

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

On April 21, 2024, Iraqi militants in Zummar launched five rockets toward a U.S. military base in Rumalyn, Syria. No U.S. personnel were injured. A U.S. official called the launch a “failed rocket attack” in an interview with Reuters. Fighter jets from the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Syria launched a counterstrike, destroying a rocket launcher-equipped pickup truck in Zummar. After the attack, a Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH)-affiliated group on Telegram announced that KH and other Iraqi militias were resuming their attacks on U.S. forces. The KH-linked Sabreen News group on Telegram later reported that KH had not issued an official statement. On April 22, KH issued a statement on Telegram denying reports that it would resume violent attacks on U.S. forces. KH called the reports “fabricated news.” According to Pentagon press secretary Major General Patrick Ryder, the April 21 incident resulted from “some type of malfunction” in which a rocket-launching truck was “shooting rockets all over the place.”

(Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Al-Monitor](#))

On April 1, 2024, an Israeli strike on an Iranian consulate in Damascus killed seven military advisers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Iran’s elite foreign operations paramilitary arm. Among those killed were three senior officials including Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior official who oversaw the IRGC’s ground forces and their operations. He was also pivotal in the supply of Iranian-made missiles to Hezbollah. Zahedi was the most senior Quds Force official to be targeted since the January 2020 death of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in a U.S. strike in Iraq. Following the airstrike, the IRGC and Hezbollah—the Lebanese armed group and Iran’s closest proxy in the region—both vowed retaliation against those threatening Iranian interests in the region. Early on April 14, Iran launched more than 300 drones and missiles toward Israel in retaliation for the April 1 strike. It is Iran’s first-ever direct attack on Israel. According to the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency, Iraqi militias simultaneously launched airstrikes during Iran’s operation. Israeli, U.S., U.K., and regional forces intercepted 99 percent of the projectiles. Those that reached Israeli territory wounded a child in southern Israel and caused only minimal damage to an air base.

(Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#), [Times of Israel](#))

In the fight against ISIS, Syria remains at the center of key operations in the region despite international efforts targeting the senior network of the group. On February 8, 2024, Mazloum Abdi, the general commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), announced that ISIS has increased attacks to further strain the SDF as they simultaneously offset regional violence carried out by Iran-backed militias. Given the number of attacks, the SDF has limited their movements and operations, which has made it more difficult to monitor ISIS activity and secure detention camps housing ISIS members and their families. (Source: [Hill](#))

Overview

The present conflict in Syria can be traced back to the historical tension between Shiite and Sunni groups fueled by the last four decades of the Assad family’s rule and the establishment of the Arab Socialist Baath Party in 1947. Prior to 2011, the Alawite Assad family had maintained political power in Syria for over four decades despite being a minority representation of the overall population. This dynamic between a ruling Shia minority and a disenfranchised Sunni majority would prove to be a source of much political tension within Syria eventually leading to the 2011 uprisings. On April 21, 2011, President Bashar al-Assad ended Syria’s state of emergency which had been in effect for nearly 50 years. Syria’s emergency law was put into effect when the Baath Party came to power in a military coup in 1963. The law gave the government nearly unlimited authority to restrict individual freedoms and to investigate and detain suspects when national security and public safety were deemed to be at risk. The abolition of emergency rule served as an attempt to placate mass protests against Assad’s rule. However, opposition supporters continued to mobilize, taking up arms to defend themselves while also protecting themselves from increasing armed responses from the country’s security forces. Violent altercations rapidly escalated and continued, launching Syria’s ongoing civil war. (Sources: [Counter Terrorism Ethics](#), [Encyclopedia Britannica](#), [Reuters](#), [BBC News](#))

The social, political, and economic conditions under which civil war erupted served to be a hospitable environment for jihadist militancy. However, Sunni extremism has had a long history in the country. For many years prior to 2011, the Assad regime had maintained a consistently amiable relationship with Sunni jihadists. During the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2010, the Syrian government allowed extremists and foreign fighters to use Syria as a transit point into Iraq to undermine U.S. forces. Additionally, Syria’s regime-appointed grand mufti, Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro, issued a nationwide fatwa that made it religiously obligatory for all Syrians to resist foreign forces through all means necessary, including suicide bombings. (Sources: [Foreign Affairs](#), [Chatham House](#))

By 2013, remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq had rebranded themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and had identified promising recruitment opportunities in Syria, which was in the third year of its civil war. ISIS leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), an Iraqi, was the leader of the group’s push to seize territory and declare its own state. Shortly after the failure of several U.N.-mediated peace talks in early 2014, the prevalence of ISIS in the

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Syrian conflict became increasingly prominent as the terrorist group launched an aggressive social media campaign involving videos depicting the enactment of gruesome atrocities consistent with sharia law. In January 2014, the city of Raqqa completely fell to ISIS's control and by the end of June 2014, ISIS and Baghdadi declared the official establishment of the Islamic "caliphate." This announcement caused an influx of thousands of foreign fighters into Syria to join under ISIS's banner. In September 2014, the United States and five Arab countries launched airstrikes against ISIS in Raqqa and Aleppo. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Counter Terrorism Ethics](#))

As of February 2020, the Syrian conflict has yet to improve. Despite the territorial defeat of ISIS, a number of jihadist groups have continued to inflict violence among the population on a daily basis. The terrorist groups with an active presence are Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), National Liberation Front, Hurras al-Din (an HTS offshoot), the People's Protection Units (YPG), Failaq al-Rahman, Jaish al-Islam, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. HTS is the latest incarnation of [al-Nusra Front](#), which was al-Qaeda's official affiliate in Syria. The group is well-equipped and is one of the strongest militant groups in northern Syria. HTS's offshoot, Hurras al-Din, also maintains a presence in the area. The other significant force is the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), which was formed in 2018 by rebel factions wanting to counter HTS. The NLF is an alliance that includes Ahrar al-Sham, a hardline Islamist group, as well as other groups that serve under the umbrella of the "moderate" Free Syrian Army. In 2019, NLF lost most of the area under its control in northern Syria to HTS after fighting broke out between the two groups. In January 2019, NLF reached an agreement recognizing the HTS-backed administration, and since then the two groups have been fighting together against recent Syrian government assaults. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [United States Institute of Peace](#), [Syria Direct](#))

On October 13, 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of American troops from northern Syria—leaving Kurdish forces, who largely control northeastern Syria, vulnerable to attacks from their better equipped Turkish opposition. The Turkish government considers their Kurdish adversaries of the People's Protection Units (YPG) to be an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—an internationally designated terrorist group. Inciting further conflict, Turkey has been accused of seeking to expand its control throughout northern Syria which has provoked clashes between Kurdish and Assad regime forces and Turkish-backed Arab militias. The death of Baghdadi on October 26, 2019, may have been a setback for ISIS, but given the decentralized infrastructure of the organization, militant actors continue to inflict violence throughout the country. Furthermore, more than 10,000 ISIS fighters were placed in makeshift prisons under guard by Kurdish forces. These prisons are not heavily secured and have been prone to prison breaks initiated by former ISIS members. Additionally, there has been growing concern that ISIS members have taken on a prominent presence throughout refugee camps and are heavily recruiting among those spaces. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [United States Institute of Peace](#))

Radicalization and Foreign Fighters

Although multiple extremist organizations operate throughout Syria, ISIS had the largest presence among them, attracting recruits from not only the Middle East and North Africa, but also Western countries, with over 272 foreign fighters coming from the United States. A study by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College in London reported that by June 2018, 41,490 persons from 80 countries had joined ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. Thirteen percent of these were women and 12 percent were minors. Of the 41,490 foreign fighters in Syria, the ICSR study reports that 7,366 (or about 18 percent) have returned to their country of origin, including 1,765 (or 30 percent) of the 5,904 who originally departed from Western Europe. According to an August 2018 United Nations report, "Member States noted that flows of returnees and relocators from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic had not materialized to the degree expected, but the vast majority of those who had successfully left the conflict zone had returned home rather than relocating elsewhere." (Sources: [Combating Terrorism Center](#), [United Nations Security Council](#))

It has also been reported that internally displaced people (IDP) camps have become ISIS's new frontier for recruitment and radicalization. Tens of thousands of former ISIS fighters and their families live in IDP camps in the Levant, which has provided former militants the opportunity to regroup. ISIS has taken over a few camps already—with al-Hol being their largest takeover. ISIS exerts more control at al-Hol than the guards stationed there and have enforced sharia law on all of the camp's inhabitants. The camp houses numerous women and children who are particularly vulnerable to deferring to the fundamental agenda that ISIS espouses. In some cases, women are reportedly enforcers for the camp's "morality brigade," or have even taken up arms in battle. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#))

Muslim Brotherhood

The [Muslim Brotherhood](#) is a transnational Sunni Islamist movement that seeks to implement sharia (Islamic law) under a global caliphate. In 1942, Mustafa al-Sibai founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria as an extension of the Brotherhood in Egypt, which was founded by Hassan al-Banna in

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

1928. The Brotherhood in Syria is currently led by its comptroller general, Mohammad Hikmat Walid, who has led the group since 2014. Some analysts also argue that the Brotherhood has served as the ideological forerunner of modern violent Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The group has been labeled a terrorist organization by the governments of Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), [Enab Baladi](#), [Middle East Eye](#))

The Brotherhood has been politically active in Syria since 1946, represented by several members of parliament and participating in governments until 1963. When the Baath Party came to power, efforts were made to undermine the Brotherhood, culminating in a decision to ban its activities in 1964. In 1964, Brotherhood member Marwan Hadid formed a violent offshoot—known as the Fighting Vanguard—whose members waged numerous terror attacks against the regime in the 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, armed Brotherhood members assassinated government officials and bombed government premises and Baath Party offices. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), [Carnegie Middle East Center](#))

In 1970, Baathist Defense Minister Hafez al-Assad consolidated power among his sectarian minority—the Alawites—and assumed the Syrian presidency in 1971. In response, the Brotherhood sought to brand itself as the leader of Syria’s Sunni majority against what it perceived as the commandeering Shiite minority. Pervasive corruption in Assad’s regime led to popular resentment and unrest across Syria. In 1975, Syrian authorities arrested Hadid, who died from a hunger strike in Syrian prison in 1976. In revenge for his death, the Fighting Vanguard launched an assassination campaign against top Syrian officials. Meanwhile, in the late 1970s, the Brotherhood’s radical “northern axis” organized massive anti-regime demonstrations in the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Hama, whose residents reportedly felt disenfranchised. Throughout this time, the Brotherhood maintained ideological and organizational distinction from its violent offshoot. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), [Al-Monitor](#), *Assad: The Struggle for the Middle East* by Patrick Seale (p. 324), *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* by Raphael Lefevre (p. 57), *Inside the Brotherhood in Syria* by Hazem Kandil (p. 156))

In 1975, Adnan Saad al-Din of Hama was elected supreme guide of the Brotherhood. Under his leadership, the movement was reorganized and developed into a sophisticated hierarchical organization with offices, formal mechanisms, and a clear division of labor. Furthermore, the Brotherhood developed a military wing and launched jihad to turn Syria into a sharia state. From the winter of 1976 until the summer of 1979, various groups affiliated with the Brotherhood attacked high-ranking members of the state, the Baath Party, the Alawite sect, and even isolated military positions and camps. In 1979, the Fighting Vanguard defected from the Brotherhood to take up arms against the regime, and it launched an attack in which 83 Alawite student officers were killed at the military artillery school in Aleppo. In June 1980, Brotherhood members attempted to assassinate Assad using grenades and machine guns. Assad’s government launched a crackdown on the group and gunned down hundreds of Brotherhood members in their prison cells. These events prompted then-President Hafez al-Assad to issue, in 1980, Law 49 banning the Muslim Brotherhood and imposing the death penalty on its members. (Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#))

Violence continued until the launch of a large-scale military operation by the regime against the Fighting Vanguard in Hama in February 1982 in which 10,000 to 25,000 of the city’s inhabitants were killed. The Brotherhood then withdrew from political life in Syria. Its surviving leaders and many of its members were exiled. In 1982, in order to quell a Brotherhood uprising in the city of Hama, Hafez al-Assad dealt a near-fatal blow to the group, killing between 10,000 and 40,000 armed Brotherhood members and civilians. The group was nearly incapacitated as surviving Brotherhood leaders fled into exile. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), [Middle East Policy Council](#), [Al-Monitor](#), [Middle East Voices](#), [Wilson Center](#))

During the 1990s and 2000s, however, the Brotherhood—still in exile—sought to rebrand itself as a non-violent, politically minded group. As popular protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, the Brotherhood remobilized and moved to consolidate political and military power among the opposition. Amid the ensuing tumult of the civil war, the Brotherhood established recruitment offices and urged its members in large Syrian cities to return to smaller communities and reconnect with the citizens there. The Brotherhood found success in recruiting members from rebel-held areas of Syria, especially in and near Aleppo. In spring 2015, Reuters reported that hundreds of Syrian Brotherhood members had returned to Syria from exile. Membership in the organization remains punishable by death, though the Brotherhood largely operates in opposition-held areas including in Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama. Indeed, the Brotherhood remains sidelined and ineffective as jihadist organizations increasingly dominate the Syrian opposition. (Sources: [Carnegie Endowment](#), [National](#), [Reuters](#))

ISIS

[ISIS](#) is an extremist group formed from al-Qaeda offshoots in Iraq and Syria. Since its formation in 2013, ISIS has worked to sustain a self-declared caliphate in eastern Syria and western Iraq. In February of 2014, al-Qaeda and ISIS formally severed ties. Ultimately, ISIS seeks to unite the world under a single caliphate and has expanded into over nine countries. Initially, ISIS gained support within Iraq as a Sunni insurgency group fighting

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

what some Sunnis viewed as a partisan Shiite-led Iraqi government. The group garnered additional momentum as a result of the Syrian civil war and recruited up to 33,000 fighters from around the world. Thousands of foreign ISIS fighters are estimated to have been killed in battle, while some have returned or are planning to return to their home countries. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Europol](#), [Soufan Center](#))

ISIS adopted the slogan “remain and expand” shortly after its leader, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), declared the caliphate at the start of Ramadan in June of 2014. ISIS expected the fight against the opposition to last for generations and heavily invested in indoctrinating children into its forces. (Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#))

At its height, ISIS controlled about 34,000 square miles of territory from western Syria to eastern Iraq. Their strategic takeover of oil fields, partnered with tactics of extortion, kidnapping, and robbery, allowed the group to generate billions of dollars in revenue. However, once the United States and its coalition partners began to seize back terrain in April of 2015, ISIS adjusted its strategy that coupled defensive tactics along with the group’s standard offensive campaign. According to scholars at the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS’s operational objectives included to destroy key Sunni Arab cities under its control, to impose high costs on counter-ISIS forces, and to retain psychological control over civilian populations as long as possible. Additionally, ISIS waged five major lines of effort in pursuit of these goals: (1) seize new cities outside of Iraq and Syria; (2) increase global terror attacks; (3) conduct fortified defense of key cities in Iraq and Syria (4) attrite counter-ISIS forces, and (5) undermine religious rivals. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Institute for the Study of War](#))

ISIS fighters began carrying out prison breaks in late 2018. On September 29, 2018, at least 10 militants escaped from Al-Bab correctional facility in northern Syria. On March 12, 2019, over 80 prisoners escaped from an HTS-run prison in Idlib. On April 7, 2019, ISIS militants attempted to break out of a detention facility in Derik, in the Kurdish administered area of Syria. YPG forces managed to thwart the attempt. It is still uncertain whether these prison breaks were coordinated events or undertaken by independent cells. Many of the escaped fighters were later recaptured. ISIS will also attack displacement camps in order to free sympathetic civilians held in de facto detention. It already conducted one such attack against an IDP camp along the Middle Euphrates River Valley on October 11-12, 2018, releasing 130 families. According to scholars at the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS likely intends to repatriate the former population of its caliphate and thus will likely attack other displacement camps in Iraq and Syria. (Sources: [Military Times](#), [Institute for the Study of War](#))

Despite ISIS’s territorial defeat on March 23, 2019, central provinces outside Iraq and Syria are contributing resources to the insurgency, which is providing the group with the necessary resources and backup to reestablish itself. Its external provinces outside Iraq and Syria are contributing resources to its insurgency in those countries while giving the organization renewed global momentum. On May 31, 2019, ISIS declared a new global campaign called the “Battle of Attrition.” Its propaganda instructed its forces to seize terrain temporarily as a way to attrite their opponents. According to Jennifer Cafarella, Brandon Wallace, and Jason Zhou at the Institute for the Study of War, ISIS’s successful reconstitution of a physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria would produce new waves of ISIS attacks in Europe and dangerously legitimize ISIS’s narrative of inevitable long-term victory. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Associated Press](#), [Institute for the Study of War](#))

On October 26, 2019, U.S. Special Forces conducted a raid in northwestern Syria, culminating in the death of Baghdadi. U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed Baghdadi’s death the next day. Baghdadi, who was 48 years old, killed himself and his three children, detonating a suicide vest in a tunnel while being pursued by U.S. troops. ISIS’s media arm, the Amaq News Agency, confirmed the death a few days later on October 31, 2019. In an audio recording uploaded on the Telegram app, ISIS mourned the loss of Baghdadi as well as its spokesman, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, who was killed a day after Baghdadi in a U.S.-led airstrike. Muhajir had widely been considered Baghdadi’s potential successor. However, ISIS released a recording on October 30 where the new ISIS spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi, announced ISIS’s new leader, [Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi](#), the *nom de guerre* of Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla. Al-Mawla was a former officer in Saddam Hussein’s army and was considered one of the most prominent ISIS members in Baghdadi’s circle. Following the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq and the capture of Hussein in 2003, al-Mawla turned to violent extremism and eventually took on the role of religious commissary and a general sharia jurist for al-Qaeda. In 2014, al-Mawla left al-Qaeda and pledged allegiance and full support to the Baghdadi’s mission, providing ISIS the support to quickly take control of Mosul. (Source: [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Washington Post](#), [Military Times](#), [New York Times](#), [National](#), [CNN](#), [Al-Monitor](#), [Daily Mail](#))

On August 25, 2020, U.N. counter-terrorism chief Vladimir Voronkov told the U.N. Security Council that ISIS remains a threat in Iraq and Syria as fighters move freely “in small cells between the two countries.” According to Voronkov, there are more than 10,000 ISIS fighters active in both Syria and Iraq and their attacks have allegedly increased in 2020. Furthermore, Voronkov claims the terrorists have regrouped given ISIS’s propaganda efforts during the COVID-19 crisis which has resonated with communities negatively impacted both socioeconomically and politically during the pandemic. On September 18, 2020, Christopher Miller, the director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, claimed that since the October 2019 killing of Baghdadi, ISIS’s new leader, al-Mawla, has been able to direct and inspire new attacks inside Iraq and Syria. According to Miller, ISIS has undertaken “a steady rate” of assassinations and IED attacks in the two countries. Furthermore, Miller claims that ISIS is now

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

focused on freeing thousands of ISIS members and their families from detention camps in northern Syria. On January 19, 2021, local news reported that American forces transferred more than 70 ISIS supporters and militants from prisons controlled by the SDF in Al-Hasakah, to their base in Al-Tanf on the Syrian-Jordanian border. As of January 2021, ISIS was reportedly threatening civilians in Deir Ezzor to pay the *zakat* Islamic charitable tax while also increasing its kidnappings and killings in the area. (Sources: [Military Times](#), [Defense Post](#), [Al-Masdar News](#), [Al-Monitor](#))

