

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## SUICIDE BOMBING IN CONGO INDICATES GROWING INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE AFFILIATE

*Jacob Zenn*

On June 29, Islamic State in Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) claimed its first ever suicide bombing at a bar in Beni, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) ([France24](#), June 30). This represented a new tactic in an increasingly violent insurgency that is attracting more attention from officials and scholars within and outside the central African region. The suicide bombing also occurred just before a separate bomb exploded at a petrol station and only one day after another bomb went off at a Catholic church. Both attacks also took place in Beni. While curfews have been imposed in the region because of COVID-19, the DRC government imposed a new curfew in Beni in anticipation of future attacks. Only police and soldiers were allowed on the streets ([aljazeera.com](#), June 28).

This suicide bombing came amid growing debate among scholars about the extent to which Islamic State (IS) is influencing ISCAP. According to one perspective,

the “fixation” on IS distracts from the complex local factors influencing the insurgency in Congo. Such scholars tend to avoid using the “ISCAP” name and prefer to refer to the Allied Defense Forces (ADF). The ADF existed for years around Beni, but its fighters no longer use that name and instead use “ISCAP” in their media releases through IS’ centralized media system. This perspective tends to not assess these media releases or considers them propaganda and argues that using the name “ISCAP” will internationalize the conflict in an unproductive way ([worldpoliticsreview.com](#), July 6).

Another perspective, however, argues that an excessive focus on the policy implications of using the name “ISCAP” overlooks demonstrated connections between the fighters in the DRC and IS leadership. This connection comes not only through media coordination, but also financial assistance, training, and other forms of coordination ([Twitter.com/VincentFoucher](#), July 7; [extremism.gwu.edu](#), March 2021). Whichever perspective eventually proves more accurate as ISCAP continues to evolve, the suicide bombing remains notable. In other cases, such as with Boko Haram in Nigeria, militant groups have turned to suicide bombing only after re-

ceiving external training, such as from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Boko Haram's first suicide bombing in June 2011 was forewarned by a militant who claimed he trained with al-Shabaab in Somalia, which is possible given the group's correspondences that indicate travel between the organizations ([Agence France-Presse](#), June 16, 2011). In addition, Boko Haram's second suicide bombing was followed by U.S. AFRICOM claims that the group was coordinating with AQIM and al-Shabaab ([telegraph.co.uk](#), March 1, 2012). Likewise, AQIM itself began conducting an increasing number of suicide bombings in 2007 only once it became affiliated with al-Qaeda and benefitted from the expertise from members who had fought in Iraq ([carnegieendowment.org](#), October 2009). Given these trends, ISCAP (or the former ADF) may have adopted suicide bombings by learning from IS itself.

Meanwhile, in Mozambique, ISCAP's other branch became relatively quiet after its stunning capture of Mocimboa da Praia in 2020. However, the group's claim of attacks in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province on July 14 shows the group remains active ([Twitter.com/Africisorg](#), July 14). In general, the Mozambican branch remains stronger than the DRC branch, but the latter's tactical evolution and growing sophistication suggests it is beginning to match the level of the former.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **GHANA SURFACES ON AL-QAEDA'S RADAR**

*Jacob Zenn*

Ghana has rarely been either a site of jihadist attacks or supplier of jihadist fighters. However, the Group for Supporting Muslims and Islam (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin—JNIM), which is al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Sahel, for the first time featured a Ghanaian man front and center in a video in June. In the video, the Ghanaian, whose alias was Abu Dujana, described the part he would play in an impending suicide bombing on Operation Barkhane forces in Gossi, Mali. The video was shocking enough to Ghana that the country responded by issuing a "terrorism alert" ([whatsupnewsghana.com](#), June 29).

