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Background Information:

The Turkish War Against Rojava/Northern Syria



KONGRA STAR
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Introduction

For years, the Turkish state has been waging a war against Rojava/Northern Syria. It deliberately supports Islamist groups such as ISIS, invades predominantly-Kurdish territory, occupies it in violation of international law, and attacks civilian populations with drone strikes on a daily basis. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is pursuing a specific goal: the expulsion and annihilation of the Kurdish population and the establishment of a new Ottoman Empire. To achieve this, attacks in violation of international law, including with chemical weapons, do not seem to be a problem for Erdoğan.

In June of this year, Erdoğan clearly restated his threat of a renewed invasion of Rojava/Northern Syria. The invasion, he said, was imminent and could begin at any time. Since then, attacks on the region have increased. Turkey is trying to end the Rojava revolution by all available means. It fears successful Kurdish autonomy in Syria will add fuel to the fire for the fight for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey. This would threaten Erdoğan's vision of a new Ottoman Empire. And so, in order to achieve his goals, he is also attacking other regions inhabited mostly by Kurds, as in Southern Kurdistan. The result is that Turkey is a destabilizing force for the entire Middle East. This background dossier summarizes the most important contextual information regarding this issue. In addition to an analysis of the most recent attacks, it clarifies Erdoğan's intentions and his ultimate goals.



Latest Attacks on Rojava/Northern Syria and Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq

On the night of November 19-20, 2022, the Turkish military carried out airstrikes in northern Syria, attacking Kobanî, Dêrik, Dirbesiye, the north of Aleppo and other areas on the Turkish-Syrian border. This operation, which began overnight, has been referred to by the Turkish state as “Claw Sword Air Operation” indicating that these attacks are not a one-time operation.

The attacks killed eleven civilians during the first night, including a journalist, and wounded six. One Syrian Democratic Forces fighter was killed in Abo Racin. Fifteen Syrian government soldiers lost their lives and three civilians were injured in Kobane.¹ These attacks on Rojava are the latest in a series of attacks and wars carried out by the Turkish state against the region.



Pictures of airstrikes in Kobane on November 20, 2022

Since 2012, the people of Rojava and Northern and Eastern Syria have begun a social revolution and have established a self-governing system. Since then, the successes of the revolution have been threatened from all sides: ISIS wants to establish an Islamic caliphate, the Assad regime wants to regain its dictatorial power over the region, and Turkey wants to drive the Kurds out of the region in order to build a neo-Ottoman empire. In pursuit of this goal, Turkey has expanded its attacks on Rojava and Northern Syria. Beginning with an initial military offensive in 2016-2017, Turkey, with the help of its own ground forces as well as mercenary armies, occupied the predominately-Arab areas around Al-Bab and Azaz in violation of international law. A military offensive in Idlib followed in the same year. In 2018, Turkey attacked and occupied Afrin with the help of its mercenary groups, mainly composed of Islamist factions opposed to Syrian dictator al-Assad. In doing so, they gained control over border areas in the western part of Rojava/North Syria that are strategically important for Turkey, and for the region as a whole. The last major military offensive was undertaken in 2019 with the occupation of the areas around Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-Ayn) and Girê Spî (Tall Abyad).

¹ <https://sdf-press.com/en/2022/11/we-will-respond-effectively-and-efficiently-at-the-right-time-and-place/>

Here, too, air and artillery attacks were used in addition to ground troops. Since then, however, Turkish attacks have not ceased. Instead, Turkey has continued to wage a low-intensity war on the region.

