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ISIS Attacks and Counter-Operations in Syria in the First Half of 2026

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Analytical Report

Omran for Strategic Studies

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Executive Summary

- The first half of 2026 brought significant changes to the security environment in which ISIS operates in Syria. The expansion of Syrian state control east of the Euphrates and the redeployment of government forces in areas newly brought under state control disrupted the organization's established operating environment, forcing its cells to adapt to increased security pressure.
- ISIS increasingly relied on **low-cost guerrilla tactics**, particularly shootings, individual assassinations, and hit-and-run attacks, rather than complex military operations. **Shooting attacks accounted for approximately 83% of recorded attack methods, with 59 incidents.** Attacks involving explosive devices, grenades, projectiles, and suicide attackers remained limited. This pattern indicates growing reliance on small, mobile cells rather than sustained engagements.
- ISIS also **reoriented its target bank—the people, institutions, and assets it seeks to attack—toward the Syrian state.** Military and security personnel, headquarters, checkpoints, and associated state institutions accounted for roughly **75% of recorded targets.** Government forces replaced the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the organization's principal target following the transfer of former SDF-held areas to government control. Attacks on customs personnel and oil infrastructure sought to undermine state revenues, while attacks on judges and tribal leaders targeted other sources of authority.
- ISIS attacks killed **49 people**, with military and security personnel accounting for the largest share of fatalities. Individual assassinations were more lethal than attacks on fortified positions, indicating a preference for exposed targets that allow the organization to inflict **substantial damage at low operational cost.** Attacks on checkpoints and headquarters were more often intended to harass security forces, test their defenses, and wear them down.
- Attacks peaked in **February and March**, then declined sharply in subsequent months. The decline in frequency did not eliminate the threat: ISIS shifted toward **fewer attacks on targets of greater symbolic significance**, including headquarters, government personnel, oil-related targets, and judicial officials. This pattern suggests adaptation to growing security pressure and a reduced capacity to sustain frequent attacks, while retaining the ability to carry out attacks with significant impact.
- **Deir ez-Zor remained the main center of ISIS activity**, accounting for approximately **55% of recorded attacks**, followed by Raqqa and Aleppo. This concentration underscores the organization's continued exploitation of desert terrain, proximity to the Iraqi border, tribal networks, and gaps in government security deployments. Activity elsewhere remained limited and sporadic.

- Syrian military and security institutions increasingly shifted from **reactive containment toward intelligence-led preemption**, using intelligence to identify and disrupt threats before attacks could be carried out. Operations targeted ISIS leaders, assassination cells, and networks producing explosive devices. Rapid responses, searches for cells and weapons, the interception of suicide attackers, and stronger links between intelligence collection and operational action supported this shift.
- The security response also involved **consolidating dispersed forces in fortified positions**, replacing isolated and vulnerable checkpoints in Palmyra and al-Sukhnah. Sustaining the decline in ISIS activity will require closing remaining security gaps, protecting vulnerable personnel and critical supply routes, disrupting illicit weapons and explosives networks, strengthening rapid-response capabilities, and deepening cooperation with local communities in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.

Introduction

The first half of 2026 brought major shifts in Syria's security and military landscape, particularly in the eastern governorates and areas newly brought under state control. Changes in force deployments and the expansion of Syrian state control east of the Euphrates reshaped ISIS's operational environment, forcing the organization to adapt rapidly to the military and security institutions' evolving strategies.

This report examines ISIS activity during the first six months of 2026, tracking attack patterns, geographic distribution, target selection, and combat effectiveness. It also assesses the response of the security services, which shifted from **reactive containment toward intelligence-led preemption**. The report aims to provide a detailed assessment of the security environment, identify likely future developments, and outline key findings and policy recommendations.⁽¹⁾

Some attacks were not formally claimed by ISIS, reflecting the organization's fragmentation and its members' reliance on individual operations, which are sometimes recorded as attacks by unknown perpetrators. The report nevertheless attributes these incidents to ISIS based on their operational context, the tactics used, and their locations within areas where its cells are known to operate.

