

# THE CENTRAL SYRIA ISIS INSURGENCY IN 2021

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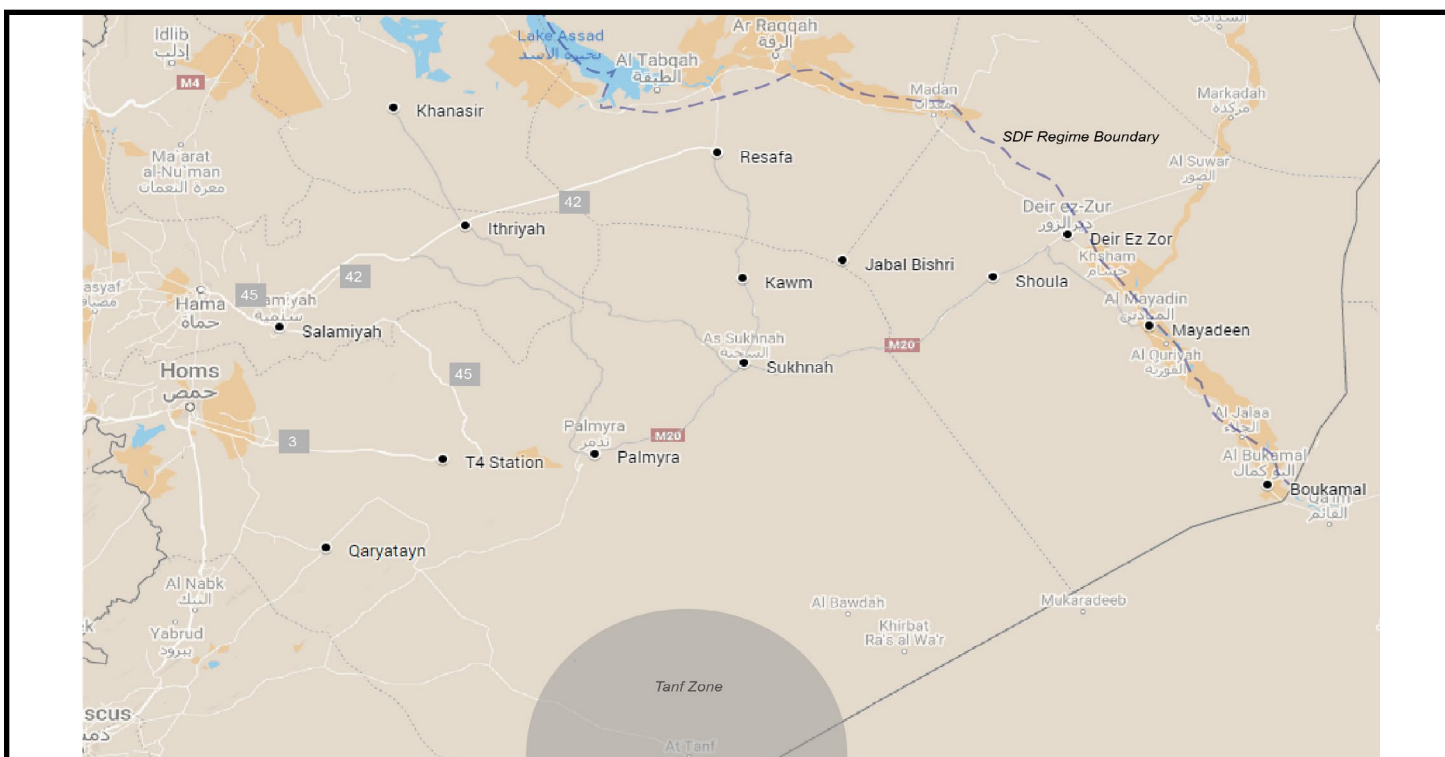
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## Key Facts

- ISIS conducted at least **299 attacks** in Syrian regime-controlled areas of Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir Ez Zor governorates in 2021, a **slight increase from 2020**.
- ISIS conducted at least **70 high quality<sup>1</sup> attacks**, a **25 percent decrease from 2020**.
- ISIS **killed at least 422 people** in central Syria, a **slight decrease from 2020**: 313 pro-regime fighters, including at least 33 Iranian-backed foreign fighters and at least one Russian officer, as well as 109 civilians.
- In September, ISIS conducted its **first attack in Damascus since June 2018**, likely using cells based in the Badia.
- The **Syrian regime and its allies successfully secured territory** it lost in late 2020 and **cut ISIS activity nearly in half** between June and December of 2021.

## Executive Summary

In 2021, the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies largely controlled the trajectory of the ISIS insurgency in central Syria, also known as the Badia. In 2020, ISIS significantly expanded the rate, scale, and geography of its attacks in central Syria, conducting sustained activity in east Hama, southern Aleppo, southern Raqqa, and central Homs for the first time since 2017, culminating in a string of attacks on highways and regime bases throughout the Badia in the last half of the year.<sup>2</sup> The regime finally responded in force to this escalation on January 1, 2021, when it launched a major operation in western Deir Ez Zor with support from Russian and Iranian forces.



<sup>1</sup> High quality attacks are defined as attacks behind frontlines, those that result in seized positions, target regime officers, involve coordinated attacks on multiple positions, fake checkpoints, ambushes on military convoys, or attacks on checkpoints that kill at least three soldiers or lead to POWs.  
<sup>2</sup> Gregory Waters, "ISIS in Syria: 2020 in Review," Newlines Institute, February 10, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-syria-2020-in-review/>.

## Regime Operations

The Deir Ez Zor offensive would be the first of four major regime operations in each of the four main governorates of the Badia in 2021. The main Deir Ez Zor operation lasted for two- and- a- half months and focused on clearing ISIS cells off of the southern and eastern slopes of Jabal Bishri in order to secure the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway and the belt of towns north of Deir Ez Zor city. In the past, ISIS cells would usually withdraw in the face of regime operations, relying on mines and indirect harassment fire to delay the advance of regime forces while cells relocated. However, when the regime launched its January operation, ISIS cells attempted to stand their ground.

Unlike past operations that lasted only weeks, this time the Syrian regime and its allies persisted despite intense fighting, slowly clearing the rural areas around the Deir Ez Zor highway. This operation was bolstered by heavy participation from Iranian-backed foreign fighters from the Pakistani Liwa Zainebiyoun and Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun, as well as intense Russian air support. This new operation also differed from previous regime offenses in that it included close cooperation between a multitude of regime units.<sup>3</sup> As they cleared territory, the Syrian army and allied National Defense Forces (NDF) set up a series of outposts to help keep the area secure. The success of the Deir Ez Zor operation was proven by a significant, sustained decrease in ISIS activity in the governorate beginning in February and extending through mid-summer (see fig. 2).

By February, ISIS cells had begun withdrawing from the Jabal Bishri front and shifting their focus south to the Mayadeen countryside. Regime forces captured several weapons caches and hideouts, but little evidence emerged of many human losses among the ranks of ISIS fighters. The regime and its allies would regularly launch smaller operations both here and in the Mayadeen and Boukamal countryside during the rest of the year in response to periodic ISIS activity, but the security threat posed in late 2020 had been significantly curtailed. In March, Damascus also deployed fresh soldiers and armored vehicles from the army's elite 4<sup>th</sup> Division to man the newly established outposts around the Homs and Deir Ez Zor highway, helping to further secure the area.

The second major regime operation began in east Homs in mid-April when elements of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, NDF, and Syrian private military contractors seized the strategic town of Kawm, the major settlement on the Homs-Raqqa highway. This operation, supported by the Russian Air Force, continued through the summer as security forces slowly pushed east of the town, creating a security zone on land that was previously

heavily populated by ISIS cells. As with the Deir Ez Zor operation, ISIS cells hit back hard initially, but the regime persisted and by late summer had largely ended ISIS activity in this area, with cells likely relocating to southern Raqqa and Deir Ez Zor.

As the Kawm axis grew more secure, the regime began focusing on smaller operations elsewhere in Homs. In May, Iranian-backed Liwa Fatemiyoun fighters assisted the Syrian army's patrols around Arak. Beginning in June and extending through the fall, the Syrian army and pro-regime militias made periodic pushes into the mountains north of Palmyra—often with support from the Russian Wagner Private Military Contractor (PMC) and the Russian Air Force. Also during the fall, foreign fighters of the Iranian backed Liwa Zainebiyoun and Liwa Fatemiyoun attempted multiple pushes into ISIS-held Wadi Doubayat, south of Sukhnah, incurring significant losses each time, and conducted new patrols south of Palmyra.

The third major regime operation began in mid-May in southern Raqqa. Several battalions of the Russian-backed 5<sup>th</sup> Corps deployed to the southern Raqqa countryside, taking up positions along the Ithriya-Tabqa highway, reinforcing the garrison in Resafa, and adding new outposts alongside the oil fields between Resafa and Kawm. The combination of regular patrols and new outposts established by these units helped eliminate the larger attacks ISIS was able to carry out in 2020, although soldiers were still periodically lost to mines and local shepherds were increasingly targeted here in the last months of 2021.

The last major regime operation of 2021 began in late spring in eastern Hama. Throughout early 2021, ISIS cells in eastern Hama, and to a lesser extent in southern Raqqa, had been preying on locals, killing shepherds and stealing sheep.<sup>4</sup> Security forces appeared unable or unwilling to prevent ISIS infiltration and Hama became the most violent governorate of the Badia in both February and March. However, by late spring a mélange of army units and regime militias began deploying more frequently to the east Hama countryside, this time focused on accompanying shepherds and farmers to deter ISIS attacks. These deployments were spurred by the Russians, who sent battalion-size elements of the Syrian 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, 25<sup>th</sup> Division, and NDF on routine patrols across the governorate. Former Minister of Defense Fahd al-Freij, who hails from east Hama, also helped organize and arm new local militias supported by the Syrian army and intelligence services.

Increased deployment of Russian and Syrian jets and helicopters to the central Syria front was also a key contributing factor to the decrease in ISIS attacks. According to two regime officers deployed in the Badia,

<sup>3</sup> Gregory Waters, "A new general and a fragile peace in Deir Ez-Zor," Middle East Institute, April 19, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-general-and-fragile-peace-deir-ez-zor>.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Waters, "Smuggling Away the Future in Syria's Northeast," CounterPoint Blog, October 26, 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/smuggling-away-future-syrias-northeast>.



it takes the Russian and Syrian air forces between 15 and 60 minutes to respond to requests for support when units come under attack. This is enough time for militants to carry out quick attacks, but it forced ISIS cells to shift from regularly conducting close ambushes to relying more on distant harassment attacks and mines or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). However, persistent Russian air support remains rare, with only some Syrian units directly under Russian control receiving continual overflights during some of their regular sweeps.

However, one significant change from 2020 is that civilian vehicles and oil tankers began traveling in larger convoys alongside numerous military vehicles. Since early 2021, these convoys have regularly received Russian or Syrian helicopter escorts as they make the several-hour trip across the Tabqa-Salamiyah or Deir Ez Zor-Palmyra highways. The use of larger convoys and regular air escorts has almost entirely eliminated ISIS's ability to target civilian, economic, or military vehicles on these major highways, with no such attacks occurring since April 2021.

## ISIS Operations

While the overall number of ISIS attacks in 2021 increased slightly compared to 2020 (299 vs. 287), this was largely due to the high level of activity early in 2021. The first quarter of 2021 was the most active three-month period of the insurgency to date, with ISIS conducting at least 114 attacks and 37 high quality attacks. However, each subsequent quarter of 2021 witnessed fewer attacks as the impacts of regime operations began to be felt. ISIS carried out 80 attacks in quarter two, 67 attacks in quarter three, and only 38 attacks in quarter four. The last quarter of 2021 saw the fewest number of confirmed ISIS attacks in a three-month period in central Syria since the fall of 2019.

Still, ISIS was able to conduct a number of significant attacks over the course of the year. The most symbolically important was the September 18 nighttime attack on a pipeline running to the Deir Ali Thermal Power Plant and two nearby power pylons just outside Damascus city.<sup>5</sup> The attack plunged the entire country into a blackout for several hours and was quickly claimed by ISIS as part of its "economic campaign against the regime." This attack was likely carried out by cells using the old smuggling routes that connect the eastern Damascus suburbs to the eastern Homs Badia.

ISIS conducted its largest attack of the year on April 6, when cells launched multiple ambushes against convoys of civilians and security forces on the highway along the east Hama-east Homs border. ISIS fighters

captured more than 60 of the locals and quickly organized a prisoner exchange with the regime, winning the freedom of militants' family members held in a nearby regime prison.<sup>6</sup> This was the first recorded incident of ISIS using captured civilians in a prisoner exchange.

The April attack was the last successful ISIS attack of the year on a regime or civilian convoy. The only other major highway attack in 2021 occurred on January 3, also in Hama, when militants attacked a bus, several oil tankers, and lorries. According to survivors, ISIS attempted to kidnap the civilians but was forced to withdraw thanks to the quick response of nearby regime security forces.

ISIS attempted to continue its 2020 strategy of overrunning regime bases, but found less success over the course of the year. The deadliest barracks attack was also the first of the year, on February 3. Militants destroyed a remote base in eastern Homs, killing 12 soldiers and wounding 15. In late March, ISIS captured another base, this time in eastern Hama, publishing footage from inside the barracks. One month later, a cell successfully captured an outpost in southern Raqqa, although, as with the Hama attack, regime casualties were light as most of the defenders fled rather than fight. The last two ISIS attacks on regime outposts occurred in May and June in southern Aleppo and eastern Hama, respectively. These attacks ended with only a few regime soldiers wounded and some material damage to the bases.

The regime's operations also disrupted ISIS's ability to consistently target and kill regime and allied commanders, as they did in 2020 on a monthly basis. In 2021, ISIS cells were still able to kill 14 pro-regime commanders and wound two in 15 attacks carried out across nine months (compared to 21 killed and three wounded in 24 attacks in 2020). Among those killed were an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general, a prominent sheikh involved in the identification and arrest of ISIS sympathizers, two Syrian army brigadier generals, and a Russian army lieutenant colonel.

## Key Questions

Despite the advances of the Syrian regime in 2021, it is unclear how much material and human damage was inflicted on ISIS. Yet even if regime operations in 2021 did not result in many dead ISIS militants, the intense battles early in the year, and particularly the elevated use of air power, significantly degraded ISIS's operational capabilities. Locally-deployed regime forces reported that ISIS had stopped using trucks for transportation and attacks by early 2021, after losing many of these vehicles to battles and airstrikes.<sup>7</sup> Active ISIS

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Waters, "Understanding ISIS's Damascus Attack," CounterPoint Blog, September 20, 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/understanding-isis-damascus-attack>.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Waters, "Mass Kidnapping in Central Syria Reveals Dynamics of ISIS Resurgence," Newlines Institute, April 8, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/mass-kidnapping-in-central-syria-reveals-dynamics-of-isis-resurgence/>.

<sup>7</sup> A regime officer working the ISIS file told this author in an interview in January 2022 that no regime forces have reported seeing trucks during fights with ISIS for nearly a year and have only found dirt bike tracks at sites of ISIS ambushes.

cells now appear to rely on dirt bikes for movement and conducting attacks. While dirt bikes remain a deadly tool for insurgents, the loss of trucks means ISIS cells can no longer employ heavy weaponry like anti-air cannons in their ambushes. These vehicles, which were a staple of official and unofficial ISIS media from the Badia in 2019 and 2020, also allowed cells to carry enough supplies to roam far from base for extended periods of time, something not possible on dirt bikes.

While ISIS has almost certainly suffered more casualties in 2021 than in the previous years of its insurgency, the significant drop in ISIS attacks can more readily be attributed to the higher number and concentration of regime forces across key areas of the Badia, as well as the more consistent air force response to attacks. This has raised the cost of attacks and forced ISIS to be more selective in choosing the time and place of an operation. In response, ISIS has adopted a more passive insurgency, relying on the heavy use of mines and IEDs to slow or prevent regime movement into the more remote areas of the Badia where its cells have relocated.

There appeared to be an overall reduction in the number of ISIS cells across the Badia in the second half of 2021 as fighting and general survival in the desert became more difficult. Most, if not all, ISIS cells reportedly withdrew from east Hama, while a significant reduction of ISIS cells occurred in western Deir Ez Zor (though this began to change in the last months of the year). The question remains, where have these cells gone? Brief surges in ISIS activity in northeast Syria in November and in Iraq in December suggest that many of the Badia fighters may have redeployed to these areas. If this is the case, it begs another question: Is this redistribution of cells part of a broader restructuring of the insurgent footprint by ISIS's central command, or more of a temporary reaction and an attempt to exploit the current weaknesses of security forces in the northeast and in Iraq?

The answers to these questions will inform the direction of the Badia insurgency in 2022. If ISIS has chosen to restructure its cell distributions as part of a larger strategy, then there will likely be a continuation of the low-level insurgency that dominated the last half of

2021, i.e., 10-20 attacks with one or two significant ambushes or regime commanders killed each month. This level of violence is largely acceptable to Damascus, as long as it does not spill over into the oil or gas fields or threaten the highways. For the regime, its next steps, if it chooses to take them, will be to try and secure the remote mountains and deserts far from the villages and roads it now patrols. Unless regime forces are able to disrupt the smaller ISIS camps and transit routes, ISIS will continue to search for and exploit weaknesses in the regime's lines.

In this context, there are three primary areas to watch for potentially significant ISIS activity in 2022. The ongoing reconciliation process in the regime-held towns in Deir Ez Zor and Raqqa has presented a unique opening for ISIS to infiltrate this heavily securitized urban belt.<sup>8</sup> There are some signs this has already occurred,<sup>9</sup> but whether ISIS chooses to leverage any infiltration into insider attacks, or simply remain content gathering intelligence, remains to be seen. Nevertheless, as ISIS activity across the Badia has decreased, its focus appears to have shifted back to Deir Ez Zor since October 2021, a trend likely to continue into 2022.

The second area is in the southern Raqqa countryside, where the regime and Russian forces manage a patchwork of loyalist militias and Syrian army units. As ISIS activity dropped in Hama it began rising here. In the last months of 2021, attacks on shepherds in southern Raqqa increased, though they remain intermittent. In lieu of a strong foothold in Hama, ISIS may re-focus some of its cells in this area in search of vulnerable communities to prey on for goods and money.

Lastly, local civilians and security forces in the southern countryside of Homs have reported increased activity of what appears to be ISIS cells moving between the Qaryatayn and Mheen countryside. These cells, at least one of which has existed outside Qaryatayn for more than a year, have yet to conduct any major attacks, but security forces fear they may attempt to link up with sympathetic locals still living in the area. It is possible that ISIS hopes to utilize these cells and sympathetic locals to conduct an attack on critical infrastructure around Homs similar to what they carried out outside Damascus in September.



8 Muhammad Hassan, "The regime "reconciles" the people of Deir ez-Zor," Daraj, December 14, 2021, <https://daraj.com/83857/>.  
9 See the December 2021 Monthly Update for more on this.



## Charts and Maps

Figure 1. ISIS attacks, high quality attacks, and pro-regime deaths per month from 2019 through 2021.

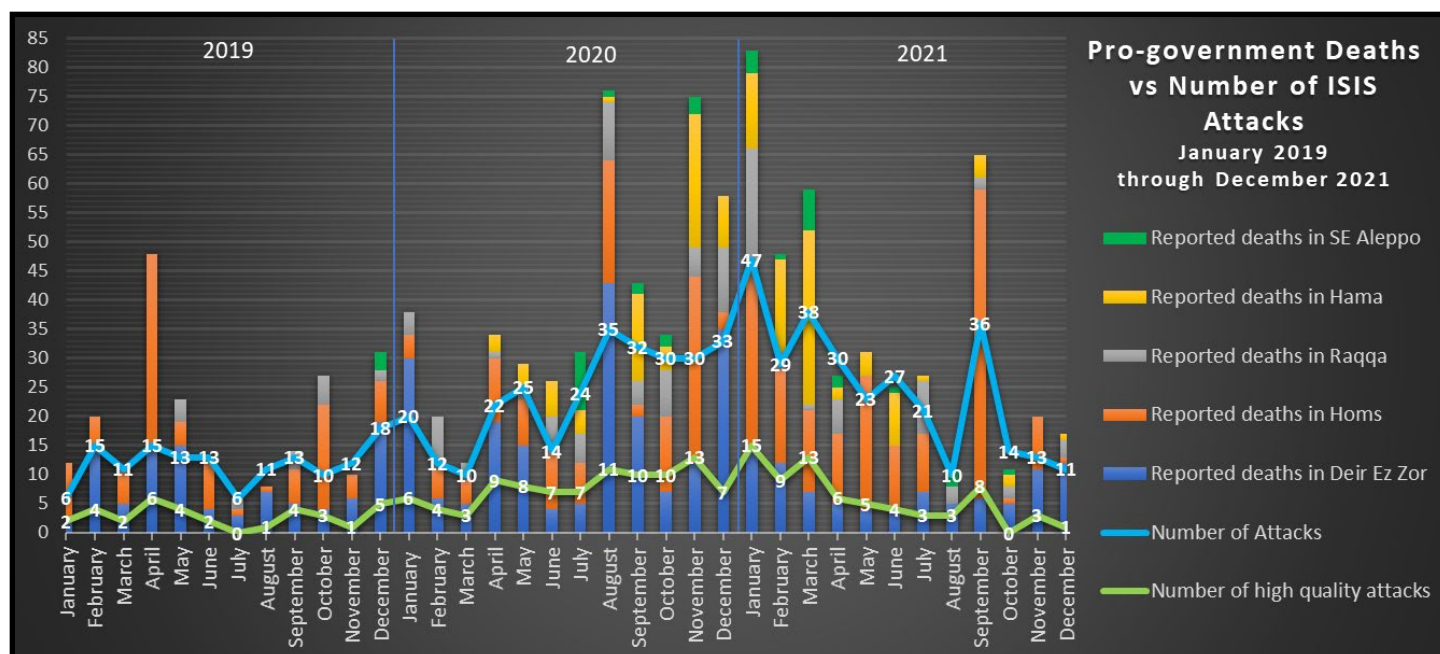
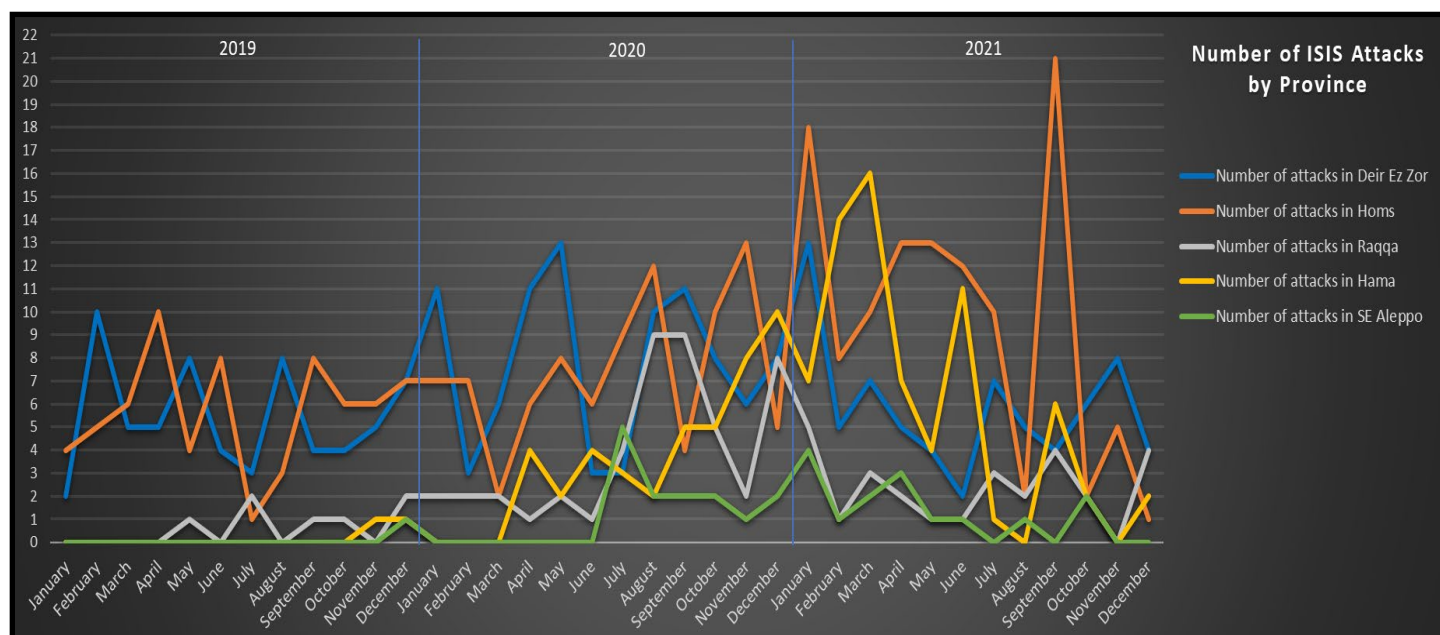
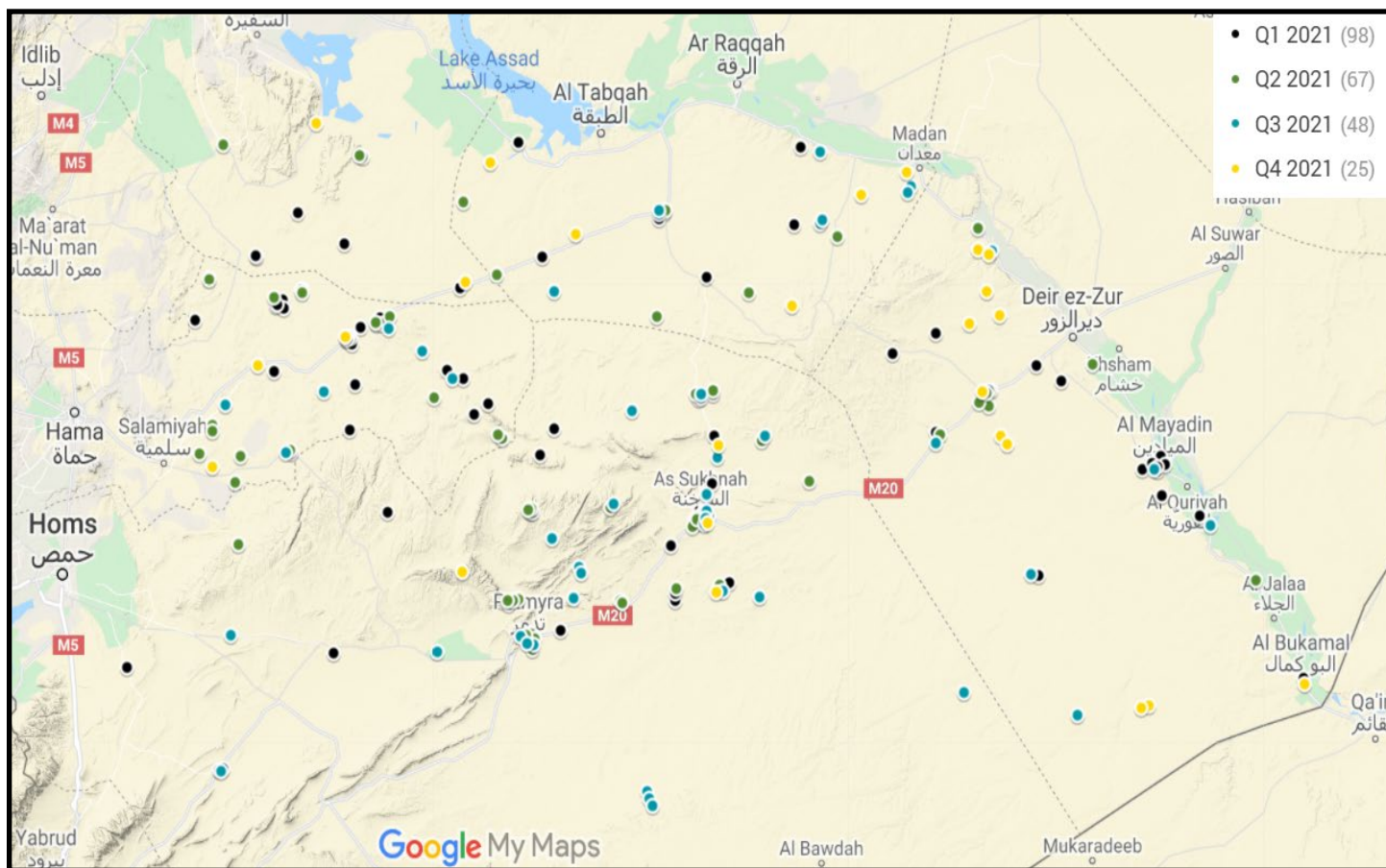


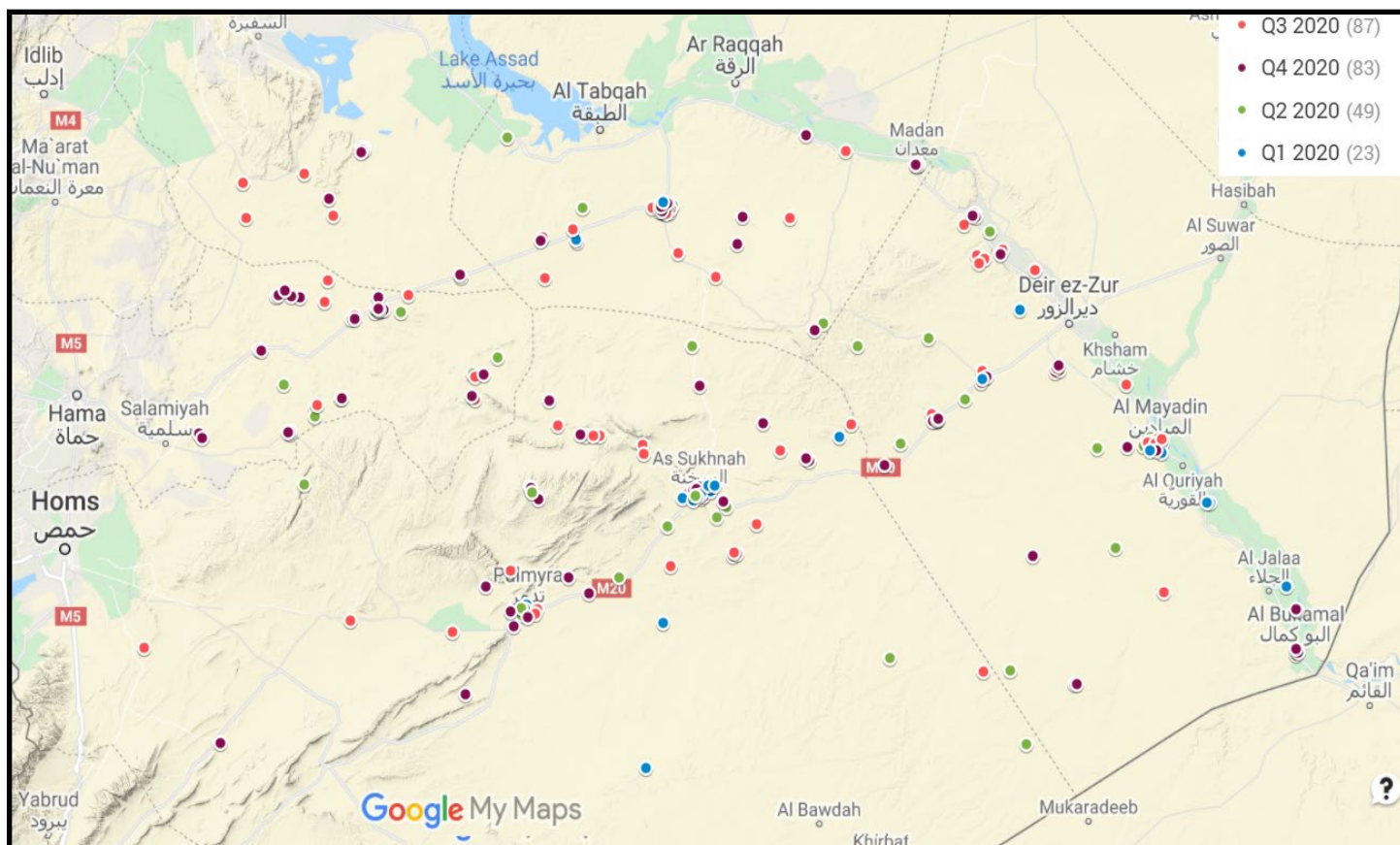
Figure 2. Number of ISIS attacks in each governorate of the Badia per month from 2019 through 2021.



Map 1. All ISIS attacks in 2021 with known locations.



Map 2. All ISIS attacks in 2020 with known locations.

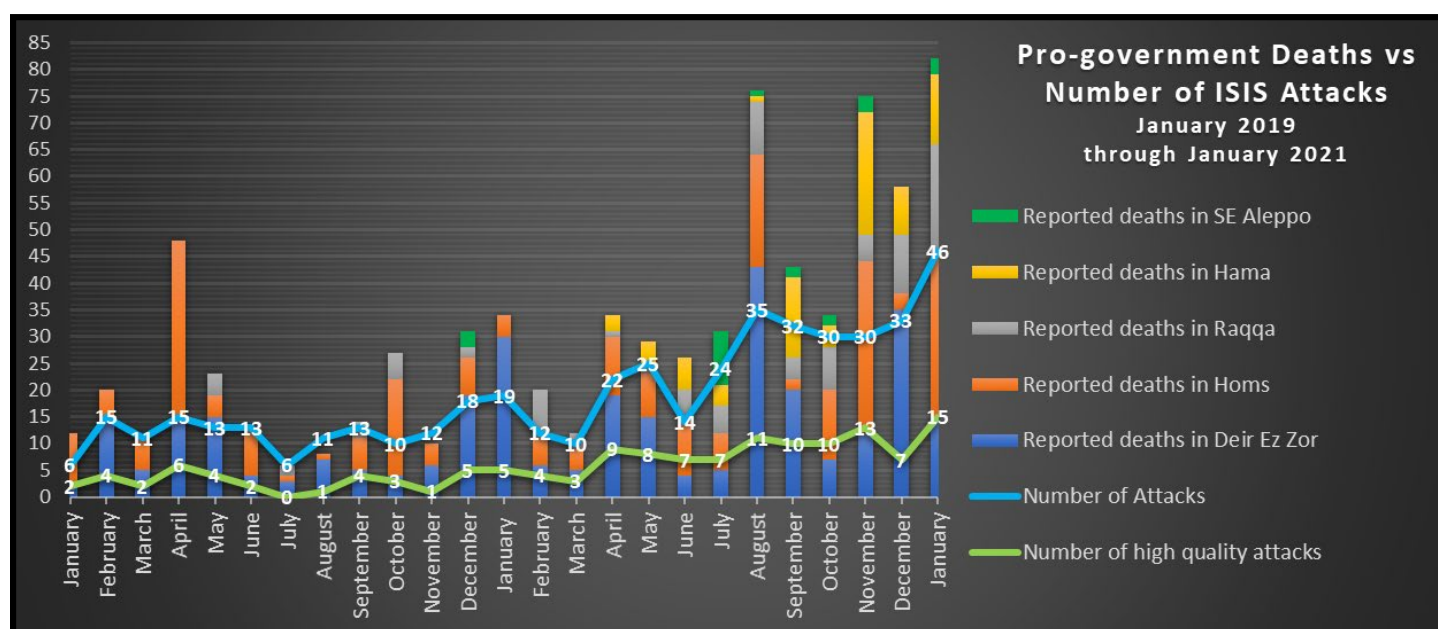




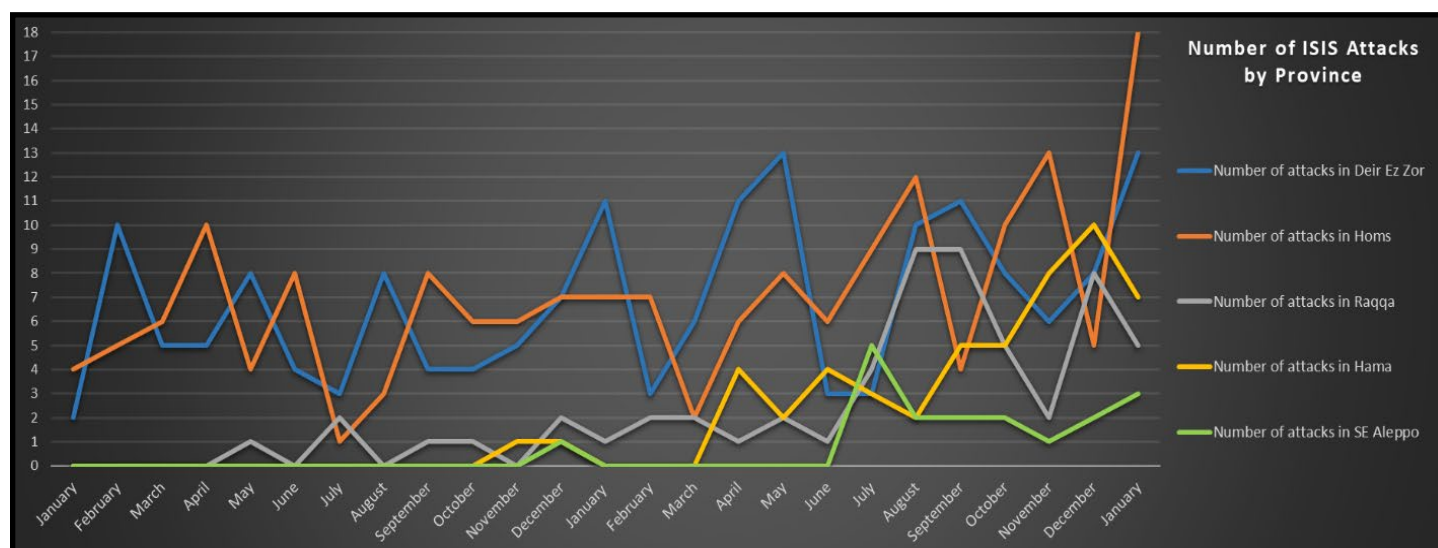
## Monthly Reports

### January 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 46 confirmed attacks in January, killing at least 55 pro-Assad regime fighters, 26 civilians, and one local political leader, while wounding at least 22 in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Hama, and Aleppo governorates. January witnessed a significant increase in the number of ISIS attacks, high quality attacks, and confirmed deaths compared with previous months. They were in fact the highest of all three metrics since the start of the insurgency two years ago.



Fighting in Homs and Deir Ez Zor provinces increased sharply, with ISIS carrying out 18 and 13 attacks, respectively. Attacks in east Hama (7) dropped slightly compared to December, largely due to an apparent pause in attacks there since January 18. Attacks in Raqqa (5) province were also down, though attacks here were evenly spread throughout the month. Aleppo (3) continues to be the least active region of the insurgency, although ISIS conducted two attacks in the [Andarin](#) area north of Rahjan for the first time in January, indicating a possible northward expansion from the east Hama town.



## Homs

The jump in reported attacks in Homs was largely due to a significant increase in fighting around the city of Sukhnah. ISIS claimed to have conducted three attacks near Sukhnah on both January 20 and January 26, marking the most intense periods of fighting around the town since November.

In addition to this, ISIS cells carried out several significant attacks against regime forces in the regions immediately surrounding Sukhnah. During the first nine days of January, ISIS forces twice attacked regime patrols in the al-Hayl gas field, south of Sukhnah, killing 10 Liwa al-Quds fighters. On January 16, ISIS killed five Liwa al-Quds members near Taybeh, northeast of Sukhnah, and two days later killed at least three more militiamen during intense battles near Kawm, further to the north.

Meanwhile, ISIS kept up its sporadic attacks around Palmyra. On January 1, two 5th Corps vehicles disappeared while on patrol, with all occupants presumed dead. On January 5, a regime soldier was found dead near the Shayrat Airbase, 75 miles west of Palmyra. The next day, ISIS cells clashed with regime forces around the T4 Airbase, 35 miles west of Palmyra.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs, January 2021.

