

ISIS Escalates Violence in Turkish-held Parts in Northwest Syria

Featuring Eva Kahan



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Claimed ISIS attacks in Turkish and opposition-controlled northwest Syria have spiked in the past two months. The United States scaled down its forces in Syria and Iraq after the defeat of the Islamic State's contiguous territorial caliphate in 2019. US policy-makers have since focused on empowering local forces who fought in the anti-ISIS coalition, including NATO ally Turkey. However, Turkey's commitment to this fight remains uncertain. In this episode of Overwatch, Eva Kahan, ISW's Evans-Hanson fellow, discusses these issues and what they mean for US national security.

Jacob Taylor:

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for the Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor. ISIS attacks in Turkish opposition controlled Northwest Syria have spiked in the past two months. The United States scaled down its security forces in Syria and Iraq after defeating the Islamic state's contiguous territorial caliphate in 2019. U.S. policy makers have since focused on empowering local forces who fought in the anti-ISIS coalition, including NATO ally Turkey, to carry on the fight against ISIS. However, Turkey's commitment to this fight has long been in question. Eva Kahan, ISW's Evan's-Hanson fellow, is with me today to talk about these issues and what they mean for U.S National security. Eva, thank you for being here.

Eva Kahan:

Thank you, Jacob. I'm happy to be here.

Jacob:

What is ISIS doing in Syria today. Eighteen months after the defeat of their territorial caliphate in Baghuz?

Eva:

ISIS no longer holds contiguous territory in Syria and Iraq, but is committed to remaining and expanding an ISIS motto currently along the model of a low grade insurgency, there's still between seven and 15,000 active ISIS fighters across Iraq and Syria with the mission of rebuilding the caliphate as it stood from 2014 to 2019. ISIS's current strategy in Syria exploit's the seams between the different parties governing Syria. Those are the Assad regime, Turkey, and the Turkish backed anti-regime rebels and the U.S coalition backed Syrian democratic forces or the SDF. One of those seams between areas of governance is the area surrounding Turkish controlled North-western Syria, specifically Al-Bab and Azaz districts.

Jacob:

How did ISIS initially become involved in these parts of Northwest Syria that are controlled by the Turkish backed opposition?

Eva:

So ISIS occupied Al-Bab and Azaz districts in 2014, as the caliphate was expanding at the height of the Syrian civil war. Turkey and their allied opposition militias and the Assad regime, both cut off ISIS in that area in August, 2016, setting the current line of control a bit North of Aleppo. The Turkish occupation of Al-Bab and Azaz became known as Operation Euphrates Shield, which is how we now refer to the entire region occupied by Turkey. The formal power holders in the Euphrates Shield Zone, as it's known, are the anti-Assad opposition militias allied with Turkey, which constitute the Syrian interim government and a patchwork of rebel militias named the Syrian National Army or the SNA. As the Turkish occupation continues, Turkey has been investing heavily in the area's governance. Turkish telephone companies supply their cell service, the Turkish Lira is the common currency and Turkish mayors on the other side of the Turkish-Syrian border directly coordinate with local "opposition

run councils” in Syria.

Jacob:

Thank you for that background. So ISIS was active in Al-Bab and Azaz, which are in Northwest Syria near the Turkish border. But how has the group’s activity evolved since Turkey took the lead on governance in those areas in Al-Bab and Azaz?

Eva:

So ISIS lay low in the Euphrates Shield Zone in Al-Bab and Azaz for the first three years of Turkish occupation. So from 2017 until June of this year. In contrast, with the active insurgency and the SDF controlled Eastern Syria, ISIS, and the Euphrates Shield Zone, didn’t openly attack security forces, either anti-Assad, militia forces or Turkish forces. However, unidentified militants carried out roughly two vehicle-borne IED attacks every month from mid 2018 to mid 2020 in the Euphrates Shield Zone. All of these attacks went unclaimed so it’s almost impossible to know who conducted them. They could have been perpetrated by ISIS. They also could have been perpetrated by groups aligned with the Kurdish U.S. designated terrorist organization, the PKK, of which several smaller militias are active in the Euphrates Shield Zones. These attacks targeted civilians in public places, caused a lot of damage and killed many people, and seemed mostly aimed at stirring up chaos rather than building up the image of a specific militant group gaining power in the region.

Jacob:

Got it. So, you mentioned that ISIS was lying low in the Euphrates Shield Zone when the Turkish occupation started, but what changed about ISIS activity this year? And why are we talking about their presence there at this moment?

