



Analysis of ISIS activity in Syria and Iraq During 2021



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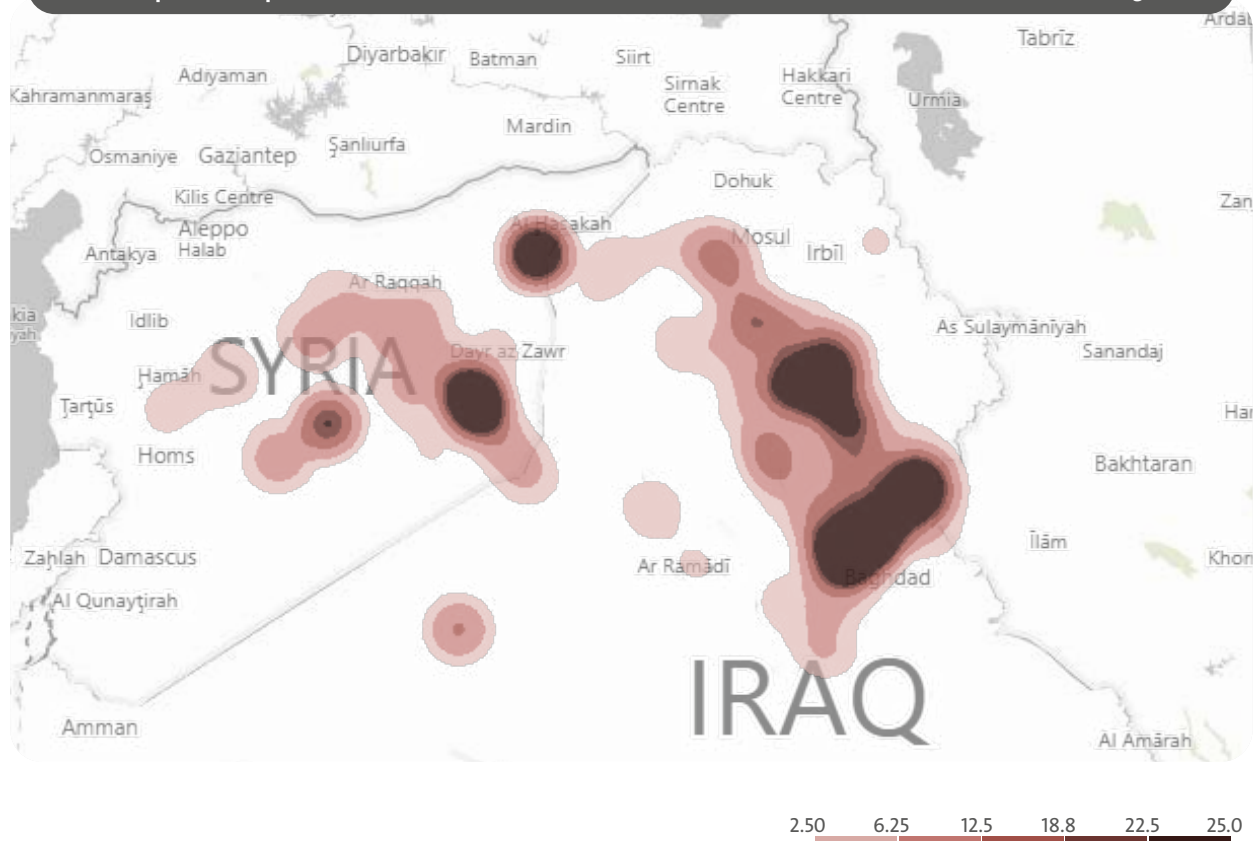
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Introduction

This study seeks to analyze the most significant changes in ISIS activity in Syria and Iraq during 2021¹, which has seen many changes at various levels, both politically in terms of the U.S. foreign policy approaches, changes in the positions of key actors locally and regionally, and last but not least economic and social developments. In this study, we are working to analyze changes in the main patterns of ISIS operations and the targets of these operations at the level of both Syria and Iraq. The data were collected from different sources where they were analyzed and processed to reach the said results.

