

Turkey's Cross-Border and Counterterrorism Operations

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Introduction

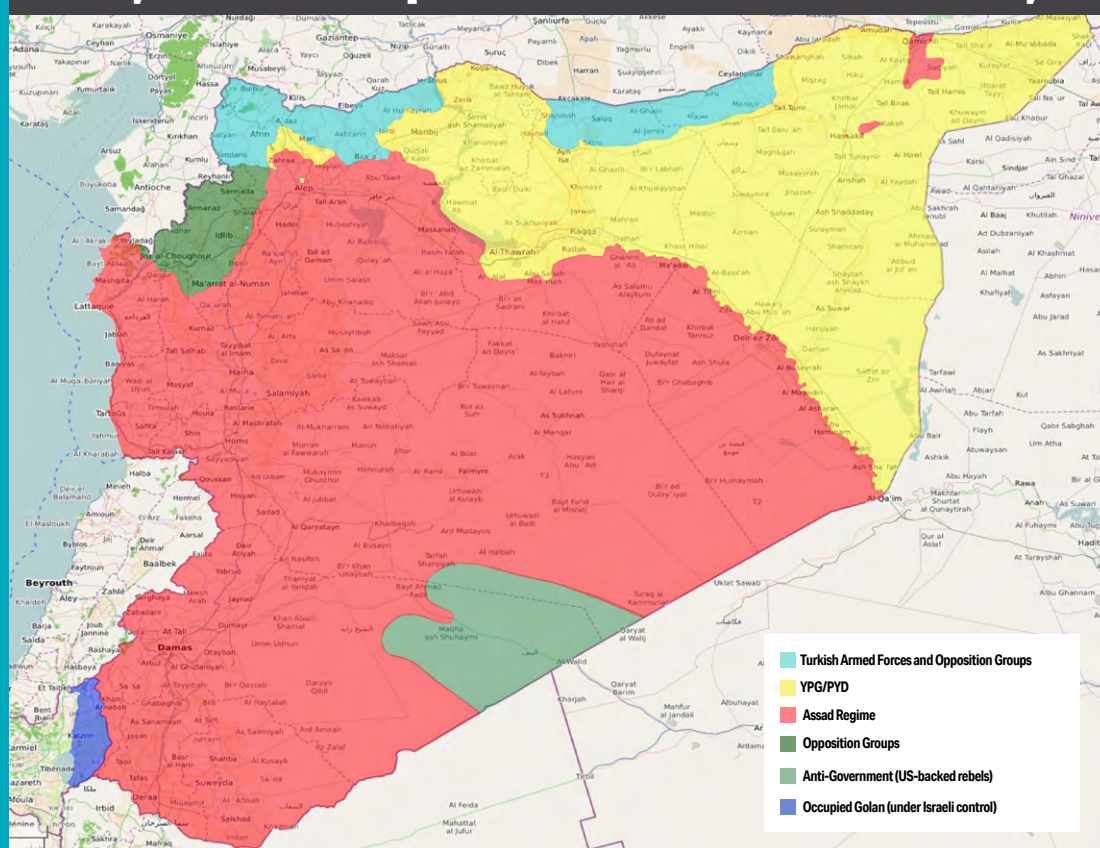
This info pack examines Turkey's cross-border military operations since 2016. Turkey's security concerns will be explored, including the chronology and consequences of Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Spring Shield and Claw in the context of Turkey's ongoing counterterrorism campaign.

Terrorism has become one of the most significant security issues of the modern world and has been on the rise since the emergence of nation states in the international system. For its part, Turkey has been fighting terrorism for many years. Apart from terrorist attacks before the 1980 military coup, Turkey encountered the first terror attack from the PKK in 1984. The PKK subsequently declared war on the Turkish state, demanding independence as part of its push to carve out an independent Kurdish territory in the region. Since 1984, more than [40,000 lives](#) have been lost in the conflict between Turkey and the PKK.

The most important milestone in the fight against the PKK has been the process that began with Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria. Operation Olive Branch and Operation Spring Shield followed in northern Syria, in addition to Operation Claw in northern Iraq. Turkey has undertaken these operations on the basis of Article 51 of the UN Charter's right to self-defence.

