

TRENDS IN THE TERRORIST THREATS AGAINST TÜRKİYE AND ITS COUNTERTERRORISM MEASURES

To assess the magnitude of the terrorist threats facing Türkiye and the nature and effectiveness of its counterterrorism (CT) campaign, this analysis is divided into two parts. The first part presents an overview of the terrorist threats facing the country by the major terrorist groups that threaten it. The second part provides an overview of the government's security agencies involved in the CT campaign and an assessment of their response measures vis-à-vis the spectrum of terrorist threats facing the country.

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TPQ

Fall 2022

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Part I: The Terrorist Threats Facing Türkiye

Türkiye, with an estimated eighty-five million population, faces a high threat from terrorist attacks by primarily domestic Kurdish insurgents (many of whom are also based in their safe havens in neighboring Syria and Iraq). Islamic State (IS) operatives present a second terrorist threat, some of whom are based in Türkiye (as either domestically radicalized Islamists or mostly based in Syria).

In another type of terrorist threat, although Iranian security services have not conducted a terrorist attack against their adversaries residing in Türkiye, the Israeli government has been concerned that Iranian operatives might attack Israeli businessmen and tourists in the country. Iran's motivation to attack Israelis in Türkiye was due to retaliation against Israel's targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and security officials in Iran and Syria. As a result, in 2022, for example, on May 30, June 13, and November 13, Israel's National Security Council issued travel warnings to Israeli businessmen and tourists in Türkiye to maintain the highest security vigilance following reported plots by Iranian operatives to target Israelis in the country.

Specifically, Türkiye faces terrorist threats from two primary types of adversaries. The first and longest running threat is presented by Kurdish terrorist groups, particularly the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK), also known as Kurdistan Workers Party, and the Turkish Freedom Falcons (TAK). The second threat, from the Islamic State (IS – also known as ISIL or Daesh), emanates from the neighboring Syrian civil war, which escalated in 2011, and with several hundred thousand Syrian refugees flowing into neighboring Türkiye, some of whom were radicalized into IS-type militancy.

While most terrorist attacks in Türkiye can be attributed to their terrorist group organizers, some have been difficult to attribute. In the latest example, on 13 November 2022, it was reported that an explosive-filled bag was detonated by a female operative on Istiklal Avenue in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district, killing six people and injuring 81 others.¹ No terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the attack, although the Turkish Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, formally accused the PKK of responsibility for the attack.²

¹ Aljazeera, "Explosion in the Heart of Turkey's Istanbul kills 6, wounds 81," (13 November 2022). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/13/turkey-istanbul-explosion-istiklal-several-injured>

² The Guardian, "Istanbul Bombing: 46 detained as Turkey Minister Blames Kurdish Separatists," (14 November 2022). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/14/istanbul-bombing-suspect-arrested-as-turkey-minister-blames-kurdish-separatists>

Kurdish Terrorist Threats

Kurds constitute the largest ethnic minority in Türkiye, estimated in 2022 to constitute 18 percent of the country's population.³ The Kurds are indigenous inhabitants of south-eastern Türkiye (with neighboring Kurdish communities in north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq, north-western Iran, and south-western Armenia).

“The YPG are the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD). While they are considered by Western governments as effective forces against IS in Syria, they are regarded by Türkiye as an extension of the PKK, resulting in Turkish cross-border military attacks against them.”

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, an increasingly significant portion of Türkiye's ethnic Kurds began to demand cultural, linguistic, and political rights as Kurds. The unwillingness of successive Turkish governments to resolve these demands was one of the factors leading to the creation of several Kurdish insurgent groups in the late 1970s. The human toll of this conflict has been high, with an estimated 40,000 people killed in Turkish-Kurdish clashes from the mid-1980s through early 2016.⁴

The Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK)

The Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), also known as Kurdistan Workers Party, is the most prominent Kurdish terrorist group. It was established in November 1978 by Abdullah Ocalan, who became its long-time leader. A Marxist-Leninist group, it called for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state within Türkiye. The PKK launched its insurgency in August 1984. In the 1990s, the PKK scaled back on its demands for an independent Kurdish state, advocating for greater autonomy for the Kurds. In 1999, the PKK experienced a major blow when Ocalan was arrested and jailed for treason. As of late 2022, he was still imprisoned.

At its peak in 1993, the PKK numbered some 10,000 fighters and approximately 60,000 part-time fighters, which by 2000 had reduced to between 3,000 and 4,000

³ Fanack, “Population of Turkey,” (11 August 2020). <https://fanack.com/turkey/population-of-turkey/>

⁴ Berkay Mandıracı, “Turkey's PKK Conflict: The Death Toll,” *Crisis Group*, 20 July 2016. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkey-s-pkk-conflict-death-toll>

fighters. In 2022 it was estimated there were approximately 5,000 PKK operatives, with most of them located in northern Iraq, along the Turkish-Iraqi border, with others located in Syria, along the border with Türkiye.