Heat Map of the Operations of the Islamic State

Figure 1



¹ Until the first week of December 2021

Methodology

This study was based on a number of sources, particularly from The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project², as well as some other open source databases, which were processed and analyzed at the state level, in addition to analysing these data at the level of actors, including the type and modalities of operations and the approximate number of fatalities as a result of these operations to measure changes and shifts in the patterns of operations conducted by ISIS towards key actors .both in Syria and Iraq

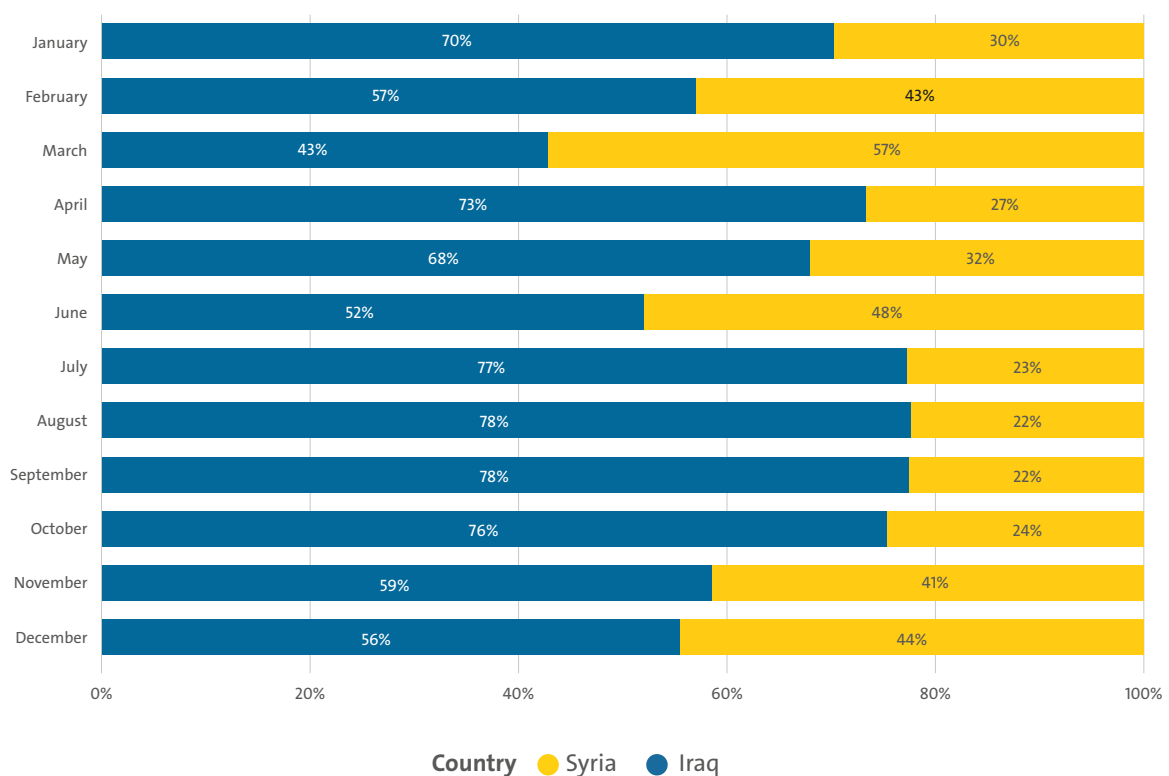
² <https://acleddata.com>

Conflict Dynamics

The distribution and nature of operations launched by ISIS in 2021 clearly shows changes in the nature of ISIS' operations, as the use of improvised explosive devices and explosives in Syria has decreased by nearly %10, which can be explained by the shortage of resources suffered by the group or the difficulty of accessing the materials that are required to carry out these operations on the Syrian scene. While in Iraq it is clear that the group does not suffer such scarcity, where the number of operations carried out using improvised explosive devices and explosives increased by about %8.