In the area of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Turkey conducted over 89 drone attacks in the year 2022 alone. In these strikes, at least 71 people were killed and 124 were injured.² Again and again, civilians, children and young people were being hit.³ Particularly on the border with Turkey, there were repeated cross-border attacks by Turkish border guards towards people living in Syria. Most of the victims were farmers who cultivate their fields near the border. At least thirteen people were killed in these attacks in 2022, three of whom were minors. A further twenty people were injured.⁴

At the end of May 2022, Erdoğan declared that he wanted to launch a “new phase” of his incursion, and purge Rojava/Northern Syria and Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq of “terrorists,” i.e., YPG/YPJ. This is to be followed by several other regions up to 30 km deep in Syrian territory.⁵ A member of al-Jabat al-Shamiya, a Turkish mercenary force, also made it abundantly clear who the real target of the mission is: “The Kurds have to get out of here, it’s not their territory”.⁶

Here, Erdoğan’s hypocritical game is obvious. He claims that the YPG/YPJ defense units and the PYD political party belong to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which is banned in Turkey. When attacking Syrian territory as well as Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq, Turkey defends its actions using the logic of self-defense. However, if we take a closer look at the people who have been murdered by Turkish attacks, the picture is different. Again and again normal civilians, even children, are the ones killed or injured. In other cases, Turkey specifically targets internal security structures of the AANES. In July, four members of the Internal Security Forces (Asayîş) were killed by a drone attack in Ain Issa, Raqqa Governorate. As the Asayîş are a part of the internal security of the Autonomous Administration region, framing them as a threat to Turkey makes absolutely no sense. However, Erdoğan seems to reliably follow through on his threats. Since July 2022, his low-intensity war is getting much more intense as he seems unwilling to wait any longer and is ramping up the attacks.

2 <https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/turkey-attacked-northern-and-eastern-syria-3-761-times-in-past-8-months-killing-33-and-wounding-124-61826>

3 <https://anfdeutsch.com/rojava-syrien/qamislo-jugendlicher-getotet-vater-verletzt-33425>

4 <https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojava-syria/27-year-old-shot-dead-by-turkish-soldiers-in-kobane-61670>

5 <https://www.rnd.de/politik/nach-drohung-erdogans-kurden-melden-bombardierungen-in-nordsyrien-FVB-3CK2I3U7IVNXZ3SFOMF2XEQ.html>

6 <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/asien/nordsyrische-kurdengebiete-101.html>



Since 1992 Turkey has also been regularly attacking Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Since 2018, the Iraqi government has recorded more than 22,700 Turkish violations of Iraqi sovereignty.⁷ Since 2021, Turkey bombarded the Metina, Zap and Avasin-Basyan regions especially hard, as well as the Duhok and Erbil Governorates. In these aggressive offensives, they also use chemical weapons in violation of both international law, and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), a convention which bans the use of chemical weapons that Turkey itself has signed. However, Western governments and international organizations such as the UN or NATO have stayed silent.



Turkish soldier dumps chemical into guerrilla tunnel. Photo published by Turkish Ministry of Defense, July 2022 <https://anfdeutsch.com/aktuelles/chemiewaffen-auf-kurdistan-akbulut-fordert-deutschen-einsatz-fur-untersuchung-34562>

7 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/438/43/PDF/N2243843.pdf?OpenElement>

But Turkey not only bombs the regions mentioned above. It also attacks more specific and seemingly random targets across Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq. In July, Turkey killed four people in a drone strike near Kelar, close to Sulaymaniyah, which is located 275 km away from the Turkish border. One of the persons killed was Farhad Shibli, deputy co-chair of the Executive Council of the AANES.⁸ Also in July, Turkey shelled the Barakh tourist resort in Zakho District. Nine people, including two children, were killed and thirty-three were injured. All of them were civilians on vacation in the region.⁹

These strikes show again, the janus-faced game Turkey is playing. While saying they only carry out self-defense because they themselves have been attacked, in reality, they kill innocent people.

