



Spotlight on Global Jihad

September 6-16, 2018



Main events of the week¹

- ▶ **In the Idlib region, preparations for the impending campaign continue.** These preparations included **continued reinforcement** of northern Syria and the Turkish-Syrian border by the various sides (the Syrian army, the Turkish army, Hezbollah, and the Shiite militias handled by Iran). At the same time, **intensive airstrikes and artillery attacks were carried out by Russia and the Syrian army**, which were concentrated in the southern part of the Idlib region. In the Idlib area and the rural area west of Aleppo, there were large-scale demonstrations in support of the rebel organizations.
- ▶ Concurrently, intensive political activity is taking place, centering around **Russia, Iran and Turkey**, which have a direct interest in the campaign. **Differences of opinion have arisen among the three countries**, centering on **Turkey's objection** to the takeover of the Idlib region by the Syrian army and the forces supporting it. This objection stems from both **political and security considerations** (the preservation of the Turkish "security zone" along the Syrian border) and fear of a humanitarian disaster that would lead hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees to flee there. These disagreements, which were at the root of the failure of the summit in Tehran (September 7, 2018), reportedly led to the postponement of the beginning of the ground offensive to take over the Idlib region.
- ▶ While ISIS is under severe pressure in Syria, **its operatives continue to carry out suicide bombing attacks in various places around the world.** Prominent attacks this week included a suicide bombing attack carried out by the organization's operatives at the Wrestling Club in Kabul (dozens killed); an attack on a procession that was held on the anniversary of the killing of Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the northern coalition that fought against the Taliban (seven killed); and attacks on Libya's National Oil Institute headquarters in Tripoli (at least two killed and dozens wounded).

¹ Due to the holidays the next publication of "Spotlight on Global Jihad" will appear on October 4, 2018.

Diplomatic contacts surrounding the campaign in Idlib

Differences of opinion surrounding the campaign in Idlib

In the course of the diplomatic contacts that have taken place over the past few weeks, **differences of opinion have arisen between Russia and Iran, on the one hand, and Turkey on the other**, regarding the need to take over the Idlib region. While Russia and Iran support a military ground campaign, Turkey calls for a ceasefire and demands that Russia and Syria stop the airstrikes and ground attacks. The Turkish foreign minister made it clear that if the attacks cease, Turkey would be prepared to act in coordination with all sides to bring an end to the presence of the “terrorist organizations” in the Idlib area (Hürriyet Daily News, September 12, 2018). **These differences of opinion prevented an agreement from being reached at the summit in Tehran (September 7, 2018), with the participation of the leaders of Russia, Iran, and Turkey.**



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (right), Iranian President Hassan Rowhani (center), and Russian President Vladimir Putin (left) at the summit in Tehran (Russian President’s website, September 7, 2018).

► **Turkey’s main motives appear to be political and security-related, with the additional fear of a new wave of refugees that could flood Turkey and lead to a humanitarian disaster.** An article by **Middle East expert Kirill Semyonov**, which was published in the Russian media, analyzed the reasons for Turkey’s objections. According to him, Turkey was concerned about a situation in which the Syrian regime would not be satisfied with regaining control of Idlib but would also try to carry out another operation in

the areas north of the city of Aleppo. These areas were taken over by Turkey in 2016-2018 during Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch, and they are where the Syrian rebel organizations sponsored by Turkey are concentrated. Moreover, according to Semyonov, Turkey has not yet decided whether to withdraw from Syria, **and therefore it is important to Turkey to preserve a situation where most of the Idlib Province is controlled by the rebel organizations.** Ankara will be able to use the rebel forces to create a “security zone” **for it, or to integrate them with other rebel organizations under its protection** (Kommersant, September 6, 2018).

► **The United States, on its part, believes that a military campaign will only make the situation in Idlib worse. US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley** said that the United States had urged all countries involved to **avoid a comprehensive military operation.** According to her, it is possible to designate the militant organizations in the Idlib area (i.e., the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham) and turn them into targets without causing a humanitarian disaster (UN website; Reuters, September 8, 2018).

