



Spotlight on Global Jihad

November 29 – December 5, 2018



Main events of the week

- ▶ **In the Idlib area**, clashes continued, mainly between the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations. The Syrian media reported that the Syrian army had sent reinforcements to the Idlib area as a preliminary step towards an offensive against the rebels. The Russian President's envoy to Syria declared that Russia would be ready to take part in fighting against the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, stressing that the fighting against it and against ISIS would continue until these organizations are eliminated.
- ▶ **In eastern Syria**, the fighting continued between the SDF and ISIS. ISIS carried out attacks against the SDF southeast of Albukamal and against the headquarters of the Popular Mobilization forces (the Iraqi Shiite militias) in east Albukamal. The SDF forces continue to send reinforcements to the area as part of their preparations for a large-scale offensive to eliminate the presence of ISIS in the region. According to Syrian media reports, International Coalition planes carried out dozens of airstrikes against ISIS targets this week, killing dozens of operatives. A **senior ISIS operative** codenamed **Abu al-Umarayn** was killed in an airstrike in the desert area west of the Euphrates Valley. He had been involved in the execution of several prisoners, including Peter Kassig (a US humanitarian activist who was executed in 2014).
- ▶ **In Iraq**, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) captured **Jamal al-Mashhadani**, a **senior ISIS operative** who had held a number of senior positions in Iraq and Syria, and served, inter alia, as governor of the North Baghdad Province and the Kirkuk Province. He had reportedly taken part in many terrorist attacks and had fired shells and rockets containing chemical substances at a city some 10 km south of Kirkuk. The capture of Al-Mashhadani, the most senior operative who fell into the hands of the Iraqi government, may provide important and intimate window into ISIS's conduct in Iraq and Syria, internal relations within the organization and a host of other topics pertaining to ISIS.
- ▶ While ISIS remains under heavy pressure in its "core countries" (Syria and Iraq), **intensive activity continues in its provinces around the world**. An examination of the activity of

ISIS's various provinces in the past month shows that the **leading provinces in terms of volume of activity were Khorasan** (Afghanistan/Pakistan) and the **West Africa Province** in Nigeria (whose activity also “overflows” into neighboring countries). **One prominent attack was carried out against two vehicles transporting Coptic Christians in Egypt** (while sporadic attacks continued in the **Sinai Province** in northern Sinai, despite the heavy pressure exerted on it by the Egyptian security forces). The rest of the provinces continued their routine terror and guerrilla activity at lower levels of intensity.

Russian involvement in Syria

The Russian President's envoy to Syria: Russia is willing to take part in fighting against the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

► Speaking at a press conference, **Russian President Putin's Special Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev** announced that **Russia was ready to take part in fighting against the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** (November 28, 2018). According to him, **there are more than 15,000 operatives (“militants”) who belong to the organization in the Idlib region**. He expressed the hope that the armed forces of the Syrian opposition (i.e., the non-jihadi rebel organizations) would manage to cope with this problematic area and impose order there. **“If necessary,”** Lavrentiev said, **“we are prepared to provide all the necessary assistance, including assistance to the Syrian government forces.”** He stressed that the **fighting against ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham would continue “until they are eliminated”** (TASS News Agency, November 28, 2018).

Announcement of the conclusion of the round of talks in Astana: Russia, Turkey and Iran will work to implement the agreements on Idlib

► On November 29, 2018, the 11th round of talks on Syria in Astana ended. **In their concluding statement, Russia, Turkey and Iran** (the three leading countries) expressed their concern over the continuing ceasefire violations in the Idlib region. The concluding statement noted that these three countries would increase their efforts to supervise the ceasefire, including intensifying the activity of the Iranian-Russian-Turkish Joint Coordination Center. The three also reiterated their determination to continue cooperation in order to **“ultimately eliminate” ISIS and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (“the Al-Nusra Front”)**. They also called upon all forces of the armed opposition (i.e., the other rebel

organizations) to immediately disengage from these organizations (the text of the joint statement as published by the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, November 29, 2018).

