



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## December 6-12, 2018



### Main events of the week

- ▶ **In eastern Syria**, SDF forces, with massive air and artillery support from the Coalition countries, launched an **attack on ISIS in the city of Hajin**, ISIS's stronghold in the enclave north of Albukamal. After several days of fighting, the SDF fighters managed to take control of the hospital in the north of the city, which had served as a combat zone for ISIS operatives, and suburbs in the western part of the city. **The fighting is still ongoing.** If the SDF fighters manage to take over the city of Hajin and its environs, this may significantly weaken ISIS's control in the area north of Albukamal.
- ▶ **In the Idlib area** incidents continued, consisting mainly of exchanges of artillery fire between the Syrian army and the jihadi rebel organizations. This week, both the United States and Britain published announcements that **the accusations against the rebel organizations on the use of chlorine gas were false.** According to the US announcement, forces supporting the Assad regime apparently used tear gas against civilians in the city of Aleppo. According to the announcement, United States believes that Russia and Syria are using the incident to undermine confidence in the ceasefire in Idlib.
- ▶ On December 12, 2018, **a shooting attack was carried out in the Christmas market in Strasbourg, France.** Four people were apparently killed and around 12 wounded. The terrorist, a French-born Moroccan with a criminal record, was on the French police list of suspected terrorists. So far, no claim of responsibility by ISIS was found. **It should be noted that ISIS's supporters have carried out deadly attacks shortly before Christmas in the past two years** (a ramming attack in Berlin in 2016, and an IED explosion in Manhattan in 2017).
- ▶ This week, an ISIS-affiliated media outlet published a **poster calling for attacks in Western countries in response to the Coalition airstrikes in Hajin.** The poster reads: "Stab, run over, [throw a] Molotov [cocktail]." Coalition airstrikes and the heavy pressure exerted on ISIS in

Hajin **may increase the motivation of ISIS supporters** to respond to calls and carry out **attacks, especially in Western countries.**

## The Idlib area

### Incidents in the Idlib area continue

► This week as well, incidents in the Idlib area continued, mainly between **the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations.** Following are the main events:

- ◆ A website affiliated with the Syrian army reported that the Syrian army had hit (possibly with artillery fire) reinforcements arriving at the **Caucasus Armies**, about 50 km south of Idlib (the Caucasus Armies is a Salafist-jihadi organization of fighters originating in the Caucasus, operating in Syria). Several operatives of the organization were either killed or wounded, and several positions were destroyed (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, December 8, 2018).



**A Syrian army soldier near a rocket launcher as part of the deployment against the rebel forces in the Idlib area (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, December 8, 2018)**

- ◆ The operations room of the **Guardians of Religion Organization** (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) reported that its snipers had killed a **Syrian army soldier** about 22 km south of Jisr al-Shughur. The following day, its snipers killed another Syrian soldier (operations room controlled by the Guardians of Religion Organization, December 7-8, 2018).
- ◆ **Jaysh al-Izza** (“the Army of Glory”), affiliated with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, fired machine guns at **Syrian army positions** about 30 km northwest of Hama. The Syrian army returned fire and attacked forces of Jaysh al-Izza in the rural area north of Hama (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, December 8, 2018).

◆A website affiliated with the Syrian regime reported that **the Syrian army** had destroyed fortifications and reinforcements of the **Turkestan Islamic Party** about 11 km south of Jisr al-Shughur (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, December 8, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