The talks in Geneva about Idlib

► On September 10-11, 2018, **talks were held in Geneva on the subject of Idlib between Russia, Turkey, and Iran**, following the summit in Tehran. **UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura** participated in the talks. At the end of the talks, **Russian President’s Special Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev said that it was impossible to live alongside the “terrorist operatives” and therefore the struggle against them must be continued until they are completely eliminated. Lavrentiev noted that the struggle against the terrorist organizations could be postponed by a few weeks, but that this was only a temporary solution.**² According to him, sooner or later **the issue must be resolved decisively.** Lavrentiev said that in his opinion **Russia, Turkey, and Iran would be able to coordinate a mechanism for carrying out a military operation against the “terrorist organizations” in Idlib**, emphasizing that caution must be exercised while minimizing harm to uninvolved civilians and guaranteeing their security. In addition, Ambassador Haley

² According to an article published on the website of the Carnegie Moscow Center, **for the past few weeks, Moscow has been restraining the Syrian regime’s aspiration (to launch the campaign in Idlib) because of Russia’s reluctance to clash with Turkey.** According to the article, **if Russia had not acted to postpone the start of the operation (in Idlib), it would have gotten underway long ago** (Carnegie Moscow Center’s website, August 31, 2018).

warned Syria, Russia and Iran against carrying out a chemical attack, noting that the United States would respond accordingly (Sputnik, September 13, 2018).

► He also noted that **the main way to resolve the situation in Idlib was to separate the “moderate opposition” from “the extremist elements.”** Turkey (which was put in charge of the de-escalation zone in Idlib some 18 months ago) is the main country responsible for this separation, **but according to Lavrentiev, it is finding it difficult to carry out the mission** because the number of “extremist operatives” in the region is large and they use civilians as human shields. Lavrentiev expressed the hope that the experience acquired during the Syrian reconciliation process and the establishment of de-escalation zones would help resolve the situation in Idlib. According to him, many of the civilians, including those representing the “moderate opposition,” will be ready for an arrangement with the regime (RIA; TASS News Agency, September 11, 2018).



The talks held in Geneva between Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the UN representative in Geneva. Left: The Russian delegation (Russian Foreign Ministry’s Twitter account, September 12, 2018)

Main developments in Syria

The campaign against the ISIS enclave in As-Suwayda

► The Syrian army continued its advance in the ISIS stronghold in the Al-Safa area, while taking over elevated areas, caves and tunnels which had been used by ISIS as positions and headquarters. The Syrian army fired artillery and carried out airstrikes in order to increase the pressure on ISIS, causing it heavy losses. According to the Syrian News Agency, ISIS is denied access to water sources, and its operatives’ attempts to flee the Al-Safa area are constantly thwarted (SANA, September 9, 2018).



Syrian army soldiers and trucks deep inside the rocky terrain of the Al-Safa area (Syrian TV, September 11, 2018)

The Idlib area

Overview

During the recent week, there were **intensive airstrikes and artillery attacks by the Syrian regime and Russia**, mainly against targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (and organizations affiliated with it) in the Idlib area. The attacks were concentrated in **the south** (the area north of Hama). **The ground campaign to take over the Idlib area hasn't started yet**, in the ITIC's assessment, due to differences of opinion between **Russia, Iran, and Turkey**, which came into expression at the Tehran summit (September 7, 2018). **On the ground, preparations for the ground operation continue, while at the same time intensive diplomatic activity takes place in the international arena.**

