



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## October 19-25, 2017



### Main events of the week

- ▶ The predominantly Kurdish SDF officially announced this week that the city of Al-Raqqah had been fully liberated. Following the liberation, a struggle over control and influence in the city and throughout the region ensued between the United States and the SDF on the one hand and the Syrian regime on the other.
- ▶ **The United States and the Kurds are trying to enlist the Saudis to assist in the rebuilding of Al-Raqqah**, presumably on the assumption that Saudi Arabia's leading role in the Sunni camp and its money will make it easier for the local residents to give their support to the process. In this context, Saudi Minister of State for Arab Gulf Affairs Thamer Al-Sabhan and US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk visited Al-Raqqah. A Saudi newspaper noted that the two men discussed the rebuilding of Al-Raqqah and that Saudi Arabia would play a central role in this activity.
- ▶ **This week, around 200 ISIS operatives were evacuated from the town of Al-Qaryatayn, southeast of Homs.** The Syrian army arranged safe passage for them to the areas controlled by ISIS in eastern Syria. The incident illustrates that even after the collapse of ISIS's "core areas" in the Euphrates Valley, it still has "local enclaves" in several areas of Syria. A number of ISIS operatives from these enclaves preferred to reach local settlements that would allow them to be evacuated to eastern Syria (for example, in the Syrian-Lebanese border area), while in some enclaves the fighting still continued (mainly in the Yarmouk Basin and south of Damascus).

### Involvement of Russia and the United States

#### Statements by the United States and Russia regarding the significance of the takeover of Al-Raqqah

- ▶ **US President Donald Trump** lavished (exaggerated) praise on the liberation of Al-Raqqah, ISIS's so-called capital in Syria, while the Russians attempted to minimize the significance of

the liberation of Al-Raqqah and to glorify the achievements of the Syrian army in Deir ez-Zor and the Euphrates Valley:

- ◆ **Donald Trump stated that the liberation of Al-Raqqah was a “decisive breakthrough” in the global campaign against ISIS.** According to him, the achievement was translated into a new phase in which the United States would support the local security forces, reduce violence throughout Syria, and promote the conditions for a lasting peace in order to remove the threat of terrorism. The President also noted that following the liberation of ISIS’s so-called capital and most of the territories that it had held, **the end of the caliphate established by ISIS was imminent** (Reuters, October 21, 2017).
- ◆ **The Russian Ministry of Defense** said that Al-Raqqah is merely a peripheral city which, until the outbreak of the war in Syria, had a population of around 200,000, but by the beginning of the US campaign for its liberation, the population had dropped to around 45,000. The Russian Ministry of Defense compared these figures to Deir ez-Zor and the suburbs along the Euphrates River, where over 500,000 residents lived before the fighting began. This area was liberated by the Syrian army with Russian air support in just ten days. The Russian Ministry of Defense criticized the massive airstrikes which it claims were carried out by the Coalition forces, comparing the fate of Al-Raqqah to that of Dresden in 1945 (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, October 22, 2017).

## Main developments in Syria

### Official announcement about the end of the campaign for the takeover of Al-Raqqah

The campaign for the takeover of Al-Raqqah, which began on June 6, 2017, ended on October 20, 2017. **After about four and a half months of fighting, SDF forces commander Talal Selo** officially announced that the **city of Al-Raqqah had been fully liberated**. Before that, SDF forces cleared mines, opened roads and searched for ISIS operatives hiding in the city (AP, October 18, 2017; Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, October 19, 2017). Talal Selo called on all international entities and organizations to take part in the rehabilitation of the city.



**Al-Naim Square in Al-Raqqah. Right: A giant flag of the SDF forces hanging on a building façade. Left: Giant flags of Kurdish organizations in Syria (YPG and YPJ) which are the predominant factor of the SDF forces (Twitter account, October 18, 2017)**

### **Power struggles in the Al-Raqqah Province on the day after**

► The day after the liberation of Al-Raqqah, **a struggle for control of the city and the entire province began**. The Ministry of Local Authorities in the interim Syrian government **published an announcement about the future of the Al-Raqqah Province. In its announcement, the ministry asked the International Coalition to hand over control of the province to its residents and to establish a local council that will run the province in cooperation with all local parties**. The ministry also asked to establish a **police apparatus that would be managed by officers of the province**. The announcement also included a demand that the local authority act in accordance with **the Syrian judicial system only** and that all refugees and immigrants return to the city unconditionally. **Foreign fighters, including SDF operatives, were required to leave the area** (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, October 21, 2017).