Turkey's aim is to neutralise terrorist organisations which threaten Turkey's security and eliminate their financial sources. Turkey also works toward protecting its border security by creating safe zones. Turkey has blocked attempts to establish terrorist-run entities along its border. Following these cross-border operations, Turkey has been criticised as having revisionist, ethnic-based policies, and of supporting extremist groups. However, Turkey's fundamental aim has been to protect its national interests and fight against terrorism.

Turkey's cross border operations and the current situation in Syria



Source: TRT World Research Centre

Turkey's Cross-Border Operations in Syria and Iraq

Turkey's operations along its southern border have been launched to eliminate terrorist elements and to avert the establishment of a 'terror corridor' along its Syrian and Iraqi borders. In addition, Turkey aims to create safe zones along its borders, control migration from Syria, and inhibit the entry into Turkish territory of members of terrorist organisations such as the YPG and Daesh. Turkey's main

concern in this regard has been preventing the establishment of terrorist-run entities along its southern border.

In other words, it is engaged in protecting its interests against terrorist organisations that have taken advantage of chaos and power vacuums in the region and have consequently set up shop on Turkey's borders.

Operation Euphrates Shield

In Syria, during the course of almost a decade of war, many people lost their lives or were forced to migrate. Given that Turkey shares a border with Syria, there have been both tangible and intangible effects on Turkey's security. The expansion of the Syrian civil war created a significant vacuum of authority, resulting in the rise of ethnic, political and religious non-state actors. The authority gap has allowed terrorist organisations to [move freely](#) throughout the region.

In particular, terrorist organisations such as Daesh and the YPG strengthened their position in northern Syria. Turkey was exposed to many [acts of aggression](#) along its borders. Turkey resorted to international options in order to

resolve the issue of terrorism. On many occasions, Turkey suggested a safe zone in northern Syria to international organisations and to parties engaged in the Syrian War. However, Turkey could not find the [support necessary](#) for this offer. Therefore, in order to secure its borders and cut off the threat of terrorism, Turkey relied on Article 51 of the UN Charter to justify the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield targeting on 24 August, 2016 Daesh and YPG terrorists.

The purpose of Turkey's operation was to eliminate Daesh from its border, block YPG activities along the Euphrates, and to establish a safe zone in northern Syria for [its own border security](#) and for the protection of civilians. Operation Euphrates Shield began on 24 August 2016 and was



Source: Anadolu Agency

successfully completed on 24 June 2017. The operation was able to secure an area to the east of Azaz, the towns around Mare and al-Bab. Furthermore, Daesh was removed from Turkey's borders and the YPG were prevented from dominating northern Syria. The operation represents an effort to create a de facto safe zone and halt the flow of refugees.

To sum up, Operation Shield was launched because of the authority vacuum in Syria, which provided an opportunity for terrorist organisations to flourish along Turkey's southern border. The YPG was attempting to seize Daesh territory and [establish its rule](#) in northern Syria. It was therefore necessary to prevent the establishment of a Daesh or YPG

terrorist entity along Turkey's border. Finally, [the safe zone](#) was intended for the protection of civilians and to secure the demographic structure of the region.

