



## COI QUERY

Country of Origin	SYRIA
Main subject	Security situation and access to the basic needs in Al-Sukhnah town and in Tadmur district overall, between 1 January-31 December 2020.
Question(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What was the security situation in Al-Sukhnah town, and in Tadmur district overall, between 1 January-31 December 2020?</li><li>2. What was the level of access to basic needs like health care, housing, electricity, water and food, and infrastructure, in Al-Sukhnah town, and in Tadmur district overall, between 1 January-31 December 2020?</li></ol>
Date of completion	13 January 2021
Query Code	Q33-2020
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	N/A

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The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. The answer was finalised on 13 January 2021. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.

# COI QUERY RESPONSE

## Background

Tadmur district is a part of Syria's Homs governorate, and it includes the two sub-districts of Tadmur and Al-Sukhnah. The administrative city of the district is Tadmur, neighbouring the ancient town of Palmyra. While it is common for the names 'Tadmur' and 'Palmyra' to be used interchangeably when describing the same geographical location, the term 'Tadmur' is used in this paper, except when referring to the site of the ancient town. Al-Sukhnah town is located in Al-Sukhnah sub-district.<sup>1</sup>

For detailed information on Homs governorate, see [EASO Syria Security situation Country of Origin Information Report](#), pp. 117-132.

The security situation in the eastern part of Homs governorate, including Tadmur district, during the reference period, has been very much linked to the increased presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) extremist group in Syria's central desert (the 'Badia').<sup>2</sup> As early as May 2015, it was reported that ISIL had captured 'all the army posts' between Al-Sukhnah and Palmyra, with Al-Sukhnah town being taken on 13 May 2015.<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 2017, the Syrian government launched offensives against ISIL in central Syria, and at the beginning of August 2017, government troops and allied forces took Al-Sukhnah, at that time 'the last major ISIL-held town' in Homs governorate.<sup>4</sup> The town was considered an important strategic asset by the Syrian government, as 'a gateway between key Syrian provinces', and a crucial point for the army to break ISIL's grip on the city of Deir al-Zour. At the same time, Al-Sukhnah town was ISIL's supply hub between Homs and Deir al-Zour, and to other areas in the eastern countryside of Hama governorate.<sup>5</sup> After ISIL launched a brief counter-offensive, government forces recaptured the territory and claimed the fall of the extremist group in the region in November 2017.<sup>6</sup>

While, as of 2020, Homs governorate remains under the control of the Syrian government, ISIL fighters remain in central Syria and have, since 2018, settled 'on the eastern half' of Homs governorate, where they have attacked government targets in various areas, including Tadmur, Al-Sukhnah and Humaymah.<sup>7</sup>

## Security situation

According to a January 2020 report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, at that time, the security situation in the centre of the country remained 'volatile'. The Commission reported that, between 11 July 2019 and 10 January 2020, ISIL attacked targets in several areas, including 'around Al-Sukhnah and Tadmur', which had 'a significant impact on the security and

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<sup>1</sup> UN OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic - Subnational Administrative Boundaries, 14 October 2020, [url](#); UNHCR Syria, HOMS SO End of year 2017 Factsheet, February 2018, [url](#), p. 2; Oxford Reference, Palmyra, n.d., [url](#); Business Standard, IS jihadists threaten Syria's ancient Palmyra: monitor, 14 May 2015, [url](#); Reach, Syrian Cities Damage Atlas, 16 March 2019, [url](#), p. 61

<sup>2</sup> MEI, ISIS's dramatic escalation in Syria and Iraq, 4 May 2020, [url](#); MEI, US Policy and the Resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, 21 October 2020, [url](#); National News (The), Fears of ISIS resurgence as Syria attacks escalate, 3 September 2020, [url](#); Asharq Al-Awsat, Almost Two Years After Defeat, ISIS Resurfaces in Syria's Badia, 11 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> Business Standard, IS jihadists threaten Syria's ancient Palmyra: monitor, 14 May 2015, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> Al Jazeera, Syrian army takes ISIL-held town of al-Sukhna in Homs, 6 August 2017, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> Xinhua, Spotlight: Battle to break siege on Syria's Deir al-Zour imminent as IS loses Al-Sukhnah city, 14 August 2017, [url](#); MEI, I.R.G.C. Outlet: Seizure of al-Sukhnah Helps Regime Operations in Raqqah and Deir Ezzor, 11 August 2017, [url](#)

