

Terrorism Monitor

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Abu Sayyaf's Local and Global Prospects Look Increasingly Grim in the Philippines

Jacob Zenn

In one of the most recent counter-insurgency successes against Abu Sayyaf, the Philippines army announced that 100 former fighters have renounced the group, pledged loyalty to the government, and returned to their homes in Sulu, southern Mindanao. Their rehabilitation program involves not only financial assistance, especially for food supplies, but also entrance into assisted learning programs and summer employment for youths (philstar.com, July 30).

This "carrot" approach toward Abu Sayyaf, however, has not detracted from the government's "stick" approach with regards to the fighters who have not surrendered. One month before the 100 Abu Sayyaf members' surrendered, the government designated five Islamic State (IS)-loyal Abu Sayyaf members as terrorists. Nevertheless, the military noted that even those members were largely unable to conduct any of their typical kidnapping-for-ransom schemes due to operational constraints, including a lack of funding (benarnews.org, June 16). In that respect, the cycle of Abu Sayyaf violence is set to diminish once funding dries up because this, in turn, further reduces the group's operations and funding.

Moreover, even Abu Sayyaf's attempted bombings have fallen short in recent weeks. The group, for example, bombed a fast food restaurant and a bus in Isabel City in May, but neither caused any fatalities, while leading to only minor property damage and injuries to civilians (rappler.com, June 1). Compared to much more lethal Abu Sayyaf bombings, such as the incident at a Jolo church in 2019 that killed 20 people, these bombings were much less deadly. Part of the reduction in Abu Sayyaf's bombing capabilities can be attributed the arrests of the group's members, including those responsible for the Jolo church bombings (aljazeera.com, January 6, 2021).

Another reason for Abu Sayyaf's decreasing capabilities is the army's continued pressure on the group's leaders. In March, for example, Philippines' troops killed Radzmil Jannatul, who had been wanted by the U.S since 2011 for abducting U.S citizens in Zamboanga that same year (manilatimes.net, March 28). Abu Sayyaf's loss of Jannatul, who had replaced Furuji Indama as the group's leader in Basilan two years after the army killed Indama, further incapacitated Abu Sayyaf's kidnapping-for-ransom operations, which are crucial for replenishing its funding.

Excluding the localized setbacks for Abu Sayyaf, the global-level picture is no more promising for the group. Various factions of Abu Sayyaf pledged loyalty to IS after Abubakar al-Baghdadi declared the caliphate in 2014. Three years later, in 2017, Abu Sayyaf leaders participated in the siege of Marawi, Mindanao, which IS widely publicized in its propaganda (rappler.com, June 6, 2017). Yet, five years on, IS no longer holds its "territorial caliphate" in the Middle East and instead focuses more on its African "provinces,"

which are as geographically far from the Philippines as possible (Terrorism Monitor, May 20). As a result, funding streams to IS's short-lived "Southeast Asia Province" are likely negligible at present. Moreover, Marawi, which was intended to be IS's crown achievement in Southeast Asia, is now under government control and is increasingly being rebuilt by the Philippines' authorities. Accordingly, it has been generally stable since 2018 (scmp.com, May 26, 2021). Abu Sayyaf is neither on the upswing nor necessarily defeated. However, any jihadist hopes for a revival will likely remain unfulfilled at least in the immediate future.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

ISWAP Attacks Key Army Checkpoint Outside Nigerian Capital

Jacob Zenn

On July 31, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) claimed an attack at the Zuba army checkpoint in Abuja ([Twitter/legiollgallica](https://twitter.com/legiollgallica), July 30). The attack, which was originally attributed to "bandits" by the media and reportedly led to the deaths of two soldiers, occurred in the symbolic location of Abuja for three reasons (vanguardngr.com, July 29). First, Abuja, as the Nigerian capital, is far removed from the main battleground between ISWAP and the army in northeastern Borno State. Thus, ISWAP struck Nigeria "where it hurts" because it is the political heartland of the state and located in an area where attacks have been increasingly rare since 2011.

