

Militancy/Terrorism

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Syria Alert: Authorities on May 17 target IS cell possessing suicide vests, explosives in Aleppo city; shows risk of terror attacks within major urban areas

Current Situation

Authorities raid IS hideout in Aleppo city

- On May 17, the Syrian Ministry of Interior (MoI) announced that the Aleppo Security Directorate (ASD) raided an Islamic State (IS) hideout in Aleppo city's northeastern neighborhoods.
- One of the specific locales referenced is the Haydariyeh Neighborhood. Unconfirmed reports indicated that operations also occurred in [Karm] al-Jazmati Neighborhood.
- The operation reportedly resulted in clashes. Security forces neutralized three cell members and arrested four. One Public Security Forces (PSF) member was killed in the clashes. According to an unconfirmed report quoting a security official, one terrorist blew himself up during the operation.
- Security forces seized explosives, including an explosive vest. They also confiscated several PSF uniforms.

IS denounces Syrian President al-Sharaa's meeting with US President Trump, calls on foreign fighters to defect to IS

- In an editorial in issue 495 of its weekly al-Naba newsletter, IS condemned Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa's [May 14](#) meeting with US President Donald Trump in Saudi Arabia. The IS denounced al-Sharaa's objective of gaining international favor and cooperating with Western governments.
- The editorial called on foreign fighters who had joined Ahmed al-Sharaa's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to "repent" and "return" to IS. The editorial vowed that the group's door would be "open" to such defectors. It also claimed that IS had established multiple active sleeper cells in Syria's "countryside and the outskirts."

Source: [SANA](#)

Assessments & Forecast:

1. This comes amid the IS' known objective of undermining the President al-Sharaa-led Syrian government by conducting terror attacks in and around major urban areas. In [January](#), authorities announced the arrest of an IS cell planning a bombing attack against the prominent Shiite shrine in Sayeda Zainab, south of Damascus. Warnings from the US State Department in [April](#) and [March](#) on potential imminent attacks in the capital amid Islamic and Christian holidays further underscored this, highlighting Washington's high threat perception concerning the risk of terrorism in major Syrian cities.
2. The latest security operation in Aleppo city is notable given that signs of a concrete IS operational footprint within the city were uncommon thus far. The northern Syrian city is located at a relatively long distance from the IS' traditional strongholds in eastern and central Syria's desert areas. The presence of a multi-member terrorist cell in Aleppo city indicates the group's capacity and efforts to infiltrate major and presumably well-policed Syrian cities that are distant from the militant group's entrenchment regions. This risk of terrorists seeking to enter government-controlled Aleppo Province was shown by a [January 10](#) statement by the MoI announcing the seizure of an explosive-laden vehicle that unspecified operatives sought to smuggle into the region from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled territory in northeastern Syria. Against this background, the IS cell's presence within Aleppo city demonstrates an elevated risk emanating from jihadist groups' attempts to orchestrate attacks in Syria's second most important city.
3. The fact that the IS cell members possessed explosives, including suicide belts, demonstrates that an attack was possibly imminent and could have materialized in the form of a suicide bombing or a multi-pronged attack. The security forces' confiscation of PSP uniforms suggests their intention to impersonate members of the Syrian government's security apparatus. This was possibly based on the terrorists' effort to obtain greater freedom of movement to gather intelligence on targets and/or conduct attacks after infiltrating sensitive government-linked sites or areas of the city. It also points to the jihadist group's significant procurement mechanism.
4. Regardless of the thwarted plot, the IS' editorial underscores the Sunni jihadist group's objective of capitalizing on disagreements and grievances among foreign and local fighters who had joined the HTS in recent years based on Sunni-jihadist motives and are now disillusioned with President al-Sharaa's policies. Namely, this pertains to his purported evolution into a pragmatic statesman pursuing good ties with "Unislamic" and Western governments, which goes against Sunni jihadist convictions that underpinned his legacy and rise to power. The IS's claim that the group's door was open for any fighters seeking to defect to the IS highlights the group's aim to motivate such operatives, likely including members of the Syrian government's HTS-dominated security apparatus, to join IS, and conduct attacks within government-controlled territory in retaliation for President al-Sharaa's alleged betrayal of the Sunni jihadist mission.
5. **FORECAST:** IS' propaganda may resonate with some foreign and local fighters who remain in Syria. This is likely to pose a challenge to al-Sharaa's government, which is still trying to establish tighter organizational structures and allegiances. In this context, the risk of terrorism is likely to remain elevated in the coming weeks and months throughout the country, and especially in large cities, which constitute desired targets for jihadists.
6. **FORECAST:** In light of growing signs of IS's effort to conduct attacks and regain operational capabilities within major urban areas, the Syrian government's security apparatus will likely work

to upgrade its counter-terror capabilities. This will likely include measures such as more sophisticated intelligence gathering and arrest operations targeting suspected IS operatives and monitoring propaganda activities online.

- 7. FORECAST:** Security forces will seek to gain actionable intelligence on further backers or cell members from the arrestees. They are likely to carry out additional raids in Aleppo City and other urban areas over the coming days and weeks.

Recommendations:

1. Due to the volatile security environment, continue avoiding all travel to Syria at the current juncture.
2. Those operating or residing in Damascus and other major cities are advised to keep a low profile and minimize non-critical movements. Remain cognizant of the threat of terrorism.
3. Avoid the vicinity of government/military sites, on-duty security forces, and sites visited by foreigners, given the elevated threat of attacks against such assets.