

JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy

Turkey Prepares for Possible Offensive Against U.S. Partners in Syria

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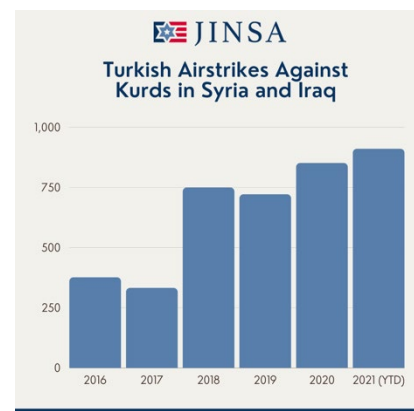
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Turkey appears to be planning a new military incursion against five Kurdish-controlled areas in northeastern Syria. Turkey's use of drones will likely be a crucial element in any new offensive. Since May 2021, Turkey has significantly escalated the frequency of its drone strikes against Kurdish targets in Syria and northern Iraq that it claims are members of terrorist organizations. However, Ankara's growing aggression in northeast Syria against U.S.-partnered Kurdish forces undermines U.S. counterterrorism operations and regional stability as well as likely helping Assad and Russia consolidate their power in the area.

The Biden administration should respond by asserting greater command over U.S.-controlled airspace and publicly increasing joint military efforts with America's Kurdish partners. Washington should not empower Moscow to mediate or insert itself into Turkish-SDF tensions. Congress and the Department of Defense should not consider the sale of any aircraft such as F-16s or air combat-related equipment to Turkey unless it adopts new operational procedures that ensure U.S. partners are not subject to attack.

What Happened?

- Since the beginning of August, [Turkish drones have launched](#) at least twenty-three attacks against targets it claims are Kurdish terrorists in the Syrian provinces of Aleppo, Raqqqa, and Al-Hasakah and the Kurdistan regions of Iraq. Most recently, a Turkish drone strike killed three people in a vehicle outside of Kobani, Syria on October 23.
 - Targets have included alleged Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) [leaders](#) as well as [bases](#) and [areas controlled](#) by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is a critical component of U.S. counterterrorism operations.



- This marks an escalation of Turkey’s drone operations in Syria and Iraq. It has [launched](#) at least 910 manned and unmanned airstrikes against Kurdish targets so far in 2021 compared to 851 in all of 2020.
- On October 10, Turkey claimed that the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) [launched a missile attack](#) that killed two Turkish police in northern Syria’s Azaz region. The strike was launched from Tell Rifaat, which the YPG controls.
 - On October 11, Turkish President Erdoğan said that this attack was “the final straw” and suggested he would [expand operations](#) “to eliminate the threats emanating from Syria with our own means.”
- On October 26, the Turkish parliament [extended its authorization](#) of operations in Iraq and Syria for another two years. The parliament’s motion cites the “constantly escalating” risks from the Islamic State, PKK, YPG, and “the U.S.-backed Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces.”
 - For the first time since Turkey began military operations in Syria, the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) voted against the authorization.
- Reportedly, Turkey is [preparing an incursion](#) to capture Tell Rifaat, Manbij, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer. [Kobani](#) has also been mentioned as a potential Turkish target.
 - Coordinating with its partner militia on the ground, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which includes Syrian jihadist groups, Ankara has moved Turkish “tanks, rocket launchers and various weapons” into FSA-controlled Syrian territory in advance of the operation.
- As Turkey’s aggression grew this fall, [Ankara has reportedly requested](#) forty Lockheed Martin-made Block seventy F-16 fighter jets and nearly eighty modernization kits. Turkey previously wanted the F-35, but the United States removed it from the program once it received the Russian-made S-400 air defense system in 2019.