## Deir Ez Zor

Most of the attacks in Deir Ez Zor were in response to an ongoing regime operation north of Shoula. Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and local Syrian and foreign militias launched this operation following the December 30 ISIS [attack](#) on troop transports nearby that left 31 soldiers dead. For the entire month of January, ISIS and pro-regime forces clashed north of Shoula and nearby Kababbj, marking the most sustained fighting between them since the insurgency began. ISIS's response to the regime operation has involved both high and low quality attacks. ISIS carried out at least one complex ambush that killed six Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-backed foreign fighters. The regime also sustained losses due to ISIS mines and harassment fire on its patrols.

Historically, ISIS cells have proven more fluid in the face of regime sweeps, harassing patrols while temporarily moving out of the area. ISIS's apparent refusal to give up its positions on the northern side of the crucial Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway mark an important evolution in the group's strategy. This change appears to indicate that

ISIS is both more prepared for head-on battles with regime forces now, and that the group is placing increasing importance on the ability to impede regime movement along the M20 Highway. Indeed, on January 24, an ISIS cell [attacked](#) a convoy of two to three buses carrying Syrian Republican Guard fighters just five miles west of Deir Ez Zor city and three and a half miles south of the SAA's 137<sup>th</sup> Brigade base.

Unlike the December 30 attack, when the militants used pre-placed Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) or mines to attack the buses, this time ISIS moved in on trucks in the middle of the day, firing on the buses with small and heavy arms. The fact that this attack occurred so close to heavily fortified regime areas and in the midst of a large-scale anti-ISIS campaign demonstrates the apparent confidence cells have on their ability to move freely about the area. Three days later, regime forces scored their first victories against ISIS in the area, destroying an ISIS truck and killing three militants on [January 27](#), and killing two militants and uncovering a hideout on [January 28](#). Despite this, the operation and intermittent clashes continue along the Shoula-Kababbj corridor.



*Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor, January 2021.*

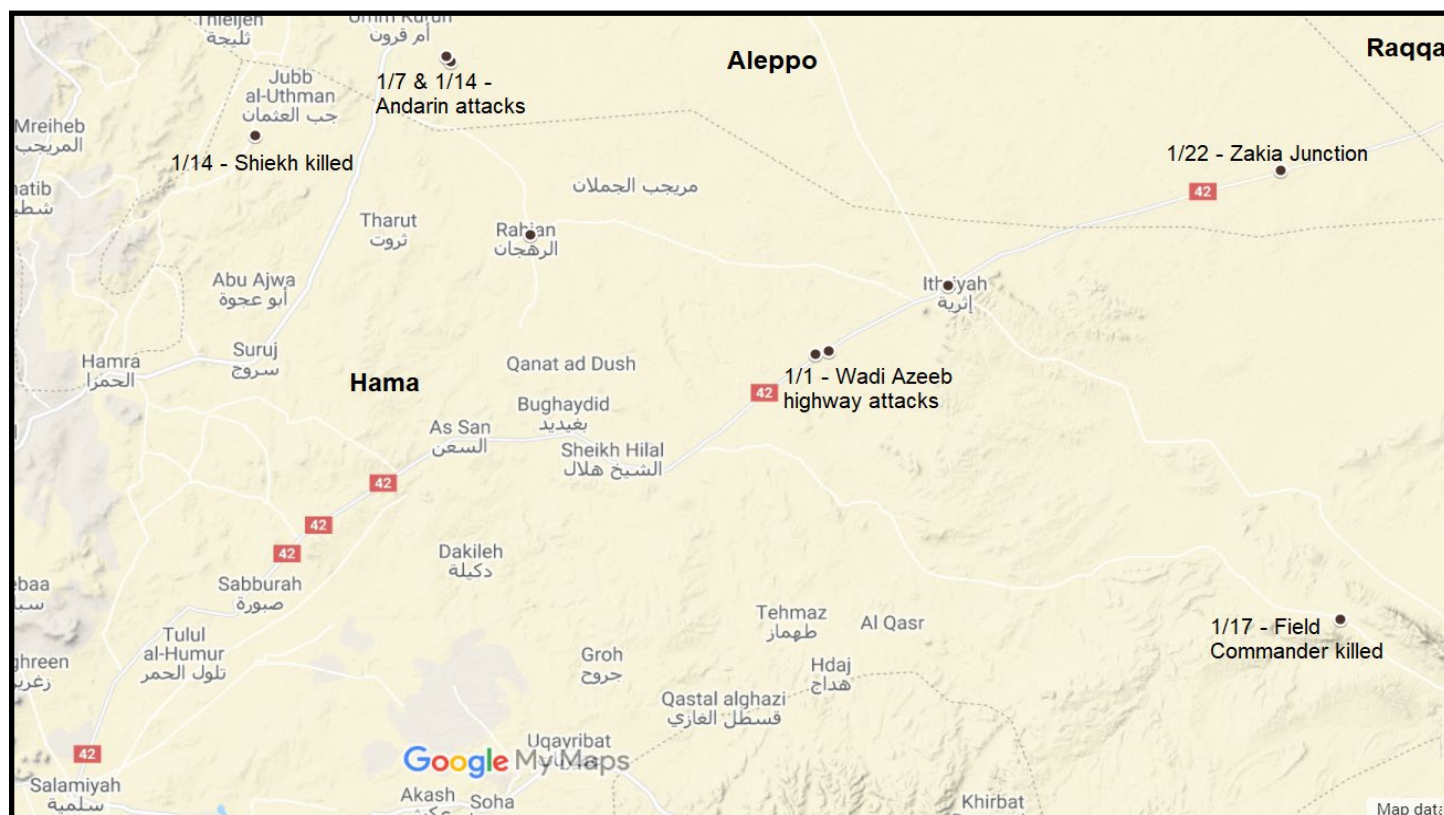
## Hama-Aleppo-Raqqa

ISIS activity in Hama was carried out at the same intense pace for the first half of January as it had been in December. On January 3, insurgents cut the Salamiyah-Ithriya highway less than seven miles west of Ithriya, ambushing a convoy of oil tankers, lorries, and an overnight bus. ISIS destroyed the nine oil tankers and one of two lorries, killing seven civilians and two soldiers. Loyalist media claimed the militants were attempting a mass kidnapping, but were stopped by the arrival of security forces. Shortly after the first attack, ISIS fighters hidden nearby attacked the first responders, forcing emergency vehicles to retreat until additional security forces cleared the area.

These attackers likely came from north of the highway, where ISIS cells appear to have embedded themselves. These cells have regularly attacked regime forces around the town of Rahjan in past months, and did so again on January 8. Farther north, regime forces were twice attacked when attempting to patrol in the Andarin area of Aleppo, close to the Hama border. The regime has long been absent from this area, and it is likely that northeast Hama cells have an established presence here.



ISIS also continued attacking regime forces along the Ithriya-Raqqa highway, targeting soldiers at the Zakia junction in Aleppo on January 22, and clashing with pro-regime fighters in southwest Raqqa on January 25. Further east, ISIS fighters launched a large attack on Resafa on January 1 and successfully captured three soldiers somewhere in the province on January 11. The next day, militants massacred 18 shepherds near Sabkhawi, the same hamlet tribal forces had liberated on August 29, 2020. This massacre was followed by regime airstrikes on multiple locations in southeast Raqqa.



Map of ISIS attacks in east Hama and south Aleppo, January 2021

On January 9, ISIS killed an IRGC 2nd Brigadier General in Deir Ez Zor. The general had reportedly been touring Liwa Fatemayoun positions in the days prior to his death, suggesting that he was either killed in the fighting near Shoula, or somewhere near Bukamal. He was the 25th commander killed in the Badia (Syrian desert) since January 2020, and his death marks the 14th month in a row that ISIS militants have successfully killed a pro-regime officer.

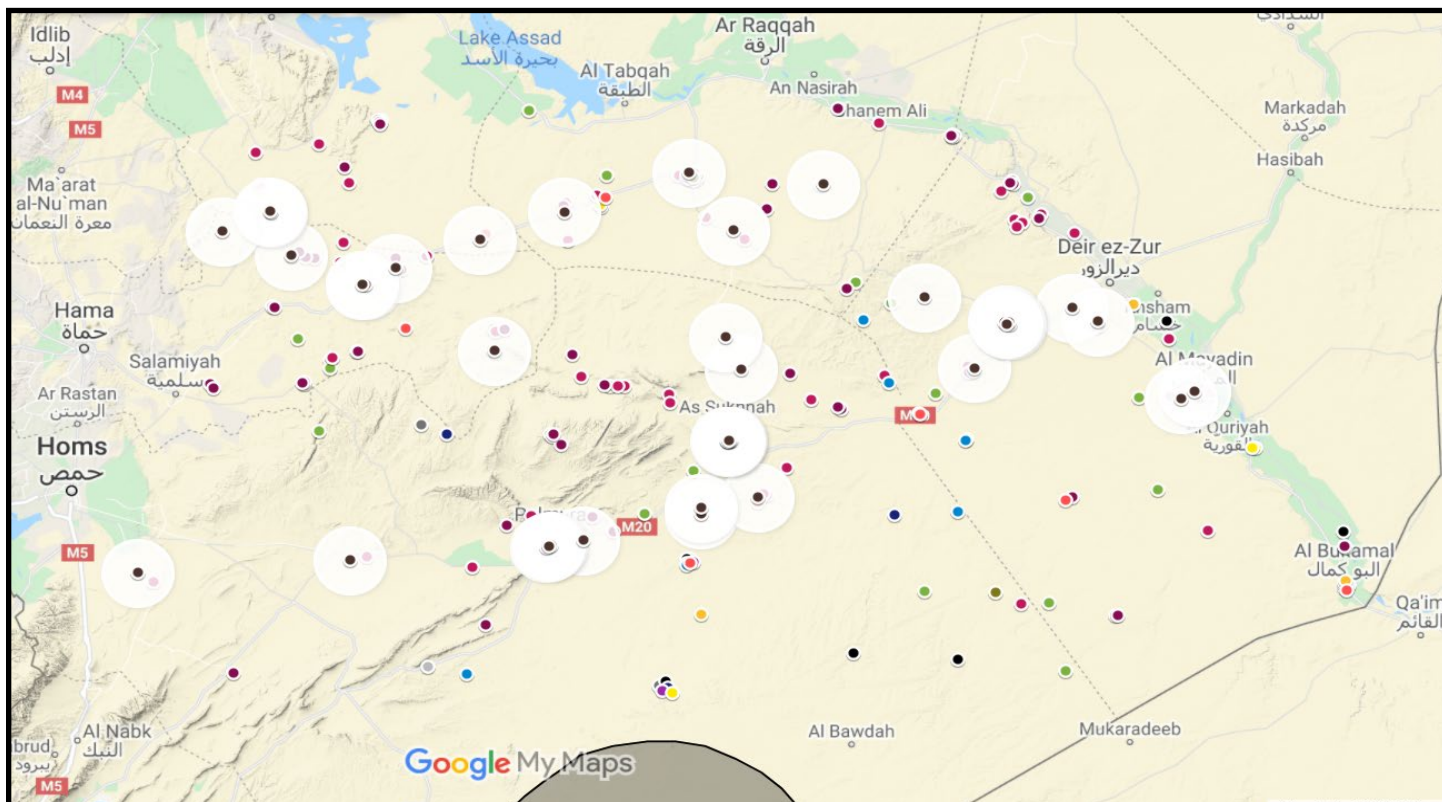
Five days later, ISIS assassinated a local Sheikh in northeast Hama. According to loyalists, the Sheikh has played a major role in arresting many local ISIS sympathizers, making him a prime target for insurgents. It was the first confirmed killing of a civil society leader in the Badia since the ISIS insurgency began, and hints strongly at heavy local support for ISIS in the volatile northeast Hama region. On January 17, ISIS killed its third regime commander of the month, destroying the vehicle of a National Defense Forces (NDF) field commander with a mine in southeast Hama.

For their part, the Syrian regime and its allies conducted three main operations in January. The first, as previously described, was launched north of Shoula and was ongoing through the end of the month. The second operation was launched following the January 3 ISIS highway attack in east Hama, and was said to span from Ithriyah to Resafa. The third operation was conducted from Palmyra to the T2 Pumping Station, on the Homs-Deir Ez Zor border. This operation ended on January 28, and, according to local loyalists, “cleared” four hamlets north of the Palmyra-T2 road. There were no claims of this operation encountering any ISIS fighters.

In addition to these operations, there was increased activity by Syrian and Russian jets in central Syria. Airstrikes were conducted regularly throughout the month, both in support of the operations and in response to ISIS attacks

in Raqqa and Homs. As always, there is no evidence of the impact of these strikes, although the regime continues to largely hit pre-selected locations, leaving little chance for the strikes to have any material impact on ISIS operations.

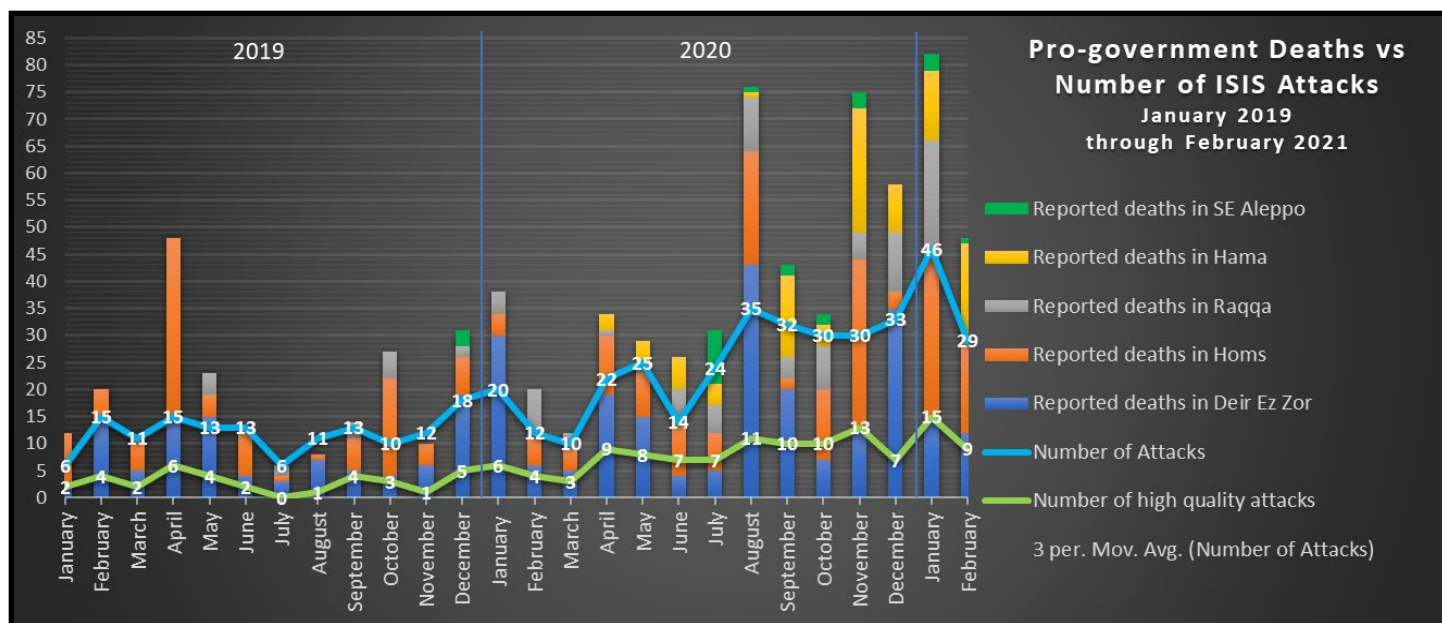
Since many of ISIS's January's attacks were a reaction to sustained regime operations, February's fate will likely be determined by what the regime chooses to do. If regime operations around Shoula and Sukhnah end, attacks will likely drop back to the late 2020 levels. ISIS activity is certain to return to east Hama, with the cells there leveraging their local intelligence-gathering to hit high value targets. Meanwhile, with both the Salamiyah-Raqqa and Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highways under constant ISIS pressure during the past two months, the likelihood that militants again ambush civilian or military vehicles in February remains high.



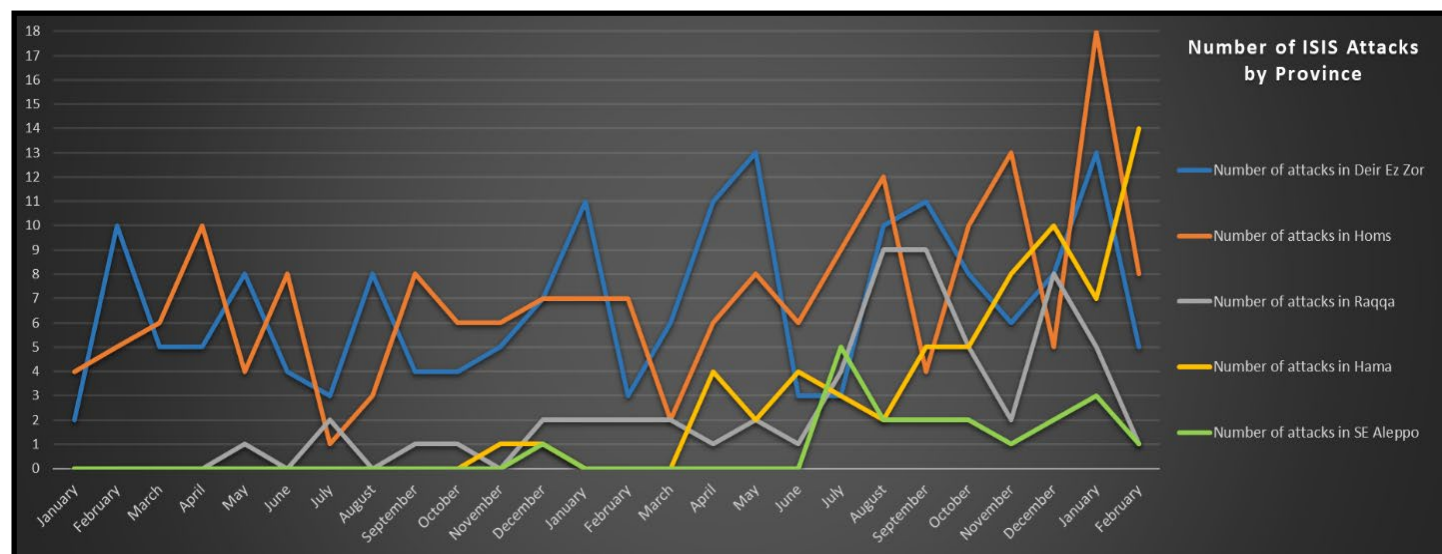
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in January 2021. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## February 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 29 confirmed attacks in February, killing at least 36 pro-Assad regime fighters and 12 civilians, while wounding at least 35 in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Hama, and Aleppo governorates. February saw a sharp drop in the number of ISIS attacks, high quality\* attacks, and confirmed deaths compared with January. However, statistically, ISIS activity for February was consistent with the escalated level of activity that began in fall 2020.



Attacks in Homs (8) and Deir Ez Zor (5) provinces decreased sharply compared to a month ago, while ISIS activity continued to grow in eastern Hama (14) after a brief pause during the second half of January. Meanwhile, confirmed attacks in Raqqa (1) and Aleppo (1) provinces seemed to fall to their lowest levels in several months. However, this could also be partially due to worsening reporting conditions that made it more difficult to get accurate information on the situation in these areas.

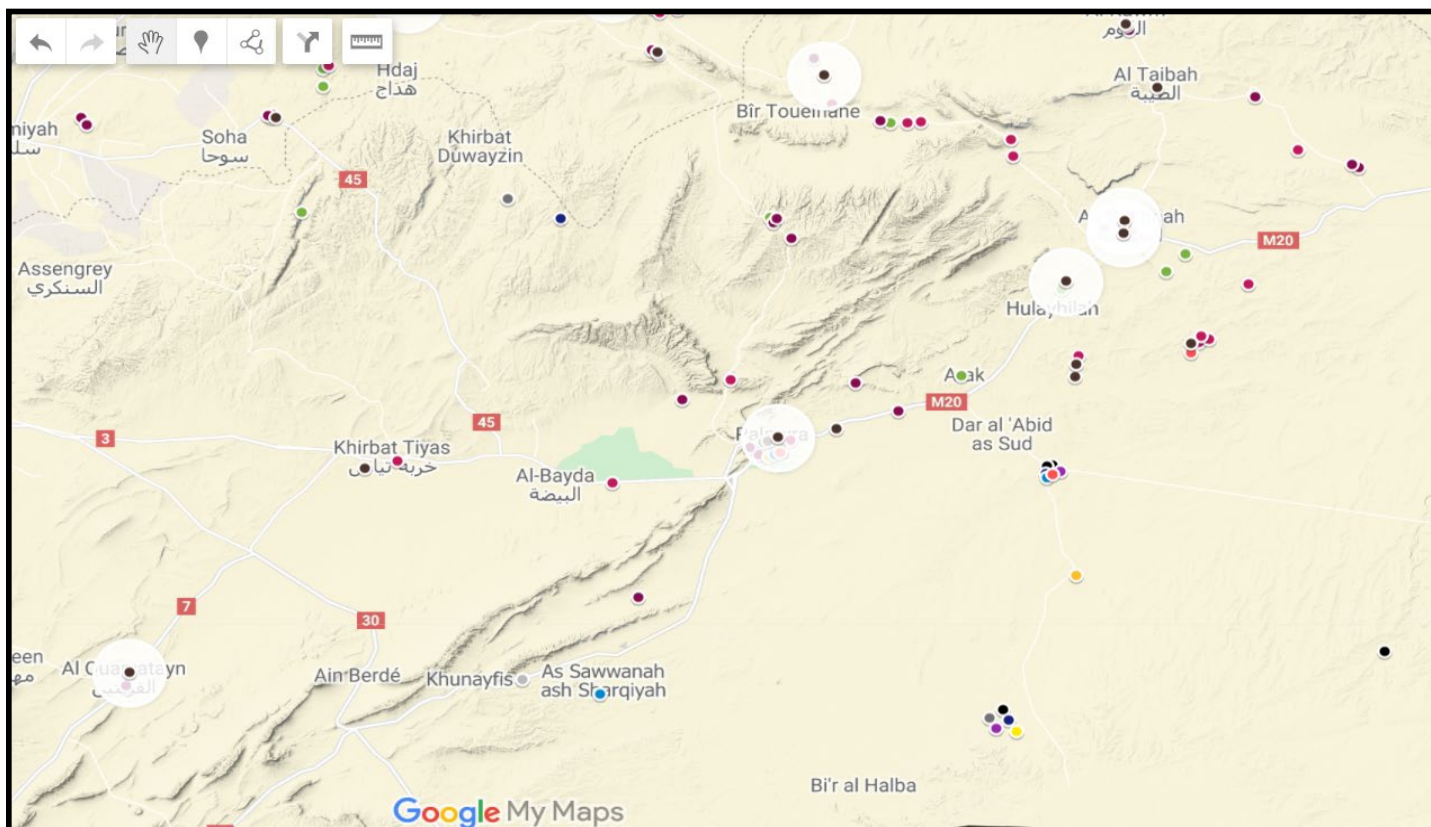


## Homs

The most significant fighting in Homs occurred on February 3, when ISIS fighters conducted a night-time raid on a regime base near the Tuwaynan oil fields. ISIS attackers killed 12 members of a pro-regime militia and wounded 15 more, while burning vehicles and barracks. According to one source, this military installation is sometimes manned by members of the Russian paramilitary group PMC Wagner, possibly indicating that these foreign fighters were the intended targets of the attack.

As in January, ISIS attacks in Homs were concentrated around the Palmyra-Sukhnah corridor. However, another attack was carried out on the outskirts of Qaryatayn, close to the Damascus provincial border. This was the second ISIS attack close to Qaryatayn in the past four months. ISIS cells also carried out another small raid on vehicles traveling along the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway on February 10, destroying at least one oil tanker. This attack came despite continued Syrian Arab Army (SAA) operations to secure the highway.





Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in February 2021 (highlighted dots).

## Deir Ez Zor

The significant drop in confirmed ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor province can be directly attributed to widespread regime operations conducted throughout the majority of February. Regime forces, assisted by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-commanded Afghan foreign fighters, successfully pushed ISIS out of the Shoula area on February 25, concluding a two-month battle on the northern side of the highway. Regime forces [uncovered](#) at least one ISIS hideout, though there was no evidence of ISIS deaths in the area this month. Further south, pro-regime tribesmen from Usoud Sharqiyah Shaytat spent the month [sweeping](#) areas west and south of Mayadeen. These units did not claim the killing of any ISIS fighters or the discovery of any hideouts during their operations.

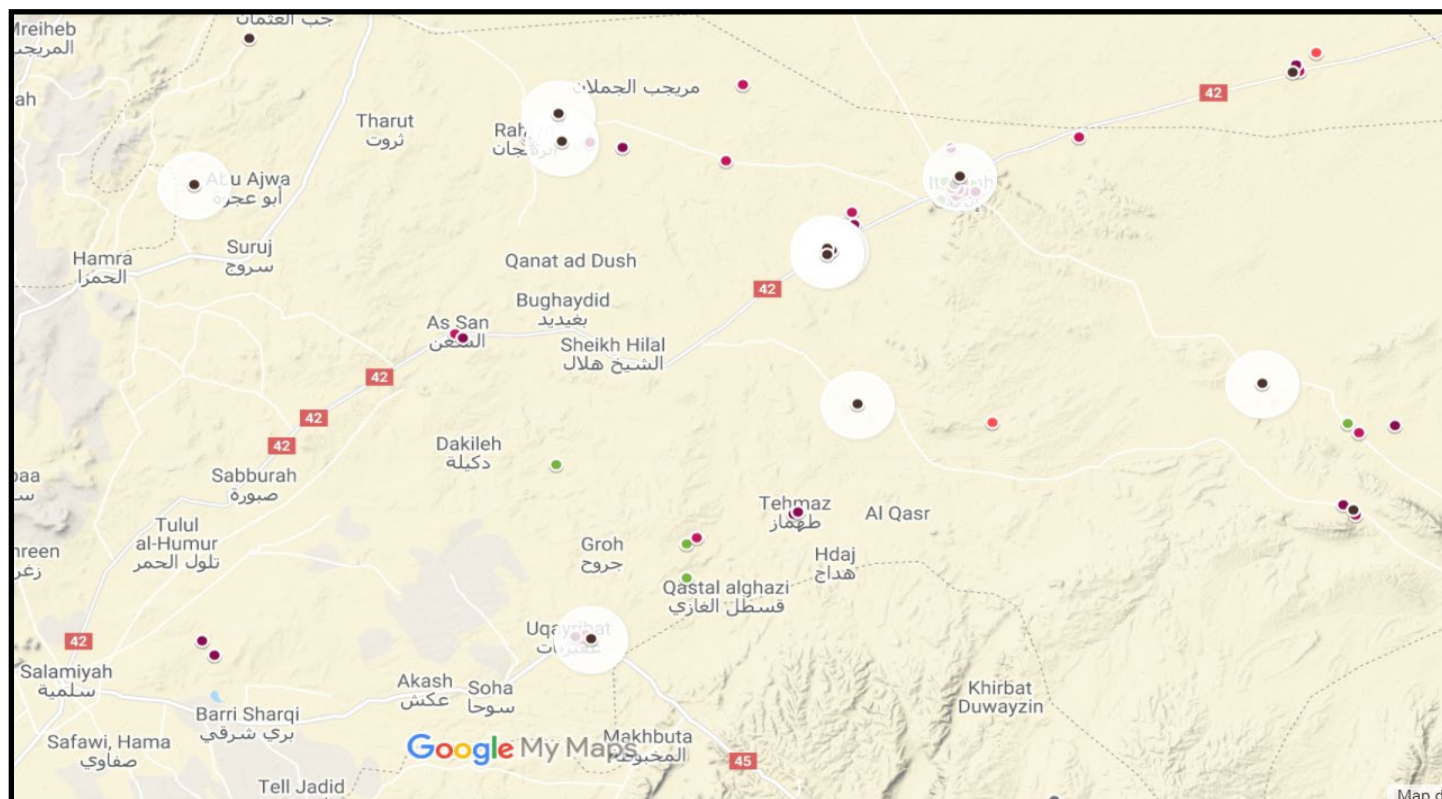
With the intense operations in northwest Deir Ez Zor, ISIS activity was concentrated around Mayadeen this month. On February 5, four regime fighters were killed during an attack on their positions just southwest of the city. On February 20, ISIS fighters successfully infiltrated the urban belt south of Mayadeen, killing four militia-men at their checkpoint at a river crossing in the village of Ghariba. This was the first confirmed successful ISIS attack inside an urban center in southwest Deir Ez Zor since the start of the insurgency.

Meanwhile, ISIS fighters ambushed the patrolling Usoud Sharqiyah Shaytat fighters at least once in the desert southwest of Mayadeen, killing three men, including a field commander. Finally, the body of a 4th Division soldier was found on the outskirts of Mayadeen on February 24, presumably kidnapped and then executed in a manner consistent with the ongoing insurgency in Dara'a province. This death further implies that ISIS cells are deepening their presence in the urban area around Mayadeen city.

## Hama

ISIS activity in Hama increased sharply in February following a slowdown during the second half of January. However, all of ISIS's activity was passive, involving mines or Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), and directed indiscriminately towards civilians and soldiers alike. Of the 14 attributed ISIS attacks in east Hama, five of them hit civilians.

ISIS cells appear to have adopted a strategy of leaving behind mines in areas where they conducted small arms attacks in January. Most of the mines reported this month occurred in Wadi Azeeb, where ISIS cells ambushed civilian drivers on January 3; around Rahjan, where ISIS cells have carried out small arms attacks every month since October; and in al-Hamra subdistrict, where ISIS carried out a targeted assassination in January.

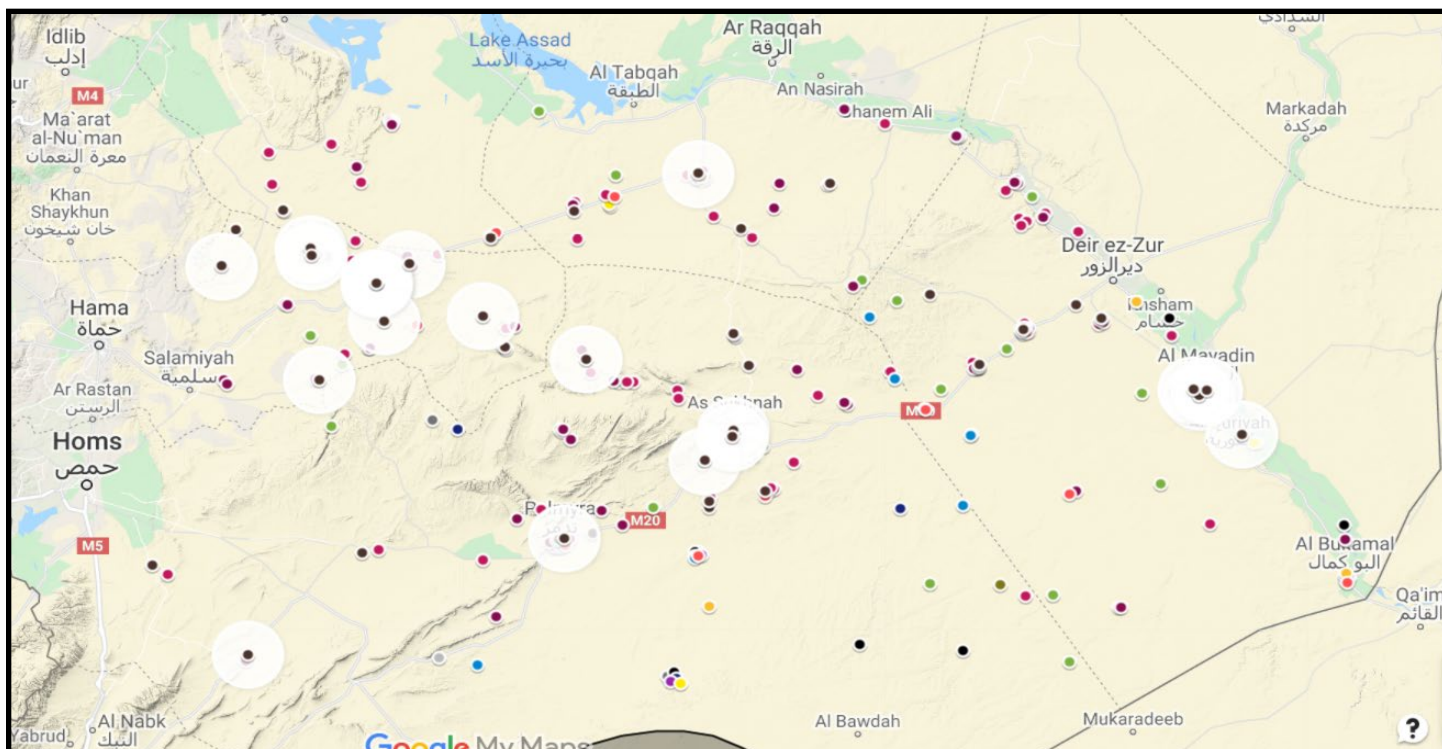


Map of ISIS attacks in Hama in February 2021 (highlighted dots).

As noted, the Syrian regime and its allies conducted several lengthy anti-ISIS operations in Homs (Jabal Amor) and Deir Ez Zor (Shoula and southwest Badia) during February. Such operations forced ISIS cells to either bed down or move to new areas, causing a drop in overall attacks and an increase in mine and IED hits. The Syrian regime also sent significant numbers of reinforcements to strategic points in the two governorates after the February 3 Tuwaynan attack, further limiting ISIS activity. However, ISIS activity steadily rose again by the second half of the month.

The regime's current main objective is to secure the major highways that run through the Badia (Syrian desert), connecting western and northeast Syria. The operations around Shoula appear to have succeeded, at least for now. Still, ISIS was able to attack oil tankers twice, once on the Palmyra-Sukhnah road on February 10, and again near Resafa, Raqqa on February 16, when they also managed to kidnap the three men guarding the tanker.

It should be noted that February and March 2020 were "down months" for the insurgency, the time when ISIS activity dropped significantly before a small surge in the spring and the larger surge in August. It can be expected that ISIS activity will similarly remain depressed in March, with the group focusing on mines and IEDs, targeting vulnerable civilian populations, and conducting a handful of small arms attacks against regime forces. It is significant, however, that in this decreased period of activity, ISIS has still conducted more attacks than during the spring 2020 surge, and more than twice the number of attacks and high quality attacks compared with February 2019 and February 2020.



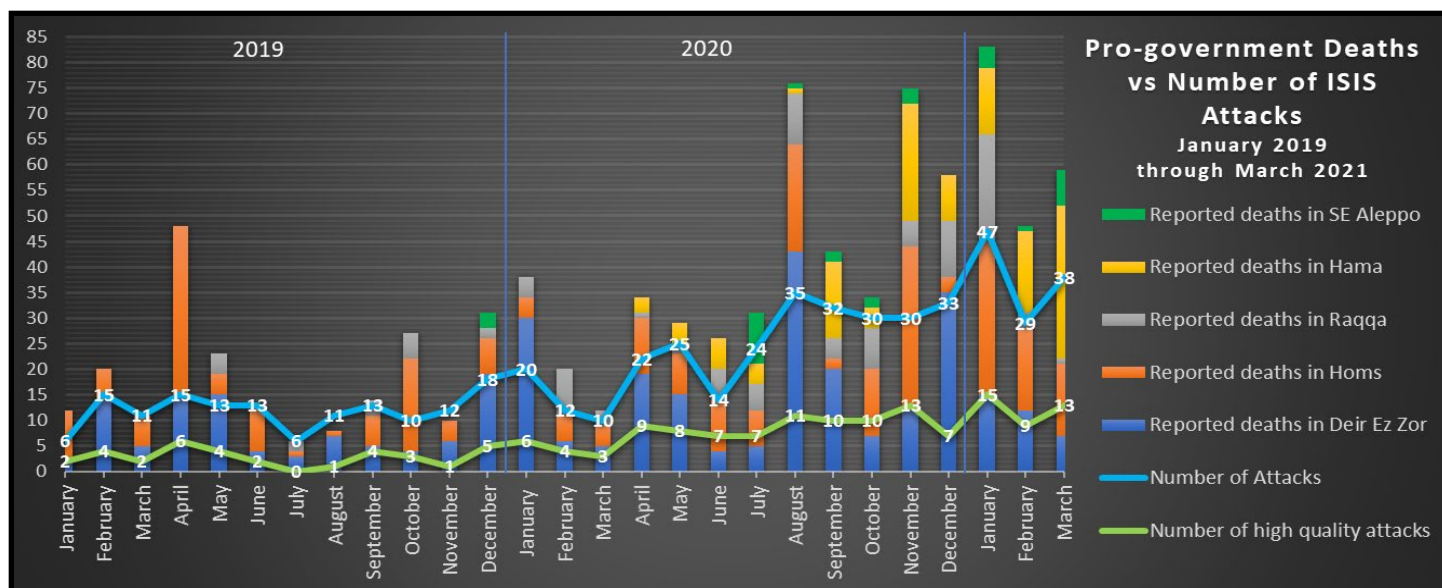
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in February 2021. This map does not include seven attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them: one “east Hama” IED, two “east Homs” clashes, three “Salamiyah countryside” IEDs, and one southwest Deir Ez Zor attack. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## March 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 38 confirmed attacks in March, killing at least 17 pro-Assad regime fighters and 42 civilians, while wounding at least 27 in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Hama, and Aleppo governorates. ISIS attacks increased significantly. March had the second most attacks and high quality\* attacks since the start of the insurgency. While February’s decline in ISIS activity matched the pattern of the previous two years, this month’s surge came almost one month earlier than it did in 2020.

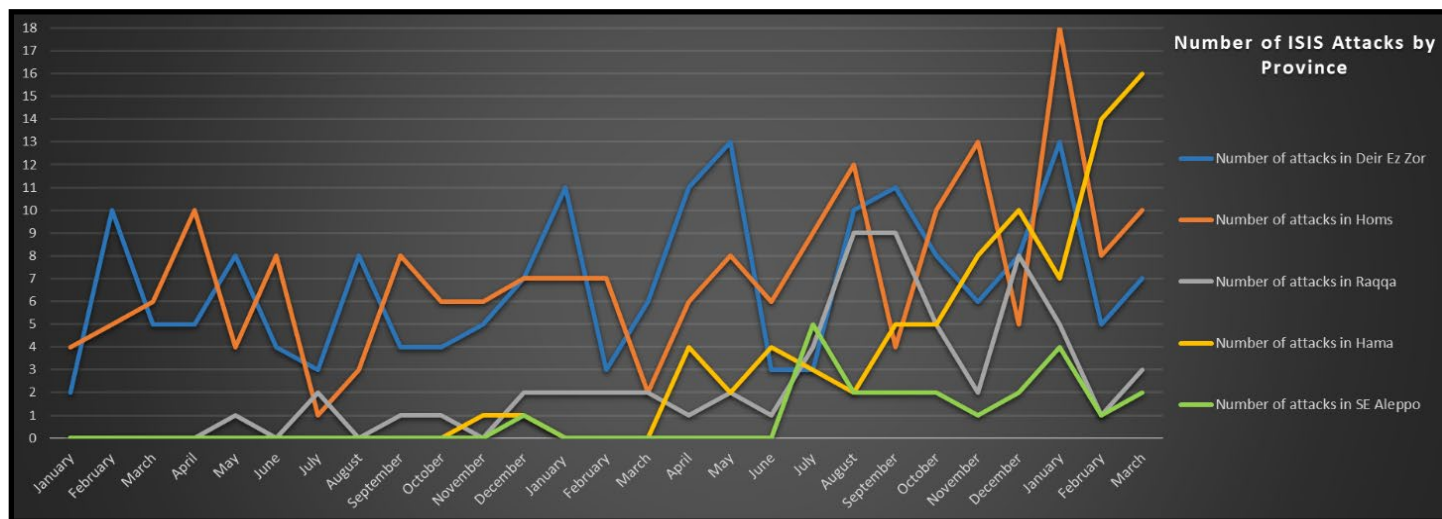
ISIS attacks during the first half of the month generally followed the trend set last month: Heavy reliance on mines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and many indiscriminate attacks against local civilians. A marked shift in target and attack types occurred on March 21 when, after a three-day lull, five attacks were reported across Homs, Deir Ez Zor, and Hama. Eighteen of March’s 38 attacks occurred in the final 10 days of the month. Only 22 percent of these attacks targeted civilians, compared to 40 percent of the attacks in the first 21 days of the month, and only 38 percent of attacks used mines or IEDs, compared to 52 percent earlier in the month.