Following three decades of conflict with the PKK, in late 2012 the Turkish government and PKK leader, Ocalan, initiated a peace process, which led to a cease-fire around March 2013. However, in July 2015, the PKK announced an end to the cease-fire and re-started its armed attacks against Türkiye's security forces and military bases.⁵ This led to large-scale operations by Turkish security forces against the PKK, whether inside Türkiye or across the border with Syria.

Inside northern Syria, along the Turkish border, there are Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG) fighters, where they have been carving out a self-declared autonomous region known as Rojava. The YPG are the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD). While they are considered by Western governments as effective forces against IS in Syria, they are regarded by Türkiye as an extension of the PKK, resulting in Turkish cross-border military attacks against them.

Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK)

The TAK, a highly secretive organization, was established as a break-away faction of the PKK. It was established around 1999 when the PKK was designated by the Turkish government as an illegal terrorist organization. It seeks an independent Kurdish state in eastern and south-eastern Türkiye. At the beginning of its operations, its strength was estimated at 300 operatives, but the current amount active is unknown. Its first major terrorist operation took place in January 2005. It has continued to launch attacks in subsequent years, including several in 2015 and 2016.

Islamic State (IS)

The Islamic State is the second most lethal terrorist threat against Türkiye. IS operatives attack mostly target civilians in popular places such as tourist sites in the country's cities.

On one level, IS's attacks against Turkish targets are part of the blowback for Ankara's previously relatively lax control of its long border with Syria. This open border enabled thousands of foreign nationals to exploit it as a transit route to join terrorist groups such as the ANF and IS in their insurgencies against the Syrian

⁵ Humeyra Pamuk, "Three Turkish Soldiers killed as PKK Steps Up Attacks After Air Strikes," *Reuters*, (2 August 2015). <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-turkey-attack-idUKKCN0Q703520150802>

regime – also Ankara’s adversary. Once Türkiye began cracking down on the use of its territory by these foreign nationals, the IS in particular, began to mobilize its operatives in Türkiye to conduct terrorist attacks in-country.

“Türkiye in formulating its terrorism watch list, and upgrading its border security, aviation security, and law enforcement investigations. Türkiye also permits the use of its Incirlik airbase in the southern city of Adana by American fighter aircraft to launch airstrikes against IS targets in Syria. At times, however, such cooperation has been marred by disagreements over U.S. and European backing of Kurdish insurgent forces in Syria that Türkiye views as affiliates of the PKK, which its own military forces attack in cross-border raids.”

The IS has also launched several attacks in Türkiye that targeted Israeli tourists. On 19 March 2016, a suicide bombing attack in Istanbul by a Turkish-based IS operative killed three Israeli tourists, with six others injured.⁶

Overall, IS’s motivations to attack Türkiye are driven by the following factors:

- Türkiye’s retaliatory offensives against its fighters following IS terrorist operations in Türkiye,
- Türkiye’s intensification of its surveillance and arrest of potential jihadi operatives from countries around the world who attempt to use Türkiye as a crossing point into Syria, with 2,337 foreigners suspected of planning to cross the border into Syria detained in 2015,
- The arrest of IS terrorists based in Türkiye,
- Türkiye’s alliance with Western nations, particularly the U.S., in targeting IS positions in Syria,
- Türkiye’s re-establishment of diplomatic, economic, and military ties with Israel,
- The opposition to their own government of some several thousand Turkish

⁶ Times of Israel, “3 Israelis said killed, at least 11 others hurt in Istanbul bombing,” (19 March 2016). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/explosion-rocks-major-istanbul-shopping-street-reports/>

nationals who became radicalized into Islamist extremism and joined IS in Syria, and, like their counterparts from other Western countries, having some of them instructed by IS to conduct attacks in Türkiye upon their return.

Part II: Assessing the Effectiveness of the Turkish Government's Counterterrorism Response Measures

The Turkish government's overall counterterrorism campaign seeks several objectives. First, Ankara seeks to militarily defeat the PKK's and TAK's domestic insurgency and force them to withdraw their operatives from Türkiye, even, if possible, without an agreed-upon political settlement of Kurdish demands. Second, by achieving these objectives, Türkiye would also be able to lessen the military threat presented by the YPD's control of an estimated 265 miles of territory along the porous 565-mile Turkish-Syrian border. Finally, Türkiye seeks to eliminate the threat presented by IS terrorist operatives in Türkiye through law enforcement, intelligence, and military measures, and to create an IS-free zone along its border with Syria. In this case, given IS's extremist and uncompromising demands, a political settlement with this jihadi group is deemed impossible.