<sup>6</sup> MEI, "A Force They Haven't Seen Before": Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria, 15 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>7</sup> UN OCHA, Syrian Arab Republic COVID-19 Response Update No.13, 9 December 2020, [url](#), p. 1; Carnegie Middle East Center, Homs, a Divided Incarnation of Syria's Unresolved Conflict, 15 May 2020, [url](#); MEI, "A Force They Haven't Seen Before": Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria, 15 April 2020, [url](#)

freedom of movement of civilians’.<sup>8</sup>

The subsequent report of the International Commission of August 2020 stated that, between 11 January-1 July 2020, ISIL ‘remained active’ in central Syria, having launched attacks on government targets in the Al-Sukhnah region during January and February 2020, to which the Syrian government responded by increasing security in eastern Homs governorate.<sup>9</sup>

Several sources note the increase of ISIL attacks in central Syria, predominantly in the area around Al-Sukhnah. On 9 April 2020, the Middle East Monitor reported that ISIL had ‘taken over’ Al-Sukhnah town. Also, on 9 April 2020, Garda reported that ‘suspected’ ISIL members had killed 27 government soldiers in Al-Sukhnah, and had ‘captured areas of the town’. According to the Middle East Institute, ISIL has ‘erupted’ across central Syria at the beginning of April 2020.<sup>10</sup> In August 2020, the Terrorism Research Initiative further noted that ISIL has ‘stepped up its operations’ in that ‘valuable’ area, since it contains ‘important gas fields as well as the highway M20 that connects Deir al-Zour to Homs and Damascus. Equally important, the desert itself provides the insurgents with a perfect spot to hide in and operate’. The same source states that the desert area that extends from eastern Homs to Iraq provides ‘favourable geographical and socio-political conditions to help jihadists survive and linger on’, leading ISIL to send its members in the ‘area spreading from Al-Sukhnah/Central Syria and Deir al-Zour/Eastern Syria to Anbar and Diyala provinces in Iraq’.<sup>11</sup>

In November 2020, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that, at the beginning of that month, ‘regime forces and loyal militias’ had brought ‘reinforcement, which comprised military vehicles, weapons, ammunition and soldiers’, to Al-Sukhnah desert in eastern Homs, in order to counter ISIL fighters in the area.<sup>12</sup>

## Security Incidents

According to the latest data published by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), between 1 January-31 December 2020 there were 10 041 violent incidents recorded in Syria, of which 97 were recorded in Homs governorate.<sup>13</sup>

In Tadmur district, there were 63 violent events recorded by ACLED during the reference period, of which: 36 were recorded as battles, 22 as explosions/incidents of remote violence, and 5 as incidents of violence against civilians.

With regards to actors, the 63 violent events recorded between 1 January-31 December 2020 in Tadmur district by ACLED, were attributed to:

- Military Forces of Syria (30 events); ISIL (12); various armed groups and militias (11); Military Forces of Russia (7); Military Forces of Israel (2), and the Global Coalition Against Daesh (1).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 28 January 2020, [url](#), para 16

<sup>9</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), para 6

<sup>10</sup> MEI, “A Force They Haven’t Seen Before”: Insurgent ISIS in Central Syria, 15 April 2020, [url](#); MEMO, Daesh takeover Al-Sukhnah town in Syria’s Homs, 9 April 2020, [url](#); Garda, Syria: Government soldiers killed in suspected Islamic State attack near Deir Al-Zor May 7, 7 May 2020, [url](#); Enab Baladi, Al-Sukhnah... “Umm al-Qura” where “Islamic State” is trying to expand influence, 4 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>11</sup> Perspectives on Terrorism, ISIS Resurgence in Al Hawl Camp and Human Smuggling Enterprises in Syria, August 2020, [url](#), pp. 49, 50

<sup>12</sup> SOHR, After losing nearly 150 soldiers in a month, Regime forces and loyal militias bring in military reinforcement to repel ISIS attacks in the desert, 1 Nov 2020, [url](#)

<sup>13</sup> ACLED, Data Export Tool - Syria, accessed 13 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> ACLED, Data Export Tool - Syria, accessed 13 January 2021, [url](#)

When referring to Al-Sukhnah town, there were 30 violent events recorded by ACLED during the reference period, of which: 21 were recorded as battles, 7 as explosions/incidents of remote violence, and 2 as incidents of violence against civilians.

