



Tribal Turks

Turkish jihadists travel to fight in Afghanistan

*Turks have been travelling to fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan, launching raids from Pakistani tribal area bases. **Brian Glyn Williams** and **Bilun Erim** assess the prevalence of Turkish jihadist fighters abroad and the potential for greater activity in Turkey.*

KEY POINTS

- Apparently outraged by the injustices suffered by Muslims and driven by a yearning for martyrdom, Turks continue to travel to fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Unable to hide among local communities in Afghanistan, Turkish insurgents are predominantly involved in cross-border raids launched from Pakistan's tribal areas.
- In the past year, the Turkish authorities have cracked down on jihadist networks that support the insurgents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but risk provoking a violent domestic backlash.

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Turkey is making a significant contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Its officers commanded the force in 2002 and 2005 and it continues to maintain a sizeable contingent of more than 1,700 soldiers in the country. Turks are especially proud of their country's considerable contributions to building hospitals, schools and roads in northern Afghanistan, which is dominated by ethnic Uzbeks and Turkmen whom they consider to be *arkadaşlar* (ethnic brothers). Back at home, the Turkish media treats the few soldiers killed in Afghanistan as *şehits* (martyrs, from the Arabic word *shahid*).

However, there have also been more unsettling stories of Turkish *şehits* coming out of Afghanistan. Since around 2008, the Turkish press and an increasingly vibrant online jihadist media have begun to relay stories of Turks who were killed fighting alongside the insurgents rather than ISAF. In January 2011, for example, there were

reports that as many as nine Turkish insurgents had been killed in a United States operation in Afghanistan. An earlier account on a jihadist website listed 12 Turks killed in an unspecified air strike.

Jihadist propaganda

Many of the Turks who travel to fight in Afghanistan appear to be inspired by an outraged sense of *namus*, a Turkish word meaning to protect one's own honour by protecting one's female relatives and Muslim women in general.

This is clearly seen in a letter written by Turkish insurgent Bahri Şeker before he travelled to Afghanistan. Published after his death on the Turkish language jihadist website *cihaderi.net* in September 2010, it said: "Gracious God, they are tormenting our brothers and sisters, they are slaying babies and children. They are raping our *bacis* [sister or someone else's wife]. Make us soldiers of remedy. We know that victory will come, make us thy vessels my God. Make us your servants."



Afghan national army soldiers march towards their Turkish instructors, at a military training base in Egirdir, western Turkey, on 18 December 2009. Turkey makes a significant contribution to ISHF in Afghanistan, maintaining a contingent of 1,700 soldiers.

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death, I will tell people all the things I could not convey when I was alive.”

Perhaps surprisingly, Zehra supported her husband's sacrifice. “He got me used to the idea of martyrdom. I was already feeling that he would be a martyr, because he had fallen in love with martyrdom,” she said. “I am proud of my husband. If all the Muslim men were as sensitive as my husband, our brothers and sisters would not be living under such cruelty.”

A eulogy on the Turkish jihadist website *sehadedettakvimi.com* for Hamza Gürkan, a Turk from the Mediterranean town of Aydin, captured similar sentiments: “We did not forget our courageous brother Hamza Gürkan who provided valuable services in Afghanistan and who came from the Mediterranean.” The posting said Gürkan had set out for Afghanistan in October 2004 and was killed in an ambush in June 2006.

It is not just young men who have been drawn to Afghanistan from Turkey. Another epitaph posted on *cihaderi.net* for Mustafa Uykiz (alias Ebu Şamil) in September 2010 claimed he was born in 1969 and was a member of right-wing nationalist organisations before entering the world of Turkish jihadism and the conflict in the North Caucasus, where many Turks have fought alongside the rebels against Russian forces since the 1990s. “After he left these [nationalist] organisations, Uykiz completely turned to the Islamic movement and he educated himself in this area,” his epitaph said. However, he apparently never entered Russian territory. “He first went to Pankisi Valley [a valley in Georgia used as a staging area by Chechen rebels] and got an armed education and then returned to his own country,” it said.

