Spotlight on Global Jihad
(January 11-17, 2018)

Main events of the week

▶ **In Syria,** the fighting continued in the area between Hama and the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase, the interim target of **the campaign to take over the Idlib region.** The Syrian forces have mopped up dozens of villages and towns and are on the verge of surrounding large groups of ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham operatives in the area.

▶ **In Iraq, a multi-casualty suicide bombing attack was carried out in central Baghdad** (26 killed, 95 wounded). In the ITIC's assessment, the attack was carried out by ISIS, which has not claimed responsibility for it. This week as well, the Iraqi security forces continued their operations against local ISIS networks scattered throughout northern Iraq.

▶ On January 11, 2018, discussions were held in The Hague between representatives of Europol[1] and experts from various countries, on the one hand, and representatives from Facebook and Instagram on the other. **The participants discussed cooperation aimed at stopping ISIS and Al-Qaeda from posting on Facebook and Instagram and removing the postings related to terrorism and violence.**

Russian involvement

Russian operations in response to the attack on the Russian bases in Hmeymim and Tartus

▶ On January 12, 2018, the Russian forces in Syria carried out a retaliatory operation against the terrorist operatives who attacked the Hmeymim and Tartus bases:

◆ The Russian forces managed to reveal the base of the squad that had launched dozens of mortar shells at the Hmeymim base (December 31, 2017). The base was located in the western part of the Idlib Province. After surveillance by Russian UAVs, the Russian forces **attacked the base of the squad with Krasnopol laser-guided high-**

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[1] The European Union's law enforcement agency, which serves as a hub for information on criminal activities, coordinating the intelligence activity of the police forces in the EU.

precision projectiles. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, all the members of the squad who were at the site were liquidated.

◆ As part of the operation, Russian intelligence revealed the site where the UAVs used by the "terrorist operatives" were assembled and stored. **The storage depot was destroyed by Krasnopol laser-guided high-precision projectiles** (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, January 12, 2018).

The attack on the base of the squad that carried out the mortar attack at the Hmeymim base on December 31, 2017 (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, January 12, 2018)

The destruction of the storage depot where the UAVs used by the terrorist operatives were stored (Facebook page of the Russian Ministry of Defense, January 12, 2018)

Press conference held by the Head of the Russian General Staff's Office for UAV Development

▶ **Maj. Gen. Alexander Novikov,** Head of the Russian General Staff's Office for UAV Development, held a press conference to discuss the latest attack in Syria. This was the first UAV attack on Russian targets. According to Maj. Gen. Novikov, Russia is monitoring all the weapons and hardware used by the rebel forces in Syria, especially UAVs. According to him, the Russian forces have set up identification systems, fire systems and electronic warfare systems at the Russian bases in Syria, **making it possible to foil the attack on the night of January 5-6, 2018.**

▶ Novikov stressed that until recently, "militants" (i.e., the rebel organizations) used UAVs **mainly for aerial reconnaissance and intelligence collection.** To date, only isolated cases in which UAVs were used for attacks have been documented. As a rule, these UAVs were self-manufactured from parts available on the market. In mid-2016, the "rebel organizations" in Syria began using UAVs manufactured in other countries. **The latest attack (January 5-6, 2018) against the Russian targets in Syria was the first of its kind.**

According to Maj. Gen. Novikov, self-manufacture of the UAVs used in the attack is possible and some of their components can be purchased on the market. However, assembling and operating them is a complex task requiring special training, knowhow and practical experience. That could only be performed by experts on the subject trained in countries that manufacture and operate UAV systems. **He warned that these UAVs were a threat of global significance, since they indicated that terrorist organizations possess advanced technology that enables them to make use of UAVs for terrorism anywhere in the world** (Russian Ministry of Defense website, January 11, 2018; TASS News Agency, January 11 2018).

**Right: One of the UAVs involved in the attempted attack on the Hmeymim and Tartus bases.
Left: The bombs carried by these UAVs (Russian Ministry of Defense website, January 11, 2018).**

The flight path of the UAVs during the attempted attack on the Russian bases in Hmeymim and Tartus (Russian Ministry of Defense website, January 11, 2018)

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman: Syrian forces are on the verge of liberating the military airbase in Abu Ad-Duhur

▶ **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova** said that in the first days of 2018, **the provocation by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** and other radical organizations in Syria had intensified significantly, including attacks on the Russian bases. Zakharova said that in response to provocations, **the Syrian forces had begun to actively advance in the southeast of the Idlib Province and the southwest of the Aleppo Province towards the Abu Ad-Duhur airbase. This airbase has been under the control of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham since September 2015.** According to Zakharova, the Syrian forces **are now on the verge of liberating the base** (Russian Foreign Ministry website, January 12, 2018).

