a combined attack against four Egyptian Army posts in the Sheikh Zuweid area in the northern Sinai Peninsula.** The ISIS operatives attacked the outposts with mortars, machine guns and RPGs. At least 10 Egyptian soldiers were killed and around 30 others were wounded. According to the Egyptians, at least seven ISIS operatives were killed in the attack (Sky News in Arabic, October 15, 2017). ISIS claimed responsibility shortly after the incident. It was also reported that **two operatives from the Gaza Strip took part in the operation, one of whom was formerly a member of Hamas's military wing** (Twitter account of Sinai News 1, October 17, 2017). Following the attack, the Egyptian authorities announced that they would cancel the opening of the Rafah border crossing, which was planned for the coming days (Safa News Agency, October 16, 2017).



Missile launched from an Egyptian aircraft hitting an ISIS vehicle in the Al-Kawadis area in southern Sheikh Zuweid (Egyptian Army Spokesman's official Facebook account, October 15, 2017)



Right: ISIS sniper during clashes with the Egyptian Army south of the village of Al-Midan, west of Al-Arish. Left: Egyptian Army vehicle damaged by an IED planted by ISIS west of Al-Arish (Haqq, October 15, 2017).

- ◆ **On October 14, 2017, the Egyptian Army reportedly foiled an attack by ISIS operatives against a staging zone of the Egyptian forces in Al-Arish.** The ISIS operatives, **wearing Egyptian Army uniforms and explosive belts** and armed with rifles and hand grenades, were spotted by the Egyptian army during their attempted infiltration and were killed by gunfire that caused the detonation of their explosive belts (Egyptian Army Spokesman's official Facebook account, October 14, 2017).
- ◆ **On October 12, 2017,** six Egyptian soldiers were killed and at least four others were wounded in an attack by ISIS operatives in the eastern part of the city of Al-Arish. **Two ISIS operatives disguised as soldiers broke into an Egyptian army outpost and attacked soldiers with machine guns, hand grenades and explosive belts.** The Egyptians reported that the attack was thwarted and that the two terrorists were identified and killed. ISIS's Sinai Province claimed responsibility for the attack (Al-Bawaba News, October 13, 2017).
- ◆ **On October 10, 2017,** a suicide bomber driving a car bomb attempted to break into a cement factory in central Sinai belonging to the Egyptian army. The terrorist was stopped at the entrance. A soldier was killed, along with the suicide bomber (Al-

Bawaba News, October 10, 2017). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack (Aamaq, October 10, 2017).



Right: Abu al-Qaqa al-Ansari, the ISIS suicide bomber who detonated a car bomb at the main checkpoint of the cement factory in central Sinai. Left: The car bomb blowing up (Haqq, October 10, 2017).

- ISIS published an announcement **detailing a series of attacks carried out against the Egyptian forces**. These attacks included **raids against checkpoints** east of Al-Arish and **Grad rocket fire** at Egyptian targets, including the **Al-Arish airport**. ISIS also reported that its operatives **fired at Israeli aircraft and launched two Grad rockets at the Eshkol Regional Council** (in Israel) (Haqq, October 16, 2017).

This series of operations indicates that **ISIS's Sinai Province is maintaining high-level operational capability**, enabling it to initiate complex attacks against the Egyptian security forces. **Its successes in Sinai are particularly prominent against the backdrop of the collapse of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq**. If ISIS operatives did indeed manage to steal USD 1 million from the bank in Al-Arish, **this will improve their financial situation and increase their freedom of action vis-à-vis the leadership of ISIS, which is fighting for its life**.

ISIS's activity in other countries

The Philippines

- On October 17, 2017, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced that **the city of Marawi on the island of Mindanao** (southern Philippines) had been liberated from the influence of two ISIS leaders. According to his announcement, **Umar Mawt'** and **Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon** were killed in clashes with the Philippine Army on October 16, 2017. According to the Philippine Army spokesman, there are still between 20 and 30 ISIS operatives in the city, and they are holding around 20 hostages. **The fighting is not quite**

over but the remaining operatives do not constitute a threat, since the area where they are located is under full military control (Reuters, October 17, 2017).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Russia

► Russia's National Counterterrorism Committee reported that on October 13-14, 2017, the Federal Security Service (FSB), together with the Russian Interior Ministry in Moscow and Makhachkala, detained four Dagestani citizens suspected of belonging to an ISIS-affiliated terrorist squad. The terrorist squad operatives planned to carry out attacks against crowds in public places. During the operation, two hiding places containing three IEDs were found (Sputnik, October 15, 2017).

