

Kurdistan under new attacks

Terry Saltsman and Michael M. Gunter¹

THE COMMENTARIES**EDITOR IN CHIEF**

Joost JONGERDEN

EDITORS

Cengiz GUNES

Bahar ŞİMŞEK

The Commentaries is an initiative by
the EUTCC.

EUTCC CHAIR

Prof Kariane WESTRHEIM,
University of Bergen, Norway

EUTCC SECRETARY GENERAL

Prof Michael GUNTER,
Tennessee Technological University,
USA

EUTCC BOARD MEMBERS

Dersim DAGDEVIREN, KURD-
AKAD, Germany
Dr Joost JONGERDEN,
Wageningen University, Netherlands
Dr Thomas JEFFREY MILEY,
Cambridge University, UK
Estella SCHMID, Peace in Kurdistan
Campaign, UK

Executive summary

The Turkish November 19, 2022 attack on Rojava dubbed Operation Claw-Sword was reputedly launched in retaliation for the earlier November 13 bomb attack on Istanbul's sleek shopping district known as Istiklal Street that killed six people and wounded at least 80 more. Although it made no sense for the Kurds to attack Istanbul and thus invite new Turkish wrath, Turkey quickly blamed the PKK and its kin Syrian Democratic Forces/Democratic Union Party/Peoples' Defense Units (SDF/PYD/YPG) in Rojava for the atrocity despite their quick denial. On November 22, Turkey escalated these air strikes by hitting an SDF/PYD/YPG military base adjacent to the main US military base in northeastern Syria housing some of the approximately 900 remaining few but strategically important troops the United States still maintains in Syria. No

U.S. casualties were reported. However, a Pentagon spokesman declared that the Turkish airstrike had "directly threatened" U.S. troops stationed in the area. Thus, there is the danger of disastrous miscalculations that could lead to Turkish clashes with the United States. Although there is no credible evidence about who perpetrated the

¹ Terry Saltsman is a retired Brigadier General in the U.S. Army and holds a Ph.D in industrial engineering. He is currently the Chief of Government Operations at Tennessee Technological University. Michael Gunter is a professor of political science at Tennessee Technological University and the Secretary-General of the European Union Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC).

2 Kurdistan under new attacks

original bombing in Istanbul, one might speculate that some rogue Turkish intelligence element carried out a false flag operation to win support for Erdogan's upcoming reelection scheduled for June 18, 2023. The PKK and SDF/PYD/YPG have accused Turkey of having used such attacks as a pretext for invasions in the past. General Mazlûm Abdi (aka Mazlûm Kobane), the SDF commander, claimed the reputed bomber, Ablam Al-Bashir, was related to ISIS jihadists via her brothers and past husbands, some of whom were killed in battles against Kurdish forces. Also possible is a reputed rogue PKK element such as the so-called Kurdistan Falcons/Hawks blamed in the past for similar violent atrocities. A jihadist group might also be responsible. Meanwhile, the midterm elections in the United States paradoxically both strengthened and weakened U.S. president Joseph Biden's hand in all this.

Introduction

Not just Rojava (Northeastern/Syrian Kurdistan), but also Basur (Northern/Iraqi Kurdistan) have recently been attacked yet again with air missiles and drones from their inveterate enemies, Turkey and also, in a separate operation analyzed below, Iran.² Unal Atabay, a Turkish counter-terrorism expert, styled the operation as a defining moment in his country's security policy when he declared, "there has never been a simultaneous air force operation on such a wide front. It is an important message given to the world and the countries in the region."³ The United States stood by idly while seemingly ironically continuing at the same time its vigorous support with sophisticated weapons and considerable billions of dollars for Ukraine under renewed Russian attack. The NATO alliance that still includes the United States and Turkey as allies explains the U.S. inaction against Turkey but backing for Ukraine. Understandably, the United States still values its NATO military ties with Turkey, who possesses the second largest military in the NATO alliance. Over its head in Ukraine, Russia too gave the green light by default to these twin attacks on Kurdistan. Nevertheless, both of the two attacks against Kurdistan as well as the continuing war against Ukraine are

²For background, see Andrew Wilks, "Erdogan Says Turkey's Strikes in Syria, Iraq May Lead to Ground Offensive," Al-Monitor, November 21, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/erdogan-says-turkeys-strikes-syria-iraq-may-lead-ground-offensive>, accessed November 22, 2022

³Ibid.



blatant violations of the United Nations Charter and International Law.