Attacks in March increased in every governorate compared to February, though ISIS again prioritized Hama (16) followed by Homs (10) and then Deir Ez Zor (7). March was the second month in a row that ISIS set a record for attacks in Hama, though the terror group carried out two-thirds of these attacks in the first half of the month. Confirmed attacks also increased in Raqqqa (3) and Aleppo (2), despite continued problems accessing credible information in these regions. High quality attacks also grew in every province except Deir Ez Zor.

In Aleppo, ISIS activity returned to the southern Khanasir area, where militants executed four shepherds on March 1 and killed three civilians with a mine on March 17. Raqqqa witnessed two important attacks. The first took place on March 25 when militants shelled a regime Air Force Intelligence checkpoint near Resafa, while the second came on March 31 when militants likely affiliated with ISIS set up a fake checkpoint near Dibsi Afnan on the Aleppo-Raqqqa border. This was only the second confirmed attack in this region since the start of the insurgency and hints at a possible strengthening of ISIS's presence here.



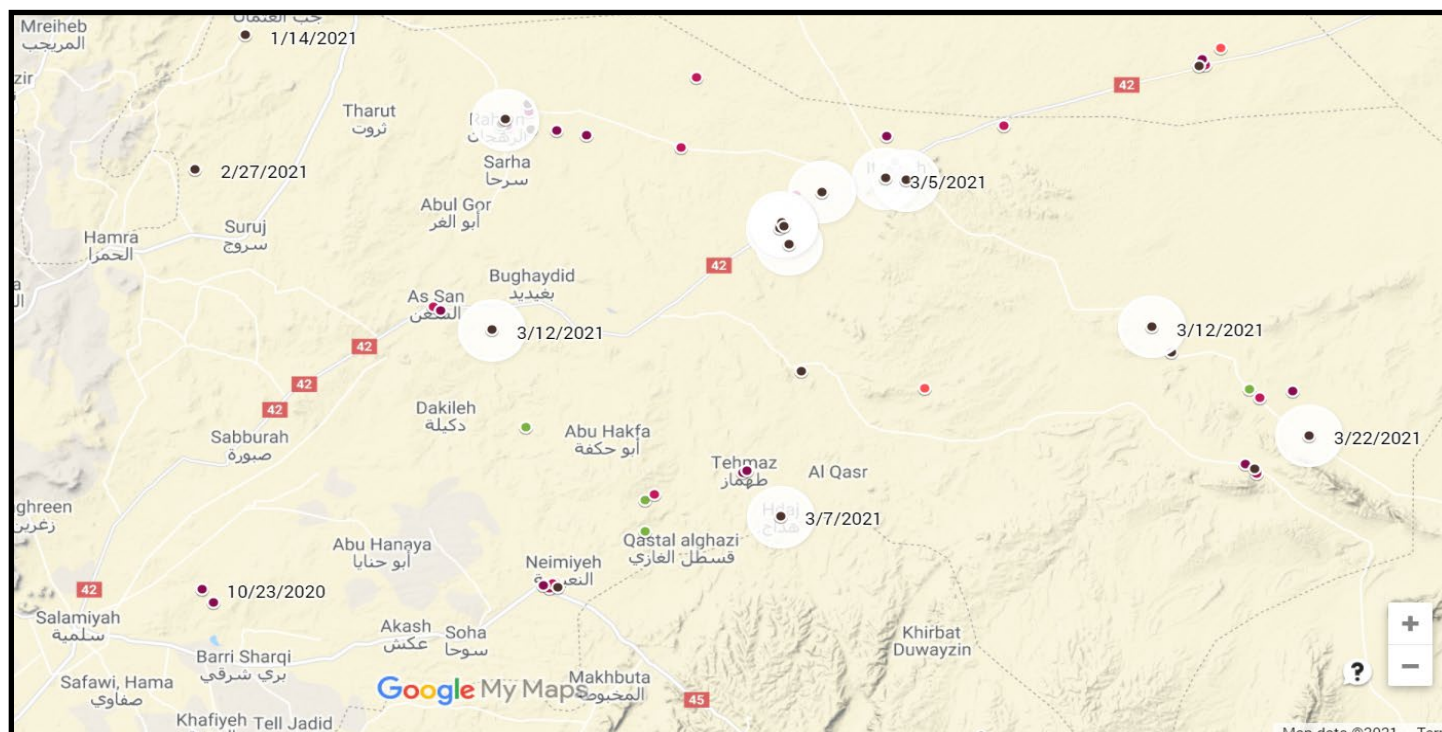
## Hama

ISIS activity continued to increase in eastern Hama during March. Unlike February's entirely passive attacks (mines and IEDs), ISIS cells conducted at least four attacks using small and medium arms in March. Three of these attacks targeted Syrian regime positions, with militants overrunning military outposts on two occasions (March 4 and March 21).

ISIS attacks targeting civilians also increased in east Hama in March. ISIS carried out seven attacks, including

one small arms attack that killed 26 and wounded 14 locals. As in February, most of these mine attacks occurred in the Wadi Azeeb area, where in January ISIS ambushed a convoy of civilian vehicles. It is highly likely that ISIS cells have continued to plant mines in this area since that January attack.

ISIS mine attacks continued in the Rahjan area for the sixth month in a row, and militants appear to have upped their attacks on the Ithriyah-Sukhnah road as well, wounding two commanders from the Syrian loyalist militia Liwa al-Baqir on March 12 and killing a Local Defense Forces militiaman on March 22. As in previous months, low scale activity also occurred in southeast Hama, around the strategic town of Uqayribat, where one regime soldier was killed by a mine on March 7. There were an additional four attacks in the “eastern Salamiyah countryside” in March that could not be more specifically located.



Map of ISIS attacks in Hama in March 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are four additional attacks that occurred somewhere east of Salamiyah.

## Homs

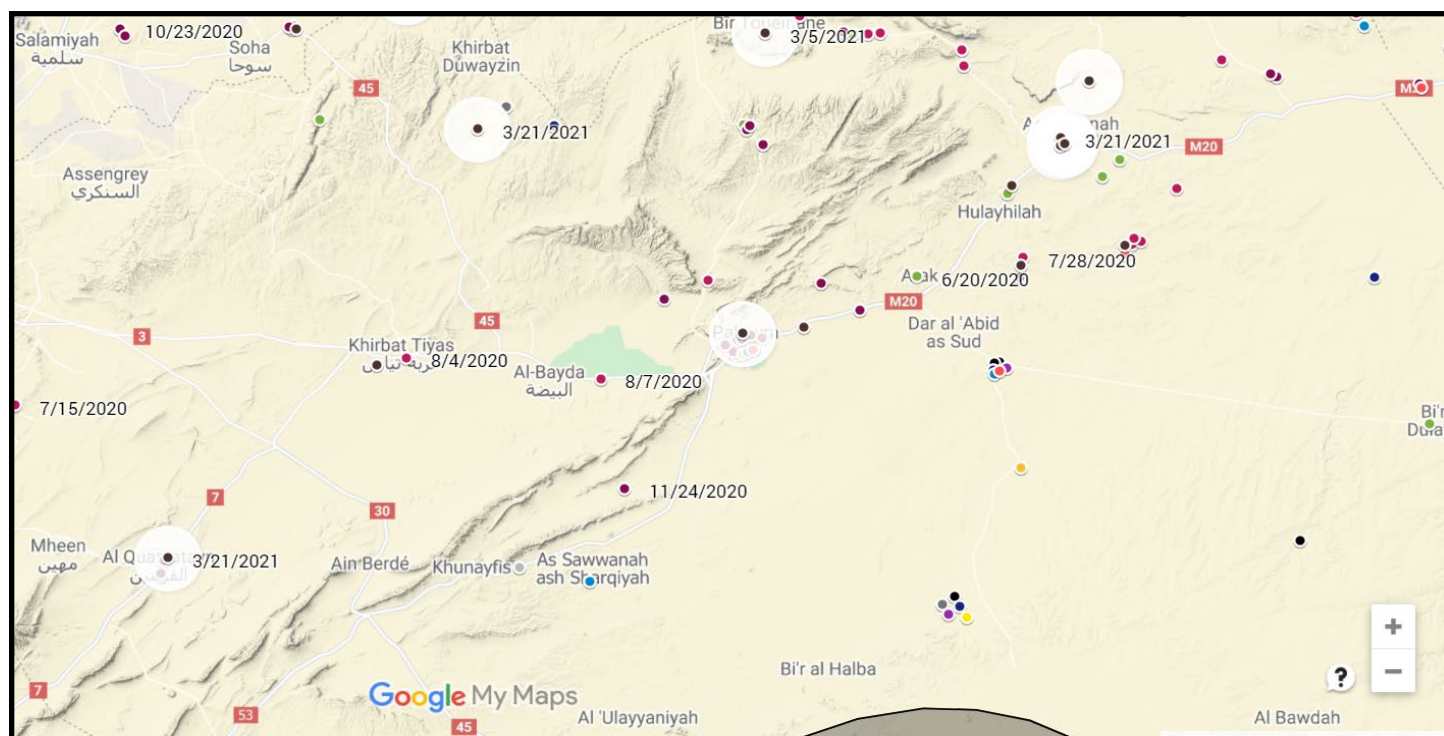
There were no recorded ISIS attacks in Homs province during the last two weeks of February and only three minor attacks in the first 18 days of March. This lull ended quickly on March 21, when the group conducted three high quality attacks. ISIS activity continued through the last 10 days of the month, during which four more attacks were carried out.

Five attacks stand out in particular this month, and point to a reinvigorated ISIS presence across the entire eastern half of the province. On March 21, ISIS militants on motorcycles ambushed a group of civilians south of the Shaer Gas Field, killing six. This was the first attack in this area since June 2020. The only confirmed prior attacks occurred in 2018.

On the same day, ISIS militants captured and executed two regime soldiers near Sukhnah and one soldier near Qaryatayn, releasing pictures of the executions within days of the attacks. The Qaryatayn incident, the second attack there in as many months, is significant in that it marks an increased pace of confirmed attacks near the town, only 17 miles from the Damascus border. It was also the first attack ISIS officially claimed there in years (the previous attacks on October 2020 and February 2021 went unclaimed). The fact that ISIS managed to capture a soldier alive *and* quickly send pictures of the execution to its central media network indicates a strengthening of the militants' position in this vulnerable area. It is possible that the group is preparing to target Qaryatayn during their likely offensive during Ramadan, which begins on April 13.

The capture of two soldiers near Sukhnah also appears to mark a return of activity around the town. In one of the group's most impressive strings of attacks in recent months, a small ISIS cell of eight to 10 fighters ambushed a bus using small arms fire as it brought new 4th Division reinforcements to the town on March 22. The attack occurred at night on the same day the regime's 4th Division began moving significant numbers of new [fighters](#) and [armored](#) vehicles to Sukhnah and Deir Ez Zor. The following day, militants in Deir Ez Zor attacked other 4th Division soldiers as they were taking command of several checkpoints near Shoula.

ISIS further claimed to have destroyed a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) ammunition truck near Sukhnah and an SAA transport truck north of the town on March 26. These attacks indicate a high degree of intelligence gathering and suggest that the lull in ISIS attacks here during the previous several weeks was not due to a loss in operational capacity.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in March 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are three additional attacks that occurred somewhere in “eastern Homs.”

## Deir Ez Zor

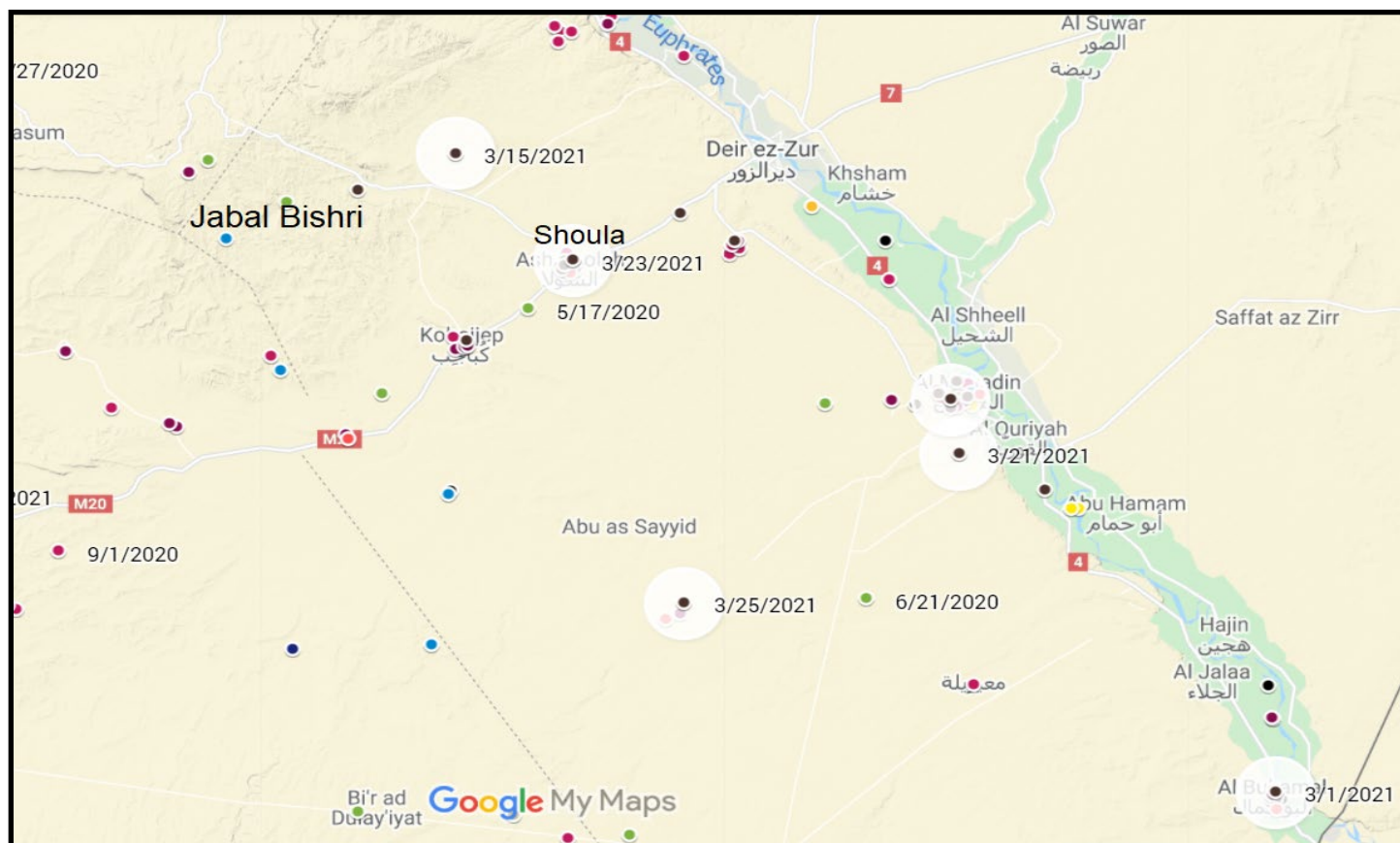
February's drop in confirmed ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor was largely the result of sustained, widespread regime security operations in the northwest corner of the province. Those operations continued until approximately March 10. In the final days of the operations, SAA units moved into the western and eastern sides of Jabal Bishri, discovering [multiple](#) ISIS weapons caches and hideouts and [destroying](#) several motorcycles and trucks belonging to the militants. Only one confirmed ISIS attack occurred in Deir Ez Zor during the first two weeks of March. Thus, the operation should be viewed as a success for the Syrian regime. It marked the first time a multi-month campaign consisting of SAA, Iranian, and Russian-backed forces, accompanied by air power, has been carried out since the insurgency began.

However, within days of the operation's conclusion, ISIS renewed its attacks. On March 15, ISIS fighters ambushed a group of civilians on the eastern side of Jabal Bishri, ostensibly cleared just days before, killing one person and destroying two trucks. At least two Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) fighters, including a field commander, were killed by a mine near Mayadin the following day and a militia checkpoint in the same area was attacked on March 21.

As previously mentioned, ISIS militants killed at least one soldier during their attack on newly manned 4th Division checkpoints near Shoula—again, the main site of the previous months' clearing operations. Finally, ISIS



captured an 11th Division soldier during a patrol in the Faydat Ibn Muwayniah region, southwest of Mayadin. This attack occurred amid several days of opposition outlets claiming multiple attacks against regime forces in this region.



Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor in March 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped is one additional attack that occurred in an unspecified location in the province.

## Regime Operations

As in February, the Syrian regime and its allies continued to conduct extensive anti-ISIS operations in March. However, unlike last month, many of these operations appear to have ended during the middle of the month, providing an opening for the observed surge in ISIS attacks.

As stated previously, the Shoula-Jabal Bishri operation initiated in January continued until about March 10 and resulted in several captured caches and hideouts. Throughout the month Liwa al-Quds fighters also conducted operations in [southern](#) Deir Ez Zor and along the [Syria-Iraq](#) border. On March 23, Air Force Intelligence soldiers were [filmed](#) at a small ISIS hideout they had reportedly discovered in the cliffs overlooking the town of Dweir, Deir Ez Zor. In Homs, Liwa al-Quds and the Russian Wagner forces conducted a 10-day operation south of Tuwaynan, close to where ISIS killed 12 militiamen in February. On March 11, approximately 150 SAA soldiers [gathered](#) near Rahjan, Hama for several days of demining operations, though mines continued to kill people in this area afterwards.

Most importantly, fresh regime soldiers, along with tanks and armored vehicles belonging to the 4th Division, arrived in Sukhnah and Deir Ez Zor in the final week of March. These units have yet to conduct any major operations and so far, appear to simply be reinforcing strategic points. The multiple attacks already carried out against these reinforcements raises questions about how effective they will be at countering the insurgency, especially considering the division's lack of experience in desert combat.

## **Where ISIS Goes From Here**

The first quarter of 2021 had almost three times the confirmed number of ISIS attacks (112), high quality attacks (37), and deaths (189) compared with the first quarter of 2020 (42, 13, and 70) and four times as many (32, 8, and 43) as in the first quarter of 2019. March broke the pattern set in the past two years, with the group returning to its high rate of attacks in both core and exterior regions nearly a month earlier than usual. This resumption of activity in what is historically an off month does not bode well for the region during the expected Ramadan offensive that is a hallmark of the terrorist group.

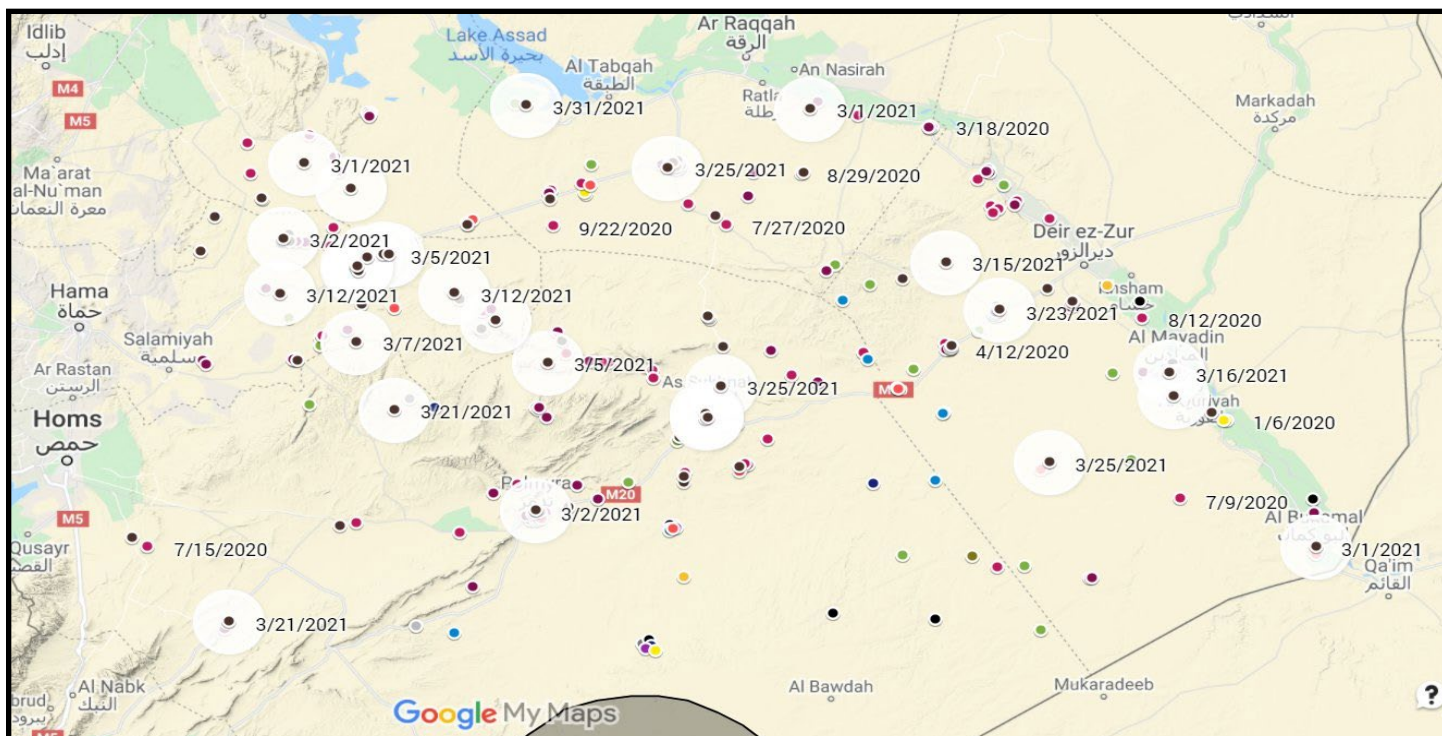
Yet this expansion and strengthening of the insurgency does not mean that regime-held towns or economic facilities are on the cusp of falling. To assume such is to deeply misunderstand the role the Badia (Syrian desert) plays in the broader ISIS insurgency across northeast Syria and Iraq. Central Syria is ISIS's safe zone, and its resource bed, so to speak, where new recruits are trained, caches are safely held, smuggling and extortion operations are based, and where insurgents return between fighting in the neighboring regions.

ISIS does not seek to hold territory here beyond its scattered camps deep in the desert and mountains where regime forces do not travel. Thus, the cells can easily move around regime patrols, and ISIS only faces real pressure when regime operations are conducted on multiple fronts for sustained periods of time. ISIS leverages its strength along the important highways to extort from traders and oil men, charging protection fees to allow safe passage. It is possible the group has also struck deals with the Syrian business moguls who operate the oil and gas facilities in the Badia, receiving money or fuel in exchange for leaving the facilities alone, though this is only speculation at the moment.

Capturing towns or these economic centers would significantly harm the insurgency. Sustained urban combat is one of the only guaranteed means for the regime to inflict unsustainable losses on ISIS, and destroying the oil and gas industry in the region would directly harm the group's ability to raise money.

This is not to say that these areas cannot become targets for the insurgents. As the group grows stronger, it will seek to raid larger bases, hoping to secure more weapons and supplies from regime stockpiles in towns like Uqayribat, Qaryatayn, and Sukhnah. Targeting regime commanders further weakens security in the area and opens more lucrative smuggling and criminal routes for ISIS to raise money. Civilian and military convoys alike will always remain targets as a means for the insurgents to pressure businessmen, harm the regime financially, and attempt to limit regime military movement on the main highways.

For the Badia, a strengthened ISIS means more freedom of movement, more effective intelligence gathering, more robust smuggling and financial opportunities, and the ability to establish cells in the exterior regions of east Hama, south Homs, and southeast Aleppo. Achieving any of these goals allows the group to more easily conduct operations across the border in Iraq and across the Euphrates in northeast Syria, as well as enabling further expansion back into areas near Suwayda, Dara'a, and Damascus.



Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in March 2021. This map does not include seven attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them: four “east Salamiyah” Hama attacks, two “east Homs” attacks, and one “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attack. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

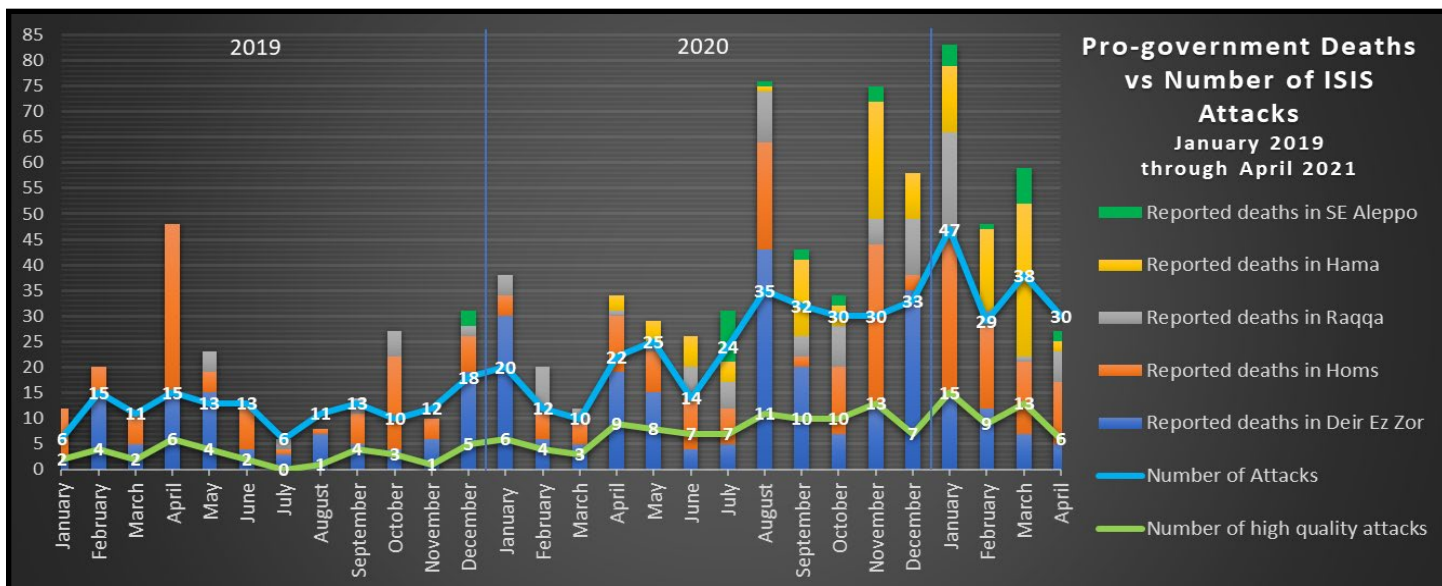
## April 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 30 confirmed attacks in April, killing at least 24 pro-Assad regime fighters and three civilians, while wounding at least 30 in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqah, Hama, and Aleppo governorates. Although the rate of ISIS attacks during April dropped back to that seen in February, ISIS continued to shift its focus from civilians back to military targets. Thus, while there were 30 attacks in April, compared to 38 in March, 24 of this month’s attacks hit military targets compared to just 26 in March. Also, slightly more security personnel were confirmed killed in April than in March.

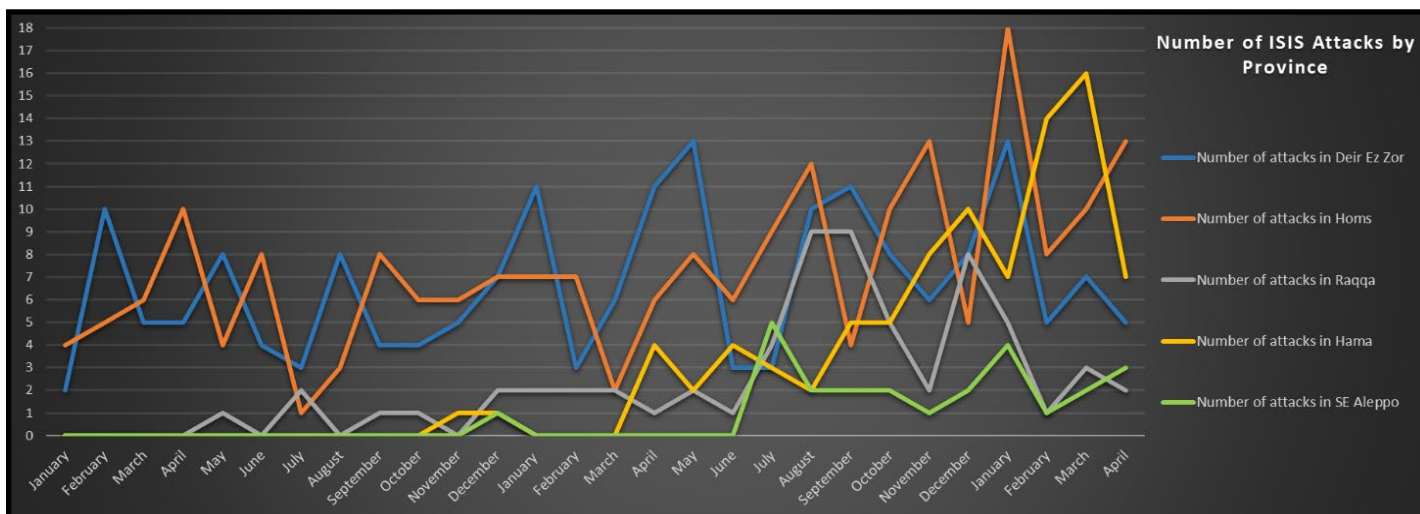
High quality\* attacks in April dropped to their lowest point in a year. This can largely be attributed to the complete lack of confirmed high quality attacks in Deir Ez Zor and a significant drop in Hama. That being said, none of April’s six high quality attacks solely targeted civilians, compared to four of the 13 in March and two of nine attacks in February.

While ISIS’s choice of targets this month continued the trend begun in late March its attack type did not, with the group using mines and IEDs at a slightly higher rate this month. Across March, ISIS used mines or IEDs for 47 percent of its attacks, heavily concentrated in the first half, and to a lesser extent, the last week of the month. In April, mines and IEDs accounted for 50 percent of confirmed attacks, which were again slightly concentrated in the first half and last days of the month.





Attacks in April continued to increase in Homs (13) and south Aleppo (3), while decreasing to February levels in Deir Ez Zor (5) and Raqqa (2). Attacks dropped sharply in Hama (7), ending a two-month climb. Despite the overall drop in attacks on civilians, ISIS's targeting of civilians in Hama occurred at a higher rate than in the previous two months. High quality attacks were carried out in every province except Deir Ez Zor in April (three in Homs and one each in Raqqa, Hama, and Aleppo).



## Hama

ISIS activity in east Hama halved in April, returning to January 2021 levels. All but two incidents involved mines or IEDs, compared to 12 of 16 attacks in March and all 14 attacks in February. All five mine/IED attacks in April occurred in established hotspots around Ithriyah and east of Salamiyah.

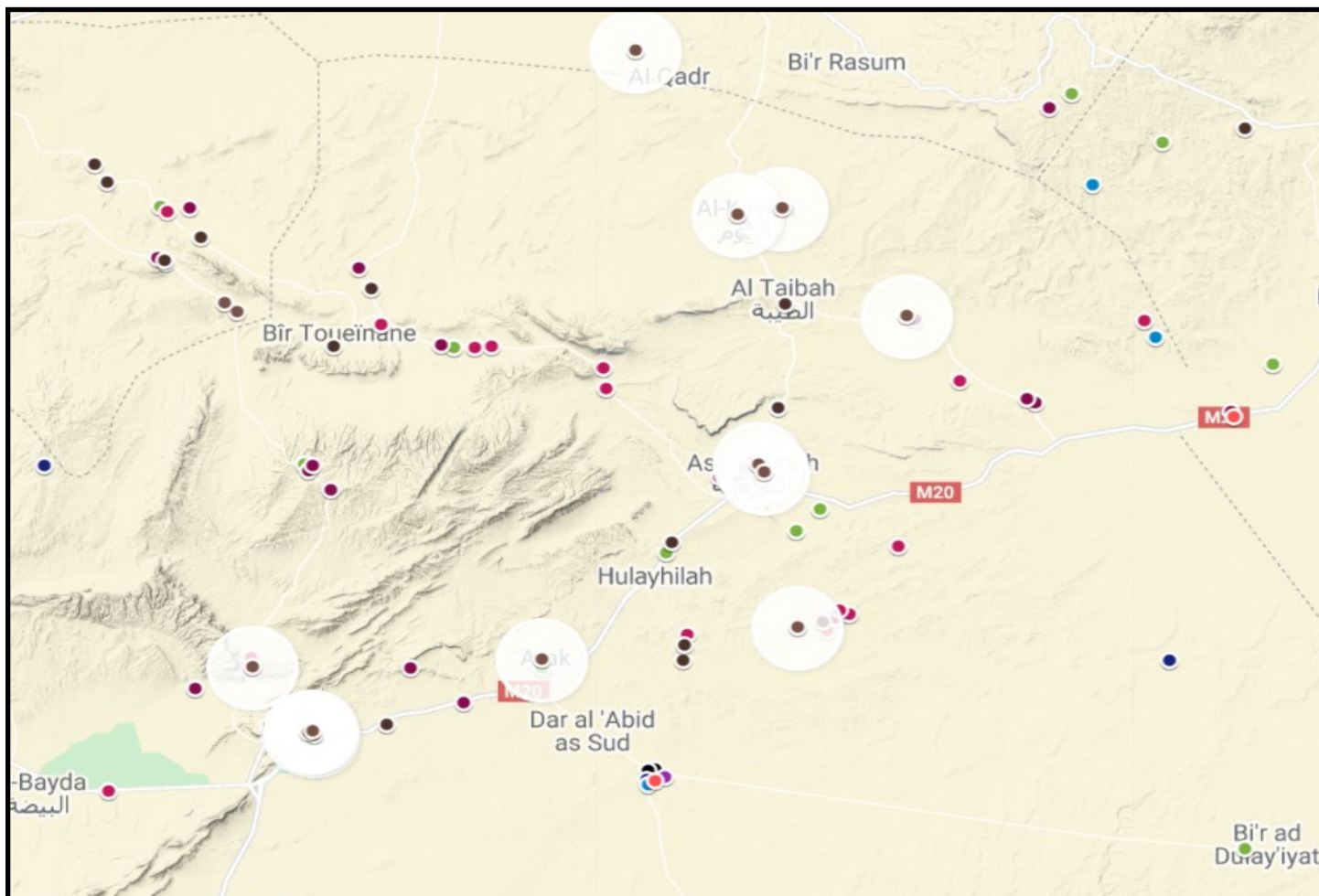
However, the remaining two incidents were extremely significant. On April 6, ISIS cells carried out a series of [ambushes](#) against at least two convoys of civilians and local security forces near the Homs-Hama border. As many as 70 people were kidnapped and several security members were killed and injured. Hours later, regime forces in Salamiyah exchanged imprisoned ISIS family members for nearly all of the civilians. This was the first known instance of ISIS using captured civilians to free its fighters' families.

## Homs

ISIS activity in Homs continued at a high rate, despite very few attacks in the first three weeks of April. Attacks were concentrated in three areas: Palmyra, Sukhnah, and Kawm. As in the past, Sukhnah remained the center

of ISIS activity in the province, with the group hitting regime forces with IEDs on several occasions, including a double-tap IED attack on April 24, when militants detonated a second device as soldiers arrived to inspect the wrecked vehicle. ISIS militants, still in control of the Wadi Doubayat area south of Sukhnah, also ambushed a regime patrol near there early in the month.

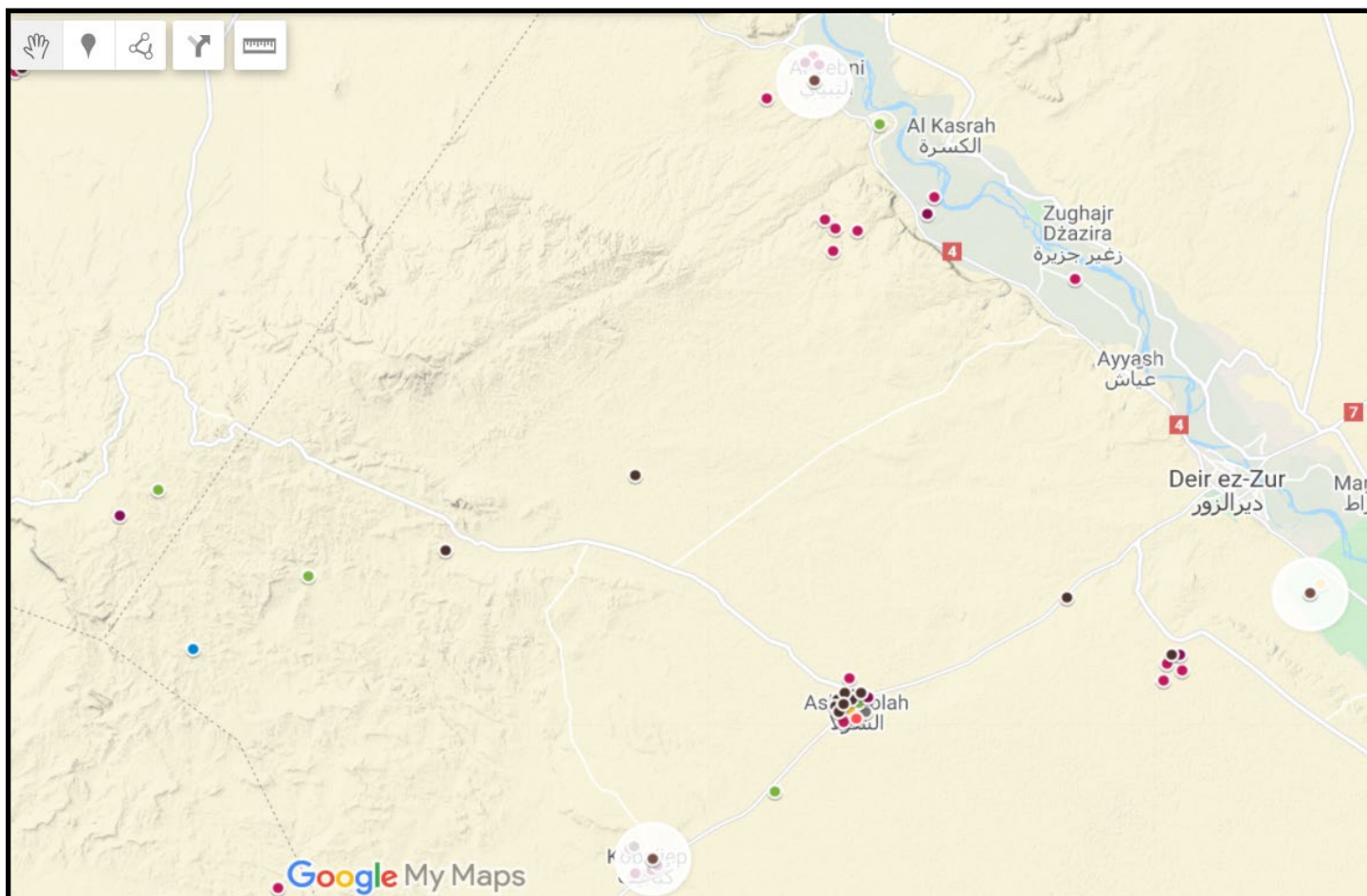
In the Palmyra region, ISIS continued to lay mines and IEDs, hitting regime forces at least four times and civilians once. In the northeast area of the governorate, ISIS cells based in the Kawm-Jabal Bishri region clashed at least twice with regime forces, attempting to secure the area around Kawm, while also attacking regime forces with a mine on one of the roads approaching Kawm from the south. To the north, at least one soldier was killed in clashes near the Kawm-Kadir area on the Homs-Raqqa border.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in April 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped is one additional attack killing a Lebanese Hezbollah fighter somewhere in the Badia.

