

# THE CENTRAL SYRIA ISIS INSURGENCY IN 2022

BY GREGORY WATERS

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بيعة جنود الخلافة لأمير المؤمنين الشيخ أبي الحسين الحسيني القرشي

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الشام

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## Key Facts

- ISIS killed more than **147 soldiers** and 31 civilians and **wounded more than 136 people** in central Syria in 2022, **42 and 47 percent**, respectively, of the casualties they inflicted in 2021.
- ISIS militants conducted at least **128 attacks in 2022**, 42 percent of the total in 2021.
- Of the 128 documented attacks in 2022, **32 attacks, or 25 percent, were high quality**, in line with the percentage of high quality attacks in 2021.
- In the last three months of 2022, ISIS militants conducted nearly the **same number of attacks and twice as many high quality attacks** compared with the last quarter of 2021.

## Executive Summary

ISIS activity in central Syria fluctuated significantly throughout 2022. The year began with a series of moderately high tempo months, reached a historic low in July, and culminated in a renewed steady increase in activity over the last four months of the year. Overall, 2022 saw a significant reduction in ISIS activity in central Syria compared to [2021](#). However, attacks in 2022 killed and wounded about the same number of people on average as those in 2021, and roughly the same proportion of these attacks were high quality<sup>1</sup> as in 2021. This would suggest that despite the significant drop in activity, when ISIS militants did choose to conduct attacks, they were able to do so as effectively as they had the year prior; 2022 also saw a return to certain styles and geographical locations of attacks for the first time since 2020, again suggesting that while overall violent activity decreased, cells may have been reconstituted and grown in strength after the heavy regime pressure in 2021.

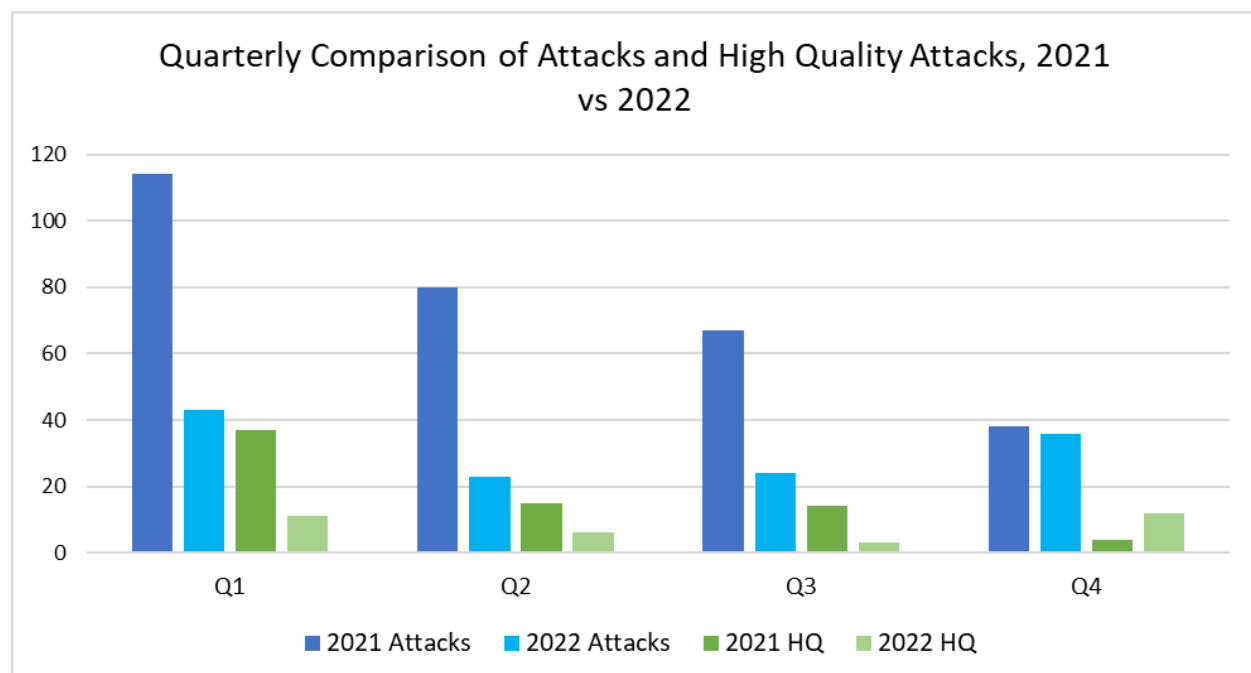


Fig 1: Comparison of the number of overall attacks and high quality attacks each quarter for 2021 and 2022.

The most significant event of 2022 was the return of sustained official ISIS media publicizing the central Syrian insurgency. The July 28 edition of ISIS's weekly al-Naba magazine contained a three-page interview with an alleged senior ISIS commander in the Badia lauding the persistence of militants, explaining the necessity of the [lack](#) of consistent media coverage, and once again asserting the insurgency's role within the "war of attrition" against the regime:

"Within the war of attrition as well, the mujahideen have intensified the targeting of oil tankers that belong to the militia of the apostate 'al-Qaterji' and transport oil to the areas controlled by the Nusayri army. They have also continued their attacks against trucks and trade convoys of the Nusayris, alongside other methods of the war of attrition that the mujahideen are developing, and they are increasing the list of its targets day after day."

This interview transcript was followed the next day by a rare series of official pictures shared on ISIS Telegram channels.

<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.

Since that July publication, ISIS has claimed 19 attacks in central Syria, more than the group claimed in the previous 13 months combined. A complete transcript of the Badia interview can be found [online](#).

The “war of attrition” concept was highlighted in ISIS media coverage of their significant September 2021 [attack](#) on the Deir Ali Power Plant outside Damascus, though it was clearly a guiding doctrine for the group since at least 2020 when militants focused their attacks on both military and commercial convoys traversing the Badia. Shortly after the July interview, ISIS cells began conducting a series of sustained attacks on regime forces around the key Tabqa Air Base, south of Raqqa City. This base has routinely hosted Russian military helicopters used for convoy escort and close air support missions in 2021. In mid-September, ISIS cells began targeting regime-operated oil and gas fields in Raqqa, Deir Ez Zor, and Homs. These attacks culminated in the brutal December 26 attack on three buses carrying dozens of oil workers from the Tayyem Oil Field just outside Deir Ez Zor city. ISIS militants used at least two Anti-Tank Guided Missiles (ATGM) in the attack, which killed more than ten workers and destroyed three buses, the first confirmed use of ATGMs in more than two years (though it should be noted that regime sources claimed an ATGM was used by ISIS in an attack in southern Raqqa in March 2022 as well).

This complex attack so close to the city of Deir Ez Zor followed attacks within the urban belt along the Euphrates River throughout 2022. Even during the peak frequency of ISIS activity in 2020, the string of towns controlled by the regime along the western shore of the Euphrates River had largely been safe from ISIS attacks. However, in 2022 ISIS cells conducted at least nine attacks in this area, particularly in the villages south of Salhiyah which is heavily controlled by Iranian forces and their Syrian proxies. This increase in ISIS’s ability to conduct attacks in presumably secure urban areas is likely a result of the group’s increased strength in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held towns across the Euphrates and the increasingly dire economic conditions in Deir Ez Zor, which create more opportunities for corruption within security forces (both in regime and SDF regions).

ISIS activity also returned to southern Aleppo following ISIS’s July publication, with the group carrying out at least three Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and small arms ambushes around Khanasir in October and December. This sparsely populated desert region, long an information black hole, was heavily targeted in 2020 (14 attacks) and the first half of 2021 (12 attacks). By late 2021, the Russian-backed 25th Division had asserted its presence in the countryside around Khanasir and north of Ithriya. Throughout 2022, the division had regularly conducted military exercises in the [countryside](#) south of Khanasir. The establishment of a regime-Russian military base in this area, alongside continued 25th Division patrols in the region makes the return of ISIS attacks here all the more remarkable. Unfortunately, pro-regime media has been completely silent on ISIS attacks here, despite ISIS media sharing photos of slain Syrian army soldiers. This leaves ISIS’s intentionally limited self-reporting as the only insight into its activity in this region.

Despite the increase in ISIS activity in Raqqa, Deir Ez Zor, and Aleppo in the second half of 2022, it is not clear if ISIS cells have made any new inroads back into east Hama, where they were reportedly expelled in late 2021. Of the 24 incidents recorded in east Hama in 2022, 23 involved mines or IEDs, while one involved a drive-by shooting of a civilian in a remote village. It is difficult to determine if these mine/IED attacks involve old explosives placed during previous years (all are reported by locals as “remnants of the ISIS terrorists”) or were more recently placed by covert cells. However, despite continued de-mining operations by local security forces, explosions still killed civilians and military men in 10 of the 12 months of 2022.

## Assessment of Future Trends

The reduction in ISIS activity in the second half of 2021 was largely spurred by significant regime military operations, troop deployments, and persistent air support from both the Russian and Syrian Air Forces. Yet 2022 saw no such dynamics. Instead, the Russians, Iranians, and Syrians returned to their 2020-style of limited patrols and de-mining operations punctuated by the occasional targeted sweep. However, there were no coordinated, multi-governorate operations like those carried out in the first quarter of 2021. As in 2020, such limited operations allowed ISIS cells to largely avoid heavy troop concentrations, move to safer regions, and avoid contact if necessary.

The reduced ISIS activity in 2022 is therefore attributable to other factors, though there is no definitive answer. It should be remembered that, by the end of 2021, ISIS cells in the Badia had suffered some human losses and reportedly significant equipment losses as well, especially among their fleet of pickup trucks that are crucial for supporting more complex attacks. Militants were reduced to mainly relying on mines and IEDs, as well as quick hit-and-run style attacks using a few men on motorbikes (motorcycle tracks were regularly reported by regime sources at the site of ambushes). ISIS appears to have shifted resources to [northeast](#) Syria by late 2021, finding the operating environment there better than in central Syria. The insurgency’s adjustment culminated in the devastating al-Sina’a Prison break in January 2022, when a few dozen ISIS fighters freed more than 300 prisoners, reportedly including leadership figures, from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) prison in Hasakah. Security officials in the northeast told this author that some of the attackers had recently come from the Badia, and at least some of the escapees had made their way to the Badia. This prison break therefore seems to have helped bolster ISIS’s Badia cells.

Furthermore, it seems that ISIS cells in the Badia have been strengthened by a new batch of young recruits. This author has long contended that the Badia has served as ISIS's training center for new recruits, especially young boys from Syria and Iraq. In December, ISIS cells from across the world released photos declaring allegiance to the new Caliph. Among these were dozens of pictures from groups in Syria, including what appears to be [Badia-based cells](#) showing numerous children and teenagers, something which has not been seen in prior photosets of armed Badia cells. These photos would appear to reveal that the newest generation of ISIS recruits have begun to be integrated into active cells in central Syria.

However, ISIS also faced several setbacks in 2022. The group lost its top leader twice, first when a U.S. raid in Idlib killed Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi on February 3, and then when local fighters backed by Syrian regime security forces killed Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Quraishi in a protracted battle in Dara'a in mid-October. Furthermore, an internal security forces commander from the rebel Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which rules Idlib, told this author recently that, according to ISIS detainees in HTS custody, regime forces killed the ISIS Badia Emir, one Abu Ali Iraqi, sometime in 2021 (possibly sometime around or just after July, when ISIS media from the Badia almost completely ended). Detainees also allegedly spoke of conflicting orders over the direction of the Badia insurgency, first under Abu Ibrahim who wanted the Badia cells to direct support to Dara'a and then under Abu al-Hassan, who had instead emphasized supporting the Badia cells themselves. In July 2022, ISIS leadership allegedly finalized plans for a re-organization of the Syria arena, unifying operational command of the various insurgencies into four sectors under one overall Sham Wilayat.

Taken together, this new information regarding command losses and policy reversals within the Badia insurgency from late 2021 through mid-2022 may help explain the general decline in activity despite the lack of significant regime pressure and then the renewed media and activity uptick beginning in July. The attack trends of the past two quarters should therefore guide policymakers' assessments of Badia trends moving into 2023.

Taking the above into account, there are three key insights moving forward:

- 1) The first time ISIS cells conducted simultaneous surges in activity in both Raqqa and Aleppo was the start of the major 2020 ISIS expansion across central Syria. Aleppo represents a periphery of ISIS activity, so increased activity here would suggest cells in core Badia regions are strong enough to divert resources to "frontline" attacks. Raqqa, meanwhile, represents a key transit and supply node for the Badia and northeast insurgencies. Increased attacks here on regime infrastructure (such as Tabqa Airbase), and SDF forces (such as the [December 26](#) raid of an SDF headquarters and prison) suggests that ISIS cells are confident enough in the resiliency of their smuggling routes that they do not fear a security crackdown.
- 2) The attacks in urban Deir Ez Zor, especially the three attacks around Dweir in one day in December, marks an important evolution of the Deir Ez Zor insurgencies that cannot be ignored by the SDF and the Coalition. The Euphrates River has long been a key gap in northeast security, serving as a smuggling and human transit route for ISIS members between western and eastern Deir Ez Zor. As ISIS continues to make inroads in SDF-held Deir Ez Zor, the strengthening of their position across the river means it will be that much more difficult for the Coalition and SDF to roll back ISIS cells in their own territory.
- 3) For most of the past two years, ISIS relied on 'defensive' attacks (e.g., IEDs, mines, distant harassment) due to heavy Syrian regime and Russian air support and troop deployments. August saw a shift in this strategy with renewed, though intermittent, aggressive attacks and the return of ISIS Badia media. This shift was visible via regime media and has largely held since (although there was a slight drop in November). But now this slew of ISIS media is publicizing an even larger shift toward consistent, aggressive attacks across the "safe" Badia. ISIS cells kidnapped and executed regime soldiers once in September and then twice in December, the first such executions since mid-2021. This comes on the heels of a concerted multi-month campaign when ISIS cells used small arms and IEDs to harass regime forces around the critical Tabqa Air base in Raqqa and briefly captured the strategic Homs village of Kawm on the Sukhnah-Resafa road. The containment of ISIS in 2021 relied on constant air support and patrols, yet it seems that by late 2022 the combination of strengthened ISIS cells and a regime weakened by fuel and economic crises has significantly curtailed the ability of regime security forces to maintain a heightened security presence across the Badia and effectively respond to increasingly brazen ISIS attacks.

These three takeaways do not necessarily imply a return to ISIS's 2020 level of attacks. ISIS continues to enjoy a high level of freedom in northeast Syria, where the bulk of recruitment and financial opportunities reside, and thus will likely continue to focus its limited resources there. However, ISIS may seek to exploit the growing fuel and food crises in regime-held Syria by increasing attacks on oil and gas fields, fuel infrastructure, and oil trucks coming from the SDF-held northeast. The most important takeaway from 2022 for western policymakers is that the dominant position of the regime in 2021 is gone—for now at least—and a resurgent and strengthened ISIS in central Syria directly weakens security in northeast Syria. The continued inability of the Coalition and their Kurdish allies to build effective intelligence networks and counter growing ISIS soft power in Deir Ez Zor—and to a lesser extent in Raqqa—risks being exploited by an emboldened Badia insurgency.

## Charts

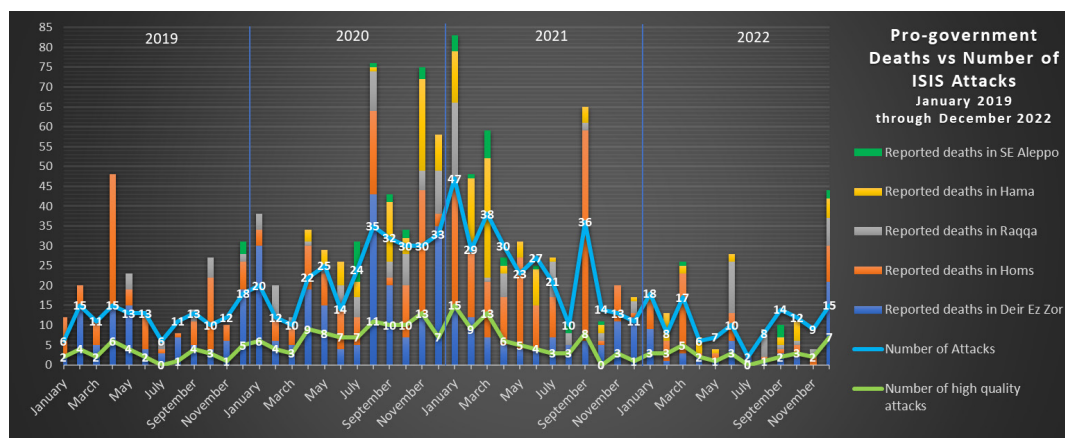


Fig 2: The number of civilians and pro-regime soldiers killed (bars) and the number of overall and high quality attacks (lines) each month since January 2019.

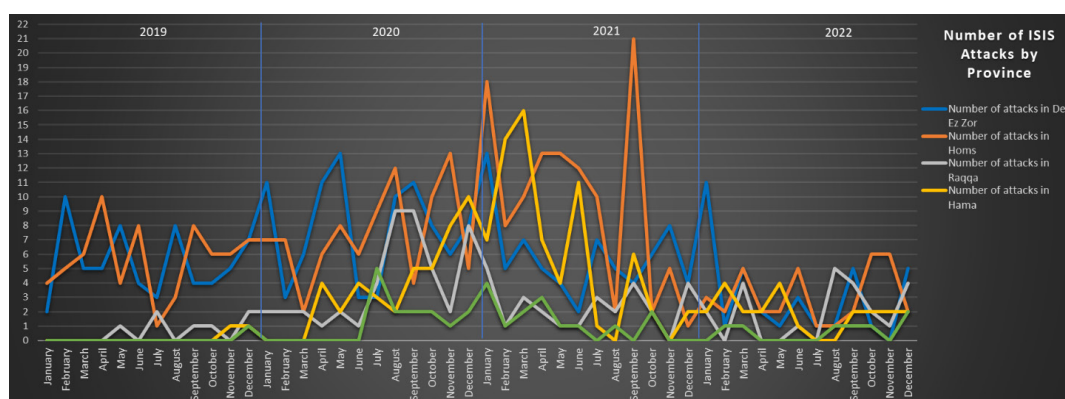


Fig 3: The number of confirmed ISIS attacks conducted in the regime-held parts of each governorate that constitutes the Syrian Badia. Note that this does not include ISIS attacks in the parts of these governorates outside of regime control, such as the SDF-held northern Raqqah and eastern Deir Ez Zor.

