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Country Report on Terrorism 2021 - Chapter 1 - Türkiye

Associated documents

Overview: Türkiye experienced a significant decrease in terrorist incidents within its borders in 2021, compared with prior years. However, it has expanded its counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria and provided counterterrorism support to Somalia. Media reported that Turkish airstrikes against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq resulted in civilian casualties, including children. Türkiye also has continued its active counterterrorism cooperation with the international community as a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, the Global Counterterrorism Forum, and the Committee of Experts on Terrorism of the Council of Europe. Active as a co-chair of the Defeat-ISIS Coalition's FTF Working Group, Türkiye also provided access to its airspace and facilities for coalition counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria.

Türkiye remains a transit point for FTFs departing Syria and Iraq. Domestically, Türkiye confronts terrorist organizations, including the PKK, ISIS, and the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C), all active both inside the country and along its borders. The nation also views the Syrian Democratic Forces, a U.S. partner in the counter-ISIS campaign, as a branch of the PKK terrorist group, and this remained a significant point of friction with the United States. Notably, Türkiye does not consider Hamas a terrorist organization; the U.S.-designated group maintains offices in Istanbul, and Hamas' political chief, Ismail Haniyeh, has met with Turkish President Erdogan.

In the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, the Government of Türkiye labeled the movement of self-exiled cleric and political figure Fethullah Gulen as the Fethullah Terrorist Organization ("FETO"). FETO (the Gulen movement) is not a designated terrorist organization in the United States. Türkiye continues to detain and arrest Turkish citizens — including locally employed staff at the U.S. Mission to Türkiye — and foreign citizens residing in Türkiye for alleged Gulen or terrorism-related links, often based on scant evidence and minimal due process. The Government of Türkiye also continued to dismiss military, security, and civil servants from public office in 2021. Since the failed coup, the Government of Türkiye has conducted 135,916 Gulen-related operations, arrested 312,121 citizens, dismissed or suspended more than 125,000 civil servants from public office, and closed more than 1,500 NGOs for alleged Gulen movement links. Politically motivated detentions and arrests of individuals — including journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, and politicians accused of

supporting or aiding either the PKK or the Gulen movement — under antiterror and other laws continued in 2021.

2021 Terrorist Incidents: Terrorist incidents included the following:

- In February, the PKK killed 13 Turkish soldiers and police officers (originally kidnapped in Türkiye) during a botched hostage rescue attempt by Turkish military forces in Gara, northern Iraq. In retaliation, Türkiye launched Operation Tiger Claw 2 in northern Iraq, killing 48 alleged PKK members.
- In April, a PKK attack killed one Turkish soldier involved in a counter-PKK operation in Türkiye's eastern Siirt Province.
- In October, a PKK-planted roadside IED exploded, killing two electricity company workers in Türkiye's eastern Bingöl Province.
- In December, a PKK attack killed three Turkish soldiers during operations close to Türkiye's border in northern Iraq.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: In 2021, Turkish security forces prevented a total of 101 terrorist attacks — 97 by the PKK, three by ISIS, and one by the violent extreme-leftist DHKP-C terror group, according to Türkiye's Ministry of Interior. Data from the Ministry of Interior indicates that Turkish forces neutralized 320 ISIS members in 2021, which Türkiye defines to mean killed, captured, or otherwise removed from the battlefield. In June, Turkish security forces captured ISIS member Kasim Guler (aka Abu Usama al-Turki), the first capture of an ISIS terror suspect on Türkiye's "red" top wanted list. Reportedly serving as an ISIS so-called financial officer covering Russia, Türkiye, and Europe, Guler allegedly confessed that ISIS had planned to assassinate Turkish political opposition leaders, as well as conduct attacks against LGBTQI individuals, tourists, and other groups in Türkiye.

Türkiye's security forces conducted multiple operations domestically along with counter-PKK military operations in northern Iraq and northern Syria. According to Ministry of Interior reports, in 2021 a total of 197 PKK members surrendered to Turkish authorities, including several on Türkiye's top wanted list, and security forces detained 7,607 individuals suspected of PKK affiliation.

The Turkish National Police (TNP) Migrant Smuggling and Border Gates division has proactively collaborated with DHS Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) to disrupt human smuggling organizations that actively move ISIS, PKK, and members of other nefarious groups across Türkiye's borders. TNP and HSI worked jointly to disrupt a vast network operating in Türkiye and arrest its Uzbekistan national ringleader, Rustam Muminov, whose fraudulent document organization provided fake passports and other documents to known members of ISIS to facilitate their travel to European countries.

