



UNDERSTANDING THE ISIS ATTACK ON TÜRKİYE

On January 28, 2024, masked attackers killed one person at the Santa Maria Church in Sarıyer, Istanbul. The masked assailants claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of ISIS through the Amaq News Agency, the official propaganda outlet of the group. According to Amaq, ISIS has now launched its first strike on Turkish territory since 2017.

EVALUATION NOTE



Below is my translation of the Türkiye Wilaya statement:

"In Istanbul, Türkiye, the Khalifa soldiers carried out an attack on a church, resulting in the killing of a Christian and the injury of another.

Wilaya of Türkiye, Sunday, 16 Rajab 445 AH.

By the grace of Almighty Allah, a covert detachment of the Caliphate soldiers was present in the city of Istanbul. They launched an armed attack with pistols on a gathering of idolatrous rituals held by infidel Christians in a church in the Büyükdere neighborhood. This led to the killing of a Christian and the injury of at least one person. Praise and thanks are due to Allah."

¹ https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1368/Hilmi+Demir_+PhD

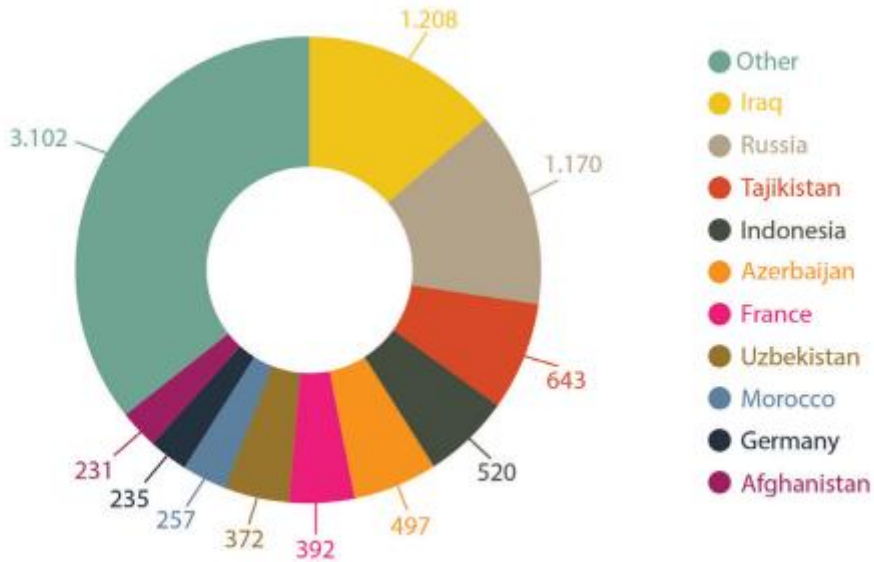
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Since 2017, ISIS has not carried out any attacks on Turkish soil, but for the first time, they resumed their attacks. Up until 2017, ISIS had orchestrated 20 attacks in Türkiye, resulting in the deaths of 308 people and the injuries of 1,167 others. The most recent known ISIS attack in the country was the Istanbul Reina nightclub attack carried out by Abdulkadir Masharipov just minutes before the start of the New Year in 2017, where 39 people were killed. Now, years later, what has prompted ISIS to resurface or succeed in doing so?

We know that in many of ISIS's attacks in Türkiye, foreigners and individuals from Central Asia have actively participated. The fact that one of the perpetrators in the 2024 attack is of Tajik origin and the other has Russian roots has once again focused attention on foreign ISIS fighters. Türkiye has been grappling with the challenge of foreign fighters for an extended period, and the figures related to this issue are quite noteworthy.

According to the ISIS Handbook prepared by the Directorate of Counterterrorism, as of October 2021, data from the Directorate General of Migration Management indicates that 8,556 foreign nationals were deported due to their links to terrorism. ²



Schema 1: Breakdown of deported persons by country between 2014-2021

² Daesh Terrorist Organization, Published by Ministry of Interior of The Republic of Türkiye General Directorate of Turkish National Police Department of Counter Terrorism, Ankara, 2022, p. 150.

