



Spotlight on Global Jihad

November 16-22, 2017



Main events of the week

- ▶ **This week marked the end of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq**, which was declared by ISIS's leader on June 29, 2014. The Syrian army, with the support of Iran, Hezbollah and Shiite militias, and with Russian air support, **took over the city of Albukamal, the last stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria** (November 19, 2017). Two days earlier, **the Iraqi army took over the city of Rawa, the last stronghold of the Islamic State in Iraq** (November 17, 2017). While ISIS operatives in Albukamal put up a fierce battle (which lasted nearly two weeks), ISIS did not display significant resistance in Rawa (the city was taken over within a few hours).
- ▶ **The Islamic State has collapsed, but ISIS continues to exist as a terrorist and guerrilla organization in Syria, Iraq and abroad, and even carries out (and is expected to carry out) showcase attacks** to demonstrate that it remains a force to be reckoned with. **In Syria**, ISIS operatives carried out attacks in the Euphrates Valley, some of them daring and complex (this week a Syrian convoy was attacked west of Al-Mayadeen; last week an ISIS squad carried out a suicide bombing attack in the military airfield in Deir ez-Zor). ISIS also increased its terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare **throughout Iraq**. A suicide bombing attack was carried out this week in a crowded open market in a Shiite-Turkmen city south of Kirkuk. In addition, an ISIS attack against the Tel Sfouk border crossing with Syria in northwestern Iraq was foiled.
- ▶ **Over the past two months, ISIS's Khorasan Province (Afghanistan/Pakistan) has carried out four mass-casualty suicide bombing attacks in the capital Kabul**. The latest attack took place this week at a hotel in Kabul where Jamaat-e-Islami, the oldest political party in Afghanistan, was holding a conference (14 dead, 18 wounded). The series of terrorist attacks in Kabul indicates an **improvement in the operational capabilities of the Khorasan Province and an increase in its operatives' motivation, at a time when the collapse of the Islamic State was complete**. At the same time, ISIS released photos from the graduation ceremony of a new training course for recruits in the Kunar Province, east of Kabul.

Involvement of Russia and the United States

Russia

► According to a report by the **Russian Ministry of Defense, over the past week the Russian Air Force carried out more than 500 sorties in Syria in order to locate ISIS targets, destroying more than 1,250 ISIS assets.** At the same time, the Russian UAV unit **carried out more than 300 reconnaissance missions,** identifying 432 ISIS targets. In addition, **the Russian demolition unit located and neutralized more than 44,780 IEDs** (Sputnik, November 17, 2017).

► According to an announcement by the **Russian Ministry of Defense,** on November 15, 17 and 18, six long-range Tu-22M3 bombers took off from a base in Russia and **flew over Iranian and Iraqi territory,** carrying out an airstrike on outposts, concentrations of forces and armored vehicles **belonging to ISIS in and around the city of Albukamal** (which was taken over by the Syrian forces and their allies on November 19, 2017). Su-30SM aircraft from the Hmeymim Base covered the bombers during the airstrike. ISIS fighters, equipment and weapons were hit in the airstrike (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, November 15, 17, 18, 2017).



**Airstrike by long-range Russian bombers in the area of Albukamal
(Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, November 15, 18, 2017)**

► **Mikhail Mezentsev, head of Russia's National Defense Management Center,** said at the Third Interagency Training Conference that **more than 40 Russian children had been brought back to Russia from Syria** over the past six weeks. Mezentsev added that "The return of Russian children from Syrian conflict zones is particularly important from the political, social and humanitarian standpoints" (Russian Ministry of Defense website, November 17, 2017). **These are apparently children of operatives who came from Russia to Syria with their families and enlisted in the ranks of the jihadi organizations.**

The United States

► **Col. Ryan Dillon, Spokesman for the International Coalition against ISIS**, rejected fears that the United States and the Coalition would abandon the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) after the liberation of Al-Raqqah. According to Col. Dillon, the SDF fought courageously and liberated millions of people from ISIS, **and the Coalition remains committed to it**. He added that there was still a need to fight against ISIS and called on all sides to unite around this goal. According to him, **ISIS operatives are still hiding in the Euphrates Valley and conducting the fighting from there**. The main goal of the Coalition is still “defeating **Daesh** [i.e., **ISIS**] in **all these areas**” (Rudaw, November 13, 2017).

