

**ANNUAL  
SLEEPER CELL  
REPORT (2023)  
FOR NORTH AND EAST SYRIA**



**ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER**

## OVERVIEW GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sealed ISIS' territorial defeat when they captured the last stronghold of the so-called caliphate in the village of Baghouz, Deir ez-Zor, in March 2019. This widely celebrated victory took global headlines and marked a distinct blow against ISIS' capability to threaten the Middle East, Europe and beyond. In the years since, North and East Syria (NES) has, on the one hand, seen serious efforts towards recovering from the impacts of the years of ISIS rule and subsequent battles to expel the group, while on the other hand facing a continuing low-level insurgency from ISIS sleeper cells. The United States' (U.S.) Department of Defense describes<sup>1</sup> ISIS as currently operating "in a survival posture", yet notes that the group remains "a potentially destabilizing influence" whose "resurgence cannot be ruled out", with particular threat posed by the thousands of ISIS detainees held in NES.

Unpartnered and partnered - with the U.S.-led Coalition providing support to the SDF - operations throughout 2023 led to the detaining and killing of several key ISIS operatives, likely degrading both its attack capabilities and logistical and financial support structures. At the same time, ISIS continued to launch attacks on both military and civilian targets, recruit from vulnerable communities, organize inside Hol camp and exert a coercive influence on the population in their former stronghold of Deir ez-Zor through zakat (taxes) collection, targeted assassinations, imposition of Sharia law and kidnappings for ransom. Sleeper cells engaged in opportunistic attacks as well as more targeted efforts to erode the structures of the governing Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES).

Outside of NES, ISIS intensified attacks in central Syria, as government forces and Wagner Group mercenaries have struggled<sup>2</sup> to suppress ISIS cells around Jabal Rujm al-Mamlahah and Jabal Sab in the Homs region, yielding an outlet for attacks across the Euphrates River in areas held by the Autonomous Administration, creating renewed challenges for DAANES security forces. Beyond Syria, the U.S.' Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) assesses that "ISIS leaders in Iraq and Syria almost certainly remain committed to directing and enabling attacks in the West, particularly in Europe. [...] However, ISIS branches probably lack both intent and capability to direct attacks against the U.S. homeland." With steadily deteriorating strength and influence in Syria and Iraq since 2019, ISIS has also begun to prioritize Africa and East Asia, where some of its branches

1 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/>

2 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/isis-beats-back-wagner-offensive-central-syria>

have found more success. In 2022, ISIS declared<sup>3</sup> Africa the “land of hijra (migration) and jihad,” encouraging its followers to migrate to areas with stronger ISIS branches. ISIS branches in the Sahel and the Philippines have been especially successful in expanding and securing their power over the past year, as documented by a BBC Monitoring report.<sup>4</sup>

As per RIC recording, ISIS sleeper cells carried out 189 attacks across NES in 2023, a 34% decrease from 285 confirmed attacks in 2022. These attacks caused a total of 247 casualties. Among them: 41 civilians killed, 29 civilians injured, 84 military personnel killed, and 93 military personnel injured. ISIS activity is concentrated in the Deir ez-Zor canton, particularly in the towns of al-Shuhayl, al-Busayrah, and Diban. RIC could confirm a total of 121 anti-ISIS raids conducted by the SDF and Asayish (NES’ Internal Security Forces) in 2023, slightly down from 185 in 2022. 76 of these raids involved Coalition forces, mainly providing intelligence and air support. These raids resulted in the arrest of 351 ISIS suspects - a large drop from 2022’s 1,230. RIC recorded a massive downtrend in overt ISIS violence in Hol camp this year, with no killings reported at all, which could be attributed to the persistent security operations<sup>5</sup> conducted by Asayish and SDF within the camp. However, in the past, such security operations have uncovered ditches within the camp used for hiding bodies. Therefore it could be that violence in the camp has not decreased but merely been reported less. Testimonies from camp residents still paint a picture of a highly insecure environment, with non-fatal attacks widespread. Additionally, ISIS organizational activities in the camp continue, largely through women in the organization whose husbands have been killed or imprisoned.

The Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) is a U.S.-led multinational military formation. It was established by the Coalition “to advise, assist, and enable partner forces until they can independently maintain the enduring defeat of ISIS”.<sup>6</sup> It uses the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) as the primary vehicle for providing material and other support to partner forces in Iraq and Syria, including the SDF. The U.S. Department of Defense enacted funding for CJTF-OIR has gradually fallen over the years since the final defeat of the so-called caliphate, from 2019’s \$15.1 bn, 2020’s \$10.8bn, 2021’s \$12.7bn and 2022’s \$7bn to 2023’s \$5.5bn. It should stand at \$6.2bn in 2024; a slight rise on the previous year, but still marking an overall downtrend. Of this, \$160 million was designated to the U.S.’ Syrian partner forces - primarily the SDF - in 2023. In 2024, this number

3 <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204uvs9>

4 <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204uvs9>

5 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1568585808529047554?s=20>

6 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/>

is expected to drop to \$156 million.<sup>7</sup>

2023 marked an increase in cooperation between forces of the SDF and the CTG (Counter-Terrorism Group) Peshmerga of KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq). CTG Peshmerga are a special branch of PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) armed forces in the KRI, this year often participating in anti-ISIS operations alongside SDF and Asayish in NES. PUK President Bafel Talabani and SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi exchanged visits, Talabani visiting NES in December 2022 and Abdi visiting the KRI 5 months later in April, one of their main focuses being cooperation on anti-ISIS operations.

Wider geopolitical tensions have impacted anti-ISIS efforts. In July alone there were at least 6 instances of Russian Air Force disruption of Coalition anti-ISIS operations,<sup>8</sup> leading to stalled or canceled operations. Following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7th, there has been a steady escalation of strikes exchanged between Iran-backed militias and the U.S. across the banks of the Euphrates River in Deir ez-Zor, diverting attention from efforts to combat ISIS cells. In late August, a band of self-proclaimed "Arab tribal fighters" - who were "receiving explicit support from the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies on the western side of the Euphrates River", as noted by the CJTF-OIR - began attacking SDF checkpoints in Deir ez-Zor, following the arrest of the former leader of the SDF's Deir ez-Zor Military Council, Abu Khawla. The ensuing chaos left the SDF and Asayish overrun, giving ISIS cells an opportunity to regroup and expand, according to SDF officials. RIC recorded a doubling of ISIS sleeper cell activity from July to August. In the KRI, a Turkish drone strike targeted a convoy carrying Mazloum Abdi during his visit to Sulaymaniyah in April, while a similar strike in September killed 3 CTG Peshmerga during training for NES anti-ISIS operations.

Turkish airstrikes - targeting critical infrastructure such as water, electricity, oil and gas facilities - have also threatened the counter-ISIS efforts in NES. As described by CJTF-OIR, Turkish bombardment has forced the SDF "to split its attention between two possibly existential threats".<sup>9</sup> When Türkiye escalates its airstrikes, the SDF has paused both anti-ISIS raids and training courses for SDF prison guards.

7 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-re-solve-oir/>

8 <https://apnews.com/article/russia-us-syria-drones-iran-flares-a5d351a5f499ec2a-d2aeb233b2ffcb3d>

9 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-re-solve-oir/>

## METHODS

RIC publishes a sleeper cell report each month throughout the year. This report collates all of those reports into an easily digestible format, shortening the explanatory sections, and adding the data together to provide an analysis of the full year. RIC's monthly reports, accessible here,<sup>10</sup> include additional details. We collect our data through local connections, local news sources, OSINT research and our own on-the-ground research.

Unlike in previous years, RIC elected not to include claimed ISIS attacks in the data for this year. ISIS are now shown to severely under-report their attacks in Syria, hence the previous channels RIC used to monitor ISIS claims dried up, as ISIS began posting infrequently. This does not have an impact on the credibility of the data, as many confirmed ISIS attacks are not claimed. At the same time, some attacks claimed by ISIS were not actually carried out by the group. RIC evaluated that recording attacks claimed by ISIS sleeper cells is not useful for the purpose of this report, which emphasizes verifiable research and data. For this report, RIC has only used channels in which ISIS claim their attacks as an aid in verifying the perpetrator of attacks in situations in which there is a lack of clarity as to the perpetrator.