Eva:

So since June 23rd, 2020, ISIS has claimed seven attacks in the Operation Euphrates Shield area, something unprecedented for the last three years. These attacks all targeted Turkish or Turkish aligned Syrian National Army forces or Syrian National Army supporting civilians. In one case ISIS successfully assassinated a Syrian National Army Brigadier General, which is a pretty big deal. ISIS has also expanded this propaganda campaign against Turkey. In the ISIS NABET magazine issue, on July 16th, they ran a feature article, critiquing Turkish President Erdogan. We’ve also seen evidence of significant ISIS leadership present in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone over the last three months. The U.S. led coalition has likely conducted three precision air strikes against high-value ISIS leaders in Turkish opposition controlled territory since May of 2020. One of those leaders killed, was reportedly carrying \$200,000 in cash at the time. These indicators all suggest that ISIS is using the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone to house valuable leadership nodes to facilitate smuggling or maintain a human network across the border into Turkey and along transit routes, either into Manbij and SDF controlled Canton, East of Aleppo, where there are consistent ISIS attacks or southward into ISIS’ historic safe havens in the middle Euphrates River Valley and in the central Syrian desert.

Jacob:

It sounds like ISIS has gone from being an under the radar spoiling actor, which may have been quietly undermining Turkish governance in the area, but not owning its attacks to directly rejecting Turkish occupation and essentially calling on populations under Turkish rule, I assume, primarily in Syria, as opposed to across the border in Turkey, to do the same, to rise up against Turkish governance there.

Why is ISIS changing their approach to Turkish occupation now? As you said, it’s been three years, at least since the Turks moved into that area.

Eva:

Definitely. So I assessed that ISIS has shifted tactics in the operation Euphrates Shield Zone in order to flip the population in their favor and recruit for future attack campaigns. The population of Al-Bab and Azaz, the districts in the Euphrates Shield Zone have spent the last four years under Turkish rule, while Al-Qaeda aligned Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib Province, which is directly Southwest of the Euphrates Shield Zone, has continued to fight the Assad regime. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham has been increasingly co-opted by Turkey and the Turkish aligned opposition. So as we go forward in time, there seems to be a lack of a representative of anti-occupation, anti-Assad opposition. It's possible that ISIS wants to take up this mantle and turn the tribes in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone who have been disappointed by inadequacies in Turkish governance against Turkish occupation. ISIS also likely still holds tens of millions of dollars in Syria and may have seen the recent economic downturn as an opportunity to renew recruitment, particularly in the Euphrates Shield Zone to which UN-sanctioned aid was cut off this June leaving approximately 1.3 million Syrians unfed.

As an alternative hypothesis it's also possible that the shift to targeting Turkish aligned security forces is aimed at increasing operational security for ISIS leadership in the area, given that we know that these leadership nodes are under attack, mainly by U.S led coalition airstrikes. ISIS would aim to achieve this end by intimidating those who might collaborate with the Syrian National Army or coalition forces, which is another method of exploiting the local population in order to enable future attacks.

Jacob:

Which sounds like a serious threat given basically that the U.S focus, as I understand it, in operating in that part of the world is specifically to deny groups like ISIS access to resources and people who might be inclined to support those groups. So what measures could Turkey take to defeat ISIS in the area?

Eva:

This is a serious threat. Turkey, however, has several options to combat the ISIS threat in the Euphrates Shield Zone. Turkey could first and foremost protect their allied SNA forces and the pro-Turkish population by re-sourcing and reforming SNA units to prioritize the protection of the communities of Al-Bab and Azaz. The SNA forces have been re-consolidated. They were initially under the title of the Free Syrian Army and are not closely integrated into the local populations of Al-Bab and Azaz. SNA units clashed with tribes in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone earlier this summer and local communities have called for the SNA to be more tightly disciplined after allegations that the SNA has kidnapped and raped local women. ISIS is using these allegations of misconduct to turn the people of the Euphrates Shield Zone against the SNA.

If Turkey and the SNA could credibly protect the civilian population of the Euphrates Shield Zone by actively countering the threat posed by ISIS, and if they could regain the trust of local leadership, this would diffuse the threat of ISIS recruitment. If Turkey was willing to take a larger step, they could carry out a broad counter ISIS campaign in the Euphrates Shield Zone much as the Syrian democratic forces with U.S led coalition support are doing in Eastern Syria. This type of campaign would involve identifying and rating ISIS cells and taking out these leadership nodes, which have found a safe haven in this area. However, a larger scale campaign could run the risk of overreaching and angering the populations of Al-Bab and Azaz, which could in turn alienate the parties working with Turkey against the PKK. Turkey will be carefully accounting for the interests of its local partners in terms of deciding how to build a longer term stability in the areas it occupies in Syria.

Jacob:

So it seems like Turkey has several options in approaching the ISIS threat in the Euphrates Shield Zone, but what are Turkey's objectives in that zone in Northwest Syria and how might those objectives influence their response?

