Main events of the week

Following is an overview of the situation in four centers of conflict and friction in Syria:

- **The “pocket” of ISIS’s operatives along the Euphrates River, which is a few square kilometers in size, is shrinking.** Fierce battles are currently taking place in the village of Al-Baghouz Fawqani, ISIS’s last remaining significant stronghold. According to the SDF forces, “ISIS operatives are breathing their last breath.” At the same time, talks between the ISIS operatives and the SDF are continuing, with the goal of reaching a surrender arrangement that would enable the operatives to leave the “pocket.” No results have been achieved to date.

- **In the Idlib area, incidents continue** between the Syrian army (which continues to bring in reinforcements) and the jihadi organizations. Russian officials expressed the hope that Turkey and Russia would be able to implement the agreements that were reached at the Sochi Conference (the establishment of a demilitarized zone), but stressed that the final objective was to restore the sovereignty of the Syrian regime in the Idlib area. In mid-February 2019, an (additional) summit is scheduled to be held in Sochi, during which the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran will discuss the Idlib problem (and other issues related to Syria).

- **In the city of Manbij and its environs, there has been no change on the ground.** Behind the scenes, power struggles between Turkey, Russia and Syria continue over control of the city after the pullback of the Kurdish (and American) forces. The Turkish president said that Turkey’s patience would run out if the Kurdish forces did not leave the region in the coming weeks.

- Of late, there has been an increase in the number of attacks by local ISIS networks in the city of Al-Raqqah (ISIS’s former so-called capital in Syria) and its environs. The attacks are carried out against SDF vehicles and against local dignitaries who
collaborate with the SDF. Kurdish security forces carry out counterterrorism activities in order to locate the ISIS networks operating in the Al-Raqqah area.

- While ISIS is under pressure in the Syrian arena, the organization continues its intensive terrorist and guerrilla activity in the Iraqi arena (in the Sunni provinces and the mixed Sunni-Shiite provinces). This activity includes planting IEDs on roads used by the Iraqi security forces, attacking positions and facilities, and executing collaborators with the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces. The counterterrorism activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces are not managing to put an end to ISIS’s activity which, in the ITIC’s assessment, is expanding.

## The Idlib region

The Syrian army continues to bring in reinforcements in the Idlib area

- This week, another report was received about Syrian army reinforcements being sent to the areas bordering on the Idlib region. On February 9, 2019, it was reported that the Syrian army had sent large numbers of reinforcements from the 5th Corps and the 9th Division to the rural areas of Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia (@IvanSidorenko1 Twitter account, February 9, 2019)

Incidents continue in the Idlib region

- Local incidents continued in the Idlib region between the Syrian Army and the jihadi rebel organizations:
  - **The Syrian army** fired artillery and tank shells at positions of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham northwest of Hama. This was in response to sniper fire at Syrian army positions (Syrian TV, February 9, 2019)

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Right: Syrian army rocket fire at the deployment areas and fortifications of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, northwest of Hama. Left: Syrian army tank attacking positions of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham, northwest of Hama (Syrian TV, February 9, 2019)
The “Awaken the Believers” operations room (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) reported a series of actions carried out by the organizations operating within its framework, including sniper fire in the rural area north of Aleppo (February 8, 2019). According to a report by the Syrian News Agency, the rebel organizations fired rockets at the area northwest of Hama (SANA News Agency, February 9, 2019).

**Russian statements about Idlib**

- **Russian Ambassador to Syria Alexander Yefimov** gave an interview to a Russian news agency in which he mentioned, among other things, the deterioration of the situation in the Idlib Province. The ambassador expressed the hope that Turkey and Russia would be able to implement the agreements that were reached at the Sochi Conference for the establishment of a demilitarized zone. However, the ambassador added that this was only a temporary step, with the ultimate goal being the restoration of the sovereignty of the Syrian regime in the Idlib Province. He noted that the meeting between the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran, scheduled to take place in Sochi in mid-February 2019, would be of major importance in all matters related to the effort to reduce tension in the Idlib region (RIA Novosti News Agency, February 8, 2019).

- **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova** announced that the Kremlin wanted to see Turkey invest more in its efforts to mop up the Idlib area from the presence of jihadists. According to Zakharova, Turkey should also work harder to implement the promises made in Sochi on September 17, 2018 (AMN, February 7, 2019; Sputnik, February 8, 2019).