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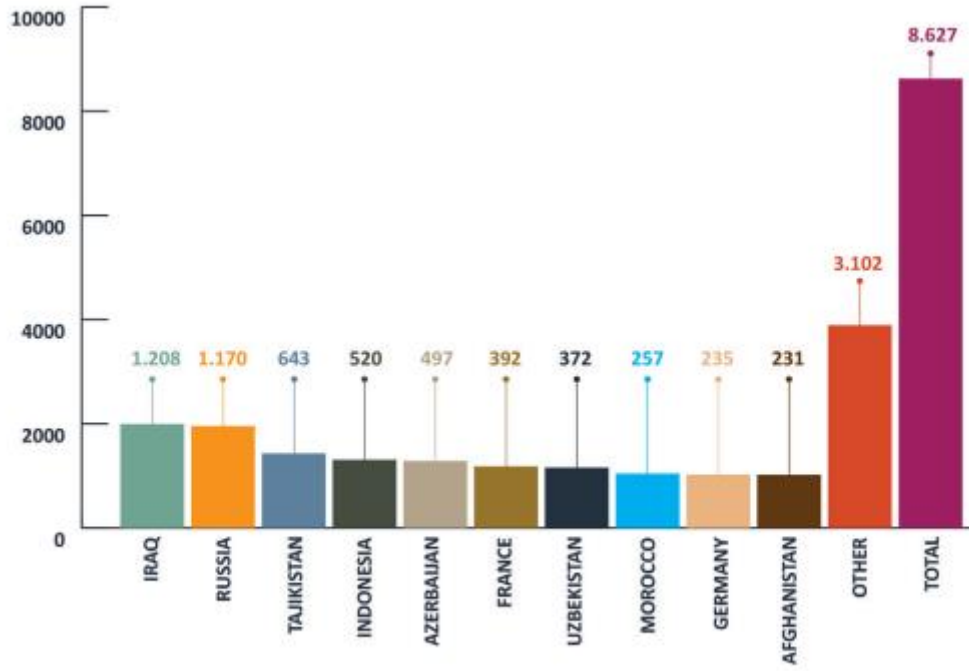
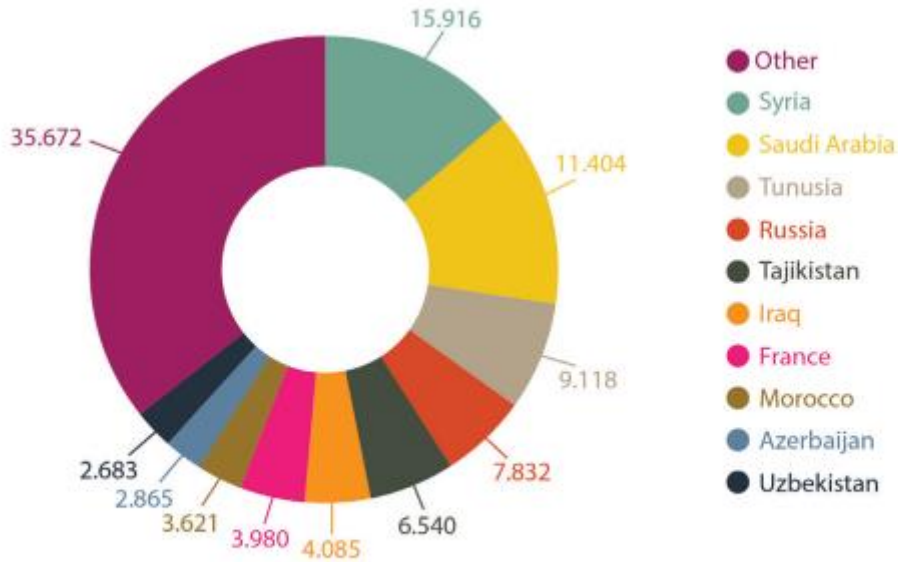


Chart 1: Breakdown of deported persons by country between 2014-2021

According to the data from the Directorate General of Migration Management, as of October 2021, entry bans have been imposed on 103,418 foreign nationals due to their connection to terrorism in Türkiye.



