



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## October 18-24, 2018



### Main events of the week

- ▶ In the Idlib enclave, **there is still no progress in the establishment of the demilitarized zone**, even after the extension for the implementation of the Sochi agreement. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, which is the dominant force in the Idlib region, refuses to remove its heavy weapons from the demilitarized zone and has publicly announced this. The situation on the ground is generally quiet. The rival sides take advantage of the respite to prepare for the possibility that the Syrian campaign for the takeover of Idlib will start.
- ▶ **In eastern Syria, the Kurdish SDF forces continue to attack** the ISIS enclave north of Albukamal, with Coalition air support. The SDF forces are encountering difficulties and are fighting fierce battles with ISIS, centering on the city of Hajin (ISIS's stronghold) and the village of Sousa (northeast of Albukamal).
- ▶ **In the area of As-Suwayda**, in southern Syria, ISIS continues its relentless fighting against the Syrian army. A ceasefire was achieved in order to enable a deal to be carried out in which six Druze abductees (two women and their four children) were released in exchange for wives of ISIS operatives detained by the Syrian regime. It was reported that in additional phases of the deal, ISIS would receive \$27 million (and this is liable to increase its "appetite" to use abductions as a source of income to make up for the sources of income that it has lost).

## Implementation of the Sochi Agreement

**The establishment of the demilitarized zone**, which was decided on at the Sochi summit between the presidents of Russia and Turkey, **is not progressing**. At the end of the deadline set for the establishment of the area (October 15, 2018), Russia announced that it had granted an extension for the implementation of the agreement. **Even during the extension, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham has not removed its weapons from the demilitarized zone<sup>1</sup>**. The Syrian regime, on its part, continues to threaten to reclaim its sovereignty over the Idlib area very soon.

### Local incidents between the Syrian Army and the rebel organizations

► In the Idlib area, quiet generally prevails, except for a few incidents between the Syrian army and the rebel organizations. According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), the Syrian army fired machine guns at the outskirts of the village of Al-Arba'een (about 63 km south of Idlib) in the demilitarized zone. On the other hand, the rebel organizations launched nine rockets at several neighborhoods in northwestern Aleppo which are controlled by the Syrian army (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 23, 2018).

### Preparations for the opening of humanitarian crossings in the Idlib area

► The Russian media reported that **preparations are underway for the opening of humanitarian crossings** in the Idlib area. These crossings **will enable the residents to leave the Idlib enclaves once the fighting against the rebel organizations resumes** (Sputnik, October 20, 2018).

► A source in the Syrian army said that **Syria was working in coordination with Russia to open the Abu al-Dhuhur humanitarian crossing (41 km southeast of Idlib) within a matter of days**. This crossing will enable civilians who wish to leave the areas controlled by rebel forces in the Idlib region to move to areas controlled by the Syrian army. The necessary logistical and technical preparations for securing the crossing are now nearing completion. A Russian military source in Syria estimated that **the humanitarian crossings in the rural area**

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<sup>1</sup>**US Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey** said that “the withdrawal of heavy weapons [from the area that is supposed to be demilitarized] is complete by all accounts.” According to him, the Turks, and to a large extent the Russians, are in agreement about this (US Department of State website, October 17, 2018). **In the ITIC’s assessment, this statement is overly optimistic**, at least with regard to the jihadi organization the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, which has refrained from removing its heavy weapons from the demilitarized zone and announced this publicly.

**north of Hama would also reopen** in a matter of days. The Russian side had reportedly consulted with the Syrian side to examine the possibility of **reopening the Mourik crossing** (around 25 km north of Hama) **and the Qalaat al-Madhiq crossing** (around 44 km northwest of Hama) (Sputnik, October 20, 2018).



**The humanitarian crossings that might be opened in the Idlib area: Abu al-Dhuhur [1]; Mourik [2]; Qalaat al-Madhiq [3] (Google Maps)**

In the ITIC's assessment, the preparations for the opening of the humanitarian crossings can be considered as part of the Syrian regime's preparations for a possible resumption of the fighting. Encouraging residents to leave the areas controlled by the rebels is intended to prevent heavy losses and mass fleeing, once the campaign for the takeover of Idlib is renewed (which could lead to international pressure on the Syrian regime). It is reasonable to assume that the rebel organizations, which are working to strengthen their hold on the population and use it when necessary as human shields, will try to prevent massive movement of residents to areas controlled by the Syrian army through the humanitarian crossings.

