



Spotlight on Global Jihad

January 24-30, 2019



Main events of the week

► Following is an overview of the situation in Syria:

◆ **The ISIS-controlled enclave on the east bank of the Euphrates River continues to shrink.** ISIS operatives are now surrounded by SDF forces in a “pocket” around 5.9 km long and 1.6 km wide. There are still reports of ISIS operatives fleeing from the “pocket” and of operatives turning themselves in to the SDF. Nevertheless, ISIS operatives **still continue to fight** and even initiate offensive actions against the SDF forces.

◆ **In the city of Manbij and its environs, there has been no significant change on the ground.** The SDF forces and the US-sponsored local council still control the city. **Turkey** continues to conduct intensive political and propaganda activities **aimed at preparing the ground for the takeover of Manbij and the establishment of a Turkish-sponsored “safe zone” in northern Syria.**

◆ **In the Idlib area, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to establish its control, mainly at the expense of the Turkish-affiliated rebel organizations.** At the same time, incidents continue between the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations. According to a report on a website affiliated with the Syrian army, the Syrian army has transferred massive reinforcements to the Idlib area, which will help increase the preparedness of the Syrian army in case of developments in the rural areas of Hama and Idlib.

► The main event in ISIS’s provinces abroad this week was a **multi-casualty attack during a ceremony in a cathedral on the island of Sulu in the southern Philippines.** The attack killed around 20 people and wounded around 110 others (worshippers and members of the security forces). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it was carried out by two suicide bombers.

The Idlib region

The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to establish its presence in the Idlib region

- ▶ The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham continues to take over areas held by rebel organizations in the Idlib region, mainly rebel organizations affiliated with Turkey.
- ▶ On the evening of January 28, 2019, a force of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham entered the city of Maarat Nu'man, about 31 km south of Idlib, and took over a command post of Faylaq Al-Sham (an organization affiliated with Turkey).¹ Negotiations are conducted between city dignitaries and representatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham in order to reach an agreement regarding the administration of the city (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 29, 2019). The city of Maarat Nu'man is situated on the main highway from Aleppo to Hama, thus representing an important crossroads.



The city of Maarat Nu'man (Google Maps)

Suicide bombing attack in Idlib

- ▶ On January 29, 2019, a female suicide bomber blew herself up near a building of the “National Salvation Government”² in the city of Idlib. At least one man was killed and

¹ Faylaq Al-Sham is an Islamic rebel organization numbering thousands of operatives. Established in March 2014, it is based on officers who deserted from the Syrian army and operates under Turkish sponsorship. It is mainly active in the rural area west of Aleppo, as part of the National Liberation Front affiliated with Turkey.

² An umbrella framework for the administration of territories in the Idlib region. Affiliated with the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, it is based in the city of Idlib (Al-Arabiya, January 29, 2019).

several others wounded (Khotwa, January 29, 2019; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 30, 2019). According to a report by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, for two minutes, the suicide bomber exchanged fire with the security guards on the site and then blew herself up (Enab Baladi, January 29, 2019). According to the Syrian media, **the suicide bomber was an ISIS operative** (Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, January 29, 2019).

Syrian army reinforcements arriving in Idlib

► According to a website affiliated with the Syrian army, on January 27, 2019, **massive Syrian army reinforcements, including tanks and medium and long range guns, arrived in the rural area of Idlib and were deployed there**. According to the report, these reinforcements will help increase the preparedness of the Syrian army in case of developments in the coming days on the fronts in the rural areas of **Hama and Idlib** (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, January 27, 2019).



**Syrian army reinforcements in the rural area of Idlib
(Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, January 27, 2019)**

Incidents continue in the Idlib region

► This week as well, incidents continued in the Idlib region between the Syrian army and the jihadi organizations, mainly exchanges of artillery fire.

► Following are prominent incidents:

- ◆ The “Awaken the Believers” operations room (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) launched rockets at Syrian army positions in the rural area west of Aleppo (“Awaken the Believers” operations room, January 25, 2019).
- ◆ The “Awaken the Believers” operations room launched rockets at Syrian army positions and forces in the rural area west of Aleppo (“Awaken the Believers” operations room, January 26, 2019).

