



The Establishment of ISIS in Syria in the Lower Euphrates Valley

February 28, 2018

Background

- ▶ **In November 2017, the city of Albukamal near the Syrian-Iraqi border was taken over by the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militia forces that support it.** The city of Albukamal, which is located near an important border crossing between Syria and Iraq, was **the last significant outpost of the Islamic State** to fall into the hands of the Syrian forces and their allies. **The takeover of Albukamal and the arrival of the Syrian forces at the border crossing marked the end of the era of the Islamic State**, which at the height of its power comprised about a third of the territory of Iraq and about a quarter (according to another version, about a third) of the territory of Syria¹.
- ▶ **The fall of the Islamic State was accompanied by a severe blow to the military, economic, political and propaganda infrastructure that ISIS had been building since 2014.** The most prominent manifestation of this blow was the loss of the government infrastructure established by ISIS, the death of many senior commanders, heavy losses among its rank and file operatives, the return of foreign fighters to their home countries, **and the loss of most of ISIS's revenues.**
- ▶ Under such circumstances, **ISIS is attempting to regroup**, adapting its nature and modus operandi **to the new situation.** From a state with territorial borders, which controlled vast areas of land and managed the lives of the inhabitants, **ISIS has returned to its origins and has once again become a jihadi terrorist and guerrilla organization that is not bound by any territorial framework.**
- ▶ At this stage, the military pressure exerted on ISIS in Syria and Iraq still **makes it hard for it to regroup and restore its military power:**
 - ◆ **In the Syrian arena,** ISIS is on the defensive in several enclaves still under its control (such as the Yarmouk Basin in the southern Syrian Golan Heights, the area of

¹ For an analysis of the Islamic State and the reasons for its collapse, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from November 16, 2017: "The Collapse of the Islamic State: What Comes Next?"

the Yarmouk refugee camp, and the area between Hama and Aleppo, where ISIS's enclave is on the verge of collapse).

- ◆ **In the Iraqi arena**, local ISIS networks continue to operate in northern and western Iraq, apparently without central guidance and an orderly hierarchy. For the time being, these networks are under pressure by the Iraqi security forces.

- ◆ **It is against this background that ISIS's intensive military activity in the lower Euphrates Valley is salient.** At present, this activity is unusual. **However, in the future it is liable to become a model for ISIS's activity in additional areas** that were lost during the campaign against the Islamic State.

The major cities in the Albukamal-Deir ez-Zor region

- ▶ In the lower Euphrates Valley, in the area where ISIS operates, **there are three major cities that were severely damaged during the campaign against the Islamic State.** To date, no significant rehabilitation process has been carried out in these cities. The delay in the rehabilitation, and the local population's feeling that the Syrian regime is ignoring its needs, **are liable to create a convenient background for ISIS to strengthen its hold among the population in this area.**

- ▶ The three major cities located in ISIS's area of activity in the lower Euphrates Valley:
 - ◆ **Deir ez-Zor:** During the period of the Islamic State, Deir ez-Zor numbered **around 100,000 residents**, after most of the population fled the city. Since the fall of the Islamic State, **around 75,000-100,000 residents have returned to the city.** The number is expected to reach **around 300,000 after debris is removed and the rehabilitation of the infrastructure is completed.** In addition, former government officials have begun to return to Deir ez-Zor in order to supervise the rehabilitation of the infrastructure in the province and to restore a normal daily routine (Al-Akhbar, Lebanon, January 28, 2018; Sputnik in Arabic, November 8, 2017).



Ruined buildings in the Rashidiyah neighborhood, near the center of Deir ez-Zor (Furat Post's Facebook page, February 26, 2018)

◆ **Albukamal:** When the civil war broke out, **the city of Albukamal had a population of around 50,000** (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, October 26, 2017). During the civil war, the number of residents doubled at various times, because many refugees fled to it. **The city was severely damaged during its takeover by the Syrian forces.** Civilian activity and a daily routine in the city **are hardly noticeable**, and the process of rebuilding the city has apparently not yet begun (as at February 19, 2018).