## Deir Ez Zor

After a small increase in attacks in March, April brought a drop in Deir Ez Zor activity. The regime's early 2021 Shoula operations and a second, smaller operation late in April appear to have effectively kept ISIS forces from coming out of the desert to launch attacks. Of the five confirmed attacks in April, four occurred in the first two weeks and only one was of note. On April 5, a suspected ISIS member threw a grenade into a checkpoint west of the town of Tabni, injuring and possibly killing some of the men inside. Tabni lies north of Deir Ez Zor city, and its countryside was the site of intense fighting in [August](#). On October 2, 2020, ISIS fighters wearing suicide belts attacks the town's police station, killing several. While there has not been any confirmed ISIS activity since early November 2020, the fact that someone was able to get close enough to a checkpoint to throw a grenade suggests there are still ISIS sympathizers in or around the town.



Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor in April 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are two additional attacks that occurred in unspecified locations in the province.

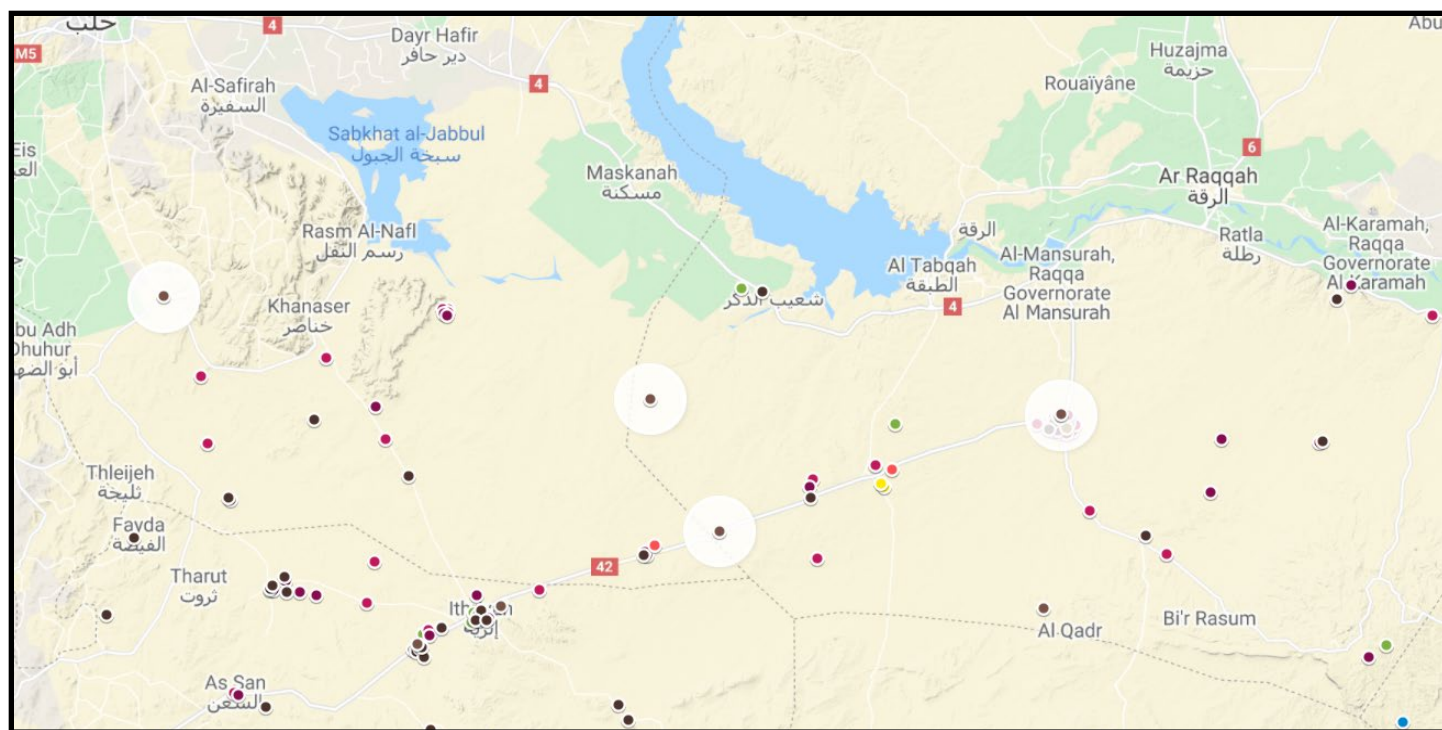
## Raqqa and Aleppo

ISIS activity continued to increase in the west Raqqa and south Aleppo areas following the fake checkpoint attack near Dibsi Afnan in late March. In the early morning of April 19, ISIS fighters in a pickup truck and on motorcycles attacked a family's house south of Dibsi Afnan on the Raqqa-Aleppo border. The militants and civilians engaged in a 30-minute firefight that left one civilian dead and one wounded. The family had been targeted by ISIS last year as well in an attack that killed the head of the household and one of his sons.

The next day, five members of the regime's Military Security disappeared while combing one of the abandoned villages near Resafa, presumably kidnapped or killed by ISIS militants. Three days later, on April 23, a small group of ISIS fighters attacked a new 5th Corps outpost on the highway at the Hama-Aleppo-Raqqa administrative border. This ISIS attack, carried out at night and employing [thermal optics](#), came as the regime began moving new troops into the governorate.

ISIS activity dropped significantly with the arrival of new forces and extensive patrols, with only one more small clash occurring somewhere south of Resafa on April 29. Meanwhile, on April 28, ISIS claimed the killing of two regime soldiers by hitting their motorcycle with an IED near Tel Daman, west of Khanasir. This marked the farthest northwest attack of an ISIS Badia cell to date, possibly signaling an expansion of Khanasir-based cells.





Map of ISIS attacks in Raqqa and Aleppo in April 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped is one additional attack that occurred somewhere south of Resafa.

## Regime Operations

The Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies completed extensive anti-ISIS operations in Deir Ez Zor in early March, as well as smaller operations in northeast Homs, around Tuwaynan, and in east Hama, around Rahjan. These operations ended by mid-March, allowing a surge of ISIS activity to occur. Simultaneously, the regime began bolstering its forces in Homs and Deir Ez Zor, sending extensive reinforcements from the 4th Armored Division, including tanks, to Palmyra, Sukhnah, and Deir Ez Zor city.

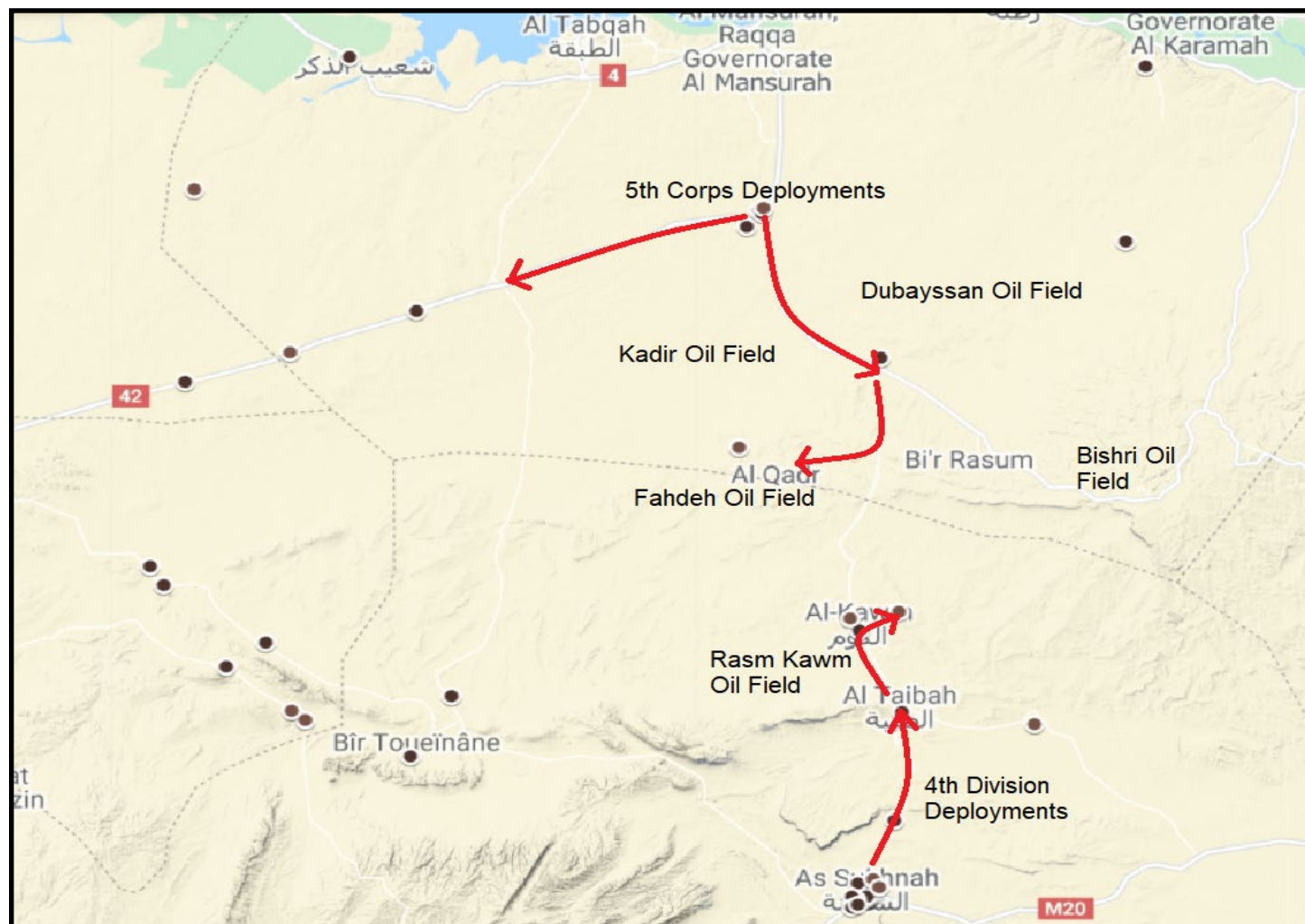
In April, these forces began new operations. The Iranian-backed Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun launched new sweeps around Shoula, likely in response to renewed ISIS activity there in late March. These forces, alongside local National Defense Forces (NDF) units, also appear to have launched a still-ongoing operation in the Mayadin countryside in late April. Other anti-ISIS sweeps took place in east Hama, the Maskanah countryside in Aleppo, and in the mountains between Palmyra and Sukhnah. This last area is where the Russian Ministry of Defense made the absurd claim of killing 200 ISIS militants in a bombing run. According to local sources and [unofficial](#) ISIS accounts, only one to three fighters were killed in the strikes.

Most significantly, beginning in mid-April, the regime initiated what appeared to be a multi-pronged operation in northeast Homs and southern Raqqa. Units from the newly arrived 4th Division, assisted by Syrian private military contractors and the NDF, pushed north from Sukhnah to secure the strategic town of Kawm. Kawm is the last major urban center along the highway connecting Sukhnah with Resafa in Raqqa. The road also runs alongside several oil and gas fields.

Regime forces have a history of fighting ISIS cells in and around Kawm, entering the town for a period only to be pushed out again. After again entering Kawm on April 22, regime forces attempted to push east into the heart of ISIS territory, but were ambushed after advancing about 5km, losing their sector commander in the process. The forces withdrew entirely from the town, but returned the next day after the Russian Air Force bombed the countryside. These forces would again clash with ISIS around Kawm on April 27. As of this writing, they remain in control of the town.

Meanwhile, the Russian-backed 5th Corps sent new units to southern Raqqa during the second half of the month. These new units took up positions along the Ithriya-Tabqa highway, reinforced the garrison in Resafa,

and began pushing south, adding new outposts alongside the oil fields between Resafa and Kawm. ISIS conducted a night-time attack on one of these new positions along the Ithriya-Tabqa highway on April 23. On April 28, 5th Corps fighters patrolling near the oil fields south of Resafa ambushed and killed several ISIS fighters, while another patrol lost at least one soldier to an ISIS ambush the following day.



*Map showing regime operations in northeast Homs and south Raqqa in April. Dots are locations of ISIS attacks in 2021.*

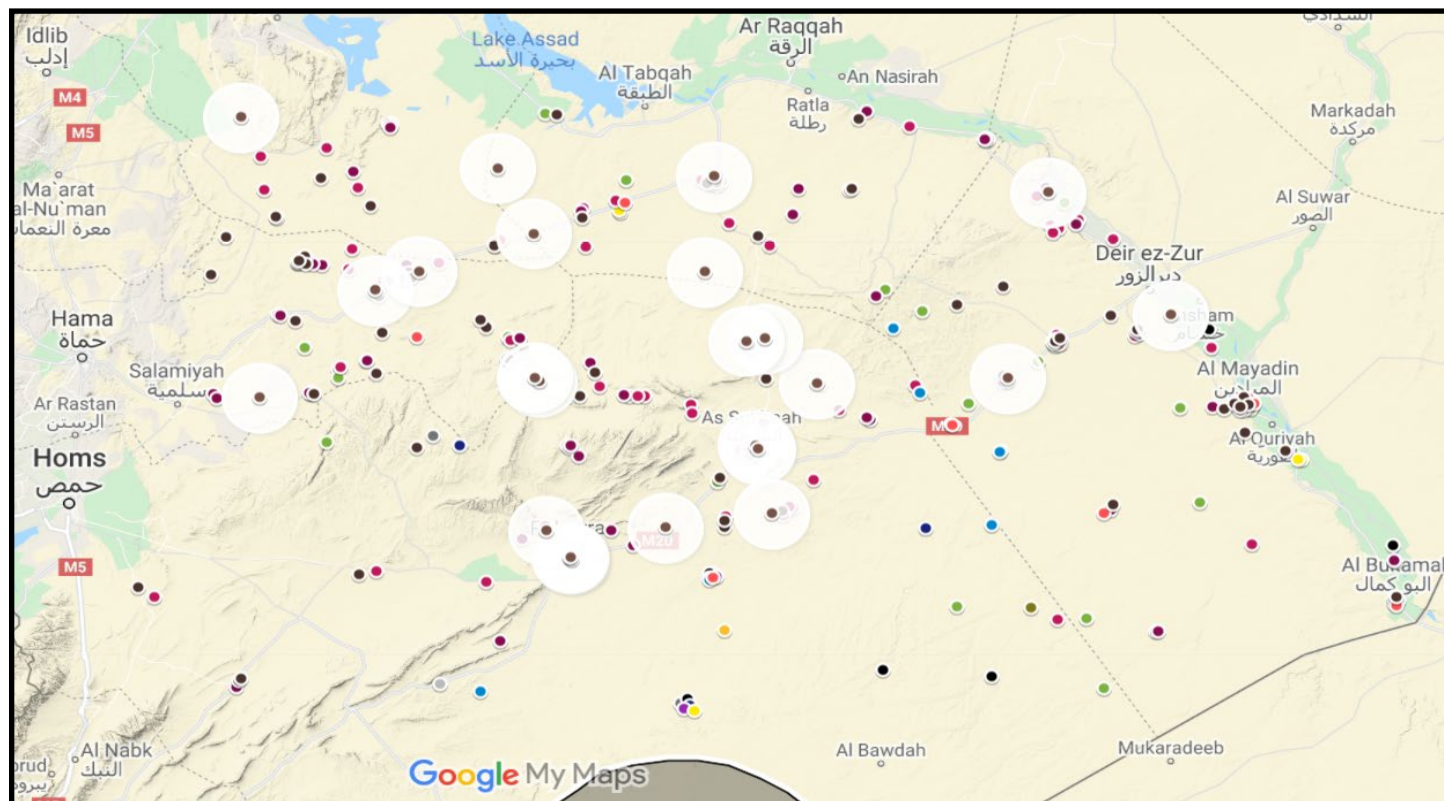
This Raqqa deployment signals a major shift in the Syrian regime's attitude towards the Badia. Southern Raqqa has always been the weakest of the regime's Badia regions, with forces there frequently undermanned, under-trained, and unsupported by the high command and Air Force. For much of 2020, pro-regime units in southern Raqqa struggled to effectively patrol or conduct anti-ISIS operations and almost never received air support. The fact that Damascus is now emphasizing what was once its least prioritized front suggests the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) leadership has finally acknowledged the scale of the ISIS problem and is ready to devote significant resources to fight it.

### Looking Ahead

The regime's actions in April, especially in Raqqa, constitute the second major obstacle ISIS has faced this year (the first being the Shoula operations in January and February). The Badia is now flooded with regime troops, and while they largely remain garrisoned in major towns where ISIS is already unlikely to attack, ISIS cells will need to adjust to the new emphasis on patrols and extensive outpost building. It will likely take several weeks for ISIS cells to adjust their tactics in response to these developments. In the meantime, they will—as one 5th Corps soldier told this author—continue to rely on “mines and IEDs and harassing fire from long distances.” Unfortunately for analytical purposes, such attacks are the least reported by loyalist media, further limiting our ability to

understand what is actually happening in the Badia.

May will be an important month for gauging the strength of ISIS in the Badia. The group has spent the past year laying the groundwork for a resurgence: Expanding into new areas of operations, smuggling in and training new fighters, and building tendrils into the local economy. This month's troop surge has forced cells to pull back into their deep rural hideouts. This comes at the same time as reports that ISIS has shifted fighters out of the Badia and into northeast Syria and Iraq to assist in Ramadan attacks. If and when ISIS is able to hit back and turn newly "cleared" areas back into "contested" areas will reveal much about the longevity of this insurgency.



Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in April 2021. This map does not include seven attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them: two “east Salamiyah” Hama attacks, one “Badia” Homs attack, one south Raqqah attack, and one “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attack. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## May 2021

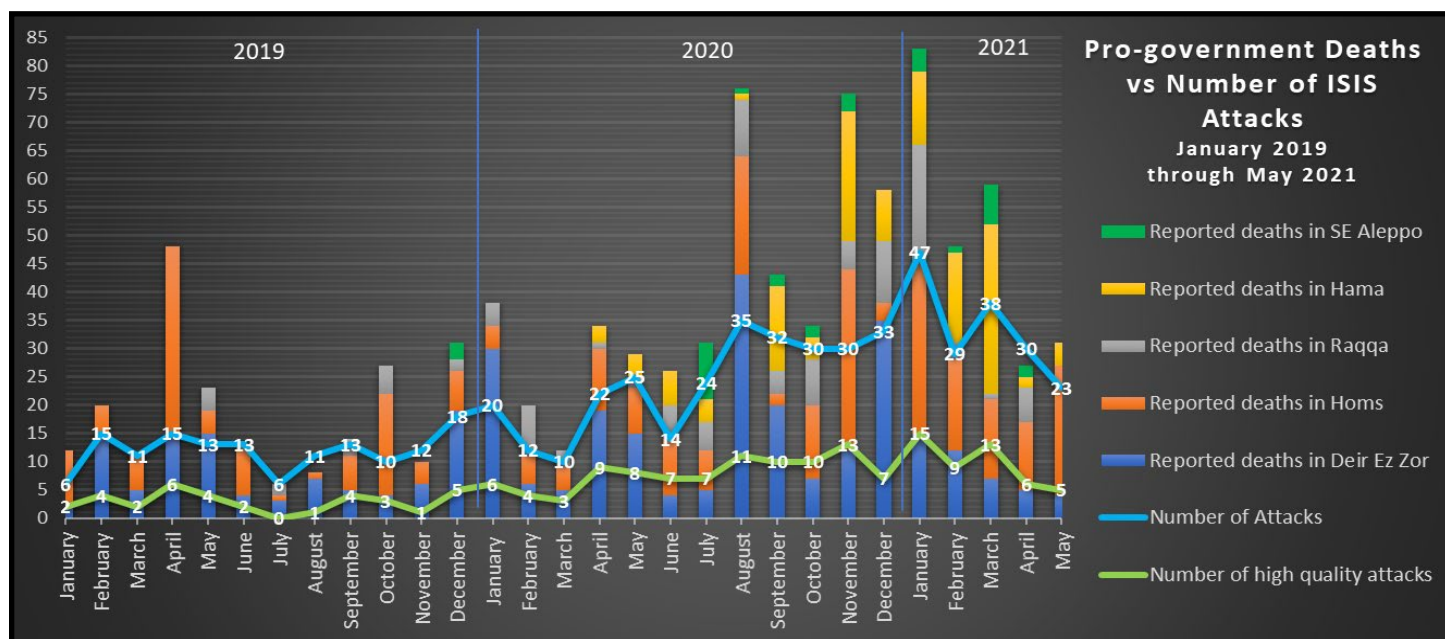
ISIS militants carried out at least 23 confirmed attacks in May, killing at least 29 pro-Assad regime fighters and two civilians, while wounding at least 73 in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqah, Hama, and Aleppo governorates. The number of ISIS attacks carried out dropped significantly for the second month in a row, matching a level not seen since April 2020. Furthermore, ISIS cells only conducted five high quality\* attacks during May, a level not witnessed since March 2020. The drop in ISIS activity in May, as in April, is largely due to the ongoing Syrian regime, Russian, and Iranian operations across Deir Ez Zor, Homs, and Raqqah.

ISIS continued to shift its focus away from civilians. All but three of May's attacks as well as all high quality attacks targeted security forces. Despite the significant drop in the number of attacks, May's attacks on average killed and wounded more people than those of the previous four months. More Assad regime security forces were killed in May than in March, despite ISIS conducting 16 fewer attacks. However, in a sign of improved regime operations, May was the first in 17 months when ISIS failed to kill a regime commander.

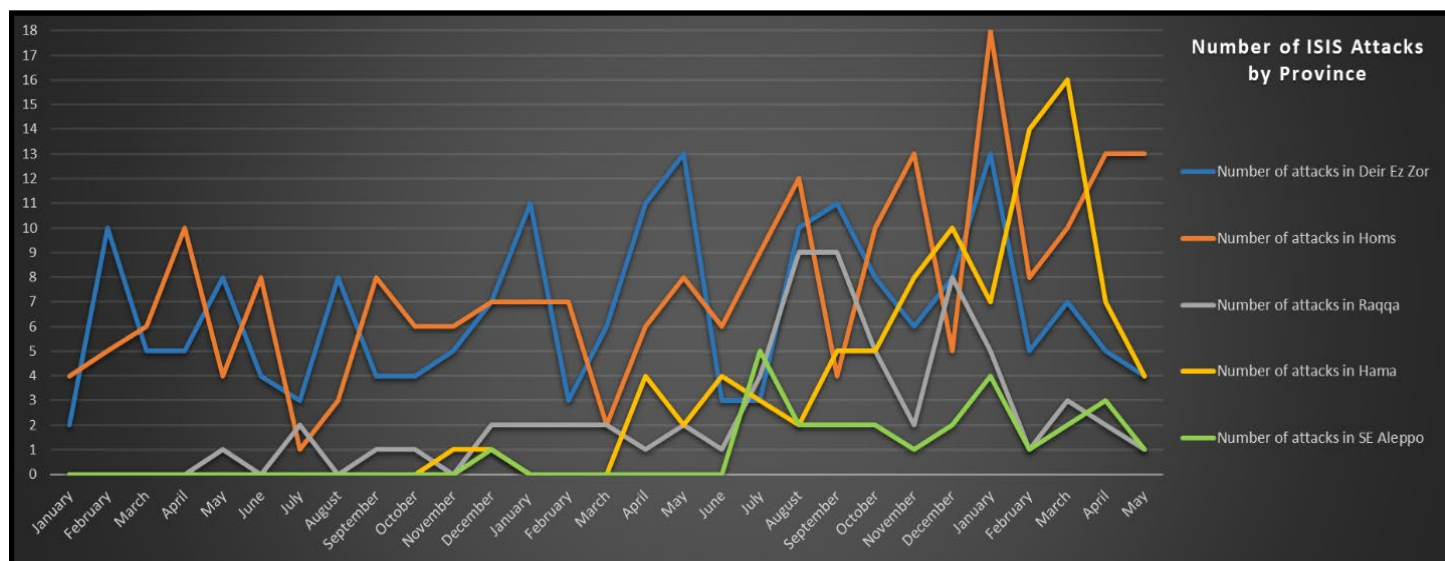
ISIS cells relied on mines and improvised explosive devices (IED) for at least 10 of the 23 confirmed attacks in



May, similar to April and March. Additional use of mines and IEDs by ISIS in Raqqa and Deir Ez Zor were referenced during interviews conducted by the author but were not recorded due to the lack of specificity about when they occurred. ISIS commonly reverts to a heavy reliance on indirect attacks when under heavy pressure from security forces, as has been the case for the past three months.



Attacks in May continued at roughly April's pace in Homs (13), south Aleppo (1), and south Raqqa (1) while continuing their precipitous two month drop in Hama (4) and five-month drop in Deir Ez Zor (4). As in April, despite the overall drop in attacks on civilians, ISIS continued to heavily target them in eastern Hama. May was also the first month since March 2020 that only one governorate, in this case Homs, experienced high quality attacks.



## Hama

ISIS activity in east Hama dropped for the second month in a row, with only four documented attacks. Three of these attacks were mines hitting civilian vehicles and workers. The only significant documented attack occurred in northern Hama, west of Rahjan in an area that has seen a slowly expanding ISIS presence since the start of 2021. On May 9, ISIS fighters attacked a checkpoint near the village of Bayoud, killing one civilian and wounding a National Defense Forces (NDF) fighter. The attack was reported by locals and claimed by ISIS's official media outlet Amaq, where the group stated its fighters overran the checkpoint and captured weapons.

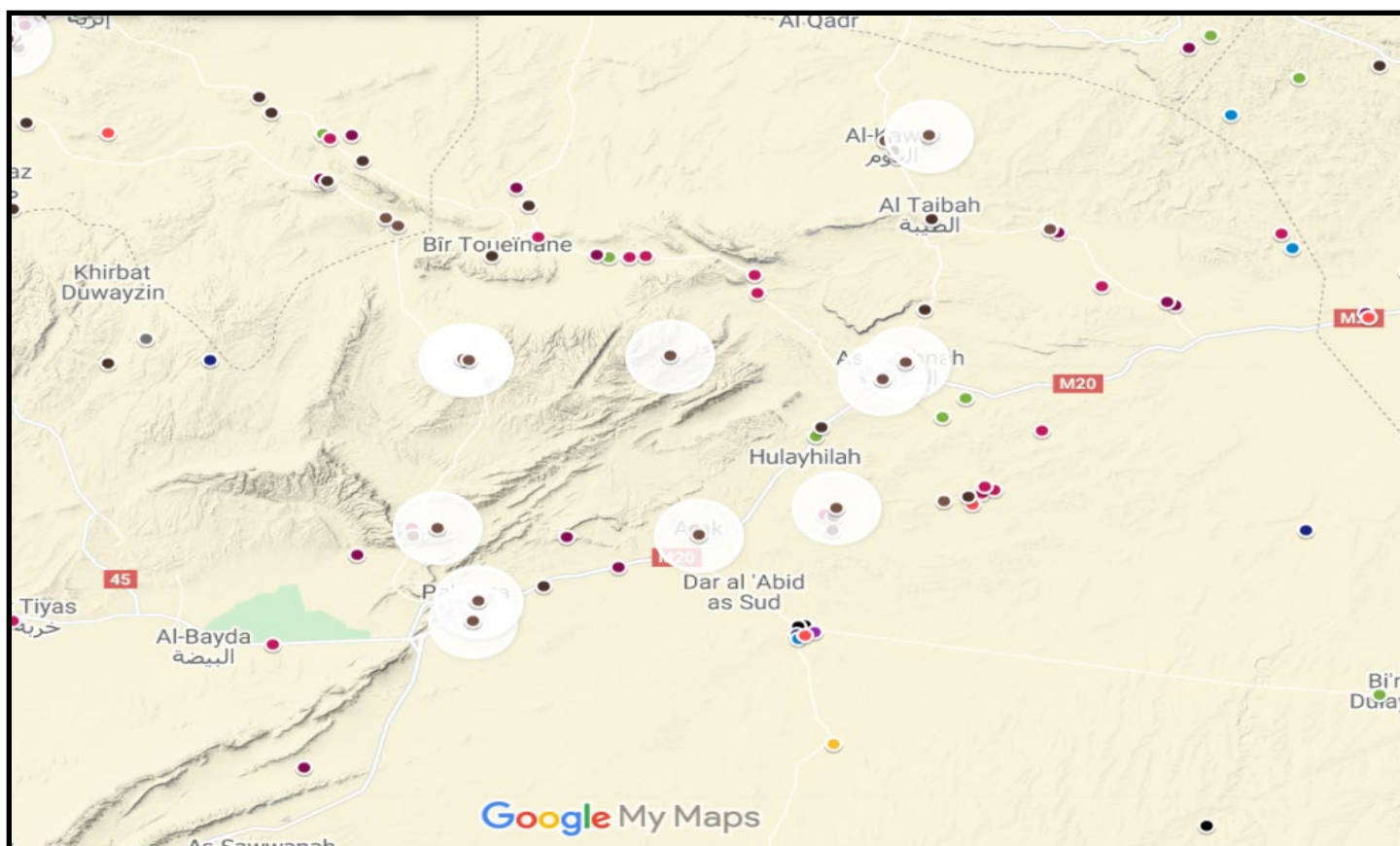
In addition to these four documented attacks, the author was informed via interviews with local NDF members about additional, continued activity targeting shepherds. According to an NDF fighter previously deployed to the area and with extensive contacts in east Hama, ISIS cells have been stealing “hundreds” of sheep each week for at least the past two months. These robberies sometimes, but not always, involve the thieves killing shepherds. The sheep are then moved out of the governorate and eventually sold in other parts of the country, providing a lucrative financial stream for ISIS.

## Homs

ISIS activity in Homs remained high in May, continuing the trend began in late April. ISIS conducted 13 attacks in Homs, at least six of which involved mines or IEDs. There was a noticeable expansion of activity outside of the usual core area of Sukhnah, largely due to Assad regime activity southeast of Palmyra and northeast of Sukhnah.

Five of the 13 attacks in Homs were high quality. On May 9, ISIS fighters ambushed and killed at least three members of the Liwa al-Quds’ Abu Zainab Group (a small militia formerly affiliated with the Tiger Forces) near Jabal Amor, north of Palmyra. On the same day elsewhere in the governorate, ISIS lured a regime convoy into a large IED ambush. According to a member of the regime’s 5th Corps interviewed by the author, a shepherd was killed by a mine, leading the locals to blame the army and demand they investigate. When the military convoy entered the area, they were hit with “every explosive device” including “standard mines, anti-armor mines, and homemade explosives.” At least one soldier was killed and 19 were wounded.

The next day, another series of mines killed six and wounded 20 soldiers in the Wadi Qatqat area northwest of Sukhnah. From approximately May 8 through May 13, ISIS and regime forces fought fierce battles east of Kawm, with at least four NDF fighters killed and 15 wounded as the regime attempted to push into the mountains. On May 15, ISIS released a statement claiming to have captured and executed five soldiers in eastern Homs “in recent days.”



*Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in May 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are two additional attacks that combined killed six and wounded 19 soldiers somewhere in the Homs countryside.*

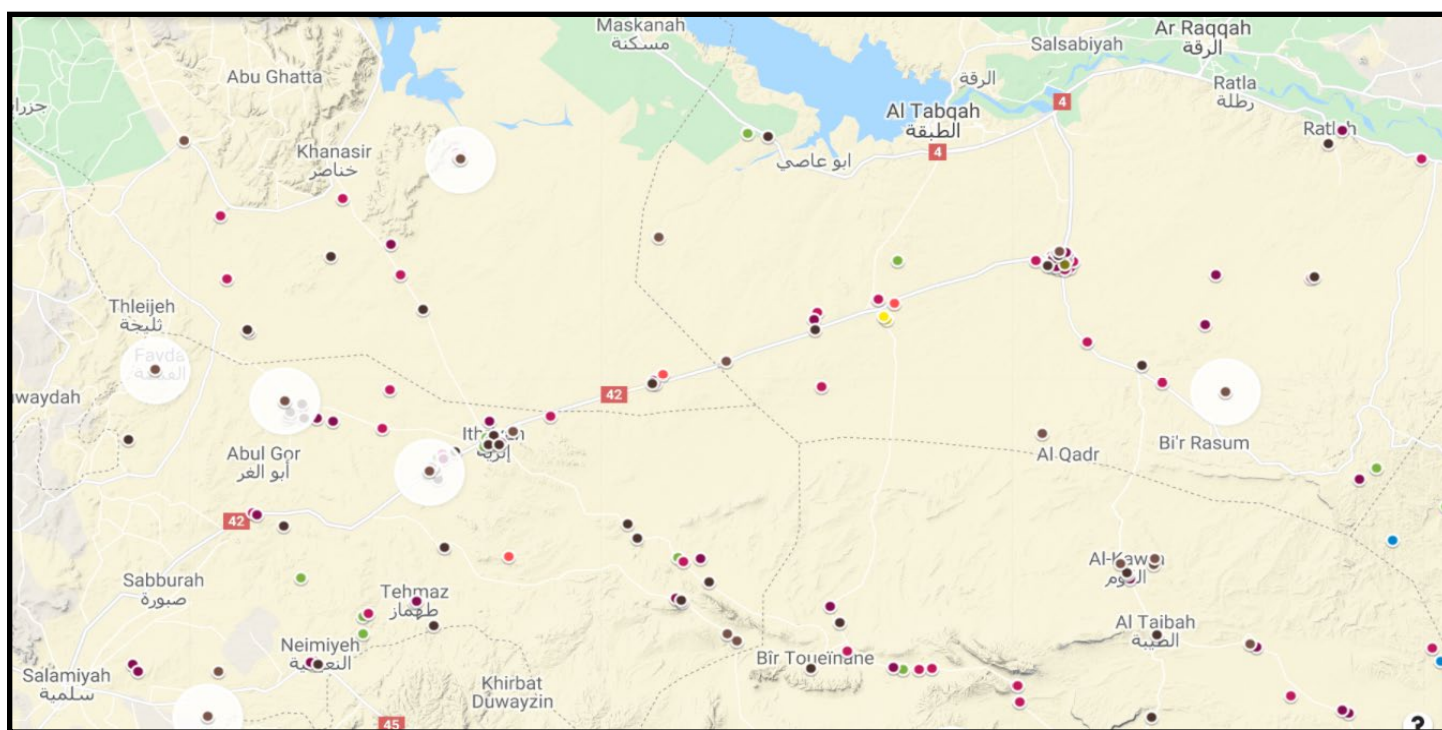
## Deir Ez Zor

Attacks in Deir Ez Zor dropped to their lowest level since July 2020 due to ongoing regime and Iranian operations in the desert. Most of the four attacks recorded in May appear to be from mines. The only attack of any significance was an attack on a checkpoint in Salhiyah, north of Bukamal, that killed two NDF fighters. However, the author was also told by knowledgeable regime sources that there had been additional, intermittent mine hits throughout the month. These were not recorded due to the lack of specificity about where and when these occurred.

## Raqqa and Aleppo

Confirmed ISIS activity in south Raqqa and Aleppo continued to fluctuate in the one to three attacks per month range. Each governorate had one confirmed attack, both of note. On May 17, ISIS fighters ambushed a regime patrol near the Dubaysan Oil Field, destroying at least one vehicle. The patrol had been searching for five soldiers kidnapped by ISIS on April 20 and believed still alive and being held somewhere in the area. On May 20, ISIS claimed to attack a regime outpost in the Durayhim area of southern Aleppo. NDF sources confirmed the attack, saying three of their soldiers were wounded and none killed.

As in Deir Ez Zor, there were additional reports of attacks in these areas not included in the database. A regime 5<sup>th</sup> Corps fighter whose friends are currently deployed to Raqqa told the author that, like Deir Ez Zor, patrols were being hit by mines every couple of days. The fighter further stated that two opposition [claims](#) of ISIS attacks in the Maskanah region, on May 13 and May 18, had indeed occurred. However, other regime soldiers interviewed by the author could neither confirm nor deny the claims. These potential attacks should be noted, however, as ISIS and criminal activity in the Maskanah and Aleppo-Raqqa border areas is rising.



Map of ISIS attacks in Hama, Raqqa, and Aleppo in May 2021 (highlighted dots).

## Regime Operations

Syrian regime anti-ISIS operations continued at a high pace in May and are increasingly being led by the Iranian-commanded Afghans of Liwa Fatemiyoun. As noted in previous updates, the regime launched its first true, large scale anti-ISIS operation in January of this year, targeting ISIS cells in Deir Ez Zor that had pushed south from Jabal Bishri and had successfully established themselves along the strategic Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway. This operation, commanded by the regime's Major General Nizar Khader with combined forces from the Syrian



Arab Army's (SAA) 17th Division, 5th Corps, NDF, and Liwa Fatemiyoun, and supported by Russian aircraft, fought fierce battles with ISIS until about March 10. Then the active part of the operation ended and the regime shifted to a strategy of flooding the newly cleared areas with fresh soldiers from the 5th Corps and 4th Division. Despite some minor clashes and mine attacks, the area north of Shoula has remained highly secure ever since.

In April, the Iranians launched a second set of smaller sweeps north of Shoula while shifting their focus south, beginning a new campaign in the Mayadin countryside under much secrecy. Unlike the Shoula campaign, this ongoing operation is being led by Iran and Liwa Fatemiyoun, but the foreign forces are still supported by the Deir Ez Zor NDF and SAA, and receive Syrian Air Force support. This Mayadin operation saw battles peak in late April, with reports of Afghan wounded and dead arriving at the Mayadin hospital. Since the start of May, however, the desert region of western Deir Ez Zor has been very quiet, with only the occasional mine hitting patrols as Liwa Fatemiyoun expands its presence.

Around the same time this Mayadin operation began in April, the regime started a new push to clear the Kawm Oasis region of northeast Homs. As stated in April's ISIS update, this operation saw regime forces moving south from Resafa and north from Sukhnah, attempting to secure the string of oil and gas fields in this remote area. The ISIS-regime fighting around Kawm has historically been marked by its ping-pong nature, with neither side taking full control. However, the late April campaign appeared to yield more permanent progress for regime forces. Despite initial setbacks and after significant fighting, the regime had fully secured new positions about 5km east of the town by mid-May. Since then, regime forces have focused on securing and widening their new holdings, rather than attempting to push deeper into what they believe is an ISIS stronghold.

Elsewhere in Homs, Liwa Fatemiyoun has been assisting Syrian forces in sweeps east of Palmyra, particularly around Arak. Meanwhile patrols continue in southern Raqqqa. The Syrian and Russian air forces continue to provide regular air support in Homs and Raqqqa, reportedly arriving within 15 to 60 minutes of regime forces coming under attack. Of course, this leaves plenty of time for ISIS cells to quickly ambush or harass security forces without much consequence, and few if any insurgents have been killed in the bombing runs. Still, the constant threat of air support, combined with the extensive presence of ground forces, appears to have seriously hindered ISIS's ability to operate in the Badia. The Russians are also pursuing an independent campaign in Deir Ez Zor of bombing suspected active and inactive ISIS hideouts in what appears to be a strategy of denying ISIS hiding places in the Badia. The impact of the campaign is not yet clear.

