



# Spotlight on Global Jihad

## January 31 – February 6, 2019



### Main events of the week

► Following is an overview of the situation in Syria:

◆ **In the “pocket” along the Euphrates Valley**, ISIS operatives halted the SDF forces and regained control of two villages in the southern part of their control area. **In the ITIC’s assessment, this is only a temporary success for ISIS, and the military pressure on ISIS operatives in the “pocket” is expected to be renewed.** In the meantime, ISIS operatives have reportedly initiated negotiations with the SDF and the International Coalition in order to arrange for their operatives to leave the “pocket.” These negotiations have proved unsuccessful (up to now). The position of the SDF and the Coalition is that ISIS must surrender unconditionally. According to an announcement by US officials, the SDF is **holding some 850 foreign fighters who joined ISIS**, and their return to their home countries remains a challenge requiring coordinated international efforts.

◆ **In the city of Manbij and its environs there has been no change on the ground.** At the political and propaganda level, there are struggles between the various forces regarding the future control of the city. Residents of the city held a demonstration which, in the ITIC’s assessment, was organized by the Kurds. The demonstrators expressed their opposition to the Turkish involvement and the establishment of a Turkish-sponsored “safe zone” that would include Manbij. On the other hand, the Turkish presidential spokesperson (February 4, 2019) announced that Turkey and Russia had reached agreement on the roadmap for Manbij, whose details are still unknown.

◆ **In the Idlib area**, clashes continued between the Syrian army and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other jihadi organizations. **Talks are underway between Russia and Turkey** about ways to deal with the Idlib problem, in view of the entrenchment of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the nonfulfillment

of the agreements between Russia and Turkey that were established at the Sochi summit. According to Russian media reports, the negotiators discussed the possibility of **a military operation being carried out in the Idlib region by Russia and Turkey or, alternatively, the Syrian army.**

► **In the United States, there is a debate about the severity of the threat posed by ISIS** (in the ITIC’s assessment, the reason for the debate is the assessment that the campaign against ISIS in the enclave along the Euphrates River may end within a few weeks). **In the ITIC’s assessment, this debate reflects fundamental disagreements between the US President and the American intelligence community:** The Annual Threat Assessment issued by the US Director of National Intelligence (DNI) states that even after ISIS’s “territorial” defeat, its thousands of operatives in Syria and Lebanon will continue to operate, and its supporters around the world will continue to carry out attacks. **In the ITIC’s assessment, this assessment is more realistic** than the optimistic assessment of the US President and Secretary of Defense, who expect ISIS to be completely eliminated within a few weeks.

## Contradictory US assessments regarding the severity of the threat posed by ISIS

### Contradictory US assessments regarding the severity of the threat posed by ISIS

► The Annual Threat Assessment issued by **US Director of National Intelligence Daniel R. Coats** included an assessment of the threat posed by ISIS (DNI website, January 29, 2019):

“While ISIS is nearing territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria, **the group has returned to its guerilla-warfare roots** while continuing **to plot attacks and direct its supporters worldwide.** ISIS is intent on resurging and **still commands thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria.**”

► This assessment of the American intelligence community is, in the ITIC’s assessment, **more realistic than the optimistic statements made by the US President and by acting US Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan.** As President Trump tweeted (February 1, 2019), **“We will soon have destroyed 100% of the caliphate...”** In an interview with CBS, the President noted that the United States would soon be able to announce the **absolute defeat of ISIS in 100% of the territory (that it controls) in Syria** (February 3, 2019). According to the Secretary of Defense, 99.5% of the territory controlled by ISIS has returned to the Syrians.

He now added that “**within a couple of weeks, it’ll be 100% ...**” (US Department of Defense website, January 29, 2019).

## The Idlib region

### Negotiations between Russia and Turkey regarding the Idlib region

► A Turkish delegation headed by the Turkish minister of defense arrived in Moscow on January 31, 2019, to hold talks on the developments in Syria. Moscow is reportedly “dismayed” by the established presence of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front) in the de-escalation zone in Idlib, contrary to what had been agreed upon at the Putin-Erdoğan summit in Sochi (Asharq Al-Awsat, February 1, 2019). According to “knowledgeable” Russian sources, Russia and Turkey cooperate **in order to prepare the ground for the opening of a joint military operation in Idlib** (Asharq Al-Awsat, February 2, 2019).