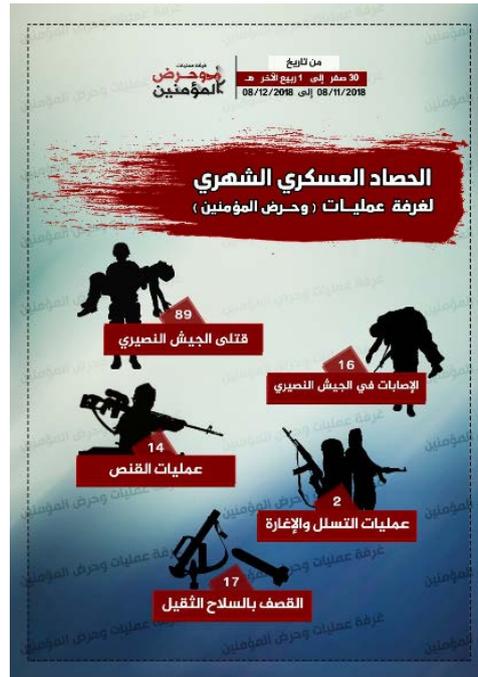
### Guardians of Religion Organization increases the scope of its activity

During the recent weeks, the Guardians of Religion Organization (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) has increased the scope of its military activity in the Idlib area. Its activity mainly consists of rocket and mortar fire and sniper shooting at Syrian army positions. This organization carries out its activity through an operations room called “Awaken the Believers”, whose activity is shared by four jihadi organizations led by the Guardians of Religion Organization. Such activity may indicate an increase in the military power and motivation of the Guardians of Religion Organization, even though the rival jihadi organization, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, has remained the leading organization in the Idlib area.

► In the past week, the operations room of the Guardians of Religion Organization released an infographic summing up its activity in the month between November 8 and December 8, 2018. According to the statement, during this period, it carried out 17 attacks by artillery fire (mortar shells and rockets), 14 incidents of sniper shooting, and two raids against Syrian army positions. In these actions, according to the operations room, the Syrian army sustained 89 fatalities and 16 wounded (in the ITIC’s assessment, these numbers are exaggerated).

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<sup>1</sup> **The Turkestan Islamic Party** is a Salafist-jihadi organization consisting of Muslim operatives of the Uyghur minority living in the Xinjiang Province (Turkestan), west China. These are operatives who arrived in Syria in early 2012 and operated as part of the Al-Nusra Front (currently known as the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham). In the past, it was reported that most of them were in the area of Jisr al-Shughur, southwest of Idlib. According to a report in Asharq Al-Awsat (August 30, 2018), they currently number about 1,500 operatives. In 2015, their number was estimated at about 3,500 operatives.



Infographic of the operations room “Awaken the Believers,” summing up the military activity in the period between November 8 and December 8, 2018 (Awaken the Believers operations room)

## The US: Assad regime and Russia disseminated false information about the use of chlorine gas by rebel organizations

- On November 24, 2018, the Syrian regime and Russia accused the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham of firing shells containing chlorine gas at west Aleppo. Some two weeks later (December 7, 2018), the Deputy Spokesman for the US Department of State issued a statement **that these allegations were false**. The statement notes that **the US had reliable information that forces supporting the Assad regime had apparently used tear gas against civilians in Aleppo**. According to the statement, the United States believes that **Russia and Syria are taking advantage of the incident to undermine confidence in the ceasefire in Idlib** (US Department of State website, December 7, 2018).
- **The British Foreign Office issued a statement** to the effect that there was no evidence to support Russia and Syria’s claims regarding the use of chlorine gas. The spokesman added that it was **unlikely that chlorine gas had been used in the incident**, as the Syrian regime and Russia claimed, and it was unlikely that the Syrian opposition was responsible for the attack (BBC News, December 7, 2018).

**The Russian Ministry of Defense** responded to the American announcement by saying that the goal of the US was to exonerate US-affiliated operatives in Syria, and that the US announcement was also intended to divert the attention of the international community

from the “crimes” committed by American warplanes in eastern Syria. The Russian Ministry of Defense noted that it had unequivocal evidence of the use of poison gas against civilians in the attack in question (ITAR TASS, December 8, 2018).