Notable among Abu Dujana's words were his references to Tamale near the Ghanaian border. Abu Dujana claimed to be from Tamale, which has come under suspicion of infiltration by "bandits" ([indexghana.news](#), 15). Such bandits, as mentioned in Ghanaian intelligence documents, planned to enter Ghana from Burkina Faso and are likely, in fact, JNIM fighters or allies. Abu Dujana's references to an emir based in the city of Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso, moreover, indicates that he was part of the JNIM contingent operating between the Burkina Faso-Ghana border area ([Twitter.com/Menastream](#), June 27).

Only several weeks after Abu Dujana's video, JNIM released another video called "If they fight you, fight them" showing combat footage throughout the Sahel ([Twitter.com/Calibreobscura](#), July 10). The video's references to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) show how JNIM historically evolved from AQIM and is still largely intertwined with that organization. However, AQIM is still focused on Algeria and much less active operationally than JNIM. Whereas the video featuring Abu Dujana was not technically a formal JNIM release, it had all of the official JNIM logos. This indicates that JNIM has only recently been expanding into the Burkina Faso-Ghana border area and may not have the logistics in place to relay videos from there, including the one of Abu Dujana, to JNIM's centralized media team.

JNIM did not release any formal combat videos in all of 2020, which indicates this video was a compendium of numerous successful operations. JNIM likely desired to display its increasing professionalization. The video also comes at a time when JNIM is benefiting from strong tailwinds, including from French president Emmanuel Macron's wavering over whether to remove French troops from the Sahel ([France24.com](https://www.france24.com/en/20200610-france-will-not-withdraw-troops-from-sahel), June 10). Although such a move seems unlikely, France has been unable to quash the Sahelian jihadist insurgency since Operation Barkhane and its predecessor operation commenced in 2012.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan nevertheless set a precedent that France could follow to leave the Sahel ([aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/2/france-withdrawal-afghanistan), July 2). At the same time, Afghanistan is much further from the U.S. homeland than the Sahel is to French territory and key economic interests, such as mining facilities in northern Niger. France cannot extricate itself from the Sahel, from a national security perspective, as easily as the U.S. can from Afghanistan. This is especially true as the Taliban has vowed to not use its territory to attack Western countries and, in any event, it may lack the capability to coordinate any such attack with al-Qaeda.

The Taliban's rapid conquest of territory in Afghanistan as the United States began withdrawing might also serve as a warning sign for Macron: if France withdraws from the Sahel, Mali and its immediate neighbors, Niger and Burkina Faso, would come under threat of jihadist takeover. Eventually, Ghana itself would no longer be at the periphery, but potentially at the heart of JNIM operational areas.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **Pakistan Braces for U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan through Extra-Regional Partnerships**

*Syed Fazl-e-Haider*

While the United States is expected to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan well before its September 11 deadline, the countries bordering the country are enhancing their capacity to combat a potential new wave of terrorism. The chaos emanating from Afghanistan poses a large security challenge to Pakistan, since a complete collapse of the country could provide further safe haven to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com/news/1424444), July 26, 2020). The TTP's attacks inside Pakistan have surged since May 1 when U.S and NATO forces commenced their withdrawal from Afghanistan. For example, on May 5, four Pakistani soldiers were killed and six were injured on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in the Baluchistan region when TTP militants opened fire from Afghan territory ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com/news/1424444), May 5).

The TTP leadership had been on the run since 2014 when Pakistan launched the Zarb-e-Azb operation across Pakistan, including its border areas with Afghanistan. The operation dismantled TTP networks in Pakistan, resulting in it breaking into different factions. The TTP's leadership along with several local commanders then took refuge in Afghanistan ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com/news/1384444), April 23). Without U.S. forces in Afghanistan, terrorist groups like the TTP will experience fewer checks on their operations and the instability in the country will likely act as a catalyst for their militant activities.

### **Pakistani Foreign Policy's Major Shift from the U.S. to Russia**

In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal, Pakistan's foreign policy has undergone a major shift vis-a-vis Afghanistan. Islamabad has categorically refused to host any American bases on its territory for CIA counter-terrorism operations inside Afghanistan ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com/news/1424444), June 19). Pakistan is

reluctant to fight a U.S. proxy war in the country, with officials often citing the 70,000 Pakistani deaths that have come in the past two decades of war. Islamabad has declared that Pakistan will be a “partner in peace, but not in conflict” ([Express Tribune](#), July 1).

