



Spotlight on Global Jihad

October 26 – November 1, 2017



Main events of the week

- ▶ A **ramming attack** was carried out this week in New York City (Lower Manhattan) on a bicycle path, by means of a rented pickup truck. **Eight people were killed and 11 others were wounded.** According to the initial reports, the perpetrator of the attack was a **29-year-old immigrant from Uzbekistan.** Security forces investigating the incident reportedly found a handwritten note in the truck, **pledging allegiance to the leader of ISIS.** At this stage, **no claim of responsibility for the attack by ISIS has been found.**
- ▶ In Syria and Iraq, Syrian and Iraqi forces are advancing in the Euphrates Valley in order to take over the last remaining **“core areas” along the Euphrates River** still under ISIS’s control, **in the area between Rawa and Al-Qaim (Iraq) and Abu Kamal (Syria).** This week, the Iraqi army and the Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias (the Popular Mobilization) **launched an operation to take over Rawa and Al-Qaim.** According to initial reports from Arab and Iraqi sources, ISIS operatives are fleeing from the Al-Qaim District to the area of Abu Kamal in Syria. The advance of the Syrian forces to Abu Kamal met with resistance from ISIS operatives.
- ▶ With the collapse of the Islamic State and the takeover of ISIS’s important strongholds, **the issue of the return of the foreign fighters to their home countries is on the agenda.** An American research institute (The Soufan Group) has reported that **5,600 ISIS fighters have already returned to their home countries.** In addition, **several thousand foreign fighters who fled from the fighting zones are now near the Syrian border with Turkey, Jordan and Iraq, waiting for a suitable opportunity to leave Syria and return to their home countries.**
- ▶ In the ITIC’s assessment, the return of the foreign fighters to their home countries is expected **to pose a serious security problem,** since they are **skilled fighters who acquired extensive military experience and absorbed the Salafist-Jihadi ideology while fighting in the ranks of ISIS.** These operatives are liable to join Salafist-jihadi networks in their home countries and become **an element that will encourage Islamic radicalization and**

terrorism, even after the collapse of the Islamic State. Another problem is that some of the foreign fighters are liable to return to their home countries with their **wives and children** and create an infrastructure for **a new generation of ISIS supporters**.

Russian involvement in Syria

► Speaking at the 11th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and the 4th ADMM-Plus Meeting which was held in the Philippines, **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu listed the achievements of the fighting against ISIS and the rehabilitation of life in Syria**, which he said was made possible thanks to Russia's involvement in the country. Following are some of the topics that he addressed (Russian Defense Ministry's Facebook page, October 24, 2017):

- ◆ **The liberation of territories from ISIS:** According to him, ISIS now controls less than 5% of the territory of Syria. Before the start of Russia's involvement, ISIS controlled more than 70% of the country's territory. In total, 998 cities and towns have been liberated from ISIS, with a total area of 503,223 square kilometers. Russian airstrikes destroyed 948 training camps, 666 factories and workshops for the manufacture of ammunition, and 1,500 units of military equipment. In addition, most of the ISIS operatives were killed.
- ◆ **Disrupting ISIS's sources of income:** Until 2015 (before the start of Russia's involvement), ISIS had earned about \$3 billion a year from oil revenues, sometimes even \$10 million a day. As a result of the fighting, these sources of income have become virtually unusable. Among other things, more than 200 oil and gas production sites, 184 refineries, 126 gas stations and around 4,000 tankers have been destroyed.



The Russian defense minister (second from the right) among the defense ministers participating in the conference in the Philippines (Russian Defense Ministry's Twitter page, October 24, 2017)

The identity and number of Russian fatalities in Syria

- ▶ On October 27, 2017, Reuters published the **death certificate of a Russian citizen named Sergei Poddubniy**, which was issued on October 4, 2017, by the Russian Consulate in Damascus. **The official number of Russian soldiers killed in Syria is 16**. However, according to the article, **the serial number of Sergei Poddubniy's death certificate was 131**, with the procedure being to start from 1 at the beginning of each year and issue certificates with consecutive numbers. This indicates that the **number of Russian fatalities in Syria is higher than that cited in official reports**.
- ▶ According to Poddubniy's death certificate, he was burned to death in the Homs Province. Reuters interviews with relatives of Russian citizens killed in Syria indicate that **some of them were in Syria as employees of contracting companies working for the Russian army**. The Defense Ministry and the Russian Consulate in Damascus did not comment on the report. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov issued a statement that Russia had no information about Russian citizens visiting Syria (Reuters, October 27, 2017).