Operation Claw-Sword

The Turkish November 19, 2022 attack on Rojava dubbed Operation Claw-Sword was reputedly launched in retaliation for the earlier November 13 bomb attack on Istanbul's sleek shopping district known as Istiklal Street that killed six people and wounded at least 80 more. Although it made no sense for the Kurds to attack Istanbul and thus invite new Turkish wrath, Turkey quickly blamed the PKK and its kin Syrian Democratic Forces/Democratic Union Party/Peoples' Defense Units (SDF/PYD/YPG) in Rojava for the atrocity despite their quick denial. The Turkish air attacks struck dozens of targets along its long Syrian border including, among others, Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobane, the latter famous for its heroic stand with U.S. air support against ISIS late in 2014, assistance that Turkey at the time notoriously chose to deny. Simultaneously, Turkey also struck targets to the east along its long border with Iraq up to Iran. Eleven Kurdish civilians were killed by the latest Turkish air strikes and many more military personnel also met their deaths.

On November 22, 2022, Turkey escalated these air strikes by hitting further targets including an SDF/PYD/YPG military base at Shamuka near the city of Hasaka. More civilian deaths and fighters died. The Turkish air strike was adjacent to the main US military base in the area housing some of the approximately 900 remaining few but strategically important troops the United States still maintains in a truncated sliver of Syria's far northeast to aid the Kurds against any ISIS resurgence and maintain custody of the more than 10,000 ISIS detainees. At least two Kurds were killed by this strike, but no U.S. casualties were reported.⁴ However, a Pentagon spokesman, Brig. General Pat Ryder, declared that the Turkish airstrike had "directly

⁴Jared Szuba, "Turkey Strikes Near US Base in Syria after Pentagon Call for De-escalation," *Al-Monitor*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/turkey-strikes-near-us-base-syria-after-pentagon-calls-de-escalation>, accessed November 23, 2022.

threatened” U.S. troops stationed in the area.⁵ Indeed, previously in 2018, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan had threatened the United States with an “Ottoman Slap”⁶ if it continued what he considered U.S. support for Syrian Kurdish terrorists. Once again, the Turkish president strongly suggested that he was ready to follow up his latest air attack with a large ground assault. Given that Turkey has already struck three times across the border with ground troops since 2016 and already occupies some territories to the west such as Afrin (also known as Kurd Dagh), he should not be lightly ignored. Indeed, Turkey had previously successfully played the same cards in October 2019 when then-President Donald Trump had withdrawn US troops in the way of a sudden Turkish attack on the SDF/PYD/YPG.⁷ Thus, not to be disregarded this time is the danger of disastrous miscalculations that could lead to Turkish clashes with the United States.

Indeed, Erdogan has partially justified his present military actions by condemning the United States for supporting the Kurds in Syria (SDF/PYD/YPG), whom he considers terrorists allied to the PKK. However, the United States does not consider the SDF/PYD/YPG to be a terrorist organization, although it has obvious political and ideological ties with the PKK, whom the United States does officially list as a terrorist organization. Rather, the United States supports the Syrian Kurds because they have proven to be a most effective de facto ally against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS),⁸ a fact all

5 Cited in “US Again Tries to Thwart Turkish Invasion of Northern Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, November 26, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-again-tries-thwart-turkish-invasion-northern-syria>, accessed December 4, 2022. For their safety, U.S. civilian staff were evacuated to Irbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurdish Commander Slams US Response to Turkish Attacks as US Diplomats Evacuated from Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/syrian-kurdish-commander-slams-us-response-turkish-attacks-us-diplomats-evacuated>, accessed December 1, 2022.