While distancing itself from Washington, Islamabad has been growing its ties to Moscow. Russia has pledged to strengthen Pakistan’s counterterrorism capacity by supplying it with military equipment ([The News](#), April 8). Relations between Pakistan and Russia have witnessed a slow but steady improvement since 2011, when U.S-Pakistan ties reached their nadir following the killing of Osama Bin Laden in a U.S. raid inside Pakistan. Afterwards, Pakistan began looking toward Russia to diversify its foreign policy options. The two countries gradually became closer after finding common grounds for mutual cooperation and joint ventures. In 2016, for example, Moscow for the first time sent troops to Pakistan to hold joint exercises with Pakistani forces ([Express Tribune](#), April 11).

Afghanistan was also on top of the agenda in Moscow-Islamabad talks during a two-day visit to Pakistan on April 7-8 by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The Russian foreign ministry stated, “Today Pakistan is an important foreign policy partner of our country....The cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad is based on the similarity of positions on most of the problems of the world community, including issues of strategic stability and countering terrorism” ([Dawn](#), April 7). Accordingly, the Russia-Pakistan relationship is likely to strengthen following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

### **Pakistani's Defense Cooperation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan**

Pakistan is also looking toward other countries outside its own region to strengthen defense ties and extend cooperation in counterterrorism. The country’s army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, is playing a particularly proactive role in strengthening regional cooperation. In 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan decided to extend the tenure of General Bajwa for another three years in view of his performance and the regional security environment ([Dawn](#), August 19, 2019).

In June, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon signed a defense deal with Pakistan during a visit to Islamabad. Under the deal, Tajikistan agreed to buy Pakistani weapons to bolster strategic cooperation. Prime Minister Imran Khan stressed the need to enhance cooperation in counterterrorism between the two countries, which both border Afghanistan, in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal from the country. Khan stated, “Peace in Afghanistan is important for both trade and connectivity. Both countries would suffer if the withdrawal of U.S. forces leads to anarchy” ([Dawn](#), June 3).

Pakistan has also trained military officers from Tajikistan and has offered to train more Tajikistani officers and assist in growing the country’s military capabilities. Both countries are working on a number of projects, including the \$1.6 billion electricity transmission Central Asia-South Asia 1000 (CASA 1000) project and the Trilateral Transit Trade Agreement for Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan ([Dawn](#), March 31). Stability in Afghanistan is, therefore, a shared interest of Tajikistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have also traditionally been strong military allies. Islamabad has always been open to military cooperation with the Saudis. Even Riyadh chose Pakistan’s former army chief, General Raheel Sharif, as Commander of the 41-country, Saudi-led coalition, Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IM-CTC) ([Arab News](#), February 11, 2019). More recently, in May, Pakistan’s army chief, General Bajwa, visited Saudi Arabia and held a meeting with the Chief of Staff of the Saudi Armed Forces, General Fayyadh Bin Hamed al-Ruwaili, in Riyadh. The two military leaders agreed to further enhance military-to-military cooperation and also discussed “matters of mutual interest, the regional security situation including Afghan Peace Process, defense and security, and military-to-military cooperation” ([The News](#), May 5). Pakistan has also been providing training to Saudi soldiers and pilots, while Saudi Arabia was the largest importer of arms and ammunition from Pakistan in 2016, when it purchased small and medium conventional weaponry worth millions of dollars ([Dawn](#), February 18, 2019). The relationship, however, was tested in August 2020, when Islamabad publicly criticized the Saudi-led Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) for

failing to take action against India's decision to strip the state of Jammu and Kashmir of special constitutional status. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia demanded the early repayment of \$3 billion in loans. Pakistani officials later walked back the statement and relations appear to now be at an even keel ([Aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com), August 28, 2020).