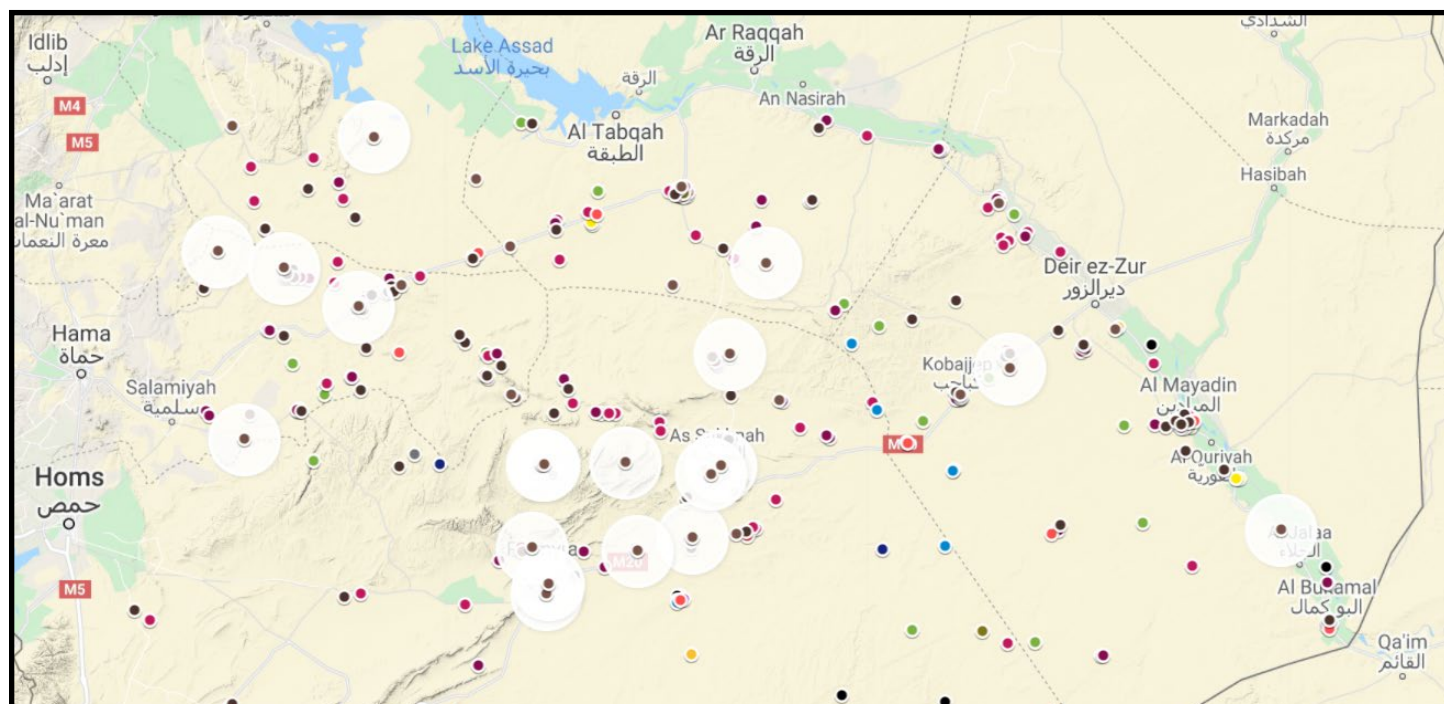
## **Looking Ahead**

If the first three months of 2021 revealed a new willingness by Damascus to deal with ISIS in the Badia, the past two months have proven just how serious this decision was. Many analysts appear eager to view regime operations through stale, outdated frameworks rooted in earlier periods of the war. But with the frontlines frozen in the northwest, Damascus has plenty of manpower to devote to central Syria.

The Assad regime's decision in April to follow up the successful Shoula operations with a large deployment of 4th Division troops to Homs and Deir Ez Zor, and then the unprecedented deployment of experienced 5th Corps battalions to Raqqqa, demonstrates a shift in SAA tactical thinking. These operations should not be viewed as just another round of the same futile actions of the past three years, but as a serious shift in emphasis that is reaping benefits on the ground. The new strategy has forced ISIS to reduce its activity to levels not seen since Spring 2020, before the group's massive expansion in the area. Crucially, ISIS has retained the ability to conduct occasional significant attacks on regime bases and convoys. But such actions have steadily been reduced from once a week to once a month, and they no longer have the same impact on regime operations as in the past.

The regime and Iranian operations of the past five months have been their most successful anti-ISIS campaigns since 2017 and have unquestionably forced ISIS onto the backfoot. The long-term success of these operations now relies on the regime maintaining its increased troop presence in the remote areas of Raqqqa, Homs, and Deir Ez Zor, and on the Syrian and Russian air forces continuing to improve their support to ground troops. However, even if this happens, Damascus will still need to contend with the chaotic security environment in southeastern Aleppo and ISIS's suspected financial operations in east Hama. Moreover, ISIS still operates training camps in the Badia, likely in southern Homs where the regime has yet to conduct major operations, and is maintaining its strength across the Euphrates in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held areas of Raqqqa and Deir Ez Zor. ISIS's

strength on the eastern side of the river and the ease with which its fighters can cross between the two sides means that there is always the possibility that the group can shift resources west and increase its focus on regime positions.



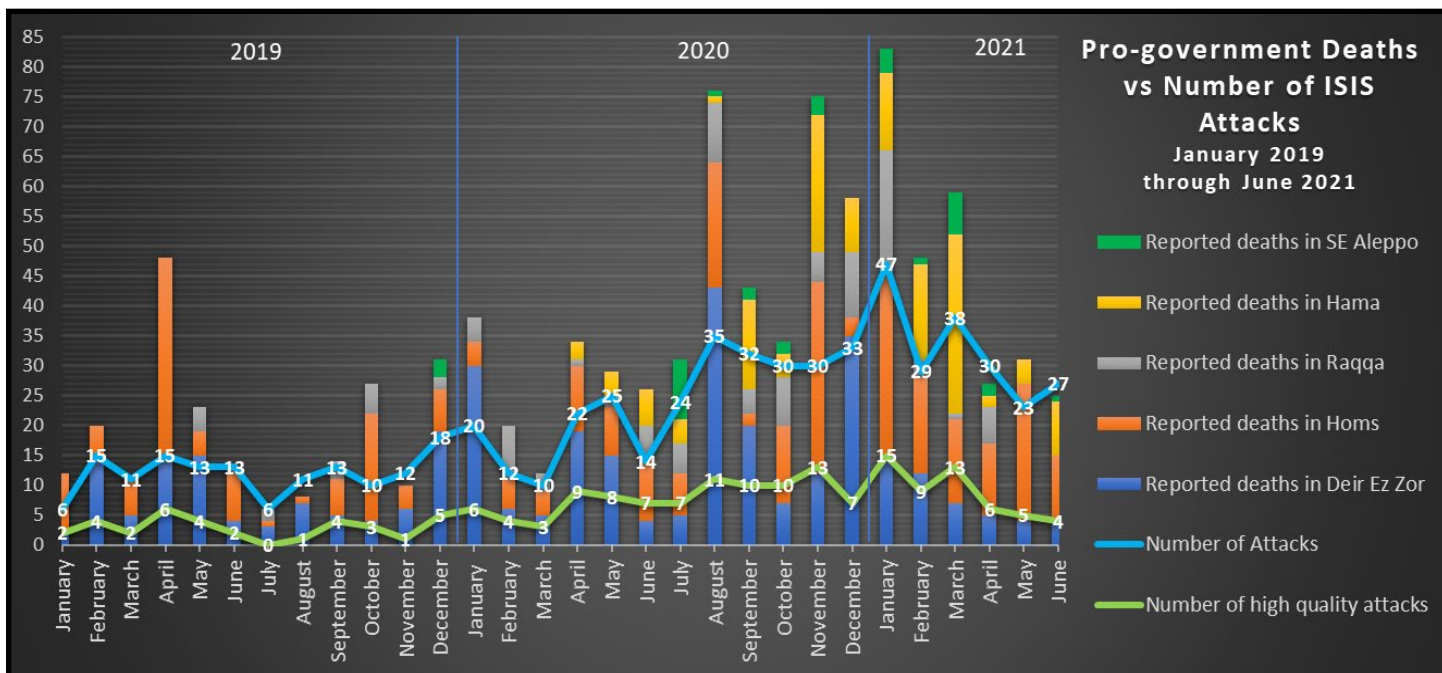
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in May 2021. This map does not include four attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them: two “Homs countryside” attacks and two “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attacks. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## June 2021

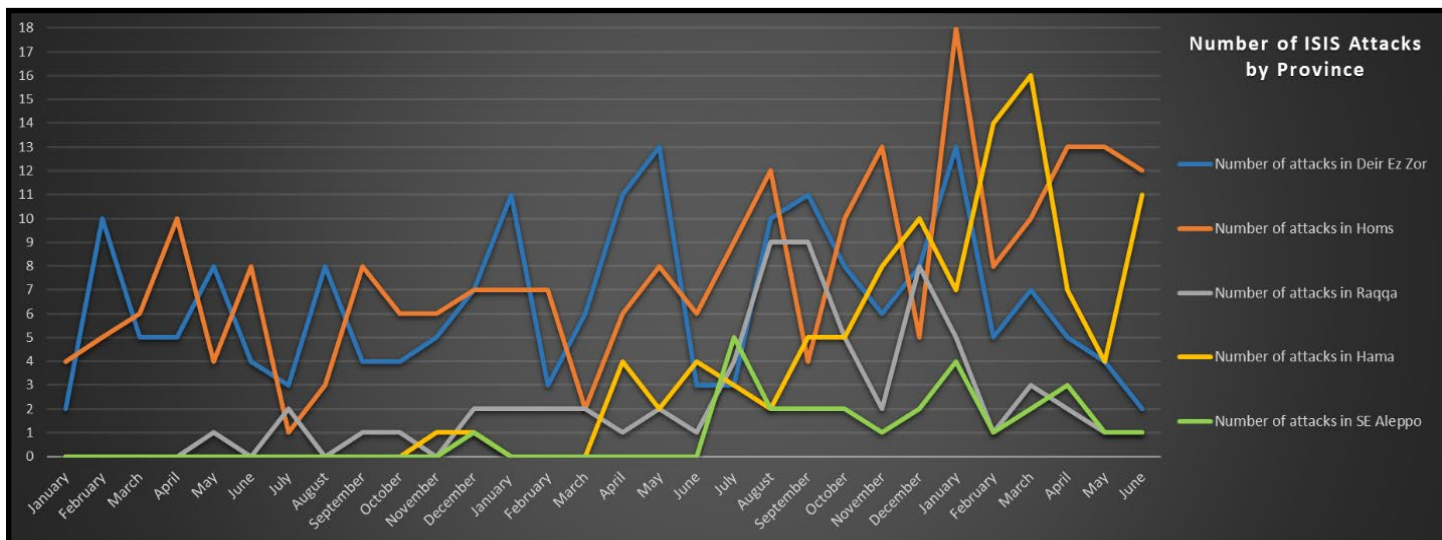
ISIS militants carried out at least 27 confirmed attacks in June, killing at least 24 pro-Assad regime fighters and one civilian, while wounding at least 59 others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Hama, and Aleppo governorates. The number of ISIS attacks carried out rose slightly from May’s one-year low of 23 attacks, but remained below the average of +30 attacks per month that began in August 2020. Furthermore, high quality\* attacks remained few and far between, with ISIS cells only conducting four in June, the lowest number since March 2020. The rise in general ISIS activity in June is solely due to a return of activity in Hama after an uncharacteristic low-activity period during May.

As in April and May, ISIS continued to shift its focus away from civilians. Only two attacks in June targeted civilians, compared to three attacks in May and five in April. Attack lethality dropped back to April levels in June after a brief increase in May. However, unlike in May, ISIS cells killed pro-regime commanders this month: a veteran Syrian Arab Army (SAA) brigadier general in Homs on June 3 and an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander in Deir Ez Zor on the same day. Both men were killed by mines/IEDs.

In fact, June saw the highest rate of mine/IED use by ISIS cells since the beginning of the insurgency, accounting for at least 17 of the 27 confirmed attacks. Almost all of the non-mine attacks occurred in Homs, while a sharp increase in Hama attacks was almost wholly attributable to mines. ISIS commonly reverts to a reliance on indirect attacks when under heavy pressure from security forces, as has been the case for the past four months. This increasing reliance on mines and the small number of high quality attacks in May and June suggests the organization continues to face difficulties reconstituting offensive actions due to sustained and widespread regime operations.



Attacks in June continued at roughly the pace of May and April in Homs (12), south Aleppo (1), and south Raqqa (1) while continuing their precipitous two month drop in Hama (4) and sixth-month drop in Deir Ez Zor (2). The main difference between May and June was the return to ‘normal’ levels of activity in east Hama (11) after a two month drop in April and May. As in April and May, June’s high quality attacks continued to be highest in Homs (2), but also occurred in Hama (1) and Deir Ez Zor (1).



## Hama

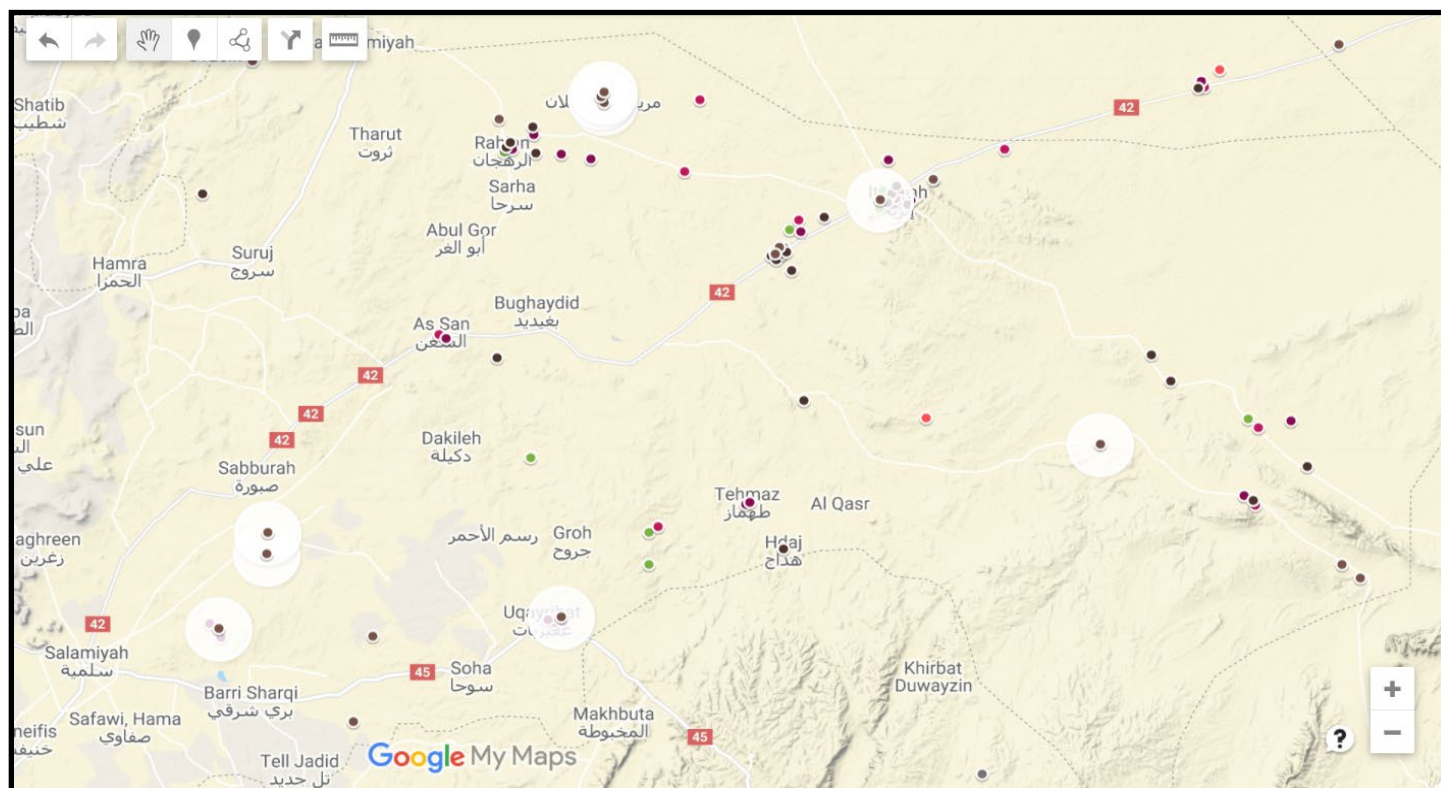
ISIS activity in east Hama rose sharply in June following a two-month decline. Eight of ISIS’s 11 attacks relied on mines or IEDs. ISIS officially claimed all but one of the mine/IED attacks. Despite being only the third highest number of attacks carried out in east Hama to date, the number of claimed attacks is both the greatest number claimed by the group in the province and the highest rate of claiming witnessed in any province in a single month. It is unclear to what extent the return of activity in east Hama is tied to the increase in claims there.

As in other parts of the Badia in June, many of the ISIS attacks in Hama could be categorized as “defensive”, i.e. cells using mines, IEDs, and small arms to harass patrols attempting to push into core ISIS territory. However, the first two days of June saw ISIS attempt to return to its late-2020 style of attacks. On June 1 militants fired on regime vehicles traveling on the Ithriyah highway, but caused only material damage. The next day, the group



attempted to conduct a significant attack, targeting a regime outpost in the province. However, per ISIS's own claim, the attack caused only material damage. This is in stark contrast to the outpost attacks the group conducted late in 2020 and early this year, when militants regularly seized such positions. The failure of the June 2 attack further speaks to the changing nature of the regime presence in the region.

ISIS then shifted to mines and IEDs, successfully carrying out some high casualty attacks. On June 8 and June 9, ISIS fighters hit regime convoys with at least three IEDs north of Rahjan, killing two soldiers and wounding 26 in total. Regime forces would attempt to reenter this area on June 18, but were stopped by small arms fire that left two soldiers wounded. On June 24, a bus carrying National Defence Forces (NDF) soldiers hit a mine or IED somewhere east of Salamiyah, leaving four dead and 11 wounded.



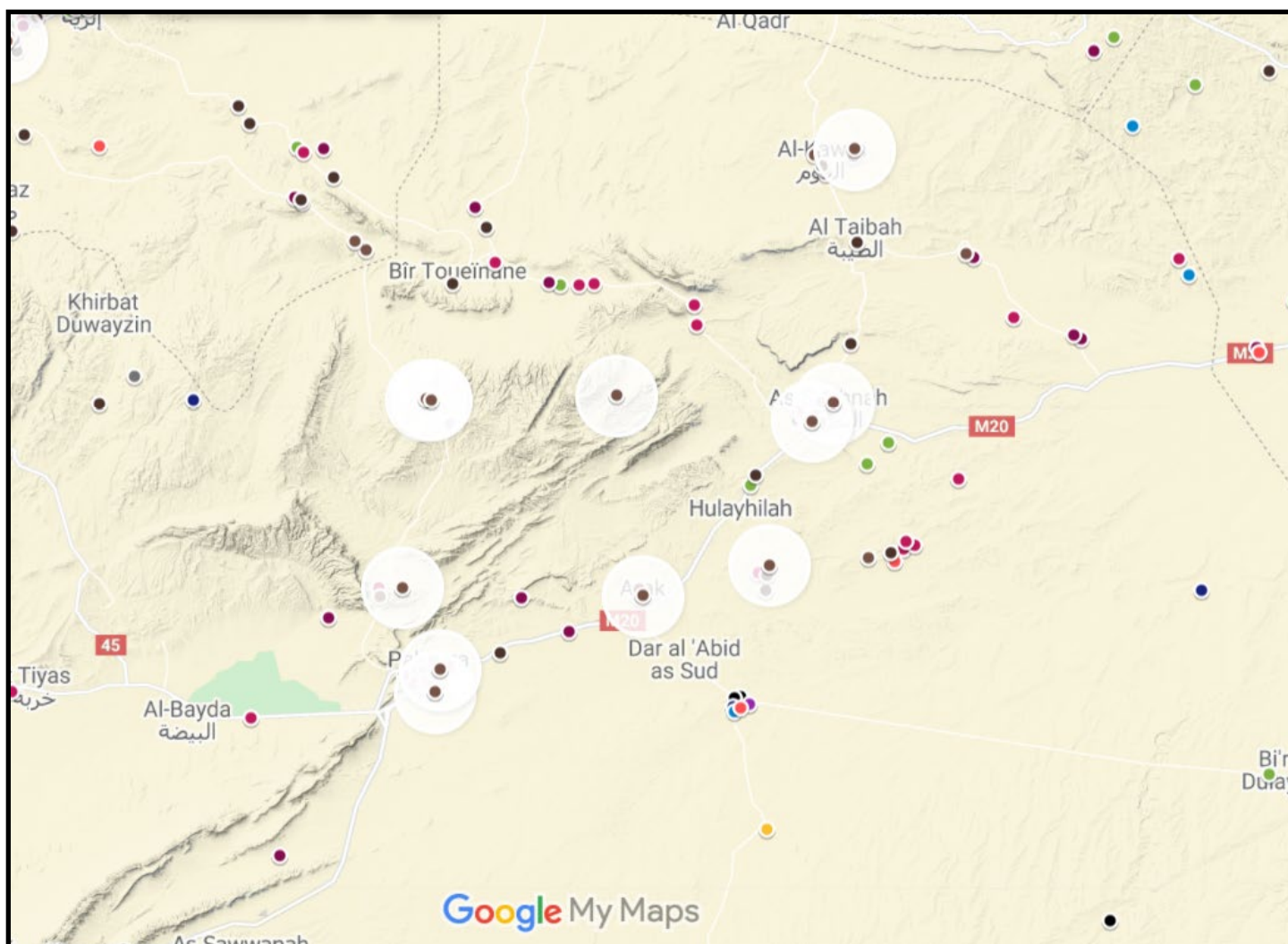
Map of ISIS attacks in Hama in June 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are two additional attacks that ISIS claimed on June 1 and June 2 somewhere in “east Hama”.

## Homs

ISIS activity in Homs remained high in June, continuing the trend began in late April. ISIS conducted 12 attacks in Homs, at least seven of which involved mines or IEDs. June’s attacks were concentrated in three areas: the Sukhnah and Palmyra countrysides, and Jabal Amor.

As in Hama, most of the Homs attacks were of very low quality. The most significant occurred on June 1, when an ISIS mine killed Brigadier General Nizar Fuhud. Fuhud was a veteran of desert warfare, having first arrived in Palmyra during the regime’s 2016 offensive. He had been commanding his own mukhabarat militia in the area and serving as the military advisor to the Sukhnah Sector commander at the time of his death.

The only significant small arms attack occurred on June 7 near the village of Baghlah, east of Sukhnah. According to local NDF, “serious” firefights went on for almost an hour before jets arrived and the ISIS fighters withdrew. It is unclear how many casualties each side sustained. One interesting attack occurred on June 19, when ISIS claimed to destroy a regime technical and a bulldozer near Sukhnah, later publishing pictures of both vehicles. Loyalist pages reported two soldiers killed in the area on the same day. It is likely that an ISIS cell targeted a small group of soldiers as they attempted to set up fortified positions somewhere on the forward edge of the ‘frontline’ around Sukhnah.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in June 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are two additional attacks that together killed three soldiers and wounded another somewhere in the Homs countryside.

## Deir Ez Zor

Attacks in Deir Ez Zor dropped to a record low of two in June, a level not seen since January 2019. However, one of these attacks led to the death of two IRGC personnel, including a commander, after their vehicle hit a mine on the Deir Ez Zor-Palmyra highway.

## Raqqa and Aleppo

Confirmed ISIS activity in south Raqqa and Aleppo continue to fluctuate in the one to three attacks per month range. As in May, each governorate had one confirmed attack in June. On June 10, ISIS claimed to hit a regime vehicle with an IED near Khanasir, Aleppo, claiming to kill one and wound three. Loyalist pages reported the death of a 25<sup>th</sup> Division 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant in the area on the same day. On June 30, suspected ISIS militants fired on a bus carrying oil workers and security personnel as it left the Wadi Ubyad Oil Field south of Ghanem Ali. Three men were lightly injured. This was the first confirmed attack in this part of Raqqa since March 2020.

## Regime Operations

There were no real changes in June to the widespread anti-ISIS operations carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies that began in January 2021. Operations in the Mayadin desert and the Jabal Bishri areas of Deir Ez Zor, heavily supported and/or led by the Iranians, continued and are clearly showing results. Meanwhile, fighters from the Shaytat tribe carried out patrols throughout the month in the Boukamal desert.

May's operations around Kawm and Palmyra in Homs also continued in June. Regime forces continued to secure their supply lines to Kawm and gradually expanded the security zone around the town, while units from the SAA's 11<sup>th</sup> Division began pushing into the mountains north of Palmyra. Both of these operations have been supported by the Syrian and Russian air forces, and the Palmyra sweeps have led to the discovery of several ISIS weapons caches.

Regime forces, mostly consisting of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, NDF, and 25<sup>th</sup> Division, increased patrols and sweeps in east Hama this month, especially around the Rahjan-Ithriyah corridor, and again swept the Ithriyah-Khanasir highway connecting Hama and Aleppo provinces.

## Looking Ahead

The current anti-ISIS operations began in January 2021 following a four-month rapid increase in the severity and sophistication of attacks on security forces. Despite the operation, ISIS attacks persisted at their same high rate through March. Thus, the first quarter of 2021 had almost three times the confirmed number of ISIS attacks (112), high quality attacks (37), and deaths (189) compared with the first quarter of 2020 (42, 13, and 70) and four times as many (32, 8, and 43) as in the first quarter of 2019. However, unlike past anti-ISIS operations, Damascus and its allies did not back down, rather they increased the number of soldiers deployed and the frequency of air support.

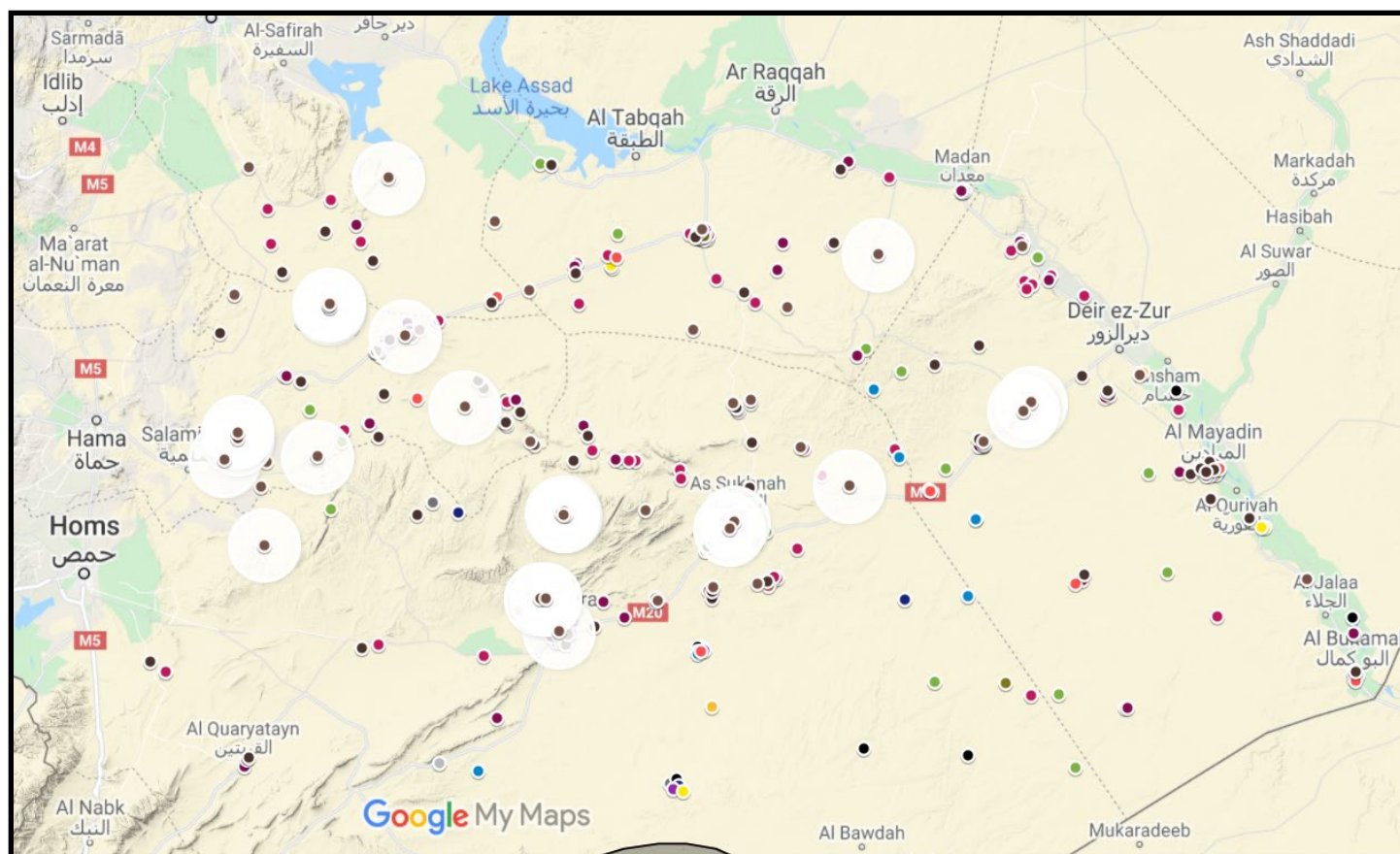
In April, ISIS began to roll back its operations. The second quarter of 2021 saw 80 confirmed attacks, only a modest increase over the 61 attacks in Q2 of 2020. These attacks only left 83 soldiers and civilians dead, the same number ISIS killed in the month of January alone and slightly less than the number killed a year ago. Most significantly, ISIS carried out only 15 high quality attacks this quarter, compared to 24 last year and 12 in 2019.

ISIS forces in the Badia are now under the most pressure they have experienced since their insurgency began. They have lost much of the freedom of movement and operational space they enjoyed in 2020, most significantly in Deir Ez Zor. That being said, these are not as crucial to the Islamic State's apparent goals in the Badia as they are in, for example, Iraq and northeast Syria. ISIS fighters may no longer be able to easily move around to conduct attacks, but as long as they can still blend in with the Internally Displaced Populations (IDP) and move across the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-regime and regime-Iraq borders, ISIS can continue to use the Badia as a "rear base" for these other theaters.

Furthermore, while regime operations have been very successful at pushing ISIS cells deep into the mountains and desert, they have not led to the deaths or capture of anywhere near enough militants to put a long-term dent in the organization. Instead, according to ISIS analyst [Mohammad Hassan](#), ISIS has been able to draw down its forces in the Badia and move fighters to Iraq and northeast Syria, where they currently face less pressure.

Regime operations will soon be facing the challenge of diminishing returns as the forward ISIS cells are all routed and forced deep into the empty portions of central Syria, which the regime can never fully clear. Once this is done, Damascus and its allies will have to continue setting up and supporting an extensive system of outposts and patrols in order to prevent "leakage" out of these remote ISIS concentrations. This process will require the near-permanent dedication of troops and resources, something that may be hard to justify once it is perceived that the ISIS threat was "dealt with". This will likely be ISIS's best chance to resurge without devoting extra resources of its own. Conversely, if coalition activity in Iraq and northeast Syria successfully pressures ISIS enough, the group may decide to withdraw fighters to the Badia and directly challenge the regime's operations – as it did during the first three months of 2021.





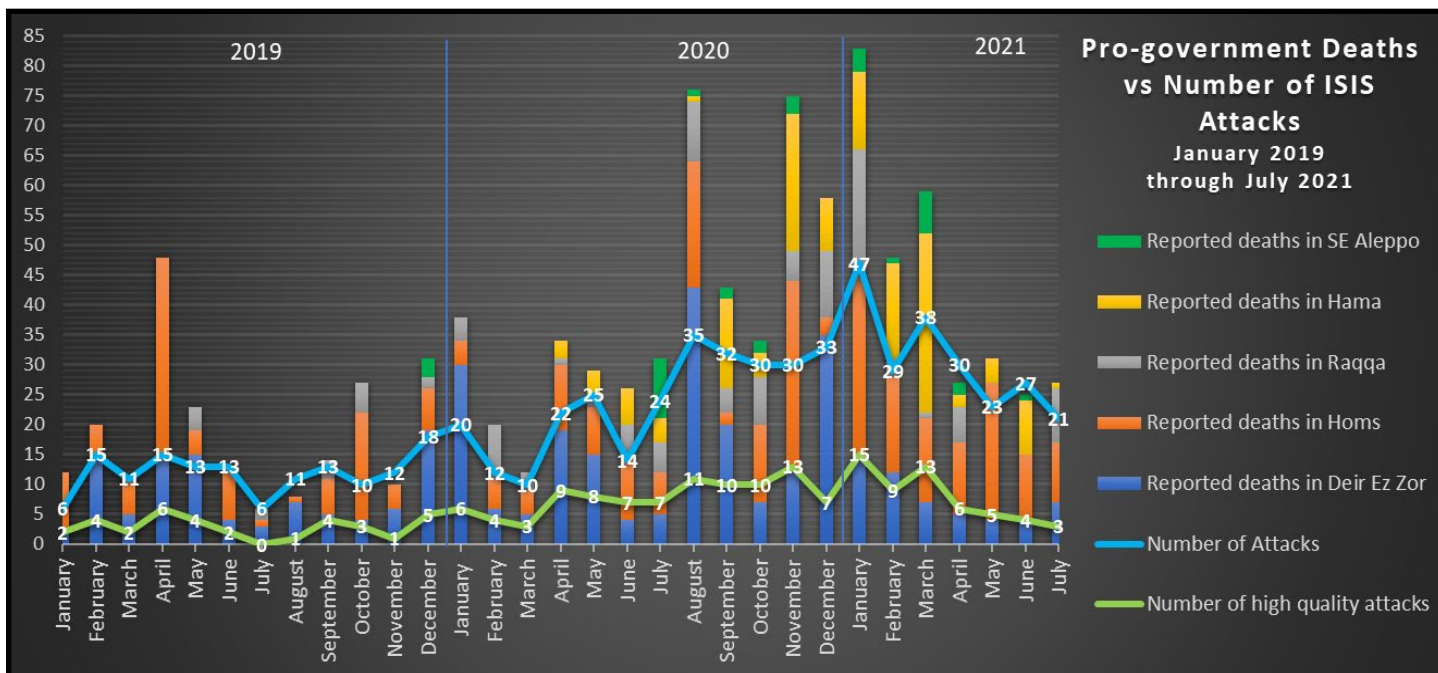
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in June 2021. This map does not include five attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them; two “Hama countryside” attacks, two “Homs Badia” attacks, and one “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attack. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## July 2021

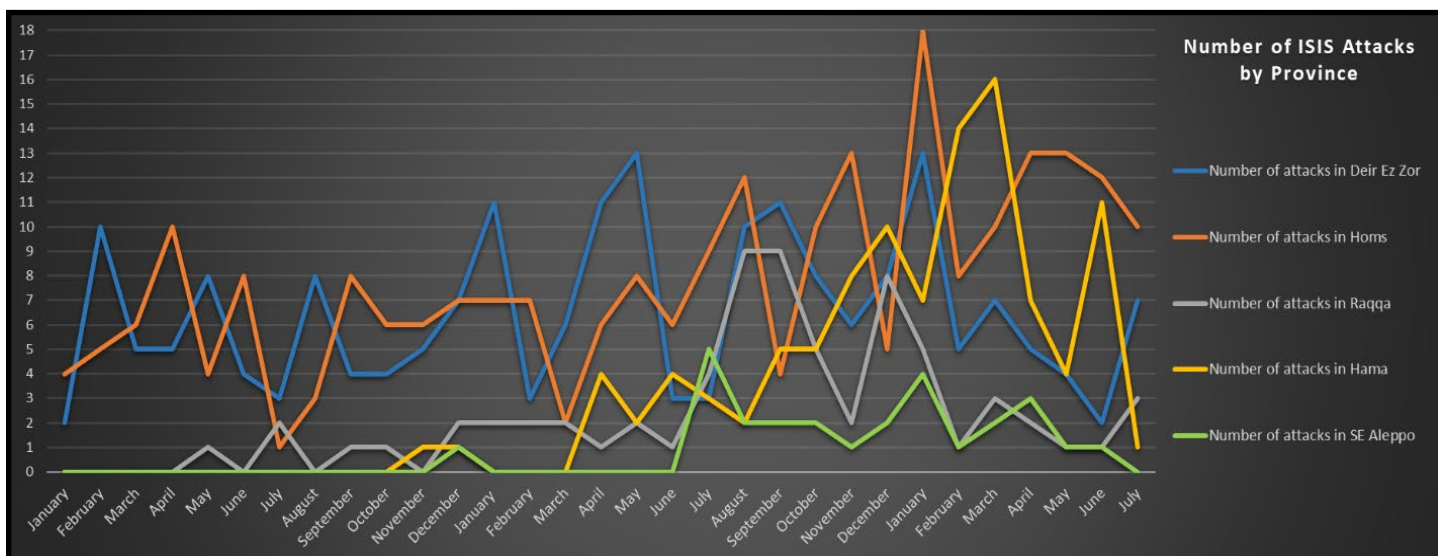
ISIS militants carried out at least 21 confirmed attacks in July, killing at least 25 pro-Assad regime fighters and one civilian, while wounding at least 25 others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqah, and Hama governorates. The number of confirmed ISIS attacks dropped to its lowest point in a year, continuing a downward trend begun following January’s high of 47 attacks. High quality\* attacks also fell in July, from a high of 15 in January to only three this month. While June’s modest rise in ISIS activity was due to an increase in attacks in Hama, July’s drop is attributable to the near total absence of ISIS attacks in that province.

As in June, ISIS continued to shift its focus away from civilians. Only two attacks in July targeted civilians, one mine and one small arms attack on shepherds. Attack lethality rose slightly compared with June, although total casualties were the lowest of the year. However, ISIS cells once again succeeded in killing a pro-regime commander.

ISIS began to increase its reliance on mines and IEDs in May, a trend which rose sharply in June and has continued into July. ISIS commonly reverts to a reliance on indirect attacks when under heavy pressure from Assad regime security forces, as has been the case for the past five months. An increasing reliance on mines and the small number of high quality attacks during the past four months suggests the organization is facing difficulties carrying out offensive actions due to sustained and widespread pressure from regime operations.



Attacks in July in Homs (10) dropped slightly for the second month in a row, while Deir Ez Zor (7) saw a significant increase in activity in the second half of the month. Meanwhile, ISIS cells conducted a quick succession of attacks in south Raqqa (3) in the first half of the month but were almost completely absent from east Hama (1) and south Aleppo (0). Unlike in past months, most of ISIS's high quality attacks occurred in Raqqa (2) with the remaining high quality attack occurring in Homs (1).



## Hama

ISIS activity in east Hama had, despite some minor fluctuations, steadily risen between April 2020 and March 2021. However, in the past four months, there has been uncharacteristic inconsistency in ISIS activity in the province. Unlike June's sharp surge in attacks, ISIS cells conducted only one attack here in July, a mine/IED hit on a pro-regime militia vehicle on the Ithriya-Sukhnah road.

It is not clear why ISIS cells have seemingly gone silent in this area. While there have been no major, sustained regime operations in east Hama in 2021, regime forces did increase their presence in the Rahjan area in July, protecting shepherds and guarding the grazing areas that ISIS had repeatedly targeted in the past months. According to one local NDF fighter, once ISIS realized it would be much more difficult to target shepherds here and steal their sheep, the local cell left, likely moving to Raqqa or Homs. However, this movement would not

account for cells that had been operating elsewhere in the governorate, such as around Uqayribat and along the Ithriyah-Sukhnah highway.

With the above in mind, it seems plausible that ISIS has begun shifting resources in and out of the governorate more frequently in recent months than in the past. With its cells under increased pressure in the rest of the Badia, ISIS may be pulling fighters from east Hama to bolster operations in Homs and Raqqa, or fill in for cells in these governorates that have moved elsewhere.

