

ANNUAL SLEEPER CELL REPORT

16 JANUARY 2021



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ANNUAL SLEEPER CELL REPORT (2020)

Politically, the AANES and SDF continue to walk a tight rope between their allies and enemies. From the US-led Coalition, the SDF remains its number one ally in the region for a sustained resistance to ISIS and its network of sleeper cells. However, with the US's NATO alliance with Turkey, the US showed their unwillingness to protect NES from Turkish incursion and subsequent occupation. Former Special Envoy to Syria James Jeffery was quoted that the US military only had two objectives for remaining in Syria for the foreseeable future: continue its ISIS counter measures, and prevent Iran from accessing more Syrian territory. These select motives pushed the SDF into negotiations with Russia which allowed Russian military police as well as forces loyal to Damascus to reinforce the SDF positions along the occupied areas controlled by Turkey and its militia groups after the October invasion in 2019. However, it is widely known that Turkey and Russia are involved in a quasi-alliance, with common or overlapping interests that include: the sale of S400 missile systems, the backing opposing sides in the Libya conflict, the backing of opposing sides in the Armenia and Azerbaijan conflict, and remain in a stalemate in the Idlib area of north west Syria. It appears that no super power or country has concern about the welfare of the Syrian civilians. While all this turns and grinds on the stage of global politics, ISIS and other clandestine actors continue to wreak havoc on North and East Syria.

As we can see from the data set for the comparison of 2019 and 2020 (p.9), without a doubt, the number of attacks and the number of fatalities have decreased quite significantly, from 906 to 572 and 415 to 299, respectively. The number of attacks are in majority in the Arab and Deir-Ez-Zore region, with only 134 attacks occurring outside the region for all of 2020. ISIS's claim on attacks also greatly diminished, only holding themselves responsible for 50% of the attacks in 2020, compared to 75% in 2019. Raids targeting sleeper cells decreased by 174 separate operations, from 395 in 2019 to 221 in 2020. It appears that the number of raids has no correlation to the quality of arrests that the raids produce. Arrests remains steady with only a 6 occurrence difference, from 581 to 575, seemingly unaltered by the number of raids performs. While there is no inherent correlation, we can speculate that as arrests continue to target ISIS affiliated persons, their operational capacity will continue to diminish. North and East Syrian roadways and cities are protected by the internal police force making travel harder for nefarious agents. Add on the intelligence gathering capabilities of

the coalition and the local sources that the SDF provides, each arrest has the potential to widely disrupt cells and limit their operations to the remnants of their last stronghold, with only the possibility to be marginally resupplied from the south east deserts across the Euphrates under the Damascus Government control or the networks still present in Iraq.

Following a given month of high arrests numbers, the next month would follow with a low attack numbers, proving that each arrest would knock back the sleeper cells. For instance, in June with 120 arrests, July only had 34 attacks, compared to April with 52 arrests, May had 84 attacks. Again, in February, 96 were arrested, and March had 48 attacks, down 13 from 61 in the previous month. ISIS has also switched tactics to deal with their reduced operational capacity by attempting to assassinate high valued targets rather than engage in firefights with security checkpoints or military bases. IEDs and VBIEDs remain a used method as well. ISIS no longer wants to exclusively threaten the general population as a method of intimidation, but also wants to threaten and target local leaders who work with the AANES or SDF.

JANUARY 2020

The first month of 2020 started off with what would be considered the average amount of monthly attacks that could be expected last year. In the Deir-Ez-Zore region, 40 out of 50 attacks took place. Among the 32 deaths were 13 village elders, suspected of being targeted for their compliance with the SDF and AANES. While the SDF was still reeling from the abrupt withdraw of American forces along the northern Turkish border, both sides were quick to reassure each other and the world of their mission to eradicate ISIS.

FEBRUARY 2020

February had a sizable increase of arrests, marking the second highest of the year at 96, comparable to February of 2019, which had 84 arrests. February 2020 marked the first month without any car or motorcycle bombings, although IEDs were used. Efforts were instead increasingly focused on assassinations and home invasions against village elders and AANES workers as well as hit and run tactics against SDF checkpoints and bases. There were no attacks in any of the northern Kurdish cities along the border, only one attack in Manbij, and only 4 attacks in the Hasaka region.