So far, there has been no open criticism from NATO, of which Turkey has been a member since 1952, of Erdoğan's war policy. This shows that so-called common values such as freedom and democracy only apply when they serve Turkey's own imperial interests. Turkey's power has even increased as a result of the Ukraine war, in which Erdoğan has managed to establish himself as a "neutral mediator" between Russia and Ukraine.¹⁰

Turkey's power is also evident in its blocking of Sweden and Finland's admission to NATO. Erdoğan sees humanitarian aid from these countries to Rojava/Northern Syria as "terror aid", and Kurds who organize themselves in these countries as "terrorists". After repeated negotiations, it appears that Turkey has gotten its way.¹¹ In exchange for the two countries being able to join NATO, Kurdish activists will now be deported to Turkey.

8 <https://medyanews.net/kri-protest-in-sulaymaniyah-against-turkish-drone-strike-that-killed-four/>

9 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/438/43/PDF/N2243843.pdf?OpenElement>

10 <https://jacobin.de/artikel/der-turkische-nato-krieg-gegen-kurdistan-nordirak-erdogan/>

11 <https://jacobin.de/artikel/der-turkische-nato-krieg-gegen-kurdistan-nordirak-erdogan/>

Erdoğan's Goal: A New Ottoman Empire

The goals of the Turkish state are clear: to revive the historical strength of the Turks, to strengthen its international influence and to reconquer the old Ottoman territories. Its policies in the region are geared towards these goals. We can see the attacks on the people and the democratic communities in the regions of Northern Syria and Southern Kurdistan, as well as the anti-Kurdish policies at home and abroad as different prongs of the same policy.

If we want to understand what Erdoğan's plan really is with his attacks on Rojava/Northern Syria and Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq, we need to take a look back at Turkish history, and the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the Islamic world. Erdoğan has had a new Ottoman Empire in mind for some time. He emphasizes, above all, the pride of the past to compensate for the failures in his present policies. He also explicitly refers to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and has made it clear in a speech that “[Turkey] did not accept [its] present borders voluntarily.” Until 1920, lands that are today part of Northern Syria and Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq, belonged to the Ottoman Empire, including the major cities of Aleppo and Mosul. Erdoğan therefore regularly emphasizes, “Turkish interests” in these regions.¹² Erdoğan invokes the Ottoman heritage and also claims territories in Armenia, Greece and, Cyprus. And even though he cannot simply invade these countries and regions, he is trying to gain influence there.¹³



This picture shows the MHP President Devlet Bahçeli with the picture “Misak-ı Milli in the Seas”, in which a part of the Misak-ı Milli map is shown, which includes the Greek islands in its borders.

<https://www.coinkolik.com/denizlerdeki-misak-i-milli-haritasi-nftye-donustu/>

12 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/tuerkei-recep-tayyip-erdogan-traeumt-vom-osmanischen-reich-a-1118342.html>

13 <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/100-jahre-vertrag-von-sevres-das-unverdaute-ende-des-100.html>

The coming year, 2023, will play an important role in the Turkish Republic's imperialist project. It is both the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Turkish Republic and the pivotal Treaty of Lausanne. Politicians therefore speculate that in 2023 Istanbul could be named the capital (of the Islamic world) and Erdoğan proclaimed caliph. This could be followed by an occupation of the former Ottoman territories and a subsequent effort at their turkification.¹⁴

This theory is supported by the fact that Erdoğan repeatedly emphasizes the year 2023 as the end of the Lausanne Treaty. He is probably also pursuing domestic political goals with this tireless repetition. After all, the elections in Turkey are coming up, and he is trying to secure more votes.¹⁵

When the so called Arab Spring started in 2010-2011, Turkey saw it as an opportunity to massively expand its influence in the region. However, the situation did not develop how Turkey would have wished. While Turkey originally wanted regime change in Syria, its primary goal shifted after the proclamation of AANES, towards preventing a predominantly-Kurdish autonomous region on the Syrian-Turkish border. The "Kurdish question" also made the conflict important for Erdoğan's domestic policy.¹⁶ Turkey has always been characterized by anti-Kurdish racism. Erdoğan is up for election in 2023, and his AKP party is currently dragging in the polls. In the past, Turkey's illegal attacks and invasions into Syria - Azaz in 2016, Afrin in 2018, and Serê Kaniyê (Ra s al- Ain) and Girê Spî (Tall Abyad) in 2019 - have always been accompanied by an increase in AKP policy approval. Through such invasions, Erdoğan can mask his domestic difficulties: poverty, inflation, and unemployment.¹⁷