Furthermore, Pakistan has a time-tested military relationship with the UAE, which has one of the most advanced defense industries in the Arab world. Pakistan's key role in training and equipping the UAE military, including its fighter pilots, has provided a strong basis for their bilateral military ties. In 2018, the UAE military for the first time participated in the Pakistan National Day parade in Islamabad ([Khaleej Times](https://www.khaleejtimes.com), March 25, 2018). In 2020, however, bilateral ties were strained by geopolitical developments. The UAE's recognition of Israel and Pakistan's stance against the country created misunderstandings, which were ultimately resolved by diplomatic efforts from both sides. Islamabad considers its relations with UAE quite important, as the UAE is home to 1.5 million overseas Pakistani workers ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com), December 22, 2020).

Turkey, meanwhile, is expected to deliver 30 Turkish-made T129 ATAK helicopters to Pakistan this year. The \$1.5 billion helicopter deal, which is the largest ever Turkish-Pakistani defense contract, was originally signed in July 2018. In March, Islamabad provided Ankara a six-month extension for delivering the helicopters. However, it was delayed because the United States refused to issue export licenses for engines and other parts made in the U.S. ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com), March 17). The T129 helicopters, which have been effectively used by the Turkish army in operations against Kurdish rebels in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria would further strengthen and enhance Pakistan's counterterrorism potential. Turkey has also further upgraded 41 F-16 fighter jets for the Pakistani Air Force ([Daily Sabah](https://www.dailysabah.com), July 4, 2019).

Pakistan and Qatar also enjoy cordial military ties. Pakistan has offered to train the Qatari Armed Forces to strengthen military ties. General Bajwa visited Qatar in January and discussed bilateral cooperation in defense during a meeting with the highest levels of the Qatari leadership ([The News](https://www.thenews.com), March 3). Qatar hosts the official

offices of Taliban leaders and was the venue for U.S.-Taliban talks that began in July 2018. As Qatar maintains a friendly relationship with the Taliban, it played a role as a mediator during peace negotiations between the Taliban and the U.S. The Taliban trust the Qatari authorities and are known to listen to their advice ([Geo TV](https://www.geotv.com), May 14, 2019).

Lastly, during his two-day visit to Azerbaijan in June, General Bajwa held meetings with senior military leaders. Bajwa stated, "The emerging geo-strategic paradigm in the region necessitates our close cooperation and collective response against common challenges" ([Express Tribune](https://www.express-tribune.com), June 23). In October 2020, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan claimed that Pakistani special forces were fighting alongside the Azerbaijani army against Armenia in their conflict over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Islamabad, however, rejected the claim as "baseless and unwarranted" and supported Azerbaijan's right to self-defense ([Dawn](https://www.dawn.com), October 17, 2020). Some analysts in India wrote that Pakistan might have extended some support to Azerbaijan in the hope that Turkey would likewise support Islamabad's position on the Kashmir issue ([Times Now News](https://www.timesnownews.com), September 29, 2020).

## Conclusion

Pakistan's foreign policy has undergone a major shift as the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan. Rapidly changing geopolitical realities and shifting alliances in the region have brought Cold War rivals, such as Russia and Pakistan, together. Similarly, Pakistan's policy of strengthening counterterrorism cooperation with other extra-regional countries may pay long-term dividends in combating Afghanistan-based terrorist groups, such as the TTP, which is rapidly expanding its influence and operations across the region. Along with its closest ally, China, Pakistan will also be backed by Russia in its counterterrorism strategy for post-U.S. Afghanistan.

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# Indian Counter-Insurgency Operations and COVID-19 Limit Maoist Insurgency

*Animesh Roul*

## Introduction

Once considered the biggest internal security challenge for the Indian state, Maoist militants, also known as Naxalites, have witnessed a steady decline over the last decade. The insurgency covered almost all central and eastern Indian states and is often referred to as the “Red Corridor,” but it is now restricted to nearly 90 districts in 11 states, with Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha as major epicenters for the Maoists’ activities. According to an official assessment, incidents of Maoist violence have declined by 70 percent, from 2,258 in 2009 to 665 in 2020. The fatality figures of civilians and security forces have been reduced by an even greater 80 percent from 1,005 in 2010 to 183 in 2020 ([Ministry of Home Affairs](#), March 17).

