

# Understanding Turkey's Qandil Operation

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- **How has the PKK gained a vast territory in Iraq and Syria?**
  - **What was the strategy of the PKK's territorial gain?**
- **Is the Turkish strategy for the de-territorialization of the PKK working?**
  - **What challenges will Turkey face?**

Turkish counter-terrorist operations have made important progress in fighting the PKK over the last three years, while the military operations have expanded in neighboring northern Syria and Iraq where the PKK enjoyed safe havens. Turkey eliminated the PKK threat in northwest Syria with Operation Olive Branch in early 2018 and started a new operation in Iraq on March 10, 2018. Even if these two operations had different contextual characters and execution methodologies, both operations had the same strategic objective: the de-territorialization of the PKK in Syria and Iraq. Turkish authorities see that the de-territorialization strategy will cause the PKK to lose its military capacity and lead to the dissolution of the PKK's state of consolidation on the regional, domestic and local levels. Turkey's ongoing military operation is the most recent example of this strategy.

## HOW HAS THE PKK GAINED A VAST TERRITORY IN IRAQ AND SYRIA? WHAT WAS THE STRATEGY OF THE PKK'S TERRITORIAL GAIN?

The PKK gained territorial control in Iraq starting in the mid-1980s when Iraq and Iran at war and the antagonism between the Iraqi government and the local Kurdish groups was at its highest point. The de facto autonomy of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union Party (PUK) in northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War also helped the PKK expand its operational, logistics and training bases in the mountainous parts of northern Iraq. The Operation Provide Comfort is also assumed to have aided the PKK with its organizational growth.<sup>1</sup> The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the opportunity for the

1. Ramazan Gözen, "Operation Provide Comfort: Origins and Objectives." *Ankara University Social Science Journal*, 1995, <http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/ausbf/article/viewFile/5000053821/5000051137>

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PKK to ensure its territorial control in the mountains under the conditions of collaborating with the invasion forces to fight against the newly emerging Ansar al-Islam which was the pro-al Qaida armed fraction in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> The PKK's territorial control in Syria was related to the failing character of the Syrian Regime in 2012 that paved the way for the PKK to take control of the northwestern city of Afrin, while the direct U.S. support of the PKK/PYD under the name of fighting against DAESH let the PKK control 55,000 sq. km on the western bank of the Euphrates River.<sup>3</sup> The PKK has pursued its strategy for territorial gain through the use of brutal violence in Turkey rather than in Iraq and Syria. Since the PKK considers Turkey as its biggest enemy with its strong national power in politics, military, economy and society, it first waged a protracted terrorist campaign in the rural area to weaken the governmental, social and economic structures and then attempted a violent urban campaign in order to obtain territorial control under the name of "democratic autonomy."<sup>4</sup> However, the PKK was not able to establish a single control zone in Turkey and its strategy of gaining territory failed in the country.

The PKK's territorial control could be summarized in three strategies: (i) occupying the territory of failed and collapsed states and regional governments (control through occupation); (ii) collaboration with international state actors such as the U.S. under the name of fighting against other terrorist groups (control through collaboration); and (iii) control through violence. Therefore, the existence of failed and collapsed states in the region, the collaboration of foreign state actors with the PKK, and the violent activities of the PKK are three different vital threats for Turkey.

2. "PKK, Irak savařından medet umuyor", *Hürriyet*, January 20, 2003, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/pkk-irak-savasindan-medet-umuyor-38532900>

3. Murat Yeřiltař and Necdet Özçelik, *When Strategy Collapses: The PKK's Urban Terrorist Campaign*, SETA Publishing, June, 2018.

4. Murat Yeřiltař and Necdet Özçelik, "PKK Terörünün Yeni Dinamikleri: Radikalleřme ve Şehir Çatıřması", [The New Dynamics of the PKK Terror], SETA, April 2017, [https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2016/05/20160426225231\\_pkk-terorunun-yeni-dinamikleri-pdf.pdf](https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2016/05/20160426225231_pkk-terorunun-yeni-dinamikleri-pdf.pdf)