Main developments in Syria

Takeover of Albukamal

On November 19, 2017, **the Syrian army and the Shiite forces supporting it, with Russian air support, took over the city of Albukamal from ISIS**. Albukamal was the last city remaining in the hands of the Islamic State in Syria. **Its fall symbolizes the end of the era of the Islamic State in Syria and the transformation of ISIS into a terror and guerrilla organization which does not have to defend a territorial framework**.



The upper part of the Clock Square in east Albukamal. The picture of Syrian President Bashar Assad is seen on the clock, and the flags of Lebanese Hezbollah (left), Syria (right), and the Nujaba Movement, an Iranian-affiliated Iraqi Shiite militia operating in Syria (top left) (YouTube account of the Syrian TV, November 20, 2017)

► **On November 16, 2017, the Syrian army entered the city of Albukamal**. Before that, on November 11, 2017, ISIS operatives launched a counterattack that repelled Hezbollah and the Shiite militias out of the city. **On November 16-19, 2017**, clashes took place in the city, at the

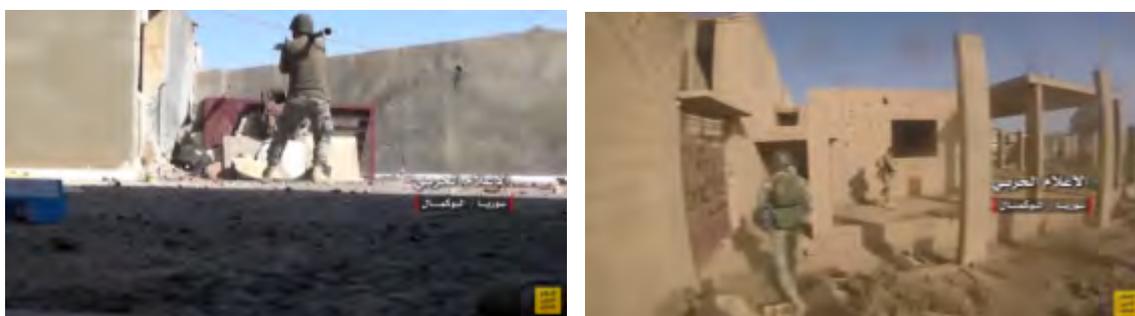
end of which **it was taken over by the Syrian army and its allies**. The Syrian army demolition units began mopping up the city in order to neutralize mines, IEDs and car bombs left by ISIS (YouTube account of the Syrian TV, November 19, 2017).

The role played by Iran and Shiite forces in the takeover of Albukamal

Hezbollah and the Shiite militias, **under the leadership of Iranian commanders and probably also with the participation of a small force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards**, were supposed to play **a key role in the takeover of Albukamal and the photo opportunities after the victory**. These forces played a key role in the first attack over Albukamal. However, as stated above, they were **repelled by ISIS and sustained heavy losses**. Apparently, only thanks to **the Syrian army joining the campaign** the city was eventually taken over, although **the media gave extensive coverage to the role played by Iran and its Shiite forces**.

► In the campaign to take over Albukamal **took part several Iranian-affiliated Shiite forces**: Most outstanding was **Lebanese Hezbollah**. There were also Iraqi Shiite militias (referred to as **Haydariyoun**), in which the most outstanding was the **Nujaba Movement**.¹ Also taking part in the campaign were forces from the Pakistani militias (**Zeynabiyoun Brigade**) and the Afghan militias (**Fatemiyoun Brigade**). Hezbollah and the Shiite militias **fought alongside the Syrian army also during the final stage of the campaign, where the Syrian army was the dominant force**.

