Highlights of the incidents

- **In the Syrian arena**, the Syrian army repulsed counterattacks by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the rebel organizations in the area southeast of Idlib. Around the village of Kabanah, northwest of the Idlib region, the rebel organizations repulsed the Syrian army’s attempted advance. In the Euphrates Valley, ISIS’s intensive activity against the SDF continues.

- **The Iraqi arena** has seen an increase in the intensity of ISIS’s attacks this week, with an emphasis on the Diyala Province north of Baghdad. ISIS’s coordinated and well-timed attacks against the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and against the Popular Mobilization forces (Shiite militias) are evidence of rigorous planning and may indicate an increase in the operational capability of ISIS’s operatives in Iraq.

- ISIS’s main activity abroad was a stabbing attack carried out in London by a jihadi operative (two dead, three wounded). ISIS claimed responsibility. This was the first terrorist attack carried out in 2019 in a western country for which ISIS claimed responsibility. The attack illustrates that in Britain and, in the ITIC’s assessment, in other European countries as well, there is a potential of ISIS supporters, which may be reflected in additional attacks in the future.

- Among ISIS’s provinces abroad, two countries stood out this week:
  - **Mali**: ISIS claimed responsibility for ambushing a French army convoy in the southeast of the country (near the border between Mali and Burkina Faso and Niger). According to ISIS’s claim of responsibility, a French helicopter that tried to land soldiers at the scene had to leave the area and collided with another helicopter. Thirteen French officers and soldiers were killed in the incident. The reliability of ISIS’s version of the incident is questionable. The French chief of staff has denied ISIS’s

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1 For details, see the ITIC’s Information Bulletin from December 2, 2019, “ISIS-Inspired Stabbing Attack in London and Its Significance.”
involvement in the helicopter collision. The cause of the collision is now under investigation by the French authorities.

- **Afghanistan:** The Afghan government continues to report the mass surrender of ISIS operatives and their families in the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. According to an unverified report, **ISIS is currently shifting the center of gravity of its activity to the Kunar Province**, north of Nangarhar. To date, ISIS has not issued any official statement on the blow suffered by its operatives in Afghanistan.

### Idlib region

**Overview**

This week, local offensive initiatives by the rival sides continued in the Idlib region. On November 30, 2019, **the rebel organizations took over four villages about 40 km southeast of Idlib.** On December 1, 2019, **the Syrian army managed to retake those villages.** In addition, **the Syrian army halted an attempted offensive by the rebel organizations on the Mushayrafa area,** which it took over in the past week. **In the Kabanah area,** in the northwestern Idlib region, **the rebel organizations halted another Syrian army attempt to advance.** Exchanges of artillery fire continued, and Russian and Syrian airstrikes were carried out against rebel targets in the Idlib region.

**Failure of the rebel organizations to take over four villages southeast of Idlib**

- **On November 30, 2019,** the rebel organizations led by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham took over from the Syrian army four villages about 40 km southeast of Idlib. Operatives of the Turkish-affiliated National Liberation Front also participated in the attack. After the rebel organizations had halted several counterattacks, **the Syrian army managed to regain control over those four villages.** Fighting in the area still continues. At least 13 Syrian soldiers and 15 rebel operatives were killed in the battles (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, December 1, 2019).
Map of the control areas in the southeastern part of the Idlib region (updated to November 30, 2019). Green: control area of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations; red: control area of the Syrian army and the forces supporting it; turquoise: the four villages which the rebel organizations unsuccessfully tried to take over from the Syrian army (Khotwa, November 30, 2019)

Right: Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham on their way to take over the four villages from the Syrian army. Left: Operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham fighting against the Syrian army (Ibaa, November 30, 2019)
Operatives of the National Liberation Front on their way to A’jaz, one of the villages which the rebel organizations attempted to take over from the Syrian army (Enab Baladi, November 30, 2019)