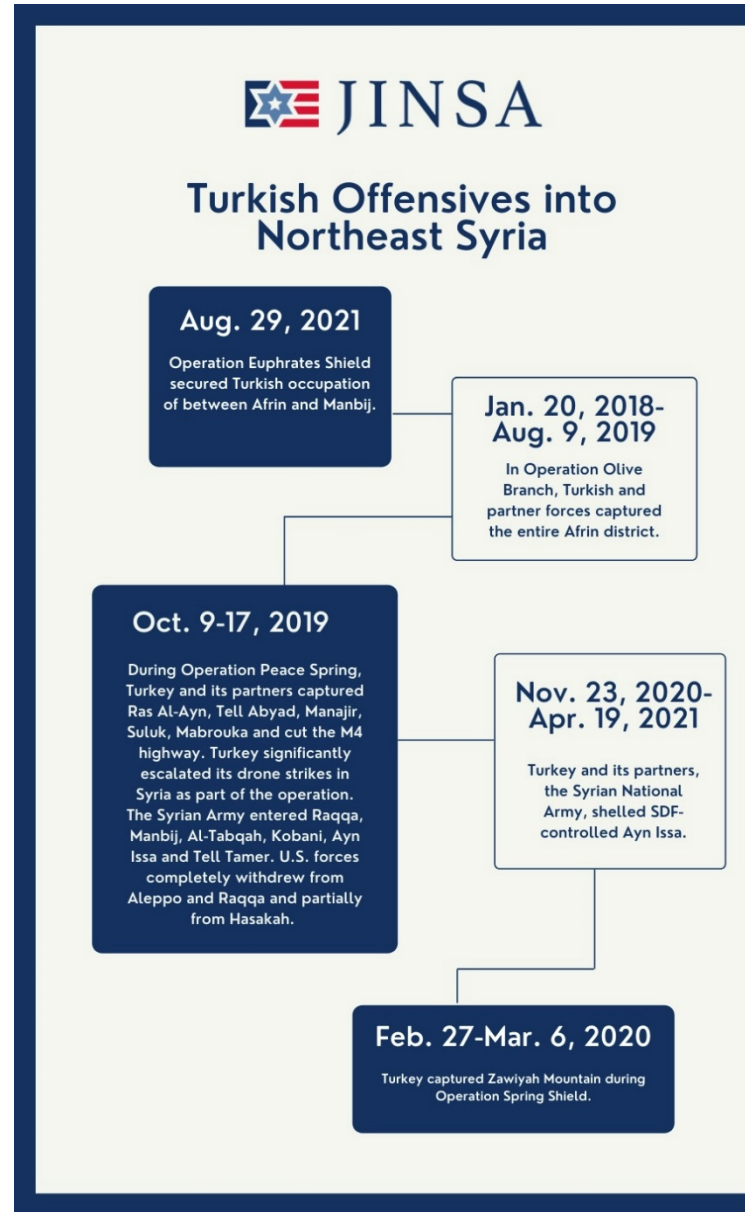


Possible Turkish Incursion into Syria



Why Is It Important?

- A new Turkish offensive in northeast Syria, supported by its increasingly capable and battle-tested drones, could be more deadly and destabilizing than in the past, undermine American counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State, and endanger U.S. forces on the ground.
 - Turkey claims that the YPG, a core component of the SDF, is indistinguishable from the PKK, its main Kurdish rival. Turkey, the United States, and European Union have designated the PKK as a terrorist group. The United States and European Union maintain military cooperation with the YPG and have not designated it as such.
 - By requiring SDF to redeploy to the Turkish border, Turkish offensives, or even the threat of them, could seriously disrupt ongoing counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State.
 - Turkey's increased usage of drones for both surveillance and airstrikes could increase the tempo, range, and lethality of its operations against SDF targets.
 - Turkey has used the territory it already controls inside Syria to allow [safe haven for jihadist groups](#), recruit Syrian fighters for foreign adventures in [Libya](#) and [Nagorno-Karabakh](#), remove Kurdish inhabitants, and pursue a policy of Turkification.
 - Turkey has learned from its successful drone operations in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh that have overcome Russian-made air defenses to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and combat air support alongside its ground forces and those of its partners.
- Damascus and Moscow appear poised to come off as the greatest beneficiaries of the building tensions between Turkey and the SDF, regardless of whether fighting erupts or not.
 - In October 2019, following the U.S. withdrawal from parts of northeast Syria and the ensuing Turkish offensive, Russian and Syrian regime forces entered into previously SDF-controlled areas, nominally to prevent further Turkish aggression.
 - Since then, Moscow has been working assiduously to expand Assad's—and its own—presence and control of this territory in a bid to reconstitute conflict-fractured Syria, bolster Assad's claims to legitimacy, and gain access to vital, oil-producing areas that still remain under SDF control.



