



Spotlight on Global Jihad

(December 28, 2017 – January 3, 2018)



Main events of the week

- ▶ **In Syria**, clashes continued in the eastern part of the Idlib Province between the Syrian forces and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. In the northern Golan Heights, the implementation of the agreement to evacuate the rebels to the Idlib and Daraa regions began, but it has not yet been completed (the evacuation was delayed due to a dispute between the sides). **In Iraq**, the Iraqi security forces carried out intensive military activity against ISIS operatives, with a decrease in the scope of ISIS's activity this week.
- ▶ In ISIS's provinces abroad and in other countries, attacks by ISIS operatives or those who identify with ISIS (ISIS-inspired attacks) continue. These attacks **clearly demonstrate that even after the fall of the Islamic State**, ISIS and its provinces (with an emphasis on Afghanistan and the Sinai Peninsula) possess **high-level operational capabilities** and **high motivation to carry out attacks**. ISIS's media outlets continue to incite Muslims throughout the world to carry out terrorist attacks, including **against the Jews**.
- ▶ The attacks carried out this week:
 - ◆ **In Afghanistan**, a suicide bombing attack was carried out **against a Shiite cultural center in Kabul** (more than 40 fatalities); this was the latest in the **series of attacks in ISIS's Khorasan Province**.
 - ◆ **In the Sinai Peninsula**, ISIS operatives blew up **an IED on the highway between Al-Arish and Bir al-Abed**. Seven Egyptian army personnel were killed, including two officers (a colonel and a lieutenant colonel). **This was the latest in a series of "quality" attacks that ISIS's Sinai Province managed to carry out**.
 - ◆ **In Egypt proper**, ISIS carried out a **shooting attack near a Coptic church in Helwan**, south of Cairo, despite the security measures taken by the Egyptian security forces prior to the Christian holidays (10 fatalities, one of them a police officer).
 - ◆ **In St. Petersburg**, an IED exploded in a supermarket in a large mall (eighteen wounded). ISIS claimed responsibility, but its connection to the attack is still unclear.

Russia and the United States

Russia

► **Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov** said in an interview that the **liquidation of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and similar organizations is expected to be completed in 2018**. According to him, some of the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other organizations are in the de-escalation zones, and **some are in Idlib**. Some of the organizations are maintaining the ceasefire, but others, including the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, object to it.

► **Therefore, according to Gerasimov, they must be liquidated. According to Gerasimov, these organizations will soon be liquidated**, partly because in the de-escalation zones the ceasefire is maintained, humanitarian aid continues to arrive and social problems are solved. Another task that Gerasimov envisioned in Syria in 2018 is turning the military solution into a political one. He noted that preparations were now underway for the upcoming conference in Sochi on this issue (Komsomolskaya Pravda, December 26, 2017).

► **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova** reported that “militants” **had fired missiles at the international airport in Latakia and at the Russian Air Force base in Hmeymim**. According to her, two of the missiles were intercepted by a Russian air defense system. The third missile deviated from its course and landed on the outskirts of the city of Jableh (TASS News Agency, December 28, 2017). She added that the attack on the Hmeymim base and the interception of a Syrian plane a few days earlier in the northern Hama Province indicated that weapons were still being supplied to the terrorist organizations. According to her, the ongoing support for terrorist operatives enables them to continue carrying out such operations (Russian Foreign Ministry website, December 28, 2017).

The United States

► **US Secretary of Defense James Mattis** told Pentagon reporters that the defeat of the Islamic State was changing the way the US-led Coalition forces would act against ISIS. According to him, **the forces stationed in Syria were now changing their mission from taking over territories to pursuing ISIS operatives who had fled to the area controlled by Assad and his allies**. They will also **support reconstruction efforts** and cooperate with “local forces” **to prevent the re-establishment of the Islamic State**. He added that after the defeat of the Islamic State, there would be more American citizens and diplomats in Syria,

who would be engaged mainly in clearing IEDs and helping the civilian authorities set up water and electricity systems and reopen schools.