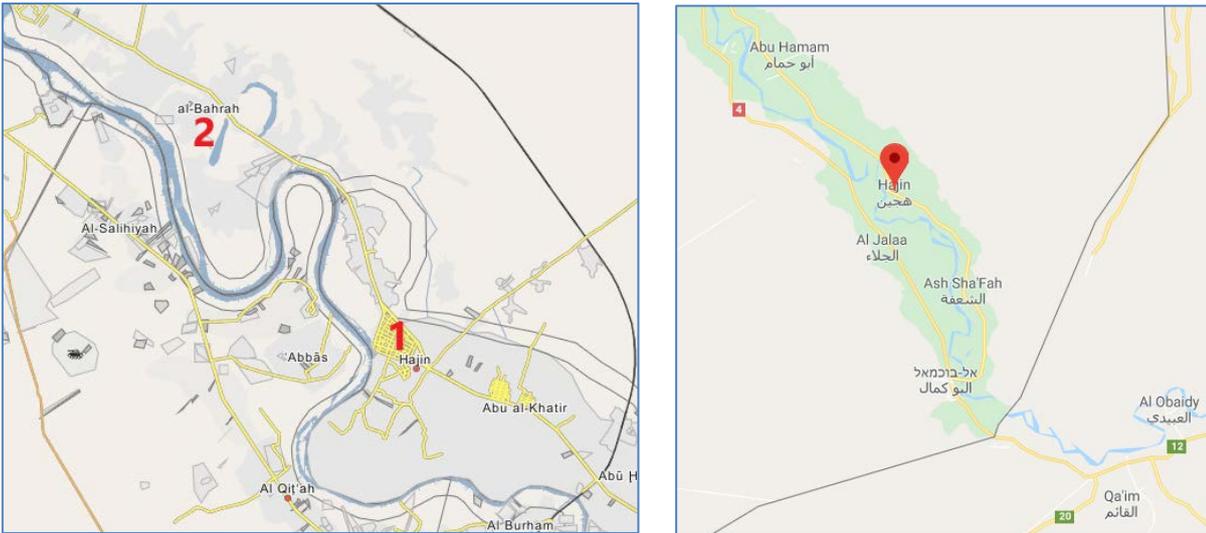
## Eastern Syria

### SDF attack on the city of Hajin

After preparations which lasted for several weeks, **the SDF fighters attacked ISIS positions and concentrations in the city of Hajin**, in the northern part of the area controlled by ISIS. Hajin is ISIS’s most important stronghold in the Euphrates Valley, apparently serving as the location of ISIS’s headquarters. According to the ITIC's assessment, the SDF and the Coalition countries believe that the fall of Hajin will bring about the collapse of the ISIS enclave north of Albukamal. The attacking force was supported by Coalition artillery fire and airstrikes. At this stage, **the SDF and the forces supporting it managed to take control of the northern and western outskirts of Hajin**. The main confrontation sites were the hospital in the northern part of the city and Al-Hawamah neighborhood to its west. **The clashes in Hajin are still ongoing**. On the night of December 11, 2018, the SDF reportedly took over the market area in the west of Hajin (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, December 12, 2018).

► Following is a brief overview of the situation based on partial information (updated to the morning of December 12, 2018):

◆ The attack carried out by the SDF forces on the Hajin area **started on December 7**, in the evening. SDF forces, supported by Coalition artillery and airstrikes, advanced towards the city from the north (SDF Media Center, December 9, 2018). The SDF took over **the village of Al-Bahra**, about 2 km northwest of Hajin, and used the village as a launching pad to attack the city. On December 8, 2018, the forces took over the **Al-Hawamah neighborhood**, on the western outskirts of Hajin (see map). The neighborhood reportedly sustained heavy damage as a result of the artillery and airstrikes, which also killed dozens of civilians (Furat Post Facebook page; Baladi News, December 8, 2018).



**Right: The city of Hajin (Google Maps). Left: The city of Hajin (1) and the village of Al-Bahra (2) (Wikimapia)**



**Confrontation sites in Hajin: the hospital in the north (1) and the Al-Hawamah neighborhood in the west (2) (Wikimapia)**



**Right: Smoke rising from an ISIS building in the city of Hajin, after a Coalition airstrike (SDF Press YouTube channel, December 8, 2018). Left: Coalition planes hitting an ISIS building in Hajin (SDF Press YouTube channel, December 8, 2018)**

◆ On December 9, 2018, ISIS reported that **its forces had halted the SDF attempt to break into Hajin**. According to ISIS's report, **its operatives caused the SDF fighters to walk into a minefield**. As a result, five SDF fighters were killed and many others were wounded. In the clashes (on Hajin's northern outskirts), at least 15 ISIS operatives were killed and others were wounded. The SDF force had to retreat (Amaq, December 9, 2018).