Eva:

Turkey initially intervened in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone in order to prevent the Syrian Democratic Forces from establishing a contiguous Kurdish occupied Canton in Northern Syria, which Turkish policy makers believe would provide a base for the long standing Kurdish insurgency in Southern Turkey. Turkey also set a goal to slow refugee flows from Syria into Turkey, which in turn requires maintaining stability in the area. The first step for Turkey to counter ISIS in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone would be recognizing that there is a problem. However, to date, Turkey has not acknowledged ISIS attacks in Turkish or on partner forces in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone in Turkish-Language media, and has refused to release information on suspects arrested in previous attacks, despite popular protests and demand for more information. Because the previous attacks conducted from 2017 to mid 2020 were anonymous, Turkey could and did choose to respond to unclaimed attacks, by only pursuing encountering PKK aligned groups. However, ISIS's recent series of claims should galvanize Turkey to conduct counter ISIS operations in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone as well.

Jacob:

What do you assess Turkey is likely to do to combat ISIS in the Euphrates Shield area?

Eva:

Because of the balance for Turkey, between their objectives to counter PKK aligned groups and other de-stabilizing elements in the Euphrates Shield area, Turkey will likely be cautious to counter ISIS in this zone in order to avoid alienating the Arab population of Al-Bab and Azaz as well as possible ex-ISIS fighters who may have infiltrated the Turkish backed Syrian National Army. It's likely that Turkish anti-ISIS operations will be small-scale and under the radar.

Although these operations may suffice to deter explosive attacks targeting Turkish security forces, they will not be sufficient to wear down the ISIS's recruitment network and export capability of attacks to other areas of regime controlled or SDF controlled Syria. Because these anti-ISIS operations are likely to be small-scale they will not provide a viable long-term solution. Turkey may be able to ignore ISIS and concentrate on fighting the PKK today, but the persistent presence of ISIS in Syria will continue to destabilize areas of Turkish occupation and to undermine the possibility of an enduring peace in Syria, as well as endangering zones currently occupied by U.S. allies, as the U.S. withdraws. It is in both the U.S and Turkey's long-term interests to deter ISIS in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone sooner rather than later.

Jacob:

And what should observers of this part of the world be watching for going forward?

Eva:

In the most dangerous scenario, increased ISIS recruitment in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone could enable more ISIS attacks in areas like Manbij or Tabka which are nearby, but under either regime or SDF control. This would be particularly dangerous if Turkey refuses to acknowledge ISIS presence in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone. One indicator that this situation might be escalating would be an increase in prison breaks in Al-Bab. ISIS has historically used mass prison breaks to free up old fighters for a renewed struggle. And ISIS fighters have escaped from the main Syrian National Army maintained prison in Al-Bab at least four times since mid 2018 with no clear Syrian National Army response to increase security. Larger scale prison breaks could enable ISIS to build out local cells with hardened, experienced fighters. We're also watching out for intimidation efforts, which are methods of controlling the population and pressuring them to join ISIS and further attack efforts.

Those often manifest in large scale crop burning, which ISIS uses to pressure locals to pay zakat, which are taxes

often in the form of those crops. On the Turkish side, we're watching for upticks and counter PKK operations and the Turkish eagerness, which we've already seen to publicize ISIS arrests within Turkey while not acknowledging the ISIS problem in Turkish occupied Syria. If ISIS escalates the tasks in the Operation Euphrates Shield Zone, Turkey will need to step up local security or risk losing control of the area.

Something else that we are watching for are indicators of how much control either the Syrian National Army or Turkey really have on the ground of this area in order to understand what pivotal parts of the population ISIS would want to exploit, or turn, in order to affect a larger scale breakout in the Euphrates Shield Zone. On the long scale, it's more likely that instead of seeing large scale prison breaks or very visible intimidation efforts, given a small scale Turkish response, ISIS might cease to claim attacks and return to using the operation Euphrates Shield Zone for support and transport, which is to say for smuggling, but not for a breakout.

However, as long as there is evidence that the support is helping ISIS export attacks to other parts of Syria. This is no reason for Turkey to become complacent and go back to blaming all the attacks on the PKK. As I mentioned upfront, as long as ISIS is active somewhere in Syria, they maintain the capability to remain and expand.

Jacob:

Do you have a final takeaway for U.S policy makers who are looking at this area?

Eva:

U.S policy makers should remember that the ISIS insurgency will survive even if the Syrian democratic forces win in Eastern Syria. Unless anti-ISIS forces managed to maintain pressure on ISIS from all sides and to sustainably rebuild Syria, ISIS will spring back when we leave. It's thus in the U.S interest to encourage countries like Turkey, occupying smaller parts of Syria to continue countering ISIS possibly with more vigor than they are already doing. If Turkey continues to prioritize defeating PKK aligned groups above the fight against ISIS, the U.S. should consider the potential consequences of this expanded Turkish occupation as we draw down in Eastern Syria. It may not be within the scope of the U.S. intervention in Syria to begin rebuilding, but given that Turkey is already doing so entrenching itself in Northwestern, Syria, we should be willing to support that process and to ensure that is conducted in a way that is conducive to a sustainable peace.

Jacob:

Eva Kahan, thank you for being here with us today and sharing your expertise.

Eva:

Thank you so much, Jacob.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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