1. A Quantitative Analysis of ISIS Operations

The analysis examines ISIS operations during the first half of 2026 across four dimensions: attack methods; targets and fatalities; changes in attack frequency over time; and geographic distribution. Each provides insight into the organization's operational behavior and capabilities.

¹ This report draws on detailed monitoring of security developments conducted by the Center's team during the first half of 2026, covering ISIS activity and counter-ISIS operations. Sources consisted primarily of Syrian media outlets that closely track security developments, supplemented by the Syrian Monitor platform, selected for the accuracy and credibility of its reporting from the field. Reports were cross-checked across multiple platforms to verify recorded incidents.

Attack Methods

ISIS used shootings, explosive devices, grenades, projectile fire, and suicide assaults. **Shootings predominated, with 59 recorded incidents**, followed by **5 attacks involving explosive devices**, **4 grenade attacks**, **2 projectile attacks**, and **1 suicide assault**.

Shootings accounted for approximately **83% of recorded attack methods**, indicating a clear reliance on low-cost, highly mobile guerrilla warfare. Small cells, often traveling on motorcycles, carried out swift assassinations and hit-and-run attacks.

The near absence of complex operations indicates a decline in ISIS's conventional combat capabilities. Nevertheless, the suicide assault on the Internal Security headquarters in Raqqa on **June 15, 2026**—the first of its kind since December—shows that the organization retains some capacity to carry out attacks with substantial impact and symbolic significance. Its reliance on small arms and improvised explosive devices reflects its adaptation following the loss of territorial control. It also exploits security gaps and the widespread availability of weapons on black markets in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah following the SDF's withdrawal. See **Table 1** and **Figure 1**.

Attack Method				
Shooting	Explosive Device / Booby-Trapping	Grenade Attack	Projectile Fire	Suicide Assault
59	5	4	2	1

