



# Spotlight on Global Jihad (December 7-13, 2017)



## Main events of the week

► This week, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a surprise visit to Syria. During the visit, he announced that the mission of combating terrorism in Syria **“has been largely completed.”** Therefore, **“a significant portion” of the Russian forces in Syria will return to Russia**, but Russian forces **will continue to operate in the Hmeymim and Tartus bases**. In the ITIC’s assessment, the Russian forces **that remain in Syria** will continue to support the Syrian regime in the ongoing fighting against the rebel organizations, **which has not yet ended** (the Idlib region is currently in the crosshairs). Moreover, the Russian military presence will serve as leverage **for Russia to maintain its influence over the Syrian regime and to safeguard its interests in the increasingly complex reality emerging in Syria.**

► The Syrians (and the Russians) announced that **the mopping up of the Euphrates Valley in the area between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal had been completed** (although hundreds of ISIS operatives still remaining in the deserts on both sides of the Euphrates River continue to carry out attacks). According to Arab and Russian media reports, **preparations are underway for the transfer of hundreds of soldiers from Deir ez-Zor to Hama, where the attack on the stronghold of the terrorist organizations in the Idlib region will be launched.** The Syrian army, with the support of the Iranian-backed militias and the Russian Air Force, **has already begun attacking the rebel organizations in the rural area northeast of Hama.**

► In the heart of Manhattan, an amateurishly prepared IED exploded on the body of a Bangladeshi immigrant terrorist. The terrorist was seriously wounded and three passersby sustained minor injuries. In his interrogation, the terrorist stated that **he had been inspired by ISIS to carry out the attack in retaliation for the American attacks in Syria and elsewhere.** The terrorist underwent a process of radicalization after watching ISIS propaganda, including calls inciting Muslims to carry out attacks in their home countries.

This is the second ISIS-inspired terrorist attack carried out in the United States in recent weeks. These attacks indicate that the ISIS propaganda machine **still has the ability (and the motivation)** to use the Internet to call on members of Muslim communities, mainly in the United States and the West, **to carry out attacks**, and that there are those who identify with these calls. **In the ITIC's assessment, the approaching Christian holidays are liable to be perceived as preferred dates for carrying out attacks.**

## Russian involvement in Syria

### The Russian president's visit to Syria

► **On December 11, 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a surprise visit to Syria.** This was **his first visit to Syria** since the beginning of the Russian military involvement in the country (September 30, 2015). President Putin landed at the Russian Air Force base in Hmeymim. He was greeted by the Syrian president, the Syrian defense minister, and the commander of the Russian forces in Syria. The Russian president reviewed the Russian military forces at the base together with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and Syrian Chief of Staff Ali Ayyoub.

► In his speech, Putin said that **the mission of combating terrorism in Syria “has been largely completed,** and brilliantly completed, by the armed forces of Russia.” Therefore, the Russian president decided that a **significant portion** of the Russian forces in Syria would **“return home to Russia” and would be redeployed at their permanent bases.** However, Putin added, **the Russian bases in Hmeymim and Tartus in Syria would continue to operate on a permanent basis. “If the terrorists raise their heads again, we will strike them with unprecedented blows, the likes of which have not yet been seen”** (Russian presidency website, kremlin.ru, December 11, 2017).



President Vladimir Putin speaking at Hmeymim base (Kremlin website, December 11, 2017)



Meeting between Putin and Bashar Assad at Hmeymim base (Kremlin website, December 11, 2017)

► Following are a number of official and unofficial Russian statements **about the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria and the extent of the withdrawal:**

- ◆ **Sergey Surovikin, commander of the Russian forces in Syria**, announced that in accordance with Vladimir Putin's instructions on the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria, **25 aircraft** (23 planes and two K-52 helicopters), **a Russian Military Police unit, a special task force, the staff of a field hospital, and Engineering Corps forces would leave Syria.** He noted that **the Russian forces remaining in Syria would be able to carry out missions in the future as efficiently as they had in the past.**
- ◆ **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu** said that **the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria had already begun**, adding that the time it would take for Russian forces to leave would depend on the situation on the ground (Zvezda TV website, owned by the Russian Ministry of Defense, December 11, 2017).
- ◆ **Franz Klintsevich, deputy head of the Russian Defense and Security Committee**, said that the withdrawal of Russian military personnel and equipment from Syria

**would take about a month** (RBC, December 11, 2017; TASS News Agency, December 12, 2017).

◆ According to a source at RBC (a Russian news website) close to the Russian Foreign Ministry, **the plans call for the removal of two-thirds of the Russian personnel and equipment in Syria. Russian military expert Viktor Murakhovsky** noted that Russia had attempted to withdraw from Syria in 2016, but the attempt had failed **because of the lack of readiness on the part of the Syrian forces**. He claimed that this situation would probably **not recur** (RBC ,11 December 2017; TASS News Agency, 12 December 2017).