► **Regarding Iraq**, Mattis said that the Coalition would continue to work with the Iraqi government to train soldiers and police forces and develop the intelligence needed to find and eliminate terrorists attempting to carry out attacks. With regard to the future of ISIS, Mattis said that the organization can still exert its influence through lone-wolf terrorist attacks or terrorist attacks carried out by groups. However, in his opinion, after the loss of the Islamic State the “ISIS brand” will be less attractive (US Department of Defense website, December 29, 2017).

Main developments in Syria

Deir ez-Zor area

► According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **ISIS still maintains full control of five towns and villages in the rural area north of Albukamal**. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also reported that on January 1, 2018, clashes had taken place between ISIS and the SDF forces. The clashes took place around the town of Hajin, north of Albukamal, on the east bank of the Euphrates River. Both sites sustained fatalities (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 1, 2018).

► The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that **over forty ISIS operatives had turned themselves in to the SDF forces east of Deir ez-Zor** (on the east bank of the Euphrates River). The operatives were transferred by SDF vehicles towards Al-Hasakah, in northeast Syria (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 1, 2018).

The campaign to take over Idlib continues

► The Syrian army and its supporters, with Russian air support, **continue to operate in the eastern part of the Idlib Province, in the rural area north of Hama**. The Syrian forces reportedly took control of **the village of Atshan** as well as four villages about 30 km north of Hama (SANA, December 30, 2017). **At the same time, the Syrian army fired artillery at the suburbs of the town of Jisr Al-Shughur**, southwest of Idlib, **and the suburbs of the town of Khan Shaykhun**, south of Idlib.

► The Syrian army’s military information released a video showing trenches, positions and tunnels of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham which fell into the hands of the

Syrian forces in the clashes in the Atshan area. Syrian army's sapper teams are reportedly engaged in neutralizing explosive charges and mines left behind by the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (SANA's YouTube channel, December 30, 2017).



The village of Atshan in the area where clashes took place between the Syrian army and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (in red) (Google Maps)



Right: Rockets launched by a fighter plane (apparently Syrian) hitting ground targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the rural area north of Hama. Left: Syrian army tank fires at targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham around the village of Atshan (SANA's YouTube channel, December 30, 2017)



Right: Entrance to a cave used by operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham while staying around the village of Atshan (SANA's YouTube channel, December 30, 2017). Left: Position above the ground level that was used by operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (SANA's YouTube channel, December 30, 2017)



Right: Outpost which served operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham while staying around the village of Atshan. Construction materials including pieces of concrete were placed on the upper part of the outpost probably to simulate debris thereby making it difficult to identify the outpost in aerial photos. Left: Tank of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham destroyed during the clashes around Atshan and the rural area north of Hama (SANA's YouTube channel, December 30, 2017)

Implementation of the agreement for the evacuation of the rebels from Mazraat Beit Jinn's enclave – update

- ▶ **The implementation of the agreement between the rebel forces and the Syrian army for the evacuation of the rebels' enclave besieged in the area of Mazraat Beit Jinn started this week.** The agreement stipulated that operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham would be **evacuated to the Idlib area**, in northern Syria, while operatives belonging to the Free Syrian Army would be **evacuated to the Daraa area** (see Spotlight on Global Jihad from last week).
- ▶ **On December 29, 2017**, Red Crescent busses and ambulances set out **towards Mazraat Beit Jinn aiming to evacuate the operatives and their family members to the Idlib area in northern Syria** (Syrian army's military information, December 29, 2017). Before leaving Mazraat Beit Jinn, the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham destroyed their headquarters there (Syrian army's military information, December 29, 2017). **About three hundred fighters, about 120 fighters of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-**

Sham and their families, were transferred to Idlib. Another convoy, including fighters who are residents of Daraa and Quneitra, set out towards Daraa (Enab Baladi, December 29, 2017).



