



Spotlight on Global Jihad

January 23-29, 2020



Highlights of the events

- ▶ The Syrian forces, with Russian air support, took the initiative once again and carried out attacks in the Idlib region this week. The operation was twofold: the **main attack** was carried out southeast of Idlib, culminating in the takeover of the city of **Maarat Nu'man** (about 30 km south of Idlib), where the Damascus-Aleppo highway (M-5) passes. Another attack, which, in the ITIC's assessment, was secondary, was carried out **west and south of Aleppo**, so far without significant results. As the fighting continues, **residents flee en masse**. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, **about 140,000 residents have fled over the past two weeks**. Following the takeover of Maarat Nu'man, **the Syrian army is expected to use the city as a launching pad to take over Idlib and its environs**, the stronghold of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations and the strategic target of the Syrian regime's campaign.
- ▶ ISIS continued its activity **in the Euphrates Valley and the Al-Hasakah region** in eastern and northeastern Syria. The main event this week was an attack on a Syrian army convoy about 40 km southwest of Al-Raqqah. According to ISIS, there were 20 casualties on the Syrian side. **In the Iraqi arena**, ISIS carried out low-intensity activity. This week, ISIS carried out intensive activity in the provinces outside its core countries, i.e., Iraq and Syria. The most prominent attacks were carried out in **northern Sinai and Africa** (mainly in northeastern Nigeria and in the northern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo).
- ▶ On January 27, 2020, ISIS's new spokesman released an **audiotape which included an unusual and explicit call on ISIS operatives in Sinai and Syria to attack Israeli communities** and turn them into a proving ground for ISIS's weapons. The spokesman also calls on **Muslims in Palestine and around the world to pave the way for the failure of the Deal of the Century**. In the ITIC's assessment, the spokesman's statements indicate that **at the present time, ISIS may have a special interest in promoting attacks against Israel and the Jewish People in order to present itself as a leading player in the campaign to undermine US President Trump's plan**.

► **What capabilities does ISIS possess in order to realize the spokesman's call?** ISIS has **operational capabilities in southern Syria** (where the activity of the Hawran Province has recently intensified) and in **northern Sinai** (where operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province carry out intensive attacks against the Egyptian security forces). In the ITIC's assessment, **the spokesman's call is liable to inspire ISIS networks in these areas to try to carry out attacks against Israel** (for example, rocket fire, planting IEDs, antitank fire, small arms fire and perhaps even infiltrating into Israeli territory). In addition, **ISIS supporters around the globe, including in Western Europe, are liable to be inspired to carry out attacks against Jewish targets on their own initiative**¹.

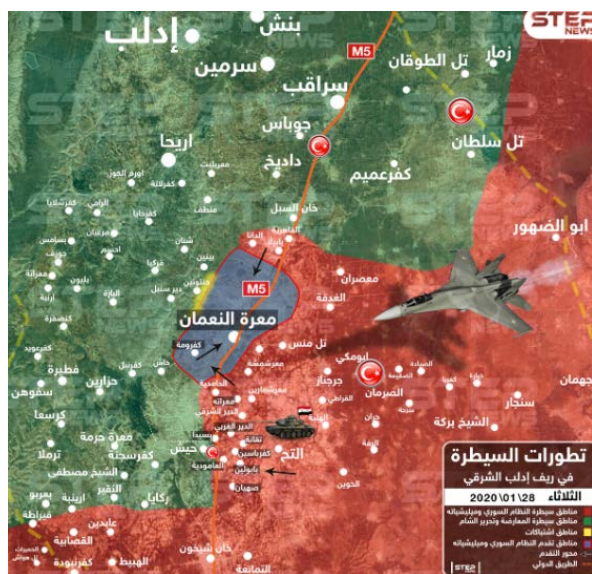
Idlib region

Overview

This week, the Syrian army took the initiative in the Idlib region **and carried out a twofold attack: the main attack targeted the city of Maarat Nu'man, southeast of Idlib**. Within four days, the Syrian forces **took over Maarat Nu'man and a section of the Damascus-Aleppo highway (M-5)**. On January 28, 2020, **Syrian forces entered Maarat Nu'man** and are now mopping up its neighborhoods. In the region **west and south of Aleppo**, another attack took place (in the ITIC's assessment, secondary in importance), so far with no significant achievements. After it finishes mopping up Maarat Nu'man, **the Syrian army is expected to prepare for the takeover of Idlib**, the stronghold of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations.