Second, the checkpoint was along the road leading to Suleja, Niger State. This town is

where, on Christmas Day in 2011, ISWAP's predecessors in "Boko Haram" conducted a massive church bombing that killed 43 people and injured well over 100 others. That attack was followed up by another one on a church in Suleja three months later that killed five (aljazeera.com, February 19, 2012). More than a decade later, the Christmas attack is still a source of psychological trauma for Christians in the area and Nigerians of all stripes more generally (punchng.com, December 29, 2021). The 2011 attack also became symbolic of Boko Haram's transformation from an emerging terrorist cell into a militant force that could no longer be ignored. The fact that ISWAP is now operating again near Suleja after roughly a decade of dormancy in the region will revive lost history for Nigerians, who again must fear attacks in central Nigeria.

Third, the military checkpoint was near Zuma Rock, as the ISWAP claim indicated. The Abuja landmark is a common site for tourists and is, to some extent, a Nigerian national symbol. The attack will dissuade visitors from exploring that site. Moreover, the site is along the Kaduna-Abuja expressway, which is adjacent to the train route that itself was attacked by bandits in a massive hostage-taking of hundreds of passengers in March (tribuneonlineng.com, July 29). That train attack alongside this checkpoint attack and other ISWAP attacks south of Abuja in Kogi State since April will only further endanger, if not isolate Abuja, and enable ISWAP to lay siege to the capital (Terrorism Monitor, July 15).

However, considering that ISWAP has not been able to seize even Borno State's capital, Maiduguri, it is unlikely the group will be able to effect anything more than making Abuja's inhabitants, including political leaders, "feel" under siege through

attacks in and around the city on a range of targets ([Twitter/@Peccaviconsults](https://twitter.com/Peccaviconsults), July 28). More broadly, however, reports of escapees from the ISWAP-claimed Kuje Prison break in July integrating with northwestern Nigerian bandits, including those involved in the Kaduna-Abuja train kidnapping, raises the likelihood ISWAP is consolidating its presence not only in central Nigeria, including the Kogi-Abuja-Kaduna axis, but also deeper into northwestern Nigeria (premiumtimes.ng, July 24). The rival Shekau faction, too, had demonstrated at least communication ties to northwestern Nigerian bandits before Shekau's death in 2021 when Shekau himself claimed a kidnapping of more than 300 schoolboys in a split-screen video with the boys, although the bandits soon after exchanged the boys for an undisclosed compensation and likely without Shekau's approval (dailynigerian.com, December 15, 2020).

ISWAP, which previously accepted al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru faction defectors into its ranks, will encounter Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria and either fight them or attempt to recruit them (al-Haqaiq, June 2018). One ex-factor is the death of al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri and whether a credible leader replaces him. While Ansaru has indicated Sayf al-Adl would be a suitable replacement for al-Zawahiri in its own media, it remains to be seen whether al-Adl will become al-Qaeda's new leader and whether al-Adl or another new al-Qaeda leader can continue to inspire Ansaru members (Terrorism Monitor, May 20). This would dissuade any ISWAP attempts to recruit more defectors from Ansaru.

Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Is Iraq on the Brink of Shia Civil War? Moqtada al-Sadr's Supporters Storming of Baghdad's Green Zone

Rami Jameel

Protesters loyal to Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr invaded the heavily fortified area in central Baghdad, known as the Green Zone, twice in one week in late July. They occupied the parliament building for days and blocked al-Sadr's Iranian-backed rivals' formation of a new government without al-Sadr's approval (annahar.com, July 30). Aware of al-Sadr's power and in accordance with orders from Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who remains an ally of al-Sadr, the Iraqi security forces avoided confrontation with the protesters and allowed them to control the parliament building (alaraby.co.uk, July 30).

Al-Sadr and his rivals stand ready for escalation, despite calls for calm by al-Kadhimi and other figures. Al-Sadr's rivals showed that they can also mobilize thousands of their supporters, who took to the streets on August 1. Security forces, however, stopped them from entering the Green Zone and approaching their Sadrist rivals. Sadrist gunmen also appeared in videos warning their rivals against carrying out any move against them (alquds.co.uk, August 1). These events revealed the possibility of direct conflict between the two factions and even the possibility of an intra-Shia civil war.

Background on Electoral Frustrations

Al-Sadr won more seats than any other party in the parliamentary elections of October 2021 but still fell short of a simple majority (alarabiya.net, October 11). Even al-Sadr's coalition with mainly Kurdish and Sunni parties did not secure the two-thirds majority that is necessary to start the process of electing a president and subsequently a prime minister. This was because his Iranian-backed Shia rivals managed to obstruct the process. They

wanted a government that included all parties like Iraqi governments have since the U.S-led invasion of 2003. Al-Sadr, in contrast, wanted a majority government this time and even offered to go to the opposition to achieve this objective (aawsat.com, May 22).

