

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## MYANMAR INSURGENCY MATURES AS FIGHTING AGAINST THE TATMADAW INTENSIFIES

*Jacob Zenn*

The roughly half-year long low-level insurgency against Myanmar's ruling Tatmadaw, as the armed forces is called, continues to brew, with the COVID-19 Delta variant's spread throughout Southeast Asia adding a new layer of complexity ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 2). Myanmar hit record high COVID-19 deaths in July, while other countries in the region began lockdowns that same month ([vnexpress.net](#), July 10). As of this publication, Myanmar was averaging more than 5,000 cases per day, which is nearly five times as high as the country's previous highest average in November 2020 ([Jakarta Post](#), July 13; [Our World in Data](#), July 22).

On the political front, on July 20, National League of Democracy (NLD) spokesman Nyan Win died of COVID-19 while in the custody of the Tatmadaw. The NLD, which was ousted from power by the regime after winning a democratic election in November 2020, meanwhile, has also borne the brunt of attacks. In the days

surrounding Nyan Win's death, for example, the Tatmadaw burned the homes of NLD supporters who were fleeing a military offensive against the People's Defense Force (PDF) in the city of Sagaing in northwestern Myanmar after a battle that led to more than ten deaths ([Rfa.org](#), July 21).

Sagaing itself has not only been the site of clashes between the Tatmadaw and civilian militias, but also the site of a COVID-19 outbreak, with well over 5,000 people having died of the disease ([scmp.com](#), July 13). Moreover, Sagaing's proximity to the Chinese border has drawn Beijing's attention, especially as China is witnessing a breakout on its side of the border in Yunnan Province, particularly in the town of Ruili. Myanmar's inability to control the virus outbreak amid conflict on its side of the border will inevitably endanger China. However, whether China will seek to intervene in the conflict in Myanmar beyond its rhetorical support to the Tatmadaw and calls for non-interventionism remains unclear ([al-Jazeera](#), July 20).

Elsewhere in the country, signs are emerging that the civilian militias are maturing. In Mandalay, on July 16, for

example, two bombs destroyed an electricity office that had become a source of contention between the Tatmadaw and its opponents. Although the local PDF did not claim the bombings, it had warned the public against paying any bills to Tatmadaw for electricity, arguing that the money would be used to suppress the people. At the time of reporting, no one had claimed responsibility for the bombings. Whether or not the PDF conducted the bombings, which injured two people, or like-minded civilians conducted the attack, it reflected how the opposition to the Tatmadaw recognizes that the battle does not just involve combatting the regime with weapons in clashes, but also winning civilian support and acquiescence, and possibly even through coercion ([myanmar-now.org](http://myanmar-now.org), July 17).

In other parts of Myanmar, the fighting is becoming increasingly brutal. In mid-July, for example, the Tatmadaw's soldiers clashed with the Karenni People's Defence Force (KPDF). The battle resulted in ten shells striking villagers and heavy weapons being fired from both sides. Moreover, the fighting occurred after a temporary ceasefire had been reached between the Tatmadaw forces and KPDF, which obviously did not last. Further, civilians reported the regime troops stealing their livestock ([Bnionline.net](http://Bnionline.net), July 15). This case is but one of dozens across Myanmar that reflects the intensification of the conflict, with COVID-19, China, and numerous other factors preventing any imminent solution.

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## **ISWAP GAINS CONTROL OF NIGERIA'S STRATEGIC SAMBISA FOREST**

*Jacob Zenn*

In May, Islamic State (IS) declared Abu Musab al-Barnawi to be the new leader of Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) ([Telegram](https://t.me/ISWAP), May 18). Al-Barnawi subsequently commanded the offensive that led to the death of rival factional leader Abubakar Shekau in Sambisa Forest, Borno State, Nigeria ([HumAngle](https://www.humangle.com), May 21). After Shekau's death, questions arose about whether Shekau's loyalists in Sambisa would defect to ISWAP and extend the group's presence to Sambisa for the first time.

