



Spotlight on Global Jihad

December 24-30, 2020



Main events of the past week

- ▶ Like every year, ISIS supporters have posted posters on social media threatening to carry out attacks against Christians around the world with the approach of Christmas. In practice, no such terrorist attacks have been carried out to date by ISIS operatives or their supporters. In Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria, ISIS claimed responsibility for burning down houses and churches in Christian villages (although it is unclear whether this was done in the context of Christmas).
- ▶ Routine attacks continued in ISIS's various provinces in Syria, Iraq and throughout Africa and Asia. Noteworthy examples:
 - ◆ **Syria:** Intensive activity continued in the Euphrates Valley and the desert region to its west, in the form of ambushing vehicles (detonation of IED and small arms fire). One noteworthy attack was the activation of an IED against a bus carrying soldiers of the Republican Guard in the desert region west of Deir ez-Zor (according to ISIS, 10 soldiers were killed). In clashes between Republican Guard forces and ISIS operatives, a Syrian officer with the rank of brigadier general was killed.
 - ◆ **Iraq:** ISIS's activity in northern and western Iraq focused on detonating IEDs and firing small arms, mortar shells and rockets at Iraqi security forces. Iraqi security forces arrested an ISIS squad that had planned to carry out a suicide bombing attack in Baghdad on Christmas.
 - ◆ **The Sinai Peninsula:** ISIS's activity in northern Sinai against the Egyptian security forces continues. This week, ISIS bombed a gas pipeline west of Al-Arish (the third of its kind of late). This time, too, only minor damage was caused to the pipeline.
 - ◆ **Nigeria:** ISIS's attacks continued against the Nigerian army in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria. In addition, attacks were carried out this week against villages with a Christian population. ISIS operatives burned down houses and churches in these villages.

◆ **Afghanistan:** ISIS operatives detonated an IED in Kabul against a bus carrying Afghan government officials. According to local Afghan media reports, one civilian was killed and five were wounded. According to ISIS, 20 people were killed or wounded. In addition, ISIS operatives fired rockets at the military section of Kabul International Airport and planted IEDs near the Kabul police headquarters.

◆ **Dagestan:** The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) uncovered a network of ISIS operatives in the capital of Dagestan. The operatives had planned to activate an IED near an office building and then carry out an attack against Interior Ministry employees.

The Syrian arena

The Idlib region

In the Idlib region, exchanges of artillery fire continued between the Syrian army and the forces supporting it, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other rebel organizations. The incidents were focused on a region 30-40 km south and southwest of Idlib. There were also reports of Russian airstrikes in the Kabanah area, about 10 km southwest of Jisr al-Shughur (Edlib Media Center, November 24, 2020).

ISIS's activity in Syria¹

The region of Deir ez-Zor and Al-Mayadeen

- ▶ **On December 28, 2020**, an IED was activated against a motorcycle of SDF fighters in the town of Hajin, about 25 km north of Albukamal. Two fighters were killed.
- ▶ **On December 28, 2020**, ISIS ambushed an SDF intelligence operative about 10 km northeast of Albukamal. He was captured and then executed.
- ▶ **On December 28, 2020**, persons unknown on a motorcycle tried to kill one of the civil council officials in Deir ez-Zor while he was taking a walk in the morning. He was wounded and evacuated for medical treatment (ANHA – Hawar News Agency, a Kurdish news website operating from Belgium, December 28, 2020). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attempted killing (Telegram, December 28, 2020).
- ▶ **On December 27, 2020**, ISIS operatives broke into the house of a mukhtar in a village about 60 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. He was killed by machine gun fire.

¹ According to ISIS's claims of responsibility posted on Telegram

► **On December 27, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 10 km north of Al-Mayadeen. Three fighters were killed.

► **On December 26, 2020**, an IED was activated against an SDF vehicle about 10 km north of Al-Mayadeen. Ten SDF fighters were killed or wounded and the vehicle was destroyed.



Right: Vehicle (a white van) carrying SDF fighters before it was hit by an IED in the village of Shahil, north of Al-Mayadeen. Left: The IED being activated (Telegram, December 26, 2020)

► **On December 23, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 70 km north of Deir ez-Zor. The passengers were wounded.