**Right: Five SDF fighters on the rooftop of a building in the village of Al-Bahra, northwest of Hajin (Al-Sham – Baraka Province, December 8, 2018). Left: ISIS antitank missile hitting a building (Al-Sham – Baraka Province, December 8, 2018)**

◆ **The takeover of the hospital in northern Hajin:** The SDF forces announced that on December 9, 2018, in the evening, **ISIS operatives had blown up the hospital in Hajin with IEDs which they had planted in the building**. The hospital sustained heavy damage. The SDF, supported by the Shueitat tribespeople,<sup>2</sup> **surrounded the building and took it over from ISIS**. SDF sappers deactivated some of the IEDs (SDF Media Center, December 10, 2018). ISIS announced that on December 10, 2018, its operatives had attacked the hospital and killed seven SDF fighters (Amaq, December 10, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The Shueitat is a Sunni-Muslim Arab tribe numbering 70,000-90,000. The tribespeople live in the area north of Albukamal, on the east bank of the Euphrates, where the SDF and the Coalition countries fight against ISIS. **A bloody conflict prevails between this tribe and ISIS**. In August 2014, ISIS operatives massacred hundreds of the tribespeople. In mid-December 2014, a mass grave was discovered, containing the bodies of about 230 of the tribespeople executed by ISIS.



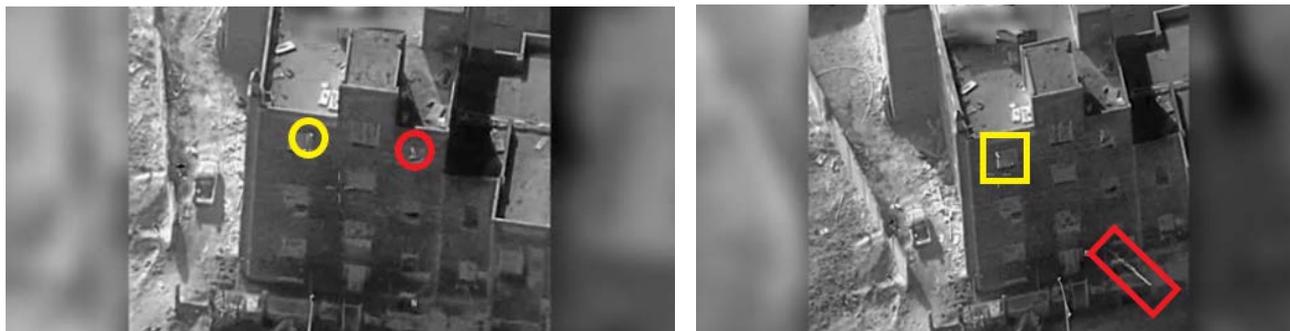
**Members of a force operating as part of the SDF near the hospital in northern Hajin which they took over from ISIS (Drexl Spivey@RisboLensk Twitter account, December 9 [US local date], 2018)**

