



Spotlight on Global Jihad

November 30 – December 6, 2017



Main events of the week

- ▶ On both sides of the Euphrates River in the area between Deir ez-Zor and Albukamal, searches after ISIS operatives who fled to the desert continue. The Syrian forces are operating on the west bank of the river and the Kurdish forces (SDF) on the east bank. Long-range Russian bombers provided air support to the searchers.
- ▶ This week, a meeting was held between senior Russian and Kurdish officers in the village of Al-Salihyah, located midway between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal. The meeting was attended by local representatives from Deir ez-Zor. It was agreed, among other things, to set up a joint operations room in the village of Al-Salihyah for the Russian army, the Kurdish forces and representatives of the Arab tribes in the area.
- ▶ Of late, **a fierce dispute has surfaced between Al-Qaeda and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (formerly the Al-Nusra Front). The root of the dispute is the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham's independent "Syrian" policy, which has been expressed in a refusal to obey Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and pragmatic conduct aimed at preserving its survival. In the ITIC's assessment, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham's pragmatic conduct stems primarily from the fear that, following the collapse of the Islamic State, **the strategic attention of Syria, Russia and Iran will shift to the rebel enclave in the Idlib area**, where the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham is the dominant force.
- ▶ **In Iraq, ISIS's terrorist attacks continue, along with extensive counterterrorism activities on the part of the Iraqi forces.** Abroad, **ISIS's provinces in Yemen and Afghanistan have succeeded in carrying out a series of attacks, some of them complex**, thus proving that **the fall of the Islamic State has not impaired their capabilities** (in Aden, Yemen, a car bomb was detonated in front of the Ministry of Finance building; in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, a car bomb was detonated at the entrance to a TV building).

► Even after the collapse of the Islamic State, **ISIS continues to threaten Western countries and to call on its supporters to carry out attacks against the so-called infidels.** ISIS's media outlets released a **video addressing the United States and “infidel” Western countries, threatening that the jihad against them would continue.** In addition, ISIS-affiliated social media accounts published a poster **threatening the countries of the West in anticipation of the coming Christmas.**

Russian involvement in Syria

More Russian statements about the intention to reduce the number of forces in Syria

► **Russian Federation Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev** said that the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria would be carried out according to their level of readiness, **and that preparations for the withdrawal were already underway. Previously, Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov** said that Russia might begin to reduce the size of its forces in Syria **by the end of the year.** According to the plan, the Russian military bases in **Hmeymim and Tartus** would remain in Syria, along with the Coordination Center of reconciliation between the warring parties and various infrastructures needed for maintaining stability in the country (tvzvezda.ru website, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense; RIA, November 30, 2017).

Russian call for imposing sanctions on those trading in cultural objects stolen from Iraq and Syria

► **Russia has reportedly urged the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on individuals and organizations that trade with terrorists in cultural objects from Iraq and Syria.** Russian Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya raised the issue at a Security Council session on trading in cultural objects. According to him, **ISIS operatives and criminals associated with them use all the existing loopholes to smuggle cultural valuables abroad.** Recently, Russian border control forces managed to **thwart the smuggling of Syrian cultural objects from areas that had been under the control of the Islamic State.**

According to the Russian ambassador, the trade in works of art is carried out **by anonymous suppliers** (including via the Internet). He said it was difficult to control such transactions, mainly because of a problem in identifying forbidden valuables. He urged countries around

the world to provide the Security Council sanctions committee on ISIS and Al-Qaeda with the information in their possession about the sources of financing of the organizations involved in this illegal trade (TASS News Agency, November 30, 2017).

Main developments in Syria

Syrian army searches the Al-Mayadeen-Albukamal region

► The Syrian forces are searching the region between Al-Mayadeen and Al-Bukamal southeast of the Deir ez-Zor Province, mopping up the area from ISIS operatives who fled to the desert areas after these cities had been taken over. Large quantities of weapons were found, including anti-tank missiles, ammunition and IEDs (Syrian News Agency, November 30, 2017).