In addition to the Russian soldiers operating in Syria, **Russian citizens are sent to Syria to work for contracting companies. Some of them are former members of the Russian security forces**. The founder of the Conflict Intelligence Independent Investigation Group (CIT), a group of independent investigators in Russia, **called these civilians mercenaries**. According to him, the Russian Defense Ministry tends to send them to the dangerous combat zones in Syria **in order to avoid "official" losses among the Russian soldiers, thereby presenting an image of a successful campaign**. The Russian Defense Ministry rarely publishes official announcements of fatalities among these civilians, denying any connection with them, but independent organizations manage to collect information about them via social media and local news websites (Daily Mail, October 6, 2017; CIT website, October 16, 2017; Open Russia, October 16, 2017; The Moscow Times, March 22, 2017; Russia Beyond, August 31, 2016).

Main developments in Syria

Deir ez-Zor-Al-Mayadeen area

South of Al-Mayadeen, there were battles between ISIS operatives and the Syrian forces advancing towards Abu Kamal. In the region between Deir ez-Zor and Al-Mayadeen, **the**

Syrian forces continued mopping up the areas from ISIS operatives, while sustaining many losses. **The Syrian troops took over additional neighborhoods in Deir ez-Zor**, with the objective of completing its takeover.

► The Syrian forces led by Suheil Hassan took over ISIS outposts in the area of Huwajat Saqr (about 2 km southeast of Deir ez-Zor). ISIS reportedly sustained many losses, and its outposts were destroyed by the Syrian army (Syrian TV, October 26, 2017). Along the Euphrates River, **the Syrian troops arrived at the town of Mahkan, about 4 km south of Al-Mayadeen**. Clashes took place with ISIS operatives. The Syrian troops also took over several neighborhoods **in southwest and southeast Deir ez-Zor** (Syrian Army Spokesperson's Office, October 26, 2017).

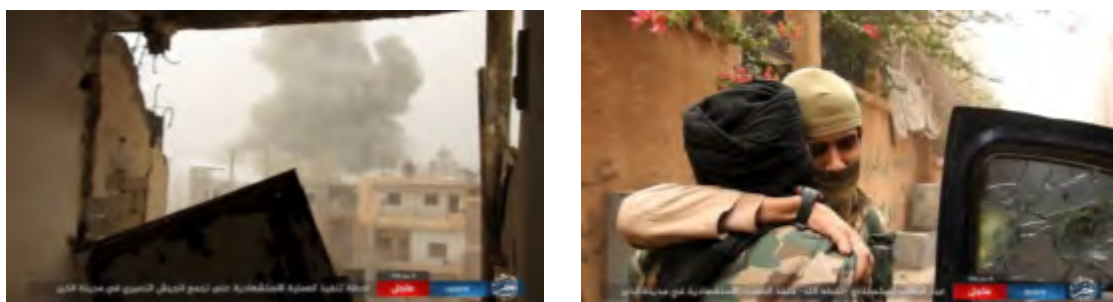


The town of Mahkan (2) south of Al-Mayadeen (1), where clashes took place between ISIS operatives and the Syrian army advancing towards Abu Kamal (Google Maps)

► The Syrian army with Russian support cleared mines and IEDs from the city of Deir ez-Zor (Syrian TV, October 29, 2017). According to a Russian report, in the city and its suburbs, around 1 hectare, 6 km of roads, and 35 buildings were cleared. A total of 963 IEDs were discovered and destroyed (TASS; Sputnik, October 28, 2017).