Raids against ISIS sleeper cells also have a margin of error in RIC's data, as it is possible that some raids are classified and not publicized. RIC's categorization of "raid" includes all physical actions involving the SDF and Asayish against ISIS sleeper cells within the territories of NES. Though the Coalition releases monthly figures on its raids against ISIS sleeper cells, its figures do not include raids conducted solely by forces of the SDF and Asayish. The Coalition has also miscategorized casualty affiliations, such as in the case of the April raid on ISIS leader Ibrahim Sheikh Musa, whereby the Coalition claimed that two people killed alongside Musa were also members of ISIS when in fact they were members of Turkish-backed militia Suqor al-Shamal who were tasked with protecting the ISIS leader. We do not use quantitative data from the Coalition unless explicitly stated. In addition, raids conducted by the Coalition alone (some of which occur outside NES) are not included in our monthly statistics, however they are mentioned in writing. The Coalition's monthly reports can be found on [www.centcom.mil](http://www.centcom.mil) titled "Month in Review: The Defeat ISIS Mission in Iraq and Syria"<sup>11</sup> under its press releases section.

It should also be noted that some of our final monthly statistics are altered from the original monthly reports given new evidence or verifiable information which has emerged since the original report.

10 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/category/report/sleeper-cells/>

11 <http://www.centcom.mil>

# MONTHLY BREAKDOWN

## JANUARY

### Top Trends

- Sharp rise in arrests of ISIS-linked individuals, including ISIS leader in Raqqa
- CAR reports that ISIS uses weapons produced by the SNA
- 20 attacks
- 10 military, 5 civilians killed, 12 military, 1 civilian injured
- 22 SDF/Asayish raids (145 arrests)

### In Depth

13 of the 20 confirmed sleeper cell attacks occurred around Raqqa, Tabqa and Ayn Issa, rather than ISIS' usual hotspot of Deir ez-Zor. Hol camp was also relatively quiet; one escape attempt was aborted by the security forces. However, five SDF members were reportedly arrested by the SDFs Anti-Terror Units (YAT) and accused of assisting in the smuggling of ISIS families out of Hol camp. Later in the month, another six Asayish members were arrested on the same charge.

The SDF and Asayish conducted 22 counter-ISIS raids, 16 with the involvement of the Coalition. These yielded the arrests of 145 individuals suspected to be members of or affiliated with ISIS. 32 arrests occurred on January 26th alone, in and around Raqqa. According to an SDF statement,<sup>12</sup> two ISIS members who facilitated an attack on the Asayish headquarters in Raqqa were among the arrested, plus ISIS' top leader in Raqqa. Two ISIS members were also killed during a raid by the YAT in Deir-ez-Zor on December 10th. A high frequency of raids in Deir ez-Zor prompted protests amid accusations that the SDF were making arbitrary arrests. Protestors demanded the release of detainees.

Conflict Armament Research (CAR)<sup>13</sup> documented weapons recovered from ISIS forces used in three prison break operations, including in Heseke (January 2022). Analyzing unique marks on the weapons, CAR concluded that the weapons recovered from ISIS were once held by six different SNA brigades.<sup>14</sup>

12 <http://tinyurl.com/3uhtjmjp>

13 <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/74cf18349183476483dbb3492472d7fb>

14 <https://rojvainformationcenter.org/2022/07/the-syrian-national-army-the-turkish-proxy-militias-of-northern-syria/>

## FEBRUARY

### Top Trends

- U.S. military personnel injured in raid
- Fire in Hol camp and attempted outbreak
- DAANES responds to UN report criticizing handling of children of ISIS families in NES
- 10 attacks
- 1 military, 3 civilians killed, 3 military, 2 civilians injured
- 8 SDF/Asayish raids (7 arrests)

### In Depth

The SDF conducted eight raids against ISIS, at least three of them with U.S. involvement, in which five ISIS members were killed and seven suspects arrested. Among the arrested was the ISIS leader Khalaf Abdullah, also known as Abu Obeida. ISIS leaders Mohammad Al-Sari Al-Fadgham and Hamza al-Homsi were also killed in two different raids, after they refused to surrender to the coalition forces. Four coalition military personnel and one dog were wounded in combat.<sup>15</sup>

The United Nations Human Rights Office released a statement<sup>16</sup> discussing NES' Roj camp, which holds ISIS-linked foreign women & children. The statement expressed concern at a "pattern of forcibly removing boys who reach the ages of 10/12 from the camp, separating them from their mothers & siblings & taking them to unknown locations." The DAANES responded, stating that separating children from their parents is part of their deradicalization programs, criticizing "clear international inaction" regarding ISIS-linked foreigners in NES.<sup>17</sup>

The risks posed by allowing children to grow up in Hol and Roj camps were underscored this month as a report emerged that children are being sexually abused by ISIS women.<sup>18</sup> On February 23rd a fire broke out in the foreign sector of Hol camp and some camp residents attempted to flee. The foreign section in Hol camp is regarded by the camp authorities as particularly sensitive as there is a significant number of women actively working to perpetuate ISIS ideology and rule inside.

15 <http://tinyurl.com/52dxc7tm>

16 <http://tinyurl.com/3uen3aza>

17 <https://aanesgov.org/ar/?p=2440>

18 <https://www.ibtimes.sg/isis-women-forcing-young-boys-into-impregnating-them-increase-population-islamic-state-syrian-69185>



## MARCH

### Top Trends

- Deadly helicopter crash in KRI kills nine members of YAT coordinating anti-ISIS missions
- French Senate honors YPG and YPJ for sacrifices against ISIS
- 20 attacks
- 4 military, 4 civilians killed, 7 military, 1 civilian injured
- 4 SDF/Asayish raids (7 arrests)

### In Depth

March saw 20 sleeper cell attacks, in which four military personnel and four civilians were killed, and seven military personnel and one civilian were injured. Compared to the previous month, sleeper cell attacks doubled from 10 to 20, and the death count doubled from 4 to 8. In addition to the dead and injured, 8 shepherds were kidnapped. 14 out of 20 sleeper cell attacks took place in Deir-ez-Zor, indicating the ongoing strength of ISIS in the region. Additionally, in Deir ez-Zor, ISIS cells engaged in extorting oil investors, threatening bakeries and publicly threatening 4 individuals in a poster campaign. The threats towards bakeries can be seen as attempts to gain support from the population; the quality of bread being a topic of dispute. 2 ISIS members died in a failed suicide attack on Heseke's Asayish headquarters.<sup>19</sup>

On March 15th, a deadly helicopter crash in the KRI killed 9 members of YAT en route to Sulaymaniyah to coordinate anti-ISIS missions with CTG officials.<sup>20</sup>

The French Senate honored YPG and YPJ during a Newroz reception ceremony, mentioning their dedication and sacrifices in fighting ISIS.<sup>21</sup> Türkiye responded by summoning the French ambassador.<sup>22</sup>

U.S. General Michael Kurilla visited Sina'a prison in Heseke which holds around 5,000 ISIS fighters. He referred to the imprisoned ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria as an "army in detention,"<sup>23</sup> and expressed concerns about the military threat Türkiye poses to the SDF and its anti-ISIS mission.

19 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/294270/>

20 <https://npasyria.com/en/95050/>

21 <https://npasyria.com/en/95441/>

22 <https://english.news.cn/20230328/efbd08174de34729987c55c5187a82d8/c.html>

23 <https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1634552733913980930/photo/1>



## APRIL

### Top Trends

- ISIS leader Ibrahim Sheikh Musa killed in Coalition raid in Turkish-occupied Jarabulus region, ISIS caliph Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi killed by HTS
- Increased cooperation between SDF and CTG against ISIS sleeper cells
- 21 attacks
- 10 military killed, 17 military, 3 civilians injured
- 14 SDF/Asayish raids (24 arrests)

### In Depth

2 ISIS members were killed and 24 were arrested in SDF and Coalition raids, including ISIS commander Hudayfah al-Yemeni. In Raqqa, the SDF raided a farm formerly belonging to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and found barrels of gold, weapons and explosives in hidden rooms. On April 8th, a joint raid conducted by the YAT, CTG and Coalition saw 4 ISIS members captured.