However, turkification can already be observed in the occupied territories. Salaries are paid in Turkish lira, Turkish-language schools have been opened, and separate governors have been appointed - all of these are signs of a permanent colonization of the territories. In addition, Erdoğan wants to settle 1 million Syrian refugees in these areas, which would greatly change the demographics. Settlements have already been built in the occupied territories for this purpose.¹⁸

In Northern Iraq/Southern Kurdistan, too, Turkey has launched something of a de facto invasion. However, the invasion there looks somewhat different, because Turkey has under taken it with the consent of the KDP, the ruling party in Southern Kurdistan. Since 2020 Turkey has intensified its bombing of the media defense areas from the air and increased attacks with ground troops. Turkey also justifies the invasion by saying that the PKK's presence threatens Turkey's security.

But Turkey's real problem with the democratic and self-determinative aspirations of the people in the region, is that these goals are opposed to its plans for a new Ottoman Empire. Therefore, Turkey is not only pursuing an anti-Kurdish policy at home and abroad, but is also waging a war in the region to prevent the democratic aspirations in the region.

14 <https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/43250/erdogans-traum-von-einem-grosstuerkisch-islamistischen-imperium>

15 <https://anfdeutsch.com/aktuelles/100-jahre-vertrag-von-lausanne-was-dann-29301>

16 <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021S16/#hd-d32436e2030>

17 <https://jacobin.de/artikel/der-turkische-nato-krieg-gegen-kurdistan-nordirak-erdogan/>

18 <https://jacobin.de/artikel/der-turkische-nato-krieg-gegen-kurdistan-nordirak-erdogan/>



Turkey's Justification: Adana Agreement and Article 51

When occupying and attacking Syria, Turkey has referred to the so-called Adana agreement. The Adana-Agreement was signed in 1998, with the sole purpose of expelling the PKK from Syrian territory. With this treaty, Turkey wanted to eliminate the Kurdish struggle for freedom and the Kurdish people in general, with a specific focus on its leader Abdullah Öcalan.¹⁹ Under the agreement, the Syrian state pledged to take action against the PKK. If they did not do so, Turkey was assured that it would be allowed to operate up to 5 km deep inside Syrian territory.

Looking at the details of this agreement, it becomes clear that Turkey is deliberately misinterpreting it and taking far more liberties than it is legally entitled to. This is most obviously reflected in Erdoğan's announcement of the creation of a 30 km security zone along the border with Syria to fight "terrorist threats". When attacking Syria and Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq, Turkey also references Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations.

Article 51 states:

"Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defense shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security."²⁰

The right to self-defense is thus a clear component of the UN Charter. However, it is valid only in the case of an armed attack, which must also be proven. The UN has also made clear that not every "armed attack" is valid to invoke Article 51, for instance border skirmishes do not count. In addition, the self-defense measures taken must be proportionate in scope, extent, duration and intensity to the aggressed attack.²¹ Furthermore, Article 51 is only meant as a stop-gap until the Security Council can be activated and take action. Decisions of the Security Council then take precedence over measures taken by the member state.

As there are no armed attacks from AANES, or from Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq territories towards Turkish territory, Article 51 simply cannot be invoked under the circumstances.

Fuad Hussein, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq, also made clear that there is no security agreement between both states that would allow Turkey to carry out military operations in Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraqi territories.²² In a security council meeting, he also made very clear that the Iraqi government does not want the Turkish army on their territory.