## **Homs**

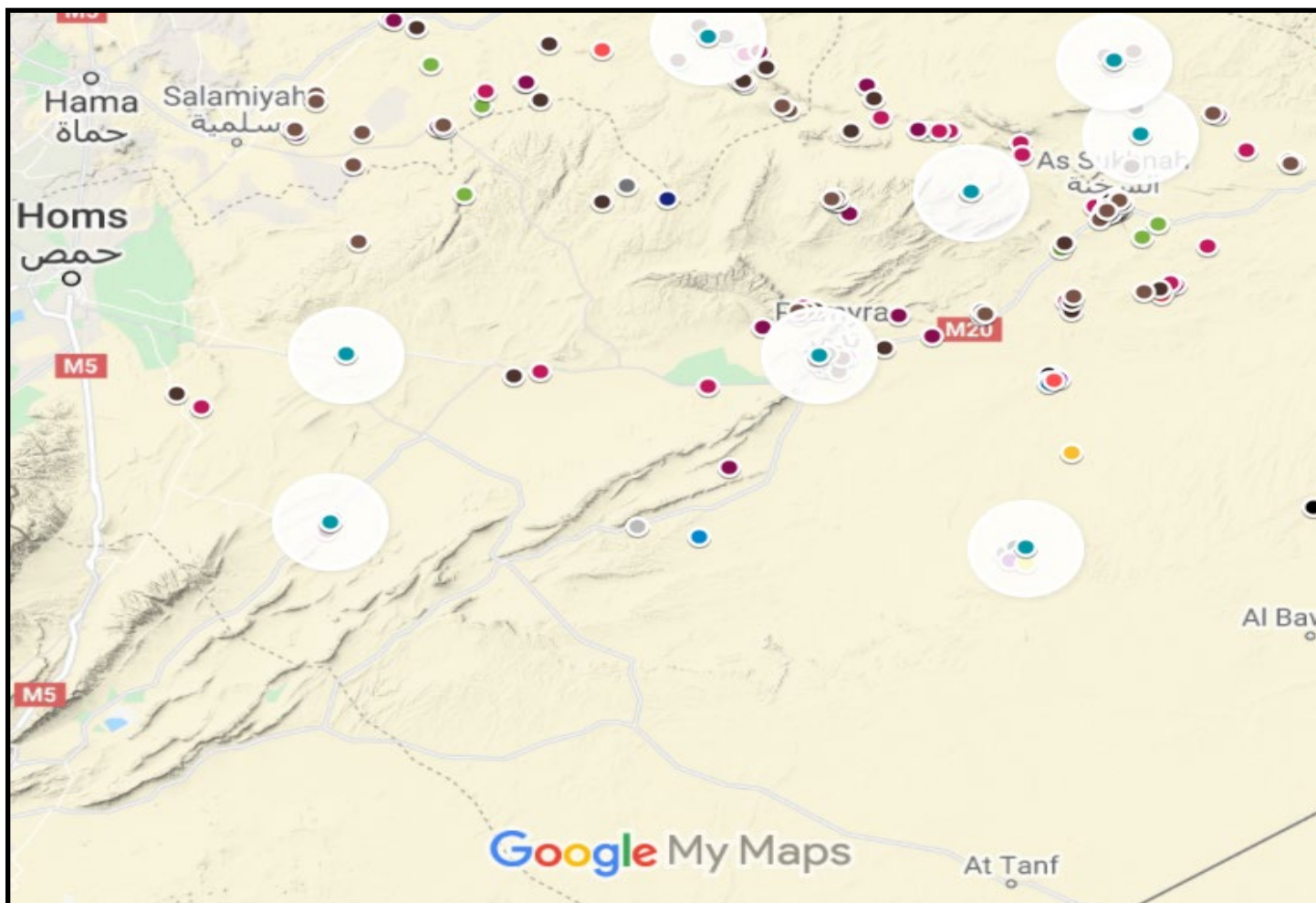
ISIS activity in Homs dropped slightly for the second month in a row, but the governorate still remained the most active front in July. ISIS conducted 10 attacks in Homs, at least seven of which involved mines or IEDs. There was no geographic concentration to July's attacks in Homs, as ISIS cells operated across the entire eastern half of the governorate.

After a quiet first week in Homs, a bus carrying 4th Division militiamen hit a mine on the Sukhnah-Resafa road, killing at least two soldiers and wounding eight. The fighters were likely on their way to or from the Kawm front. Two days later, on July 8, a mine or IED killed an IRGC soldier somewhere in the Homs Badia. That same day, a regime soldier was reported killed near Qaryatayn, close to the border of the Damascus governorate. This was the first confirmed attack near the city since March 21, 2021.

On July 11, ISIS announced that they blew up a booby-trapped building near Sukhnah as a regime patrol moved past it, wounding some of the soldiers. The next day, a regime militia commander's vehicle was hit by an IED, killing the commander and two soldiers, near the Kawm front. On July 17, loyalist pages reported the death of a soldier somewhere in the Palmyra countryside, possibly killed by a mine during sweeping operations southeast or north of the city.

On July 25, a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) patrol hit a mine in the Wadi Qatqat area west of Sukhnah, wounding six. This came two months after a multi-IED ambush in the valley left at least 26 soldiers dead or wounded, suggesting the army is still attempting to establish a foothold and clear the area of ISIS cells and mines. Two days later, a soldier reported on his Facebook page that his vehicle had been attacked while he drove "in the Tanf area." He later died of his wounds. The label "Tanf" often refers to any part of the Homs Badia south of the Palmyra-Humaymah Road. This is the first time the location has been referenced in an attack since February 2020, indicating that the regime may have restarted operations in this largely ignored area. Lastly, on July 29 a Syrian employed by the IRGC was wounded by a mine somewhere in the Homs Badia.





Map of ISIS attacks in Homs and Hama in July 2021 (highlighted dots). Not mapped are two additional attacks that together killed one person and wounded another somewhere in the Homs countryside.

## Deir Ez Zor

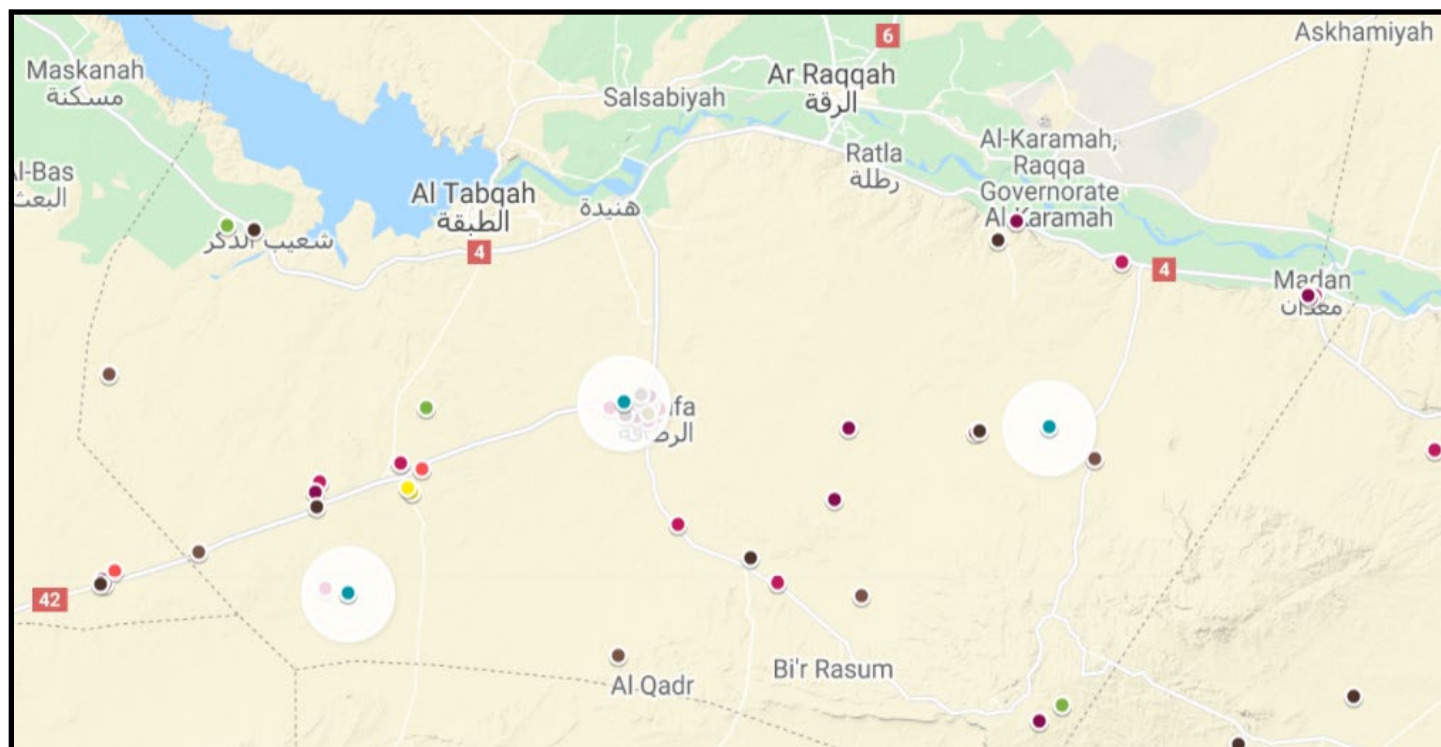
The most important developments in July occurred in Deir Ez Zor. June witnessed just two attacks here, the fewest since January 2019. The first sign of activity in July came on the 10th, when a soldier was reported killed west of Mayadin. Five days later, local National Defense Forces (NDF) reported that a new group of ISIS fighters had moved into the area from Iraq and began skirmishing with regime and regime-allied forces west of Mayadin. Evidence of this renewed ISIS presence emerged over the next two weeks. From July 19 to July 28, six regime soldiers were reported killed in the Deir Ez Zor countryside, mostly by newly placed mines. All of the men killed were from western Syria, indicating that they are not part of the local NDF and were likely members of the SAA's 4th Division, Mukhabarat, or 5th Corps.

These reports show definitively that after several months of retreat, ISIS has upped its activity in the governorate. The group's use of fighters from Iraq to bolster its pressured cells is a timely reminder of how interconnected the Iraq and Syria insurgencies are, and the renewed emphasis in the governorate is an important development to watch in August.

## Raqqa

Confirmed ISIS activity in south Raqqa in July continued to fluctuate in the one to three attacks per month range. All three attacks in southern Raqqa in July occurred in the first half of the month, yet each was significant. On July 6, ISIS fighters ambushed a patrol of Special Forces soldiers in an abandoned village south of the Ithriya-Tabqa highway. At least four soldiers were killed and six wounded in the fighting. ISIS later released pictures of the attack, including one showing the execution of one captured soldier.

On July 9, local loyalist pages reported that two trucks of ISIS fighters had attacked a group of shepherds near the village of Quway'an, south of Sabkha. This attack occurred in the same area as the June 30 attack when ISIS fighters fired on a bus transporting workers and guards to the nearby oil field. Combined, these two attacks point to a renewed ISIS presence in this area. Lastly, on July 12 a bus carrying regime soldiers hit a mine or IED in the Resafa area, killing three men and wounding five.



Map of ISIS attacks in Raqqa in July 2021 (highlighted dots).

## Regime Operations

As in June, there were no real changes in July to the widespread anti-ISIS operations carried out by the Syrian regime and its allies that began in January 2021. Operations in the Mayadin desert and the Jabal Bishri areas of Deir Ez Zor, heavily supported and/or led by Iranians, continued. But with the renewed ISIS presence there, additional units from the Russian-backed 5th Corps were sent to this front.

The regime continues to secure the Kawm Oasis region, conducting patrols and sweeping operations in the mountains east and south of the remote Homs town. Further to the west, the SAA and Pakistani foreign fighters under the IRGC-commanded Liwa Zainebiyoun have begun extending patrols and sweeps south of Palmyra while continuing their previous operations north of the city.

In Hama, the SAA sent additional soldiers to the countryside west of Ithriyah, tasked with guarding the grazing land used by shepherds who have been repeatedly attacked by a local cell of ISIS fighters. Just north of here, the Russian-backed 25th Division extended its usual sweeps north of Ithriyah east, moving through the southern Aleppo countryside and into the Dibsi Afnan region of west Raqqa.

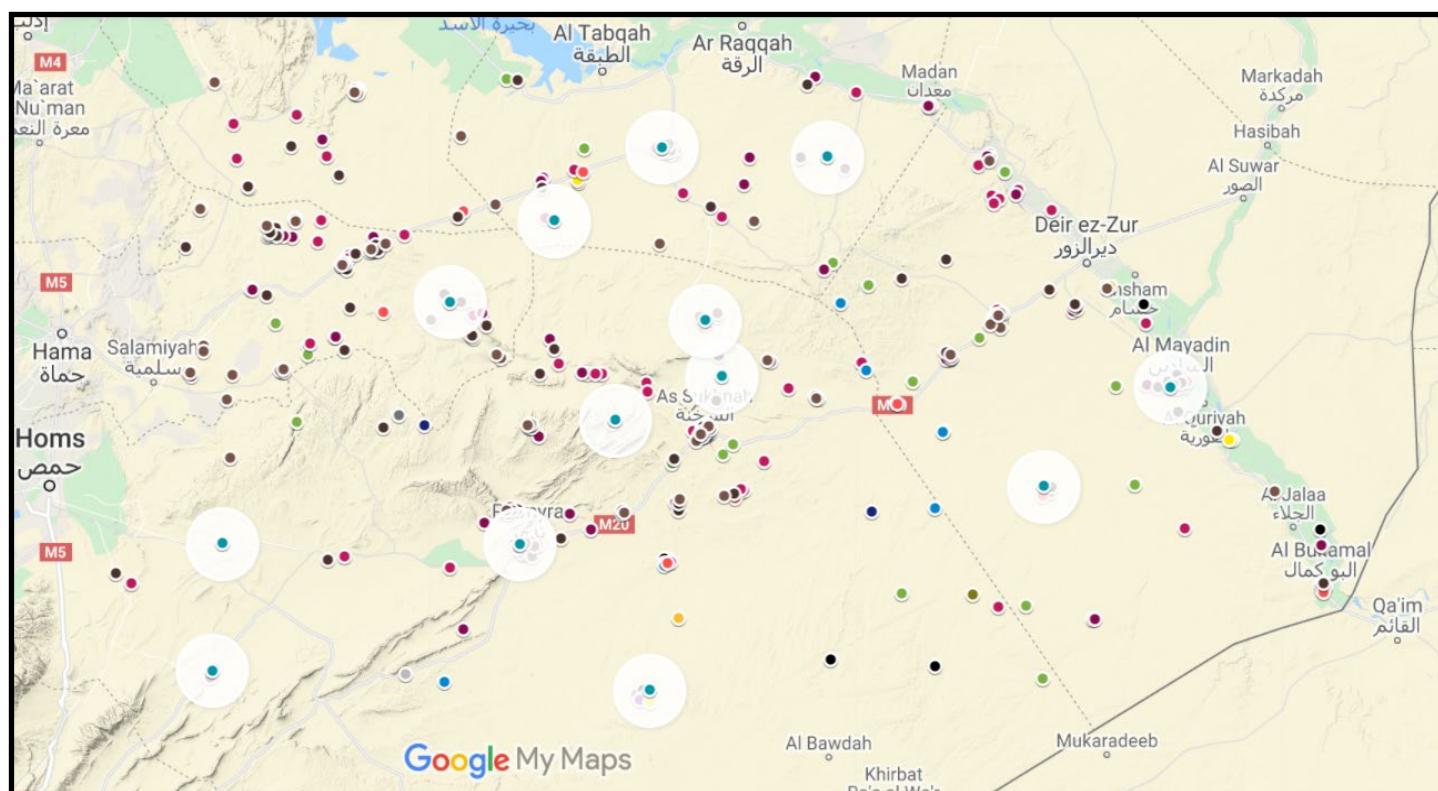
## Looking Ahead

ISIS activity ebbed and flowed throughout July. A very quiet first week was followed by a high-tempo seven-day period between July 6 and 12 in which 10 attacks were carried out. Activity dropped off again until the last 10 days of the month, during which ISIS cells conducted seven attacks. This inconsistency and overall level of activity during a period in which regime anti-ISIS operations had not escalated in any significant manner suggests that ISIS may now be intentionally avoiding fights.

If true, this would mark a new shift in the Badia dynamic. The trajectory of the insurgency during the second half

of 2020 was firmly under the control of ISIS as its cells surged unimpeded across central Syria. However, at the start of 2021 the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies attempted to assert some control over ISIS's operation tempo. The first three months of the year saw ISIS battling hard against a concerted regime push in crucial fronts. By April, ISIS changed tact, withdrawing cells from the highly contested highways and urban frontlines and seeking refuge in the remote deserts and mountains. The regime and its allies pursued the ISIS cells here, and the militants began adopting a more defensive strategy utilizing high numbers of mines and IEDs and harassment fire from heavy weapons mounted on technicals to slow down and impede regime patrols. However, the expansion of regime operations appears to have slowed in June and nearly stopped in July. With the frontlines now more solidified, ISIS will have begun adapting to the new "status quo", moving fighters and supplies between the Badia, northeast Syria, and Iraq as it sees fit.

The absence of attacks in eastern Hama is particularly interesting, as this further indicates that ISIS has either sent its cells into hiding for a period of time, or has begun shifting men and resources across, or out of, the Badia. If the latter is true, this could mean either an increased ISIS focus on specific parts of the Badia in August, or increased attacks in northeast Syria and/or Iraq.

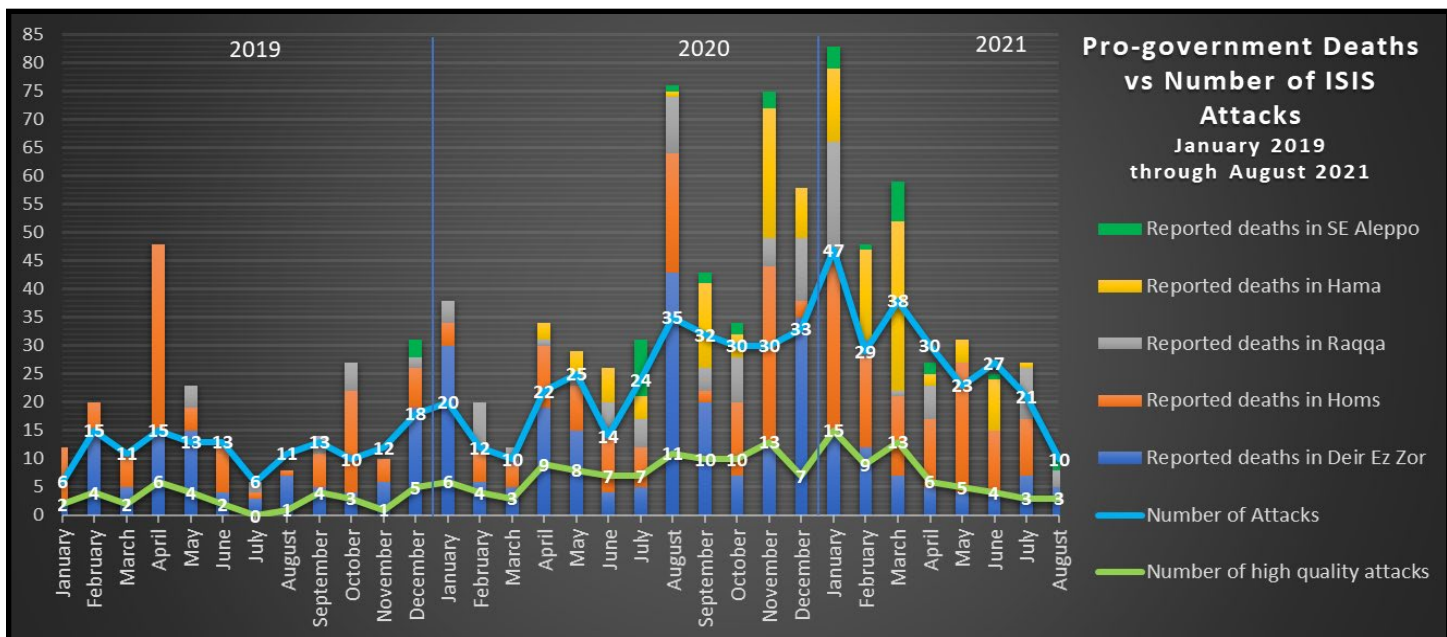


*Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in July 2021. This map does not include seven attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them; two "Homs countryside" attacks, and five "Deir Ez Zor countryside" attacks. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).*

## August 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 10 confirmed attacks in August, killing at least nine pro-Assad regime fighters and two civilians, while wounding at least three others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Aleppo governorates. The number of confirmed ISIS attacks dropped to its lowest point since March 2020, continuing a decline that began following a high of 47 attacks in January 2021. High quality\* attacks matched July's total of three, compared to a high of 15 in January. ISIS attacks have completely ended in Hama—where militants carried out only one attack in July—and continued to be concentrated in Deir Ez Zor for the second month in a row.

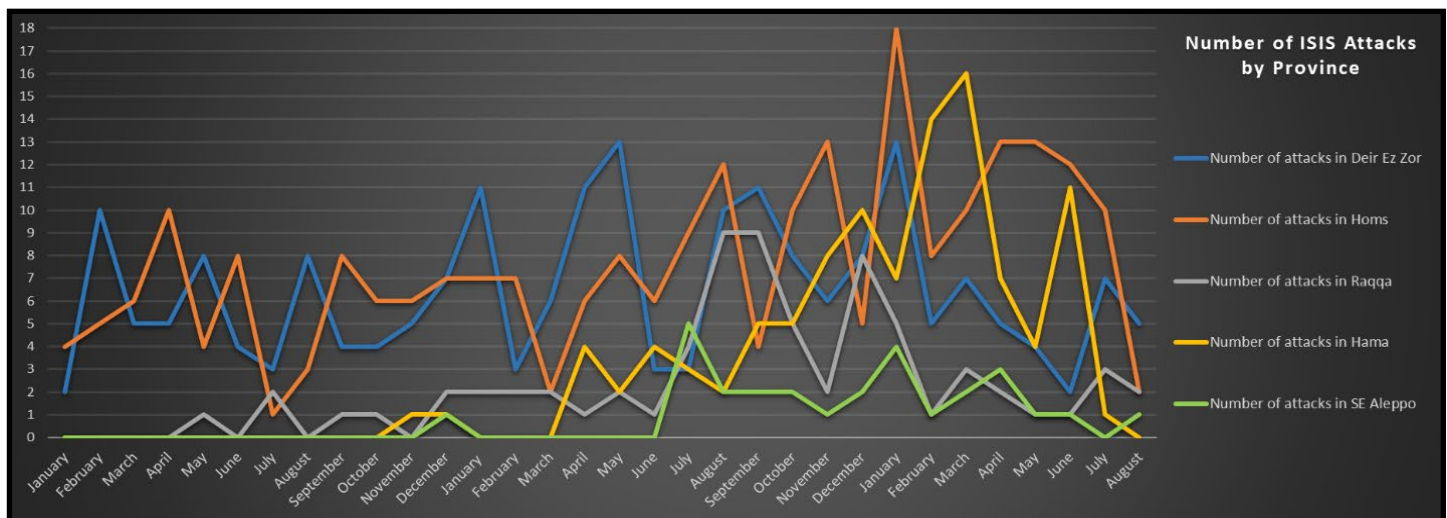




Only one attack in August targeted civilians, compared to two in the previous month. Both attack lethality and the number of total casualties dropped significantly in August. Total casualties reached a level not witnessed since November 2019. However, ISIS cells once again succeeded in killing a pro-regime commander.

The increased reliance on mines and IEDs that began in May 2021 and rose sharply in June and July shifted slightly in August. Only three confirmed mine/IED attacks compared to four confirmed small arms attacks and three attacks of unknown means took place during the month. This shift in attack style may indicate the beginning of a shift in ISIS posture, as it is possible that cells have successfully finished relocating and reestablishing themselves in new areas of operation. However, the sample size for August is too small to draw definitive conclusions.

Confirmed attacks in August in Homs (2) dropped significantly following two months of gradual decline. While attacks in Deir Ez Zor (5) dropped slightly from last month, activity in the governorate is still higher than it was during spring. Meanwhile, ISIS cells continue to operate a low-level but consistent insurgency in south Raqqa (2) and south Aleppo (1) while appearing to have completely abandoned eastern Hama for the time being. ISIS cells conducted a high quality attack in Raqqa for the second month in a row, as well as one high quality attack each in south Aleppo and Deir Ez Zor.



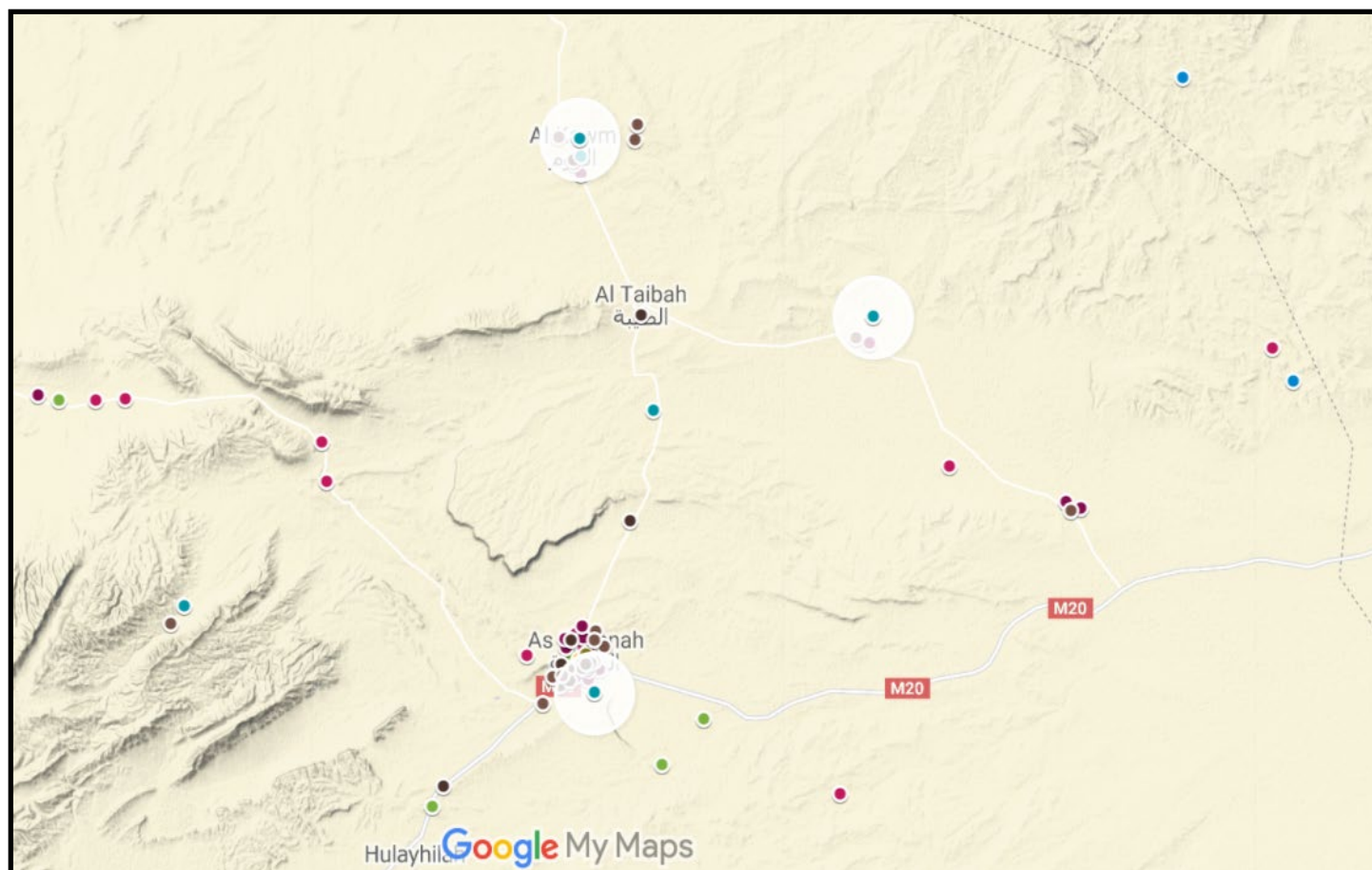
## Hama

There was no confirmed ISIS activity in Hama in August. The last attack in the governorate occurred on July 8. A locally deployed regime fighter told this author last month that both of the main ISIS cells had fully withdrawn from the governorate between June and July, and a second soldier interviewed this month confirmed that his battalion had seen no trace of ISIS during a two week mission across the area in the first half of August. This is the first month without ISIS activity in Hama since March 2020, when ISIS was only just beginning to re-establish itself in the governorate.

## Homs

ISIS activity in Homs dropped significantly as regime forces continued to expand patrols and maintain extensive garrisons across the governorate. On August 6, regime pages reported clashes between security forces and insurgents along the highway outside Sukhnah. On August 15, ISIS claimed it downed a Russian Orlan drone, which according to the pro-government militia the National Defense Forces (NDF) had been operating over Shanhas on the southeastern Kawm front. On August 26, further activity was reported around Kawm, with militants conducting a minor small arms attack on regime militias in the area and attempting to down another observation drone the following day.

Unlike in June and July, when ISIS activity in Homs was reduced but still occurred across the governorate, ISIS cells appeared to focus almost exclusively on the Kawm-Sukhnah front in August. This may hint at the importance ISIS places on opening the terrain around Kawm, which sits strategically on the highway connecting Raqqa to Homs. However, it seems unlikely that ISIS will dislodge regime forces here anytime soon due to the high number of regime units deployed and constant Russian air support.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in August 2021 (highlighted dots).

## Deir Ez Zor

As in July, Deir Ez Zor continued to see the most important developments of the ISIS Badia insurgency. Activity here has dropped significantly since January 2021 as regime, Russian, and Iranian forces moved to dislodge ISIS cells first around Jabal Bishri and then in the Mayadin countryside. By June, ISIS had reportedly moved hundreds of fighters out of the province and into Iraq. By mid-July, regime sources claimed that new ISIS cells had entered the governorate, triggering a notable increase in attacks. While this author previously assumed the new fighters had returned from Iraq, it is also possible that some of these cells consist of fighters who left east Hama in June and early July.

Two notable attacks occurred in Deir Ez Zor in August. First, ISIS fighters attacked an NDF/Syrian Arab Army (SAA) position near the town of Musarib in west Deir Ez Zor on August 12. This area had been the scene of intense ISIS attacks throughout the fall of 2020. While this attack was reportedly repelled, it may portend a return of some cells to the previously “cleared” part of the governorate. Second, on August 25, a pro-regime Liwa al-Quds commander was killed somewhere in the governorate. His exact role is unclear. However, pictures and posts suggest he was part of the command staff of the Deir Ez Zor branch of Liwa al-Quds, and may have been traveling with the overall commander of the Deir Ez Zor region at the time of his death.

## Raqqa and Aleppo

Confirmed ISIS activity in south Raqqa in August continued to be in the one-to-three attacks per month range as it has all year. As in July, both attacks in August occurred at the beginning of the month. On August 5, ISIS fighters attacked a group of shepherds in the western part of the governorate, killing two and kidnapping three, while also stealing their sheep. Two days later, a local regime fighter was killed by a mine somewhere in the governorate.

Also on August 5, three regime soldiers were killed and one was injured when their vehicle hit a mine/IED in southern Aleppo during sweeping operations. This was the first attack in this area in almost two months.

## Regime Operations

Anti-ISIS operations have not changed significantly in recent months. In Homs, security forces still maintain a heavy presence around Kawm and conduct sweeps and patrols around Palmyra and Sukhnah. The Russian-backed 25th Division continues sweeps north of Ithriya into southern Aleppo while the Russian-backed 5th Corps conduct one-to-two week sweeps from Resafa, Raqqa through east Hama to Salamiyah.

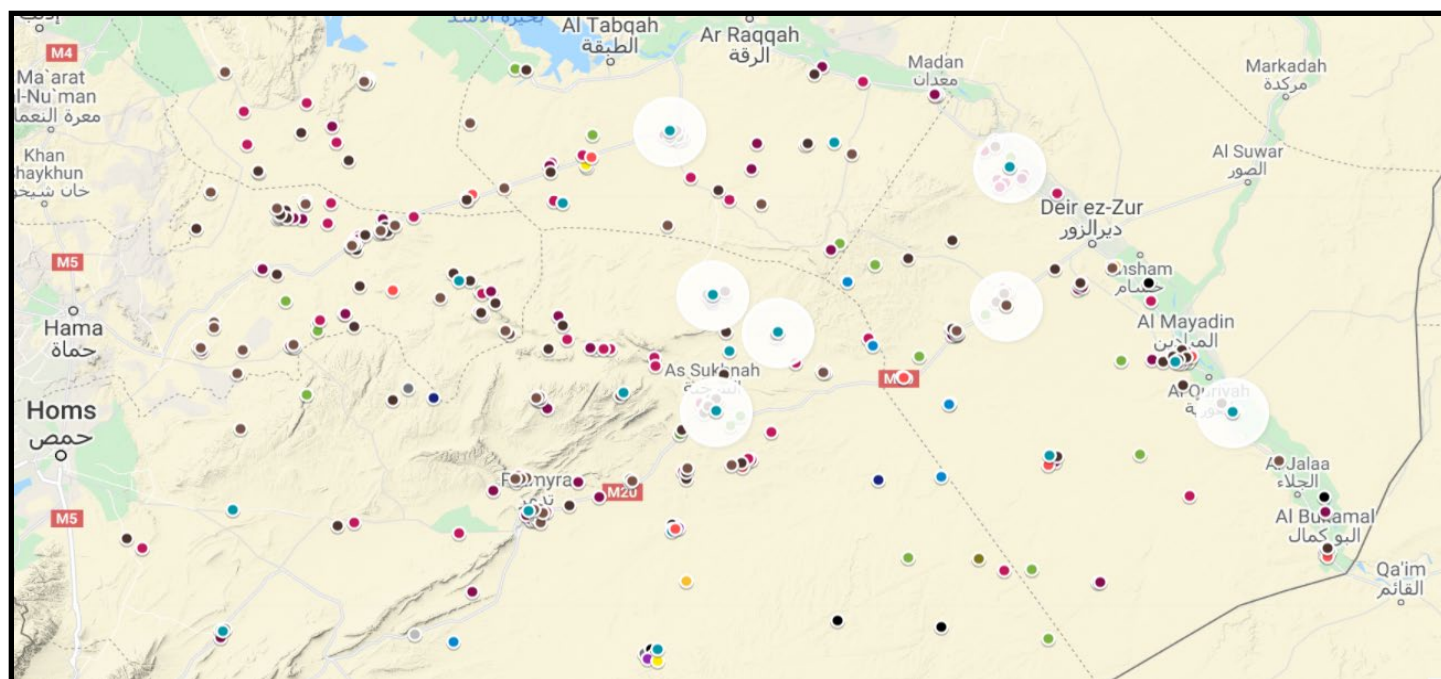
The 5th Corps sweeps are conducted by rotating battalions approximately once a month and include mine-sweeping tanks and engineering units. According to one soldier who participated in August’s sweep, they neither found nor were engaged by ISIS cells at any point, and no one in the operation was hit by a mine or IED. The soldier further told this author that Russia provides drone coverage for the patrols, scouting the roads ahead of the convoy and hitting any “suspicious areas” with airstrikes.

## Looking Ahead

ISIS was less active in the Badia this month than they could have been. As stated in July’s update, it seems likely that, for the time being, ISIS is content with the current status quo in the Badia. The lack of confirmed attacks suggests that ISIS’s training camps and transit routes between Iraq and northeast Syria remain largely intact, as both are too crucial to ISIS’s broader strategy for the group to allow them to be cut off by regime forces.

Interestingly, August was the first month since 2019 that ISIS has not officially claimed an attack somewhere in central Syria. While ISIS has always been reluctant to claim attacks here—only claiming around [25 percent](#) of all confirmed attacks since 2020—the past two months have seen fewer claims than usual. This suggests that regime operations may have finally disrupted communication nodes. However, the August 12 edition of ISIS’s weekly newspaper *al-Naba* had an entire page devoted to praising the insurgents in central Syria, comparing them to the original Islamic State in Iraq fighters in the mid-2000’s and bragging about the “military bases and legal schools that have been established in the Badia”—an under-discussed dynamic. While attacks in central Syria may be dropping, the regional importance of the Badia remains as high as ever.





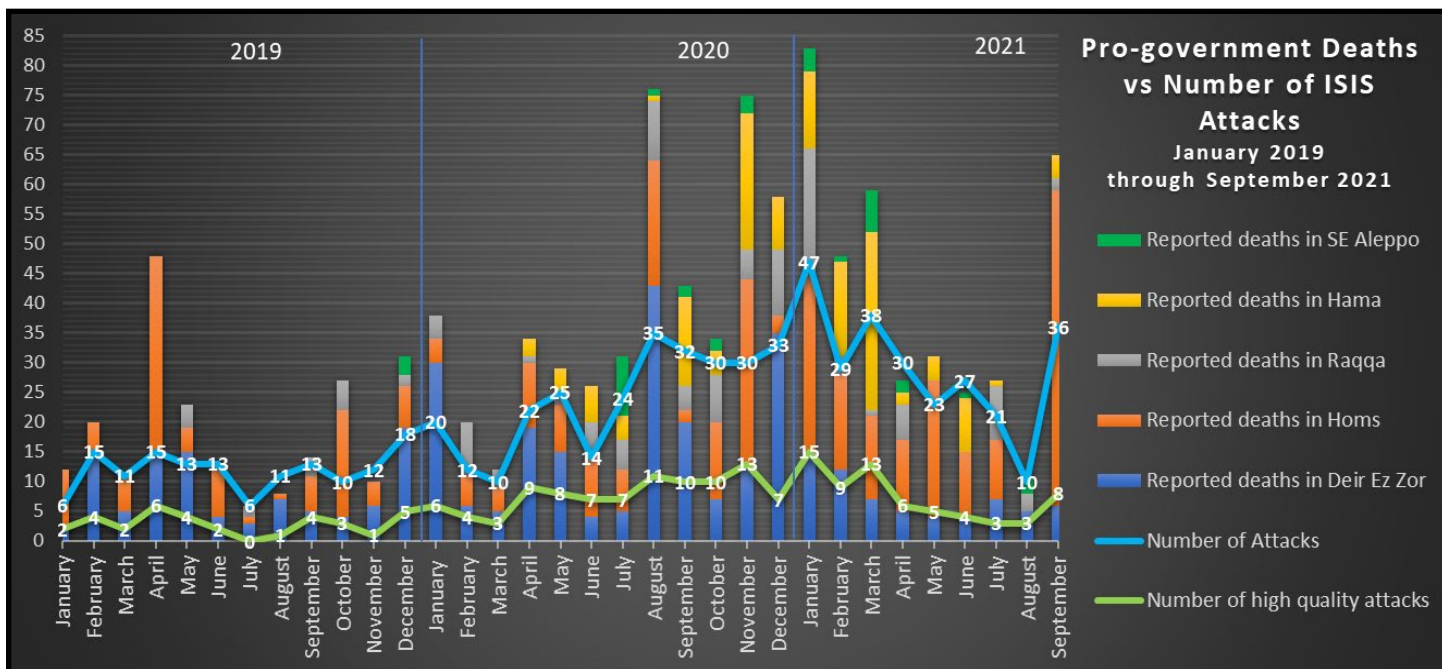
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in August 2021. This map does not include four attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them; one “south Aleppo” attack, one “Raqqa countryside” attack, and two “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attacks. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## September 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 36 confirmed attacks in September, killing at least 56 pro-Assad regime fighters and seven civilians, while wounding at least 22 others and kidnapping three civilians in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Aleppo governorates. ISIS activity surged across the entire central Syrian Badia in September following a five-month drop in attacks. More than half of September’s attacks were carried out in the Homs governorate, where ISIS cells appear to have launched a small offensive across four different areas in an attempt to pre-empt impending Russian, Iranian, and regime operations in the governorate. Additionally, an ISIS cell successfully infiltrated the outskirts of Damascus city and conducted a [high profile sabotage mission](#), destroying the main pipeline carrying gas to two major power plants (Deir Ali and Tishreen) and plunging the capital into darkness for several hours.

