



July 2016

Turkey vs. ISIS and PKK: A Matter of Distinction

Over the course of four days in July 2015, Turkey entered into two wars. Following a deadly bombing in Suruç on July 20, 2015, Turkey joined the international coalition fighting the terrorist group known as the Islamic State (or ISIS). By July 24, 2015, it had also resumed hostilities with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) following the collapse of a two-year cease-fire. A year later, and following a horrific attack on Istanbul's Ataturk Airport on June 28, 2016, examining both conflicts provides an opportunity to explore Turkey's interests, objectives, and tactics in its struggle with terrorism, consider how it might evolve—and compare them with U.S. regional policies.

An analysis of Turkish actions against ISIS and the PKK—drawn from Turkish and U.S. government and military statements, as well as Turkish and international news reports—shows the stark differences between the two campaigns: while Turkish fighter jets have repeatedly battered PKK locations in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, Turkey's air and artillery efforts against ISIS have been limited—even in response to devastating ISIS attacks in Turkey. In fact, even when attacked by ISIS, Turkey has consistently retaliated against the PKK.

Despite the United States designating the PKK a terrorist organization and supporting Turkey's right to defend itself against terrorism, Turkey's actions stand in sharp contrast to the overriding objective of current U.S. Middle East policy and the role that many American policymakers most want their once-staunch ally, Turkey, to play—a partner in defeating ISIS. Moreover, with the two conflicts—against the PKK and against ISIS—increasingly intertwined, Turkey thus far clearly has prioritized the PKK threat over that of ISIS and, as a result, has directly opposed the growing Kurdish role in the ISIS conflict in Syria, which has had a negative impact on the international anti-ISIS campaign. This has made it more difficult for the United States to achieve its strategic objective of degrading and destroying the terrorist group, which also poses a significant threat to Turkey.



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ISIS



The Turkish Campaign Against ISIS

The Turkish campaign against ISIS has been primarily reactive in nature. Turkey’s participation in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS—including officially declaring war on the terrorist group and allowing coalition forces to use its Incirlik Airbase after months of negotiations—came more than a year after the terrorist group first directly threatened Turkey. Indeed, even as ISIS carried out attacks in Turkey and took Turkish citizens hostage in Iraq in 2014, Turkey’s government was accused of turning a blind eye to ISIS.

Yet, even once it officially joined the anti-ISIS effort, **Turkish participation in coalition airstrikes has been limited and retaliatory.**

Data from the U.S. Department of Defense on the contribution of other coalition partners shows just how limited Turkey’s participation has been: since the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve in October 2014 through June 1, 2016, non-U.S. coalition forces have carried out a total of 2,890 strikes in both Iraq and Syria. (The United States has carried out more than 9,000 individual strikes against ISIS targets.)¹ Turkey has only participated in Syrian airstrikes, where the total non-U.S. coalition strikes is 237. However, with nine other coalition countries also participating in actions against Syria, the exact extent of Turkish airstrike involvement against ISIS is unclear, though reports and BPC’s analysis suggest that Turkey’s contribution is relatively minimal.

Even once it joined the coalition, rather than proactively targeting ISIS, most Turkish actions against the terrorist group came as a direct result of attacks on Turkish territory. Turkey engaged in aerial bombardment of ISIS positions, for example, in August 2015 in response to ISIS seizing villages close to the