ISIS cells reinforced efforts to impose taxation on oil interlocutors in the Deir ez-Zor Canton, with gunmen blocking oil trucks and contractors and forcing them to pay zakat (taxes). In Hol, ISIS-affiliated camp residents burned a charity office and a woman was injured in a stabbing. A subsequent security raid in the camp resulted in the arrest of 2 ISIS smugglers.

U.S. forces launched a raid in the Turkish-occupied village of Suwayda which led to the killing of ISIS leader Ibrahim Sheikh Musa and two members of the Turkish-backed SNA militia Suqor al-Shamal. Musa enjoyed refuge from Suqor al-Shamal.<sup>24</sup> The Coalition falsely claimed that it had killed two other ISIS members, when they were confirmed members of Suqor al-Shamal.<sup>25</sup>

Turkish President Erdogan claimed Turkish intelligence forces had killed ISIS caliph Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi in Turkish-occupied Jinderes, Afrin Canton. This was rebutted by U.S. and SDF. In August, ISIS acknowledged the death of al-Qurayshi, but said he was killed by HTS in Idlib. This account of Qurayshi's death was corroborated by Coalition intelligence.<sup>26</sup>

24 <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/exclusive/2023/04/19>

25 [https://twitter.com/SOJTF\\_LEVANT/status/1648226985120808960?s=20](https://twitter.com/SOJTF_LEVANT/status/1648226985120808960?s=20)

26 <http://tinyurl.com/yy8axsn6>

## MAY

### Top Trends

- ISIS uses extortion and threatening as tactics in Deir ez-Zor
- Turkish strikes target security personnel of Hol camp
- 13 attacks
- 1 military, 2 civilians killed, 10 military, 3 civilians injured
- 16 SDF/Asayish raids (38 arrests)

### In Depth

ISIS cells carried out a total of 13 confirmed attacks, resulting in one military personnel being killed, 10 military personnel injured, two civilians being killed, and three civilians injured. Instead of targeting checkpoints with the same frequency as April, ISIS made greater use of IEDs to inflict casualties and targeted SDF leadership and offices of the Autonomous Administration.

In Deir ez-Zor - particularly in the towns of al-Shuhayl, al-Busayrah, and Diban - ISIS used leaflets and posters to threaten women who do not wear the hijab and workers who do not pay zakat (taxes) to ISIS, particularly those with above-average salaries such as doctors.<sup>27</sup>

The SDF carried out 16 raids, resulting in 38 arrests. These raids were largely focused on ISIS mobility and intelligence personnel. During a May 13th operation in Raqqa, NES security forces detained a cell that was “responsible for facilitating the movements of ISIS terrorists between the cities of al-Hasaka and Raqqa, in addition to their involvement in the smuggling of ISIS prisoners and families from the Hol camp to the Turkish-occupied areas (Ras al-Ain/Serekaniye and Tal Abyad),” according to SDF Press.<sup>28</sup>

5 women in Hol camp were arrested in an SDF raid inside the camp, which sought to locate ISIS affiliates.<sup>29</sup> On May 5th, a Turkish drone strike killed two guards of Hol camp in Tel Hamis. This is not the first time Türkiye has targeted Hol camp guards. In November 2022, a Turkish airstrike killed 8 camp guards, resulting in the attempted escape of multiple ISIS families.<sup>30</sup>

27 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/300139/>

28 <http://tinyurl.com/bdcsh6jj>

29 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/297768/>

30 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/277438/>

## JUNE

### Top Trends

- ISIS cells prioritizing targeted assassinations
- DAANES announces trial of foreign ISIS fighters
- U.S. soldier pleads guilty to aiding ISIS
- 24 attacks
- 11 military, 4 civilians killed, 5 military, 5 civilians injured
- 8 SDF/Asayish raids (18 arrests)

### In Depth

This month saw an 85% increase in confirmed attacks from May and a notable increase in both military and civilians killed. This appears to be the result of a greater emphasis on targeted assassinations. Confirmed targeted assassination attempts on military personnel and civilians were 13 in June, as opposed to only 2 in May. Overall, ISIS activity increased in both frequency and lethality.

Reports from SOHR claimed that ISIS prisoners detained in an SNA-held Serekaniye prison were smuggled into DAANES-held territory.<sup>31</sup> RIC found no further reports of this event and contacted Farhad Shami (SDF Press Media Center) on the matter, who stated that the report was not true. SNA sources claimed that there was in fact an escape from the prison and that their forces were on high alert,<sup>32</sup> but made no mention of their smuggling into DAANES territory.

The SDF executed 8 confirmed raids during the month of June, down from 16 in May. 3 raids were conducted in the Heseke region and 5 in the Deir ez-Zor region, leading to 1 ISIS member being killed and 18 arrested. In a failed Coalition raid on the residence of a former ISIS commander near Koniko oil field on June 19, the suspect successfully escaped.

With stagnant repatriation and no international efforts towards developing an international court for trying foreign ISIS fighters, the DAANES stated it would unilaterally hold “open, fair and transparent trials, in accordance with international and local terrorism laws,”<sup>33</sup> for the roughly 2,000 foreign ISIS fighters held in NES detention facilities.

31 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/301715/>

32 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/646479>

33 <https://aanegov.org/?p=4567>

## JULY

### Top Trends

- Deir ez-Zor towns witness ISIS threats, intimidation
- Leaked documents indicate ISIS purposefully under-report their own attacks
- UN Special Rapporteur criticizes situation of NES' camps
- 10 attacks
- 4 military, 1 civilian killed, 1 military, 1 civilian injured
- 7 SDF/Asayish raids (12 arrests)

### In Depth

July saw 10 attacks by ISIS sleeper cells. These attacks killed three military personnel and one civilian, and wounded one military personnel and one civilian. ISIS also put up posters on the walls of mosques in al-Hassin village in northern Deir ez-Zor calling for the death of 39 residents of Deir ez-Zor for “deviating from the truth.”<sup>34</sup> ISIS frequently publicly names those who it perceives as affiliated with the DAANES or SDF in order to re-establish authority and spread fear. There were reports of individuals taking advantage of this by pretending to be members of ISIS for the purpose of blackmail and extortion. On July 19th, two men reportedly impersonated ISIS and raided a house in Zaiban, Deir ez-Zor, demanding money from the owner.<sup>35</sup>

Leaked documents<sup>36</sup> showed a difference in propaganda strategy between ISIS groups. In some branches, ISIS chooses not to publicize all the attacks it conducts, hence trying to estimate ISIS activity and strength based purely on the group’s own statements could lead to researchers under-estimating the true number of attacks carried out.

UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ní Aoláin visited NES camps and detention facilities, including Hol camp and Gweiran prison. Ní Aoláin criticized the Autonomous Administration for “indefinite and arbitrary detention in North-east Syria.”<sup>37</sup> The DAANES meanwhile, continued to call for international repatriation and an international solution to disband Hol and other camps. A Kurdish Center for Studies report<sup>38</sup> evaluates the common criticisms leveled at the DAANES regarding detention camps. During a raid in Hol camp this month, 5 ISIS suspects were arrested.