¹ An analysis of the statements made by ISIS's spokesman will appear in a separate document.

Situation on the ground in the Maarat Nu'man sector



Map of the control areas in the Maarat Nu'man region (updated to January 28, 2020). Green: area controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations; Red: area controlled by the Syrian army; Blue: area taken over by the Syrian army in the recent attack; Yellow: area where fighting still takes place (Khotwa, January 28, 2020)

The takeover of Maarat Nu'man

- On January 25, 2020, the Syrian army mounted a ground attack with the aim of taking over the city of Maarat Nu'man and its rural area. For several days, there were battles between the Syrian army and the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations in the rural area of the city. On January 27, 2020, the Syrian army entered one of the city's northern neighborhoods and, in addition, took control of a section of the Damascus-Aleppo highway (Al-Watan, January 28, 2020).
- On January 28, 2020, the Syrian army continued to enter Maarat Nu'man from several directions, apparently, mainly from the north. Before the army entered the city, massive artillery was fired and fierce clashes took place for several hours. It appears that operatives of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham hardly fought inside the city and preferred to retreat (Khotwa, January 28, 2020). The Syrian forces are now combing the neighborhoods of the city (SANA, January 28, 2020).



Right: Syrian army soldiers and forces supporting them on the northern outskirts of Maarat Nu'man. Left: Syrian soldiers in the city (Khotwa, January 28, 2020)



Right: Syrian soldiers combing one of the neighborhoods of Maarat Nu'man. Left: Syrian soldiers in the rural area of the city (SANA, January 28, 2020)

► **Maarat Nu'man is of major significance** since the Damascus-Aleppo highway (M-5) passes through the city. About 370,000 inhabitants lived there before the civil war, **but most of them fled**. It seems that today, it is inhabited by about 90,000. The Syrian army regards the city as a launching pad for its campaign to take over Idlib and its environs, the stronghold of the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations.

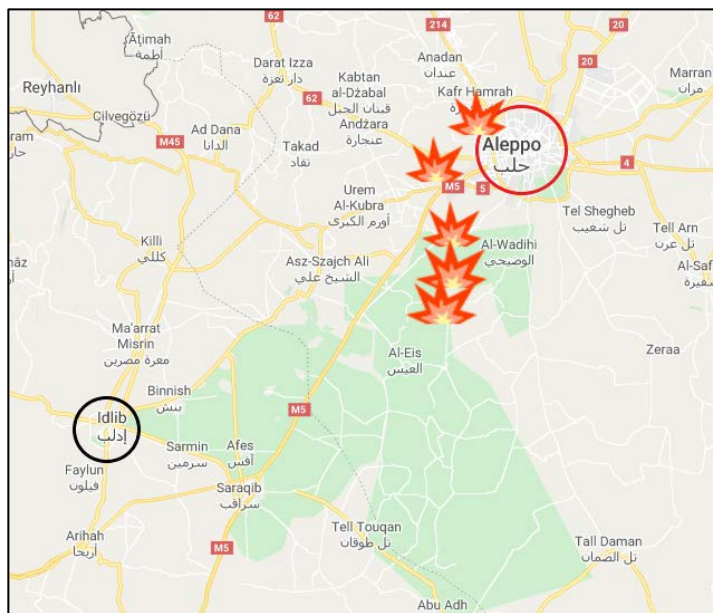
The war effort west and south of Aleppo

► **On January 26, 2020**, the Syrian army and Shiite militias attacked the rebel organizations **west and south of Aleppo**. In the ITIC's assessment, this was a **secondary effort**, which took place at the same time as the main effort in Maarat Nu'man. In the ITIC's assessment, **the Syrian forces could not record a significant advance in this area**. The Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham announced that it had foiled the advance of Shiite militias supporting the Syrian army (Ibaa, January 27, 2020).

► **Clashes west and south of Aleppo are still ongoing**. The Syrian media announced that **on January 27, 2020**, the Syrian army advanced on the Khan Tuman road, 6 km southwest of Aleppo. The advance of the Syrian army was accompanied by massive artillery fire (SANA, January 28, 2020).



Map of the control areas west of Aleppo (updated to January 26, 2020). Green: area controlled by the Headquarters for the Liberation of Al-Sham and the other rebel organizations; Red: area controlled by the Syrian army; Black arrows: directions of the attacks of the Syrian army and Shiite militias; Yellow: area controlled by the Kurds (Khotwa, January 26, 2020).