The distribution of the activities of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq during 2021

Figure 2

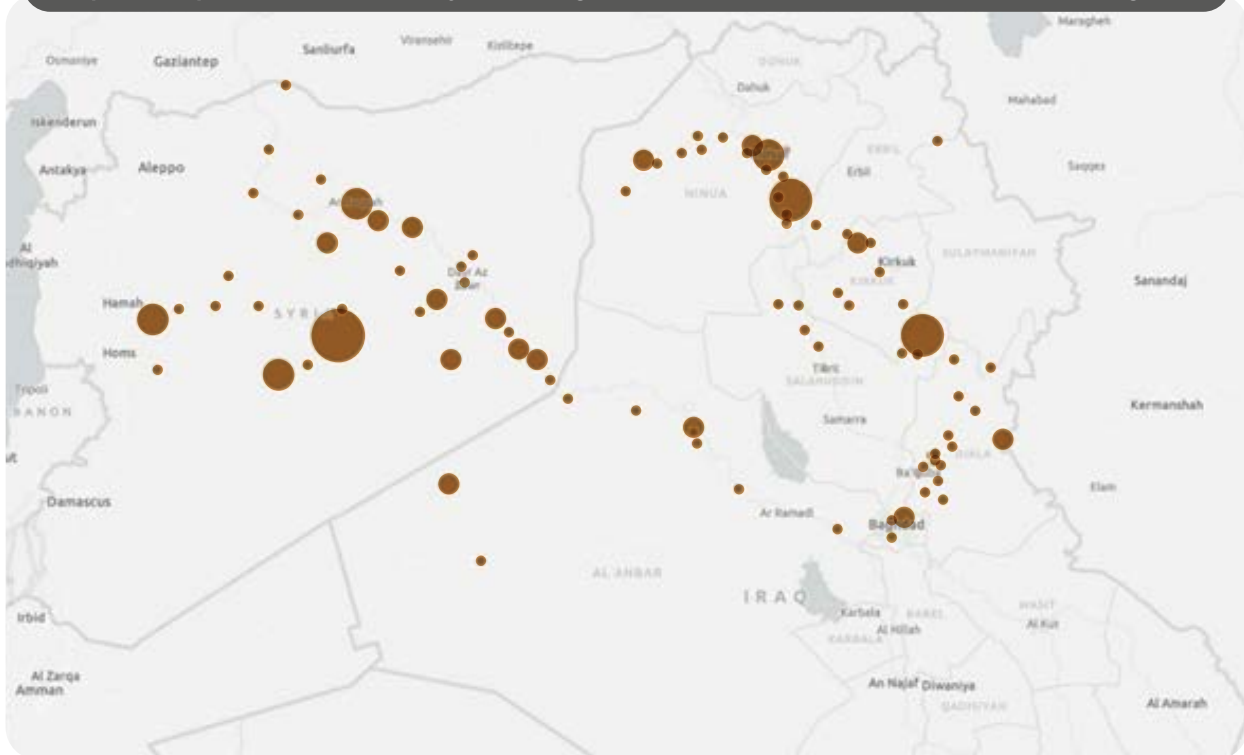


However, this slight increase led to a significant increase in the number of victims and deaths as a result of these operations compared to 2020, this increase is nearly %90, which is a relatively large figure and equivalent to about %25 of the total number of victims and deaths in 2021. It is also noticeable that in both Iraq and Syria, ISIS has followed a similar tactic in terms

of locations and the nature of the targets, where in Syria the largest percentage of bombings targeted government forces and militias loyal to them, especially on the supply lines between the capital and the advanced lines in the Syrian badia, where most of these bombings targeted buses transporting military personnel and fighters in militias loyal to the Syrian regime. In the Iraqi scenario, the explosive attacks targeted mainly Iraqi government forces, mainly along the Baghdad-Kirkuk axis and the Baghdad-Albu Kamal axis, as well as a number of explosions targeting the movement lines of the Iraqi border guards patrols, most probably to insure that ISIS members have a certain degree of flexibility in regards to the movement across the Syrian-Iraqi border. And although civilians were the most affected group by the explosive attacks during 2021, However, most of these explosions were caused by unexploded ordnance (UXO) from previous wars and battles, particularly in Mosul one of the group's last strongholds in Iraq.