34 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/304832/>

35 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/306129/>

36 <https://theArabweekly.com/isis-shows-signs-division-over-propaganda-strategy>

37 <http://tinyurl.com/yckc6d6b>

38 <https://nlka.net/eng/the-children-of-isis-kcs-reports-from-roj-camp/>

## AUGUST

### Top Trends

- Episode of violent unrest in Deir ez-Zor, amidst an SDF “Security Enhancement Operation.”
- The UN Secretary-General’s 17th ISIL report was released, alongside rising concerns about the situation of children in the Hol and Roj camps.
- 22 attacks
- 10 military, 7 civilians killed, 14 military injured
- 10 raids (23 arrests)

### In Depth

A “Security Enhancement Operation,” conducted by the SDF and Asayish, spiraled into a 2-week-long episode of unrest and violence in Deir ez-Zor, following the SDF’s arrest of the local Military Council (DMC) leader, Abu Khawla. Some fellow tribesmen of Abu Khawla, condemned by DAANES and SDF for his corrupt governance, attacked SDF targets along the Khabur River in Deir ez-Zor. The places that witnessed the most fighting are also home to both ISIS sleeper cells and Syrian and Iranian government-linked cells. For these groups, this was an opportunity to demonstrate power and get a better foothold in these areas, as noted in a Pentagon press briefing.<sup>39</sup>

The monthly toll of ISIS personnel killed (6) and arrested (23) in SDF raids rose from last month. These included two reportedly senior members. A civilian was killed in a raid by Coalition forces on a house in which a wanted ISIS member had taken refuge. In addition ISIS finally acknowledged the death of its former leader, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurayshi, who was killed during clashes with HTS in Idlib region on April 29. Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi was announced as the organization’s 5th caliph.

This month, ISIS cells again hung leaflets in the town of Al-Tayana (including on some houses), threatening to “punish” any women in the town who do not comply with their understanding of the Islamic dress code. These leaflets list strict rules for wearing the niqab, to differentiate oneself from men and infidels, the imperative of total coverage, the width and opacity of the fabric, the absence of eye-catching elements and the ban on using perfume.

The UN highlighted the situation of imprisoned ISIS suspects and their children, reiterating the need for repatriation as the safest long-term option.<sup>40</sup>

39 <http://tinyurl.com/2ajxy9c9>

40 <http://tinyurl.com/m7y2wc49>

## SEPTEMBER

### Top Trends

- ISIS financial officials arrested
- The UN Security Council adopts resolution 2697 (2023) which sets an end date for UNITAD mission for accountability of ISIS members.
- Escape attempt thwarted in Hol camp
- 6 attacks
- 2 military, 7 civilians killed
- 10 SDF/Asayish raids (30 arrests)

### In Depth

The unrest in Deir ez-Zor continued to draw resources away from the ongoing struggle against ISIS. However there were some significant arrests of high ranking members. Several arrests struck ISIS' financial networks, arresting Yahya Ahmed Al-Hajji, a financier and arms smuggler with a position on ISIS' military council, as well as Abdulghafour Taber al-Diyab, the so-called emir of the Islamic Bank of ISIS.<sup>41</sup> Further Coalition arrests this month included ISIS operational facilitators Abu Halil al-Fad'ani and Mamduh Ibrahim Al-Haji Shaykh. Both of these helicopter raids took place in the Turkish-occupied Sere Kaniye region.

The UN issued a decision to set a non-extendable deadline for the UNITAD project,<sup>42</sup> which is responsible for the investigation to promote accountability for crimes committed by ISIS. The resolution sets "a non-extendable one year extension of the mandate of the Special Adviser and the Team contained in its letter dated 5 September 2023 (S/2023/654); and decides accordingly to extend the mandate of the Special Adviser and the Team until 17 September 2024 only."<sup>43</sup> By so hobbling UNITAD, it makes it extremely difficult to pursue justice for the many victims of ISIS or even hope for a fair trial of those currently in Hol and other facilities.

Violence within Hol camp has notably decreased in recent months. Yet the issue of ISIS smugglers helping ISIS-linked people escape Hol and reunite with the wider ISIS networks in Syria remains. On September 8th, 19 women and children were detained by the Internal Security Forces while attempting to escape in a van which had entered the camp using forged documents.<sup>44</sup>

41 <https://npasyria.com/en/104195/>

42 <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1snr31o9f>

43 <http://tinyurl.com/4r6yx7pc>

44 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/310043/>

## OCTOBER

### Top Trends

- ISIS activity rises amidst heavy Turkish airstrikes on NES
- ISIS intelligence officer Muhannad al-Dandah captured
- SDF-Coalition coordinator assassinated in Turkish drone strike
- 16 attacks
- 13 military, 3 civilians killed, 8 military, 1 civilian injured
- 8 SDF/Asayish raids (28 arrests)

### In Depth

October saw an uptick in ISIS sleeper cell attacks coinciding with an intense Turkish airstrike campaign that lasted one week and targeted NES' essential infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> ISIS sleeper cells carried out 17 attacks, killing 13 SDF and Asayish personnel and injuring 8, as well as killing 3 civilians and injuring 1. At the same time, following Hamas' October 7th attack and the commencement of Israel's intensified siege and bombardment of Gaza, missile attacks from Iranian-backed militias against Coalition and U.S. bases in NES sharply rose in frequency.<sup>46</sup> While Türkiye was launching its wave of airstrikes in the north and Iranian-backed militias were confronting the SDF in Deir ez-Zor, ISIS sleeper cells applied extra pressure to the region. Of the 17 documented attacks carried out by ISIS sleeper cells, 12 occurred in Deir ez-Zor.

The SDF conducted 8 raids targeting ISIS sleeper cells, resulting in 28 arrests. On October 26th, the Anti-Terror Units of the SDF raided the residence of ISIS member Muhannad al-Dandah in Raqqa, capturing al-Dandah.<sup>47</sup> Al-Dandah was reportedly responsible for sending intelligence to ISIS sleeper cells in order for attacks to be carried out.

On October 27th, a Turkish drone strike killed Ferhad Derik, a high-level SDF commander who had participated in the battles against ISIS that led to the defeat of the so-called Caliphate and was working closely with the Coalition in coordinating ongoing anti-ISIS operations. The DAANES released a statement<sup>48</sup> encouraging the Coalition to take action as the attack affected joint efforts in combating ISIS sleeper cells.

45 <http://tinyurl.com/yfmbyaa2>

46 <http://tinyurl.com/46a5uhta>

47 <https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/10/anti-isis-operations-one-isis-operative-captured-in-raqqa-city/>

48 <https://hawarnews.com/en/aanes-inaction-of-international-powers-over-turkish-attack-affects-combating-isis>



## NOVEMBER

### Top Trends

- Numerous high-ranking ISIS officials captured and killed
- Wives of detained ISIS fighters hold protest in Hol camp
- SDF Commander-in-Chief says U.S.-Iranian militias' trading of strikes threatens to benefit ISIS
- 11 attacks
- 4 military killed, 5 military, 7 civilians injured
- 10 SDF/Asayish raids (17 arrests)

### In Depth

The SDF and Asayish conducted 10 raids on ISIS sleeper cells this month, resulting in the arrest of 17 members and affiliates of ISIS, as well as the killing of a high-ranking official. Numerous other key officials of ISIS were captured in raids, including Muhammad Sakhr al-Bakr, reportedly a major coordinator of the January 2022 al-Sina'a prison break, Muhammed Mahmoud Homadah, reportedly responsible for trafficking ISIS families and children into the Turkish-occupied areas,<sup>49</sup> an ISIS armaments director<sup>50</sup> in Deir ez-Zor, an official responsible for ISIS sleeper cell activity in Heseke,<sup>51</sup> and an unnamed leader of the organization. Iraqi ISIS commander Emir al-Zakaa was also killed during an Asayish and Coalition raid in Shaddadi.

Violent activity in Hol camp has been at record lows for several months, though the presence of ISIS affiliates in the camp endures. On November 14th, women in Hol camp – the wives of ISIS fighters held in NES' prisons – organized a protest demanding the release of their husbands.

Iran-backed militias continued escalating their missile and drone attacks, targeting U.S. bases on 74 occasions between October 17th and November 28th. The U.S. responded with three rounds of airstrikes in Syria and one in Iraq. In an interview with al-Monitor, SDF Commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi, said: "we do not want our region to become a battlefield between the United States and Iran-backed militias, and we have told them that. We are trying to reduce these tensions because we all know who ultimately benefits: Daesh [ISIS]."