Airstrikes and artillery fire

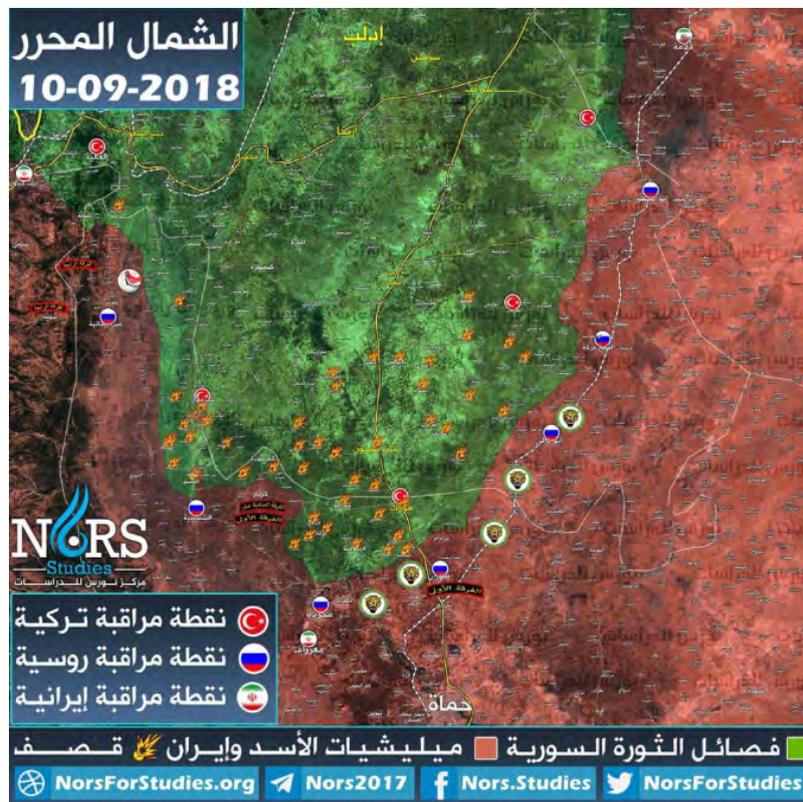
The Syrian army

► The Syrian regime reported that **Russian fighter planes and helicopters of the Syrian army had carried out airstrikes north of Hama and south of Idlib** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, September 8, 2018). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that over 15 helicopters had dropped barrel bombs on the villages north of Hama and in the southern Idlib Province (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 9, 2018). According to the Syrian and Western media, in response to attacks carried out by the rebel organizations in the Hama area, **on September 8, 2018, Russian and Syrian planes carried out over 60 airstrikes in the Idlib area and in northern Hama.**



Right: Barrel bomb dropped from a Syrian Air Force helicopter hitting an urban area in the village of Al-Lataminah, north of Hama (Khotwa, September 8, 2018). Left: Barrel bomb hitting an urban area in the village of Tell Aas, in the rural area south of Idlib (Ibaa, September 8, 2018)

► Concurrently with the airstrikes, **the Syrian army continued to fire artillery at targets in the Idlib area.** According to a Syrian News Agency report, since early September 2018, artillery has been fired on positions, staging zones and weapons of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. The organization sustained fatalities, and its weapons and equipment were destroyed (SANA, September 10, 2018).



Map of the airstrikes and artillery attacks, in the area held by the rebels in southern Idlib (marked in green); Area controlled by the Syrian army and the forces supporting it (marked in red) (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, September 10, 2018)

Russia

Airstrikes in the Idlib Province

► **Russian airstrikes against targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the Idlib area continue.** According to a website affiliated with the rebel organizations, **the Russian make use of bunker busters.** On September 10, 2018, the Russians attacked tunnels where weapons and ammunition were stored (Muraselon, September 10, 2018).



Right: Two openings of tunnels used by the rebel forces in the Idlib Province. Left: Smoke rising after a Russian bunker buster hit a target of the rebel forces in the Idlib Province (Muraselon, September 10, 2018)

Russian airstrikes against the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

► The Russian Defense Ministry reported that **on September 4, 2018, the air defense systems of the Hmeymim base had intercepted two drones launched by “terrorist operatives.”**³ In response, four Russian Air Force planes carried out **airstrikes against targets of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in the Idlib Province.** Those targets included depots where drones were stored, ammunition for making the IEDs used by the drones, and mobile air defense systems. A workshop where the operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham assembled offensive drones was also attacked. In addition, airstrikes were carried out against areas from which the drones were launched. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, all the airstrikes were carried out against terrorist targets only, far from populated areas (Facebook page of the Russian Defense Ministry, September 5, 2018).

³ In the past month, a total of 47 drones were intercepted. Those drones were launched at the Hmeymim airbase from the Idlib area by “armed groups” (mostly, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham).



**Russian attacks against “terrorist targets” in the Idlib Province
(YouTube channel of the Russian Defense Ministry, September 5, 2018)**

Reinforcements dispatched to northern Syria by the Syrian army, Turkey, and organizations affiliated with them

► Reinforcements are still being sent to northern Syria by the various sides in preparation for the campaign over Idlib. The Syrian, Turkish and Arab media report in this context:

- ◆ **The Syrian army reinforced Aleppo’s rural area.** The reinforcements reportedly included many APCs (Muraselon, September 10, 2018).