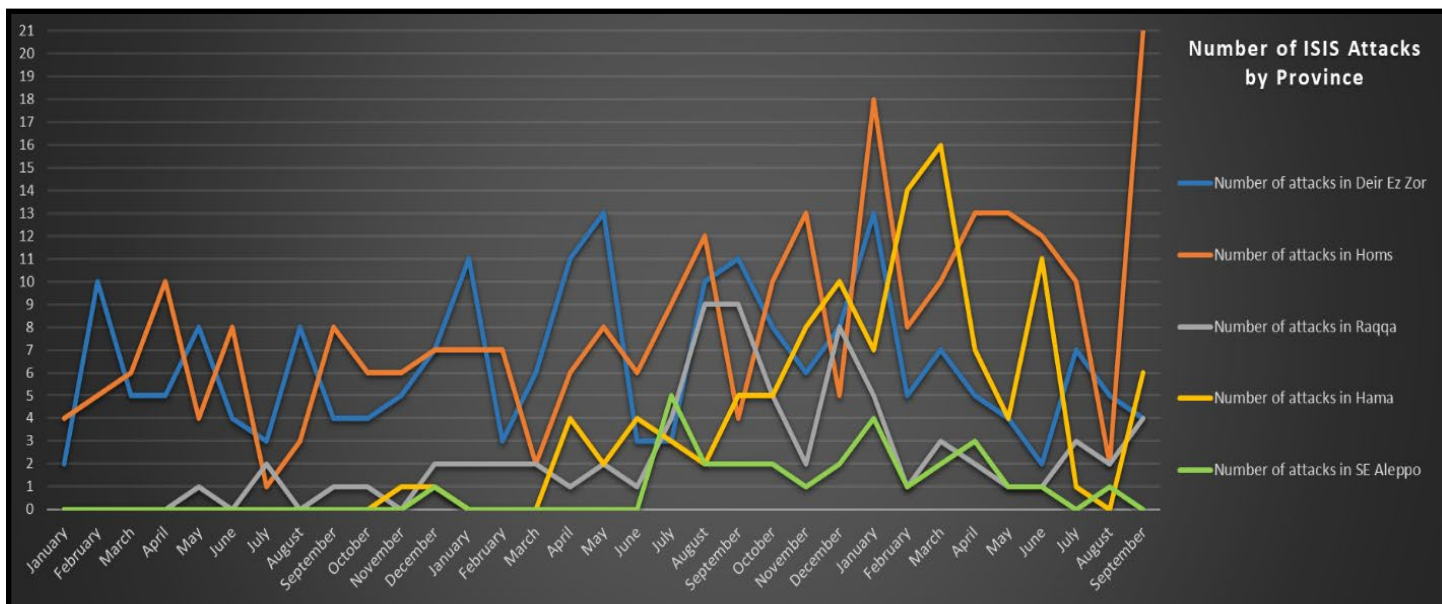
Not only did high quality\* attacks climb in September, but ISIS fighters significantly changed their attack style compared with previous months. ISIS cells had transitioned to less aggressive attacks beginning in April, relying mostly on mines and IEDs to harass regime patrols and defend their core territories. August saw this policy begin to change as less than half of confirmed ISIS attacks used mines or IEDs.

As this author stated in August, this policy change hinted at an impending surge in ISIS activity, as an increase in small arms attacks implied increased operational capabilities and freedom of movement. In September, only 11 attacks were confirmed to have been conducted with mines or IEDs while at least 21 attacks involved small arms. This significant shift in attack type, combined with the surge in activity across the entire Badia, indicates that ISIS cells have likely finished the relocation and reestablishment process made necessary by large regime operations that began at the outset of 2021.



ISIS increased its targeting of civilians, specifically shepherds, killing seven and kidnapping three in eight different attacks in Homs, Hama, and Raqqa. Both attack lethality and the number of total casualties increased significantly in September compared to the previous five months. ISIS cells also returned to eastern Hama this month after a near complete absence in the province for more than two months. For the fourth month in a row, ISIS succeeded in killing at least one pro-regime commander, and for the first time since March, successfully raided a regime position for supplies.

Confirmed attacks in September in Homs (21) surged after dropping to a 16-month low in August. The high rate of activity in Homs overshadowed increased attacks in both Raqqa (4) and Hama (6), the latter of which had seen no ISIS activity at all in August. Attacks in Deir Ez Zor (4) remained largely steady compared with last month while confirmed activity in Aleppo (0) continued to fluctuate around the zero-to-one attacks per months level. ISIS cells conducted a high quality attack in Raqqa for the third month in a row and Deir Ez Zor for the second month in a row, but the bulk of high quality attacks occurred in Homs (5).



## Homs

September ISIS activity in Homs reached a level not seen since this author began tracking central Syria attacks in January 2019. Fighting was concentrated on four fronts: the mountains north of Palmyra, the south and west sides of the ISIS-controlled Wadi Doubayat, and Humaymah, and the countryside south and west of Kawm. While the high rate of attacks during the third week of the month captured the most attention, ISIS cells had been ramping up activity here since the beginning of September. According to local regime security forces, this renewed activity began with ISIS cells laying fresh mines and IEDs around the Palmyra area.

Whereas ISIS only carried out two attacks in Homs in August, its fighters conducted at least four attacks in the first week of September. These attacks, mostly mines or IEDs, were focused around the mountains north of Palmyra and in the desert south of the city, stretching to the U.S.-controlled Tanf zone on the Syria-Jordan-Iraq border.

The second week of September again saw four attacks, though severity increased slightly and a new front was opened. On September 9, a Russian Lieutenant Colonel was killed when his vehicle hit a mine in the governorate's southeast, possibly in the region north of Tanf. That same day, a family of civilians was killed when their vehicle hit a newly laid mine in the farmlands west of Palmyra. Three days later, militants attacked a regime outpost northeast of Sukhnah—the edge of the strategic Kawm front that the two sides have been fighting over for several months. The next day another regime soldier was reportedly killed in the Tanf region.

ISIS fully launched a mini offensive in the third week of September when it conducted at least nine recorded attacks. However, the actual number of attacks is likely higher, as explained below. On September 17, pro-regime National Defense Forces (NDF) soldiers based in the Badia reported that ISIS cells in the Doubayat Gas Field area south of Sukhnah had been clashing with Iranian-backed Afghan foreign fighters. Those same sources reported additional details two days later, claiming that at least 25 Afghan foreign fighters had been killed over the previous week in continuous, intense clashes with ISIS.

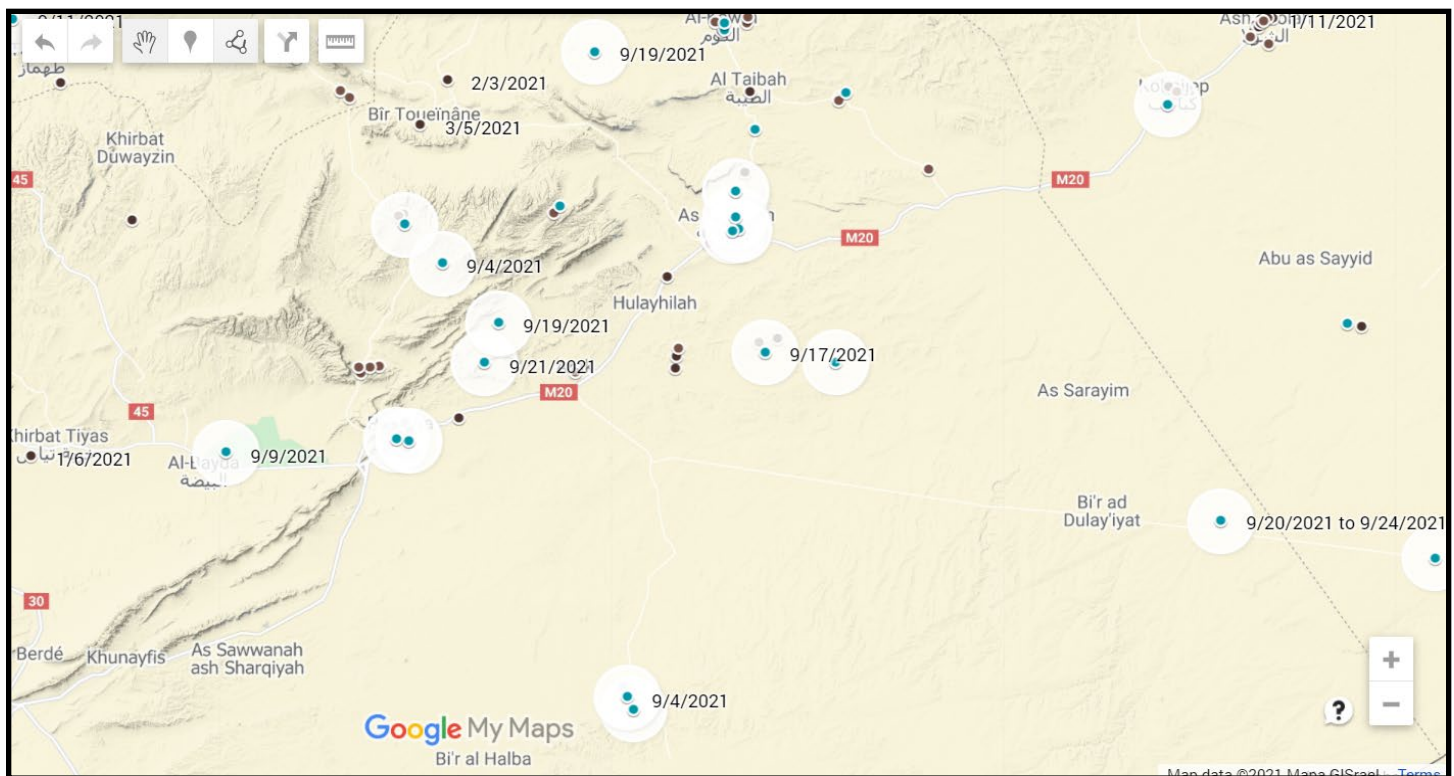
Similarly, on September 24, NDF sources reported that ISIS had been engaged in steady skirmishes for five days with another group of Afghan foreign fighters and members of the Russian-backed 5th Corps in the remote town of Humaymah, along the Homs-Deir Ez Zor border in southeast Homs. The reports went on to say that at least seven Syrian soldiers had been killed in the clashes before the Russian Wagner private military company arrived and helped push back the attackers. The Doubayat and Humaymah battles were listed as two and three attacks, respectively, and dated based on when they were reported to have begun and ended. In reality, it is very likely that clashes occurred more regularly.

Beyond these two fronts, ISIS cells continued to conduct steady attacks around the southern edge of the Kawm front. On September 17, two members of the pro-regime Liwa al-Quds militia were killed in the Sukhnah area, and on September 19, a third regime soldier was reported killed, while ISIS separately succeeded in raiding a regime food warehouse 11 miles west of Kawm.

Lastly, ISIS pre-empted planned regime patrols north of Palmyra with several days of intense battles around the Mustadira and 'Ubayrah mountains. On September 18, ISIS ambushed a convoy of Liwa al-Quds fighters approaching the 'Ubayrah mountains, killing five and wounding 14. "Intense" clashes continued the following day, according to local NDF fighters, with additional soldiers killed and wounded. On September 21, Wagner forces supported by Syrian units reportedly "cleared" Jabal Mustadira—just south of 'Ubayrah—after a short fight, although no ISIS fighters were reported killed or captured.

Fighting in these northern fronts calmed down during the last nine days of the month, although two soldiers were reported killed in the Palmyra and Sukhnah areas on September 22 and 23 respectively. The aforementioned Humaymah battle ended on September 25.





Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in September 2021 (highlighted dots). Not included in the map is one attack that occurred on September 9 in east Homs, likely in the southern part of the governorate.

## Deir Ez Zor

Confirmed ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor dropped slightly in September. Of the four confirmed attacks, only two were significant. On September 22, a regime colonel was killed in an ambush, along with three of his men, while leading reinforcements to assist embattled forces in Humaymah. The ambush reportedly occurred near the T2 Pumping Station, which sits on the road connecting Humaymah with Abu Kamal at the Iraqi border. Two days later, loyalist forces claimed they repelled an attempt by ISIS to cut the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway just west of the town of Kabbabj. Readers of this series will recognize this town as the site of one of the biggest [ambushes](#) against regime, which took place in late 2020.

## Hama

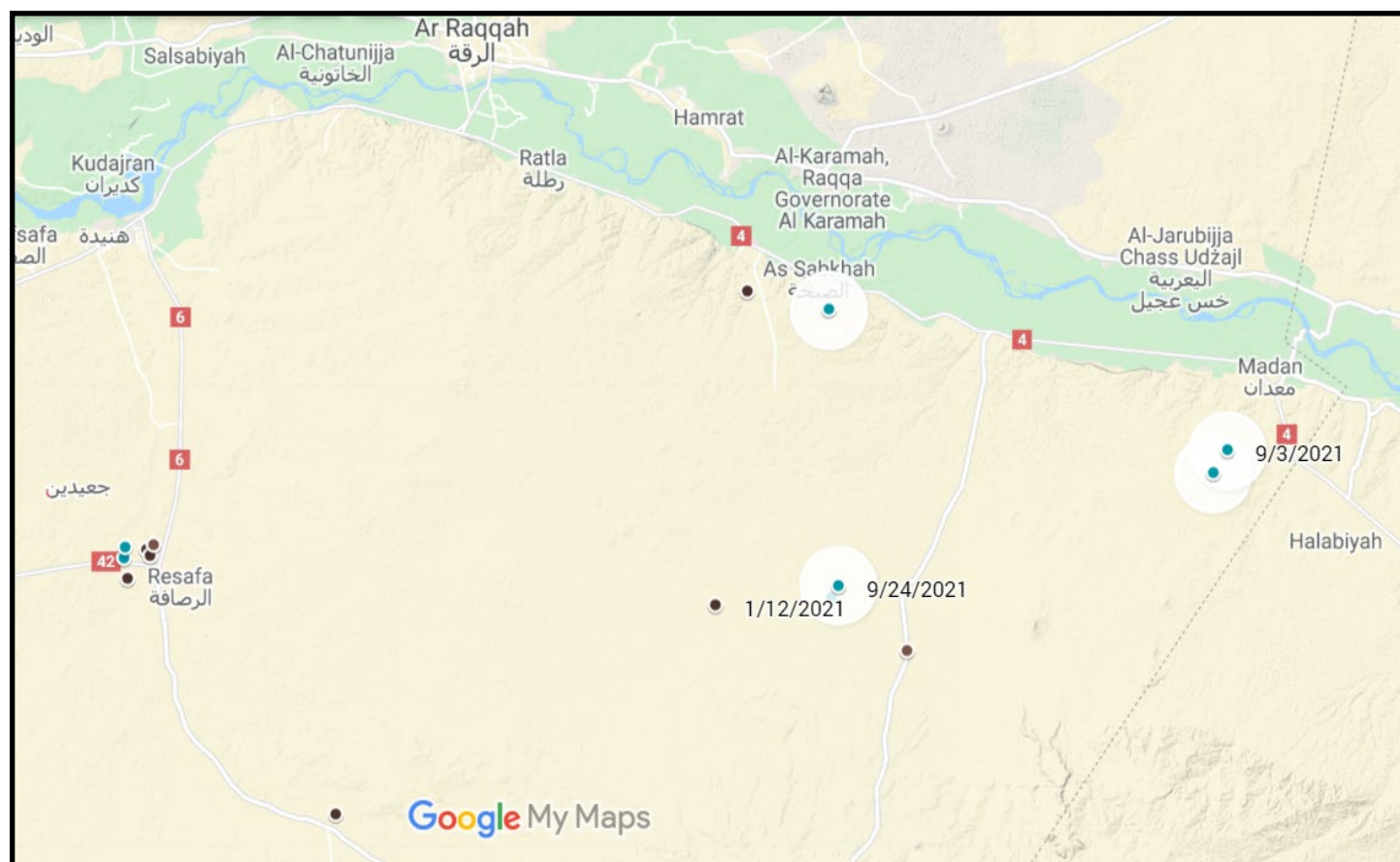
Between June 25 and September 3, ISIS only conducted one confirmed attack in the Hama governorate, where a mine hit on a regime militia likely carried out by a cell based in northeast Homs. Multiple regime security members interviewed by this author in July and August were adamant that the main ISIS cells had withdrawn from the governorate at the time.

However, on September 4, ISIS militants conducted a small arms attack on a regime checkpoint south of the strategic Ithriya crossroads. Four more mine or IED attacks occurred over the rest of the month (three hitting civilians and one, on September 27, killing a soldier on patrol) and, based on their locations, seem to show the cell moving southwest from Ithriyah along the highway towards Salamiyah. It therefore appears that at least one cell re-infiltrated eastern Hama in September.

## Raqqa

Confirmed ISIS activity in south Raqqa increased in September, possibly due to the arrival of cells previously based in east Hama. All four attacks in Raqqa targeted shepherds in the Maadan countryside in the southeast of the governorate. On September 4, the body of a young shepherd kidnapped the day before and executed, was found in the countryside. Two days later, three shepherds were kidnapped in the same area. On September 20,

another shepherd was executed and some of his sheep killed—the rest were likely stolen. This time, security forces were close enough to respond to the attack, driving the ISIS fighters away. Four days later a cell attempted a similar attack nearby late in the evening, killing 120 sheep before security forces again intervened and the attackers withdrew.



Map of ISIS attacks in Raqqa in September 2021 (highlighted dots).

## Regime Operations

Anti-ISIS operations have not changed significantly after reaching what appears to be their geographic limit several months ago. Since then, security forces have focused on securing their new outposts and conducting patrols. This stability in territorial movement has enabled ISIS cells to re-establish themselves in the mountains of northeast Homs and in the deserts of southeast Homs and southwest Deir Ez Zor.

In Hama and Raqqa, regime forces continued to prioritize protecting locals from ISIS attacks while herding their flocks or farming. The Russian-backed 5th Corps also continued its monthly sweeping operation across eastern Hama and southern Raqqa. Meanwhile, the Russian Wagner PMC continues to be deployed across the region as a stopgap force assisting regime and Iranian forces in the Palmyra and Humaymah regions.

## Looking Ahead

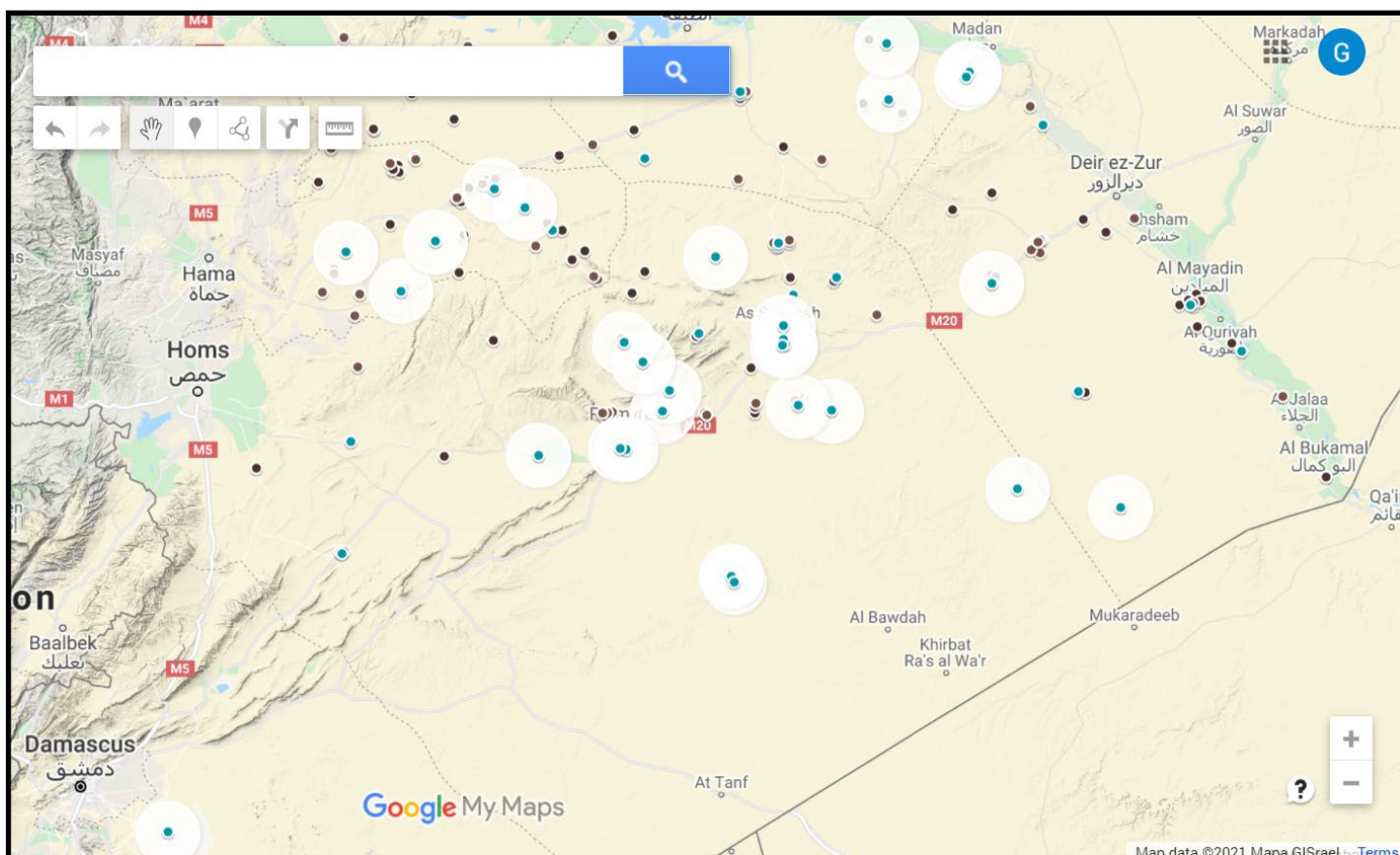
ISIS reminded everyone this month of the degree to which it has embedded itself in Syria. The wave of complex, drawn-out battles across the Badia *combined* with the significant infiltration operation into the Damascus area demonstrates the limits of Russian, Iranian, and Syrian regime efforts to counter the group. To be clear, throughout most of 2021, these allied forces did successfully turn what appeared to be, at the end of 2020, an unstoppable wave of ISIS expansion. But there are limits to what brute force and unsophisticated air support can achieve against an embedded and dispersed rural insurgency.

Those limits may have been reached in recent months when the regime and its allies were no longer able to

push into the remaining core ISIS territories in the mountains and deserts of the Badia. ISIS used this pause to regroup and rebuild its lines of communication and logistics. September showed a return to the mix of offensive and defensive operations that dominated ISIS strategy here in the second half of 2020. However, it is unlikely that October will see the same level of violence.

More importantly, the decision to dedicate resources to infiltrate and attack crucial energy infrastructure serves as a new milestone for the insurgency. It may mark the beginning of a smaller scale version of the anti-infrastructure offensive the group carried out in Iraq in June and July of this year that saw scores of power pylons destroyed. Alternatively, ISIS in the Badia may focus more on carrying out fewer but more impactful attacks like the one in Damascus.

Other than the attack in Damascus, ISIS claimed no attacks in central Syria for the second month in a row. The group clearly understands the importance outsiders place on its claims for assessing the group's strength. ISIS has thus made a conscious decision not to draw the attention of the West to its activities in a region that it sees as the bedrock of its eventual return to power in both Syria and Iraq. September's attacks should therefore serve as a reminder to those wishing to write off ISIS as a defeated force that the group not only remains but has long-term plans to return.



Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in September 2021. This map does not include four attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them; one “Hama countryside” attack, one “Homs countryside” attack, and two “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attacks. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

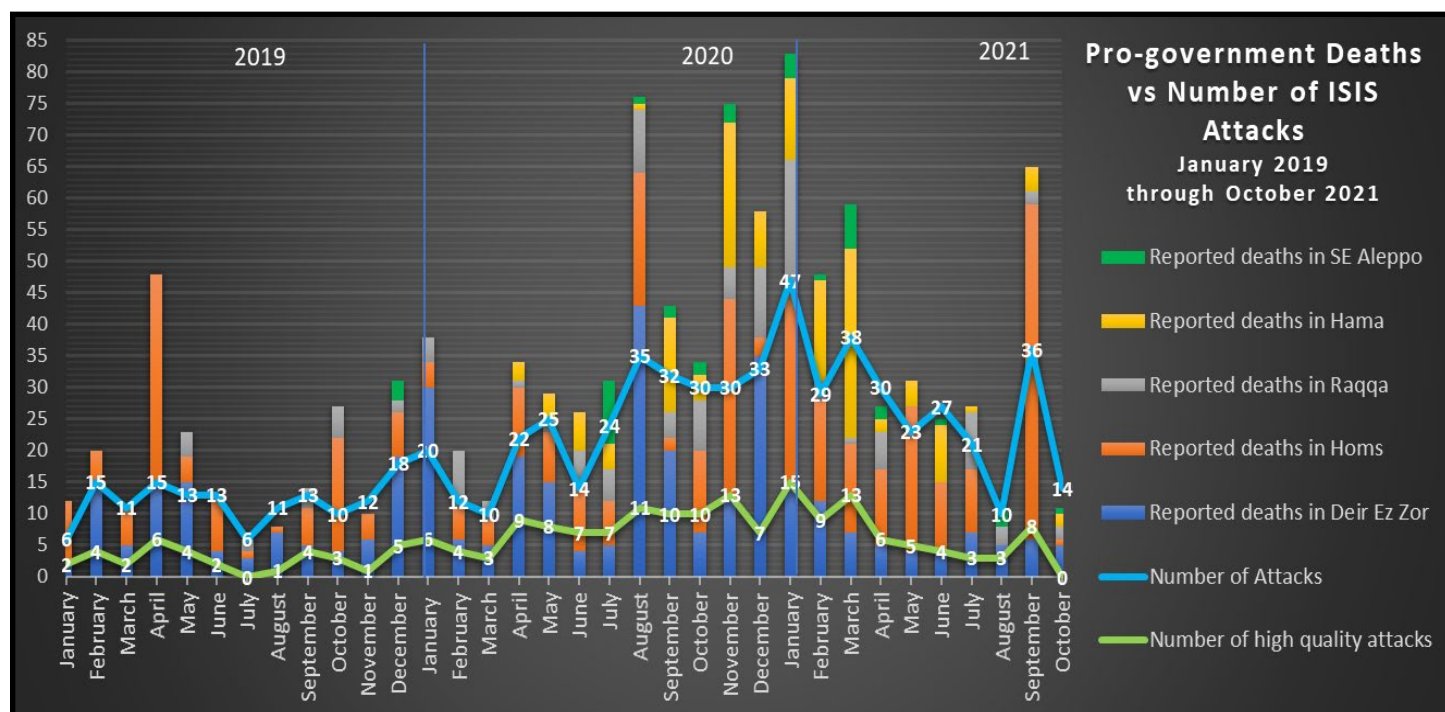
## October 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 14 confirmed attacks in October, killing at least 13 pro-Assad regime fighters and one civilian, while wounding at least three others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Aleppo governorates. ISIS attacks dropped significantly in October from a six-month high of 36 in September. October was the first month with no high quality\* attacks and fewer than 12 deaths since 2019. Yet more attacks occurred in in the



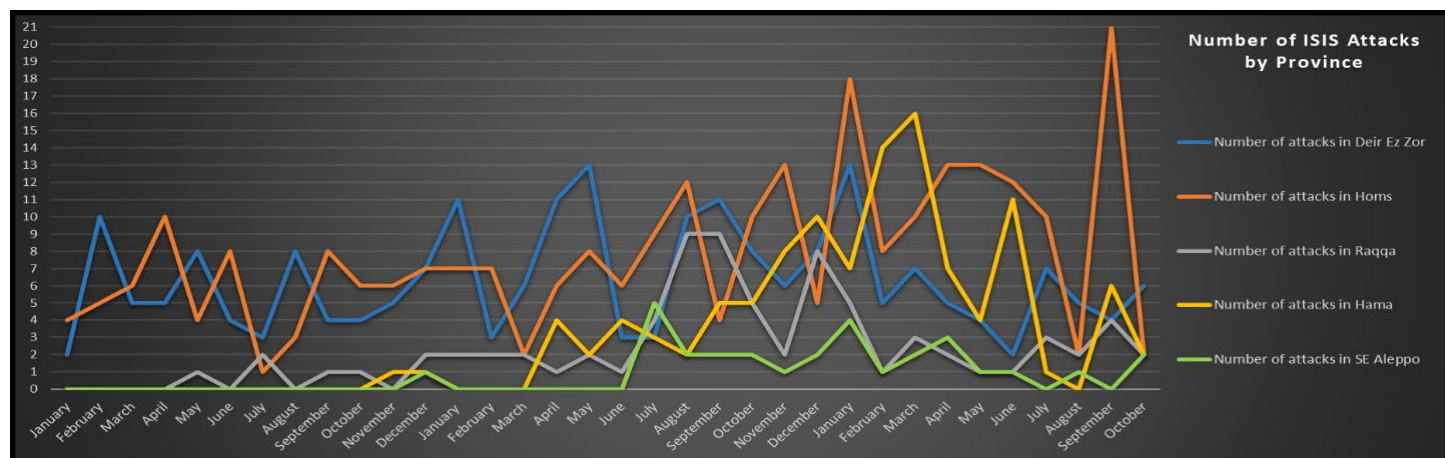
Badia this month than in August. The drop in both severity and quantity of attacks suggests that while ISIS cells may have reconstituted themselves following several months of regime operations, they are not yet choosing to or able to conduct sustained, multi-week offensives like they were at this time last year.

ISIS fighters shifted their attack style throughout August and September, adopting a more aggressive posture and relying less on improvised explosive devices (IED) and mines and more on small arms ambushes. In October, they appear to have reverted to their pre-August strategies. Of their 14 confirmed attacks, at least six used mines or IEDs, while there were only three confirmed small arms attacks. The method used in five attacks is unknown.



ISIS's targeting of civilians appears to have decreased this month, compared with September, with only one reported mine attack occurring in eastern Hama. The uptick in east Hama attacks in September that appeared to imply a return of ISIS cells to the area did not continue into October, although ISIS did not completely disappear from the governorate this month. Finally, after killing six pro-regime commanders over the past four months, ISIS cells failed to kill or attack any commanders during October.

Confirmed attacks in October dropped in Homs (2), Hama (2), and Raqqa (2) while rising slightly in Deir Ez Zor (5) and southeast Aleppo (2). Despite the decrease, activity in every governorate was at or above the levels registered in August. This suggests that whether or not the drop in activity was imposed on ISIS by regime operations in October, the cells are still trending in an upward direction.



## Homs

There were only two confirmed attacks in Homs in October, both occurring in the Sukhnah countryside. On October 20, a Liwa al-Quds fighter from the Palestinian camp in Sabina, Damascus, was reported killed around Sukhnah and on October 22, a 5th Corps tank was reportedly damaged by a mine or IED east of the city.

Based on the unprecedentedly high level of activity in east Homs last month and the generally high level of activity in the governorate throughout 2021, it seems unlikely that there were only two attacks here in October. There were likely additional, unreported ISIS attacks in the vicinity of Wadi Doubayat and northern Palmyra, both areas which saw sustained skirmishes during the second half of September.

## Deir Ez Zor

Confirmed ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor continues to fluctuate, averaging about six attacks per month after steadily dropping during the spring and early summer this year. ISIS cell(s) continued to be active around the Shoula area after moving there last month, with a light skirmish reported on October 4. On October 12, a regime soldier was reported killed in the Tanf Boukamal corridor, likely on or near the highway connecting Humaymah to Boukamal where ISIS ambushed regime forces in September. On October 13 and 14, at least two soldiers were reportedly killed by an ISIS mine west of the Akash oil field. The deaths of two more soldiers were reported somewhere in the governorate on October 17 and 23.



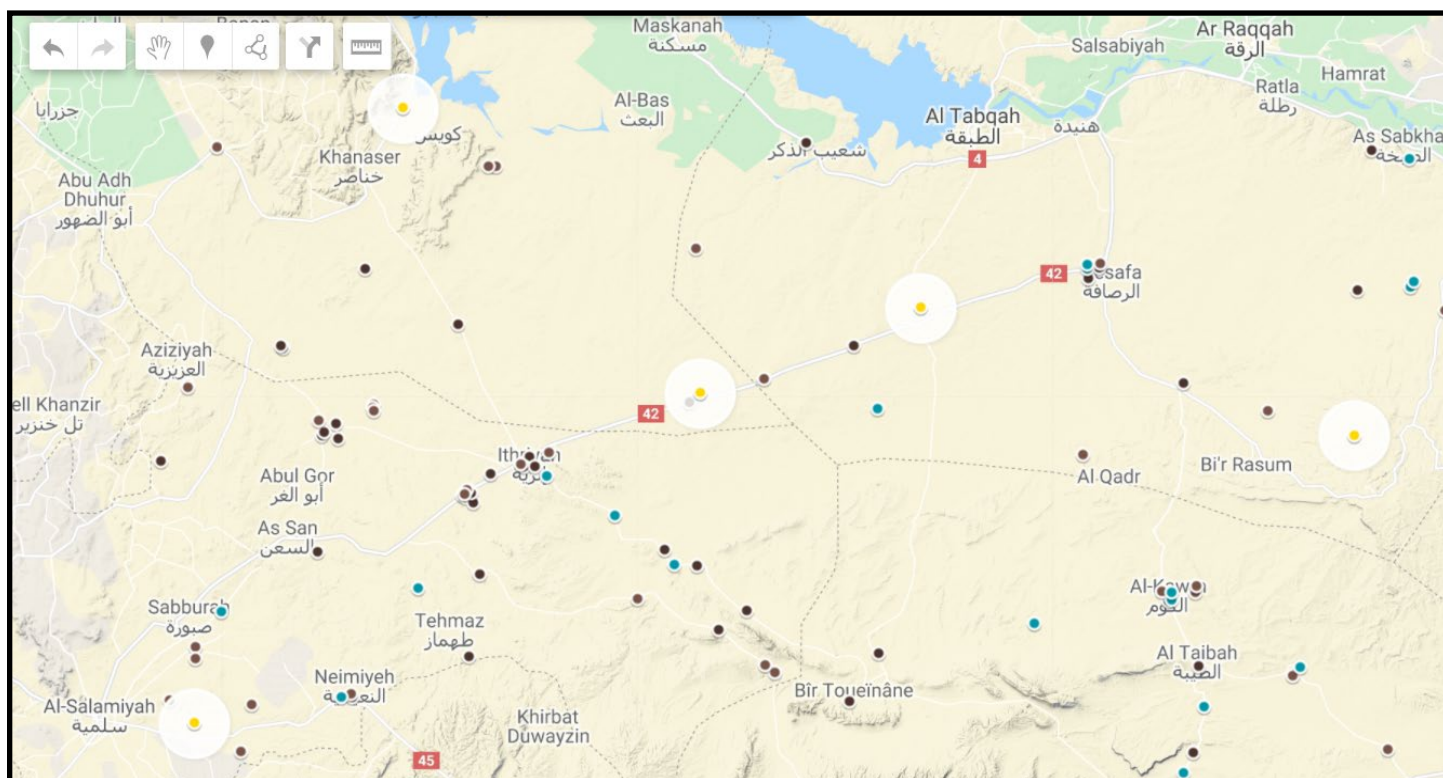
Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor in October 2021 (highlighted dots). Not included are two attacks that occurred in unspecified parts of the governorate.

## Hama, Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

Between June 25 and September 3, ISIS only conducted one confirmed attack in the Hama governorate—a mine hit on a regime militia likely carried out by a cell based in northeast Homs. Multiple regime security members interviewed by this author in July and August were adamant that the main ISIS cells had withdrawn from the governorate. Then between September 4 and 27, ISIS cells conducted six attacks, seemingly reasserting their presence in the governorate. However, only two attacks on regime forces were recorded in October, despite at least two regime sweeping operations that presented ample targets for mines/IEDs or harassment fire. A soldier was killed by a mine in one such sweep on October 20. On October 22, a child was killed by a mine outside his village.

While the four ISIS attacks in southern Raqqa in September targeted civilians, the two attacks in October targeted military forces. On October 7, two soldiers were killed and three wounded by a mine outside the Safwan Oil Field. On October 15, ISIS cells attacked several regime positions near the Raqqa side of Jabal Bishri, triggering a Russian air response.

ISIS conducted at least two attacks in southeast Aleppo in October after no confirmed attacks took place in September. On October 1, a suspected ISIS cell attacked a convoy of Liwa al-Quds fighters and oil tankers moving from southern Raqqa to southern Aleppo, though no injuries were reported. On October 12 a soldier's death was reported in the Safira-Khanasir region of southeast Aleppo. The exact cause is unknown.



Map of ISIS attacks in Hama, Raqqa, and Aleppo in October 2021 (highlighted dots). Not included in the map is one attack that occurred on October 20 in “east Hama.”

## Regime Operations

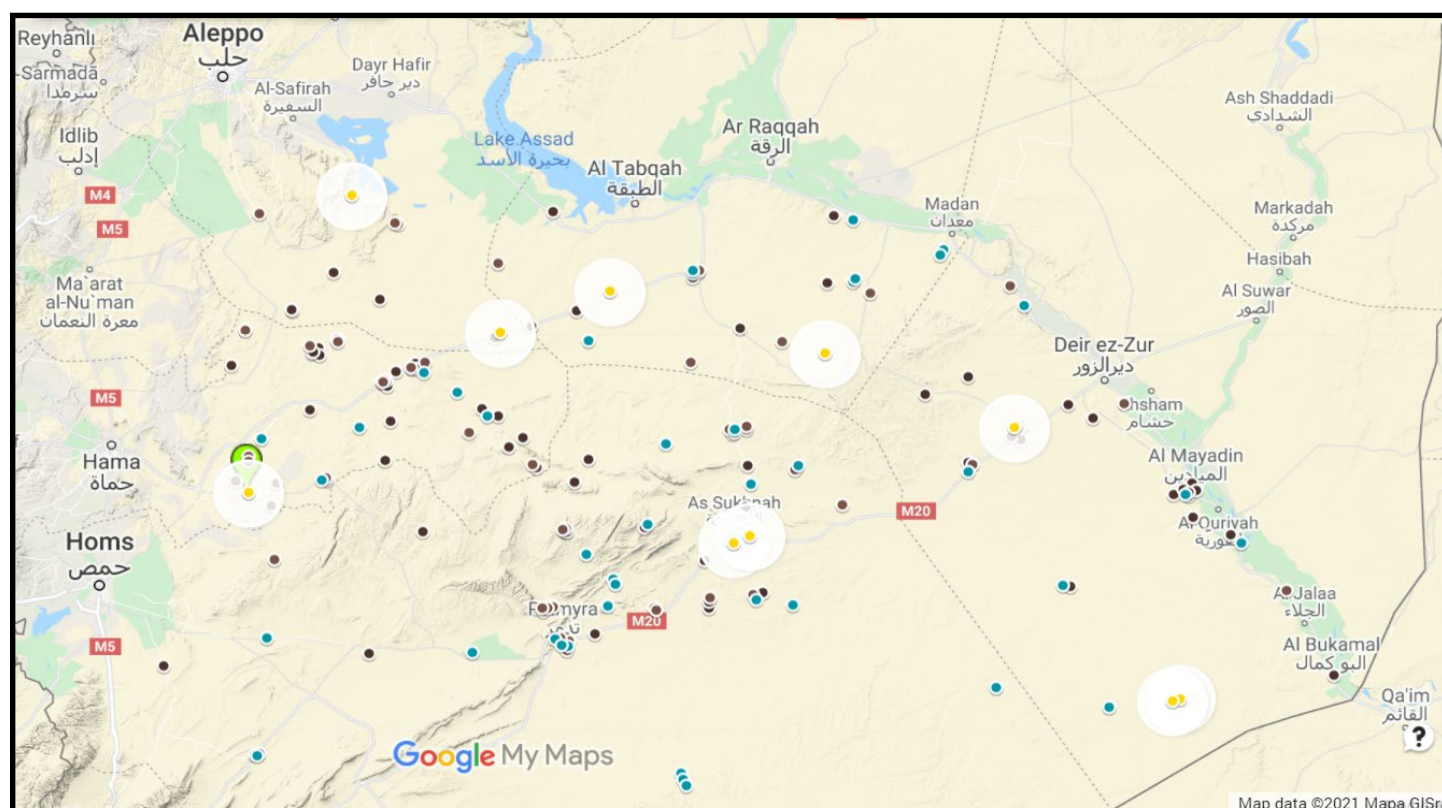
Anti-ISIS operations continue to follow the same pattern established in previous months. Small-to-medium sized sweeps continue on a regular basis in the Hama, Aleppo, and Raqqa governorates while Syrian regime, Russian, and Iranian forces redeploy units as needed across eastern Homs and Deir Ez Zor. Russian warplanes continue to support regime forces during larger attacks on their positions and regularly bomb pre-determined coordinates. In October, most reports of Russia warplane activity focused on the Raqqa and Homs sides of Jabal Bishri.