⁶ Joel Gehrke, “Recep Tayyip Erdogan Threatens US Forces with ‘Ottoman Slap,’” *Washington Examiner*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/recep-tayyip-erdogan-threatens-us-forces-with-ottoman-slap>, accessed December 1, 2022.

⁷ For background on this earlier Turkish attack, see Michael M. Gunter and M. Hakan Yavuz, “The October 2019 Turkish Inursion into Kurdish Syria: Its Background & Broader Implications,” *Middle East Policy* 27 (Spring 2020), pp. 86-101.

⁸ On this important point, see Michael Knights and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, *Accidental Allies: The U.S.—Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership against the Islamic State* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2022); and Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds: A Divided Nation in Search of a State*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publications, 2019), pp. 175-183.



the more important given the failure to find any other effective ally as well as what at times has appeared to be tacit Turkish support for ISIS.⁹

Identifying the perpetrator

In a none-too-subtle negative allusion to his American NATO ally, the Turkish leader proclaimed, “We know the identity, personal record and location of every single terrorist in this area. Likewise, we also know very well who are guarding, arming and encouraging these terrorists.”¹⁰ He then added, “It’s the end of the road for those who believe they can stall Turkey by pun games by changing names of terrorist organizations [from PKK to SDF, for example], by sharing pictures showing their soldiers next to terrorists.”¹¹ In conclusion, the Turkish leader declared, “From now on we cannot tolerate anyone coming before us with this lie.”¹² At the same time, he also has faulted Russia, which controls the airspace over much of northern Syria, for not implementing a promise made in 2019 to clear the area of the Syrian Kurds Turkey claims are terrorists, but which neither the United States, European Union, or Russia for that matter so consider.

Although there is no credible evidence about who perpetrated the original bombing in Istanbul on November 13, 2022, that ignited these latest Turkish attacks, one might speculate that some rogue Turkish intelligence element carried out a false flag operation to win support for Erdogan’s upcoming reelection scheduled for June 18,

⁹ See, for example, David L. Phillips, “Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey List,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke ...](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke...), _November 9, 2014, which cites numerous sources, accessed December 15, 2014. In addition, see Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurdish Leader: Ankara Supporting Jihadists,” *Al-Monitor*, September 3, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com>, ..., accessed October 7, 2014; Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurds Continue to Blame Turkey for Backing ISIS Militants,” *Al-Monitor*, June 10, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor/> ..., accessed October 7, 2014; and Liz Sly, “Biden Issues Second Apology to United Emirates, over Comments,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 2014, <http://www.washington-post.com> ..., accessed October 7, 2014, among many others.

¹⁰ Cited in Szuba, “Turkey Strikes Near US Base in Syria.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Cited in “US Again Tries to Thwart Turkish Invasion of Northern Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, November 26, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-again-tries-thwart-turkish-invasion-northern-syria>, accessed December 4, 2022.

2023.¹³ Given the dismal state of the Turkish economy racked by inflation rates approaching 100 per cent, Erdogan obviously finds the Kurds a convenient scapegoat to rally his flagging domestic support.

Although the Istanbul bombing is more violent, it is what many believe to be a natural progression to the alleged “Sledgehammer” controversy of 2010 when elements of the Erdogan government produced over 6,000 false documents against the leading members of the Turkish military not closely aligned with the Justice and Development Party – accusing them of orchestrating a coup.¹⁴ The military leaders were convicted by a lower court, but eventually, Turkey’s Constitutional Court unanimously overturned the verdict on June 18, 2014. Of course, vindication came after their careers were in ruin.¹⁵ On the other hand, Turkey also has accused the United States of complicity in the Istanbul bombing because of its support for the Syrian Kurds (SDF/PYD/YPG). Suleyman Soylu, the Turkish interior minister, sarcastically dismissed U.S. condolences messages for the bombing, claiming that the U.S. regrets were like “the killer is among the first ones returning to the scene.”¹⁶ Also possible is a reputed rogue PKK element such as the so-called Kurdistan Falcons/Hawks blamed in the past for similar violent atrocities. Of course, there might be yet another explanation for the Istanbul bombing such as some jihadist group. Despite Erdogan’s own Islamic qualifications and attempts in the past to appease ISIS, the genocidal jihadist terrorist organization has a bloody record of

¹³ An anonymous source, which unfortunately cannot be further identified, indicates that British intelligence claims that there is a 65 percent likelihood that the Istanbul bombing was perpetrated by some such Turkish group to further Erdogan’s political prospects. The authors of this article feel that this reputed evidence against Erdogan is problematic at best, but offer it only as a possible insight given the general belief that Turkey itself is in back of the bombing and lack of any more solid evidence.