## History of Protracted Conflict

Their steady decline notwithstanding, Maoist militants in India have managed to regularly stage violent attacks against security forces. In early April, Maoists armed with light-weight machine guns and rocket launchers ambushed paramilitary forces along the Sukma-Bijapur border in Chhattisgarh, killing 22 soldiers and injuring 30 others ([India Today](#), April 4). Similarly, on March 23, five District Reserve Guard (DRG) personnel were killed, and 13 others sustained injuries after their vehicle was hit by a Maoist-planted landmine in Chhattisgarh's Narayanpur district ([Indian Express](#), March 24). One year before the Narayanpur incident, on March 21, 2020, 17 security personnel and 23 Maoists were killed in a major encounter in the Sukma district of Chhattisgarh ([Hindustan Times](#), September 12, 2020). This sporadic violence suggests that the Maoists are seeking to maintain their dominance in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, which is one of the group’s few remaining strongholds.

What started in 1967 as a small peasant and tribal rebellion from the remote Naxalbari village of Darjeeling district, West Bengal, the Maoist insurgency has mutated into a violent anti-India movement over the years. Initially, the activity centered around impoverished parts of central and eastern India, including West Bengal, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh states. Soon this movement organized as the Communist Party of India–Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) and adopted various violent tactics, including guerrilla war and fueling peasant unrest against landlords and ultimately the government. The whole movement was inspired by the revolutionary ideals and agenda of Mao Zedong, the Chinese communist revolutionary and founding father of the People’s Republic of China ([Hindustan Times](#), May 28, 2017). Other Communist and Marxist ideologues, of course, also inspired the movement in India, such as Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Lin Biao and CPI-ML founding father Charu Majumdar, a sculpture of whom can be still found in Naxalbari.

Maoists in India have adopted the ‘protracted People’s War’ strategy to achieve a political objective in three strategic phases: occupy the land, step up the guerilla struggle, and bring power to the people. A significant shift occurred, however, among Indian Maoists in September 2004 with the merger of two powerful Maoist formations—the Peoples War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI), which unified the CPI-ML ([Times of India](#), October 14, 2004). This strategic merger and apparent fusion of ideology, personnel, and firepower added strength to the insurgent movement and has challenged the Indian government ever since.

### **Leadership Losses Amid the Pandemic**

The central government and affected states have undertaken sustained counter-insurgency operations in the Maoist-dominated Red Corridor, including Operation Green Hunt and Operation Prahar since November 2009. In May 2017, a newly formulated Samadhan strategy effectively addressed the lacuna in the existing anti-Maoist measures ([Economic Times](#), May 8, 2017). Due to these sustained efforts, the geographical spread of Maoist influence has been dramatically contained over the years. At present, 53 districts reported Maoist-relat-

ed violence in 2020 as compared to 76 districts in 2013 ([Ministry of Home Affairs](#), March 17). The Maoists’ diminishing territorial presence can be seen as an accomplishment primarily resulting from the government’s multi-pronged strategy involving counter-insurgency measures and development interventions under the National Policy and Action Plan of 2015.

The security restrictions and lockdowns across India during the coronavirus pandemic have also impacted the Maoist movement adversely in two ways: restricting vital supplies, including rations and medicines, to the interior of Maoist-dominated zones; and infections and deaths of Maoist leaders and soldiers due to COVID-19 complications. In May, Chhattisgarh police received information about the spread of COVID-19 in Maoist camps. A seized Maoist letter further revealed that at least 7-8 members had died of COVID-19 and around 15-20 others were seriously ill. The police also indicated that fear of COVID-19 triggered desertion within the ranks of the Maoists ([ANI News](#), May 12).