Al-Raqqah region

► **On December 28, 2020**, an SDF vehicle was targeted by machine gun fire about 25 km northwest of Al-Raqqah. Three fighters were killed.

The desert region (Al-Badia)

► **On December 24, 2020**, a powerful IED was activated against a bus carrying soldiers of the Republican Guard (an elite force of the Syrian regime) near the village of Ash-Sholah (about 30 km southwest of Deir ez-Zor). After activating the IED, ISIS operatives fired light and medium weapons at the bus and the soldiers inside. **Ten soldiers were reportedly killed and several others were wounded.**



Site of the attack against the bus near Ash-Shola (Google Maps)

► On December 27, 2020, there were clashes between the Syrian army and ISIS operatives in the desert region west of Albukamal. **Brigadier General (*Amid*) Mazen Ali Hassoun, a Republican Guard officer, was killed** (ALBADIA24@24 Twitter account, December 27, 2020).



Brigadier General Mazen Ali Hassoun killed in the clashes with ISIS
(ALBADIA24@24 Twitter account, December 27, 2020)

SDF counterterrorism activities

► On the morning of December 27, 2020, the SDF announced with loudspeakers that **the use of motorcycles was absolutely forbidden in the city of Al-Basira and the village of Al-Sabha** north of Al-Mayadeen. According to the announcement, motorcycles of people violating the ban will be seized. In the past, the SDF had also forbidden the use of motorcycles in several towns and villages in the Deir ez-Zor region and even seized and burned dozens of motorcycles whose owners had violated the ban. According to the SDF, **the ban on the use of motorcycles stems from ISIS's use of motorcycles in attacks against SDF positions and patrols** (Ayn al-Furat, eyeofeuhrates.com, December 27, 2020).



Several motorcycles burning after being set on fire by the SDF in the village of Shahil, north of Al-Mayadeen, due to the violation of the ban on the use of motorcycles
(Ayn al-Furat, eyeofeuhrates.com, December 27, 2020)

► **On December 27, 2020**, SDF fighters with International Coalition forces operated about 10 km northeast of Deir ez-Zor. An ISIS operative was caught. In addition, weapons and equipment in his possession were seized (Coordination & Military Ops Center – SDF@cmoc_sdf Twitter account, December 27, 2020).

The Iraqi arena

ISIS attacks in the various provinces²

Salah al-Din Province

► **On December 28, 2020**, an IED was activated against a vehicle of the oil facilities police about 10 km north of Tikrit. One policeman was killed. A police officer with the rank of brigadier general was wounded.

► **On December 25, 2020**, ISIS operatives fired machine guns and threw hand grenades at Iraqi soldiers about 30 km north of Baghdad. One soldier was killed and another was wounded.

► **On December 23, 2020**, an Iraqi policeman was targeted by sniper fire in the Samarra region. He was killed.

► **On December 22, 2020**, an IED was activated against a Popular Mobilization vehicle east of Tikrit. The passengers were killed or wounded.

Kirkuk Province

► **On December 22, 2020**, a rocket was fired at Popular Mobilization forces about 30 km south of Kirkuk.



Right: Rocket being prepared for firing. Left: Rocket being fired
(Telegram, December 27, 2020)

² According to ISIS's claims of responsibility posted on Telegram

Babel Province

► **On December 21, 2020**, two fighters of the Satan Party (the name probably refers to Kataeb Hezbollah) were targeted by sniper fire about 40 km southwest of Baghdad. Both fighters were wounded.

Nineveh Province

► **On December 21, 2020**, four mortar shells were fired at an Iraqi army compound about 10 km west of Mosul. According to ISIS, accurate hits of the target were observed.

Counterterrorism activities by the Iraqi security forces

Kirkuk Province

► **On December 27, 2020**, Iraqi police teams detained a wanted operative who had served as commander of ISIS squads in the provinces of Kirkuk and Nineveh (Al-Sumaria, December 27, 2020).