Areas where battles took place in the Aleppo region between the Syrian army and the rebel organizations on January 26-27, 2020 (Google Maps)



Right: A Syrian army tank on the Khan Tuman road, southwest of Aleppo. Left: Syrian soldier at a firing position on the Khan Tuman road (SANA, January 27, 2020)

Airstrikes

► **Russian fighter jets reportedly carried out 86 airstrikes against targets south of Aleppo, in the Maarat Nu'man area and elsewhere.** In addition, **Syrian fighter jets** carried out 68 airstrikes against targets southeast of Idlib, including targets in the Maarat Nu'man area. **Syrian helicopters** dropped dozens of barrel bombs on targets in the rural area of Maarat Nu'man and the rural area east of Idlib (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 26, 2020).



Building hit in a Syrian airstrike in the area of Saraqib, southeast of Idlib (Edlib Media Center – EMC, January 26, 2020)

Inhabitants flee the battle zones

► The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that inhabitants were fleeing the battle zones in the rural area south and southeast of Idlib. **About 140,000 inhabitants reportedly fled their homes within less than two weeks** (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, January 28, 2020). These displaced persons join **more than 400,000 others who have fled the Idlib region over the past six months. Over three million people are now living in the Idlib region; over half of them are displaced persons** (unocha.org, the website of the UN Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs, December 27, 2019).



Inhabitants fleeing their homes in the rural area south of Idlib, following the Syrian army attacks (Edlib Media Center – EMC, January 28, 2020)

The Euphrates Valley

Al-Raqqah area

Syrian army convoy ambushed by ISIS

► On January 20, 2020, a Syrian army convoy was ambushed by ISIS operatives near **Al-Rasafah**, about 40 km southwest of **Al-Raqqah**. The forces exchanged fire. When another force arrived at the scene to assist the Syrian troops, IEDs were activated against it. According to ISIS reports, 20 soldiers, including an officer, were killed or wounded in the incident. Four soldiers were taken prisoner (Telegram, January 23, 2020).



Right: ISIS operative firing at the Syrian army convoy near Al-Rasafah. Left: Syrian army vehicle on fire (Telegram, January 23, 2020).

The area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal

► Following are noteworthy ISIS attacks in the area of Al-Mayadeen and Albukamal (mainly according to ISIS's claims of responsibility):

- ◆ On January 28, 2020, an IED was activated against two SDF fighters in Al-Susah, 7 km northeast of Albukamal. Two SDF fighters were killed and another was wounded (in addition, a motorcycle was put out of commission) (Telegram, January 28, 2020).

◆ **On January 25, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle about 10 km northeast of Albukamal. Two SDF fighters were killed and an SDF commander was wounded (Telegram, January 25, 2020).

◆ **On January 22, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 30 km north of Al-Mayadeen. One SDF fighter was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, January 23, 2020).

◆ **On January 21, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 10 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. One SDF fighter was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, January 22, 2020).

Northeastern Syria

Al-Hasakah area

► **On January 25, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 30 km south of Al-Hasakah. Two fighters were killed and two others were wounded (Telegram, January 26, 2020).

► **On January 20, 2020**, a hand grenade was thrown at an SDF vehicle about 30 km south of Al-Hasakah. Two SDF fighters were wounded (Telegram, January 22, 2020).

The Iraqi arena

During the week, there were no reports of any significant activity by ISIS operatives in Iraq. It is possible that additional attacks were carried out but were not reported because the Iraqi regime shut down the internet several times (due to the growing wave of protests in Iraq).

ISIS activity

Erbil Province

► **On January 21, 2020**, an Iraqi soldier was targeted by sniper fire about 70 km southeast of Mosul. He was wounded (Telegram, January 22, 2020).



**ISIS sniper shooting at an Iraqi soldier
(Telegram, January 28, 2020)**

Al-Anbar Province

► **On January 20, 2020**, a convoy of the Peace Battalions Shiite militia was targeted by machine gun fire about 30 km west of Baghdad. Three fighters were killed (Telegram, January 22, 2020).

Nineveh Province

► **On January 21, 2020**, ISIS operatives broke into the house of an Iraqi Army Intelligence operative about 90 km southwest of Mosul. The intelligence operative was shot to death and his house was set on fire (Telegram, January 22, 2020).