Putin's comments give formal expression to Russian statements made in recent weeks **about Russia's intention to reduce its military presence in Syria, against a backdrop of the sense of achievement in view of the fall of the Islamic State**. However, Putin's remarks make it clear that **a small portion of the forces** (whose size is unknown) **will remain in Syria to support the Syrian regime in the ongoing fighting against the rebel organizations, which has not yet ended** (the Idlib region is still under the control of the rebel organizations, the most dominant being the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham – formerly the Al-Nusra Front). In the ITIC's assessment, the permanent Russian military presence in Syria will also serve as leverage **for Putin to maintain his influence over the Syrian regime and to safeguard Russia's interests in the increasingly complex reality that is emerging in Syria**.

## Main developments in Syria

### Mopping up the Euphrates Valley

► On December 7, 2017, the Syrians announced that **they had finished mopping up the Euphrates Valley in the area between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal**. Syrian army forces under the command of Suheil Hassan ("the Tiger") **advanced from the city of Al-Mayadeen and joined forces with the Syrian troops which had recently taken over Albukamal**. According to the Syrian announcement, many ISIS operatives were killed, and large amounts of weapons and ammunition, including dozens of tanks and APCs, were found and destroyed (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, a blog affiliated with the Syrian army, December 7, 2017). Suheil Hassan's forces, which operated in the Euphrates Valley, **received Russian air support. Sergey Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operational**

**Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces**, stated that on December 2-7, 2017, Russian planes eliminated over 550 terrorists, including 130 suicide bombers, and hit six tanks, 14 car bombs, and 92 SUVs equipped with heavy machine guns (Russian Defense Ministry website, December 7, 2017).



**Suheil Hassan (“the Tiger”), commander of the forces that finished mopping up the Euphrates Valley (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, a blog affiliated with the Syrian army, December 7, 2017)**



**Sergey Rudskoy at the press conference. In the background, videos of the Russian airstrikes (website of the Russian Defense Ministry, December 7, 2017)**

► A representative of the International Coalition told the Russian media that, **in the Coalition’s assessment, ISIS was still present** in the areas beyond the two banks of the Euphrates River. Therefore, **the Coalition airstrikes**, which are designed to support the SDF, **would be continued on the east bank of the Euphrates River**, while the Syrians and the Russian Air Force continue to attack targets on the west

bank, between Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal. **The International Coalition continues to operate in coordination with the SDF** in order to ensure that the civilians are able to return to the liberated areas (Sputnik, December 9, 2017).

### **Weapons seized from ISIS in the Deir ez-Zor Province**

► On December 9, 2017, the Syrian News Agency released a video showing large amounts of diverse weapons which belonged to ISIS and were seized by the Syrian army in the Deir ez-Zor Province. The video shows light weapons, anti-aircraft guns, mortars, vehicles bullet-proofed by ISIS, APCs, guns, anti-tank missiles, drones, and artillery and light weapon ammunition (SANA YouTube account, December 9, 2017). Following are examples:



**Left: SUV-mounted anti-aircraft guns. Right: Rifles and machine guns.**



**Left: ISIS APCs and tank. Right: Mortars and vehicles bullet-proofed by ISIS.**



**Left: Drones. Right: Anti-tank missiles.**

## ISIS's activity

► **ISIS reported that its operatives continued to attack Syrian targets in the Albukamal area:**

- ◆ **On December 11, 2017**, ISIS announced that its operatives had carried out a large-scale attack against positions of the Syrian army northwest of Albukamal (Haqq, December 11, 2017).
- ◆ **On December 12, 2017**, ISIS announced that over 41 soldiers of the Syrian army and the (Shiite) militias had been killed and three were captured by the organization in clashes with ISIS operatives in the rural area (north and northwest) of Albukamal. ISIS claimed that **it had taken over four villages and two towns**, including Al-Salihyah (where there is a joint operations room of the Russian army, the Kurdish forces, and the Arab tribes) (Haqq, December 12, 2017).

## Joint Russian-Kurdish Committee for Governance of the Eastern Euphrates Territories commences operation

- On December 3, 2017, the first meeting of the **Committee for Governance of the Eastern Euphrates Territories** took place, **with the participation of representatives of the Russian forces in Syria**. The meeting took place in the **village of Al-Salihyah**, south of Al-Mayadeen (where a joint operations room was set up by the Russian army, the Kurdish forces, and the local Arab tribes in the Deir ez-Zor Province). The meeting was attended by 23 representatives from all the ethnic and religious groups living east of the Euphrates River and **a representative of the Russian forces in Syria, Major General Evgeniy Poplavsky**.
- In a speech at the meeting, Poplavsky said that militia units comprising Kurdish forces (YPG) and tribesmen east of the Euphrates River were nearing the end of the operation against ISIS in eastern Deir ez-Zor. According to him, the command of the Russian forces in Syria, located at the Hmeymim base, coordinated the activities of the units operating east of the Euphrates River. Poplavsky said that **restoring routine in the liberated territories was a top priority**. Accordingly, units of the Russian Reconciliation Center in Syria were set up at the Joint Operations Headquarters in Al-Salihyah to help local leaders set up the Committee for Governance of the Eastern Euphrates Territories. In addition, experts from the Russian Reconciliation Center, together with representatives of the local authorities

that are being formed, are helping to create conditions for the return of the residents and the provision of humanitarian aid to the area.