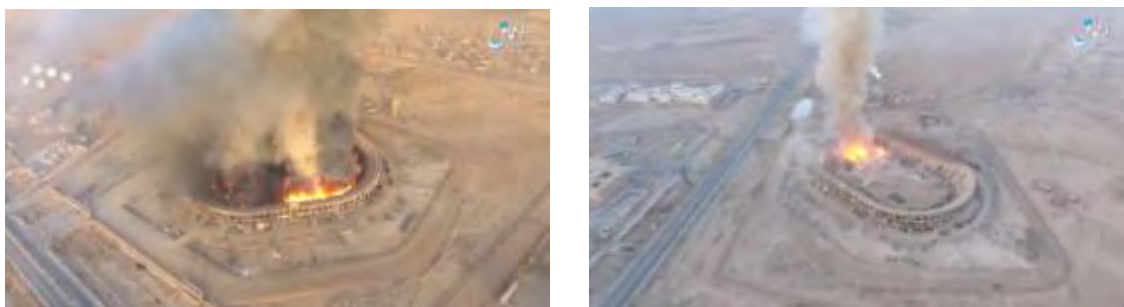
ISIS's response

► **During the mopping up of the Deir ez-Zor area, the Syrian troops sustained many losses.** The fatalities included **Issam Zaher al-Din**, Commander of the 104th Brigade. Dozens of Syrian army soldiers were killed and wounded in Huwajjat Saqr, southeast of Deir ez-Zor, in confrontations and as a result of the detonation of a car bomb by an ISIS suicide bomber (Khotwa, October 26, 2017). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. In its announcement, it stated that a suicide bomber codenamed **Abd al-Wahhab al-Turkestani** detonated a vehicle at the center of Syrian army staging zone in Deir ez-Zor (Haqq, October 28, 2017).

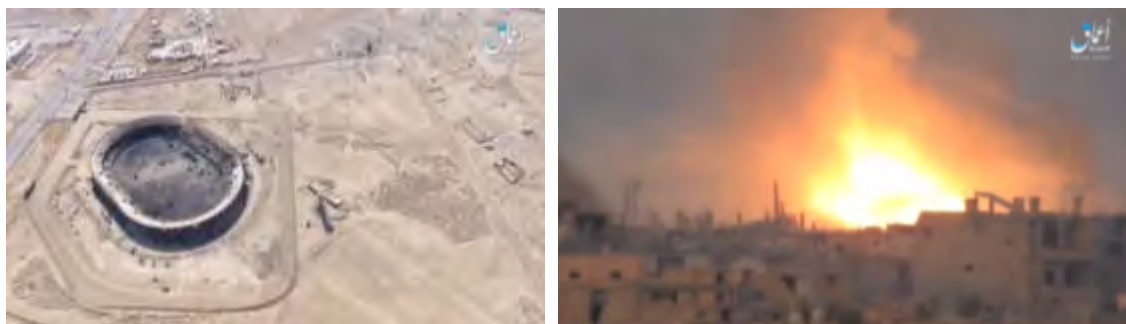


Right: ISIS suicide bomber Abd al-Wahhab al-Turkestani bids farewell before leaving for the attack. Left: The detonation of the vehicle (Haqq, October 28, 2017)

► On October 30, 2017, **ISIS reported that a large ammunition depot of the Syrian army located in the Deir ez-Zor stadium was completely destroyed by two bombs dropped from a drone.** A video released by ISIS shows that **the bombs were dropped from an ISIS quadcopter** (Haqq; file-sharing website). Apparently, this is **ISIS's most significant achievement in dropping bombs from drones.**



The attack on the municipal sports stadium of Deir ez-Zor, which served as a Syrian army ammunition depot (Haqq; file-sharing website, October 30, 2017)



Right: The attack on the municipal sports stadium of Deir ez-Zor. Left: The stadium after the attack (Haqq; file-sharing website, October 30, 2017)

The advance of SDF forces on the east bank of the Euphrates River

► **At the same time, the SDF forces continued their advance on the east bank of the Euphrates River.** The advancing forces **sustained losses at the hands of ISIS.** According to an announcement by ISIS, a total of 32 ISIS fighters were killed and 13 vehicles were destroyed by two car bombs **in the area of the Jafra oil field, about 24 km east of Deir ez-Zor** (Al-Sawarim, October 28, 2017). ISIS also reported that in the area of the village of Jadid Akidat on the route east of the Euphrates River, nine SDF fighters were killed in clashes with ISIS operatives (Al-Sawarim, October 28, 2017). The SDF forces succeeded in taking over the Omar oil field north of Al-Mayadeen, but ISIS retook it.