Table 1. Distribution of ISIS Operations by Attack Method

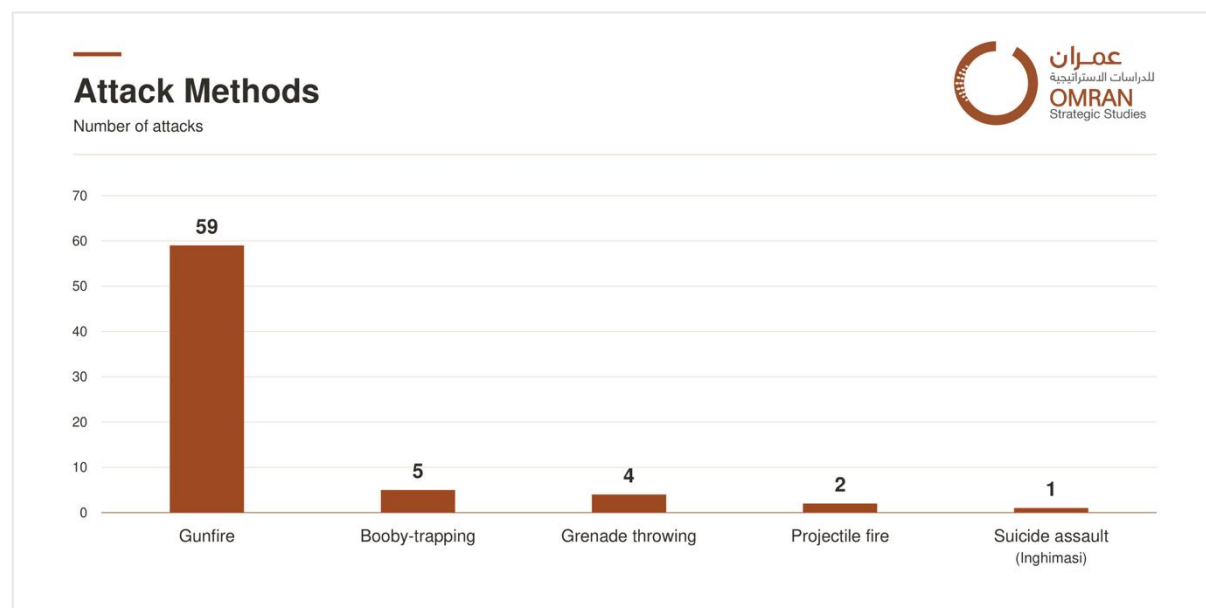


Figure 1. Distribution of ISIS Operations by Attack Method

Target Types

ISIS's target selection during the first half of 2026 showed a clear concentration on military and security personnel, **with 28 recorded incidents** resulting in a total of 28 deaths. These were followed by attacks on **military headquarters (11 incidents)**, **security checkpoints (9)**, and **civilians (7)**. **Customs personnel** were targeted in **4 incidents** and **military commanders**

in **3. Security patrols, oil tankers, and shops** were each targeted twice, while **a judge, oil supply lines, and a tribal notable** were each targeted once.

Military and security targets accounted for approximately **75% of recorded targets**, indicating a fundamental shift in ISIS's target bank. In 2025, the organization primarily targeted the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following the transfer of its historical strongholds from SDF to government control in January 2026, ISIS redirected its attacks almost entirely toward government forces.

ISIS spokesman Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari reinforced this shift on **February 21, 2026**, by calling for attacks on the transitional government. Attacks on personnel, checkpoints, patrols, and headquarters form a campaign against the state, aimed at eroding the new authorities' monopoly on the use of force and undermining their legitimacy in eastern areas newly brought under government control. Attacks on customs personnel and oil infrastructure serve two purposes: **undermining state revenues and financing ISIS through looting**. The targeting of a judge and a tribal notable also points to an effort to weaken other sources of authority. Such attacks carry particular significance in eastern Syria, where tribal structures play an important role in social relations and local security. See **Table 2** and **Figure 2**.

By Target Type					
Military and Security Personnel	Military Headquarters	Security Checkpoint	Civilian	Customs Officer	Military Commander
28	11	9	7	4	3
Security Patrol	Oil Tanker	Commercial Shops	Oil Supply Lines	Judges	Tribal Notable
2	2	2	1	1	1