When al-Sadr gave up on this political objective, he ordered his lawmakers to resign—and they did (aa.com.tr, December 6). However, when al-Sadr's rivals moved relatively quickly and nominated a new prime minister, that was the tipping point for igniting the Sadrists' late July protests and the occupation of the parliament building. Al-Sadr might have withdrawn from parliament, but quite evidently not from politics.

An Iraqi Shia Civil War?

There are dozens of Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq, but the exact numbers of each Shia militia are not available and, in any case, they tend to inflate their numbers. Al-Sadr, on the other hand, has only one militia compared to his rivals' dozens. In any potential showdown al-Sadr, however, would most likely dominate all of them. Any confrontation between the two sides would not be typical open fighting. Rather, it would involve a series of confrontations in civilian areas where the Sadrists have the opportunity to combine their militia operations with the supportive efforts of the civilian population.

Unlike the other militias, the Sadrists are also a grassroots movement that has a presence in most of the cities, towns, and neighborhoods of Shia dominated Baghdad and southern Iraq. Additionally, the tribes, which are powerful in Iraqi local communities, tend to respect al-Sadr as a revered politico-religious figure, but not necessarily other Shia political and militia leaders. As for al-Sadr's followers, they have always shown their willingness to sacrifice for him. While all other militia leaders try to establish themselves as symbolic, charismatic figures and seem to

have never achieved that, al-Sadr in the eyes of his supporters is a semi-divine figure.

Nevertheless, the key factor in any confrontation between al-Sadr and his rivals would be Iran, which is the preeminent Shia powerhouse in the Middle East. The current commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Esmail Qa'ani, has struggled to live up to his predecessor Qassim Soleimani, who was killed outside Baghdad airport in a U.S. raid on January 3, 2020 (newkhalij.news, January 3, 2020). Qa'ani has not brought all Shia factions into consensus and expanded that into a deal with the Kurds and Sunnis, which was a craft that Soleimani mastered for years. Qa'ani also met with al-Sadr more than once since the October elections, but no agreement was reached on forming a government (aljazeera.net, February 9). Iran will likely continue to call for Iraqi Shia unity. If it cannot stop the escalation from turning into a civil war, Iran is likely to support al-Sadr's rivals, but probably not to an extent that would significantly hurt al-Sadr and turn him from a nuisance into a staunch enemy.

Conclusion

After his followers took full control of the parliament building and as the chances of forming a new government have almost vanished, al-Sadr has called for fresh elections. (baghdadtoday.com, August 4). His intentions remain unclear in the wake of the preceding events, but he says he envisions a "peaceful democratic revolutionary period" (khabaar.press, August 3). What this means exactly is anybody's guess but it likely indicates more struggle with his opponents. Although he pledged not to commence violence against his rivals, he equally vowed that he would be ready to die for what he believed in (annahar.com, August 3).

Both Iran and the U.S, which are the two countries that have exerted the most influence in Iraq since 2003, seem to have had little involvement in the recent events.

However, what happens between the two countries' negotiations to revive the nuclear deal will be reflected in Iraq. The U.S still has troops in Iraq, albeit in an advisory role. The threat of Islamic State and other Sunni jihadists has not disappeared, and a stable Iraq is important for President Joe Biden's strategy in the Middle East, which hopes to curb the power of Iranian-backed Shia militias.

Iran seeks to consolidate its influence in Iraqi politics and, therefore, its position on the ongoing intra-Shia tension is critical. The U.S seems to hope that the role of its old enemy, al-Sadr, as an Iraqi nationalist will counter Iran's influence. Al-Sadr has never claimed to be an enemy of Iran, and many within the ranks of his movement blame Iran for Iraq's problems while his rivals are undoubtedly Iran's allies. The outcome of Shia strife in Iraq will ultimately affect both U.S. and Iranian positions not only in Iraq, but also across the Middle East.

Rami Jameel is a researcher specializing in militant groups in the Middle East and North Africa. He focuses on the political and military conflicts in the region and its impact on global security.