In general, Türkiye's counterterrorism campaign consists of three components: first, agencies involved in law enforcement, intelligence, and military measures; secondly, countering violent extremism; and, finally, cooperation with regional and international partners.

Government Agencies Involved in Counterterrorism

The primary Turkish government bodies involved in managing and executing the country's counterterrorism campaign consist of intelligence, law enforcement and military agencies. At the top, under the Prime Ministry's Under Secretariat, are the National Security Council and the National Intelligence Organization (MİT). Under this echelon are the Strategic Analysis Directorate, the Counter-Intelligence Directorate, the External Operations Directorate, the Security Intelligence Directorate, the Electronic and Technical Intelligence Directorate, the Signals Intelligence Directorate (SİB), and the Under Secretariat of Public Order and Security (KDGM) – a semi-dependent, internal security service.

In terms of the military component of counterterrorism, the responsible agencies include the Joint Chief of Staff Intelligence Bureau, the Army Intelligence Bureau, the Navy Intelligence Bureau, the Air Force Intelligence Bureau, the Coast Guard Intelligence Bureau, the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Bureau

(allegedly known as JITEM) and the Gendarmerie Intelligence Organization.

The Interior Ministry (IM) is the primary agency responsible for countering terrorism. Under the IM are two counterterrorism agencies: the Turkish National Police (TNP) and Turkish Gendarmerie (TG) forces. In this organizational framework, responsibilities for countering terrorism are divided according to the two agencies' geographical jurisdiction. Thus, the TNP, and its Counter-Terrorism Department, are responsible for policing urban areas, while the TG is responsible for maintaining security in the country's rural areas. Finally, the TNP's Intelligence Department (ID) collects terrorism-related intelligence throughout the country's urban and rural regions. The ID's International Relations Section also shares terrorism-related intelligence with Türkiye's foreign counterpart police agencies.

Other government services also involved in counterterrorism (or the more defensively focused anti-terrorism), such as the Ministry of Finance, Financial Crimes Investigation Unit (MASAK), and the Ministry of Customs, Customs Enforcement.

Countering Violent Extremism

A second component of counterterrorism involves countering the violent extremism that gives rise to terrorism. The Turkish government has established several programs to counter violent extremism. These include an outreach program administered by the Turkish National Police to reach vulnerable populations and prevent their recruitment into terrorism. Another program is administered by the government's Religious Affairs Office (Diyanet) to counter violent extremist messaging. Yet, no effectiveness metrics or examples of programmatic success by these programs in turning vulnerable populations away from PKK/TAK or IS violent extremism are available to determine the effectiveness of such programs.

Regional and International CT Cooperation

With terrorist groups attaining global reach by taking advantage of porous borders between states and other interconnected international systems, such as in transit, communications (with much of this facilitated by the Internet), and finance — it is essential for effective counterterrorism to include bilateral, regional and international cooperation with counterpart state partners. In this third component, Türkiye's counterterrorism campaign cooperates with regional and international partners. These include NATO allies, including the United States. It has been reported, for example, that CIA Director John Brennan has made several trips to Ankara, including in January 2016, for meetings on counterterrorism operations

with his MIT counterparts. Such cooperation reportedly involves assisting Türkiye in formulating its terrorism watch list, and upgrading its border security, aviation security, and law enforcement investigations. Türkiye also permits the use of its Incirlik airbase in the southern city of Adana by American fighter aircraft to launch airstrikes against IS targets in Syria. At times, however, such cooperation has been marred by disagreements over U.S. and European backing of Kurdish insurgent forces in Syria that Türkiye views as affiliates of the PKK, which its own military forces attack in cross-border raids.

Türkiye also cooperates with other countries' intelligence services whose IS-inspired violent extremists attempt to use Türkiye as a transshipment point into Syria in counter-terrorism information sharing. This reportedly includes a "banned from entry list" of such foreign operatives to prevent their travel into Türkiye as potential foreign fighters.

In a recent development, following a thawing in their diplomatic relations, which were broken in 2008, Turkish and Israeli security services are reported to cooperate in counterterrorism. Although no specific details are available in media sources, this cooperation was formalized in 2022 during the official visits of Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog to Türkiye on March 9, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid on June 23, and Defense Minister Benny Gantz on October 27.

Türkiye is also a member of international agencies involved in counterterrorism such as the United Nations, NATO, the Committee of Experts on Terrorism, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), to which it has also provided secretariat support. It is a member of the Global Coalition to Counter IS, as well as the Working Group on Foreign Terrorist Fighters (WGFTF). It serves as co-chair of the GCTF's Horn of Africa Working Group. Türkiye also participates in the OSCE's expert meetings on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism. It is also a member of the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, which provides training for judges and prosecutors who handle terrorism cases.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Türkiye's CT Response Measures

Türkiye's counterterrorism response measures against its separatist Kurdish and Islamic State (IS) threats have been vastly exacerbated by several factors, especially the country's internal political turmoil, post-15 July developments, and a hawkish stance against oppositional media and academic circles. These factors led to severe internal political turmoil, resulting in contradictory CT strategies (e.g., battling

IS and Kurdish anti-IS forces at the same time), which have greatly hindered the country's overall CT effectiveness.