Schema 2: Breakdown of persons banned from entering Türkiye between 2014-2021 by country

These figures indicate a serious concern for Türkiye regarding foreign fighters. Despite the significant efforts Türkiye is making to prevent foreign fighters from accessing conflict zones,

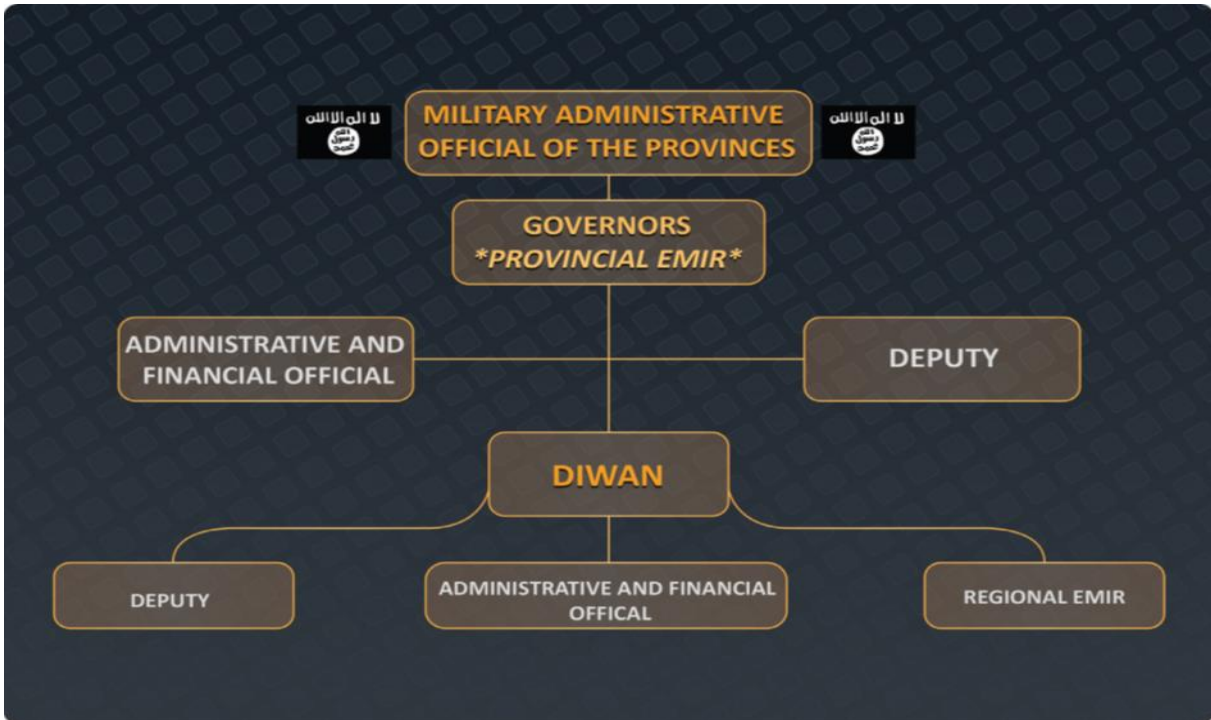
it appears to be a challenge that Türkiye alone cannot overcome. The source countries also need to take action to prevent these foreign fighters from departing. Additionally, foreign fighters who wish to return to their countries after territorial losses in Syria and Iraq face serious obstacles to being accepted back, further increasing the burden on Türkiye. Notably, the presence of a significant number of foreign fighters attempting to enter Türkiye, particularly from Tajikistan, is evident in this context. During a press statement on the capture of the perpetrators of the Santa Maria Church attack in Istanbul, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya mentioned that from June 1 to the present, 1,046 operations against ISIS had been conducted, resulting in 2,086 detentions, 529 arrests, and 404 individuals released under judicial control. Although details about the countries of the apprehended individuals were not disclosed, it is known that among them are many foreign ISIS members. ISIS exploits gaps in Türkiye's counterterrorism laws, and the question arises: Why are so many foreign ISIS members coming to Türkiye, even knowing they might be apprehended? The answer lies in our legal system. Unfortunately, if an individual has not actively participated in an armed attack, they may be released relatively quickly after being detained for terrorism-related charges, such as membership or propaganda for a terrorist organization. Once released, they encounter a process that does not entail exclusion but rather awaits them with an extensive social welfare network. In Türkiye, ISIS members can easily benefit from support, work informally, and receive assistance, facilitating their continued lives. Contrarily, facing more severe penalties in their home countries upon deportation, they prefer getting caught in Türkiye. Our counterterrorism laws and immigration policies serve as facilitators for ISIS members. Proposed reforms in this regard face challenges both within the country and in the context of European Union discussions.