Growing evidence suggests Sambisa is now becoming an ISWAP heartland. The first piece of evidence that suggested this was a video released by ISWAP after Shekau's death. The video featured Shekau's loyalists in Sambisa acknowledging their new allegiance to ISWAP ([Telegram](https://t.me/ISWAP), July 25). This was despite the fact that Shekau's loyalists in Lake Chad announced in a separate video that they would fight ISWAP until IS designated them as ISWAP's true leaders ([Telegram](https://t.me/ISWAP), June 14). Since these videos' publication, ISWAP also released an Eid al-Adha video, which included prayers in Sambisa. This again demonstrated that ISWAP had expanded its footprint into Sambisa after Shekau's demise ([Telegram](https://t.me/ISWAP), July 23).

ISWAP photo streams, which it releases on average at least once per week, have also indicated that the group now operates in and around Sambisa, where Shekau's fighters exclusively operated before his death. Such photo streams were from:

- Pulka, Borno and Mora, Cameroon on July 12, showing captured motorcycles and weapons from the Nigerian and Cameroonian armies;
- Sambisa Forest on July 17, showing prayers and practice shooting of a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher; and
- Konduga, Borno, showing captured weapons from the Nigerian army. [1]

# New Europol Report Warns of Lone Actors and Analyzes Decrease in Terrorism in 2020

*Raffaello Pantucci*

In late June, Abdirahman Jibril A, a 24-year-old Somali migrant legally residing in Germany, walked barefoot into a Woolworth shop in the center of Würzburg, Bavaria asking for the kitchenware department. Once there, he took a large kitchen knife and started attacking people. When he was finally brought down by police and pedestrians, he had murdered three people and injured seven others.

The attack came only a week after the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) had launched its latest annual report, which highlighted that lone actor terrorism of this sort is the sharp end of the threat Europe faces. Most worrying for Europol chief, Catherine de Bolle, was the fact that “more jihadist terrorist attacks were completed than thwarted during 2020.” While absolute numbers of such attacks remain low at 15 attacks recorded over the year, the lone actor threat remains a critical gap in European counterterrorism.

## Comparing the Attackers in Würzburg and France

At time of writing, details around the Würzburg attacker were lacking. Authorities in Germany seemed divided between whether he was a terrorist or suffering from some sort of mental crisis at the time of the attack. While he was reported as having shouted “Allahu Akhbar” during the attack, authorities appear not to have concluded that he consumed much jihadist or other radical material prior to the attack. Discussions with family members have also not clarified the extent of his radicalization ([tagesspiegel](#), July 15). Some reports indicated a history of serious mental issues, including hearing voices and believing himself to be followed by the authorities ([Welt](#), July 2). The attack seems part of a pattern of incidents highlighted in the Europol report whereby “some lone attackers in 2020 again displayed a

With the releases of these videos and photos, ISWAP has affirmed its control of Sambisa and its environs. Strategically, this means ISWAP will be better able to carry out attacks in Cameroon and northern Adamawa State in Nigeria. Since Shekau’s death, raids on villages in Cameroon have notably decreased, which is likely a result of ISWAP ordering the former Shekau fighters to desist from such attacks. At the same time, ISWAP’s claim on July 14 of raiding a small Adamawa village to kill Christians and burn down a church indicates the group will not desist from those types of attacks ([Telegram](#), July 14).

Thus, although ISWAP is generally less brutal than Shekau was, the group’s levels of violence vary depending on the target. Christians and Nigerian soldiers and vigilantes who support the soldiers, for example, will not be spared by ISWAP. However, ordinary Muslim civilians and aid organizations are likely to face fewer security risks as long as they cooperate with ISWAP and not the Nigerian government or military. ISWAP’s release of abducted aid workers for an undisclosed ransom shortly after Abu Musab al-Barnawi reemerged as the leader of the organization in May exemplifies the group’s, and especially his, general leniency toward aid organizations that provide their resources to ISWAP ([Punch](#), June 14). These resources are then dispersed to populations under ISWAP’s control.

Sambisa Forest was an impenetrable hideout for Shekau ever since he relocated there from Maiduguri around 2013. The Nigerian army and air force were never able to capture or locate Shekau for airstrikes. Now that ISWAP controls the forest, it will be able to stash captured weapons and other supplies there as well as relocate key commanders so that, like Shekau, they can evade security forces. Control of the forest will not only provide entry points for ISWAP into Cameroon and Adamawa State—if not also towards Borno’s capital, Maiduguri—but also provide another hideout for the group.

[1] The photo streams can be seen at the following link: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/08/06/iswap-photostreams-2015-onwards/>

combination of extremist ideology and mental health issues. This made it difficult at times to distinguish between terrorist attacks and violence caused by mental health problems.”