Like other Turkish veterans of the fighting in the Caucasus, Uykiz tried to travel to Afghanistan, but was picked up by the security forces. “Even though he tried to go to Afghanistan a few times, he was not successful. He remained in Bagram prison [near Kabul] for eight months and was tortured there many times. Three months later [after he was released and returned to Turkey], he partook in *hijra* [the Turkish spelling for *hijra*, a religiously charged Arabic word for migration] to Afghanistan and was martyred there.” It was unclear from this posting when and where he was killed.

Interview with a sniper

While many of the Turkish jihadists' exploits in Afghanistan seem to end in death, at least one account posted on *cihaderi.net* in February 2011 spoke of continuing violence. Presented as an interview with a Turkish sniper who uses the alias Hamza Harbi, the account provides an insight into the world of Turkish and foreign jihadist volunteers in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

As is often the case with jihadist propaganda, Harbi claimed that the United States and its allies were near defeat and were under-reporting their

casualties. “America is no longer fighting to win, it is fighting not to lose and to keep up its prestige in the international arena. Before I started jihad, I was thinking that the numbers of American casualties and those lost in the battle, as reported on some sites, were propaganda. However, after I commenced jihad I realised that the casualties we inflict on the enemy with our numerous operations are actually underrepresented in media. In other words, Americans are hurt twice as much as you hear in the media.”

He also outlined the importance of his role as a sniper. “The psychological effect of sniper operations is great because we can make a camp full of Americans panic with just one bullet. They are not comfortable in their own camps, passing from container to container, or going to the toilet or changing shifts. And this tension is projected onto soldiers from the lowest ranks to the highest. An environment of anxiety seizes the camp.”

Harbi tried to convey the impression that he was a professional sniper, capable of picking off specific officers. “A sniper does not blast away at the first American soldier he sees. Our bullets are very precious. With his training and foresight, a sniper can determine who is a crusader commander at a camp, even though he does not have the symbols of his rank on his uniform, by his behaviour and the behaviour of other soldiers towards him.”

He also made bold claims about the superiority of jihadist snipers over their US counterparts: “Praise be to God, there were a lot of times that we shot Americans from 1,000, 1,100 metres. Before I went into jihad, I was influenced by the American sniper videos found on YouTube. I watched a lot of documentaries on this subject. I realised that these were nothing but shows for propaganda. Have you seen one precise American sniper shot in Afghanistan in the last 10 years?”

One reason for the insurgents' claimed superiority is that US soldiers were over-reliant on their cumbersome equipment, according to Harbi. “The American army is a force that is equipped with perfect technology. But the American army cannot fight without this technology. They would be lost without their GPS [global positioning system] and walkie-talkies. They cannot stand hunger and thirst, their load is so heavy that they cannot walk great distances. They would never take the risk and walk into regions where a helicopter cannot land or a vehicle cannot enter. Even if they wanted to, they do not possess the courage and the ability to do this,” he said.

This gives the insurgents a distinct advantage, according to Harbi: “We *mujahideen*, by contrast, walk kilometres to get to our camps, to reach their camps, raid them, perform assaults and then walk kilometres back to our own region. America causes casualties on our side with air bombardments and artillery strikes, but they are very unsuccessful in face-to-face combat. When the bullets start



Clockwise: 1. Ebu Zer is identified as the individual sat second on the right. 2. Ebubekir is seen training before he carried out a suicide bombing. 3. A Turk identified as Musab is flanked by two other jihadists. 4. Abu Usama al-Turki. 5. An image celebrating the 'martyrdom' of Mustafa Uykiz and Babri Seker.

flying around them, the American soldiers, 1.9 metres in height, try like moles to burrow into the earth."

He added that the insurgents were not reliant on supply lines for weapons, ammunition and other resources. "Light weapons are already abundant in the region. The ammunition in this region would not run out even if the war went on for 50 years. There is a tremendous amount of ammunition in the underground storage depots of the Taliban that was left over from the jihad against the USSR. Many of the Taliban vehicles are Ford Rangers that the Americans gave to the [Afghan] national army. Materials that come in the trucks for equipping the American army are captured in convoy ambushes by the mujahideen. We use the equipment we can and sell the rest in local bazaars," he said.

Nonetheless, he called on cihaderi.net's readers to send money. "My message to my Muslim brothers and sisters, in particular in Turkey, and the world in general, is that we do not need anything other than God to be able to wage jihad. But you really need to give your support to this jihad and spend money on this path of God," he said.