Right: ISIS operatives preparing to attack the SDF forces at the Omar oil field, northeast of Deir ez-Zor. Left: ISIS operative attacking the SDF forces at the Omar oil field by an anti-aircraft gun (Haqq, October 30, 2017)



Right: ISIS operative launching an anti-tank rocket at the SDF forces in the Omar oil field. Left: ISIS operatives at the Omar oil field which was taken from the SDF (Haqq, October 30, 2017)



The main sites of the fighting between SDF and ISIS: The Jafra oil field (1), Jadid Akidat (2), the Omar oil field (3) (Google Maps)

The advance of the Syrian forces towards Abu Kamal

- ▶ The Syrian forces continued their advance towards the city of Abu Kamal, ISIS's last stronghold in Syria. Among the attacking forces are also **Hezbollah and the Iranian Fatemiyoun Brigade, which is composed mainly of Afghan soldiers (Tasnim, October 29, 2017)**. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that since October 23, 2017, the beginning of the campaign to take over Abu Kamal, a total of 98 Syrian army soldiers and operatives of the supporting forces were killed. Among ISIS, a total of 124 operatives were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 31, 2017).
- ▶ On October 31, 2017, Russian submarine Veliky Novgorod launched three Kalibr cruise missiles at ISIS targets in the area of the city of Abu Kamal, hitting ISIS command centers, fortifications, armored vehicles, arms depots, and operatives (SANA News Agency, based on the Russian Ministry of Defense, October 31, 2017).



**Launch of a Kaiibr cruise missile from a Russian submarine
(SANA, October 31, 2017)**

Syrian army activity against the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham northeast of Hama

► On October 26, 2017, the Syrian army launched an attack against **outposts of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the rural area northeast of Hama**. The Syrian army advanced about 15 km and took over three villages and several outposts. According to Syrian media reports, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham sustained fatalities, including three senior commanders (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, a website affiliated with the Syrian army, October 28, 2017).



Right: Syrian army soldiers waving Syrian flags in one of the villages (apparently, Al-Shahatiya) taken over from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (NBN, October 25, 2017). Left: Vehicle of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham which was hit by Syrian army fire (Twitter account of Hezbollah's Military Spokesman's Office, October 29, 2017)

► Official Syrian sources released a photo of an aid kit which was found in a vehicle of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (led by the former Al-Nusra Front), hit by Syrian army fire in the battles in the rural area northeast of Hama. There are two logos on the kit, which quite resemble each other: the one (top) is of the Ummah Welfare Trust, based in Britain; and the other (bottom) is of the Turkish IHH, an organization with radical Islamic ideology (which led the Marmara flotilla). According to the Ummah Welfare Trust website, since 2012 it has delivered aid in the value of nearly GBP 30 million to Syrian residents. It is

unclear how such aid kit ended up in the hands of operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham.



Aid kit found in a vehicle of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham which was hit by Syrian army fire in the rural area northeast of Hama. The kit bears the logos of the Ummah Welfare Trust and the IHH organization (source: Syrian Army Spokesperson's Office; the photo was published on the Twitter account of Hezbollah's Military Spokesman's Office, October 29, 2017)

Main developments in Iraq

Al-Anbar Province

On October 26, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi announced the beginning of the campaign to take over the cities of Rawa and Al-Qaim from ISIS, thereby completing the takeover of ISIS's last remaining strongholds in Iraq (Twitter account of Al-Jaysh Al-Arabi Al-Watani). **An Iraqi force has started to advance towards these cities.**

Iraqi sources reported that ISIS operatives were fleeing the Al-Qaim district towards Abu Kamal, on the Syrian side of the border. ISIS operatives reported that they had detonated car bombs on the road leading from Al-Rutba to Al-Qaim. Prior to the attack, a meeting was held between representatives of the Iraqi and the Syrian armies **for security coordination.**



Right: Opening the Iraqi army campaign to take over the Al-Qaim District from ISIS (Twitter account of Al-Jaysh Al-Iraqi Al-Watani, October 26, 2017). Left: Column of Iraqi army forces advancing towards Rawa and Al-Qaim (Twitter account of Al-Jaysh Al-Iraqi Al-Watani, October 27, 2017)

► **The Popular Mobilization** (Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias) reported that **they had finished their mission on the Akashat-Al-Qaim road after taking over a segment of 43 km** and mopping up an area of 301 square kilometers in the region (Twitter account of the Popular Mobilization's news agency, October 27, 2017). The forces also started to set up embankments along the border between Iraq and Syria **to prevent infiltration of ISIS operatives into Iraq** (Iraqi News Agency, October 29, 2017).