► According to a Turkish media report, the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran are expected to meet on February 14, 2019, in Sochi (Anadolu News Agency, February 3, 2019). In the ITIC's assessment, the talks between them will focus on the issue of the Idlib region. The ITIC believes that in the backdrop of the expected negotiations is the tension in the Idlib area as a result of the takeover of Turkish-affiliated rebel organizations by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. Furthermore, the establishment of the de-escalation zone agreed upon at the Sochi summit (September 17, 2018) **is not implemented on the ground and frequent incidents occur between the Syrian army and the jihadi rebel organizations.**

### Russian media reports on a possible military move in Idlib

► Recently, the Russian media reported that the solution for the Idlib problem might be **a joint Russian-Turkish operation**. As part of such operation, a “**humanitarian safe zone**” **will be established along the border between Syria and Turkey**. According to a report in one of the Russian newspapers, another possibility is that the situation in the Idlib region will be kept unchanged for an undetermined period until the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham becomes a “reasonable” organization similar to the Taliban in Afghanistan (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, January 28, 2019).

According to another Russian daily (Kommersant, January 29, 2019), **it has already been definitely decided that the Syrian army will launch an operation to return the Idlib Province to the control of the Syrian regime.** According to the same report, Turkey will probably agree to such an operation.

### Incidents continue in the Idlib region

► According to a website affiliated with the Syrian army, **on January 30, 2019, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Guardians of Religion Organization fired guns and launched rockets at the Syrian army.** The firing took place in the village of Atshan, about 30 km northeast of Hama. According to the website, the firing was accompanied by the organizations concentrating their forces in the Idlib rural area, in preparation for a large-scale attack. In response, the Syrian army fired guns and launched rockets at the sources of the fire (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, January 30, 2019). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that exchanges of artillery fire and clashes had taken place between the Syrian army (and the jihadi organizations) in various areas north of Hama and in the Idlib rural area (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 1, 2019).

► According to other reports, the Syrian army fired rockets in response for the violation of the de-escalation agreement. As a result, several hiding places were destroyed and the rebel organizations sustained casualties (SANA, February 4, 2019). In addition, the Syrian army fired at the southern Aleppo region, in response to the violations on the part of the rebel organizations in the area (Al-Ikhbariya al-Suriya channel, February 5, 2019).



**Right: Syrian army rocket fire (Butulat Al-Jaysh Al-Suri, January 30, 2019). Left: Dust clouds in the village of Zeita north of Hama as a result of the Syrian army artillery fire (Drexl Spivey@RisboLensky Twitter account, February 3, 2019)**



**Right: Syrian army rocket fire at the southern Idlib region (Al-Ikhbariya al-Suriya channel, February 5, 2019). Left: Syrian army tank attacking a target of the rebel organizations in the southern rural area of Idlib (Syrian TV, February 4, 2019)**

- The “Awaken the Believers” operations room (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) reported a series of activities carried out by the organizations operating as part of it, including **sniper fire** at a force supporting the Syrian army in west Aleppo (January 31, 2019); **sniper fire** at the Syrian army in west Aleppo, killing three Syrian soldiers (February 1, 2019); and **launching rockets** at Syrian army positions in the northern Al-Ghab Plain (February 1, 2019).



**A sniper of the “Awaken the Believers” operations room during operation of the snipers battalion in the Aleppo and Latakia rural areas (“Awaken the Believers” operations room, February 3, 2019)**