The Idlib area

The Syrian army reinforces its troops in the Idlib area in advance of a possible attack

According to a report in the Syrian media (a website affiliated with the Syrian opposition), **the Syrian army has reinforced its troops in the Idlib area in advance of a possible attack.** This week, the Syrian army and the forces supporting it reportedly **sent hundreds of reinforcements and dozens of military vehicles to the Idlib area and to the demilitarized zone, as a preliminary step in advance of a possible attack against the rebels** (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, December 2, 2018). Photos of these reinforcements were uploaded to YouTube apparently in order to convey a **public deterrent message** to the rebel organizations in the Idlib area. In addition, it was reported that Shiite militias handled by Iran had been transferred from Deir ez-Zor and deployed in the southern Idlib Province (Khotwa, December 2, 2018).



Right: APC column making its way to the Idlib area (Cedar News – Lebanon, December 1, 2018).

Left: Syrian army convoy moving towards the Idlib area (YouTube, Ex Aldebaran313 Channel affiliated with the Syrian regime, November 30, 2018)

Incidents in the Idlib area

► Following are prominent incidents that took place this past week in the Idlib area, **mainly between the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations:**

◆ **The Syrian army** fired artillery at villages northwest of Hama. According to the Syrian regime, the targets were rebel traffic arteries and infiltration routes. Several rebel organization operatives were killed and wounded (SANA, December 1, 2018).



Syrian army soldier at a firing position in the rural area north of Hama (SANA, December 1, 2018)

◆ **The Syrian army** fired artillery at towns and villages in the rural area south of Idlib. One woman was wounded and several houses were damaged (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, November 28, 2018).

◆ **The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham** attacked Syrian army positions in the Latakia Province. Four Syrian soldiers were killed. The attackers were killed by the Syrian army (TASS, November 29, 2018).

◆ The operations room controlled by the **Guardians of Religion Organization** (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) reported that it had fired mortar shells and heavy machine guns in the northern part of the Al-Ghab Plain (about 11 km south of Jisr Al-Shughur) (Whaharid_almuminin@ Telegram channel, December 1, 2018).

◆ Snipers of the **Guardians of Religion Organization** (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) fired at soldiers of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it in the rural areas of Aleppo, Latakia and Hama (operations room controlled by the Guardians or Religion Organization, November 30, 2018).



Right: One of the Syrian army soldiers who was targeted by the snipers of the Guardians of Religion Organization. Left: Position made of tires filled with rocks, manned by a Syrian army soldier, targeted by a sniper of the Guardians of Religion Organization (operations room controlled by the Guardians of Religion Organization, November 30, 2018)

- ◆ Media outlets affiliated with the Syrian regime reported that **the Syrian army** had fired artillery at the rural area north of Hama, in retaliation for a rebel attack.



Right: Syrian army field gun firing at the rural area north of Hama (Syrian TV, December 1, 2018). Left: Syrian army tank attacking “terrorist operatives” in the rural area north of Hama (Syrian TV, December 2, 2018)

Eastern Syria

Fighting against the ISIS enclave along the Euphrates River focused this week on the southern part of the enclave, southeast of Albukamal. It seems that this week, too, ISIS seized the initiative. Coalition planes increased their airstrikes, killing dozens of ISIS operatives. The Coalition spokesman said that one of those killed was a senior ISIS operative involved in the execution of prisoners, including the American humanitarian activist Peter Kassig (who was executed by ISIS in 2014). At the same time, the SDF continued to send reinforcements to the area.

ISIS attacks against the SDF forces

- ▶ **On November 30, 2018**, an ISIS motorized force, including 15 vehicles, attacked SDF forces in the Al-Baghouz area (southeast of Albukamal).¹ Clashes occurred between both sides. As a result, twelve ISIS operatives were killed (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 30, 2018). The SDF forces reported that **on December 1, 2018, ISIS operatives had attacked** SDF positions in the Albukamal area. According to the statement, the ISIS operatives used car bombs (SDF Media Center, December 1, 2018).
- ▶ The SDF forces announced that they had carried out a humanitarian campaign in the Albukamal area (the focus of the fighting this week). As part of this campaign, **they opened a humanitarian crossing used by dozens of people**, mostly women and children. Those were families previously controlled by ISIS, who had used them as human shields. The SDF fighters gave them food and medications and transferred them to safe zones (SDF Media Center, December 1, 2018).