In some cases, authorities have gone so far as to blame COVID-19 for attacks. The Europol report mentions, “At an individual level, there is a risk that the situation created by the pandemic could be an additional stress factor for radicalized individuals with mental health problems. As a result, lone actors might turn to violence sooner than they would have done under different circumstances.” French authorities in particular have suggested that two cases almost exactly a year apart reflect this trend, with mental strain pushing individuals previously not known to authorities to launch extremist attacks.

The first attack in Romans-sur-Isère came just as lockdowns were starting in France in April 2020 and was conducted by a Sudanese migrant who murdered two people and injured five others waiting in a shop. He was found to have extremist material, though ultimately he was placed into a secure mental health unit ([lemonde.com](https://www.lemonde.com), May 11). Almost exactly a year later, a Tunisian man who had lived in France for several years attacked staff at a police station in Rambouillet, leading to one death. This attacker was as unknown to authorities as the man in Romans-sur-Isère and was listening to extremist material at the time of his attack. He was shouting “Allahu Akhbar” during his attack before being killed by police. Authorities are still unclear about his radicalization process, although indicators, including his online activity, appear to suggest it may have in part been triggered by COVID-19 lockdowns ([lexpress.fr](https://www.lexpress.fr), April 25).

### **Diminishing Mainstream Jihadism and Right- and Left-Wing Terrorism?**

Notwithstanding the attacks in Würzburg and France, the Europol report is notable for highlighting the more mainstream jihadist activity that might have been expected has not materialized. The report mentions that few people sought to travel to foreign terrorist battlefields in the past year, and downplayed the criminal-terrorism nexus. It stated, “In the EU, there is little evi-

dence of systematic cooperation between criminals and terrorists...The nexus between crime and jihadist terrorism mainly manifested itself through financing sources as well as within prisons.”

The report highlighted that a third of the attacks identified during the reporting year involved individuals who had previous criminal charges for terrorism offences. However, it downplayed the link, stating that “recidivism among terrorism convicts in Europe is relatively low.” A lingering sense of threat from the western Balkans is felt throughout the report, however, as the successful Vienna attacker in November 2020 revealed a terrorist network linked to Islamic State (IS) and the Middle East ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorism-monitor.com), December 3, 2020).

Beyond violent Islamists, the report also discussed extreme right-wing terrorism as a threat, although reported numbers are relatively low. The report, for example, identified one successful extreme right-wing attack in Hanau, Germany in February 2020 ([dw.com](https://www.dw.com), February 20, 2020). However, it made the point that while that shooter was clearly racist, it was unclear the degree to which he was connected to any other networks. The report also highlighted three other disrupted attacks in Belgium, Germany, and France, the growing trajectory right wing extremist youths, and the importance of online communities for this contingent ([brusselstimes.com](https://www.brusselstimes.com), July 28, 2020; [euronews.com](https://www.euronews.com), January 28, 2020; [francebleu.fr](https://www.francebleu.fr), May 29, 2020).

Also notable is that Europol reported that there were more actual attacks on the far-left and anarchist side of the coin than from right-wing extremists, although the former did not result in any fatalities. According to the report, some 24 attacks were reported in Italy, with another one disrupted in France. An example of the incidents in Italy was a parcel bomb sent to Giuseppe Pasini, the leader of the Brescia industry association and Chair of local Steelmaker Feralpi Group in September 2020 ([Giornale di Brescia](https://www.giornaledibrescia.com), September 23, 2020).

More recently, Italian authorities noted an increase in anarchist violence directed at authorities and COVID-19 response centers, television transmitters, ATMs, and other public defacements ([Panorama](https://www.panorama.com), April 21). This re-

flects Europol reporting in 2019 where more than 20 incidents were recorded in Italy, as well as in Spain and Greece, and a broader trend in Europe whereby left-wing/anarchist groups tend to be more active in southern European countries ([Europol](#), June 2020). While for the most part they are involved in letter bomb and fire-bombing campaigns that cause damage to property rather than life, the Council of the European Union held a discussion on July 7, 2021 to examine whether the seeming escalation of the threat required a greater focus from a higher level ([Council of the European Union](#), July 1).