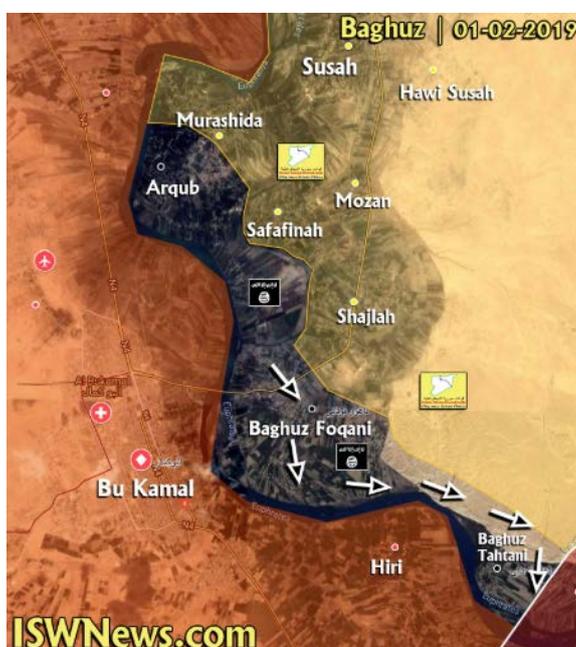
## Eastern Syria

### Halt in the advance of the SDF forces

- It was reported that **ISIS operatives who were left in the “pocket” along the Euphrates River halted the SDF forces.** On February 1, 2019, it was reported that **ISIS regained control of the villages of Al-Baghouz Fawqani** (east of Albukamal) **and Al-Baghouz Tahtani**

(southeast of Albukamal, near the border with Iraq) (IWN@A7\_Mirza Twitter account of the IWN news website, probably affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, February 1, 2019). **In the ITIC's assessment, ISIS's takeover of these villages may make it easier for the ISIS operatives to flee to Iraqi territory.**

► In the meantime, it was reported that ISIS **has started to reestablish itself in the areas recently taken over from the SDF along the Euphrates River and deploy for the continuation of the fighting.** The ISIS operatives started to plant mines, removed encampments and divided the areas into separate sectors (Khotwa, February 2, 2019). On the other hand, it was reported that ISIS had evacuated its positions from the outskirts of the village of Al-Marashida, in the north of the “pocket” (DeirEzoreNow Twitter account, February 4, 2019).



**The expansion of the “pocket” controlled by ISIS (map updated to February 1, 2019). ISIS (dark gray); the SDF forces (yellow); areas controlled by the Syrian army and the forces supporting it (light brown); ISIS attack and advance routes are marked with white arrows) (IWN@A7\_Mirza Twitter account of the IWN news website, February 1, 2019)**

### **Pro-Iranian Shiite militias firing at ISIS targets in the Al-Baghuz area**

► The Popular Mobilization (the Iraqi Shiite militias affiliated with Iran) reported that on February 1 and 2, 2019, it fired rockets at an ISIS staging zone in the village of Al-Baghuz [Tahtani], near the Syrian-Iraqi border. The fire thwarted ISIS attempts to attack the Iraqi security forces near the border and infiltrate into Iraq (Al-Hashed.net Popular Mobilization website, February 2 and 3, 2019). Houses in the village of Al-Baghuz sustained heavy damage (Khotwa, February 2, 2019).



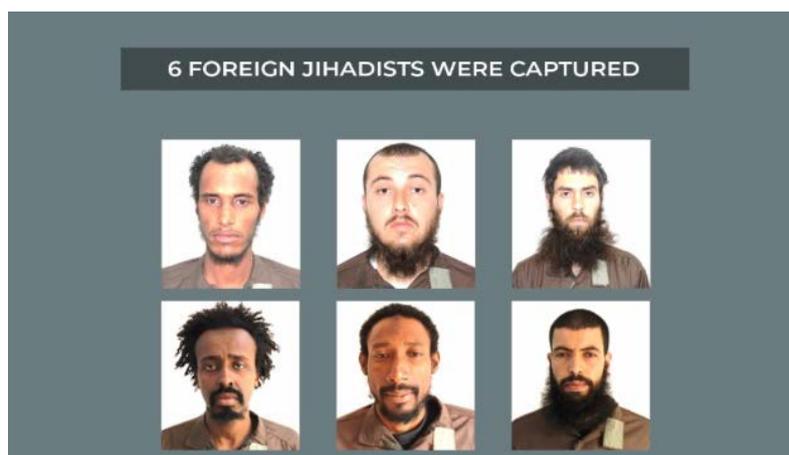
**Popular Mobilization launching rockets at ISIS operatives in Al-Baghouz Tahtani (IWN news website, probably affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, February 2, 2019)**

### **Infiltration of ISIS operatives into the city of Albukamal**

► On the night of February 2-3, 2019, **an ISIS squad infiltrated into the city of Albukamal**, which is held by the Syrian army and Shiite militias. The operatives arrived in the city from the east bank of the Euphrates River after **crossing the river with boats into neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city**. Subsequently, clashes took place for three hours between the ISIS operatives and the Syrian army and the forces supporting it. Both sides sustained casualties (Khotwa, February 3, 2019). On February 3, 2019, ISIS operatives fired mortar shells at the city of Albukamal (Furat Post Twitter account, February 3, 2019).