Mushayrafa area: counterattack halted by the Syrian army

The Syrian army managed to retain its control over the area of the village of Mushayrafa, about 30 km southeast of Idlib. Last week, the area was taken over from the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and other rebel organizations. On November 30, 2019, the Syrian army halted an attack on this area, carried out by operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the Turkish-affiliated National Liberation Front. The rebel organizations reportedly sustained over 30 fatalities and 60 wounded. In addition, it was reported that Russian and Syrian planes supported the ground forces and contributed to halting the attack (Al-Watan, December 1, 2019).
On November 29, 2019, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced that its operatives had halted another Syrian army attempt to advance in the Kabanah area (about 10 km southwest of Jisr al-Shughur). According to the announcement, two Syrian army tanks were damaged (Ibaa, November 29, 2019). At least four Syrian soldiers and operatives of the forces supporting them were reportedly killed in the fighting (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, November 29, 2019).
The Kabanah area where Syrian army attempted attacks were repelled (Bing Map)

**Airstrikes**

- This week, Russian and Syrian airstrikes against rebel targets continued, focusing on the Kabanah area, the rural area southeast of Idlib, and Kafrnubl (34 km south of Idlib).

![Airstrike in the village of Saraqib, southeast of Idlib](https://example.com/saraqib_airstrike.jpg)

**Russian fighter jets attack Idlib’s main prison**

- On December 2, 2019, the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced that [Russian fighter jets had carried out several airstrikes against Idlib’s main prison](https://example.com/idlib_prison_airstrikes), which is under its control (Ibaa, December 2, 2019). According to the report, over 10 airstrikes were carried out and six people were killed. Following the airstrikes, several openings were formed in the prison building, enabling several criminal prisoners to escape. Searches are now being carried out after them (Edlib Media Center; Al-Durar Al-Shamiya, December 2, 2019).
Initial report on an airstrike against a senior operative of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham

The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced that a Coalition UAV had attacked a car in the village of Atmah, about 40 km north of Idlib (near the Syrian-Turkish border). The two passengers were killed (Ibaa, December 3, 2019; Edlib Media Center, December 3, 2019). So far, no CENTCOM official statement was found.

According to media reports, a Coalition UAV carried out the airstrike against Abu Ahmad al-Muhajir, a commander in the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and an instructor at the organization’s central military academy (@slmhktn_ar, Twitter account of a Turkish journalist operating in Istanbul, December 3, 2019). According to another report, Abu Ahmad al-Muhajir was an instructor of the “Red Gangs,” the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham’s elite force (Maan Alkhoder@m3nati, Twitter account of a reporter in southern Turkey and Syria, December 3, 2019).

Right: The village of Atmah, where the airstrike was carried out (Wikimapia). Left: Report by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham. The Arabic text reads, “An International Coalition UAV attacked a car in the village of Atmah, in Idlib’s rural area.” There is no mention of a senior figure in the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham being targeted (Ibaa, December 3, 2019)

ISIS’s activity

ISIS’s activity against the SDF continued in the areas of Al-Raqqah and Al-Mayadeen:

- On November 26, 2019, an SDF fighter was shot and severely wounded 20 km west of Al-Raqqah (Telegram, November 27, 2019).
- On November 28, 2019, two SDF fighters were shot and killed about 20 km southwest of Al-Raqqah (Telegram, November 28, 2019).
On November 30, 2019, an SDF fighter was targeted by machine gun fire 14 km north of Al-Mayadeen. He was killed (Telegram, December 1, 2019).

On December 1, 2019, SDF fighters were targeted by machine gun fire 5 km east of Al-Mayadeen. Several fighters were killed or wounded (Telegram, December 1, 2019).

On December 2, 2019, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire 14 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. An SDF fighter was wounded (Telegram, December 2, 2019).

On December 2, 2019, several IEDs were activated against a convoy of SDF fighters about 10 km east of Deir ez-Zor. SDF fighters were killed or wounded. Several vehicles sustained damage (Telegram, December 3, 2019).

On December 3, 2019, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle 4 km northeast of Al-Mayadeen. Two SDF fighters were killed (Telegram, December 3, 2019).

**Counterterrorist and preventive activity**

- **On November 28, 2019**, SDF forces carried out security activity in the village of Tiyanah, 8 km southeast of Al-Mayadeen. Seven people were detained on suspicion of belonging to ISIS (Deir ez-Zor 24, November 30, 2019).

- **On November 29, 2019**, Coalition forces with SDF support landed forces from a helicopter in the village of Harija, about 40 km northeast of Al-Mayadeen. Several local residents engaged in smuggling oil were detained for trading with ISIS (Deir ez-Zor 24, November 30, 2019).