ISIS continued to carry out smaller scale attacks throughout 2020 and 2021. However, on January 20, 2022, more than 100 ISIS militants launched an attack on Gweiran Prison in Hasakah, northeastern Syria, in an attempt to free detained ISIS fighters. The prison, which is the largest of around a dozen facilities run by U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish forces, held over 3,500 inmates, including ISIS commanders and other dangerous terrorists. The attack began when the militants—who were armed with heavy machine guns and explosive-laden vehicles—launched one explosion that was quickly followed by two others. According to Farhad Shami, a spokesman for the Kurdish forces, the attack was ISIS’s biggest since its territorial defeat in Syria in 2019. Additionally, Shami states the attack was led by foreign insurgents, many of whom spoke in Iraqi dialect. On January 21, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack and later released a video showing militants holding prison kitchen staff captive. According to the *New York Times*, jihadists were using more than 600 boys detained in the complex as “human shields.” Following U.S. airstrikes on the 24th, 300 ISIS fighters surrendered, but ISIS retained control of one-quarter of the prison. Despite ISIS’s threats to kill hostages and child detainees if the coalition’s assaults continued, on January 26, the U.S.-backed Syrian forces announced they retook full control of the prison. Media sources claim at least 27 Kurdish fighters and 180 inmates are killed in the days long attack, and that the majority of the 400 to 500 inmates who originally escaped were recaptured. (Sources: [NBC News](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [New York Times](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [NBC News](#), [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#))

On February 3, 2022, U.S. special forces launched a raid in Atmeh, northern Syria, targeting the house of ISIS leader Amir Muhammad Sa’id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla. The raid included around two dozen American commandos, backed by helicopter gunships, and armed with Reaper drones and attack jets. Upon the start of the operation, al-Mawla detonated a bomb that killed both himself and his family members. The operation lasted for about three hours, leading to the death of at least 13 people, including four women and six children. At least 10 civilians were evacuated, including eight children. According to U.S. President Joe Biden’s aides, the operation was planned months in advance and included dozens of rehearsals. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#))

A month later on March 10, 2022, ISIS released an audio recording in which the group’s spokesperson confirmed former ISIS leader al-Mawla’s death and announced the appointment of new ISIS leader [Abu Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi](#). According to the recording, al-Mawla, as well as ISIS’s former spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, were “killed in recent days.” According to the statement, ISIS jihadists “pledged allegiance” to Abu Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi as “an emir over believers and the caliph of Muslims.” (Source: [Agence France-Presse](#))

In the fight against ISIS, Syria remains at the center of key operations. On November 30, 2022, ISIS announced the death of leader Abu Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. The statement also declared Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi as the new leader of the terrorist group. That same day, the United States Central Command confirmed that al-Qurashi was killed in an operation conducted by The Free Syrian Army in Dar’a province in mid-October. A month earlier, on October 6, 2022, the United States conducted an airstrike in northern Syria, killing Abu-Hashum al-Umawi and Abu Mu’ad al Qahtani. Umawi was the deputy leader of ISIS in Syria, and Mu’ad was a senior leader. The airstrike came a day after U.S. forces conducted a raid near the village of Qamishli, northeastern Syria. The raid resulted in the death of Rakkan Wahid al-Shammri, a senior ISIS leader who was known to facilitate the smuggling of weapons and fighters in support of ISIS operations. Along with al-Shammri, another ISIS member was killed, and two others were captured. (Sources: [Mirror](#), [CENTCOM](#), [CBS News](#), [Reuters](#), [U.S. Central Command](#), [Washington Post](#))

CENTCOM and its partners carried out 43 operations targeting ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria in January 2023, capturing 198 ISIS operatives and killing two in Syria. According to CENTCOM commander General Michael “Erik” Kurilla, ISIS continues to threaten the stability of Syria, Iraq, and the region. While CENTCOM and its partners have degraded ISIS, its ideology remains “uncontained and unconstrained,” according to Kurilla. According to CENTCOM commander General Michael “Erik” Kurilla, ISIS continues to threaten the stability of Syria, Iraq, and the region. While CENTCOM and its partners have degraded ISIS, its ideology remains “uncontained and unconstrained,” according to Kurilla. Between February and April 2023, the U.S. carried out four operations that targeted and killed senior ISIS leaders. Among those killed were Abd-al-Hadi Mahmud al-Haji Ali, a senior leader responsible for planning terror attacks in both the Middle East and Europe; Hudayfah al-Yemeni, an “ISIS attack facilitator;” Khalid ‘Aydd Ahmad al-Jabouri, a senior official who developed ISIS’s leadership network and was responsible for planning attacks targeting Europe and Turkey; and Hamza al-Homsi, who reportedly oversaw ISIS’s network in eastern Syria. (Sources: [CENTCOM](#), [CNN](#), [NBC News](#), [ABC News](#), [CBS News](#))

On February 6, 2023, two major earthquakes struck Syria and Turkey, causing widespread destruction and killing more than 34,000 people. The earthquakes also damaged a military prison in the northwest Syrian town of Rajo known as the “Black Prison.” Approximately 1,300 of the prison’s 2,000 prisoners are suspected ISIS fighters. After the earthquake damaged the prison, prisoners started a mutiny, during which at least 20 suspected ISIS militants escaped. Reportedly, the escaped inmates paid between \$1,000 and \$10,000 to be let out of the prison. The incident brought renewed

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

international attention to the prison and the fact it holds thousands of ISIS fighters. It also raised questions among regional observers about how the imprisoned fighters got hold of that much U.S. currency. (Sources: [CNN](#), [Independent](#), [Telegraph](#), [WTOP News](#))

ISIS remains a resilient threat to the region despite international efforts targeting the senior network of the group. According to the United Nations, as of August 2023, 5,000 ISIS members remained active in Syria. On August 3, 2023, ISIS released an audio statement announcing the death of its leader, [Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi](#), in clashes with rival group HTS. Details regarding the location and timeline of his death remain unclear. However, HTS controls a portion of northwestern Syria, and ISIS regularly accuses HTS of working on behalf of Turkey. In the same statement, ISIS also announced the appointment of new leader [Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi](#). (Sources: [Wall Street Journal](#), [National](#))

As of February 2024, Syria continues to struggle to contain ISIS. On February 8, Mazloum Abdi, the general commander of the SDF, announced that ISIS had increased attacks to further strain the SDF as they simultaneously offset regional violence carried out by Iran-backed militias in response to the Hamas-Israel War. Given the number of attacks, the SDF has limited their movements and operations, which has made it more difficult to monitor ISIS activity and secure detention camps housing ISIS members and their families. (Source: [Hill](#))

Since the defeat of ISIS's territorial caliphate in 2019, the United States has contended with repatriating U.S. born citizens who traveled to fight alongside the terror group in Syria. On September 12, 2023, the U.S. Department of State initiated the repatriation process of 10 American citizens held at an ISIS detention camp in northeastern Syria. The returnee cohort included Brandy Salman and nine of her American-born children. The Salman family traveled to ISIS territory in 2016 before her Turkish national husband was killed. Further details of Salman's case have not been reported, including whether she will face charges. (Source: [New York Times](#))

The People's Protection Units (YPG)

The People's Protection Units (YPG) and its all-female affiliate, the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ), are the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria. An offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, the YPG was created in 2003 and like the PKK, seeks autonomy for Syria's Kurds and has shown a willingness to work with any power capable of advancing that goal. The PKK seeks an autonomous region for Kurds inside Turkey and has fought Turkish forces since 1984. The PKK is outlawed by Turkey and considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union. Although both Turkish forces and the YPG are part of the same coalition against ISIS, Turkish troops in northern Syria continue to attack the YPG. The YPG had been a major component of the U.S.-led effort to combat ISIS in Syria and as of October 2019, controlled approximately a third of Syria. The YPG ranks are thought to include tens of thousands of fighters, including hundreds of fighters from abroad. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [Reuters](#))

Some rebels accuse the YPG of collaborating with Assad, who has supported the PKK and whose decision to withdraw forces from several majority-Kurdish areas in northern Syria in mid-2012 allowed the YPG to establish control there. In 2014, the YPG launched a social media campaign to rescue Iraq's minority Yazidis who were being relentlessly targeted and killed by ISIS. Their mission to rescue the Yazidis attracted international attention that indirectly led to the enlistment of hundreds of foreign fighters to the YPG's humanitarian mission. According to recent data by the United Nations, the YPG recruited over 224 children in 2017, and according to Human Rights Watch, the children voluntarily enlisted in order to financially support their families. The YPG maintains an active Internet profile that has made it easy for interested individuals from countries all over to enlist and contribute to the fight against ISIS. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [CNN](#), [United Nations](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [New York Times](#))

In 2015, when the United States established the Syrian Democratic Forces to counter ISIS, the YPG served as a crucial addition to the forces. In May 2017, the U.S. began to allocate ammunition to the YPG to retake the city of Raqqa from ISIS. In October 2019, following U.S. President Trump's announcement of the immediate withdrawal of American forces in northern Syria—and essentially leaving the YPG vulnerable to greater attacks from Turkish forces—the YPG has said it would now prioritize defending its fellow Kurds over the larger battle of preventing the resurgence of ISIS. The group has said in the past that it would consider a deal with Assad if the U.S. leaves Syria. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [CNN](#))

Al-Nusra Front (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)

[Al-Nusra Front](#)—also known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (“the Levantine Conquest Front”)—was an internationally sanctioned terrorist group, the second-strongest insurgent group in Syria after ISIS, and a formerly open al-Qaeda affiliate that sought to replace the Assad regime with an Islamic state. Operating as a part of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) coalition since January 2017, al-Nusra Front stands accused of serving as a base for al-Qaeda operations. In the years since its formation in 2011, when al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent AQI operative Abu Muhammad al-Golani to Syria to organize regional jihadist cells, al-Nusra Front has gradually amassed and sustained territory throughout Syria. In

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

2017, HTS formed the Salvation Government, a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib. HTS subsequently ended its ties to al-Qaeda and has sought to present itself as a legitimate authority in Idlib. (Sources: [Long War Journal](#), [Reuters](#), [Syrian War Daily](#), [Asharq al-Awsat](#), [Syrian War Daily](#), [Washington Post](#))

Al-Nusra Front began targeting ISIS in January 2014 amid rising tensions between ISIS and the Sunni opposition forces. Additionally, on July 28, 2016, al-Qaeda released an audio statement allowing al-Nusra Front to end its affiliation with al-Qaeda. Following the split, al-Nusra changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. Throughout the conflict, the group has sought to cast itself as an irreplaceable military ally for opposition forces and has a longstanding military partnership with Ahrar al-Sham. (Sources: [Center for International Security and Cooperation](#), [Reuters](#), [Jihadica](#), [Associated Press](#), [Reuters](#))

Since its founding, al-Nusra Front has conducted formal military campaigns, assassinations, hostage takings, and “lone wolf” operations, including suicide bombings. By June 2013, al-Nusra Front had claimed responsibility for 57 out of 70 suicide attacks conducted during Syria’s civil war. The group has since continued to carry out its signature suicide bombings in Syria and expanded its operations into neighboring Lebanon after Hezbollah joined the war in mid-2013. In Lebanon, al-Nusra Front works to stoke sectarian divisions, conducting and attempting suicide bombings against civilian centers like Beirut and Hezbollah strongholds like Hermel, along Lebanon’s northeastern border with Syria. Al-Nusra Front also employs arbitrary detention and torture in order to silence its critics and opposition activists. According to a Human Rights Watch report, HTS detained more than 184 people in Idlib in the last three months of 2018. Other human rights organizations accuse HTS of arresting at least 622 people between January 2017 and August 2019. The United Nations and human rights groups continue to accuse HTS of mass arrests without charge and torture of detainees, which HTS denies. (Sources: [Long War Journal](#), [Reuters](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Daily Star](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Now](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [Syria Direct](#), [PBS](#))

Al-Nusra Front attracted the largest contingency of foreign fighters to Syria after ISIS, reportedly consisting of 3,000 to 4,000 foreigners as of late 2018. The group regularly engages in violent clashes with other rebel groups in northern Syria and conducts operations to arrest civilian protesters. In a February 2021 interview, Golani denied HTS is detaining innocent people or those critical of the group and instead arresting thieves and other criminals. He further claimed individuals detained by HTS were “regime agents,” “Russian agents who come to place booby traps,” or members of ISIS. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [CNN](#), [Bellingcat](#), [PBS](#))

Al-Nusra Front has been well-funded since its inception. By August 2016, the group received streams of funding through a variety of means, including taxation, tariffs, fines, ransoms, international donations, oil sales, looting, and smuggling. In September 2019, HTS commander Abu al-Abed al-Ashida released a video statement accusing HTS of corrupt internal practices. In the video, Ashida claimed HTS had a monthly income of \$13 million. Following the formation of the Salvation Government in November 2017, al-Nusra Front began taxing water and electricity usage in the municipalities under its control. HTS also captured the Bab al-Halwa border crossing between Idlib and Turkey in July 2017, providing an additional taxation source for the terror organization. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [Hate Speech International](#), [YouTube](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

In order to join al-Nusra Front, the group has historically required its recruits to procure *tazkiyya* (a voucher on behalf of the recruit) from two commanders on the front lines. Once the recruit is accepted, he swears *bay’ah* (an oath of allegiance) to the group, thereby cementing his religious commitment. Al-Nusra Front has also recruited its members online and in private messaging applications through its former media branches, al-Minara al-Bayda and Fursan al-Sham media. Within Syria, the group has attracted recruits by appealing to the locals in a strategy adopted from al-Qaeda jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri. When it comes to attracting recruits, al-Nusra Front holds a financial advantage over competing rebel groups, as it has historically been able to provide members with salaries and weapons. Under HTS, a new media outlet has been created, Ebaa Agency, which produces high-quality videos, infographics, and media statements similar to those of Amaq, ISIS’s media wing. (Sources: [Quilliam Foundation](#), [National](#), [Washington Post](#), [Long War Journal](#))

In addition to recruiting guerilla fighters through online and in-person efforts, al-Nusra Front stands accused of recruiting child soldiers. The U.N. Human Rights Council’s Independent Commission on Syria has issued reports on al-Nusra Front’s successful recruitment of child soldiers continuing into 2017. In Idlib province, al-Nusra fighters include boys under the age of 18 and 15, with some manning checkpoints. The Commission found that al-Nusra Front specifically targets poor, uneducated boys for recruitment, paying them modest salaries used to support the boys’ families. (Source: [U.N. Human Rights Council](#))

In opposition to the Syrian Assad regime, HTS has sought to place Idlib province under its own governance. On November 2, 2017, HTS announced the formation of the Salvation Government, a civilian-run administrative and political body in Idlib chaired by Mohammad al-Sheikh. HTS reportedly handed over control of its Public Services Administration to the Salvation Government. According to Syrian expert Sam Heller, the Salvation government formed through “a miniature, managed version of an inclusive national dialogue,” implying that at least some non-HTS elements are present in the body. However, many analysts and activists believe that the newly formed governing bodies in Idlib are controlled by

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

HTS. In January 2019, a ceasefire between HTS and the Turkish-backed rebel alliance National Liberation Front resulted in the Salvation Government taking control of every local council previously under the control or protection of those rebel groups, making HTS the dominant force in Idlib. (Sources: [Century Foundation](#), [Atlantic Council SyriaSource](#), [Syrian War Daily](#), [Asharq al-Awsat](#), [Syrian War Daily](#))

HTS has continued seeking to exert control over other jihadist groups in Idlib. On June 22, 2020, HTS banned all opposing factions not under its control and barred its members from defecting and forming independent factions. The move made the recently formed So Be Steadfast—a joint operations room of Hurras al-Din (HaD), Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Deen, Tansiqiyat al-Jihad, and Liwa al-Mouqatilin al-Ansar—illegal. In response, So Be Steadfast accused HTS of acting on behalf of Assad and foreign occupiers. Several days of violent clashes erupted between HTS and So Be Steadfast that month and left more than 100 dead. On June 28, HTS launched a military campaign against rival jihadist groups in Idlib. According to the war monitor group, Syrian Observatory, HTS fighters raided villages in Idlib and have arrested multiple jihadist militants, including a leader in HaD. In February 2022, HTS's so-called electronic jihad army announced the closure of multiple Telegram channels run by opposing jihadists. According to the Telegram post, the group's "efforts are ongoing, and we will continue our work until the closure of the last channel of any extremists, spoiler, and criminals." (Sources: [Twitter](#), [Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog](#), [Jihadica](#), [Voice of America](#), [Al-Monitor](#))

In 2021, HTS leader [Abu Muhammad al-Golani](#) began to rebrand HTS in an attempt to secure its political future. Golani has maintained that HTS is no longer formally connected to al-Qaeda, with HTS even dismantling al-Qaeda's military operations room in June 2020. HTS reportedly killed and detained many of al-Qaeda's senior leaders and commanders and has closed their military bases. Additionally, HTS official Abu Abdullah al-Shami has claimed that instead of launching international terrorism or creating an Islamic emirate, HTS's military efforts have focused instead on bringing down the Syrian government. As of 2023, limited Christian religious services have begun again in Idlib, though limitations on public Christian practice remains. For example, while HTS has allowed some churches in Idlib to resume regular services, they are forbidden from ringing church bells or publicly displaying crosses on their buildings. HTS has also started a program to repatriate confiscated property to Syrian Christians, except for those linked to the Syrian regime. However, HTS is continually accused of committing human rights abuses and faces a long road ahead if they seek to be considered a legitimate governing force by the international community. (Sources: [Financial Times](#), [Associated Press](#), [France 24](#), [Middle Eastern Institute](#))

As of 2023, scholars on the region have noted that HTS has suppressed most extremist groups in Idlib and has maintained dominance in the province. In its bid for international legitimacy, HTS has turned its weapons against both al-Qaeda and ISIS. HTS claims it wants to ensure its territory cannot be used for attacks against the West. Although HTS has gone after ISIS, ISIS maintains a presence in the area. Following the deadly earthquake in February 2023, HTS's control over northwestern Syria raised complications in the delivery of much needed humanitarian aid. HTS refused to allow shipments from government-held parts of Syria and instead looked to Turkey for assistance. However, the delivery of aid across Syria's borders without prior authorization from the government is considered a violation of sovereignty. (Sources: [International Crisis Group](#), [Reuters](#), [France 24](#), [Guardian](#))

Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (NZD)

The Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, or the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (NZD), was a Sunni Islamist group based in Aleppo. Founded in late 2011 by Tawfiq Shahabuddin in the countryside of Eastern Aleppo, the NZD was one of the strongest factions within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to defect and join Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The movement's forces were estimated to number around 7,000. It played a prominent role in the fight against ISIS, helping to expel ISIS from the city of Aleppo in 2014. Until September 2016, NDZ was a recipient of financial and arms support from the United States. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#), [Los Angeles Times](#))

Although once siding with the FSA, NZD defected to the rebel camp sometime before 2016. In June 2016, a video of the group circulated showing its members beheading a 15-year-old boy who reportedly was a member of the pro-government Liwaa al-Quds (Jerusalem Brigade) faction. It is speculated by analysts at the Atlantic Council that NZD shifted their approach and chose to defect from the FSA when the Friends of Syria Group—an alliance of Western and Arab Gulf countries opposed to Assad—stopped providing NZD assistance in early 2015. The shift in NZD's ideology and alliances raised many questions given how organized the group was. The group featured a Shura Council, as well as specialized political, military, administrative, service, relief, and medical offices, all of which employed specialists, politicians, officers, and graduates. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#), [Reuters](#), [Atlantic Council](#), [Los Angeles Times](#))

In January 2017, NDZ joined the newly formed HTS, which resulted from the merger of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and three other opposition groups of the FSA. The Zenki movement merged with Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya on February 18, 2018. On March 26, 2019, the NZD announced its dissolution in favor of forming the "Third Brigade" along with Faylaq al Majd. The Third Brigade supports the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army.