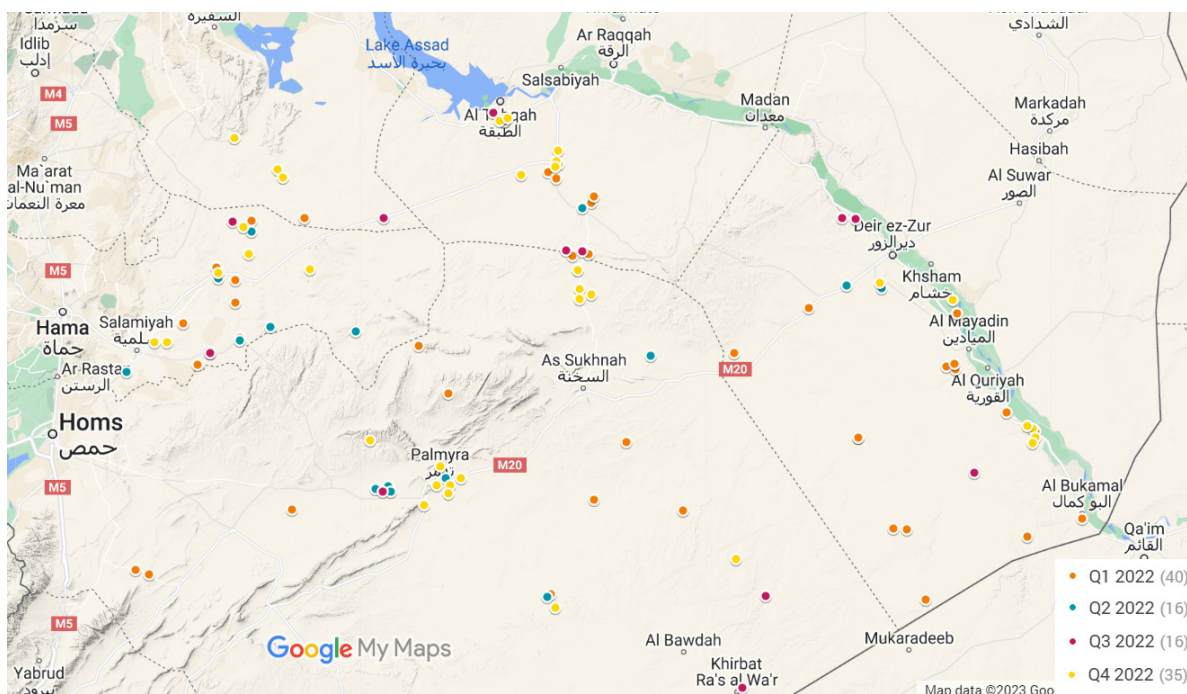


Fig 4: Map of ISIS attacks in Central Syria in 2022. Not mapped are 14 attacks which did not have specific locations attributed to them: eight in Deir Ez Zor countryside, four in eastern Homs, one in eastern Hama, and one in southern Aleppo.

## Monthly Reports

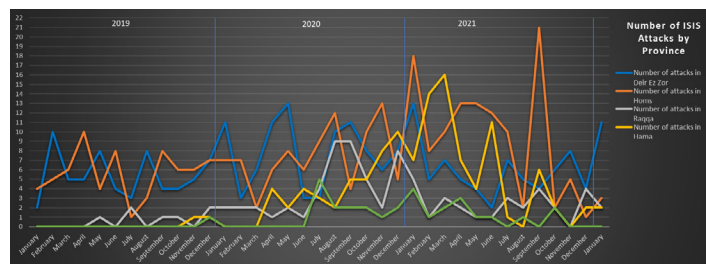
Following are the 2022 monthly installments of “ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency.” A review of developments throughout 2021 can be found [here](#), and each 2022 monthly editions can be viewed through the following links: [January](#), [February](#), [March](#), [April](#), [May](#), [June](#), [July](#), [August](#), [September](#), [October](#), [November](#), [December](#). A full background and analysis of ISIS’s resurgence in Syria, including the methodology used to collect this data, can also be explored [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

### ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in January 2022

ISIS militants carried out at least 18 confirmed attacks in January, killing at least 16 pro-Assad regime fighters and three civilians, while wounding at least 28 others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Hama governorates. ISIS activity in January was the highest since September due to an uptick in attacks in the countryside and urban centers of Deir Ez Zor. This spike was concurrent with a large surge in attacks across northeast Syria in January as well. ISIS carried out three high quality attacks in central Syria and exhibited a significantly more aggressive posture than in recent months. Attacks continued to be very limited, however, in Hama, Raqqa, and Homs.

There were only five confirmed IED or mine attacks in the Badia in January, and one attack via unknown means. Two-thirds of the attacks were conducted using small arms, a significant increase in aggressiveness compared to ISIS’s preferred attack methods in the second half of 2021. Nearly all of these small arms attacks occurred in Deir Ez Zor and Raqqa, while passive mines were used in the only two attacks in Hama. Of the small arms attacks, at least two involved ambushes in the urban belt along the Euphrates river and one saw ISIS fighters ambush a small regime military convoy on a highway in southeast Homs.

ISIS activity was the highest in a year in Deir Ez Zor (11) and rose slightly in Homs (3), after both governorates saw a drop in attacks in December 2021. Activity in Hama (2) and Raqqa (2) remained very low while the southern Aleppo countryside remained quiet for the third month in a row.

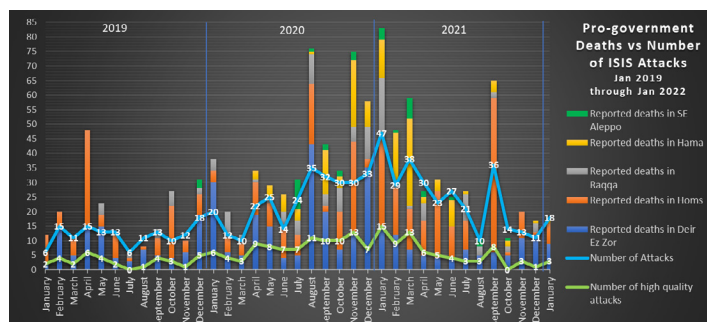


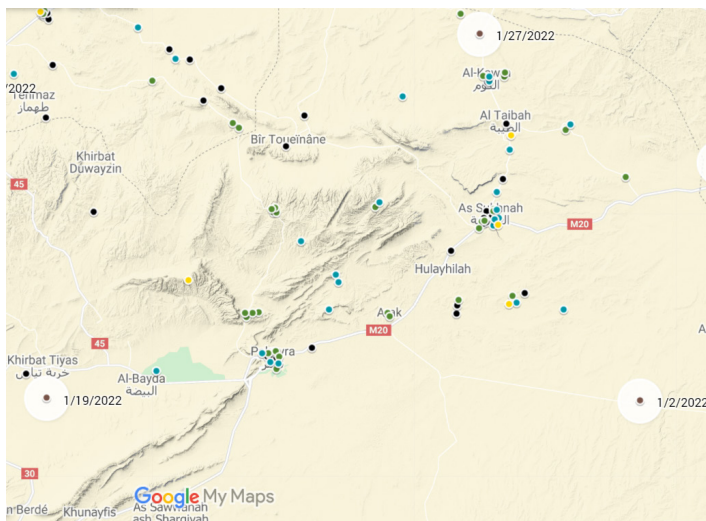
### Homs

There were three attacks in east Homs this month, the second fewest since March 2020. Two of the attacks involved aggressive small arms raids on regime forces. On January 2, ISIS militants ambushed a small military convoy in southeast Homs, destroying a bus and killing six soldiers and wounding 20 more. The convoy consisted of only four vehicles, a rarity since last year. The larger convoys the regime adopted in early 2021 have all but ended ISIS’s attacks on major highways. This attack thus suggests that cells are still monitoring the roads in the hope of finding easier targets. While initial reports indicated the use of “rockets”, the attack consisted only of ISIS fighters firing on the bus with small arms.

On January 19, a mine south of Tiyas killed one civilian and wounded another. This area, which marks the border of the remote Badia and the string of villages extending east from Homs city, has seen only rare attacks over the past year and half. However, recent reports from local security forces suggest that one or more ISIS cells long-positioned here are now trying to infiltrate further west, likely attempting to link up with sympathetic locals in order to create a foothold on the edge of Homs city. This mine attack may indicate that this cell, or cells, are now actively mining the area as part of the strategy.

Lastly, on January 27 ISIS militants attempted a night-time raid on a Liwa al-Quds position near al-Kadir, on the Homs-Raqqa border north of the Kawm Oasis. Regime forces seized Kawm and the surrounding countryside in the spring of 2021, and attacks in this area have been extremely rare in the second half of last year. This attack may have been a one-off event, or an indication that cells are attempting to re-establish themselves along this important transit route.





Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in January 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2021 and 2022.

## Deir Ez Zor

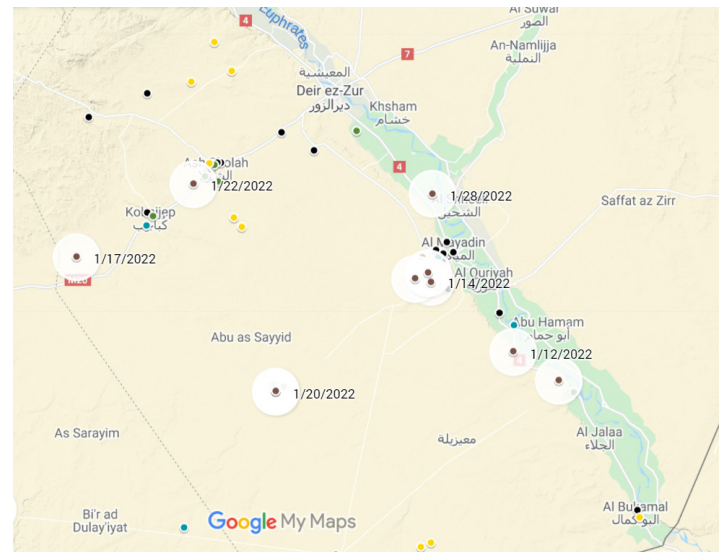
While ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor in the last months of 2021 was focused in the northwest of the province, January saw cells engage regularly with regime forces farther south along the Mayadeen countryside. This region was highly active in 2020 and was one of the security priorities for the regime and Iran in early 2021. The return of semi-consistent ISIS activity here suggests that cells from Iraq or other parts of the Badia have moved in recently, or that the cells operating here in 2020 and early 2021 had simply gone to ground until now.

The most significant attack occurred on January 12, when ISIS fighters used the cover of heavy fog to infiltrate the town of Kashmah, just south of Mayadeen, attacking two regime checkpoints and raiding a small warehouse. The militants killed four security forces and stole a truck, food and medical supplies. Early the next morning, an ISIS cell ambushed a pro-regime National Defense Forces (NDF) vehicle on the road south of the town, destroying it with a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG), killing three regime fighters and wounding six others. Two weeks later, on January 28, ISIS militants attacked a regime checkpoint in the town of Zabari, seven miles north of Mayadeen. The attack left one soldier dead and one wounded.

These three attacks marked the first time ISIS carried out small arms attacks in the urban belt stretching from Boukamal to Deir Ez Zor city since 2020. The attacks came just a month after [reports](#) of possible ISIS infiltration into the ranks of local NDF forces via the reconciliation process that began in November 2021.

Low-level clashes continued in the Mayadeen countryside

through most of January, with skirmishes reported on January 14 and two attacks on patrols in the desert occurring between January 21 and January 23. Farther west, ISIS cells operating out of the Faydat bin Muwaynah region—a long-time ISIS stronghold in the desert—destroyed a Syrian army vehicle with an IED on January 20 and repeatedly skirmished with Syrian Arab Army (SAA) forces between January 21 and 23. In Deir Ez Zor's northwest, ISIS cells destroyed an army water truck with a mine on the southwest edge of Jabal Bishri on January 17 and clashed with Iranian-backed forces west of Shoula on January 22.



Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor in January 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2021 and 2022.

## Hama, Southern Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

There were no attacks in Hama, Raqqa, and Aleppo in November 2021, the first time this has occurred since August 2019. However, limited ISIS activity returned to both Hama and southern Raqqa in December 2021 and January 2022.

Unlike December's attacks that largely targeted civilians, the two attacks in Raqqa in January both targeted regime security forces. On January 5, ISIS militants fired on a vehicle carrying NDF fighters near Resafa, wounding some of them. On January 23, militants clashed with security forces near gas fields south of Resafa. This second attack was then exaggerated by pro-opposition media outlets, including SOHR, which claimed either that ISIS had captured Resafa or that the regime had withdrawn from several key areas around Resafa. This author spoke with two contacts in different regime units who were in contact with soldiers deployed in Resafa, all of whom denied these rumors.

The two attacks in eastern Hama, both using mines, hit civilians, as has become custom. The first mine, on January

3, killed a 17-year-old shepherd near Sheikh Hilal. The second mine, on January 13, wounded a child outside his village near Uqayribat. These mines, which were likely laid in recent months, are intended to limit civilian travel in the countryside in order to better protect ISIS cells that may be hiding there. However, it is still unclear if there are currently active ISIS cells in east Hama.

## Regime Operations

There continue to be no major anti-ISIS operations in central Syria. Various pro-regime forces have continued general patrols, de-mining operations, and training in eastern Hama while other forces, including from the Russian Wagner Private Military Contractor, continue patrols north of Palmyra. The spate of ISIS attacks around Mayadeen appear to have triggered increased sweeping operations in the Mayadeen countryside, although it remains to be seen whether this turns into a major operation.

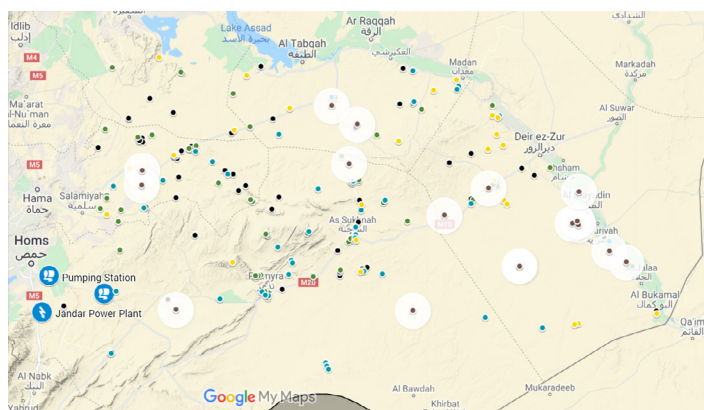
## Looking Ahead

While January's attacks were still a far cry from the quantity and quality of ISIS activity witnessed in the second half of 2020, they do hint at some potentially worrying changes in central Syria. The three attacks within the heavily urbanized Euphrates River belt in Deir Ez Zor follow a slow return of activity to Deir Ez Zor after a sharp drop off in the first half of 2021. The fact that ISIS cells were confident enough and able to infiltrate the towns despite the increased number of pro-regime security forces in the governorate and general decline in ISIS operational freedom may indicate that new cells have entered the governorate or that existing cells have improved their intelligence networks. Alternatively, these attacks may have been borne out of desperation from cells that have been unable to resupply for months now due to a lack of civilian trade in the Badia and their inability to raid regime positions like they could in 2020. If this is the case, we may see cells acting more boldly simply out of necessity.

Furthermore, the single mine attack south of Tiyas in Homs may portend a gradual increase in activity from the cell(s) that have long been based in this area but until now have remained quiet. Local Syrian intelligence is convinced this cell or cells is now attempting to expand westward towards the Mheen countryside. It may be that the ISIS fighters here have begun laying new mine fields to protect their flanks. This is a common tactic the group has used elsewhere in the Badia. Assuming this Syrian intelligence assessment is true, the cell or cells are likely looking for ways to establish a gateway to attack the numerous powerplants and refineries southeast of

Homs city.

If the increase in ISIS activity this month is indeed indicative of a more long-term planned increase in attacks, then this strategy will no doubt benefit from January's prison break in Hasakah. While the escaped prisoners, which likely number in the hundreds, will likely wait in safehouses across the northeast until the ramped-up security pressure dies down, there is little doubt that they intend to eventually disperse between the northeast, the Badia, and Iraq. This potential influx of fighters, and with them needed supplies, would empower ISIS cells in central Syria to step up attacks against regime targets, particularly its oil and gas infrastructure.



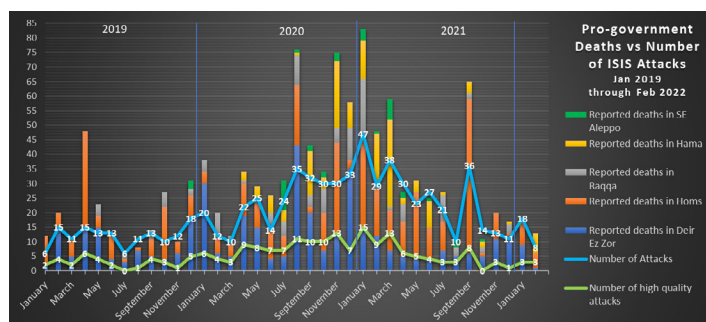
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in January 2022. This map does not include one attack in Deir Ez Zor which did not have aspecific location attributed to it. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in February 2022

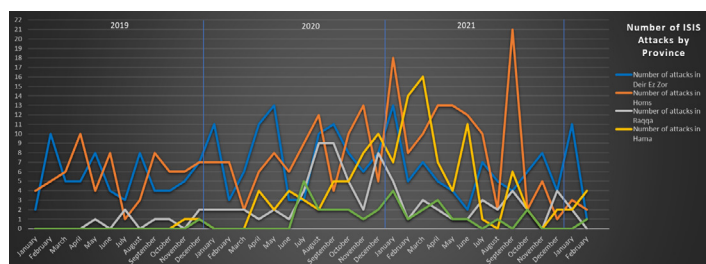
ISIS militants carried out at least eight confirmed attacks in February, killing at least eight pro-Assad regime fighters and five civilians, while wounding at least two others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Aleppo, and Hama governorates. Following a spike in January, ISIS activity in February dropped to its lowest point since July 2019. This reduction can largely be attributed to the near total absence of confirmed attacks in regime-held Deir Ez Zor, despite attacks in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled Deir Ez Zor remaining steady in February. As in January, ISIS carried out three high quality attacks in central Syria, although two of these involved mines, one of which hit civilians. Overall, ISIS militants retreated from the more aggressive posture they adopted in January and returned to the more passive approach that dominated their strategy during the second half of 2021.