## The Syrian regime continues to threaten that Idlib will soon be returned to Syrian sovereignty

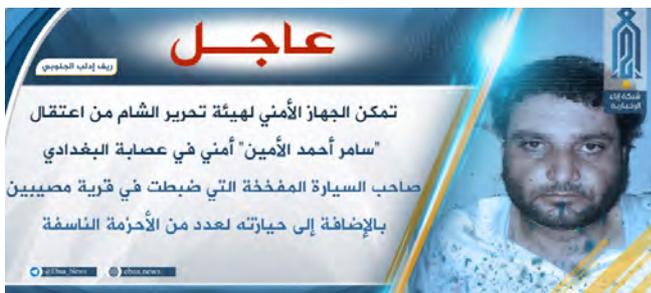
► Speaking at a UN Security Council meeting in New York, Syria's ambassador to the United Nations said that Syria welcomed the Sochi agreement regarding Idlib due to what he called "its commitment to the prevention of bloodshed." However, he reiterated that **"the city of Idlib, like every region in Syria, will eventually and very soon be under Syrian sovereignty once again"** (Syrian TV, October 18, 2018).

## The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to act against ISIS

► Members of the security apparatus of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continued to raid ISIS hiding places in the Idlib area. In one of the raids, in the village of Msaibeen, south of Idlib, large quantities of weapons were found, including **explosive belts and a truck bomb** (Ibaa News Agency, affiliated with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, October 19, 2018). Following the seizure of the weapons, security operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham detained Samer Ahmad al-Amin, an ISIS security operative who owned the truck bomb. Several explosive belts were also found in his possession (Ibaa News Agency, October 20, 2018).



**Right: Explosive belts, equipment for making IEDs, and weapons, found by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. Left: Truck bomb found by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (Ibaa News Agency, October 19, 2018)**



**Right: Four barrels of explosives that were on the truck bomb (Ibaa News Agency, October 19, 2018). Left: ISIS security operative Samer Ahmad al-Amin, owner of the truck bomb (Ibaa News Agency, October 20, 2018)**

## Demonstrations against the Syrian regime continue

► On October 19, 2018, a demonstration was held in the city of Marea, some 26 km north of Aleppo, in the area controlled by the rebel organizations. The demonstrators appeared in a video carrying Free Syrian Army flags, while a song was playing in the background. The words of the song were “Go away, O Bashar.” The video also shows a boy carrying a sign with the words: “The Syrian people [...] Is the one that will decide who will go and who will stay,” and “the white helmets are not terrorist operatives” (Furat Post Facebook page, October 19, 2018).



**Right: Demonstrators carrying Free Syrian Army flags in the city of Marea, north of Aleppo. Left: A boy carrying a sign with the Arabic text: “The Syrian people [...] is the one that will decide who will go and who will stay” (Furat Post Facebook page, October 19, 2018)**

## Iranian Revolutionary Guards officer captured by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham issues a public call for his release

► On October 20, 2018, **the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham released a video showing an officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards held by the organization.** The prisoner was identified as **Akid (Colonel) Abu al-Hassan Suleiman Biyati**. Biyati, who spoke in Farsi, said that he had served in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards for 29 years. He notes that he was wounded **and asks that efforts be made to release him.** He added: “I appeal to all senior Iranian officials, especially Qassem Soleimani [commander of the Qods Force], to make efforts to release me” (The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, October 20, 2018). Postings on social media noted that **Biyati was taken prisoner in 2016 in south**

**Aleppo** (Twitter, October 20, 2018). The Iranian media quoted the report, but Iranian sources refrained from verifying it.



