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Country Report on Terrorism 2020 - Chapter 1 - Turkey

Overview: Turkey continues its efforts to defeat terrorist organizations both inside and outside its borders, including the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party/Front, and ISIS. Turkey is an active contributor in international counterterrorism fora, including the GCTF and the Defeat-ISIS Coalition.

Turkey is a source and transit country for FTFs seeking to join ISIS and other terrorist groups fighting in Syria and Iraq, as well as for FTFs who seek to depart Syria and Iraq. Turkey co-chairs the Defeat-ISIS Coalition FTF Working Group and continues to provide access to its airspace and facilities for Defeat-ISIS counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Syria. According to the Ministry of Interior, from 2015 until December, Turkey deported 8,143 individuals for suspected terrorism ties, with Turkey’s “banned from entry” list reportedly containing around 100,000 names. Public data indicated that at year’s end Turkish authorities had detained 2,343 suspected ISIS supporters for questioning and pressed charges against 333 of them. Turkish press alleged that one suspect, Mahmut Ozden, detained in August, was the ISIS emir for Turkey; he has reportedly been detained in Turkey at least four previous times.

The PKK continues to conduct terrorist attacks in Turkey and against Turkish interests outside of Turkey including by taking hostages. Turkey’s security forces conducted operations domestically along with military operations in northern Iraq and northern Syria. The International Crisis Group, an NGO, assessed that, at year’s end, 35 civilians, 41 security force members, and 265 PKK militants had been killed in eastern and southeastern provinces in PKK-related clashes. Politically motivated detentions and arrests of individuals — including journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, and politicians accused of supporting or aiding the PKK — continued in 2020.

In the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, the government labeled the movement of self-exiled cleric and political figure Fethullah Gulen as the Fethullah Terrorist Organization (FETO). FETO is not a designated terrorist organization in the United States. The Turkish government continues to detain and arrest Turkish citizens as well as foreign citizens residing in Turkey — including locally employed staff at the U.S. Mission to Turkey — for alleged FETO or terrorism-related links, often on the basis of scant evidence and minimal due process. The government also continued to dismiss military, security, and civil servants from public office in 2020. Since the 2016 failed coup attempt, the government has dismissed or suspended more than 125,000 civil servants from public office, arrested more than 96,000 citizens, and closed more than 1,500 NGOs for alleged FETO links.

2020 Terrorist Incidents

- On February 28 a rocket attack on the Gurbulak customs gate with Iran killed two Turkish Customs officials. The PKK claimed responsibility for the attack.
- On March 31 a suicide bomber struck a natural gas pipeline near the Turkish-Iranian border, taking the pipeline offline for months. A PKK affiliate claimed responsibility for the attack.
- On October 28 a bombing in Mardin province temporarily disabled an oil pipeline running from Iraq to Turkey. The PKK claimed responsibility for the attack.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: Turkey has a broad definition of terrorism that includes so-called crimes against constitutional order and internal and external security of the state, which the government regularly used to criminalize the exercise of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. According to the Ministry of Interior, in the first seven months of this year, it examined 14,186 social media accounts and took legal action against more than 6,743 social media users whom it accused of propagandizing or promoting terror organizations, inciting persons to enmity and hostility, or insulting state institutions. Legal actions taken by Turkey against the accused included a mix of charges related to terrorism or other criminal activity under Turkish law. Turkey has advanced law enforcement capacity to combat terrorism, and efforts continue to streamline interagency information sharing. Turkey sometimes deports suspected FTFs without providing advance notice to the destination countries, but coordination with receiving countries has improved following a 2019 ultimatum to European countries to take back their citizens.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Turkey is a member of FATF. Its FIU, the Financial Crimes Investigation Board (called MASAK), is a member of the Egmont Group. Turkey is also a member of the Defeat-ISIS CFIG. In December, Turkey promulgated a new law on terrorism finance, money laundering, and nonproliferation that addressed many of the deficiencies identified in the FATF 2019 mutual evaluation.

Countering Violent Extremism: The Turkish National Police (TNP) undertakes social projects, activities with parents, and in-service training for officers and teachers. Programs prepare medical, community, and religious officials for intervening to undermine terrorist messaging and to prevent recruitment. The Ministry of Justice implements some rehabilitation and reintegration programs for convicts and former criminals. The Ministry of Interior claimed that by year’s end 321 PKK members had surrendered to Turkish security forces, including 243 PKK members who were persuaded to surrender by their family members.

Turkey’s Religious Affairs Presidency (Diyanet) reports that it works to “undermine terrorist messaging by promoting its inclusive version of Islam.” Antalya is a member of the Strong Cities Network.

International and Regional Cooperation: Turkey is a member of the United Nations, NATO, the Committee of Experts on Terrorism of the Council of Europe, and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. It co-chairs, with Kuwait and the Netherlands, the Defeat-ISIS Coalition FTF Working Group. Turkey regularly participates in GCTF meetings and initiatives. Turkey 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. Turkey participates in OSCE expert meetings on the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism, organized by the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the OSCE Secretariat.

Turkey has bilateral security cooperation agreements with more than 70 countries. The TNP contributes to counterterrorism capacity-building programs of partner countries and offers specialized international law enforcement training in a variety of sectors, including counterterrorism.

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