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# Damascus intensifies anti-ISIS crackdown after spate of attacks

Syrian authorities seek to maintain US support as Trump ally warns of radical elements in security forces

**AMR MOSTAFA,  
LIZZIE PORTER and  
KHALED YACOB OWEIS**

Syria has seized drones, explosives and firearms during raids against suspected ISIS cells across the country in an operation officials said confirms the government's ability to fight against extremists.

The operations came days after two deadly attacks attributed to the group. Three Americans were killed on Saturday in an assault in Palmyra, a day before four Syrians were killed in an ISIS-claimed attack in Idlib.

The attacks were the latest setback to Syrian President Ahmad Al Shara as he works to restore order in Syria. While US envoy Tom Barrack has said Washington continues to back the government in Damascus, two Republican politicians yesterday voiced support for Israel's calls to carve out a buffer zone in Syrian territory.

Syrian officials played down those remarks as they announced moves to reinforce security. The Interior Ministry said government troops arrested eight suspected members of an ISIS cell alleged to have carried out attacks in Idlib and Aleppo. The ministry said it had intensified its investigations after the attack in Idlib, leading to the identification of a vehicle used by the suspects.

"Through monitoring and surveillance operations, security units were able to arrest three individuals, while another was neutralised. During interrogations, the detainees confessed to the involvement of four other individuals who participated in carrying out the terrorist operations," the ministry said.

In a second operation, Syrian security troops arrested five suspects, who later confessed

to carrying out three "terrorist operations", including the killings on Sunday, another assault in Idlib and an attack on customs officers in Aleppo province.

Explosive belts, silencers, missiles and machineguns were confiscated during the raid. Security forces later seized drones and explosives from an alleged ISIS hideout in Damascus, arresting one suspect.

The operation in the capital "confirms the ability of the security services to deal with terrorist threats", said Damascus province security chief Brig Gen Osama Atika.

Syria has made considerable efforts to gain US support since Mr Al Shara took power last year and, in May, persuaded President Donald Trump to waive sanctions.

The US wants Syria and Israel to reach an agreement to calm tension.

However, Israel is seeking a demilitarised buffer zone stretching far into Syrian territory, all the way to Damascus.

Lindsey Graham, a Republican US senator, said Israel was "right to insist on security zones" and warned that Syrian security personnel could be "more radical than they are being billed". A member of Syria's security forces was blamed for the attack in Palmyra.

"While I support trying to help this new government in Syria, we have to do it with eyes wide open," Mr Graham said.

Walid Phares, a former adviser to Mr Trump, said a demilitarised zone should be part of any agreement between Israel and Damascus, along with "self-determination" for the Druze minority in the south of Syria and the Kurds in

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## UAE and Azerbaijan seek to boost ties



President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan receives Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan, at Adnec yesterday, with the leaders discussing ways to boost ties as part of the comprehensive strategic partnership between their nations. They also attended the inauguration of Games of the Future Abu Dhabi 2025, alongside senior UAE officials including Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed, Vice President, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the Presidential Court Abdulla Al Neyadi / UAE Presidential Court

## Ronaldo, Maldini and Jabeur among stars to speak at sport summit in Dubai

**ALI AL SHOUK**

Former Brazilian footballer Ronaldo and Russian UFC legend Khabib Nurmagomedov will be among the key figures participating in the World Sports Summit in Dubai.

Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad, commander of Bahrain's Royal Guard and the head of the country's Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, is to be among the key speakers at the summit, along with Nasser Al Khelaiifi, president of Paris Saint-Germain, and Philippine boxer and former senator Manny Pacquiao.

The World Sports Summit, organised by the Dubai Sports

Council, will be held at the Madinat Jumeirah on December 29 and 30.

Khalfan Belhouli, vice chairman of the council, said the summit will feature 70 key speakers representing various sporting bodies, teams and federations to discuss the future of the industry in the context of economic, legislative, regulatory and social frameworks.

"We are expecting to have 1,500 attendees. It will be the largest sports gathering in the world," Mr Belhouli told a media briefing yesterday.

Leading sports stars, experts and decision-makers will take part in 20 panel discussions. "Dubai is an attraction hub

for everybody. With the Dubai magic, especially in the December months, legends and athletes come with their families to enjoy their holiday. They will also come and have conversations with like-minded people in the summit," Mr Belhouli said.

"About 90 per cent of the athletes come to spend their holiday in the emirate."

The council did not reveal all of the speakers, but did announce 10 further names, including Dr Ahmad Al Falasi, Minister of Sport, former Italian footballer Paolo Maldini, Tunisian tennis player Ons Jabeur and former American football player Reggie Bush.

Eisa Sharif, the council's director of sports events, said the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Sports Award would also form a key part of the summit.

He said "17 categories will be awarded to the athletes and legends of sport" during the event.

"We have a strong foundation and very strong leadership to continue giving us the support and build a long-lasting legacy," he added.

Formerly known as the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Creative Sports Award, the honour was renamed to reflect its growing global role in advancing the industry.

## UAE to change age cut-off date for schools

**CHRIS MAXWELL**

The UAE is to update its age cut-off date for kindergarten and school admissions, starting from the next academic year.

Authorities said the change, which will affect all schools and kindergartens whose academic calendars begin in August or September, would "ensure fair access to early education through unified admission criteria" and align the UAE with international standards.

The Ministry of Education yesterday said the age eligibility cut-off date for pupils from

pre-kindergarten – or foundation stage in UK-curriculum schools – to Grade 1 (Year 2 in the UK curriculum) would be moved from August 31 to December 31 in the relevant admission year.

The ruling, approved by the Education, Human Development and Community Development Council, will affect children aged between two and six at the start of a school year.

The updated policy means that children aged two can be admitted to pre-kindergarten, provided they turn three by December 31. Schools that

begin studies in April – including those using the Indian curriculum – will continue to use March 31 as the cut-off point.

Pupils already attending kindergartens and schools will not be affected.

The move is supported by national and international research assessing child readiness and development, including cognitive, socio-emotional, language and motor skills.

A national dataset of more than 39,000 children was analysed, including those who had enrolled at ages three, four and five under the previous system.

The academic performance data revealed no major disadvantages from early enrolment.

"The updated policy is designed to ensure greater fairness and consistency in enrolment, facilitate smoother transitions between different curricula and better match early education expectations to age-appropriate developmental stages," state news agency Wam reported.