► Prior to the Ministry of Local Authorities' announcement, **SDF Commander Talal Selo** said that the SDF leadership **would hand over the management of the city and its environs to the Al-Raqqah Regional Council** and the security control to **Al-Raqqah's internal security force** (in the ITIC's assessment, these entities are subject to the SDF influence rather than to the Syrian central government). According to Selo, the SDF forces that would leave the city would continue to protect the province borders **from external threats** (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, October 20, 2017)

► It seems that **the US and the Kurds are trying to enlist the Saudis in the task of rebuilding Al-Raqqah**, in order to prevent the rebuilding from being led by parties affiliated

with the Syrian regime. **Saudi Secretary of State for Arab Gulf Matters Thamer al-Sabhan and US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS General Brett McGurk visited Al-Raqqah.** The Saudi newspaper Ukaz quoted sources affiliated with the Coalition, according to which Al-Sabhan's visit to the northern rural area [of Syria] and the city of Al-Raqqah **took place thanks to mutual understanding between Saudi Arabia and the United States regarding the restoration of security and stability to the city.** In addition, it was reported that Riyadh and Washington discussed the rebuilding of Al-Raqqah, with Saudi Arabia playing a central role in the process (CNN in Arabic, October 20, 2017).



**US General Brett McGurk (third from the left) together with Saudi Minister Thamer al-Sabhan (first from the left). The photo was reportedly taken when the two visited Al-Raqqah (Twitter account, October 21, 2017)**

### **Deir ez-Zor-Al-Mayadeen area**

After the takeover of Al-Mayadeen (October 14, 2017), the Syrian forces continued **to mop up the area between Deir ez-Zor and Al-Mayadeen.** There were clashes south of Al-Mayadeen between the Syrian forces and ISIS operatives. **The SDF forces expanded their control on the east bank of the Euphrates River,** in the area south of Deir ez-Zor. They captured the northern and southern Omar oil fields, situated at the confluence of the Euphrates River and

the Khabur River. These oil fields had previously represented an important source of income for ISIS.<sup>1</sup>



**Oil fields which the SDF forces have taken over from ISIS on the east bank of the Euphrates River: Southern Omar (1) and Northern Omar (2) (Google Maps)**



**Clashes between ISIS operatives and the Syrian army south of Al-Mayadeen (Haqq, October 20, 2017)**

► **The Syrians released a video showing the large amount of weapons found after the takeover of Al-Mayadeen.** The weapons found included: machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank rocket launchers, SPG-9 recoilless guns, 155mm field guns, tanks and an armored car bomb self-manufactured by ISIS. In addition, the video shows drones and quadcopters

<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that ISIS had produced 10,000 oil barrels a day from these oil fields during the past three years. Before the outbreak of the civil war, Syria produced 30,000 oil barrels a day from these oil fields (Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath, October 22, 2017).

(SANA YouTube account, October 19, 2017). **The lack of significant fighting against the Syrian forces and the large amounts of weapons seized indicate damage to ISIS's military capability and morale.**



**Right: ISIS's anti-aircraft guns. Left: Anti-tank rocket launchers (SANA YouTube account, October 19, 2017)**



**Right: Antitank rockets. Left: Towed guns (SANA YouTube account, October 19, 2017)**



**Right: ISIS's tank, with the inscription "Islamic State, Caliphate Army 412". Left: Armored car bomb self-manufactured by ISIS (SANA YouTube account, October 19, 2017)**



**ISIS's drones and quadcopters found by the Syrian army in Al-Mayadeen  
(SANA YouTube account, October 19, 2017)**

► **The Syrians have also released a video documenting the situation in the city of Al-Mayadeen after it had been taken over.** The video mainly shows **ISIS's public institutions.** Among other things, it shows the city's central square; the Ibn Taymiyyah school, which operated under ISIS's Bureau of Education (Diwan Al-Ta'lim); the main open market; A "media point," which includes seats and a screen where ISIS's propaganda videos were probably screened to the public (SANA YouTube account, October 21, 2017). The video gives the impression that compared to other cities in Syria which have been taken over from ISIS, **the damage caused to Al-Mayadeen was relatively minor. This was probably due to the short duration of the fighting that took place until the city was taken over.**