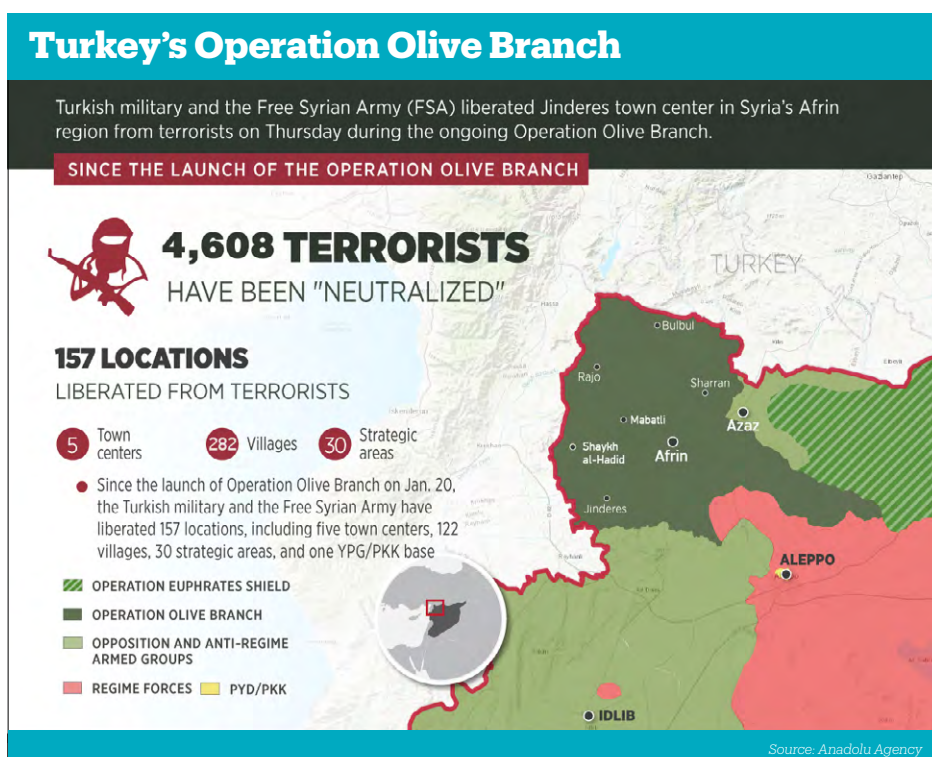
Turkey took an important step in the fight against terrorism with Operation Euphrates Shield. As a result of the operation, terror attacks against civilians and security forces in Turkey were reduced. Although Turkey received international criticism because of the operation, Ankara's resolve did not wane. Turkey held onto its decisive stance in order to protect its security, block terrorism and pave the way for other counterterrorism operations in the region.

Operation Olive Branch

Operation Olive Branch, also called Operation Afrin, took place from 20 January 2018 to 26 March 2018 by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). It targeted the cities of Afrin and Azaz in the region of Aleppo, Syria. Turkey declared that the [reasons for the mission](#) were to counter YPG and Daesh activities along the Turkish border and to provide security for local communities.

Lasting until 26 March 2018, Operation Olive Branch allowed for the control of 332 regions, taken under control by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army. Within this area, the following strategic points were included: Bülbül, Cinderes, Mabatlı, Raco, Şeran and Şeyh Hadid town centres; 282 villages; 6 sub-village settlements; 23 strategic mountains or hills; 1 dam; 1 airport and 1 base. The operation resulted in victory with the capture of Afrin city centre on 18 March and the entire district of Afrin on 24 March 2018. Operation Olive Branch was pursuant to the right to self-defence under the UN Charter, Article 51.

Prior to the operation, Turkey declared [the objectives of Operation Olive Branch](#): to liberate its southern borders from any terrorist organisation, primarily the YPG; to completely prevent the YPG from its goal of reaching the Eastern Mediterranean; to ensure the stability and continuity created by Operation Euphrates Shield; to prevent US support of terrorist organisations; to provide security for Turkey's Syrian borders; to ensure that an area of 10,000 square kilometres would be passed on to the Syrian National Army; to prevent PKK infiltration into Turkey through



the Amanos Mountains; to enable civilians to return to their homes by taking control of Tel Rifat; and to secure the critical location of Afrin in order to protect Turkey's security.

Following the successful capture of Afrin, Operation Olive Branch entered a new phase. Turkish soldiers and Free Syrian Army are now taking measures to improve and restore peace and security. These measures are allowing for the safe return of civilians and a return to normalcy in daily life. Similar to the methods used in Jarablus, Azaz and al-Bab, Turkish security forces are constantly patrolling the city. They also search for and destroy handmade explosives and mines which were planted by terrorists. According to military sources, the Turkish military has defused

nearly 650 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and 80 landmines since the beginning of Operation Olive Branch.

