



ISIS's use of drones in Syria and Iraq and the threat of using them overseas to carry out terrorist attacks

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Overview

- ▶ During the years in which it was active in Syria and Iraq, ISIS made extensive use of drones, both for offensive and defensive purposes. It handled the drones to carry out attacks (“explosive drones”), to collect intelligence, and even for propaganda purposes (documenting attacks by suicide bombers in order to disseminate the photos through ISIS’s media foundations). Upon the collapse of the Islamic State and in view of the heavy pressure exerted on ISIS on the various fronts, **the organization’s capability of handling drones, which ISIS had developed in Syria and Iraq since 2014, sustained a significant blow.**
- ▶ However, it seems that **ISIS still possesses a certain amount of drones.** Recently, operatives of the security apparatus of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham took control of an ISIS arms and equipment depot north of Idlib. In this depot, **they seized a drone intended for collecting intelligence, manufactured by the Chinese DJI technology company** (one of the leading manufacturers of drones for civilian purposes). It is a drone with advanced capabilities, **first released in April 2017.** It can be assumed that ISIS operatives in the Idlib region (and possibly in other regions as well) have additional drones of this type. Furthermore, **in Denmark, the authorities recently detained two men who apparently were part of an ISIS network for purchasing drones in Europe.** Their detention indicates that **ISIS is still making efforts to purchase drones and deliver them to its operatives in Syria (and maybe even in Iraq).**

A potential threat is handling drones for terror attacks by ISIS operatives or supporters abroad. Drones used for civilian purposes **are sold on the open market and can be easily bought, at affordable prices.** Recently, a media foundation affiliated with ISIS released a **threatening poster showing the Eiffel Tower with a drone with a large canister** (possibly intended for a weapon) **beside it.** The poster had an English inscription, “Await for our surprises.” In February 2018, ISIS also released a poster **threatening to operate an offensive model airplane against a Western city.** In the ITIC's assessment, **ISIS supporters abroad have the ability to realize such threats by purchasing civilian drones and operating them as offensive weapons** against people, facilities of symbolic importance, or other pinpoint targets.

Seizure of an ISIS drone by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

► Around October 15, 2018, operatives of the security apparatus of the jihadi Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham raided an ISIS hideout north of Idlib, Syria. They found a great deal of military equipment, including **a drone used for collecting intelligence.** An examination of the photo of the seized drone shows that it's a Phantom 4 Advanced, manufactured by the **DJI Chinese technology company**, one of the leading manufacturers of drones for civilian purposes.¹ It may be assumed that **ISIS in the Idlib region, and maybe in other regions in Syria and Iraq, possesses additional drones of this type.**

¹ Dà-Jiāng Innovations, known as DJI, is a Chinese technology company which was established in 2006. It is based in Shenzhen, Guangdong, China, with manufacturing facilities throughout the world. DJI is the manufacturer of drones intended for aerial photography and videography. The company also manufactures camera gimbals, flight platforms, cameras, propulsion systems, camera stabilizers, and flight control systems. DJI is the world's leader in the manufacture of drones for commercial and civilian purposes, controlling over 70% of the drone market (Wikipedia). The photo of the drone seized from ISIS by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham shows a **great resemblance, maybe even identity, to the DJI Phantom 4 Advanced** (sold by Amazon UK for GBP 1,589).



Right: ISIS drone for collecting intelligence, seized by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Ibaa News Agency, affiliated with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, October 15, 2018). Left: DJI Phantom 4 Advanced drone in its original package (DJI's official website)

- The Syrian army seized ISIS drones in the past. On December 9, 2017, during the campaign against the Islamic State in eastern Syria, the Syrian News Agency released a video showing large amounts of ISIS weapons, **seized by the Syrian army in the Deir ez-Zor Province. Among other things, the video shows drones** (SANA's YouTube account, December 9, 2018). An ISIS offensive drone was downed by the Syrian army north of Daraa (see photo below).



Two ISIS drones seized by the Syrian army in the Deir ez-Zor Province. One of the drones is seen in an original package (SANA's YouTube account, December 9, 2018)

Purchasing drones

- A study by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (USA), which examined ISIS's use of drones, indicated an extensive acquisition network of civilian drones established by the Islamic State at the time. They were purchased and delivered to Syria and Iraq through an international network of individual operatives and companies, which at the time included 16 different companies in at least seven countries.² It may be assumed that **this acquisition network was severely damaged with the collapse of the Islamic State**, but it seems that **several ISIS networks for the acquisition and smuggling of drones still exist today.**

² Don Rassler, "**The Islamic State and Drones**" (July 2018), Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (USA) (hereinafter: The Islamic State and Drones).