Table 2. Distribution of ISIS Operations by Target Type

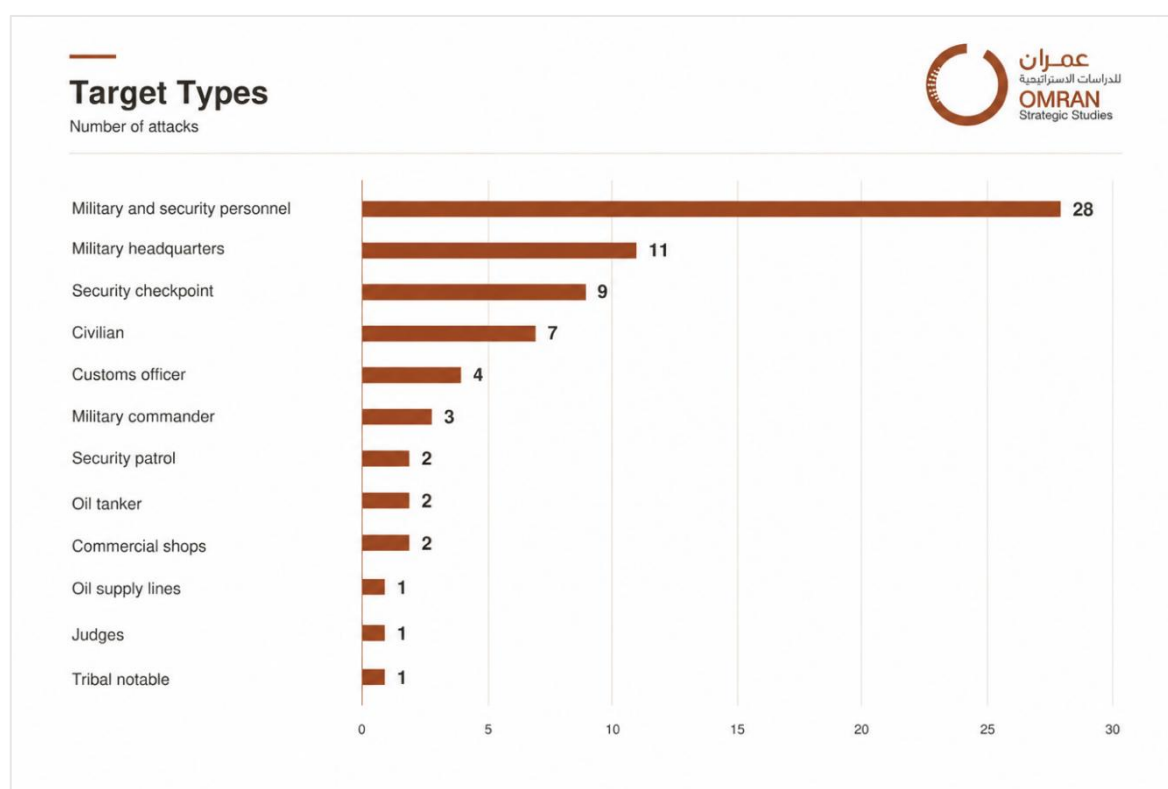


Figure 2. Distribution of ISIS Operations by Target Type

Fatalities by Victim Category

ISIS attacks killed **49 people**. Attacks directly targeting military and security personnel accounted for **28 deaths across 28 incidents**, the largest share of fatalities. **Six civilians** were killed in **7 attacks**, **5 customs personnel** in **4 attacks**, and **2 military commanders** in **3 attacks**. Attacks on security checkpoints killed **4 military personnel across 9 incidents**, while attacks on military headquarters killed another **4**.

These figures reveal differences in the lethality of ISIS's attack methods. Individual assassinations targeting security personnel, customs officers, and military commanders illustrate the organization's preference for exposed targets against which it can inflict **substantial damage at low operational cost**. Attacks on fortified positions were considerably less lethal, suggesting that they primarily served to **harass security forces, test their defenses, and wear them down**, while demonstrating ISIS's operational reach rather than overrunning those positions.

This difference helps explain the predominance of shooting attacks: ISIS seeks to maximize the impact of each operation by prioritizing individual targets over complex engagements. Although civilian deaths accounted for a smaller share of fatalities, these attacks reflect efforts to intimidate people suspected of cooperating with the authorities. This pattern also suggests an erosion of the organization's support base among the population. See **Table 3** and **Figure 3**.

Fatalities from ISIS Attacks					
Military and Security Personnel	Civilian	Customs Officer	Security Checkpoint Personnel	Military Headquarters Personnel	Military Commander
28	6	5	4	4	2