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

The group's reorganization included removing top leader Tawfiq Sabah al-Deen and designating Abu Bashir and Abu al-Yaman as managers of the brigades. (Sources: [Carter Center](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Islamic World News](#), [Syrian War Daily](#))

Hamas

Syria has long acted as a conduit between [Hamas](#) and its Iranian benefactor, allowing weapons and money to cross its borders. Hamas's political leadership was based in Damascus until 2012, when it relocated due to the ongoing Syrian civil war. On June 21, 2022, Reuters reported unidentified Hamas officials confirmed the group had decided to restore its ties with Syria and the two sides had held high-level meetings. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Reuters](#))

Those overtures resulted in an October 19, 2022, meeting in Damascus between a Hamas delegation and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on restoring relations between Hamas and Syria. Hamas and Assad agreed to move past their previous disagreements while the Hamas delegation called the meeting a new start for joint Palestinian-Syrian work in a welcoming Syrian environment. Some Assad loyalists in Syria denounced the reconciliation, labeling Hamas traitors who abandoned and slandered Syria. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Hamas](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [Middle East Eye](#))

Hezbollah

[Hezbollah](#) is an Iran-sponsored transnational terrorist group founded in Lebanon in the early 1980s as a way for Tehran to expand its influence in the region. Iran has transferred mass quantities of weapons, fighters, and other supplies to Hezbollah through its [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC), using Syria as a transfer point. It has been responsible for transferring thousands of rockets, which Hezbollah has used against Israeli civilians. In addition to its violently anti-Israel position, Hezbollah's loyalty to Iran has translated into Hezbollah involvement on behalf of Assad's government in Syria's civil war. However, since 2015, the Assad regime, backed by Russian military support, has sought to redefine its relationship with Hezbollah to reverse the group's influence on Syrian society. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Atlantic](#), [Arab Weekly](#), [Carnegie Middle East Center](#))

In 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department levied additional sanctions on Hezbollah for its support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. According to the Treasury, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in early 2011, Hezbollah provided "training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria's increasingly ruthless efforts to fight against the opposition." Since 2013, Hezbollah's fighters have fought alongside Syrian military and paramilitary forces, openly carrying out attacks along the Lebanese-Syrian border and allowing Assad to retake rebel-held areas in central Syria. However, Hezbollah's current role in Syria is to serve as an extension of Iran's military entrenchment, focusing more on deterring Israel and less on fending off ISIS and other Syrian rebel groups. (Sources: [U.S. Department of the Treasury](#), [Institute for the Study of War](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

On October 19, 2016, Hezbollah's second-in-command, Naim Qassem, told Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV that Hezbollah "will not leave Syria as long as there is a need to confront takfiri groups." In September 2017, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah declared victory in Syria. "We have won in the war," he said, according to the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar*. However, in June 2018, Lebanese parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, of the Hezbollah-allied Amal movement, told Russian media that Hezbollah and Iran would remain in Syria until it is "fully liberated from terrorists." In September 2018, Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah would remain in Syria indefinitely with the Syrian government's permission. (Sources: [Al-Manar](#), [Reuters](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#))

In the early stages of the Syrian war, Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime was limited to small numbers of trainers and advisers. Hezbollah leaders did not confirm their activities in Syria until 2013, when Nasrallah announced that he was sending fighters to aid the Syrian government. It is estimated that Hezbollah has between 7,000 and 10,000 fighters in Syria—the largest deployment anywhere in the world outside of Lebanon. (Sources: [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

Hezbollah has carried out a sophisticated information campaign in Syria to support its political and military objectives, using television, radio, print media, the Internet, and social media to spread its message as the self-proclaimed protector of Shia communities and holy sites throughout Lebanon and Syria. To achieve its political and military goals, Hezbollah has redirected significant personnel, capabilities, and resources from Lebanon to Syria. The conflict in Syria has both strengthened and improved Hezbollah's military capabilities as the group adjusted its battlefield strategies based on collaboration with Iran and Russia, as well as less-sophisticated Iranian battlefield proxies from Afghanistan and other countries. (Source: [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#))

Hezbollah's participation in Syria has increased tensions among the Middle East's Sunni Arab nations who oppose the Shiite group and the presence of its sponsor country, Iran, throughout the region. The Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) designated Hezbollah a terrorist group in March 2016

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

because of its “hostile acts” against GCC member states, recruitment for “terrorist attacks, smuggling weapons and explosives, stirring up sedition and incitement to chaos and violence,” and participation in the Syrian civil war. The Arab League also labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group that month, accusing Hezbollah and the IRGC of financing and training terrorist groups and interfering in regional affairs. The GCC had previously sanctioned Hezbollah in 2013 for its role in Syria. On November 19, 2017, the Arab League further condemned Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, citing its regional disruption efforts on behalf of Iran. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#))

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Israel has allegedly been behind hundreds of airstrikes against Iran-backed paramilitary fighters, government troops, and Hezbollah militants in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. On May 31, 2020, an airstrike was launched in eastern Syria that struck three military vehicles, killing five paramilitary fighters. The war monitor claimed that “Israel was likely responsible.” Additionally, the Syrian Observatory reported that an unidentified aircraft targeted M’ezileh base which is controlled by Iranian forces and Iran-backed militias. The attack killed seven militiamen. Israel rarely confirms its operations in Syria, but Jerusalem often contends that Iran’s presence in the region poses significant risks for Israel. (Sources: [Middle East Eye](#), [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#))

In July 2020, there were local reports that Hezbollah has been intensifying efforts to construct an unofficial crossing along Lebanon’s eastern border with Syria. Reportedly, the route would help to transport fighters, weapons, and even fuel between the two countries while evading international sanctions. A voice recording that allegedly featured an unidentified Hezbollah commander claimed that the construction of the border crossing was a “message to the enemies inside and outside [Lebanon that] soon convoys will pass through here.” Along with the Lebanese-Syrian border, as of January 2021, Hezbollah exercises major influence across areas in eastern, southern and northwestern Syria, including several suburbs around Damascus. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Voice of America](#))

Given Hezbollah’s connection to Iran, Israel has carried out frequent attacks against the group in Syria. Since the war broke out in Syria in 2011, Jerusalem has acknowledged mounting hundreds of attacks in an effort to prevent Iran from exerting influence throughout the region and carrying out attacks on Israel. The strikes often target military outposts and weapons depots operated by Hezbollah. In one instance on April 27, 2022, Israel launched an airstrike targeting an ammunition depot near Damascus. The assault killed nine, including five Syrian soldiers. (Sources: [France 24](#), [Al Arabiya](#), [France 24](#))

Hezbollah and Israel continued airstrikes against each other into 2023, with Israeli airstrikes targeting arms depots for government forces and Iran-backed proxies. In March 2023 an alleged Israeli airstrike killed two IRGC military advisers in Damascus. The strike reportedly targeted shipments of microchips that Israel believes could be used by Hezbollah to develop precision-guided missiles. Airstrikes continued on both sides, and in April 2023, at least five Hezbollah members were killed following Israeli airstrikes in Syria. Although not confirmed by Israel, in multiple instances after artillery strikes, threatening pamphlets were dropped warning Syrian soldiers to stop cooperating with Hezbollah. (Sources: [Times of Israel](#), [Times of Israel](#), [Guardian](#))

Following the catastrophic February 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, a U.S. intelligence assessment in May 2023 revealed that Iran and its proxies reportedly hid weapons among earthquake aid. While it is uncertain if Iran specifically intercepted aid to the benefit of Hezbollah, a U.S. defense official noted that the IRGC has previously used this method as “a way to get materials to IRGC-affiliated groups” in Iraq and Syria. (Source: [Washington Post](#))

Jaish al-Islam

Formerly known as Liwa al-Islam, the group was later renamed to Jaysh al-Islam in 2013 when Liwa al-Islam joined the Islamic Coalition—a political group that opposed the Assad regime. It aims to replace the Assad government with a Syria that is based on Islamic law. Jaysh al-Islam’s central mission is to “fight Assad and [refuse] ISIS’s takfiri mentality.” The Jaysh al-Islam, or Army of Islam, coalition is centered in the Damascus area and eastern Ghouta, with over 10-15,000 members, making it the largest rebel faction in the eastern Ghouta area. Jaysh al-Islam differs from al-Qaeda and ISIS—groups Jaysh al-Islam considers deviations from and a danger to Islam—in that Jaysh-al-Islam does not call for eliminating western presence in the Middle East or creating a single Islamic state. The group’s founder, Zahran Aloush, recruited many of its members and expanded its arsenal of military equipment. Aloush was assassinated by the Syrian military in a 2015 airstrike. The group is now headed by Essam al-Buwaydhani. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Center for International Security and Cooperation](#), [OFAC](#), [Deutsche Welle](#))

Failaq al-Rahman

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Founded in 2013, Failaq al-Rahman (or al-Rahman Legion or al-Rahman Corps) includes over 9,000 fighters. The organization describes itself as “a revolutionary military entity aiming for the downfall of the Syrian regime,” but it does not seek to turn Syria into an Islamic state. The group’s military commander, Abdul-Nasser Shmeir, is a former captain of the Syrian army. The group is said to have been allied with Turkey, Qatar, and HTS against Jaysh al-Islam in eastern Ghouta. It is also connected to the Free Syrian Army, one of the biggest rebel coalitions formed at the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The group is well-resourced as it produces its own weaponry in primitive factories. The group is also taking part in the peace talks in Geneva and Astana. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Associated Press](#))

Ahrar al-Sham

The Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, better known as Ahrar al-Sham, aims to also form an Islamic state in Syria based on sharia. A Sunni Salafist militant group and HTS’s main rival, Ahrar al-Sham emerged in 2011 following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. The group is estimated to have over 25,000 fighters. Although Ahrar al-Sham officials tried to brand the group as moderate, in 2016, Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Yahya al-Hamawi expressed his desire to expand ties to al-Nusra Front as part of an effort to “re-empower Islam.” Ahrar al-Sham is known for pioneering the use of IEDs as a tool of insurgency as well as targeting military bases to capture weapons such as mobile artillery and anti-guided missiles. Ahrar al-Sham broke ties with ISIS following Baghdadi’s opposition to reconciliation efforts between Syrian Sunni militant groups. According to analysts at Stanford’s Center for International Security and Cooperation, given the impact of Ahrar al-Sham’s attacks, the organization has allegedly received money from donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey to counter Syrian government forces. (Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#), [Washington Post](#), [Middle East Monitor](#), [Mapping Militant Organizations at Stanford](#), [Deutsche Welle](#))

Ahrar al-Sham has formed three prominent umbrella organizations—the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), the Islamic Front, and Jaysh al-Fatah—and often absorbs smaller groups when organizations begin to lose support. Ahrar al-Sham formed its first umbrella organization, the SIF, in December 2012 in order to unite Syrian Islamic opposition forces and pursue a Syrian government that implements Shariah law. (Sources: [Mapping Militant Organizations](#), [Long War Journal](#))

Hurras al-Din

Hurras al-Din (HaD or Guardians of the Religion) is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization and an HTS splinter group that is widely believed to be al-Qaeda’s new affiliate in Syria. HaD is largely made up of HTS defectors. Founded in February 2018, HaD is led by Khaled al-Aruri (a.k.a. Abu al-Qasim al-Urduni) and shura council members Samir Hijazi (a.k.a. Abu Hamam al-Shami or Faruq al-Suri), Sami al-Uraydi (a.k.a. Abu Mahmud al-Sham), Bilal Khuraysat (a.k.a. Abu Hudhayfah al-Urduni), Faraj Ahmad Nanaa, and Abu Abd al-Karim al-Masri. Its founding statement urged “the fighting factions in al-Sham to stop fighting among themselves and save the tent of Muslims.” Following the plea, over sixteen factions joined HaD. HaD claims to have carried out over 200 attacks since its inception. (Sources: [Federal Register](#), [BBC News](#), [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#))

HaD further strengthened its military capacity by establishing different fighting alliances. Included among the alliances are: Hilf Nusrat al-Islam which was founded in April of 2018 and Wa-Hardh al-Muminin Operations Room in October of 2018. Further alliances include Jabhat Ansar al-Din and Jamaat Ansar al-Islam—two al-Qaeda aligned groups. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#))

HaD dedicates a significant amount of time in spreading its ideology throughout Idlib. Along with a clerical establishment, HaD has also established a “Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong.” Activities of the committee include conducting *hisba* patrols (moral policing). Additionally, HaD and its Wa-Hardh al-Muminin Operations Room have raised funds for military activities locally and online as part of their “Jahizuna Campaign.” The funds are used for weaponry—particularly AK-47s, bullets, rocket-propelled grenades—food, fuel, and medical treatment for wounded fighters. The campaign began in May of 2019 and provided supporters with designated Telegram and WhatsApp accounts that detailed how to send funds to the campaign. (Source: [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#))

On January 1, 2021, HaD militants detonated a car bomb outside a Russian military base in Raqqa. The number of casualties was not reported, but the attack demonstrated that HaD is potentially expanding its attacks beyond the usual location of Idlib. HaD leader, Mohammed Abu Khalid al-Suri, later released a statement claiming the objective of the attack was to target the “bases of the Syrian regime and the Russian enemy,” in “rejection of imported international agreements.” Given the operation outside of HaD’s general locale, some scholars suggest that HaD may carry out other attacks outside Idlib against the Syrian regime forces and even Iranian militias. (Source: [Al-Monitor](#))

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

[Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba](#) (HHN) is a U.S.-sanctioned, radical Iraqi Shiite militia group that operates under the leadership of the Iran's IRGC – Quds Force. The group is led by Secretary-General [Akram al-Kaabi](#), and is estimated to have over 10,000 fighters. The movement is loyal to Iran, helping create a supply route through Iraq to Damascus. Kaabi was also a former leading figure in [Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#) (AAH) and was designated by the U.S. government as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in March of 2019. Kaabi left AAH in 2012, and with support from Iran, founded HHN to mobilize Iraqi militants into Syria, eventually becoming one of the largest Iraqi contingents in the country. Kaabi is said to have been close to Major General [Qasem Soleimani](#), the former leader of the Quds Force, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a specially designated global terrorist who directed Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces until his death in January 2020. In 2014, when ISIS began to take over parts of Southeast Syria near the border of Iraq and Jordan, HHN further legitimized its status as a forceful militia as they managed to swiftly deploy troops between Syria and Iraq to undermine the insurgency. Along with its campaign to deter the presence of Sunni jihadists, HHN has mostly shifted its focus on subverting the Israeli presence throughout the Golan Heights. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#), [Long War Journal](#), [National](#), [Middle East Institute](#))

Iran

Prior to the Syrian civil war, Syria acted as a conduit between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. After the start of Syria's civil war in 2011, Iran increased its direct support of the Syrian regime by sending Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisers, weapons, and equipment to the regime and Iranian proxies operating in the country, such as Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. Iran maintains the IRGC acts only in an advisory role to the Syrian government and at the invitation of the Syrian regime. Nonetheless, Israel has launched numerous strikes against IRGC weapons depots and other targets in Syria to stop alleged weapons transfers to Iranian proxies. One alleged Israeli strike—Israel does not typically publicly confirm its actions in Syria—on March 31, 2023, killed an IRGC officer. It was reportedly Israel's sixth attack on IRGC forces in Syria that month. Suspected Israeli strikes in April 2023 killed two Iranian advisers. Between January and April 2023, Syrian officials suspect Israel carried out at least 10 airstrikes in Syria against Iranian targets. That May, a suspected Israeli strike targeted sites in Aleppo used by Iran's Unit 18340, which reportedly assists a Syrian contingent within the IRGC in weapons testing and production. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [Associated Press](#), [Jerusalem Post](#))

The United States has also targeted Iran-backed militants in Syria. On August 23, 2022, for example, U.S. airstrikes in Syria targeted Iran-backed militants affiliated with the IRGC. The strikes hit nine bunkers described as ammunition depots and logistics supply facilities. According to media reports in early June 2023, Iran planned to increase its support for its proxies in Syria to better attack U.S. forces in Syria. According to classified intelligence reports cited in the *Washington Post*, Iran and its allies preparing more powerful armor-piercing roadside bombs to target U.S. forces. Earlier that January, members of the IRGC's Quds Force, the group's expeditionary arm, reportedly oversaw testing in eastern Syria of an explosive that could disable a U.S. tank. (Sources: [CENTCOM](#), [CENTCOM](#), [Reuters](#), [Washington Post](#))

As of February 2024, Syria's relationship with Iran remained unflinching, a dangerous prospect as Tehran regularly attempts to ship arms into Syria with the intention of equipping Iran-backed terror groups in the region. In October 2023, the Israeli Air Force carried out an attack on an attempted Iranian shipment near Damascus. The strike was one of numerous against Iran-backed groups over the past decade. Furthermore, in September 2023, Ismail Ghaani, the head of the IRGC's Quds Force, visited Syria to oversee joint military exercises between Syria and Iran. (Sources: [i24 News](#), [France 24](#))

ISIS has also targeted IRGC personnel in Syria, such as during a February 8, 2021, ambush of Syrian soldiers and Quds Force members in Deir Ezzor. That attack killed at least 26. (Sources: [Media Line](#), [Agence France-Presse](#))

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a U.S.-designated, Iran-sponsored Palestinian terrorist organization based in the Gaza Strip. The group has carried out numerous suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israel. PIJ's leadership has operated from Syria since 1989, when they relocated from Lebanon after Israel expelled them a year earlier. According to the U.S. State Department, PIJ's senior leadership continues to reside primarily in Syria, though most PIJ members live in Gaza. International Arabic-language newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported in 2012 that PIJ's Syria-based leadership had relocated to Iran but continued to enjoy positive ties with their Syrian patrons. However, a PIJ official denied that report, claiming "relations between [PIJ] and the Syrian government are excellent, unlike Hamas," whose leadership left Syria after refusing to support the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war. Official representatives of the group are also stationed elsewhere in the Middle East, including Iran. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Asharq Al-Awsat](#), [Al-Monitor](#), [Tasnim News Agency](#))

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Israel has carried out multiple strikes in Syria targeting PIJ infrastructure and its leadership there. On October 5, 2003, for example, Israel bombed a PIJ training camp in Syria in retaliation for a PIJ suicide bombing in Haifa, Israel, that killed 21 people the day before. On February 23, 2020, Israel killed two PIJ members during air raids on PIJ training facilities and weapons depots in Damascus in response to PIJ rocket fire on Israel from Gaza. PIJ launched dozens of rockets from Gaza toward Israel in response to the Syrian strike. (Sources: [Fox News](#), [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [BBC News](#))