## IS THE TURKISH STRATEGY FOR THE DE-TERRITORIALIZATION OF THE PKK WORKING?

Starting from the end, the Turkish security forces have been able to defeat the PKK's violent activities during domestic counter-terrorism operations; even if the PKK aims to create "safe zones" through brutal violent acts on Turkish territory, it has no military capacity for applying this strategy in Turkey. Regarding the foreign state actors' collaboration with the PKK against the Jihadist group, Turkey has also developed its capacity in fighting against terrorist groups such as DAESH and HTS in Syria and has increased its law enforcement capabilities against the foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). While Turkey tries to replace the PKK/PYD with state level military forces for fighting against DAESH and other terrorist groups, it also underlines the emerging threat of the PKK/PYD to convince international actors, as was the case in the Manbij Deal. The Turkish strategy for the de-territorialization of the PKK in the region is related to a greater extent with the military operations against the PKK strongholds in neighboring failed or collapsed countries and developing the sovereignty of legal authorities.

Turkey aims to eliminate the PKK terrorists in northern Iraq with military measures by coordinating with Iraq, Iran and the KRG, and then aims to re-establish the Central Iraqi government sovereignty in the PKK-controlled areas in northern Iraq in order to prevent the return of the PKK terrorists. Therefore, the Turkish military operation in Iraq targets the PKK's two strongest bases in the region: Khakurk and Qandil. Khakurk is a mountainous region ranging between 1,700 and 2,100 meters above sea level and is directly across from Turkey's Şemdinli District. This area is between the PKK's Qandil headquarters and the Turkish territory which is composed of approximately 600 sq. km. Khakurk was always used by the PKK elements to infiltrate Turkish territory in order to carry out attacks. Now, Turkish forces secured almost 500 sq. km in Khakurk and opened a safe corridor to approach Qandil Mountain. Qandil is approximately

80 km from the Turkish border and it is where the PKK coordinates its activities. The Turkish military has carried numerous airstrikes against Qandil for decades; however, no ground operations had been carried out to date. This will be the first time that Turkish ground forces operate on Qandil Mountain. The mountain also has some space in Iranian territory. Iran has cooperated with Turkey and evacuated the villages on the mountain's outskirts in order to let Turkish forces carry out the operations against the PKK.

### WHAT CHALLENGES WILL TURKEY FACE?

It is unquestionable that Turkey's de-territorialization strategy of the PKK will enormously contribute to Turkey's counter-terrorism operations and its homeland security. However, it is also inevitable that Turkey will face new forms of challenges mainly in the form of the two direct consequences of the de-territorialization: the re-territorialization of the PKK and the re-establishment of Iraqi sovereignty in northern Iraq.

It is estimated that 2,000 PKK terrorists are were in Qandil and Khakurk: some have dug trenches for stable defense, some are prepared for dynamic defensive tactics, and some have already fled to different areas in northern Iraq, Syria and Iran. The Turkish military engagement in the area of operation in Khakurk and Qandil focuses on the terrorists who are actively fighting against the operation forces. Yet, terrorists who already fled their safe havens in Qandil Mountain and the Khakurk region pose a more serious threat with their re-territorialization aspirations. The terrorists' destination choices when fleeing from the area of the Turkish military operations are driven by two expectations: the pursuit of foreign military cover and the hope of Turkish inaccessibility. Sinjar Mountain is the primary destination for the PKK to enjoy the U.S. military cover through the newly established U.S. operational base there. The Sinjar region is a strategic location for the survival of the PKK in the future and it is the potential re-territorialization area for the PKK. The geostrategic location of the Sinjar Mountain enables the PKK and the U.S. forces to meet their need

for the sustainment of transnational activities between Syria and Iraq. The PKK desperately needs the U.S. military protection in Sinjar while the U.S. opts for investing in the PKK as a local partner in the same geography. The PKK/PYD territorial consolidation with 55,000 sq. km in northeast Syria is another protection factor for the PKK terrorists in the Sinjar region. The possible merger of the PKK/PYD-controlled area in Syria and the Sinjar area will serve in favor of the PKK's re-territorialization. Although the U.S. officials admit that the PKK presence in Sinjar threatens Turkey's national and homeland security,<sup>5</sup> the U.S. military practices in the field conflict with the U.S. political discourses and only help the PKK's re-territorializing.<sup>6</sup> The re-territorialization of the PKK in northeast Syria and on the border with Syria and Iraq with the help of U.S.-lead multiple state actors is a direct challenge for Turkish national and homeland security while Turkey is expected to develop diplomatic, military and information capabilities for the total defeat of PKK.