Main developments in Syria

The campaign to take over Idlib

▶ The Syrian army continued to advance in several routes **towards the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase**, the interim target of the campaign to take over the Idlib region. According to reports, the Syrian forces are near the airbase and **will soon encircle large groups of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and ISIS, which are deployed in the area.**

▶ In the meantime, battles continued in the area north of Hama. They focused on the area of the **village of Khreibeh** (38 km southeast of Abu Ad-Duhur) **and Atshan** (about 30 km north of Hama). According to Syrian army reports, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

and other rebel organizations fighting with it sustained dozens of fatalities in these battles (the Syrian army military information center, Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, January 13, 2018).

Right: Operative of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham firing a 23mm four-barrel anti-aircraft gun mounted on an SUV, at positions of the Syrian forces in the village of Khreibeh (38 km southeast the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase). Left: Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham firing field artillery at Syrian army positions in the village of Khreibeh (Ibaa News Agency, which is affiliated with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, January 11, 2018).

▶ The Syrian forces advancing towards the military airbase of Abu Ad-Duhur **will reportedly soon join** the forces deployed near the airbase. According to reports, the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and ISIS **will soon be encircled in enclaves including dozens of villages** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 14, 2018).

▶ On January 15, 2018, it was reported that operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and Ahrar Al-Sham had retreated from nearly thirty towns and villages in the rural area southeast of Aleppo, **in the area of Khanaser.** Following their retreat, the Syrian army could take over these towns and villages in a matter of days. The above organizations retreated **for fear of being encircled by the advancing Syrian army.**

Right: Sites of the battles in the area between Aleppo and Hama: the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase (1), Khreibeh (2) and the village of Atshan (3). Left: The town of Khanaser, near the road to Aleppo (Google Maps)

Clashes between a Palestinian brigade supporting the Syrian troops, and ISIS

▶ ISIS announced that in battles taking place on January 11-14, 2018, near the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase, **its operatives had killed nine Syrian soldiers and taken prisoner eight others, including an officer.** ISIS also announced that it had destroyed or seized weapons of the Syrian army. One of the prisoners captured by ISIS said **that he was serving in the (Palestinian) Al-Quds Brigade supporting the Syrian forces under the command of Colonel Suheil Hassan ("the Tiger").** According to the Palestinian soldier, this brigade assisted the Syrian army in the campaign to take over Deir ez-Zor (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 14, 2018).

Right: A Syrian soldier captured by ISIS on January 11, 2018, during the clashes between the sides near the Abu Ad-Duhur military airbase. Left: 23mm four-barrel anti-aircraft gun seized by ISIS (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 12, 2018)

▸ **Al-Quds Brigade is a Palestinian force** operating mainly in the Aleppo region, **supporting the Syrian forces.** The brigade was established in 2013 by **Engineer Mohammad al-Sa'id**, in coordination **with Ahmad Jibril's terrorist organization** (which is handled by the Syrians). Most of the fighters in the brigade are Sunni Palestinians from the Al-Nayrab Palestinian refugee camp (southeast of Aleppo), but it also includes Christians (Wikipedia).

▸ It is estimated that the brigade **includes over 3,500 fighters** in three battalions equipped with light, medium and heavy weapons (Sputnik, December 26, 2017). On September 9, 2017, it was reported that about 3,000 fighters of the Al-Quds Brigade had arrived by air from Aleppo to Deir ez-Zor to participate in the campaign against the Islamic State (Al-Kawthar TV, Iran, September 9, 2017). **This is the largest, most capable Palestinian force operating in Syria, which has accumulated extensive combat experience during the battles**.

Right: The insignia of the Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade on their military uniform (Al-Kawthar TV, Iran, September 9, 2017). Left: Engineer Mohammad al-Sa'id, founder and commander of the Al-Quds Brigade, visiting wounded fighters (Facebook page, August 9, 2014)

Clashes continue north of Albukamal

Clashes between ISIS operatives and the SDF forces north of Albukamal continued this week. On January 13, 2018, ISIS operatives attacked SDF positions around the village of Al-Buqan, about 18 km north of Albukamal, on the west bank of the Euphrates River. The continuation of the clashes indicates that **the area south of Deir ez-Zor is still not completely free of ISIS operatives, who persist in their guerrilla warfare against the Syrian troops and the SDF forces.**

**The village of Al-Buqan on the west bank of the Euphrates River, where
clashes took place between the SDF forces and ISIS operatives (Google Maps)**

**Right: ISIS operatives in a self-manufactured armored off-road vehicle moving towards SDF
positions in the village of Al-Buqan. Left: ISIS operatives firing a mortar shell at SDF positions in
the area of the village of Al-Buqan (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 13, 2018)**