- **On November 30, 2019**, SDF forces carried out security activity in Hawaij, 4 km northeast of Al-Mayadeen. Five people were detained for being affiliated with ISIS (Deir ez-Zor 24, November 30, 2019).

**Northeastern Syria**

**400 family members of ISIS operatives released from the Al-Hol DP camp**

- **On November 27, 2019**, the SDF forces released **115 families of ISIS operatives from the Al-Hol displaced persons camp. A total of over 400 women and children**, residents of the Deir ez-Zor and Al-Raqqah provinces, were released. Their release was made possible following a meeting held in May 2019 between the SDF and the heads of the Syrian tribes in these provinces. The heads of the tribes vouched for all those who were on the list of families submitted to the SDF (Khotwa, November 27, 2019).
According to a Syrian source, about 400 people from 70 families were released, most of them from the Albu Kamal area. The family members had stayed in the Al-Hol camp for two years. After being released, they were taken to the Deir ez-Zor area and sent home (Halab al-Youm, December 1, 2019).

Families of ISIS operatives who were released from the Al-Hol displaced persons camp, on their way home (Halab al-Youm, a website opposed to the Syrian regime, December 1, 2019)

The release of the 115 families is a continuation of the release of 77 ISIS family members in mid-November, after receiving a guarantee from one of the sheikhs. In the Kurds’ view, the release was intended to improve their relations with the Sunni-Arab local tribes considered a strong power center in the area. The involvement of the sheikhs and dignitaries in the release procedure was intended as a guarantee of sorts that the operatives or their family members would not return to operate in the ranks of ISIS.

Killing Kurdish local council members

On December 2, 2019, ISIS operatives fired machine guns at two members of the Al-Shadadi Civilian Council in their homes in the village of Al-Hasana al-Sharqiya, northeast of Al-Shadadi (about 50 km south of Al-Hasakah). Both were killed (Telegram, December 2, 2019). Council members of the Kurdish local government are preferred target for ISIS’s elimination attempts. ISIS seeks to kill them in order to undermine the self-government in the Kurdish control areas.
Iraq

Iraqi provinces (Wikipedia). The numbers indicate provinces in northern and western Iraq where ISIS’s military activity is more intense.

Overview

This week, there has been an increase in the level of intensity of ISIS’s terrorist activity in the various provinces in Iraq. Particularly prominent was a series of attacks against the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and operatives of the Popular Mobilization (Shiite militias). These attacks, carried out based on meticulous planning, may indicate an increase in the operational capabilities of ISIS operatives in Iraq. The Diyala Province, north of Baghdad, where the attacks were carried out, is ISIS’s most active province in Iraq today (Fighters’ Harvest; Telegram, November 29, 2019).

Series of coordinated attacks by ISIS against Kurdish Peshmerga fighters

In the past week, ISIS operatives carried out a series of attacks against the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in the Diyala Province, north of Baghdad (November 29, 2019). The attacks included launching mortar shells at Peshmerga houses and command posts in the rural area; activating an IED against a vehicle carrying fighters to the area which was attacked; sniper fire at the regional commander of the Kurdish Internal Security Forces (known as the Asayish); and machine gun fire at four Peshmerga vehicles. According to ISIS,
13 Peshmerga fighters were killed and wounded in the attacks (Telegram, November 30, 2019).

These operations indicate an increase in the activity against the Kurds, who up till now have not represented a main target for ISIS. Commenting on the attacks, Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani said that the commander of the Internal Security Forces and two fighters had been killed and several others had been wounded. He added that the attacks were proof that ISIS had still not been defeated and called on the international community to help Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to eradicate terrorism (Al-Sumaria, November 30, 2019).

**Series of coordinated attacks by ISIS against operatives of the Popular Mobilization (Shiite militias)**

- On December 1, 2019, a Popular Mobilization camp about 30 km south of Khanaqin (about 80 km northeast of Baqubah) was targeted by sniper fire. When a Popular Mobilization force arrived at the scene, an IED was activated against it. At the same time, ISIS operatives ambushed a convoy in the area. A total of 23 Popular Mobilization fighters were killed or wounded in the series of attacks (Telegram, December 2, 2019).

**ISIS’s activity in the various provinces**

**Diyala Province**

- On November 29, 2019, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle about 20 km northeast of Baqubah. Two soldiers were killed and three others were wounded, including an officer with the rank of major (Telegram, November 29, 2019).