Table 3. Fatalities from ISIS Attacks by Victim Category

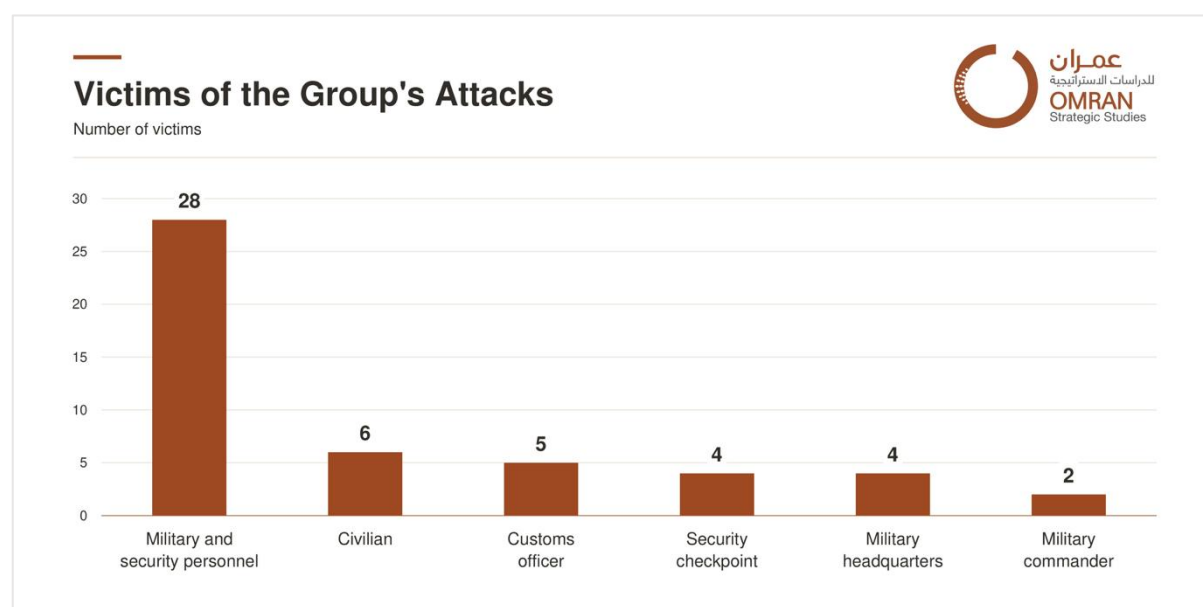


Figure 3. Fatalities from ISIS Attacks by Victim Category

Changes in Attack Frequency Over Time

No significant ISIS operations were recorded in **January 2026**. Activity peaked in **February, with 26 attacks**, followed by **23 in March** and **13 in April**. The number then fell to **4 attacks in May**, followed by **5 in June**.

Although attacks became less frequent, those recorded in May and June carried greater operational and symbolic significance. January's relative calm coincided with the government's offensive against the SDF, which reshaped conditions in ISIS's traditional areas of operation as its cells repositioned themselves.

The rise in attacks in February occurred as government forces expanded into areas formerly held by the SDF. Al-Ansari's call on **February 21** to target the new authorities reinforced this shift. The subsequent decline in attack frequency is consistent with growing security pressure from Syrian authorities and the dismantling of several ISIS cells.

In May and June, ISIS carried out fewer attacks but focused on higher-value targets, including Ministry of Defense buses, oil tankers, headquarters, and judicial officials. This pattern suggests an adaptation toward **attacks with greater impact and symbolic significance** as the organization's capacity to sustain frequent operations declined. See **Table 4** and **Figure 4**.

Temporal Distribution of Operations				
February	March	April	May	June
26	23	13	4	5