**Syrian army APC’s en route to northern Syria
(Muraselon, September 10, 2018)**

- ◆ Turkey continued to reinforce its positions in the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama (Al-Mayadeen, September 10, 2018). According to the Turkish media, **30,000 Turkish army soldiers are deployed along the border with Syria.** They are concentrated in the areas where Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive

Branch took place and in 12 additional sites in Idlib. In addition, according to reports, **the Free Syrian Army (affiliated with Turkey) numbers 50,000 soldiers** (Yeni Shafaq, September 10, 2018).

◆ **About 5,000-7,000 operatives of Hezbollah and Iranian-handled Shiite militias arrived at the front line with Idlib in preparation for the imminent campaign.** Reinforcements arrived from the area of Damascus and Zabadani to the Al-Ghab Plain (southwest of Idlib) (Al-Hayat, September 11, 2018).

An Ahrar Al-Sham senior commander killed

► **Khaled al-Hassan, a senior commander in the Ahrar Al-Sham organization** (an Islamic rebel organization rival to the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, operating in the Idlib area) was killed by the Syrian army along with his three escorts near the village of Al-Karakat (the eastern part of the Al-Ghab Plain, southwest of Idlib). The Syrian army reportedly **made use of precision-guided artillery, using Russian army drones for that purpose** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, September 11, 2018).



Khaled al-Hassan, AKA Abu al-Walid Karnaz, one of Ahrar Al-Sham's senior commanders, killed by the Syrian army (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, September 11, 2018)

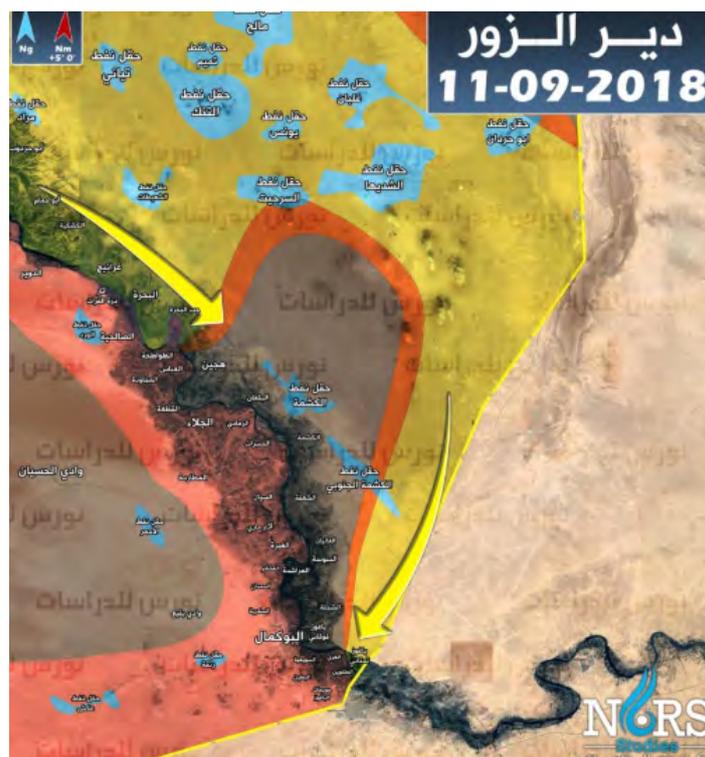
Residents flee their homes due to air and ground bombardments

► According to Mark Lowcock, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, **more than 30,000 people have so far fled their homes in the Idlib Province due to the recent air and ground bombardments of the Syrian army and its allies.** Lowcock estimated that a continued military assault could set 800,000 people to flight (Reuters, September 10, 2018).

Eastern Syria

SDF attack against ISIS north of Albukamal

On September 10, 2018, a large-scale attack of the SDF forces with Coalition support against the ISIS enclave north of Albukamal started. ISIS operatives are concentrated in the area between Hajin and Al-Sha'fah in the Euphrates Valley, but they also control additional sites near Albukamal. The attack was preceded by the dispatch of reinforcements of thousands of fighters and armored vehicles (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, September 11, 2018; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 10, 2018).