**Photos from the video: Right: City Square of Al-Mayadeen. Left: Partial destruction of one of the streets of Al-Mayadeen (SANA YouTube account, October 21, 2017)**



**Right: An ISIS "media point" which includes seats and a screen where propaganda videos were screened to the residents. Left: Ibn Taymiyyah school of ISIS's Education Bureau (SANA YouTube account, October 21, 2017)**

► **ISIS operatives continue to hold on to several neighborhoods in Deir ez-Zor.** This week it has been reported that clashes continued, mainly in the area east of the city. There were also clashes between the Syrian forces and ISIS on the east bank of the Euphrates River, near the Deir ez-Zor military airfield (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 21, 23, 2017).

**Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham tries to refute a Russian report that Al-Julani was seriously wounded**

- ▶ On October 19, 2017, a video was released on YouTube by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (a coalition of Islamic organizations headed by the former Al-Nusra Front). Coalition leader Abu Mohammad al-Julani appeared in the video. He spoke to the operatives against despair and the loss of faith, stressing that “we shall never give up the military option.” A major part of the video was dedicated to the activity of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham against the Syrian army (showing clashes from October 6, 2017) (Al-Sada YouTube account / Vedeng News, October 19, 2017).<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ According to the Russians, Al-Julani was seriously wounded and lost his hand in a Russian airstrike on October 3, 2017. In the two segments that were combined in the video, Al-Julani is seen healthy, moving his hands freely. It therefore seems that the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham released the video **to refute the Russian report and convey a message of business as usual**. However, in the ITIC's assessment, **the video does not refute the Russian report, as it is unclear when Al-Julani was speaking in the video**. The ITIC believes that while the video was edited, segments where Al-Julani spoke about clashes with the Syrian army taking place on October 6, 2017, were added to give the impression that Al-Julani spoke around that time, i.e., three days after the Russian airstrike.



**Abu Mohammad Al-Julani (center) speaking to Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham operatives. The date this segment in the video was shot is unknown (Al-Sada YouTube account / Vedeng News, October 19, 2017)**

## **Evacuation of ISIS operatives from Al-Qaryatayn and preparations for rebuilding the town**

- ▶ On October 22, 2017, it was reported that **about 200 ISIS operatives had retreated from the town of Al-Qaryatayn**, about 74 km southeast of Homs, and that **the Syrian army had completed the takeover of the town**. The town was handed over to the Syrian army on

<sup>2</sup> Vedeng is a news portal about Syria, affiliated with Syrian Kurds.

October 21, 2017, without resistance after twenty days during which it was held by ISIS (Al-Arabiya, October 23, 2017). According to several reports, **a safe passage was arranged for ISIS operatives who retreated from the town towards the areas held by ISIS in the Syrian Desert**. A small group of ISIS operatives in Al-Qaryatayn turned itself in to the Syrian army (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 22, 2017). During their short rule of the town, **ISIS operatives reportedly killed over a hundred residents**, mainly due to their concern that they had served as “agents” of the Syrian regime (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 22, 2017; Al-Arabiya, October 23, 2017).

The evacuation of ISIS operatives from Al-Qaryatayn demonstrates that after the shrinking of ISIS’s “core areas,” **local ISIS enclaves of sorts remained in various areas in Syria**, besieged by the Syrian forces or other rebel organizations. Some of the operatives of these enclaves (as in Al-Qaryatayn or the Al-Qalamoun ridge at the border between Syria and Lebanon) **preferred to reach local settlements that made it possible to evacuate them to the desert area in eastern Syria**. On the other hand, in some regions, including the Yarmouk Basin and the area of the Yarmouk refugee camp south of Damascus, there are still operatives maintaining organized military activity, albeit **not necessarily controlled by ISIS’s central leadership**. The ITIC believes that **when the Syrian forces complete their takeover of ISIS’s “core areas” along the Euphrates River, they will be free to address the remaining local enclaves, as the balance of power is clearly in favor of the Syrian regime and its allies**.

► Following the evacuation of the ISIS operatives, a delegation arrived in Al-Qaryatayn to examine the situation prior to rebuilding the town. According to the water administration in Syria, the water pumps will be recommissioned within three days. Food distribution was also organized for the town residents (Syrian TV, October 22, 2017).