Has Türkiye become an ISIS Wilaya?

Let's discuss the matter of the "Wilaya of Türkiye" used in the statement by the ISIS news agency Amaq regarding the Istanbul attack. After declaring the Caliphate in Mosul in 2014, ISIS began to act as a state, creating its own public space. The most significant difference that sets ISIS apart from Al-Qaeda is its characteristic behavior as a state. Consequently, ISIS built its own bureaucracy, regularly maintaining official documents, including court records and taxation. It institutionalized and organized itself like a state, mimicking various aspects such as finances, military, healthcare system, municipal services, and issuing currency to collect taxes. The province system emerged as one of these aspects. Initially, provinces such as Al-Anbar, Baghdad, North Baghdad, South Baghdad, Fallujah, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Diyala, Salahaddin, and Euphrates were established. A governor/Amir was appointed to each province, and courts and councils were established under these governors. Within this framework, in regions dominated by the organization, ministries were established under various names such as Diwan al-Jund (Military Council), Diwan al-Amin (Security Council), Diwan al-Shura Islamiyya (Islamic Police Council), Diwan al-Hasba (Internal Order Council), Diwan al-Zakat (Zakat Council), Diwan al-Ziraa (Agriculture Council), Diwan al-Khadamat (Municipality/Internal Services Council), Diwan al-Ighlam (Press and Publication Council), Diwan al-Sahha (Health Council), Diwan al-Dawa al-Masajid (Prayer and Religious Affairs), and Diwan al-Isnad (Support Forces). Administrators were appointed with the title of Amir to lead these ministries. Additionally, courts were

established, and Judges/Sharia Judges were assigned to resolve disputes that arose among the public.³

As seen, this organization meant two things for ISIS: firstly, demonstrating its status as a state, and secondly, declaring territorial sovereignty in the province it claimed. Therefore, a hierarchical structure was established, similar to the central organization, to indicate the supposed Amirs/Governors appointed by the organization in local administrations. Just as there was a central hierarchy, attempts were made to create substructures under local city and district administrations. In this way, the upper management cadre of the organization and the provincial administration were shaped by the same system. It was partially conceptualized and attempted to be implemented in cities and lower-level settlements. This relationship network is illustrated in the table below:



The secret witness DORA talked about the structure of the organization: "After the Caliphate was declared, Governors/Amirs were appointed to the cities and Diwans (Ministries) were set up. The Governors/Amirs were in charge of running the cities and were chosen by the Shura Council. They were below the so-called Provincial Military/Armed Officer and answerable to the Shura Council; the Governors/Amirs chose them."⁴

Although ISIS militants have been planning and carrying out attacks in Türkiye since 2014, we did not encounter the official term "province" (wilaya) associated with Türkiye until April 2019. We first observed this in a video featuring ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In the video, he was shown receiving reports from various ISIS "provinces" worldwide, and one of the files he was given indicated the "Province of Türkiye." However, since that date, have we witnessed ISIS establishing dominance in a regional area within Türkiye? No, in fact, we have not obtained any significant evidence that they have organized institutionally within Türkiye as they

³ Daesh Terrorist Organization, p. 26.

⁴ Daesh Terrorist Organization, p.116.

did in other provinces. Moreover, many of ISIS's correspondences and archives within Türkiye have been seized.⁵

Nevertheless, we are aware that some key figures known as responsible for the ISIS "Wilaya of Türkiye" have been apprehended. These individuals were affiliated with the organization's branches in Syria and Iraq. Among them, Mustafa Dokumacı stood out as the highest-ranking executive, also known as the leader of the group called "Dokumacılar." The first designated leader of the ISIS Türkiye Province was a militant named Nusret Yılmaz, later succeeded by Kasım Güler. During the period when Baghdadi filmed the video holding the "Wilaya of Türkiye" file, it was likely that Kasım Güler was the person responsible for the province. After Güler's capture, he was initially replaced by a Syrian-origin militant and later by Şahap Variş. The claim that Mahmut Özden, captured on August 20, 2020, was the amir of Türkiye surfaced. In 2022, I.Ç., who was arrested in a terrorism investigation in Adana, claimed that he received instructions from ISIS Türkiye's amir Mahmut Özden and operated within the organization's Yamaçlı Group.⁶ Until 2022, all the individuals identified as responsible for the ISIS Türkiye Province are either deceased or captured. There is no evidence indicating the appointment of a new amir. Additionally, unlike in other provinces, these amirs do not have extensive organizational structures in Türkiye. It is known that the ISIS governors in Türkiye generally consist of a consultative council (shura) with 5-10 members, all operating under the authority of Syria. As ISIS loses its influence in Syria, the impact of these groups within Türkiye is significantly limited. Moreover, continuous operations against ISIS within Türkiye seem to have caused significant losses for the organization.