### **US response to accusations of civilian casualties in airstrikes**

- ▶ Russia, ISIS and other elements are waging a propaganda war against the United States and the Coalition, accusing them of airstrikes that hit dozens of civilians and the destruction of the hospital in Hajin<sup>3</sup>. Senior US and SDF officials accused ISIS of using civilians remaining in the area under its control as human shields. According to the same officials, ISIS operatives are threatening civilians not to leave the Hajin enclave. According to UN estimates, there are about 7,000 people there (The New York Times, December 9, 2018).
- ▶ In response to these accusations, the US Army issued a statement to the effect that the hospital in Hajin had lost its status as a protected site under the Geneva Convention. This is because **ISIS used it as a site for an attack against the SDF** (“our partner forces”). The announcement accused ISIS of hiding in mosques, hospitals and other protected sites. It was accompanied by a video showing (an ISIS operative) shooting from inside the hospital building (Operation Inherent Resolve website, December 10, 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> Russian media reported that an airstrike carried out by US-led Coalition forces completely destroyed a hospital in the city of Hajin. The Russian and Syrian media also reported that dozens of civilians were wounded in the American airstrikes. Coalition Spokesman Sean Ryan stated that there were no civilian casualties in these airstrikes (Sputnik, December 7, 2018).



**Right: The hospital in Hajin. In yellow: The window from which light weapons were fired by an ISIS operative. In red: SDF fire. Left: The hospital in Hajin. In yellow: ISIS operative who fired from the window. In red: Another ISIS operative near the window (Operation Inherent Resolve website, December 10, 2018).**



**Right: Buildings destroyed in the Al-Hawamah neighborhood in west Hajin. Left: SDF fighters in the Al-Hawamah neighborhood (Al-Raqqa Post, December 8, 2018)**

## Iraqi airstrikes against ISIS

► On December 11, 2018, Iraqi Air Force warplanes carried out airstrikes against two ISIS targets in the area of Al-Susah, about seven kilometers northeast of Albukamal. The first target was an ISIS headquarters where around 30 ISIS operatives were holding a meeting; the second was a headquarters where 14 terrorists were present (Syria TV, December 11, 2018).

## Losses sustained by ISIS and the SDF

► The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that since the beginning of the attack on the ISIS enclave, **854 ISIS operatives and 512 SDF fighters had been killed** (SOHR, December 9, 2018).

## Morale-raising video produced by an ISIS media outlet

► ISIS's Al-Baraka Province released a video, the third in a series, entitled: "Attacks by those who believe in the oneness of Allah." **The purpose of the high-quality video was to raise the morale of its operatives fighting against the SDF north of Albukamal.** The video

begins by addressing each of the organization’s operatives (“Who are you, soldier of the Caliphate?”). It then shows Coalition airstrikes and documentation of attacks carried out by ISIS in recent weeks. In the video, ISIS showcases its achievements, including attacks on positions with antitank missiles, planting high-intensity IEDs, use of car bombs, and the takeover of areas protected by dirt embankments. The video also shows SDF fighters who were taken prisoner and the bodies of SDF fighters who were killed (Shumukh, December 10, 2018).



**Poster for the third video in the series: “Attacks by those who believe in the oneness of Allah” (Dawlat al-Muwahidin) released by ISIS’s Al-Baraka Province (Shumukh, December 10, 2018)**



**Force of ISIS operatives including ATVs and motorcycles on its way to attack the SDF forces under cover of a sandstorm (Shumukh, December 10, 2018)**



**Right: SDF fighters leaving after having surrendered to ISIS operatives (Shumukh, December 10, 2018). Left: ISIS operatives firing at SDF forces during a sandstorm in the area north of Albukamal (Shumukh, December 10, 2018)**

## Main developments in Iraq

### The activity of the Iraqi security forces

#### Suicide bombing attack thwarted

► On December 6, 2018, a police force stopped a car bomb loaded with IEDs about 45 km west of Baghdad. In the car, there was a 15-year-old boy, allegedly an ISIS operative sent to carry out a suicide bombing attack. On the rear window of the car, there was an inscription: “[The days] will pass, and better [days] will come” (Al-Sumaria News, December 6, 2018).



**Right: The boy who drove the car bomb, an ISIS suicide bomber. Left: IEDs found inside the car bomb (Al-Sumaria News, December 6, 2018)**

#### Additional activities

- Following are additional activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces on the past week:
- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** An Iraqi Military Intelligence force in the city of Hit exposed and detained seven operatives of a “terrorist squad” [by implication, ISIS], who had planned to attack civilians and members of the security forces (Al-Sumaria News, December 8, 2018).
  - ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** An Iraqi Military Intelligence force in the area of [Lake] Tharthar, about 47 km west of Samarra, located a hideout of [ISIS’s] weapons. They were blown up in a controlled manner (Iraqi News Agency, December 7, 2018).
  - ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** A Popular Mobilization force in the Hamrin Mountains killed an ISIS suicide bomber and wounded two others, who fled the scene. Explosive belts and IEDs were found in the possession of the three operatives (Al-Hashed.net, December 6, 2018).