**Right: A Syrian senior official examines the situation in Al-Qaryatayn after it had been retaken from ISIS. Left: Food distribution to the residents of Al-Qaryatayn (Syrian TV, October 22, 2017)**

## Fighting continues at the Yarmouk Basin

► Clashes between the ISIS-affiliated Khaled bin Al-Walid Army and the rebel forces continue. On October 18, 2017, twelve operatives of the rebel forces were killed and wounded in an attack by Khaled bin Al-Walid Army in the rural area northwest of Daraa. The Khaled bin Al-Walid Army also seized weapons (Haqq, October 20, 2017).



**Right: Vehicle of the rebel forces seized by the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army in the rural area northwest of Daraa. Left: Weapons seized by the Khaled bin Al-Walid Army (Al-Sawarim, October 20, 2017)**

## Main developments in Iraq

### Al-Anbar Province

► Anbar Operations Commander **Major General Mahmoud al-Falahi** said that in an Iraqi airstrike in the desert area southwest of Rutba district, about 310 km west of Ramadi, dozens of ISIS operatives were killed and two ISIS camps were destroyed. According to him, vehicles, including car bombs, and weapons of the operatives were destroyed (Al-Sumaria, October 21, 2017).



10:04 PM - 21 Oct 2017

**A target on fire in an ISIS camp near the border between Iraq and Syria, after being hit by a missile from an Iraqi aircraft (Twitter account affiliated with the Iraqi army, October 21, 2017)**

### ISIS's activity

► ISIS reported that its operatives had **continued to carry out terror and guerrilla activities throughout Iraq**:

- ◆ **Samarra area:** Six Iraqi army soldiers were killed and nine others wounded when an ISIS suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt against a gathering of forces in the Al-Hawi area (about 18 km southeast of Samarra) (Haqq, October 20, 2017).
- ◆ **Baghdad area:** ISIS reported that its operatives had carried out a combined attack against an Iraqi army camp south of Al-Tarmiyah, about 40 km north of Baghdad. Several Iraqi soldiers were killed and wounded in the clashes. Five additional soldiers were killed when their armored vehicle being part of a rescue force hit an IED planted by ISIS operatives. Two other soldiers were shot dead by ISIS snipers (Haqq, October 22, 2017).
- ◆ **Al-Hawija district:** ISIS operatives killed three Iraqi security personnel about 58 km west of Kirkuk (Al-Sawarim, October 19, 2017).
- ◆ **Tal Afar area:** Ten Popular Mobilization operatives were killed and three others wounded after they had run into an ambush of ISIS operatives south of Tal Afar (Haqq, October 22, 2017).
- ◆ **West Al-Anbar Province:** ISIS reported that on October 23, 2017, two of its operatives attacked an Iraqi army outpost south of the town of **Ana** (about 72 km east of Al-Qaim). One of the operatives was **a 15-year-old boy** codenamed **Abu Abd al-Muhaymin the Russian**, and the other was a 20-year-old operative codenamed **Abu Ishak al-Salmani**, who is seen wearing an explosive vest.



Left: ISIS operative codenamed Abu Ishak al-Salmani. Right: Abu Abd al-Muhaymin the Russian, a 15-year-old ISIS operative (Al-Sawarim, October 23, 2017).

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

### Egypt

- ▶ In view of the recent series of terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS, the Egyptian security forces in north Sinai declared the highest state of alert. The forces closed all entrances and exits to and from the cities in north Sinai. Special Forces and law enforcement personnel deployed at the entrances to the cities. At the same time, police forces raided several neighborhoods in search for ISIS operatives (Al-Watan, October 21, 2017).
- ▶ **Following the bank robbery in Al-Arish carried out by ISIS operatives, the Egyptian Central Bank announced that it had formulated an emergency plan to secure bank branches operating in Sinai and the border areas.** As part of this plan, security measures will be increased in the branches, in cooperation with army and police forces as well as the banks themselves (Al-Masry Al-Youm, October 17, 2017). It was also reported that as part of the security services' reevaluation of securing essential government targets in Al-Arish, the security department allocated an APC for guarding bank branches and the main post office in the city (Al-Shorouk, October 18, 2017).
- ▶ According to **Kamel al-Buhairi, researcher at Al-Ahram Strategic Studies Center who specializes on terrorism and the situation in the Sinai Peninsula,** the percentage of foreign fighters among ISIS operatives in the Sinai Peninsula does not exceed 10%-20%. **According to Al-Buhairi, most of the foreign operatives (about 80%) are Palestinians.** He also noted that at the head of armed organizations in Sinai **there have always been Egyptian tribesmen from Sinai.** According to another report, published in September 2017 and quoting a knowledgeable source in the interior security service in the Gaza Strip, **at least 130 Palestinians have joined ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula in the past three years.** Some of them had served as commanders in Hamas's military wing (Mada Masr, October 11, 2017).