Claw-Lock: An Assessment of Turkish Counter-PKK Operations in Northern Iraq in 2022

Rich Outzen

Turkish military operations against Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan*, or PKK) militants inside northern Iraq have evolved since the 1990s from large, ponderous, marginally effective incursions into a combination of semi-permanent screening operations with more precise strikes and raids. The shift, facilitated in large measure by Turkish drones and growing political coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), has enabled Ankara to move most

counter-PKK operations off of Turkish soil and nearer to PKK bases inside Iraq. Coupled with similar operations in Syria, this forward strategy has enabled Turkish military and security forces to roughly triple their operational lethality against the PKK, which places pressure on the Turkish- and U.S.-designated terrorist organization's leadership cadres and has significantly reduced the number of PKK attacks within Türkiye ([Al-Monitor](#), July 7, 2021).

The Claw Series of Operations

Earlier Turkish operations in Iraq, including Steel (1995), Hammer and Dawn (1997), Sun (2008) and smaller, unnamed operations typically involved large but brief ground incursions and wide-ranging airstrikes based on rudimentary target intelligence. These operations temporarily disrupted PKK attacks into Türkiye, but neither secured Turkish territory nor significantly degraded PKK freedom of movement in Iraq ([Washington Post](#), July 7, 1995). In the aftermath of the U.S. Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) and counter-Islamic State (IS) campaign in Iraq (2014-onward) however, PKK control and activity along the Iraq-Türkiye border increased, leading Ankara to reassess its operational approach ([Middle East Policy](#), November 8, 2021).

The new approach combined fixed and temporary ground locations with continuous surveillance and strikes from Turkish drones, with an estimated 5,000-10,000 Turkish troops on the ground at nearly three dozen sites ([SWP](#), May 30). This approach impeded PKK attacks into Türkiye itself, but also hindered movement between PKK headquarters in Qandil, Iraq and PKK affiliates' bases in northeast Syria. At the same time, it enabled Turkish forces to surveil strike PKK facilities, small units, and leaders more effectively.

A series of operations designated "Claw" was launched according to the new operational concept, beginning with Claw 1 in May 2019 directed at caves, depots, and routes in the Hakurk region of northeast

Iraq ([Sabah](#), June 13, 2019). Other operations in the series include the following ([Ministry of Defense](#), April 2020 and [Oryx](#), April 30, 2021):

- Summer 2019: Claw 2 and Claw 3, targeting deeper into Iraq, including Sinat-Haftanin.
- Summer 2020: Claw Eagle (airstrikes) and Claw Tiger (ground forces).
- February 2021: Claw Eagle 2, airstrikes and failed hostage rescue raid in Gara range.
- Summer 2021: Claw Lightning (Metina area) and Claw Thunderbolt (Avashin-Basyan area) clearing operations against PKK cave complexes used for launching attacks, logistics, transportation, and training.

The Claw series has succeeded in limiting PKK freedom of maneuver, creating a buffer zone that protects Turkish territory from PKK infiltration and attacks, and pressuring Erbil and Baghdad to crack down on PKK use of Iraqi territory to launch attacks against Turkish forces and territory. ([Kurdpress](#), January 5, 2021). Further, Claw has established a network of bases and operations that can reach deeply into areas previously considered safe havens for PKK ([Rudaw](#), July 6, 2020). Turkish official figures from June describe the Claw series as comprising hundreds of tactical engagements which have "neutralized" 1,130 PKK fighters, improved Turkish border security, and severely damaged PKK logistical capabilities ([Kahraman](#), June 7).

Operation Claw-Lock

The 2022 Claw operation - Claw Lock (*Pençe Kilit*) - began on April 18. The main assault involved air and artillery strikes, augmented by commando and Special Forces landings in the PKK's operational heartland in Iraq, including the cave complexes and entrenchments of Metina, Zap, and Avashin-Basyan ([Soylu](#), April 18). By the end of July, the Turkish Ministry of Defense estimated PKK losses at 289 slain

fighters and 330 destroyed caves and bunkers ([Hurriyet](#), July 23).

Alongside the military operation, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) has led to remote tracking and airstrikes against High Value Targets (HVTs), who are normally senior field and political leaders. By the end of July, MIT had carried out at least 22 such strikes, removing 25 HVTs operating in Syria and Iraq ([Sozcu](#), July 26). MIT focuses these operations on fighters with “blood on their hands” from terror attacks on Turkish soil ([Sozcu](#), July 21). Forces from the Ministry of Interior, especially *Jandarma* units, continue to conduct operations within Türkiye that complement the cross-border operations. One example is the ongoing “Eren Abluka 28” operation currently ongoing near Diyarbakir, which is aimed at flushing out residual PKK elements on Turkish soil ([Anadolu](#), July 31).