Evacuation of the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham to the Idlib Province (SANA, December 29, 2017)

► On January 1, 2018, **the implementation of the agreement was stopped** because of a dispute. According to Syrian sources, the **“armed operatives” refused to hand over several outposts in the Al-Ahmar Hills and the Sheikh Abdallah tomb compound** (a holy place for the Druze which dominates Mazraat Beit Jinn). However, in view of the Syrian regime’s adamant refusal, **Al-Ahmar Hills were eventually handed over to the Syrian army’s control**, in accordance with the agreement between the two sides (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, a blog affiliated with the Syrian army, January 2, 2018). On January 2, 2018, the Syrian army captured positions in the Al-Ahmar Hills previously held by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations (SANA, January 2, 2018). **In the ITIC’s assessment, this makes it possible to resume the implementation of the agreement.**



The enclave in the area of Mazraat Beit Jinn (in yellow) and the Al-Ahmar Hills (in red). Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations were evacuated from these areas (Google Maps)



Right: The area seen from the Al-Ahmar Hills. Left: Column of Syrian army vehicles and soldiers around the Al-Ahmar Hills (SANA, January 2, 2018)

Main developments in Iraq

ISIS guerrilla warfare and terror activity and Iraqi counterterrorist activities

► Last week, **Iraqi security forces conducted intensive military activity against ISIS operatives.** Following are prominent incidents:

◆ **Nineveh Province:**

- Seventeen ISIS operatives were reportedly killed in the area of Albu Sayf, **south of Mosul**. Five were killed by the Iraqi police SWAT. Some of the ISIS operatives retreated from the area, but twelve of them were killed in an airstrike by US helicopters which provided the operation with air support (Al-Sumaria News, December 30, 2017).
- On December 30, 2017, **Arshad Ahmad Saleh**, ISIS's military commander in the Nineveh Province, was killed in an operation by the province police against ISIS (Iraqi News Agency, December 31, 2017).

◆ **Diyala Province:**

- The Iraqi army destroyed a workshop for manufacturing car bombs and IEDs in Hawi Al-‘Azeem, **about 77 km north of Baqubah**. Iraqi Air Force planes provided the operation with air support (Al-Sumaria News, December 30, 2017). The Iraqi Air Force reportedly destroyed a large cache of explosives and IEDs belonging to ISIS around the Al-Mita Basin, **about 77 km north of Baqubah** (Iraqi News Agency, December 29, 2017).
- The Iraqi army with air support from the Iraqi Air Force operated **in the Hamreen area, northeast of the Diyala Province**. The army reportedly destroyed seven ISIS terrorist sites, two motorcycles, IEDs, and supplies (Iraqi News Agency, December 29, 2017).
- Three ISIS operatives, including a senior commander, were killed in an airstrike by an Iraqi aircraft against a terrorist target in Wadi al-Thullab, **in northeastern Diyala Province** (Iraqi News Agency, December 29, 2017).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

The Sinai Peninsula

► **Eight Egyptian members of the security forces were killed in two terrorist attacks by ISIS in the Al-Arish area.** The military governor of Bir Al-Abed, an officer with the rank of colonel, another officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel, and five more Egyptian soldiers **were killed when an IED was activated on the road between Al-Arish and Bir Al-Abed** (Al-Watan, December 28, 2017). **ISIS's Sinai Province claimed responsibility for the attack** (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 29, 2017). The Egyptian security forces detained several suspects and closed the entrances to Al-Arish (Al-Watan, December 30, 2017).



ISIS documentation: An Egyptian army vehicle exploding in the area of Sebeekah, west of Al-Arish (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 30, 2017)



Right: ISIS operative shooting soldiers who survived the detonation of the IED. Left: Weapons seized by ISIS, including cellular phones and ID cards of the soldiers (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 30, 2017)

Egypt proper

► **On December 29, 2017, a shooting attack was carried out near a Coptic church in Helwan, south of Cairo.** According to Egyptian media reports, a terrorist riding a motorcycle tried to enter the Mar Mina Church in Helwan. He ran into security forces. Next, fire was opened at soldiers and civilians in the area, as well as at an adjacent store owned by Christians. One terrorist was killed in the exchange of fire. Another fled the scene and was caught. An automatic weapon and an IED were found in his possession (website of the security information center of the Egyptian Interior Ministry, December 29, 2017).