¹⁴ See Marc Parry, “A Harvard Economist. A Coup Plot. A Career Changed Forever,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 16, 2015, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-harvard-economist-a-coup-plot-a-career-forever-changed/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in, accessed December 8, 2022.

¹⁵ See Tulin Daloglu, “Landmark Ruling Frees Turkish Officers in Sledgehammer Case,” *Al-Monitor*, June 20, 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/06/daloglu-turkish-military-officers-ruling-sledgehammer.html>, accessed December 9, 2022.

¹⁶ Cited in Ben Hubbard and Safak Timur, “Turkey Accuses U.S. of Complicity in Istanbul Attack that Killed 6,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/14/world/middleeast/turkey-us-istanbul-attack.html>, accessed November 25, 2022.



previous bombings in and against Turkey for various murky reasons.¹⁷

However, the Turkish authorities were quite certain that they could identify the Syrian Kurdish hand. Within a day of the bombing, they arrested Ahlam al-Bashir and claimed that she had been trained by the PKK and YPG in Syria. The Turkish authorities further asserted that she had crossed the border illegally into Turkey from Turkish-occupied Afrin in northern Syria on July 27, 2022, with an alleged male partner posing as her husband and carrying the bomb. Security cameras revealed that she had left a small amount of TNT in a bag at the site.¹⁸

On the other hand, the PKK¹⁹ and SDF/PYD/YPG²⁰ denied any involvement and instead accused Turkey of having used such attacks as a pretext for invasions in the past. General Mazloun Abdi (aka Mazlum Kobane), the SDF commander, claimed the bomber, Ahlam Al-Bashir, was related to ISIS jihadists via her brothers and past husbands, some of whom were killed in battles against Kurdish forces. More recently, she was inhabiting a Turkish-controlled area within North-western Syria. In a lengthy interview, General Abdi, explained, “I believe it [the bombing] was an act of provocation that was conceived by the Turkish government in order to lay the ground for the war against us.” Elaborating, Abdi claimed:

We did a lot of research and have concluded that the attack was perpetrated by Syrian opposition groups operating under Turkey’s control. We established, for example, . . . that

¹⁷ Gunter, *The Kurds: A Divided Nation in Search of a State*, p. 191.

¹⁸ See “Istanbul Police Says Syrian Woman Main Suspect, Detains 46 over Bombing,” Reuters, November 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/istanbul-police-says-syrian-woman-main-suspect-detains-46-over-bombing-2022-11-14/>, accessed November 21, 2022; and “Istanbul Bomber, Accomplice Brought Bomb-laden Bag from Syria,” *Bianet*, November 18, 2022. <https://m.bianet.org/english/law/270098-istanbul-bomber-accomplice-brought-bomb-laden-bag-from-syria>, accessed November 21, 2022.

¹⁹ See KCK [PKK] Executive Council, “Istanbul Attack Shows That AKP-MHP Are Pursuing New Malicious Plans,” November 15, 2022, <https://kck-into.com/statement-nov-1522/>, accessed November 16, 2022.