Images from a video released by Hezbollah on the fighting in Albukamal



Left: Launching an anti-tank rocket. Right: Urban fighting
(YouTube account of Hezbollah's Military Spokesman's Office, November 18, 2017)

¹ **The Nujaba Movement ("The Movement of the Noble")** is an Iraqi Shiite militia operating mainly in the Baghdad region. It is affiliated with Iran. Its commander is **Sheikh Akram Abbas al-Kaabi**. Part of this militia was sent to Syria and fought alongside the Syrian army.



Firing a 23mm anti-aircraft gun mounted on an SUV
(YouTube account of Hezbollah's Military Spokesman's Office, November 18, 2017)

Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani's visit to Shiite forces in Albukamal

General Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force Commander, visited the Shiite forces supporting the Syrian army during the campaign for the takeover of Albukamal **and assumed command over the "operations room of the allies," i.e., the Shiite allies of the Syrian army.** In the ITIC's assessment, Soleimani's visit indicates **the Iranian interest to emphasize the part played by Iran and the Shiite forces in the campaign for the takeover of Albukamal, the last stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria.**

► **In the campaign for Albukamal, the Shiite forces were handled from a separate operations room called "the Allies Operations Room."** Apparently, **Iranian Revolutionary Guards' officers** played the key role in running this operations room. **Qassem Soleimani, Qods Force Commander, who arrived in the area of Albukamal,** assumed command of the operations room **during the final stages of the campaign for the takeover of Albukamal** (YouTube account of Hezbollah's Military Spokesman's Office, November 19, 2017).²

² Iranian media outlets boasted that **Soleimani had personally commanded the operations to take over Albukamal from ISIS** (Al-Alam, November 19, 2017). This bragging, whose purpose was to glorify the role of Iran and Soleimani in taking over the last stronghold of the Islamic State **is baseless.** Soleimani did not command the Syrian army, which played the key role in taking over the city, but rather the Shiite forces ("the allies").



Left: Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani with fighters of the Nujaba Movement. Right: Qassem Soleimani in Albukamal on November 16, 2017 (Enab Baladi, November 17, 2017)



Left: Qassem Soleimani speaking on a radio device in Albukamal (Hezbollah's Military Spokesman's Office, November 20, 2017). Right: Qassem Soleimani with one of the Nujaba Movement operatives (Enab Baladi, November 17, 2017). The insignia of the Nujaba Movement, seen on the operative's back, is similar to that of Hezbollah.

Losses of Iran and the Shiite forces in the campaign for Albukamal

► According to Syrian sources, **about 40-50 fighters were killed in the campaign for Albukamal, including 30 fighters of Hezbollah and the Shiite militias.** The fatalities include **two senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders with the rank of colonel and two low-ranking commanders.** The two senior Iranian commanders killed are **Kheirollah Samadi and Alireza Nazari.** Two other Iranian officers killed are a **low-ranking Iranian officer named Mehdi Movahednia**, apparently killed in the Deir ez-Zor area, and another officer named **Aref Kaid**, killed in Albukamal.



Right: Photos of operatives killed in the battles with ISIS, mainly among Hezbollah. Left: Photo of Mahmoud Mohammad Khaz'al, commander in Hezbollah, killed in clashes with ISIS on the outskirts of Albukamal (Haqq, November 19, 2017)



Right: Photos of three Hezbollah fighters killed in clashes with ISIS on the outskirts of Albukamal. Left to right: Adnan Abbas Qumayha, Qassem Ali al-Khatib, and Fawaz Ahmad Medlej. Left: Funeral procession of Fawaz Ahmad Medlej, who was buried on November 17, 2017, in Al-Fadhiliya, Lebanon's Bekaa Valley (YouTube account Shaheed Charity, November 19, 2017)



Right: The announcement that Kheirollah Samadi, of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, was killed in clashes with ISIS in the Albukamal area (the source of the announcement is the ISIS-affiliated Moata agency). The attached photo shows Samadi with Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani (Twitter account, November 18, 2017). Middle and Left: Photos of Alireza Nazari, senior commander in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who was killed during the takeover of Albukamal (Baladi News, November 20, 2017).