The PKK portrays the Claw operations as a campaign of genocide against the “Medya Defense Zones,” which is their term for areas of northern Iraq beyond central or regional government control. The PKK sees these zones as critical to bringing down the government in Ankara, which confirms the linkage between PKK operations in the two countries ([Calkurd](#), August 1). However, the majority of Turks remain opposed to the PKK, and 54,000 Kurds have been fighting to defend the Turkish state under the Village Guards program, although Kurdish electoral support remains roughly divided between pro-government (AKP) and PKK-aligned (HDP) parties ([Al-Monitor](#), January 24, 2018; [VOA](#), November 13, 2019; [K24](#), April 11, 2019). The PKK, therefore, sustains its armed struggle in part through forced conscription of child soldiers, and despite strict discipline and ideological training, it continues to see a steady defection rate of roughly ten fighters per month ([A News](#), June 13 and [Sozcu](#), August 1).

Conclusion

Ankara’s forward strategy as operationalized in the Claw campaign has put the PKK under significant pressure in the field, but at a price. The human cost includes approximately ten fatalities among Turkish state security forces during typical operations, and a higher number of injuries ([ICG](#), July 18). The financial cost of the Claw operations has helped drive a rise in overall defense and security expenditures, though these have remained relatively steady as a portion of Turkish GDP ([Insight](#), September 23, 2020).

There have, however, been few domestic political costs, as the Turkish public generally accepts the operations as prudent and necessary. Yet regional tensions with Iran, and periodically with Baghdad and Erbil, have increased ([K24](#), April 21 and [National Interest](#), May 11). Alleged collateral damage and civilian deaths during Claw operations have prompted criticism from human rights advocates, though Ankara asserts its operations are conducted scrupulously and with increasing precision ([CPT](#), July 4 and [Middle East Eye](#), July 22). A July 2022 civilian casualty event near Zakho, Iraq prompted Iraq’s foreign minister to demand in an emergency UN Security Council meeting the withdrawal of all Turkish forces from Iraq. However, the paucity of presented evidence coupled with a Turkish offer of a joint investigation and a new political crisis in Baghdad have made further action unlikely ([Al Arabiya](#), July 27 and [Reuters](#), August 1). The regional fallout has been more rhetorical than real, as leaders in Baghdad and Erbil feel compelled to reflect public anger when it spikes but seem intent on maintaining proper working relations with Ankara ([Deutsche Welle](#), July 27).

In aggregate, none of the costs outweigh the benefits of more safety and security within Turkish national borders and losses and disorder among PKK fighting elements and fear and disruption among PKK leadership levels. Turkish military, intelligence, and interior security forces

have taken the PKK campaign largely off of Turkish soil and into PKK transit and base areas through a more comprehensive strategy integrating new technologies, operating concepts, and cooperative arrangements ([TAP](#), January 11). Claw Lock represents neither the final answer in the counter-PKK approach nor the death-knell of the PKK, as both the opponent and the strategy will continue to evolve. It does represent an effective application of counter-terror and counter-insurgent methods that has achieved significant, if not yet decisive, effects.

Colonel (retired) Rich Outzen is a Jamestown Senior Fellow, geopolitical analyst and consultant currently serving private sector clients as Dragoman LLC.

Türkiye's Objectives in Syria and the Changing Regional Balance of Power

Selim Özertem

On May 24, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that Türkiye would start a new cross-border operation in Syria once preparations were complete. He defined the main objective of the new operation as establishing a 30 kilometer-deep "safe zone" on the southern borders of Türkiye. A week later, the Turkish president repeated his statements, and defined the new operational zone as Tel Rifat and Manbij, Syria ([aa.com.tr](#), June 1). An operation in this area aims to expand the safe zone already controlled by Türkiye in northern Syria, while pushing the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, or PKK) and its offshoots further from Turkish borders.

Considering other geopolitical and non-state actors' stakes in the region, such a move will have political consequences.