Mass graves found in Al-Raqqah

▶ The Syrian newspaper Al-Watan reported that mass graves containing 10,000 bodies were
found in the city of Al-Raqqah, which was liberated by the SDF forces. A total of 4,000 bodies
were found in a single mass grave. The bodies were transferred to the Aleppo military
hospital, and the Syrian regime set up a commission to identify them (Al-Watan, January 16,
2018). In the ITIC's assessment, these were people **killed by ISIS while the city was under its
control.**

Taking out a body from a mass grave (apparently, in Al-Raqqah)
(Al-Watan, January 16, 2018)

Main developments in Iraq

Prominent among the incidents of this week was a **multi-casualty terrorist attack in central Baghdad which, in the ITIC's assessment, was carried out by ISIS.** ISIS did not claim responsibility for it. At the same time, this week as well, Iraqi security forces continued to conduct intensive military activity against ISIS operatives scattered throughout northern Iraq, in enclaves, sporadic pockets, and clandestine networks. ISIS on its part continued its terrorist and guerrilla activities.

Double suicide bombing attack in central Baghdad

▶ On the morning of January 15, 2018, **a suicide bombing attack was carried out in the open market in Al-Tayaran Square in central Baghdad.** Two suicide bombers wearing explosive belts blew themselves up. **At least 26 people were killed and 95 others were wounded** (Al-Sumaria News, January 15, 2018). So far, nobody claimed responsibility. In the ITIC's assessment, **the attack was carried out by ISIS.**

Right: The scene of the double suicide bombing attack in Al-Tayaran Square in central Baghdad. Left: Market stalls in Al-Tayaran Square and civilians who fled the scene immediately after the attack (Al-Sumaria News, January 15, 2018)

▶ Following are the main incidents of the week in other provinces:

◆ **Diyala Province:** The Iraqi media reported that a force of the province police destroyed three ISIS terrorist sites on the border between the Diyala Province and the Salah Al-Din Province (about 66 km north of Baqubah). In addition, a lot of equipment and explosives were destroyed (Al-Sumaria News, January 11, 2018).

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** Popular Mobilization fighters halted an attack by ISIS operatives 98 km southwest of Kirkuk. Iraqi media reported that five ISIS operatives had been killed and the rest fled the scene. The ISIS operatives had arrived from the desert area between the Salah Al-Din Province and the Al-Anbar Province (Iraqi News Agency, January 13, 2018).

◆ **Baiji District:** Three ISIS suicide bombers were killed by the Popular Mobilization fighters about 20 km north of Baiji. A large tunnel used by ISIS operatives was found in a village. In addition, two hiding places of the organization were destroyed in the village (Iraqi News Agency, January 12, 2018).

Article in ISIS's weekly: ISIS operatives conduct guerrilla warfare in the provinces of Kirkuk and Diyala

▶ An article published in ISIS's Al-Nabā' weekly (January 11, 2018) discusses the fighting carried out by ISIS operatives ("soldiers of the Khilafah") in the provinces of Kirkuk and Diyala:

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** Many of the (Sunni) inhabitants of the province, who cooperated with the Shiites, are now supporting the Islamic State. **The main target of the operations**, according to the article, **is the city of Kirkuk.** The jihad fighters are now waiting for the right opportunity **to use car bombs and carry out suicide bombing attacks and raids.**

◆ **Diyala Province:** The "soldiers of the Khilafah" are allegedly in control of various areas in the Diyala Province. They employ new fighting tactics. Instead of using charges, sniper shooting and mortar shells, they switched to organized attacks in various areas. The "soldiers of the Khilafah" are working **to wear out the enemy and break the enemy's morale. The article states that in the next stage, they will switch to control on the ground.**

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

The Sinai Peninsula

In spite of the intensive activity by the Egyptian security forces **in the central and northern Sinai Peninsula**, the guerrilla activity by ISIS's Sinai branch continues. Recently, ISIS is working, among other things, **to eliminate members of the Egyptian security forces and the execution of "agents," who according to ISIS are operating in the service of the Egyptian army.**

▶ Highlights of the Egyptian army activity this week:

◆ On January 11, 2018, the Egyptian army announced that **its forces had destroyed off-road vehicles, five motorcycles and two explosive charges of terrorist elements in the central Sinai Peninsula.** In addition, they destroyed "terrorist sites" where "terrorist elements" were hiding and where they kept supplies and substances used for making explosive charges (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces' Spokesman, January 11, 2018). Moreover, the Egyptian security forces **searched and raided south Al-Arish and Bir Abed** and detained suspects (Al-Watan, January 13, 2018).