With regards to actors, the 30 violent events recorded between 1 January-31 December 2020 in Al-Sukhnah town by ACLED, were attributed to:

- Military Forces of Syria (18 events); ISIL (8); various armed groups and militias (3); and the Military Forces of Israel (1).<sup>15</sup>

Some of the indicative security incidents that took place in the region during the reference period include:

- On 9 April 2020, ISIL fighters attacked government positions in Al-Sukhnah area. At least 32 'regime soldiers and loyalists' were reportedly killed.<sup>16</sup>
- On 14 April 2020, the SOHR reported that two children were killed and another one was injured, by the explosion of a landmine in Tadmur city.<sup>17</sup>
- On 20 April 2020, media outlets reported that government air defence systems intercepted Israeli aerial strikes on Tadmur city, where Iranian backed-militias were stationed.<sup>18</sup>
- On 30 April 2020, six government soldiers were killed by a landmine explosion on a road in the area of Hamima, east of Al-Sukhnah.<sup>19</sup>
- On 7 May 2020, an ISIL attack on government forces in the area between Al-Sukhnah and Al-Shawlah was reported, leaving 11 soldiers and militiamen dead.<sup>20</sup>
- On 17 May 2020, ISIL executed four people in Al-Sukhnah area. They were accused of 'spying for the government'.<sup>21</sup>
- On 10 June 2020, ISIL members attacked a government checkpoint in the countryside of Al-Sukhnah town, killing four soldiers.<sup>22</sup>
- On 24 June 2020, media outlets quoted Syria's official news agency SANA report that Israel missiles had targeted several parts of Syria, including a military outpost in the vicinity of Al-Sukhnah town.<sup>23</sup>
- On 12-13 July 2020, Russian planes launched several airstrikes on ISIL positions in Al-Sukhnah desert, as a response to the group's 'escalating resurgence'.<sup>24</sup>
- On 23 July 2020, a 'broad displacement' of civilians, caused by fighting between government forces and ISIL members in Al-Sukhnah countryside, was reported.<sup>25</sup>
- On July 28, some 40 members of ISIL 'attempted to raid a warehouse on the outskirts of Al-Sukhnah'.<sup>26</sup>
- On 11 August 2020, two children were killed as a landmine exploded in an area east of Tadmur city.<sup>27</sup>
- On 29 October 2020, a Syrian Air Force pilot was shot and killed while he was 'driving on the

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<sup>15</sup> ACLED, Data Export Tool - Syria, accessed 13 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>16</sup> SOHR, Battles of Al-Sukhnah, 24 hours on: nearly 60 fatalities of ISIS and regime forces, large regime reinforcement brought into conflict zones, and Russian jets continue bombing ISIS positions, 10 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> SOHR, Two children killed in explosion of old landmine in Palmyra, 14 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>18</sup> Reuters, Syrian air defences intercept Israeli aerial strikes on Palmyra: state media, 20 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>19</sup> SOHR, ISIS resurgence: cells attack regime military bus in Homs, killing six soldier, including high-ranking officer, 30 April 2020, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> SOHR, ISIS resurgence | 11 regime soldiers killed in new ISIS attack in Syrian desert, 7 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>21</sup> SOHR, ISIS resurgence | Four people executed for "spying for regime", 17 May 2020, [url](#)

<sup>22</sup> SOHR, ISIS resurgence | Members attack regime forces leaving casualties in deserts of Homs and Hama, 10 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>23</sup> Pars Today, Syrian air defenses respond to Israeli aggression in multiple areas, 24 June 2020, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> SOHR, Syrian desert | Russian jets renew intensive airstrikes on ISIS positions, 12 July 2020, [url](#); SOHR, Syrian desert | Russian jets bombard ISIS positions in Al-Sukhnah, amid renewed battles between regime forces and ISIS, 13 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> SOHR, Syria desert | ISIS unleashes new attack on Al-Sukhnah, while civilians flee from the area, 23 July 2020, [url](#)