Russian air support for the Syrian army

► On December 1 and 3, 2017, six Tu-22M3 long-range Russian bombers, **which took off from an airbase in Russia, attacked ISIS targets in the Deir ez-Zor Province** (mainly in the southeast of the province, where the Syrian army conducts the searches). Su-30SM planes from the Hmeymim airbase covered the bombers. ISIS positions, ammunition depots and equipment were destroyed during the airstrike. After the attack on December 3, 2017, the bombers returned to their base in Russia (Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, December 1, 3, 2017).



**One of the strategic bombers attacks in Deir ez-Zor
(Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, December 1, 2017)**

Deir ez-Zor area

The SDF forces mop up the east bank of the Euphrates River

► On December 3, 2017, the SDF forces announced that their fighters had mopped up **the rural area east of Deir ez-Zor**, on the east bank of the Euphrates River, **with assistance from local tribes, the International Coalition and Russian air support** (YPG website, December 3, 2017). **Sihanouk Dibo, the presidential adviser to the PYD** (the Kurdish Democratic Union Party), stated that **the Russian forces had provided the Kurds with logistic support** (RT, December 4, 2017).



YPG fighters (the Kurdish fighters comprising the dominant part of the SDF) during clashes with ISIS on the east bank of the Euphrates River (Twitter account, December 2017)

► The SDF forces took over from ISIS the villages of **Abu Hamam and Al-Khan, southeast of Al-Mayadeen**, on the east bank of the Euphrates River. On December 1, 2017, the forces announced that during **Operation Al-Jazeera Storm** (the mopping up of the east bank of the Euphrates River), ISIS sustained 17 fatalities (SDF Information Center website).



The villages of Abu Hamam (1) and Al-Khan (2), on the east bank of the Euphrates River. These two villages were taken over by the SDF this week (Google Maps)

Meeting between Kurdish representatives and senior Russian army officers

- ▶ On December 3, 2017, a meeting was held between Russian senior officers and Kurdish senior operatives in the YPG (the Kurds' military force in Syria comprising the main part of the SDF forces). The meeting was attended by **Deputy Commander of the Russian forces in Syria General Alexander (Aleksey) Kim; YPG Spokesman Nouredine (Nouri) Mahmoud; and Ghassan Al-Yusuf**, the chairman of a local body named **“the Deir ez-Zor Civilian Council”** (Al-Akhbar, Lebanon, December 4, 2017). The meeting was held in the **village of Al-Salihyah** on the west bank of the Euphrates River, halfway between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal.
- ▶ At the end of the meeting, a press conference was held, in which YPG Spokesman Nouri Mahmoud praised the active role played by **the Coalition forces and Russia in the fight against ISIS** (YPG website, December 3, 2017). He pointed out the importance of future cooperation to restore security and reconstruct infrastructures in the area (Al-Akhbar, December 3, 2017). **The Russian general Alexander Kim** noted in the press conference that **the operation to eliminate ISIS's pockets of resistance east of Deir ez-Zor is near its end**. He said that in the **village of Al-Salihyah**, where the meeting was held, **a joint operations room would be set up, shared by the Russian army, YPG, and the representatives of the Arab tribes** (Twitter, December 4, 2017).



Center: Russian General Alexander (Aleksey) Kim during the press conference. Left: YPG Spokesman Nouredine (Nouri) Mahmoud (Twitter, December 4, 2017)



The village of Al-Salihyah, where a joint operations room is to be located, shared by the Russian army, YPG, and the Arab tribes (marked in red) (Google Maps)

SDF denies reports of ceasefire agreement with ISIS

► On November 28, 2017, reports appeared on social networks about a ceasefire agreement allegedly achieved between the SDF forces and ISIS (Al-Mayadeen, November 28, 2017). **Mostafa Bali, director of the SDF Information Center, denied these reports** and stressed that the SDF forces **continued to fight against terrorism “with all their might” until it ended in Syria** (Russia Today, November 28, 2017). **In the ITIC's assessment, these reports are false, as on the ground, the SDF forces continue mopping up the areas from ISIS operatives.**

Clashes between ISIS and the Syrian army in western Albukamal suburbs

► On December 1, 2017, ISIS released several photos documenting clashes between its operatives and the Syrian army **in the western suburbs of Albukamal** (Haqq, December 1, 2017). It seems that **the security situation in the city of Albukamal, taken over by the Syrian forces and the Shiite militias, has not yet been stabilized.**