► **The drone seized north of Idlib was released by DJI in April 2017.** This means that even while ISIS is on the defensive in the Syrian arena, and is under heavy pressure on the various fronts (including in the Idlib region), **it has the ability to continue to smuggle into Syria advanced drones with photography and navigation capabilities** (with the intention of operating them in due course). In the ITIC's assessment, it is reasonable to assume that the drone supply reaches ISIS through the Turkish border, possibly with the assistance of contacts or Islamic rebel organizations. It was reported that for purchasing the drones and delivering them to Syria and Iraq, **ISIS maintains a network of smugglers in Europe, and two of its people were recently detained in Denmark.**³

ISIS's use of drones in Syria and Iraq

During its activity in Syria and Iraq, ISIS used drones in the different arenas where its forces were active. Initially, the drones were apparently used **to collect intelligence**. Subsequently, **ISIS made extensive use of drones as a platform for carrying ammunition (IEDs and bombs) for attacking targets**. In addition, ISIS made use of **drones for purposes of propaganda** by documenting and disseminating photos of suicide bombing attacks.

Using drones for collecting intelligence

► Since the beginning of its activity in Syria, **ISIS has made use of drones as a means to collect visual intelligence (VISINT) against its various enemies**. Operating drones in Syria and Iraq allowed ISIS to acquire intelligence on headquarters, concentrations of forces and positions, to improve its defensive and offensive capabilities. Drones were extensively used when ISIS was in the height of its power. However, it continued on a smaller scale also in recent years, while ISIS has been under heavy pressure and its operational capabilities have been impaired.

► An example of the use of drones for collecting intelligence can be found in the period that preceded the takeover of the Al-Tabaqa airfield west of Al-Raqqah (August 24, 2014). In early September 2014, ISIS released a video taken before the takeover of the Al-Tabaqa military airfield. The video shows hangars, artillery barrels, positions and buildings (Al-Jazeera, August 25, 2014).

³ About a month ago, the Danish police detained two people in Copenhagen on suspicion of an attempt to smuggle drones for ISIS (Reuters, September 24, 2018). The two people intended to deliver the drones to **ISIS operatives in Syria and Iraq**. According to the Copenhagen police, the two men were apparently **part of an ISIS network for purchasing drones in Europe** (Global News, September 26, 2018).



The Al-Tabaqa military airfield in Syria, as photographed by an ISIS drone (video disseminated by ISIS in YouTube on September 7, 2014, and published on Maydan al-Tahreer, September 10, 2014)

Offensive use of drones

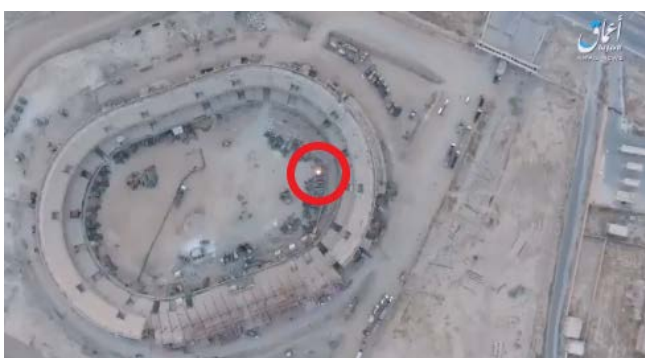
► The use of a drone for offensive purposes was first discovered in October 2016, when an IED attached to a drone killed two Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers.⁴ In early 2017, ISIS operated armed drones **against Iraqi army targets during the campaign over Mosul** (ISIS's Nineveh Province released several photos documenting these attacks). However, subsequently, when the process of collapse and the loss of territories of the Islamic State was accelerated, ISIS lost a considerable part of its operational capabilities and its drone activity was reduced as well.



Bomb (in red) dropped from an ISIS armed drone on an Iraqi army vehicle in the west Mosul neighborhood of Al-Maamoun (the photo was released by ISIS's Nineveh Province on a file-sharing website, February 25, 2017)

⁴ The Islamic State and Drones.

► In spite of the heavy blow to its operational capabilities, and despite the heavy pressure it was subjected to, **ISIS continued making offensive use of drones** in the battles that took place in eastern Syria during the second half of 2017. On October 24, 2017, ISIS reported that a large ammunition depot of the Syrian army, **located in the Deir ez-Zor stadium, was attacked and utterly destroyed**. An examination of a video released by ISIS reveals that **IEDs were dropped by an ISIS drone**. It appears from the video that the drone which photographed the attack was staying statically in the same altitude and on the same spot, with the stadium seen below. This was probably **ISIS's most significant achievement of using a drone for offensive purposes**.