<sup>26</sup> Center for Global Policy, Strengthening and Expanding: ISIS' Central Syria Campaign, 19 August 2020, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> SOHR, Old ordnance | Landmine explodes killing two children, east of Palmyra in regime-controlled areas in Homs countryside, 11 August 2020, [url](#)

Homs road in the desert region east of Homs'. While the attackers were not identified, it is alleged that these were members of ISIL.<sup>28</sup>

- On 3 December 2020, members of the 'Russian-backed Al-Quds Brigade militia' opened fire on residents in 'various areas around the city of Al-Sukhnah' and subsequently stole livestock.<sup>29</sup>
- On 7 December 2020, the SOHR reported the displacement of residents from the Jabal Al-Ammour area in the western countryside of Al-Sukhnah town, due to attacks 'by gangs affiliated to regime forces and Russian-backed militiamen'.<sup>30</sup>

## Civilian casualties

During 2020, the SOHR documented 1 528 civilian casualties, including 231 children.<sup>31</sup> According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), civilians in Syria were killed through 'shelling, airstrikes, improvised explosive devices and explosive remnants of war, armed clashes and targeted killings at the hands of various parties to the conflict or by unidentified perpetrators'.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, between 1 January-31 December 2020 ACLED recorded 1 961 civilian casualties across Syria due to violent events. Of those, 34 casualties were recorded in Tadmur district, caused by 7 violent events that were attributed to: Unidentified armed groups (3); ISIL (2); and Pro-Iran militias (2).<sup>33</sup>

Referring to Al-Sukhnah town, between 1 January-31 December 2020 ACLED recorded 6 civilian casualties, caused by 2 violent events that were both attributed to ISIL.<sup>34</sup>

In its August 2020 report, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria highlighted the prevalence of 'detention-related human rights violations'. According to the report, the Commission identified 'ongoing patterns of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture and death in detention'. Between 11 January-1 July 2020, 'at least 34 men, one woman and 10 children disappeared' in governorates including Homs, and involved 'government security forces, including the Military Intelligence Directorate and the Military Police'.<sup>35</sup>

## Access to Services

With regards to the population's access to food, no information regarding Tadmur district specifically could be found during the reference period. At national level, the WFP reported in March 2020 that people in areas including Homs were using negative coping mechanisms to deal with depleted income levels, such as 'reducing the number of meals from 3 to 2 meals in a day'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Spotlight on Global Jihad (October 29- November 4, 2020), 5 November 2020, [url](#)

<sup>29</sup> SOHR, Homs desert | Russian-backed "al-Quds Brigade" militia steal about 1,000 sheep, 5 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>30</sup> SOHR, After looting their sheep | Bedouin families displace from Jabal Al-Ammour in eastern Homs, 7 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> SOHR, Lowest yearly death toll ever | 6,817 people killed across Syria in 2020, of whom 22.4% are civilians, 31 December 2020, [url](#)

<sup>32</sup> UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para 18

<sup>33</sup> ACLED, Curated Data – Anti-Civilian Violence Syria, accessed 13 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>34</sup> ACLED, Curated Data – Anti-Civilian Violence Syria, accessed 13 January 2021, [url](#)

<sup>35</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#), paras 20,21

<sup>36</sup> WFP, SYRIA - Review on the impact of rising food prices, Food Security Update, March 2020, [url](#), p. 3

According to the August 2020 report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, during the reporting period of 11 January 2020-1 July 2020, ‘the country’s economic crisis accelerated’, and resulted in ‘rapidly rising food prices, food insecurity and growing levels of poverty’.<sup>37</sup>

In its August 2020 report, the UN Secretary-General quoted figures published by the WFP, who recorded a ‘48 % increase in the average price of a standard reference food basket’ between May-June 2020, while ‘the year-on-year increase in the price of a standard reference food basket in July 2020 stood at 261 %’. The same source reported that, at national level, an estimated 9.3 million people were ‘food insecure – the highest number ever recorded – with 2.2 million additional people at risk of becoming food insecure’.<sup>38</sup> A June 2020 report by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) quoted a returning IDP to Homs, who stated that there were no ‘changes in services and livelihoods, and prices are still high’.<sup>39</sup>