Right: A light-armed ISIS operative equipped with a communications device walking through a hole in the wall during clashes in the western suburbs of Albukamal. Left: ISIS operative firing a machine gun (Haqq, December 1, 2017)



Right: ISIS operative firing a mortar during clashes in the western suburbs of Albukamal. Left: ISIS mortar shell hitting Syrian army positions (Haqq, December 1, 2017)

Fierce dispute between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda

Recently, harsh words have been exchanged between Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front), indicating **a widening rift between the two organizations**. At the core of the dispute **was the nature of the relationship between the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda, its parent organization**: is the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham allowed to conduct an independent “Syrian” policy of its own, **taking into account the serious constraints it is facing**, or is it subject to the instructions of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, **whose overview of the situation and set of considerations are completely**

different. A series of arrests carried out by Abu Mohammad Al-Julani, the leader of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, among operatives affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and his response to the accusations against him by Al-Qaeda leader, are, in the ITIC's assessment, an indication that **Al-Julani chose to follow his own independent path, in order to try to survive the serious constraints it is facing**, even though he has not yet completely burnt his bridges with Al-Qaeda.

► **Note:** A detailed analysis of the dispute, its causes and implications, will be published in a separate document.

Main developments in Iraq

Iraqi counterterrorist activities in the various provinces

► The Iraqi security forces continued their counterterrorism activities in the various provinces:

- ◆ **South of Baghdad:** The Iraqi security forces found three IEDs and explosives inside an apartment. Several suspects were detained (Iraqi News Agency, December 4, 2017).
- ◆ **Hamrin Mountains, east of Baqubah:** An intelligence and counterterrorism unit of the Diyala police killed a suicide bomber and detained three foreign terrorist operatives (Iraqi News Agency, December 4, 2017).
- ◆ **South of Baqubah:** Diyala police detained five wanted terrorists (Iraqi News Agency, December 4, 2017).
- ◆ **Al-Ghabat area, north of Mosul:** The Iraqi army found a weapons and ammunition cache which included anti-aircraft guns, anti-tank missiles and artillery and mortar shells (Iraqi News Agency, December 3, 2017).
- ◆ **Neighborhoods in southeast Mosul:** The Iraqi security forces detained several ISIS operatives who had settled in two disadvantaged neighborhoods in southeast Mosul (Iraqi News Agency, December 3, 2017).

ISIS terrorist and guerrilla warfare activity

► ISIS operatives continued their terrorist and guerrilla activity in various provinces in Iraq, albeit not in a coordinated manner and without central direction:

- ◆ The (Shiite) Popular Mobilization forces halted an ISIS attack west of the Baiji District. ISIS operatives used three SUVs (Iraqi News Agency, December 2, 2017).

- ◆ An Iraqi army soldier was wounded as a result of ISIS sniper fire about 28 km northeast of Baqubah (Al-Sumaria News, December 3, 2017).
- ◆ Five people, apparently civilians, were wounded when IED exploded in Al-Hamamiyat area, about 16 km north of Baghdad (Iraqi News Agency, December 2, 2017).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

Mobilizing the Bedouin tribes in Sinai to fight terrorism

The mass attack at a mosque in the village of Al-Rawdah, home of the Sawarka tribe, led to an awakening among the Bedouin tribes in Sinai, which publicly expressed their willingness to assist the Egyptian security forces in fighting terrorism. According to Egyptian media reports, the Egyptian security forces are coordinating their activity with senior tribesmen (Al-Masry Al-Youm, December 1, 2017).

- ▶ Following are a number of noteworthy statements made by the tribes this week:
 - ◆ **The Sawarka tribe** in northern Sinai, whose members were the victims of the mass attack in Al-Rawdah, issued a statement **declaring its participation in the war on terrorism alongside the Egyptian armed forces**. The tribe announced that it was placing its men under the authority of the commanders of the armed forces (Veto portal, December 2, 2017).
 - ◆ **The Sinai Tribal Union** published a statement on its Facebook page **expressing its support for the Egyptian army, police and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi**. The statement includes the following points: it is permitted to kill anyone who provides any assistance to terrorist elements; the Sinai Tribal Union will support anyone who passes on information that will help reach terrorist operatives; all terrorist operatives who are involved in operations against Egyptian citizens should turn themselves in and accept the rule of law, otherwise they will be condemned to death; the Sinai Tribal Union called on all fighters to be ready to go to battle (Facebook page of the Sinai Tribal Union, November 30, 2017).