Right: Mehdi Movahednia, commander in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards killed in clashes with ISIS in the rural area of Deir ez-Zor (Haqq, November 19, 2017). Left: Are Kaid, commander in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards killed in clashes with ISIS in Albukamal. In the photo he is seen (right) together with Qassem Soleimani (Twitter account, November 21, 2017)

Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah referring to the takeover of Albukamal

► Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who sent a force to take part in the attack on Albukamal, declared in his speech that the “ISIS state” had collapsed, but ISIS was not eliminated, as the organization and its ideas still exist. Nasrallah congratulated all the forces that took part in taking over Albukamal: the Syrian army, the Iraqi militias (“the Iraqi resistance,” as Nasrallah put it), the (Afghan) **Fatemiyoun Brigade**, the (Pakistani) **Zeynabiyoun Brigade**, the **Iranian Revolutionary Guards**, and **Hezbollah**. He also expressed appreciation to the **Russian Air Force** for taking part in the campaign. Nasrallah extended special thanks to **Qods Commander Qassem Soleimani** who, he said, was present on the battlefield, risking his own life (Al-Manar, November 20, 2017).

ISIS activity in the Al-Mayadeen area

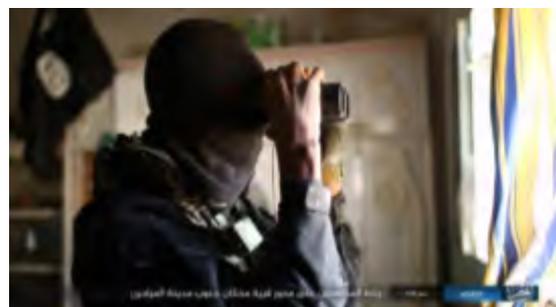
► On November 16, 2017, ISIS announced that fifty Syrian army soldiers had been killed in an attack by the organization against a motorized convoy west of the city of Al-Mayadeen. An ISIS suicide bomber blew up a car bomb in the middle of the convoy. Thereafter there were clashes between ISIS operatives and the Syrian army for over eight hours. ISIS claimed that it had seized five trucks carrying ammunition, four 122mm guns, two 23mm anti-aircraft guns, and many more weapons (Haqq, November 16, 2017).

► On November 15, 2017, ISIS released photos **showing some of its operatives deployed in combat and observation positions around the town of Mahkan**, about 4 km south of Al-

Mayadeen (near the road from Deir ez-Zor to Albukamal). An ISIS operative is seen observing after firing a **heavy machine gun mounted on a motorcycle** (a relatively small mobile platform which makes it difficult to locate him and is suitable for guerrilla operations). Another operative fired an SUV-mounted anti-aircraft gun, and yet another is seen in a sniper position (Haqq, November 15, 2017).



The town of Mahkan, situated near the road from Deir ez-Zor to Albukamal (Google Maps)



Left: ISIS operative firing a heavy machine gun mounted on a motorcycle. Right: ISIS operative looking at the Mahkan road, with ISIS flag in the background (Haqq, November 15, 2017)



Left: ISIS operative in a sniper position. Right: ISIS operative firing an SUV-mounted anti-aircraft gun near the town of Mahkan (Haqq, November 15, 2017)

Main developments in Iraq

Takeover of Rawa, ISIS's last stronghold in Iraq

On November 17, 2017, the Iraqi army announced that its forces had **taken over the city of Rawa**, the Islamic State's last stronghold in Iraq. **Sunni militias of the Tribal Mobilization** participated in the takeover of the city, while the Shiite militias did not play any significant role. In the ITIC's assessment, this was done so as not to alienate the Sunni population of the Anbar Province. **Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar Abadi** declared that Rawa had been liberated **within a record time of several hours** and that the Iraqi forces **continued mopping up the desert** and securing the borders of Iraq (Al-Sumaria News, November 17, 2017). In another declaration, the Iraqi Prime Minister announced the end of ISIS in Iraq from a military perspective. He added that in the forthcoming short term, **the Al-Anbar Desert would be fully mopped up** and then ISIS's absolute defeat would be declared in Iraq (Iraqi News Agency, November 21, 2017).