Map of IED operations carried out by ISIS during 2021

Figure 3



In the same context, it is notable that ISIS in Syria is not willing to carry out operations involving the use of SVBIEDs (Suicide Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device) or BBIEDs (Body Borne Improvised Explosives Devices), and this can be explained mostly by the group's attempt to reduce its human losses, as this type of operation in Syria has been almost completely absent, also in Iraq the situation looks similar as the number of such operations has decreased by %75, yet, the number of victims and deaths increased significantly from 8 to 34, as it is noted that the vast majority of the victims of these operations in Iraq are civilians regardless of their religious or political affiliations.

It also appears through the analytical study that the organization moved from complex military operations with extensive planning to launching limited operations against small targets or what is known as soft targets, which are exposed in open areas during movements or that do not have air coverage, as it was clear that there were no figures for Victims on the Russian side or on the part of the US forces, whether as a result of the media blackout, and also because both forces move according to a specific military pattern that includes air reconnaissance or air coverage of ground forces in open and hot areas.

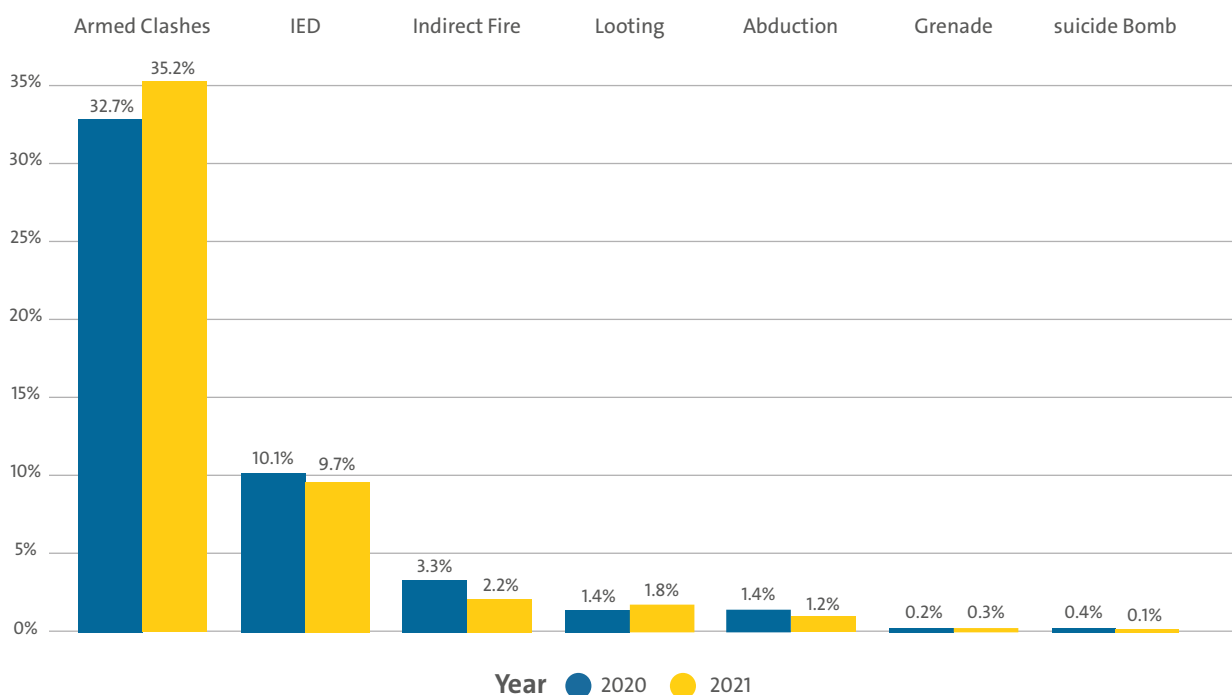
“It is noteworthy that all these 34 victims were killed during the double bombing that targeted the city of Baghdad on January 2021 ,21, which was the only time that the Islamic State carried out a suicide car bomb attack that resulted in deaths and casualties during 2021”

What's Different?