► **On December 27, 2020**, International Coalition aircraft carried out an airstrike about 40 km southwest of Kirkuk. Two ISIS operatives were killed (Facebook page of Iraqi Armed Forces Spokesman Yahya Rasoul, December 27, 2020).

► **On December 26, 2020**, teams of the Kirkuk Intelligence Directorate captured two wanted ISIS operatives who were engaged in distributing allowances to families of ISIS operatives in the Kirkuk Province (Iraqi News Agency, December 26, 2020).

Diyala Province

► **On December 26, 2020**, the Iraqi security forces captured an ISIS squad consisting of four operatives who had been part of ISIS's Diyala sector. **Squad members were suspected of intending to carry out a suicide bombing attack in Baghdad on Christmas** (Al-Sumaria, December 26, 2020).

Nineveh Province

► **On December 26, 2020**, an Iraqi army force captured a senior ISIS operative about 60 km northwest of Mosul (Facebook page of the Iraqi Defense Ministry, December 26, 2020).

Al-Anbar Province

► **On December 25, 2020**, the Iraqi Counterterrorism Unit detained three ISIS operatives in the Hit region (Facebook page of the Iraqi Counterterrorism Unit, December 25, 2020).



Three ISIS operatives apprehended by the Iraqi Counterterrorism Unit (Facebook page of the Iraqi Counterterrorism Unit, December 25, 2020)

The Sinai Peninsula

ISIS's activity in northern Sinai³

- ▶ **On December 25, 2020**, an IED was activated against an Egyptian army bulldozer west of Rafah. It was damaged. In addition, Egyptian soldiers preparing to blow up residents' homes were targeted by machine gun fire. One soldier was killed.
- ▶ **On December 24, 2020**, an IED exploded in Bir al-Abd. An Egyptian commando was killed (Shahed Sinaa, December 24, 2020).

Another bombing of a gas pipeline west of Al-Arish

- ▶ **On December 24, 2020**, a gas pipeline was bombed in the Sabika area, about 30 km west of Al-Arish. According to an Egyptian source, **the pipeline was only slightly damaged**. North Sinai Governor Dr. Mohammad Abd al-Fadel Shosha said that there had been no casualties and that the bombing would not impact the gas supply to Al-Arish. The Egyptian Natural Gas Company Gasco closed the control valves immediately after the explosion in order to contain the fire (Shahed Sinaa – al-Rasmia Facebook page, December 24, 2020). Several hours later, ISIS claimed responsibility for the bombing. According to ISIS, several IEDs were detonated, causing major damage to the pipeline (Telegram, December 24, 2020).

This is the fourth bombing of a pipeline in this area during 2020. **Three of the bombings were carried out recently**. All of the bombings were carried out by ISIS's Sinai Province but did not cause any significant damage.

³ According to ISIS's claims of responsibility posted on Telegram



**Bombing of a gas pipeline in the Sabika area, west of Al-Arish
(Shahed Sinaa – al-Rasmia Facebook page, December 24, 2020)**

Stealing olives from local residents

► **On December 24, 2020**, Egyptian security sources said that **operatives of ISIS’s Sinai Province had commandeered the olive harvest** as a new source of income. On the other hand, tribal sources reported that ISIS operatives had entered residents’ houses and fields, took food and olives, but paid twice as much as it was worth (Shahed Sinaa – al-Rasmia Facebook page, December 24, 2020).

ISIS’s activity around the globe⁴

Summary of ISIS’s activity in its various provinces

ISIS released an infographic summarizing its activity **on December 17-23, 2020**. During this period, **ISIS operatives carried out 60 attacks in the various provinces in Asia and Africa**, compared to 48 attacks in the previous week. **Most of the attacks were carried out in Iraq (29)**. Attacks were also carried out in ISIS’s other provinces: Syria (10); West Africa (8); Central Africa (7); and Khorasan, i.e., Afghanistan (6) (Al-Naba’ weekly, Telegram, December 24, 2020).

► **A total of 154 people were killed and wounded in those attacks**, compared to 156 in the previous week. **The largest number of casualties was in Iraq (46)**. The other casualties were in the following provinces: Central Africa (41); West Africa (34); Syria (19); and Khorasan, i.e., Afghanistan (14); (Al-Naba' weekly, Telegram, December 24, 2020).