Morocco

► **The Moroccan authorities detained 11 operatives of an ISIS-affiliated squad** who planned to carry out attacks on sensitive sites throughout the country. One of the squad operatives who was detained has extensive knowledge in preparing explosives and IEDs. Weapons, ammunition, tear gas grenades and materials used to make explosives were also found. According to the Moroccan authorities, around 170 terrorist squads have been uncovered since 2002, about 50 of which were closely linked to terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq (Reuters, October 14, 2017).

The battle for hearts and minds

Encouraging women to join the fighting

► **An article on the duty of women to carry out jihad was published in ISIS's Al-Nabā' weekly.** According to the article, the Islamic State is waging a war that requires Muslim women to do their duty and to help the holy warriors in all areas in order to defend the religion and sacrifice themselves for it. The article explains that women are partners in the campaign not because of a lack of men but because of women's desire to be rewarded for their sacrifice for the sake of Allah. It addresses Muslim women and calls on them to follow the path of the female holy warriors known in Islamic history in order to achieve a state of grace from Allah. According to the article, **if the holy female warriors serve as a role model for women, then the Muslim nation will win** (Al-Nabā', October 5, 2017). **This article may**

be an indication of ISIS’s effort to find alternatives to the many operatives who have been killed, including through the recruitment of women.

ISIS calls the Russian and Coalition airstrikes “a holocaust”

► On October 12, 2017, ISIS published an article titled “The Deir ez-Zor Holocaust and the Holocaust of Al-Raqqah,” using a hashtag that included the word holocaust and its transliteration into Arabic. The author of the article claims that some 2,700 sorties were carried out over a period of around 10 weeks. According to him, this is not a war against the Islamic State or against terrorism, but rather an “organized holocaust and annihilation” carried out by the superpowers, Russia and the United States (Haqq, October 12, 2017). **In the ITIC’s opinion, this is an attempt by ISIS to arouse its supporters and public opinion worldwide against the airstrikes by Russia and the Coalition countries.**



The title of the article: “#DeirEzZorHolocaust” (Haqq, October 12, 2017)

A speech by Al-Qaeda’s leader to mark the 16th anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers

► In early October 2017, Al-Qaeda’s **As-Sahab media foundation** released an audiotape of a **speech by Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri** marking the 16th anniversary of the attack on the Twin Towers. The title of the audiotape is, “We will fight you until there is no more persecution, Allah willing.” It was disseminated on Telegram and quoted in the Arab media.

► Al-Zawahiri’s speech included two noteworthy topics (according to Al-Bawaba News, October 8, 2017, and other Arab media outlets):

- ◆ **A call to carry out jihad against the United States and the Arab regimes that collaborate with it.** Al-Zawahiri said that “this is the path of Osama bin Laden and the path of Al-Qaeda after him, to go first and foremost against the head of the global infidels [i.e., the United States] and to carry out jihad against the local agents [i.e., the Arab regimes that collaborate with the United States and the West].” Al-Zawahiri notes

that the Arab Spring had failed and, as a result, the “enemies of the nation” have become more evil than in the past and more enslaved to America.



Photo of the Pentagon behind the title of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s audiotape, “We will fight you until there is no more persecution, Allah willing” (Haqq, October 4, 2017). The photo was published by ISIS, and its reliability is questionable.

◆ **Indirect criticism of the Al-Nusra Front (without explicitly mentioning its name).** Al-Zawahiri denies that he had exempted anyone from the obligation to uphold the pledge of allegiance (to the Al-Qaeda leader) and stresses that the pledge of allegiance cannot be violated. He notes that Al-Qaeda supports jihad and the jihad fighters in Syria, and calls on its supporters in Syria to express confidence in Al-Qaeda and to help the organization. His statements can be regarded as indirect criticism of (the former) Al-Nusra Front for having begun to operate under the umbrella-framework of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, in which other rebel organizations are also participating.