**Popular Mobilization vehicle with a heavy machine gun during security activity  
(Al-Hashed.net, December 6, 2018)**

- ◆ **Diyala Province:** The Iraqi Military Intelligence announced that one of ISIS's greatest experts on making IEDs, nicknamed "the father of the IEDs," was killed in the explosion of an IED (a work accident) (Iraqi News Agency, December 9, 2018).

### ISIS terrorist and guerrilla activities

► Following are terrorist and guerrilla activities carried out by ISIS during the past week (according to ISIS reports):

- ◆ **Diyala Province:** ISIS operatives infiltrated into a factory belonging to an Internal Security member of the Kurdistan region (about 100 km northeast of Baqubah). Photos released by ISIS show trucks and a tractor going up in flames after being set on fire by ISIS operatives (Iraq – Diyala Province, December 9, 2018).



**Trucks and a tractor set on fire by ISIS operatives (Iraq – Diyala Province, December 9, 2018)**

- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** On December 7, 2018, ISIS operatives detonated an IED against a vehicle of the Iraqi federal police near the 'Allas oilfield, about 41 km east of

Tikrit. ISIS reported that the passengers were either killed or wounded (ISIS's Al-Bayan Radio, December 9, 2018).

◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** On December 8, 2018, ISIS operatives detonated two IEDs against a vehicle of the Iraqi federal police in the city of Fallujah (about 45 km west of Baghdad). ISIS reported that the vehicle was destroyed and the passengers were either killed or wounded (ISIS's Radio Al-Bayan, December 9, 2018).

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** On December 8, 2018, ISIS operatives detonated an IED against a vehicle of the Iraqi federal police in a village situated about 32 km northwest of Kirkuk. ISIS reported that the vehicle was damaged and the passengers were either killed or wounded (ISIS's Al-Bayan Radio, December 9, 2018).

## Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

### Detonation of two IEDs against an Egyptian army tank

► On December 8, 2018, ISIS operatives detonated two IEDs against an Egyptian army tank east of Al-Arish. The tank was damaged and a number of soldiers were killed or wounded (ISIS's Al-Bayan Radio, December 9, 2018). According to tribal sources, at least three soldiers were killed and others were wounded (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, December 9, 2018).

### Senior operative of ISIS's Sinai Province killed

► ISIS's Sinai province announced the death of ISIS operative **Abu Malek al-Masri**, an Egyptian national. He was a senior ISIS operative who was killed in clashes with the Egyptian army (Al-Ghurabaa, December 6, 2018; Erem News, December 7, 2018).

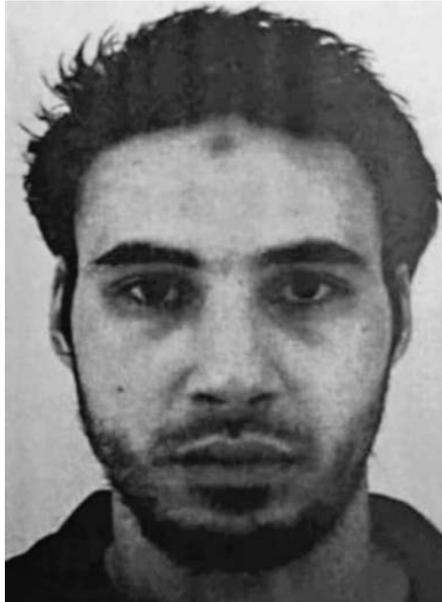


**Abu Malek al-Masri, senior ISIS operative killed in the Sinai Peninsula (Al-Ghurabaa, December 6, 2018)**

## Jihadi activity in other countries

### Shooting attack in the Christmas market in Strasbourg (initial update as of December 12, 2018)

- ▶ On the evening of December 11, 2018, **a shooting attack was carried out near the Christmas market in the city of Strasbourg**. Apparently, four people were killed and 12 wounded. The terrorist opened fire at the crowd with an automatic weapon, shouting “Allahu Akbar.” He then exchanged fire with the security forces. After the shooting, the terrorist managed to escape in a stolen car. The French security forces are searching for him.
- ▶ The French police announced that the terrorist was **Chérif Chekatt**, 29, a native of the city of Strasbourg of Moroccan descent. **He has a criminal record and is on the list of terror suspects**. On the day of the attack, policemen who came to arrest him on suspicion of armed robbery found hand grenades (or explosives) in his house.
- ▶ **ISIS has not (yet) claimed responsibility for the attack**. According to the website of the Site Intelligence Group, which operates in the US and monitors jihadi websites, supporters of ISIS celebrated after the attack (Reuters, December 11, 2018).



**Photo of Chérif Chekatt, perpetrator of the shooting attack in the Christmas market in Strasbourg, which was posted on Twitter and additional media outlets**

To the best of the ITIC's knowledge, ISIS's claim of responsibility for the attack in Strasbourg has not yet been issued. It should be noted that **the Christmas period** is a **preferred time** for ISIS supporters to carry out **attacks** because of the large crowds that participate in the holiday events and the media resonance that accompanies these attacks. In the past two years, there have been two major attacks during this period: **a ramming attack in the Christmas market in Berlin** (December 19, 2016, 12 killed and 49 wounded), and **an IED explosion in the passageway between subway stations in the heart of Manhattan** (December 13, 2017, three lightly wounded). The Coalition airstrikes against ISIS in the city of Hajin, and the call to carry out terrorist attacks in response, **are liable to increase the motivation of ISIS supporters to carry out attacks.**

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### Thwarted ISIS-inspired attack on a synagogue in Ohio, USA

► **On December 11, 2018, an attack in a synagogue in the city of Toledo in the State of Ohio, USA was thwarted.** On December 7, 2018, the FBI arrested **Damon M. Joseph**, a 21-year-old convert to Islam from Ohio. Joseph is suspected of intending to **carry out a shooting attack at a synagogue in the city of Toledo. He planned the ISIS-inspired attack for several months.** According to the indictment filed against him, **he was influenced by the**

**shooting attack at the synagogue in Pittsburgh about a month and a half ago, in which 11 worshipers were murdered.**

► In an undercover investigation conducted by the FBI, Damon claimed that based on an examination that he had conducted, he intended to carry out the attack in a synagogue in the city of Toledo, where many worshipers attend Sabbath services on Saturdays. He stated that **his intention was to kill many people.** According to his posts on social media, **he supports ISIS and has displayed a profound hatred of the Jews** (US Department of Justice, December 10, 2018; The Washington Post, December 10, 2018; NBC, December 11, 2018; Reuters, December 11, 2018).



**The would-be perpetrator of the attack after his arrest (FBI, December 10, 2018)**

## The battle for hearts and minds

### ISIS-affiliated media outlet calls for attacks in the West

► An ISIS-affiliated media outlet published a **poster calling for attacks in Western countries in response to the Coalition airstrikes in Hajin.** The inscription at the top of the poster reads: “The Crusaders [i.e., the US and the West] bombing your brothers in Hajin, so kill them on their occasions. Make their joys sadness and their holiday pains.” The inscription at the bottom of the poster reads: **“Stab, run over, [throw a] Molotov [cocktail].”** Below the words “run over” there is a picture of the truck used to carry out the ramming attack in Nice (July 14, 2016), in which 86 people were killed (ISIS-affiliated Telegram channel, December 10, 2018).



Poster calling for terrorist attacks in Western countries in response to the airstrikes carried out against Hajin (ISIS-affiliated Telegram channel, December 10, 2018)