MARCH 2020

In March, as COVID-19 began to grip the world, operational raids and arrests dropped to a low number, with only 3 arrests, the lowest of 2020. All other raids and operations only involved dismantling IEDs and mines. 73% of the attacks in March were localized in the Deir-Ez-Zore region. In a detention facility in Hasaka, there was a prison uprising by detainees, demanding communication with the Coalition and human rights organizations. No prisoners escaped and control over the prison was restored in a day. SDF special forces and American Special Forces were on the ground monitoring the situation.

APRIL 2020

Assassinations and targeted attacks continued against village elders as well as AANES workers, as ISIS had begun spreading pamphlets in the Deir-Ez-Zore region calling for the deaths of anyone working for AANES. April also saw the start of the SNA claiming attacks past the cease-fire line agreed upon in October 2019. Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, a SNA group known for its involvement in Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, claimed attacks against the SDF in the Ain Issa region.

MAY 2020

Attacks spiked upward in May, most likely due to ISIS releasing attrition announcements, encouraging their members to act in an effort to receive religious forgiveness for their sins. It was also the deadliest month of the year with a year high of 36 recorded deaths. Arsons also started across the region in attempt to ruin the food supply for the AANES. These fires also were aimed at ruining the livelihoods of people who were also facing the inflation of the Syrian Pound to the US Dollar, going as high as 3000 SP to 1 USD.

JUNE 2020

The Coalition and the SDF announced a surge of operations named 'Deterrence of Terrorism' engineered to knock ISIS back, resulting in 120 arrests from 21 raids. This follows the general trend of actions from 2019's warmer months, May through August. Also, 73% of attacks occurred in the Arab dominant regions, including ISIS targeting a community center for women in Deir-Ez-Zore. After a SNA group sent death threats to Kurdish activists, Turkey drone struck three female politicians in Kobane, killing all of them.

JULY 2020

After the high mark of June in terms of arrests, sleeper cells killed 18 people in July, the 4th lowest number of deaths for 2020. A high number of arrests continued with 43 from only 13 raids. However, an assassination of an important tribal leader in Der Ez Zore, Muttshar al-Hifil of the Al-Akidat tribe, led to wide spread protests, demanding that the SDF catch the killer. At the time, rumors and speculation believed the assailant to be from a Iranian-linked group.

AUGUST 2020

August had the year's second highest recorded number of attacks. August was a tense month for all parties in Syria, not just the NES. Protests had begun the previous month, highlighting the demand for increased security in the Arab regions where the most sleeper cell attacks occurred. Under the civil unrest, as well as rising tensions between the US and Russian militaries, SNA, NDF, and Iranian-linked groups staged and executed attacks across the NES. For the first time, Damascus backed groups attacked a US military base, potentially for the recent announcement of an agreement between a US oil company and the SDF. ISIS also used the cover of these new groups entering the conflict to claim 48% of all recorded attacks in August.

SEPTEMBER 2020

Following August protests in Deir-ez-Zor, anti-ISIS raids increased from 11 in August to 24, while raids in Deir-ez-Zor increased from 4 in August to 15. This is likely a response to one of the demands made by the protesters calling for more security in the region. These raids resulted in 28 arrests in Deir-ez-Zor, and 38 for all of NES. This is an overall 12% increase compared to August, 34 to 38, and a 155% increase for Deir-ez-Zor, 11 to 28. An IED also targeted the area close to Syriac and Armenian churches in Hasake, shortly after news of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke, though it is not certain this attack was related. SDC began preparations to release and grant amnesty to Syrian nationals being held in Hol Camp, save for those accused of serious crimes or connections to ISIS. Hol Camp also saw 6 attacks carried out by female ISIS affiliates, starting a trend of attacks and assassinations within the camp that are difficult to diffuse.

OCTOBER 2020

Outside of the 31 attacks and 10 raids taking place in Deir-ez-Zor, 7 attacks and 4 raids occurred in Heseke, 4 attacks and 3 raids in Raqqa, and 3 attacks and 2 raids in Manbij. No attacks occurred in the Kurdish-majority areas near the Turkish border. SDC held two public consultations in Deir-ez-Zor to hear feedback from key local actors about the performance of the SDC, AANES and SDF in the region, and how they can be improved. A rise has been detected in escape attempts by foreign ISIS affiliates in Hol camp, with at least three such escape attempts being thwarted this month by the camp's security forces.