Deployment of the forces in the Albukamal region (updated to September 11, 2018):
 in yellow – the area controlled by the SDF forces; in red – the area controlled by the Syrian army and the forces supporting it; in grey – areas under ISIS control; in blue – the oil fields (most of them are under SDF control); in orange – areas where there are clashes; the yellow arrows mark the directions of the attack of the SDF forces
 (Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies, September 11, 2018)



ISIS's control area between Hajin (1) and Al-Sha'fah (2) (Google Maps)

► Currently, there are clashes between the SDF forces **in the city of Hajin and in the village of Al-Baghouz, east of Albukamal**, with the support of artillery fire and Coalition airstrikes. At least 17 ISIS operatives were killed in the attacks (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 10, 2018). An ISIS force destroyed an SDF armored vehicle with an anti-tank missile near the village of Al-Baghouz. Several SDF fighters were killed (Deir ez-Zor 24, September 11, 2018).



Right: SDF forces in the Hajin area (YPG Press Office video, Twitter account affiliated with the SDF forces, September 7, 2018). Left: Wreckage of an SDF vehicle destroyed by an ISIS anti-tank missile (Deir ez-Zor 24, September 11, 2018)

► According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (September 10, 2018), **there are over 65 senior ISIS commanders in Hajin, most of them Iraqis, some of them freighters**. According to the same report, **in the city of Al-Sha'fah**, there are two ISIS prisons, where over 1,350 people are incarcerated (including foreign operatives accused, inter

alia, of security offenses). In addition, in the city of Hajin there reportedly exists another prison, where about 800 people are incarcerated.

Syrian army attacks against ISIS

- ▶ Concurrently with the SDF attack, the Syrian army attacked ISIS in two regions:
 - ◆ **The west bank of the Euphrates River, in the area between Albukamal and Al-Mayadeen:** In clashes that reportedly took place on September 6, 2018, both sides sustained dozens of casualties (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 6, 2018).
 - ◆ **The deserts west of the Euphrates Valley, mainly the area between Palmyra and Al-Sukhnah:** On September 10, 2018, there were clashes between the Syrian army, which combs the area, and ISIS operatives. At least six Syrian army personnel and four ISIS operatives were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 10, 2018).



The area between Palmyra (1), Al-Sukhnah (2), and sites of the Syrian attacks against the ISIS operatives (Google Maps)

Main developments in Iraq

ISIS activity

- ▶ Following are the main operations carried out by ISIS in the recent week:
 - ◆ **Blowing up an oil pipeline**, about 27 km **northwest of Kirkuk**. As a result of the explosion, a fire broke out and firefighters worked to extinguish it. An official Iraqi source said that ISIS operatives had been responsible for the explosion (Rudaw and Iraqi media, September 9, 2018).

- ◆ **Suicide bombing attack** of a terrorist who **blew himself up at the entrance to a hospital in Haditha**, Al-Anbar Province. One policeman was killed and three other people were wounded (Iraqi News Agency, September 10, 2018).
- ◆ **Two Tribal Mobilization fighters were killed** by ISIS operatives who broke into the house of one of them (Iraqi News, September 11, 2018).

Counterterrorism activity by the Iraqi security forces

- ▶ Following are the main activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces against ISIS:
 - ◆ **Killing and detaining operatives:** The Iraqi security forces conducted an operation against ISIS **in the city of Hit**. Twenty ISIS operatives were killed in the operation. They had stayed in three tunnels which were destroyed (Iraqi News, September 7, 2018).
 - ◆ **Killing ISIS operatives from an ambush:** The Iraqi security forces set up an ambush **about 14 km southwest of Shirqat**. Seven ISIS operatives who were in a vehicle were killed, and four others were detained (Iraqi News, September 7, 2018).
 - ◆ **Destroying tunnels and killing ISIS operatives:** The Iraqi security forces operating in the **Shirqat district** killed six ISIS operatives and destroyed three tunnels. A police force in the Salah al-Din Province **killed two suicide bombers** (Al-Sumaria News, September 10, 2018).
 - ◆ **Detonating IEDs:** Syria army sappers detonated 150 IEDs in a controlled manner **south of Fallujah** (Iraqi News Agency, September 9, 2018).