According to the UN Secretary-General report of 14 October 2020, the ‘price of a standard reference food basket remained nearly 22 times the pre-crisis average’, while highlighting reports of bread shortages during September 2020, ‘largely owing to the scarcity of wheat flour across the country and electricity cuts, as well as the ongoing fuel crisis’.<sup>40</sup> The same source stated that ‘fuel shortages prompted queues at public gas stations, with reports of people waiting for two days in Homs [...] Black market prices for fuel surged by 50 % [...] and multiple scheduled aid convoys in Homs and Hama were delayed in September 2020 [...] Fuel shortages are of particular concern as temperatures drop.’<sup>41</sup> A 22 December 2020 report by FAO stated that Syria was facing a ‘severe shortage of essentials, including bread at subsidized prices, medicines and fuel’.<sup>42</sup>

With regards to access to healthcare or housing, no information regarding the availability of services in Tadmur district could be found during the reference period. While past reports have highlighted that, at national level, by 2017 around half of Syria’s physicians had left, as of March 2020, the figure had increased, as ‘up to 70 % of the health workforce’ had reportedly left the country.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, a 2019 PHR report showed that the Syrian government and its allies had ‘systematically targeted health facilities and health workers as part of a wider strategy of war aimed at breaking civilian populations and forcing them into submission’.<sup>44</sup> The same source documented the accounts of health care professionals in Homs, who suffered or witnessed torture, arbitrary detention, or sexual violence.<sup>45</sup>

Regarding physical facilities, in Tadmur, some 50 % of health facilities had been destroyed, and further 25 % had been partially damaged, as of 2017.<sup>46</sup> At national level, a recent report of October

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<sup>37</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, [url](#) para 9

<sup>38</sup> UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 20 August 2020, [url](#), para 4

<sup>39</sup> Joint Agency NGO Report, Into the unknown: Listening to Syria’s displaced in the search for durable solutions, June 2020, [url](#), p. 16

<sup>40</sup> UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para 4

<sup>41</sup> UN Security Council, Implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017), 2401 (2018), 2449 (2018), 2504 (2020) and 2533 (2020), 14 October 2020, [url](#), para 5

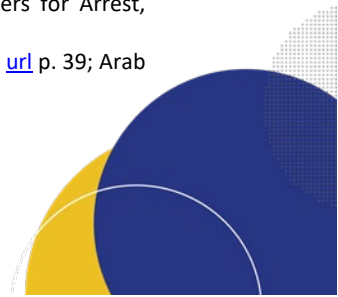
<sup>42</sup> FAO, GIEWS Country Brief on Syrian Arab Republic, 22 December 2002, [url](#)

<sup>43</sup> UN OCHA, Syria anniversary press release, 6 March 2020, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> PHR, “My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor” How the Syrian Government Targets Health Workers for Arrest, Detention, and Torture, December 2019, [url](#), p. 3

<sup>45</sup> PHR, “My Only Crime Was That I Was a Doctor” How the Syrian Government Targets Health Workers for Arrest, Detention, and Torture, December 2019, [url](#), pp. 18, 21, 26

<sup>46</sup> World Bank, The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 10 July 2017, [url](#) p. 39; Arab Weekly (The), The high cost of Syria’s destruction, 24 September 2017, [url](#)





2020 by WHO showed that 49 % of public hospitals, and 48 % of public health centres, were 'fully functional' across Syria.<sup>47</sup>

Concerning housing, past reports have shown that for instance, 32.8 % of the housing stock in Tadmur had been damaged, and 8.6 % had been destroyed, by 2017.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, at the time Al-Sukhnah was recaptured by government forces in 2017, a media source stated that 'the destruction in the city was immense, with destroyed buildings and blown up concrete', while 'holes were seen everywhere on ground'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> WHO SYRIA, Summary Of Key Indicators, October 2020, [url](#), page 3

<sup>48</sup> World Bank, The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria, 10 July 2017, [url](#) p. v

<sup>49</sup> Xinhua, Spotlight: Battle to break siege on Syria's Deir al-Zour imminent as IS loses Al-Sukhnah city, 14 August 2017, [url](#)

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