NOVEMBER 2020

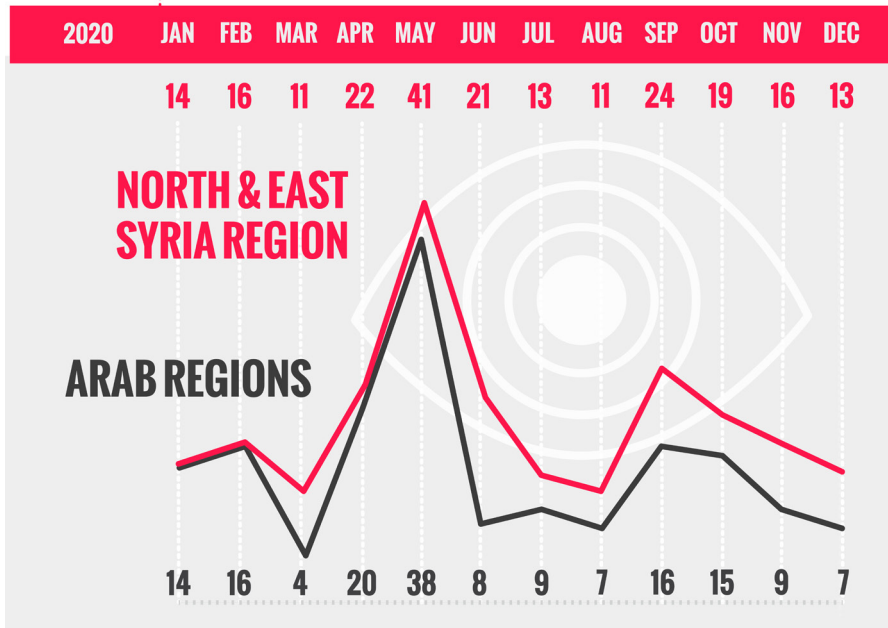
General Amnesty was given to detainees in the Al-Hol camp, allowing a number of families to return to their homes in Syria. November 2020 saw the lowest number of sleeper-cell attacks since records began after ISIS' territorial defeat in March 2019 with only 16 occurrences. Hol Camp saw 7 assassination attempts in November, all of them resulting in deaths, many of the victims being of Iraqi nationality. Our sources indicate the drop in attacks for November were due in part to ISIS releasing little to no publications or declarations for the month.

DECEMBER 2020

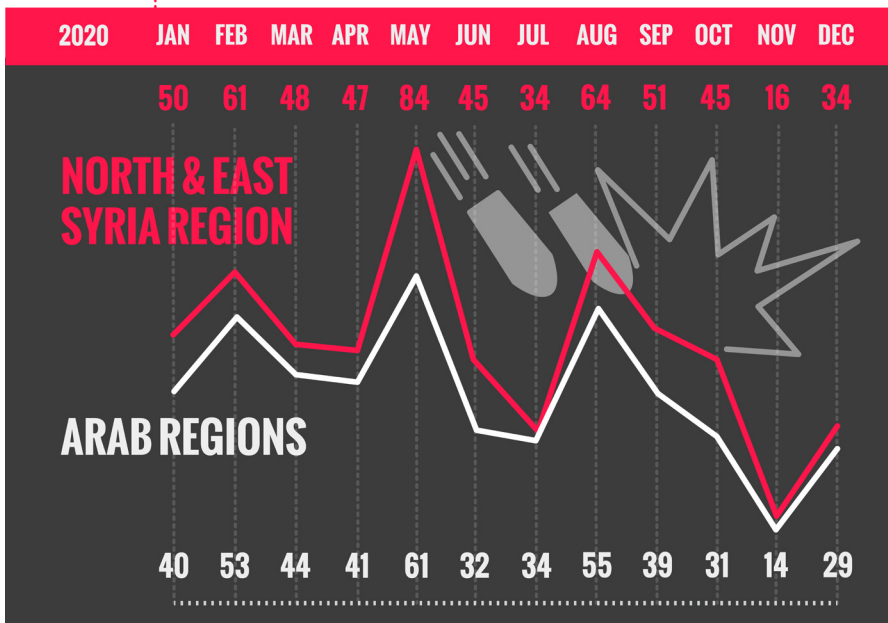
While SNA groups shelled Ain Issa and Tel Tamir, ISIS continued its reign of terror with 25 claimed attacks out of 34 in NES. Twenty-nine of these attacks occurred in the Arab regions of NES. After a lackluster month in November for ISIS, ISIS ramped up its propaganda and publications to counter the SDF's arrests and raid campaign, going as far to circulate videos and images of dismembered bodies and captured AANES affiliated persons.