49 <http://tinyurl.com/4b38bvun>

50 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/318756/>

51 <http://tinyurl.com/49tr99ny>

## DECEMBER

### Top Trends

- ISIS continues psychological warfare in wave of assassinations targeting members of DAANES in Deir ez-Zor
- Turkish attacks across NES create hurdle for anti-ISIS operations
- 16 attacks
- 12 military, 5 civilians killed, 7 military, 7 civilians injured
- 4 SDF/Asayish raids (3 arrests)

### In Depth

ISIS conducted 16 confirmed sleeper cell attacks in December, 14 of which occurred in Deir ez-Zor. Notably, these included 3 attacks on civil workers of DAANES, all occurring on December 15th: Deir ez-Zor Civil Council member Munir Abd al-Mahbash was assassinated in a gun attack in Abu Khashab,<sup>52</sup> DAANES fuel administration official Ismail al-Laban was killed<sup>53</sup> and municipal official Abdulkarim al-Jalud was injured during an attack in al-Kishkiyah town, and a member of a local commune in Abu Khashab was assassinated the same day.<sup>54</sup> While ISIS did not directly claim the attacks, various local sources pointed to the group as the perpetrator. This wave of assassinations targeting DAANES-affiliated civilians in Deir ez-Zor exemplifies ISIS' post-caliphate emphasis on dissuading people from cooperating with DAANES by instilling fear in the population.

Notable SDF arrests included an ISIS weapons distribution official and an ISIS strategist reportedly responsible for planning attacks in Raqqa. Furthermore, during a joint operation in Hol camp, the Asayish killed ISIS emir Abu Mu'awiyah al-Iraqi and his wife, Umm A'isha, after they refused arrest.<sup>55</sup>

On December 14th, U.S. Congress approved its annual 2024 defense budget, which includes \$156 million for "fighting the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria."<sup>56</sup> Though a majority of this funding goes to anti-ISIS efforts in NES, a portion also goes to the smaller Coalition garrison in al-Tanf, southeastern Syria. The amount allocated is \$27.6 million less than 2023's budget.

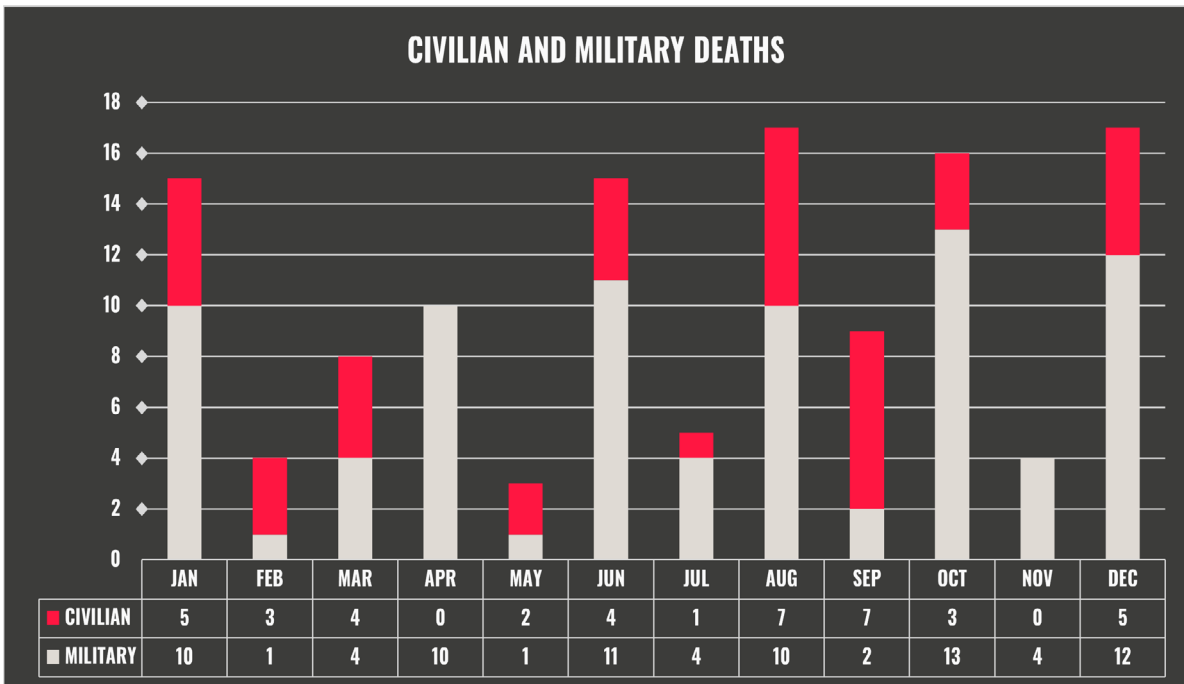
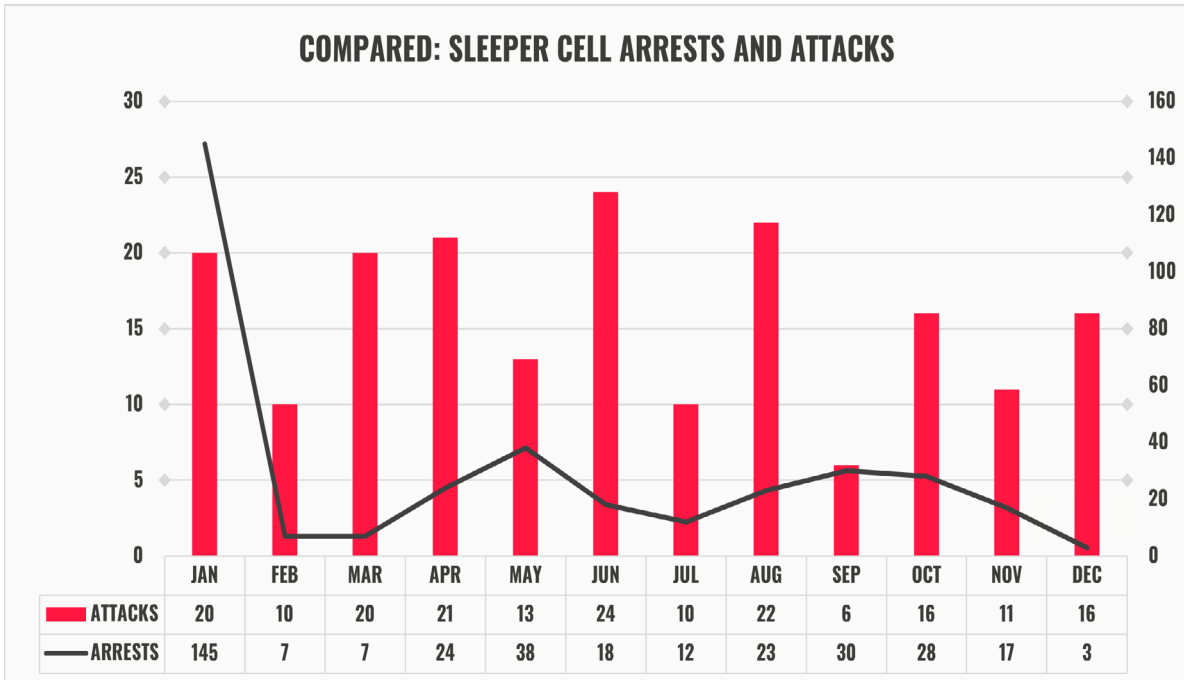
52 <http://tinyurl.com/yc3usnzx>