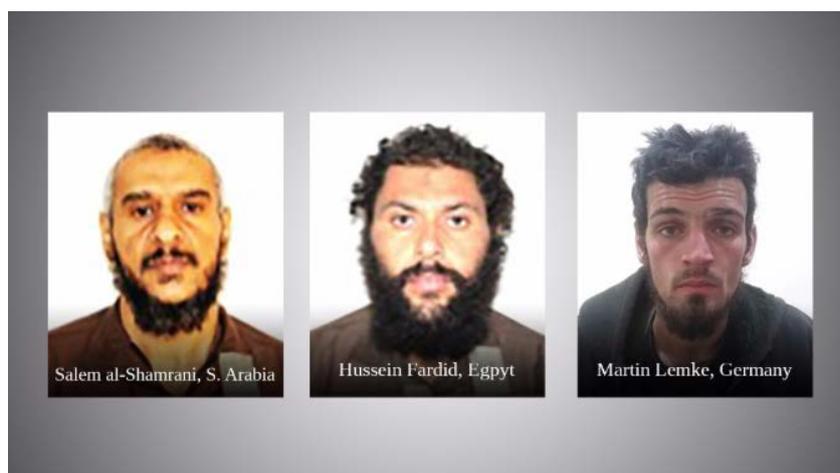
### **Apprehension of foreign fighters who joined ISIS**

► The Kurdish forces reported that **during the battles in the Hajin area, they had captured six ISIS foreign fighters who had carried out terrorist activity in recent years**. The Kurdish forces published their names and their countries of origin: **Russia, Germany, Sweden, America** (probably meaning the United States), **Turkey and Morocco** (YPG website [ypgrojava.org](http://ypgrojava.org), February 2, 2019).



**The foreign fighters who had operated in the ranks of ISIS, who were taken prisoner by the Kurdish forces (YPG website ypgrojava.org, February 2, 2019)**

► According to another report, the SDF carried out two operations in the Hajin rural area, during which they captured **three ISIS foreign fighters: an Egyptian, a Saudi and a German**. Due to the mopping up activity carried out by the SDF forces in the territories taken over from ISIS, ISIS operatives are trying now to infiltrate across the defense lines and flee the enclave in order to reorganize (SDF Press, February 4, 2019).



**The three ISIS operatives captured by the SDF forces in the Hajin rural area (SDF Press, February 4, 2019)**

► According to US Department of Defense Spokesperson Commander Sean Robertson, **the SDF forces are holding more than 800 ISIS foreign fighters from over forty countries** (CNN, February 1, 2019). According to a Reuters report, the US Department of State called on countries to take in foreign fighters captured by the SDF in Syria. According to senior American officials, **there are about 850 foreign operatives** (Reuters, February 4, 2019). US Chief of Central Command General Votel said in a hearing before the US Senate that **returning ISIS foreign fighters to their**

**countries to stand trial still remains a challenge.** According to Gen. Votel, the SDF and the Iraqi forces are holding hundreds of foreign fighters in prisons or in temporary detention facilities without trial. **This requires a concerted international law enforcement effort, intelligence and diplomatic cooperation** (US Senate website, February 5, 2019).

### **Negotiations by ISIS to rescue its surrounded operatives**

► According to several reports, **ISIS negotiates with the SDF forces and the International Coalition to try to rescue its operatives who are surrounded in the “pocket” along the Euphrates River.** All ISIS approaches were reportedly rejected outright. Following are more details:

◆ On January 3, 2019, negotiations took place between ISIS and the International Coalition for securing a safe passage for the ISIS operatives from the enclave on the Euphrates River **to the Syrian Desert.** The negotiations were held at ISIS’s request. They were conducted in English, through wireless communications devices, between an ISIS commander and one of the officers of the Coalition countries. It was reported that **the negotiations failed** and that the Coalition demanded that ISIS surrender completely (Baladi, February 3, 2019).

◆ According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **negotiations are being held between the SDF forces and ISIS commanders** in order to reach agreement regarding the operatives surrounded in the “pocket.” ISIS is trying to reach an agreement that will bring about the rescue of its operatives. However, it was reported that all its offers had been rejected by the SDF forces and the International Coalition countries (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 1, 2019).