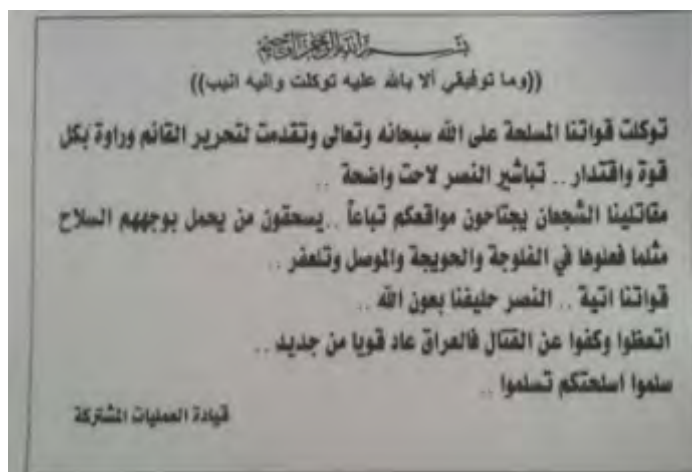
Popular Mobilization armored force during the takeover of a segment of the Akashat-Al-Qaim road (Twitter account of the Popular Mobilization's news agency, October 27, 2017)



Heavy machinery works on the border between Iraq and Syria by Popular Mobilization operatives to prevent infiltration of ISIS operatives from Syria into Iraq (Iraqi News Agency, October 29, 2017)

ISIS's response

- ▶ According to ISIS operatives, there were attempts to hit the Iraqi forces advancing towards Al-Qaim. On October 26, 2017, ISIS reported that Iraqi army forces were hit when **two car bombs were detonated on the road between Al-Rutba and Al-Qaim**, near the border between Iraq and Syria (Haqq, October 26, 2017). On October 27, 2017, ISIS announced that it had destroyed Iraqi army heavy machinery in the area of Al-Jibab, about 37 km east of Al-Qaim (Al-Sawarim, October 27, 2017).
- ▶ **On October 29, 2017, the Iraqis reported that ISIS operatives were fleeing the Al-Qaim District towards the area of Abu Kamal in Syria.** This was after most of their commanders had either been killed or fled, and may also be due to the airstrikes by the Iraqi Air Force and International Coalition. One of the commanders killed was **Raed al-Atouri, ISIS's military official in charge of the Al-Qaim District**, who had been killed along with six of his men in an airstrike (Al-Hayat, October 29, 2017). **ISIS reportedly used loudspeakers in the mosques in Al-Qaim to call on its operatives not to flee.** It threatened that anyone who did so would be **considered a traitor** who had broken the pledge (to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS) **and would be severely punished** (Al-Sumaria News, October 29, 2017).
- ▶ The Iraqi Air Force planes scattered leaflets throughout the western part of the Al-Anbar Province, stating that **the Iraqi army was advancing to liberate Al-Qaim and Rawa.** In the leaflets, ISIS operatives were called upon **to cease fighting** and surrender their weapons (Al-Sumaria News, October 29, 2017).



Wording of the leaflets scattered by the Iraqi Air Force throughout the western part of the Al-Anbar Province (Al-Sumaria News, October 29, 2017)

ISIS's activity in other provinces

► Concurrently with the campaign to take over Al-Qaim, ISIS operatives continued to report terror and guerrilla attacks carried out in various sites in Iraq, **albeit less extensively this week:**

◆ **Diyala Province:** Operatives of the Tribal Mobilization Force (Sunni tribal framework) thwarted an ISIS attack against an outpost in eastern Diyala Province (Al-Sumaria News, October 29, 2017).

◆ **Baghdad:** A security guard and three civilians were killed in the Amir Ali Mosque in north Baghdad when a suicide bomber activated his explosive belt (Al-Sumaria News, October 28, 2017). Five civilians were wounded by the detonation of an IED south of Baghdad (Al-Sumaria News, October 30, 2017).

Ramming attack in New York City (initial report)

► **On October 31, 2017, a ramming attack was carried out** on a bicycle path in Lower Manhattan, New York City. **Eight people were killed and 11 others were wounded** while riding bicycles or walking on the path. The attack was carried out with a **rented pickup truck**. Five of the dead are Argentinian citizens who were visiting New York, and another is a Belgian citizen. Eyewitnesses said that the driver sped toward the bicycle path, hitting passersby and cyclists. The truck then turned onto a street where it hit a school bus. After the collision, the driver got out of the truck, waving “rifles” (which later turned out to be an air rifle and a paintball rifle), and was shot by the police. He was wounded and taken to the hospital.