Of February's eight attacks, only two were confirmed to have been conducted via small arms. At least five of the remaining

six attacks were conducted using mines. However, the two small arms attacks are notable for their locations. The first occurred near the town of Mheen, in southern Homs, and targeted a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) convoy carrying a prominent general. However, the attack only led to minor injuries. This attack underscores local security forces' fears, expressed in December and highlighted in the [2021 review](#) report, that ISIS militants are attempting to infiltrate this region. The second small arms attack occurred in southern Aleppo near the east Hama border and involved militants stealing 600 sheep from locals. This attack indicates that while ISIS cells may have vacated east Hama, they remain close by and are willing to risk targeting locals in this area again.



ISIS activity dropped to its lowest level ever in Deir Ez Zor (1) while rising slightly in Hama (4) and Aleppo (1). Raqqa (0) and Homs (2) both saw small dips in activity compared to January.

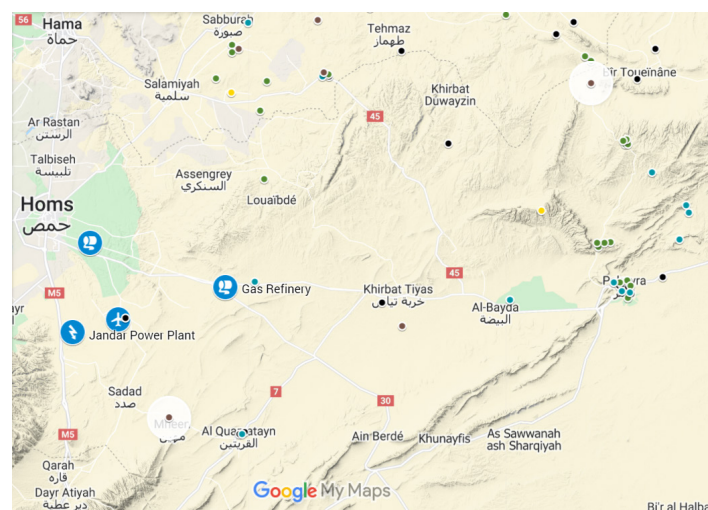


## Homs

There were two attacks in Homs in February, both of which were high quality. The first occurred on February 14 when an ISIS cell fired on an SAA convoy near the town of Mheen in southern Homs. The small arms attack only led to minor injuries and failed to kill Major General Faris Ghaida, the military commander of the northeast region.

However, this attack follows last month's mine attack south of Tiyas—just east of Mheen, and further supports regime fears that ISIS is attempting to infiltrate the southern Homs countryside. If ISIS cells can gain a foothold in this area, they will be well within striking range of several critical powerplants and refineries outside Homs city.

The second attack in east Homs occurred on February 20, when a vehicle carrying five Liwa Imam al-Baqir militiamen hit a mine, killing all on board. While no specific location was given, the attack likely occurred along the Homs-Hama administrative border, as the Baqir militia has a base and several outposts there around the town of Tuwaynan.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in February 2022 (highlighted dots) along-side all other attacks in 2021 and 2022.

## Deir Ez Zor

ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor increased significantly in January 2022, but dropped to its lowest point ever in February. Only one confirmed ISIS attack has been documented—a soldier killed in an unknown location. Never since ISIS lost its caliphate has there been only one attack in regime-held Deir Ez Zor. The reasons behind this significant lull in activity are thus far unclear.

## Hama, Southern Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

There was no ISIS activity in southern Raqqa in February, following a somewhat elevated level of activity in late 2021 and January 2022.

After three months of no confirmed attacks in southern Aleppo, an ISIS cell carried out one attack in mid-February. On February 15, locals reported that ISIS militants severely wounded two shepherds in the Aleppo countryside north of Ithriya, Hama, and stole 600 sheep. This attack came after a sharp, sustained drop in attacks against shepherds in the nearby northeast Hama region, spurred by an increased presence of local security forces. The attack on shepherds indicates both that cells remain close to the Rahjan-Ithriyah corridor of Hama, and that militants are either confident enough or desperate enough now to return to mass theft attacks here (the stolen sheep will need to be moved elsewhere for sale).

and/or be split up and supplied to other ISIS cells, all of which takes coordination and confidence in freedom of movement).

Four mine attacks occurred in the nearby east Hama region during the last two weeks of February. One mine east of Aqrab killed two children and a mine north of Sa'an killed three other civilians, while the other two mines each killed one soldier involved in de-mining/sweeping operations. As always, it is impossible to know how recently these mines were placed, but the uptick in mine detonations and the presence of active cells just north of Ithriyah could hint at these being newer mines.

*Map of ISIS attacks in Hama and Aleppo in February 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2021 and 2022. One attack in east Hama is not shown as no specific location was given.*

## Regime Operations

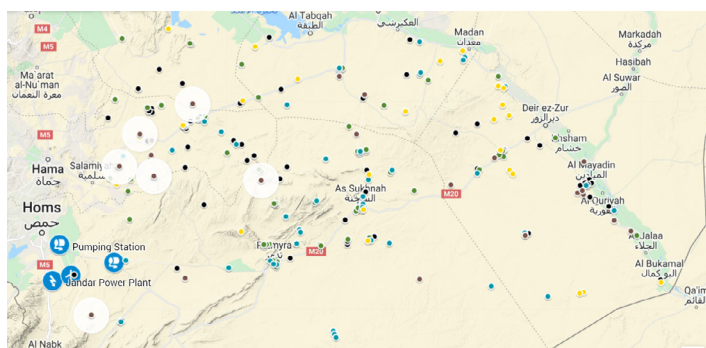
As in January, there continued to be no major ongoing anti-ISIS operations in February in central Syria. The Russian Wagner Private Military Contractor moved fighters into the Kawm Oasis of east Homs in late February, following potential sightings of ISIS movement nearby. Most patrols, however, were focused in east Hama and southern Aleppo, where the Russian-backed National Defense Forces (NDF) and 25th Division conducted several demining operations. The Military Intelligence-backed local militia "Suqour al-Assad" also continued its regular patrols around the Rahjan area of east Hama, largely focusing on protecting sheep grazing areas.

## Looking Ahead

There was not a single confirmed ISIS attack for the first two weeks of February, and the remaining two weeks saw almost exclusively "passive" mine attacks, making February the quietest month in central Syria in more than two-and-a-half-years. This lull follows a not-insignificant increase in attacks last month and a steady rate of attacks in SDF-held Deir Ez Zor and Raqqa this month. It is unclear why the Badia has been so quiet, but one possibility may be that ISIS is in the process of moving some of the prisoners freed in the January Hasakah attack into the Badia. If that is the case, it would make sense for cells to reduce their activity—particularly in Raqqa and Deir Ez Zor—in order to avoid drawing attention from local security forces. If this is the case, we will likely see another surge in attacks in late March or early April after the new fighters have finished linking up with existing cells or establishing new cells throughout the Badia.

The attacks in Mheen and against shepherds in southern Aleppo likely portend the near-term goals of ISIS in the Ba-

dia; continued infiltration into southern Homs and resupplying by targeting civilians. If the hypothesis that ex-prisoners are currently being moved into the Badia is true, ISIS will need to acquire more basic goods—like food—to keep these new fighters supplied. However, it is equally possible that the drop in attacks is due to other factors—such as the death of the caliph in early February, ISIS's continued focus on northeast Syria, and regime patrols in the Badia—and therefore any future increase in activity will be attributable to some other factor.



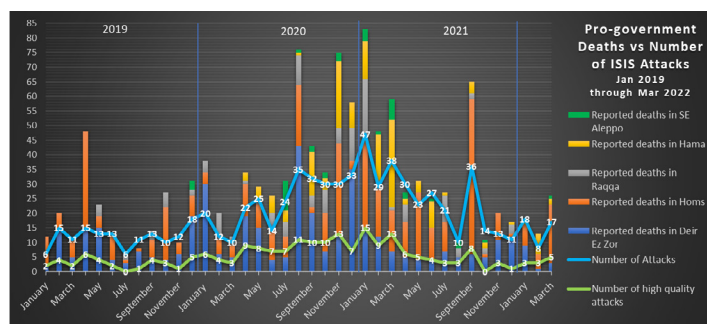
*Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in February 2022. This map does not include one attack in Deir Ez Zor and one attack in east Hama which did not have specific locations attributed to them. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).*

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in March 2022

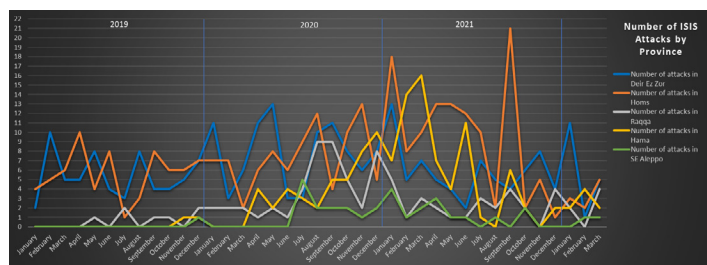
ISIS militants carried out at least 17 confirmed attacks in March, killing at least 25 pro-Assad regime fighters and one civilian, while wounding at least 28 others in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, Aleppo, and Hama governorates. ISIS activity increased in March following an extreme low in February. March's escalation can largely be attributed to a general increase in attacks in Homs and Deir Ez Zor throughout the month and a sharp, though brief, escalation in activity in southern Raqqa between March 18 and 22. More importantly, ISIS carried out five high quality attacks across three governorates in March, the second highest number in a month since May 2021, marking a shift to a more aggressive posture compared to the last several months.

Of March's 17 attacks, only four were confirmed to have been conducted via mines or improvised explosive devices (IEDs), while at least nine employed small arms. Four other attacks were conducted by unknown means. The more frequent use of small arms, which requires ISIS cells to be actively monitoring targets and be willing to risk losing fighters and supplies, has not been a fixture in central Syria since the mini-offensives launched in September 2021. Several of these small arms attacks are significant for their location and

complexity, and will be discussed in greater detail in their relevant sections below. The most important conclusions to be drawn from March's attacks are: 1) ISIS cells appear to be closely watching regime movements along the Palmyra-Boukamal highway, looking for targets of opportunity; 2) ISIS cells have either returned to or have been reactivated along the Kawm-Jabal Bishri front of southern Raqqa and northeast Homs, and; 3) ISIS continues to infiltrate the Mheen countryside, south of Homs city, in a likely attempt to eventually target the critical energy infrastructure in the area.



ISIS activity increased in all governorates except Hama and Aleppo in March. Deir Ez Zor (5) saw an increase in confirmed attacks compared with February, though activity there is still low compared to January. Homs (5) and Raqqa (4) experienced the most activity in March, reaching their highest levels in several months. East Hama (2) and south Aleppo (1) continued to witness a low level of mine activity, but it is again unclear how recently these mines were placed.



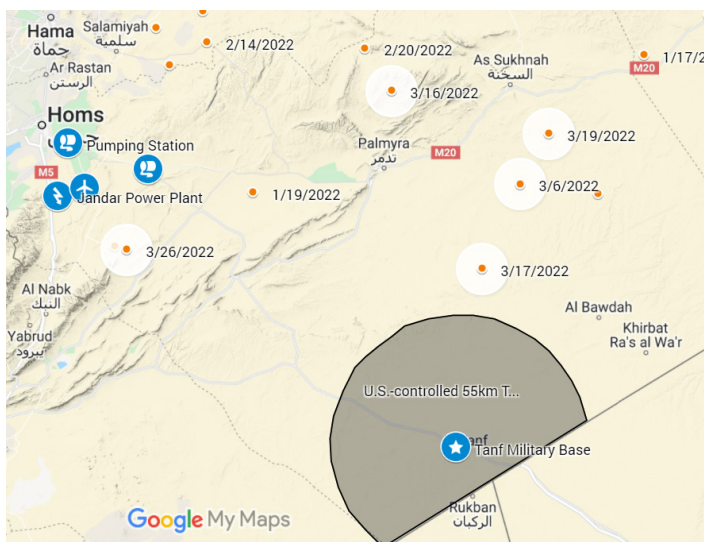
## Homs

ISIS activity more than doubled in Homs in March compared to February. Attacks were carried out in all parts of the governorate using both mines and small arms. On March 6, a group of militants ambushed a lone Syrian Arab Army (SAA) bus traveling east of the T3 pumping station, killing at least 13 soldiers and wounding 18. Among the dead was a brigadier general, the first commander killed in 2022. This attack came two months after a nearly identical ambush on a small four-vehicle SAA convoy in the same area. These two attacks suggest that, while ISIS was unable to conduct highway ambushes for most of 2021, their cells have remained close by watching for vulnerable targets.

The next series of attacks occurred in mid-March, and likely involved mines or IEDs. On March 16, five pro-regime Liwa al-Quds fighters were reported killed near Jabal Amor, north of Palmyra. The cause of death was not given, but Liwa al-Quds has routinely suffered losses from mines in the past in this mountainous area. The next day, an SAA soldier was reported killed in the Tanf countryside, in southern Homs. A picture of a destroyed truck was published the same day, indicating he and likely others were killed when their truck hit a mine. On March 19, a vehicle belonging to the Iranian-backed Local Defense Forces was destroyed by a mine while doing new patrols east of Wadi Doubayat, south of Sukhnah. This wadi is still controlled by ISIS and the outskirts are heavily mined. Iranian forces have taken on the bulk of operations around here since the fall of 2021.

Finally, a suspected ISIS cell stole a small herd of sheep east of Mheen on March 26. This marks the third ISIS attack in the Mheen area in three months, a dangerous pattern so close to the southern Homs suburbs. The first occurred on February 14 when an ISIS cell fired on an SAA convoy near the town of Mheen in southern Homs. The small arms attack only led to minor injuries and failed to kill Major General Faris Ghaida, the military commander of the northeast region.

However, this attack follows last month's mine attack south of Tiyas—just east of Mheen, and further supports regime fears that ISIS is attempting to infiltrate the southern Homs countryside. A regime officer overseeing security efforts in the area told this author in December 2021 that they had grown increasingly worried about ISIS infiltration attempts into the Mheen countryside after locals reported new movement of at least one cell in the area. He further stated that the Mheen countryside is known to still have ISIS sympathizers, and that security forces feared ISIS fighters were seeking to link up with those locals. The three attacks since then—one mine, one ambush on a military convoy, and now a sheep theft—underscore this worry. It is likely that ISIS seeks to infiltrate the southern Homs countryside in order to conduct an attack on critical infrastructure outside of Homs, similar to its September 2021 Damascus [attack](#), which caused a nation-wide blackout.



Map of ISIS attacks in Homs in March 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2022.

## Deir Ez Zor

ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor increased significantly in January 2022, but dropped to its lowest point ever in February before increasing slightly in March. Five attacks were confirmed this month, all of which occurred in the southwest of the governorate. On March 4 a soldier was reported killed near Boukamal in an unknown type of attack. The next day, reports emerged of significant fighting around the hamlet of Sawab, in the remote Boukamal countryside close to the Deir Ez Zor-Homs-Iraq border. According to regime security forces, ISIS launched a nighttime attack attempting to raid or seize a checkpoint in the hamlet. Fighting continued into the morning, with SAA reinforcements arriving from the nearby T2 Pumping Station. The raid ultimately failed. Regime forces lost at least one soldier while two ISIS fighters were killed.

Units of the Afghan Liwa Fatemiyoun, commanded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), engaged in several skirmishes with ISIS militants while patrolling the desert north of the T2 Pumping Station between March 10 and March 12. This front has seen recurring fighting for over a year, as ISIS fighters are suspected of controlling the area between here and the village of Faydat bin Muwaynah to the north. The skirmishes here in March are conservatively recorded as two events.

Lastly, on March 30 a Syrian soldier was reported killed in clashes west of the Akash Oil Field in the Boukamal countryside. The concentration of small arms attacks along the Iraq-Deir Ez Zor border may indicate that ISIS was, and possibly still is, moving fighters between the two countries. This could be related to the escapees from the Hasakah prison break in late January, or it could simply be relate to normal rotation of

cells.



Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor in March 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2022.

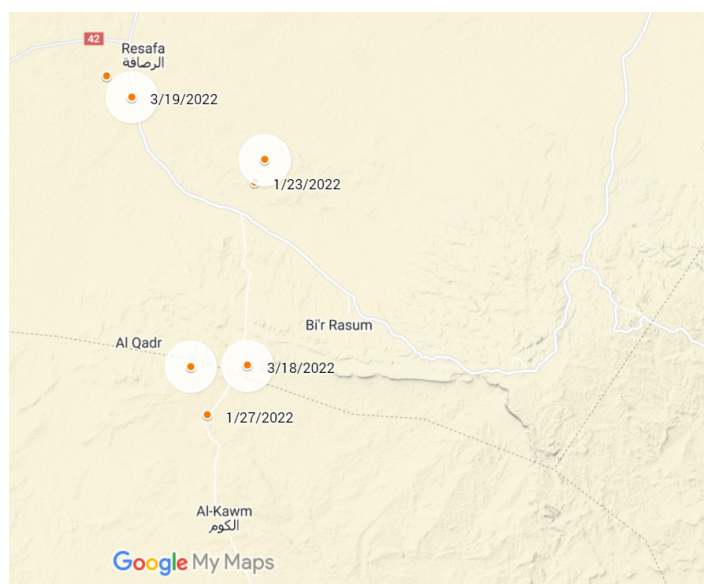
## Raqqa

ISIS activity has fluctuated in southern Raqqa for many months now. Attacks decreased for two straight months following a surge in December 2021, resulting in no confirmed activity in February 2022. However, a flurry of attacks in mid-March indicate that cells here remain active and highly potent.

As mentioned in previous reports, it appears that after ISIS withdrew from eastern Hama it began exploiting southern Raqqa as a new source of sheep to steal and either sell on the black market or supply to its cells in the Badia. This sheep stealing trend continued in March, with at least one group of shepherds being attacked south of Raqqa on March 19.