Asos Mountain, 60 km north of the Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah, is known as PKK's new destination in northern Iraq for its re-territorialization after fleeing the Khakurk and Qandil regions. The Asos area is 180 km from the Turkish border and provides natural protection for the PKK terrorists. There, the PKK terrorists enjoy easy access to logistical support from Irbil, Sulaymaniyah and the Iranian cities across the border. The Turkish military has so far carried out some limited airstrikes against the PKK positions in this area,<sup>7</sup> while no ground military activities have been carried out against the PKK presence there. The PKK considers the Asos area as a perfect replacement for Qandil with the assumption that Asos is out of the Turkish military's range. Turk-

5. "PKK Presence in Sinjar Threat to Turkey: Mattis", *Anadolu Agency*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-security/pkk-presence-in-sinjar-threat-to-turkey-mattis/19405>

6. Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Veale via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq, U.S. Department of Defense, June 5, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1541855/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-veale-via-teleconference-from-b/>

7. Sarp Özer, "Turkish Air Raids Kill over 80 PKK Terrorists in N Iraq", *Anadolu Agency*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkish-air-raids-kill-over-80-pkk-terrorists-in-n-iraq/985424>

ish military expansionism into Asos is also possible, but Turkey is for the most part expected to work with legitimate local partners and the regional actors in order to prevent the re-territorialization of the PKK in the relatively distant Asos region in northern Iraq.

The second challenge for Turkey in preventing the PKK's return to the Khakurk and Qandil regions is related with the re-establishment of Iraqi sovereignty in northern Iraq. War-torn Iraq has suffered the lack of national power and national unity, and regional effectiveness following a series of conventional and non-conventional wars since the 1980s. The U.S.-led military intervention in the country in 1991 and the strict sanctions had paralyzed the Iraqi governments and prevented them from delivering security and political goods to their people. The disputed imposition of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq with the limit of the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel north caused the Iraqi government to give up its national sovereignty and paved the way for creating a political authority vacuum in the region. Even if the 2005 Iraqi Constitution authorized the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), neither the Central Iraqi government nor the KRG was keen on imposing sovereignty over the mountainous parts of northern Iraq. Now, Turkey aims to liberate the PKK-controlled mountainous parts of northern Iraq from the terrorist presence and enlist the Iraqi government and the KRG to cooperate against the PKK's presence in their realm of sovereignty?. Turkey already developed common ground with the Central Iraqi government and the KRG during the fight against ISIL in Mosul, the fight against the PKK in Sinjar, and forced both sides to cooperate during the KRG independence referendum - despite objections from the side of the KRG. The re-establishment of sovereignty is more related with the information efforts to raise the national awareness of Iraq and the success of Turkey's economic, sociological and military instruments in forcing the Central Iraqi government and the KRG to occupy the PKK-controlled spaces in northern Iraq.

## CONCLUSION

Iraq and Syria have been the targets of the federalization strategy of foreign actor to replace the autocratic regimes of the Middle East. In this strategy, Kurdish nationalism seemed to turn into a tool for fragmenting the national unity of these two countries. The U.S. military support of the PKK under the pretext of its fight against DAESH ended up ....DAESH ended up with rewarding the PKK/PYD as the representative of the Kurds in the region and undermined the national security of Turkey, a democratic country and NATO member. The PKK's territorialization strategy in Iraq and Syria has also emboldened the PKK's urban terrorism in southeastern Turkish cities in order to gain territory in Turkish land. Until 2016, Turkey was able to defeat the PKK at home and later, Turkey started to push its efforts in preventive and interventionist cross-border military activities in northern Syria and northern Iraq where the PKK enjoyed territorial control for years. The Turkish strategy of de-territorialization of the PKK targets the PKK's geographical control and its methodological realms when gaining territory. Cross-border operations are different from Turkey's past limited preventive operations in northern Iraq in the 1990s and the 2000s. Similarly to Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch in Syria, Turkey is eliminating the PKK in northern Iraq, bringing stability to the region, and working together with the local and regional actors until the legitimate authority is able to take the control of security and stability. When considering the effective counter-terrorism operation on the supremacy trilogy of intelligence, operation and information, Turkey's self-capacity of intelligence gathering and military/law enforcement operations against PKK activities seem to be quite satisfying. However, information efforts in fighting against the PKK in a broader sense should be developed - the PKK's presence in Europe is one of the main targets of this struggle.