PKK



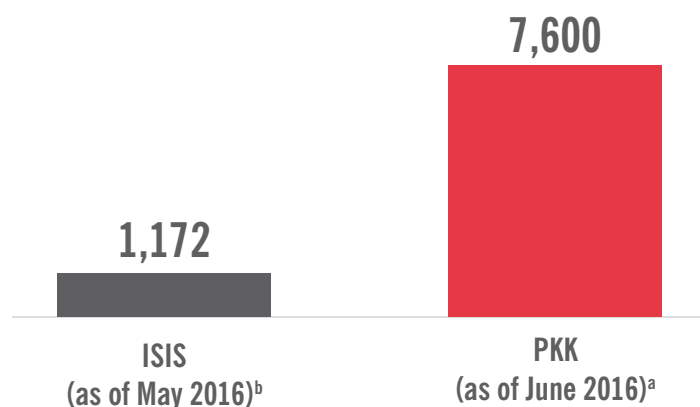
The Turkish Campaign Against PKK

Turkey has quite clearly prosecuted its conflict with the PKK with vigor. A cease-fire between the government and the PKK—one that many hoped might lead to a lasting peace deal—collapsed as a result of escalating attacks and reprisals over the course of four days in July 2015. (For more information about the conflict and how it started, see the recent BPC analysis.)² Since July 24, 2015, when the Turkish Air Force carried out airstrikes against PKK positions in northern Iraq, the two sides have been at war.

Overall, **Turkish efforts against the PKK are broad, proactive, and often politically motivated:** airstrikes against PKK positions in northern Iraq are near-daily occurrences, as are skirmishes between PKK militants and Turkish security forces in Turkey. But not only has the Turkish government focused the bulk of its security apparatus on the PKK, it has sought to use the international campaign against ISIS to further its conflict with the PKK.

Militants “Neutralized”

(Militants killed, caught, or surrendered, according to Turkish security sources)



a. Erdinc Aksoy. “PKK Dealt a Severe Blow in Last 11 Months.” *Anadolu Agency*, June 9, 2016.

b. Volkan Kasik. “Turkey: 199 Daesh Suspects Arrested Since Jan 2016.” *Anadolu Agency*, May 9, 2016.

ISIS

Turkish border; in October 2015 in response to an ISIS bombing in Ankara; and in January 2016 in response to an attack in Istanbul.

Turkey's sluggishness in responding to ISIS, even when the terrorist group is posing a direct threat to Turkish territory and citizens, is best demonstrated by the Turkish reaction to sustained ISIS shelling of Kilis, the closest Turkish town to the ISIS-controlled region of Syria. Since January 2016, near-daily ISIS rocket attacks on Kilis have caused more than 20 casualties and injured almost 100 more, many of them civilians. However, Turkey did little in response until May. Then, after public pressure, Turkish participation in coalition strikes markedly increased, and 15 to 20 Turkish special forces units conducted a ground incursion into Syria for the first time, gathering targeting information to guide coalition airstrikes. While Turkey's actions in response to the bombardment of Kilis might suggest it has finally changed its approach to the terrorist group, it is more likely that Turkey's previous inaction against ISIS has created a threat that Turkey can no longer ignore.

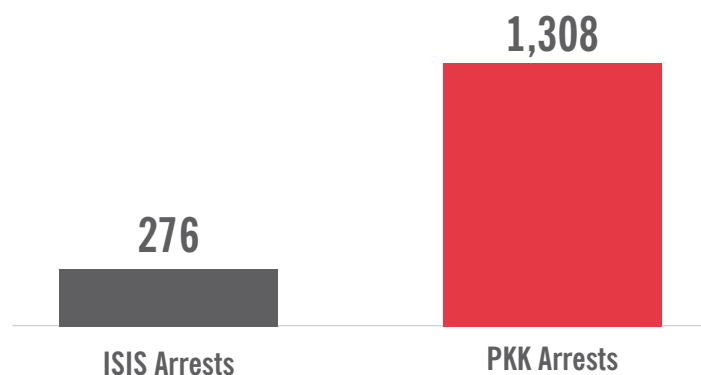
There have been many times, since the beginning of the international campaign against ISIS, when the United States and others have declared that Turkey has seen the light on ISIS and will become a more productive partner against the terrorist group. Such anticipation of an imminent change in Turkish policy often came following devastating ISIS bombings, which have claimed over 200 lives in Turkey in the past year. However, despite frequent pledges by Turkey to increase its efforts against ISIS, Turkey has yet to become the active and sustained participant in the anti-ISIS coalition that its allies would like it to be, allowing such speculation to be renewed following the next ISIS attack.