This attack came amid a series of serious clashes across southern Raqqa, beginning on March 18 and ending on March 21. Over four days, ISIS cells clashed with Liwa al-Quds, 5th Corps, and 18th Division forces as the militants targeted supply lines and regime positions. The heaviest battles occurred south of the hamlet of Khirbat al-Muqman, where ISIS cut supply lines and tried to besiege the troops in the hamlet. Security forces reported that ISIS used a rare anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) strike to destroy a Liwa al-Quds vehicle, and a Quds position was overrun near the nearby village of Fahdeh. Liwa al-Quds lost two more vehicles when the village was captured, and ISIS looted food and some minesweeping equipment. The Fahdeh position was recovered on March 21. Security forces also reported that shepherds affiliated with those who had been attacked on March 19 joined in the fighting out of revenge. Significantly, regime forces received no air support from either the Russian or Syrian air force. It is unclear why.

Also, on March 23, a mine wounded a soldier at the Dibseen Oil Field, southeast of Resafa. Small arms clashes had been reported in this area two months earlier.

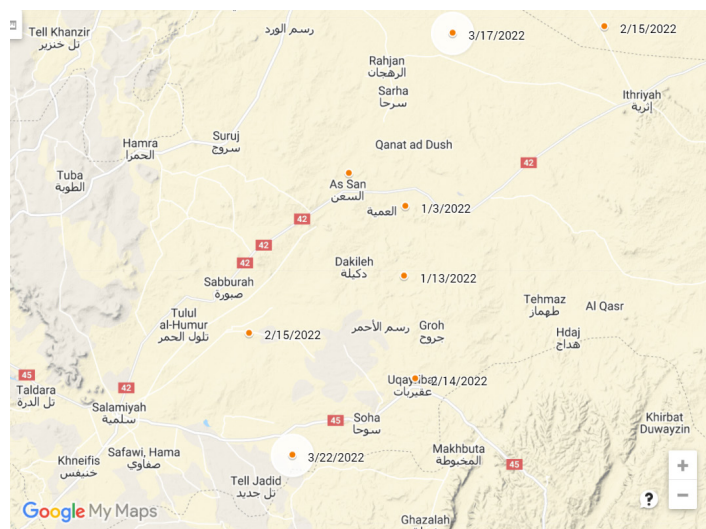


Map of ISIS attacks in Raqqa in March 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2022.

## Hama and Southeast Aleppo

As with February, there was only one confirmed incident in southern Aleppo in March. On March 30 a soldier was officially reported as killed somewhere in the Aleppo governorate. Other unofficial reports put his place of death as somewhere in the southern countryside where ISIS has been operating. The soldier was likely killed by a mine during a sweeping operation, though exact details are unknown. It should also be noted that there were additional unofficial claims that he was actually killed alongside the previously mentioned soldier in the March 30 attack west of the Akash Oil Field in Deir Ez Zor.

Two mine attacks occurred in east Hama during March, a decrease from the four mine incidents in February. On March 17, a mine in the Rahjan area hit a group of what appeared to be local militia, killing two and wounding three others. The incident came the same day local security forces had launched a demining operation in the area. On March 22, a mine wounded a 10-year-old child outside his village in the Uqayribat area of southeast Hama.



Map of ISIS attacks in Hama in March 2022 (highlighted dots) alongside all other attacks in 2022.

## Regime Operations

There continues to be no major ongoing anti-ISIS operations this year in central Syria. The Russian Wagner Private Military Contractor moved fighters into the Kawm Oasis of east Homs in late February, following potential sightings of ISIS movement nearby, though they were not involved in the battles north of Kawm in March. Multi-day demining operations continue every one to two weeks in east Hama, southern Aleppo, and southwest Raqqa. Iranian-backed Local Defense Forces began a small sweeping operation around Wadi Doubayat in mid-March while Iranian commanded Syrian and Iraqi forces continue to do small operations and training in the Mayadeen and Boukamal countrysides, though nothing major enough to uncover ISIS hideouts or cells. Following the March 18-March 21 fighting in southern Raqqa, Liwa al-Quds forces launched a new sweeping operation that uncovered an ISIS-controlled oil well. Quds forces continued to sweep new areas for the rest of the month.

## Looking Ahead

For the past two months, ISIS appeared to be following a lose pattern of going quiet for one to two weeks followed by multiple attacks over several days before going quiet again. In this sense, while March does represent an increase in activity compared to January and February 2022, it is not clear that there is a sustained increase in operational tempo in the Badia. More importantly, the types of attacks conducted during these brief periods of activity represent a more aggressive, bold stance than has been witnessed by ISIS in recent months.

Last month, this author theorized that the decline in activity

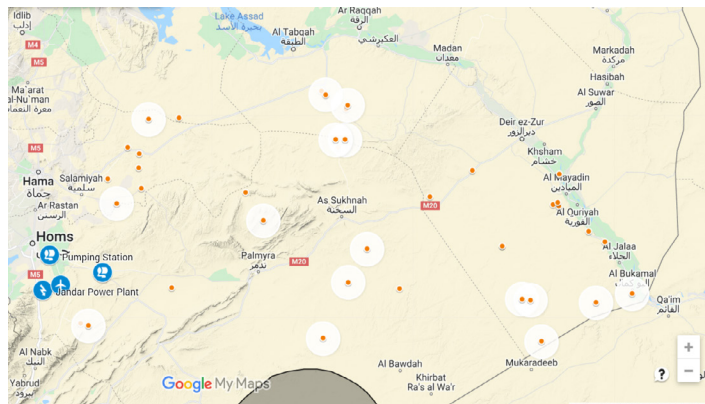
was due to ISIS focusing on moving and integrating escapees from the January prison break into pre-existing cells in the Badia. It is possible that some of the increased activity in March—particularly the fighting in southwest Deir Ez Zor and in southern Raqqa—are a result of these cells now being reinforced. However, it's also important to recognize that the regime appears to be moving away from some of the important operational changes it made in 2021 that helped decrease ISIS activity. The highway ambushes in January and March in Homs were the fault of the SAA command for allowing military vehicles to travel alone or in such small groups, a departure from last year's effective strategy of moving forces in large convoys.

Security forces have also blamed the southern Raqqa battles on regime complacency, pointing out that anti-ISIS sweeps always follow the same paths in order to reduce the chance of running into mines, thus allowing ISIS the freedom to easily move around these patrols. Lastly, both the Russians and Syrians have appeared to reduce air activity in the Badia since the start of the year. This is partially due to decreased ISIS activity, which has led to fewer targets for their airframes to engage. However, it is unclear why these airplanes have not been able to respond to the prolonged ISIS attacks that occurred this month. Increased air power was the major factor in 2021 that forced ISIS to abandon large attacks on fixed positions. ISIS cells are sure to step up raids on regime checkpoints and outposts if this lack of air presence becomes a prolonged reality.

Finally, the sheep theft in Mheen marks another dangerous escalation by ISIS in southern Homs. [Sheep theft](#) has been a long-time ISIS tactic across central Syria, used to both supply its cells and bring in revenue through trade. Regardless whether ISIS sold the sheep or used them for food, the fact that they successfully moved the sheep to a new location undetected does not bode well for regime security in the region. It increasingly appears that ISIS is seeking to establish a long-term presence in this area, thereby putting the two nearby power plants and an oil refinery at risk of attack.

The locations of March's confirmed ISIS attacks provide some insight into the current geographic concentrations of ISIS cells in the Badia. As can be seen in the map below, there were three distinct "hotspots" in March: southwest Deir Ez Zor along the Iraq border, southeast Homs between Wadi Doubayat and Tanf, and southern Raqqa between Resafa and Kawm. The Mheen countryside south of Homs City marks a fourth location where at least one ISIS cell is known to be active. The first three of these areas have been historic

hotbeds of ISIS activity, all of which border territory currently or previously controlled by ISIS during its insurgency.



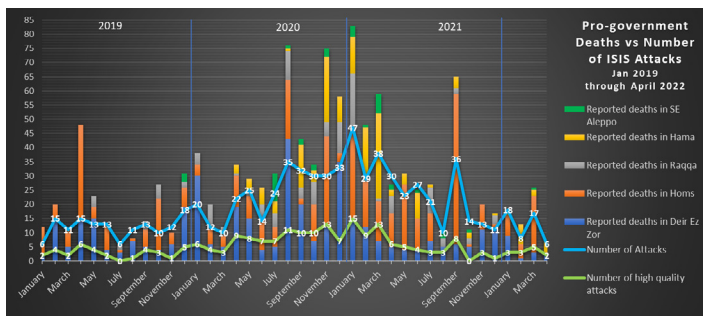
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in March 2022. Not pictured is one attack that occurred somewhere in the Aleppo countryside. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in April 2022

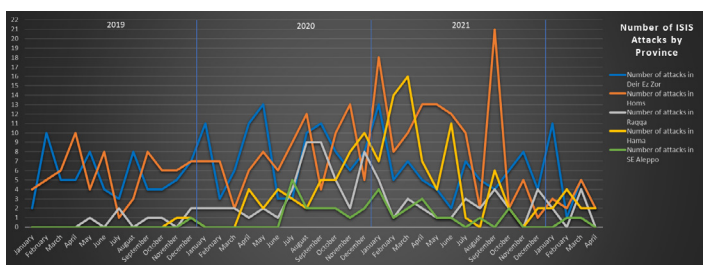
ISIS militants carried out at least six confirmed attacks in April in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, and Hama governorates. These attacks in total left at least six pro-Assad regime fighters and one civilian dead and at least two others wounded. ISIS activity decreased significantly in April compared to March, matching the historic low points that occurred in January and July 2019. This decrease in activity came despite no changes in the Syrian regime's security posture or any significant anti-ISIS operations. It is unclear why April was so quiet, but it appears to be a result of ISIS's own strategic decisions, rather than something imposed on the group by regime security pressure.

There was no confirmed ISIS activity in Raqqa or Aleppo in April, the first time both governorates have been quiet in the same month since November 2020. High quality attacks also dropped significantly in April, with ISIS conducting only two such attacks: one in Hama and one in Homs. Other than one death reported in Deir Ez Zor on April 1, there was no confirmed ISIS activity in central Syria until April 13.

At least half of ISIS's six attacks in April used mines or IEDs, with only two confirmed small-arms attacks. This increased reliance on remote attacks represents a reversal from the more aggressive nature of March's insurgency, when more than half of ISIS's attacks involved small arms.



ISIS activity remained the same in Hama (2), decreased in Deir Ez Zor (2) and Homs (2), and was non-existent in Aleppo and south Raqqa. As is currently the norm, both incidents in east Hama involved mines, and it is unclear how recently these mines were placed.



## Homs

There were only two confirmed ISIS attacks in Homs in April. The first occurred on April 13, when an oil well worker was killed by a mine or IED in the Bayarat area just west of Palmyra. ISIS cells have targeted civilians and local security in this area in the past using mines and IEDs, though most of this activity occurred in 2020. The April 13 attack is likely from a more recently placed mine, potentially placed on one of the service roads leading to the nearby oil fields.

The second Homs attack occurred on April 25, when an ISIS cell attacked the base of a unit belonging to the Syrian army's 18th Division in the village of al-Khuwayliyah, on the road connecting Taybeh to the M20 highway. According to local security forces, ISIS managed to raid the petrol station and steal army uniforms and flags. These materials are key for ISIS fake checkpoints, used extensively during the height of the group's insurgency in 2020. This is the first known ISIS attack in this area in 2022, and it was the most significant attack in the Badia in April.

## Deir Ez Zor

ISIS activity in regime-held Deir Ez Zor continues to fluctuate in 2022. After a moderate increase in activity in March, only two attacks were confirmed in April. On April 1, a soldier was reported killed somewhere in the governorate—likely during

intermittent clashes near Akash Oil Field that had been occurring since March 30. On April 25, a second soldier was reported killed somewhere in the governorate. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) had claimed the previous day that a large ISIS attack on the Kharata Oil Field, near Deir Ez Zor city, had left two soldiers dead and 12 wounded. This author contacted a pro-regime militiaman in Deir Ez Zor city the following day who denied this claim, however. It is therefore unknown where and how the soldier was killed on April 25.

This decrease in activity in regime-controlled Deir Ez Zor occurred during a spike in attacks across the Euphrates River in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held Deir Ez Zor. In April, ISIS officially claimed 23 attacks against SDF positions in Deir Ez Zor, up from just nine claims in March. Additional attacks have been reported by local media. It is possible the decline in activity in regime parts of Deir Ez Zor was caused by ISIS cells moving into SDF areas to conduct operations in April.

## Hama, Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

There were no confirmed attacks in Aleppo or regime-held Raqqa in April. There were two incidents in east Hama this month, both involving mines, and as usual it is unclear how recently the mines were planted. The first came on April 19 during a sweep conducted by the 1579th Battalion of the Syrian army's 5th Corps in southeast Hama. One truck hit a mine, killing three soldiers and wounding two others. The next day, local media reported the death of a 7-year-old boy from "a mine left over by the ISIS terrorists" near the village of Rasm Koujan, south of Sa'an.

## Regime Operations

There continues to be no major ongoing anti-ISIS operations this year in central Syria. The bulk of current operations are focused on demining and conducting limited patrols. Demining operations continue in east Hama, south of Palmyra, Arak, and Sukhnah, and are expected to begin in May in parts of Deir Ez Zor. While no new operations were conducted this month, Syrian forces and their foreign allies deployed in central Syria were reportedly on higher alert in anticipation of ISIS's Ramadan campaign. This heightened level of awareness, however, may have dissuaded some ISIS attacks.

## Looking Ahead

The lack of any significant or coordinated anti-ISIS operations in central Syria raises interesting questions as to why ISIS has been so quiet here of late. This author has previously

[raised](#) the idea that ISIS was taking time to integrate prisoners it had freed during the January Hasakah prison attack into cells across central Syria. It is possible that this continues to be the case, though the high level of activity in March may serve to counter this theory. Another possibility is that ISIS cells are using this time of low pressure to rest, refit, and plan more medium- and long-term attacks, such as infiltration attempts into southern Homs and the Damascus countryside. Lastly, it may be that ISIS cells from central Syria moved into northeast Syria to assist in attacks against the SDF in April.

Further complicating matters is the fact that this historic lull in ISIS activity in central Syria occurred during Ramadan, when ISIS cells [globally](#) have increased the quantity and quality of their attacks. During Ramadan, ISIS claimed an unprecedented 11 attacks in southern Syria, the first time the group claimed attacks here since mid-2021, and 42 attacks in northeast Syria. All of the official media for these attacks framed them as part of the group's "Revenge for the Two Sheikhs" campaign, a reference to the killings of previous leaders [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#) and [Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi](#). Yet despite this media and attack campaign, ISIS cells in central Syria not only decreased their activity but continue to refuse to publish claims for their attacks. It is clear that the lack of claims cannot solely be attributed to technical difficulties, as Badia-based cells did release a [photoset](#) showing their fighters engaging in religious study, communal meals, and desert patrols. It would therefore seem that ISIS central leadership is intentionally disengaging, at least partially, the Badia insurgency from their broader global campaigns.

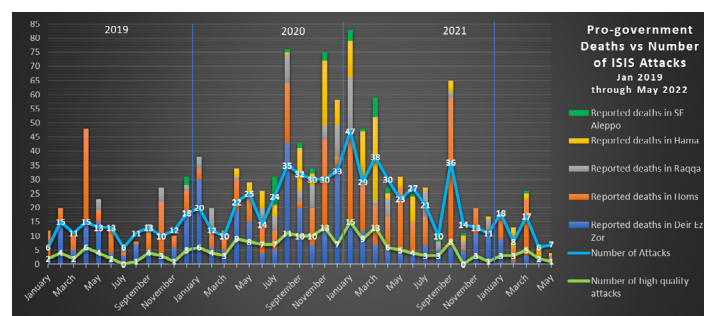


Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in April 2022. Not pictured are two attacks that occurred somewhere in the Deir Ez Zor countryside. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

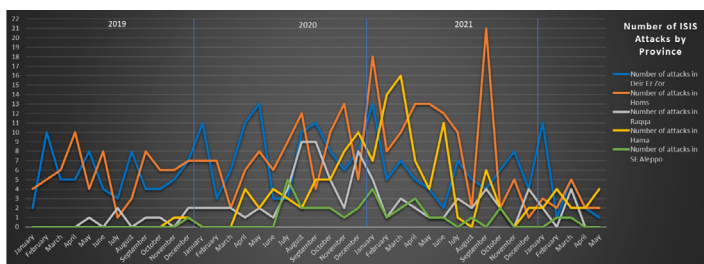
## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in May 2022

ISIS militants carried out at least seven confirmed attacks in May in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, and Hama governorates. These attacks killed at least three pro-Assad regime fighters and one civilian, while wounding six others. Confirmed ISIS activity in central Syria continued to be very low in May, in line with the historic lows of April. As with April, this reduced level of activity occurred despite no changes in the Syrian regime's security posture or any significant anti-ISIS operation. Therefore, ISIS's quietness in May is likely a result of the group's own strategic calculations, rather than something imposed on them by regime pressure.

As in April, there was no confirmed ISIS activity in Raqqa or Aleppo in May. High quality attacks dropped for the second month in a row, with ISIS conducting only one such attack: the killing of a colonel in Homs. ISIS activity in May was sporadic, with one or two incidents reported each week. However, the vast majority of attacks were conducted using mines or improvised explosive devices (IED). May was therefore the most passive month for ISIS since this author began tracking the insurgency in detail in 2019. It should be reiterated, however, that this passivity is not a sign that ISIS has been defeated in central Syria. As if to underscore this point, ISIS cells ambushed a civilian transport bus on the major Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway on June 2, killing the three soldiers on board.



Compared with April, ISIS activity remained the same in Homs (2), Aleppo (0), and south Raqqa (0), decreased in Deir Ez Zor (1), and increased in Hama (4). As is currently the norm, all incidents in east Hama involved mines. It is unclear how recently these mines were placed.



## Homs

There were only two confirmed ISIS attacks in Homs in May, both likely carried out with mines or IEDs. On May 18, a soldier was reported killed in the Bayarat area, west of Palmyra. This was the second death in the Bayarat area in as many months. ISIS cells have targeted civilians and local security in this area in the past using mines and IEDs, though most of this type of activity occurred in 2020. On May 23, a colonel was reported killed “in the Badia.” The colonel was from the town of Qaryatayn, in southern Homs, and his death coincided with reports from pro-regime sources about mine threats in the Qaryatayn countryside. It is therefore likely that the colonel was killed somewhere in this area.

## Deir Ez Zor

ISIS activity in regime-held Deir Ez Zor continues to fluctuate in 2022. After a moderate increase in activity in March, only two attacks were confirmed in April and only one attack in May. A military intelligence soldier from the local branch 243 was reported killed somewhere in the province on May 5.