## ISIS's activity in other countries

### Afghanistan

- ▶ According to Afghan security sources, **at least 15 cadets of the military academy in Kabul were killed and four others wounded when a suicide bomber blew himself up near their minibus.** The terrorist attack took place close to the entrance to the Marshal Fahim Military Academy in west Kabul (Afghanistan Times, October 21, 2017).
- ▶ Taliban operatives claimed responsibility for the attack. However, at the same time, **ISIS released an announcement, according to which about thirty officers and trainers in the Afghan army had been killed and wounded when an ISIS operative detonated a car**

**bomb** near a bus that carried them in the vicinity of the military academy in Kabul. According to the announcement, the suicide bomber who carried out the attack was codenamed Mu'awiyah al-Khurasani. ISIS released his photo, masked and holding a Kalashnikov assault rifle with ISIS flag in the background (Haqq, October 22, 2017).



**The suicide bomber who carried out the attack at the entrance to the military academy in Kabul (Haqq, October 22, 2017)**

► On October 20, 2017, a suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt against worshipers in the Shiite mosque Imam Zaman in the Afghan capital Kabul. At least 50 people were killed and a similar number of people were wounded (Afghanistan Times, October 20-21, 2017). Apparently, ISIS did not issue any claim of responsibility, but it was reported in the media that the attack was carried out by an ISIS operative codenamed Abu Ammar al-Turkmani (Thinkprogress.org, October 21, 2017).



**Destruction at the Shiite mosque Imam Zaman in Kabul after an ISIS suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt (Afghanistan Times, October 21, 2017)**

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

## Russia

► **Ziyad Sabsabi**, a member of the upper house of the Russian Parliament, revealed that more than 160 officers from the Russian security forces took part in a **large-scale military operation aimed at bringing Russian women and children back from Syria to Russia**. According to him, seven women and 14 children were rescued in the operation. After they were rescued, they flew to Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic (Sputnik, October 22, 2017).

## Germany

► Germany's domestic intelligence agency said that **minors returning from battle zones in Syria and Iraq were liable to become a "new generation" of ISIS recruits in Germany**. The agency added that **950 German citizens joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq, 20% of whom were women and 5% of whom were children**. According to the agency, after the defeat of ISIS, many of these women and children may return to Germany, and the country must prepare for the risks posed by **children who return to Germany from the battle zones after having undergone radicalization by ISIS** (Deutsche Welle, October 19, 2017).

## The battle for hearts and minds

### ISIS is threatening to carry out attacks during the 2018 World Cup in Russia

**ISIS's Al-Wafa media foundation published a poster threatening to carry out terrorist attacks during the World Cup games in Russia in 2018**. The poster shows a masked operative dressed in camouflage fatigues and armed with a Kalashnikov assault rifle. **The symbol of the World Cup games** appears on the right side of the poster, and next to it there is a bomb whose fuse has been lit. The ISIS insignia appears on the center of the bomb. **Below it the caption "Wait for us" appears in Arabic and Russian** (ISIS-affiliated Twitter account John Morris@xjhy2ait2ssp8tv, October 18, 2017).

► The poster was uploaded to an ISIS-affiliated Twitter account, John Morris@xjhy2ait2ssp8tv, whose content deals with ISIS. On October 19, 2017, a number of Twitter accounts affiliated with Arab media outlets and sports websites published the same poster. A link to the news website of one of these accounts states that the **poster shows the Volgograd Arena**, which is currently under construction in the city of Volgograd, about 913

km southeast of Moscow. This stadium will be one of the 11 football fields where the World Cup games will be held between June 14 and July 15, 2018 (Twitter, October 19, 2017).



**ISIS's poster threatening to carry out attacks during the 2018 World Cup in Russia. The poster reads "Wait for us" in Arabic and Russian (ISIS-affiliated Twitter account John Morris@xjhy2ait2ssp8tv, October 18, 2017)**