Multiple actions by the SDF led to Turkish backed cells in Raqqa and Tel Tamir to be captured; one weapons cache was intercepted and a group of people were arrested in connection with passing intel to the SNA and Turkish military. Despite ongoing attacks along the occupied zones and Russian pressure to turn more territory over to Damascus, the overall situation remains unchanged. As the US braced for turmoil surrounding its national elections, the US military retained its position as an allied partner of the SDF against the remnants of ISIS.

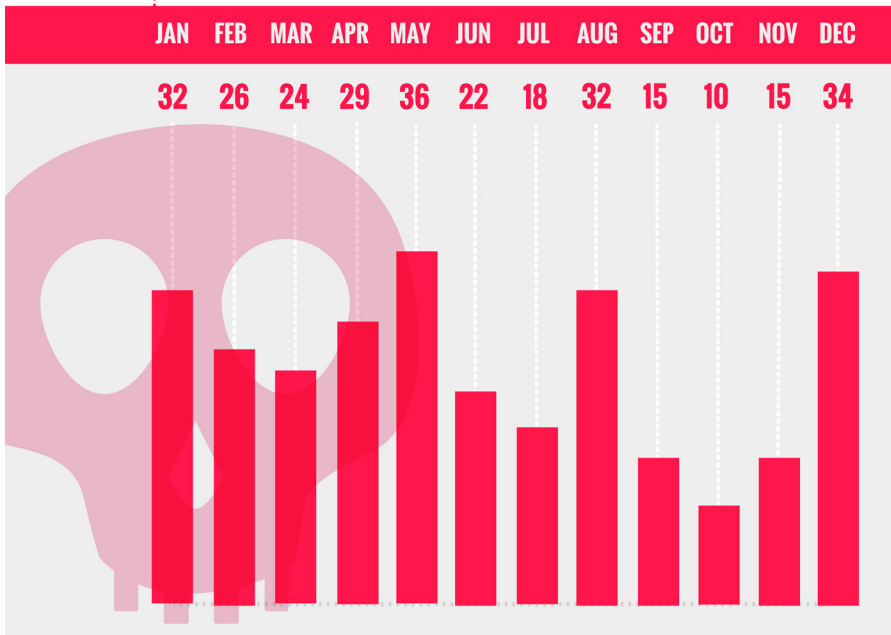
COMPARED SLEEPER-CELL RAIDS IN ARAB REGIONS AND NORTH & EAST SYRIA