## Conclusion

The overall narrative from Europol reporting is that terrorist threats in Europe are down, though the agency hesitates to say this is a result of lowered activity and speculates that the downturn might be linked to COVID-19-related restrictions. It states, "This decrease, however, is not necessarily linked to decreased terrorist activities. The UK cautioned that the decline in terrorism-related arrests and convictions can also be attributed to the operational changes necessary under government restrictions imposed in March 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Published in the middle of 2021, it is notable that the trends highlighted in the report for 2020 appear to have carried forward. Thus far, few violent Islamist attacks have taken place in Europe, and those that have taken place are similar to the Würzburg attack, including an incident in Vetlanda, Sweden in March, another stabber in Dresden, Germany days after the Würzburg attack, and a former terrorist offender who attacked a police officer in France in May ([politico.eu](#), March 4; [tagesspiegel.de](#), July 6; [France24.com](#), May 28). All were identified in reporting as individuals ideologically inspired and troubled. Meanwhile, the case in May of Jurgen Conings in Belgium, who tried to kill a virologist before dying while in hiding in the wilderness, highlighted the danger on the far right ([politico.eu](#), June 20). Isolated individuals launching one-man terrorist campaigns appear to be the sharp end of the terrorist threat in Europe for the moment.

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# U.S. Troops to Combat al-Shabaab in Kenya Amid Mandera County's Security Crisis

*Sunguta West*

Kenya's battle against al-Shabaab will receive a boost from U.S. forces after President Joseph R. Biden's approved the deployment of special operation troops to the country. The soldiers are expected to join forces with Kenyan forces in countering al-Qaeda's affiliate in East Africa, al-Shabaab, which continues to threaten the country's peace and security ([Daily Nation](#), June 13). The presence of the troops is expected to end or hamper the frequent al-Shabaab raids on Kenya's northeastern and coastal regions, which have been rising.

## Al-Shabaab's Ascendance in Northeastern Kenya

Although al-Shabaab has been targeting security forces and civilians in Somalia, it has also carried out both low- and high-level attacks in Kenya since Kenyan troops entered Somalia in 2011 to fight the group. The small-scale attacks have continued inside Kenya, even though the country maintains 3,500 soldiers in Somalia as part of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops. The most notable al-Shabaab large-scale attacks have occurred in Nairobi, including the Westgate Shopping Mall in 2013 and the DusitD2 Complex in 2019. However, in 2015, an attack on northeastern Kenya's Garissa University College also left at least 148 people dead ([Garowe Online](#), June 13).

More recently, al-Shabaab has intensified attacks in northeastern Kenya. Bearing the brunt of the violence is Mandera County, where public transport buses, security forces, and private citizens have become targets. Local officials fear that the government's failure to improve security means handing the region to al-Shabaab ([Africnews](#), February 10). At least three people were killed on June 21 when the militants struck Jabibar area of Mandera in the latest attack. In a separate incident, the attackers also burned down a truck after kidnapping

a crew which was constructing a road in Mandera South. Less than two weeks earlier, on June 9, at least three people were also killed when a Kenya Wildlife Service Vehicle hit an improvised explosive device (IED) in the Qoqay area of Takaba, Mandera. ([The Star](#), June 21). Two days prior, on June 7, the militants further ambushed two buses traveling to Mandera, killing at least two people and injuring 10 other passengers ([Nation](#), June 7).

In the Boni Forest area in the northeastern coastal county of Lamu, al-Shabaab militants on May 18 further killed seven security officers in Baure area near the border with Somalia. The officers were part of a contingent patrolling area and died when an IED struck their transport vehicle ([Nation](#), May 18). The forest, which straddles the Kenya-Somalia border, has been a hideout for al-Shabaab members. From these hideouts deep in the forest, the militant group has launched attacks targeting security teams on patrol. As a result of the militants' increasing attacks on road transport, security installations, and civilians near Boni Forest, the government in 2015 launched Operation Linda Boni. The multi-security agency operation aimed at flushing out the militants from the forest, but it did not achieve lasting effects ([The Star](#), June 5).