Right: Deir ez-Zor Province Governor Muhammad Ibrahim Samra [at the head of the group, accompanied by a delegation, during a visit to inspect the destruction in the city of Albukamal (SANA News Agency, November 30, 2017). Left: Destruction in the city of Albukamal (SANA News Agency, November 30, 2017)



Photo and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)²

◆ **Al-Mayadeen:** When the civil war broke out in 2011, Al-Mayadeen numbered **around 60,000 people** (Wikipedia; Tele Orient, February 22, 2018). **Since then, the city's population has doubled** because it has become a haven for many residents. The city became an important commercial center for the Islamic State. After the fall of Al-Raqqa, there were those who claimed that Al-Mayadeen had replaced it temporarily as the capital of the Islamic State (alsouria.net, February 26, 2018). **The city was severely damaged during its takeover by the Syrian forces.**



Destruction in the area of the open market in Al-Mayadeen
(Furat Post's YouTube channel, December 7, 2017)

² The ITIC would like to thank ImageSat International (ISI) for its assistance in writing this document.

ISIS's guerrilla warfare in the area of Albukamal and Deir ez-Zor

In the Euphrates Valley, ISIS is making an effort to restore its operational capabilities, contrary to the difficulties it is facing in other provinces in Syria and Iraq. **The area of Albukamal and Deir ez-Zor, and especially the rural area between the city of Albukamal and the city of Al-Mayadeen, is currently ISIS's most active area in Syria and Iraq.** ISIS is **initiating and carrying out military activity** in this area, and **a significant improvement in its operational capabilities** is clearly evident. Further consolidation by ISIS in the area may turn it into a **model for the rehabilitation of additional provinces in the future, in Syria and Iraq.** Moreover, in the future, the establishment of ISIS in the Euphrates Valley **is liable to spill over into other provinces in eastern and northern Syria and western Iraq (the Al-Anbar Province).**

► **Why did the lower Euphrates Valley become the first area where ISIS resumed intensive operational activity?** In the ITIC's assessment, there are a number of reasons:

- ◆ **The failure to completely mop up the area in the final stages of the attack against the Islamic State:** The takeover of the Islamic State's strongholds in this area by the Syrian and SDF (Kurds) forces was carried out on a plate schedule without thorough mopping up of the areas that were taken over. Many ISIS operatives were in the area (including in the city of Albukamal) **managed to escape (with their weapons) to the desert areas and the rural area of the Euphrates Valley. In these areas, they reorganized without hindrance and quickly resumed intensive operational activity.**
- ◆ **Sparse Syrian forces maintain routine security:** The Syrian forces stationed on the west bank of the Euphrates River (mainly in the city of Deir ez-Zor and its environs) are sparse and, in the ITIC's assessment, their operational capability is low. **The Syrian elite forces**, under the command of Suheil al-Hassan ("the Tiger"), which played a central role in the takeover of the Islamic State's strongholds in the lower Euphrates Valley, **were transferred shortly after the takeover of Albukamal to the campaign in the Idlib area.** It appears that **even the Kurdish-dominated SDF forces**, which are deployed on the eastern side of the Euphrates River and enjoy air support from the US and the Coalition countries, **are not an effective force capable of responding to ISIS's guerrilla warfare** (in addition to the fact that the main attention of the Kurds is now directed at the Afrin enclave in western Syria, where Turkey has invaded).