**Eastern Syria**

**SDF attack against the ISIS “pocket” east of the Euphrates River**

- **On February 7, 2019**, the SDF forces launched an attack designed to mop up ISIS’s “pocket” east of the Euphrates and end the campaign against ISIS, which started five months ago. **On February 9, 2019**, Mustafa Bali, director of the SDF Press Center, announced that the SDF forces had started to advance towards the village of Al-Baghouz Fawqani, east of Albukamal. According to him, this is the last village remaining under ISIS’s control in the region, and it will soon be mopped up (Mustafa Bali’s Twitter account, February 2, 2019). Coalition planes carried out airstrikes against ISIS command posts and fortifications and blocked roads used by ISIS (SDF Press, February 7, 2019).
According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, on February 9, 2019, the SDF forces with Coalition support continued the attack against the ISIS “pocket,” which is about four square kilometers in size, in order to terminate the ISIS presence east of the Euphrates (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 9, 2019). Coalition planes reportedly carried out intensive airstrikes against ISIS targets in the area overlooking Al-Baghouz, east of Albukamal (Deir ez-Zor 24 Twitter account, February 9, 11, 2019).

On February 10, 2019, the director of the SDF Press Center announced that the SDF forces had entered the village of Al-Baghouz (Fawqani) which had been taken over from ISIS last week. The forces reportedly took over ISIS positions and destroyed fortifications. An ISIS counterattack was foiled on February 10, 2019. On February 12, 2019, fierce fighting still took place in the area and the Coalition planes continued to...
attack ISIS positions (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 12, 2019). The SDF forces stated that “the ISIS operatives are breathing their last breath” (SDF Press, February 10, 2019).

ISIS’s activity

- During the battles in the village of Al-Baghouz Fawqani, ISIS sent two suicide bombers (two brothers, possibly foreign fighters) to detonate car bombs among a concentration of SDF forces. According to ISIS, many SDF fighters were killed or wounded (Telegram, February 10, 2019). In addition, ISIS launched four anti-tank missiles at the SDF forces in Al-Baghouz (Fawqani). According to ISIS, about 25 SDF fighters were killed and wounded (Telegram, February 11, 2019). ISIS also released a photo of an Uzbek operative (Abu Uthman the Uzbek) who attacked a concentration of SDF forces in Al-Baghouz (Telegram, February 12, 2019).
ISIS operative codenamed Abu Uthman the Uzbek, who attacked SDF forces in Al-Baghouz (Telegram, February 12, 2019)

ISIS announced that on February 6, 2019, its forces had downed an Iraqi army drone flying over Al-Baghouz (Shabakat Shumukh, February 8, 2019).

The drone which flew over Al-Baghouz breaking apart after being hit by ISIS fire (Shabakat Shumukh, February 8, 2019)

In the ITIC's assessment, ISIS is now waging its final battle, focusing on the Al-Baghouz area. Fierce fighting is now taking place in the area. It seems that the SDF effort is intended to eliminate the operatives remaining in the “pocket” and prevent the ISIS operatives from fleeing eastward, to Iraqi territory (fleeing westward is more difficult because the Euphrates River is an obstacle, and to its west are the Syrian army and the Shiite militias). At the same time, contacts continue between the SDF forces and ISIS to arrange for ISIS’s surrender, so far without results.

ISIS operatives continue fleeing among the local population

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that since early December 2018 until February 6, 2019, a total of 37,700 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 3,420 ISIS operatives, who had been detained by the SDF forces (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 8, 2019).

Dozens of tons of gold and huge amounts of money in the hands of the ISIS operatives surrounded in the “pocket”

According to a report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in the ISIS “pocket” there are about 40 tons of gold and tens of millions of dollars. Therefore, according to the report, the Coalition forces refrain from an attack that might kill the operatives. The International Coalition is interested in making the ISIS operatives surrender in order to lay its hands on the gold and the money (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, February 12, 2019).

The Manbij area

No fundamental changes took place on the ground in the city of Manbij and its environs. On February 5, 2019, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Turkey’s patience would soon run out if the Kurdish forces (YPG affiliated with the PKK, as Erdoğan put it) did not leave Manbij in the coming weeks. Turkey reportedly intends to accelerate the “Manbij process” under which the Kurdish forces (YPG) will withdraw from the city and the entire province will be transferred to the administration of an entity composed of local residents (Daily Sabah website, February 8, 2019).

Northeastern Syria

ISIS’s terrorist and guerrilla activity in the Al-Raqqah region

Recently, there have been more reports of terrorist and guerrilla activity carried out by ISIS operatives around ISIS’s former “capital” Al-Raqqah, situated along the Euphrates River. Following are the highlights of ISIS’s activity:

- ISIS’s Al-Raqqah Region reported that on February 9, 2019, its operatives had blown up an SDF vehicle about 70 km east of Al-Raqqah. One SDF fighter was killed and another was wounded (Drexl Spivey@RisboLensky Twitter account, February 10, 2019).
- ISIS’s Al-Raqqah Region reported that in the village of Al-Salehiya, north of Al-Raqqah, an SDF fighter in charge of communications and his escort were shot to death (Drexl Spivey@RisboLensky Twitter account, February 10, 2019).
ISIS’s Amaq News Agency reported that ISIS operatives had killed the mukhtar (head) of one of the neighborhoods in northwestern Al-Raqqah (Drexl Spivey@RisboLensky Twitter account, February 9, 2019).