PKK

The Turkish government has proved willing to twist the growing number of tragic bomb attacks in Turkish cities to suit its political purposes and, in doing so, has revealed its priorities. Repeatedly, the government has been quick to blame the PKK or other Kurdish groups for terrorist attacks, only to have ISIS later proven responsible. For example: in March 2016, a suicide attack on Istanbul's popular İstiklal Avenue, which caused five deaths and wounded dozens more, was initially attributed to the PKK by the Turkish government, though DNA testing later revealed the bomber to be an ISIS member of Turkish origin.

This pattern, however, does not stop with wrongly assigning blame. In carrying out reprisals for terrorist attacks within its territory, Turkish actions against the Kurds are swifter and more severe than its retaliatory measures against ISIS. In the aftermath of two attacks that took place within days of one another—an ISIS bombing of a Kurdish gathering in Suruç and the assassinations of Turkish police officers by a PKK splinter group in response to perceived government complicity in the Suruç bombing—the Turkish Air Force retaliated against both ISIS and the PKK, but far from equally: it flew but a single sortie against ISIS, but it deployed 75 aircraft in 185 sorties against the PKK.³

Arrests: July-October 2015^c

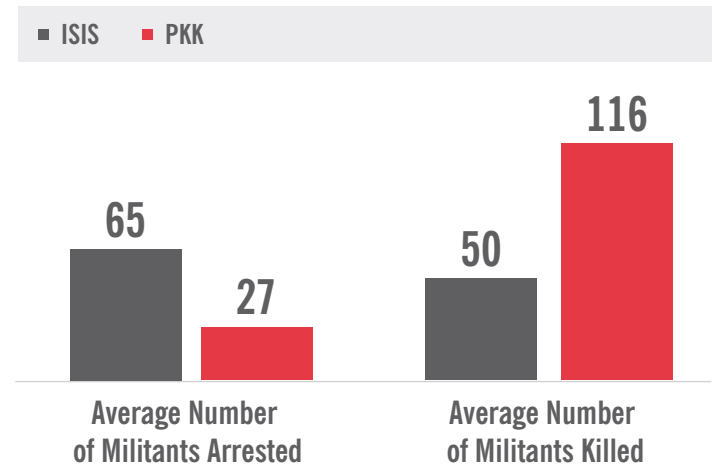


c. "Turkey Arrests Some 1300 PKK-Linked Suspects, Less than 300 ISIL-Linked Suspects Since Late July." *Hurriyet Daily News*. October 20, 2015.

PKK

Turkish Government Response to Terrorist Attacks:

Arrest ISIS, Kill PKK^d



d. Data taken from Turkish and international news sources following major terrorist attacks with civilian targets.

And, in the aftermath of several ISIS attacks, Turkey appeared to take no action against ISIS but struck the PKK instead. After the March 2016 Istanbul bombing, which Turkey initially attempted to attribute to the PKK, Turkey did not respond militarily against ISIS but continued its operations against PKK positions instead, striking ammunition depots, bunkers, and shelters in northern Iraq.

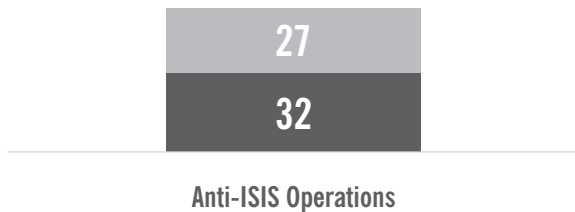
In October 2015, following an ISIS bombing targeting a Kurdish peace rally that killed 103 and wounded more than 400 more—the deadliest terror attack in Turkey’s history—then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu suggested, without evidence, that ISIS and the PKK might have been jointly responsible in what he termed a “terror cocktail.”⁴ This thinking has since appeared to dominate the Turkish government’s approach to combating terrorist groups—that no matter what the circumstances or evidence suggest, all terrorism and all terrorists can be lumped together, and any attack on Turkey can be twisted to justify Turkey’s war with the PKK.

Conclusion

The Turkish government has vowed to fight terrorist groups “without distinction.”⁵ However, a comparison of Turkish actions against ISIS and Turkish actions against the PKK reveals that Turkey is *not* fighting terrorists without distinction: it has in fact distinguished the PKK (and the Kurdish groups it believes to be affiliated with the PKK) as the greatest threat, and it is focusing on the PKK to the detriment of the anti-ISIS campaign, putting Turkey at odds with its partner, the United States.