From Wilaya to Battalion

Therefore, ISIS has been compelled to transition from Wilaya to the Battalion. Of course, this does not prevent ISIS from being a threat to Türkiye. Information about the ISIS cell, which was in the process of preparing attacks on churches and synagogues in Türkiye and was thwarted by an operation conducted by MIT (National Intelligence Organization) and law enforcement teams on January 3, 2024, may have gone unnoticed. Simultaneous operations in Istanbul, Ankara, Balıkesir, Bolu, Düzce, Kırşehir, Konya, Sakarya, and Samsun resulted in the capture of 32 suspects of Iraqi, Syrian, and Moroccan origin. A total of 26 suspects, including key figures in the cell such as Michel al-Suwayhi codenamed Abu Yaşin al-Iraqi, Muhammad Khilaf Ibrahim Ibrahim codenamed Abu Layth, and Iyhab al-Ani codenamed Abdullah al-Jumayli were arrested. It was determined that the members of this cell, along with other ISIS members, were operating in Türkiye under the name of the Salman al-Farsi Battalion. Additionally, reconnaissance and surveillance footage of ISIS suspects planning to attack churches and synagogues in Türkiye were uncovered. This indicates that after losing territory in Syria in 2017, ISIS first underwent a transformation within its own structure by adopting the Wilaya organization. Subsequently, following the capture of Kasım Güler on June 15, 2021, and facing difficulties in recruiting personnel within Türkiye, the organization was compelled to undergo further changes domestically, resulting in a shift to battalion level. The Salman al-Farsi Battalion captured in 2024 should be considered evidence of this change.

⁵ <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/deasin-arsivi-acildi-4553018>.

⁶ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/deasin-sozde-turkiye-emiri-ozdenin-suriyeden-aldigi-talimatlar-iddianamede/2496072>.

Another issue that needs to be highlighted here is whether there is any connection between the numerous Central Asian and Tajik ISIS members captured in Türkiye and ISIS in Afghanistan. Is Türkiye possibly within the wave of attacks orchestrated by ISIS in Afghanistan?

Is ISIS in Afghanistan (ISKP) Operative in Türkiye?

In 2014, several groups affiliated with Tahrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They united with the aim of establishing the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province. The organization that emerged as a result of this alliance was named the Khorasan Province, and it declared its allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the first leader of ISIS. The group attempted to establish its presence under the name 'Khorasan Wilaya,' covering parts of Central Asia, China, Iran, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia. For a long time, the organization remained in the shadow of the Taliban. However, after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the group began to reassert itself in the years 2021-2022.

Following this, the organization began to be referred to worldwide as the Islamic State of Khorasan Wilaya (ISKP). The name Khorasan was specifically chosen. The term Khorasan is derived from the Old Persian words "khur" (sun) and "âsân" (âyân, meaning "coming, rising") and carries the meaning of "the land where the sun rises; the land of the sun; the eastern region." In historical terms, Khorasan was the name of a vast geographical region in the northeast of Iran. In today's context, the region includes Turkmenistan, parts of Afghanistan like Balkh and Herat, and the remaining portion is within the borders of Iran. In Islamic history, Khorasan holds a special place in apocalyptic narratives. According to one tradition, the army of the Mahdi will emerge from the region of Khorasan with black banners. The central theme of these narratives suggests that an army with black flags originating from the Turkestan region, including places like Khorasan, Bukhara, and Samarkand, will conquer Mecca, Medina, and even Istanbul. The significant role of these apocalyptic narratives contributes to the importance of using the name Khorasan by ISIS. Therefore, the name Khorasan can be seen as a crucial psychological motivator for increasing recruitment among Muslims in the region. Hence, using the term Afghanistan Islamic State (IS-A) instead of the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) might be more accurate to diminish ISIS's motivation. However, in this text, both usages will be preferred.