Right: ISIS antitank missile hitting a Syrian army tank in the village of Al-Asha'er, north of Albukamal (Shabakat Shumukh, December 3, 2018). Left: SDF fighter assisting a boy to dismount from a vehicle with civilians rescued from ISIS in the Albukamal area (SDF Media Center, December 1, 2018)

ISIS attack against the Iraqi Shiite militias

- ▶ **On November 29, 2018**, an ISIS force attacked the **headquarters of the Popular Mobilization forces** (Iraqi Shiite militias) in east Albukamal (near the Euphrates River). For over two hours, clashes took place between ISIS operatives who infiltrated from the east bank of the Euphrates, and members of the Shiite militias who manned the headquarters. During the clashes, the ISIS operatives fired an antitank missile, following which the headquarters caught fire. At the end of the attack, the ISIS force retreated, and

¹ It is unclear whether it was Al-Baghouz Tahtani (adjacent to the Syrian-Iraqi border) or Al-Baghouz Fawqani (which is closer to Albukamal).

reinforcements of the Nujaba Movement (an Iraqi Shiite militia handled by Iran) were sent to the site (Al-Sharqiya 24, November 30, 2018).

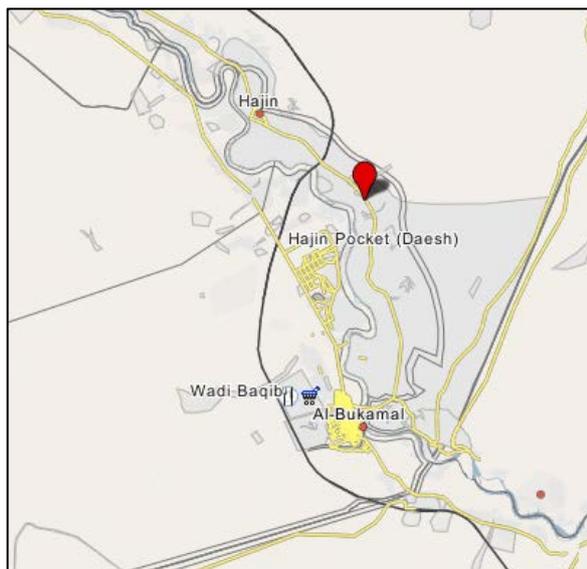
International Coalition airstrikes

The desert area west of the Euphrates

► **Colonel Sean Ryan**, Spokesman for the International Coalition forces, announced that a Coalition aircraft had carried out an airstrike that **resulted in the death of a senior ISIS operative codenamed Abu al-Umarayn. Several other operatives of the organization were also killed in the airstrike.** According to the announcement, the airstrike was carried out in the “Syrian desert” west of the Euphrates Valley. Abu al-Umarayn was directly involved in the execution of a number of prisoners held by ISIS, including Peter Kassig in 2014. Kassig was a US citizen who worked for a humanitarian organization (CNN, December 2, 2018; Army Times, December 3, 2018).

ISIS enclaves in the Euphrates Valley

- Following are reports of Coalition airstrikes in the Euphrates Valley:
- ◆ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights announced that **on the night of November 27-28, Coalition aircraft carried out an airstrike against ISIS houses and headquarters in the village of Al-Kashmah** (about 11 km south of Hajin). **At least five prisoners held by ISIS were killed in the attack, along with three ISIS operatives** who secured the area (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 29, 2018). ISIS, on its part, announced that **Coalition aircraft had carried out an airstrike against a prison** (controlled by ISIS) **in the village of Al-Kashmah.** As a result, SDF fighters who were incarcerated in the prison were killed and wounded (Shumukh, November 28, 2018).