⁴ According to ISIS’s claims of responsibility posted on Telegram

Africa

Nigeria

Attacking Christian villages and burning down churches in Borno State

► On December 26, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked **four villages inhabited by Christians** in Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria. The operatives exchanged fire with Nigerian police and forces supporting it. Six policemen and/or fighters were killed and two Christian residents were taken prisoner. **The ISIS operatives set fire to several houses and six churches.** In addition, they seized weapons and ammunition (Telegram, December 27, 2020).



Right: Nigerian police vehicle set on fire by ISIS. Left: Church on flames in one of the four Christian villages (Telegram, December 27, 2020)

► On December 25, 2020, ISIS operatives exchanged fire with Nigerian soldiers in the northeastern part of Borno State. A total of 14 soldiers were killed and others were wounded. In addition, an IED was activated against a vehicle. ISIS seized weapons, ammunition, and four vehicles.

► On December 24, 2020, ISIS operatives attacked the village of Garkida, about 170 km southwest of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. **Christian residents live there, and there is also a Nigerian army facility in the village.** There were exchanges of fire with the Nigerian soldiers and forces supporting them. **Four fighters and three Christian residents were killed.** In addition, five Christian residents were taken prisoner and executed. **ISIS operatives set fire to the compound and also burned down four churches and several houses.** They seized weapons and ammunition.



Right: Five Christian residents taken prisoner by ISIS in the village of Garkida, southwest of Maiduguri (Telegram, December 26, 2020). Left: The five Christian residents before being shot to death (Amaq, December 29, 2020).

- **On December 23, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked an army roadblock about 70 km north of Maiduguri. Several soldiers were killed or wounded.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

- **On December 29, 2020**, ISIS operatives ambushed Congolese soldiers in the Beni region, in the northeastern part of the country. Four soldiers were killed. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized.
- **On December 28, 2020**, ISIS operatives attacked two Congolese army compounds in the Beni region. Four soldiers were killed and others were wounded. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized. A week earlier, ISIS had attacked the Congolese army in the same region. ISIS issued a video showing Congolese army tents set on fire by ISIS operatives.



**Congolese army tents going up in flames
(Amaq, December 28, 2020)**

- **On December 21, 2020**, ISIS operatives fired machine guns at a Congolese army compound in the Beni region. Three soldiers were killed. In addition, weapons and ammunition were seized.

Niger

► **On December 26, 2020**, three Grad rockets were fired at a Nigerian army compound east of the city of Diffa, in southeastern Niger (about 3 km north of the Niger-Nigeria border). According to ISIS, accurate hits of the target were observed.

Asia

Afghanistan

► **On December 28, 2020**, an IED mounted on a bicycle was activated against a bus carrying employees of the National Statistics and Information Authority in the city of Kabul. One civilian was killed and five others were wounded (TOLO News, Afghan news website, Kabul, December 28, 2020). ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack. According to ISIS, an IED was activated against the bus, which was carrying officials at the Afghan Ministry of Justice in Kabul. According to the claim of responsibility, 20 people were killed or wounded (Telegram, December 28, 2020).



**The bus targeted by an ISIS IED in Kabul
(TOLO News, Afghan news website, Kabul, December 28, 2020)**

► **On December 26, 2020**, two rockets were fired at the military section of Kabul International Airport. In addition, an IED was activated against a vehicle of the Afghan National Directorate of Security, near the airport. Four security personnel were killed or wounded (Telegram, December 26, 2020).

► **On December 26, 2020**, two IEDs were activated after having been planted near the Afghan police headquarters in the city of Kabul. Five policemen were killed or wounded.

► **On December 24, 2020**, an IED was activated against the vehicle of a mukhtar in the city of Jalalabad. He was wounded.

► **On December 23, 2020**, an IED was activated against an investigator (apparently an Afghan police investigator) about 15 km east of Jalalabad. He was wounded.