In June, four senior Maoist leaders reportedly died of COVID-19 complications, including Yapa Narayana (a.k.a. Haribhushan), who was the head of CPI-ML’s Telangana unit, and Siddaboina Sarakka, who was a female leader of the Indravati Area Committee ([Telangana Today](#), June 21). Two senior Maoist commanders of the People’s Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), who were identified as Sobrai and Nandu, also died of COVID-19 in Telangana ([India Today](#), June 23).

In a major setback for the Maoists, COVID-19 was also contracted by the most infamous Maoist commander, Madvi Hidma, who is the alleged mastermind of the April ambush in Chhattisgarh, which claimed the lives of 22 paramilitary personnel. According to police sources, several other top Maoist militants active in Chhattisgarh’s Bastar region were infected with Covid-19, including Katta Ramchandra Reddy and Mula Devender Reddy of the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee (DKSZC) and Kunkati Venkataiah of the South Bastar Darbha Division Committee (DVC) ([Times of India](#), June 26; [The Hindu](#), June 2). On July 11, another senior Maoist leader Vinod Hemla, who is accused of being involved in the 2013 Darbha valley massacre of the Congress party

leaders, also died of COVID-19 in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh ([The Week](#), July 13).

## Conclusion

The combination of security measures and COVID-19 have stifled the Maoist militants in recent months. The erosion of Maoist dominance over vast swathes of territory may be irreversible under the present circumstances. However, despite the recent setbacks in terms of leadership deaths and receding territory, several districts in Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Odisha remain largely under Maoist control.

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# Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militias Deter Turkish Intervention in Sinjar

*Jacob Lees Weiss*

In February, indications of an incoming Turkish military operation targeting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Sinjar, northern Iraq led to a flurry of Iranian-backed militia activity targeting Turkey. Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), one of the most prominent Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq, hinted that the focus of his group's activities could switch to Turkey instead of the United States ([Rudaw](#), March 4). Al-Khazali even urged the Iraqi government to consider cooperating with the United States militarily to counter Turkey ([al-Etejah](#), March 30).

Despite the Iranian-backed militia threats toward Turkey, Turkish military operations in northern Iraq expanded in June to include Makhmour, a refugee camp that Turkey claims is an incubator for PKK militancy, and is roughly 180 kilometers south of the Turkish border ([Rudaw](#), June 7). Now that Turkey is once again striking deeper into Iraqi territory, the question remains—how will Iranian-backed militias respond? [1]

## Turkish Military Expansion into Iraqi Kurdistan

Turkish military activity targeting the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan is nothing new. Turkey has launched multiple military incursions in the territory since the 1990s aimed at reducing PKK cross-border capabilities ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7). In recent years, Turkey has intensified its military operations and increased the number of military checkpoints and bases in the country ([Rudaw](#), June 7, 2020). Such activities have largely been focused on the mountainous border region and around the Qandil Mountains near the Iraqi-Iranian border, where the PKK has based its headquarters since 1998.

The PKK and PKK-affiliated militants also maintain a presence further south in Iraqi territory, including in the aforementioned Sinjar (Nineveh Governorate) and Makhmour (Erbil governorate) areas. Both of these terri-

territories are the subject of disputes between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi federal government. [2] Sinjar, in particular, is of strategic importance to the PKK due to its proximity to Syria, which allows the PKK to link with the affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) Kurdish militant group in Syria. [3]

### **Sinjar's PKK and PMU Alliance**

Sinjar, a historically Yazidi region, came under the control of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. A coalition of Kurdish forces, including the PKK, liberated the territory from IS in 2015, with assistance from Iranian-backed militias embedded within the state-sponsored security organization known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2020). The 2017 expulsion of KRG forces from Sinjar, ordered by pro-Iranian former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, left the PKK and PMU in control of the territory. This brought the PKK into an alliance with the PMU, with several PKK-affiliated groups such as the Sinjar Resistance Units (YPS) officially joining the PMU by 2019.