◆ On January 14, 2018, the Egyptian army announced that it had increased security in the crossings between Egypt proper and the Sinai Peninsula. The objective mentioned was to prevent smuggling of weapons, ammunition and explosives from the Sinai Peninsula [to Egypt proper] and to the Sinai Peninsula [from Egypt proper] (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Armed Forces' Spokesman, January 14, 2018).

◆ According to Egyptian "security sources," **there are over 250 senior terrorist operatives** behind the terrorist attacks in northern Sinai. **They were joined by operatives who returned from Syria and Iraq.** The Egyptian security services are searching for them (Akhbar Al-Youm, January 13, 2018).

Right: Egyptian army soldiers at a checkpoint. Left: Egyptian army soldiers near a vehicle screening device (official Facebook account of the Egyptian Armed Forces' Spokesman, January 14, 2018)

Egyptian security guard with a sniffer dog searching for explosives in a truck (official Facebook page of the Egyptian Army Spokesman, January 14, 2018)

Killing of "Egyptian Military Intelligence agent" by ISIS

▶ On January 10, 2018, ISIS's Sinai Province released the photo of **Hussein Jamal Iskandar**, allegedly an "Egyptian Military Intelligence agent." Two additional photos show him being beheaded by one of ISIS operatives (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 10, 2018).

Hussein Jamal Iskandar, who was beheaded by an operative of ISIS's Sinai Province (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 10, 2018)

ISIS's sniper shooting

▶ ISIS announced that on January 13, 2018, two Egyptian soldiers had been shot dead by its snipers. The shooting was carried out in the area of Al-Tumah, about 4 km south of Sheikh Zuweid.

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Cooperation between Facebook and Europol against postings by ISIS and Al-Qaeda

▶ According to a report from January 13, 2018, **Facebook will cooperate with Europol (the European Union's law enforcement agency) in order to stop ISIS and Al-Qaeda from posting on Facebook and Instagram and to remove postings related to terrorism and violence.**

▶ **Representatives from Facebook and Instagram** attended the meetings at Europol's headquarters in The Hague. The meetings were also attended by experts from various countries. The cooperation between Facebook and Europol has been going on for two years. With the fall of the Islamic State, **there has been a decrease in ISIS's online activity** (Al-Arabiya, January 13, 2018; Europol's Facebook account, January 12, 2018).

Facebook post on the cooperation between Europol and Facebook in the battle against ISIS and Al-Qaeda terrorist propaganda on Facebook and Instagram (Europol's Facebook account, January 12, 2018)

ISIS activity in other countries

Afghanistan

▶ **On January 12, 2018,** ISIS issued a claim of responsibility for the assassination of a senior Afghan militia commander in the Sheikh Masri neighborhood of Jalalabad. The senior commander and two of his bodyguards were shot and killed, and two others were wounded (Beit al-Massader, January 10, 2018).

▶ **On January 14, 2018,** at least 17 ISIS operatives were killed in the Nangarhar district in an airstrike carried out by US-led Coalition aircraft (Afghanistan Times, January 14, 2018).

▶ According to the Arab newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (January 11, 2018), **ISIS is gaining strength in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan.** This is after **ISIS recruited members of the middle class, including college students, lecturers and others.** In the past year and a half ISIS, whose operatives are concentrated in eastern Afghanistan, **has claimed responsibility for 20 operations carried out by local squads (in Kabul) comprising members of the middle class**.

▶ **ISIS's local branch, the Khorasan Province,** was established in Afghanistan in 2014 and consisted at the time mainly of fighters who had left the Taliban or other organizations in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The branch's first claim of responsibility for an attack was issued in the summer of 2016, and since then the attacks against the Shiite minority and the Afghan security forces have doubled. **The number of ISIS operatives in Kabul has grown rapidly due to recruitment efforts in social media, mosques, schools and universities.**

▶ Although the Taliban movement is still the main threat from the perspective of the Afghan authorities, ISIS has made headlines in recent weeks after **killing scores of people and carrying out attacks in close proximity to foreign embassies and the Coalition offices. All of this gives rise to fears that Afghanistan will become a new base for the organization's fighters who flee from Syria and Iraq. However, the connection between ISIS in the Middle East and the Afghan branch is still unclear.** The Afghan government claims there is no such connection, but commentators believe there is some sort of connection, in light of the fact that **French or Algerian radicals, some of whom came from Syria, have been seen in northern Afghanistan.**

ISIS's activity in sub-Saharan countries

▶ According to a report broadcast on the Al-Arabiya al-Hadath channel (January 14, 2018), **several extremist groups are operating in the African Sahel region** (African countries bordering the Sahara). They have **announced that they had joined forces under the name of ISIS in the Sahara.** These groups operate in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area **and are fighting against Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.** The force is headed by **Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi**, who is considered the mastermind of the latest attacks on the French forces in Mali.