## Looking Ahead

ISIS surged in September, returning to attack levels more in line with this time in 2020. September's escalation came after a steady decline in activity beginning in April 2021. Confirmed activity once again dropped in October, though remained higher than it was in August. Activity this month can be described as sporadic but consistent with reports of one or two soldiers being killed every few days in different areas of the Badia.

While overall attacks were down, October was the second month in a row that there was at least one attack in each governorate, and the first time since April that ISIS carried out at least two attacks in every governorate of the Badia. Taken together, this seems to imply that ISIS is still choosing to reduce its activity—rather than being forced to by regime operations—though disruptions to ISIS logistical or communication lines cannot be ruled out. It is also important to remember that September's heightened level of activity came as a reaction to attempted regime sweeps. As long as the regime stays out of specific parts of the Badia, ISIS may be content with this lower level of sustained insurgency while it focusing its resources on Iraq and northeast Syria.

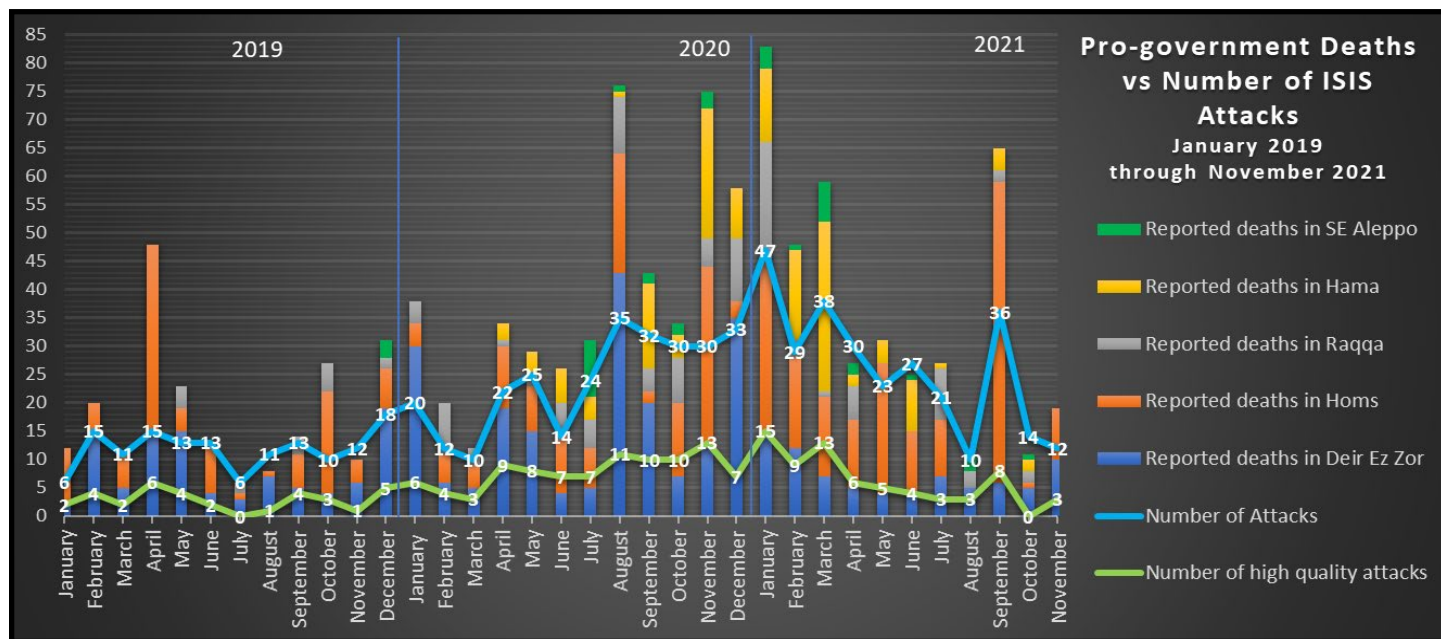


Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in October 2021. This map does not include three attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them; one “Hama countryside” attack, and two “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attacks. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

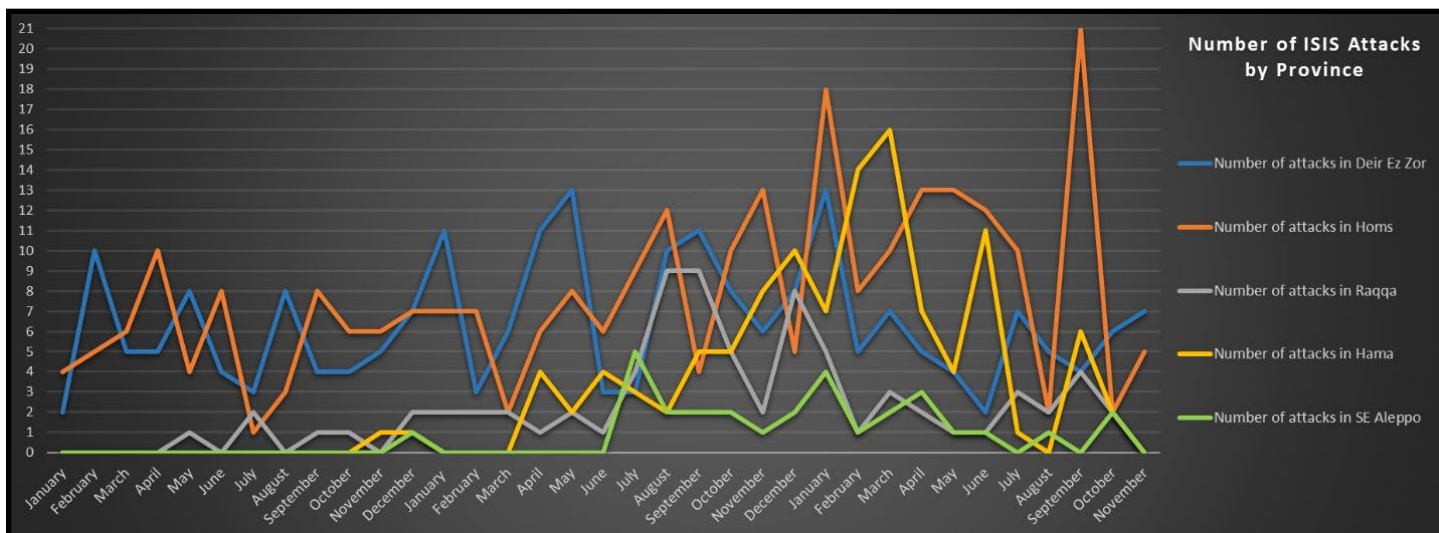
## November 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 12 confirmed attacks in November, killing at least 11 pro-Assad regime fighters and eight civilians, while wounding at least four others in the Homs and Deir Ez Zor governorates. Overall, the number of ISIS attacks dropped slightly from October, though high quality\* attacks increased back to the level seen in late summer. November was the first month since August 2019 that ISIS carried out confirmed attacks in only Homs and Deir Ez Zor provinces. Despite, or perhaps because of this, attacks in both governorates increased compared to October. November also saw the first official ISIS claim of an attack against regime forces in central Syria since July.

ISIS fighters had shifted their attack style throughout August and September, adopting a more aggressive posture, relying less on improvised explosive devices (IED) and mines and more on small arms ambushes. In October, ISIS appeared to have reverted to their pre-August strategies, relying on mines or IEDs for at least half of their attacks. However, despite the reduced activity, November saw a slight return to more aggressive attack types. Not only were there three high quality attacks in November compared to zero in October, but at least seven of the 12 confirmed attacks involved small arms, while there was only one confirmed mine attack and four attacks where the means was unknown. Furthermore, ISIS fighters launched multiple attacks on the same checkpoint and attempted to ambush a nearby regime convoy in Deir Ez Zor over the course of three days, signaling renewed confidence in their ability to carry out attacks on larger military targets without taking losses.



Confirmed attacks in November increased in Homs (5) and Deir Ez Zor (7) while dropping to zero in Hama, Raqqa, and Aleppo. Despite the decrease, activity in every governorate was at or above the levels registered in August. Despite the lack of confirmed attacks in the three historically 'periphery' governorates, ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor and Homs remained elevated. After a steady decline throughout the spring and early summer, both the number of ISIS attacks and high quality attacks in Deir Ez Zor in November matched a nine month high. In other words, where cells were active this month, activity trends upward.



## Homs

Four of the five confirmed Homs attacks in November occurred during the first nine days of the month, with the fifth occurring on November 27. In the first two days of November, ISIS cells clashed repeatedly with Pakistani fighters from the Iranian-backed Liwa Zainebiyoun outside Wadi Doubayat, south of Sukhnah. The Wadi has remained under ISIS control despite the regime's recapture of the Badia in 2017, and significant fighting occurred in this area in August.

On November 4, seven civilians were killed when their vehicle hit a mine or IED in the mountains north of Palmyra. On November 9, regime forces found the body of a known weapons smuggler, believed to have had a history of dealing with ISIS, executed near the Kawm Oasis. Lastly, on November 27 a soldier was reported killed somewhere in eastern Homs.

## Deir Ez Zor

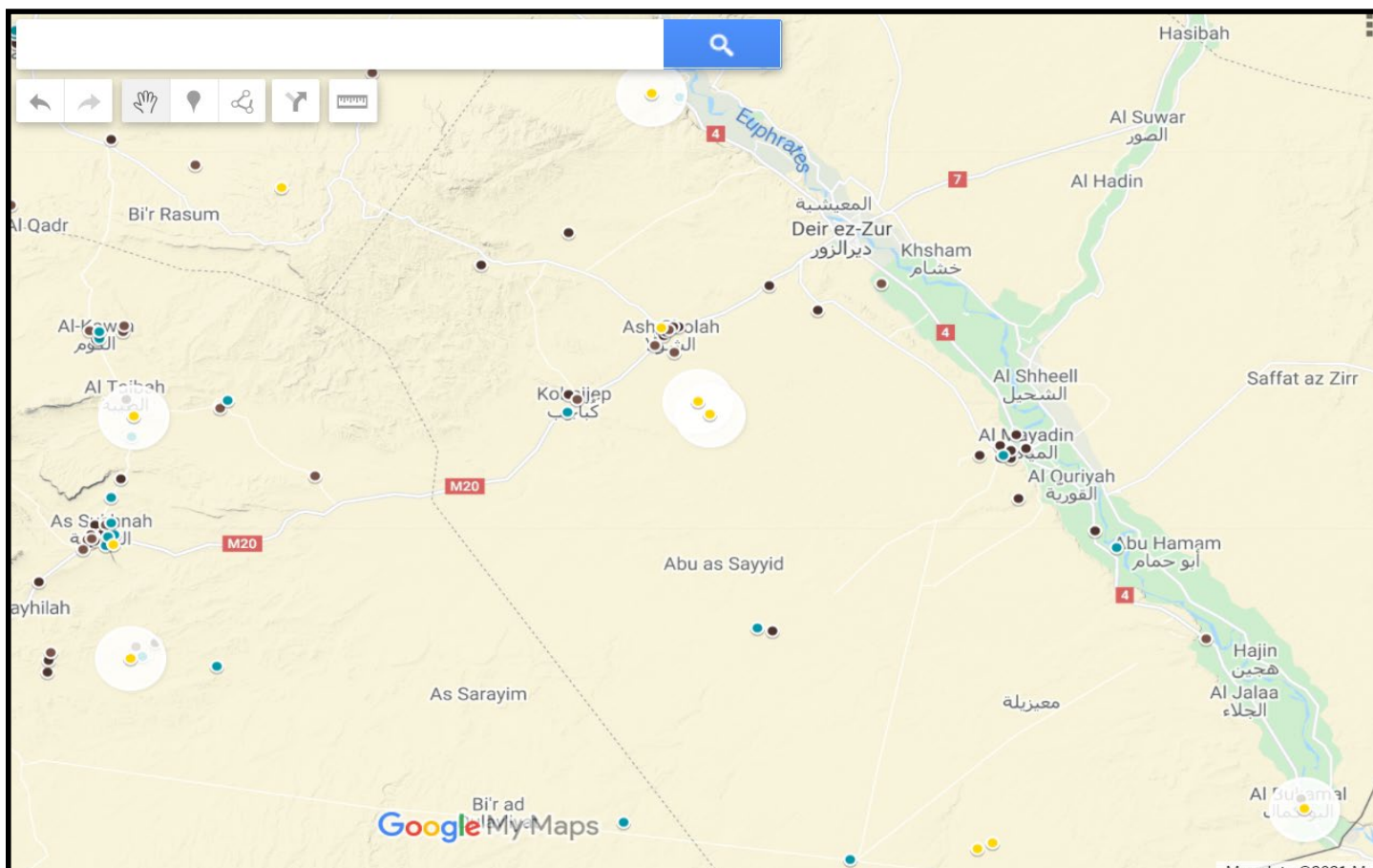
ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor continued to be focused in the northwest of the province, around both Shoula and the eastern slope of Jabal Bishri. This trend began in August when at least one ISIS cell was reported to have moved into the Shoula area.

On November 10, a soldier was reported killed in the Boukamal region, another area of Deir Ez Zor where ISIS activity has been low but consistent. On November 13 and 15, ISIS cells carried out three attacks around the Bir Dohoul checkpoint, south of Shoula. On the 13th, cells attempted to ambush a regime convoy, though no soldiers were killed. On the 15th, ISIS fighters launched at least two separate attacks directly against the checkpoint, withdrawing both times after failing to dislodge the defenders.

Also on November 13, ISIS fighters ambushed a convoy of pro-regime Shaitat tribal fighters near the salt mine outside Tabni. The initial ambush involved guns and IEDs and left all seven tribesmen dead, including a commander. ISIS militants documented the aftermath and then laid new mines, which wounded five Shaitat militiamen who later responded to the first attack, according to one of the survivors interviewed by this author. ISIS officially claimed these attacks several days later.

On November 14, ISIS killed a Brigadier General from the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) 17<sup>th</sup> Division somewhere in the province, likely using a mine or IED. On November 17 another soldier was reported killed in the province.





Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor and Homs in November 2021 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2021. Not included are two attacks that occurred in unspecified parts of the Deir Ez Zor governorate and one attack that occurred somewhere in eastern Homs.

## Hama, Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

No confirmed attacks occurred in Hama, Raqqa, or southeast Aleppo. November was the first month in two years with no confirmed attacks in southern Raqqa province.

## Regime Operations

The Assad regime has continued to conduct small scale patrols across the Badia. Throughout November, elements of the 5th Corps continued to patrol southern Raqqa while various HAMA-based National Defense Forces (NDF) units conducted de-mining operations across eastern Hama. The SAA's 11th Division also continues to conduct sweeps around the strategic town of Qaryatayn, where ISIS cells have conducted intermittent attacks every few months since late in 2020.

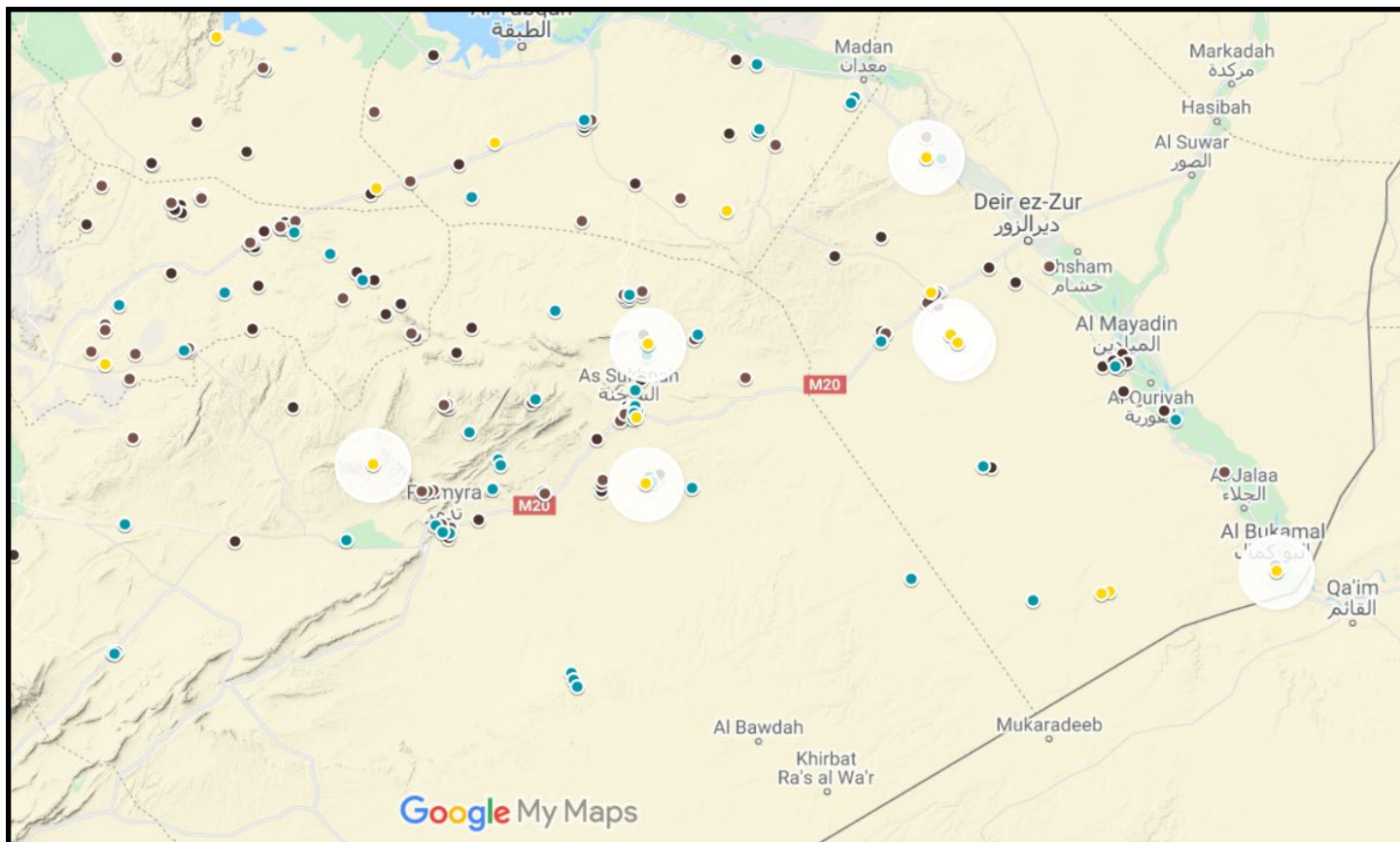
## Looking Ahead

The October attack in Damascus and the surge in attacks in September were reminders that despite a general decrease in activity in the Badia this year, ISIS cells remain present and capable of carrying out complex attacks. Statistically, November's totals appear to show a continued decrease in ISIS activity. However, this was due to a lack of attacks in the three 'periphery' governorates, Hama, Aleppo, and Raqqa. Meanwhile, activity in Deir Ez Zor increased for the second month in a row and activity in Homs more than doubled compared with October.

Additionally, November saw a surge in ISIS attacks across the northeast, with the group carrying out at least 27 attacks in eastern Deir Ez Zor, northern Raqqa, and Hasakah governorates, including an attempted prison break and car bombing. This constitutes a massive increase in confirmed ISIS activity in the northeast compared to October. Cells there continue to have the ability to increase operational tempo at will, thanks to the persistence

of the Badia network, which continues to provide training camps and safehouses for ISIS networks across Syria and Iraq.

As stated in last month's update, the continued low level of activity in central Syria suggests that while ISIS cells may have reconstituted themselves following several months of regime operations, they are not yet able or not yet choosing to conduct sustained, multi-week offensives like they were at this time last year. However, the November 13 ambush in western Deir Ez Zor and ISIS's official claim of the attack shows that the group possesses the ability to operate close to the regime's major urban centers in the Badia.

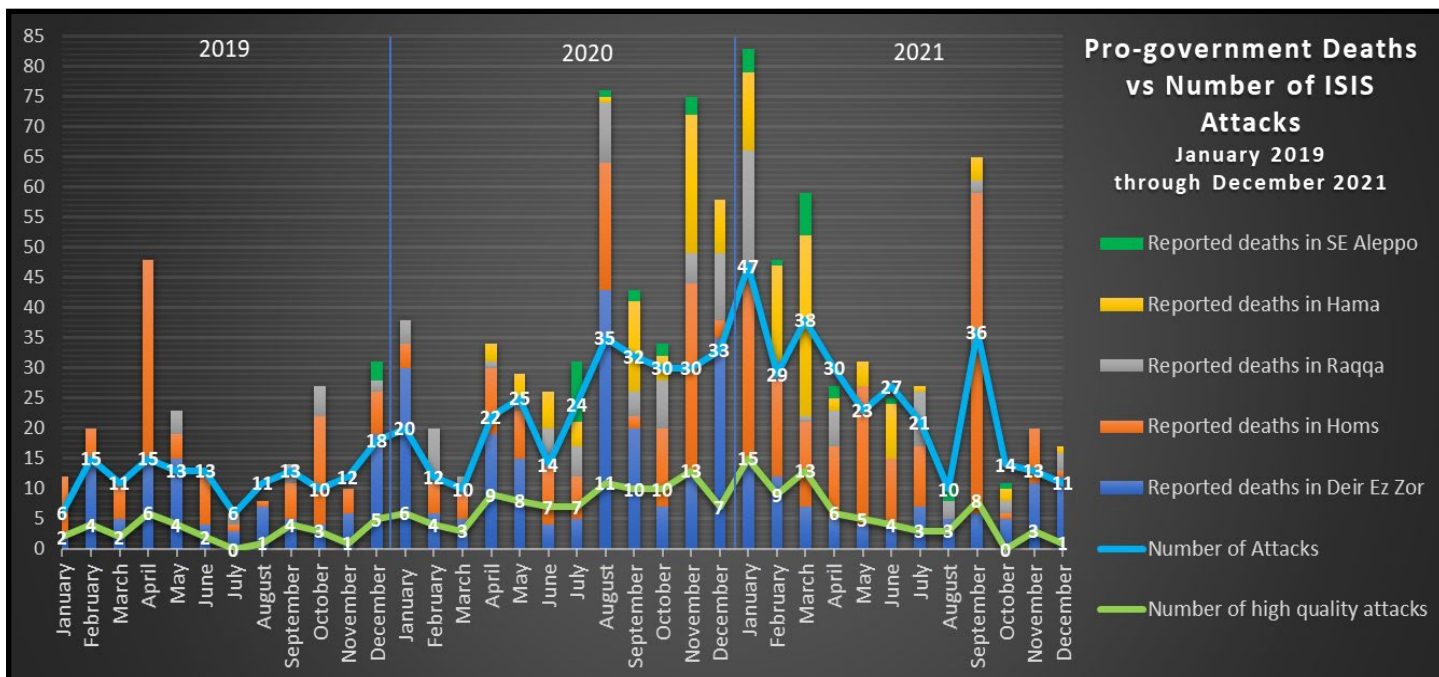


Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in November 2021. This map does not include three attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them; two “Deir Ez Zor countryside” attacks and one “east Homs” attack. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

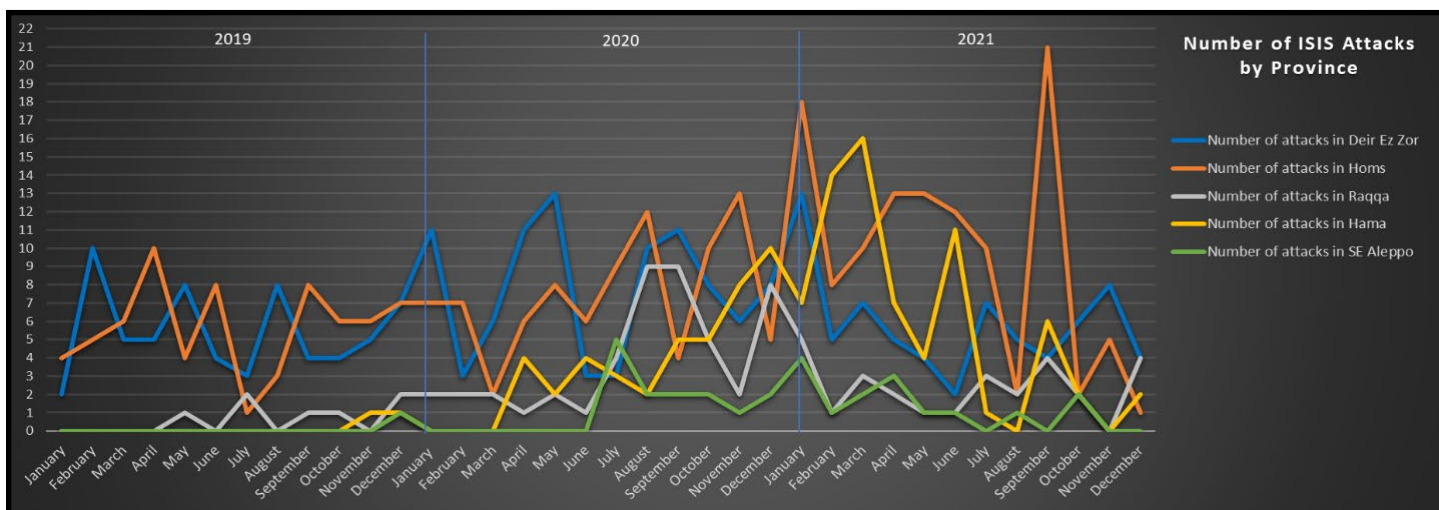
## December 2021

ISIS militants carried out at least 11 confirmed attacks in December, killing at least five pro-Assad regime fighters and 12 civilians, while wounding at least nine others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Hama governorates. December matched the year's previous low of 10 attacks (August), and registered the lowest number of regime fighters killed since prior to 2019. ISIS carried out only one high quality\* attack, the second fewest of the year after October. Attacks returned to the Hama and Raqqa governorates after disappearing in November, although these attacks appeared to largely rely on mines and targeted civilians.

Despite November's lack of geographic spread in ISIS activity, that month was noteworthy for an uptick in high quality attacks and less reliance on mines or IEDs. However, in December ISIS returned to its pre-August strategy of more passive attacks. Half of December's attacks involved mines, and one of the five confirmed small arms clashes targeted a lone shepherd and his flock. Despite this, ISIS did carry out two aggressive attacks in December, one involving a fake checkpoint to ambush civilians and security forces outside an oil field, and the other attacking security forces near an urban center at night.



After an up-tempo November in Homs and Deir Ez Zor, ISIS's traditional 'core' areas, confirmed attacks in December decreased in Homs (1) and Deir Ez Zor (4). Attacks in Hama (2) and Raqqa (4) increased from zero last month. The southern Aleppo countryside remained quiet for the second month in a row, while it was the most active month for southern Raqqa since January 2021. The high number of attacks on civilians had not been seen since the first half of this year.



## Homs

The death of one regime soldier from a mine in the Palmyra area was reported on December 17. There were no other confirmed reports of ISIS attacks in Homs in December. It is unclear if clashes continued in the Wadi Doubayat area, given the recurring fighting seen there in November and September.

## Deir Ez Zor

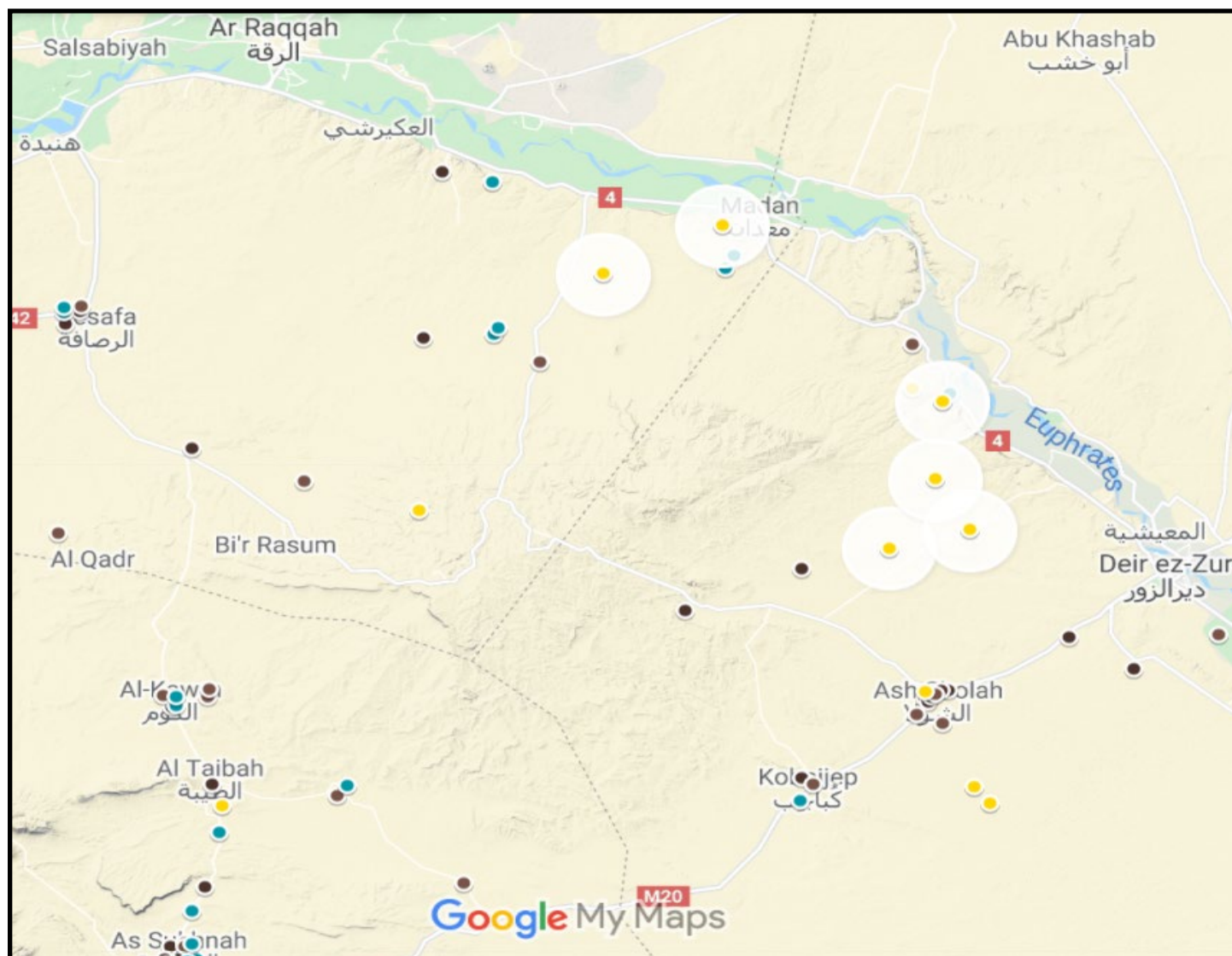
ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor continued to be focused on the northwest of the province, specifically in the rural area stretching from Deir Ez Zor city northwest to the Musarib countryside. This follows a trend that began in August when at least one ISIS cell was reported to have moved into the Shoula area.

The most significant attack occurred on December 2, when ISIS fighters set up a fake checkpoint on the road



connecting Deir Ez Zor city's northern suburbs to the Kharrata Oil Field. Militants used the fake checkpoint to ambush a convoy of oil workers and their security, killing nine civilians and three pro-regime fighters. Shortly thereafter, either the same ISIS cell or a second cell nearby clashed with pro-regime Qaterji Forces fighters further north in the Musarib countryside.

On December 11, an ISIS cell carried out a night attack on pro-regime positions on the outskirts of the town of Musarib, though they reportedly withdrew without inflicting any casualties. Lastly, on December 21, skirmishes occurred around the Kharrata Oil Field between an ISIS cell and security forces deployed to the area for a sweeping operation the week before. This series of attacks, combined with last month's, seems to indicate at least one experienced ISIS cell has re-embedded itself in the eastern Jabal Bishri-Musarib desert region of Deir Ez Zor.



*Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor and Raqqa in December 2021 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2021. Not included is one attack that occurred in the Raqqa countryside.*

### **Hama, Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo**

There were no attacks in Homs, Raqqa, or Aleppo in November, the first time this has occurred since August 2019. However, limited ISIS activity returned in December to both Hama and southern Raqqa.

A mine in the Wadi Azeeb area of east Hama killed one civilian and wounded two more on December 3, just two weeks after the local security forces conducted a demining operation there. On December 16, another mine in

the Sa'an countryside exploded, wounding several men. Local reports did not specify if the wounded men were civilians, likely indicating that the victims were part of the local security forces.

At least two of the four confirmed ISIS attacks in southern Raqqa in December occurred on the Raqqa side of Jabal Bishri, in the same region as the attacks in Deir Ez Zor. On December 2, a soldier was reported killed somewhere in the governorate. On December 8, two local men were wounded by a mine in the Kuwaynan area, north of Jabal Bishri. It is unclear if the men were civilians or local militiamen. On December 16, a farmer was killed by a mine while tending his land in western Raqqa, an area that has not seen ISIS activity since spring 2021. This mine may have been a one-off event or indicate a return of ISIS cells to this area. Lastly, on December 24, ISIS militants killed a shepherd and 100 of his sheep in a small arms attack in the countryside north of Jabal Bishri.

## **Regime Operations**

As with November, December saw no major anti-ISIS operations. With a few exceptions, various pro-regime units continued to conduct small-scale patrols and sweeps around the usual areas in the Badia. In Deir Ez Zor, the National Defense Forces (NDF) reportedly uncovered several old ISIS weapons caches in the Mayadeen and Boukamal countryside after recruiting ex-ISIS fighters who had been living in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) areas east of the Euphrates. Other forces launched a small combing operation in the desert around the Kharrata Oil Field on December 15. These forces clashed with an ISIS cell at least once.

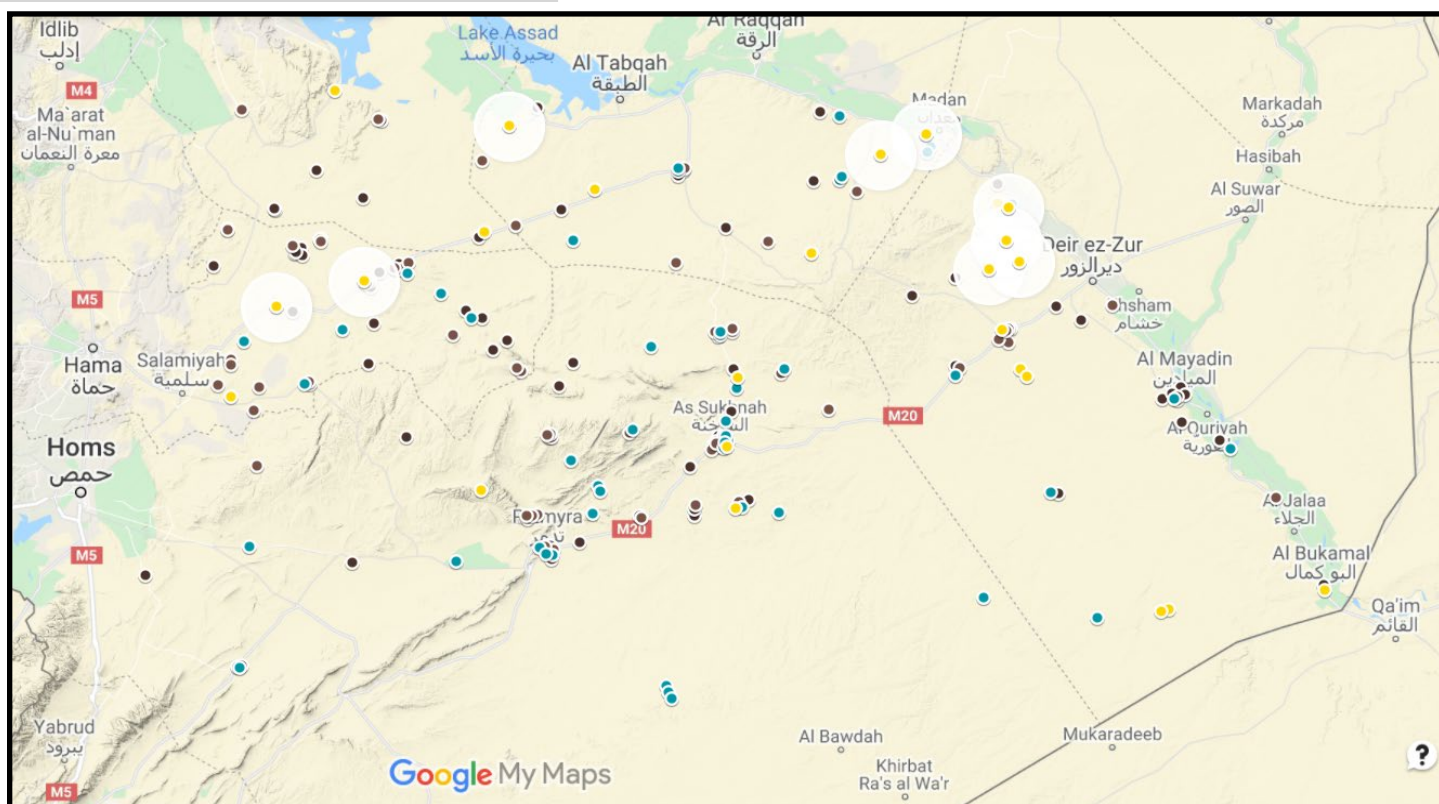
In Homs, Russian forces worked with the Syrian 5th Corps to remove some of the new and old ISIS mines in the Talilah area south of Palmyra. Meanwhile, Russian Wagner fighters conducted their first patrols in the Maskanah region of southeast Aleppo.

## **Looking Ahead**

ISIS activity has been almost non-existent in eastern Hama since June 2021. There was only one confirmed ISIS small arms attack in the governorate in the second half of 2021 (in early September) and 10 mine explosions. This stands in stark contrast to the consistent, pervasive attacks on both regime security forces and civilians that ISIS militants conducted here in late 2020 and early 2021. The new-found security in eastern Hama should be viewed as a significant win for the regime. However, the escalation in violence against civilians in Raqqa in recent months, and the return of experienced cells to northwest Deir Ez Zor will likely be a point of concern for regime forces in early 2022.

One of the most interesting developments in Deir Ez Zor this month has been the continued reconciliation push in Mayadeen and Boukamal. Following several months of intense propaganda and Russia escalations in the SDF-controlled parts of Deir Ez Zor, the regime opened its offices to allow internally displaced people (IDPs) to [reconcile](#) their status and return to their homes in regime areas. This process began in Deir Ez Zor city on November 14 before spreading to Mayadeen and then Boukamal in December. According to members of the NDF, some former ISIS fighters recently released from SDF camps participated in this reconciliation process and joined the Deir Ez Zor NDF. These men then passed information to active ISIS cells on the locations of NDF weapons caches in the SDF-held area of Deir Ez Zor, which were intended for NDF sleeper cells targeting the SDF. ISIS reportedly raided three such caches, seizing around two dozen small arms and several IEDs. The integration of IDPs from SDF territory into regime-held Deir Ez Zor with little to no background checks may open the door for new ISIS attacks inside urban centers in the future.

As noted then, the November 13 ambush in western Deir Ez Zor and ISIS's official claim of the attack showed that the group still possesses the ability to operate close to the regime's major urban centers in the Badia. December's series of attacks in this same area further underscores this point. The second half of 2021 has seen a steady return of ISIS activity in various parts of Deir Ez Zor, following a very quiet period in the middle of the year when security forces had appeared to push ISIS cells deep into the desert. With this in mind, it remains to be seen how long-term the recent stability in eastern Homs will last.



Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in December 2021. This map does not include two attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them: one “Raqqa countryside” attack and one “east Homs” attack. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).