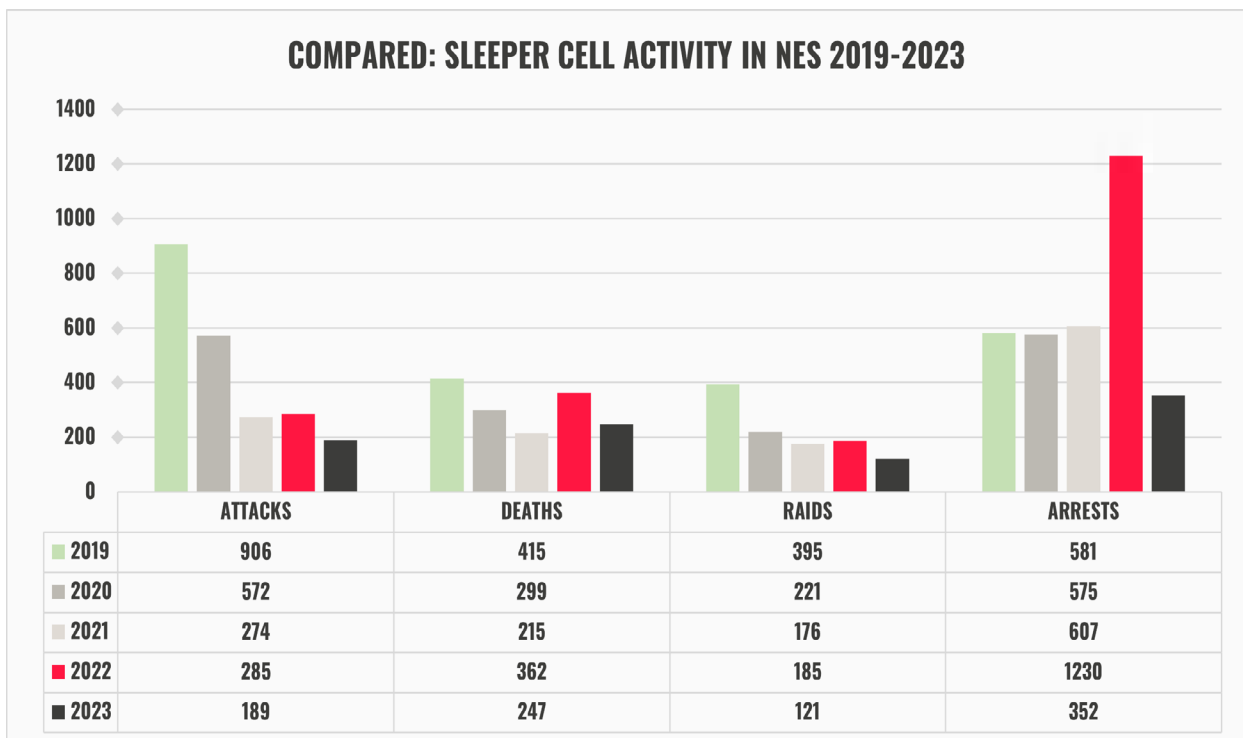
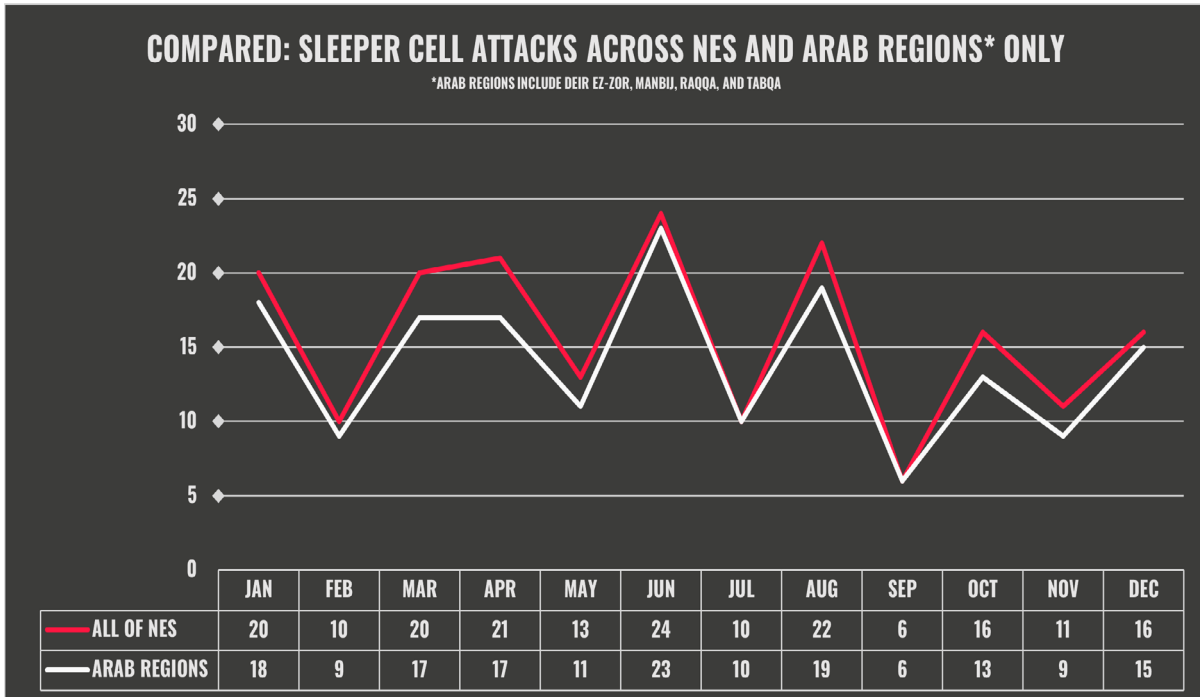
53 <https://npasyria.com/en/108793/>

54 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/320308/>

55 <https://asayish.com/?p=10627>

56 <https://npasyria.com/en/108777/>





## FINANCING

Middle East-wide Coalition and law enforcement actions have targeted ISIS' financial facilitation networks, yet the group still has an estimated \$25-50 million buried in cash reserves across Syria and Iraq.<sup>57</sup> Extortion and kidnapping for ransom are ISIS' key methods to gain income, plus soliciting online donations. ISIS has put increasing emphasis on fundraising as its revenue has declined significantly, meaning it is unable to meet all its financial obligations such as payments to fighters or the families of imprisoned/killed fighters.<sup>58</sup>

ISIS distributes much of its finances through unregistered hawala networks, whereby cash couriers transport money to and from brokers. A significant portion of ISIS cash transfers into Syria occur through Türkiye, which was found in January to be harboring numerous ISIS financial networks.<sup>59</sup>

In NES, ISIS continues to make use of leaflets and posters to threaten workers who do not pay zakat (taxes).<sup>60</sup> A major source of ISIS revenue in NES was taxation of oil. This became particularly pronounced in April, when ISIS reinforced its efforts to impose taxation on oil in Deir ez-Zor region,<sup>61</sup> with gunmen blocking oil trucks and contractors and forcing them to pay zakat.

In 2023, there were significant arrests of high ranking members of ISIS financing networks in NES, including Yahya Ahmed Al-Hajji,<sup>62</sup> a financier and arms smuggler with a position on the ISIS military council as well as Abdulghafour Taber al-Diyab, the so-called emir of the Islamic Bank of ISIS.<sup>63</sup>

In January, the Philippines sentenced a UK citizen to 12 years in prison for funding ISIS in Syria,<sup>64</sup> and 2 men in India were arrested for gathering funds for ISIS.<sup>65</sup> Under pressure from the U.S. to crack down on ISIS financial networks in Türkiye, a joint US-Türkiye intelligence operation in January led to the sanctioning of individuals and networks involved in funneling ISIS finances into Syria and Iraq.<sup>66</sup> On May 31, Germany arrested seven

57 <https://iraq.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/N2321007.pdf>

58 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/>

59 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1181>

60 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/299218/>

61 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/295231/>

62 <https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/09/counter-terrorism-an-isis-senior-leader-arrested-in-al-busayra-town/>

63 <https://npasyria.com/en/104195/>

64 <https://npasyria.com/en/90314/>

65 <https://npasyria.com/en/90442/>

66 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1181>

people linked to financing ISIS.<sup>67</sup> The group, comprising four Germans, a German-Moroccan, a Kosovar, and a Turkish citizen, is thought to have raised €65,000 for ISIS members in NES detention facilities with the intention of aiding their escape.

In November, the cryptocurrency exchange company Binance was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Treasury for “terrorist financing” related to ISIS, among other violations.<sup>68</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Treasury’s report: “Binance failed to report to FinCEN transactions associated with terrorist groups including Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hamas’ Al-Qassam Brigades, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).” ISIS used Binance as a donation resource through cryptocurrency exchange, where funding is less easily tracked.