**Akid (Colonel) Abu al-Hassan Soleiman Biyati, Iranian Revolutionary Guards officer held by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, October 20, 2018)**

## Southern Syria

### The campaign in the Al-Safa area

► **In the Al-Safa area**, fierce fighting continued between the Syrian army and the ISIS operatives. ISIS's Amaq News Agency reported on October 16, 2018, that ISIS operatives had killed and wounded 46 Syrian soldiers in the Al-Safa area. A day later, Amaq reported the killing of four other soldiers (Enab Baladi, October 17, 2018).



**Syrian soldiers advancing with difficulty in the rocky Al-Safa area (YouTube, October 16, 2018)**

► **On October 18, 2018, a ceasefire between the Syrian army and ISIS entered into effect.** It lasted at least until October 22, 2018 (Enab Baladi, October 21, 2018); Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, October 23, 2018). The parties were interested in the ceasefire in order to allow the implementation of the deal to release the Druze abductees, carried out on October 20, 2018 (see below). The Syrian army reportedly sent reinforcements to the Al-Safa area to increase

the pressure on ISIS and expedite the release of the abducted Druze women from As-Suwayda (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 20, 2018).

### Two Hezbollah commanders killed by ISIS

► According to a source affiliated with ISIS, two Hezbollah commanders, Mohammad Zaydan and Mohammad Saeed, **were killed when an ISIS-planted IED was detonated.** The IED was activated against a vehicle in which they were riding in a desert area around As-Suwayda. The photo released shows the two men and the vehicle that was hit (Mu'ta News Agency affiliated with is, October 22, 2018).



**Two Hezbollah commanders killed by an ISIS-planted IED in the As-Suwayda area (Mu'ta News Agency affiliated with ISIS, October 22, 2018)**

### Druze abductees held by ISIS released in As-Suwayda

► At the end of negotiations held between ISIS and the Syrian regime and local Druze dignitaries, an agreement was reached to release some of the Druze women abducted by ISIS in the As-Suwayda area. On October 20, 2018, ISIS released two women and four children. In return, the Syrian regime released 17 women, wives of ISIS operatives, and eight of their children (Suwayda 24, October 20, 2018).



**The abducted Druze woman Rasmiya Abu Amar (center). Behind her is Abir Shalgheen and some of her children. The abducted women were transported by a vehicle which took them out of the area controlled by ISIS in Al-Safa (Suwayda 24 Twitter account, October 19, 2018)**

- ▶ According to Rami Abdel Rahman, the director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **this was the first phase in an overall deal agreed upon by the sides. As part of the deal, the Syrian regime will reportedly release more than 60 female detainees** (apparently, wives of ISIS operatives) **and pay ISIS \$27 million** (Al-Nashra, October 20, 2018; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 22, 2018). According to the Arab media, **the overall deal will be carried out in three phases** (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, October 23, 2018). **ISIS released photos of 14 abductees held by it** (probably as indication that it is interested in promoting further phases).

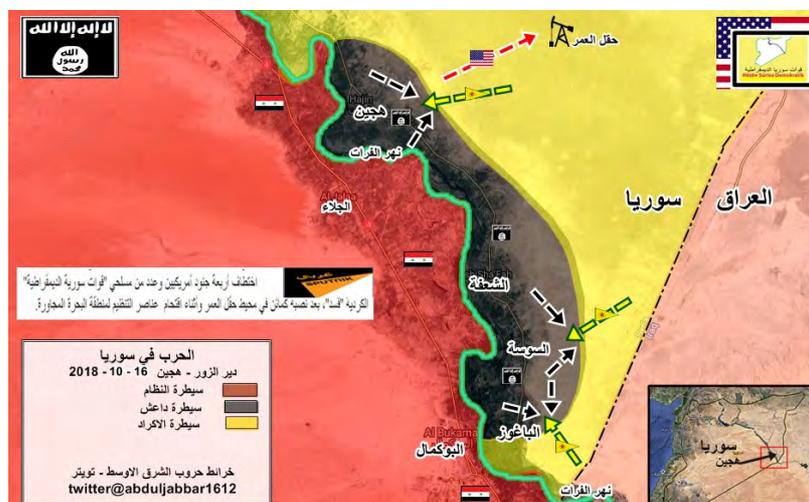


**Fourteen abductees still held by ISIS  
(Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, October 18, 2018)**

The prisoner exchange deal was made possible in the wake of pressure recently exerted on the Syrian regime by Druze inhabitants of the As-Suwayda area, who held protest demonstrations. Releasing the abducted women will help the Syrian regime alleviate pressure by the Druze population and promote the regime's efforts to control the area. **As perceived by ISIS, receiving large amounts of money for releasing its abductees may motivate it to abduct more civilians as an alternative source of income, making up for the revenues that it has lost following the collapse of the Islamic State.**