Counterterrorism and preventive activity

Dagestan

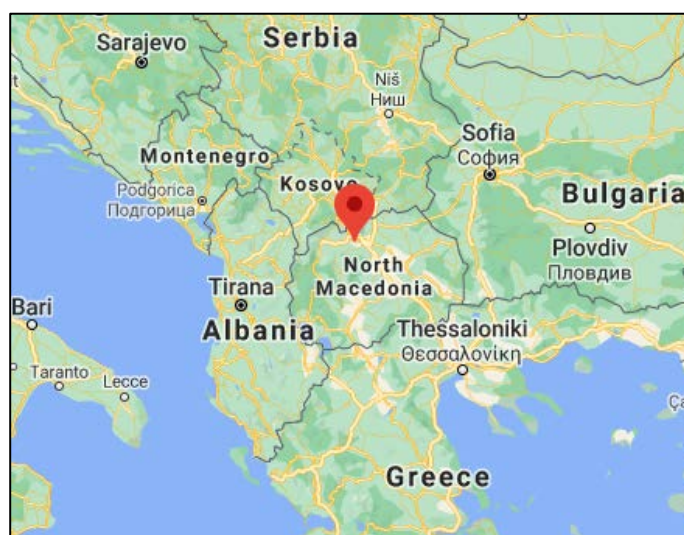
► **On December 25, 2020**, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) captured four operatives belonging to an ISIS terrorist squad. **The operatives had planned to carry out a combined attack in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan.** The squad operatives had planned to activate an IED near an office building and then carry out an attack against Interior Ministry employees. Following their arrest, a hiding place was found containing IEDs, cold weapons, and large quantities of ammunition (TASS, December 26, 2020).

Turkey

► **On December 29, 2020**, Turkish security forces in Ankara arrested **35 Iraqi civilians** suspected of being affiliated with ISIS. An operation is reportedly underway with the goal of arresting five more suspects. In another operation in the province of Düzce, about 160 km northwest of Ankara, three suspected ISIS operatives were arrested and the operation is still ongoing (Anatolia News Agency, December 29, 2020).

North Macedonia

► **On December 27, 2020**, Macedonian police arrested eight people in the capital Skopje and in the city of Kumanovo (about 25 km north of Skopje), on suspicion of plotting to carry out attacks on behalf of ISIS. Following their arrest, police found a hiding place containing large quantities of weapons. One of the suspects had previously been convicted of involvement in ISIS activity (DW, Deutsche Welle, December 28, 2020).



Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia (Google Maps)

Poland

► **In June 2020**, the Internal Security Agency in Poland arrested two Iraqis, a father and son, **on suspicion of financing ISIS operatives**. An investigation by the Internal Security Agency in Poland, which was carried out in 2017-2020, revealed that the father and son had transferred money from relatives of ISIS operatives living in Europe. The money was transferred from European countries to Poland by Western Union and from there to Iraq (Polandin.com, a Polish portal based in Warsaw, December 28, 2020).

The effect of the release of jihadist detainees from detention camps

Overview

Researchers Eva Kahan, Rama Bayrakdar and Omer Niazi recently published an article examining **the effects of the release of ISIS prisoners and detainees, especially Salafi jihadists**. These prisoners and detainees were released in recent months in Iraq, Syria, Africa, South Asia and Afghanistan. The authors conclude that **their release is liable to have serious global consequences in the near future**⁵.

The reasons for the recent mass release of Salafi-jihadi prisoners

- Recent prisoner exchanges, escapes, and mass releases are **returning thousands of insurgents to battlefields in West Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia and will accelerate the growth of several insurgencies**. Large-scale prisoner releases and escapes will invigorate the global Salafi-jihadi movement at a time when it has ample opportunity to expand.
- The release of the prisoners is taking place against the backdrop of a **reduction in global counterterrorism efforts**. The spread of COVID-19 has forced the various governments to

⁵ Eva Kahan and Rahma Bayrakdar with contributor: Omer Niazi, **Prison Releases will Empower Extremist Insurgencies**. Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Critical Threats (CT).