- ◆ The Syrian army fired artillery at rebel organization positions about 52 km south of Idlib. The artillery was fired in response to violations of the de-escalation agreement (i.e., Sochi Agreement) (SANA, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ The Syrian army thwarted an infiltration attempt of the rebel organizations from the western outskirts of the village of Hasraya, about 27 km northwest of Hama. The rebel organizations sustained casualties (SANA, January 27, 2019).



Convoy of operatives of the Guardians of Religion Organization (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) (oload.club file-sharing website, January 27, 2019)

- ◆ The Syrian army fired artillery at rebel organization targets in the city of Mawrak, about 24 km north of Hama (Ibaa, January 17, 2019).



**Right: Syrian army artillery hitting the city of Mawrak, north of Hama (Ibaa, January 27, 2019).
Left: Ruins in the city of Mawrak as a result of Syrian army artillery fire (Ibaa, January 27, 2019)**

- ◆ The Russian coordination center in the Hmeymim base reported that **“militants” of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham had attacked Syrian army positions in the Idlib region.** The Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that “the current situation in the Idlib region is very concerning. The situation in the region is deteriorating.” According to the spokesperson, the provocations of the Headquarters

for the Liberation of Al-Sham endanger Syrian civilians, the Syrian forces in the region, and the Russian Hmeymim base (Sputnik, January 23, 2019).

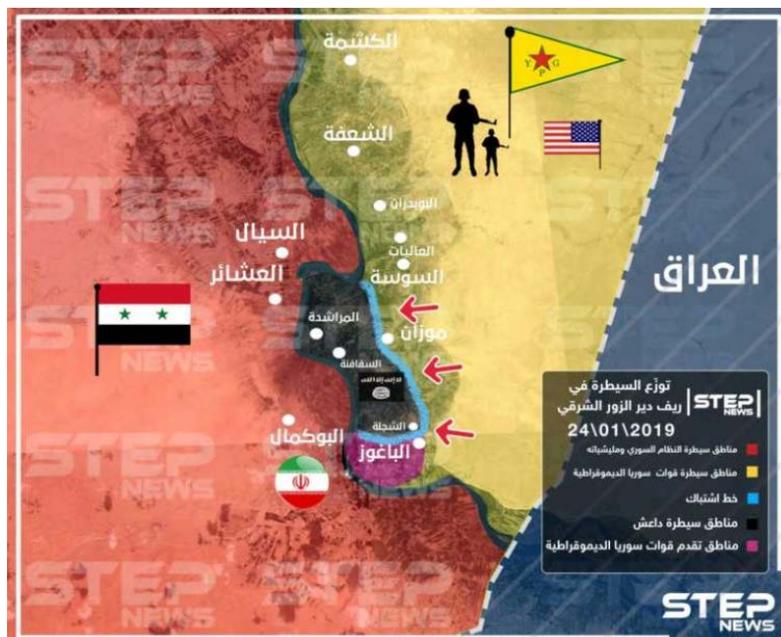
Drones intercepted near the Russian Hmeymim base

► According to a “military source” report, on January 27, 2019, three rebel organization drones were intercepted by anti-aircraft missiles near the Russian Hmeymim base. The drones took off from the rural area 30 km southwest of Idlib (Muraselon, January 27, 2019).

Eastern Syria

The ISIS enclave in the Euphrates Valley continues to shrink

► This week, the SDF forces continued to advance down the Euphrates Valley, in the “pocket” remaining under ISIS’s control. In the southern ISIS “pocket,” the SDF took over the village of **Al-Baghouz Fawqani** (east of Albukamal). The SDF attacked from east to west, pushing the ISIS operatives towards the Euphrates River. In the north of the “pocket,” the SDF forces took over **the village of Muzan**. **The ISIS-controlled “pocket” is now 5.9 km long and 1.6 km wide**. Civilians and ISIS operatives continue to flee from the territory held by ISIS. However, **ISIS operatives still continue to fight, and on January 28, 2019, they carried out a large-scale counterattack against the SDF forces in the village of Al-Susah**.