## Role of U.S. Troops in Kenya

The U.S. troops are expected to support Kenyan security forces in the northeastern and coastal regions of Kenya, where al-Shabaab frequently attacks. The size of the force has not been made public, but it comes months after former U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew around 700 troops from Somalia, who were helping African Union soldiers fight al-Shabaab ([Garowe Online](#), June 13). In Kenya, the troops will conduct counterterrorism operations, as well as advise, assist, and accompany Kenyan troops on their operations. Current President Biden has announced that the United States has already conducted a small number of airstrikes against al-Shabaab in Somalia under his presidency and is prepared to carry out more, but whether any will target the militant group in Kenyan territory remains uncertain ([Kenyans.co.ke](#), June 13).

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The airstrikes referenced by Biden occurred in July, when the U.S. Air Force conducted two drone strikes against al-Shabaab. On July 20, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) carried out the first of the airstrikes against al-Shabaab in Galkayo, north of Qeycad. The drone strikes supported Somali Special Forces known as Danab, which have been fighting al-Shabaab north of Galkayo city ([Garowe Online](#), July 24). Three days later, on July 23, drone strikes hit members of the militant group in Qeycad, Galmudug Province, which is approximately 310 miles north of the capital, Mogadishu ([The Citizen](#), July 24).

Besides northeastern Kenya bases, al-Shabaab still controls large swathes of rural central and southern Somalia. The current Somali administration has been accused of failing to tackle the jihadists. However, a new administration is expected to soon come to power in Somalia. After months of deadlock, Somali politicians finally agreed to hold elections in October. The country is using a complex, indirect parliamentary and presidential election model. Special delegates, chosen by clan elders, will choose lower house members of parliament, while senators are nominated by state presidents and then endorsed by the local legislature ([Africanews](#), June 30).

President Mohammed Abdullahi Mohammed (a.k.a. Farmaajo) is accused of failing to tame al-Shabaab and may not be re-elected. Indeed, Somali elections have never resulted in the reelection of a sitting president or returned a former president since the country's civil war began in 1991 ([The East African](#), July 5). Either way, the leader who takes the helm will be expected to achieve greater results in defeating al-Shabaab.

## **Conclusion**

Boosting Kenyan efforts in the battle against al-Shabaab is crucial to the region's fight against terrorism. In the past, U.S. airstrikes targeting the militant group's leaders have somewhat disrupted its activities and reduced its threat. However, al-Shabaab continues to be resilient. As a result, U.S. forces' counterterrorism operations, as well as advising, assisting, and supporting Kenyan troops' operations has become necessary.

# Turkey Conducting Targeted Killings of PKK Leaders in Iraq: What's Next?

Ömer Faruk Cantenar

Northern Iraq has long been a safe haven for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is a Kurdish militant group recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and European Union. The group has been waging an armed struggle in Turkey since 1984. Turkish air and land operations have routinely targeted the PKK in the mountainous region of northern Iraq, near the border with Turkey. The most recent iteration of these operations, titled Operations Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt, began in April and is currently ongoing (*Pençe-Şimşek ve Pençe-Yıldırım*) ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 7). In mid-May, in addition to these ground operations, Turkey initiated a new campaign of targeted operations that have killed several prominent PKK figures in northern Iraq. This piece aims to analyze Turkey's recent focus on targeted killings, often referred to as "personality strikes," in the country's fight against the PKK and to elaborate on potential future targets. [1]

## Turkey's First 'Personality Strikes' in Northern Iraq

On May 17, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the "PKK's general officer responsible person for Syria codenamed Sofi Nurettin was killed in northern Iraq" ([Milliyet](#), May 18). Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu stated that Sofi Nurettin, based in Rojava, worked as the head of the PKK in Syria, as a member of PKK's Central Committee, and as a member of the People's Defense Forces' (HPG) Military Council. Soylu congratulated the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MİT) and wished the same fate "for the others [in the PKK] who could not get out of the cave" ([TRT Haber](#), May 18).

This first high-value target, Sofi Nurettin, whose real name was Halef el-Muhammed, was eliminated in a joint TAF-MİT operation. According to Turkish media, the MİT learned of his location in northern Iraq by monitoring his family in Syria ([Sabah](#), May 17). However, no information on how the operation was conducted is currently publicly available. Due to the emphasis on collaboration between TAF and MİT, it can be assumed that the oper-

ation was executed by a drone or fighter jet, or both together.

Another targeted killing operation in northern Iraq was conducted on May 24. This time, Turkish aerial assets targeted two cars in the vicinity of Mangesh, a sub-district of Dohuk Governorate in Iraq, and killed four PKK members, including Selahattin Dede, codenamed Zargos, who was a midlevel militant and was categorized in the grey list of Turkish security forces. This was again declared a joint operation of MİT and TAF. However, this time Turkish media showed video footage of the attack and pictures of the destroyed vehicles ([Sabah](#), May 24).