Although the rapid attacks of ISIS remain the most frequent pattern in terms of the type of attacks carried out in Syria and Iraq, followed by attacks that rely on explosives and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in second place, the main difference in 2021 is the decrease in the number of operations carried out with IEDs compared to 2020, with approximately %10 of the total of these operations both in Syria and Iraq. And while there was a slight increase in attacks involving the use of light weapons, especially in Iraq during the years 2020 and 2021, it was noticeable that there was a clear disparity in terms of reliance on the use of medium-range weapons compared to short-range weapons in military operations between Syria and Iraq. The number of artillery shelling operations in Syria nearly doubled, targeting mainly the sites and points of the Iranian-backed militias stationed in Deir Ezzor Governorate, while, on the contrary, artillery shelling operations in Iraq decreased by half between 2020 and 2021, where most of these operations focused on the Baghdad-Khannaqin axis, and this may indicate a kind of transfer of the organization's equipment between Syria and Iraq as a result of the different nature of the land and the distribution of actors on the operations grounds in each of the two countries.

Changes in patterns of ISIS attacks between 2020 and 2021

Figure 4



While the Syrian Army and the militias loyal to it, in addition to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), were the main targets of ISIS's direct military operations in Syria, which were mainly concentrated along the movement and reinforcement routes in the Syrian desert, in addition to the southern side of the Euphrates River in the eastern countryside of Deir-Ez-Zor governorate, in the same context, the Iraqi government forces, both military and police, were the main target of ISIS's direct military operations with more than %50 of the total number of such operations during 2021, the People's Mobilization Forces (PMF) came second with nearly %25 of total number of such operations.



Dozens of casualties in an ISIS attack in Baghdad - New York times

In Depth Analysis ●

On the Syrian side, both rapid attacks, in addition to attacks that rely on explosives and improvised explosive devices, witnessed a remarkable development in 2021, namely, the movement of the Islamic State to target Iranian forces and militias loyal to them more intensively compared to 2020, for example, the number of direct attacks against pro-Iranian militias using light and medium weapons increased from only 3 operations in 2020 to more than 50 operations in 2021, and overall, ISIS operations against various pro-Iranian militias have increased by nearly %125 between 2020 and 2021. This clear change in the parties targeted by ISIS most likely comes as a result to the increased obstacles facing the group in terms of the ability to move and operate in the areas held by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) compared to the abilities in the areas held by the Syrian regime in the eastern desert, moreover, it is difficult to say conclusively whether the various operations against these pro-Iranian militias are actually carried out by ISIS fighters themselves or by local individuals using methods of implementation similar to the group's methods, so these attacks can also be interpreted as an ideological reaction to the proliferation of Shiism carried out by various Iranian actors under cover and protection by those pro-Iranian militias. Around half of these operations took place on the road between Palmyra and Deir Ez-Zor cities, which is considered as one of the most important reinforcement routes for these militias stationed in Deir Ez-Zor countryside, this high number of operations along this road can also be considered as an indication of the increased frequency of these militias' movements along their supply lines between Damascus and Deir Ez-Zor, which can be explained by the tension witnessed in the eastern countryside of Deir Ez-Zor Governorate between various regional actors, especially between militias loyal to Iran and the American forces stationed on the northern bank of the Euphrates River across the pro-Iranian militia's locations. On the other hand, during 2021, the number of operations carried out against civilians working with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) within the self-administration of North-Eastern Syria (NES) decreased slightly compared to the number of such operations in 2020.