²⁰ Department of Foreign Relations, Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), “Turkish Air Military Operation, 19-20 November 2022,” November 21, 2022. Document made available by AANES sources.

the woman who was arrested for planting the bomb comes from a family linked to the Islamic State [ISIS]. Three of her brothers died fighting for the Islamic State. One died in Raqqa, another in Manbij and a third died in Iraq. Another brother is a commander in the Turkish-backed opposition in Afrin. She was married to three different Islamic State fighters and the family is from Aleppo. We had absolutely nothing to do with the bombing and we have no such policy.²¹

Salih Muslim, the co-chair of the PYD, added that the Istanbul bombing was a conspiracy by Turkey's Special Warfare Department. "This was a terrorist attack, which we condemn like everyone else. This is an Ottoman intrigue that benefits no one." He elaborated:

There are photos of the person arrested by Turkish police in connection with the Taksim attack [Istanbul bombing] that suggests links to groups like the Turkish-controlled Free Syrian Army. Nobody in our region knows the person who was responsible for the attack... However, her social media accounts indicate that she has ties to groups such as the FSA. There are photos of her in front of Sultan Murad Brigade flags. She is not Kurdish and has no ties to the Rojava Autonomous Administration.²²

However, Syria is not the only place Kurdistan is now under attack and Turkey is not the only perpetrator. Turkish ground troops have already been fighting against the PKK in Basur since April of this year. What is more, many credible reports claim that the Turks have been using internationally banned chemical weapons during their Basur forays.²³ In addition, Iran has been wracked by domestic

²¹ Cited in RIC/Rojava Information Center, "Turkey's Attacks on North and East Syria (NES), November 23, 2022. Document emailed to authors.

²² Ibid.

²³ For background on this issue, see "Open Letter on Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons by Turkey," REPAK Kurdistan repak—@outlook.com, November 30, 2022; and Sedat Ulugana, "Turkish



demonstrations that have resulted in the deaths of several hundred throughout the country since the death on September 16, 2022 of the young Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in police custody for not wearing her hijab correctly. Instead of honestly examining its own failed policies, Iran has conflated the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq's sheltering of dissident Iranian Kurdish groups for somehow sponsoring the deadly unrest that even might threaten the future of the Islamic Republic.²⁴

Thus, on November 21, Iran launched deadly air attacks against numerous targets in the KRG region and has even threatened a ground attack if Iraq does not prevent Iranian Kurdish dissidents and other reputed foreign enemies from additional supposed actions against Iran. The Iranian football team's silence during the singing of its national anthem in its first World Cup game on November 21 cannot be a favorable sign for the Islamic Republic's future. These new Iranian attacks against Basur are now suddenly occurring against the background of continuing Turkish attacks against the region since April 2022 already referred to.

Conclusion. Meanwhile, the midterm elections in the United States paradoxically both strengthened and weakened U.S. president Joseph Biden's hand in all this. The midterm elections reinforced Biden's hand by returning better than expected results for his Democratic Party, which even allowed it to hold on to the Senate, which constitutes half of the powerful U.S. Congress. In addition, Biden's party suffered less reversals than expected in the other half of Congress, the House of Representative. However, the minimum losses in the lower house of Congress proved enough to retire Nancy

Forces Have Historically Used Chemical Weapons in a 'Genocide Regime' against Kurds Says Historian," *MedyaNews*, October 26, 2022, <https://medyanews.net/turkish-forces-have-historically-used-chemical-weapons-in-a-genocide-regime-against-kurds-says-historian/>, accessed December 1, 2022. Turkey has categorically denied these accusations. See "Turkey Slams Allegations of Chemical Weapons Use in Northern Iraq," *Reuters*, October 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-slams-allegations-chemical-weapons-use-northern-iraq-2022-10-20/>, accessed December 1, 2022.

²⁴The following discussion is based in part on Shelly Kittleson, "Iran Strikes Iraqi Kurdistan Again, Warns of Possible Ground Operation," *Al-Monitor*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/iran-strikes-iraqi-kurdistan-again-warns-possible-ground-operation>, accessed November 22, 2022.

Pelosi, the influential female Speaker of the House. Kevin McCarthy, the opposition Republican Party leader, will probably become the new Speaker of the House in January. This will probably weaken Biden's overall role in foreign affairs, particularly in financial matters which are the famous prerogative for the lower house to initiate. Since the opposition Republican Party has previously expressed its caution on continuing unabated foreign affairs expenses, the already limited willingness of the United States to check Turkish aggression in Rojava and Basur may further decline. What the United States calls "Divided Government" may also hold for the U.S. president's ability to counter Iran to the degree or manner he might choose.