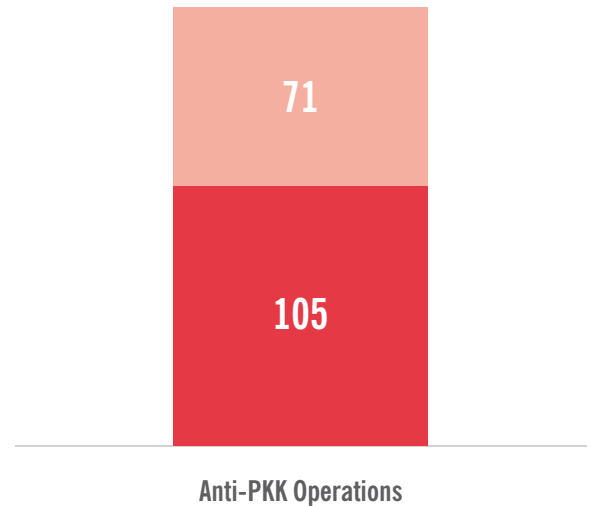
Comparison of Anti-PKK and Anti-ISIS Operations^e

■ Airstrikes and Shelling ■ Counterinsurgency Operations and Raids



e. As logged on map

■ Airstrikes and Shelling ■ Counterinsurgency Operations and Raids



Not only is Turkey failing as a reliable partner in the anti-ISIS coalition, it is also using the smokescreen of the international fight against ISIS to further its conflict with the PKK. The scope and scale of the Turkey-PKK conflict—with near-daily airstrikes, arrests, and skirmishes—show how effectively Turkish security forces can be mobilized against a threat, if the political will is present. But the acts of terror that Turkey’s government has shown itself willing and capable of responding to are those carried out by Kurds, or those that can be erroneously blamed on Kurds. In comparison, that aggressiveness in fighting terrorism is severely lacking when it comes to responding to ISIS, which the United States and its allies have identified as the most pressing security threat facing the region.

But the divide between Turkey and the United States on ISIS is more than just a mismatch in priorities. First, Turkey appeared to allow ISIS to operate from its territory with seeming impunity, while also actively obstructing Kurdish efforts to halt the ISIS advance. And, as

long as Turkey continues to pursue a military solution to its conflict with the PKK, it will effectively be undermining America's chosen and most effective partner on the ground against ISIS—the Syrian Kurds—thereby extending, rather than abating, the conflicts seizing the region.

It is the stated goal of the United States to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS. For many reasons, Turkey should be a vital partner in this effort. However, Turkey has shown itself unwilling or unable to fulfill this role: its regional and domestic policies are both dominated by its conflict with the PKK to the detriment of actions against ISIS, which creates increasing domestic instability in Turkey and which is transforming Turkey into a destabilizing force in the region. While a reversal of this approach is not impossible, particularly in light of apparent increased ISIS aggression against Turkey, it would require a significant shift in Turkish strategic thinking, evolution in tactics, redeployment of resources, and political attempts to deescalate the conflict with the PKK before a robust anti-ISIS counter-terrorist campaign could take shape.

Endnotes





1. "Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations Against ISIL Terrorists." U.S. Department of Defense. Available at: http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve.
2. "Authoritarianism and Escalation: Preparing for the Worst in Turkey's Resurgent Kurdish Conflict." Bipartisan Policy Center. June 2016.
3. Metin Gürcan, trans. Timur Göksel. "Is PKK Real Target of Turkish Strikes?" *Al-Monitor*. July 27, 2015.
4. Metin Gürcan, trans. Timur Göksel. "Would You Like Your Terror Straight Up Or As A Cocktail?" *Al-Monitor*. October 22, 2015.
5. "One Killed, Over 290 Detained as Turkish Police Raid Suspected ISIL, PKK Militants." *Hurriyet Daily News*. July 24, 2015.



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