The entrance to the Mar Mina Church in Helwan. The terrorist attack occurred nearby (Al-Masry Al-Youm, December 31, 2017)

- ▶ According to the Health Ministry's spokesman, **ten people were killed in the attack, including a police officer.** Five people were wounded. According to some of the reports, two terrorists took part in the attack, and one of them was killed by the Egyptian security forces (Al-Youm Al-Sabea, December 29, 2017). **The church area was secured as part of the high state of alert declared by the Egyptian security forces during the Christian holidays.**
- ▶ **ISIS's Egypt Province claimed responsibility for the attack in the church.** According to ISIS's statement, a unit of the Caliphate soldiers attacked a group of Egyptians in a church in Helwan, killing ten Christians and policemen. An ISIS operative was also killed (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 30, 2017). ISIS released a video showing one of the perpetrators of the attack reading his own will. The operative, who pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, addressed ISIS operatives in Sinai and encouraged them (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 30, 2017).



One of the terrorists reading his own will before setting out for the attack (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, December 30, 2017)

Summary of terrorism in Egypt in 2017

- ▶ According to data published by **The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in Washington**, during the first eleven months of 2017, **there was a decrease in the number of terrorist attacks carried out in Egypt**. A total of 332 terrorist attacks were carried out, compared with 807 attacks in 2016. However, the attacks carried out **were major showcase attacks, and therefore there was a significant increase in the number of civilians killed**. However, **most of the terrorist attacks are still carried out against the security forces** (Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 1, 2018).
- ▶ **Khaled Okasha, director the National Center for Security Studies and member of the National Counterterrorism Council in Egypt**, said in an interview that **during 2017, there had been a decrease in the number of attacks**. Yet, he pointed out several new characteristics of the attacks during that year, including **an increase in the quality of the attacks**; more attacks **were aimed against the civilian population**; **there were fewer attacks against government institutions and more against places of worship**. Khaled Okasha predicts that **2018 will see an increase in the scope of attacks, mainly due to the expected return of terrorist operatives from Syria and Iraq**. He expresses concern about the loose (security) situation in Libya **and the attempts by operatives to infiltrate Egypt from Libya through the western border** (Al-Masry Al-Youm, January 1, 2018).
- ▶ ISIS's Al-Nabā' weekly (issue 112, page 2) **published an infographic summing up the activity of ISIS's Sinai Province between September 21, 2017, and December 18, 2017**.

According to the infographic, during this period, ISIS carried out over 47 terrorist attacks, killing and wounding 186 people. These attacks included **the detonation of 18 IEDs; nine sniper attacks; seven assassinations, and five suicide bombing attacks** (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen and a file-sharing website, December 29, 2017). The terrorist attacks enumerated **did not include the mass-killing attack carried out on November 24, 2017, in the Sufi mosque in Al-Rawdah, in North Sinai, where 309 people were killed** (ISIS, which carried out the attack, did not claim responsibility for it).¹

ISIS activity in other countries

Afghanistan: suicide bombing attack in Kabul

► **On December 28, 2017, a suicide bombing attack was carried out in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. A suicide bomber blew himself up in a building where the Shiite Tabyan Cultural Center and an Afghan news agency are located.** The center is located in a neighborhood **populated mainly by Shiites. More than 40 people were killed**, including women and children, and **more than 84 were wounded**. In the first stage of the attack, a suicide bomber blew himself up among a group of students attending a lecture at the cultural center. Then a bomb exploded among the members of the emergency services who arrived on the scene to treat the victims of the first explosion (Afghanistan Times, December 28, 2017; Washington Post, December 28, 2017).

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** ISIS's Khorasan Province issued a statement saying that **the Shiite cultural center was supported by Iran**. According to the statement, **the site served as an important recruitment center for the Fatemiyoun Brigade**, which is composed of Afghan Shiites handled by Iran in the campaign against ISIS in Syria.

Russia: IED explosion in a supermarket in St. Petersburg

► **On December 27, 2017, an IED** (with the estimated strength of about 200 grams of TNT) **exploded in a supermarket located in a large shopping mall in St. Petersburg**. A total of **18 people were wounded** in the blast, eight of whom are still hospitalized (RT, December 28, 2017; Twitter account of St. Petersburg Deputy Governor Anna Mityanina, December 30, 2017; website of the Investigative Committee of Russia, December 27, 2017; Russian National Counterterrorism Commission website, December 27, 2017). **Russian President Vladimir**

¹ For further details on this terrorist attack, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from November 29, 2017: "Mass-Killing Attack at a Sufi Mosque in the Sinai Peninsula: Overview and Assessment."