In two other successive incidents on June 5 and June 10, MİT killed Selman Bozkur (a.k.a. Doctor Hüseyin) and Hasan Adır (a.k.a. Salih), respectively, in the Makhmur region of northern Iraq, which is a town located 40 miles southwest of Erbil. Both figures were reportedly on the Interpol red list ([TRT Haber](#), June 6). Erdoğan announced the attack as "good news for the nation" ([Twitter.com/RTErdoğan](#), June 6).

## Erdoğan Signals Target Locations: Makhmur and Qandil

Selman Bozkur was illegally trafficking money in Iraq before becoming the head of the Makhmur camp ([TRT Haber](#), June 6). During a televised live interview just a few days before the operation, Erdoğan gave a hint of the impending operation against Bozkur ([YouTube](#), June 2, 2021). He mentioned two PKK safe havens in northern Iraq, including in the Qandil mountains and the Makhmur camp. Qandil mountain, located over 200 miles away from Turkey near the Iraqi-Iranian border, is the central headquarters for the PKK's top leadership cadres. The bulk of the militant group has been based there for decades.

Makhmur, a 12,000-person refugee camp, has existed in the region since 1998 ([Al-Monitor](#), June 7). [2] According to the Turkish government, the PKK forcefully moved Makhmur's Kurdish inhabitants from Turkey into northern Iraq in 1992 ([TRT Haber](#), June 6). The Iraqi government and the United Nations recognized Makhmur as an official refugee camp in 2011. In recent years, however, the PKK has increased its influence in the camp, and it has become a recruiting ground for the group.

Erdoğan has argued that, "We also prioritize Makhmur as much as Qandil. This place serves as an incubator for

Qandil...the kids, at the age of nine or ten, were trained and then sent to Qandil. If we do not go to them, they will continue to recruit [from Makhmur camp]. We tell the United Nations: If you can do it, come and clear this place, otherwise we will do it. We cannot tolerate it anymore" ([YouTube](#), June 2). Turkish security forces killed two key PKK figures of Makhmur camp successively, Bozkur and Adır, within ten days after Erdoğan's remarks.

Turkish aerial assets continue to fly and search for PKK members to conduct "signature strikes," which, until recently, have been the favored method to target the PKK both in Turkey and abroad. A signature strike involves targeting individuals who bear the characteristics of certain militants, as judged from the screen of a drone operator. By assessing the behavioral patterns of individuals on the drone screen, experts can differentiate militants from civilians. A Turkish air attack on May 30 that killed five PKK members in the Gare region of northern Iraq was such an example of this type of signature strike ([Sözcü](#), May 31).

However, the above-mentioned operations against specific militants, as well as Erdoğan's remarks, indicate a new method for Turkey's fight against the PKK, which can be defined as "personality strike targeted killing operations" or "killings from the list." Targeting key PKK militants is deeply connected to precision capabilities, possession of required aerial assets, including mostly armed drones, and the intelligence capacity of the state. Turkey has enjoyed these technological capabilities for several years and has also improved its signal and human intelligence capacity as well as its intelligence agency's operational capability to conduct personality strike targeted killings in northern Iraq.

In a live interview, Erdoğan also discussed Qandil and Makhmur: "There are two sides of Qandil, one is on Iran's side and the other is on Iraq's side...We told our brothers in Iraq that if you are going to do it then do it, otherwise we will do it and we will come and strike. There is no other solution to this. In countering terrorism, Turkey is not awaiting [on] other countries anymore. Turkey searches, finds, and eliminates and this is a new reality...Turkey is determined to dry this Qandil swamp until it will not spread any terror microbe ever again. To achieve this, we will do whatever is needed under the law by respecting the sovereignty of our neighbors" ([YouTube](#), June 2).

Therefore, it could have been expected that the upcoming targeted attacks, in addition to Makhmur, would be in Qandil. However, Qandil's long distance from the Turkish border made a ground attack option almost impossible. Moreover, such an operation would be economically costly. Turkish jets had bombed Qandil several times before, but they were not effective due to a lack of real-time information on the area's cave infrastructure. If fighter jets were again used for individual targeted killings, they would need drone assistance to pinpoint targets for their laser or GPS-guided ammunition to achieve the intended outcomes of such an operation.