Harbi also admitted that he is operating in Pakistan, saying "the Pakistani army, which has sold its religion for very little reward, attacks us like hungry dogs despite their massive loss in lives

and properties. We attack the American army, but we merely defend ourselves against the Pakistani army."

Combat reports

These stories of 'courageous martyrs' and 'embattled' US soldiers appear to be encouraging a small but steady flow of Turks to travel to fight in Afghanistan. The mainstream Turkish media has reported that as many as 100 have travelled to the conflict zone, while jihadist websites have reported that as many as a dozen Turks have been killed in the fighting every year since 2008.

The presence of Turkish fighters is also noted in the 'Afghan war logs' released by the whistleblowing website WikiLeaks in July 2010. The US military documents note a series of engagements in Bermel, a district in northeast Paktika province that abuts the Pakistani tribal areas of North and South Waziristan, in which Turkish fighters were suspected of taking part. The first took place in May 2007, when a rocket was launched at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Bermel. After a similar incident later that month, a US military analyst noted: "The Turkish fighters appeared to use this indirect fire incident to gather knowledge on range from a previously unused [position]."

In July 2007, insurgents ambushed US soldiers as they returned to FOB Bermel. "It was most

likely initiated by Turkish fighters," the US commander noted. "The ambush fire was accurate and the [exfiltration] of the enemy was disciplined."

When FOB Bermel was again attacked with rockets in September 2007, the US military responded with an artillery barrage that apparently hit the insurgents as they withdrew towards the Pakistani border. The US military picked up an insurgent saying over the radio: "Nasrat, do you hear me? I hear somebody is injured. You do not hear anything else but this voice. This means everybody is hurt."

In October 2007, radio communications gave away the position of a group of at least 14 Turkish fighters. An unmanned aerial vehicle confirmed their location and two A-10 ground attack aircraft carried out air strikes. An hour later, a US patrol found a wounded insurgent, six corpses and part of a head at the scene of the air strikes. Based on the blood trails, the soldiers estimated that 15 to 20 insurgents had been killed or wounded.

A few days later, soldiers at FOB Bermel overheard Turkish fighters talking on the radio. "Brother, we are leaving. It has got 15 minutes on it," one said. A rocket was launched towards the base 15 minutes later, apparently having been initiated by a timer that minimised the insurgents' exposure to US counter-fire.

In November 2010, insurgents were overheard planning an attack on a combat outpost in Bermel district. Forewarned, US officers called in mortar, artillery and air strikes. The post-action report said that two Turkish fighters had been among the 30 insurgents killed in the battle.

Freelancers

The fighters mentioned in the WikiLeaks documents were led by Nasrat, described in an October 2007 US military report as “a Taliban commander overseeing Turkish foreign fighters repeatedly involved in initiating attacks against Task Force Eagle forces in southern Bermel district”.

However, Turkish jihadists do not seem to be concerned about whom they fight with. Militants identified with the ‘al-Turki’ alias that indicates they are from Turkey, or at least ethnic Turks, have appeared in videos released by various other jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda. For example, Musab al-Turki was part of a four-man suicide team that featured in an Al-Qaeda video released in July 2010. According to the video, the team attacked a security forces base in the Urgan district of northern Paktika on an unspecified date. One drove

a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) into the main gate of the base and then Musa al-Turki and two others attempted to assault it on foot. The attack featured in the video corresponds with reports of one carried out on 21 May 2010.

Videos released by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), an ethnic Uighur group from western China, have also featured ‘al-Turkis’. Both groups are based in Pakistan’s tribal areas. For example, in early 2009, the TIP’s media wing released a 40-minute video featuring an individual identified as Abu Usama al-Turki as he prepared to carry out a SVBIED attack in Pakistan.

Turks have also died in suicide missions on behalf of the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), an IMU splinter group that was heavily promoted by Turkish jihadist website *sehadtzamani.com*. In March 2008, the website released IJU statements and videos announcing that Cüneyt Çiftçi, a Turk from Germany, had carried out a SVBIED attack on a district centre in Khowst province. That attack was also claimed by the Afghan Taliban faction known as the Haqqani Network, which operates out of North Waziristan.