As Turkey's national security is at stake in the prevention of YPG terrorist attacks, Operation Olive Branch has shown Turkey's commitment to protecting its borders. The YPG has attempted to create autonomous areas along the Turkish-Syrian border. Therefore, Turkey has removed the possibility of a PKK stronghold in northern Syria. Furthermore, the operation has secured gains achieved in Operation Euphrates Shield. Is it therefore necessary to ask if the aim of Operation Olive Branch is to invade Syrian lands. It is important to note that Turkey did not intervene in any area outside the operational plan. Neither did Turkey make any demands upon the population after the mission was completed. The operation's [fundamental purpose](#) was to protect Turkey's national interests.

Operation Spring Shield

Operation Spring Shield was a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces against Assad regime forces in the Idlib Governorate. The operation began on 27 February 2020 following the Balyun airstrikes which killed dozens of Turkish soldiers. Turkey declared that [the purpose of the operation](#) was within the framework of the Astana talks, which aimed to provide a cease-fire agreement in the second northern Syria buffer zone, and also sought to prevent migration from Idlib toward the Turkish border.

On 27 February 2020, during the peak of Operation Dawn of Idlib 2, which aimed to clean terrorist groups in Idlib, the Syrian Air Force and allegedly the Russian Air Force, performed airstrikes against Turkish Army positions in Balyun, Idlib Governorate. The strikes resulted in the death of 38 Turkish soldiers, and the number of wounded reportedly ranged from 36 to 60. The following day, Russia denied that it had conducted airstrikes in the area, stating that it had made attempts to ensure that the Syrian military ceased firing to allow for the evacuation of Turkish casualties.



Source: Anadolu Agency

Russia also insisted that Turkish forces should not have been in the area where [‘counter-terror operations’](#) were taking place, and that Turkey had failed to notify Russia in advance of the Turkish soldiers’ presence. Turkey claimed that Russia was aware of Turkish troop locations as the two countries had regularly communicated about this matter.

On 5 March 2020, the presidents of Turkey and Russia met in Moscow for high-level talks. According to the statements made by Presidents Erdoğan and Putin following their one-on-one meeting, a ceasefire in the zone of Idlib was to come into force beginning at 00:00 pm on 6 March. The terms of the [ceasefire](#) included a secure corridor of 6 kilometres on either side of the M4 highway, to be patrolled jointly by Russia and Turkey beginning on 15 March.

It is important to note that Operation Spring Shield has become an illustration of the effectiveness of the Turkish defence industry and the development of new methods of military operations by the Turkish Armed Forces. Despite the closure of the Syrian airspace, Turkish Anka drones and TB-2 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) successfully penetrated Syria’s airspace and completed many effectual airstrikes. Organised airstrikes took place which utilised a vast number of UAVs. As a result, many pundits

have claimed that the use of drones was a [game-changer](#) during this operation.

A wide range of Turkish indigenous weapons and systems were used in Operation Spring Shield. Other domestic systems like Koral, Aselsan’s electronic warfare (jammer) system, supported Turkish airstrikes against Syrian forces in sophisticated coordination with Turkish aerospace systems. Consequently, the Turkish Defence Ministry announced that its forces had neutralised 151 tanks, 47 howitzers, 3 airplanes, 8 helicopters, 3 drones, and 8 defence systems. They had also eliminated a reported 3,000 Syrian regime troops. As a result, Turkish military forces were [successful](#) in their military operation with the support of the Turkish indigenous defence industry. The operation also proved that Turkish military forces could carry out sophisticated military operations without depending upon weapon systems from other countries.

The security of Idlib Centre was ensured with Operation Spring Shield. In this way, a huge wave of migration was prevented. In addition, Turkey’s message to Assad was communicated in a clear manner: Russia would not create a solution to the Syrian crisis without Turkey. In addition, the policies and gains acquired through previous operations were preserved through Operation Spring Shield.