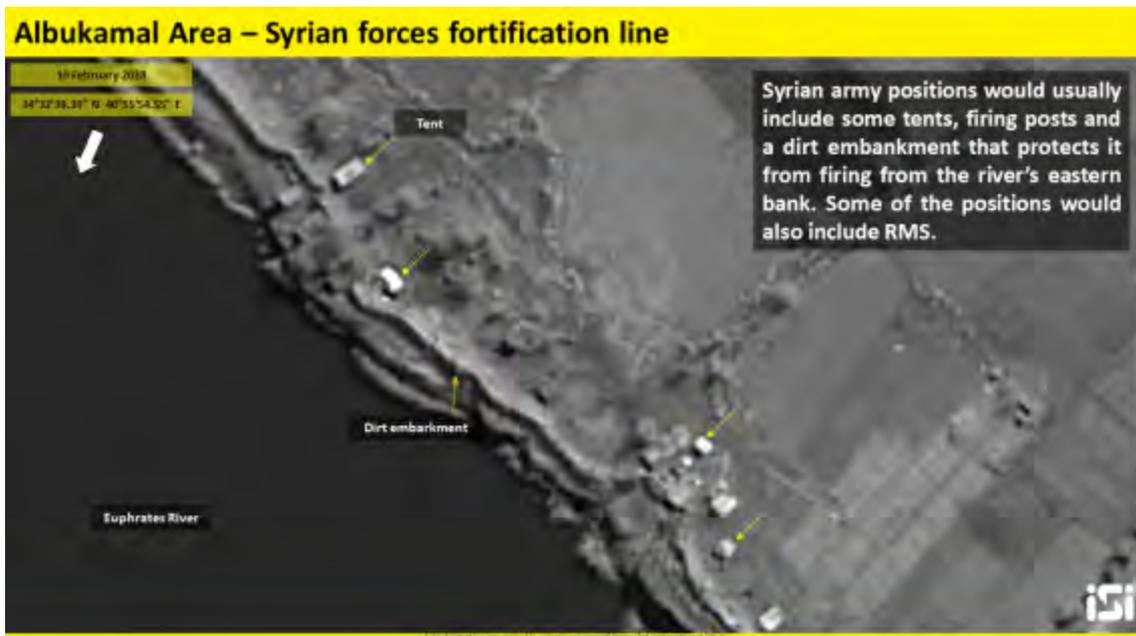
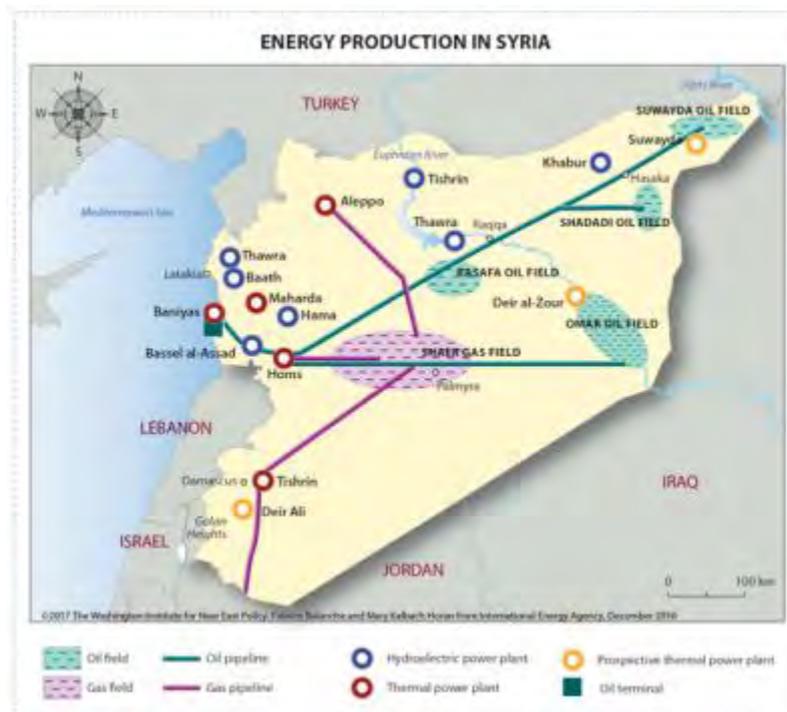


Photo and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)

- ◆ **The terrain in the lower Euphrates Valley and its environs (a vast desert area) is suitable for guerrilla warfare and hit-and-run attacks:** the vast desert area extending east and west of the Euphrates River, and ISIS's ability to transfer forces between Syria and Iraq, **are suitable for the guerrilla warfare that ISIS specializes in.** The settled area on the Syrian and Iraqi side of the Euphrates Valley, and the major cities that are located there, enable ISIS to assimilate among the local population and constitute a human and logistical hinterland for it.
- ◆ **Delays in rehabilitating the considerable destruction caused in the main cities where the battles against the Islamic State were fought:** The three main cities, Deir ez-Zor, Al-Mayadeen, and Albukamal were severely damaged during the fighting but they have not undergone any significant rehabilitation process to date. The delay in their rehabilitation and in the return of many residents to their homes **is liable to create alienation and hostility towards the Syrian regime and to facilitate ISIS's activity among the local population.**
- ◆ **The presence of strategically important assets in the lower Euphrates Valley:** Syria's largest oil fields and oil reserves (see map); The important Albukamal border crossing, through which the main road from Baghdad to Aleppo passes; **And the military airfield** south of the city of Deir ez-Zor (which was the target of a

combined ISIS suicide bombing attack after the liberation of Deir ez-Zor³). **The SDF forces**, after having taken control of the oil fields on the east bank of the Euphrates River, and the Syrian army and the forces that support it, which are deployed on the west bank, are now competing over control of these assets, especially the abundant oil fields. **In the ITIC’s assessment, ISIS is interested in establishing itself as another player in the future struggles over control of the oil fields in the Deir ez-Zor⁴ area, which have already begun.⁵**



The oil and gas fields in Syria (Washington Institute, USA, January 4, 2017)

³ On November 13, 2017, ISIS carried out a **combined suicide bombing attack** at the Deir ez-Zor military airfield. The attack was carried out by five ISIS operatives from Chechnya, **who came to the airfield from the desert area in the Albukamal region**. One of them blew himself up with a car bomb at the entrance to the airfield. Four other operatives, who were wearing Russian army uniforms, entered the airfield, fired at Syrian soldiers and launched RPGs at the aircraft. According to Syrian and Arab media reports, a number of aircraft were hit and 13 Syrian soldiers were killed (See the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from November 20, 2017: “Combined ISIS Suicide Bombing at the Military Airfield in Deir al-Zor – Additional Indication of ISIS Remaining Military Capabilities after the Fall of the Islamic State”).