Islamic Resistance in Iraq

Following the onset of the Hamas-Israel war in the Gaza Strip in October 2023, a coalition of all Iran-backed Shiite militias emerged called the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI). The IRI includes established Shiite militias such as [Kataib Hezbollah](#) (KH), [Asaib Ahl al-Haq](#) (AAH), [Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba](#) (HHN), and [Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada](#) (KSS), as well as lesser-known militias, such as Tashkil al-Waritheen. The IRI targets U.S. interests across Iraq and Syria in retaliation for the perceived U.S. role in the Gaza crisis. Following IRI's first official claim of a drone attack on Harir Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan on October 17, 2023, the IRI launched at least 20 other attacks by the end of the month on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria. The IRI claimed the attacks on a Telegram group called al-Elam al-Harbi (The War Media) that was launched on October 18, 2023. Although not all claimed by the IRI, security officials recorded at least 170 attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces between October 2023 and February 2024. (Sources: [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#), [France 24](#), [CBS News](#), [Associated Press](#))

On February 4, 2024, the IRI launched a drone strike on the al-Omar military base in Deir Ezzor, killing at least six allied Kurdish soldiers. The base hosts U.S. troops but no American casualties were reported. The strike was launched in response to U.S. strikes against Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria and western Iraq, as well as Houthi targets in Yemen. On February 2, the United States carried out multiple strikes against Iran-backed forces across Syria and Iraq, further escalating tension in the region. The strikes hit more than 85 targets including command and control operations, intelligence centers, weapons facilities, and bunkers used by the IRGC's Quds Force as well as their affiliated militia groups. Nearly 40 people were killed in the strikes. (Sources: [Fox News](#), [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#))

Major Extremist and Terrorist Incidents

- **April 21, 2024 - April 22, 2024:** On April 21, Iraqi militants in Zummar launch five rockets toward a U.S. military base in Rumalyn, Syria. No U.S. personnel are injured in the attack. A U.S. official calls the launch a "failed rocket attack" in an interview with Reuters. Fighter jets from the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and Syria launch a counterstrike, destroying a rocket launcher-equipped pickup truck in Zummar. A KH-affiliated group on Telegram announces that KH and other Iraqi militias are resuming their attacks on U.S. forces. The KH-linked Sabreen News group on Telegram reports that KH had not issued an official statement. On April 22, KH issues a statement on Telegram denying reports that it would resume violent attacks on U.S. forces. KH calls the reports "fabricated news." According to Pentagon press secretary Major General Patrick Ryder, the April 21 incident resulted from "some type of malfunction" in which a rocket-launching truck was "shooting rockets all over the place." Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Al-Monitor](#)
- **April 1, 2024:** A suspected Israeli airstrike targets an Iranian consulate building within its embassy complex in Damascus. The airstrike kills seven military advisers from the IRGC Quds Force. Among those killed is Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the most senior Quds Force official killed since the January 2020 death of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in a U.S. airstrike. Zahedi oversaw the IRGC's ground forces and their operations. He was also allegedly pivotal in the supply of Iranian-made missiles to Hezbollah. Following the airstrike, the IRGC and Hezbollah both vowed retaliation against any threats toward Iranian interests in the region. On April 14, Iran launches more than 300 drones and missiles toward Israel in its first-ever direct attack against Israel. According to the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency, Iraqi militias simultaneously launched airstrikes during Iran's operation. Despite launching more than 300 drones and missiles, 99 percent are intercepted by Israeli, U.S., and regional forces, with those reaching Israeli territory causing only minimal damage to an air base and wounding one child in southern Israel. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Associated Press](#), [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#), [Times of Israel](#)
- **March 1, 2024:** Israeli airstrikes target a IRGC compound in the port of Baniyas, northwestern Syria. The airstrike kills three, including IRGC Navy adviser Colonel Reza Zarei and two unidentified members of Lebanese Hezbollah. Zarei was reportedly overseeing Iranian oil deliveries to Syria as well as offering guidance to Hezbollah forces. Source: [Long War Journal](#)
- **February 25, 2024:** An Israeli airstrike targets a truck in Syria near the Lebanese border. The airstrike kills two Hezbollah members. Although unreported where the militants were headed, a later statement released by Hezbollah claimed the two fighters were "martyred on the road to Jerusalem." Source: [Arab News](#)
- **February 4, 2024:** The Shiite militia umbrella group the Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) launches a drone strike from Iraq on the al-Omar military base in Deir Ezzor, Syria, killing at least six allied Kurdish soldiers. The bases hosts U.S. troops but no American casualties are reported. Source: [Fox News](#)
- **January 15, 2024:** The IRGC launch missiles targeting an Israeli "spy headquarters" in Irbil, Iraq, as well as ISIS elements in northern Syria. The Irbil strike occurs near the U.S. consulate, killing four civilians and injuring six. The Irbil strike occurs near the U.S. consulate, killing four civilians and injuring six. Source: [Associated Press](#)

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

-
- **December 28, 2023:** The SDF launch an operation in Syria's al-Hol detention camp to target and kill senior ISIS official Abu Obeida al-Iraqi. The SDF accuse al-Iraqi of planning "terrorist activities" in the detention center targeting security and military personnel and non-governmental organizations. Source: [Kurdistan 24](#)
 - **November 8, 2023:** ISIS militants carry out multiple machine gun attacks in Raqqa, Homs, and Deir Ezzor. The attacks kill at least 34 pro-government militia and injure an unspecified number of others. Source: [Al-Monitor](#)
 - **September 28, 2023:** American and Syrian-Kurdish forces carry out a joint operation resulting in the capture of Mahmoud Ibrahim Al Haji, also known as Abu Youssef, in Raqqa. Abu Youssef was reportedly a senior ISIS member and one of the group's key facilitators in expanding terror cells throughout the region. Source: [National](#)
 - **September 23, 2023:** A U.S. raid in northern Syria captures Abu Halil al-Fad'ani, an ISIS operational and facilitation official with close affiliations to other ISIS networks in the region. Source: [U.S. Central Command](#)
 - **September 1, 2023:** HTS militants ambush Syrian soldiers in Latakia province, killing nine and wounding 12. Source: [Arab News](#)
 - **August 26, 2023:** Militants from the al-Qaeda-allied Ansar al-Tawhid group and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) detonate explosives in tunnels dug underneath Syrian army positions in Idlib province. The explosion and ensuing attack kill 11 soldiers and wound 20 others. Source: [Times of Israel](#)
 - **August 12, 2023:** ISIS ambushes a convoy carrying Syrian government forces in Deir Ezzor, killing at least 33 and injuring 10 others. It is the deadliest attack carried out by the terror group in Syria that year. Sources: [Agence France-Presse](#), [BBC News](#)
 - **August 6, 2023:** ISIS militants ambush military vehicles and checkpoints in Raqqa, killing 10 pro-government fighters and wounding another six. Source: [National](#)
 - **August 3, 2023:** ISIS releases an audio statement announcing the death of its leader, Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi, in clashes with HTS. Details regarding the location and timeline of his death remain unclear. However, HTS controls a portion of northwestern Syria, and ISIS regularly accuses HTS of working in Turkey's favor. In the same statement, ISIS also announced the appointment of new leader Abu Haf's al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)
 - **July 27, 2023:** An ISIS suicide fighter detonates an explosive-ridden motorbike in a Sayeda Zeinab, Syria, near a Shiite Muslim shrine. The explosion kills at least six and injures 26 others. Source: [Associated Press](#)
 - **May 10, 2023:** A car bomb at the Barzeh police station in Damascus kills a Syrian police officer and wounds four others. ISIS claims responsibility. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#)
 - **April 29, 2023:** Turkey's MIT intelligence agency carries out an operation in Syria's Afrin province. After surrounding a house harboring ISIS leader Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi, the leader of the terrorist organization detonates a suicide vest to avoid detention. Erdogan confirms the death of al-Qurashi the next day. Sources: [CBS News](#), [Agence France-Presse](#)
 - **April 17, 2023:** The U.S. carries out a helicopter raid in northeast Syria, targeting and killing Abd-al-Hadi Mahmud al-Haji Ali, a senior ISIS leader. Ali, who was killed alongside two other ISIS members, was responsible for planning terror attacks in both the Middle East and Europe. According to U.S. Central Command, the raid was launched after the U.S. discovered that ISIS planned to kidnap officials abroad. Source: [CNN](#)
 - **April 8, 2023:** U.S. forces launch a helicopter raid in eastern Syria, later capturing senior member Hudayfah al-Yemeni and two of his associates in eastern Syria. Al-Yemeni is reportedly an "ISIS attack facilitator." Source: [CNN](#)
 - **April 3, 2023:** U.S. forces launch a drone strike in Killi, northwest Syria, killing ISIS senior leader Khalid 'Aydd Ahmad al-Jabouri. Al-Jabouri had reportedly helped develop ISIS's leadership network and was responsible for planning attacks targeting Europe and Turkey. Sources: NBC News, [ABC News](#)
 - **March 23, 2023:** HTS militants ambush Syrian soldiers in Aleppo. The violence kills five soldiers and wounds six others. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#)
 - **March 23, 2023:** A suspected Iranian-made drone strikes northeast Syria, killing a U.S. contractor and wounding six other Americans. U.S. forces retaliate by launching airstrikes on Iranian positions in eastern Syria. The next day, 10 rockets target U.S. personnel at the Mission Support Site Green Village, northeast Syria. No American troops are injured, but civilians are wounded when a rocket strays off course and strikes a home. U.S. officials later reveal an Iran-backed Iraqi militia Liwa al-Ghaliboun ("Brigade of the Victors") had launched the drone. U.S. officials suspect Liwa al-Ghaliboun is a front group for Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN). An HHN representative acknowledges the drone originated from Iraq and HHN supported the attack but denies responsibility. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Wall Street Journal](#)
 - **March 11, 2023:** Suspected ISIS militants target truffle hunters in northern Syria. The assailants kill three and kidnap 26 others. The area is a known hideout for extremists. Source: [Al Arabiya](#)
 - **February 16, 2023:** The U.S. military along with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) carry out a helicopter raid in northeast Syria, killing senior ISIS leader Hamza al-Homs. Homs, who reportedly oversaw ISIS's network in eastern Syria, detonates a suicide vest once discovered, wounding four American service workers. Source: [CBS News](#)
 - **January 29, 2023:** Armed drones target an Iranian defense factory in Isfahan, causing some damage but no reported casualties.
-

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Hours later, drones attack a truck convoy in eastern Syria shortly after it crosses into the country from Iraq. There are no immediate reports of casualties or responsibility. Source: [Associated Press](#)

- **January 26, 2023:** Syrian Kurdish-led forces announce the capture 68 ISIS militants during a weeklong operation in eastern Syria. Among those captured is a local ISIS commander who acted as the chief of ISIS's faction in Raqqa. Source: [Associated Press](#)
- **January 20, 2023:** Three suicide drones attack the al-Tanf base, which hosts U.S. forces in Syria. Two of the drones are shot down and the third collides with a building on the base, wounding two Syrian Free Army soldiers. No Americans are hurt in the attack. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says Iran-backed militants likely launched the drones. Source: [Associated Press](#)
- **January 17, 2023:** An IED planted on the road to the Al-Thawra oil field in Al-Tabaqah desert wounds four soldiers. The military suspects ISIS of responsibility. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 16, 2023:** Unidentified militants attack a military post in Deir Ezzor, killing one. Officials suspect the militants may be linked to ISIS. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 15, 2023:** Suspected ISIS militants attack Syrian military positions in Al-Sokhna desert in Homs, killing one. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 12, 2023:** A landmine explodes under a military vehicle in the Al-Tanf area near the Syria-Jordan-Iraq border, killing one. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 9, 2023:** Alleged ISIS militants attack the headquarters of local Iran-backed militias in Palmyra, killing one. ISIS militants also attack Syrian military positions in Al-Masrib Desert, killing an undisclosed number. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 9, 2023:** Suspected ISIS gunmen open fire at a Syrian military outpost near Al-Jalaa town in the eastern part of Deir Ezzor. One of the attackers is killed while the others escape. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 7, 2023:** ISIS militants ambush Syrian soldiers in the Juaydeen area in Al-Tabaqah desert in western Raqqa, killing one and wounding at least four. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 5, 2023:** Turkish forces operating in Syria kill approximately 12 militants who were allegedly preparing an attack on Turkish interests. According to the Turkish government, the targets belonged to the YPG. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **January 5, 2023:** An alleged ISIS landmine wounds two NDF members near the Al-Rasafa area in the southwestern Raqqa desert. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **January 4, 2023:** A landmine planted in a house kills two Afghan members of Iran's IRGC in the Al-Jamaiah neighborhood, west of Palmyra. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
- **December 26, 2022:** ISIS militants attack security and military buildings in Raqqa, killing six SDF fighters and wounding an unspecified number of others. At least one attacker is killed and another is arrested. Source: [Associated Press](#)
- **November 30, 2022:** ISIS announces the death of leader Abu Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. In an official statement, the group claims the deceased leader was killed in action but offered no other explanation regarding his death. The statement also declares Abu al-Hussain al-Hussaini al-Qurashi as the new leader of the terrorist group. That same day, the United States Central Command confirmed that al-Qurashi was killed in an operation conducted by The Free Syrian Army in Dar'a province in mid-October. Sources: [Mirror](#), [CENTCOM](#)
- **October 6, 2022:** The United States conducts an airstrike in northern Syria, killing Abu-Hashum al-Umawi and Abu Mu'ad al-Qahtani. Umawi was the deputy leader of ISIS in Syria, and al-Qahtani was a senior leader. Sources: [Washington Post](#), [U.S. Central Command](#)
- **October 5, 2022:** The United States launches a raid near Qamishli village in northeastern Syria. The raid results in the death of Rakkan Wahid al-Shammri, a senior ISIS leader who was known to facilitate the smuggling of weapons and fighters in support of ISIS operations. Along with al-Shammri, another ISIS member is killed, and two others are captured. Sources: [CBS News](#), [Reuters](#), [Washington Post](#)
- **September 30, 2022:** A French court finds French-Algerian Sami Allem and French-Moroccan Abderrahman Cheikh guilty of "terrorism financing" and "criminal association." The men were first arrested in 2020 for their scheme. The two men are sentenced to four years in prison for transferring cryptocurrency and opening online accounts for members of HTS in Syria. Reportedly, more than 280,000 euros in cryptocurrency was transferred to fighters in Syria. Source: [New Arab](#)
- **August 25, 2022 - September 17, 2022:** U.S.-backed Syrian fighters conduct a 24-day sweep at al-Hol camp during which they discover ISIS sleeper cells that were indoctrinating new generations of ISIS fighters. The U.S.-backed forces also detained 226 extremists and confiscated weapons in the camp housing tens of thousands of women and children linked to ISIS. The operation was launched due to increasing violence carried out by ISIS cells within the camp. Since the beginning of 2022, extremists reportedly killed 44 camp residents and humanitarian workers. Source: [Associated Press](#)
- **August 23, 2022 - August 25, 2022:** On August 23, U.S. forces launch airstrikes in Syria, targeting Iran-backed militants affiliated with the IRGC. The strikes hit nine bunkers described as ammunition depots and logistics supply facilities. On August 24, rockets target two U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) bases in northeastern Syria, wounding three. The rockets target Mission Support Site Conoco and Mission Support Site Green Village. U.S. forces suspect Iranian militias of responsibility. In response, U.S. forces launched retaliatory strikes, killing two or three suspected militants and destroying three vehicles and equipment used to launch some of the rockets. Over the next 24 hours, CENTCOM forces strike at Iran-backed militants in the area, killing four fighters and destroying seven rocket launchers. Iran denied any connection to the targets hit. Sources: [NBC News](#), [CENTCOM](#), [CENTCOM](#), [Reuters](#)

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

- **August 15, 2022:** Two Iranian-made two KAS-04 drones attack the Al-Tanf Garrison in eastern Syria, where U.S. forces train Syrian forces to counter ISIS. No casualties are reported.
There are no claims of responsibility, but U.S. officials blame Iranian-backed militants in central Iraq. Officials tell media the attack originated from Iraq's Babil province in an area controlled by Iran-backed militia Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), which denies responsibility for the attack. Despite KH's denial, the model of drones used in the attack match drones previously displayed during KH military parades. KH also maintains tight control over the Jurf al-Sakhar complex in Babil, labeling it a closed military zone. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#)
- **July 26, 2022:** Four rockets are fired toward the Shaddadi Patrol Base in northwest Syria.
There are no casualties or damage reported. The base hosts the largest contingent of U.S. forces in Syria. Source: [Iran International](#)
- **July 24, 2022:** A rocket attack on the Hagia Sophia Greek Orthodox Church in Al-Suqaylabiyah in Hama kills at least two and wounds approximately 12 during the church's inauguration.
The government-run Syrian Arab News Agency attributes the attack to "terrorist organizations." The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says shelling or a drone attack by nearby rebel groups could be responsible. Sources: [Catholic News Agency](#), [Greek City Times](#)
- **July 12, 2022:** A U.S. drone strike kills senior ISIS leader Maher al-Agal in the village of Khaltan, about 35 miles northwest of Aleppo. The strike wounds a second unidentified ISIS leader who later succumbs to his wounds. According to the U.S. military, Agal worked "aggressively" on building ISIS's networks outside of Iraq and Syria and was one of the top five ISIS leaders in Iraq and Syria. Sources: [CENTCOM](#), [CNN](#), [Washington Post](#)
- **June 27, 2022:** U.S. forces launch an airstrike that kills Abu Hamzah al Yemeni, a senior Hurra al-Din leader (HaD), in Idlib, Syria. Yemeni was reportedly riding alone on a motorcycle at the time of the attack. Sources: [ABC News](#), [Al Jazeera](#)
- **June 20, 2022:** Militants attack a civilian bus on a highway between Raqqa and Homs in the Jabal al-Bishri region of Raqqa province, killing at least 11 soldiers and two civilians.
Three soldiers are wounded. ISIS claims responsibility. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#)
- **June 7, 2022 - November 1, 2022:** Allison Fluke-Ekren appears at the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia where she pleads guilty to charges of organizing and leading an all-female military battalion in Syria on behalf of ISIS.
Fluke-Ekren, a former resident of Kansas, traveled overseas around September 2011 until May 2019 where she engaged in terrorism-related activities in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. Fluke-Ekren ultimately served as the leader of Khatiba Nusaybah, an ISIS military battalion, where she trained around 100 women and girls on the use of AK-47 rifles, grenades, and suicide belts. In May 2019, after attempting to flee Syria, Fluke-Ekren surrendered to a local police station in Qabasin, Syria, where she was later taken to a detention facility in Jarabulus, Syria. She was transferred in custody to the Eastern District of Virginia on January 28, 2022 and was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment on November 1, 2022. Sources: [CNN](#), [U.S. Department of Justice](#)
- **May 30, 2022:** HTS reportedly fires at least five rounds of shells toward the Idlib de-escalation zone over a period of 24 hours.
Source: [UrduPoint News](#)
- **May 13, 2022:** Syrian rebels launch an anti-tank missile at an army bus in Aleppo province, killing at least 10 soldiers and wounding nine. Ahrar al-Sham posts a video on its Telegram channel of a rocket hitting a bus but does not claim responsibility. The video is not independently authenticated. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights accuses opposition fighters of carrying out the attack, but it is unclear whether HTS or another group was responsible. It is the highest death toll among pro-government forces from a rebel attack since the declaration of the March 2020 truce between Russia and Turkey. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#), [Agence France-Presse](#)
- **April 7, 2022:** Two rounds of indirect fire reportedly strike the Green Village U.S. military base in Deir Ezzor province, injuring four U.S. personnel.
According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, rockets were fired after midnight from an area west of the Euphrates River where Iran-backed militias exercise influence. Iranian-backed militias are concentrated in Deir Ezzor province, where they get supplied from Iraq through the al-Bukamal border crossing. While the attack is initially believed to be the result of indirect fire, U.S. officials announce a week later they believe it was caused by "the deliberate placement of explosive charges by an unidentified individual(s) at an ammunition holding area and shower facility." On June 6, the U.S. military launches an investigation into whether a U.S. servicemember set the explosives. Sources: [Reuters](#), [U.S. Central Command](#), [U.S. Central Command](#), [Washington Post](#)
- **April 6, 2022:** German investigators arrest a Syrian man, Raed E., on charges of war crimes in Berlin.
Raed E. allegedly tortured captives while he was a member of ISIS in Syria in 2014. Prosecutors along with working in ISIS prisons, Raed E. also manned checkpoints for the terrorist group. Source: [Associated Press](#)
- **March 24, 2022:** Members of YPG, the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), launch a mortar attack from Turkey's Kilis province into the Azaz district of northern Syria.
The attack kills one person and injures seven others. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **March 6, 2022:** ISIS militants ambush an army bus in the central Syrian desert.
The ambush kills 15 soldiers and injures 18 others. Source: [France 24](#)
- **March 4, 2022:** Militants attack a military vehicle east of Palmyra, central Syria.
The attack kills three regime soldiers. Source: [France 24](#)
- **February 3, 2022:** U.S. special forces launch a raid in Atmeh, northern Syria, targeting the house of ISIS leader Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla.
At the beginning of the operation, al-Mawla detonates a bomb that kills himself and his family members. According to U.S. President Joe Biden's aides, the operation was planned months in advance and included dozens of rehearsals. Sources: [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#)

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

-
- **January 20, 2022 - January 26, 2022:** On January 20, more than 100 ISIS militants launch an attack on Gweiran Prison in Hasakah, northeastern Syria, in an attempt to free detained ISIS fighters.