Diyala Province

► **On January 27, 2020**, an IED was activated against a policeman about 30 km northeast of Baqubah. He was killed (Telegram, January 28, 2020).

Salah al-Din Province

► **On January 28, 2020**, ISIS operatives shot at fishermen about 20 km southeast of Tikrit. One fisherman was killed and another was wounded (Al-Sumaria, January 28, 2020).

Counterterrorist activity of the Iraqi security forces

Nineveh Province

► **On January 26, 2020**, forces of the Iraqi army's 20th Infantry Division combing the area about 100 km west of Mosul located a cave with ISIS explosives and weapons (Facebook page of the Iraqi Defense Ministry, January 26, 2020).

► **On January 24, 2020**, Iraqi Military Intelligence teams captured two wanted men (implicitly, ISIS operatives) east of Mosul. Two Kalashnikov rifles were found in their possession (Al-Sumaria, January 24, 2020).



Right: Cave used by the ISIS operatives. Left: Weapons seized by the Iraqi security forces (Facebook page of the Iraqi Defense Ministry, January 26, 2020)

Kirkuk Province

► **On January 25, 2020**, a Popular Mobilization force acting on intelligence located an ISIS “guesthouse” about 90 km west of Kirkuk. Weapons and rockets were found in the guesthouse (al-hashed.net, January 25, 2020).

The Sinai Peninsula

ISIS activity

► **This week, there was an increase in the intensity of the activity carried out by operatives of ISIS’s Sinai Province against the Egyptian security forces.** Following are four attacks that were carried out **on January 25, 2020**, for which ISIS’s Sinai Province claimed responsibility (Telegram, January 25, 2020):

- ◆ An IED was activated against an Egyptian army tank near an army camp west of Rafah. The crew members were killed or wounded.
- ◆ An Egyptian soldier was targeted by sniper fire near a checkpoint south of Rafah. He was killed.
- ◆ ISIS operatives attacked Egyptian army forces south of Sheikh Zuweid. Several soldiers were killed or wounded. A tank and an armored vehicle were damaged.
- ◆ An Egyptian army bulldozer was targeted by heavy weapons fire south of Sheikh Zuweid. It was damaged.

► **On January 27, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army vehicle near a checkpoint west of Rafah. The passengers were killed or wounded (Telegram, January 28, 2020).

► **On January 27, 2020**, Egyptian soldiers were targeted by sniper fire at checkpoints east of Sheikh Zuweid and south of Rafah. The soldiers were wounded (Telegram, January 28, 2020).

► **On January 26, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army armored vehicle near a checkpoint in Rafah. An officer and three soldiers were wounded. In addition, an IED was activated against an armored vehicle of the Egyptian security forces in Sheikh Zuweid. An Egyptian security operative was wounded (Shahed Sinaa – Al-Rasmiyah Facebook page, January 26, 2020).

Counterterrorist activity by the Egyptian security forces

► Acting on intelligence, on **January 25, 2020**, Egyptian security forces west of Al-Arish carried out an operation against ISIS operatives who were planning to carry out an attack. The forces killed 12 “terrorist operatives” (i.e., ISIS operatives) and wounded several others (Shahed Sinaa – Al-Rasmiyah Facebook page, January 25, 2020).

► **On January 27, 2020**, indictments were filed against 44 people on charges of joining ISIS. Seven of them were ISIS commanders who had set up squads throughout Egypt, with the goal of carrying out attacks and disseminating the Salafist-jihadi ideology. The charges against them included financing terrorism, supplying weapons and ammunition, collecting intelligence to carry out attacks, supplying materials used for manufacturing explosives and delivering a quadcopter. They had undergone military, security and technical training, some of which was carried out at camps in northern Sinai (Al-Youm al-Sabea, January 27, 2020).

The activity of ISIS’s provinces in Africa and Asia

ISIS carried out intensive activity in various countries in Africa. This activity included two major attacks against army camps: the first was carried out in **Nigeria**. ISIS reported that 13 soldiers had been killed. The second was carried out in **northeastern Mozambique**. ISIS reported that 22 soldiers had been killed. ISIS also carried out intensive activity in **northern Democratic Republic of Congo**.

Nigeria

► This week, ISIS’s activity continued in Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria. Following are the main attacks for which ISIS’s West Africa Province claimed responsibility:

- ◆ **On January 26, 2020**, Nigerian army forces were ambushed about 50 km from Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. The forces exchanged fire. Several soldiers were killed or wounded. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, January 27, 2020).