## Hama, Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

There were no confirmed attacks in Aleppo or regime-held Raqqa in April. There were four incidents in east Hama in May, all involving mines and all hitting civilians. As usual, it is unclear how recently the mines were planted. The consistency of mine incidents in east Hama targeting civilians despite the continual demining operations being carried out by local security forces may indicate that ISIS cells are still operating in this area, though focusing solely on laying mines. However, two regime soldiers who deployed to separate parts of east Hama in May each told this author that their units encountered no evidence of recent ISIS activity.

## Regime Operations

There continues to be no major ongoing anti-ISIS operations this year in central Syria. The bulk of current operations are focused on demining and conducting limited patrols. Security forces continue to emphasize east Hama, conducting both demining operations and community outreach programs

through the local National Defense Forces and Liwa al-Quds. The Tiger Forces, now called the 25th Division, launched a larger sweeping operation on May 18 that moved from Ithriya in east Hama, to Resafa, in south Raqqa. Unlike past 25th Division sweeps that relied mostly on newer recruits from east Aleppo, this operation drew on the veteran Tiger Forces unit ‘Zarif Regiment’ based out of Salamiyah, Hama. The operation reportedly found no evidence of recent ISIS activity in the Resafa-Zakia area of southwest Raqqa.

## Looking Ahead

Little has changed since April. It remains unclear what ISIS’s long-term plans are in the Badia. The lack of any significant anti-ISIS operations in central Syria raises interesting questions as to why ISIS has chosen to be so quiet here as of late. It is possible that ISIS is still taking time to integrate prisoners it freed during the January Hasakah prison attack into cells across central Syria, that they continue to focus resources on northeast Syria or Iraq, or that its fighters are simply taking this time to rest and regroup. It is worth noting that ISIS attacks in Iraq have been at an all-time high for 2022 since mid-April, averaging 22.5 claimed attacks per week compared to just 10 per week over the preceding months. However, it remains obvious that the reduced level of activity in the Badia is not from any significant degradation caused by regime operations. There have been no reports of killed or captured ISIS fighters in central Syria since 2021, and no recently used ISIS camps uncovered. ISIS will undoubtedly heavily pressure regime forces again, it is only a matter of when.

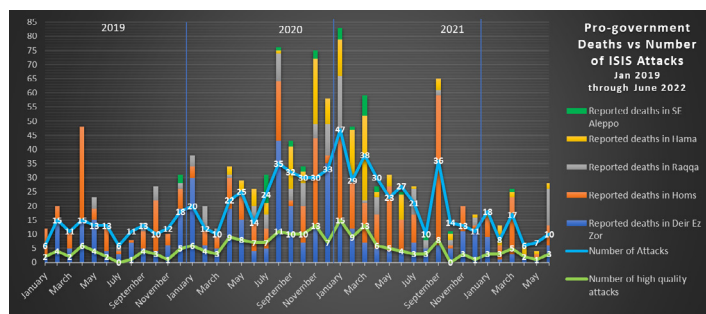


Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in May 2022. Not pictured are two attacks: one that occurred somewhere in the Deir Ez Zor countryside and one somewhere in Homs. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

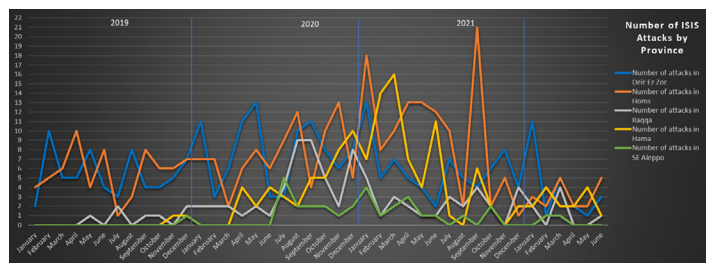
## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in June 2022

ISIS militants carried out at least 10 confirmed attacks in June in the Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Hama governorates. These attacks killed at least 25 pro-Assad regime fighters and three civilians, while wounding 26 others, the largest number of deaths attributed to the group since September 2021. Confirmed ISIS activity in central Syria rose in June following historical lows in April and May. As stated in those monthly updates, the reduced level of activity occurred despite no changes in the Syrian regime's security posture or any significant anti-ISIS operation and was therefore likely a result of ISIS's own strategic decisions. June demonstrated this, with ISIS cells carrying out several complex ambushes in previously considered secure areas and generally increasing the number of attacks on all fronts.

High quality attacks also rose in June after a very low April and May. ISIS cells carried out one complex attack in Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Homs. This increase in overall activity also corresponded to a decrease in passive attacks compared with the past two months: only 50 percent of attacks in June involved mines or IEDs.



Compared with April and May, ISIS activity in June rose significantly in all 'core' governorates of the Badia: Homs (5), Deir Ez Zor (3), and south Raqqa (1). Incidents decreased in east Hama (1) and remained absent in south Aleppo (0). As is currently the norm, the incident in east Hama involved mines. It is unclear how recently these mines were placed.



## Homs

ISIS activity in Homs more than doubled in June compared with April and May. On June 1, a soldier was reported killed in the "Tanf Region," likely by a mine during patrols. The "Tanf Region" is used to describe any area from southern Palmyra south and east to the Iraqi-Homs border. On June 15, another soldier was reported killed in the Palmyra countryside. The next day, two separate mine attacks occurred in eastern Homs. One killed a seven-year-old child in Bayarat, a farm area east of Palmyra that endured mine attacks in both April and May. The other mine went off somewhere in northeast Homs, killing three soldiers and wounding seven others during a demining mission. This sudden frequency of mine explosions in Bayarat suggests that an ISIS cell may have begun laying mines here in recent months. The last attack of the month occurred on June 24, when a soldier was reported killed somewhere in east Homs.

## Deir Ez Zor

ISIS activity in regime-held Deir Ez Zor continues to fluctuate in 2022. After a moderate increase in March, only two attacks were confirmed there in April and one in May. June saw a slight increase, three attacks, but two of these were significant for their complexity and locations.

On June 2, ISIS fighters ambushed a bus traveling on the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway in the area around Shoula. Four guards were killed, all members of the regime's intelligence service, and 14 civilian passengers were wounded according to regime news outlets. The fact that the only deaths were from security forces on board raises the possibility that ISIS stopped the bus at a fake checkpoint and executed all soldiers on board. Whether this was a fake checkpoint attack, or simply ISIS fighters firing on the bus as it drove by, this incident marks the first ISIS attack on the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway since January 2021.

On June 7, a 4th Division captain was killed in the Tayyem Oil Field, just outside Deir Ez Zor city. This field was a prime target for local ISIS cells in 2020, and is actively being renovated by Russian and Syrian energy companies. The possibility of renewed ISIS infiltration into this important area is a bad sign for local security forces. Lastly, on June 21, a soldier was reported killed somewhere in the Deir Ez Zor countryside.

## Hama, Raqqa, and Southeast Aleppo

There have been no confirmed ISIS attacks in southern Aleppo since March. There was incident in east Hama in June in

which a mine killed two civilians and wounded two others near Rahjan. As usual, it is unclear how recently the mines were planted. The consistency of mine incidents in east Hama targeting civilians comes despite the continual demining operations being carried out there by local security forces. This may indicate that ISIS cells are still operating in this area, but focused solely on laying mines.

There was one ISIS attack in southern Raqqa in June, the first incident here since March. On June 20, ISIS fighters ambushed a bus carrying regime soldiers near the Zemlah area as they traveled on the road connecting Resafa with Shoula, killing 13 and wounding three. This area has several gas and oil fields and has witnessed sporadic attacks since late 2020. ISIS officially claimed the attack on the same day, publishing photos showing its fighters inspecting the bus after stopping it, then setting it on fire. The ISIS media is interesting for several reasons: It is the first ISIS claim of an attack in central Syria in 2022 (despite this author documenting at least 66 attacks in that time) and only the second claimed attack since July 2021. The pictures also show that ISIS fighters brought the bus to a stop, either via firing on it or with by using a fake checkpoint, and that the bus was likely traveling alone or in a small convoy. This would mark a shift in regime strategy from early 2021, when the regime began moving soldiers and civilians through the Badia in large convoys through the Badia to prevent ISIS attacks.

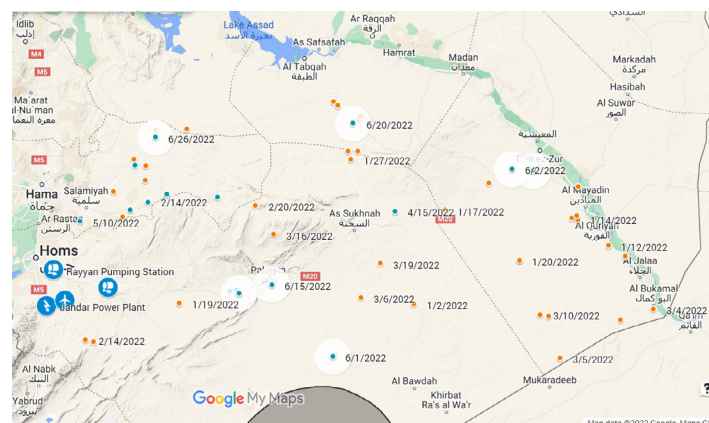
## Regime Operations

There have been no major ongoing anti-ISIS operations this year in central Syria. The bulk of current operations are focused on demining and conducting limited patrols. Syrian regime, Russian, and Iranian forces continue to expand the security zone around Palmyra in the hopes of enticing more western tourism to the ancient site. There was one positive, if brief, regime operation around Jabal Bishri in late June. Following the June 20 attack near Zemlah, Liwa al-Quds fighters embarked on a five-day sweeping mission of the Jabal Bishri area, receiving Russian air support. On June 27, the unit posted a video to its social media pages, showing the capture of several alleged ISIS safehouses (though only containing some clothes) and at least two destroyed technicals allegedly belonging to ISIS. One clip showed a scene from a Russian drone of a technical and its crew being targeted, with at least two ISIS members confirmed killed.

## Looking Ahead

June's increase in ISIS activity and high quality attacks should serve as a reminder that as long as the Syrian regime is inca-

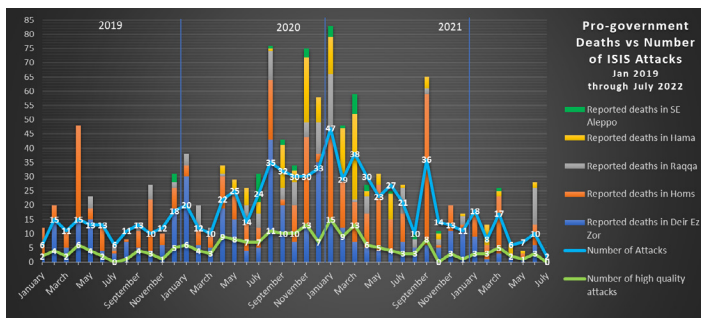
pable of pressuring them, ISIS retains the ability to escalate in central Syria. While the number of attacks pales in comparison to the second half of 2020, the two highway attacks in June are unprecedented in the past 18 months. One of the regime's major achievements in early 2021 was securing the highways and ending the regular attacks on civilian and military convoys. That victory has slowly eroded in 2022, with small arms ambushes occurring first in January, and again in March. June's two ambushes therefore represent a worrying trend and decaying regime security in important transit lines across central Syria.



Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted dots) in June 2022. Not pictured are three attacks: one that occurred somewhere in the Deir Ez Zor countryside and two somewhere in east Homs. To view an interactive version of this map, please [click here](#).

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in July 2022

ISIS militants carried out at least two confirmed attacks in July in the Homs and Deir Ez Zor governorates. These attacks killed at least three pro-Assad regime soldiers. This is the fewest number of confirmed attacks and casualties recorded by this author in at least three years. As stated in previous updates, the reduced level of ISIS activity occurred despite no changes in the Syrian regime's security posture and was therefore likely a result of ISIS's own strategic decision-making. There were no high quality attacks in July. The first confirmed attack occurred on July 11 when a soldier was reported killed somewhere in the Badia and the second, on July 18, when two soldiers were reported killed by a mine in Deir Ez Zor.



It is unclear why there were virtually no reported ISIS attacks in central Syria in July, as there were no major anti-ISIS operations carried out this month (although Liwa al-Quds fighters began a new sweep in the Jabal Omour area north of Palmyra, uncovering several ISIS caches in caves). It should be noted that during July, claimed ISIS attacks remained steady in Iraq (33) compared to June and more than doubled in northeast Syria (20). The latter region has also seen [consistent reporting](#) recently of continued ISIS recruitment among vulnerable youth, a reality detailed in the recent International Crisis Group [report](#) on ISIS networks in northeast and central Syria.

Interestingly, ISIS released two significant media products from the Badia in late July. First, the July 28 edition of its weekly Naba magazine contained a three-page interview with an alleged senior ISIS commander in the Badia. This interview transcript was followed the next day by a rare series of official pictures being shared on ISIS Telegram channels.

The July 28 interview covered a range of topics, from introducing ISIS supporters to the geography of the Badia to discussing both ISIS's and the regime's military campaigns in the region. A complete transcript of the Badia interview can be found [online](#) and will not be reproduced here. However, there are several interesting responses worth highlighting.

After describing the harsh geography of the desert, the interviewer asks how the militants manage to survive. The interviewee ("military official") does not respond directly, instead extolling the high level of theological and ideological devotion the fighters have for their cause. As has been reported by this author, much of ISIS's ability to survive in the desert in the past depended on the ability to trade with local villagers—an ability that has been significantly diminished in the past year as economic and security concerns have driven communities to the urban centers in the east and west of the Badia.

The interviewer then asks about the day-to-day routine of the fighters. Here, the official makes several important comments:

*"The mujahid spends his daily life in the Badiya moving between preparation of faith and physical and military preparation... so from ribat on the frontlines, keeping a look out for the enemies of God, to helping the mujahideen in fulfilling their needs, to making military preparations through participation in assignments of rigging explosives, making IEDs and explosive belts, to operations of observance of enemy movements, and from raids and assaults on patrols and convoys of the Nusayris and their allies, to participating in repelling campaigns and thwarting penetrations."*

The official references training camps and preparation hubs, where ISIS militants can build IEDs and suicide belts. This is a crucial role the Badia plays for the larger ISIS insurgency in Syria, providing a safer space for the group to train new recruits, and a fallback area for preparing weapons and supplies for attacks in northeast Syria. He also claims that the cells are on 'ribat' (here essentially meaning guard duty out remote outposts), which would only make sense in an environment where ISIS was solidly in control of certain territory, and refers to fighters conducting reconnaissance missions to observe regime military movements. This latter concept is something this author has emphasized throughout monthly updates this year. The renewed highway attacks on lone regime buses in 2022 suggests that, while militants stopped attacking the highways, they remained able to observe them, waiting to strike the most vulnerable targets. In a later statement, the official cites these actions as being crucial for the group's ability to target Syrian and Russian military leadership in the Badia.

The official expands on this concept in his response to the next question:

*"Regarding the military and field situation, by the grace of God alone, vast areas of the Badiya have been falling in a security sense into the hands of the mujahideen. In them they attack the enemy at the time they define, and in the way that they wish."*

Of course, there is a degree of exaggeration throughout this interview, and the official makes no mention of the regime's operations which have heavily influenced the way in which ISIS chooses when and where to attack. But the general concept asserted in his response is supported by the visible attack trends. He also claims that IEDs and mines are heavily employed to limit the regime's movements, a claim that is also reflected in the documented attack data.

Most interesting in this interview is the official's response to the question on media coverage of the Badia insurgency:

*“We hear a lot about many attacks and the wiping out of convoys of the apostates in the Badiya, so what is the truth of these reports? ...*

*Yes true, by the grace of God Almighty, wiping out of convoys of the Nusayri army and militias takes place, but also there is exaggeration in a lot of the distorted news that the media of the apostate Sahwa forces deliberately publish at specific times and for systematic malicious aims, among them: inciting campaigns against the mujahideen in the Badiya, getting Crusader support, and other malicious aims.”*

Here the official explicitly calls out the anti-regime media outlets who regularly write fake stories about ISIS attacks in the Badia. These stories often involve regular, complex ISIS attacks against regime forces. It is quite interesting that, rather than use these fake stories to boost the image of ISIS operations in the Badia, the official denounces them. He goes on to urge patience among ISIS supporters, saying that they should only follow official ISIS claims which are “subject to the policy of publication that is subject to specific military and security assessments, and all that goes within the framework of the blazing media war that is no less dangerous than the military war that their mujahideen brothers wage on the ground.” In other words, ISIS media from the Badia is limited due to military and security concerns and engaging in a full-blown media war with an emphasis on claiming every attack would be dangerous to their activities. This claim supports the theory put forth last year by this author and Dr. Charlie Winter in an [analysis](#) of ISIS’s under-reporting phenomenon in the Badia.

The interview ends with the official highlighting several high-profile attacks the group has carried out in 2022 and a discussion of the regime’s counter-ISIS efforts, particularly the heavy use of drones, jets, and helicopters. Here the official admits that these efforts have had some impact on the group, saying that “most of these campaigns have failed”—which means at least some have been successful. Finally, the official addresses those supporters who might wish to join them in the Badia, stating that the routes for foreigner fighters are “cut” and that “mobilization to us is prevented,” so they should instead join other ISIS wilayats outside Syria. This should not be surprising. The preponderance of evidence suggests that the Syria insurgency is dominated by Syrians and Iraqis, with some Russian-speaking veterans remaining from the territorial days.