The prison, which is the largest of around a dozen facilities run by U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish forces, held over 3,500 inmates, including ISIS commanders and other dangerous jihadists. The militants were armed with heavy machine guns and explosive-laden vehicles. The attack began with one explosion and was closely followed by two more, with one bomb hitting a nearby petroleum depot that resulted in a fire that continued into the next day. Kurdish forces attempted to repel the extremists and the inmates, and according to Farhad Shami, a spokesman for the Kurdish forces, the attack was ISIS's biggest since its territorial defeat in Syria in 2019. Additionally, Shami states the attack was led by foreign insurgents, many of whom spoke in Iraqi dialect. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack and later releases a video showing militants holding prison kitchen staff captive. According to the New York Times, terrorists were using more than 600 boys detained in the complex as "human shields." Fighting continues through the 24th—with the United States launching airstrikes to retake control of Hasakah—and 300 ISIS insurgents surrender that day. Media sources claim at least 27 Kurdish fighters and 180 inmates are killed in the days long attack. According to a spokesman for the SDF, between 400 and 500 inmates originally escaped, with the majority being recaptured. Despite the surrender of 300 ISIS fighters, as of January 25, ISIS still controlled one-quarter of the prison and threatened to kill hostages and child detainees if the coalition continues to assault the prison. On January 26, the U.S.-backed Syrian forces announced they retook full control of the prison. As many as 200 U.S. soldiers fought alongside the Kurdish-led forces. Sources: [NBC News](#), [Wall Street Journal](#), [New York Times](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [NBC News](#), [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#)
 - **January 5, 2022:** Suspected Iranian-backed militias launch eight rounds of indirect fire at the Green Village base in eastern Syria, which hosts U.S. and international forces near the Iraqi border. Coalition forces return fire.

Minor damage but no fatalities are reported at the Green Village base. Source: [CNN](#)
 - **January 3, 2022:** According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIS militants launch an attack near oil installations on the edge of Deir Ezzor province, eastern Syria.

The militants kill ten soldiers in the attack. That same day, ISIS militants launch a rocket attack on a military transport bus traveling to Palmyra desert, southeast of Damascus, Syria. The attack kills between five and nine soldiers and injures 15 to 20 others. Sources: [Agence France-Presse](#), [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
 - **December 27, 2021:** ISIS militants ambush a car carrying Adham Dabash al-Abes, the leader of the SDF, in Dhiban, Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria. The militants kill al-Abes and one of his escorts as well as injure another escort. Source: [Middle East Monitor](#)
 - **December 6, 2021:** Alleged ISIS militants from Syria attack Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq in Ninevah province's Makhmour district.

Source: [Al-Monitor](#)
 - **September 28, 2021:** ISIS agents attempt to smuggle 500 kilograms of TNT into Iraq from Syria via car.

Iraqi security forces stop the car at the border and seize the explosives. Source: [National](#)
 - **September 17, 2021:** ISIS militants plant and detonate explosives on a major natural gas pipeline southeast of Damascus.

The gas pipeline feeds the Tishreen and Deir Ali power plants which generate half of Syria's power needs. The explosion affected several other smaller stations and caused blackouts in Damascus before power was restored half an hour later. Maintenance on the pipeline begins on September 18, but leads to severe energy rationing until the pipeline is restored. Source: [Voice of America](#)
 - **June 21, 2021:** The SDF arrest an alleged ISIS assassination squad in al-Hol camp, northern Syria.

The four male suspects were ISIS members who arrived to al-Hol in 2019. According to ISIS leaders outside of the camp and a confession from one of the suspects, the men have carried out two assassinations within the camp. Among the victims was a woman who worked for the SDF intelligence service. The following week, on June 29, ISIS members kill two Syrian women in al-Hol camp. Sources: [Rudaw](#), [Rudaw](#)
 - **April 19, 2021:** Russian air forces strike an ISIS training camp in Palmyra, Syria, killing approximately 200 fighters.

The strikes are in retaliation for an ISIS claim of killing two Russian soldiers in Syria. Source: [Enab Baladi](#)
 - **April 9, 2021:** An IED explodes at the home of the head of the local council in al-Harmousheya, Syria, causing damage but no casualties.

ISIS claims responsibility. Source: [Enab Baladi](#)
 - **April 8, 2021:** ISIS fighters fighter RPGs in the Syrian town of town of al-Shuhayl, causing material damage.

ISIS fighters then ambush SDF patrols in the area and detonate an explosive device, killing four. Source: [Enab Baladi](#)
 - **April 6, 2021:** ISIS fighters on motorbikes attack a police station in al-Saan, Syria, killing at least one civilian.

The militants take hostage eight soldiers and police officers, along with 11 civilians. Up to 46 others are captured but later released. The attack is reportedly ISIS's largest operation in at least three years. Source: [The Times](#)
 - **February 26, 2021:** Three people are killed when their motorcycle hits a landmine in Sallamiyyah in Hama.

Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **February 25, 2021:** An unidentified gunman on a motorcycle kills one in Jassim in Daraa.

In Idlib, unidentified gunmen shoot and wound a military commander from the Ahrar al-Sham-affiliated al-Maghaweer forces. Sources: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **February 24, 2021:** An IED explodes in a car in Afrin, wounding three.

Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **February 22, 2021:** Unidentified gunmen plant a bomb in a car carrying Iran-backed militiamen in Wadha village of Aleppo's Maskanah town, killing four and wounding two.

ISIS militants attack a checkpoint of the IRGC-backed al-Qura Guards militia in al-Asharah city in Deir Ezzor, killing at least four. ISIS also attacks various Syrian military outposts in the Syrian desert, killing at least eight regime-backed militiamen. Russia carries out airstrikes over ISIS position in response. Source: [Asharq al-Awsat](#)
-

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

-
- **February 15, 2021:** Unidentified gunmen block a car carrying several members of the Turkish-backed Al-Sham Corps outside of Hazano in Idlib.
The gunmen seize the members' weapons and personal items and then leave. Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **February 14, 2021:** An IED explodes in Al-Foua in Idlib, causing damage but no casualties.
Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **February 9, 2021:** Suspected ISIS fighters attack an SDF security checkpoint in the Abu Khashab desert, killing four.
Sources: [Al-Monitor](#), [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **February 8, 2021:** ISIS militants ambush a military convoy of Syrian army soldiers and IRGC-Quds Force members in Deir Ezzor, killing at least 26.
Eleven ISIS fighters are also killed.
-
- Media Line, [Agence France-Presse](#)
- **February 3, 2021:** An IED explodes in the city of Ras al-Ain in Al-Hasakah province, wounding one.
A second IED explodes immediately but causes no casualties. Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
 - **January 31, 2021:** ISIS kidnaps two local female officials from their homes in al-Dashisha.
The decapitated bodies of the two women are found hours later. Sources: [Voice of America](#), [Voice of America](#), [Twitter](#)
 - **January 30, 2021:** A car bomb explodes in Afrin, killing at least five and wounding 22.
The Turkish defense ministry blames the attack on the YPG. Source: [Al Jazeera](#)
 - **January 24, 2021:** Gunmen ambush a bus carrying government soldiers in Deir Ezzor, killing three and wounding 10.
ISIS claims responsibility. Source: [Defense Post](#)
 - **January 1, 2021 - January 16, 2021:** At least 12 people are murdered in the al-Hol refugee camp.
The United Nations warns of an "increasingly untenable" security situation in the camp. Source: [Agence France-Presse](#)
 - **January 18, 2021:** ISIS landmines detonate in Deir Ezzor province.
The explosion kills 10 Russian soldiers. Source: [Asharq Al-Awsat](#)
 - **January 17, 2021:** Suspected terrorists ambush a military outpost in the southern province of Quneitra.
The assailants detonate a bomb before attacking with guns. The attack kills three Syrian soldiers and wounds two others. Source: [Arab News](#)
 - **January 16, 2021:** Militants attack a Turkish military outpost in Idlib, wounding three.
The Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron claims responsibility. Source: [Voice of America](#)
 - **January 12, 2021:** Unidentified gunmen kill a tribal leader in Deir Ezzor's Hwaij Dhiban village.
ISIS is suspected of responsibility. Source: [Al-Monitor](#)
 - **January 4, 2021:** A bomb detonates in Tal Abyad province.
The attack kills two and wounds an unreported number of others. It is suspected that the YPG carried out the attack. That same day, unidentified assailants ambush a bus in Hama governorate. The attack kills nine and injures four. In Salamiyah, unidentified terrorists attack a bus, killing at least six. Sources: [Anadolu Agency](#), [Mehr News Agency](#), [Sputnik News](#)
 - **January 1, 2021:** HaD militants detonate a car bomb near a Russian military base in Tal al-Saman, Raqqa.
The number of casualties was not reported. Source: [Arab News](#)
 - **December 31, 2020:** Explosions target three buses carrying regime soldiers in Deir Ezzor, killing at least 28 and injuring at least 13 others.
Some reports claim as many as 37 are killed. It is suspected that ISIS carried out the attack. Sources: [BBC News](#), [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), [Mehr News Agency](#)
 - **December 30, 2020:** Suspected ISIS militants ambush three buses in southern Syria.
According to the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIS militants planted explosives on the road between central Homs and Deir Ezzor provinces, and then opened fire at the buses. The attacks kill at least 30, all of which were soldiers returning home for the holidays.
Source: [Associated Press](#)
 - **December 29, 2020:** A bomb detonates in Soran district, Azaz.
The explosion, which targeted a minibus, kills two. No group claims responsibility for the attack, although the YPG is suspected. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
 - **December 23, 2020:** Turkish security forces raid a PKK cell in Jarablus, northern Syria.
The apprehended suspects give away information on a tractor filled with 336 pounds of explosives, confess to participating in multiple attacks in the area, and admit to the planning of upcoming attacks. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
 - **December 10, 2020:** A car bomb detonates at one of the Syrian National Army's (SNA) checkpoints in Ras al-Ain.
The attack kills two Turkish gendarmerie forces and two local forces while also injuring eight others. The attack was reportedly carried out by the YPG. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
 - **November 30, 2020:** An explosive-laden motorcycle detonates in Jarablus, northern Syria.
The attack injures seven. No group claims responsibility for the attack, but the YPG has reportedly carried out similar attacks in area. Source: [Middle East Monitor](#)
 - **November 24, 2020:** An explosive-laden vehicle detonates in al-Bab, northern Syria.
The attack kills five and wounds at least 18 others. Local security forces suspect the YPG to be behind the attack. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
 - **November 2, 2020:** Suspected YPG militants detonate a bomb at a marketplace in Ras al-Ain, northern Syria.
The attack injures four. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
 - **October 6, 2020:** Unidentified assailants detonate an explosives-laden truck in Aleppo province.
-

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

The attack kills 14. Source: [TRT World](#)

- **September 29, 2020:** French police arrest 29 people in a nationwide sting operation targeting a network of terror financing for jihadists in Syria.
Two French jihadists, Mesut S. and Walid F., are believed to be the masterminds of the network—which mostly operated through the purchasing of cryptocurrency coupons which was then given to jihadists in Syria and then credited to bitcoin accounts—are believed to be operating out of Syria. The two men, who are both the target of an international arrest warrant, are suspected members of HTS. Source: [France 24](#)
- **September 24, 2020:** YPG militants detonate an explosive-laden car in Tal Halaf, northern Syria.
The attack kills two and wounds 12 others. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **September 14, 2020:** Masked assailants ambush a Turkish Red Crescent vehicle between the towns of al-Rai and al-Bab and open fire on three personnel on board.
The attack kills one and injures another. That same day, an explosive-laden vehicle detonates in Afrin. The attack kills nine and injures at least 43. The Turkish Defense Ministry suspects the YPG to be behind the Afrin attack. Sources: [Daily Sabah](#), [Daily Sabah](#)
- **September 12, 2020:** Two bombs detonate near the town post office in Ras al-Ain, northern Syria.
The attacks injure at least 21. The YPG is suspected of carrying out the attack. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **August 24, 2020:** An explosion occurs in Damascus, targeting a gas pipeline.
The explosion leads to a nationwide blackout. According to Ambassador James Jeffrey, the U.S. special representative for Syria engagement, ISIS was allegedly behind the attack. Sources: [Defense Post](#), [Reuters](#)
- **August 13, 2020:** HTS detains American journalist Bilal Abdul Kareem in Atmeh, northwest Syria.
For the past eight years, Kareem has reported from Syria's north, where HTS has a shrinking presence. According to media sources, Kareem was arrested due to an interview he published on the case of Tauqir Sharif—an aid worker who was detained by HTS in June 2020—which insinuated the group tortured and arbitrarily arrested Sharif. Sources: [Defense Post](#), [Committee to Protect Journalists](#)
- **July 26, 2020:** A bomb explodes outside a vegetable market in Ras al-Ain, along the border with Turkey.
The attack kills eight. It is suspected that the YPG was behind the attack. That same day, two bombs explode simultaneously in Afrin and Idlib. The attack kills two and injures at least 16. No group claims responsibility for the attack, but it is suspected the YPG coordinated the attacks. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **July 19, 2020:** YPG assailants detonate a bomb attached to a Syrian National Army vehicle in Afrin.
The attack injures 13. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **July 19, 2020:** A car bomb detonates in Bab Al-Salameh, northwestern Syria.
The attack kills at least five and injures at least 60 others. No group claims responsibility for the attack. Source: [Middle East Monitor](#)
- **July 4, 2020:** A roadside bomb detonates in Afrin.
The attack, which security sources claim was carried out by the YPG, kills one and injures two others. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **July 3, 2020:** A car bomb detonates in Afrin, northern Syria.
The attack kills a police officer and injures two civilians. No group claims responsibility for the attack. Source: [Middle East Monitor](#)
- **June 24, 2020:** A bomb-laden motorbike detonates in Afrin, the attack kills two and injures five others.
No group claims responsibility for the attack, but security sources believe the YPG to have planted the bomb. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **June 22, 2020 - June 27, 2020:** Violent clashes erupt between HTS and the So Be Steadfast collective of jihadist groups, leaving more than 100 dead and an unknown number of wounded.
Al-Qaeda issues a statement condemning HTS for targeting fellow mujahideen and calling on HTS to remember the necessity of unity among the mujahideen. Sources: [Twitter](#), [Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog](#), [Jihadica](#)
- **May 26, 2020:** The United States, aided by Iraq's intelligence and counterterrorism services, launches an airstrike in Deir Ezzor province, eastern Syria.
The strike kills ISIS senior leader, Moataz Al-Jabouri—also known as Hajji Tayseer—who Iraq's intelligence agency alleges was also known as the “governor of Iraq and head of ISIS's foreign operations.” Al-Jabouri oversaw ISIS's state-building efforts and was responsible for planning and coordinating foreign operations. Source: [National](#)
- **May 21, 2020:** Iraq's National Intelligence Service transfers Abdul Nasser Qardash, a senior ISIS leader, from Syria, to Iraqi custody.
It is reported that Qardash was allegedly captured by U.S. or Kurdish forces in Syria last year. Qardash was allegedly one of the potential successors to former ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Qardash, who is known within the insurgency as Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Qurashi, served as the head of one of ISIS's commissions. Sources: [Arab News](#), [Middle East Monitor](#)
- **May 21, 2020:** An armed male drives to the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, Texas, where he opens fire at a security forces member, proceeds to crash his vehicle into a barrier, and continues to open fire at naval security forces.
The victim suffers non-life-threatening injuries. The assailant, Syrian-born Adam Alsahli, is then shot and killed by naval security forces. Preliminary investigations conclude Alsahli was likely a supporter of Salfi-jihadist ideology and that his social media accounts expressed support for ISIS and al-Qaeda. Sources: [CNN](#), [Daily Mail](#)
- **May 18, 2020:** ISIS gunmen execute 11 people along a desert highway between Deir Ezzor and Damascus in Syria.
All but one of the victims are pro-regime fighters. Source: [New Age](#)
- **May 10, 2020:** Hurras al-Din militants ambush government forces in the Ghab plain area, outside of Idlib.
The attack kills 21 soldiers. Source: [Times of Israel](#)
- **May 4, 2020:** According to Deutsche Welle, it is reported that since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, ISIS has killed over 32 Syrian soldiers and damaged two oil fields.