Table 4. Distribution of ISIS Operations over Time

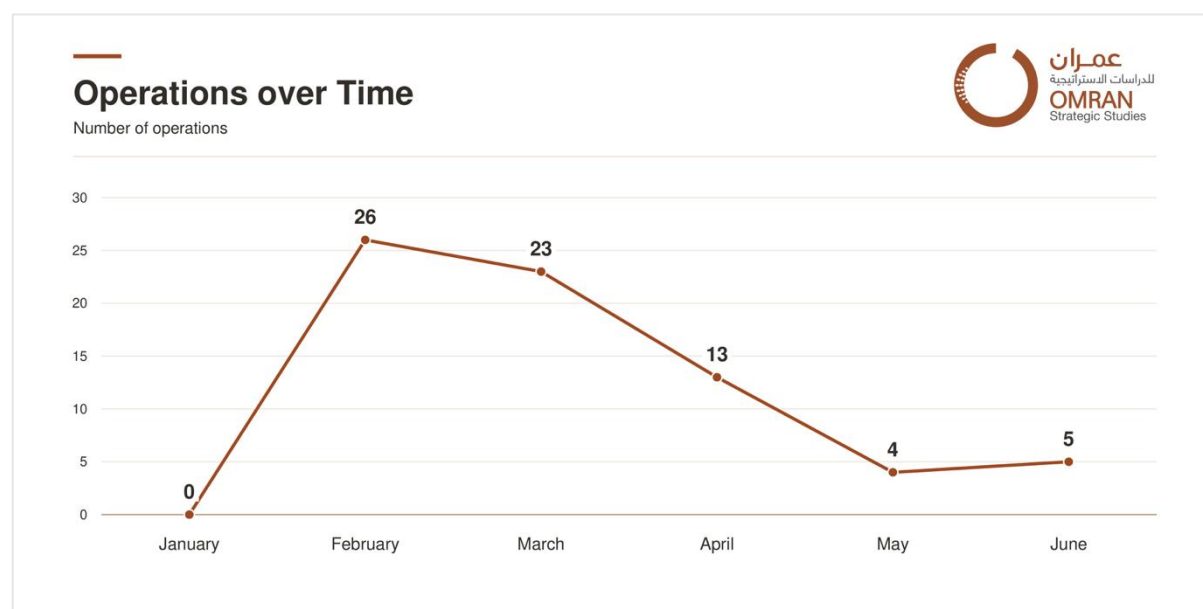


Figure 4. Distribution of ISIS Operations over Time

Geographic Distribution of Operations

ISIS operations were distributed across **seven governorates**, led by **Deir ez-Zor with 39 operations**, most of them concentrated in Mayadin, al-Bukamal, al-Sabha, and al-Busayrah. **Raqqa ranked second with 13 operations**, concentrated primarily in al-Sabahiya and Raqqa city, followed by **Aleppo with 10 operations**, most of which occurred in Manbij, al-Rai, and al-Safira. **Rural Damascus, Hasakah, Homs, and Daraa** recorded broadly similar levels, with no more than **3 operations each**.

Deir ez-Zor accounted for approximately **54% of recorded attacks**. Its longstanding importance to ISIS reflects its vast desert terrain, tribal networks, and proximity to the Iraqi border.

Activity in Raqqa and Aleppo also shows ISIS's continued presence in areas formerly under its control across eastern and northern Syria. Attacks in Aleppo indicate exploitation of security gaps and limited government deployments in areas newly brought under state control, particularly around Manbij and al-Rai.

The low number of recorded attacks in Rural Damascus, Hasakah, Homs, and Daraa suggests a limited operational presence during the reporting period. Operations in Rural Damascus—most notably the targeting of a judicial official in Babila on **June 16**—were isolated symbolic attacks rather than evidence of a sustained operational presence. See **Table 5** and **Figure 5**.

Geographic Distribution of Operations						
Deir ez-Zor	Raqqa	Aleppo	Rural Damascus	Hasakah	Homs	Daraa
39	13	10	3	2	2	2