Putin and the Investigative Committee of Russia described the incident as a “terrorist attack” (Kremlin website, December 28, 2017; website of the Investigative Committee of Russia, December 31, 2017).

► **Around two days after the explosion, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.**

According to a statement issued by ISIS, its operatives planted explosives on December 27, 2017, in a commercial center in the city, and at least 14 casualties were reported (Aamaq, December 30, 2017). Two weeks earlier, on December 15, 2017, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), acting on information from the US intelligence services, foiled a suicide bombing attack **planned by ISIS supporters in a church in St. Petersburg.**

► On December 30, 2017, the Russian Federal Security Service arrested **Dmitry Lukyanenko** on suspicion of carrying out the attack (Russian Federal Security Service website, December 30, 2017). His interrogation revealed that **he had made the IED and planted it at the site of the explosion.** According to the Russian authorities, the suspect has a history of psychiatric problems and has been treated at mental hospitals since the age of 19 (website of the Investigative Committee of Russia; TASS News Agency, December 31, 2017).



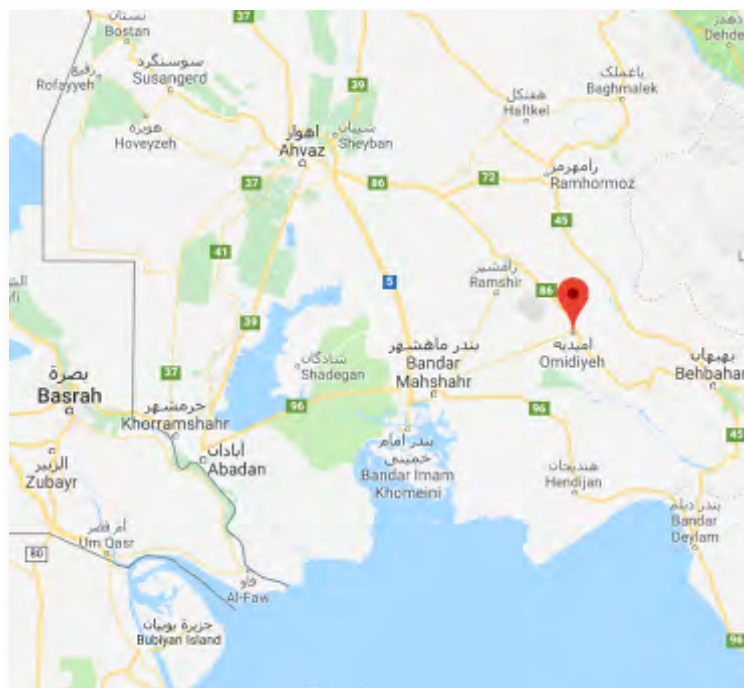
The scene of the explosion at the supermarket in St. Petersburg (Russian National Counterterrorism Commission website, December 27, 2017)

Iran: explosion of an oil pipeline in the Khuzestan Province

► **On December 28, 2017, a Salafist-jihadi organization by the name of Ansar Al-Furqan,** operating in southeastern Iran, blew up an oil pipeline near **the city of Omidiyeh** in the Khuzestan Province (an area in southwestern Iran, most of whose residents are Arab Sunni Muslims). The organization released a video claiming responsibility for the attack, which it said was carried out in cooperation with the Ahvaz Martyrs Brigade (Ahvaz is a city in Khuzestan located northwest of Omidiyeh). According to the claim of responsibility in Arabic, the pipeline was blown up in order **“to cause damage to the Iranian occupier.”**



Photos from the video claiming responsibility for blowing up the pipeline. Right: The route of part of the oil pipeline. Left: The moment of the explosion of the pipeline (Twitter account of Baloshi_issue, December 30, 2017).