## Looking Ahead

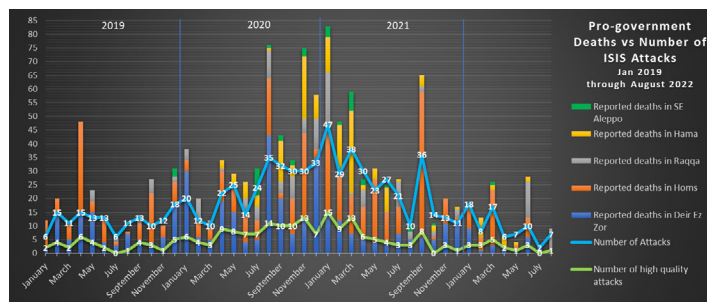
Simply put, July was a strange month for the ISIS insurgency in central Syria. There were almost certainly additional attacks this author was not able to confirm, but that holds true for previous months as well. The methodological consistency of the attack tracking research over the past two years yields a high degree of certainty that July was an extraordinarily quiet month for ISIS in the Badia. This conclusion is supported by discussions this author had with local pro-regime soldiers in July, who confirmed that the central Syrian desert is currently very quiet. The Liwa al-Quds operation in Jabal Omour uncovered at least one cave holding small arms and explosives, and the militia claims to have destroyed two “ISIS vehicles” though it’s not clear if the vehicles belonged to ISIS or were actively being used, as no bodies were present in the pictures posted online. Thus, the same explanations for past lulls in activity can be applied to July: fighters shifting to northeast Syria or Iraq (the former saw an increase in attacks in July), fighters resting, or militants not finding easy or opportune targets. The severity of the drop in activity is new, however, and may suggest other factors that this author has yet to discover.

At the same time, July witnessed more official ISIS media from central Syria than had been published in the past two years. One could argue that the lengthy Naba interview was timed specifically to coincide with the unprecedented quiet month. The long-term trajectory of the Badia insurgency remains a mystery. It is entirely possible that the region will continue to experience very few attacks as long as ISIS finds it easy to operate in northeast Syria.

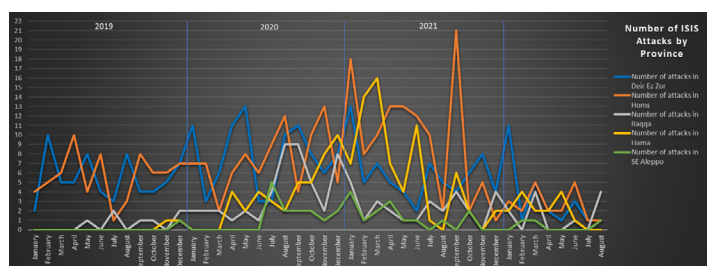
## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in August 2022

ISIS militants carried out at least seven confirmed attacks in August in the Raqqa, Aleppo, Homs and Deir Ez Zor governorates. These attacks killed at least nine pro-Assad regime soldiers and wounded 11 more. There was one high quality attack in August. August attacks climbed back to the spring average following an unprecedentedly quiet July. Interestingly, August’s activity was concentrated in the southwest Raqqa region, an area that has not witnessed much violent activity for many months. It is worth noting, however, that regime forces began new sweeping missions here in July following recurring reports of suspected ISIS movement in the desert plains in the south of the governorate. ISIS also claimed three attacks in southern Raqqa in August—the first attacks claimed in the Badia since June 2022, and only the second, third, and

fourth claims made here since November 2021. These media announcements come on the heels of July's rare three-page editorial in the group's weekly Naba magazine detailing the activity of ISIS cells in central Syria.



ISIS attacks in southern Raqqa (4) and Aleppo (1) both rose, following a four month lull in which only one attack was conducted in Raqqa. Attacks in Homs (1), Deir Ez Zor (1), and east Hama (0) were consistent compared with July. Comparatively, ISIS claimed 18 attacks in northeast Syria in August, roughly consistent with July, and 38 attacks in Iraq, an increase from July. It should be noted that these are only attacks claimed by ISIS, and in northeast Syria at least, ISIS conducts additional, unclaimed violent activity, especially in eastern Deir Ez Zor.



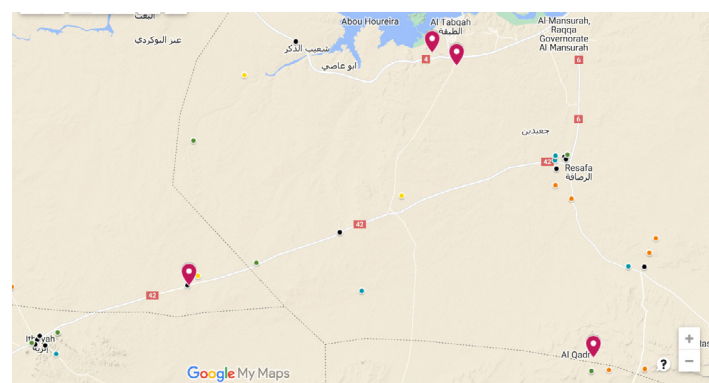
## Raqqa, Aleppo, and Hama

Three of the four confirmed attacks in Raqqa were reported only by ISIS—that is, there was no public regime media acknowledging the attacks. This should not necessarily come as a surprise, however, as attack reporting from Raqqa is very difficult to pin down. The first claim was of a small arms ambush west of Tabqa in which ISIS claims it killed four soldiers in a vehicle. The second claim was of a mine planted on the road leading to the Tabqa Air Base—used by Russian air assets supporting regime anti-ISIS operations—which allegedly killed one soldier. The third attack was reported by pro-regime media. On August 21, local Facebook pages reported that five soldiers were wounded by a mine near the village of Kadir, in southern Raqqa. Kadir village sits on the southern edge of the large Kadir Oil field, between Resafa and Kawm, Homs. Small arms ambushes occurred in this area in both March and April of this year. The last attack was claimed by

ISIS on August 28 and again involved a mine along the Tabqa Air Base road, allegedly killing two soldiers.

Pro-regime media reported a mine attack in southern Aleppo on August 23, the first confirmed attack in the governorate since March 2022. The mine reportedly wounded two soldiers at the “Zakia point,” an outpost along the Ithriya-Tabqa highway that sits on the southern edge of the Ithriya Oil Field. ISIS captured several checkpoints here in September 2020, and engaged in small arms clashes with regime forces in this area in December 2020, January 2021, and October 2021.

There were no reported attacks or mine incidents in east Hama for the second month in a row.



Map of ISIS attacks in southwest Raqqa and south Aleppo in 2021 and 2022. August 2022 attacks are marked by the red pins.

## Homs and Deir Ez Zor

On August 7, pro-regime media announced the death of a soldier somewhere in the Deir Ez Zor governorate.

Pro-regime media also reported a mine attack on regime forces near the Uwayrid Dam in southeast Homs on August 19, killing one and wounding four soldiers. This remote dam sits close to the Iraq border and the US-controlled Tanf Zone. In 2018, it was the site of several large ISIS ambushes against regime forces.

## Looking Ahead

Several interesting ISIS attacks in central Syria took place in August, highly reminiscent of the type of activity seen in 2020. While ISIS only carried out seven confirmed attacks, the choice of targets may represent a shift in strategy or the start of a new low-simmering campaign. At least five of the attacks targeted regime infrastructure: The two mines in Kadir and Zakia targeted forces operating around the respective oil fields, while the mines and ambush claimed by ISIS near Tabqa targeted forces moving to and from the air base. The Tabqa Air Base has proven critical for regime forces operating

against ISIS since 2021, with Russian helicopters frequently deployed there providing air support for both convoys and patrols.

The Uwayrid Dam mine attack is also interesting. It is not clear to this author if the regime maintains a permanent presence in this area, or if the targeted soldiers were conducting new patrols. The region is quite remote and its proximity to the Anbar desert in Iraq and the vast southern Homs desert has likely made it a key spot in recent years where ISIS cells can move between the two countries and run training camps.

It remains to be seen if both this level and type of activity is maintained in September. There have already been several months in 2022 when spikes in ISIS activity were followed by steep declines. Furthermore, three of the seven confirmed attacks were only able to be documented due to ISIS claiming them. This should again serve as a reminder that ISIS largely controls our (lack of) understanding of the central Syria insurgency. The lack of reporting by pro-regime media from the region—and a complete absence of reliable opposition media—means that if ISIS does not publicize their attacks, then they will likely go unknown to analysts and outside observers.

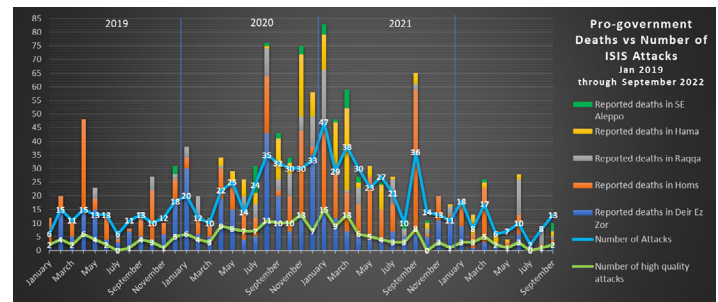


Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted pins) in August 2022. Not pictured is one attack that occurred somewhere in Deir Ez Zor. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

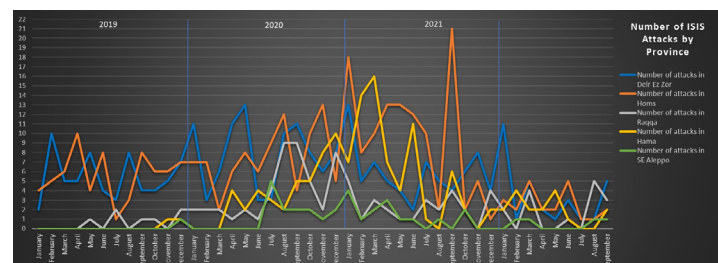
## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in September 2022

ISIS militants carried out at least 13 confirmed attacks in September in the Raqqa, Hama, Homs, and Deir Ez Zor governorates. These attacks killed at least nine pro-Assad regime soldiers and one civilian and wounded six more. There were two high quality attacks in September. Attacks, high quality attacks, and deaths climbed for the second month in a row following a historic low level reached in July. As with August, September's activity was concentrated in the southwest Raqqa region, an area that has not witnessed much violent

activity for many months but is now experiencing multiple Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and small arms attacks on a weekly basis. The recent trend, begun in August, of ISIS claiming some of its Badia attacks has continued into September, with the group claiming three attacks (two in Tabqa, Raqqa, and one in Deir Ez Zor). These media announcements come on the heels of July's rare three-page editorial in the group's weekly Naba magazine detailing the activity of ISIS cells in central Syria, which coincided with reports shared with this author of a restructuring of ISIS's Badia command.



ISIS attacks increased sharply in Deir Ez Zor (5) and slightly in Homs (2) and east Hama (2). Confirmed ISIS attacks fell slightly in southern Raqqa (3) and Aleppo (0) in September. However, while there were only three confirmed attacks in southern Raqqa, both pro-regime sources and journalists in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held Raqqa have mentioned throughout the month that ISIS is carrying out IED attacks around Tabqa on a more regular basis, suggesting that more attacks have occurred than this author has been able to confirm. There was one additional IED attack reported in “the Badia” that hit a 25th Division unit. This division has historically patrolled the Khanasir-Ithriya-Resafa triangle between Aleppo, Hama, and Raqqa, and all confirmed attacks involving the 25th Division in 2021 occurred in southern Aleppo. Therefore this author has chosen to record this “Badia” attack as occurring in Aleppo.



## Raqqa, Aleppo, and Hama

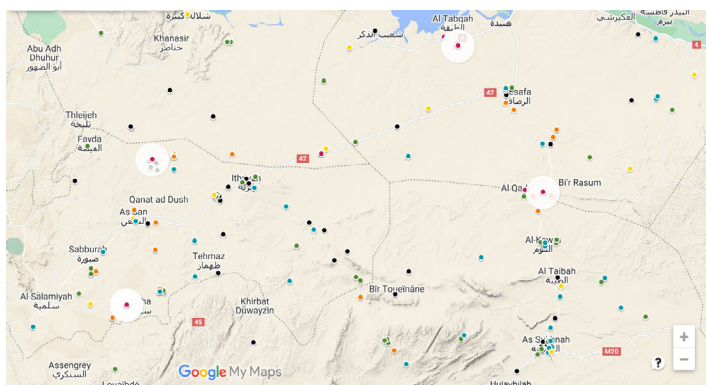
As in August, most of the confirmed attacks in Raqqa in September were reported only by ISIS—that is, there was no public pro-regime media acknowledging the attacks. This should not necessarily come as a surprise, however, as at-

tack reporting from Raqqa is very difficult to pin down. The first claim by ISIS was of an IED attack on a regime military vehicle west of Tabqa Airbase in which the group says two soldiers were killed (deaths not included in the author's data). The second attack occurred on September 11 when pro-regime sources reported one soldier killed and three wounded in an ambush near the Kadir Oil Field along the Raqqa-Homs border. On September 14, ISIS claimed another IED attack west of the Tabqa Airport.

These attacks eerily mirror those conducted by ISIS in August, when the group was confirmed to have carried out four IED and small arms attacks around Tabqa and one mine attack on regime forces near Kadir. This author reached out in early September to a regime soldier with contacts in southern Raqqa, who confirmed that the Tabqa area had not witnessed consistent attacks like this before, and that security forces suspect individuals are regularly planting IEDs at night with the help of insiders. The continuity of target locations and the number of attacks in these areas suggests that ISIS may be pursuing a specific strategic goal in southern Raqqa.

On September 22, a truck carrying soldiers from the Russian-backed 25th Division hit a mine somewhere in the Badia, killing three and wounding one. This event likely occurred in southern Aleppo or southwest Raqqa.

Similarly, there were two reported mine incidents in eastern Hama in September, both targeting regime security forces. The first occurred on September 17 when a soldier was slightly wounded by a mine/IED in Akash, the second on September 25 when two members of the Salamiyah National Defense Forces were killed and a third wounded by a mine or IED near Rahjan. This incident followed two consecutive months of no confirmed attacks or mine incidents in east Hama.

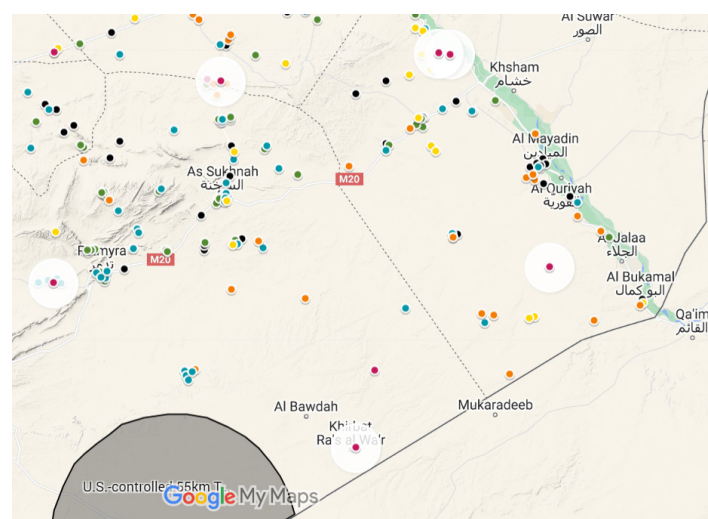


Map of ISIS attacks in southwest Raqqa and east Hama in 2021 and 2022. September 2022 attacks are highlighted. Missing from the map is one attack attributed to "the Badia" which likely occurred in southern Aleppo.

## Homs and Deir Ez Zor

There were two confirmed attacks in Homs in September. The first, and most significant, occurred on September 1 when pro-regime sources reported that two groups of ISIS fighters entered the province from Iraq and ambushed a group of regime soldiers from the 17th Division near al-Tayyara, east of the U.S.-controlled Tanf zone and southwest of Humaymah. Casualties from the battle are unknown, but it is likely at least several soldiers were killed. On September 5, a mine killed a local civilian in Bayarat, west of Palmyra.

ISIS attacks against regime forces in Deir Ez Zor occurred regularly during September, a significant increase compared to August. Several were carried out close to the urban belt along the Euphrates River. On September 6, ISIS claimed to have destroyed a regime military vehicle with an IED near Ma'izila, northwest of Boukamal. On September 13, the Deir Ez Zor National Defense Forces claimed they "thwarted" an ISIS attack on their positions near Kharita, bordering a major oil field north of Deir Ez Zor city. The next day, pro-regime sources reported that a National Defense Forces (NDF) soldier was kidnapped at the nearby oil field. Pro-regime sources also reported the deaths of two soldiers somewhere in Deir Ez Zor province on September 22 and September 24. The soldier killed on September 22 belonged to the 4th Division, which to the author's knowledge is only deployed in urban areas (versus other units which are responsible for patrolling the desert).

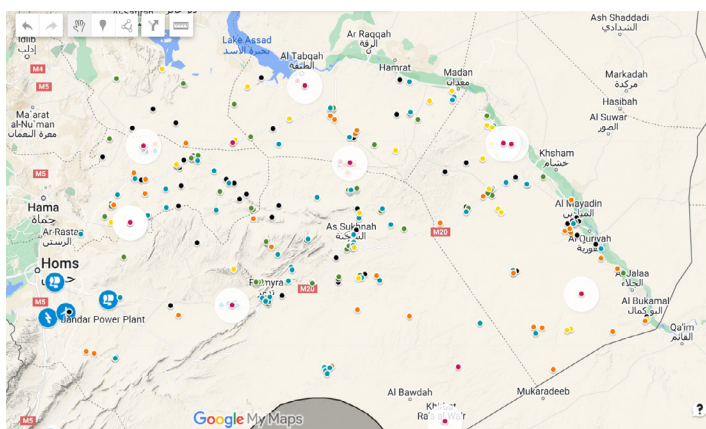


Map of ISIS attacks in east Homs and Deir Ez Zor in 2021 and 2022. September 2022 attacks are highlighted. Missing from the map are two attacks that occurred somewhere in Deir Ez Zor.

## Looking Ahead

As noted in last month's report, the location, style, and quantity of ISIS attacks these past two months are highly reminis-

cent of the type of activity seen in 2020. In August, at least five of the attacks targeted regime infrastructure while in September there were at least four such attacks. The emphasis on Tabqa and southern Raqqa, as well as the arrival of new cells from Iraq, may suggest that ISIS has decided to emphasize its central Syrian insurgency and is either laying the ground work for increased support to its northeast insurgency, or is now increasingly drawing on resources acquired in the northeast to bolster the central Syria fight. As stated by this author in August, it remains to be seen if both the number nature of attacks is maintained during the next few months, or if a new large regime counter-ISIS operation launched at the end of September will succeed in degrading ISIS's capabilities.