◆ **On January 26, 2020**, a Nigerian army convoy was fired at west of Maiduguri. Several soldiers were killed or wounded. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, January 27, 2020).

◆ **On January 24, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Nigerian army camp in Borno State. The forces exchanged fire. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, January 25, 2020).

◆ **On January 24, 2020**, ISIS operatives fired mortar shells at a Nigerian army base about 200 km north of Maiduguri (Telegram, January 24, 2020).



**Mortar shell fire at a Nigerian army base
(Telegram, January 24, 2020)**

◆ **On January 21, 2020**, Nigerian forces were attacked about 50 km west of Maiduguri. The forces exchanged fire for several hours. A total of 13 soldiers were killed and others were wounded. The ISIS operatives seized weapons, ammunition, and vehicles (Telegram, January 22, 2020).

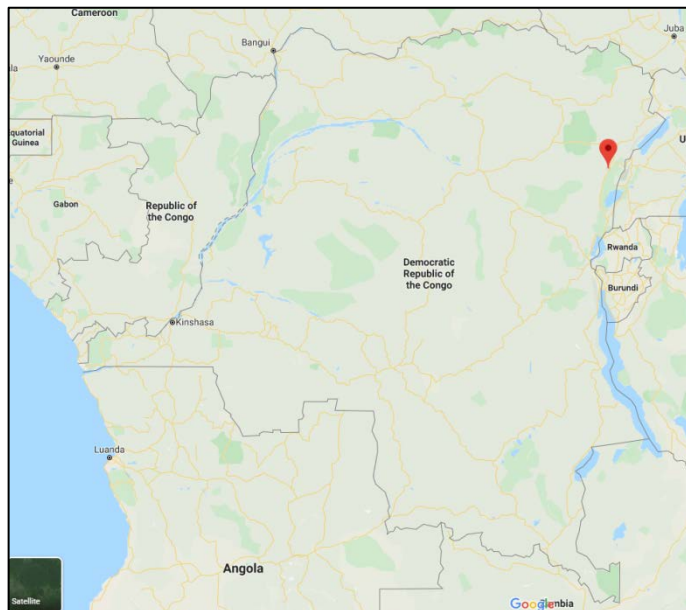


**Weapons, ammunition, and vehicles seized by ISIS operatives in the attack on the Nigerian army
(Telegram, January 22, 2020)**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

► **This week, ISIS carried out intensive activity in the Beni region in Congo.** Following are the main attacks for which ISIS’s Central Africa Province claimed responsibility:

- ◆ **On January 22, 2020**, homes of Congolese army “agents” were raided. Three “agents” were taken prisoner and executed, and their homes were set on fire (Telegram, January 23, 2020).
- ◆ **On January 22, 2020**, Congolese soldiers were ambushed. The forces exchanged fire. One soldier was killed (Telegram, January 23, 2020).
- ◆ **On January 21, 2020**, an army camp was attacked in Congo. The forces exchanged fire. Several soldiers were killed or wounded (Telegram, January 22, 2020).
- ◆ **On January 20, 2020**, an army camp was attacked in Congo. The forces exchanged fire. Three soldiers were killed and several others were wounded. Weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, January 22, 2020).



The area of Beni, in northeastern Congo, ISIS’s main center of activity (Google Maps)

Mozambique

► **On January 23, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked **a Mozambican army camp in the northeast of the country**. The forces exchanged fire. According to ISIS, 22 soldiers were killed and several others were wounded. ISIS operatives seized two vehicles carrying machine guns and ammunition (Telegram, January 23, 2020).

Somalia

► **On January 22, 2020**, ISIS operatives fired at a Somali policeman about 20 km northwest of Mogadishu. The policeman was killed (Telegram, January 22, 2020).

Yemen

► **On January 26, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked a Houthi position in Qifah, in the northwestern Al-Bayda Province (about 100 km southeast of Sana'a). The forces exchanged fire. Two Houthi fighters were killed and others were wounded. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized (Telegram, January 28, 2020).

► **On January 25, 2020**, a Houthi operative was targeted by sniper fire in Qifah. He was killed (Telegram, January 26, 2020).

► **On January 25, 2020**, Houthi operatives were targeted by gunfire in Qifah. One operative was killed and another was wounded (Telegram, January 26, 2020).