◆ The SDF press center reported that **they had rejected an ISIS request to allow the organization operatives remaining in the enclave along the Euphrates a safe passage to Turkey.** ISIS reportedly sent several smugglers to negotiate with the SDF forces. The head of the press center noted that the operation would continue until “the last of the terrorist operatives dies” (Ahval, a Turkish news website, February 1, 2019).

## ISIS enclaves in the Syrian Desert west of the Euphrates River

► According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, on February 3, 2019, the Syrian army and the forces supporting it attacked a vehicle of ISIS operatives **in the Al-Sukhnah Desert west of the Euphrates River**, killing seven ISIS operatives. **The ISIS enclave in this region is reportedly about 4,000 square kilometers in size and extends from the northern part of the city of Al-Sukhnah up to the Deir ez-Zor Desert.** This is the largest enclave remaining under ISIS's control west of the Euphrates River. **The attention (of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it) is reportedly addressed to this ISIS enclave** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 3, 2019).



The city of Al-Sukhnah on the road from Deir ez-Zor to Palmyra (Google Maps)



**The ISIS enclave in the Al-Sukhnah area (updated to January 31, 2019): ISIS (marked in black) controls an extensive desert area in the region (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 31, 2019)**

## The Manbij area

The situation in the city of Manbij has not changed fundamentally. The city is administered by a local military council (supported by the Kurds) that opposes Turkey’s ambition to take control of the city and include it within the “safe zone.” This opposition was expressed in a demonstration which, in the ITIC’s assessment, was initiated by the Kurdish forces. The demonstrators expressed their opposition to any attempt on Turkey’s part to intervene in the area. On the other hand, Turkey and Russia have reportedly reached agreement on a roadmap for Manbij (whose details are still unknown).

### Anti-Turkish demonstration in Manbij

► On January 31, 2019, hundreds of residents of Manbij staged a demonstration in the city. The participants included members of the Manbij Military Council and members of the city’s democratic civil administration institutions. The demonstrators expressed support for the Manbij Military Council **and opposition to any Turkish intervention and the establishment of a “safe zone” under Turkish supervision** (Manbij Military Council website, January 31, 2019).



**Right: The demonstration in Manbij. Left: Manbij Military Council Spokesman Sharvan Darwish stressing opposition to Turkish intervention in the area (Manbij Military Council website, January 31, 2019)**

### Statements by residents of the city of Manbij against Turkish involvement

► On February 1, 2019, Syrian TV aired a report that included interviews with civilians in the city of Manbij. The interviewees **expressed their support for the Syrian army. The civilians expressed their opposition to any intervention by Turkey or the Turkish army.** Two interviewees noted that they would assist the Syrian army in the city of Manbij (Syrian TV, February 1, 2019).



**Residents of the city of Manbij expressing support for the Syrian army and opposition to Turkish involvement (Syrian TV, February 1, 2019)**

### ISIS detonates an IED in the rural area of Manbij

- ISIS reported that it had detonated an IED against SDF vehicles about 42 km west of the city, on the road between Manbij and Al-Bab (on the main highway from Manbij to Aleppo). According to the announcement, several SDF fighters were wounded (Al-Sham Province, Aleppo area, February 1, 2019).
- ISIS reported that its operatives had detonated an IED that hit a vehicle traveling in the rural area east of Aleppo. According to ISIS, several SDF fighters were killed (Al-Sham

Province, Aleppo area, February 1, 2019). According to Syrian TV, the driver was killed and five teachers in the vehicle were wounded (Syrian TV, February 2, 2019).



**The vehicle against which ISIS detonated an IED in the rural area east of Aleppo (Syrian TV, February 2, 2019)**

### **Agreement between Turkey and Russia on a roadmap for Manbij**

► According to a report by the Turkish News Agency, Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin announced that **Turkey and Russia have reached agreement on the roadmap for Manbij**. According to him, this has been agreed upon with the United States (Anadolu News Agency, February 4, 2019). The details of the agreement are as yet unknown.

## **Main developments in Iraq**

### **ISIS's terrorist and guerrilla activity**

- Following are the highlights of ISIS's activity in the past week:
  - ◆ **Diyala Province:** Attack on an oil police position around 37 km north of Baghdad. An Iraqi security guard was killed (Iraqi News Agency, February 2, 2019).
  - ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The killing of two members of the Tribal Mobilization (Sunni militias loyal to the Iraqi regime) near Haditha (around 195 km northwest of Baghdad) (Shabakat Shumukh, February 2, 2019).