The “pocket” controlled by ISIS (map updated to January 24, 2019): ISIS (black); SDF forces (yellow); areas controlled by the Syrian army and the forces supporting it (red); attack routes of the Kurdish forces (red arrows) (Khotwa, January 24, 2019)

► The battles between the SDF forces and ISIS concentrated this passing week in the following sites:

◆ **The village of Al-Baghouz Fawqani, east of Albukamal:**

- The village was taken over by the SDF on January 24, 2019 (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, January 24, 2019). ISIS mounted a counterattack (Al-Sham – Baraka Province, January 24, 2019). According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (January 25, 2019), at least 34 ISIS operatives were killed and 21 were taken prisoner. The SDF sustained 16 fatalities. In recent days, ISIS mounted additional counterattacks. On January 27, 2019, there were still reports on fire exchanges in the area (Deir ez-Zor Province Instagram account, January 27, 2019).
- **ISIS sent two suicide bombers**, who detonated car bombs among concentrations of SDF forces on the outskirts of the village. The suicide bombers were brothers, Abu Ihsan and Abu Ismail the Turkestanis. According to ISIS, many SDF fighters were killed and wounded. In addition, **ISIS operatives launched antitank missiles** at concentrations of SDF forces on the outskirts of the village. ISIS claimed that over 15 SDF fighters had been killed or wounded (Al-Sham – Baraka Province, January 25, 2019).



Right: Fighting in Al-Baghouz Fawqani (Deir ez-Zor Province Instagram account, January 27, 2019). Left: ISIS operative firing a mortar shell at a concentration of SDF forces in the village of Al-Baghouz (Fawqani) (Al-Sham – Baraka Province, January 25, 2019)

- **On the outskirts of the town of Al-Marashida**, the largest community still remaining in the ISIS-held “pocket,” clashes took place between the SDF forces and ISIS. The SDF announced that they had taken over the village of Muzan,

about 2.5 km east of Al-Marashida. Mines were found and neutralized there, and weapons, military equipment and ammunition were seized (SDF Press, January 24, 2019). On January 28, 2019, it was reported that over 40 ISIS operatives had turned themselves in to the SDF forces in the town of Al-Marashida (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, January 28, 2019). **The SDF forces reportedly took over parts of the town** (Furat Post YouTube channel, January 27, 2019).



Right: Houses in the town of Al-Marashida, part of which was taken over by the SDF forces (Furat Post YouTube channel, January 27, 2019). Left: ISIS’s gun turret mounted on an off-road vehicle, seized by the SDF forces in the village of Muzan; The inscription “The Army of the Caliphate” appears on its base (SDF Press, January 23, 2019)

- **On January 28, 2019**, ISIS carried out a **large-scale counterattack against SDF positions in the village of Al-Susah**. During the attack, five female suicide bombers blew themselves up with explosive belts near the SDF forces. US and Coalition planes gave the SDF air support. The SDF forces announced that dozens of ISIS operatives were killed and wounded. In addition, one SDF fighter was killed and three others were wounded (SDF Press, January 28, 2019).

ISIS operatives fleeing among the local population

► The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that since early December 2018, **over 33,550 people** had fled from the ISIS enclave east of the Euphrates River. Most of them are local residents, **but there are also hundreds of ISIS operatives of various nationalities among them** (Syrians, Iraqis, Russians, Somalis, Filipinos and foreign fighters of other Asian nationalities). It was also reported that among the civilians who had fled there were also **about 2,970 ISIS operatives who had been detained by the SDF forces** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 29, 2019).

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, **a total of 1,259 ISIS operatives and 664 SDF fighters had been killed** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 29, 2019).

Northern Syria

The area of Manbij

It appears that **the situation in the city of Manbij and its environs has not fundamentally changed**. The local council administering Manbij and its environs (under Kurdish sponsorship) announced that it was opposed to the establishment of a Turkish-run “safe zone” (as demanded by Turkey). Such area, according to the Kurds, must be administered by the UN, with international guarantees and without external intervention (an idea which the Turks were quick to reject) (SMART News Agency, January 25, 2019). The Turks continue to insist on their demand that the Kurdish force withdraw from Manbij as part of a “deal” to establish a “safe zone,” which will be agreed upon between the United States and Turkey (Anadolu News Agency, January 25, 2019).

► At a joint press conference at the end of the meeting between Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdoğan, President Erdoğan noted that both countries were in agreement regarding the “safe zone” about to be established (by Turkey) in northern Syria. According to Erdoğan, the US has already issued positive statements in this regard. He added that Turkey had no problems with Russia regarding the “safe zone” (Daily Sabah, January 23, 2019; Russian Presidency website, January 27, 2019). According to additional statements, **President Erdoğan undertakes to establish a “safe zone” between northern Syria and Turkey in the coming months. He rejects the possibility that the UN would be involved in the establishment of the “safe zone”** and notes that Turkey is determined to govern the “safe zone” by itself (ITAR TASS; Reuters, January 25, 2019).