Right: ISIS operatives preparing to launch a mortar shell at SDF positions northeast of the town of Al-Kashmah (ISIS's Al-Sham – Al-Baraka Province, December 2, 2018) Left: The village of Al-Kashmah (Wikimapia)

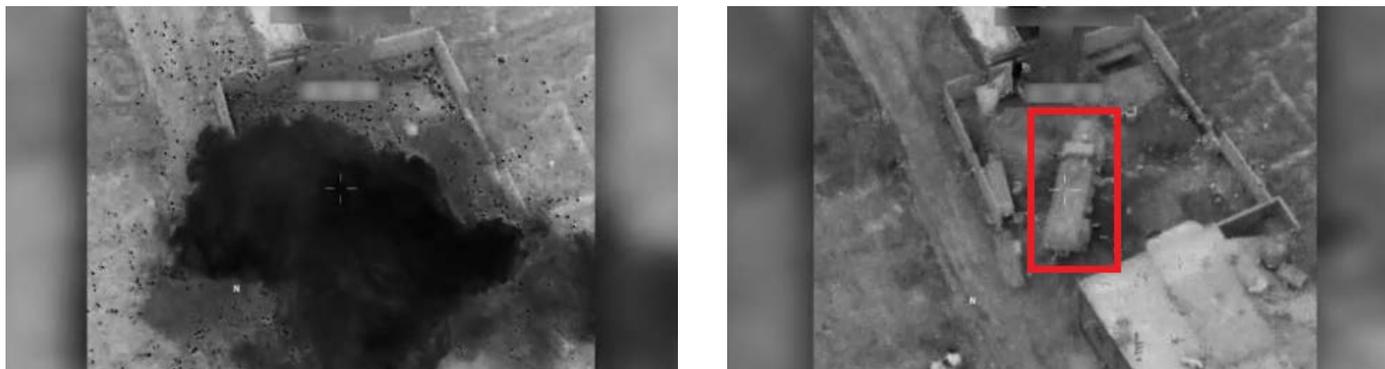
- ◆ **On November 30, 2018**, a Coalition airstrike was carried out **against ISIS targets in the city of Hajin, ISIS's stronghold**. The targets attacked included ISIS arms and ammunition depots. **Seven ISIS operatives were killed in the attack** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 30, 2018). ISIS reported that its operatives had used a heavy machine gun mounted on a motorcycle to shoot down an SDF drone used for surveillance missions around the city of Hajin (December 3, 2018) (Amaq, December 4, 2018).



Right: ISIS operative firing a machine gun mounted on a motorcycle at an SDF drone circling above the city of Hajin (Amaq, December 4, 2018). Left: ISIS operative firing an anti-aircraft gun mounted on an ATV at a Coalition drone circling above the region (ISIS's Al-Sham – Al-Baraka Province, December 1, 2018)

- ◆ According to the Media Center of the SDF forces, **on December 1, 2018, a total of 34 airstrikes were carried out by Coalition aircraft against ISIS targets**. According to the announcement, **33 ISIS operatives were killed**. The bodies of four of them are

in the hands of the SDF forces. In addition, two positions where ISIS operatives had barricaded themselves were destroyed (SDF Media Center, December 1, 2018).



Right: ISIS fuel tanker in Al-Sousa, moments before its destruction by Coalition aircraft. Left: Smoke rising from the wreckage of the tanker (Operation Inherent Resolve website, December 4, 2018).

SDF reinforcements along the contact lines with ISIS

► According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **over 1,000 fighters were sent this week to reinforce the SDF troops along the contact lines with ISIS.** In addition, more than 1,700 SDF fighters arrived to reinforce the Al-Tanak oilfield (about 22 km north of Hajin), where the SDF base is located. **According to these reports, a total of over 2,700 fighters reinforced the area north of Albukamal** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 29, 2018). According to a Syrian opposition source, the SDF and the local forces supporting it have **over 15,000 fighters in the area north of Albukamal** (Syria TV, December 1, 2018).²



SDF reinforcements on their way to the contact lines with ISIS (Syria TV, December 1, 2018)

► According to another report, on the night of December 4, 2018, a convoy was spotted consisting of 75 trucks transporting military equipment for the SDF. The trucks arrived from the autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq. The arrival of the convoy is reportedly **part of the**

² As opposed to a few thousand ISIS operatives in the enclave north of Albukamal. The US army recently announced that ISIS had about 2,000 operatives remaining in the central Euphrates Valley (Operation Inherent Resolve website, December 4, 2018).

preparations carried out in advance of a large-scale offensive, designed to put an end to the ISIS presence on the east bank of the Euphrates River by taking over the ISIS enclave (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 4, 2018).