- Most recently, Russia appears to be playing a double game, trying to cut deals with both Turkey and the SDF, the result of which would be that both sides make territorial concessions to Damascus.
 - Erdoğan [reportedly expressed](#) his desire to launch a ground offensive into Tell Rifaat during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on September 29 in Sochi.
 - In the wake of that meeting, Ankara and Moscow have reportedly been planning for a [Turkish incursion into Kobani](#) in which Russia would maintain its presence in the city, the M4 highway would be under joint Russian-Turkish control, and Ankara would avoid deploying SNA to the city. In exchange, Russia wants territorial concessions in Idlib along the M4 road.
 - Yet, Russia is also reportedly in [conversations with the SDF](#) for the Kurdish group to withdraw south of the M4 highway to avoid Ankara's offensive and hand their positions over to Syrian forces.
 - The east-west-running highway is a critical logistical thoroughfare and the dividing line between the Turkish-claimed security area (within Syrian territory) to the north and SDF-, Syrian-, and Russian-patrolled territory to the south.
 - Gaining control of the M4 would allow Syrian and Russian forces to further encircle and strangle the holdout Turkish-protected opposition and jihadist enclave of Idlib to the west and, eventually, reconnect Damascus to energy-producing areas to the east.
- While Turkey claims to be escalating its operations because of an increase in PKK attacks, there is [little indication](#) that terrorist activity against Turkey has significantly increased recently.
- Thus far, Turkey has been able to launch drone strikes and conduct ground operations against U.S.-partner forces in northeast Syria without a significant adverse reaction from the United States.
 - Most of the airstrikes are against individuals or small groups, frequently targeting their vehicles, but Turkey has also launched widespread attacks, such as when it hit [twenty-eight targets](#), including alleged PKK members, 120 kilometers inside Iraqi territory on August 24.
 - Given the lack of international costs and the domestic popularity of these actions among Erdoğan's ethno-nationalist base, these operations are likely to continue, further undermining the U.S.-Turkish relationship and counterterrorism efforts.
- The United States has [approximately 900 special operations forces in Syria](#) who regularly patrol alongside SDF and coalition partners. U.S. forces have previously [flown American flags](#) to deter Turkish or Russian airstrikes.
 - U.S. officials believe that Iran backed a [coordinated drone and rocket attack](#) on the small force of roughly 200 U.S. troops at Tanf. Turkey could use similar Iranian-linked attacks as a distraction to launch its own operations in Syria.
- For Erdoğan, the decision to launch an offensive into northeast Syria is as much about domestic political calculations as national security and foreign policy.
 - Erdoğan's popularity at home is sagging amid economic troubles as the country prepares for presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. Foreign adventures are one means that Erdoğan has previously employed to [distract from domestic problems](#), rally his nationalist base against alleged enemies of the state, accuse his opponents of complicity with terrorist groups, and make the case that he is the only one capable of protecting Turkey from myriad external threats lurking on its borders.

- However, if Erdoğan views a Syrian offensive as a last gasp measure to shore up popular support, he might choose to wait to launch it until closer to the elections when it will have a more dramatic impact on his vote tally. It is notable, thus, that the Parliament's authorization for operations in Syria has a two-year timeframe, lasting until the 2023 elections.
- [Current U.S.-Turkey deconfliction measures](#) in the Kurdistan region are limited in scope and prioritize dealing with countering Islamic State.
 - In Northern Iraq, the U.S. and Turkey operate north and south, respectively, of an agreed-upon deconfliction line.
 - The United States officially supports Turkish drone strikes against the PKK within its allotted boundaries, so long as Turkey informs the United States of its flight plans, if flights are armed, and if a strike is planned.
 - The United States retains the prerogative to “non-concur,” but Turkey is not technically obligated to abide by U.S. input on these operations.
 - Since October 2019, a similar arrangement has existed in Syria, with Turkey operating freely within a twenty km corridor between the border towns of Tel Abyad and Tel Afar.
 - In 2019, the United States ended its long-running [intelligence sharing program](#) that supported Turkish counterterrorism operations against the PKK because it led to an increase in Turkish drone strikes against the SDF.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration should issue a strong public warning to Erdoğan not to conduct a ground incursion into northeastern Syria and push for a return peace talks between Turkey and Kurdish groups.
- Washington should avoid looking to Moscow to help mediate, prevent, or contain any potential conflict between Turkey and the SDF.
- The Pentagon should renegotiate deconfliction procedures with Ankara in Syria and Iraq to enable enhanced U.S. vetting of Turkish targets and obligate Turkey to terminate operations if the United States non-concurs. America's air superiority enables it to restrict operations that could potentially target SDF or other American partner forces.
 - U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should conduct air superiority patrols over the airspace it controls in Iraq and Syria and threaten to intercept Turkish drones that operate against the SDF. CENTCOM should evaluate the deterrent effect of redeploying additional Patriot and [Avenger](#) surface-to-air defense systems, which have previously intercepted drones, to the Kurdish regions of Iraq.
- Congress should not consider any potential F-16 foreign military sale to Turkey until Ankara demobilizes its forces, de-escalates its strikes against the SDF, and agrees to enter good-faith negotiations with Kurdish groups.
- U.S. Special Operations Forces in Syria should increasingly patrol with the SDF and coalition forces and use means of displaying the involvement of U.S. forces, such as displaying the American flag, while maintaining operational security.