## CAMPS, DETENTION FACILITIES AND REPATRIATIONS

Over 50,000 ISIS affiliates and family members – men and women, plus their children – are currently held in under-staffed and over-burdened SDF prisons and camps. The security and economic stress this places on the shoulders of the SDF and DAANES is significant, particularly in the case of the roughly 10,000 third country-nationals (coming neither from Syria nor Iraq) living in Hol and Roj camps or NES prisons. CJTF-OIR assesses that 8 of the SDF’s 22 ISIS detention facilities are at risk of an attack/breakout attempt. The other 14 were assessed as secure enough to prevent detainees from escaping and re-joining ISIS, yet the threat vulnerability assessment for many of them is out of date. Furthermore, guard training for the prisons is behind schedule, as training has been frequently paused when Turkish airstrikes are intensified.

Hol camp is a refugee camp located 45 km east of Heseke city, initially set up to house Iraqi refugees from the 1991 Gulf War. Then, as ISIS took control of great swathes of territory in Iraq in 2014, the camp received the resulting refugees who fled their homes. Following the defeat of ISIS in Baghouz, its final stronghold, thousands more women and children were brought to Hol, pushing the camp to its breaking point. Currently, Hol camp residents include both Syrians and Iraqis who fled ISIS, as well as the families of ISIS members who continue to not only support the group but also

67 <https://npasyria.com/en/98813/>

68 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1925>

actively uphold and propagate its rule and ideology within the camp. CJTF-OIR report that ISIS transfers funds - up to \$20,000 per month each - to individuals in Hol camp through intermediaries in Türkiye via the hawala system, and via cash transfer apps and cryptocurrency.<sup>69</sup> In particular, foreign women (who were or still are the wives of ISIS fighters) remain committed to perpetuating ISIS activity within the camp, in coordination with cells outside the camp. While Hol holds 49,186 people, of whom 24,147 are Iraqi, 18,028 are Syrian and 7,011 are third-country foreigners, Roj holds only 2,600 people, most of whom (85%) are foreigners. The U.S. Department of Defense reported that the security situation in Hol camp “remain[ed] a challenge for local security and humanitarian partners”<sup>70</sup> despite the decrease in the number of violent incidents and no in-camp killings since November 2022. CJTF-OIR stated that repatriations and subsequent reduction in camp population, plus better camp policing, has helped improve the security and humanitarian situation, yet “ISIS continued to target youth from Hol and other displaced persons camps in Syria for indoctrination and training as part of its efforts at recruitment and resurgence” and “poor conditions in Hol likely remained favorable for ISIS to exert a coercive influence on the camp population”.<sup>71</sup>

Reports of extensive in-camp radicalization, particularly of children, fuel fears of an ISIS revival. Additionally, both the camps and NES’ prisons are targets for ISIS cells. The SDF has openly expressed concerns about potential breakout attempts. For this reason, NES’ camps and prisons are often referred to as a “ticking time-bomb” where the “next generation of ISIS” are preparing themselves. Preventing further radicalization and encouraging former ISIS affiliates to disengage from the group is tricky within camps. The attempts that are being made by NES’ civil administration include moving children out of the camp into rehabilitation centers, where they can grow up without the coercive influence of ISIS. While this practice has been critiqued by human rights organizations who are concerned about separating children from their mothers, NES officials argue that it is largely women in the camp who are upholding ISIS rule, therefore removing children from this environment is the best option. ISIS sleeper cells have employed a breeding strategy in the camps deemed “go forth and multiply” to promote generational growth that can bolster an eventual resurgence.<sup>72</sup> This often entails forcing young adolescent boys to impregnate older women from ISIS families.

69 <http://tinyurl.com/upfef5c3>

70 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/>

71 <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/3672093/operation-inherent-resolve-oir/>

72 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/islamic-state-women-use-children-sex-tools-syrian-kurdish-officials-say>



The DAANES regards disbanding its camps and prisons as an urgent priority, yet lacks the means to do so swiftly and safely. For ISIS prisoners, this means a justice system process. For camp inhabitants, this means

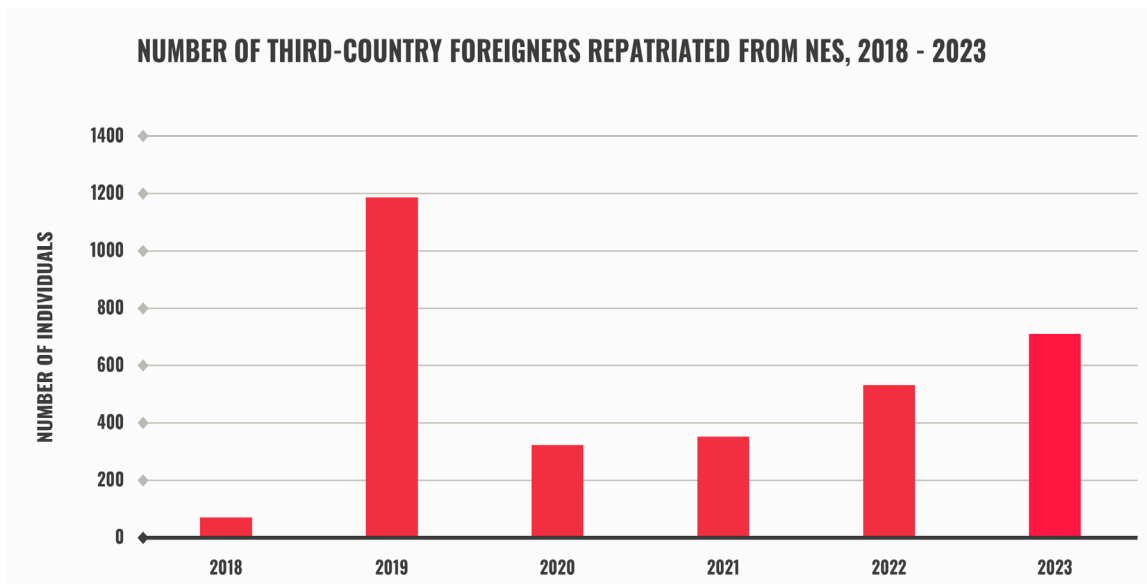
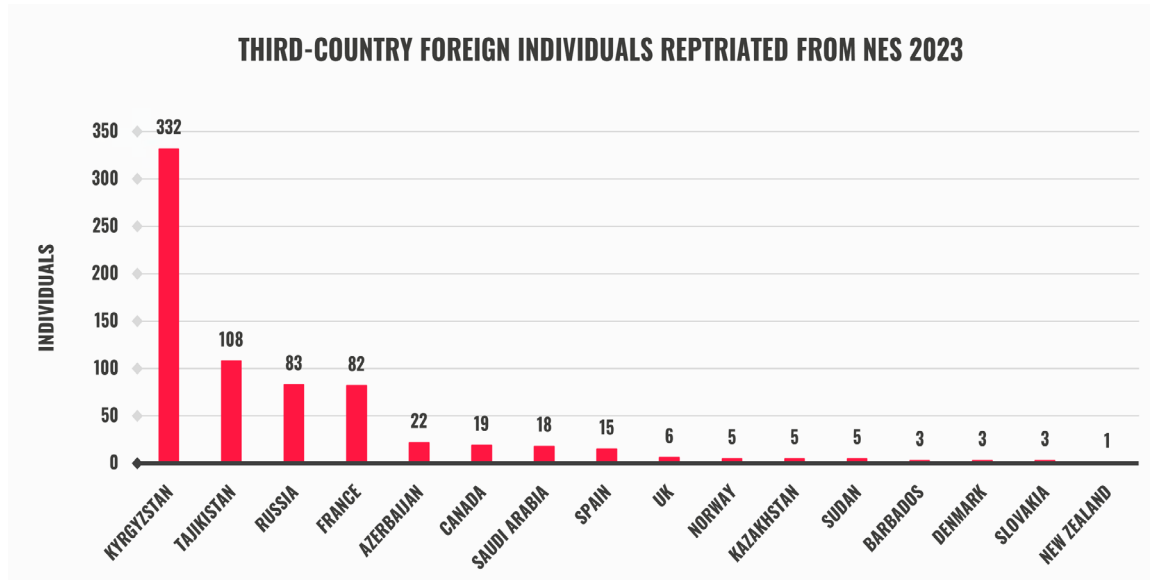
rehabilitation, repatriation and reintegration as appropriate. On April 19th, 22 Syrian prisoners, many of them affiliated with ISIS, were released from Raqqa Central Prison for maintaining good behavior.<sup>73</sup> For Syrian ISIS members, the DAANES has also been holding trials from 2014 up to the present day. ISIS prisoners are only released upon good behavior, screening, and confirmation of their will to return to civilian life. Foreign ISIS members could be repatriated and returned to their home countries to face justice there. The DAANES have repeatedly called for such steps to be taken, and the U.S. has publicly backed this position too. The governments of countries with citizens held in NES prisons, however, have either not responded to the DAANES' calls, or have only repatriated a select few individuals. RIC records that 92 foreign men have been repatriated from NES since repatriations began in 2018. An estimated 2,000 remain. Several states, including France, Germany, Canada, Australia, Belgium and the UK, have not repatriated a single male ISIS fighter.