Current Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who has been keen to diminish the influence of the Iranian-aligned PMU militias, entered into the "Sinjar Agreement" with the KRG to reestablish formal Iraqi government control in Sinjar in October 2020 ([al-Hurra](#), October 9, 2020; [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2020). The goal is to regain control over the territory by removing the PKK, while simultaneously preventing Turkey from using Sinjar as a reason to expand its military presence deeper into Iraq.

### **Iranian-Backed Militias' Reaction to Turkey's Sinjar Threats**

The Sinjar Agreement initially had Turkish backing. However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reportedly became frustrated by the agreement's perceived lack of progress, and threatened to launch a joint Turkish-Iraqi military operation in Sinjar in January ([Middle East Monitor](#), January 23). The subsequent killing of 13 Turkish citizens who were kidnapped by the PKK in the Gare region of Iraqi Kurdistan led Erdoğan to renew

threats against the PKK in Sinjar in February ([al-Monitor](#), February 17).

Following increased Turkish threats of escalation in Sinjar, the Iranian-backed militias of the PMU responded uniformly to deter Turkey. Three PMU brigades were sent to Sinjar to bolster the already sizeable PMU presence in the area ([Shafaq](#), February 14). Prominent militias, including AAH, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, and the Badr Organization, all threatened Turkey with military action if Turkey launched any major operation in Sinjar ([Al-Nahar](#), February 14). AAH's al-Khazali, in an attempt to turn public opinion against Turkey, went on Iraqi television claiming that Turkey represented more of a threat to Iraq than the United States ([al-Etejah](#), March 30). Al-Khazali further stated that he would personally take up arms if Turkey were to follow through with what he described as "neo-Ottoman desires" to occupy and annex parts of Iraq. Most notable of all, a PMU militia is highly likely to have been behind the April 14 rocket attack on the Bashiqa Turkish military base in northern Iraq that killed one Turkish soldier ([Rudaw](#), April 15; [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), June 4). [4]

### **Successful Deterrence?**

The Iranian-backed PMU militia's show of force appears to have at least temporarily deterred a major Turkish military operation in Sinjar. Since Erdoğan's Sinjar threats, the Turkish military launched Operation Claw-Lightning, which focused on the usual PKK targets in the Metina, Avashin, and Basyan areas near the Turkish border ([Middle East Eye](#), April 24). While the Turkish military also launched an airstrike on a refugee camp in Makhmour on June 5, no significant Turkish military action occurred in Sinjar.

With the PMU highlighting its readiness to attack Turkish forces, Turkish reluctance to internationalize its conflict with the PKK was made apparent. Ankara argues that the PKK should continue to be seen as a domestic issue only, despite its presence outside of Turkey and its links to the PMU. This was particularly clear after the Bashiqa attack. Despite the loss of Turkish lives, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu refused to directly blame the PMU despite their obvious links to the attack. Instead,

Çavuşoğlu preferred to refer to the perpetrators as militias that support the PKK ([Anadolu Agency](#), April 20).

### **Risks for Erdoğan**

While Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party's (AKP) strong rhetoric and action against the PKK may resonate with a domestic audience, risking Turkish lives fighting Iraqi militias could quickly become quite unpopular. This would particularly be the case given the considerable international backlash that would likely follow any attack on Sinjar, since it would threaten to reignite conflict in a region that had only recently suffered genocide and brutal conflict with IS.

While Turkish military superiority could overwhelm the PKK-affiliated militias, even with the support of the PMU, the conflict would also risk jeopardizing Turkey's important economic relations with Iraq and Iran. Iraq is highly likely to condemn Turkish unilateral military operations in Sinjar and is equally too constrained by domestic politics to participate in a joint Turkish military operation. Turkish action in Sinjar would then risk its important economic relations with Iraq and the KRG, which include a set target of \$20 billion in bilateral trade ([Anadolu Agency](#), December 17, 2020). Likewise, Turkey is reluctant to risk its economic links to Iran by attacking Iranian-backed militias, which play a key role in Iran's Iraq foreign policy, although due to U.S. sanctions bilateral trade with Iran has decreased.