19 <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/dirrar-and-debo-on-adana-agreement-a-justification-for-occupation-violation-of-syrian-sovereignty-h32438.html>

20 <https://legal.un.org/repertory/art51.shtml>

21 <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/recht-auf-selbstverteidigung-was-sagt-artikel-51-der-uno-char-ta-a-1198879.html>

22 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/438/43/PDF/N2243843.pdf?OpenElement>

“Turkiye must withdraw its military forces from Iraqi territories. (...) To date, a total of 22,742 violations have been recorded. (...) we request (...) Türkiye to withdraw its military forces from all Iraqi territories, because they maintain an illegitimate presence in Iraq that was not requested and will destabilize the security situation and lead to instability. (...) [There have been] repeated Turkish violations of Iraq’s territories and airspace in the past several years, which has claimed the lives of several unarmed Iraqi victims.”²³

The Erdoğan government is misusing the UN and its agreements to undertake invasions in violation of international law. Erdoğan actually announced one of his illegal invasions of northern Syria in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 24, 2019.²⁴ The United Nations is an organization whose goal is to maintain international peace and security, and yet when Erdogan presented his plans to the UN, there was no reaction against it.



 **MİLLÎ SAVUNMA BAKANLIĞI**
BASIN AÇIKLAMASI 19 KASIM 2022

**“PENÇE KILIÇ HAVA HAREKÂTI” İLE İLGİLİ
 BASIN AÇIKLAMASI**

PKK/KCK/YPG ve diğer terörist unsurları etkisiz hâle getirerek; Irak’ın ve Suriye’nin kuzeyinden halkımıza ve güvenlik güçlerimize yönelik terör saldırılarını bertaraf etmek ve hudut güvenliğini sağlamak, terörü kaynağında yok etmek maksadıyla;

Birleşmiş Milletler Antlaşması’nın 51’inci maddesinden doğan meşru müdafaa haklarımız doğrultusunda, Irak’ın ve Suriye’nin kuzeyinde bulunan ve teröristler tarafından ülkemize saldırılarda üs olarak kullanılan bölgelere **PENÇE KILIÇ HAVA HAREKÂTI** icra edilmiştir.

Kamuoyuna saygıyla duyurulur.

Press release from the Turkish Defense Minister announcing the start of the Claw Sword Air Operation, referring again to article 51, dated 19 November 2022.

<https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1594121676551344129?s=46&t=BMoMknafy78DjlkkykdUf9A>

23 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/438/43/PDF/N2243843.pdf?OpenElement>

24 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/08/erdogan-wants-redraw-middle-east-ethnic-map-kurds-arabs-turkey-syria/>



Turkey as a Destabilizing Force for the Entire Middle East

To pursue its goals, the Turkish state has entered into alliances with questionable partners. For many years, Turkey has been supporting Islamist groups, ISIS not least among them. Almost since the beginning, Turkey has allowed ISIS fighters to cross its border into Syria unhindered, has cared for its wounded fighters in Turkish hospitals, and has supplied it weapons as well as training. It is therefore not surprising that the leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was tracked down and killed by U.S. forces in Turkish-controlled Idlib in October 2019.

As mentioned above, the Turkish-invasions of Syria are closely linked to Erdoğan's domestic policies. Since he became president in 2014, he began to build a private military and paramilitary system. Nowadays this system also includes the SNA, the Syrian National Army (which is also known as Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA)) which serves as kind of a foreign legion. Using these mercenary groups as proxy fighters has the advantage of minimizing international criticism against Turkey as well as its legal culpability. The SNA unites various groups that formerly fought as the opposition against the Assad regime. Nowadays, they have become Turkey's proxy army-for-hire, and have fittingly adjusted their primary goal. While they used to fight the al-Assad regime as their common enemy, now their fight is against AANES, where most of the Kurds in Syria live.

Erdoğan also uses his proxy militias to enforce Turkish interests in other parts of the world. He has already employed them in Libya and the Caucasus region. Since 2021, Turkey has also been sending mercenaries who were previously trained in the regions occupied in northern Syria to Yemen.²⁵ A mission in Afghanistan was also planned, but was canceled when the Taliban took power.