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

It is unreported where and when exactly these attacks took place. Source: [Deutsche Welle](#)

- **May 4, 2020:** Unidentified gunmen abduct and kill nine policemen in Daraa province, southern Syria. The attack was unusual as government buildings have rarely been attacked throughout the Syrian war. No group claims responsibility. Source: [Al Jazeera](#)
- **April 28, 2020:** A fuel tanker rigged with a hand grenade explodes at a crowded marketplace in Afrin. The attack kills at least 40 people. Turkey's Defense Ministry alleges that the YPG is responsible for the attack. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **April 10, 2020:** ISIS launches an attack in Homs, central Syria. ISIS manages to take control of some neighborhoods in Al-Sukhna. The attack kills at least 27 pro-government fighters. Source: [Middle East Eye](#)
- **March 19, 2020:** Unidentified assailants launch a rocket attack in Idlib. The attack kills two Turkish soldiers. Turkey's Defense Ministry claims the attack was carried out by "radical groups." Source: [U.S. News](#)
- **March 12, 2020:** The YPG detonates a car bomb at a security checkpoint in Ras al-Ayn, northern Syria. The attack kills four and wounds 10 others. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **February 24, 2020:** Turkish security forces arrest five YPG terrorists in Tal Abyad, northern Syria. It is suspected that the militants were plotting a terror attack. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **February 16, 2020:** A bomb-laden truck detonates in Tal Abyad district. The attack kills four and wounds five others. It is suspected that the YPG is responsible for the attack. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **February 4, 2020:** YPG militants launch a missile attack in Afrin, northwestern Syria. The missiles targeted two schools and a mosque, killing one and wounding seven others. Sources: [Anadolu Agency](#), [Daily Sabah](#)
- **January 27, 2020:** Turkish security forces arrest five YPG terrorists in Tal Abyad, northern Syria. The suspects were allegedly plotting terrorist attacks as during the bust, weapons, digital materials, and documents relating to the terror group were recovered. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **January 22, 2020 - January 23, 2020:** Militants from the Islamic Party of Turkistan and Tahrir al-Sham ambush government forces in Idlib over a period of two days. Syrian state media does not immediately release details of the offensive, but reports that the attacks included car bombs and heavy gunfire. The attacks kill up to 40 soldiers. The fighters seize two Idlib settlements, which forces the Syrian army to abandon some of their positions in the de-escalation zone. However, Syrian Armed forces manage to repel the insurgents. Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#), [Arab News](#)
- **January 14, 2020:** ISIS militants ambush a border checkpoint near Al-Waleed port. The attack wounds four members of the Border Guard Forces command. Source: [Kurdistan 24](#)
- **January 12, 2020:** Unidentified militants carry out a mortar attack in Aleppo. The attack kills two and injures three others. Source: [MENAFN](#)
- **January 9, 2020:** A car bomb detonates near a roadside security checkpoint in northeast Syria, near the Euphrates River. The attack kills four. It is suspected that the YPG is responsible for the explosion. Source: [Reuters](#)
- **January 7, 2020:** Turkish police arrest seven people in western Turkey suspected of being ISIS members. Among the suspects are five Syrian nationals. Police sources claim the "suspects were in contact with people in conflict zones and were plotting terrorist attacks." Source: [Kurdistan 24](#)
- **January 4, 2020:** The U.S.-led military coalition fighting ISIS announces that it will temporarily halt its counter-ISIS missions to focus on protecting Iraqi bases from Iranian-backed militias. Following the death of IRGC-QF leader Qasem Soleimani on January 2, 2020 by a U.S. drone strike, Major General Hossein Dehghan—the military adviser to Iran's Supreme leader—stated that Tehran's response will "for sure be military." Dehghan further claimed that Iran would retaliate directly against U.S. "military sites." Sources: [New York Times](#), [CNN](#)
- **December 25, 2019:** YPG militants carry out a bomb attack in Jarabulus, northern Syria. The attack injures 14. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **December 19, 2019:** The YPG detonates a car bomb in Turkish controlled, Tal Halaf. The attack kills five and injures an unconfirmed number of others. Source: [The New Arab](#)
- **December 18, 2019:** The YPG detonates a car bomb in Tel Abu Shayh, northern Syria. The attack kills one person and injures 26 others. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **December 2, 2019:** Regime forces and armed groups engage in heavy clashes on the edge of Idlib, Syria's last opposition bastion. Over 51 regime fighters are killed in the attack and 31 jihadists are also killed. The attack is the most deadly since a Russia-brokered ceasefire went into effect in late August of 2019. Source: [Telegraph](#)
- **November 26, 2019:** A car bomb detonates in Tel Halaf. The explosion kills 17 and wounds another 20. It is suspected that the YPG is responsible for the attack. Source: [Al Jazeera](#)
- **November 25, 2019:** U.S. troops resume large-scale counterterrorism missions against ISIS in northern Syria, nearly two months after the Trump administration's abrupt order to withdraw American troops opened the way for a bloody Turkish cross-border offensive. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **November 23, 2019:** YPG militants detonate a car bomb in Tal Abyad. At least three people are killed and another 20 are injured. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **November 10, 2019:** YPG militants detonate a car bomb in Tal Abyad. The attack kills eight and wounds another 20. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
- **November 2, 2019:** YPG militants detonate a bomb-laden vehicle and attack a market in Tal Abyad.

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

-
- At least 13 civilians are killed and another 20 are injured. Source: [Daily Sabah](#)
- **October 31, 2019:** An explosive-laden vehicle detonates in a grocery market at Afrin city center. The attack kills eight and wounds another 14. Although no group claims responsibility for the attack, it is suspected that the YPG terror group uses car bombs to attack civilians. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
 - **October 28, 2019:** A car bomb detonates in Suluk town. The attack kills one civilian and wounds seven others. The same day, a mine explodes in Cobaney town. The explosion kills one and wounds three others. The PKK claims responsibility for both attacks. Source: [Anadolu Agency](#)
 - **October 26, 2019 - October 31, 2019:** On October 26, a team of American Special Operations troops launch an assault on a militant compound sheltering ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in northwest Syria. During the raid, Baghdadi detonates an explosives vest, killing himself and three of his children. A day later, U.S. President Trump confirms Baghdadi's death. Also on the 26th, U.S. forces launched an airstrike in northeast Syria. The strike targets and kills Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, ISIS's spokesman and long-considered successor to Baghdadi. On October 31, Al Nurah Agency confirms that ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as spokesman Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, are dead. Sources: [New York Times](#), [Washington Post](#), [Wall Street Journal](#)
 - **October 27, 2019:** The PKK launch an attack on Turkish forces in Tel Abyad, Syria. A Turkish soldier is killed and five others are wounded. Source: [Xinhua](#)
 - **October 16, 2019:** YPG militants open fire and launch missiles on residential areas in Jarabulus, northern Syria. The attack kills six and wounds another 15. That same day, YPG militants attack Azaz district, firing artillery shells. The attack wounds two civilians. Source: [Hurriyet Daily News](#)
 - **October 11, 2019:** A car bomb explodes in the predominantly Kurdish city of Qamishli, northern Syria. The bombing kills three and injures nine. It is suspected that ISIS is responsible for the attack. Sources: [Kurdistan 24](#), [Long War Journal](#)
 - **September 17, 2019:** A missile attack by an unidentified aircraft hits a weapons depot belonging to the PMF in Al Bukamal, in the eastern Syrian province of Deir Az Zor. Conflicting reports suggest that there is anywhere from zero to 10 casualties. No group claims responsibility for the attack. Source: [Al Jazeera](#)
 - **August 19, 2019:** American and Iraqi military intelligence officers report that five months after ousting ISIS from Syria, the jihadist group has not only started to conduct guerilla attacks throughout Iraq and Syria, but has also been reestablishing its financial networks and actively recruiting at allied-run tent camps. Source: [New York Times](#)
 - **July 15, 2019:** Unidentified militants launch rockets onto Aleppo. The attack kills six and wounds eight others. It is suspected that HTS is behind the attack. Source: [Japan Times](#)
 - **July 11, 2019:** A car bomb detonates outside of a Christian church in Qamishli, Syria. At least 11 people are injured in the attack. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack despite having lost its last stronghold of Baghuz in March. Source: [Defense Post](#)
 - **July 10, 2019 - July 12, 2019:** Violent clashes erupt between regime troops and jihad-dominated forces in Idlib. Violence is centered in Idlib. More than 100 people are killed in three days. Despite a truce, Russian and regime aircraft increase their aerial bombardments of the region which has been occupied by HTS, as well as other rebel and jihadist factions. Source: [France 24](#)
 - **March 23, 2019:** The SDF announces that ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, bringing an end to the so-called caliphate declared in 2014. Source: [CNN](#)
 - The U.S.-backed SDF launch an assault on ISIS's last territorial hold in Baghuz, Syria, on March 10. At least 20 suicide bombers attack SDF positions during the fighting. On March 12, hundreds of ISIS fighters and their families reportedly surrender to rebel forces. The SDF declare that the battle to retake Baghuz is as "good as over." The SDF claim to have killed 112 ISIS fighters by March 13. Sources: [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Guardian](#), [Reuters](#), [Voice of America](#)
 - **January 16, 2019:** ISIS militants detonate a bomb in downtown Manbij. The explosion kills at least 19, four of which are U.S. service members. An unconfirmed number are wounded, including three U.S. service members. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)
 - - : On December 19, U.S. President Donald Trump tweets that ISIS has been defeated in Syria and the United States will soon remove its forces from the country. German, French, and British officials respond that ISIS has been pushed back in Syria but not been defeated. On January 16, an explosion in the U.S.-patrolled town of Manbij kills at least 16, including four U.S. citizens. ISIS claims responsibility. Afterward, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence repeats that ISIS "has been defeated." Sources: [Deutsche Welle](#), [Associated Press](#)
 - **July 25, 2018:** ISIS militants launch a series of coordinated suicide bombings in Sweida province, southern Syria. The attacks kill more than 200 people. Source: [New York Times](#)
 - In July 2018, ISIS launches a new wave of attacks against HTS and opposition forces in Greater Idlib Province after a series of HTS raids against ISIS in June 2018. On July 6, ISIS claims responsibility for an attack against an HTS checkpoint near Saraqib and for an IED attack against unidentified opposition fighters west of Aleppo City, its first official attack claims in Idlib Province since May 2017. ISIS claims responsibility for three other attacks against HTS and opposition forces from July 6-9. ISIS was likely also responsible for an unclaimed VBIED attack near the Al-Ahrar Mosque in the Muhandisin District of Idlib City on July 6. Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#)
 - - : On May 1, the U.S.-led coalition begins Operation Roundup to eliminate ISIS's remaining presence in Iraq and Syria. In June, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launch a ground offensive against ISIS targets in coordination with Coalition and Iraqi airstrikes. By December 2018, ISIS retains only a small foothold in the Syrian town of Baghuz along the Syrian-Iraqi border. Sources: [New York Times](#),
-

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

U.S. Central Command, U.S. Central Command

- **April 2, 2018:** Approximately 400 ISIS fighters attack Iranian-backed militias in the Syrian town of Boukamal, killing 11 pro-government fighters. Five ISIS militants are also killed. Source: [Chicago Tribune](#)
- - : On March 12, ISIS fighters attack the rebel-held al-Qadam neighborhood of southern Damascus. ISIS reportedly takes control of 25 percent of Qadam. On March 13, the Syrian government evacuates approximately 300 rebel fighters from Damascus to the Idlib province. The rebels turn their remaining territory over to the Syrian government, which takes control of approximately 70 percent of Qadam. ISIS attacks rebels during the evacuation. On March 14, ISIS forces attack Syrian army positions and gain ground in southern Damascus after several days of fighting. At least 62 Syrian army soldiers are killed. The Syrian army sends thousands of reinforcements to southern Damascus in April to force ISIS from Qadam and surrounding areas, including the nearby Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp, which ISIS had occupied since 2015. On May 18, the Syrian government reportedly reaches a truce with the militants. On May 19, the government begins evacuating ISIS fighters in buses under a reported deal for the government to retake full control of southern Damascus, though Syria denies any deal exists. Sources: [Al Masdar News](#), [Al Masdar News](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#), [Al Arabiya](#), [Al Masdar News](#)
- **April 18, 2018:** ISIS attacks pro-Assad regime soldiers in Mayadin, central Syria. The ambush kills at least eight. Source: [Institute for the Study of War](#)
- **January 5, 2018:** ISIS renews its offensive against Syrian rebel group HTS, capturing at least two villages in south-eastern Idlib, Syria. Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
- **December 12, 2017:** ISIS forces launch a new offensive against Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces in Deir Ezzor, Syria. ISIS media claims to capture up to eight villages and kill as many as 41 pro-regime fighters. Source: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#)
- - : The Syrian army relives Deir al-Zor and re-extends state control at the Euphrates. In October, the SDF drives ISIS from Raqqa. Source: [Reuters](#)
- **February 25, 2017:** Jabhat Fateh al-Sham militants conduct suicide attacks on two security installations in Syria's government-held city of Homs. The attack kills 50 and injures another 24. Source: [Chatham House](#)
- **October 3, 2016:** ISIS suicide bombers target a Kurdish wedding party in northeast Syria, killing at least 36 people. Source: [CNN](#)
- **September 16, 2016:** A U.S. airstrike targets and kills Wael Adel Salman, a.k.a. Abu Muhammad al-Furqan, ISIS's chief spokesman. Salman was the ISIS minister of information, responsible for overseeing the production of terrorist propaganda videos showing torture and executions. Source: [CNN](#)
- **August 30, 2016:** Coalition forces conduct an airstrike in al Bab, Syria. The missiles target and kill ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani. Source: [U.S. Department of Defense](#)
- The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG, take Manbij. Alarmed by the Kurdish advances near its own frontier, Turkey launches an offensive into Syria against both ISIS and the YPG. Enmity between Turkey and the YPG will continue to complicate operations against ISIS in years to come. Source: [Reuters](#)
- **July 27, 2016:** A bombing carried out by ISIS militants kills 44 in the Syrian Kurdish-controlled city of Qamishli. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **April 7, 2016:** ISIS militants kidnap over 300 cement workers from a cement plant near Damascus, Syria. Source: [CNN](#)
- **April 4, 2016:** Airstrikes perpetrated by either Syrian or Russian forces target and kill 20 al-Nusra Front militants, including Abu Firas, the media spokesman for the insurgent group. Source: [Time](#)
- **February 21, 2016:** Multiple attacks in Homs and southern Damascus kill at least 122 and injure scores, according to Syria's state-run SANA news agency. ISIS claims responsibility for the attacks. Source: [CNN](#)
- **September 15, 2015:** Two car bomb attacks kill more than 20 and injure more than 100 others in Syria's northeastern Kurdish city of Hasakah. The local Kurdish forces blame the attack on ISIS. Source: [ARA News](#)
- **August 24, 2015:** ISIS destroys the nearly 2,000-year-old Baalshamin temple in Palmyra. UNESCO calls the destruction of the temple a war crime. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **August 14, 2015:** U.S. officials confirm suspicions that ISIS used a mustard agent on its enemies in Syria. Source: [CNN](#)
- **August 7, 2015:** ISIS captures and holds dozens of Christians in Syria's Homs province. Source: [Wall Street Journal](#)
- **July 4, 2015:** ISIS circulates a video showing insurgents executing 25 Syrian government soldiers in the ancient amphitheater in the city of Palmyra. Sources: [CNN](#), [Al Arabiya](#)
- **June 24, 2015:** ISIS militants destroy two Muslim holy sites in Palmyra—a 500-year-old shrine and a tomb where a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed's cousin was reportedly buried. Source: [CNN](#)
- **May 25, 2015:** ISIS wrests control of the ancient Roman city of Palmyra, in central Syria, from the Syrian army.

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ISIS executed more than 200 Syrians, civilian and military, during the offensive.
Source: [CNN](#)

- **May 21, 2015:** ISIS takes control of Palmyra, an ancient Syrian city that is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, it was the last Syria-Iraq border crossing under control of Syrian troops. Sources: [CNN](#), [BBC News](#), [New York Times](#)
- **February 26, 2015:** In the culmination of a multi-day offensive on Assyrian Christian villages in northeastern Syria, ISIS militants kidnap further hostages, bringing the total number of Assyrian Christian hostages to 262.
Source: [CNN](#)
- **February 5, 2015:** Jordanian fighter jets carry out airstrikes over Syria, reportedly hitting ISIS training centers as well as arms and ammunition depots in Raqqa.
The next day, ISIS claims that the airstrikes killed American hostage Kayla Jean Mueller. ISIS posts a picture of a collapsed building and the terror group claims Mueller is buried in the rubble. Source: [CNN](#)
- **December 17, 2014:** A mass grave containing over 230 bodies is discovered in eastern Syria.
The dead are believed to have belonged to al-Sheitaat, a Sunni tribe against ISIS. The deaths bring the number of al-Sheitaats killed by ISIS over 900. Source: [International Business Times](#)
- **December 15, 2014:** ISIS militants capture two key army bases in the northwestern province of Idlib, Syria.
The two bases, Wadi Deif and Hamidiyeh, are significant losses for the Syrian army, who had them under its control for more than two years. The battle results in dozens of casualties on each side. Source: [Al Arabiya](#)
- **November 2, 2014:** Leaders from ISIS and its jihadist rival, al-Nusra Front, meet in Atareb to discuss joining forces.
No formal merger or cooperation between the groups is established, but ISIS reportedly sends fighters to help al-Nusra Front's assault on Haraqat Hazm, a Western-backed moderate rebel group. Source: [Military Times](#)
- **September 19, 2014 - September 22, 2014:** ISIS advances on the Syrian border town of Kobani and thousands of refugees flee into Turkey.
Source: [Brookings Institution](#)
- **September 13, 2014:** ISIS posts a video showing the beheading of British aid worker David Haines.
Source: [CNN](#)
- **September 2, 2014:** ISIS releases video of the beheading of American journalist Steven Sotloff.
Source: [New York Times](#)
- **August 24, 2014:** ISIS militants seize Taqba airbase in Raqqa, Syria.
ISIS now controls the entire Raqqa province. Source: [Guardian](#)
- **August 19, 2014:** ISIS posts a YouTube video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley.
Source: [Brookings Institution](#)
- **August 1, 2014 - August 5, 2014:** ISIS militants crucify, behead, and shoot over 700 members of the Shaitat tribe in eastern Syria, in what is one of ISIS's bloodiest advances.
Source: [Washington Post](#)
- ISIS takes control of Syria's largest oilfield and seizes a gas field in the Homs Province, storming the facility and killing dozens of workers. Militants conquer a 90-mile stretch of Syrian towns, from Deir Ezzor to the Iraq border. In Mosul, they blow up Jonah's tomb, a holy site dating back to the 8th century B.C. Sources: [CNN](#), [CNN](#)
- **July 17, 2014:** ISIS storms the Shaer gas field in Palmyra region and kills 270 people.
Source: [CNN](#)
- **June 21, 2014 - June 29, 2014:** ISIS takes control of Al-Qaim, a town on the border with Syria, as well as three other Iraqi towns.
ISIS announces the establishment of a caliphate and rebrands itself as the "Islamic State." They announce the erasure of all state borders and claim Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the self-declared authority over the world's estimated 1.5 billion Muslims. Sources: [CNN](#), [CNN](#)
- American citizen Moner Mohammad Abusalha, who goes by the *nom de guerre* Abu Huraira al-Amriki, reportedly carries out a suicide truck bombing on a mountaintop restaurant in Syria that had been a gathering spot for Syrian soldiers.
Also in May, French citizen Mehdi Nemmouche, who reportedly fought in Syria with ISIS, shoots and kills three people at a Jewish museum in Brussels. The attack is the first instance of a European Islamist fighter returning home from the conflict in Syria to commit acts of violence.
Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#)
- ISIS kidnaps more than 140 Kurdish schoolboys in Syria, forcing them to take lessons in radical Islamic theology.
Sources: [CNN](#), [The Times](#)
- ISIS exploits the power vacuum created when rebels wrested parts of the country's north and east from the Assad government.
ISIS pushes out moderate rebels and easily seizes strategic territory. The group pushes into the northeastern Syrian city of Raqqa and consolidates control by the end of January, declaring it the capital of the ISIS emirate. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **February 3, 2014:** Al-Qaeda's central leadership officially cut ties with ISIS.
Rifts between al-Qaeda and ISIS emerged last year when al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, ordered ISIS's withdrawal from Syria and to leave the insurgency there to be run by the official al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusra Front. ISIS refuses and its haste to seize resources like oil fields and border crossings brings it into conflict with other rebels, and causes widespread clashes between the sides leaving thousands dead across northern and eastern Syria. Source: [New York Times](#)
- ISIS is accused of carrying out mass executions against civilians, prisoners, and other rebel fighters in Aleppo, Idlib, and Raqqa.
According to reports, bodies were found handcuffed and blindfolded at a children's hospital used as a base by ISIS. In early January, after ISIS had asserted control over Aleppo for months, opposing Syrian rebel factions drive the group from its headquarters in the city. However, by mid-