The relationship between the IJU and Turkish jihadist websites appeared to ebb with the emergence of Elif Medya, a jihadist media organisation dedicated to promoting a group of Turkish and German jihadists. As in the case of Çiftçi, this group served as a pool of volunteers for other organisations. In April 2010, Elif Medya released a

video featuring Ebubekir Turki, who was filmed as he purportedly carried out a suicide vehicle bombing in Pakistan on 28 July 2009. The Pakistani press reported that there had been an SVBIED attack at a security checkpoint near Miram Shah in North Waziristan on that day. The local Pakistani Taliban faction led by Hafiz Gul Bahadar claimed responsibility.

Elif Medya has faded in prominence since Salahaddin Turki and his German associate Eric Breininger (alias Abdul Ghaffar) were killed by Pakistani security forces in May 2010. Turkish jihadist websites described the former as a German-born Turk who ran Elif Medya.

While these videos suggest the Turks are happy to serve with any of the myriad of jihadist groups based in Pakistan’s tribal areas, a dedicated Turkish unit called Taifetul Mansura (victorious sect) announced its presence in April 2009, when Elif

‘The stories of ‘courageous martyrs’ appear to be encouraging a steady flow of Turks to fight in Afghanistan’

Medya published an interview with its leader. Kumatan (commander) Ebu Zer said he had fought in the North Caucasus for 15 years, but had returned to Turkey with some of his men in 2007. They tried to return to the North Caucasus the following year, but their efforts were thwarted by the outbreak of the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, so they travelled to Afghanistan instead. He said that on their arrival they had been assigned to a local group and given an area of operations. Taifetul Mansura did not just include Turkish fighters. When it released a video featuring all its fighters killed in 2009, they included Azeris, Uzbeks, Kazaks and a Tatar (an ethnic group predominantly found in Russia).

Domestic threat

The presence of Turks with links to Al-Qaeda has raised concern that they might return home to carry out attacks. There is already a precedent for this. Habib Akdaş met senior Al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan before the US invasion of that country in late 2001, according to an indictment that accused him of being the ringleader behind the co-ordinated suicide bombing attacks on synagogues and UK interests in Istanbul in November 2003. The indictment said Al-Qaeda leaders ordered his cell to attack Incirlik Air Base in south-east Turkey or Israeli cruise ships, but it instead went after easier targets in Istanbul. Akdaş was reportedly killed in Iraq by a US air strike in 2004.

While there have been no significant Al-Qaeda linked attacks in Turkey since then, the Turkish

authorities continue to periodically arrest suspected jihadists, although they rarely release many details. In the largest sweep to date, police detained more than 150 Al-Qaeda suspects in January 2010. Turkish media reports suggested they were suspected of disseminating jihadist propaganda and sending recruits, money and other resources to Afghanistan, rather than planning terrorist attacks in Turkey.

The Turkish media reported that the suspected leader of the Al-Qaeda group was Serdar Elbasa (alias Ebu Zer). It is unclear if this was a reference to the Taifetul Mansura commander who uses the same alias. The name cropped up again in October 2010, when another batch of suspects was arrested in raids carried out across Turkey. A security official was cited as saying they were members of the Turkish branch of Al-Qaeda, which was led by the Afghanistan-based Ebu Zer.

Another group of suspected terrorists were arrested in April. Again, the Turkish authorities released no details about what they were suspected of doing, but the media identified one as Halis Bayancuk, alleging that he was a former member of the Sunni militant group Turkish Hizbullah who was suspected of

being the leader of Al-Qaeda networks in Turkey. He denied that he was a member of a terrorist organisation in court.

While Turkey’s jihadists currently appear uninterested in carrying out domestic attacks, this could change if they perceive the security forces to be preventing them from fulfilling their religious duty by stopping them fighting in Afghanistan. Turkey has angered Russia by doing little to crack down on North Caucasus militants who operate out of the country or the Turks who support them, but may feel under more pressure to act against its own jihadists now they are attacking its NATO allies. It is even possible that Turkish soldiers could find themselves fighting fellow Turks in Afghanistan. ■

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Author

Brian Glyn Williams is associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. Bilun Erim is a research analyst at Middle East Technical University, Turkey.

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