ISIS and SDF casualties

► According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, since the beginning of the offensive against the ISIS enclave north of Albukamal, **807 ISIS operatives and 469 SDF fighters have been killed** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 4, 2018).

Main developments in Iraq

The activity of the Iraqi security forces

► On November 29, 2018, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) announced that it had detained **Jamal Khalil Taha al-Mashhadani** in Baghdad. He was a high-ranking ISIS operative who had held several senior positions in Syria and Iraq and served, inter alia, as **the governor of North Baghdad and governor of Kirkuk**. He took part in many terrorist activities, as well as in firing shells and rockets containing chemical substances at the city of Taza (Khurmatu), about 10 km south of Kirkuk. He also participated in the battles in Iraq and Syria (Al-Sumaria News, November 30, 2018).



Jamal Khalil Taha al-Mashhadani, codenamed Abu Hamza al-Kurdi, ISIS senior operative apprehended in Baghdad by the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (NAS YouTube channel, November 29, 2018)

In the ITIC's assessment, this is **the most significant achievement of the Iraqi government** and the Iraqi security forces, as part of the activity to locate ISIS operatives and commanders who have occupied senior positions in the Islamic State. The capture of Al-Mashhadani opens a window to more intimate knowledge of ISIS's military and financial conduct in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS activity

An examination of ISIS's activity in the past month in Iraq shows that ISIS's terrorist and guerrilla activity continued to focus on the area between Baghdad and Kirkuk, **an area with a large Sunni-Muslim population**. The provinces where prominent activity took place were **Diyala, Salah al-Din, and Kirkuk**. Terrorist activity and guerrilla warfare also took place on a smaller scale **in the Al-Anbar Province** and in other provinces.

► Following are prominent ISIS's operations carried out in the past week (according to ISIS reports):

◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** On November 30, 2018, ISIS reported that **its operatives had killed an Iraqi army officer** in the Al-Anbar Province. The officer served also as the sheikh of one of the tribes cooperating with the Iraqi government as part of the (Tribal) Mobilization. The ISIS operatives killed the officer in his home with an M-16 assault rifle equipped with a silencer. Seven other people who were there were killed along with him (Iraq – Al-Fallujah Province, November 30 – December 1, 2018).



ISIS operative threatens Iraqi army officer with a gun equipped with a silencer (Iraq – Al-Fallujah Province, November 30 – December 1, 2018)

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** A roadside charge was activated against vehicles of the “Mobilization” (either the Tribal or Popular Mobilization, the ISIS report does not specify which) about 65 km south of Kirkuk. The operatives in the vehicles were either

killed or wounded and the vehicles were damaged (Iraq – Kirkuk Province, November 30, 2018).

- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** On November 30, 2018, ISIS operatives attacked with light and medium weapons a position of the “Mobilization” (either the Tribal or Popular Mobilization, the ISIS report does not specify which) about 63 km north of Baghdad, killing two of the Popular/Tribal Mobilization members and wounding a third (Iraq – North Baghdad Province, December 1, 2018).
- ◆ **Diyala Province:** An airstrike was carried out against an ISIS underground hideout in the Hamrin Mountains, about 75 km northeast of Baqubah, killing three ISIS operatives (Iraqi News Agency, December 1, 2018)
- ◆ **Salah Al-Din Province:** ISIS operatives activated an IED against a Popular Mobilization vehicle southwest of Baiji. ISIS reported that all the passengers in the vehicle were either killed or wounded (Iraq – Salah Al-Din Province, December 2, 2018).
- ◆ **Salah Al-Din Province:** ISIS operatives activated an IED against a Tribal Mobilization vehicle in the Tikrit area. ISIS reported that all the passengers were either killed or wounded (Iraq – Salah Al-Din Province, December 2, 2018).
- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** ISIS announced that on December 1, 2018, its operatives had detonated an IED against an Iraqi army vehicle in the city of Mosul. One soldier was reportedly killed and another wounded (Iraq – Nineveh Province, December 2, 2018).