Right: Attack on a Syrian army ammunition depot by an ISIS drone in the Deir ez-Zor sports stadium. Left: Flash caused by the hit of the IED (marked in red) dropped from the ISIS drone (Amaq, October 24, 2017)



Explosion of the Syrian army ammunition depot (Amaq, October 24, 2017)

► On June 12, 2017, it was reported that **the Syrian army had downed an “explosive drone” of ISIS around the town of Tafas, about 11 km north of Daraa**. The photo which was released shows a **drone with a metal pipe attached to it. The metal pipe probably contained explosives** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, June 12, 2017). According to the photo, it is

possibly a drone of the Phantom type, manufactured by DJI (the company logo can be seen on the upper side of the drone).



An ISIS drone, to which was attached a metal pipe, probably serving as a hanging and releasing mechanism for ammunition. This drone was downed by the Syrian army north of Daraa (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, June 12, 2017)

- On June 14, 2017, an ISIS drone dropped a bomb on a military force operating against ISIS on the border between Syria and Iraq (Amaq, June 14, 2017).



Bomb (in red) dropped from an ISIS drone against a military force on the Syrian-Iraqi border (Amaq, June 14, 2017)

Documentation for propaganda purposes

In Albukamal, eastern Syria, where ISIS is now fiercely fighting against the SDF forces, the organization has made **use of drones to document suicide bombing attacks for propaganda purposes**. ISIS took photos of car bombs driven by suicide bombers en route to their targets. The moment of the detonation of the car bomb and the scene of the attack were photographed as well. It seems that the visual information produced by the drones **is perceived by ISIS as contributing to the quality and attractiveness of its propaganda network, to which it attaches major importance**.

► An example of the documentation of a terrorist attack for propaganda purposes can be found in the detonation of a car bomb by an ISIS suicide bomber among a concentration of SDF forces. The attack was carried out in the village of Gharanij, about 37 km northwest of Albukamal, on the east bank of the Euphrates River. An ISIS drone documented the car bomb en route to the scene and the moment of detonation (photos released on Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 17, 2018).



Right: An ISIS car bomb en route to a staging zone of the SDF forces in the village of Gharanij, northwest of Albukamal. Left: Detonation of an ISIS car bomb (Akhbar Al-Muslimeen, January 17, 2018)

Possible use of offensive drones by ISIS outside Syria and Iraq

Recently, a media foundation affiliated with ISIS published **a poster threatening to hit the Eiffel Tower with a drone**. In February 2018, **ISIS threatened to hit a Western city with an offensive model airplane**. In the ITIC's assessment, **ISIS supporters abroad have the ability to operate drones for offensive purposes since purchasing and handling them is not complicated. The drones are sold on the open market and can be very easily purchased, at affordable prices**. Drones can be used for terrorist attacks by adding IEDs or any other weapons to them, and detonating them among a large crowd to achieve mass-killing. They can be used also for terrorist attacks against facilities, prominent figures⁵ or any other pinpoint target. In addition, drones may also find their way to the various provinces of ISIS throughout the world.

► Muharir Al-Ansar Media, a media foundation affiliated with ISIS, which previously published calls for carrying out terrorist attacks, **recently published a threatening poster showing the Eiffel Tower with the English inscription, “Await for our surprises.”** The poster shows an ISIS operative carrying an assault rifle on his back, **with the Eiffel Tower in the crosshairs, in the background**. On the left side **there appears a drone carrying a large canister** (where it is possible to install various weapons). The English inscription on the lower part of the poster reads, “The Islamic State – The Caliphate” (Muharir Al-Ansar media foundation, October 13, 2018).

⁵ Use of drones as an offensive weapon to eliminate outstanding figures has a precedent in Latin America. On August 4, 2018, an assassination attempt was carried out against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Venezuelan Interior Minister Nestor Reverol noted that **two DJI M600 drones were used in the assassination attempt** (Wikipedia). According to a BBC report, during a speech by Venezuela's president, **at least two explosive drones were used. They carried IEDs, but exploded while on their way** (BBC, August 5, 2018).



An ISIS poster threatening to carry out a terrorist attack with a drone against the Eiffel Tower (Muharir Al-Ansar media foundation, October 13, 2018). Note: Due to the bad quality of the photo, the drone on the left of the Eiffel Tower is barely visible.



Right: Poster in which ISIS threatens to operate an offensive model airplane against a Western city. Left: Poster of the Muharir Al-Ansar media foundation, affiliated with ISIS, calling for ramming attacks by trucks (Al-Bawaba, February 27, 2018). This media foundation is the one that recently published the threatening poster against the Eiffel Tower.