Turkish President Erdogan and Russian President Putin at the joint press conference after their meeting (Russian Presidency website, January 23, 2019)

Main developments in Iraq

ISIS's terrorist and guerrilla activity

► Following are the highlights of ISIS's activity in the past week:

- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** ISIS claimed responsibility for detonating an IED in the **Al-Shirqat District**, killing four Iraqi policemen (Amaq, January 27, 2019). According to reports by Iraqi sources, four policemen were killed in the incident and six others were wounded (Iraqi News Agency, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **Diyala Province:**
 - Mortar shells were fired at an Iraqi army headquarters in the **northeastern part of the Diyala Province**, wounding three Iraqi soldiers (Iraqi News Agency, January 26, 2019). No claim of responsibility by ISIS has been found.
 - ISIS claimed responsibility for sniper fire at a joint camp of Kurdish and Iraqi security forces **west of Khanaqin** (95 km northeast of the city of Baqubah). Five operatives of the security forces were wounded (Iraq – Diyala Province, January 27, 2019).
 - ISIS claimed responsibility for sniper fire **south of Baqubah**. An Iraqi policeman was killed (Amaq, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** ISIS claimed responsibility for detonating an IED in **the eastern part of the city of Mosul**. The blast killed two Iraqi army soldiers (Amaq, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** On January 23, 2019, a car bomb exploded **around 45 km southwest of Kirkuk** (Al-Sumaria News, January 23, 2019). ISIS claimed responsibility

for the detonation of a car bomb driven by an ISIS suicide bomber codenamed Sayf al-Islam al-Ansari (Iraq – Kirkuk Province, January 27, 2019).



ISIS suicide bomber codenamed Sayf al-Islam al-Ansari on his way to carry out the suicide bombing attack (Iraq – Kirkuk Province, January 27, 2019)

- ◆ ISIS claimed responsibility for the execution of a member of the Tribal Mobilization (the Sunni militias loyal to the Iraqi regime) and an Iraqi intelligence agent, **around 50 km south of Kirkuk** (Iraq – Kirkuk Province, January 27, 2019)
- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** ISIS claimed responsibility for killing three operatives of the Iraqi security forces in an ambush **west of the city of Ramadi** (Amaq, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** Execution of a so-called Iraqi government agent west of Ramadi (Iraq – Al-Anbar Province, January 28, 2019)



Execution of an Iraqi government agent who was taken prisoner by ISIS west of Ramadi (Iraq – Al-Anbar Province, January 28, 2019)

Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

- ▶ Following are the main counterterrorist activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces:
 - ◆ **Diyala Province:** the killing of three ISIS operatives in an Iraqi airstrike against an ISIS hiding place some 15 km **northeast of Baqubah** (Iraqi News Agency, January 26, 2019).

◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** An Iraqi police force located an ISIS weapons depot **some 42 km southeast of Samarra**. The depot contained around 260 mortar shells, concealed inside plastic barrels (Iraqi News Agency, January 26, 2019).

The Sinai Peninsula and Egypt

ISIS's activity in northern Sinai

► Following are reports of ISIS attacks in northern Sinai:

- ◆ **Egyptian army vehicle destroyed by an IED** south of Sheikh Zuweid. Several soldiers were killed or wounded. In addition, an **Egyptian army vehicle was blown up** west of Rafah. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, January 24, 2019).
- ◆ **IED detonated in Rafah.** An Egyptian soldier was killed (ISIS's Sinai Province, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **Clashes** between ISIS operatives and the Egyptian security forces in Al-Arish. Several Egyptian officers were killed, including a lieutenant colonel (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **An IED was detonated** near Al-Arish Airport, and an Egyptian army bulldozer was damaged (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, January 27, 2019).
- ◆ **Attack** on an Egyptian army force south of Rafah. **Detonation of an IED** near a military vehicle east of Al-Arish. Three Egyptian soldiers were killed and five others were wounded in these two attacks (Al-Jazeera TV, January 28, 2019).