- On November 30, 2019, a sticky bomb was activated against a vehicle carrying an Iraqi police officer about 5 km south of Baqubah. The police officer was killed (Telegram, December 1, 2019).

- On December 1, 2019, three mortar shells were fired at the homes of Tribal Mobilization operatives about 80 km northeast of Baqubah. According to ISIS, accurate hits of the targets were observed (Telegram, December 1, 2019).
Salah al-Din Province

► On November 27, 2019, Iraqi army forces were targeted by gunfire about 25 km north of Baghdad. Five soldiers were killed. In addition, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle in the same area. The passengers were killed (Telegram, November 28, 2019).

► On November 30, 2019, an IED was activated against Iraqi soldiers about 30 km north of Baghdad. Two soldiers were killed and several others were wounded (Telegram, December 2, 2019).

► On December 1, 2019, Popular Mobilization fighters were targeted by machine gun fire north of Baghdad. A Popular Mobilization fighter was killed and several others were wounded (Telegram, December 3, 2019).

Babel Province

► On November 27, 2019, an IED was activated against a Popular Mobilization vehicle about 40 km south of Baghdad. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, November 28, 2019).

Kirkuk Province

► On December 1, 2019, an IED was activated against a vehicle carrying police personnel about 60 km southwest of Kirkuk. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, December 2, 2019).

Al-Anbar Province

► On November 30, 2019, Iraqi security forces operating in the deserts of the Al-Anbar Province destroyed several ISIS tunnels (al-hashed.net, November 30, 2019).

► On November 30, 2019, a sticky bomb was activated against a vehicle carrying a judge about 25 km west of Baghdad. The judge was killed and one of his escorts was wounded (Telegram, December 1, 2019).

► On December 1, 2019, an IED was activated against Iraqi forces 25 kilometers northeast of Fallujah. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, December 3, 2019).

► On December 2, 2019, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle 25 kilometers northeast of Fallujah. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, December 3, 2019).
Erbil Province

On November 29, 2019, an IED was activated against an Iraqi army vehicle in the area of Makhmur, about 70 km southeast of Mosul. An Iraqi soldier was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, December 1, 2019).

Nineveh Province

On December 1, 2019, an Iraqi Interior Ministry force located an ISIS workshop for manufacturing IEDs in the Nineveh Province. The force detained an ISIS operative in the workshop (Al-Sumaria, December 1, 2019).

On November 30, 2019, ISIS operatives took an Iraqi “intelligence agent” prisoner about 30 km southeast of Mosul. After being interrogated, he was shot to death (Telegram, December 2, 2019).

Counterterrorist activities by the Iraqi security forces

According to an announcement by “senior Iraqi officials,” Abu Khaldun, one of ISIS’s senior operatives in Iraq, was captured in a raid carried out by the Iraqi police in Hawija (about 50 km west of Kirkuk). Abu Khaldun served as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s deputy and as commander of ISIS’s Salah al-Din Province. When he was captured in the apartment, he had a fake ID in his possession (Al-Arabiya, December 3, 2019).
Abu Khaldun, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s deputy, who was captured by the Iraqi police in Hawija
(SecMedCell@ Facebook page, December 3, 2019)

The Sinai Peninsula

- ISIS’s “routine” attacks in the northern Sinai Peninsula continued:
  - On November 27, 2019, ISIS operatives attacked an Egyptian army tank south of Rafah. The tank was put out of commission. All the soldiers in the tank were killed or wounded (Telegram, November 27, 2019).
  - On November 27, 2019, ISIS operatives activated an IED against an Egyptian army tank west of Al-Arish. The tank was destroyed. The soldiers in the tank were killed or wounded (Telegram, November 27, 2019).

ISIS’s activity around the globe

Africa

ISIS publication summing up three months of activity of the West Africa Province

- This week, ISIS released an infographic summing up three months of activity of the West Africa Province (August 31 – November 27, 2019). According to the report, the organization carried out 57 operations, in which 518 people were killed and wounded; 59 vehicles were destroyed or damaged, nine bases and camps were destroyed; and 48 vehicles were seized. The infographic also states that that two French helicopters were destroyed (see report on Mali) (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, November 29, 2019; Al-Naba’, Issue number 210).
- The country where most of ISIS’s activity was carried out is Nigeria (40 attacks). ISIS also operated in Niger (6 attacks), Mali (4), Chad (4), Burkina Faso (2) and Cameroon (2). Distribution of the dead and wounded in the various countries: Nigeria (260), Mali (120), Burkina Faso (80), Niger (28), Cameroon (20) and Chad (10) (Akhbar al-Muslimeen, November 29, 2019).
Nigeria

On November 27, 2019, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army camp in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria. According to ISIS, several soldiers were killed or wounded, and weapons were seized (Telegram, November 29, 2019).