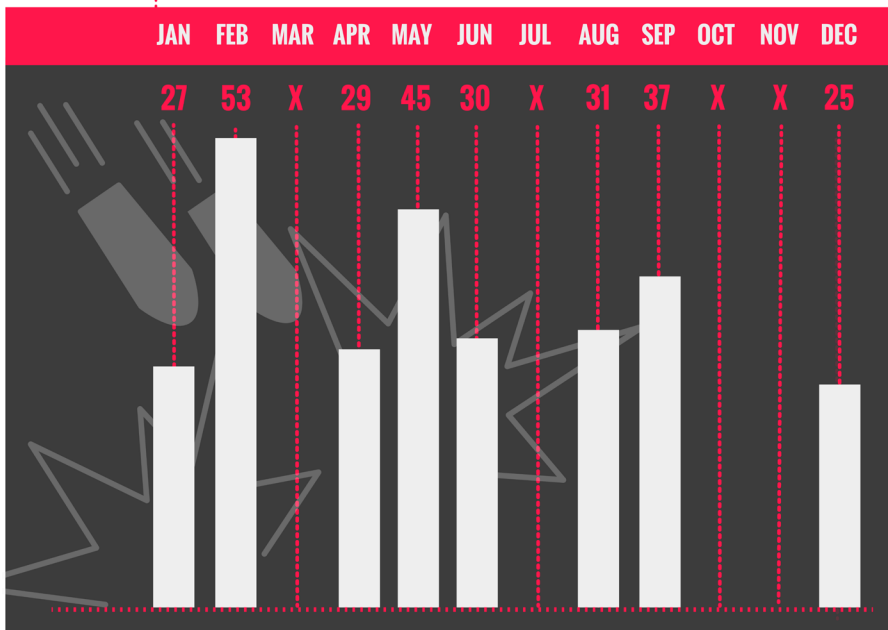
COMPARED SLEEPER-CELL ATTACKS IN ARAB REGIONS AND NORTH & EAST SYRIA



2020 DEATHS CAUSED BY SLEEPER-CELL ATTACKS IN NORTH & EAST SYRIA



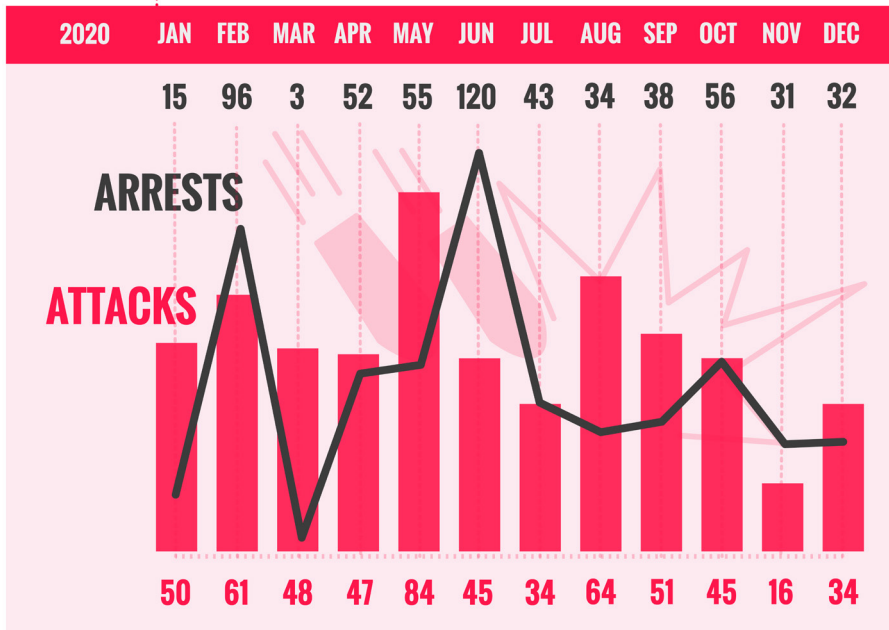
2020 SLEEPER-CELL ATTACKS CLAIMED BY ISIS IN NORTH & EAST SYRIA



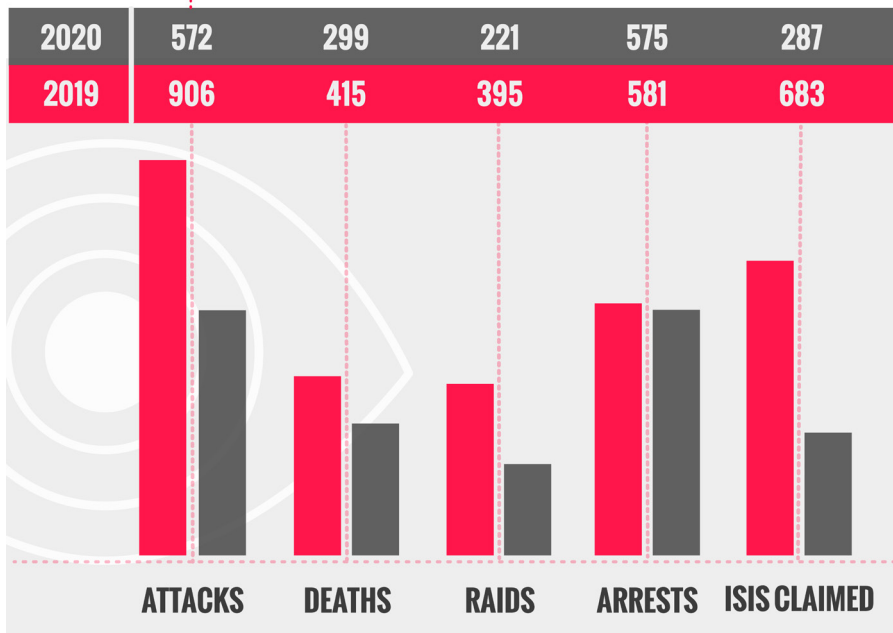
X - NO DATA AVAILABLE
 NUMBERS FOR ISIS CLAIMED ATTACKS ARE APPROXIMATE

ANNUAL SLEEPER CELL REPORT FOR NORTH AND EAST SYRIA JANUARY 2021

COMPARED SLEEPER-CELL ATTACKS AND ARRESTS IN NORTH & EAST SYRIA



COMPARED SLEEPER-CELL ACTIVITY IN NORTH & EAST SYRIA 2019/2020



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