The activity of the Egyptian security forces

► **According to an announcement by the Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman, 44 “terrorist operatives” (i.e., ISIS operatives) were killed during activity by the Egyptian security forces in the Sinai Peninsula.** Rifles and IEDs were found in their possession. According to the announcement, **15 other “terrorist operatives” were killed** in an operation carried out by the Egyptian Police and National Security. **A total of 15 military vehicles and 43 motorcycles were also destroyed.** In addition, the **Egyptian Air Force destroyed 56 ATVs** that had been used by the “terrorist operatives.” Two safe houses of “terrorist operatives” were destroyed in the airstrikes. Egyptian army combat engineers **located and neutralized 242 IEDs** which had been planted on the Egyptian security forces' traffic arteries (Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman's Facebook page, January 22, 2019).



Right: rifles, magazines and wireless communications devices seized by the Egyptian army.
Left: Motorcycles belonging to “terrorist operatives” after the Egyptian security forces set fire to them (Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman’s Facebook page, January 22, 2019)



Right: Vehicles belonging to “terrorist operatives” which were destroyed in an Egyptian airstrike. Left: Two vehicles of “terrorist operatives” going up in flames (Egyptian Armed Forces Spokesman’s Facebook page, January 22, 2019)

Jihadi activity in other countries

Multi-casualty terrorist attack in a cathedral in the southern Philippines

On January 27, 2019, ISIS carried out a **complex multi-casualty terrorist attack** at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral **in the city of Jolo, on the island of Sulu in the southern Philippines**. There are two versions of how the attack was carried out: according to Philippine media reports, two IEDs exploded inside the cathedral and in the adjacent parking lot (The Manila Times). **According to ISIS, it was a suicide bombing attack** carried out by two terrorists who blew themselves up with their explosive belts at the entrance to the cathedral and in the adjacent parking lot. **A total of 20 people were killed in the attack, and 81 were wounded** (The Manila Times, January 28, 2019). According to another version, **around 110 people were wounded in the attack, most of them (around 90) civilians and the rest members of the security forces** (AP, January 27, 2019).

► The first explosion occurred during the ceremony in the cathedral. A total of 15 civilians were killed in the explosion. According to the Philippine media, another IED then exploded in the parking lot outside the church. The IED had been planted in a crate on a motorcycle. The IED exploded **when army soldiers arrived at the scene**. Five soldiers were killed in the second explosion, and dozens of people were wounded, most of them civilians (The Manila Times, January 28, 2019).



Right: The island of Sulu in the southern Philippines (Google Maps). Left: The entrance to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral after the two explosions (West Mindanao Command, January 28, 2019)

► **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack.** The organization announced that **two suicide bombers had carried out a double attack against a church in the city of Jolo during a religious ceremony**. It was noted that **the first terrorist detonated his explosive belt at the entrance to the church while the second suicide bomber detonated his explosive belt in the parking lot reserved for church vehicles**. According to the claim of responsibility, the second explosion took place when Philippine security forces arrived at the scene after the first explosion. According to ISIS, nearly 120 people were killed or wounded in the two explosions, including Christian civilians and members of the Philippine security forces (Amaq, January 27, 2019).

The Abu Sayyaf Group (ISIS's East Asia Province)

The island of Sulu, where the attack was carried out, is one of the strongholds of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist organization, which announced that it was joining ISIS around four and a half years ago. The organization is now part of **ISIS's East Asia Province**. According to Philippine media reports (relying on a “security source” in Sulu), **there are about 300 operatives of the Abu Sayyaf Group on the island** (The Manila Times, May 17, 2018). The Philippine army reportedly suspects that **the Abu Sayyaf Group** was responsible for the attack on the cathedral, although it does not rule out the possibility of another organization being responsible (The Manila Times, January 28, 2019).

► The **Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)** is a radical Muslim separatist organization that was founded in the Philippines in 1991. The organization operates in the southern Philippines and aspires to establish an independent Islamic state for the Filipino-Muslim minority. This minority is known as the Moro People, and lives mainly on **the Island of Mindanao**. Abu Sayyaf is considered the most violent organization in the Philippines. Its first attack, which included the use of hand grenades, was carried out on April 4, 1991, in Zamboanga City, on the southwestern tip of the island of Mindanao. Two American evangelists were killed (Stanford University, Mapping Militant Organizations, Abu Sayyaf Group).

► **On July 23, 2014, Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Hapilon pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.** On October 16, 2017, Isnilon Hapilon was killed by the Philippine army during the campaign to take over the city of Marawi, on the **Island of Mindanao**. However, the clashes between ISIS and the Philippine army on the island of Mindanao continued even after the killing of **Isnilon Hapilon**.