An Iraqi army force during a security activity against ISIS (Iraqi News Agency, December 1, 2018)

- ◆ **The city of Mosul:** An Iraqi police force apprehended an ISIS security apparatus operative in northwest Mosul. Following his admission, four other ISIS operatives were detained. They had operated as part of ISIS’s security apparatus and morality police when the organization controlled Mosul (Al-Sumaria News, December 2, 2018).

Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

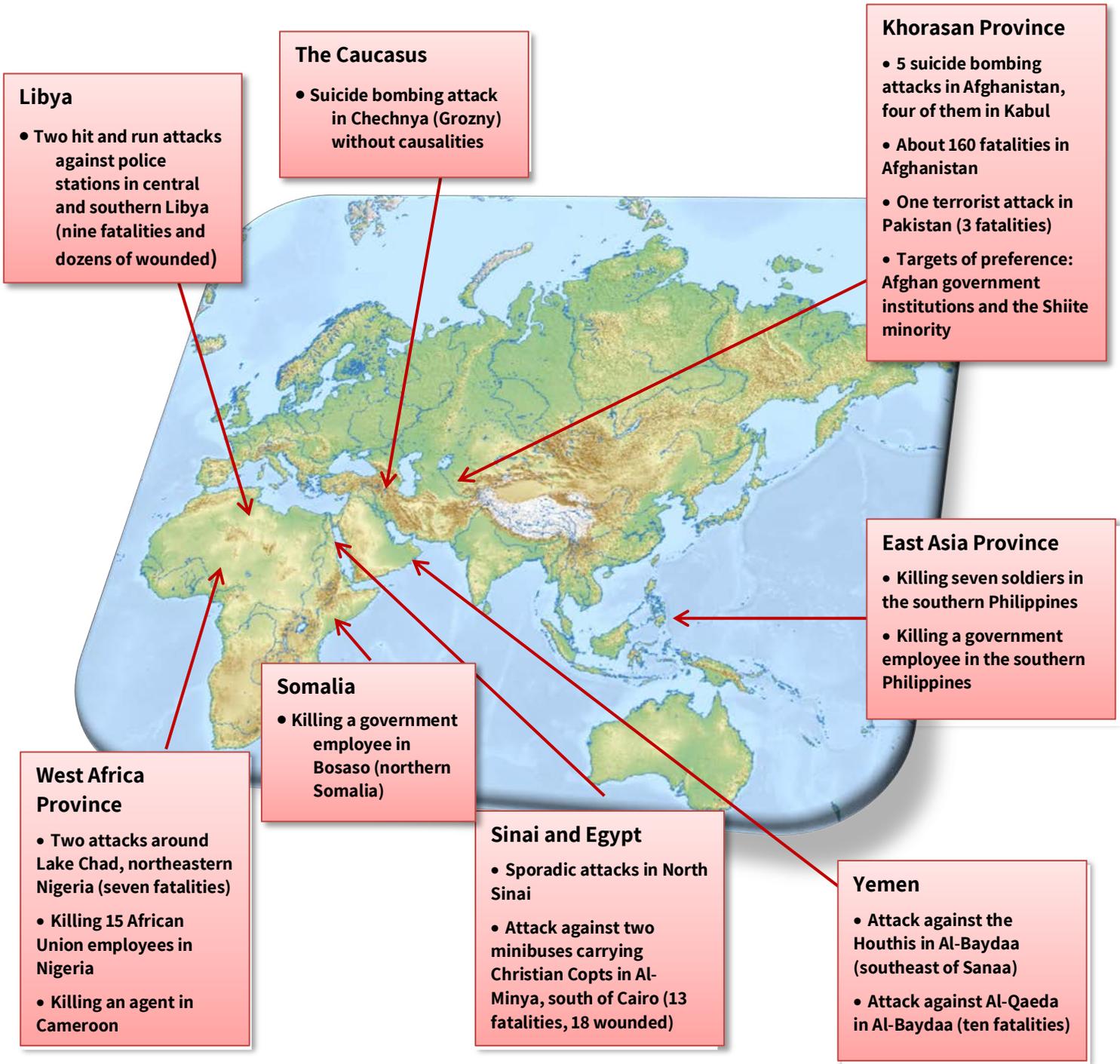
- On December 3, 2018, an IED was detonated against an Egyptian army patrol near the Port of Rafah, killing one soldier. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack (ISIS’s Sinai Province and Amaq, December 3, 2018).