Claw Operations

The Claw Operations conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces aimed to damage the PKK in northern Iraq. These operations have been launched on a continuous basis, including Operation Claw; Operation Claw-2; Operation Claw-3; Operation Claw-Eagle and Operation Claw-Tiger. During the Claw Operations, [significant PKK camps](#) have been neutralised and prominent figures of the PKK have been killed.



Source: Anadolu Agency

Turkey announced the beginning of Operation Claw in northern Iraq on 28 May 2019. Both Turkish air forces and ground troops [carried out operations](#) against PKK positions. Operation Claw ended on 12 July 2019. During this

operation, 143 PKK members were killed. [Air Force jets and UAVs](#) were actively used through the operation. In addition, the Turkish-made Bora ballistic missile was tested during the operation. Prior to Operation Claw-2, the Turkish Foreign Ministry and National Intelligence Service (MIT) held

a meeting with Iraqi officials. Operation Claw, which took place along the Bradost-Hakurk line, was extended to include the Zaho-Barzan region, resulting in the launch of Operation Claw-2. It was announced that 80 PKK members were killed in the course of Operation Claw-2.

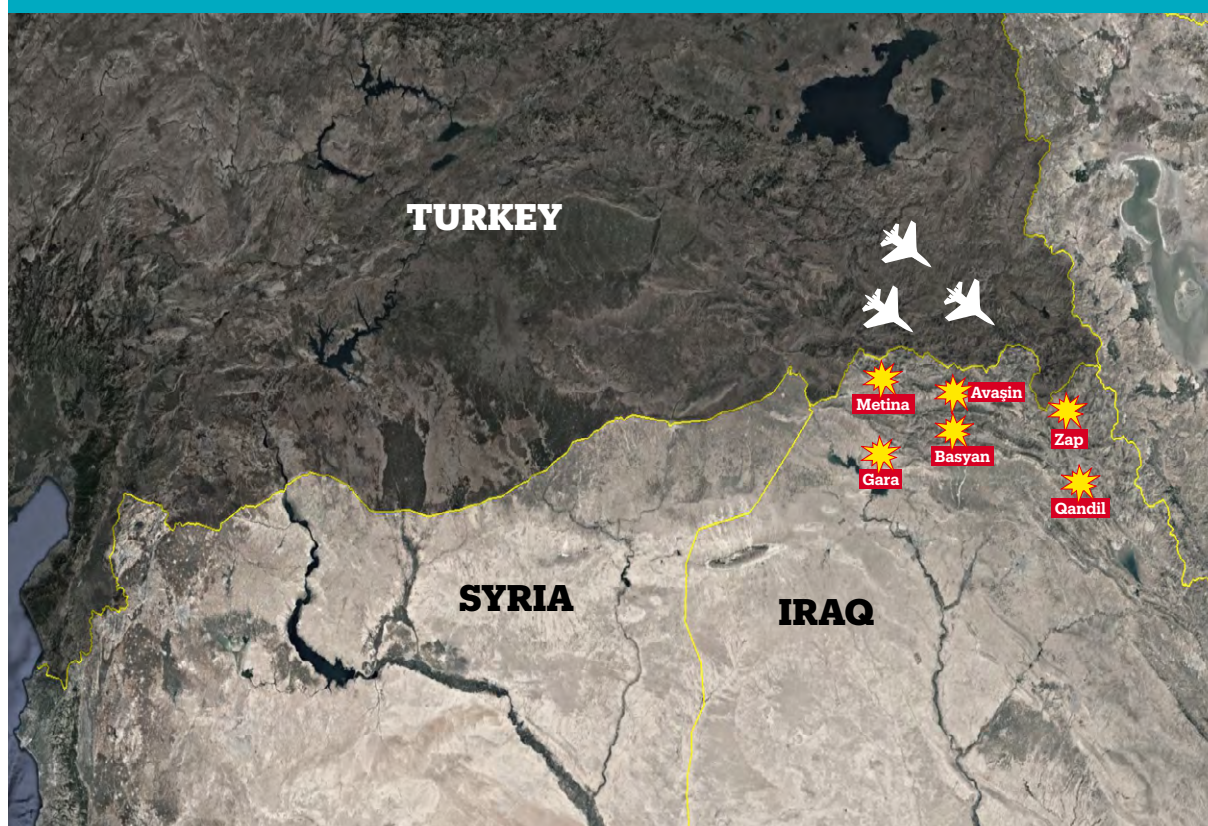
Operation Claw-3 targeted northwest Iraq, while previous operations were conducted in northeast Iraq. Turkey announced that six PKK camps would be targeted in this operation. The aim was to create [a safe zone](#), as had been done in northern Syria. For the first time since the beginning of counterterrorism operations against the PKK, Turkey has completely controlled Hakurk, one of the most important bases for the PKK in northern Iraq, through this operation. This represented an important turning point for the struggling PKK in northern Iraq.