### **Recent Drone Upgrades and Prospects for Future High-Value Targets**

The range of current operational TB2 Bayraktar drones is limited by "the line of sight," referring to the antenna communication range between a drone and its ground terminal that extends approximately 185 miles. This is the main limitation of this weapon system. However, by the end of 2020, the technical manager of the Baykar Defense Company, which is the main producer of TB2s, Selçuk Bayraktar, shared the test flight of a new version of TB2, which was integrated with a satellite communication (SATCOM) system ([SavunmaSanayiST.com](#), November 10, 2020). This capacity would allow TB2s to be used beyond the line of sight. In an online event on the May 28, Haluk Bayraktar, Selçuk's elder brother and the chief executive of the Baykar Defense company, announced for the first time that the new SATCOM integration TB2s could operate beyond the line of sight with a range of approximately 1,100 miles ([Twitter.com/haluk](#), May 28).

According to Turkish defense analyst Hakan Kılıç, the SATCOM capability will allow the TB2 to fly over regions covered by the Turkish satellite TURKSAT 4B. Therefore, TB2, with its 24 hours of flight time, could fly to places that require ten hours or more and still be able to return to Turkey. It is also known that the TAF has been using satellite-operated drones named ANKA for several years now. Hakan Kılıç also stated that the satellite-operated ANKA-S, the armed version of the drone, has already proven itself in Syria ([TRT Haber](#), November 11, 2020).

On February 24, Temel Kotil, general manager of TUSAŞ, which is the company that produces the ANKA, announced that the company had already delivered 27 drones to the TAF ([Defenceturk.net](#), February 24) Therefore, the increased inventory number of ANKA drones

and the recent improvements in TB2s could allow the TAF to conduct signature strikes in the vicinity of Qandil mountain. However, personality strikes require both signals intelligence and human intelligence capability, which would not be easy to acquire given the long-distance to Qandil from Turkey and the limited capacity of the Turkish intelligence assets in this region.

### **Intelligence Needed for Personality Strikes in Qandil: Turkey's own Assets or 'Allied' Support?**

The Turkish intelligence community will face a real test in the coming years. If it can develop the capacity to designate the exact location of PKK leaders in Qandil without any help from its allies, such as the United States or other NATO countries, Turkey can enter a new phase in its efforts to contain that organization. Any success also could provide immense political advantage to the Erdoğan government, which has been losing popularity due to worsening economic conditions, recently uncovered government-mafia connections, and alleged corruption scandals.

However, if the MIT or other intelligence bodies cannot gather adequate, reliable intelligence for personality strikes, the government may turn to allies, especially the United States, for whom it would not be particularly difficult to designate the real-time location of high-caliber PKK leaders. Yet, at this time, under the current state of strained relations between the two countries, the U.S. might not volunteer support to Turkey. Such cooperation had taken place in 1999 when Turkish intelligence captured PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Kenya with U.S. assistance. However, if US policymakers offer intelligence support to Turkey to target PKK leaders, it could reduce the negative perception of the U.S. among the Turkish population. Anti-Americanism has grown in Turkey in recent years due to accusations that Washington supported the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the harboring of the Gülen movement leader—who has been accused of leading the coup attempt—and ongoing cooperation with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the PKK's affiliate in Syria. Regardless, the PKK leadership's days in Qandil are numbered. [3]

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### **Notes**

[1] Jack McDonald, *Enemies Known and Unknown: Targeted Killings in America's Transnational War* Oxford University Press, 2017, p.11

[2] Makhmur is both a UN-recognized camp and a PKK hideout. It is the residence of villagers who fled Turkey. Turkey says the PKK forcefully moved them to gain international attention for its cause, while the PKK states that the inhabitants are local Kurdish villagers escaping from the pressure of the Turkish security forces. Others suggest it is not easy for the villagers to deal with both the Turkish security forces and PKK at the same time. Thus, villagers preferred to leave their homes and hoped they would be taken care of by the UN. One cannot say all of the inhabitants are PKK members, but PKK has been a powerful force at the camp.

[3] Turkey and PKK peace negotiations have taken place in the past. The most recent such negotiation, which took place between 2013 and 2015, failed.