However, the Turkish administration seems determined to undertake this operation by mitigating the existing risks and pursuing a close dialogue with its counterparts, particularly Moscow. Ankara also plans to reap some political gains at home after the operation.

Shifting to a Preemptive Strategy

Taking advantage of the peace process (çözüm süreci) introduced by the AK Party government in 2013, the PKK had attempted to claim control and establish rebel-controlled zones in Türkiye's southern provinces. To prevent access of the Turkish security forces, PKK dug trenches and tunnels, built barricades, and started establishing checkpoints on roads. Such activities reached their climax in 2015, and Türkiye undertook a large counter-PKK operation, which was concentrated in Diyarbakır, Hakkari, Mardin and Şırnak.

A security-oriented agenda had aided the AK Party's popularity in the November 2015 elections, which resulted in a landslide victory with the party receiving more than 49% of the votes. Following the operations domestically, attacks changed form and Turkish cities were targeted by both Islamic State (IS) and PKK attacks, including in Ankara, İstanbul, Gaziantep, and Kilis ([Sözcü](#), February 18, 2016; [Yeni Safak](#), March 14, 2016; [Hürriyet](#), March 20, 2016; [Cumhuriyet](#), June 30, 2016; [Hürriyet](#), August 21, 2016; [BBC Türkçe](#), May 9, 2016).

Consequently, Ankara adopted a preemptive strategy in 2016 and carried out numerous operations in Iraq and Syria ([Haberturk](#), October 19, 2016). The short-term objective of this strategy was to eliminate asymmetric threats emanating

from non-state actors beyond Türkiye's borders and secure border-cities. In the long term, Turkish officials perceived the expansion of PKK and its affiliated groups, Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People's Defense Units (YPG) as the primary threat to national security and the operations, therefore, also aimed to prevent a "terror corridor" next to the country's southern borders.

Ankara's shift in strategy in 2016 saw attacks dramatically decrease in Türkiye, but this was not the same for operational zones in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, Syrian civilians and Turkish troops have continued to be targeted in Azaz, al-Bab, and Jarablus, Syria and in Iraq in the form of bomb attacks or rocket strikes since the beginning of the operations ([VOA Türkçe](#), January 13; [Sabah](#), April 22; [Habertürk](#), April 18; [Cumhuriyet](#), April 25). To eliminate these risks and secure the Turkish borders, the Turkish Armed Forces finally launched the Claw-Lock (Pençe-Kilit) Operation in northern Iraq in April 2022, and now is planning the new cross-border operation in Syria ([aa.com.tr](#), June 1). President Erdoğan asserted that although the targets will be Tel Rifat and Manbij, the operation will continue in other regions until a 30 kilometer-deep "safe zone" is established.

The other factor that shapes Ankara's strategy is linked to the socio-economic structure of Tel Rifat and Manbij, which were predominantly Arab-populated areas before the Syrian civil war and saw thousands of Syrians from these areas flee to Türkiye in the past decade ([Crisis Group](#), May 4, 2017; [alaraby.co.uk](#), July 15, 2019). Located to the west of the Euphrates, Manbij has access to water resources, which makes it critical for Türkiye's plans to resettle half a million

more Syrians from Türkiye into the new "safe zone." Although in its current operational zones, such as in Jarablus and Afrin, Türkiye continues to construct infrastructure and superstructures and provide public services, resettling more people in those zones requires planning water and food supply for the residing population. This is all more readily accessible in Manbij.

Political Motives for Repatriating Syrians

In the last six years, more than half a million Syrian migrants in Türkiye have returned to their homes ([Habertürk](#), March 3). The "safe zone" in the northwestern Syria's Jarablus-Afrin axis has become a gathering point for them. Nonetheless, this momentum has slowed due to unstable security dynamics caused by non-state actors and attacks and scarce resources in the area. Turkish officials argue that the new operation may pave the way for half a million more Syrians to resettle in the expanded-secured safe zone ([Hürriyet](#), May 4).

The Syrian migration issue has also become a significant element of domestic politics since the municipal elections in 2019 and will likely dominate the agenda in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023. Surveys show that a newly established political party, Zafer (Victory) Party, has increased its popularity up to two percent from scratch by campaigning solely on the Syrian migration issue ([Cumhuriyet](#), August 4). Facing harsh criticisms from the opposition, it seems the government envisages using its resettlement plan as a success story in the upcoming campaign period.