⁴ According to a report that requires verification, ISIS still controls a number of oil wells in the desert area east of Deir ez-Zor. According to the same report, ISIS sells crude oil produced from these fields at a lower price than that charged by the SDF forces (Furat Post’s Facebook page, February 19, 2018).

⁵ On February 8, 2018, there was an incident during which Coalition planes attacked a Sunni militia force operating in the service of the Syrian regime. The force crossed the Euphrates River to the east bank in the area of Deir ez-Zor and moved towards oil wells controlled by the SDF. Some 100 operatives of the militia force were killed in the attack. The attack provoked tension between the United States and Russia.



Oil fields and oil facilities in Deir ez-Zor Province: 1 - Al-Jafrah; 2 - Al-Taym; 3 - Al-Omar; 4 - Al-Tanak; 5 - Al-Ward; 6 - T2 oil pumping station (Akhbar Al-Aan, February 16, 2016)

ISIS's fighting tactics

► In the Euphrates Valley, ISIS **conducts guerrilla warfare**, whose main target (so far) is **the SDF forces** (which operate with coalition air support). ISIS operatives **carry out hit-and-run operations** by squads emerging from the desert region **with off-road vehicles and motorcycles** or by groups **blending into the population after the attack**. In its fighting, ISIS (as usual) **makes use of suicide bombers**. ISIS squads attack outposts of SDF forces or the Syrian army or **fire rockets and mortar shells** at them. Noteworthy is a **combined suicide bombing** carried out by ISIS against the **military airfield** in Deir ez-Zor, where it showed **courage and creativity** (see footnote 2).

Sudden attacks by off-road vehicles



Right: ISIS operatives moving with off-road vehicles and motorcycles during the attack against the SDF forces in the village of Al-Bahrah Al-Gharbiyah, north of Albukamal. A double-barreled anti-aircraft gun was mounted on at least one of the off-road vehicles (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 19, 2018). Left: ISIS operative firing a heavy machine gun mounted on an off-road vehicle, at the SDF forces in the village of Al-Bahrah Al-Gharbiyah, north of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 19, 2018)



Right: ISIS operative firing a heavy machine gun mounted on an off-road vehicle, at the SDF forces in the village of Al-Bahrah Al-Sharqiyah, north of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 19, 2018). Left: ISIS gun mounted on an off-road vehicle during an attack on SDF forces on January 19, 2018, in the village of Al-Bahrah, north of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 20, 2018)



ISIS operatives attacking outposts of the SDF forces (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, February 11, 2018)

Shelling SDF positions



ISIS armored vehicle shelling an SDF position on the outskirts of the village of Abu Al-Hassan, north of Albukamal (Nasher, a file-sharing website, February 26, 2018)

Shooting at Syrian army positions on the outskirts of Albukamal



ISIS operatives deployed against Syrian army positions in Albukamal (Nasher, a file-sharing website, February 7, 2018)

Rocket fire



ISIS operative preparing to launch a rocket at the SDF forces north of Albukamal (file-sharing website)

Using motorcycles



Right: ISIS operatives firing a heavy machine gun, apparently at an aircraft, near the village of Mahkan, south of Al-Mayadeen (Haqq, November 15, 2017). Left: ISIS operative firing a machine gun mounted on a motorcycle, at SDF forces in the village of Hawi Abu Hamam, north of Albukamal (Haqq, December 22, 2017)



ISIS operative firing a machine gun mounted on a motorcycle, at SDF forces in the village of Hawi Abu Hamam, north of Albukamal (Haqq, December 21, 2017)

► **The interpretation of satellite photos from the area north of Albukamal** gives rise to several insights regarding ISIS activity:

- ◆ **ISIS forces are in control of villages on the east bank of the Euphrates River, where SDF forces operate.** Maybe the reason for it is that ISIS considers the area controlled by SDF as a weak spot from a military perspective and would rather avoid **for the time being** maintaining presence and intensive activity in the Syrian army deployed on the west bank.
- ◆ **The satellite photos do not reveal clear ISIS outposts and military facilities in the area north of Albukamal.** It seems that ISIS forces **blend into the local population**, usually without clear visual characteristics, in the ITIC's assessment, in order to avoid Coalition airstrikes. Furthermore, it is also possible that ISIS vehicles and weapons are not permanently kept in the Euphrates Valley but **rather deeper in the desert regions.**
- ◆ **Civilian activity in villages controlled by ISIS:** In the village of Al-Sousa, north of Albukamal, lively activity of civilian vehicles is evident. This may indicate the return to normal life by the local population and maybe also some coexistence between it and ISIS (possibly even without any other choice from the residents' point of view).⁶

⁶ The area north of Albukamal, on the east bank of the Euphrates River, is home to **the Sunni Al-Shueitat tribe**. A bitter conflict broke out between this tribe and ISIS, and in August 2014 ISIS operatives slaughtered hundreds of the tribespeople. In mid-December 2014, a mass grave was discovered, with about 230 bodies of tribespeople who were executed by ISIS.



The village of Al-Sousa situated 7 km northwest of Albukamal. The bustling activity in the village is in stark contradiction to the sparse civilian activity in Albukamal. Photography and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)



Photography and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)



Photography and interpretation: ImageSat International (ISI)

Administrative division

► The area north of Al-Bukamal belongs to **two ISIS provinces**. The border between them is around **the village of Hajeen, about 30 km north of Al-Bukamal**. North of Hajeen is ISIS's **Al-Barakah Province**, and to the south is ISIS's **Al-Furat Province**. Al-Furat Province also includes the city of Al-Bukamal (currently controlled by the Syrian regime) and territories of the Al-Anbar Province, in western Iraq. The city of Deir ez-Zor and its environs belong to ISIS's **Al-Khayr Province**.

ISIS media support

The collapse of the Islamic State **had an adverse impact on the quantity and quality of the media products disseminated by ISIS**. However, in recent months, **there has been an increase in ISIS's media activity in the provinces of Al-Barakah and Al-Furat along the Euphrates River**. There is a clear correlation between the **rehabilitation of ISIS's military operational activity** along the Euphrates River and the **extensive media activity** which accompanies it⁷ (in other areas of Syria and Lebanon, ISIS's media activity is still deficient).

► ISIS's most important media platform, which disseminates announcements by the provinces of Al-Barakah and Al-Furat is **Amaq News Agency**. This news agency is affiliated with the **Akhbar Al-Muslimeen** website, by which media products are disseminated. The ITIC

⁷ For details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin "ISIS's Media Network in the Era after the Fall of the Islamic State."

believes that in the areas where ISIS is active along the Euphrates River, there are reporters, who transfer the information to some media outlet (where information is processed, captions are added, and translation and editing are carried out). In several cases, ISIS **made use of photos taken from a drone to document car bomb attacks.**

► Following are several examples of media activity by the provinces of Al-Barakah and Al-Furat:

◆ **Al-Barakah Province:** The province once again reports about guerrilla activity carried out by ISIS. It reported on clashes between ISIS operatives and SDF forces north of Albukamal and southeast of Deir ez-Zor. It also reported (January 2018) on the use made by ISIS of car bombs driven by its suicide bombers. Suicide bombing attacks in the media campaign once again included the familiar format: a photo of the suicide bomber, the ride towards the target, and the attack.

◆ **Al-Furat Province (southeastern Syria / Western Iraq):** The media activity of this province also seems to have recovered. Media products deal mainly with the guerrilla warfare waged by ISIS against the SDF and Kurdish forces in the Euphrates Valley. It seems that in several cases, **ISIS made use of photos taken from a drone to document terrorist attacks by car bombs.**



Detonation of a car bomb (January 16, 2018) against SDF forces in a village northwest of Albukamal. Right: The target of the attack – the area where an SDF force was stationed. Left: The detonation of the car bomb (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 17, 2018).



SDF force staging zone before an ISIS suicide bomber carries out a car bomb attack. The white van seen on top was apparently used as a car bomb (Amaq News Agency through Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 21, 2018)



Right: Operatives of ISIS's Al-Furat Province riding (January 13, 2018) in an armored off-road vehicle manufactured by ISIS, towards SDF positions north of Albukamal (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 13, 2018). Left: Photo released by the Al-Barakah Province, showing an armored off-road vehicle during clashes with SDF forces in the village of Al-Bahrah Al-Sharqiya (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 20, 2018)