On border security, Türkiye has expanded its Risk Analysis Units — embedded within TNP's Migrant Smuggling and Border Gates division and staffed by TNP intelligence and counterterrorism branch officers — to cover not only its major airports in Istanbul, Antalya, and Ankara, but also regional airports, bus terminals, and border crossings. These units have enhanced Türkiye's security apparatus, preventing the flow of FTFs into the region. As a result, Türkiye this year detained more than 1,000 foreigners suspected of terrorist links, who now await deportation.

Türkiye completed a 145-kilometer (90-mile) wall along the Ağrı-Iğdır section of Türkiye's eastern border with Iran to prevent terrorists from entering the country. Since 2015, 837 kilometers of

Türkiye's 1,295-kilometer southern border have been sealed with a border wall. Work continued in 2021 to bolster security with an additional 238-kilometer stretch along the Iranian border in the East and 33 kilometers on the border shared with Iraq in the South.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: A member of the FATF, Türkiye failed to adequately address deficiencies identified in the *2019 Mutual Evaluation Report*, resulting in an October FATF Plenary decision that put Türkiye on its gray list. At that time, Türkiye committed to a FATF-designed action plan to address these deficiencies. Since the October FATF result, Türkiye's Financial Crimes Investigation Board (MASAK) has greatly improved its responsiveness to U.S. requests for asset freezes of suspected ISIS or Al-Qa'ida financial facilitators and has started sharing more information. MASAK also has decreased the time it takes to implement new UN designations from up to a month to less than 24 hours.

The Turkish Parliament approved a new law (effective as of 2021) titled "Prevention of Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction," reportedly aimed at addressing some of the significant shortcomings identified by FATF with relation to anti-money laundering and combating financing of terrorism. MASAK created a system to categorize Türkiye's non-profit organizations (NPOs) according to risk criteria and increased its audits of those in what it deemed to be the highest risk categories. MASAK has not publicly released its risk criteria. To date, audits have focused on NPOs working on human rights issues and vulnerable communities, particularly groups that focus on the human rights of LGBTQI+ persons. Before the passage of this new legislation, those suspected of money laundering or raising funds for terrorist groups could be charged only with support for a terrorist group or "seeking to undermine Türkiye's constitutional order," which carries a six- to-15-year prison sentence upon conviction. Now, additional anti-money laundering or countering terrorism finance charges can add jail time. The indiscriminate scope of the new legal provisions on aid collection do not seem to meet the requirements of necessity and proportionality to protect freedom of association, and lack of judicial oversight to authorities could constitute serious infringement of the right of associations to conduct their own affairs. The Venice Commission and other international bodies have issued opinions and recommendations aimed at addressing these deficiencies.

Countering Violent Extremism: The TNP undertakes social projects, activities with parents, and in-service training for officers and teachers in all 81 provinces with a concentration on areas where the risk of what Türkiye deems radicalization is higher. Programs prepare medical, community, and religious officials for intervening to undermine terrorist messaging and to prevent recruitment. A new program, Hand in Hand to a Safe Future, specifically targets university students vulnerable to recruitment by radical groups. The Ministry of Justice implements some rehabilitation and reintegration programs for convicts and former criminals. Türkiye's Religious Affairs Presidency (the Diyanet) attempts to prevent "radicalization" by creating a single Friday sermon it distributes nationally, leaving no room for dissenting messages. Antalya is a member of the Strong Cities Network.

International and Regional Cooperation: Türkiye is a member of the UN, NATO, the GCTF, the Committee of Experts on Terrorism of the Council of Europe, the Economic Community of West African States, and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. It co-chairs, with Kuwait and the Netherlands, the Defeat-ISIS Coalition's FTF Working Group. Türkiye is also a member of the Counter-ISIS Finance and Stabilization Working Groups in the coalition. Türkiye regularly participates in GCTF meetings and initiatives. Türkiye also contributes to the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, a GCTF-inspired institution, and provides expert support to assist in training for judges and prosecutors handling terrorism cases.

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of
Origin and Asylum Research and
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Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041
Wien
T +43 1 589 00 583
F +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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F.A.Q.
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