Right: The Iraqi army's announcement of its takeover of the city of Rawa (Twitter account, November 17, 2017). Left: Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar Abadi announcing the end of ISIS in Iraq from a military perspective (Iraqi News Agency, November 21, 2017)

► **Apparently, ISIS did not display significant resistance in Rawa.** Reportedly, it sustained several fatalities, its equipment was destroyed, and many of its operatives **fled towards the desert**. The Iraqi forces are mopping up the city searching for mines and IEDs left by ISIS. On November 17, 2017, the day the city was taken over, **the Iraqi forces erected a bridge on the Euphrates River southwest of Rawa and crossed the river towards the city.**



Right: Photo of the city of Rawa taken from an aircraft. The Rawa Bridge is seen in the middle of the photo (Twitter, November 18, 2017). Left: Column of SUVs with heavy machine guns of the Sunni militia (the Tribal Mobilization)(YouTube account of Al-Aan Arabic Television, November 17, 2017)



Right: Column of bullet-proof Humvees of the Iraqi forces in the Rawa District. Left: Column of armored vehicles flying Iraqi flags in the Rawa District (YouTube account of Al-Aan Arabic Television, November 17, 2017)

ISIS terrorist and guerrilla attacks and attempted attacks in Iraq and thwarting operations by the Iraqi security forces

During the week in which the Islamic State collapsed, ISIS carried out a mass-casualty attack in the Turkmen-Shiite city of Tuz Khurmatu, south of Kirkuk (23 dead). The Iraqi security forces carried out large-scale thwarting activity and managed to prevent some of the planned attacks.

Mass-casualty suicide bombing attack south of Kirkuk

► On November 21, 2017, a suicide bomber blew up a car bomb in a vegetable open market in the center of the city of Tuz Khurmatu, about 69 km south of Kirkuk.³ **At least 23 people were killed and 60 people were wounded.** Most of the dead are civilians. **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.**



The scene of the car bomb explosion in a vegetable and fruit open market in the city of Tuz Khurmatu (Al-Jazeera, November 21, 2017)

Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

► Following are the main counterterrorist activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces against ISIS:

Al-Anbar Province: Two female suicide bombers (according to their photos, they appear to be around 17 years old) were detained by the Iraqi security forces **in the city of Haditha**. They intended to blow themselves up in the apartment of **Major Bahajat al-Jreifi**. The officer they tried to eliminate belonged to a unit that attacked ISIS in the Al-Anbar Province (Iraqi News Agency, November 21, 2017). This unusual attack **may be an indication of the changes that ISIS is making on the ground** after the collapse of the Islamic State. These changes include **more extensive use of women because it is easier to use them on missions such as suicide bombing attacks** (a woman can pretend to be pregnant and wear an explosive belt; Muslim men are precluded from touching her body during a search).

◆ **Diyala Province:** Iraqi security forces **prevented the infiltration of dozens of ISIS operatives** who had fled after the takeover of Al-Hawija by the Iraqi security forces. The

³ The city of Tuz Khurmatu has a Turkmen-Shiite majority and also Kurdish and Arab residents.

number of ISIS operatives in the province is now estimated at **around 100 armed operatives** operating in secret squads (Al-Sumaria News, November 20, 2017).

◆ **Nineveh Province:** On November 18, 2017, the Popular Mobilization (an umbrella framework of Shiite militias under the protection of Iran) announced that a force from the 29th Brigade of the Popular Mobilization had killed five ISIS operatives, **thereby thwarting their attack against the Tel Sfouk border crossing between Iraq and Syria** in northeastern Syria (Popular Mobilization website, November 18, 2017).



The Tel Sfouk border crossing (marked in red) between Iraq and Syria (Google Maps)

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** On November 19, 2017, the Popular Mobilization announced that its forces, together with forces from the Iraqi Army's 20th Division, **had killed 12 ISIS operatives in the Al-Hawija District**, around 58 km west of Kirkuk. The ISIS operatives were hiding in rocky terrain and in houses in this area (Popular Mobilization website, November 19, 2017).

◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** On November 14, 2017, the Salah al-Din Province (north of Baghdad) released a video showing ISIS operatives during clashes with the Iraqi security forces (Haqq; file-sharing website, November 2017).



Right: ISIS operative launching an anti-tank rocket at the Iraqi forces. Left: ISIS operative firing a heavy machine gun at the Iraqi forces (Haqq; file-sharing site, November 14, 2017).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

ISIS's response to the IDF Spokesperson's statement that an IDF soldier was wounded by gunfire from Sinai

► On November 20, 2017, ISIS's news agency quoted Maj. Avichay Adraee, the head of the Arab media department at the IDF Spokesperson's Office, as saying that an IDF soldier was lightly wounded by gunfire from Sinai. ISIS's announcement does not refer to the incident itself **but takes advantage of the opportunity to send a threat to Israel by ISIS's Sinai Province** (Haqq, November 20, 2017).



ISIS's threat to Israel: An operative of the organization waving the ISIS flag on a tank, with the caption: "We are coming, O Jews. The Islamic State – Sinai Province" (Haqq, November 20, 2017)

ISIS's activity in other countries

(Another) ISIS suicide bombing attack in Afghanistan

► On November 16, 2017, a suicide bomber wearing an explosive vest blew himself up **outside a hotel in Kabul where the Jamaat-e-Islami (the Islamic Association) party** was holding a political conference. Jamaat-e-Islami is considered the oldest political party in

Afghanistan⁴. The terrorist attempted to enter the hall, but policemen at the entrance prevented him from doing so. **A total of 14 people were killed, eight policemen and six civilians.** In addition, 18 people were wounded, seven of them policemen and 11 civilians. **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack** (Afghanistan Times, November 16, 2017).

► The Islamic Society Party has been the target of two attacks this year. The conference at the hotel was organized by supporters of the party in honor of **Atta Muhammad Nur**, senior party member and Governor of the **Balkh Province** in northern Afghanistan (near the border with Uzbekistan). Atta Nur is expected to be **one of the candidates in Afghanistan's presidential election** in 2019 (Afghanistan Times, November 16, 2017).

The current suicide bombing attack **is the fourth in a series of suicide bombing attacks carried out by ISIS in Kabul over the past two months** (the three previous attacks were carried out at the entrance to the military academy in western Kabul, at the Shiite Imam Zaman Mosque, and at Kabul International Airport). In the ITIC's assessment, **this series of attacks indicates an improvement in ISIS's operational capabilities in Afghanistan** and an increase in its motivation to carry out showcase attacks, **precisely at the time when the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has collapsed.**

ISIS training course ends in eastern Afghanistan

► On November 20, 2017, ISIS's Khorasan Province (Afghanistan/Pakistan) **published photos showing new recruits who have completed their training.** The photos show the **Sheikh Abd al-Hassib** training camp in **Kunar** (a province located east of Kabul, near the border with Pakistan). The graduates (at least 17 operatives) joined the ranks of ISIS in the Kunar Province (Haqq, November 20, 2017).

⁴ **Jamaat-e-Islami (the Islamic Society)** was founded in 1972 and is considered the oldest political party in Afghanistan. Most of its members are Tajiks (Sunnis) from the north and west of the country. It has an essentially anti-Western ideology based on Islamic Law (Sharia), as it is perceived by the Muslim Brotherhood. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) and the ensuing civil war (1989-1992), it became one of the most prominent Mujahidin groups. **The party had a military wing headed by Ahmad Shah Massoud, who founded the Northern Front, which fought the Taliban after they took over Afghanistan (1996-2001). Massoud was murdered in a suicide bombing attack on September 9, 2001. In recent years, the party has been involved mainly with domestic matters.**



The Kunar Province (marked in red) (Google Maps)



Right: ISIS's new recruits who completed their training at the Sheikh Abd al-Hassib camp. Left: ISIS's new recruits in an exercise, firing from a kneeling position. The ISIS flag appears in the background (Haqq, November 20, 2017)