► Speaking at the meeting, **Hassan Yusuf, chairman of the Committee for Governance of the Territories in the Eastern Deir ez-Zor Province**, thanked the Russian forces for their support for the fighting against ISIS and the liberation of the towns and cities in Deir ez-Zor from the “terrorists.” He expressed confidence that the committee would carry out its activities with the support of the Russian Reconciliation Center. **Mahmoud Nuri, Deputy Chairman of the Committee**, who represents the Kurdish Forces (YPG), thanked Russia for its assistance in restoring peace to the Syrian territories. He said that **the Kurdish units were ready to provide security to the Russian army units on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River**. Mahmoud Nuri also noted that the YPG forces fought effectively against ISIS under the Russian command (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, December 4, 2017).

### Beginning of the campaign to take over the Idlib Province (?)

► According to reports in Arab and Syrian media outlets, preparations are underway **for the transfer of hundreds of soldiers**, under the command of Suheil Hassan (“the Tiger”), **from the Deir ez-Zor rural area to the Hama rural area** (Al-Quds Al-Arabi, December 1, 2017). At the same time, it was reported that **the campaign against the rebel stronghold in the Idlib Province had started**. In the ITIC's assessment, this means **shifting the strategic attention of Syria (and the Russians) from the Euphrates Valley to the Idlib area**. This area, which remains the **prominent stronghold of the rebels in Syria, is predominantly controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (formerly the Al-Nusra Front). If it is taken over, the rebel organizations, including the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, will sustain a heavy blow.

► On December 11, 2017, the Syrian army, supported by Iranian-affiliated militias and Russian air support, reportedly **started the campaign against the rebel forces in the eastern area of the Hama Province. This is part of the attack to liberate the Idlib Province from the rebel organizations**. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (dominant among the rebel organizations) and several Free Syrian Army factions sent reinforcements to retake a number of villages in the rural area which had been taken over by the Syrian army. According to reports, **the Abu Ad-Duhur military airfield southeast of Idlib is the first target of the Syrian army** (Reuters in Arabic, December 11, 2017).



**The Abu Ad-Duhur military airfield – a possible interim target for the attack on the Idlib area? (1)  
(Google Maps)**

- On December 12, 2017, **the Syrian army announced that it had taken over the village of Balil**, in the rural area northeast of Hama. A video released by the Syrian Army Spokesman’s Office shows rockets and artillery being fired by the Syrian army, with air support, against targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham.



The village of Balil, taken over from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham by the Syrian forces (Google Maps)



Right: Targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the village of Balil, hit by rockets fired by a fighter plane (either Syrian or Russian). Left: Rocket being fired at targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the village of Balil (Al-Hadath Suriya, December 12, 2017)



Right: A Syrian army tank attacks targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham around the village of Balil. Left: Target of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the village of Balil, hit by a Syrian army tank fire (Al-Hadath Suriya, December 12, 2017)



**Right: Syrian army artillery fire (from a field gun) at targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the area of the village of Balil. Left: Village of Balil after being taken over by the Syrian army (Al-Hadath Suriya, December 12, 2017)**

## ISIS detonates IED in a minibus in Homs

► On December 5, 2017, official Syrian sources reported on the **explosion of an IED planted in a minibus in the city of Homs**. The IED was activated by remote control. According to the Syrian sources, **eight civilians were killed and 18 others were wounded**. In addition, cars and several stores near the scene of the attack were hit (SANA, December 5, 2017). **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, allegedly targeting a bus carrying Syrian soldiers** (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 5, 2017).



**Right: Wreckage of the minibus where an IED was detonated by ISIS in Homs. As it was completely destroyed, it seems that ISIS had used a powerful IED. Left: Wreckage of the same minibus (SANA, December 5, 2017)**

## Main developments in Iraq

### Iraqi prime minister announces the complete liberation of Iraq from ISIS

► On December 9, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi delivered a solemn speech in which he announced **the complete liberation of Iraq from ISIS**. Seventy members of the Iraqi security forces were standing behind him. He noted that the Iraqi forces had finished mopping up ISIS strongholds west of the Al-Anbar Province, which was “the last Iraqi territory which was stolen.” He called on politicians to assume responsibility for security

and stability in the country and prevent the return of terrorism (Al-Sumaria News, December 9, 2017; YouTube account of the International Al-Iraqiya Channel, December 9, 2017).



**Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi delivers his speech marking the victory over ISIS in Iraq**  
(YouTube account of the international Al-Iraqiya Channel, December 9, 2017)

## Mopping up the upper Euphrates River area by the Popular Mobilization

► On December 8, 2017, the headquarters of the Popular Mobilization (an umbrella framework of Iranian-affiliated Shiite militias) announced the beginning of an operation to complete the takeover of the Al-Jazeera Desert (the western part of the Al-Anbar Province) up to the Iraqi-Syrian border (Al-Sumaria News, December 9, 2017). During the operation, the Popular Mobilization forces reportedly mopped up 35 villages and an area of 4,300 square kilometers from ISIS. This activity is still ongoing (Al-Sumaria News, December 8, 2017).

## Mopping up the area west of Kirkuk

► On December 9, 2017, the Kirkuk Operations Headquarters announced the opening of a large-scale operation against ISIS west of Kirkuk. According to reports, five ISIS operatives were killed in the beginning of the operation, and tunnels and many IEDs were destroyed (Al-Sumaria News, December 9, 2017).

## ISIS guerrilla warfare activity

► On December 8, 2017, an Iraqi Border Police force reportedly **thwarted an ISIS attack against one of its headquarters north of the Al-Waleed border crossing**, about 15 km northeast of the Iraq-Syria-Jordan tri-border area. **ISIS's operatives arrived from Syria.**

Two Iraqi Border Police fighters were wounded in the clashes. ISIS's operatives sustained losses and retreated to the Syrian territory (Al-Sumaria News, December 8, 2017).



Al-Waleed border crossing between Iraq and Syria (Google Maps)

► **ISIS operatives attacked Popular Mobilization vehicles** about 11 km south of Al-Hawija. ISIS announced that it had destroyed three vehicles and killed four fighters. Another ISIS squad hit an Iraqi army vehicle by an IED which was planted in the area (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 5, 2017).

► On December 9, 2017, a civilian security guard was killed **when a car bomb exploded in central Tikrit** (Al-Sumaria News, December 9, 2017). It is unclear whether ISIS was behind the attack. Of late, ISIS has been detonating car bombs not necessarily by suicide bombers, but also by remote control or by cellphone.

### Coordination between the SDF and the Iraqi army to secure the border between Syria and Iraq

► On December 10, 2017, the SDF forces announced the establishment of a **joint center with the Iraqi army to coordinate defense and security at the border between Syria and Iraq in the area of the Deir ez-Zor Province**. The decision was made in a meeting between senior SDF and Iraqi army officials, in which they discussed the issue of protecting the border and the methods of eliminating ISIS operatives in the area (website of the SDF forces, December 10, 2017; Al-Sumaria News, December 11, 2017).



Meeting of senior SDF and Iraqi army officials to hold talks which led to the decision to set up a joint coordination center for the defense of the Syrian-Iraqi border (website of the SDF forces, December 10, 2017)

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

### ISIS continues its attacks against the Egyptian security forces

- ▶ Despite the Egyptian campaign against ISIS in the Sinai Province, **ISIS reported that it was still carrying out attacks** against the Egyptian security forces. According to a report by ISIS from December 10, 2017, a bulldozer was destroyed and two people were wounded when eight IEDs were detonated near the Egyptian-Gaza border, targeting Egyptian army soldiers and their vehicles. In addition, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army foot patrol and a large IED was detonated in the Rafah area (Haqq, December 11, 2017).
- ▶ On December 9, 2017, ISIS's Sinai Province announced that Palestinian **operative Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Maqdisi had been killed**. The announcement said that “**Palestine continues to hand over its finest sons** in the campaign for the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate” (Haqq, December 9, 2017).



ISIS operative Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Maqdisi, who was killed in the Sinai Peninsula. The upper right inscription: “The Convoy of the Shahids” (Haqq, December 9, 2017)

## ISIS activity in other countries

### ISIS-inspired attack: IED detonated in the heart of New York City by a supporter of ISIS<sup>1</sup>

► On December 11, 2017 (at around 7:10) an attack was carried out in an underground passageway between subway stations in central Manhattan. **An IED**, amateurishly prepared from household materials, **exploded on the body of the terrorist** (possibly as a result of a “work accident”). **The terrorist was seriously wounded and three passersby sustained minor injuries.** The terrorist was detained. So far ISIS has not claimed responsibility for the attack. This was an **ISIS-inspired attack** but there were no findings indicating a direct connection between the terrorist and ISIS. **Note:** For a summary and analysis of the information about the attack in New York City, see a separate bulletin.

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<sup>1</sup> Initial situation assessment as at the morning of December 13, 2017. It is based mainly on the NYPD website and on US media and news agencies.