IS-A (ISKP) increased its activities after the withdrawal of the United States from the region and carried out bloody attacks in Afghanistan and neighboring countries. Some radical Salafi Uzbek and Uighur groups in Afghanistan, whose movement was restricted due to the strengthening of the Taliban, began to provide support. Consequently, the organization witnessed an increase in recruits from Central Asia. Understanding the reasons behind the inclination of Central Asian youths to join ISIS is crucial.

Particularly, the migration of Tajiks abroad in search of employment is linked to the lack of adequate employment opportunities and wages in the country. Moreover, the intense pressures on young individuals conscripted into the Tajik armed forces contribute to the annual exodus of thousands of youths from the country to avoid military service. Additionally, religious repression in Tajikistan encourages people to seek alternative paths, promoting them to join

Salafi groups.⁷ These circumstances either force the majority of young individuals in the country to either lead a religious life or migrate for economic reasons.

However, those who want to join ISIS for religious motivations cannot directly go to Afghanistan due to the intense pressure from their state's security forces. Therefore, they first travel to the West via Russia and then somehow reach Iran, eventually joining the Khorasan Province in Afghanistan by road. Some of those unable to reach Afghanistan attempted to carry out terrorist acts in the West with the direct instruction and support of the organization. For instance, in 2023, some militants of Central Asian origin were arrested in the Netherlands and Germany before carrying out terrorist acts on behalf of IS-A (ISKP). Both in Germany and the Netherlands, a transnational network consisting of Central Asians associated with IS-A (ISKP) was exposed.⁸

After the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, IS-A (ISKP) initiated a campaign accusing the Taliban of getting closer to China and the U.S. and claiming itself as the sole representative of Islam. In doing so, the organization pursued a two-pronged strategy. The first was to fill the void created by the Taliban's withdrawal from the fight against the Crusaders. Differentiating itself from other ISIS provinces, IS-A developed an independent media architecture through the al-Azaim media foundation, producing content in Arabic, English, Farsi, Pashto, Tajik, Urdu, and Uzbek.

This content focused on a wide range of targets, including the Taliban and countries like India, Iran, China, Türkiye, and others, employing a harsh rhetoric. China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and various Central Asian governments have been employing highly effective media strategies to transform national or ethnic themes into comprehensive ideological narratives to recruit dissatisfied individuals. So far, these propaganda efforts seem to have been successful in spreading the message of ISKP and attracting fighters from different nations.

The second aspect involved planning and executing attacks abroad. While its primary focus was on the Taliban, Pakistan, and India, the ISKP's global network for attacks became quite extensive.⁹

ISKP Attack, Recruitment, and Financing Networks Abroad



⁷ <https://www.iess.ir/en/interview/3405/>.

⁸ <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/islamic-states-central-Asian-contingents-their-international-threat#footNote5>.

⁹ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>.

In addition, the security forces thwarted at least ten operations by the organization in India (3), Iran (4), Germany (3), Maldives (1), Qatar (1), and Türkiye (3). The weight of ISIS had shifted from Syria to Khorasan, and the Korasan Province had begun to demonstrate global influence. The main issue here was whether the global-scale actions were hierarchically managed by the Khorasan Province or carried out independently by cells following the order "attack at every opportunity" as stated in the publications of IS-A (ISKP). It is challenging to predict the situation in other countries because we do not have enough evidence. However, we can make some inferences about the actions related to the Korasan Province in Türkiye.

We have started hearing about operations related to the Korasan Branch in Türkiye since 2023. The first of these was probably the arrest of a foreign national codenamed Abu Maymuna, described as an expert in homemade explosives and providing training in this field, on January 7, 2023, reportedly associated with the Afghanistan structure.¹⁰

Secondly, when Abdulmusair Gulboev was arrested in February 2023, we heard about the Khorasan Province again. According to his statements to the press, he claimed to be tasked with recruiting personnel for ISIS's structure in Afghanistan through Türkiye.¹¹ Abdulmusair Gulboev was identified as the responsible person for ISIS's so-called Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the so-called Mawara al-Nahr/Transoxiana Province in Türkiye. It seemed that their interest in Türkiye was more about transporting fighters to controlled areas than carrying out an operation.

