

SWP Comment

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Turkey's Military Operations in Syria and Iraq

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In the early hours of 18 April, Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) launched a military operation inside Northern Iraq dubbed Claw-Lock. Simultaneously, Turkey intensified its military activities in Syria. Furthermore, on 23 May, President Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Turkey will soon start a new military operation in Syria. These moves reflect Turkey's new military strategy, based on area control, against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). So far, this new approach has yielded military success. However, it is precisely military success that is reinforcing the tendency to deal with the Kurdish problem only in terms of security and military solutions and to rule out any long-term political solution to the problem. Europe should continue to support efforts towards seeking a solution that also addresses the political dimensions of the problem.

Claw-Lock is the latest in a series of cross-border operations by Turkey into Iraqi territory over the last three decades. These operations typically take place in spring, when climate conditions are more beneficial for military moves. Operations in spring also prevent the organisation and regrouping of the militants, who usually spend the winter passively waiting. This year Turkey is simultaneously attacking forces of the People's Defense Units (YPG) in north-eastern Syria. Turkey's Kurdish policy does not differentiate between Syria and Iraq, as Turkey considers them to be different theatres of the same struggle. During this struggle over the last years, Turkey has developed a new military approach with two geopolitical aims.

Pushing the Fighting into Syria and Iraq

The first aim is to keep the PKK away from the territory of the Republic of Turkey. Instead of chasing PKK militants inside the country, Turkey has gone from being defensive to offensive and now aims to create area control beyond its southern border so as to prevent the massing of PKK forces near its territory. This overall strategy was implemented in different ways in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, Turkey conducted three military operations (in 2016, 2018, and 2019) that specifically aimed to prevent the formation of politically autonomous regions along the Turkish border controlled by the Kurdish-dominated YPG militants.

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Table 1

Turkey's military operations in Syria in comparison

Operation	Region	Start
Euphrates Shield	al-Bab region	24 August 2016
Olive Branch	Afrin region	20 January 2018
Peace Spring	Between Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad	9 October 2019
Spring Shield	Idlib region	27 February 2020

Turkey considers the YPG and its political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as the Syrian branch of the PKK, and hence a direct threat to Turkey's security. With the incorporation of large numbers of Arab and Assyrian elements, the YPG later developed into a larger coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). However, within the SDF, the YPG remains the main fighting force. Turkey considers this name change to be a bogus attempt to cover up the PKK linkage and insists that the YPG, the PYD, and the SDF are all branches of the PKK. Based on this perception, Turkey tries to justify these cross-border operations as self-defence. In contrast, the SDF claims that they are a Syrian umbrella organisation completely separate from the PKK. The truth is somewhere in between. The YPG, the PYD, and the SDF are clearly linked with the PKK in terms of ideology, and they have organisational ties as well. However, they have been very careful to maintain an operational distinction, as neither the YPG nor the SDF considers Turkish territory as an area to launch attacks – a point that significantly undermines Turkey's argument of acting in self-defence.

A fourth operation in 2020 in the Idlib region did not specifically target PKK affiliates, but it was in line with Turkey's desire to maintain territorial control and create a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border. As a result of these operations, Turkey is now controlling significant chunks of territory in Northern Syria. Moreover, Turkey has been engaged in state-building attempts in these regions, providing education and

healthcare along with security. The Turkish lira is the official currency in these regions, and the administration of the regions is conducted by the governors of Turkish cities on the other side of the border.

Unlike Syria, where PKK affiliates have never targeted Turkey, Northern Iraq has been the PKK's launching pad for decades. Thus, Turkey has a long history of cross-border operations inside Iraqi territory that goes back to the 1990s. However, in recent years, the nature of Turkey's military moves has changed significantly. Previous operations in Iraq were temporary offensives in which Turkey's air force raided supposed PKK camps in mountainous terrain. Occasionally, air raids were supported by ground troops as well. A couple of permanent Turkish bases in Northern Iraq had been established through informal agreements between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), despite a lack of approval and the occasional objection from Baghdad. However, neither these operations nor the limited number of permanent military bases had managed to weaken the PKK's presence along the Turkish border.

As of 2019, Turkey had changed strategy and started to seek area control with operations named Claw, Claw-Tiger, and Claw-Eagle. Since then, Turkey has maintained a permanent military presence in Northern Iraq that is sustained by a much larger chain of military bases and smaller forward-operation posts along the Iraqi-Turkish border. While numbers are hard to verify, open sources indicate that Turkey has a permanent deployment of 5,000 – 10,000 soldiers in Iraqi territory.

Unlike in Syria, Turkish area control in Iraq does not amount to the invasion of large territories and the creation of proto state structures. But through these bases, Turkey has created a de facto secure zone and managed to move the armed struggle forward onto Iraqi soil. Turkey is now even building roads in Iraqi territory to connect its military bases in order to achieve more effective area control.

The current Claw-Lock operation is the latest stage of this development. Already its