The pickup truck used to carry out the ramming attack. The front of the truck looks partly destroyed after colliding with the bus (Gulf Eyes website, November 1, 2017)

► According to initial US media reports, the ramming attack was carried out by **Sayfullo Habibullahevich Saipov**, 29, an **immigrant from Uzbekistan**. He came to the United States in

2010 and lives in Tampa, Florida. According to eyewitnesses, **Saipov shouted “Allahu Akbar”** while carrying out the attack. Security forces investigating the incident reportedly found a handwritten note by Saipov in the truck, **pledging allegiance to the leader of ISIS. Up to now, no claim of responsibility for the incident by ISIS has been found.**



Sayfullo Saipov, the man suspected of carrying out the ramming attack in Manhattan (Twitter, November 1, 2017)

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Egypt

► **The Egyptian army announced that its forces had arrested three ISIS operatives in central Sinai.** At the time of the arrest, a vehicle hidden in a cave was found, along with explosives used to manufacture IEDs, four motorcycles used by terrorist operatives, and a truck containing a large number of spare parts for motorcycles (Facebook page of the Egyptian army spokesman, October 28, 2017).



Right: A truck that was stopped, which contained a large quantity of spare parts for motorcycles and was on its way to terrorist elements in the Sinai. Left: A terrorist operative arrested by the Egyptian army, next to two motorcycles (Facebook page of the Egyptian army spokesman, October 28, 2017)

ISIS's activity in other countries

Nigeria

► On October 26, 2017, ISIS's West Africa Province announced that **a number of its operatives had attacked Nigerian army positions in the town of Sasu, in the northeast of the country.** In the clashes between the sides, eight Nigerian army soldiers were killed and additional soldiers were wounded. ISIS operatives took over Nigerian army vehicles, weapons, and ammunition (Haqq, October 26, 2017). According to Kayode Ogunsanya, spokesman for the 3rd Division of the Nigerian army, ISIS's attack was halted by the forces on the ground (Daily Post [Nigeria], October 27, 2017).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

The return of the foreign fighters who fought in the ranks of ISIS to their home countries

► In the wake of ISIS's defeat in Syria and Iraq, **many countries are expressing their fear of the fighters who went to fight in the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and are liable to return to carry out attacks in their home countries.** According to a study by Richard Barrett of **The Soufan Group**, **around 5,600 ISIS fighters from 33 countries have already returned to their homes. Thousands of additional ISIS fighters who fled the fighting are now at the borders of Turkey, Jordan and Iraq,** waiting for an opportunity to return to their countries of origin.¹ Another group of foreign fighters who were forced to leave the Islamic State and are unable or unwilling to return to their home countries are now seeking new battlefields or refuge in Muslim countries. It is reasonable to assume that the influence and involvement in terrorism of those returning to their home countries will increase as their numbers rise (The Soufan Group, October 24, 2017).

► The study also states that **some 3,500 Russian citizens joined the ranks of ISIS in Syria,** most of them from the former Soviet Union. **Around 400 of them have already returned to Russia.** Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov questioned the veracity of the figures presented,

¹According to the Jordanian daily Ad-Dustour, **more than 3,000 Jordanians fought with ISIS in Syria, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere.** They are now a major problem for Jordan, regardless of whether they remain abroad or try to return home (Ad-Dustour, October 26, 2017).

saying that “the Kremlin tends to doubt the credibility of this claim.” **According to him, the Russian citizens who joined ISIS have been “eliminated”** (TASS News Agency, October 26, 2017). Earlier this year, President Vladimir Putin admitted that 10% of more than 9,000 foreign fighters from Russia and the CIS who had gone to Syria or Iraq had returned home (The Soufan Group, October 24, 2017). The Syrian media also reported that **450 Britons** who had fought in the ranks of ISIS had returned home (Dimashq Al-Aan, October 25, 2017).

► **Official US sources claim that the fall of Al-Raqqah reduced ISIS’s ability to plan and coordinate attacks abroad.** According to them, ISIS has lost **more than 120 of its leaders**, and the organization is now fighting for its survival. Most of the fighters who are still active, estimated at **between 6,000 and 10,000, have fled to the deserts in the Euphrates River Valley** (The New Yorker, October 23, 2017).

Turkey

► The Counterterrorism Unit of the Turkish Police raided the hideouts of terror suspects in several areas in Ankara and Istanbul. **They detained 63 foreign nationals suspected of belonging to ISIS.** Some of the detainees **planned to carry out attacks during the Turkish Independence Day celebrations on October 29, 2017. A number of detainees had fought in the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq** (Daily Sabah, October 28, 2017).