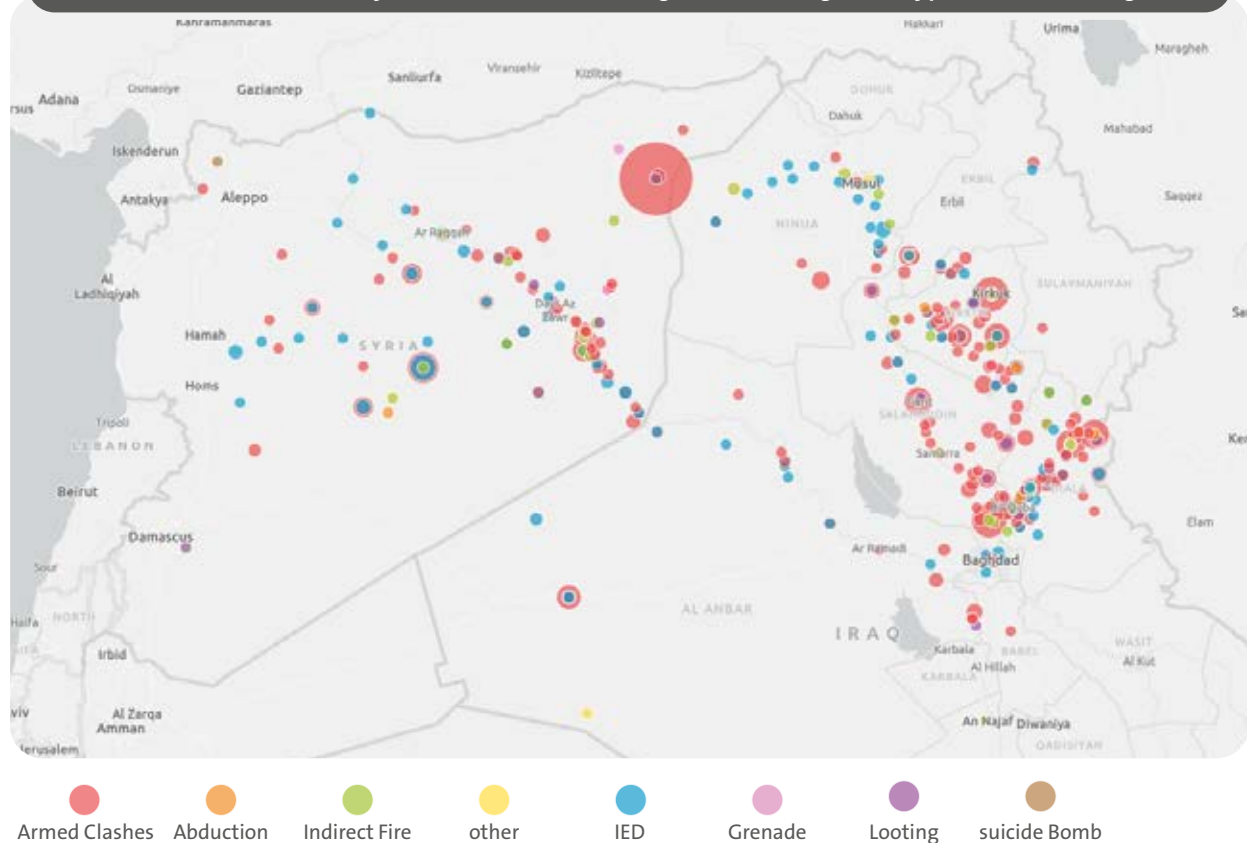
Nevertheless, civilians of all affiliations, whether working with the Syrian regime, self-administration, or other civilians, were the most category targeted by ISIS attacks with

about %30 of the total operations, followed by the SDF and Syrian regime forces with close ratios around %22, and then the pro-Iranian militias. However, despite this distribution in the number of attacks, Syrian regime forces suffered the highest number of casualties by nearly %40 of the total number of casualties in 2021 as a result of ISIS operations.