Profile picture on the Sinai Tribal Union's Twitter page, showing the emblem of the Union and the insignia of the Egyptian Armed Forces side by side (Twitter account of the Sinai Tribal Union, December 3, 2017)

◆ **On December 3, 2017, the Sinai Tribal Union posted a Facebook status** addressing the terrorist elements [i.e., operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province]: “Where is the refuge? **You will be defeated [...]** **You will be defeated [...]** The earth will boil underneath you [...] And the sky will set fire to you, and the Sinai air will choke you [...]



The Sinai Tribal Union promising the terrorist elements that they will be defeated (Facebook account of the Sinai Tribal Union, December 3, 2017)

► **At this stage, it is not clear how the tribes will assist the Egyptian security forces.** In this context, the Facebook page of the Sinai Tribal Union reported that one of the sheikhs, **Issa al-Kharafin**, had said that the tribes were cooperating with the army. According to him, **they are providing the Army with guides and trackers to help it chase the terrorist operatives in rough terrain, along with information about these areas.** The Sheikh added that **the tribesmen were not willing to arm themselves and take part in the killing operations, because these were the functions of the army and the police** (Facebook page of the Sinai Tribal Union, December 2, 2017).

► **Sheikh Issa al-Kharafin, 75, lives in Egyptian Rafah. He is the senior Sheikh of the northern Sinai Peninsula and the Sheikh of the Al-Rumeilat tribe.** In July 2017, he survived

an assassination attempt when masked men fired seven bullets at him. He is a former member of the People's Assembly of Egypt (the lower house of parliament). He frequently grants interviews to the Egyptian media.



Sheikh Issa al-Kharafin being interviewed by an Egyptian channel following the terrorist attack at the Al-Rawdah Mosque (eXtra News Channel, Egypt, November 25, 2017)

ISIS's activity in other countries

ISIS continues its terrorist and guerrilla activity in Aden

► On November 29, 2017, ISIS reported that a cell of its operatives had **detonated a car bomb (in the middle of the night) in front of the Finance Ministry building in the area of Khor Mkassar, in Aden**. As a result, the building caught fire and **parts of it were destroyed** (Haqq, November 29, 2017). Five people were killed and 12 others were wounded. According to eyewitnesses and security officials, the explosion completely destroyed the Finance Ministry building and also damaged nearby houses (dailymail.co.uk, November 29, 2017).



Right: Finance Ministry building in Aden, damaged by an ISIS car bomb (Haqq, November 29, 2017). Left: The car bomb (Novite website, which posted a photo from Twitter, November 29, 2017)

The attack at the Finance Ministry is a continuation of a wave of attacks carried out in Aden in November 2017. This wave included a combined attack by a suicide bomber and a car bomb against the Criminal Investigations Administration building; a car bomb attack at the headquarters of the Arab Coalition in central Aden (November 14, 2017); and the assassination of a senior officer during criminal investigations (November 25, 2017). These attacks, which were carried out despite successful counterterrorism activities by the local security forces¹, **reveal that ISIS has an operational infrastructure in Aden that is motivated and able** to carry out a series of showcase attacks at short notice.

Complex attack against a TV station in the city of Jalalabad, Afghanistan

- ▶ On December 2, 2017, an attack was carried out on a private TV station by the name of In'ikas (meaning "reflection" in Arabic) **in the city of Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan** (Nangarhar Province). **The attackers parked a car bomb near the gate of the station building** and then fired a rocket at the building. **When the police and security forces arrived on the scene, the attackers detonated the car bomb** and two IEDs. **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack** (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, December 2, 2017).
- ▶ **The attack killed at least two Afghan intelligence officers and wounded ten policemen, intelligence personnel and civilians.** According to Attahullah Khogyani, spokesman for the governor of the Nangarhar Province, one of the dead was the **director of**

¹ In November 2017, the local security forces in Aden uncovered an ISIS terror cell in a residential neighborhood in the city center. In the wake of the attack on the headquarters of the Arab Coalition, the security forces arrested two ISIS operatives in possession of an explosive belt, IEDs and weapons (Al-Ittihad, November 13, 2017).

the Intelligence Department of Jalalabad² (Radio Free Europe website; The New York Times, December 2, 2017). It should be noted that this is not the first time that ISIS has targeted Afghan media outlets³.