**Two ISIS operatives in a vehicle firing at two Tribal Mobilization operatives near Haditha (Iraq – Al-Anbar Province, February 2, 2019)**

- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The downing of an Iraqi army reconnaissance drone near the 60th kilometer west of Ramadi (Shabakat Shumukh, February 3, 2019).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** ISIS operatives attacked an Iraqi Border Police position near the Syrian-Iraqi border. One member of the Border Police was killed and another was wounded. ISIS sustained many casualties (Al-Sumaria News, February 1, 2019).



**Iraqi security forces standing near an embankment near the Syrian – Iraqi border (Al-Sumaria News, February 2, 2019)**

- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** ISIS operatives broke into the home of an Iraqi military intelligence operative, 39 km north of Mosul, and executed him (Iraq – Dijla Province, February 4, 2019).



**Execution of an Iraqi military intelligence operative (Iraq – Dijla Province, February 4, 2019)**

- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The downing of an Iraqi army reconnaissance drone near the 60th kilometer west of Ramadi (Shabakat Shumukh, February 3, 2019).



**Iraqi army reconnaissance drone downed by ISIS west of Ramadi  
(Iraq – Al-Anbar Province, February 4, 2019)**

- ◆ **Nineveh Province:** Detonation of an IED against a vehicle belonging to an Iraqi Special Forces unit in the city of Mosul. Two Iraqi combatants were wounded (Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** The activation of an IED against a vehicle of the Popular Mobilization in the area of the city of Baiji (Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** The killing of a collaborator with the Iraqi army with an IED in the Samarra area (Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019).
- ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** Nine Shiites visiting the province were killed and six others were wounded in an ambush southeast of Samarra (Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019).
- ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** The execution of a Popular Mobilization operative who was caught in an ambush near the city of Al-Qaim (Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019).



**The execution of a Popular Mobilization operative  
(Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019)**

## Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

- ▶ Following are the main counterterrorist activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces:
  - ◆ **Kirkuk Province:** The arrest of an ISIS commander in the **Al-Hawija District west of Kirkuk** (Al-Sumaria News, February 1, 2019).
  - ◆ **Al-Anbar Province:** An Iraqi force detonated IEDs in a controlled manner, neutralized a booby-trapped house and detonated an explosive belt (Al-Sumaria News, February 2, 2019).
  - ◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** The destruction of two ISIS hiding places northeast of Tikrit, with air support by the Iraqi Air Force (Iraqi News Agency, February 3, 2019).

## The Sinai Peninsula and Egypt

### ISIS's activity in northern Sinai

- ▶ ISIS's activity in northern Sinai continues. Following are highlights of ISIS's activity:
  - ◆ **Detonation of an IED** against an Egyptian army patrol in the Al-Midan area west of Al-Arish. Several members of the force were killed or wounded (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, February 1, 2019).
  - ◆ **An ambush of "armed men"** took control of a large quantity of weapons and ammunition. Two Egyptian soldiers were killed. The location of the incident was not specified (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, February 1, 2019).
  - ◆ **Detonation of an IED** against a vehicle carrying three (Sinai) Tribal Union members northeast of Al-Barth, south of Rafah. Two of them were killed and a third was wounded (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, February 1, 2019).

## Attack in the heart of Egypt

► According to an Egyptian “security source,” four policemen were wounded in an attack by “armed men” against a police checkpoint some 70 km south of the city of Al-Kharijah (200 km west of the city of Luxor). The attackers exchanged fire with the policemen at the checkpoint and ultimately managed to flee (Al-Gomhuria, February 5, 2019). **ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack** (Shabakat Shumukh, February 5, 2019)

## Counterterrorism and preventive activity

### Turkish border police arrest ISIS operatives who tried to cross the border into Syria

► According to a report by a Turkish security source, on February 1, 2019, Turkish border police arrested four suspected ISIS operatives in southeastern Turkey (opposite the Syrian city of Tell Abyad located on the Syrian side of the border). The four were captured while attempting to cross the border from Turkey into Syria (Anadolu News Agency, February 2, 2019). Those arrested include Fride Samur, against whom there is an international arrest warrant (France 24, February 2, 2019).