Eva Kahan is the Institute for the Study of War's Evans Hanson Fellow and is a research assistant on ISW's Counterterrorism portfolio. Eva graduated from Tufts University and also studied at the American University in Cairo, Egypt. **Rahma Bayrakdar** is an analyst for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, a think tank established in 2007 and located in Washington DC. The Institute deals with research on security and policy issues.

concentrate on eradicating the pandemic. The US, on its part, plans to significantly downsize its forces that are fighting ISIS and the Taliban in Afghanistan, as well as its forces in Iraq and Syria. The drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan creates an opportunity for the Taliban to expand and cement its political power just as these experienced fighters return to the battlefield. While the ceasefire agreement signed by the US and the Taliban in Qatar in February 2020 includes terms for the release of several thousand Taliban fighters and guarantees that the released detainees will not return to the battlefield, there is no mechanism for the US or the Afghan government to enforce that guarantee.

► In addition, the United States may soon reduce its forces **in Africa's Sahel region**, forces that play a significant role in the fight against Islamic terrorism. The significant reduction in US support for local forces and governments undermines the preservation of the detention camp infrastructure, among other things, making it impossible to carry out the de-radicalization program for detained local Islamic terrorists. **The US deal with the Taliban also affected the Malian government's handling of the local Salafi-jihadi threat.** It justified the negotiations between the ousted President of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). Now, other senior officials are currently negotiating with jihadists based on a similar principle, such as UN Secretary General António Guterres and a Commissioner of the African Union, whose members are representatives of local governments in Africa.

► **In Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) accelerated releases of former ISIS fighters and their families, without de-radicalization and reintegration.** It is reasonable to assume that ISIS will pressure released fighters to rejoin ISIS's anti-SDF insurgency. Concurrently with the recent release of ISIS prisoners from prison, in recent months ISIS has focused on releasing fighters from detention facilities around the world through shady deals, bribes and initiatives to enable prisoners to escape from detention facilities.

The global implications of the release of ISIS prisoners

► **The influx of ISIS operatives released from detention into the various arenas could strengthen the organization and make it harder to fight global terrorism.** Released detainees and their families, who underwent a process of radicalism in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo, **are liable to resume their activity and increase the activity of Islamic terrorist organizations in various arenas around the globe.**

► **Experienced Salafist-jihadist fighters returning to the battlefields are liable to breathe new life into various rebel organizations in different countries, aided by the release of their fighters from prison. Such insurgency has a precedent from the past in Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq, which later became ISIS.** The release of ISIS prisoners, some through prison breaks, **has happened recently in Afghanistan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.** They were carried out at short notice in the wake of the call by ISIS Spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi. The released fighters had gone through a process of radicalization in prison. After their release they made use of the combat experience that they had acquired to strengthen their organization's command and control networks.

► Taliban and Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al-Muslimin prisoners who were released in various deals are veteran combatants. Taliban-affiliated fighters may have been recruited to Salafi-jihadi groups, including Al-Qaeda and ISIS's Khorasan Province, while in prison. Malian prisons similarly serve as hotbeds for radicalization. In Syria, returning ISIS-affiliated families may also carry forward the group's governance vision by replicating **the re-establishment of Islamic law (Sharia) based on the radical interpretation of the organization**, which they maintained in DP camps in their home communities.

Summary

The release of Salafi-jihadi prisoners and their escape from prisons will **make it more difficult to fight terrorism on a global scale**, especially in view of the fact that the intensity of the struggle is diminishing, given the significant reduction in military forces involved, especially US forces. In the estimation of the researchers, **this is liable to lead to a strengthening of the power of the extremist Islamic terrorist groups operating around the world in the near future.**

The battle for hearts and minds

► This year as well, with the approach of Christmas, **ISIS supporters posted posters on social media threatening to carry out attacks against Christians around the globe** (Telegram, December 23, 2020; Vera Mironov's Twitter account, December 23, 2020).



Right: Poster showing an ISIS operative shooting Santa Claus to death (Vera Mironov's Twitter account, December 23, 2020). Left: Poster showing an ISIS operative stabbing Santa Claus to death (Vera Mironov's Twitter account, December 23, 2020). Bottom: Poster showing an ISIS operative shooting Santa Claus in the head (Vera Mironov's Twitter account, December 23, 2020).