Reported Turkish Drone Strikes Timeline

2015	Turkey begins flying reconnaissance drones against Kurdish militants in southeastern Turkey.	7/30/2021	A Turkish drone strike killed two civilians riding in a car in Qemeli, Syria.
11/12/2016	A Turkish drone strike killed six PKK forces in Northern Iraq.	8/13/2021	A 50-year-old civilian in Dishesh, Iraq was killed by a Turkish drone.
5/5/2017	A Turkish drone strike killed eight PKK forces in Cukurca, Eastern Anatolia, Turkey.	8/16/2021	Multiple Turkish drone strikes hit an unspecified Kurdish vehicle in Sinjar, Nineveh, Iraq.
7/16/2017	A Russian military outpost in Darbasiyah, Syria was hit by a Turkish drone strike.	8/17/2021	A Turkish drone strike hit Al Darbasiyah hospital in Al Darbasiyah, Syria, killing two people.
8/31/2017	Four Kurdish individuals died during a Turkish drone strike in Orgul, Turkey.	8/17/2021	Two people in in Al-Hasakah, Syria were killed by a Turkish drone strike.
8/15/2018	A Turkish drone strike hit a PKK leader in Sinjar, Iraq.	8/17/2021	Three Turkish drone strikes hit a makeshift Kurdish clinic in Sinjar, Nineveh, Iraq, killing 18 people.
8/20/2019	A Turkish drone operation killed a PKK leader in Duhoq, Iraq.	8/19/2021	Multiple Turkish drone strikes hit an SDF base in Tal Tamr, Syria, killing four people.
10/8/2019	Multiple Turkish drone strikes killed over 181 unspecified Kurdish forces in Rojava, Syria.	8/20/2021	A Turkish drone strike hit the Military Relations Office of the Tal Tamr Military Council, killing nine people.
2/28/2020	A Turkish drone strike hit a Syrian Army Pantsir-S1 ADS in Idlib, Syria.	8/21/2021	A YPG leader and another YPG member were killed by Turkish drones in Al-Hasakah, Syria.
4/8/2020	At least one PKK operative died after a Turkish drone attack in Duhoq, Iraq.	8/21/2021	A vehicle at the Sofian Farm in Kobani, Syria was struck by a Turkish drone.
4/15/2020	Turkish drones killed three Kurdish female civilians in Makhmur, Iraq.	8/21/2021	Turkish drones struck a vehicle in Mezra, Syria.
5/26/2020	A Turkish drone strike killed five PJAK forces in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq.	8/22/2021	A Turkish drone strike hit a military vehicle carrying an unspecified Kurdish politician in Qamishi, Iraq.
6/14/2020	Multiple Turkish drones hit targets in Sinjar, Nineveh, Iraq.	8/24/2021	At least 28 Turkish drone strikes hit PKK targets in Penjwen, Iraq, killing at least 28 people.
6/23/2020	Three women's rights activists were killed by alleged Turkish drones in Kobani, Syria.	9/1/2021	SDF forces in Tal Tamr, Syria were struck by Turkish drones, killing one SDF member.
6/25/2020	A Turkish drone strike hit a PKK vehicle and adjacent shops in Kuna Masi, Iraq, killing one person.	9/3/2021	A Turkish drone strike hit an unspecified location in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, killing three PKK leaders.
8/11/2020	Turkish drones killed two senior Iraqi military officials riding in a vehicle on Bradost Mountain, Iraq.	9/12/2021	The SDF-controlled village of Al-Hamam in Manbij, Syria was hit by Turkish drones.
8/14/2020	Three PKK members were killed by Turkish drones in Rashanki, Iraq.	9/17/2021	A Turkish airstrike hit a vehicle in Dibis, Raqqa, Syria, killing four people.
9/10/2020	A Turkish drone strike killed six PKK members in an unspecified location.	9/20/2021	Two people were killed and four injured after a Turkish drone strike struck a vehicle in the Kurdish-controlled town of Kobani in northeast Syria.
9/11/2020	A Turkish drone operation killed three PKK leaders in Andicen, Turkey.	9/28/2021	A Turkish drone attack killed a PKK leader in the Ali Fara area, Al-Hasakah, Iraq.
10/20/2020	A Turkish drone strike hit a vehicle in Al-Malkiyah, Syria, killing two people.	10/4/2021	Two people died when a Turkish drone attacked a vehicle in Chamchamal, Iraq.
1/22/2021	A civilian in Kobani, Syria died during a Turkish drone operation.	10/4/2021	A Turkish drone hit the Saydani village in Kirkuk, Iraq.
2/14/2021	Multiple Turkish drone strikes killed 48 PKK members on Qara Mountain, Iraq.	10/9/2021	Two people died when a Turkish drone attacked a vehicle in Saydani, Iraq.
4/23/2021	Turkey carried out an offensive involving attack helicopters, drones, and special forces in Metina, Iraq.	10/20/2021	Two people were killed and four injured after a Turkish drone strike struck a vehicle in the Kurdish-controlled town of Kobani in northeast Syria.
6/5/2021	A Turkish drone strike killed three people at a refugee camp in Makhmur, Iraq.	10/23/2021	A Turkish drone killed three people and injured destroyed a vehicle outside of Kobani.
6/22/2021	A PKK leader in Sulaymaniyah inside Iraq's Kurdistan region died from a Turkish drone operation.		