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

January, ISIS has reclaimed much of its territory. On January 23, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri releases an audio statement pleading with jihadist factions to stop fighting each other, and to set up an Islamic arbitration court. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that during two weeks of intense fighting between rebel groups and ISIS, approximately 1,400 people were killed. After taking control of Syria's oil and gas resources, reports surface in late January that al-Nusra Front and ISIS are selling those resources back to the Assad regime. According to one intelligence source, "The regime is paying al-Nusra to protect oil and gas pipelines under al-Nusra's control in the north and east of the country..." Sources: [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Telegraph](#)

- - : ISIS and a rebel brigade called Northern Storm battle for control of Azaz, a Syrian town strategically located along the Turkish border. In late September, ISIS wrestles control of Azaz from Northern Storm. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **September 12, 2013:** Ayman al-Zawahiri releases a message the day after the 12th anniversary of the September 11 attacks. He calls on his followers to carry out "a few disparate attacks" against the American homeland and to "bleed America economically." Part of his message refers to the war in Syria, where he tells Islamist fighters not to cooperate with secular rebel forces. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **August 4, 2013:** Fighters from several different rebel groups attack army positions in the Sheikh Nabhan area of the Latakia countryside. The rebels then entered the Alawite villages of Barouda, Nbeiteh, al-Hamboushieh, Blouta, Abu Makkeh, Beyt Shakouhi, Aramo, Bremseh, Esterbeh, Obeen, and Kharata. Over 190 civilians are killed in the attacks. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **July 22, 2013 - July 23, 2013:** Rebels ambush and seize the northern town of Khan al-Assal. Unconfirmed reports suggest the ambush kills 123 regime forces. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **June 12, 2013:** Rebels attack Hatla village, in eastern Syria. The attack kills dozens of Shia Muslim residents, most of them pro-government fighters. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **June 9, 2013:** Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri issues a letter nullifying the merger between al-Nusra Front and ISI, notifying each side where they are to operate. "The seat of the Islamic State in Iraq is in Iraq. The seat of Jabhat al-Nusra for the people of al-Sham, is in Syria." Source: [Al Jazeera](#)
- - : ISIS escalates attacks against members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in an apparent attempt to take out the FSA's leadership. ISIS reportedly kills "prominent" FSA commander Kamal Hamami for planning operations without consulting it. The organization also beheads two FSA soldiers and leaves their heads next to a garbage can. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **April 11, 2013:** Baghdadi moves from Iraq to Syria, and claims that ISI merges with al-Nusra Front in Syria to become "The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria." However, al-Nusra Front leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani rejects the alliance and declares allegiance to al-Qaeda. Sources: [Wilson Center](#), [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#)
- **February 11, 2013:** Syrian rebels, including battalions from al-Nusra Front, take control of the Tabqa Dam, Syria's largest hydroelectric dam, in Raqqa Province. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **January 15, 2013:** Unidentified militants attack Haswiya village. The attack kills over 100 people. The Syrian government claims that al-Nusra Front is responsible for the ambush, supposedly in retaliation against the villagers for supporting the government. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **October 9, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for multiple suicide attacks against an air force intelligence branch in Harasta, a suburb of Damascus. The group claims that one suicide bomber detonated a vehicle packed with nine tons of explosives, while another attacker drove an ambulance loaded with explosives to the scene 25 minutes later. Source: [New York Times](#)
- **September 8, 2012:** A suicide bomber from al-Nusra Front attacks al-Haya hospital in Aleppo. The group claims that it killed more than 200 military officers and soldiers, while the Syrian government reports that 27 soldiers died and 64 were wounded. Source: [Long War Journal](#)
- Merges a number of rebel groups under an umbrella called the "Shields of the Revolution," though it denies formal ties to the Shields. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)
- Brotherhood spokesman Mulham Droubi announces the formation of "armed battalions within Syria whose mission is self-defense and security protection of the wronged." Brotherhood Comptroller General Riad al-Shaqfeh later denies this claim. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)
- **July 19, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for kidnapping and executing Syrian television presenter Mohamed al-Saeed. The group warned supporters of the Syrian regime that "...the swords of the mujahideen will cut off their heads and purify the Levant from their obscenity." On the same date, al-Nusra Front claims that it conducted a suicide bombing on a security post in Ma'arat al-Nu'man, killing 60 Syrian soldiers. Sources: [Huffington Post](#), [Defend Democracy](#)
- **July 12, 2012:** Armed terrorist groups ambush Tremseh, a village in Hama province. The ambush was suspected to target army defectors and activists. Due to conflicting reports, the ambush kills anywhere from 39-220 people. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **June 1, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front carries out multiple attacks on Syrian military targets. This is in retaliation for the Syrian government's massacre in Houla. The attacks include a suicide attack on the al Nayrab Camp in Idlib, as well as ambush and IED attacks on military units responding to the attack at al Nayrab. Source: [Long War Journal](#)
- **April 24, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for a suicide bombing attack on the Iranian Cultural Consulate in Damascus. According to the group, one of its security battalions attached explosives to a Syrian army vehicle and detonated them when it arrived at the Consulate. Source: [Chicago Tribune](#)
- **March 12, 2012:** Armed militants attack the Karm el-Zeytoun neighborhood of Homs.

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

The attack kills over 45 people. Syrian State news agencies blame “armed terrorist gangs” for the killings, saying the militants kidnapped residents, killed them and then filmed the bodies to discredit Syrian forces. Source: [BBC News](#)

- **February 10, 2012:** Several car bombs explode minutes apart from each other at a military security headquarters and police compound in Aleppo, Syria, killing 28 people and wounding more than 200. Al-Nusra Front claims responsibility for the attack. Sources: [New York Times](#), [Al Arabiya](#)
- **January 24, 2012:** Al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, officially announces its formation with a video statement, claiming it is “bringing the law of Allah back to His land.” The group carries out numerous attacks against diplomatic, military, and civilian targets inside Syria. Sources: [Quilliam Foundation](#), [Chicago Tribune](#), [New York Times](#)
- **January 6, 2012:** The Syrian government reported that a suicide bomber detonated himself in the Midan neighborhood in Damascus, killing 26 and wounding dozens. Again, the opposition accused the Syrian government of perpetrating the attacks to bolster its narrative that al-Qaeda was gaining influence among the opposition. Al-Nusra Front eventually claimed responsibility for the attack. Sources: [New York Times](#), [Al Arabiya](#)
- Former members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Fighting Vanguard, Luay al-Zubi and Abu Basir al-Tartusi, return to their hometowns in Syria, allegedly in order to revive the Vanguard’s old militant networks. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)
- **December 23, 2011:** Two car bombs explode near Syria’s intelligence agencies in Damascus. The explosions kill at least 44 people. Al-Qaeda is suspected to be responsible for the attack. Source: [New York Times](#)
- The Brotherhood begins to provide funds and arms to Syrian rebels and revolutionaries seeking to oppose the Assad regime, using donations from individual members and from the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Some of these weapons fall into the hands of extremists. Source: [Washington Post](#)
- After Syria’s crisis begins, Islamic State in Iraq’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sends operatives to set up a Syrian subsidiary. Source: [Reuters](#)
- The United States renews sanctions against Syria, claiming that it supports terrorist groups, seeks weapons of mass destruction and has provided Lebanon’s Hezbollah with Scud missiles in violation of U.N. resolutions. Source: [Foreign Affairs](#)
- The Muslim Brotherhood announces it will resume political activity, 20 years after its leaders were forced to flee. Source: [BBC News](#)
- In 1990, Iraq invades Kuwait and Syria joins the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq. In October of 1991, Syria participates in the Middle East peace conference in Madrid and holds talks with Israel that flounder over the Golan Heights issue. Source: [BBC News](#)
- The Muslim Brotherhood instigates an uprising in the city of Hama which is suppressed by the Syrian army. Tens of thousands of civilians are killed. Source: [BBC News](#)
- **November 29, 1981:** A car bomb explodes in the Azbakiya neighborhood of Damascus, killing approximately 200 people. The Lebanese group Front for the Liberation of Lebanon from Foreigners claims responsibility, but the Syrian government blames the Brotherhood. Sources: [NPR](#), [New York Times](#)
- The Brotherhood officially partners with its violent offshoot, the Fighting Vanguard. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)
- **June 26, 1980:** Brotherhood members attempt to assassinate Syrian President Hafez al-Assad using grenades and machine guns. They fail, and a government crackdown on the group results in many Brotherhood deaths. Source: [Voice of America](#)
- The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria launches an attack during the Islamic uprising, killing 83 cadets at Aleppo Artillery School. Source: *The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship* by Yvette Talhamy
- The Fighting Vanguard launches a campaign to assassinate top Syrian officials in revenge for Brotherhood militant Mawan Hadid’s death. Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

Domestic Counter-Extremism

Syria has had a long history as a repressive state. Repressive policies became standard following the passing of a law declaring the country was in a state of emergency in 1963. The law gave the government nearly unlimited authority to restrict individual freedoms and to investigate and detain suspects when national security and public safety were deemed to be at risk. The state of emergency was enacted following the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, with then-President Hafez al-Assad declaring the state of emergency as a way to stymie the Brotherhood’s influence and opposition to the central regime. Following the outbreak of the 2011 mass protests, the government of Bashar al-Assad, son to Hafez al-Assad, has taken a hardline approach when dealing with dissenters—using violent tactics against civilians, such as bombing raids, and chemical attacks—as a way to respond to supposed threats of terrorism. (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#), [U.S. Department of State](#))

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

However, the Assad regime has allowed al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups to develop terrorist networks inside Syria as well as facilitated the transport of both weapons and fighters to Iraq. The Syrian government has also been involved in terrorist financing. The Assad regime has purchased oil from ISIS, providing revenue for the group. Given that the majority of business transactions are conducted in cash or are conducted through regional *hawala* (informal money transfer establishments) networks, there are concerns that Syrian government officials and businesses are complicit in terrorist financial schemes that utilize these financial frameworks. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Since the beginning of the civil war, the central regime has presented itself as a victim of terrorism. In the government's effort to neutralize opposition, the public is often caught in the crossfire. It was revealed that in April of 2017, the Syrian government launched a chemical attack against the residents of the opposition held town of Khan Sheikhoun. Over 80 people were killed following the attack. Although Syrian officials denied involvement in the operation, claiming the state no longer possessed chemical weapons following a 2013 deal, the United Nations and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons's (OPCW) Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) gathered an "extensive body of information" that determined that the Syrian air force was responsible for the attack. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [U.S. Department of State](#), [BBC News](#), [Al Jazeera](#))

Counter-Terrorism Law

Following the start of the 2011 protests, the Regional Command of the Baath Party commissioned a law to reportedly ensure "homeland security and citizens' dignity." In April 2012, Assad issued Decree 161 ending the law that had placed Syria in a state of emergency since 1963. He also issued Decree 53/2012 that abolished the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) and Decree 54/2012 that regulated the "right of peaceful demonstration" in Syria. Following these decrees, the Counter-Terrorism Law (CTL) was issued on June 28, 2012. On July 26, 2012, Assad also issued Decree 22 which stated that a court would be established to address terrorism cases. However, all the "legal" mechanisms within the Counter-Terrorism Court (CTC) were created to suppress and stifle any opposition and to ensure the regime's dominance in all matters of the state. Although the CTC was modeled after the SSSC, the CTC has proven to be far more severe in its sentencing of detainees. The CTC often defers to vague legal texts which does not differentiate between the severities of acts carried out by detainees. According to the current interpretation of the CTL, actors accused of belonging to a terrorist organization could be tried similarly to peaceful demonstrators. Although CTC jurisdiction covers crimes of terrorism and crimes referred to it by the CTC attorney general, there are no clear standards behind referring a detainee. These arbitrary referrals further perpetuate the severity in which the government responds to its opposition as it is reported that all those sent to the CTC have participated in activities linked to the revolution. Furthermore, the CTC does not have to oblige to regular trial and due process which further demonstrates that the CTC works in the favor of the government and at the opposition of the Syrian public. Given the lack of due process in the Syrian court system, in cases where ISIS members are tried, Syrian courts heavily rely on pre-trial torture and post-trial mass executions. (Sources: [Violations Documentation Center in Syria](#), [Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy](#), [Just Security](#))

Rojava

Given the severity of political and social instability in 2012, the inhabitants of northeastern Syria attempted a level of democratic self-governance. Under this direction, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) or Rojava, was established to provide de facto governance in the region. Rojava features a constitution and legal system that features female judges, a ban on death penalties and extradition to countries with the death penalty, and creative restorative justice. However, Rojava does not have access to more sophisticated technology needed to prove more substantive crimes like rape, murder, and slavery that require evidence than confirmation of membership in a terrorist organization. Rojava has been proven to be successful in trying ISIS suspects, a trait that the central justice system has not figured out itself, however conviction for international crimes that capture the full extent of ISIS brutality, like war crimes and genocide, are impractical within that system. Although Rojava has proven to be a proactive domestic legal mechanism, the Syrian government considers the Rojava to be an illegal judiciary which has led to warrants for the arrest of Rojavian judges and staff. International recognition is also limited as the Rojava is not considered an independent judiciary and cannot engage in substantial foreign relations. (Sources: [Just Security](#), [Financial Times](#))

However, countries such as Germany, Finland, Russia, and France have repatriated "particularly vulnerable" children of ISIS suspects from Rojava. In December 2020, Germany repatriated 12 children and the Finnish foreign ministry repatriated six children. On December 27, 2020, Russia repatriated 19 children who were living at al-Hol and Roj camps in Rojava, and on January 13, 2021, France repatriated seven children. Overall, France has repatriated 34 French children from Rojava since 2019, with a reported 200 children still held at camps in the region. Russia has repatriated over 144 children in 2020, with over 96 Russian children in Syria who also now have the documentation to fly home. (Sources: [Rudaw](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [France 24](#))

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Law Enforcement

Syria's central government has not controlled large portions of land for almost a decade which has necessitated the decentralization of law enforcement from the national level to the local level. Syria's government has not controlled large swathes of land for almost a decade which has necessitated the decentralization of law enforcement from the national level to the local level. According to the Omran Center for Strategic Studies' 2016 survey of 105 local councils in opposition-held territory, they found that 57 percent of local councils were formed through "a general agreement on a local level," and 38 percent were formed through elections, with the lack of security and legal expertise cited as the major reasons why more elections were not held. The majority of these councils were created in 2012 and 2013 and go through restructuring on average once a year. (Sources: [Middle East Institute](#), [International Review](#))

Free Syria Police

Through Operation Euphrates Shield, Turkey allocated significant resources and humanitarian assistance to local Syrian governments. One outcome of this initiative was the creation of the Free Syria Police (FSP) in 2012. Funded by six western countries, the FSP was created with the goal of creating security and stability in north Aleppo, an area where local rebel groups have contributed to ongoing conflict and lawlessness. The FSP did not have any relation to the police operating in other rebel-controlled territories like Idlib, Daraa, or other parts of the Aleppo countryside, but instead reported to the local councils operating in northern Aleppo. Most of the recruits were from refugee camps in Turkey, though some were also former rebel fighters. The police recruits received specialty training as well as equipment from Turkish forces and were provided with uniforms, weapons, and police cars. On January 16, 2019, the FSP ceased operations following an HTS takeover of Idlib province. As part of an HTS-rebel agreement to halt the fighting, all areas previously held by rebels not directly backed by Turkey fell under the governance of the militants' so-called National Salvation Government. According to local media, HTS-related Islamic police were deployed in areas where Free Syrian Police disbanded. (Sources: [International Review](#), [Middle East Eye](#))

U.S. Military Operations

By June 2014, the security situation in Iraq had deteriorated with the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit falling in rapid succession to ISIS aggressors. On October 17, 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense formally established Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) in order to formalize ongoing military actions against the rising threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. (Source: [U.S. Department of Defense](#))

Proposals for U.S. military action in Syria began in August 2013 after the Assad regime reportedly used chemical weapons on civilian populations, however, they were unable to pass through U.S. Congress. In September 2014, then-U.S. President Barack Obama ordered the first airstrikes in Syria, specifically targeting ISIS-controlled territory. The international coalition included the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Jordan. In late 2015 the first American ground troops entered Syria—initially 50, growing to the current official total of about 2,000. They recruited, organized, and advised thousands of Syrian Kurdish and Arab fighters, dubbed the Syrian Democratic Forces, and pushed ISIS out of most of its strongholds. As of December 2018, the U.S.-led coalition has launched airstrikes on at least 17,000 locations in Syria since the start of the operation. Thousands of ISIS fighters have been killed or captured, but U.S. military officials say there are still as many as 2,000 insurgents still in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, and a number of others who have escaped to various locations around the country. In 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that he would withdraw American forces from Syria. American forces have begun leaving Syria in early 2019, however, as of October 2021, approximately 900 troops remain. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Atlantic](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [New York Times](#), [Military Times](#), [Task and Purpose](#), [Al Jazeera](#))

On October 7, 2019, Trump declared the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria and the end of U.S. protection for Kurdish fighters. The decision generated a rare rebuke from Republican lawmakers, including Senator Lindsey Graham, who strongly objected to the abandonment of the Kurds and forfeiting critical ground in Syria—an opportunity that U.S. adversaries, including ISIS, will undoubtedly capitalize upon. On November 25, 2019, it was announced that United States troops have resumed large-scale counterterrorism missions against ISIS in northern Syria. American-backed operations against ISIS fighters in the area had effectively ground to a halt despite warnings from Defense Intelligence Agency analysts that ISIS militants were regrouping and still posed a threat even after their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was killed during an American raid on October 26, 2019. Additionally, several hundred other U.S. troops, arrived in Syria from Iraq and Kuwait under a subsequent order from Trump to protect Syria's eastern oil fields from ISIS, as well as from the Syrian government and its Russian partners. (Source: [New York Times](#))

On January 5, 2020, the U.S.-led military coalition fighting ISIS announced that it would temporarily halt its counter-ISIS missions to focus on protecting Iraqi bases from Iranian-backed militias. Following the death of Qasem Soleimani, leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps'

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Quds Force (IRGC-QF), on January 2, 2020, by a U.S. drone strike, Major General Hossein Dehghan, the military adviser to Iran's Supreme leader, stated that Tehran's response will "for sure be military." Dehghan further claimed that Iran would retaliate directly against U.S. "military sites." However, on January 25, 2020, U.S. troops picked up the pace of counterterrorism missions in Syria. General Frank McKenzie, the U.S. Middle East commander, has stated that it is uncertain how long American troops will remain in Syria, but maintains that American forces will stay long enough to weaken ISIS while also providing the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) with enough mentorship and training to become an enduring domestic security unit before U.S. withdrawal. Additionally, the Trump administration hopes that maintaining American forces on the ground—particularly at bases such as Green Village, an outpost near a major Syrian oil field, and Conoco, a site that houses massive storage drums—will help to protect oil infrastructure that will help fund the SDF's ongoing operations. (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [New York Times](#), [CNN](#), [Washington Post](#), [Military.Com](#))