Especially since the middle of 2023, ISIS's Khorasan branch, through its periodic publication "Voice of Khurasan," consistently have begun targeting President Erdoğan and Türkiye.



Following Erdogan's victory in the elections in Türkiye, the publication "Voice of Khorasan" dedicated extensive coverage to Erdogan's election triumph. When threats related to Türkiye began in "Voice of Khorasan," in June 2023, Tajik national Shamil Hukumatov (codenamed

¹⁰ <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/teror-saldirisi-hazirligindaki-deasli-2-terrorist-istanbulda-yakalandi/2782028>.

¹¹ <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/deasin-katliam-plani-4546580>.

Abu Miskin) was arrested in Türkiye on charges of recruiting fighters for IS-A (ISKP) and providing financial support.¹²

The blockchain intelligence platform TRM Labs stated that ISIS managed a significant network through cryptocurrency in Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia.¹³ According to TRM's claim, these funds were used for the release of ISIS members held in Syrian camps. Therefore, the Khorasan network was primarily involved in recruiting personnel and conducting financial operations, probably avoiding conflicts to ensure their safe execution.

On January 28, 2024, masked attackers at the Santa Maria Church in Sarıyer, Istanbul, demonstrated the capacity of a Khorasan Province-affiliated cell to carry out operations in Türkiye. Despite significant shortcomings in the supply of weapons during the attack, it indicated that, despite operations against ISIS, the logistics and extensive network of Khorasan in Türkiye could remain active and capable of carrying out actions.

What does the future hold for Türkiye

Will cells affiliated with the Wilaya of Khorasan consider Türkiye as a direct operational area, or will they decide on actions influenced by motivations such as Quran burning and the Gaza issue along transit routes? It is currently too early to answer this question. However, it is a reality that actions like Quran burning and issues like Gaza increase radicalization and motivate foreigners in Türkiye to take action for ISIS. We experienced firsthand that Quran burning incidents motivated attacks on embassies in Türkiye. Therefore, it is a fact that attacks on Islam's sanctities in the West trigger a process we call "hooligan radicalization" in our country.

Additionally, it is essential not to forget the relationship between the Khorasan Branch and Syria. ISIS has consistently campaigned for the rescue and transportation of women and children it sees as the legacy of Mujahideen held in camps in Syria, considering this issue of special importance. Türkiye is seen as a crucial crossroads in this regard. Therefore, considering Türkiye as an operational area may jeopardize the passage of women and children from these camps. The coming days will be a clearer test of ISKP's influence. However, especially the breadth of the immigrant stock in Türkiye, ghettoization, and uncontrolled migration should be seen as facilitating social structures for ISIS. Even if ISIS members are detained, they manage to stay inside through various means and migrant policies, finding a suitable environment to recruit new members. The post-October 7 process has offered new opportunities for ISIS. ISIS now has more motivation to attack Western targets, and recruitment has become easier due to increased anti-Jewish and anti-Western sentiments.

It should be noted that ISKP has expanded its international attack planning capabilities and increased its capacity to recruit fighters from many regions worldwide. Although we do not know the connection between these camps and uncontrolled areas in Syria, an examination of the organization's official publications reveals that it hosts jihadist travelers from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, China, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Maldives, the Philippines, Russia,

¹² <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/deasin-sozde-horasan-vilayeti-adina-faaliyet-yuruten-terorist-istanbulda-yakalandi/2928603>.

¹³ <https://tr.cointelegraph.com/news/evidence-crypto-usage-isis-trm-labs>.

Tajikistan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan. This shows that a constant network is moving, and these networks pass through Türkiye. From this perspective, it is more accurate to say that the strengthening of ISKP increases the risks for Türkiye. Perhaps our only consolation in this regard is that due to the operations of Turkish law enforcement and intelligence against ISIS, the organization's capacity to obtain serious weapons and explosives has decreased. The use of a blank gun turned into a weapon by the perpetrators in the attack on Santa Maria Church in Istanbul also demonstrates this. In this regard, the perpetrators had to carry out the attack hastily, quickly, and amateurishly. We can predict that future attacks will also be simple and individual actions. However, we must acknowledge that the migration and irregular migration stock in Türkiye pose a significant risk in the fight against ISIS.