Jihadi activity in other countries

ISIS combined suicide bombing attack in Kabul

- ▶ At 18:00 on September 5, 2018, **a suicide bomber blew himself up at a wrestling club in Kabul**. At 18:40, **another terrorist blew up a car bomb** that he was driving among a crowd of people who had come to help the victims of the first explosion. The attack killed at least 26 people and wounded 91 (www.khaama.com, September 6, 2018).
- ▶ **ISIS's Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack.** The claim of responsibility stated that an ISIS suicide bomber shot and killed a security guard at a Shiite gathering place in Kabul and then detonated his explosive vest. In addition, ISIS operatives detonated a car bomb near the scene of the first attack, after security forces and media personnel arrived at the scene. **According to ISIS, some 150 people were killed and**

wounded in the attack. The victims included Shiites, security forces, and media personnel (Amaq News Agency, September 5, 2018).

Suicide bombing attack in a procession in Kabul in memory of Ahmad Shah Massoud

► On September 9, 2018, a **suicide bomber blew himself up near a procession in Kabul** commemorating the 17th anniversary of the **killing of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the commander of the anti-Taliban United Islamic Front**. As a result, **seven people were killed and 24 others were wounded**. ISIS's Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack, stating that 55 people were killed and wounded (Sada al-Balad, September 10, 2018).



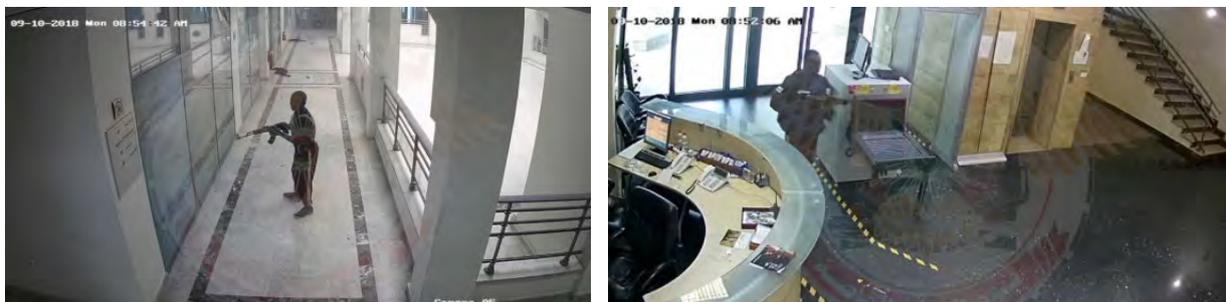
The scene of the attack (Ajel, Saudi Arabia, September 9, 2018)

Libya: Suicide bombing attack at the headquarters of the National Oil Corporation of Libya in Tripoli

► In the early hours of the morning of September 10, 2018, **three suicide bombers attacked the headquarters of the National Oil Corporation of Libya in Tripoli**. The three terrorists were wearing explosive belts and were armed with light arms and hand grenades. The attackers took several people hostage and exchanged fire with the Libyan security forces. In the exchange of fire, part of the building was destroyed and a fire broke out. According to the Libyan Ministry of Health, two employees of the National Oil Corporation of Libya headquarters were killed and 25 others were wounded (National Oil Corporation of Libya, September 10, 2018; Al-Wasat, Libya, September 11, 2018).

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack**. According to an announcement published the next day, the organization's operatives had clashed with security guards at the site. According to the claim of responsibility, more than 37 people were killed and wounded. ISIS

operatives set fire to the headquarters, destroyed its contents and were later killed. The claim of responsibility states that the oil fields that support the Crusaders and their projects are legitimate targets for the jihad fighters and that the attack was carried out in the context of the attacks against the “tyrants” in Libya, who are loyal to Western governments (Akhbar Libya, quoting ISIS’s Amaq News Agency, September 11, 2018).



Right: One of the suicide bombers at the entrance to the headquarters of the National Oil Corporation of Libya. Left: Suicide bomber in one of the corridors (Twitter account of Libya Alahrar TV, September 10-11, 2018)



Right: Firefighters near the rubble of the headquarters of the National Oil Corporation (YouTube, September 10, 2018). Left: Smoke rising from the headquarters of the National Oil Corporation (in red) following the attack (Erem News, UAE news website, September 11, 2018)

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

ISIS activity foiled in Morocco

► On September 6, 2018, security forces in Morocco detained three ISIS operatives who had pledged allegiance to the organization’s leader. The three operatives, who were detained in the cities of Agadir and Tétouan (about 45 km southeast of Tangier), planned to carry out attacks throughout the country using IEDs and toxic substances. Searches revealed cold weapons, army uniforms, electronic equipment and documents advocating violence (Al-Sabah, Morocco, September 8, 2018).