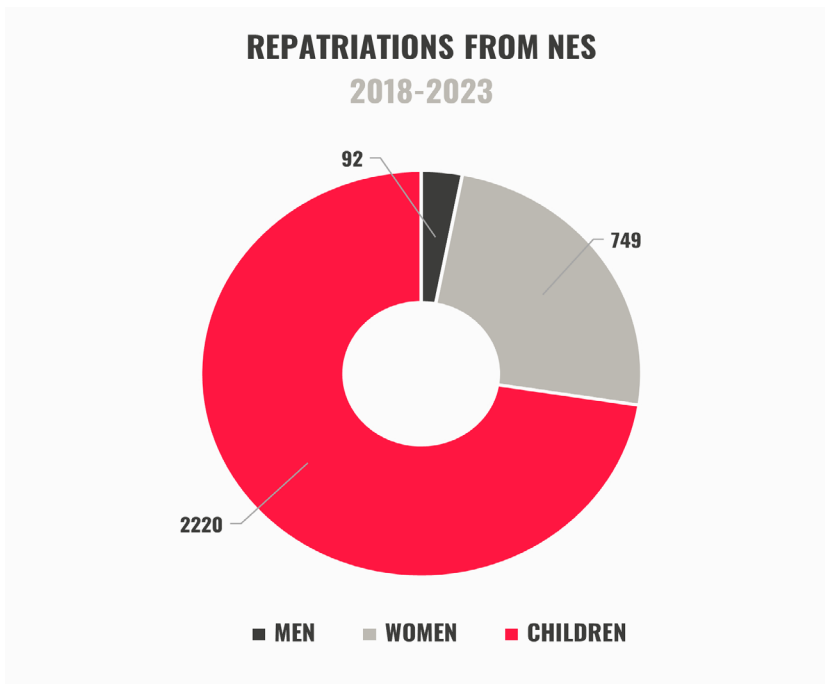
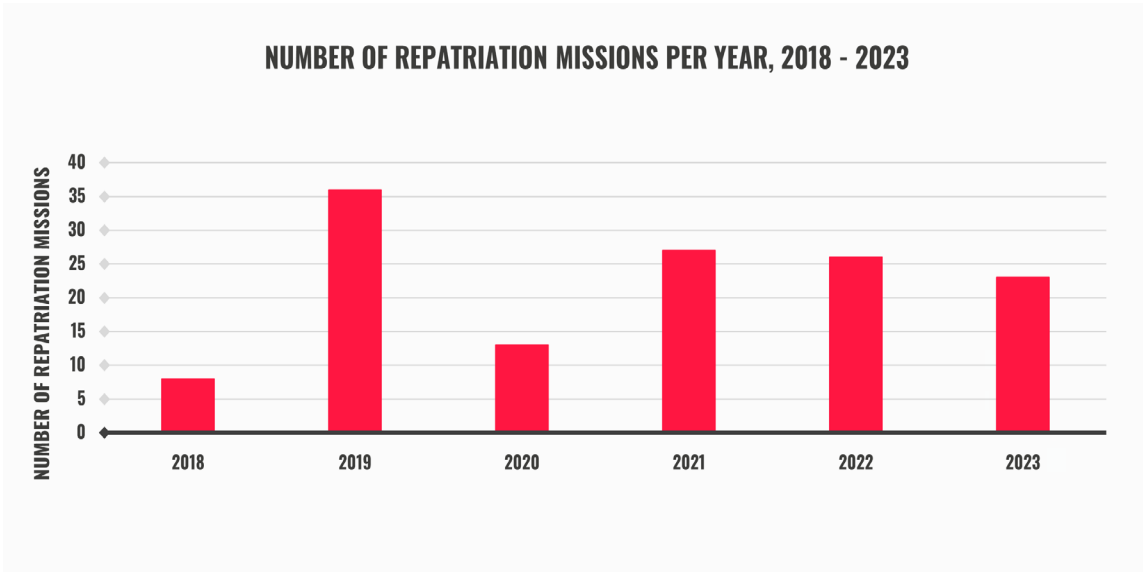
In light of this deadlock, the DAANES announced in June that they would unilaterally hold trials for the foreign fighters they hold in detention. While the DAANES has no international political recognition as a formal governing administration with the legal ability to hold trials, Bedran Kurd, the DAANES' Foreign Affairs Bureau co-chair, argued in a press conference that the DAANES has been holding these men in detention for five years without a trial, which doesn't comply with international law either. Kurd pointed out that the DAANES has been obliged to initiate their trials process because these prisons see repeated breakout attempts and force the SDF to shoulder the burden of securing and caring for highly-radicalized individuals on behalf of foreign countries. While DAANES has not released precise details regarding the trials, they are expected to follow the legal procedures currently employed in the 'People's Defense Courts' through which the civil administration has been trying Syrian ISIS suspects since 2014, based on NES' terrorism law. In a press conference, Kurd stated: "We have prosecutors, we have a group of specialized judges, and we also have years of experience. They will be public trials – monitors, observers, experts, lawyers, will be welcome to these trials. We have been in contact with several European authorities. We want them to be a part of this process. They can send their lawyers to defend their own nationals, or observers to follow the process." There has been no public response from the Coalition regarding the DAANES' announcement.

73 <https://npasyria.com/en/96709/>

In 2023, 710 ISIS-linked foreign individuals were repatriated from NES' camps and prisons to 16 different countries: 18 men, 171 women and 521 children. Kyrgyzstan - which only began repatriations this year - topped the list of countries, taking home 332 people. The total number of third-country foreigners repatriated from NES now stands at 3,175, 2,220 of whom were children, as per RIC data. 2023 saw 23 separate repatriation missions - a slight fall from 2022 - yet the total number of individuals repatriated rose significantly from 2022, because more individuals were repatriated per mission in 2023. Kyrgyzstan's approach - to return large numbers at the same time on relatively few separate missions - contrasts that of many Western countries, which have chosen to repatriate their citizens in a slow, piecemeal fashion, taking home just a few individuals per mission.

Legal procedures for dealing with these repatriated individuals vary. Some governments have been pursuing legal routes to enable them to avoid being obliged to repatriate at all. In February, a Danish-Bosnian woman had her Danish citizenship removed after being sentenced to 4 years in prison by a Danish court. In a widely-reported case, Shamima Begum, a former UK-Bangladeshi citizen, and current Roj camp resident, lost her appeal to gain back her UK citizenship after it had been stripped for her involvement in ISIS. The UK government now has no obligation to repatriate her. Canada, on the other hand, has resumed its repatriations despite a May 31 ruling which impeded repatriation efforts. An Australian court ruled on November 3 that Australia has no legal obligation to repatriate its remaining citizens in the detention camps, adding a barrier to repatriation efforts for the country. Australia's last repatriation occurred in October 2022, which included 4 women and 13 children. 11 women and 20 children from Australia remain in NES camps, most of whom are residing in Roj camp. An unnamed French government official announced that France is ending its repatriation efforts, stating to AFP: "Having repatriated all of the mothers who wanted to leave Syria, there will not be any more of these types of operations." This, in effect, means leaving the burden of dealing with the most radicalized individuals - those who chose not to leave - to the Autonomous Administration.





**ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER  
FEBRUARY 2024**

**WWW.ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.COM  
PRESS@ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.ORG  
TEL +963 992 461 683**



**ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER**