

Turkey's military interventions in Syria and Iraq are creating space for an Islamic State resurgence



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Turkey's crimes against the Kurds domestically and regionally

Turkey has a [longstanding history](#) of repressing the Kurds. The repression of the Kurds has become more acute in recent years because of the rise of Kurds in the recent decades in both Iraq and Syria. Further, since 2015, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used regional issues to crack down on the Kurds in order to provide cover for an ailing economy. For example, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) has been politically persecuted by the ruling Party of Justice and Development (AKP) because of its pro-Kurdish position and because they are challenging Erdogan's authoritarian AKP government. When Erdogan loses popularity, he regularly instrumentalizes the minority Kurds to rally their base. The persecution of the HDP includes having the party's offices raided, the party's co-leaders imprisoned, and the [removal](#) of HDP mayors and officials from their positions. Kurdish free speech is being repressed through the banning of Kurdish television, newspapers, and online sources— a tactic that Erdogan is known for. Kurds face heavy economic discrimination because of ethnic differences between them and Turks. The Kurdistan Region of Turkey is underserved and underdeveloped, which leads to higher unemployment rates, lower pay, and longer periods of unemployment. Kurdish job applicants are less likely to receive a call back than their Turkish counterparts, especially [Kurdish women](#).

Hate crimes targeting Kurdish citizens in Turkey are [rising](#) because of the government's campaign against Kurds inside Turkey and outside in Syria and Iraq. There have been several well-documented cases of violent assaults on Kurds in Turkey in recent years. For example, seven members of a Kurdish family in [Konya](#) were killed by a Turkish man in what is described as a "purely racist attack" last year. This was not the first time the family had been attacked by Turkish gunmen, but Turkish officials failed to address the complaints that the family was being targeted for their ethnicity and pushed back on claims of ethnic discrimination in Turkey. Instead, the Turkish officials prevented large gatherings from mourning the family and arrested protesters over the massacre in Van. Another victim, Ekrem Yasli, a 74-year-old Kurdish citizen of Canakkale, was attacked with a bottle by a Turkish man for speaking Kurdish and was hospitalized for head wounds. The attacker was [acquitted](#) because of a 'lack of evidence for racially charged assault' according to the state prosecutor's office. In the province of Sakarya, a 43-year-old Kurdish man and his son were assaulted at gunpoint for speaking Kurdish. The father, Kadir Sakci, was killed in the attack, and the son was wounded. The suspect reportedly asked if the two were Kurdish or Syrian and, upon hearing, they were Kurdish, opened fire. The state prosecutor is handling this as a normal murder rather than a hate crime because Turkey makes a habit of protecting perpetrators if their victims are Kurdish. A 13-year-old Kurd named Sirin Tosun died in the intensive care unit in the Sakarya province after being beaten and shot by six people for speaking Kurdish. The men have faced minimal legal repercussions, and many are free. Another attack in [Izmer](#) targeted the HDP's office in the city, killing one of the party's workers, Deniz Poyraz. The gunmen that attacked the building stated that he had no connections to any organizations and attacked the HDP building because he [hated the PKK](#).

These attacks are not a new phenomenon in Turkey, but they have become far more transparent because the perpetrators know the Turkish government is behind the attackers, not their victims. The HDP has accused the AKP-MHP coalition of supporting attacks on the Kurds

in the [past](#). The calls for minority rights, fair trials, political rights, and economic development by the HDP and Kurdish citizens in Turkey are manageable for the government, but President Erdogan has villainized the HDP as an extension of PKK because he can only see Kurdish nationalism as terrorism, instead of requests that basic human needs be met. Turkey's [top appeals court](#) has begun the process of shutting down the pro-Kurdish HDP for alleged ties to terrorists.

Regionally, Turkish-backed militias and the Turkish military have been responsible for a multitude of crimes against Kurds by invading Kurdish areas in Syria and Iraq. These crimes include [mass looting](#), forced displacement, extortion, murder, and sexual violence. U.S. intelligence believes, because of the build-up of military elements in the 18-mile wide security corridor by Turkish-backed militias and armed forces, that the Turkish government is planning to clear [civilian populations](#) from the area (a predominantly Kurdish area) in order to resettle it with Syrian Arabs. Nearly [170,000 Kurds](#) have fled the battle zone, while those who remain behind are subject to looting, 'occupation taxes,' and other crimes because of a lack of means. These militias place a huge strain on the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) resources and inflict heavy casualties. In the first [11 days](#) of Operation Olive Branch, 235 civilians, including 22 children, were killed, and 677 civilians have been injured by Turkish military operations, along with over 500 SDF fighters killed. The massive Turkish military operations forced the SDF to agree to the Sochi agreement, which would redeploy SDF fighters to different areas of Northeast Syria while the central government took over control of the Syrian-Turkish border. Civilians, including children, have been [targeted](#) by consecutive airstrikes, especially in Kurdish-dominated urban centers. In Afrin, [hundreds of civilians](#) have been killed by the Turkish military. The Turkish militias that attacked Afrin were composed of former [ISIS fighters](#). This move to use former ISIS fighters makes sense for Turkey because they view the Kurds as an existential threat, or at least Erdogan constructs them as one. In Iraq, the Turkish military has forcibly displaced thousands of Kurdish civilians in the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). Turkish airstrikes have targeted border villages and the United Nations'-recognized Makhmour Refugee Camp. One airstrike [killed](#) a taxi driver and his passenger in Dohuk. Turkey has expanded its military presence in Northern Iraq, in recent years, because of its fight with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The Turkish military has expanded mainly to crush growing Kurdish political power in the region, namely the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (AANES) and the KRG.

Turkey's parliament extended its military mandate in Iraq and Syria for another [two years](#) in October 2021 in order to combat 'extremism' on its border. There has been open conflict between the PKK and the Turkish military in the Zagros Mountains, with casualties on both sides. Kurdish civilians in the Zagros Mountains have been caught in the bloodshed, and many have been killed by Turkish drone [strikes or displaced](#).

ISIS has been on the rise since its territorial loss in 2019

Following their massive territorial loss in 2019, ISIS has operated through a series of disparate sleeper cells that conduct unorganized attacks. However, ISIS still maintains massive strength even though it has lost its territory. It can still conduct widescale guerrilla attacks, including

assassinations, sniper attacks, and kidnappings. [In 2019](#), there were roughly 18,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq who had access to a massive war chest of an estimated \$400 million. Many of the tent camps for refugees have become breeding grounds for the [ISIS ideology](#). Unless Western and regional actors figure out what to do about these tent camps and how to ensure the people populating these camps have a place to go, these tent camps may become recruiting centers for ISIS. Refugee camps, historically, are a consistent place for extremists groups to gain new recruits. The Taliban used the Afghan flooded refugee camps in Pakistan to recruit a large force, and now ISIS may use the under-secured IDP camps in Syria and Iraq to do the same. The SDF is responsible for over [70,000 refugees](#), displaced peoples, and ISIS family members, as well as over 10,000 ISIS fighters, and they receive minimal aid for managing these tent camps and prisons. The AANES has repeatedly made requests to the international community to assist with repatriating ISIS prisoners, establishing a fair tribunal process, and basic security for these massive tent prisons. Many of the SDF requests fall on deaf ears, with countries like France simply refusing to take back its citizens who joined ISIS and leaving it to the regional actors to deal with their citizens. In the al-Hol Camp, because of a lack of resources, the SDF is struggling to prevent the spread of ISIS ideology and the recruitment of new ISIS fighters. It is important to remember that ISIS operates globally, and the financial and global networks for ISIS have not been cut off. They still have logistical capabilities even though they lost much of their territory. ISIS still poses a threat regionally and globally.

In October 2019, Trump's administration killed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, and claimed that ISIS was [100% defeated](#). The problem is that Baghdadi had given more operational freedom to subordinates, creating a decentralized structure that could withstand being landless, and because of that they continue to threaten minority communities like the Yazidis and Christians along with the stability of the region. In 2019, [37](#) people were killed in a bus bombing by ISIS in one of the largest attacks conducted by ISIS. The terror group did not need territory to coordinate this attack; sleeper cells operating out of the vast Syrian desert were able to launch this deadly attack. ISIS has taken advantage of the continued instability along the Syrian-Iraq border to move fighters' resources and conduct attacks across the two countries. The lack of coordination for security along the buffer zone of the KRG and the central Iraqi government has created a sphere for ISIS to operate in. In December 2021, an ISIS attack killed three civilians and wounded several members of the Peshmerga in the rural village of [Khidir Jija](#). Currently, ISI is only capable of infrequently launching large-scale attacks, and it has not been able to penetrate major Iraqi cities, but there is a growing concern that sleeper cells are becoming more coordinated. In [December](#), the Makhmour district in Iraq was attacked by ISIS, killing 10 Peshmerga and three civilians. This attack was coupled with an ISIS attack on a [Peshmerga checkpoint](#) in the same district. In January, ISIS fighters attempted to free the 4,000 prisoners in the Al-Sina prison. This was one of the most well-planned ISIS attacks in recent years. It required the coordination of [dozens](#) of sleeper cells from all around Al-Hasakah to swarm the area and wait for an opportune time. The SDF claims the attack on Al-Hasakah's Al-Sina prison was planned over a sixth month period in Turkish-controlled regions of Syria in order for sleeper cells to properly organize. The nearly week-long battle in and around the prison was one of the largest engagements with ISIS fighters in recent years. On January 20th, an estimated 200 ISIS fighters launched a coordinated-multi-pronged assault on the prison that

was preceded by two car bombs on the prison's north side. The secure walls of the prison were destroyed by stolen [SDF vehicles](#) which allowed hundreds of ISIS prisoners to escape. The battle between the coalition and ISIS lasted almost a full week and left nearly 374 [ISIS fighters, 50 Kurdish fighters, and seven civilians dead](#). The SDF has gained control over Al-Sina again with the help of U.S. airstrikes, and many of the ISIS prisoners and fighters have [surrendered](#). SDF Spokesmen Farhad Shami claims that only a minimal number of prisoners were able to escape, but according to the Rojava Information Center, up to [2,400 prisoners](#) are unaccounted for, citing SDF data. There is no exact number on how many ISIS fighters escaped the prison, but the Al-Sina prison will most likely become a major event for ISIS to rally new fighters. To date, the SDF has lost over [11,000](#) fighters in the War with ISIS, and in the first 11 months of 2021, over 350 people have died in ISIS attacks in the disputed territories of Iraq.

The Al-Sina prison assault is worrying because it indicates three negative trends for the stability in Iraq and Syria. First, SDF security forces are clearly under strain from being spread across multiple fronts, and its security forces are under-resourced. The 200 ISIS fighters and two car bombs had to go through at least a [dozen SDF security checkpoints](#) and through Al-Hasakah itself. The question becomes: How did the SDF let this large force slip through to what is supposed to be one of its most secure sights? Prisoners were able to take some of the SDF guards hostages, but many of the prison staff taken hostage were [rescued](#) according to the SDF. For example, the attacks on Al-Sina were coupled with [dozens](#) of other attacks across SDF-held territories. This hampered a larger, more effective SDF response to the Al-Sina prison break. The second concern is more likely reality, and that is that ISIS still has the logistical and financial resources to conduct large, sophisticated attacks. The Al-Sina prison assault underlies the fact that ISIS has been gradually and [methodically](#) rebuilding its power in Syria and Iraq and that it is capable of attacking secure sights en masse. Since ISIS lost its territory, the coalition's counter-insurgency campaign has proved difficult and expensive, especially because the coalition cut its own resources and placed more of the burden on regional partners like the SDF. The last concern is that Al-Sina may become an event for ISIS to rally around. ISIS has made it a part of its political strategy to target prisons holding their soldiers. There are three broad reasons why ISIS targets prisons: to replenish their numbers, to release leaders or specialists, and to use them as propaganda. These kinds of attacks are opportunistic and take advantage of weaknesses in the detention system. The security of prisons/camps that hold ISIS prisoners is [precarious](#) at best, according to the UN Security Council, which explains why ISIS was able to conduct such a wide-scale operation both inside and outside of Al-Sina's prison. The success of Al-Sina will be used as propaganda for ISIS to get new recruits and to increase the tempo of their attacks. At nearly the same time as the Al-Sina prison assault, ISIS made one of its most deadly attacks in history in Jalawla, Iraq, [killing](#) 11 soldiers. There is a growing concern that ISIS is rebuilding its logistics and intelligence capabilities because of the recently coordinated assaults on Kurdish and Iraqi forces.

There is also a concern that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover may create a vacuum in the country that ISIS-K will fill. Since 2015, ISIS-K has been in over [250 clashes](#) with former Afghani security forces, U.S. forces, and the Taliban. There is concern that ISIS-K is increasingly working more closely with its parent organization in Syria and Iraq. ISIS-K successfully undermines the weak stability of the Taliban government in

Afghanistan, then this may create a space for [ISIS](#) to regain not only lost land but also lost fighters.

Turkey is helping ISIS's resurgence

Extremism in the Middle East is almost always born out of regional instability and lack of opportunities. The Arab Spring of 2011 and the instability that came with these social movements created a power vacuum in Syria and other Middle Eastern states that allowed extremists groups to fester. The protests began because of oppressive governments and a lack of economic opportunities. Specifically, the [repression of dissent](#) pushes citizens to out-groups based on sectarian or extremist positions because they offer a better path to alleviate anger. Extremists then exploit the anger with the system and blame it on religious differences in order to radicalize downtrodden people. Proxy wars have created power vacuums because they undermine the existing state and create a space for militant groups to operate.

That is why Turkey's intervention in Syria has created new opportunities for ISIS. Turkey has launched what is effectively a proxy war in Syria, and there are concerns that these military operations will [invite](#) an ISIS resurgence. According to the SDF, [Turkish airstrikes](#) near the Jirkin prison allowed hundreds of ISIS prisoners to escape because it forced SDF forces to scatter. Many of the Turkish airstrikes [targeted](#) YPG and SDF units that were integral to Rojava's counter-terrorism campaigns, specifically units that were stationed around prisons that hold ISIS family members and fighters. For example, an SDF vehicle driving to reinforce Kurdish forces at the Al-Sina prison was [struck](#) by an airstrike and destroyed, killing a commander and a soldier of the Yazidi YBS forces. Turkish interventions not only further destabilize the region but also makes it harder for stable entities like the AANES to [pursue](#) ISIS. In 2019, ISIS remnants car bombed the area outside of Al-Sina prison, taking [advantage](#) of the Turkish offensive. Almost immediately after Turkey's invasion of Syria, ISIS detainees escaped from a prison in Ayn Issa. There were increased reports of prison riots in SDF-held containment camps, and Turkey's invasion prevented the transfer of high-level detainees to the United States, keeping them in vulnerable positions. According to the Pentagon, ISIS used the Turkish intervention and the chaos that came with it to reconstitute "[its capabilities and resources](#)" to continue operating in Syria and globally. Turkey's invasion also forced the United States to cease training SDF soldiers, which further weakened the fighting capabilities of coalition forces. Turkey's Syrian militias have shown little interest in combating ISIS, and in fact, the U.S. decided to ally with the Syrian Kurds in the fight with ISIS because the SNA was disorganized, underequipped, and filled with extremists who were sympathetic to ISIS. The Turkish police have done some work busting up ISIS cells, but on the battlefield, it was the YPG and coalition advisors fighting ISIS. Even the [Pentagon](#) recognizes that Turkish-backed militias in the Free Syrian Army have a history of helping smuggle ISIS fighters across coalition territory and maintain low-level ties with ISIS because of their shared religious ideology. The unwillingness to combat ISIS may come from ideological sympathy or incompetence, but Turkey has since 2014 been an [unreliable ally](#) in the fight against ISIS. Just days after reconciling Al-Sina prison, Turkey conducted multiple drone strikes in Syria and Iraq targeting the SDF and the YBS. The Makhmour camp, a refugee camp for Kurds who fled Turkey in the 90s, was hit by Turkish airstrikes killing eight people. In Hasakah, a power plant near Al-Malikiyah was hit by Turkish airstrikes killing at least four

people. The casualties may go up because there were several critically wounded, and power has been cut to nearby villages hampering care. The Turkish defense ministry claims that it [targeted](#) military positions in the Sinjar region, Karack region, Al-Raqqa, and in the Derik region. However, in the Sinjar region, multiple Yazidi [villages](#) were destroyed by Turkish airstrikes. A U.S. special forces strike on February 3rd killed top ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. The U.S. claims that al-Qurayshi set off a suicide bomb that killed his wife and children as [U.S. forces](#) closed in. The base Abu Ibrahim was located in the Turkish security zone in northern Syria and was less than [1000 meters](#) away from a Turkish military post.

After the fall of ISIS in 2019, thousands of fighters escaped to Turkey. There ISIS may find the perfect place to back their military operations in Syria. Syria and Iraq present the space for ISIS to operate in, and Turkey may become the logistical center of ISIS. Turkey's security and intelligence forces have finite resources, and many of these resources are dedicated to the decades-long fight with the PKK, which may make it easy for ISIS to operate in the country. Even further, many of the Turkish-backed militias have officers or are commanded by former [ISIS fighters](#), another reason why they have been poor allies in the fight against ISIS. Turkey was accused of using former ISIS fighters in order to take the city of Afrin in Northeast Syria and to clear the city of the Kurds, an act that would not be outside the norm of Turkey's Kurdish policy. ISIS continues to sell Yazidi and other minority captives on the deep web, and a [number](#) of these sales have occurred in Turkey. In one instance, a Yazidi woman who had been kidnapped in 2014 was tracked down by her brother, who went to the police, and was rescued. The Turkish authorities did not press criminal charges for abduction and rape. Turkish citizens also provided help via recruiting for, financing and supplying ISIS. A group of shopkeepers in Ankara helped recruit jobless and struggling young men to go to Syria and [sheltered fighters](#) when they returned in 2016. Buses actually ran from Ankara to Raqqa to allow family members to visit their relatives in ISIS. A [2019 interview](#) with Abu Mansour, an ISIS Emir, further underlines how connected ISIS and Turkey really are. Mansour revealed that much of his duties involved negotiating with various Turkish officials in order to secure safe passage for wounded fighters, new jihadis, and supplies. The Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT), the Turkish intelligence agency, supposedly met with Abu Mansour on multiple occasions to discuss topics ranging from smuggling new ISIS fighters across the border to Turkey's goals for northern Syria. Turkey uses and funds Islamist groups like ISIS in order to crush Kurdish political power in Turkey and abroad. Turkey had much to gain from aligning itself with ISIS in its campaign against the Kurds. The biggest benefit was that they did not have to exchange any money or use any of their resources. Instead, they simply had to allow people through their porous border with Syria in order to quell any autonomous Kurdish political body, and it helped hide their intentions from their NATO allies. According to Mansour, Turkey and ISIS had almost state-to-state-like relations, especially with regards to the flow of ISIS fighters along the Turkish border. It is important to note that extremist prisoners often inflate their importance.

If Mansour's story is to be believed, then it means the Turkish government is doing more than just turning a blind eye to ISIS; it is effectively helping it get supplies and fighters to Syria and Iraq. However, as it is, the Turkish government's policy towards ISIS has at best been disingenuous. Many of the Turkish fighters in Syria are former ISIS fighters, who maintain ties with ISIS, and many of the ISIS fighters from abroad came through Turkey. There were an

estimated 30,000 militants that moved through Turkey on what is called the “[Jihadi Highway](#) .”There is evidence that Turkey helped support ISIS’ illegal, extensive [oil](#) trafficking networks. The Turkish military has done very little in the fight against ISIS, with the Kurds and U.S. coalition forces doing much of the fighting. Lastly, the Turkish invasion in northeast Syria has created an environment that may allow for an ISIS resurgence.