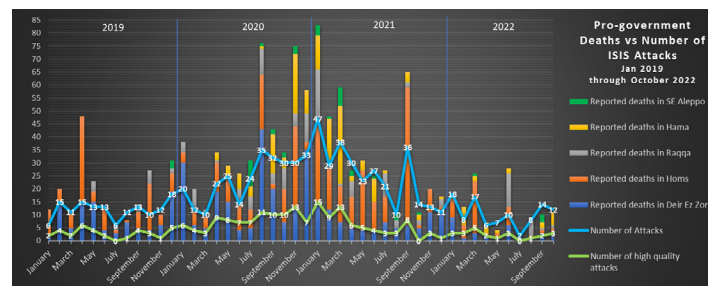
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted pins) in September 2022 alongside attacks in 2022 and 2021. Not pictured are two attacks that occurred somewhere in Deir Ez Zor and one attack somewhere in "the Badia" that likely occurred in southern Aleppo. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in October 2022

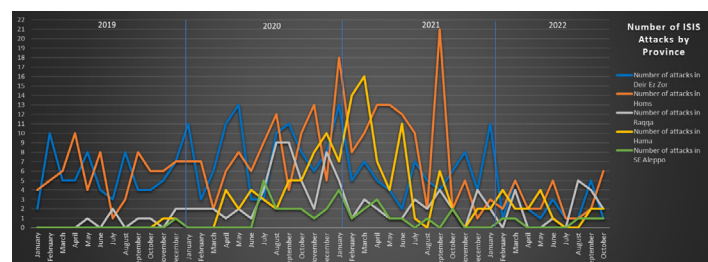
ISIS militants carried out at least 12 confirmed attacks in October in the Raqqa, Hama, Homs, Aleppo, and Deir Ez Zor governorates. These attacks killed at least nine pro-Assad regime soldiers and two civilians and wounded 11 more. Additionally, there were three high quality attacks in October. Attacks, high quality attacks, and deaths remained consistent with the recent increase in ISIS activity following a historic low point reached in July. However, unlike August and September, October's confirmed activity was concentrated in Homs, rather than in the southwest Raqqa region. (It is worth noting that all but two of the confirmed southwest Raqqa attacks since August have come via ISIS claims, so this perceived change in activity may only reflect a change in ISIS media strategy, rather than a drop in actual attacks.)

ISIS continued the trend it began in August of claiming some Badia attacks, claiming in October one attack in south-

ern Aleppo and two in southwest Raqqa. These media announcements come on the heels of July's rare three-page editorial in the group's weekly Naba magazine detailing the activity of ISIS cells in central Syria, which coincided with reports shared with this author of a restructuring of ISIS's Badia command. October also saw the launching of the first major anti-ISIS operations of the year by regime forces, focused primarily in eastern Hama, Homs, and Deir Ez Zor.



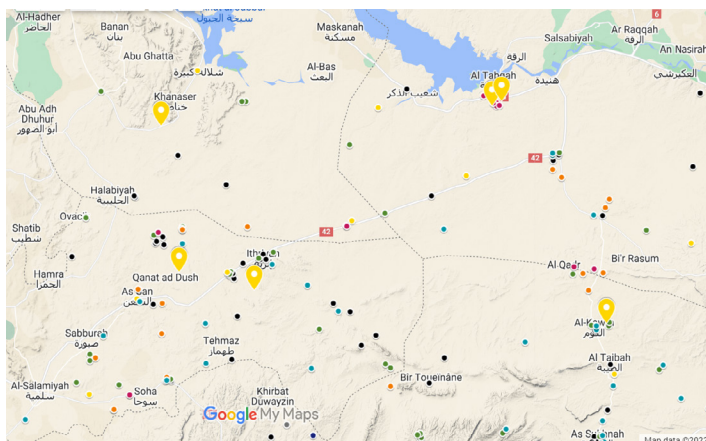
ISIS attacks increased sharply in Homs (6) following a three-month lull in the province, dropped sharply in Deir Ez Zor (1) after a spike in confirmed activity in September, and in Raqqa (2) after two months of elevated activity. Confirmed ISIS activity remained steady in east Hama (2) and in southern Aleppo (1). The sharp increase in Homs attacks is partially attributable to the regime's new anti-ISIS operations, which have encountered many mines and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) across the region.



## Raqqa, Aleppo, and Hama

ISIS claimed all three of the attacks documented attacks in Aleppo and Raqqa in October (none of which were reported on by regime media, which is standard for these areas). The first occurred on October 5, when ISIS claimed an IED attack on a regime military truck west of Khanasir, Aleppo. The second claim was for a similar IED attack on a regime truck west of Tabqa, Raqqa, on October 24. Lastly, ISIS claimed a small arms attack on a regime barracks near the Tabqa Airbase on October 30, which is confirmed to have killed at least one soldier. These are the ninth, 10th, and 11th ISIS claims in central Syria since the Naba magazine editorial in late July. Prior to that, ISIS had only claimed one attack in central Syria in 2022.

There were two reported incidents in eastern Hama in October that could be attributed to ISIS. The first occurred on October 6, when local Facebook pages reported that unknown men on a motorbike had killed two civilians and wounded a third in a drive-by shooting while the civilians were fishing in the countryside. The attack reportedly occurred “near Abu Huwadid, in the northeast Salamiyah countryside.” This author found two villages referred to as Abu Huwadid on online maps, one southeast of Salamiyah, near Uqayribat, and one in the far northeast, between Sa’an and Wadi Azeeb, that is also referred to as Rasm Ahmar. Both of these areas are near previous ISIS hotspots. Furthermore, the second Hama incident occurred on October 17 when a mine or IED destroyed a regime National Defense Forces (NDF) truck near Wadi Azeeb, potentially linking the October 6 assailants with the nearby mine attack a week later. The October 17 attack killed three regime fighters, including the commander of the unit, and wounded six others.



Map of ISIS attacks in southern Aleppo, southwest Raqqa and east Hama in 2021 and 2022. October 2022 attacks are highlighted.

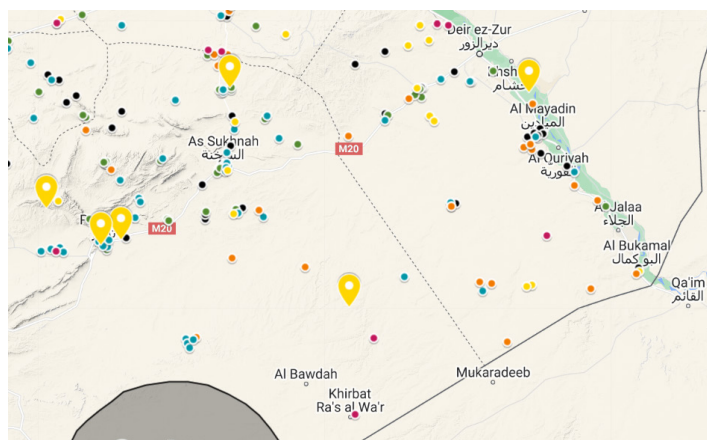
## Homs and Deir Ez Zor

There was one confirmed attack in Deir Ez Zor in October. Two local members of the regime's 4th Division were killed on October 3 in the village of Toub, next to Bouleel, on the Euphrates River between the cities of Mayadin and Deir Ez Zor. If the two men were killed by ISIS it would mark a rare attack deep in the urban belt controlled by the regime, and along the critical smuggling routes across the Euphrates. However, local journalist [Zain al-Abidin](#) told this author that, according to his sources, it is believed the men were killed alongside three other Iranian-backed militiamen due to an internal conflict over control of the smuggling route. Al-Abidin said a similar incident occurred nearby in Salihyah on October 6 when 4th Division soldiers killed six others in a smuggling dispute. This author could not verify the alleged October 3 incident, and an NDF member he spoke to denied that there was infighting in

Deir Ez Zor. However, with the continuing crash of the Syrian economy, controlling smuggling has become exceedingly important for armed groups to maintain funding, so it would not be surprising if battles broke out over the issue. However, even if the killing was a bout of regime infighting rather than an ISIS attack, such incidents only weaken regime security and play into ISIS's hands.

Homs experienced the most ISIS attacks in October. The first attack was reported on October 3, when serious fighting broke out east of al-Kawm between ISIS cells and regime militiamen from Liwa al-Quds and the local NDF. Security forces were forced to abandon their outlying positions despite the use of regime warplanes. It is worth noting that just three weeks earlier, a group of ISIS fighters had ambushed regime forces north of al-Kawm, near the Kadir Oil Field.

On October 9, a soldier from the 4th Division's Security Office was reported killed somewhere on the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway, likely by a mine or IED. On October 12, a regime source reported that three 17th Division soldiers had recently disappeared while on patrol east of the Tanf zone, likely either kidnapped or had deserted to ISIS (ISIS cells entering from Iraq had ambushed 17th Division soldiers in this area on September 1 as well). On October 18, a member of the Russian Wagner PMC was reportedly injured by a mine while assisting Liwa al-Quds fighters in an anti-ISIS clearing mission around the Jazal Field area of Homs. Local pro-regime media pages reported the death of a soldier somewhere in Homs on October 29, and on October 31, a mine or IED destroyed a regime military truck near Palmyra, killing one soldier and wounding four.



Map of ISIS attacks in eastern Homs and Deir Ez Zor in 2021 and 2022. October 2022 attacks are highlighted. Missing from the map is one attack that occurred somewhere in eastern Homs.

## Regime Operations

The Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies launched

new, widespread anti-ISIS operations at the start of October, the first serious operations of 2022. Russian military officials traveled to southern Raqqa to meet with leaders of the local al-Ajil Tribe early in the month in an attempt secure local assistance in rooting out the cells targeting Tabqa Airbase. Meanwhile, Iranian-commanded Afghans from Liwa Fatemiyoun deployed to the T3 Pumping Station southwest of Palmyra in order to conduct new sweeping operations northeast towards the Wadi Doubayat area, which has long been an ISIS safe zone. Elsewhere in Homs, Syrian Army units from the 17th and 18th Divisions continued patrols which began in September east of al-Tanf along the Iraq border. The regime believes this area is being used by ISIS cells to infiltrate Syria from Iraq. In Deir Ez Zor, NDF, tribal militias, and 4th Division fighters have been conducting sweeps in the Mayadin region. NDF fighters have also been conducting de-mining operations in east Hama throughout October.

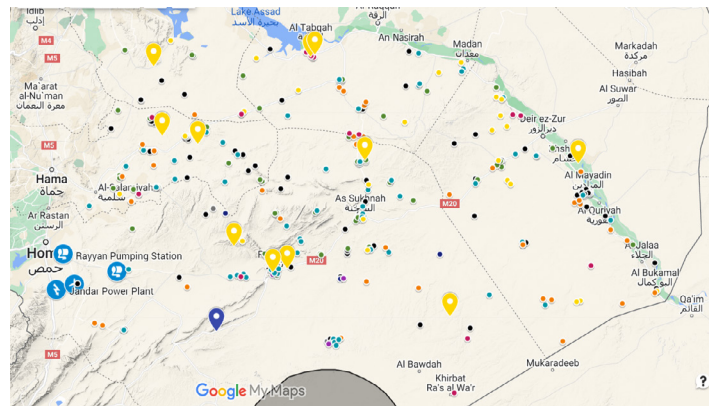
These operations, which are focused on a mix of demining (particularly in east Hama and east Homs) and rooting out ISIS caches and hideouts (mostly in southeast Homs and Deir Ez Zor) have led to the discovery and destruction of several ISIS caches, particularly by Liwa al-Quds fighters in the mountains north of Palmyra.

## Looking Ahead

October's recorded incidents somewhat bucked the more high-tempo trend set in August and September. While ISIS cells managed to conduct at least four serious attacks—the fighting in Kawm, which seized regime positions, and the IEDs and small arms attack in Khanasir and Tabqa, deep within regime territory—the largescale regime operation is clearly pressuring the group across the Badia. At least six of October's attacks can in some way be attributed to the anti-ISIS operations—units either encountering old mines or being hit by new mines/IEDs while venturing into ISIS hotspots.

The continued absence of more regular, complex attacks (i.e., the October 3 Kawm attack) compared with 2020 suggests that ISIS does not have a large number of fighters in central Syria, or at least they are not active at any one time. It could be that ISIS is still focusing its forces on northeast Syria (the group claimed 15 attacks here in October), or simply it does not have enough men to risk carrying out more brazen attacks since the regime flooded the Badia with more soldiers in 2021. As with northeast Syria, the group seems to have settled on a longer term, methodical approach, unwilling to risk too many assets at a time when they have no hope of returning to territorial control, but still working to keep pressure on local security forces while they recruit, train, and

fundraise for the next generation of fighters. However, the continued activity around the Tabqa airbase should not go unheeded by policymakers, as such brazen attacks against a key regime and Russian security node suggests that ISIS believes its Raqqa cells are in a strong position, which could ultimately lead to increased security threats in SDF-held areas of Raqqa.



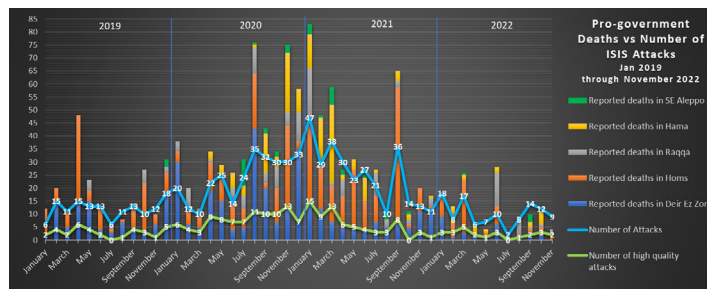
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (yellow pins) in October 2022 alongside attacks in 2022 and 2021. Not pictured is one attack that occurred somewhere in east Homs. To view an interactive version of this map, please [click here](#).

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in November 2022

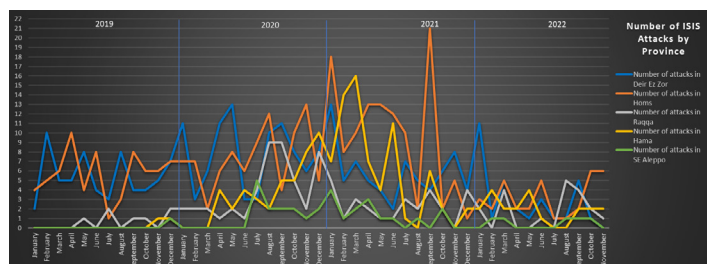
ISIS militants carried out at least nine confirmed attacks in November in the Raqqa, Hama, and Homs governorates. These attacks killed at least four pro-Assad regime soldiers and wounded 10, as well as two civilians. Additionally, there were two high quality attacks in November. There were fewer attacks, high quality attacks, and deaths compared to September and October. Like October, confirmed activity in November was concentrated in Homs, rather than in the southwest Raqqa region where ISIS activity in September and August was focused. (It is worth noting that all but three of the confirmed southwest Raqqa attacks since August have come via ISIS claims. ISIS made no official Badia claims in November, so this perceived change in activity may only reflect a change in ISIS media strategy, rather than a drop in actual attacks.)

While ISIS cells in Deir Ez Zor, and possibly Raqqa, appear to have decreased their activity in November, the cells in northeast Homs continued a serious campaign against regime forces around the key village of Kawm this month. In October, ISIS cells reportedly routed regime forces from the eastern Kawm sector—the mountainous region between Jabal Bishri and Kawm. Then, over a three-day period at the end of November, ISIS cells first cut off the northern approach

to the town and then, on November 30, forced a complete withdrawal of pro-regime forces (which included members of the Russian Wagner Group). This is the first time ISIS has seized the town from the regime since briefly doing so in April 2021 and comes one month after the regime launched its first major anti-ISIS operations of 2022.



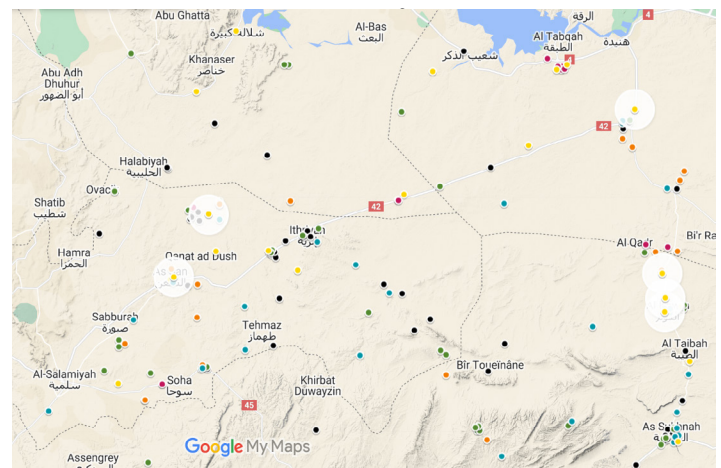
ISIS attacks remained steady in Homs (6) following a three-month summer lull,, continued their precipitous decline in Deir Ez Zor (0) following a spike in September, and in Raqqa (1) after two months of elevated activity during August and September. Confirmed ISIS activity remained steady in east Hama (2), consisting of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and mines as has become the norm.



## Raqqa and Hama

ISIS has not claimed an attack in southern Raqqa since its October 30 announcement of a small arms attack on a regime barracks near Tabqa airbase. On November 17, however, pro-regime media reported an ISIS ambush on the vehicle of a regime lieutenant colonel traveling near Shuwayhan, just north of Resafa and 10 miles east of Tabqa airbase. The attack left the officer “severely wounded,” and killed two and wounded four in his escort.

As in October, there were two reported incidents in eastern Hama in November that could be attributed to ISIS. Both incidents involved mines or IEDs and therefore, it is unknown if the devices were recently placed or are only now being discovered. The first occurred on November 19 when two civilians were wounded after they drove over a mine east of Rahjan. The second incident occurred on November 21 when three local militia men were wounded by a mine while driving in the countryside near Sa’an. Both of these areas have wit-



Map of ISIS attacks in southern Aleppo, south Raqqa and east Hama in 2021 and 2022. November 2022 attacks are highlighted (yellow pins).

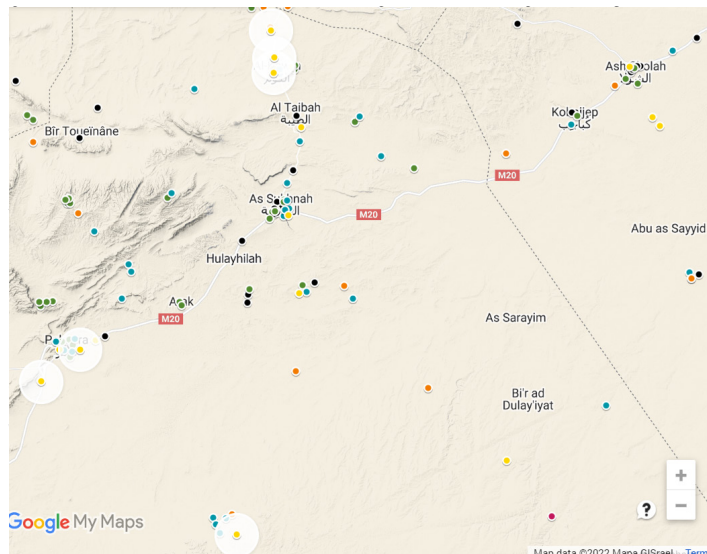
## Homs and Deir Ez Zor

There were no confirmed attacks in Deir Ez Zor in November.