Mali

On November 25, 2019, ISIS operatives ambushed a French army convoy west of the city of Ménaka, in southeastern Mali. According to ISIS, many French soldiers were killed and wounded in the exchange of fire that took place on the scene. In addition, shots were reportedly fired at a French helicopter which attempted to land soldiers at the scene of the incident in order to assist the soldiers who had been attacked. According to ISIS’s version, the helicopter had to move away and then collided with another helicopter. According to ISIS, 13 French officers and soldiers were killed (Telegram, November 28, 2019). The reliability of ISIS’s version of the incident is questionable².

²The Support for Islam and Muslims organization, Al-Qaeda’s official branch in Mali, published an announcement denying ISIS’s involvement in shooting down the helicopter. According to the announcement, ISIS’s claims about responsibility for the shooting are false and harm the reputation of the jihad fighters. The announcement states that the Support for Islam and Muslims organization has been in the heart of the region for many years, and calls on ISIS to “repent” (Telegram, December 3, 2019).
According to the France 24 channel, two French helicopters collided on November 25, 2019, during a campaign against jihadists in the Sahel area in southwestern Mali, near the border between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The ground forces fought against the jihadists, who fled the scene on motorcycles and pickup trucks. During the operation, two helicopters collided, killing the 13 soldiers who were on board (France 24, November 27, 2019; Sputnik, November 26, 2019). The French chief of staff denied ISIS’s involvement in the helicopter collision. The circumstances of the collision are under investigation by the French authorities.

**Afghanistan**

**Mopping up the Nangarhar Province**

**Overview**

The Afghan government continues to report the mass surrender of ISIS operatives and their families in the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. According to an unverified report, ISIS is currently shifting the center of gravity of its activity to the Kunar Province, north of Nangarhar.

The Afghan government issued a press release stating that 31 ISIS operatives, along with 62 women and children, have turned themselves in to the Afghan security forces in the Achin area in the southern Nangarhar Province (the site of mass surrender of ISIS operatives and their families). In addition, heavy and light weapons were seized (Asian News International; Republic World, December 1, 2019; Iran News, November 30, 2019).

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3 Further to last week’s Spotlight on Global Jihad.
Forty-nine ISIS operatives who surrendered to the Afghan security forces in the Nangarhar Province (Afghanistan Times, December 1, 2019)

The significance of the blow suffered by ISIS in the Nangarhar Province

The newspaper Al-Arabi al-Jadeed (December 1, 2019) reported that despite the mass ISIS surrender in Afghanistan, “it has not yet been vanquished.” Its main stronghold in Afghanistan was the Nangarhar Province, and now ISIS is working to transfer most of its operatives to the Kunar Province, north of it. According to the report, the approach of winter to the mountainous areas will probably reduce the intensity of the attack against ISIS, so that “the fate of the local ISIS branch will be postponed until spring” (Al-Arabi al-Jadeed, December 1, 2019).

The Kunar and Nangarhar provinces (Google Maps)

US government officials commented on the blow suffered by ISIS in Afghanistan:

According to Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells, following the ongoing attack against ISIS’s branch in
Afghanistan, ISIS operatives and their families continue to surrender to the Afghan security forces. She added that there was “real progress” in the activity of the Afghan forces in the Nangarhar region and that the US was committed to defeating ISIS’s Khorasan Province in Afghanistan (Big News Network, November 28, 2019).

General Austin S. Miller, commander of NATO’s Resolute Support Mission and United States Forces – Afghanistan, noted that the operation “would severely restrict their recruitment and planning” (i.e., that of ISIS operatives). But General Miller also warned that ISIS could remain a threat in Afghanistan even if it does not hold territory, with attention required to track militants on the move and the group’s remaining urban cells (New York Times, December 2, 2019).

Azerbaijan

Pledge of allegiance of three operatives of ISIS’s Azerbaijan Province to ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi (Telegram, November 29, 2019)