First, the July 15-16, 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and subsequent declaration of a 90-day state of emergency by his government was followed by an escalation in arbitrary police arrests and other coercive military measures against what were perceived as internal threats to regime stability.

Second, the high fatality terrorist attacks by IS in Türkiye, whether in Ankara, Istanbul, or Gaziantep, near the Syrian border, were followed not necessarily by incursions against IS forces in Syria, but by incursions into YPG-held positions along the Syrian-Turkish border. Thus, while Türkiye's stated objective is to fight IS and other jihadi rebel forces in Syria, it is also battling anti-IS Kurdish forces, thereby diminishing the overall fight against IS.

Third, further complicating Türkiye's CT campaign is the fact that although Türkiye is not responsible for the Syrian-based IS – Kurdish conflict, it has spilled over into Türkiye, with IS terrorist operatives using it to attack Kurdish civilian targets. This was demonstrated by the horrific suicide bombing by an IS operative of a Kurdish wedding in Gaziantep, a city near the Syrian border, in which more than 50 people were killed.⁷

Fourth, Türkiye's incursions against the Kurdish anti-IS insurgents, in fact, belied the fact that the Turkish government's Syria policy was filled with other contradictions, as well. Thus, Ankara's stated opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's regime appeared half-hearted. Thus, at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye sponsored and trained the reportedly "moderate" anti-Syrian regime Free Syrian Army (FSA) and provided it a safe haven in its territory. Later, however, the improvement in political relations with Russia in September 2016 signaled that Türkiye was not necessarily vehemently opposed to Russia's extensive military involvement in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the Assad regime, which included battling the FSA, Türkiye's supposed ally.

Fifth, moreover, in this regard, Türkiye's permission for the use of its Incirlik airbase in the southern city of Adana by American fighter aircraft to launch airstrikes against IS targets in Syria, also served to complicate the picture of the multi-faceted interventions by different actors in the Syrian civil war from Turkish originated military bases, especially since they, unlike Türkiye, specifically target IS forces, while regarding the anti-IS Kurdish forces as their military allies.

⁷ Tim Arango and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Syria's Horrors Visit Turkey again as Bomber Attacks Kurdish Wedding," *The New York Times*, (21 August 2016). <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/22/world/europe/turkey-wedding-attack-i-sis-blamed.html>

Sixth, the massive influx of primarily Sunni Syrian refugees into Türkiye since the civil war intensified in 2011, which numbered an estimated 2,726,980 (as of August 25, 2016), out of a total of more than 4.7 million Syrian refugees, included an unknown number of IS sympathizers or operatives, who were intent on attacking not only Türkiye but Western Europe, as well. Here, Türkiye cooperated with its Western allies in attempting to vet these refugees, while receiving Western financial assistance in managing their well-being at their refugee camps.

Seventh, after an initial period in which Türkiye largely tolerated the presence of foreign Sunni Islamists who were using the country as a cross-border transit point into Syria to join the jihadi insurgents – which also served Türkiye’s efforts to undermine the Assad regime – the Turkish government began tightening their freedom of movement, which, this time, resulted in a boomerang, as they turned against their previously tolerant Turkish hosts.

Eighth, with Türkiye restoring full diplomatic relations with Israel in June 2016, ending a five-year diplomatic estrangement, IS also targeted this rapprochement, which conducted several attacks in 2016 against Israeli tourists and the Israeli Embassy in Ankara. Türkiye’s strengthened cooperation with Israel in counterterrorism, particularly in 2022, has likely upgraded the country’s CT capability (although specific details are not publicly known).

Finally, Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine in early 2022, which was followed by closer diplomatic and military relations with Türkiye’s NATO partners (and, particularly, the United States), has likely led to increased cooperation in countering terrorism – although, the nature and extent of such cooperation are not publicly known.

Conclusion

The insurgent threats against Türkiye by its terrorist adversaries remain unceasing, as demonstrated by the major attacks taking place in 2022. Still, Türkiye’s counterterrorism campaign was likely aided by strengthening its diplomatic and military ties with regional partners, such as Israel and NATO, and international partners, such as the United States. With the civil war in Syria still unresolved, and with the Iraqi government unable to exert its rule over the country, as Kurdish and IS terrorists continue to use both countries as their safe haven, the terrorist threats presented by both groups will continue to present counterterrorism challenges to the Turkish government in the coming years.