On February 26, 2021, the United States launched airstrikes in Syria against targets linked to Iran-backed militias, reportedly killing at least 22 members of Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. According to the Pentagon, the strikes targeted a weapons shipment from Iraq to Syria and struck facilities belonging to Iranian militias KH and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The Pentagon said the strikes were in retaliation for a February 15 rocket attack on an Iraqi base that killed a civilian contractor and wounded an American service member. KH denied responsibility for recent attacks on U.S. interests in the region. The Pentagon said the strikes were in retaliation for a February 15 rocket attack on an Iraqi base that killed a civilian contractor and wounded an American service member. KH denied responsibility for recent attacks on U.S. interests in the region. KH also claimed only one of its soldiers was killed in the strike. The airstrikes were the first military action taken by the Biden administration. The Syrian government condemned the strikes. On June 28, the U.S. continued their airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria in retaliation for drone attacks against U.S. forces. The strikes targeted three sites controlled by Hashd al-Shaabi—the Iran-backed umbrella group for licensed militias—in Syria and Iraq that were used to store munitions and to launch drone strikes against U.S. troops and diplomats. The targeted facilities were used by the groups KH and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS). According to sources within KSS, at least four of their fighters were killed in the strikes. (Sources: [Associated Press](#), [Washington Post](#), [Reuters](#), [The Times](#))

The U.S. continued to launch airstrikes in Syria through 2021, with two airstrikes neutralizing key al-Qaeda figures. In September, the Pentagon conducted a strike in Idlib, rebel-controlled northwestern Syria. The airstrike killed Salim Abu-Ahmad, a senior al-Qaeda leader. On October 23, 2021, the U.S. military launched a drone strike in southern Syria, targeting and killing Abdul Hamid al-Matar, a senior al-Qaeda leader. According to U.S. Army Major John Rigsbee, "al-Qaeda uses Syria as a safe haven to rebuild, coordinate with external affiliates, and plan external operations." (Source: [Al Jazeera](#))

U.S. airstrikes continued into early 2022, most notably on January 24, 2022. Following ISIS's assault on Gweiran Prison in Hasakah, northeastern Syria, the U.S. launched airstrikes to repel the insurgent forces. The attack, which was ISIS's biggest since its territorial defeat in Syria in 2019, was an attempt to free detained ISIS commanders and other dangerous terrorists. Although the airstrikes resulted in the surrender of 300 ISIS militants, the siege on Gweiran Prison remained ongoing until January 25. On January 26, the U.S.-backed Syrian forces announced they retook full control of the prison. As many as 200 U.S. soldiers fought alongside the Kurdish-led forces. (Sources: [NBC News](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Wall Street Journal](#))

On February 3, 2022, U.S. special forces launched a raid in Atmeh, northern Syria, targeting the house of ISIS leader Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla. The raid included around two dozen American commandos, backed by helicopter gunships, and armed with Reaper drones and attack jets. Upon the start of the operation, al-Mawla detonated a bomb that killed both himself and his family members. The operation lasted for about three hours, leading to the death of at least 13 people, including four women and six children. According to U.S. President Joe Biden's aides, the operation was planned months in advance and included dozens of rehearsals. (Sources: [Reuters](#), [New York Times](#), [New York Times](#))

Aside from tracking ISIS members throughout the country, Syria must also contend with the impending threat of ISIS cells within detention centers in northwestern Syria. On August 25, 2022, U.S.-backed Syrian fighters began conducting a 24-day sweep at al-Hol camp. During the sweep, they discovered ISIS sleeper cells that were indoctrinating new generations of ISIS fighters. Additionally, the U.S.-backed forces detained 226 extremists and confiscated weapons in the camp housing tens of thousands of women and children linked to ISIS. The operation was launched due to increasing violence carried out by ISIS cells within the camp. Since the beginning of 2022, extremists reportedly killed 44 camp residents and humanitarian workers. (Source: [Associated Press](#))

Turkish Military Operations

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Turkey has conducted three military operations throughout the Syrian civil war—Operation Euphrates Shield, which lasted from August 2016 to March 2017 and Operation Olive Branch, which began on January 2018 and remains ongoing. The Turkish Armed Force’s primary objectives during these respective operations were to seize and hold critical terrain for border security and create buffer zones inside Syria to prevent ISIS from encroaching northwest of the Euphrates River, and to oust the YPG from Afrin in northwestern Syria. At the initial phase of Operation Euphrates Shield, Ankara emphasized that the operation would be limited both in time and space to maintain border security and confront the Islamic State as an act of self-defense against terrorism. (Source: [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#))

On January 20, 2018, Ankara launched Operation Olive Branch into the YPG-controlled Afrin region in northwestern Syria. The purpose of the operation, according to the release, was “to neutralize the terrorists belonging to the PKK-affiliated YPG and the Islamic State in the region of Afrin in northwestern Syria, in order to provide security and stability along Turkey’s borders as well as in the Afrin region.” Through Operation Olive Branch, Ankara aimed to reposition international actors vis-à-vis the YPG, casting the group as a serious threat to Turkey’s security. Turkey views any Kurdish entity as part of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), an internationally designated terrorist organization that has been in conflict with the Turkish government for decades. (Source: [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#))

On October 9, 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the start of Operation Peace Spring. The campaign launched a cross-border offensive into northeastern Syria using airstrikes, artillery bombardments, and a ground invasion against Kurdish forces. Operation Peace Spring follows the abrupt announcement made by U.S. President Donald Trump on October 7, 2019 that declared the withdrawal of U.S. troops from northern Syria and the end of U.S. protection for Kurdish fighters. The decision by Trump to draw back on U.S. presence in northeastern Syria gave the Turkish government the green light to attack the Kurds. The Kurdish forces, who are lightly armed compared to the Turkish military, have fought alongside Americans for years. The group, long considered one of the United States’ most reliable partners in Syria, has played a key strategic role in the campaign against ISIS in the region. The White House added Turkey would now be responsible for all captured ISIS fighters who are currently being held by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria. (Sources: [The Soufan Group](#), [Council on Foreign Relations](#), [Hill](#), [Washington Post](#), [CNN](#))

Following the announcement of U.S. withdrawal in October 2019, security in the north has rapidly deteriorated. Without additional support, Syrian Kurds are unable to adequately guard detention camps in al-Hol, with reports claiming that as many as 100 ISIS prisoners have escaped and that at least 400 others were released by or managed to evade YPG forces. Additionally, on November 17, 2019, Turkey’s Defense Ministry claimed that the YPG released over 800 ISIS prisoners in Tal Abayad. Additionally, one prison in the border city of Qamishli, was hit by Turkish mortars on October 13, 2019, and five ISIS suspects fled in the aftermath. Al-Hol, which lies outside the border strip towards the Iraqi border, holds thousands of ISIS prisoners who, if not adequately guarded, could escape and reactivate ISIS sleeper cells in the area. SDF guards have been trying to hold their positions at the prisons, but it is unclear how long they can remain. However, on November 25, 2019, U.S. troops resumed large-scale counterterrorism operations against ISIS in northern Syria, under the auspice of safeguarding Syrian oil fields from falling into ISIS’s hands. General Kenneth McKenzie, the head of U.S. Central Command, even claimed that there is no foreseeable “end date” for complete U.S. withdrawal from Syria. (Sources: [ABC News](#), [Anadolu Agency](#), [New York Times](#), [Military Times](#))

On October 26, 2021, Turkey’s parliament extended the Turkish military’s mandate to launch cross-border operations against in Iraq and Syria for two more years. The motion allows for operations against groups considered “terrorist organizations” by Ankara. Turkey and its proxy groups primarily target Kurdish fighters in northern Syria. (Source: [Al Jazeera](#))

On November 20, 2022, Turkey launched airstrikes over northern regions of Syria and Iraq targeting the bases of the PKK and YPG. According to the Defense Ministry, the strikes—which ranged from Tall Rifat, northwest Syria to the Qandil mountains, northeast Iraq—destroyed 89 targets and killed a “large number” of “terrorists.” Ankara has stated the airstrikes are in retaliation for a November 13 bombing in Istanbul that killed six and injured 81. The Turkish government accuse the PKK of enlisting a member of its Syrian offshoot, the YPG, to carry out the explosion—the deadliest in Turkey in over five years. In the days following the attack police detain 50 people including Ahlam Albashir, a Syrian woman and self-described PKK member who planted the bomb. (Source: [Associated Press](#))

Relations between Turkey and Syria have been fractured for more than a decade given Turkey’s backing of armed opposition groups seeking to remove Assad from power. On May 10, 2023, Russia, with the support of Iran, hosted Syria and Turkey for peace talks. Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad later expressed that while Turkey and Syria share common goals, Syria ultimately seeks to remove all “illegal” military presences in the country. (Source: [Associated Press](#))

Russian Military Operations

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

Moscow has intervened in Syria's war in several ways since 2011. Moscow consistently sought to prevent Western military intervention to oust Assad, but following ISIS' increasing strength and eventual capture of Palmyra in the first half of 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the start of an air campaign to support the Syrian regime. Moscow justified the campaign as a way to undermine ISIS and prevent the terror threat from spreading to Russia. The Russian military has claimed that the air campaign would exclusively take down terrorist targets, however, there are reports that civilian areas have been hit. Russian airstrikes and missile strikes were decisive in late 2016 during the battle for eastern Aleppo and in early 2018 during in Eastern Ghouta. U.N. human rights investigators have accused the Syrian government and Russian forces of committing war crimes as they have conducted campaigns targeting medical facilities, schools, markets, and farmland. (Sources: [BBC News](#), [Atlantic](#), [RAND Corporation](#), [Reuters](#))

On March 5, 2020, Turkey and Russia—who back opposing sides in Syria's war—agreed to halt fighting in Syria's Idlib. Recently, the Russian-backed Syrian government forces attempted to retake Idlib, which prompted Turkey to back rebels seeking to oust President Bashar al-Assad. The ceasefire also includes an agreement to establish a security corridor with joint patrols. Idlib, the last stronghold of Syrian rebels, has been the scene of intense fighting as Russian-backed forces have tried to expel the rebels. The operation has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing towards the border with Turkey, which President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claims is already at capacity to properly control and support migrant flows. On March 13, Turkey and Russia officially agreed to start joint patrols in Idlib, with the new measures to take effect on March 15. On December 18 and 24, Turkish and Russian troops conducted joint patrols in Hassakeh, northeastern Syria, to monitor whether terrorist groups were present in the region. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Reuters](#), [CNN](#), [Defense Post](#), [Daily Sabah](#))

In December 2020, local news sources reported that Russia continued to intensify its military presence in northeastern Syria. Russia increased the number of troops to 1,000 in Hassakeh, a Syrian province occupied by the YPG, and increased the number of personnel who fight alongside Syrian regime soldiers to over 1,200 to guard the Qamishli Airport, which is also in Hassakeh. Currently, there are more than 18 Russian military bases and posts in areas controlled by the YPG. On January 19, 2021, Dmitry Suntuov—the head of the Russia-Syria Joint Monitoring Center—confirmed that an additional Russian military police unit was deployed and that Russian reinforcements would be posted in the towns of Ain Issa, Tal Tamer, and Amuda. (Sources: [Daily Sabah](#), [Middle East Monitor](#))

On February 22, 2021, ISIS militants attacked a checkpoint of the IRGC-backed al-Qura Guards militia in al-Asharah city in Deir Ezzor, killing at least four. Also, that day in Wadha village of Aleppo's Maskanah town, unidentified gunmen planted a bomb in a car carrying Iran-backed militiamen, killing four and wounding two. Russian, in turn, launched 48 hours of airstrikes of ISIS positions, killing at least 35 ISIS members. (Sources: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), [Asharq al-Awsat](#))

Israeli Military Operations

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Israel has allegedly been behind hundreds of airstrikes against Iran-backed paramilitary fighters, government troops, and Hezbollah militants in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. Israel rarely confirms its operations in Syria, but Jerusalem often contends that Iran's presence in the region poses significant risks for Israel. On January 13, 2021, Israeli jets struck multiple Iranian-linked targets in Syria near the Iraqi border, killing more than 57 Syrian and allied fighters. Paramilitaries belonging to Hezbollah and the Fatimid Brigade—a group of pro-Iranian Afghan fighters—allegedly operate in the region. A senior U.S. official claimed the raids were carried out with the help of U.S. intelligence and targeted warehouses that reportedly stored Iranian weapons. According to some Western intelligence sources, Israel's increased strikes in Syria throughout 2020 were reportedly part of a shadow war that had been approved by the Trump administration. (Sources: [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), [Reuters](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Guardian](#), [Financial Times](#))

On May 31, 2020, an airstrike was launched in eastern Syria that struck three military vehicles, killing five paramilitary fighters. The Syrian Observatory claimed that "Israel was likely responsible." Additionally, the Syrian Observatory reported that an unidentified aircraft targeted M'ezileh base, which is controlled by Iranian forces and Iran-backed militias. The attack killed seven militiamen. On February 23, 2020, Israel killed two Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) members during air raids on PIJ training facilities and weapons depots in Damascus in response to PIJ rocket fire on Israel from Gaza. PIJ launched dozens of rockets from Gaza toward Israel in response to the Syrian strike. (Sources: [Middle East Eye](#), [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), [Fox News](#), [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [BBC News](#))

Israel reportedly upped its "war between wars" campaign against Iran in Syria in November 2021. In November of 2021 alone, Israel launched seven airstrikes targeting Shiite militias. According to media sources, \$5 billion of Israel's defense budget will be allocated exclusively towards the "war between wars" campaign against Iran, and within 2021, many of the airstrikes during campaign operations targeted Iranian entrenchment and weapons smuggling in Syria. (Source: [Jerusalem Post](#))

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

International Counter-Extremism

The U.S. has designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979. Reasons for the designation include the country's former occupation of Lebanon from 1990 to 2005, pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and policies in supporting terrorism—such as allowing U.S.-listed terrorist groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, to maintain headquarters in Damascus—and undermining international efforts towards stabilizing Iraq. Under the Syria Accountability Act, Syria is subjected to export sanctions and ineligibility to receive or purchase most forms of U.S. aid or U.S. military equipment. Following the mass protests of 2011, subsequent Executive Orders have been issued due to ongoing violence and human rights abuses at the hands of the regime. Additionally, Syria denies the designation as a state sponsor of terrorism as it condones Hamas and Hezbollah's operations on Syrian soil as legitimate resistance movements towards Israeli occupation of Arab territory. (Sources: [U.S. Department of State](#), [Council on Foreign Relations](#))

Combating Terrorist Financing

Syria is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force, a regional organization that aims to combat terrorist financing and money laundering. (Source: [FATF](#))

On September 19, 2020, the Syrian government accused the Dutch government of financing and supporting militant groups in Syria. The accusation came one day after the Dutch government said it sought to hold the Syrian government responsible for gross human rights violations and torture under the U.N. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Syrian Foreign Ministry claimed that the Netherlands' action "is nothing but a maneuver to camouflage the scandals of that regime and a desperate attempt to get what it couldn't through its support for terrorist organizations in Syria." Syria was called on by the Dutch government through diplomatic note to cease human rights violations and offer reparations to victims of the decade long conflict. (Sources: [CNN](#), [Forbes](#))

The United States maintains comprehensive sanctions on Syria that broadly restrict the ability of U.S. persons to engage in transactional dealings involving Syria. Syria has been subject to U.S. economic sanctions since 2004 under the Syria Accountability Act, which prohibits or restricts the export and re-export of most U.S. products to Syria. Sanctions in August 2008 prohibited the export of U.S. services to Syria and banned U.S. persons from involvement in the Syrian petroleum sector, including a prohibition on importing Syrian petroleum products. In response to regime brutality against peaceful protesters beginning in 2011, the U.S. government imposed additional sanctions beginning in April 2011, designating those complicit in human rights abuses or supporting the Assad regime. In April and May 2012, the U.S. government authorized additional sanctions for serious human rights abuse against the Syrian people and for efforts and activities undertaken to evade sanctions. (Source: [U.S. Department of State](#))

Despite U.S. sanctions, on May 7, 2023, 13 of the 22 members of the Arab League voted in Cairo to readmit Syria into the forum. Syria's membership was suspended in 2011 due to military crackdowns against national protests. However, the economic benefits of Syria's reentry into the League will be limited due to U.S. sanctions and policy, as well as Assad's unyielding stance on critical policies. The United States has expressed hesitation over the regional normalization of Syria as Damascus has not delivered on political reforms that would minimize Russia and Iran's influence on the Syrian government. Iran remains a threat to U.S. interests in Syria, as a few weeks earlier on March 23, a suspected Iranian-made drone struck a coalition base in Hasaka, northeast Syria. The strike killed a U.S. contractor and wounded six other Americans. U.S. forces responded by launching airstrikes on Syrian sites used by groups affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). (Sources: [Al Jazeera](#), [Reuters](#))

International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court lacks jurisdiction to try ISIS members in Syria as Syria is not a party to the Rome Statute, a statute which led to the establishment of the International Criminal Court. However, Sweden has supported the idea of an international tribunal to try ISIS members to rectify the jurisdiction challenges in Syria and Iraq. (Source: [Just Security](#))

International criminal justice has yet to adequately compensate victims and survivors of terror acts. Two important initiatives were initiated in 2014—the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) and the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria (IIIM). CIJA uses on-the-ground Syrian investigators to collect evidence of international crimes carried out by ISIS and the Assad regime. Rather than waiting for a tribunal to be set up, CIJA initiates investigations concerning mass atrocities and offers either domestic or international courts the

Syria: Extremism and Terrorism

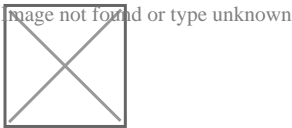
evidence it has gathered. Set up by the U.N. General Assembly, IIIM gathers, collates and preserves existing evidence of mass atrocities, eventually hoping to use the evidence in appropriate courts. Currently, evidence acquired by CIJA and IIIM is primarily used in war crime trials in Europe.

(Source: [Washington Post](#))

Public Opinion

In March 2018 Gallup reported that over half of Syrians (52 percent) believe Assad will win the conflict—which was a 10 percent increase from the previous year. According to a 2018 poll conducted by ORB International, over 57 percent of Syrians believe that the West has played a negative role in supporting Syrian people to restore their rights. Furthermore, more than 94 percent of Syrians are reported to reject ISIS, with an additional 78 percent rejecting HTS. (Sources: [Gallup International](#), [ORB International](#))

Additionally, Syrians living in opposition-controlled areas are more likely to say their access to basic services has worsened in comparison to those living in areas under Kurdish or regime control:



(Source: [ORB International](#))

Although Syrians living in areas controlled by Assad and the Kurds reported improved access to food, medicine, and drinking water, they reported deteriorating conditions to electricity and fuel. Given worsening access to basic aid in opposition-held Syria, ORB International reports that citizens choose to trust non-government organizations and local relief organizations to provide aid rather than the United Nations or the Assad regime.

(Source: [ORB International](#))

Overall, Syrians do not see an immediate end to the conflict as 26 percent of respondents believe the conflict will end in 1-2 years, with an additional 22 percent believing it will be more than three years. (Source: [ORB International](#))