

ANALYZING TRENDS, THREATS AND ADAPTATIONS

NAVIGATING SECURITY IN FLUX  
**COUNTERING  
THE PKK IN 2023**

MEHMET SALAH DEVRİM, SİBEL DÜZ



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# ABBREVIATIONS

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KRG	: Kurdistan Regional Government
SDF	: Syrian Democratic Forces
TAF	: Turkish Armed Forces
MIT	: Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (National Intelligence Service)
UAV	: Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UCAV	: Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle
PKK	: Kurdistan Workers' Party
YPG	: People's Defense Units
PJAK	: Kurdistan Free Life Party
DAESH	: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
PUK	: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
CT	: Counterterrorism
FETÖ	: Gülenist Terror Group
SNA	: Syrian National Army
KDP	: Kurdistan Democratic Party
YAT	: SDF Anti-Terror Unit
MLKP	: Marxist–Leninist Communist Party (Türkiye)
NSAA	: Non-State Armed Actors
EGM	: Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü (the General Directorate of Security)
HQ	: Headquarter
AI	: Artificial Intelligence



IED : Improvised Explosive Device  
ISR : Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance  
BTÖ : Bölücü Terör Örgütü (Separatist Terrorist Organization)

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- *Shifting Tactics and Focus:* Turkish counterterrorism (CT) operations have evolved significantly, focusing on pushing terrorist threats away from Turkish soil into Syria and Iraq. The shift toward more policing operations domestically reflects success in clearing Turkish territory of armed terrorist activity, with military operations becoming less intense in Türkiye.
- *Operations Overview:* In 2023, Turkish security forces conducted a total of 1,983 operations, primarily targeting PKK/YPG members, while also addressing other terrorist organizations like FETÖ and DAESH. The majority of operations (83.96%) targeted PKK/YPG elements in Syria, Iraq, and Türkiye.
- *Firepower in Action and Strategic Strikes:* In Syria, operations primarily utilized fire support units to strike PKK/YPG-controlled areas, with regions in the Aleppo governorate being a focal point due to their strategic significance. Most operations in Iraq, particularly in the Duhok governorate, targeted PKK hideouts and arsenals.
- *Operation Claw-Lock:* Turkish CT strategy in Iraq centered on Operation Claw-Lock, establishing bases to prevent PKK resurgence in the north of Iraq. Operations were seasonal due to weather conditions, with a notable increase in targets neutralized from September onward.
- *Domestic Focus:* Domestically, Türkiye shifted its focus toward policing operations, and combatting organized crime and gangs. The Interior Min-

istry's reporting reflected this change, highlighting a decrease in terrorist threats within Türkiye.

- *A Game-Changer in Turkish CT Operations:* The use of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) increased, particularly in targeting PKK/YPG leadership in Syria and Iraq, disrupting their command structure and technical expertise.
- *Proactive Dismantling:* Overall, Turkish CT operations in 2023 demonstrated a proactive approach to dismantling terrorist organizations, with a focus on shifting the center of gravity away from Turkish borders and toward Syria and Iraq.
- *Overall Decrease in Attacks:* Between January and December 2023, there was a significant decrease in terrorist attacks in Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria compared to the previous year, attributed to a combination of factors including Türkiye's comprehensive counterterrorism strategy and the PKK/YPG's unilateral cessation of terrorist activities during a period of natural disaster and political events.
- *Regional Distribution:* Syria emerged as the epicenter of terrorist activities, with Türkiye experiencing a remarkable decrease in attacks. Both Iraq and Syria saw reductions in attacks against Turkish security forces, indicating some success in Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts.
- *Attack Types and Targets:* Harassing fire, rocket launchers, and armed reactions were the primary methods of attack, with military bases and units being the main targets. Geographic conditions in Iraq and Syria influenced the tactics employed, with PKK/YPG utilizing terrain advantages for ambushes and long-distance rocket attacks.
- *Seasonal Trends:* Attacks increased notably in the second half of the year, with PKK/YPG resuming activities after a period of nonaggression and Türkiye intensifying operations targeting mid/high-level operatives. Weather conditions during winter months posed challenges to Türkiye's operations in the north of Iraq, allowing PKK to exploit temporary vulnerabilities.
- *Dec. 22-23 Attacks:* The most devastating attacks in 2023 targeted Türkiye's military bases in Tatasara and Matin mountains, highlighting the PKK's ability to exploit weather conditions to neutralize technological advantages. Türkiye's withdrawal from at-risk bases during harsh weather created temporary security gaps exploited by the PKK.

- *Türkiye's Response:* Türkiye's counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria utilized joint efforts involving the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and National Intelligence Organization (MIT), employing airstrikes, UAV operations, and ground assaults. Operations like Claw-Lock targeted caves and tunnels used by the PKK/YPG, while domestic initiatives like Operation Heroes led to numerous arrests and neutralization of terrorist elements.
- *Impact of Counterterrorism Strategies:* MIT's decapitation operations targeting mid/high-level terrorists disrupted PKK/YPG's hierarchical structure and operational capabilities. UAV/UCAV operations and ISR activities effectively identified and targeted the organization's members and infrastructure, aiming to degrade morale and operational efficiency.
- *Strategic Implications:* While Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts have shown significant success in reducing attacks, the PKK/YPG remains a persistent threat, necessitating ongoing vigilance, adaptive strategies, and continued cooperation with regional partners to maintain security and stability.
- *PKK/YPG's Strategic Shifts:* The PKK/YPG is undergoing tactical and strategic changes, driven by challenges in countering Turkish counterterrorism (CT) operations. This includes a move toward smaller tactical formations, increased emphasis on secrecy, retreat underground using tunnels and caves, and the development of UAV technology.
- *Turkish CT Operations:* Turkish security forces have advanced military technological capabilities, enabling easy identification of terrorist locations and preventing large group gatherings. Türkiye's operations in Iraq and Syria, including UAV/UCAV operations and airstrikes, have pushed the PKK/YPG threat away from its territory, into Iraq and Syria.
- *Secured Area in Syria:* Türkiye's attempts to establish a secured area in Syria to prevent PKK/YPG infiltration have been challenged by the U.S. However, Türkiye's intelligence network and CT operations in the region have forced the PKK/YPG to adapt.
- *Emerging Threats:* Emerging technologies, like off-the-shelf drones, are being actively adopted by the PKK/YPG for planning attacks, indicating potential future challenges for Turkish security forces.
- *Impact of Regional Conflicts:* The ongoing Israel-Hamas conflicts and security dynamics in the Middle East could influence the PKK/YPG's strategies and tactics. The involvement of non-state armed actors (NSAAs) in

conflicts poses a growing threat potential, necessitating proactive preventive measures.

- *U.S. Support for PKK/YPG:* The PKK/YPG receives support from the U.S. under the guise of combating DAESH, posing a significant challenge to Turkish counterterrorism efforts in Syria and Iraq.
- *Implications for Turkish Security:* Insights from the Israel-Hamas conflicts highlight the importance of adopting preventive measures against PKK/YPG threats, despite advanced intelligence and surveillance technologies.

# KEY ISSUES AND TURNING POINTS IN 2023\*

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- Jan. 8: Türkiye withdraws from eight bases during the winter months.<sup>1</sup>
- Feb. 10: After the earthquakes on February 6th, the PKK declared a unilateral non-aggression policy and claimed not to have carried out attacks against Turkish security forces until June 13.<sup>2</sup>
- March 4: U.S. Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley visited northeastern Syria. It was alleged that during these visits, Milley met with the PKK/YPG leaders.<sup>3</sup>
- March 15: Two helicopters carrying PKK members crashed in Dohuk. The KRG Anti-Terror Unit announced that the helicopter was a Eurocopter AS350 and some of the deceased were PKK members. The members turned out to be YAT members, the PKK/YPG's anti-terror unit trained by U.S. forces in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

\* We are sincerely thankful to Mr. Muhammet İsmail Üzen for his invaluable contributions to this research, which significantly enriched our analysis and interpretation of the data.

1 "TSK Zap ve Metinada 8 noktadan çekildi", Rudaw, January 8 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/middle-east/turkey/0701202319>

2 "Cemil Bayık'tan PKK'ye çağrı: Depremler nedeniyle eylem yapmayın", Kurdistan24, February 10 2023, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/tr/story/86389-Cemil-Bay%C4%B1k%E2%80%99tan-PKK%E2%80%99ye-%C3%A7a%C4%9Fr%C4%B1:-Depremler-nedeniyle-eylem-yapmay%C4%B1n>

3 Stewart, P. "Syria mission worth the risk, top U.S. general says after rare visit", Reuters, March 6 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/top-us-general-makes-unannounced-visit-syria-reviews-mission-2023-03-04/>

4 "Crashed helicopter carrying PKK terrorists in northern Iraq purchased by group in PUK: KRG premier", Anadolu Agency, March 19 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/crashed-helicopter-carrying-pkk-terrorists-in-northern-iraq-purchased-by-group-in-puk-krp-premier/2849856>

- March 28: PKK-affiliated sources stated that they were focused on the May 2023 elections and had allegedly ceased attacks until the elections concluded.<sup>5</sup>
- April 3: Following the increased activities of the PKK in northern Iraq, the Turkish airspace was closed for Sulaymaniyah flights.<sup>6</sup>
- April 8: Near the city of Sulaymaniyah in Iraq, a bomb dropped by an unidentified UAV detonated in the vicinity of a convoy including Mazlum Abdi, the so-called general commander of the SDF, and three U.S. soldiers. No casualties were reported.<sup>7</sup>
- June 13: The PKK announced the termination of its unilateral non-aggression decision, which it had attributed to the earthquakes on Feb. 6, stating that they would continue their activities.<sup>8</sup>
- Aug. 22: Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan paid a comprehensive visit to Iraq.<sup>9</sup>
- Aug. 27-Sept. 25: Armed conflicts took place between Arab tribes and PKK/YPG in Syria.<sup>10</sup>
- Sept. 18: An explosion occurred at Arbat Airport in the city of Sulaymaniyah in Iraq.<sup>11</sup>
- Oct. 1: Two PKK terrorists attempted an attack in front of the Ministry of Interior in Kızılay in Türkiye's capital Ankara, on the opening day of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM).<sup>12</sup>
- Oct. 1: On Oct. 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> in Iraq and on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> in the north of Syria, hundreds of terrorist organization targets were destroyed by

5 "PKK'den seçim sürecine ilişkin yeni karar", Rudaw, March 28 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/28032023>

6 Kazancı, H. "Türkiye closes airspace to flights using Sulaymaniyah airport in Iraq", Anadolu Agency, April 5 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-closes-airspace-to-flights-using-sulaymaniyah-airport-in-iraq/2864421>

7 M. R. Gordin, "Drone Strike in Iraq Targets Syrian Kurdish Leader, a U.S. Ally", The Wall Street Journal, April 7 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/drone-strike-in-iraq-targets-syrian-kurdish-leader-a-u-s-ally-a567055a>

8 "PKK, 'eylemsizlik' kararını sona erdirdi", Euronews, June 14 2023, <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/06/14/pkk-eylemsizlik-kararini-sona-erdirdi>

9 "Visit of Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to Iraq, 22-23 August 2023", Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 23 2023, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sayin-bakanimizin-irak-i-ziyareti-22-23-agustos-2023.en.mfa>

10 "Fighting between Arab tribes and SDF spreads to northwest Syria", Al Jazeera, September 1 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/1/fighting-between-arab-tribes-and-sdf-spreads-to-northwest-syria>

11 "Airport in Iraq's Kurdish region hit by deadly drone attack", Al Jazeera, September 18 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/18/airport-in-iraqs-kurdish-region-hit-by-deadly-drone-attack>

12 Goksedef, E. & Ozturk, F., "Turkey: Two officers injured in blast outside interior ministry", BBC News, October 1 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66975452>

the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and National Intelligence Agency (MIT) through air operations, UAV/UCAV strikes, and artillery support.<sup>13</sup>

- Oct. 3: In cooperation with the MIT, the Turkish Police (Emniyet Genel Müdürlüğü) and Gendarmerie forces launched Operation Heroes.<sup>14</sup>
- Oct. 6: The U.S. shot down a Turkish UAV by a United States Air Force F-16 in Syria during Turkish CT operations in the region.<sup>15</sup>
- Dec. 22: The PKK conducted an attack on a Turkish base on Mount Tatasara in the north of Iraq (in the Hakurk region), resulting in the martyrdom of six Turkish soldiers.<sup>16</sup>
- Dec. 23: The PKK conducted an attack against a Turkish base on Mount Matin north of Amediyah in the Duhok province of Iraq (in the Metina region), martyring 6 Turkish soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

13 Butler, D. „After Ankara bombing, Turkey hits back in Iraq and at home”, Reuters, October 2 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-neutralised-many-militants-north-iraq-air-strikes-2023-10-02/>

14 “Terör Örgütüne Yönelik “Kahramanlar” Operasyonları”, Ministry of Interior, October 3 2023, <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/teror-orgutune-yonelik-tum-turkiyede-baslatilan-kahramanlar-operasyonlarinda-928-supheli-goz-altina-alindi>

15 Ali, I. & Hayatsever, H., “U.S. jet shoots down Turkish drone in Syria, Pentagon says”, Reuters, October 6 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkish-officials-says-ground-operation-into-syria-an-option-after-bombing-2023-10-05/>

16 Isik, E., Simsek, U. & Zeyrek, S. “Irak’ın kuzeyinde bölücü terör örgütü tarafından düzenlenen saldırıda 6 asker şehit oldu”, Anadolu Agency, December 22 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/irakin-kuzeyinde-bolucu-teror-orgutu-tarafindan-duzenlenen-saldirida-6-asker-sehit-oldu/3090285>

17 Olcay, Ö. “Peñçe-Kilit Harekatı bölgesinde 6 asker şehit oldu, 1 asker yaralandı”, Anadolu Agency, December 23 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/pence-kilit-harekati-bolgesinde-6-asker-sehit-oldu-1-asker-yaralandi/3090843>





# INTRODUCTION

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The period from 2022 to 2023 has been characterized by significant events reshaping both national and international security landscapes. The Russian invasion of Ukraine served as a pivotal moment, highlighting the intricacies of modern warfare and geopolitical dynamics. However, its ramifications extended beyond state actions, drawing attention from terrorist organizations and non-state actors keenly observing the unfolding events. Notably, the emergence of unconventional tactics employed by groups like Hamas, as demonstrated in the Oct. 7th, 2023, incursion of southern Israel, underscored the adaptability and ingenuity of non-state actors, significantly impacting the security situation in the Middle East. Additionally, Türkiye's response to both natural disasters, such as the February 2023 twin earthquakes, and regional security challenges, including tensions along the Iraq-Türkiye border and shifts in terrorist organizations' strategic posture, reflects the complexity and volatility of the evolving international arena.

Against the backdrop of these developments, Türkiye's strategic security outlook and its efforts to counter terrorism take center stage. This report delves into Türkiye's proactive measures to mitigate threats along its borders, particularly from groups like the PKK, amidst regional instability and shifting dynamics. The PKK's adaptation to changing circumstances, as highlighted by its leadership, underscores broader trends among violent non-state actors and terrorist organizations, reflecting the constant evolution and response to the challenges posed by an increasingly complex global landscape.



# REGIONAL CHALLENGES AND ACTORS

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The Middle East retained its strategic importance in 2023 as a location where complex and multifaceted alliances are constantly competing to protect their geopolitical interests. As an actor of regional and global geopolitical importance, Türkiye is one of the countries that are most affected by the changing security dynamics of the Middle East. Iraq and Syria are important focal points for regional security as they struggle with civil wars, political instability, and terrorist mobilization. Meanwhile, external actors such as the U.S. and Russia profoundly impact the security architecture of the Middle East through their pursuit of regional hegemony, ideological ties, and relationships with regional actors. Regional actors have been struggling with the strategic ramifications of Israel's ongoing military assaults in Gaza which ultimately transformed the overall strategic interactions among the countries enforcing a policy change in their regional orientation. Among the most prominent changes are the Israel and U.S. military operations targeting Iranian proxies in the wider region and the relative militarization of U.S. foreign policy overall. In response to the changing environment since Oct. 7 there is a visible remobilization of Iran-linked non-state armed actors, especially in Lebanon and Yemen. The U.S., Iran, and Israel conflict are increasingly proxying. With the rising tension between the two sides, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are becoming more unstable and vulnerable. The policies implemented since Oct. 7 also increased the friction between Arab states and Israel, raising the question of whether the Abraham Accords will ultimately become the 'Abraham Discords'. This emerging

restrictive security environment forces regional actors to adopt an assertive military posture. In light of this, Türkiye's security landscape and CT environment are experiencing drastic and fundamental changes. Just like Türkiye, the PKK also notices the shifting dynamics and feels the urge to change and adapt. The PKK/YPG is undergoing tactical and strategic changes, driven by challenges in countering Turkish counterterrorism (CT) operations, including a move toward smaller tactical formations, increased emphasis on secrecy, retreat underground using tunnels and caves, and development of UAV technology and finally adopting a much more aggressive stance against Türkiye's presence in Iraq by launching multiple attacks against Turkish bases in the country.

## CURRENT SECURITY OUTLOOK IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Syria and Iraq remain pivotal to Türkiye's security architecture, representing the forefront of its counterterrorism efforts and policy considerations. These countries are central to understanding and addressing the myriad terrorist threats that directly impact Türkiye's security landscape. Although DAESH was defeated by the U.S.-led global coalition, including Türkiye, it remains a potential threat to Iraq, Syria, and the countries in the region. The PKK/YPG tried to expand the area under its control and change the demographic structure of the region by engaging in clashes with opposition forces and Arab tribes. The Aug. 27-Sept. 25 clashes ended with the withdrawal of the Arab tribes from the villages they initially captured, but friction between the parties continued from time to time.<sup>18</sup> The crackdown of the PKK/YPG on Arab tribes and villages following the clashes damaged the Arab-SDF relationship significantly and possibly permanently.

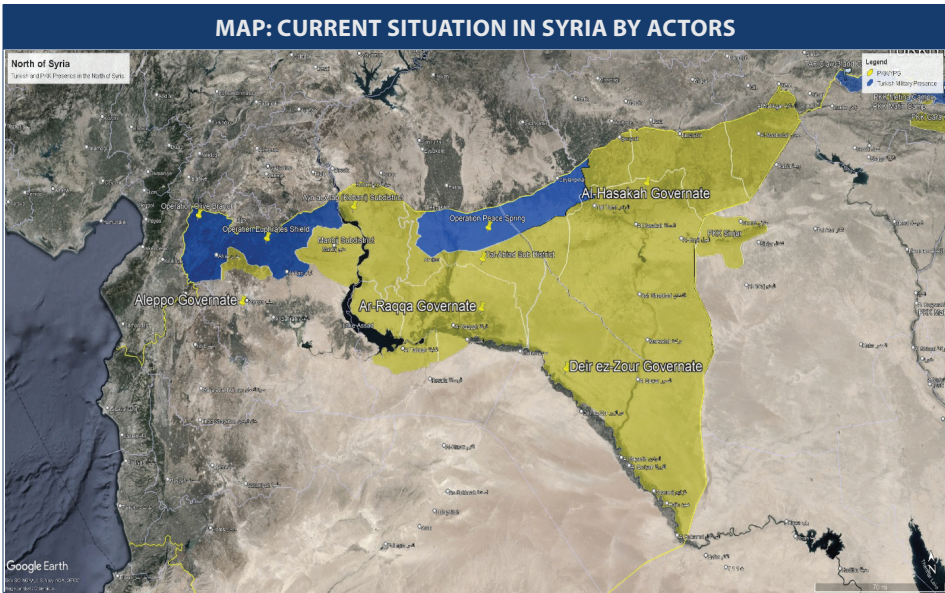
The situation in Syria remains dynamic and volatile. The PKK/YPG still targets Turkish-backed safe zones, while Israel and the U.S. target Iranian proxies in the region. The escalating situation since May 30, 2024, led to a more aggressive stance of Iranian proxies and a series of drone and missile attacks against the U.S. bases in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.<sup>19</sup> Since the beginning of 2024, rumors of a

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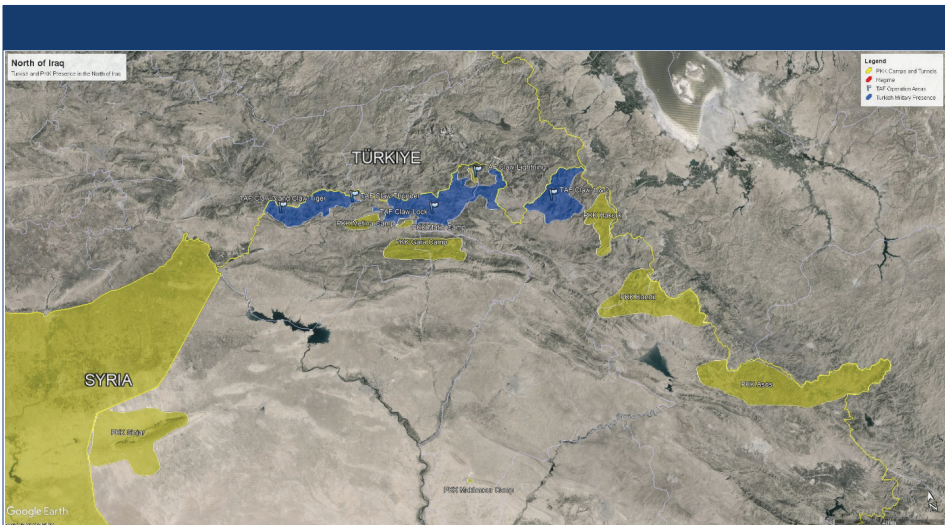
18 B. Carter et al. "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Update, September 13, 2023: SDF Lose Legitimacy in Deir ez Zor, al Qaeda and the Islamic State expand in West Africa, TTP Launches Offensive in Pakistan", Critical Threats, Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, September 13 2023, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-update-september-13-sdf-lose-legitimacy-in-deir-ez-zor-al-qaeda-and-the-islamic-state-expand-in-west-africa-ttp-launches-offensive-in-pakistan>

19 On January 28<sup>th</sup> Iranian proxies targeted a U.S. base in Jordan killing 3 U.S. soldiers and wounding more than 40 others. See Bynum, R. "Shock, grief and mourning for 3 Georgia-based U.S. soldiers killed in Middle East drone strike", AP NEWS, January 30 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/947c5c440e149154b06bc1bc29d84a19>

possible withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Syria have been circulating.<sup>20</sup> Türkiye, meanwhile, continues its decapitation operations in Syria, eliminating notable PKK/YPG members while simultaneously establishing a punitive strike doctrine for any PKK/YPG action.



Source: Syria Liveuamap, “Eastern Mediterranean: Turkey’s Legal and Political Views”, Liveuamap 2024, <https://syria.liveuamap.com/>, (Access date: 10 April 2024)



Source: A combination of the map data shared by twitter users @Min\_Intel and @SavunmaTR.

20 Lister, C. “America Is Planning to Withdraw From Syria—and Create a Disaster”, Foreign Policy, January 24 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/24/america-is-planning-to-withdraw-from-syria-and-create-a-disaster/>

In Iraq, the most significant security issue for Türkiye is the presence and mobilization of the PKK in the north of Iraq. The terrorist organization maintains numerous camps within Iraqi territory (such as Qandil, Hakurk, Avashin, and Zap etc.) and a substantial portion of attacks against Türkiye are planned in these regions. Türkiye has been conducting Operation Claw (Pence) in the north of Iraq since 2019. The operation primarily focuses on narrowing the PKK's control and mobility and aiming to seize areas considered pivotal in the organization's operational context. Furthermore, Türkiye has pushed deeper into Iraqi territory while conducting its operations with Sulaymaniyah province becoming an increasing focus of Turkish special and intelligence operations.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, Türkiye's relations with the KDP and the PUK are one of the determining parameters in Türkiye's counterterrorism. On the other hand, the PKK finds more space to maneuver in PUK-controlled areas, which has led Türkiye to exert pressure on the PUK by closing its airspace to planes departing from Sulaymaniyah.<sup>22</sup>

In Iraq, the KDP-PUK rivalry is intensifying and potentially evolving into a conflict of its own. The PUK has increasingly aligned itself with the PKK/YPG in Syria, turning Sulaymaniyah into a new haven for the PKK. Just like in Syria, Iranian proxies and some Shiite groups in the region are mobilized and target the U.S. and Israel, culminating in a missile strike by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard against what it claims to be an Israeli spy HQ in the Erbil region of Iraq.<sup>23</sup> In February 2024, Iran asked its proxies to avoid overt provocations against the U.S., but whether that stabilizes the situation remains to be seen.<sup>24</sup> The Iraqi government seeks the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from the country but is not decisive about it,<sup>25</sup> rather it is expressing its discontent with the ongoing clash between the U.S. and Iranian proxies in its territory and the ramifications thereof more so than actively pressing for a U.S. withdrawal. The situation in Iraq remains extremely volatile, which the PKK is likely to exploit. Türkiye's military

21 Terrorism Analysis Platform 2023 Data

22 "Turkey closes airspace to Iraq's Sulaimaniyah, cites PKK presence", AlJazeera, April 5 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/5/turkey-closes-airspace-to-iraqs-sulaimaniyah-cites-pkk-presence>

23 Hafezi, P. & Azhari, T. „Iran says Revolutionary Guards attack Israel's 'spy HQ' in Iraq, vow more revenge", Reuters, January 16 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-revolutionary-guards-say-they-have-attacked-espionage-centers-iraqs-erbil-2024-01-15/>

24 George, S. et al. "Iran, wary of wider war, urges its proxies to avoid provoking U.S.", The Washington Post, February 18 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/18/iran-proxies-middle-east/>

25 Azhari, T. "Exclusive: Iraq seeks quick exit of US forces but no deadline set, PM says", Reuters, January 10 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-seeks-quick-exit-us-forces-no-deadline-set-pm-says-2024-01-10/>



presence in the north of Iraq, while proving successful against infiltration attempts of the PKK terrorists into Türkiye, is turning into a target of PKK attacks. Especially, new bases that were established in late 2023 remain vulnerable and are the targets of PKK attacks.

## MULTIFACETED DRIVERS INFLUENCING TÜRKIYE'S COMPREHENSIVE COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGIES

Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies derive from complex drivers such as geopolitical proximity, internal dynamics, and external actors. These pivotal factors collectively shape Türkiye's approach to counter terrorism within its borders and in neighboring countries, particularly Iraq and Syria.

### Geopolitical Proximity

Due to its geographical location, Türkiye faces numerous security threats. With constant instability in Iraq and Syria along its south and southeastern borders and the thereby resulting refugee crisis, Türkiye faces multi-dimensional regional security challenges. Especially, regional instabilities such as the refugee crisis and the terror threat from Syria and Iraq, necessitate a security-oriented foreign policy and the implementation of multifaceted counterterrorism strategies.

### Terrorism Threats from Iraq and Syria

One of the most important challenges that Türkiye faces is the presence of the PKK/ YPG in Iraq and Syria. The PKK's stronghold in Iraq's Qandil and other areas poses a persistent threat, due to enabling recruitment, training of terrorist elements, and planning of attacks against Türkiye. Türkiye's military operations and establishment of bases in the north of Iraq aim to prevent these attacks and secure its borders.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, the PKK, operating under the name of the PYD/YPG, seeks dominance in the north of Syria, exploiting the power vacuum during the Syrian civil war. The U.S. support for the PKK/YPG in the fight against DAESH inadvertently contributed to the creation of a "terrorism belt" along Türkiye's southern borders, escalating terrorist activities within Türkiye and making Syria a hotspot for terrorism in the Middle East.

26 Yildirim, O. "Turkey 'has 11 temporary military bases' in northern Iraq", Anadolu Agency, June 21 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkey-has-11-temporary-military-bases-in-northern-iraq/1180935>



## Refugee Crisis

Türkiye hosts a significant number of refugees, predominantly from Syria, which may impact security considerations across political, economic, and demographic domains within both the host country and the region. For instance, the PKK/YPG exploits the migration waves to alter regional demographics by forcefully displacing populations and creating a continuous and homogenous Kurdish zone. Türkiye's counterterrorism strategy aligns with the resolution of the Syrian conflict and the eventual return of refugees, aiming to mitigate these security risks. Furthermore, the influx of refugees has also triggered secondary challenges within Türkiye, notably manifesting in the rise of nationalist and far-right narratives during the national election in May 2023. The threat of refugees acting as foreign agents in Türkiye should also be taken into consideration. Türkiye conducted multiple operations against former refugees who had taken up the role of spying for foreign agencies in the country.<sup>27</sup>

## Internal Dynamics

Two key internal dynamics emerge regarding terrorism and counterterrorism: the 2023 earthquake and the Turkish defense industry. While the earthquake was a singular event, it significantly influenced the events and decisions of both Türkiye and the PKK/YPG. On the other hand, the Turkish defense industry represents a constant dynamic that has been evolving over the past decade. This development has bolstered Türkiye's confidence in its military actions and widened the technological gap between Türkiye and the PKK.

## The Earthquake

The February 2023 earthquake was the most catastrophic event in recent Turkish history, causing more than 50,000 deaths and \$103 billion worth of financial damages to the economy in Türkiye alone. The earthquake affected the entire southern region of Türkiye as well as the north of Syria leading to a decrease of CT operations for Türkiye in the following months, as well as a unilateral nonaggression announcement by the PKK. Given that displaced populations, damaged infrastructure, and overwhelmed government resources can create vulnerabilities that terrorist organi-

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<sup>27</sup> See cases such as the arrest of 6 Chinese Spies: "Turkey detains six suspected of spying on Uyghurs for China", Reuters, February 20 2024; the arrest of Ahmed Katie who acted on behalf of the French DGSE: Ragip Soylu, "Turkey arrests Syrian activist for allegedly spying for French intelligence", Middle East Eye, February 20 2024; and the arrest of 33 people who acted on behalf of Israel's Mossad: Zeynep Yesildal, "Türkiye detains 33 suspected of spying for Israel's Mossad", Anadolu Agency, January 2 2024.

zations may seek to exploit through increased recruitment, fundraising, or attacks during periods of heightened vulnerability, the direct impact of an earthquake on Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts may vary depending on the scale and location of the disaster. It is also important to recognize the potential indirect effects on resources, infrastructure, populations, vulnerabilities, and international relations that could influence Türkiye's ability to address terrorism effectively.

### **Defense Industry**

Türkiye's reliance on foreign defense industries has historically constrained its influence on counterterrorism operations. Nevertheless, a consistent strategic progression in indigenous defense initiatives since the 1970s has markedly bolstered Türkiye's capacity for independent policymaking. Local defense companies have spearheaded the supply of indigenous military technologies, thereby augmenting Türkiye's tactical maneuvering prowess. This technology-centric approach to counterterrorism, prominently showcased in the realm of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), has effectively curtailed the PKK/YPG influence in the region while fortifying Türkiye's dominance in the battlespace. These advancements haven't solely amplified operational capabilities but have also enriched Türkiye's intelligence infrastructure across the region.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, as the technological disparity widens, the PKK activity remains restricted to instances where environmental conditions temporarily alleviate the gap.

### **External Actors**

Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts are influenced by the policies and actions of global and regional actors of the United States, Russia, and Iran in Iraq and Syria. First, despite being strategic allies, tensions arise between the U.S. and Türkiye due to conflicting stances on military operations which strains Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies, especially in Syria, where differing understandings of the conflict persist. Secondly, the utilization of the PKK/YPG as a political pressure instrument complicates Türkiye-Russia relations and hinders Türkiye's operations in the north of Syria, reflecting the complex network of interests in the region. Finally, Iran's involvement through Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq affects Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies, with Iran supporting the Bashar Assad regime and engaging pragmatically with PKK/YPG activities.

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28 Düz, S. & Üzen, M.I, "Remote Control Aerial Elimination of the PKK's Terrorist Leaders and Operatives", SETA, <https://seta.org/en/assets/uploads/2023/08/R237En.pdf>

## U.S. Relations and Türkiye

The U.S. support for the PKK/YPG,<sup>29</sup> despite Türkiye's opposition, strains relations between the two NATO allies. Türkiye's military operations in Syria and Iraq are aimed at countering the PKK/YPG threat, while facing opposition from the U.S. creating periodic tensions. Despite being strategic allies, conflicting stances in operations and incidents, like the UAV attacks near the PKK/YPG convoys<sup>30</sup> and the downing of a Turkish UAV by a U.S. F-16, temporarily escalate tensions.<sup>31</sup> These differences affect Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies, posing challenges in operations within Syria. For instance, during Türkiye's Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016 against DAESH and the PKK/YPG, the U.S. supported operations against DAESH but opposed interventions against the PKK/YPG elements. Similarly, during the Operation Olive Branch in 2018, the U.S. took a stance against Türkiye and attempted to discredit Ankara's operations against the terrorist organization, suggesting that these operations would disrupt the fight against DAESH. Moreover, in 2018, the U.S. intended to establish a "Border Security Force" comprising 30,000 individuals under the command of the PKK/YPG in the north of Syria. This decision, strongly criticized by Türkiye, was also opposed by the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the U.S. support for the PKK/YPG extended beyond rhetoric, as significant arms and ammunition were provided to the group, and efforts were made for the organization to acquire a more professional military capability. However, on April 8, 2023, a drone attacked the convoy carrying Mazlum Abdi, the so-called general commander of the PKK/YPG, and U.S. soldiers in Iraq. While it remains unclear by whom it was carried out, statements by the U.S. about the attack described the PKK/YPG as a local ally of the United States. Additionally, on Oct. 6, 2023, the shooting down of a Turkish UAV by a U.S. F-16 further escalated tensions in the relationship.<sup>33</sup>

29 Guldogan, D. "US continues to support YPG/PKK terror group: Türkiye", Anadolu Agency, March 8 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/us-continues-to-support-ypg-pkk-terror-group-turkiye/2840320>

30 Türkiye made no official statement regarding the strike in the vicinity of the convoy, but a defense Ministry official denied conducting it according to Reuters, while most media attributed the strike to Türkiye. See A. Ismail, "Iraq calls on Turkey to apologize for attack on Sulaymaniyah airport", Reuters, April 9 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-calls-turkey-apologize-shelling-sulaymaniyah-airport-2023-04-08/>

31 T. Mackintosh, "Talks after US fighter jet shoots down armed Turkish drone in Syria", BBC, October 6 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67034560>

32 T. Perry & O. Coskun, "U.S.-led coalition helps to build new Syrian force, angering Turkey", Reuters, January 18 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1F30OD/>

33 I. Ali & H. Hayatsever, "US jet shoots down Turkish drone in Syria, Pentagon says", Reuters, October 6 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkish-officials-says-ground-operation-into-syria-an-option-after-bombing-2023-10-05/>

Therefore, despite the U.S. defining Türkiye as a strategic ally, it is observed that the relationship between the two countries, especially in the context of Syria, is shaped by different understandings. This situation directly affects Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies and continues to pose occasional challenges in operations in the north of Syria. At the same time, the quick resolution of such tension shows that the strategic mechanism, announced in April 2022, is working to resolve the tensions whenever they may arise.<sup>34</sup>

### Russia's Involvement

Russia's relations with the PKK/YPG constitute a more complex network compared to the PKK/YPG's relationship with the United States. Historically, Russia has supported the PKK both rhetorically and in terms of ammunition. In Syria, this support continues on a more complex ground of interests.<sup>35</sup> However, in Türkiye-Russia relations, the PKK/YPG issue was handled as a tool of political pressure by Russia. Moreover, Russia's closure of airspace to Turkish warplanes has been one of the critical obstacles to Türkiye's operations in the north of Syria.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in addition to historical ties, the PKK/YPG has been used as a pragmatic leverage tool in the context of the U.S. presence in Syria and relations with Türkiye.

### Iran's Influence

Iran's involvement in Syria and Iraq through Shiite militias affects Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies. The support for the Assad regime and its nuanced engagement with the PKK/YPG activities further complicates the regional security landscape. Regarding the PKK/YPG activities in Syria, Iran takes a pragmatic approach and makes moves in line with its interests. In this context, while limiting Türkiye's sphere of influence in Syria could be seen as a potential gain for Iran, the PKK/YPG's state-building attempts pose challenges to Iran's opportunities within the "Axis of Resistance." Moreover, occasional conflicts arise between the PKK/YPG and Shiite militias, but no developments have occurred to significantly alter the country's security equation.

34 "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism", US Embassy & Consulates in Türkiye, March 9 2024

35 Erbay, N. Ö., "Moscow's support to YPG/PKK obstacle for trust in Ankara", Daily Sabah, November 25 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/moscows-support-to-ygppkk-obstacle-for-trust-in-ankara>

36 "Rusya Suriye hava sahasını yıllar sonra ilk kez Türkiye'ye açtı", Yeni Şafak, November 20 2023, <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/rusya-suriye-hava-sahasini-yillar-sonra-ilk-kez-turkiyeye-acti-3890964>



# TURKISH COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS

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Turkish counterterrorism operations have been a staple of Türkiye's CT strategy. Following the failure of the 2013-2015 "Reconciliation Process," Türkiye launched a series of military operations against the PKK. First, the domestic operations to remove the PKK from Turkish urban areas in 2015 and 2016, followed by a series of counterterror operations in Syria and Iraq. The main drivers behind these cross-border operations are to push terrorism away from Türkiye and confine it to Syria and Iraq. Simultaneously, Türkiye is dismantling the PKK/YPG structure through military operations. Actions by the PKK are countered with punitive strikes and operations that targeted PKK infrastructure in Syria and Iraq following notable PKK/YPG activities. Throughout the last year, the focus of the Turkish CT effort has been on the Claw Operation series, which started in 2019 and with the most recent addition, Operation Claw-Lock, ongoing since April 2022.

## SECURITY LANDSCAPE: CONTRASTING 2022 WITH 2023

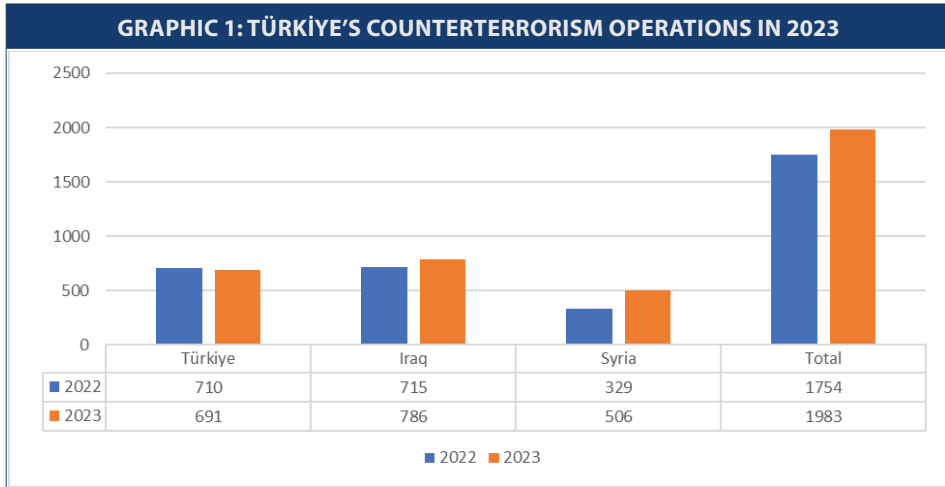
In the 11 months between Jan. 1, 2023, and Dec. 31, 2023, the Terrorism Analysis Platform<sup>37</sup> recorded a total of 1,983 operations conducted by the Turkish security forces in Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq. Of these operations, 691 were conducted inside Türkiye, 786 in Iraq, and 506 in Syria (Graphic 1). The numbers suggest that a

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37 The Terrorism Analysis Platform (TAP) employs a comprehensive approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to gather detailed data on terrorism-related events. Please check data collection methods of TAP via <https://tap-data.com/category/our-methodology>

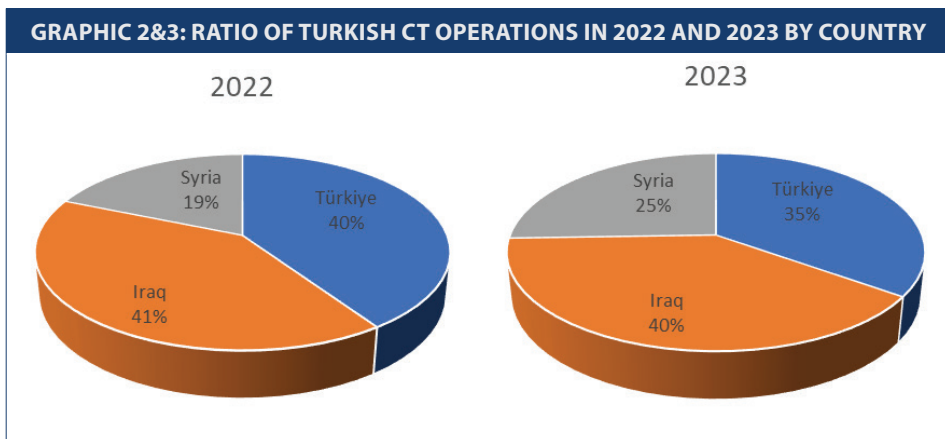
considerable level of security and military activity occurred in mostly Iraq, indicating transitions among the theaters of the conflict.

In contrast, the Platform recorded a total of 1,754 operations between Jan. 1, 2022, and Dec. 31, 2022. Of them, 710 were conducted in Türkiye, 715 in Iraq, and 329 in Syria. There is also a rise in operations in Iraq and Syria and a decrease in operations conducted within Türkiye compared to the previous year.

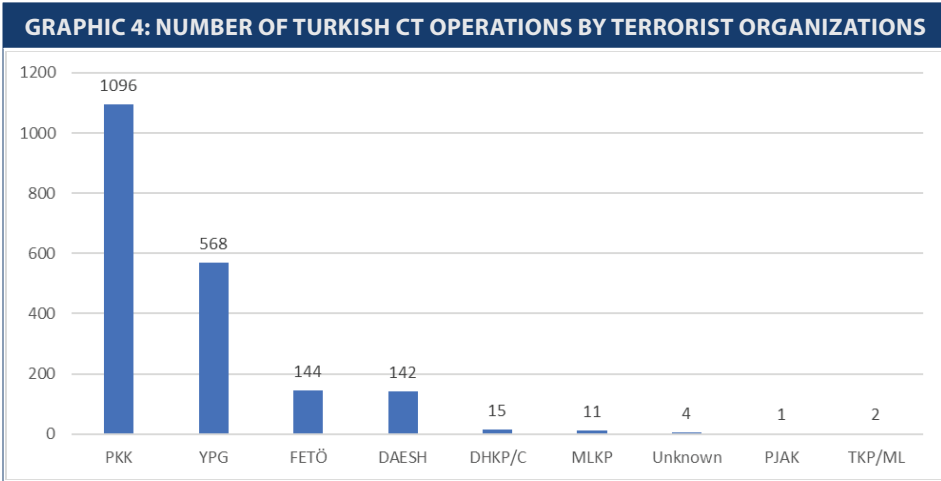


Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

Operations in Syria rose from a total of 329 to 506, a 54.80% increase. Simultaneously, Iraq has emerged as the focal point of Turkish counterterrorism operations, underscoring a discernible trend wherein Türkiye strategically endeavors to shift counterterrorism efforts progressively away from its immediate borders, extending the operational depth further into the territories of Syria and Iraq (Graphic 2 & 3).



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

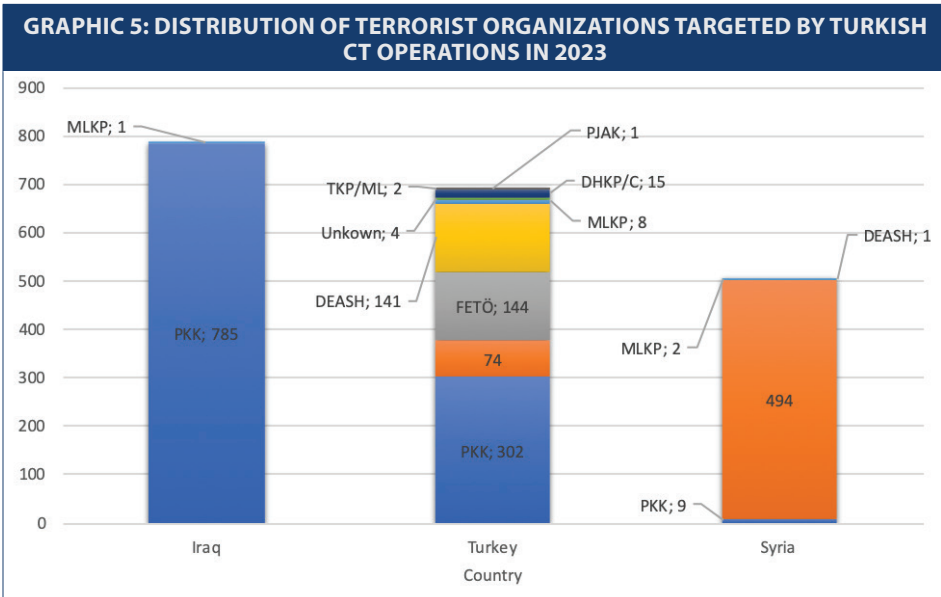


Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

**TABLE 1: OPERATIONS AGAINST THE PKK/YPG COMPARED TO OTHER TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS**

Targeted Organization	Number of Operations	Percent of Total Operations
PKK/YPG/PJAk	1,665	83.96
Other	318	16.04

Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

The PKK/YPG remains the focus of the Turkish counterterrorism efforts in every theater (Graphic 5). Türkiye also conducted operations against FETÖ, DAESH and other organizations, making up 16.04% of the recorded total (Table



1). Operations against FETÖ and other organizations can be categorized mostly as policing operations, while those conducted against the PKK/YPG typically have a more military nature (Table 2). Operations in Türkiye have turned mostly into policing operations such as arrests, detentions, and seizures of equipment.

**TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF TURKISH CT OPERATIONS AGAINST THE PKK/YPG AND OTHER GROUPS BASED ON OPERATION TYPES: POLICING AND MILITARY OPERATIONS IN 2023**

	PKK/YPG	Other	Total
<b>Military Operation Type</b>	1,393	9	1,402
<b>Policing Operation Type</b>	268	309	577
<b>Total<sup>38</sup></b>	1,661	318	1,979

Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

Most Turkish CT operations took place across the border in Iraq, with all operations and strikes, except for one, targeting the PKK/YPG structures and assets in the country.<sup>39</sup> Except for that single strike, all remaining 785 operations were directed against the PKK/YPG. Operations against the PKK/YPG made up 83.96% of all Turkish CT operations in Syria, Iraq, and Türkiye.

Following the Oct. 1 terrorist attack on the Interior Ministry campus, Türkiye expanded the scope of targets to include all facilities under the PKK/YPG's control, including power stations and dams as well as oil and gas facilities.<sup>40</sup>

## OPERATIONS IN GENERAL

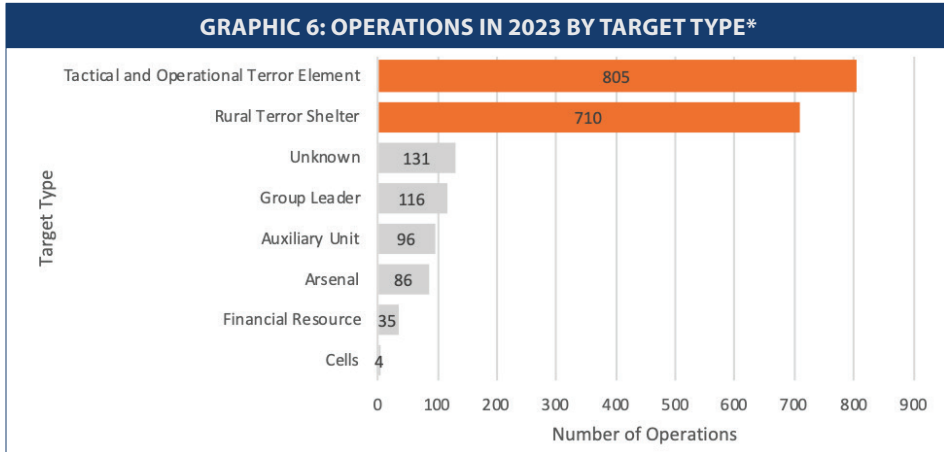
The nature of Turkish CT operations changes with the geography and therefore should be analyzed separately for each region. While CT operations in Türkiye are mostly policing operations conducted by forces and institutions under the direction of the Interior Ministry, the ones in Syria and Iraq are military operations conducted by the Ministry of National Defense and the TAF. The one institution that operates both inside and outside the country is the MIT. It conducts operations independently while also providing support to the operations of other institutions. The MIT has seemingly developed its own CT strategy, primarily fo-

<sup>38</sup> According to TAP data, four operations were categorized as “unknown” and were excluded from the table.

<sup>39</sup> The Turkish Intelligence Service MIT conducted an operation against the MLKP near Galala village and Mawat in Sharbajar district of Sulaymaniyah killing Ibrahim Çiçek a high-ranking member of the MLKP. It is the only non-PKK related operation that the Terrorism Analysis Platform recorded in Iraq. “ten MLKP’ye üst düzey darbe! Süleymaniyede nokta vuruşu”, *Aksam*, May 4 2023, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/guncel/mitten-mlkpe-ust-duzey-darbe-suleymaniyede-nokta-vurusu/haber-1363622>

<sup>40</sup> See “Bakan Fidan: PKK/YPG’nin kontrolündeki tüm tesisler artık meşru hedef”, *TRT Haber*, October 4 2023, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/bakan-fidan-pkkyggnin-kontrolundeki-tum-tesisler-artik-mesru-hedef-800584.html>

ocusing on decapitation operations that started in 2018 but have gained traction and become more frequent.



\* Due to the lack of information “illegal border crossings” are recorded as “unknown” targets. Of the 131 cases of “unknown” targets, 91 are illegal border crossings.

Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

“Tactical and Operational Terror Elements” and “Rural Terror Shelters” remain the two main targets of operations in 2023 (Graphic 6). This is in line with the prior analysis that for Türkiye, the PKK is still primarily an armed threat rather than a policing threat (Table 2). To note that with changes in Turkish media and official reporting language, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between “Cells” and “Tactical and Operational Terror Elements” in Türkiye. In 131 operations, members of different terrorist organizations – mostly the PKK/YPG and FETÖ – were caught crossing the Turkish border illegally either into or out of Türkiye. The reporting here comes directly from official Turkish sources with no information on whether the group members tried to cross into or out of Türkiye, making analyzing this data difficult.<sup>41</sup>

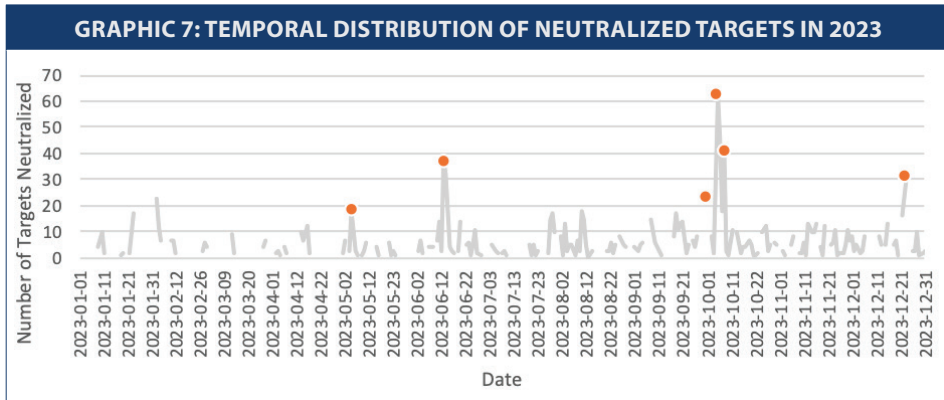
41For consistency reasons “Tactical and Operational Terror Element” refer to any individual or vehicle that is part or used by the terror group. For consistency reasons “Rural Terror Shelters” are any shelter, tunnel, command post, checkpoint, building or construct that is used by the terrorist organization.

Illegal Border Crossings are individuals, who tried to illegally cross the border, were arrested and identified as potential terrorist organization members.

Group Leaders are high ranking members of the terrorist organization, specialists as well as terrorist on Türkiye’s “most wanted” (<https://www.terorarananlar.pol.tr/>) list.

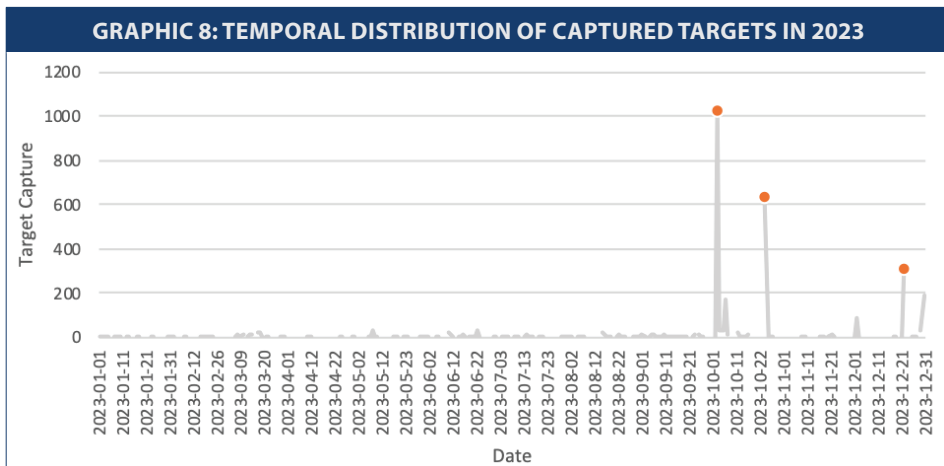
Unless the reported language clearly identifies that a group of arrested terrorists was a terrorist “cell” (Turkish *hücre*) belonging to a specific terrorist organization such as DAESH or the PKK/YPG, the Terrorism Analysis Platform records the arrested terrorist members as “tactical and operational terror elements”. This results in urban areas having inflated “tactical and operational elements” arrests while the “cells” category is deflated due the language used in the source material.

In their daily releases the TAF only state that a number of people who tried to illegally cross the Turkish border were identified as members of certain terrorist organizations and handed over to policing forces for processing. There is no further information released in neither public nor open-source media regarding these arrests. This makes illegal border crossings some of the difficult operation types to validate and analyze.



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

In the reporting period of 2023, there were three major spikes in neutralized terrorist targets (see Graphic 7). The first spike occurred on July 13, 2023, after the PKK/YPG's members launched five rockets into Türkiye's Kilis province.<sup>42</sup> The following three spikes are one single event. On Oct. 1, 2023, the PKK/YPG attacked the Interior Ministry in Ankara. In response, Türkiye launched a major air campaign targeting PKK/YPG positions in Iraq and Syria, resulting in visible spikes in neutralized targets between Oct. 5 and Oct. 8. The last major spike was on Dec. 23 following the attacks of the PKK against temporary Turkish bases in Tatasara in the Hakurk region of Iraq's Erbil governorate (Dec. 22) and Matin in the Metina region of Iraq's Duhok governorate (Dec. 23) and resulting in the loss of 12 Turkish soldiers.

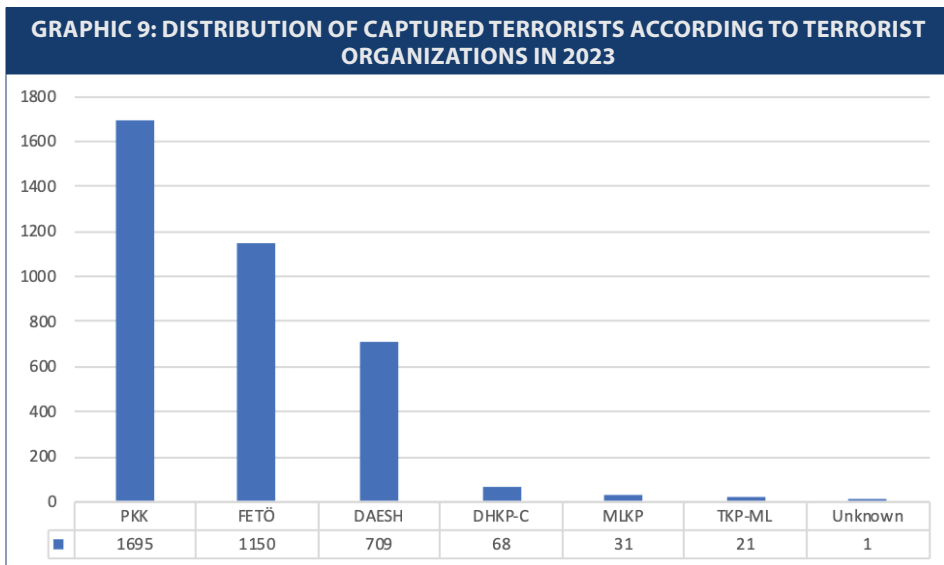


Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

<sup>42</sup> "Terör örgütü YPG/PKK mensuplarınca atılan roketler Kilis'te sınır bölgesine düştü", Anadolu Agency, June 11, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/teror-orgutu-ypg-pkk-mensuplarinca-atilan-roketler-kiliste-sinir-bolgesine-dustu/2919784>

There are three major spikes in Graphic 8. Following the October 1 attack, the Interior Ministry launched the *Heroes* operations in Türkiye targeting the PKK/YPG's structures within the country and which have been ongoing since. The first visible spike in Graphic 8 is the launch of Operation *Heroes* on October 3, whereas the subsequent spikes are operations conducted within the framework of *Heroes*. The third spike is a series of operations launched against the members of DAESH within the framework of *Heroes* where 304 DAESH suspects were detained across 32 provinces on December 22.

In 2023, a total of 3,671 people were detained<sup>43</sup> for terrorism-related charges and 1,414 terrorist elements were neutralized.<sup>44</sup>



Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

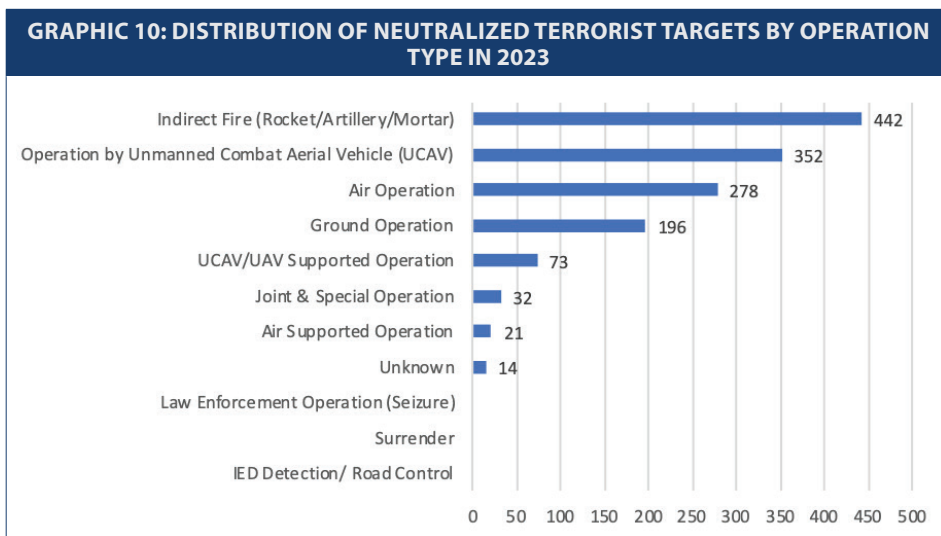
Meanwhile, a total of 3,675 targets were either detained or captured during the reporting period with the vast majority of these being PKK/YPG and FETÖ members. Some 1,015 of those captures took place on Oct. 3 with another 629 on Oct. 24. This means that almost half of the captures of 2023 were in October alone. However, how many of those captured turned into arrests is unknown.

The spike in arrests and neutralizations after major or notable attacks by the PKK/YPG led to the emergence of a punishment/punitive doctrine by the

43 Not every detention turns into an arrest and many detainees are released the same day with no charges.

44 In the context of operations in Türkiye, neutralized can mean that the target has been killed, injured or arrested. It means to say that the target no longer poses a threat to Türkiye and its agents.

TAF.<sup>45</sup> Following PKK/YPG attacks, Türkiye consistently launches a series of operations against the groups domestically as well as in Syria and Iraq striking a variety of targets ranging from financial to tactical or possible command quarters. Türkiye followed a proactive CT approach, actively dismantling the PKK/YPG in all three countries, but major operational spikes are reactionary responses to the PKK/YPG's actions. This could lead to certain divisions within the PKK/YPG as the Syrian wing of the PKK/YPG has to bear the brunt of the response for PKK/YPG action in Iraq and vice versa. The scope of these punitive strikes expanded with more recent ones targeting the critical infrastructure of the PKK/YPG in Syria.<sup>46</sup> Following the Oct. 1 attack, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan declared “all facilities of the PKK/YPG” as legitimate targets.<sup>47</sup>



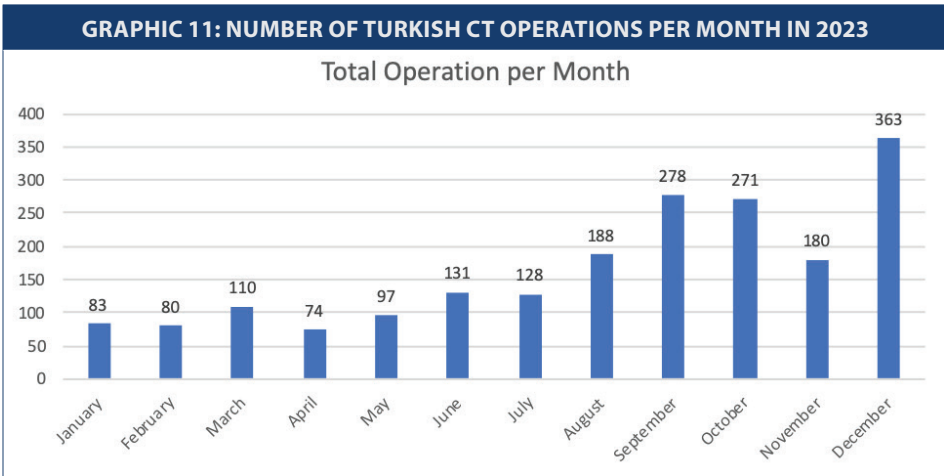
Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

Türkiye neutralized most targets through indirect fire such as artillery, rocket artillery, and mortars (Graphic 10). This suggests that the majority of the targets are outside of urban areas as the TAF prefers not to use artillery shelling to neutralize targets in urban areas. It also means that the majority of the targets are likely stationary objects such as fortifications, trenches, buildings, checkpoints.

45 See Can Acun in “Türkiye ‘Cezalandırma Harekâtları’nı devreye soktu! Terör örgütü PKK’ya petrol darbesi”, 24TV, January 21 2024, <https://www.yirmidort.tv/gundem/turkiye-cezalandirma-harekatlarini-devreye-soktu-teror-orgutu-pkkya-petrol-darbesi-149449>

46 “Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Disrupt Water, Electricity”, Human Rights Watch, October 26 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/26/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity>

47 “Bakan Fidan: PKK/YPG’nin kontrolündeki tüm tesisler artık meşru hedef”, TRT Haber, October 4 2023, <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/bakan-fidan-pkkyppgnin-kontrolundeki-tum-tesisler-artik-mesru-he-def-800584.html>



Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

During the winter months, Türkiye halts or reduces its active counterterrorism (CT) operations in Iraq, even going as far as temporarily withdrawing from military bases that cannot be adequately supplied.<sup>48</sup> Operations then resume during the summer and peak in autumn. This seasonal pattern is reflected in the total number of operations conducted each month in 2023 (Graphic 11). Between January and August, there is a notable decrease in operations, followed by an increase. In 2023, the return to regular operations took longer, with significantly less activity observed until August and September (Graphic 11). A critical change in 2023 was that the Turkish security forces decided not to retreat from forward bases, in return, the PKK saw this as an opportunity to attack. The Dec. 22 and Dec. 23 attacks were followed by a response of Turkish security forces resulting in December having the highest operation count of all months in the year.

## Syria

Most areas relevant to Turkish CT operations in Syria are relatively flat and close to the very defined line of contact. This allows Türkiye to focus its CT efforts on striking the PKK/YPG-controlled areas with artillery and occasional airstrikes.

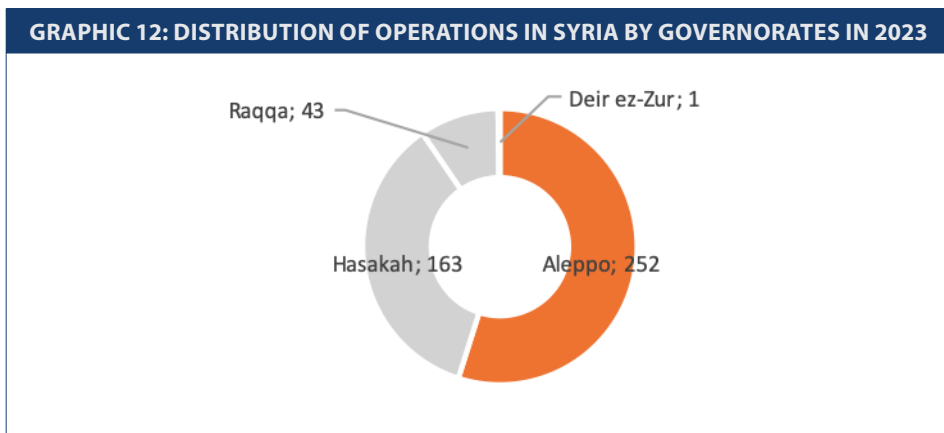
Of the 506 operations and strikes verified in Syria, 314 were carried out by fire support units, including artillery, mortars, and rocket artillery units. At the same time, the majority of the strikes were focused on the Aleppo province. In total, the TAF and security agencies conducted counterterrorism (CT) operations

48 "TSK Zap ve Metina da 8 noktadan çekildi", Rudaw, January 8 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/middleeast/turkey/0701202319>

in four governorates of Syria: Aleppo, al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zour, indicating a strategic effort to address terrorist threats in key regions of Syria.

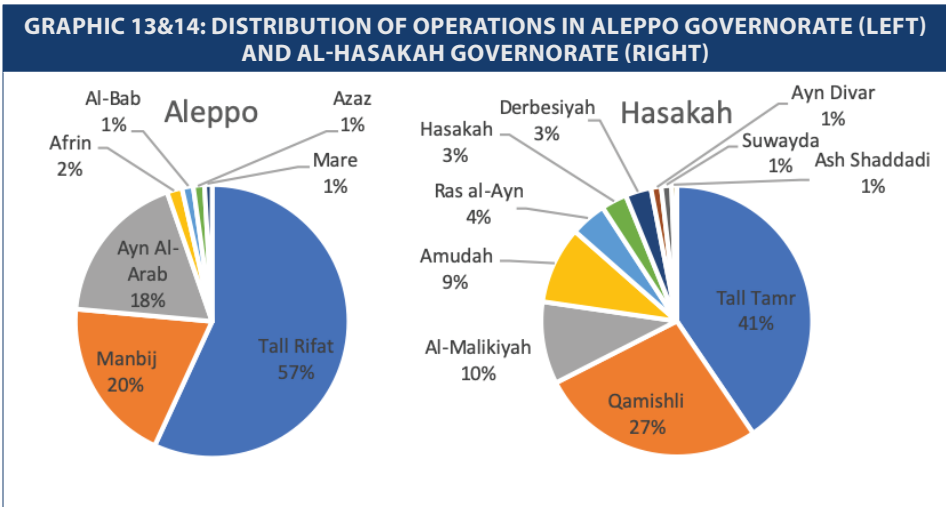
Although situated in distinct Syrian provinces, operations in Hasakah and Raqqa should be amalgamated due to their inclusion within the operational scope of Operation Peace Spring. Notably, only one operation could be verified within Syria's Deir ez-Zour governorate, executed by the MIT. Consequently, there were 252 operations identified in the vicinity of the Operations Euphrates Shield area and 206 operations within the Peace Spring area, representing approximately 55% and 45%, respectively. The geographic origins of the remaining operations could not be precisely determined.

As the focus narrows to the district level, the specific areas of interest become more delineated. Examination reveals that the majority of operations centered on the Tal Rifat district of Aleppo, totaling 100 strikes and operations, followed by Tal Tamr in the al-Hasakah governorate, with a recorded count of 60 strikes and operations. Similarly, all strikes and operations within the Raqqa governorate were concentrated in and around the Ain Issah district, amounting to a total of 46 strikes and operations.



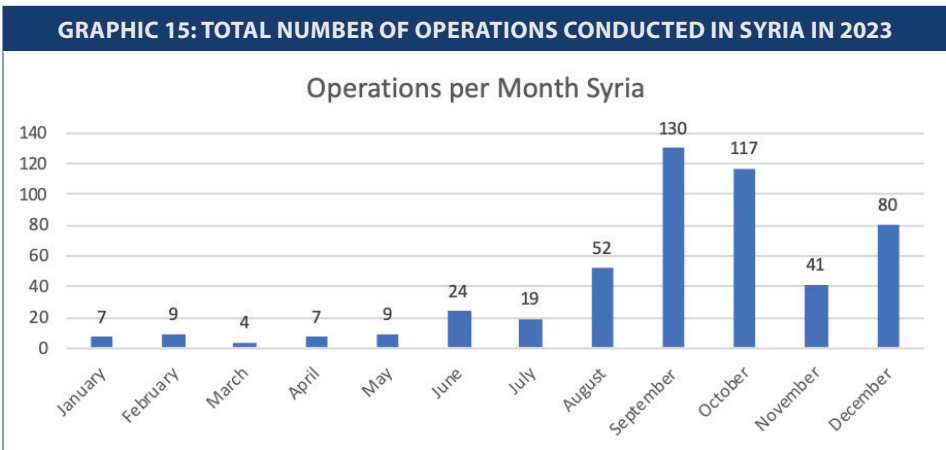
Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

Tal Rifat is an isolated area under the joint control of the PKK/YPG and the regime in Syria and the staging ground for attacks against Turkish and Syrian National Army (SNA) assets in the al-Bab, Marea, Azaz and Afrin regions. As it also contains assets of the Syrian regime, this location serves as a central point of contact for all three factions engaged in the Syrian Civil War. Consequently, it has become the focal point of Türkiye's counterterrorism operations in Syria (Graphic 12).



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

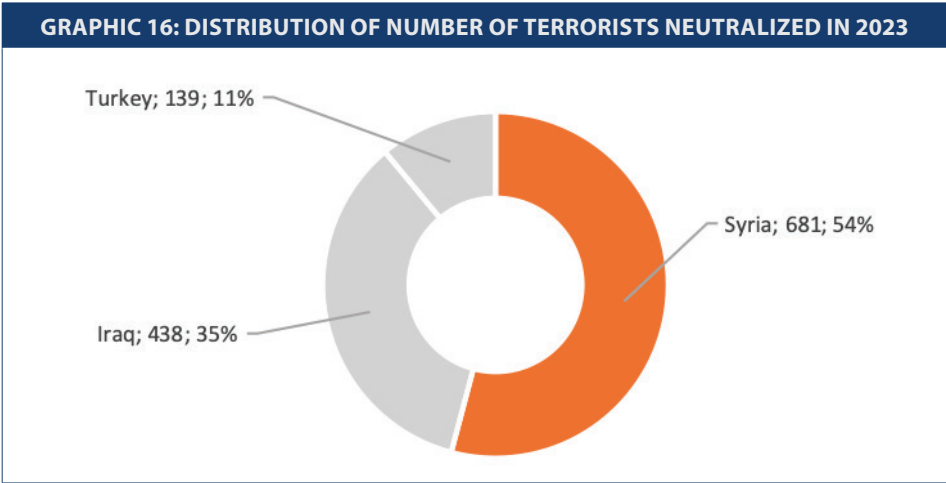
Syria has become the focus of the PKK/YPG efforts with the majority of their members and structure shifting away from Iraq to the north of Syria. This trend is likely going to continue as Türkiye, the KRG and the Iraqi government exert political and military pressure on the PKK to withdraw from major populated areas and cut off access to supplies.<sup>49</sup>



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

49 H. Sallon, "In Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey is hunting down the PKK beyond its borders", Le Monde, April 10 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/04/10/in-iraqi-kurdistan-turkey-is-hunting-down-the-pkk-beyond-its-borders\\_6022413\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/04/10/in-iraqi-kurdistan-turkey-is-hunting-down-the-pkk-beyond-its-borders_6022413_4.html)





Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

While most CT operations are conducted in Iraq and Türkiye, most terrorists are neutralized in Syria due to the types of operations. While a significant portion of the operations in Iraq were search-and-destroy operations, targeting stashes of weapons, those in Syria are mostly artillery and airstrikes targeting in-use positions by the PKK/YPG (Table 3<sup>50</sup>). There it becomes visible that the preferred operation type in Syria is indirect fire, usually through artillery, indicating a strategic preference for leveraging firepower from a distance rather than direct engagement, whereas, the preferred targets are stationary positions. On the other hand, operational elements get targeted when they try to infiltrate into Turkish or Syrian opposition-held territory.

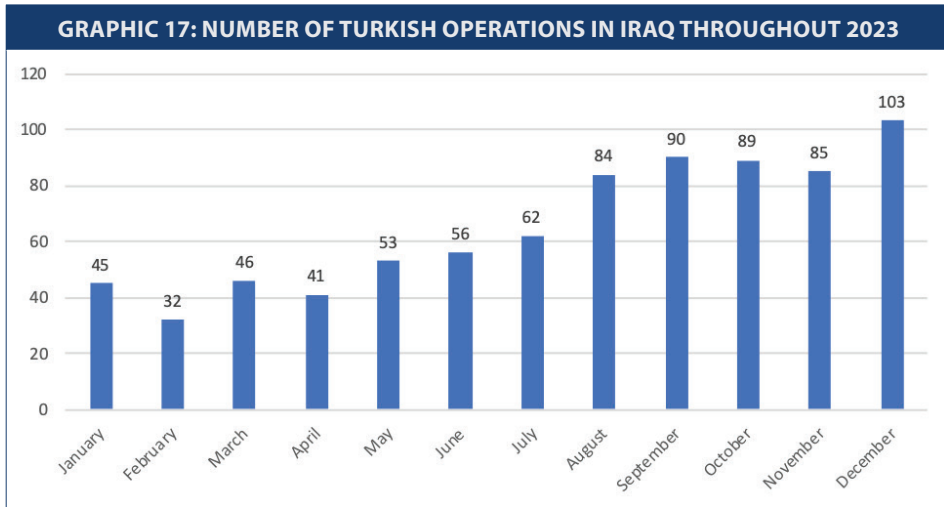
50 Table 3 relates the operations conducted, the operation types with the operation target, visualizing the Operation-Target relationship.

Operation-Target Relation	Target Type						
Operation Type	Rural Terror Shelter	Tactical and Operational Terror Element	Group Leader	Financial Resource	Arsenal	Unknown	Grand Total
Indirect Fire (Rocket/ Artillery/Mortar)	179	135					314
Operation by Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV)	40	36	47	18	2	2	145
Air Operation	15	2	1	5			23
Ground Operation		16					16
Joint & Special Operation			5	1		1	7
Law Enforcement Operation (Seizure)		1					1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>506</b>

Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

## Iraq

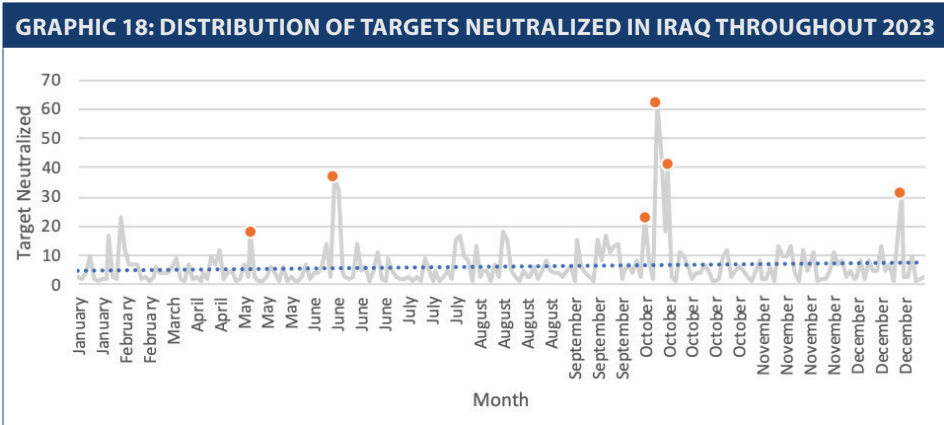
Türkiye launched Operation Claw (Pençe) operation in May 2019 with Claw-1 (Pençe-1), followed quickly by Claw-2 in July, and Claw-3 in August. These were then supported and expanded by aerial operations Claw-Eagle 1 (June 2020) and Claw-Eagle 2 (February 2021), Claw-Tiger (June 2020), Claw-Thunderbolt and Claw-Lightning (April 2021). But the biggest operation to date is “Claw-Lock” (Pençe-Kilit), which was launched in April 2022 and has continued since. Claw-Lock expanded the Turkish area of operation deep into the Metina, Zap, and Avashin areas and the mountains in the north of Iraq. The TAF initiated the construction of bases atop mountains to deter the PKK from reoccupying these areas. Owing to the elevated terrain and remote nature of the operational zone, Operation Claw-Lock is seasonally dictated, occurring during periods of favorable weather conditions and necessitating seasonal retreats if base sustainability proves challenging throughout winter.



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

During the winter months, there was a decrease in the activity of the Turkish security forces in Iraq, as the mountains were covered in snow, and supplying forward bases can be difficult under certain weather conditions. Graphic 17 shows the number of operations conducted in Iraq per month. Between April and July, there was an average of three reported operations per day.<sup>51</sup> Graphic 18 shows the number of neutralized targets between January and November 2023. While the overall operational activity is difficult to detect due to the reporting, there are significantly longer breaks between the number of neutralized targets during April, May, and June, with spikes becoming more frequent in July. There is a steady increase from 5.5 neutralized terrorists per week between January and August to 7.8 terrorists per week between September and December. The number of neutralized targets spiked in October, with an average of 11.4 terrorists.

51 The TAF on their daily releases announce daily operations in bundles and only states result such as how many terrorists were eliminated, or how many shelters destroyed. They do not state how many operations of a given category were actually conducted.



Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

Notably, the operational season did not start until September, when the number of targets neutralized increased along with the number of operations conducted. This becomes also visible in the formation of Turkish bases. According to certain pro-PKK/YPG observers,<sup>52</sup> Turkish forces did not commence their return to certain former bases until Sept. 10. Independent verification reveals that significant construction of these bases did not commence until mid-October. Consequently, there was likely a reduction of activity in 2023, compared to the previous year, resulting in fewer targets neutralized. Another conceivable factor is that with the clearance of each cave and tunnel, the presence of terrorists diminishes, reducing the likelihood of encounters unless actively sought out. This trend is likely influenced by weather conditions, which ultimately dictate operations in the north of Iraq.

52 Twitter Account @VivaKurdheti is a pro-PKK OSINT account that maps the events in the north of Iraq from the PKK perspective. Mount Matin/Gire Amediye, was the scene of a major PKK attack against Turkish Security Forces on December 23<sup>rd</sup> resulting in the loss of 6 Turkish soldier and the neutralization of 13 PKK terrorists. See Kurdheti, Twitter, 11 September 2023, <https://x.com/VivaKurdheti/status/1701231161983349131>, (Access date: 20 October 2024).

TABLE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATIONS ACROSS TARGET TYPE AND OPERATION TYPE IN IRAQ							
Operation-Target Relation	Target Type						
Operation Type	Rural Terror Shelter	Tactical and Operational Terror Element	Arsenal	Group Leader	Unknown	Financial Resource	Grand Total
Air Operation	226	104	1	4	1		336
Ground Operation	137	42	57	4	2	1	243
Operation by Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV)	45	65	1	23		1	135
IED Detection/ Road Control	3	27	1				31
Joint & Special Operation		3		11			14
Law Enforcement Operation (Seizure)	4		7		1		12
Indirect Fire (Rocket/ Artillery/Mortar)	1	4					5
Unknown				1	3		4
Surrender	1	1	2				4
Air Supported Operation	1						1
UCAV/UAV Supported Operation		1					1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>786</b>

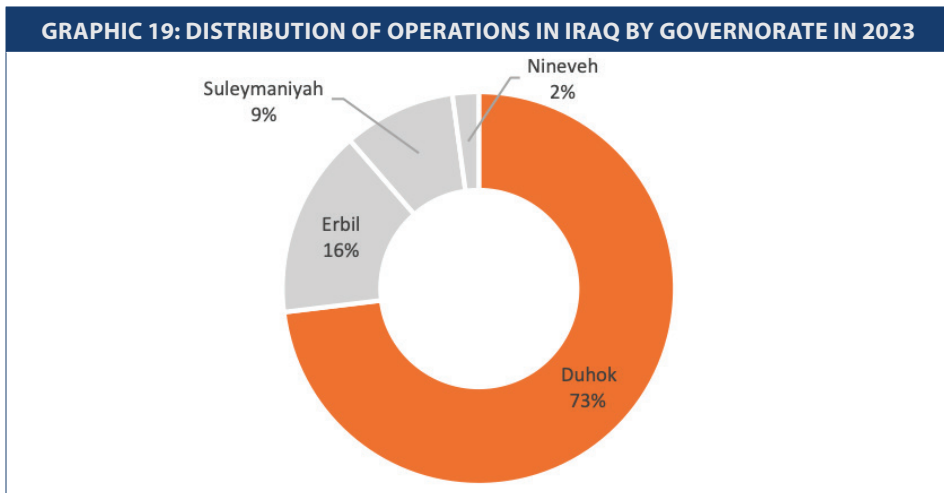
Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

Table 4. depicts the relationship between operation types and target types, and which operation is used against which target in Iraq. Unlike in Syria, aerial operations are the preferred choice in Iraq. Of the 683 operations and strikes in Iraq, the vast majority were aerial operations and ground operations, mostly search and destroy, with the majority of the targets being rural terror shelters. Terrorist shelters make up 65% of the targeted operations, with tactical and operational terrorist elements, such as individual members, and tactical assets like cars and trucks making up 32%. Both of these are most frequently targeted by aerial operations. Of the tactical and operational terror elements, 42% were destroyed by airstrikes. In the rural terror shelters that number rises to 52%.

Beyond this primary category, Türkiye demonstrates a heightened propensity to deploy its drones for targeting tactical assets. The PKK/YPG's group leaders, including high-, mid- and low-level so-called commanders and specialized

personnel such as communication and technical staff are primarily targeted by drones and special operations, predominantly conducted by the MIT. Over the past year, the MIT has notably intensified its decapitation operations in Syria and Iraq while expanding the range of targets. This broadened target scope has resulted in the majority of the PKK's facilities struck after the Oct. 1 attack being targeted by drones operating deep within Syrian and Iraqi territory.<sup>53</sup>

This reflects Türkiye's strategy aimed at eliminating the PKK/YPG leadership, reducing their ability to maneuver and launch attacks in Türkiye or against Turkish forces, disrupting the PKK/YPG command structure, and depriving it of essential technical expertise.<sup>54</sup>



Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

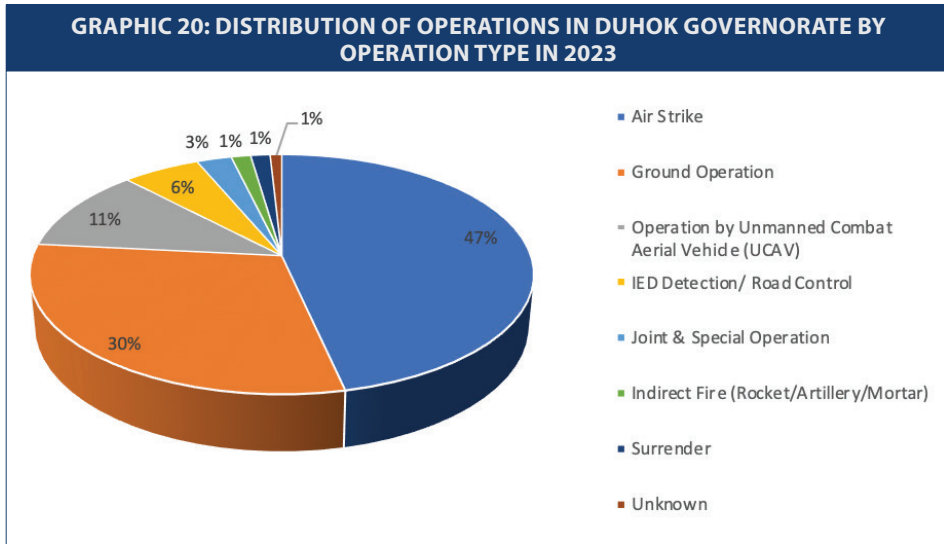
The vast majority of Turkish CT operations in Iraq were focused in the Duhok governorate, especially the Operation Claw-Lock area, which ranges from Mount Metina to the east bank of the Avashin river (Graphic 19). These were mostly search-and-destroy missions and airstrikes targeting the PKK's hideouts, barracks, arsenals, and shelters used to stage attacks against Turkish forces. The PKK members in the region have been confined to underground caves and tunnels.<sup>55</sup> It is diffi-

53 The strikes against the YPG facilities (Energy, Command Centers, Power Plants, Telecommunication Centers) are counted as part of the Rural Terror Shelter Category.

54 S. Düz and M. I. Üzen, "Remote Control | Aerial Elimination of the PKK's Terrorist Leaders and Operatives", SETAV, August 14, 2023, <https://www.setav.org/en/remote-control-aerial-elimination-of-the-pkks-terrorist-leaders-and-operatives/>

55 See H. Sallon, "In Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey is hunting down the PKK beyond its borders", *Le Monde*, April 10 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/04/10/in-iraqi-kurdistan-turkey-is-hunting-down-the-pkk-beyond-its-borders\\_6022413\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/04/10/in-iraqi-kurdistan-turkey-is-hunting-down-the-pkk-beyond-its-borders_6022413_4.html) and B. Mandraci, "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Regional Battleground in Flux", *Crisis Group*, February 18 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/turkeys-pkk-conflict-regional-battleground-flux>

cult for the terrorists to safely leave these underground systems, but it is also difficult for Turkish forces to enter and clear the systems as tunnel warfare presents a unique challenge and heavily favors the defender.<sup>56</sup> Between January and June, Suleymani-yah was targeted only nine times, which were almost exclusively with drones. How-ever, from July to December, Suleymani-yah was targeted 38 times, of which 19 were airstrikes and 16 were drone strikes.



Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

At the current state, it seems most likely that Türkiye will focus on clearing and stabilizing control in the current declared operation area. Türkiye has established a roughly 10-20 kilometer deep buffer zone in Iraq in mostly sparsely or even unpopulated areas. These are used to prevent any illegal movement of terrorists from Iraq into Türkiye. This buffer zone only goes up to a point where either the Iraqi government or the KRG can establish control, leaving no gaps for PKK members to sneak across. Pressure from Türkiye, the KRG, and the Iraqi central government already led to the PKK announcing their withdrawal from the Makhmour Camp which was under the control of terrorist organizations since its fight against DAESH.<sup>57</sup> The PKK had to withdraw from Sinjar in 2022 after

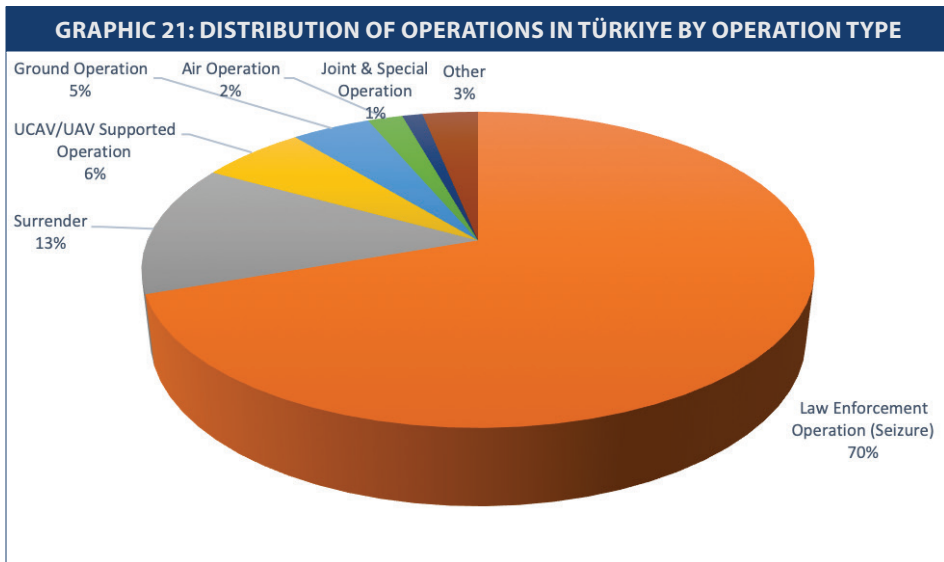
56 J. Spencer, "UNDERGROUND NIGHTMARE: HAMAS TUNNELS AND THE WICKED PROBLEM FACING THE IDF", Modern War Institute, October 17 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/underground-nightmare-hamas-tunnels-and-the-wicked-problem-facing-the-idf/>

57 K.F. Dri, "PKK announces withdrawal from Makhmour refugee camp in Erbil province", Rudaw, October 19 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/191020231>

similar pressure was applied there.<sup>58</sup> Operational pressure from Türkiye, the KRG, and the Iraqi government may confine the PKK in small pockets in Iraq and force the organization to switch to a cell structure, finalizing the shift of the center of gravity for the PKK from Iraq toward Syria. If Türkiye has to expand the operation area, this could be the Gara region in the Duhok Governorate of Iraq, which the PKK uses as its military and logistical hub. Negotiations for this upcoming operation are already underway between Türkiye, Iraq, and the KRG.

## Türkiye

The trend of shifting military operations away from Türkiye and pushing the armed terrorist threat deeper into Iraq and Syria continued in 2023. The vast majority of operations in Türkiye are now policing operations, where the targets are captured alive, and surrenders by terrorists to the TAF and police.<sup>59</sup>



Source: *Terrorism Analysis Platform*

Domestically, with the *Heroes* operations, Türkiye launched a new series of missions under the directive of the Interior Ministry to combat terrorism in Türkiye. But this operation series is also accompanied by other operations such as Kafes (Turkish for *cage*), Kalkan (Turkish for *shield*), Narkogüç (Turkish *Narco-*

<sup>58</sup> “Calm prevails as PKK terrorists withdraw from Sinjar after clashes”, May 8 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/calm-prevails-as-pkk-terrorists-withdraw-from-sinjar-after-clashes>

<sup>59</sup> Surrenders are counted as “operations” for the Terrorism Analysis Platform because there are departments within the Turkish security apparatus working to convince terrorist group members to surrender themselves to Turkish security forces in return for leniency.



*power*), Mahzen (Turkish for *cellar*), and similar, targeting non-terrorist threats and issues. The Interior Ministry's website, previously predominantly reported counterterrorism (CT) operations, but now focuses heavily on crime-fighting and narcotics operations (Table 5). Since the terrorist threat is gradually shifting away from Türkiye, further research is needed to determine whether there is a correlation between decreased terrorist activity and the threat within Türkiye or there is an increased threat posed by organized crime and other non-terrorist elements.

Type	January	February	March	April	May	June
<b>Terrorism</b>	3	4	7	0	7	4
<b>Non-Terrorism</b>	2	1	1	1	1	6

July	August	September	October	November	December
2	11	12	23	8	9
4	7	28	26	28	26

Source: Ministry of Interior (<https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/basin-aciklamalari-yeni>)

TABLE 6: DISTRIBUTION OF OPERATIONS ACROSS TARGET TYPE AND OPERATION TYPE IN TÜRKİYE									
Operation-Target Relation	Target Type								
Operation Type	Tactical and Operational Terror Element	Unknown	Auxiliary Unit	Rural Terror Shelter	Group Leader	Arsenal	Financial Resource	Cells	Grand Total
Law Enforcement Operation (Seizure)	270	113 <sup>60</sup>	91	3	1	7	9	4	498
Surrender	52	9		1					62
Ground Operation	7			30	4	5			46
UCAV/UAV Supported Operation	19		5	2	10				36
Joint & Special Operation	3			18	2				23
Air Operation	5			4					9
IED Detection/Road Control	6					2			8
Air Supported Operation	3				2				5
Operation by Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV)	2				1				3
Indirect Fire (Rocket/Artillery/Mortar)	1								1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>691</b>

Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

In Türkiye, the most frequent targets are tactical and operational terror elements. Law enforcement operations account for 72.07% of operations, while surrenders make up 8.97%, meaning that 81.04% of operations conducted in Türkiye are non-military.<sup>61</sup> In total, some 3,667 suspects were recorded by the Terrorism Analysis Platform as being detained or arrested, while 142 terrorist elements were

60 Illegal border crossings are recorded as “Unknown” in the Terrorism Analysis Platform. The combination of the operation type “Law Enforcement Operation”, the Unit Type “Tactical Military Unit” against an “Unknown” target is how illegal border crossings are recorded. Of the category the 113 cases of “Law Enforcement Operations (Seizure) operations and “Unknown” targets, 91 are illegal border crossings while the remaining are targets that could not be identified.

61 In some instances, such as in border control military units police the border. While the unit is military, the operation itself is accepted as non-military.

neutralized. According to the Interior Ministry's 2023 summary, 923 members of the Separatist Terrorist Organization (BTÖ, referring to the PKK/YPG) were neutralized, with 7,716 suspects detained, 1,555 arrested, and 1,683 released under police supervision.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "Bakanımız Sayın Yerlikaya, 2023 Yılı Terör Operasyonlarının Bilançosunu Açıkladı: 32 Bin 226 Operasyon", Ministry of Interior, January 30, 2024.

# TERRORIST ATTACKS AGAINST TÜRKİYE

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The PKK/YPG threat faced by Türkiye generates significant security concerns, particularly originating from Iraq and Syria. The dimensions of this threat, along with the support received by the PKK/YPG from external actors are closely linked to regional and international dynamics. In this context, it is vital to address the PKK/YPG threat that Türkiye faces and assess it from a strategic security perspective.

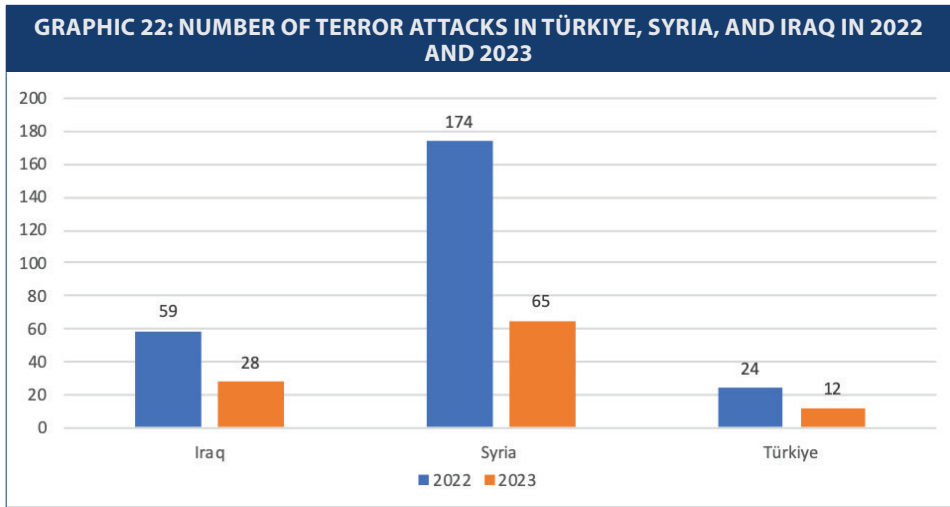
This strategic security analysis includes an examination of the PKK/YPG's activities in Iraq and Syria, a review of regional relations, and an assessment of the effectiveness of Türkiye's counterterrorism strategies. In this framework, the main focus of this study is to analyze the PKK/YPG's negative impact on Türkiye's security, the dynamics of relations with regional actors, and the assessment of current measures and recommendations for the future.

## CURRENT SITUATION ANALYSIS

According to the Terrorism Analysis Platform (TAP), between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2023, a total of 105 attacks were recorded in Türkiye, Iraq, and Syria. Twelve of the attacks took place in Türkiye, 28 in Iraq, and 61 in Syria. An analysis of the distribution of attacks reveals that Syria is the epicenter of terrorism. When compared to previous years, it is also understood that there has been a remarkable decrease in the number of terrorist attacks.

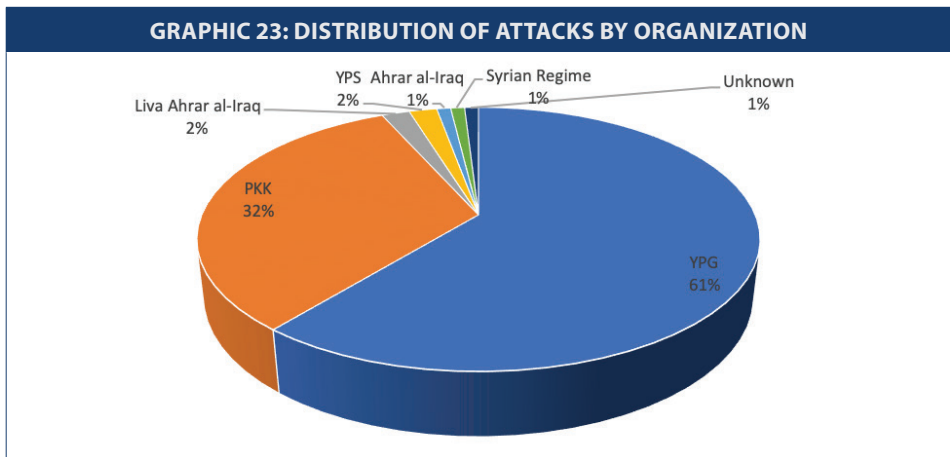
According to the TAP database, the number of total attacks in 2022 is recorded as 257, showing there has been a decrease of 59.14% in attacks in 2023. This decrease

is likely the result of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy by the Turkish security establishment, targeting the PKK/YPG domestically and almost eradicating the organization's existence within Türkiye, blocking the transit of PKK/YPG members from Iraq into Türkiye through several temporary military bases in the north of Iraq and increasing border security in Syria, and targeting the PKK/YPG leadership wherever possible with decapitation operations. However, what is relevant for this decrease in attacks is also the declared cessation of action by the PKK/YPG between the February 2023 earthquake and lasted until the election in May 2023.



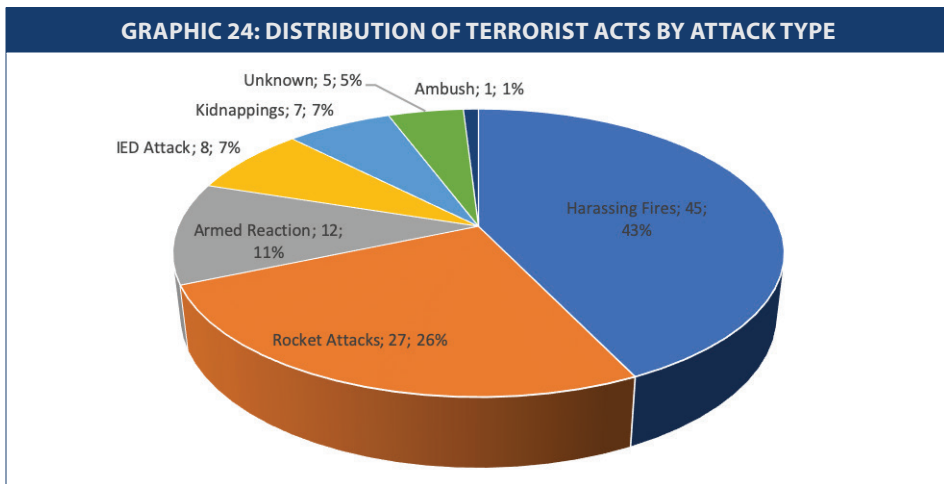
Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

Examining the situation within each country, a similar pattern emerges. According to TAP data, while 26 attacks were recorded within Türkiye's borders in 2021, this number was reduced to 23 in 2022. In 2023, there were 12 terrorist attacks in Türkiye marking a significant halving of attacks.



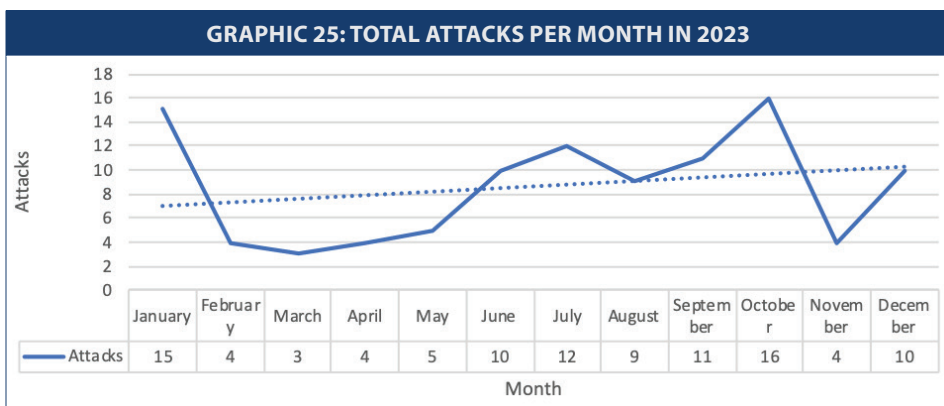
Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

Similarly, while 59 attacks against Turkish security forces were recorded in Iraq in 2022, this number dropped to 28 in 2023. The most striking change was in Syria. In 2022, there were a total of 174 attacks against Turkish security forces and bases in Syria, dropping to 65 attacks in 2023. Many factors contributed to the remarkable decrease in terrorist attacks, such as the February 2023 earthquakes, the unilateral decision of the terrorist organization to cease activities, conflicts between Arab tribes and the PKK/YPG, and Türkiye’s effective counterterrorism strategies. The exact impact of these on both terrorist activity as well as CT activity is difficult to measure but will be considered while conducting the analysis.



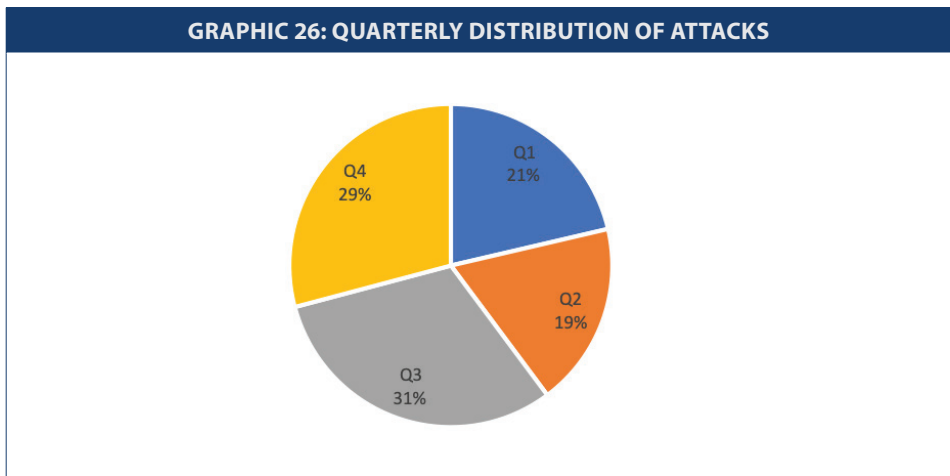
Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

According to TAP data, when examining the distribution based on attack type between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2023, it is observed that there were 45 attacks primarily consisting of harassing fire by terrorist groups against Turkish forces. This is followed by 27 attacks with rocket launchers and 12 instances of armed reactions.

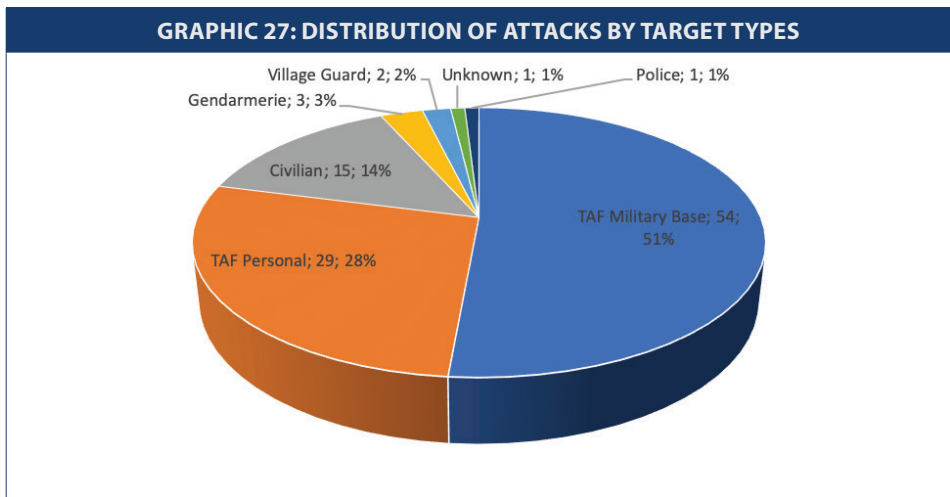


Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

When analyzing the monthly distribution of attacks, a noticeable increase is seen in the second half of the year (Graphic 25 & 26). Q3 and Q4 make up 60% of the total attacks taking place in 2023. Among the primary reasons for this situation are the PKK/YPG’s unilateral non-aggression decision in February and their resumption of attacks against Turkish security forces in June. Additionally, the increase in operations by the TAF and the MIT, particularly between May and June, targeting the organization’s mid/high-level operatives, is also among these factors. During this period, the PKK/YPG suffered heavy losses and began reacting to Türkiye’s operations.