ISIS’s Al-Raqqah Region reported that an ISIS squad had broken into the house of the mukhtar of one of the neighborhoods in the northern part of Al-Raqqah. The mukhtar, affiliated with the SDF forces, was shot to death (Telegram, February 12, 2019).

The SDF forces and the Kurdish Internal Security launched an operation in which raids were conducted in the city of Al-Raqqah to locate secret ISIS cells. A total of 63 “terrorist operatives” involved in terrorist attacks were detained (SDF Press, February 7, 2019).

**Demonstrations in Al-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor**

The Syrian TV reported that on February 8 and 9, 2019, residents in Al-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor had carried out demonstrations calling for the departure of US, French and Turkish armies from Syrian territory. The demonstrators burned American and French flags and asked the Syrian army to enter the entire Al-Raqqah Province (Syrian TV, February 9, 2019).

**Main developments in Iraq**

**ISIS’s terrorist and guerrilla activity**

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

- **Kirkuk Province:** Seven mortar shells were fired at a concentration of Tribal Mobilization forces (militias loyal to the Iraqi regime) some 70 km west of Kirkuk. It is not known whether there were any casualties (Shabakat Shumukh, February 8, 2019).
◆ **Kirkuk Province:** The home of a Tribal Mobilization intelligence officer 70 km west of Kirkuk was blown up (Shabakat Shumukh, February 8, 2019).

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** An IED was detonated 70 km west of Kirkuk. A member of the Tribal Mobilization was wounded (Shabakat Shumukh, February 8, 2019).

◆ **Salah al-Din Province:** On February 6, 2019, ISIS operatives abducted three brothers 21 km north of Baiji. Two days later, on February 8, 2019, all three were executed (Al-Sumaria News, February 8, 2019).

![The bodies of the three brothers executed by ISIS (Al-Sumaria News, February 8, 2019)](image)

◆ **Kirkuk Province:** An Iraqi “intelligence agent” and a Tribal Mobilization operative were executed south of Kirkuk (Sylvain@Burgy65 Twitter account, February 12, 2019).

![Right: ISIS operative aiming his weapon at the Tribal Mobilization operative. Left: execution of the “Iraqi intelligence agent” and the Tribal Mobilization operative (Sylvain@Burgy65 Twitter account, February 12, 2019).](image)

◆ **Diyala Province:** An ISIS squad attacked a Popular Mobilization office in the Khanaqin District. A suicide bomber wearing two explosive belts, who was probably a foreign fighter, blew himself up. The Popular Mobilization announced that the attack had been
foiled and that the suicide bomber and another ISIS operative had been killed in the attack (alhashed.net, February 12, 2019).

- **Diyala Province**: ISIS operatives burned down the homes of two Kurdish internal security personnel 5 km north of Khanaqin (Telegram, February 12, 2019).

![ISIS operative burning down the home of one of the Kurdish internal security personnel north of Khanaqin (Telegram, February 12, 2019).](image)

### Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

- Following are the main counterterrorist activities carried out by the Iraqi security forces:
  - **Kirkuk Province**: An Iraqi Federal Police force located an ISIS hideout. They found 200 mines (Iraqi News Agency, February 8, 2019).
  - **Nineveh Province**: A Popular Mobilization force killed two ISIS operatives who were planning to carry out a suicide bombing attack against the Iraqi security forces. In addition, three ISIS operatives who had been involved in organizing the attack were detained. This squad was one of the most prominent terrorist networks in Iraq and Syria (alhashed.net, February 10, 2019).
  - **Diyala Province**: An Iraqi Border Police force prevented an attack by “armed men,” apparently ISIS operatives, against a position near the Iraqi-Iranian border (around 100 km northeast of Baqubah). An Iraqi security guard was killed in the attack and another was wounded (Iraqi News Agency, February 11, 2019).
This week, ISIS continued to carry out attacks in northern Sinai:

- ISIS detonated two IEDs against an Egyptian army bulldozer and armored vehicle near Al-Arish Airport. Both vehicles were damaged (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, February 10, 2019).
- Snipers fired at a concentration of Egyptian army soldiers in the village of Abu Shanar, east of Rafah. Three soldiers were killed and the fourth was wounded (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, February 11, 2019).
- Snipers fired at an Egyptian armored force carrying out routine security operations south of Rafah. One soldier was killed (Shahed Sinaa Twitter account, February 12, 2019).