The scene of the attack in Jalalabad (Pajhwok Afghan News@pajhwok Twitter account, December 2, 2017)

The attack on the Jalalabad TV station is a continuation of the wave of attacks carried out by ISIS in recent months in Afghanistan, with an emphasis on the capital Kabul. This wave has so far included: a suicide bombing attack against a minibus at the entrance to the military academy in western Kabul (October 21, 2017); a suicide bombing attack at the Shiite Imam Zaman Mosque (October 20, 2017); and a suicide bombing attack at the international airport (September 27, 2017). These attacks indicate that **ISIS has an operational infrastructure in Afghanistan (Khorasan Province of the Islamic State) with a high level of capability and motivation to carry out complex attacks that include the use of suicide bombers.**

The takeover of villages from the Taliban by ISIS

► On November 30, 2017, ISIS reported that on November 24, 2017, **its operatives had taken over 18 villages from the Taliban in the Khugyani area.** This area is located in the western part of the Nangarhar District in eastern Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan

² According to another version, the dead man was an officer at NDS, Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security.

³ On May 17, 2017, ISIS reportedly claimed responsibility for attacking the Afghan National Radio and Television Authority building, located near the government compound in Jalalabad. The building's security guard was killed and at least 17 people were wounded. Three ISIS operatives who carried out the attack were also killed (Reuters, May 17, 2017).

(about 37 km southwest of Jalalabad). The report by ISIS listed the names of 18 villages taken over by its operatives (Akhbar al-Muslimeen and a file-sharing website, December 1, 2017, quoting the latest issue of Al-Nabā', November 30, 2017).



The Khogyani area where the villages taken over by ISIS operatives are located (marked in red) (Google Maps)

The battle for hearts and minds

Even after the collapse of the Islamic State, **ISIS continues to threaten Western countries and release videos and posters calling on its supporters to continue to wage jihad against the infidels.** A poster published in ISIS-affiliated social media accounts **threatened the countries of the West in anticipation of the coming Christmas.**

ISIS video threatening the West

► **ISIS's media arm, the Al-Hayat Media Center,** produced a video entitled **Flames of War,** which appeared on an ISIS-affiliated website on November 30, 2017 (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, November 30, 2017). The video is 58 minutes long and was published in English and Arabic. The purpose of the video is to encourage ISIS's remaining operatives **and recruit new supporters in the West who will continue the jihad.**



Poster referring to the Flames of War video (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, November 30, 2017)



Caption from the video: “The Jihad enters a new phase – purification for the believers, destruction for the disbelievers” (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, November 30, 2017)

► The video attacks the Trump administration for brutally fighting against Muslims and calls on them to fight back against him. The announcer notes that the best of the believers do not stop fighting until they achieve victory, even when they are few. These believers **will continue jihad as long as there are infidels**. In the video, **an ISIS operative in Iraq says that the disappearance of the United States is imminent and that ISIS fighters will fight the countries under America’s protection** (i.e., the countries of the West). At the end of the video, a masked ISIS operative (probably an American) speaks. “They [Trump and his men] said that they would fight fire with fire and thus defeat the Islamic Caliphate. They have failed. We are the victors [...]”



ISIS operative in Iraq noting that the disappearance of the United States is imminent and that the fighters of ISIS will fight the countries under America's protection. He later calls on Muslims to join jihad (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, November 30, 2017)

A threat to the Western-Christian world as Christmas approaches

► BlackOps Cyber, an American company that collects and monitors Internet intelligence, **found a poster that was published in ISIS-affiliated social media accounts on November 21, 2017.** The poster contained a threat **against the Western-Christian world in Arabic, English, French and German, under the inscription “Soon on your holidays.”** The poster shows the silhouette of Jihadi John, ISIS's notorious British executioner, with Santa Claus bending over in front of him against the background of a city in Europe decorated for Christmas. The poster was found in a chat by a group calling itself the Army of Mujahideen (www.theepochtimes.com, November 22, 2017). It has since been removed from social media.