Considering AK Party's nationalist agenda, a new operation will serve the party's interest to divert public attention toward 'the survival agenda' against terrorist elements. This is also a pragmatic policy choice because economic indicators in Türkiye have tumbled in the post-pandemic period. The economy will potentially be the Achilles' heel of the AK Party for the first time in its two-decade rule and it needs to offset this by showing it is resettling Syrians in their home country and it is scoring military victories on PKK offshoots.

Additionally, the Turkish government seeks to take advantage of the changing international power balance. The Kremlin is striving to break the Ukrainian resistance in the Donbas while struggling with the repercussions of sanctions. Naturally, Syria has become a secondary issue on the Kremlin's agenda. Türkiye, therefore, is trying to use this as leverage in its dialogue with Russia on Syria. While Russian troops are reassessing their position in Syria, it seems that Iran is trying to fill the power vacuum ([JPost](#), May 21). Ankara believes that Russia's reaction will be limited under these circumstances if a new cross-border operation is launched. Although the Kremlin continues to send mixed signals, it seems that the Russians want the Syrian government's forces to advance to the north rather than the Turkish military to move southwards in western Syria.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin has left some margin for negotiation. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in his visit to Ankara that "We understand and take into consideration our Turkish friends' sensitivities regarding the security threats, emanating from the separatist groups that are supported by the U.S on their borders ([Cumhuriyet](#), June 10)." Lavrov's statement can be interpreted as a "yellow

light" of approval for the new Turkish operation. But Moscow also aims to redirect Türkiye's energy to the areas where the U.S troops are deployed, as opposed to where Russians are deployed.

Erdoğan's Visits to Tehran and Sochi

On June 19, Erdoğan visited Tehran to join a trilateral summit with his counterparts, Vladimir Putin and Ebrahim Raisi. He also had a bilateral meeting with the Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. During the visit, Erdoğan reemphasized Türkiye's concerns about a "terror corridor" next to its southern borders. The officially published follow-up on Khamenei's website showed, however, that Iran was dissatisfied with Türkiye's plans for a new cross-border operation because it stated that Khamenei had told Erdoğan that "Syria's territorial integrity is crucial. A military attack on Syria would be harmful to Syria, harmful to Türkiye, and harmful to the region, and it would be to the benefit of the terrorists ([khameini.ir](#), July 19)."

In light of Iran's position, Ankara is trying to urge Moscow to join its side to balance against Tehran. In fact, Erdoğan's meeting with Putin in Sochi just three weeks after the Tehran summit underpinned this objective. One of the topics high on the Turkish president's agenda was the Syria issue. Following the meeting, the parties adopted a joint statement and "reaffirmed their determination to act in coordination and solidarity in the fight against all terrorist organizations ([kremlin.ru](#), August 5)." A Turkish political analyst, Serhat Erkmen, claims that Türkiye can overcome Iran's resistance by including the Syrian government's forces in the equation in coordination with Russia and starting an operation in Tel Rifat ([Habertürk](#), August 8). In other words, a bargain with Moscow

can allow Bashar al-Assad's forces to advance to the north, while Türkiye expands its control in Tel Rifat and then Manbij.

The tension between the West and Türkiye, meanwhile, has somewhat calmed in parallel with the Russian aggression in Ukraine. That war helped the West to recall Türkiye's crucial role on Russia's southern flank. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Ankara has played its cards pragmatically. It positioned itself at a safe distance from Moscow, while militarily assisting Kiev. Additionally, Ankara used Sweden and Finland's bids for NATO membership as leverage to force these countries to revise their approaches toward the PKK as a terrorist organization ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 16). As a result, the West may be more accommodating of a Turkish operation in Tel Rifat or Manbij than if the war in Ukraine had not occurred.

Conclusion

In the past, international reactions shaped, but did not prevent, Türkiye's cross-border operations in Syria. Currently, Türkiye endeavors to coordinate its steps with regional actors as well as with the U.S and Russia. It is difficult to determine whether Türkiye has a clear "green light" from any of these actors. However, the operational plans are off the shelf, and this time it is not only Turkish security concerns, but also international power balances and domestic political dynamics that are shaping the Turkish government's position.

Dr. Hasan Selim Özertem is an Ankara-based political analyst. His research interests include security, political economy, energy, elite politics, Eurasia, Russia and Türkiye.