As for Iraq, there was no significant difference in the dynamics of the executed operations or the targeted parties by ISIS, but the most important observation was the increase in the number of explosions resulting from the remnants of war, which was accompanied by a noticeable increase in the number of civilian casualties as a result of these UXOs between 2020 and 2021, on the other hand during 2021, the increase in the Islamic State attacks against the People's Mobilization Forces (PMF) was the highest compared to the rest of the actors in the Iraqi arena.

The distribution of the activity of the Islamic State during 2021 according to the type of event

Figure 5

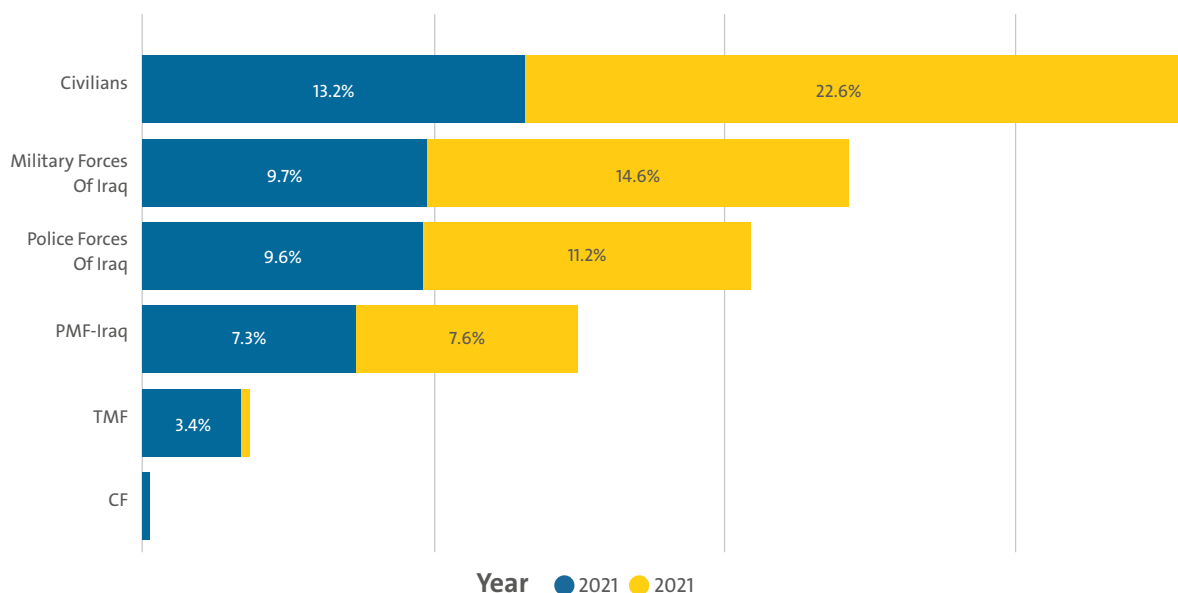


Human Losses Analysis

Although, at first glance, we can say that ISIS's activity has not witnessed a noticeable change in terms of the number of operations carried out in various regions - based on statistics and figures, the organization's operations in 2021 increased only by %1.4 compared to 2020 - but at the same time It seems that the Islamic State used a different approach in tactics and targeting, as despite this equality in the number of operations in general, there was a noticeable increase in the number of victims of the operations launched by the organization, by approximately %28 compared to the number of victims during 2020. It is difficult to predict the main reason for this change and the increase in the number of victims, but this undoubtedly reflects a kind of deterioration in the ability of the various actors to take adequate measures related to the protection of their citizens or fighters and their affiliates against ISIS attacks. Where in Syria, the Syrian regime forces incurred approximately %40 of the total casualties, followed by the pro-Iranian militias with approximately %25, while the Syrian Democratic Forces incurred approximately %10 of the total casualties, while in Iraq approximately %45 of the total number of victims and deaths were Members of the Iraqi government forces, including the military and police forces, and the percentage of civilian casualties was approximately %40 of the total number of victims, while the Iraqi People's Mobilization Forces (PMF) came third with approximately %13 of the total number of victims.