## Eastern Syria

This week, the SDF offensive against the ISIS enclave north of Albukamal continued. **Fierce fighting takes place in the town of Hajin, ISIS's stronghold in the enclave.** Violent clashes also took place **in the village of Al-Susah, northeast of Albukamal,** attacked by the SDF. ISIS continued to carry out counterattacks while Coalition plane airstrikes killed dozens of ISIS operatives. There were (unverified) news items in Telegram, according to which **ISIS managed to send to Hajin reinforcements of operatives from the Deir ez-Zor Western Desert** (Twitter, October 19, 2018).



**Areas of clashes in the northern part of the ISIS enclave (Hajin area) and its southern part (Al-Susah and Al-Baghouz). On the ground, there were no changes in ISIS's control area in comparison with last week (Twitter, October 16, 2018)**



**Right: YPG fighters, the dominant force in the SDF, on the Hajin front. Left: YPG fighter manning a dual-barrel anti-aircraft gun mounted on an off-road vehicle on the Hajin front (YPG Press Office, October 20, 2018). Left: Anti-tank missile fired by ISIS hitting an SDF vehicle. According to ISIS, the vehicle was destroyed. The missile was fired on the outskirts of the village of Al-Bahra, northwest of Hajin (Amaq, October 21, 2018)**

### Clashes around the village of Al-Susah

► In the village of Al-Susah, about seven kilometers northeast of Albukamal, there were heavy clashes between the SDF forces and ISIS operatives. A suicide bomber driving an armored car bomb (self-manufactured by ISIS) was shot and killed south of Al-Susah by SDF snipers (SDF Media Center, October 20, 2018).



**Car bomb whose driver was killed by SDF sniper fire south of Al-Susah (SDF Media Center, October 22, 2018)**

► **SDF fighters in the Al-Susah area received International Coalition air support.** One of the Coalition airstrikes (October 18, 2018) targeted a mosque in the village of Al-Susah which was used as an ISIS headquarters. According to the Coalition, 12 ISIS operatives were killed in the airstrike. It was also reported that as a result of the airstrike on the mosque and several houses near the Euphrates River, an additional 22 ISIS operatives were killed (Reuters, October 21, 2018).



**Ruins of the Uthman Mosque in Al-Susah which had been used as an ISIS headquarters and was attacked by the Coalition planes (Twitter, October 20, 2018)**

► According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **at least 63 civilians and ISIS operatives were killed** in Coalition airstrikes against targets in Al-Susah on October 18 and 19, 2018. An airstrike against the mosque and a nearby house killed 11 ISIS operatives and 18 civilians, family members of ISIS operatives. On October 19, 2018, airstrikes targeted an institute for memorizing the Quran and nearby houses. Eleven additional ISIS operatives were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 21, 2018).

### Civilian casualties

► According to the spokesperson of the UN secretary-general, **in the Hajin area there are about 10,000 civilians** trapped due to the fighting. In addition, **about 7,000 civilians**, mainly women, children and seniors, left the area and they are now north of Hajin, in an area controlled by the SDF (UN website; Rudaw, October 11, 2018).

► Negotiations are reportedly being held between ISIS and the SDF to bring about the release of prisoners and handover of bodies of SDF fighters in return for the introduction of food into the ISIS-controlled enclave and the opening of a safe passage for civilians to leave the enclave (Furat Post Facebook page, October 21, 2018).

### Casualties

► According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, during the six weeks since the beginning of the attack on the ISIS enclave north of Albukamal, **at least 419 ISIS operatives and 232 SDF fighters** were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, October 22, 2018).