Turkey's great power fantasy has now made it a destabilizing force for the entire Middle East. In their speech to the UN security council, the Iraqi government made their position very clear. They see Turkish presence and continued attacks on and in their territories as something that, "will destabilize [their] security situation and lead to instability".²⁶ Even though Turkey has come to terms with the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq and is now making common cause, relations with the majority of neighboring states such as Syria, the Republic of Iraq, Iran and even Egypt are tense. Turkey is not known as the regional superpower it would like to be. In Turkey's opinion, the Western powers would like to divide Turkey and are to blame for its lack of leadership and influence in the region. But Turkey's aggressive and reckless involvement in the Syrian Crisis, its attacks, occupations, unceasing recruitment of various Islamist mercenary groups and continuous support for ISIS, makes it clear that Turkey remains a threat not only to the Kurdish people but to all people in the Middle East.

25 <https://anfenglish.com/news/human-rights-organization-turkey-deploys-mercenaries-to-yemen-61646>

26 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/438/43/PDF/N2243843.pdf?OpenElement>



10 Years of Women's Revolution – a Short Review

Since the uprisings of 2011, the people of Rojava, a majority-Kurdish (but multicultural) region in northern Syria, took advantage of the power vacuum to put their years of grassroots organizing into practice. On July 19, 2012, the revolution was declared, first in Kobanê and then in other parts of northern Syria. This was the start of the revolution in Rojava/Northern Syria. Since then, the people have administrated themselves autonomously, based on the principles of direct democracy, ecology and women's liberation. While the liberated territories initially consisted of the cantons Cizre, Kobanê and Afrin, the area that today comprises the Autonomous Administration of North and East has now expanded. As ISIS was pushed back and defeated, and majority-Arab regions were liberated and incorporated into the Autonomous Administration. Today it comprises almost a third of Syria's territory.

The self-administration is based on the concept of Democratic Confederalism²⁷ developed by Abdullah Öcalan, who has been in solitary confinement in Turkey since 1999. The goal of the self-administration is therefore not a separate (Kurdish) nation-state, but the grassroots democratic self-administration of all inhabitants of North and East Syria.

Four years ago, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria²⁸ was established. It is an administration that, through the struggle of the women's movement, is building a grassroots democratic, multicultural, multiethnic, and egalitarian administrative system. Over the past decade, women have become involved in all aspects of life, socially, politically, legally, economically, educationally, and they have played a pioneering role in building a free society: a society that manages itself. The system of co-presidency (one man, one woman in the executive seats) in AANES and all its institutions is mandatory. There is a 50% gender quota in all government bodies and structures. According to the social contract of North and East Syria, all ethnic or social groups have the right to organize and represent their own interests.

27 <https://www.freeocalan.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Ocalan-Democratic-Confederalism.pdf>

28 <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/amina-omar-autonomous-administration-its-purpose-to-serve-people-consolidation-of-administrations--h3599.html>



Conclusion

As the above analysis shows, the Turkish state is pursuing a very clear strategy through its war on the autonomous self-government in Rojava/Northern Syria and Southern Kurdistan/Northern Iraq. While Erdoğan is trying to outwardly proclaim protection of its “security interests” in fighting against the PKK, the attacks on the region, the invasions and occupation of territories are in fact a step towards a new Ottoman Empire, including the expansion of the current borders of Turkish territory. Erdoğan also benefits from the fact that the attacks on the majority Kurdish-populated areas cast him in a good light domestically. This is all the more important because Turkey is currently in economic chaos. As the 2023 elections loom, Erdoğan wants to be sure he and his AKP party emerge as clear winners.

It is becoming clear that Turkey under Erdoğan is an increasingly risky gamble for the Middle East and a destabilizing force for the entire region. His war against the Kurds is having the inflammatory effects of undermining international efforts against ISIS and other Islamist groups, while further stoking tensions in contested regions.



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