Jihadi activity in other countries

Examination of ISIS’s activity around the world (monthly summary³)

While ISIS remains under heavy pressure in its “core countries” (Syria and Iraq), **intensive activity continues in its provinces around the world**, at varying levels of intensity. In the past month, the activity of three provinces has been especially prominent: **the Khorasan Province (Afghanistan/Pakistan)**, which is the leading province in terms of deadly attacks (multiple suicide bombing attacks); **the West African Province in Nigeria**, whose activity is also gradually spreading to neighboring countries. A prominent attack was carried out **in Egypt proper** against the Christian Copts (while in **the North Sinai Province** sporadic attacks continue despite the heavy pressure exerted on ISIS by the Egyptian security forces). ISIS’s other provinces around the world continued their “routine” offensive and defensive activities at a lower level of intensity.

³ From the end of October to the end of November 2018.



Detonation of an IED against a militia supporting the Afghan army

► On December 3, 2018, ISIS operatives detonated an IED against a force of a militia that supports the Afghan army in the Kunar region of eastern Afghanistan. Four fighters were killed and two were wounded (ISIS’s Khorasan Province, December 3, 2018)

ISIS attack against police patrol in western Tunisia

► Three “terrorist operatives” riding on motorcycles reportedly fired Kalashnikovs at a **Tunisian police patrol in the city of Kasserine in western Tunisia** (approximately 217 km southwest of the capital, Tunis). A civilian was wounded in the exchange of fire. The attackers fled from the scene (Masrawy, November 29, 2018). **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** According to the claim of responsibility, ISIS operatives attacked a Tunisian police patrol in the Al-Manar neighborhood of the city of Kasserine (Amaq, November 30, 2018).

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Detention of ISIS operatives in Turkey

► The Turkish police announced that they had detained at least three Iraqi nationals in the northwest of the country on suspicion of having ties with ISIS. One of the suspects was a central figure in ISIS’s branch in the Al-Anbar Province (in western Iraq). One of the detainees had reportedly sent operatives [from Iraq] to Turkey (Anatolia News Agency, November 28, 2018).

Detention of ISIS operatives in Tunisia following a suicide bombing attack

► The Tunisian security forces detained 12 suspected ISIS operatives. According to the Interior Ministry, the detentions were carried out following a suicide bombing attack carried out by a woman in the capital, Tunis (on October 29, 2018), in which the suicide bomber was killed and 26 people were wounded (France 24, November 30, 2018).⁴

The battle for hearts and minds

Threat to carry out attacks in Canada during Christmas

► One of ISIS’s media outlets [which was not named] published a poster **threatening to carry out attacks in a shopping and entertainment district in Toronto during Christmas.** The poster shows a hand holding a bloody knife in Yonge-Dundas Square, which is illuminated at

⁴See the ITIC’s Information Bulletin “Spotlight on Global Jihad” from October 31, 2018.

night. A caption appears in one corner of the poster, which reads: “O cross pigs we’ll color your Christmas with your blood, so drink its toast and your children’s presents will be your corpse pieces if Allah wants” (P.J. Media, December 3, 2018). **Note:** The poster was published on P.J. Media but without the threatening caption. The complete poster was not found in other sources.



ISIS poster threatening attacks in Toronto during Christmas (P.J. Media, December 3, 2018)