### **Turkey's Inadvertent Justification for Iran's Militias in Iraq**

Sinjar is important for the Iranian-backed militias for two reasons. The first is to maintain PMU influence over Sinjar, which provides a crossing point into Syria. While the PMU already controls border crossings in al-Qaim and al-Anbar, the diversification of routes into Syria further minimizes the risk posed to militia access to the country. Access to the Sinjar Mountains is also significant because it provides militia groups scope to attack Israel, with Iraq previously firing Scud missiles toward Israel from the Sinjar Mountains in 1991 ([al-Monitor](#), November 13, 2017).

Secondly, initiating hostilities with Turkey provides renewed justification for the continued existence of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. These militias have defended their privileged position in Iraq, where they are embedded within the state but operate independently, by claiming that their presence is necessitated by the alleged U.S. military occupation of Iraq. The continued U.S. withdrawal from the region has meant that these groups will eventually no longer be able to resort to the U.S. military presence as justification for their continued use of arms unsanctioned by the state. By inflaming the crisis with Turkey, these groups hope to find the same domestic credibility that they had when they were fighting to push U.S. forces out of Iraq. With the Iraqi general elections planned for October, in which many of the political wings of these militias will compete, switching the focus of the militia narrative to fighting to defend Iraqi sovereignty against Turkish encroachment could be a clever move.

### **Turkish Occupation?**

Such a strategic and rhetorical shift of the Iranian-backed militia narrative from the U.S. to the Turkish military presence in Iraq would not be straightforward. The pro-Iranian militia support base is largely limited to the Shia-majority central and southern regions of Iraq, which lack significant cultural links to the ethnically and religiously diverse disputed northern Iraqi territories and the Sunni Iraqi Kurdistan autonomous region. Without Turkey directly attacking Shia militia interests, its largely Shia support base is unlikely to consider Turkish military activity as relevant. This would especially be the case if Turkey limits its military activity to the mountainous border regions in Iraqi Kurdistan with only the occasional airstrike or drone attack on Sinjar or Makhmour.

The pro-Iranian militia support base, therefore, requires a more dramatic confrontation between the Iranian-backed militias and the Turkish military for the Turkish occupation of northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan to appear relevant. However, Iran's own strategic interests with Kurdish militant groups mitigates the possibility of significant military conflict with Turkey. Iran has no real ideological alignment with the PKK or other Kurdish militant groups. In fact, Iran suppresses Kurdish autonomy

movements in northwestern Iran. If pro-Iranian militias were to force a withdrawal of the Turkish military from northern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan, then it would free up PKK capability in the country to focus on other targets. This is a prospect that Iran would be keen to avoid. In particular, it could lead to the formation of a Kurdish crescent linking Kurdish militants in Syria to Iraq and through to Iran's own domestic Kurdish militant group—the Kurdistan Free Life Party (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê—PJAK).

This has meant that while pro-Iranian militias may seek to increase anti-Turkish rhetoric, Iran is likely to give the green light to the militias to launch significant military activity against Turkey only in areas where Iran's interests are directly affected, such as Sinjar. Likewise, Turkey, despite its bellicose rhetoric, is equally reluctant to intensify military operations outside of its usual Iraqi Kurdistan targets. This limits the capability of the pro-Iranian militias to act on their anti-Turkish rhetoric with the result that its anti-Turkish narrative risks being exposed as lacking relevance to its own support base.

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## Notes

[1] Turkey previously bombed Makhmour in 2017 and 2020 ([Rudaw](#), April 15, 2020).

[2] In Sinjar and Makhmour, local militant groups, such as the Sinjar Resistance Units and the Makhmour Protection Units, are linked to the PKK. Turkey also claims that its strikes in Makhmour have killed PKK militants ([Daily Sabah](#), June 11).

[3] See Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG-PKK connection" (Atlantic Council, January 2016).

[4] While no group claimed the attack, the missile launch pads were found in an area controlled by the PMU's 30th Brigade.