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform



Source: Terrorism Analysis Platform

Examining the distribution of attacks by target types shows that 54 attacks were directed toward tactical/operational military bases. This is followed by 29 at-

tacks targeting tactical/operational military units. While attacks on military bases are more common in Syria, harassment fire and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks stand out in Iraq. The PKK utilizes the favorable geographical conditions in Iraq to engage in harassment fire and set up IED traps in small tactical formations and targets the Turkish military units. Moreover, they hide in caves and tunnels, waiting for opportune moments to launch attacks. In Syria, due to the absence of direct clashes between the PKK/YPG and the TAF, and a relatively clear line-of-sight (LOS), attacks are mostly carried out through long-distance rocket firing by the PKK/YPG while Turkish forces prefer artillery and airstrikes. The geographic conditions are part of the reason for the events on Dec. 22 and 23 where the PKK launched two major attacks against Turkish forces against the Tatasara and Matin bases in north of Iraq.

## DEC. 22-23 ATTACKS

The Dec. 22-23 Attacks were the most devastating attacks Türkiye has suffered in 2023, as a result of which six soldiers were martyred on each base. Both of the Turkish bases in Tatasara and Matin mountains started to be constructed in late 2023. Open-source information suggests that troops did not arrive on Matin until September 2023 and there was no significant construction until October. A similar series of events likely took place at the base on Tatasara. The PKK exploited the rough weather conditions at the time, consistent with mostly fog and snow, to get as close as possible, to the extent of infiltrating into the base itself, and opening fire at very close range.

Based on the events of Dec. 22-23 and the attack by the PKK on Jan. 12, which targeted the Matin base again, it can be assumed that weather conditions can negate Türkiye's technological superiority in the field and allow the PKK to establish a temporary advantage.

In Iraq, Türkiye's advantage lies in the fact that its troops occupy mountain tops, giving them a height advantage while also allowing them to see their surroundings, have sophisticated equipment for detecting approaching enemies such as Ground Surveillance Radars and thermal cameras, are usually better trained and equipped at an individual level and lastly can call air support when deemed necessary. However, most of these advantages lose their effectiveness in certain weather conditions that appear more frequently during the winter months in the north of Iraq.



Türkiye had secured itself during the winter months by temporarily withdrawing from at-risk bases during the period and re-entering them when the weather conditions became clearer. This was a considerable constraint on Turkish operations in the north of Iraq. The PKK used this period to resupply and reinforce itself in the given areas. By not withdrawing, Türkiye is sustaining the pressure on the PKK throughout the year but also leaving itself more vulnerable than ever.

## TURKISH RESPONSE AND STRATEGIES

Türkiye's counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria continued in 2023. It's observed that joint operations involving the MIT and TAF utilized airstrikes, UAV/UCAV operations, and artillery fire through ground elements against terrorist targets in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, ongoing operations against the terrorist group persist with military units in the area of the Operation Claw-Lock region in Iraq - identifying and destroying caves and tunnels where the terrorist elements were hidden.

In October, two PKK/YPG terrorists attempted to attack the Interior Ministry on the opening day of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye (TBMM), prompting Ankara to launch extensive airstrikes and UAV/UCAV operations in north Iraq and Syria.<sup>63</sup> These operations between Oct. 1, 3, and 4 in Iraq and Oct. 5, 6, and 8 in the north of Syria destroyed a total of 194 targets, including caves, shelters, weapon depots, and facilities providing income for the organization, and neutralizing 229 terrorists. Domestically, a coordinated operation named Operation Heroes was initiated by the MIT, the General Directorate of Security (EGM), and the Gendarmerie. This operation resulted in numerous arrests of terrorist members and suspects, dealing blows to the organization's internal ammunition, intelligence, and financial resources.

Additionally, the MIT continued its decapitation operations targeting the so-called middle/high-level executives and leaders of the organization. Between Jan. 1 and Dec 1, 2023, MIT rendered 201 terrorists ineffective according to the MIT's own published data.<sup>64</sup>

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63 "Turkey says PKK targets in north Iraq destroyed after Ankara suicide attack", <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/1/banned-kurdish-group-pkk-claims-responsibility-for-turkey-suicide-attack>

64 MIT, "MİT OPERASYONLARI, TERÖR ÖRGÜTÜ PKK'NIN SÖZDE SORUMLULARINI HEDEF ALDI", Milli İstihbarat Teskilati, December 18, 2023, [https://www.mit.gov.tr/basin-yansimasi\\_mit-operasyonlari-terror-orgutu-pkknin-sozde-sorumlularini-hedef-aldi\\_20.html](https://www.mit.gov.tr/basin-yansimasi_mit-operasyonlari-terror-orgutu-pkknin-sozde-sorumlularini-hedef-aldi_20.html)

An analysis of the distribution of tasks of the mid/senior level terrorists neutralized by the MIT reveals a wide variety. The so-called organization leaders in various areas such as training, finance, intelligence, and logistics were identified by the MIT and neutralized through UAV/UCAV operations.<sup>65</sup>

Overall, the counterterrorism operations conducted by the TAF and the MIT have significant effects on the organization, causing tactical changes. The UAV/UCAV operations cause the organization to constantly hide and move in dispersed groups. The intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activities of Turkish UAVs in the north of Iraq and Syria have been significantly effective in identifying the organization's members, weapons depots, shelter, and training areas. In this way, it is also aimed to put pressure on the organization and to keep the psychological superiority in the hands of Turkish security forces by causing loss of morale and motivation of the terrorist group.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, neutralizing the so-called top executives and leaders aims to disrupt the hierarchical structure within the organization, cause communication breakdowns, and reduce the organization's ideological and operational capabilities due to a lack of experienced personnel.<sup>67</sup>

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65 M. I. Üzen, „Turkey's National Intelligence Service Leadership Decapitation Strategy against the PKK/YPG”, Politics Today, August 30 2023, <https://politicstoday.org/turkey-national-intelligence-service-mit-pkk-pyd-ypg-leadership-decapitation-strategy/>

66 Sibel Düz, “How Turkey Neutralizes the PKK and Other Terrorist Targets”, Politics Today, May 10, 2023, <https://politicstoday.org/turkey-the-pkk-terrorism/>

67 Uzen, M.I., “Turkey's National Intelligence Service Leadership Decapitation Strategy against the PKK/YPG”, Politics Today, August 30 2023, <https://politicstoday.org/turkey-national-intelligence-service-mit-pkk-pyd-ypg-leadership-decapitation-strategy/>



# STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

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## PKK'S POTENTIAL STRATEGIES AND ADAPTATIONS

The statements from the PKK/YPG's sources indicate that some tactical and strategic changes are occurring within the organization. The PKK/YPG has been unable to keep up with Turkish CT operations for a few years now and has taken a rather defensive stance with occasional attacks into Türkiye like in Mersin, Istanbul, and Ankara to make it known that they still exist, but the number of attacks and their success rate is diminishing year by year. Türkiye has managed to largely push the terrorist threat away from its territory and into the borders of Iraq and Syria, where it is now trying to establish a buffer between itself and the threat.

While it is not within our data, Türkiye's base-building operations in the north of Iraq seem to have largely eliminated or at least diminished the risk of the PKK/YPG members infiltrating Türkiye, with the remaining risk being that soldiers in those areas are exposed to infiltration attempts by the PKK/YPG themselves. This will further go down as more caves and tunnels get cleared, the bases become more sophisticated, and troops become more experienced in handling themselves in the area. Türkiye's attempts to build a secured area in Syria, which seems to have now become the only or at least preferred way for the PKK/YPG to infiltrate into Türkiye, have been stifled by the U.S.

It is believed that the effectiveness of MIT's extensive intelligence network in the region, the depth of Turkish CT operations in Iraq and Syria, the UAV/UCAV

operations, and airstrikes in Iraq and Syria have forced the organization to make such a change.

Firstly, the Turkish security forces enhanced military technological capabilities allow for easy identification of terrorist locations. This prevents terrorists from gathering in large groups, compelling them to operate in small formations of three to four individuals. In addition, the organization's sources plan to increase the operational capabilities of these elements, enabling a small number of terrorists to carry out more effective actions in terms of quality. It seems the organization aims to move away from classic guerrilla tactics, focusing on smaller tactical formations for a professional attack mobilization.

Secondly, the organization places significant importance on secrecy, largely influenced by Türkiye's advanced military surveillance and detection systems. Satellite systems, UAV/ UCAV operations, and the extensive intelligence network on the ground make the organization's members feel that they are under constant surveillance. For this reason, statements from PKK sources indicate that the organization's propaganda activities will no longer be carried out physically, but through audio-visual methods by moving online.

Thirdly, the organization is taking advantage of the challenging geographical conditions in Iraq, retreating underground through tunnels and caves. In Avashin, Gare, Metina, and Zap, the organization's members hide in tunnels and caves in small tactical formations and use these areas for various purposes such as underground shelters, ammunition, and food/supply storage. Additionally, in small, scattered groups, they engage in harassment fire or improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against Turkish soldiers.

Fourthly, the organization has been observed engaging in the procurement and development of UAV technology in recent years. In this context, the use of commercial and small tactical drones and model aircraft in terrorist attacks has increased. It is also claimed that the organization has established an R&D unit for the development of weapons and UAVs to strengthen its technical capabilities.<sup>68</sup>

The Dec. 22-23 and Jan. 12 attacks on Matin and Tatasara indicate that the PKK/YPG has not yet been defeated and still can conduct attacks. Especially forward bases are under threat. If the TAF plans on keeping their forward

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68 PKK established the "Delal Amed Air Defence Units" in 2020, a unit focused on the development and use of drones and other rotary vehicles in their terrorist attacks. While they have been used plenty of times in their attacks against Türkiye, their success remains limited. See W. Zwijnenburg, "Between Terror Strikes and Targeted Killing: the evolving role of drone warfare in Iraq", PAX, October 30 2023, <https://paxforpeace.nl/publications/between-terror-strikes-and-targeted-killings/>

bases manned during the winter months, a new plan is required to keep those bases secure.

The TAF has reached the contact line between the unpopulated areas of the Türkiye-Iraq border and the populated areas of the north of Iraq from where the PKK/YPG draws its resources. This is further exacerbated by a constant stream of supplies, equipment, personal, experience and training flowing from the U.S.-trained forces to those conducting attacks against Türkiye. While Türkiye has cut the contact between terrorists in Türkiye and those outside, further progress in defeating the PKK/YPG will require cutting the contact between the PKK's Gara camp and the Zap and Metina regions as well as cutting the contact between the PKK/YPG terrorists in Syria and those in Iraq. Both of these will be strategic defeats for the PKK/YPG activities and a threat to its continued existence. Expanding and consolidating current operation areas will only lead to tactical victories.

Meanwhile, the PKK/YPG will continue to adapt. Terrorist organizations in general are very prone to rapid changes in methods and tactics, quickly adopting emerging technologies but usually lacking the resources and knowhow to deploy them effectively and at scale. The PKK/YPG is no exception. But recent technological developments in artificial intelligence (AI) and the easy access to small off-the-shelf drones are turning a new page in the terrorist handbook. The PKK/YPG actively uses drones in the planning of their attacks. Their propaganda videos show that they are recording the position of Turkish bases in Iraq with drone cameras and using the footage in the planning of their attacks. It has not reached the point where kamikaze drone attacks are being frequently used.

## EMERGING THREATS AND EFFECTS OF THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

Türkiye's proactive strategy in counterterrorism – based on military technologies and intelligence capabilities – has led to tactical and strategic transformations within the PKK/YPG. Statements made by PKK-affiliated sources indicate that there has been a change in the PKK/YPG's doctrine in particular, tactical, and technical restructuring has been carried out in certain periods, and the organization is trying to professionalize itself by specializing in the use of weapons, the development of drones, and the capabilities of tactical formations.<sup>69</sup> Murat Karayılan

69 According to the Murat Karayılan's interview with the PKK news agency ANF published on November 25, 2023. "Karayılan: Bizim savaşımız bir gelecek yaratma savaşıdır", ANF, November 25 2023, <https://firatnews.com/kurdistan/karayilan-savasimiz-bir-var-olma-ve-gelecek-yaratma-savasidir-190845>

in his Nov. 25 speech also made an emphasis on the potential use of AI in their terrorist effort. It is currently not known how this is planned out to take place but there seems to be potential.

Since Oct. 7, 2023, the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict indicates that security dynamics in the Middle East will change profoundly in the short, medium, and long term and that security perception will be at the forefront of the foreign policies of the countries in the region. Moreover, considering non-state armed actors (NSAA) in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, conflicts are demonstrating a shift from interstate to engagements between states and NSAAs. Therefore, the security problems emerging in the region provide a suitable ground for terrorist organizations to take advantage of this chaotic environment and force states to pursue security-oriented policies.

In particular, the attacks of Iranian-backed militia groups against the U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria and the activities of Hezbollah on the Israel-Lebanon border indicate that Iran will try to maintain its influence in the region through proxy actors rather than directly engaging in conflicts. Therefore, considering Türkiye's military presence in Iraq and Syria, the growing threat potential of NSAAs should be considered.

At this point, another issue that needs to be considered is how the PKK/YPG will be engaged in the developments in the region, what kind of threat it may pose to Türkiye with its tactical/strategic changes and adaptations, and how preventive strategies should be determined in the light of possible attack scenarios. As seen in the case of Israel, despite advanced intelligence networks in the field and sophisticated military surveillance technologies at the border, NSAAs can overcome these barriers with relatively weaker yet innovative methods. Moreover, identifying these vulnerabilities and executing surprise attacks at a tactical level could lead to unexpected damage. Therefore, the Israel-Hamas conflicts provide significant insights for Turkish security forces in adopting preventive measures against the PKK/YPG threat.

On the other hand, the United States' local alliance relations with the PKK/YPG remain a significant handicap in Türkiye's counterterrorism operations in Syria and Iraq. Under the guise of combating DAESH, the PKK/YPG receives arms and ammunition support from the U.S. conducts military exercises, and maintains close relationships with senior American diplomats and military officials.







# ANALYZING TRENDS, THREATS AND ADAPTATIONS NAVIGATING SECURITY IN FLUX COUNTERING THE PKK IN 2023

*Mehmet Salah Devrim, Sibel Düz*

Türkiye faced significant challenges in 2022 and 2023, marked by transformative events both domestically and internationally. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 triggered profound shifts in global security dynamics, with implications felt far beyond state actors. Terrorist and non-state actors closely monitored these developments, recognizing strategic opportunities amid the upheaval. Concurrently, Türkiye grappled with a devastating earthquake in February 2023, prompting widespread devastation and necessitating extensive recovery efforts. These events underscored the interconnectedness of security challenges and the imperative for proactive measures to address emerging threats.

Amid regional turmoil, Türkiye's strategic security outlook remains focused on countering terrorism, particularly the PKK. Against the backdrop of ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Türkiye confronts the persistent threat of mass migration and instability spillover. In response, Türkiye has implemented measures to secure its borders, including the establishment of buffer zones within Iraqi territory to prevent terrorist infiltration. As the PKK undergoes internal transformations, Türkiye remains vigilant in adapting its counterterrorism strategies to address evolving threats and maintain regional stability.