Table 5. Distribution of ISIS Operations by Geographic Area

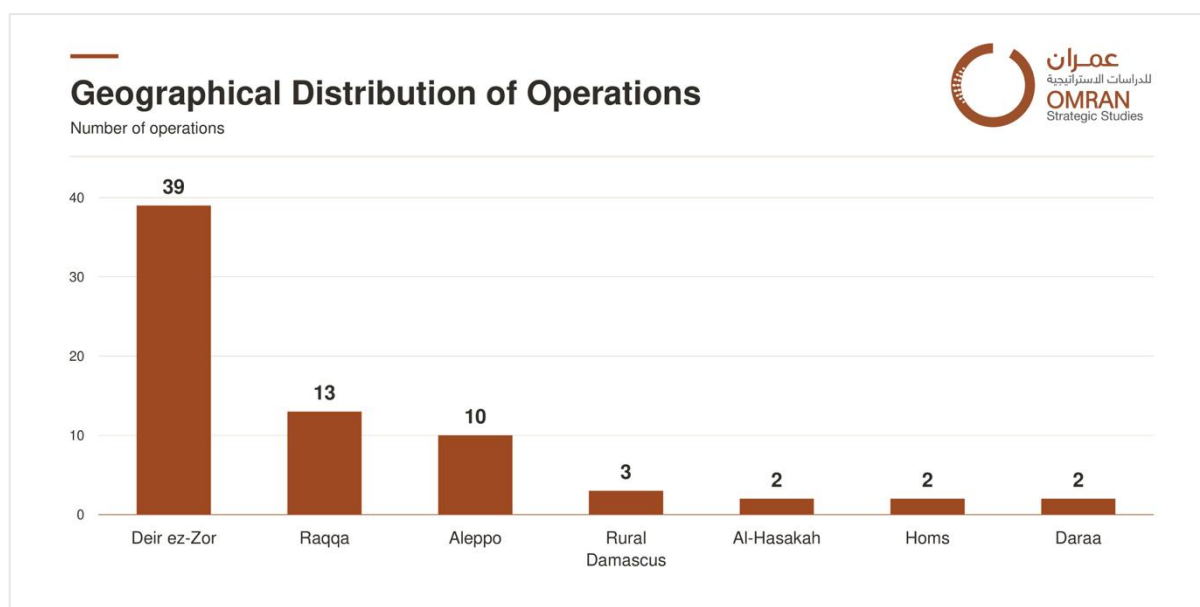


Figure 5. Distribution of ISIS Operations by Geographic Area

2. Military and Security Services' Response to ISIS

The first half of 2026 saw a significant shift in Syria's military and security response to ISIS, from **reactive containment toward intelligence-led preemption**. Operations focused on dismantling the organization's core infrastructure by targeting its leadership, manufacturing facilities, and supply networks, while disrupting interconnected cells before they could carry out attacks.

This approach produced several significant operations against ISIS's organizational infrastructure. On **June 21**, the Ministry of Interior announced the arrest of ISIS leader Akram Saleh al-Hamad, known as "**Abdu Tasni**," who oversaw the organization's manufacturing activities in eastern Syria. His arrest weakened networks producing improvised explosive devices and explosive belts and disrupted technical support to cells in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and the Syrian desert.

Preemptive operations also targeted assassination cells. On **February 27**, Aleppo's Internal Security forces arrested ISIS leader Jassem Ibrahim al-Ahmad in Jarabulus. Investigations linked him to several attacks, including the killing of a civilian with an explosive device in 2022 and an attack on a Military Police official. In a separate operation in Mayadin on **February 25**, forces led by Colonel Dirar al-Shamlan arrested Mahmoud Eid al-Ali, who was implicated in an attack on a member of the 86th Division. These cases suggest an improved ability to use security databases and analysis of attack methods to link earlier crimes to their perpetrators, alongside a shorter intelligence cycle from collection to operational action.

Operations also disrupted larger attack plots. On **March 1–2**, Internal Security forces in Deir ez-Zor infiltrated and dismantled a network of cells, seizing large quantities of mines and explosive devices prepared for use. The operation disrupted preparations for imminent attacks on civilian gatherings.

In responding to suicide attackers, security units relied on direct intervention to stop them before they could reach their targets. Examples included the killing of a suicide attacker near a military headquarters in Bizaah, in the Aleppo countryside, on **May 30**, and another who attempted to storm the Jazrat al-Buhamid checkpoint in Deir ez-Zor on **February 27**. During an operation in al-Lataminah, in the Hama countryside, on **March 8**, forces surrounded a wanted suspect considered particularly dangerous. After an exchange of fire in which he exhausted his ammunition, the suspect detonated his explosives, causing no casualties among the raiding force.

To maintain control on the ground, security forces combined these operations with immediate responses and searches of surrounding areas after hit-and-run attacks. These measures aimed to prevent isolated security breaches from becoming recurring sources of disruption. Responses to attacks on checkpoints in al-Sabahiya, Raqqa, on **February 22** and **June 5** resulted in one attacker being killed and another arrested. Other examples included the mobilization of security forces in Ain Issa on **June 24**, following an attack on members of the 72nd Division, and a search operation in al-Busayrah, eastern Deir ez-Zor, on **February 23**.