## Main developments in Iraq

### The activity of the Iraqi security forces

► The Iraqi security forces continued their counterterrorist activities against ISIS in the various provinces:

◆ **The Kirkuk area:** An Iraqi federal police force killed three ISIS operatives southwest of Kirkuk. The force found weapons, including two explosive belts (Al-Sumaria News, October 20, 2018). The Iraqi police also found an ISIS commander hiding inside a tunnel near his house, in the Al-Hawijah area (Akhbar Al-Iraq; Al-Sumaria News, October 21, 22, 2018).



**Iraqi federal police operatives dragging an ISIS commander out of a tunnel, where he had been hiding (Al-Sumaria News, October 22, 2018).**

◆ **The Al-Anbar Province:** An Iraqi army intelligence force detained an ISIS squad about 30 km west of Baghdad (Al-Sumaria News, October 20, 2018). In addition, an ISIS tunnel was destroyed, and four ISIS operatives were killed in the Hit area, in the Al-Anbar Province (Iraqi News Agency, October 21, 2018).

◆ **The Salah Al-Din Province:** An Iraqi army force found an ISIS underground cache north of Baghdad. It contained cellphones intended for remote detonation of IEDs. Thus, they reportedly thwarted ISIS's intention to carry out terrorist attacks against pilgrims, as part of the events to mark the 40th day since the death of Imam Hussein in the city of Karbala (Al-Sumaria News, October 19, 2018). In addition, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army motorized patrol east of Tikrit. An Iraqi soldier was killed (Al-Rafidayn Channel, October 18, 2018).

## ISIS activity

- ▶ According to an Iraqi security source, ISIS operatives attacked a headquarters of the Special Task Force of the Iraqi Counterterrorism Apparatus west of the Ramadi area. In clashes between ISIS operatives and the security guards on the scene, both sides sustained casualties (Al-Sumaria News, October 19, 2018).
- ▶ The Nineveh Province police reported that ISIS operatives had attacked a checkpoint in the Makhmur area, about 67 km south of Mosul. Four policemen (one of them an officer) were killed. The assailants fled the scene (Akhbar Al-Aan, October 22, 2018).

## Thwarting terrorist attacks outside Iraq

- ▶ **Abu Ali al-Basri, chief of the Intelligence and Counterterrorism Apparatus in the Iraqi Interior Ministry**, announced that the apparatus operatives had infiltrated into ISIS and provided Iraq, Syria, Iran and Russia with intelligence about the organization. He added that based on this intelligence, Russian planes had carried out airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria. These airstrikes thwarted dozens of ISIS plans to infiltrate into Iraq, Iran, Turkey and several other European countries and carry out terrorist attacks in their territory.
- ▶ Abu Ali al-Basri added that ISIS was trying to reinforce its presence in Turkey, France, East Asia and North Africa by recruiting once again the organization operatives who had fled from Syria and Iraq, and using them to carry out terrorist attacks (Iraqi News Agency, October 21, 2018).

## The Sinai Peninsula and Egypt

- ▶ ISIS's Sinai Province claimed responsibility for destroying an Egyptian army tank by detonating an IED near the western entrance to Al-Arish (Amaq, October 22, 2018). In addition, ISIS's Sinai Province announced that the organization had destroyed an Egyptian army armored vehicle by detonating an IED in southern Al-Arish (Amaq, October 22, 2018).

## Jihadi activity in other countries

### ISIS's India Province expands its ranks

- ▶ The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) recently published a study entitled "Prospects of Daesh's Expansion in South Asia." According to the study, **ISIS's India Province**, whose establishment was officially announced in 2016, **has recently attracted educated young people and is promoting its ideology among them**. Many of these recruits

are reportedly engineers, doctors and holders of MBA degrees **in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan** (Pakistan Today, October 20, 2018).

► According to the study, **Indian citizens mainly join ISIS's Khorasan Province** (which operates in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran). Over the past three years, at least 54 of the Indian citizens who joined ISIS were from Kerala, in southern India. Military activity in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has reportedly enabled the passage of ISIS operatives from Syria or Iraq, and they now have a presence in Afghanistan along this common border (Pakistan Today, October 20, 2018).