Operation Claw Eagle began on 14 June 2020. The Turkish government claimed that fighter jets destroyed caves in the Qandil Mountains used by terrorists. The airstrikes also struck near Makhmur Refugee Camp, which hosts thousands of Turkish-Kurd refugees who fled the conflict

in the 1990s, as well as refugees from Yazidi villages in Sinjar. The Turkish Ministry of National Defence released a video of the airstrikes, claiming that 81 targets had been destroyed. On 25 June, a drone strike killed at least one PKK terrorist outside a shop in Kuna Masi, north of Sulaymaniyah, and injured six civilians (two men, two women, and two children) who were in a nearby marketplace. Four of the wounded were in serious condition and treated at Qalchwan Hospital.

Two days after Operation Claw-Eagle, on 17 June 2020, Operation Claw-Tiger was launched as a ground operation to the south of Haftanin. According to the Turkish Defence Ministry, Turkey hit [900 PKK targets](#), killed 65 terrorists and captured 7 PKK camps in Operation Claw-Tiger. Moreover, Turkey created a 40-kilometre safe zone along its border through this operation. Turkey has significantly interrupted PKK activities in northern Iraq through the Claw Operations. Additionally, Turkey has protected its interests in relation to Syria by combatting terrorist cross-border activities.

PKK's Camps Hit in Iraq



Source: Anadolu Agency

Conclusion

For many years, terrorism and non-state armed actors have been among the most important issues for states, societies and international institutions. Until today, many methods have been applied to solve the issue of terrorism, with or without the use of arms. Turkey is one of the countries which is highly affected by terrorism. Turkey has carried out several military operations since 1984 in the context of counterterrorism. Until the Arab Spring, Turkey's fight against the PKK had been predominantly domestic. However, the struggle with the PKK underwent a transformation after the Arab Spring resulted in power vacuum in Syria. As a result, terrorist organisations have attempted to establish autonomous territories in the region. Because of new and emerging instances of terrorism, Turkey has embraced a pro-active policy since 2016 and has carried out cross-border operations. In this regard, Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Spring Shield, and Claw were launched in northern Syria and Iraq. Turkey has gained important advantages due to these operations.

During these operations, Turkey has been criticised by some quarters. Despite the criticism, it can be understood that the chronology of events and the aims of operations have shown that Turkey operated within the scope of its fight against terrorism. When we look at the results of the operations since 2016, it can be seen that the people who live in the areas of the operations have benefited from an existence free from war. Terrorist organisations such as the PKK/YPG and Daesh have decreased their activities. Turkey has been providing border security through safe zones resulting from the operations in Syria and Iraq. In addition to this, Turkey has prevented the entrance of many terrorists into the Turkish homeland. It should be noted that all of these cross-border operations have been performed according to the UN Charter, Article 51, and Turkey has highlighted the territorial integrity of Syria and Iraq many times.



Turkish soldiers conduct a search for explosive ordnances, including improvised explosive devices and mines with a sniffer dog after the Turkish Armed Forces and Free Syrian Army (FSA) took complete control of northwestern Syria's Afrin as part of 'Operation Olive Branch', on March 31, 2018. Turkish troops and Free Syrian Army fighters took control of the Afrin town center on March 18, 2018 as part of Operation Olive Branch, which was launched on Jan. 20 to clear the area of the YPG and Daesh. (Emin Sansar - Anadolu Agency)