The response also included **tactical redeployment and force consolidation**. Following early warnings of potential security breaches, forces withdrew from **11 military positions and checkpoints** around Palmyra and al-Sukhnah and regrouped at **four fortified positions** inside the two cities. This reduced their exposure at isolated, vulnerable positions and established more resilient operating bases for securing public facilities and protecting vital routes.

3. Statistical Findings and Recommendations

The findings from the first half of 2026 indicate a significant shift in ISIS's behavior. Its declining capacity for direct confrontation and territorial control has forced the organization to adapt its structure and tactics, relying increasingly on **low-cost guerrilla warfare** and attacks on rear-area targets. At the same time, Syria's military and security institutions demonstrated greater operational flexibility and improved intelligence collection on the ground. These capabilities helped disrupt weapons supply and explosives production networks and restrict the movement and operations of sleeper cells.

Statistical Findings

The data identify five main trends:

- **Reliance on low-cost guerrilla tactics:** Shootings accounted for approximately **83% of recorded attack methods**, indicating reduced capacity for complex operations and growing reliance on small, mobile cells conducting assassinations and hit-and-run attacks.
- **Reorientation of the target bank:** Military and security targets accounted for approximately **75% of recorded targets**. This concentration reflects a campaign to undermine the transitional authorities in the eastern governorates and challenge their monopoly on the use of force.
- **Geographic concentration amid security gaps:** Deir ez-Zor accounted for approximately **54% of recorded attacks**, followed by Raqqa and Aleppo. This concentration indicates ISIS's continued exploitation of desert terrain, tribal networks, proximity to the Iraqi border, and gaps in security deployments.
- **Fewer attacks with greater operational and symbolic significance:** Attack frequency declined sharply after the high levels recorded in February and March, with May and June recording the lowest monthly totals since February. This decline is consistent with mounting security pressure. Meanwhile, attacks increasingly focused on headquarters and high-value individuals, suggesting an effort to sustain media attention and psychological impact despite a reduced capacity for frequent operations.
- **Stronger intelligence-led preemption:** Security operations disrupted ISIS's manufacturing networks, notably through the arrest of "**Abdu Tasni**," and dismantled interconnected cells before they could carry out attacks. Measures to intercept suicide attackers and consolidate dispersed forces in fortified positions further reduced opportunities for ISIS to attack vulnerable personnel and locations.

Recommendations

The assessment of current risks and evolving ISIS tactics identifies five priorities:

- **Strengthen partnerships with local communities:** Build closer security partnerships with communities in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa in response to repeated attacks on tribal and community leaders. Local cooperation is essential to identifying mobile ISIS cells and detecting suspicious activity.
- **Protect vulnerable personnel and supply routes:** Strengthen preventive security measures and close-protection procedures for officers, judges, and customs personnel. Expand drone reconnaissance to protect oil tankers and major transport routes against sabotage and extortion.
- **Close security gaps in areas newly brought under state control:** Accelerate military and security deployments and establish effective control points in the eastern Aleppo countryside, particularly around Manbij and al-Safira, and along the border. These measures should prevent ISIS cells from exploiting gaps during the transition to government control and opening new areas of activity.
- **Disrupt illicit weapons and explosives networks:** Conduct targeted security operations against weapons-smuggling networks and the illicit explosives trade in rural Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. These operations should cut off the supplies that enable assassinations and other rapid attacks.
- **Consolidate forces in fortified bases:** Continue replacing isolated checkpoints in remote desert areas with consolidated, fortified bases, drawing on the experience of Palmyra and al-Sukhnah. Reinforce these bases with rapid-response forces and mobile units equipped to search surrounding areas and counter infiltrations and hit-and-run attacks.

ISIS remains one of the most significant security threats facing the new Syrian state. Addressing it requires an integrated security system built around **intelligence-led preemption**, alongside effective military responses. The decline in attack frequency and the shift toward swift assassinations indicate that intelligence operations have helped weaken ISIS's manufacturing and supply networks. Sustaining these gains will require closing remaining security gaps, disrupting illicit weapons markets, and strengthening partnerships with local communities to deny sleeper cells the support, concealment, and freedom of movement on which they depend.