The distribution of victims among the various actors in Iraq during 2020 and 2021

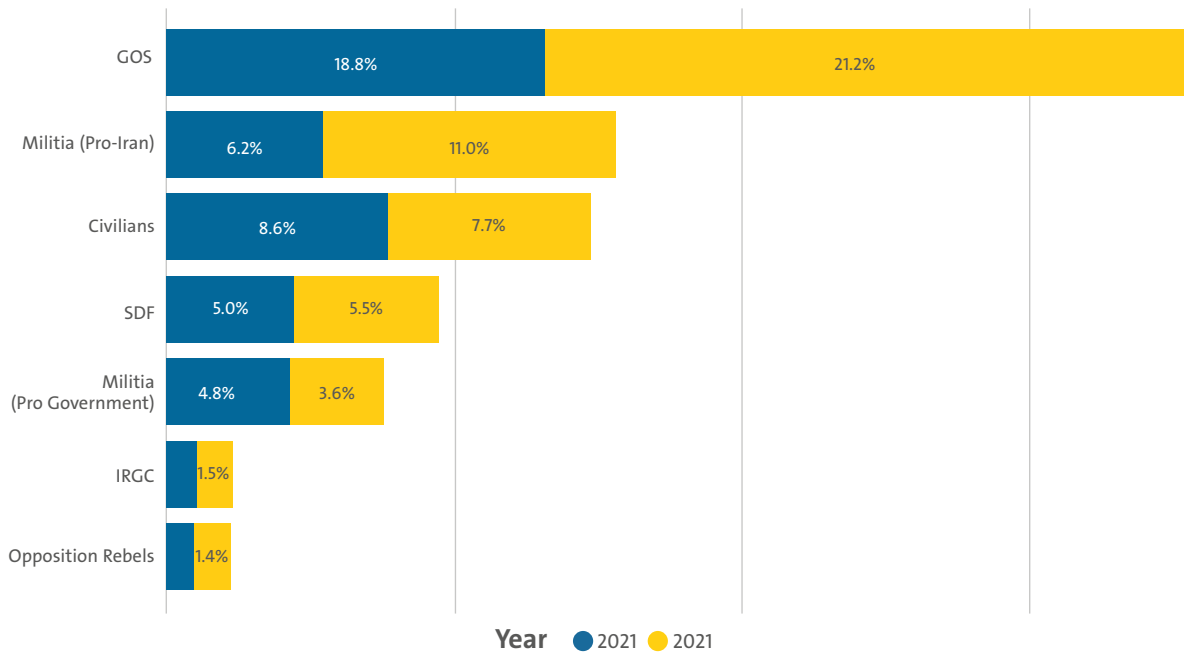
Figure 6



It is worth noting that the year 2021 witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of casualties among the Syrian regime forces, by approximately %11 over the previous year 2020, and it is also noticeable that the number of casualties among the militias loyal to Iran increased by a very high rate compared to 2020, while in Iraq The greatest increase in the number of casualties was the share of civilians, as the number of civilian casualties increased by approximately %75 compared to 2020, while the Iraqi government forces incurred an increase in human losses estimated at %35 compared to their losses during the year 2020.

The distribution of victims among the various actors in Syria during 2020 and 2021

Figure 7



Conclusion

The figures in this analytical study show that it is still too early to judge that ISIS has lost its ability to carry out various operations, as it is clear that it is still able to move and carry out various types of operations, especially in open areas such as the Syrian desert or the routes of military reinforcements and supplies, in addition to the military operations near the border lines between Syria and Iraq to ensure the continuity of operational linkage between its forces and supporters in both countries. It seems clear also that ISIS still retains a tactical ability and capabilities that directly contribute to the operational decisions making in order to implement various types of operations according to the available capacity of the groups in different situations and geographic locations.



✉ info@informagene.com

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