The city of Omidiyeh in the Khuzestan Province. The city of Ahvaz is situated 116 km northwest of Omidiyeh (Google Maps).

► **Ansar al-Furqan**², designated by the Iranians as a terrorist organization, is a Salafist-jihadi organization of residents of the Baluchistan Province in Iran (Sunni Muslims), established in 2013. The organization operates against the Iranian regime in the **Sistan-Baluchistan Province** in southeastern Iran, near the border with Pakistan. The explosion of the oil pipeline in **Khuzestan** was an unusual operation by Ansar al-Furqan, which generally operates in Baluchistan.

² The name **Ansar Al-Furqan** means the **supporters of the Koran**. In Arabic, Al-Furqan is a name for the Quran, as well as a distinction between truth and lies.

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Turkey: arrest of ISIS operatives

► In an extensive operation carried out by the Turkish security forces to arrest ISIS operatives on New Year's Eve, **29 operatives were arrested in Ankara and 38 in the Bursa region (northwestern Turkey)**. Some of those arrested are Syrian. It is suspected that **some of those arrested planned to carry out attacks during the New Year's Eve celebrations** (The Washington Post, December 29, 2017). In Istanbul, Turkish police arrested more than 20 people, including 15 foreigners, on suspicion of membership in ISIS (Anatolia News Agency, December 31, 2017).

► A year ago, on January 1, 2017, an attack was carried out at the Reina Nightclub, in the heart of Istanbul. A terrorist shot and killed a policeman and a civilian who were standing in the doorway to the club. He then entered the club, where around 600 people were celebrating, and opened fire in all directions. A total of 39 people were shot to death, mainly foreign nationals, and 40 were wounded.

UN Security Council resolution to address the threat of foreign fighters returning to their home countries

► On December 21, 2017, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2396, which is intended to help address the threat of foreign fighters returning to their home countries, particularly **those returning from the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria**. With reference to the Security Council's previous Resolution 2178, which was adopted in 2014 and required all countries to treat any activity by foreign fighters as criminal activity, the Security Council orders its member states **to take further steps**. The resolution requires all UN member states **to maintain a passenger database**. It also requires them to **collect biometric information and compile lists of known and suspected terrorists, including foreign fighters**. The resolution also calls on UN member states **to share information and improve the measures that they use to prevent terrorists from traveling** (UN website, December 21, 2017).

ISIS campaign of incitement to carry out attacks around the world

Incitement to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States

► On December 28, 2017, ISIS released a video featuring an operative codenamed Abu Saleh Al-Amriki [i.e., the American]. In the video, Abu Saleh declares that the ISIS flag will be hoisted on the White House, noting that the United States is more vulnerable now in the era of **President Trump**, who is fighting against the Muslims. He ends with a **call on Muslims in the US to attack Americans with knives and firearms**, taking advantage of their easy availability in the US (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, December 28, 2017).



Right: Abu Saleh and a drawing of a rifle below the inscription “The Weapon of Choice.” Left: Abu Saleh and a drawing of a bloodied knife below the inscription “The Weapon of Choice” (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, December 28, 2017)

A threat directed at the so-called infidels, including the Jews

► On December 31, 2017, ISIS’s Al-Hayat Media Center released a video in a combination of three languages – Arabic, English and French – entitled “Oh, the Infidels of the World.” In the video, **ISIS threatens, among other things, to carry out attacks against the Jews**. The video begins with a recorded broadcast by ISIS Spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, who says: “O Jews, O Crusaders, O infidels, O dissenters [i.e., Shiites] O those who have renounced Islam, O all the enemies of Allah, you shall die in your anger!” Photos of beheadings appear in the background. Later a song is played against a background of photos of terrorist attacks around the world, **including a photo of ultra-Orthodox Jews**. The final slide says: “The war between us and you is for eternity” (Al-Sawarim, December 31, 2017).



The slide referring to the video: Trump, Netanyahu, Putin, Macron and Bashar Al-Assad below the inscription “Oh, the infidels of the world” (Al-Sawarim, December 31, 2017)



Right: Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Left: The final slide: “The war between us and you is for eternity” (Al-Sawarim, December 31, 2017)