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2.5. ISIL

As the former government was overthrown in early December 2024, ISIL reportedly utilised the power vacuum to attack former government forces,456 expanding its presence in Homs and Hama governorates into areas of the Syrian desert vacated by Assad's forces.457 The UN Secretary-General reported that the Syrian desert region was still a 'centre for external operational planning' for ISIL and remained crucial for its operations.458 According to a Kurdish officer, ISIL managed to seize large amounts of weapons left by former government troops.459 Meanwhile, the US expanded its airstrikes on ISIL camps and operatives, likely weakening the group.460 The US Defense Intelligence Agency reported for the time period October to December 2024, that ISIL 'had shown no significant improvement in operational capabilities or attack sophistication' in Syria, the group's capabilities having reportedly been diminished due to targeted strikes and the capture or killing of many ISIL leaders.461

During the reference period, ISIL operations were mainly recorded in SDF-held areas,462 with SOHR documenting 17 ISIL operations for the month of January 2025.463 The group's operations involved ISIL cells attacking SDF patrols464 and checkpoints,465 with some of these attacks involving IEDs,466 hand grenades467 and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).468 On 11 January 2025, the intelligence agency of the Transitional Administration469 stated that a bombing planned by ISIL at the Shia Sayyida Zaynab shrine near Damascus had been foiled.470

According to assessments made by British intelligence, the weakening of the SDF might lead to ISIL seizing an opportunity to facilitate the escape of about 9 000 ISIL members in SDF custody, while the group already had about 2 000 active members staging a resurgence on the ground.471 The SDF reported to have about 10 000 ISIL fighters in their custody, further stating that, since the fall of Assad's government, ISIL had already attempted two attacks on prisons in order to free its members.472

Christoph Reuter, journalist for the German news magazine Der Spiegel, in mid-February filed a report on ISIL activities in areas under control of the Transitional Administration, after having traversed the Syrian desert. Statements received from soldiers stationed in the area as well as some remaining locals indicated that they perceived no ISIL activity, rather there were signs that former government soldiers as well as criminals had used ISIL disguises when perpetrating attacks against rival groups as well as civilians. A local journalist mentioned that many ISIL operatives have crossed the Euphrates into SDF-held territories.473

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