As with October, Homs experienced the greatest number of ISIS attacks in November. The most serious of these occurred around the village Kawm. Kawm is the only major urban area along the highway connecting Sukhna to Resafa – i.e., the highway connecting the two main Badia highways—the Palmyra-Deir Ez Zor highway and the Salamiya-Raqqa highway. The Kawm region also has several oil and gas fields the regime and Russian forces have brought back online since retaking the Badia from ISIS in 2017. This area saw intense fighting in 2020 when ISIS activity surged across the Badia, and was for much of that year considered either no-man’s-land or in ISIS control. The major regime operation at the start of 2021 heavily emphasized securing Kawm, with 4th Division reinforcements deploying to support local National Defense Forces (NDF) and Liwa al-Quds fighters, all backed by the Wagner Group and Syrian air support. By May 2021, these forces had managed to create a security cordon around the town and set up outposts across the countryside. After a few failed attacks in the following months ISIS appeared to have largely left the sector alone, instead focusing its efforts further north in the Kadir area along the Homs-Raqqa administrative border. Fighting was concentrated therein the first nine months of 2022.

However, in early September a group of ISIS fighters ambushed regime forces north of Kawm, near the Kadir Oil Field, and on October 3 serious fighting broke out east of Kawm between ISIS cells and regime militiamen from Liwa al-Quds and the local NDF. Security forces were forced to abandon their outlying positions despite the use of regime warplanes. On November 28, ISIS cells were able to cut the

northern approach to Kawm, forcing security forces, which included Wagner members, back to the town. On November 30, pro-regime sources reported that security forces were



Map of ISIS attacks in eastern Homs and Deir Ez Zor in 2021 and 2022. November 2022 attacks are highlighted (yellow pins).

## A Brief Look at ISIS Cells

On November 30, ISIS announced the death of its leader, Abu Hasan al-Hashimi al-Qurashi. Following the announcement, which U.S. CENTCOM released a [statement](#) claiming the man was killed by ex-rebels in Dara'a in mid-October. In announcing its leader's death, ISIS named a new caliph and ISIS groups from across the world have since released photosets of their fighters pledging allegiance to the new leader. Several such [photos](#) showing ISIS cells across Syria were published on December 2. Among them were photos of Badia-based fighters which appear to show numerous children and teenagers, something which has not been seen in photosets of armed Badia cells before. This author has frequently written about ISIS's use of the Badia for training camps for children it recruits or kidnaps, primarily in northeast Syria. These photos would appear to confirm this, revealing the newest generation of ISIS recruits which have recently begun to be integrated into active cells.



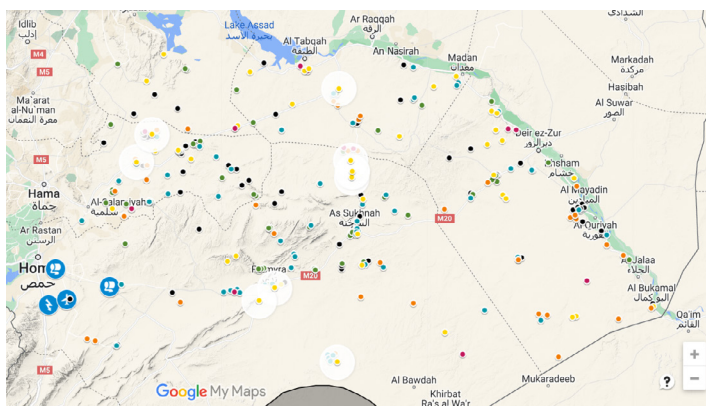
A group of ISIS fighters in the Badia with numerous apparent children and teenagers.

## Looking Ahead

Despite the rise in quantity and complexity of ISIS attacks in recent months, the continued lack of consistency in complex attacks compared with 2020 suggests that either ISIS does not have a large number of active fighters in central Syria or does not feel confident enough in its ability to maintain a high tempo without taking significant losses. However, the recent series of battles around southern Raqqa and Kawm mark a serious, continued emphasis by ISIS cells on securing and expanding its area of operations along the southern Raqqa front. These actions show that despite whatever resource constraint the group is currently facing, it is still able to concentrate resources on at least two fronts it views as strategically important.

The killing of the ISIS caliph in mid-October in Dara'a and the subsequent revelation that he spent at least the last few months in southern Syria suggest that the central Syrian insurgency is able to escalate and make strategic decisions absent any direct oversight from the ISIS central command. These Badia cells are likely more tied into sub-regional command structures stretching between northeast and central Syria, with senior leaders coordinating on resource and troop movement with sectors in Iraq.

The apparent teenagers in the photos released of ISIS cells across Syria should serve as a stark reminder that the al-Hol prison camp is not the only "ticking time bomb" in terms of future ISIS members. The Syrian regime and its allies have done a decent job of securing critical infrastructure across central Syria over the past two years, but their forces have proven incapable of destroying the large ISIS camps that the group has used for years to rebuild and refit. It is these camps that enable ISIS to train the next generation of fighters and prepare for future surges across the country.



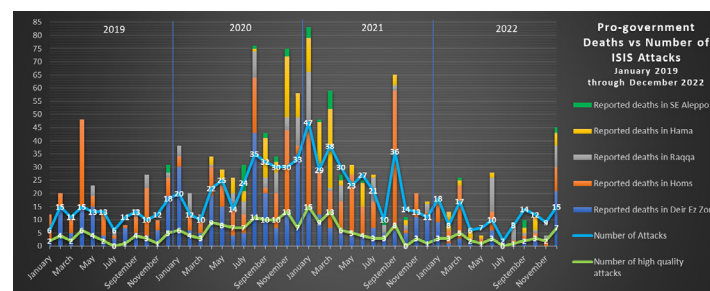
Map of locatable ISIS attacks (yellow pins) in November 2022 alongside attacks in 2022 and 2021. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

## ISIS Redux: The Central Syria Insurgency in December 2022

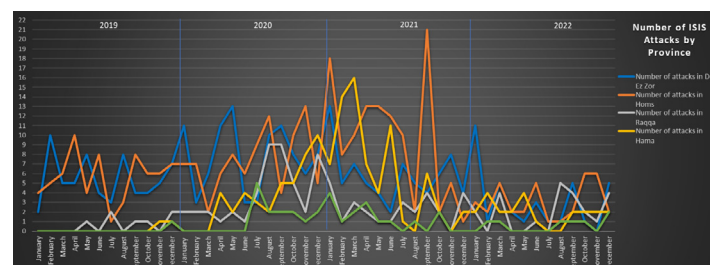
ISIS militants carried out at least 15 confirmed attacks in December in all governorates of the Syrian Badia: Raqqah, Hama, Deir Ez Zor, Aleppo, and Homs. These attacks killed at least 30 pro-Assad regime soldiers, 15 civilians, and wounded at least two others. Additionally, there were seven high quality attacks in December, the most since September 2021. An increase in overall attacks and a significant increase in both high quality attacks and regime casualties in December reflected an overall rise in ISIS attack complexity and aggressiveness. This is in line with the general trend that began in August, when ISIS started to consistently claim some of its Badia attacks for the first time since 2021 and shifted toward a more aggressive posture, targeting regime forces with small arms ambushes in more urban environments. As with August and September, December's activity was concentrated in Raqqah and Deir Ez Zor, with a decrease in observable attacks in Homs. ISIS also claimed a significant number of attacks in December, marking the first month the group has claimed eight or more Badia attacks since June 2021.

While ISIS shifted its focus in October and November to northeast Homs, particularly the Kawm sector, December saw the group shift back to its emphasis on southern Raqqah and the urban sector of southwest Deir Ez Zor. Both of these areas had been targets for ISIS cells in August and September, but in December militants were even more aggressive, kidnapping and executing regime soldiers at least twice, conducting multiple small arms ambushes in towns long held by regime forces, and carrying out an extremely rare Anti-tank Guided Missile (ATGM) attack on buses carrying dozens of oil workers from the Tayyem Oil Field. This shift back to the urban belt that divides the regime-held Badia with Syri-

an Democratic Forces (SDF)-held northeast Syria preceded a serious attack in Raqqah city. On December 26, two ISIS members reportedly disguised themselves as SDF fighters and infiltrated the SDF Internal Security Headquarters next to a major prison in Raqqah, killing at least six security forces before detonating suicide belts. This was the most significant attack in Raqqah since 2019 and almost certainly is tied to the strengthened position of ISIS cells in regime-controlled areas just south of the city.



ISIS attacks decreased in Homs (2) following a spike in October and November, but rose sharply in Deir Ez Zor (5), Raqqah (4), and south Aleppo (2). Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and mine incidents remained steady in east Hama (2). ISIS claimed attacks in December in all governorates except Hama and Homs.



## Raqqah, Aleppo, and Hama

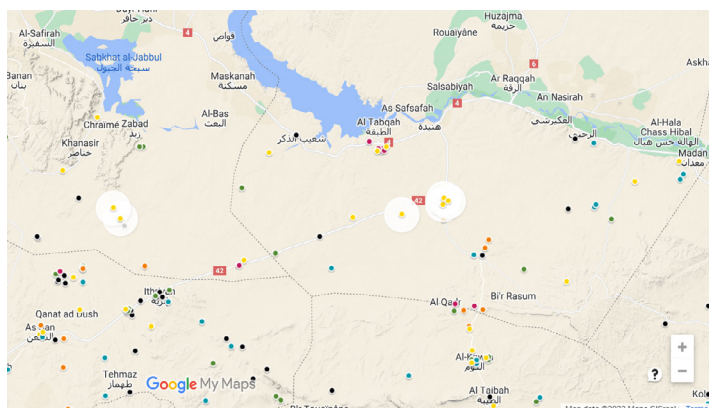
ISIS began its renewed Badia media strategy in August with a string of southern Raqqah claims. The group claimed nine attacks in southern Raqqah between August 7 and October 30. After a six-week break, ISIS again began claiming attacks in Raqqah, now including multiple pictures of dead soldiers and destroyed vehicles.

On December 8, regime media reported the death of a soldier from a mine near Resafa. ISIS claimed an IED attack on a regime truck near Resafa on December 14, publishing pictures of three dead men and the destroyed vehicle. Only one of the soldiers' deaths was reported by pro-regime media (again demonstrating that relying on pro-regime media to track ISIS attacks only provides a partial picture). ISIS claimed a second attack on December 19, this time kidnapping and executing two soldiers in a house outside the town of Resafa.

ISIS again published pictures of the dead men. Lastly, ISIS militants attacked a barracks in Bir al-Sadran, west of Resafa, late on December 30. Regime pages reported the deaths of two soldiers in southern Raqqa that same day, likely killed in the attack.

ISIS also claimed two attacks in southern Aleppo, both near the town of Khanasir. The group claimed it detonated an IED against a regime truck south of the city on December 5, and that it ambushed a patrol using small arms in a similar area on December 13, killing at least one soldier.

There were two mine incidents in Hama in December. On December 21, a child was killed by a mine in a village outside Salamiyah and on December 28, four civilians were killed by a mine outside Tel Salama, east of Salamiyah.



Map of ISIS attacks in southern Aleppo and south Raqqa in 2021 and 2022. December 2022 attacks are highlighted.

## Homs and Deir Ez Zor

ISIS activity in Deir Ez Zor surged in December following no confirmed attacks in November. ISIS claimed four attacks in December, all in the southwest of the governorate, two of which were reported by regime media as well. Three of these attacks occurred around the town of Dweir on December 17, while the fourth came in the desert south of the town the following day.

ISIS claimed its fighters killed two regime soldiers in a small arms attack on a barracks near Dweir on December 17, while a second cell ambushed two soldiers near the nearby al-Ward Oil Field, capturing and executing them. Pro-regime pages in Deir Ez Zor reported the attack on the barracks, claiming it was “repelled” with one loyalist killed and one wounded. Militants also fired on a regime truck in the same area that day. On December 18, a truck full of regime soldiers hit a mine in the desert south of Dweir, killing at least eight. ISIS later claimed the attack. A trusted regime source stated the incident had occurred while the truck was driving through a

regime defensive minefield. There are therefore two possibilities, the first being that the truck indeed hit a regime mine by accident and that ISIS simply claimed the attack (the deaths of the men was widely reported by pro-regime and pro-opposition media). The second possibility is that ISIS added its own mines to the regime minefield, a common tactic for the group and one that would make sense given their series of attacks nearby a day earlier.

An ISIS cell conducted a fifth attack in Deir Ez Zor on December 30. In what was one of the most significant attacks of 2022, ISIS fighters utilized at least two ATGMs to target and destroy between two and three minibuses carrying more than 40 oil workers from the Tayyem Oil Field, close to Deir Ez Zor. Regime media initially reported 10 dead, though this number will likely rise. The Tayyem attack was significant for two reasons: First, it is the first confirmed use of ATGMs in two years; and second, it was a brazen high profile attack against a critical regime target very close to the heavily militarized Deir Ez Zor city. ISIS cells have almost certainly been armed with ATGMs for the past several years, yet rarely chose to use the deadly weapon. These cells could easily have destroyed tanks at lone regime outposts (as they had two years ago). Instead, ISIS chose to use ATGMs on a civilian soft target, clearly prioritizing the “war of attrition” they publicly declared against the regime in 2021. ISIS cells had targeted oil fields and workers somewhat regularly in late 2020, and then intermittently in 2021, but has largely been unable and/or unwilling to expend resources on such targets since the regime bolstered its presence and patrols across central Syria. The return of these types of attacks—if indeed they continue—would signal a significant shift in the Badia power dynamic back in favor of ISIS.

ISIS activity dropped sharply in Homs in December after a high tempo October and November, with only two incidents recorded. On December 1, a mine or IED killed three soldiers near Palmyra. On December 30, ISIS cells attacked a regime outpost north of Palmyra, killing at least six members of the Syrian army’s 18th Division. As November’s report indicated, ISIS captured the village of Kawm from regime forces on November 30 before retreating to the countryside in the face of a Russian Wagner-led offensive launched on December 12. There were likely additional ISIS attacks around Kawm during this time that were not reported by ISIS or pro-regime media.



Map of ISIS attacks in Deir Ez Zor in 2021 and 2022. December 2022 attacks are highlighted.

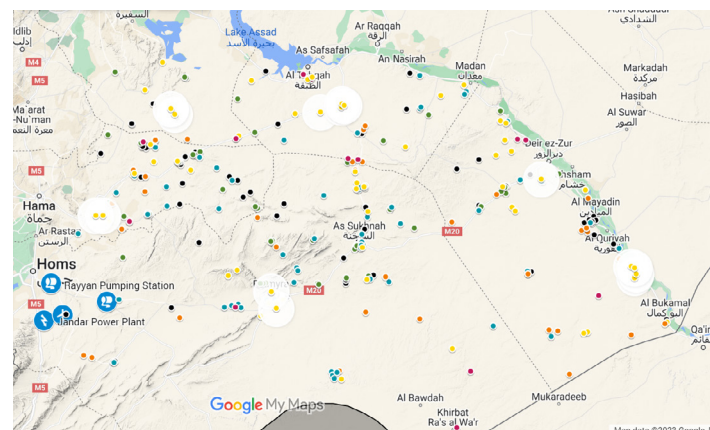
## Regime Operations

The year 2022 ended with limited regime operations taking place across central Syria. Units of the 25th Division continued de-mining and sweeping operations in southern Aleppo (likely the units that were hit by the two claimed ISIS attacks there). The only serious regime operation in December was the Russian Wagner Group-led offensive to re-take Kawm. On December 12, members of the Rostov formation of Wagner led a night operation to advance on Kawm, finding the town abandoned but heavily mined. Security forces spent the next several days de-mining the southern approach, fully securing the town on December 17.

## Looking Ahead

The massive ISIS surge across central Syria in 2020 was preceded by a simultaneous increase in activity in south Aleppo and south Raqqa. These two regions represent areas of weak regime presence straddling key transit routes and oil fields, and connect directly to ISIS's northeast networks. ISIS cells have always been present here, yet the areas remain among the least active in central Syria. The steady increase in aggressive attacks in south Raqqa beginning in August, and the return of ambushes in south Aleppo in December would seem to indicate a strengthened and emboldened ISIS in this region. This could be due to the arrival of new fighters and resources, or by the reduction of regime patrols and air support, or both. It is likely no coincidence that the emboldened attacks around Tabqa and Resafa over the past four months preceded a major attack within Raqqa city on December 26, when two ISIS fighters killed 10 SDF members.

This once again underscores the crucial gap in the SDF's and the Coalition's anti-ISIS strategy—that ISIS's northeast insurgency is deeply intertwined with its central Syrian cells, and the two networks feed off of and strengthen one another. Just as the increase in kinetic activity in southern Raqqa preceded a significant attack in SDF-held Raqqa, the growth in the insurgency in SDF-held Deir Ez Zor appears to now be spilling over into regime-held areas. The series of attacks on Dweir village and the high profile attack on Tayyem follow a gradual shift of ISIS activity in the governorate from the western desert to the long-secured urban belt along the Euphrates River. An ISIS that is confident enough to carry out multiple same-day attacks in 'secure' urban areas is certainly an ISIS that is confident in its supply and transit lines crossing the Euphrates. Furthermore, it must be remembered that, since ISIS's 2021 attack on the Damascus power plant, the group has consistently framed its anti-regime activity as a "war of economic attrition." A strengthened ISIS may therefore seek to capitalize on Damascus' present crushing energy and financial crises, focusing its resources on further degrading the regime's ability to extract and process oil and gas from its Badia facilities. This may mean that this winter ISIS will shift its activity away from northeast Syria and into central Syria, or at least shift its targets in northeast Syria to more consistently focus on SDF fuel being transported to the Syrian regime.



Map of locatable ISIS attacks (highlighted) in December 2022 alongside attacks in 2022 and 2021. To view an interactive version of this map, please click [here](#).

