

# Turkey/Syria - Latest ISIS attack on Kobanê implicates Turkey once more

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**This weekend ISIS attacked Kobanê from Turkish soil. While Turkish complicity in the attack is hard to prove, the events raises some important questions.**

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In the early hours of Saturday, November 29, on the 75<sup>th</sup> day of the resistance of Kobanê, the militants of the Islamic State launched yet another attack against the city. In the 2.5 months that ISIS has been besieging the predominantly Kurdish city at the border with Turkey it launched numerous attacks — ranging from indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas with tanks, mortars and heavy artillery to suicide attacks by individuals and car bombs (VBIEDs) — but never before did it attack the city from the north, from the Turkish side of the border.

For many international observers and Kurdish activists this fact confirmed once again that the Turkish state is in bed with the Islamist militants, and that the two are collaborating closely in their fight against the region's Kurdish population. Despite many clues pointing in this direction, one has to be careful in drawing too many conclusions from Saturday's attack.

At this point it is a well-established fact that ISIS launched its latest attack on Kobanê from Turkish soil, but the extent to which the Turkish military and/or state has been complicit in this event remains impossible to determine. Aaron Stein's Open Source Analysis [\[1\]](#) of the attack presents the possibility that ISIS entered Turkey without the latter's knowledge, crossing the border from Kobanê just a few hundred meters to the east of the border crossing before looping south and attacking the border gate from the north [\[2\]](#).

However, plausible as this might look on a map, when taking into consideration the heavy military presence at the border, with Turkish troops continuously patrolling the area with tanks and APCs, it seems highly unlikely — if not outright impossible — that two bomb-laden vehicles and a few dozen fighters could pass the border into Turkey unnoticed.

Moreover, according to reports by the YPG [\[3\]](#), the fighting between the city's defense forces and the ISIS militants ensued for the better part of the afternoon and for most of the time took place on Turkish soil. This means that even if the military wasn't complicit in ISIS' attack, at the very least they failed (or refused?) to engage with the militants when it became clear that they were armed and present inside Turkey's borders.

## **Turkish Support for ISIS**

Ever since ISIS commenced its attack on Kobanê the town has been cut off from the outside world. ISIS controlled the western, southern and eastern fronts and the hermetically sealed border with Turkey formed an unsurpassable border in the north. The Turkish armed forces (TSK) have maintained a heavy military presence at the border, with dozens of tanks stationed on hills overlooking Kobanê, regular patrols along the border fence and watch towers and outposts every few kilometers.

Nonetheless, despite the ubiquity of the Turkish armed forces in the border region, aspiring jihadists have been managing to cross the border from Turkey into Syria in large numbers [4] — in some cases even in broad daylight [5]. Reports and rumors of Turkish support for ISIS have been doing their rounds for months, but have become more persistent since Kobanê came under attack from ISIS in late September.

A selection of trustworthy reports on Turkish aid to the jihadists reveals that the Turkish government has been providing logistical, medical, financial and military support [6] by allowing ISIS fighters to ‘travel through Turkish territory to reinforce fighters battling Kurdish forces’; shipments of construction goods and materials to cross the border into ISIS-controlled territory [7]; that it has treated injured ISIS fighters and commanders free of charge in Turkish hospitals; that it facilitates the smuggling of oil across the border into Turkey from ISIS-controlled territory [8]; and that it even has been sending arms to the Islamist radicals [9] and provided them with intelligence in the form of satellite imagery and other data [10].

Other examples of links between ISIS and the Turkish political establishment — such as details on the release of 180 ISIS members in exchange for 49 Turkish hostages [11]; the impunity with which ISIS supporters attack and intimidate students at Istanbul University [12]; and the ease with which ISIS is able to draw a steady stream of recruits from the country’s poorer neighborhoods [13] — point towards at least some level of ideological agreement, if not outright cooperation, between the two parties.

## **ISIS as a Necessary Evil**

Turkey’s close relations with ISIS should be understood in the context of the difficult relationship with its domestic Kurdish population and its deep hatred for the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad. Not taking the full complexity of the region’s political power play into account — which would require a separate and more extensive treatment — but looking merely at Turkey’s disposition towards the conflict in Syria, one has to realize that from the perspective of the Turkish government ISIS is one of the lesser evils active in the region.

From the start of the Syrian revolution-turned-civil-war Turkey has been actively supporting anyone fighting against Assad, from the moderate revolutionaries of the Free Syrian Army to Islamist radicals such as the Al Nusra Front and ISIS. Turkey perceives these latter organizations not as a big threat to its own domestic security and at the same time believes that these parties have the best chance of overthrowing the Syrian dictator. Turkey’s perception of the Islamist militants can best be described as a ‘necessary evil’ — good enough to fight against Assad and other groups in the region, and not bad enough to actively endanger Turkish security.

Turkey’s alleged support for ISIS in the battle for Kobanê — or at the very least its refusal to support the Kurdish defenders of the city — stems from the fact that it views the Democratic Union Party

(PYD) as a sister organization of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which for more than thirty years has been leading an insurgency against the Turkish state. An autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria, led by a close ally of the PKK and based upon the principles of horizontal democracy, gender equality and environmental sustainability — the same values that also guide the Kurdish struggle in Turkey — might very well inspire Turkey's Kurdish population to voice similar demands and pursue similar goals, posing a possible threat to the territorial integrity of the Turkish state. This is why the Turkish government has been reluctant to support Kobanê's Kurds in their battle against ISIS.

## **ISIS Suffers Setbacks**

Back to the border.

The clashes started around 5:00am, Saturday morning, when ISIS launched its attack on the Mursitpinar border crossing. The advance of ISIS ground forces was preceded by the deployment of one VBIED and two suicide bombers, who attacked the border crossing from the north. This was the first time since the start of the conflict in Kobanê that the border crossing had come under direct attack from ISIS.

As a key strategic position for whoever wants to control the city, the border crossing had been subject to many attacks from ISIS already. Thus far, ISIS had been prevented from reaching the crossing as every attack was successfully repelled by the People's/Women's Defense Forces (YPG/YPJ) who have been defending the city alongside small contingents of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and 150 Peshmergas troops from Iraqi Kurdistan. However, where all previous attacks were launched from either the east or the south, where ISIS formerly controlled large parts of the city, Saturday's attack came from the north, from the Turkish side of the border.

Videos of the fighting show YPG forces engaged in a fight with ISIS members (who can't be seen in the video) [14]. The location of the fighters can't easily be determined, but around 1:20am a Turkish flag is visible, indicating that the clashes are taking place inside Turkey — at the train station close to the border, to be precise. The YPG fighters are firing towards the grain silos which are also in Turkey from where ISIS is shooting back at the defenders, as can clearly be seen in another video [15].

A third video [16] shows the damaged border gate which was allegedly blown-up when the VBIED detonated in its vicinity. This specific gate is situated on the Turkish side of the border, thus providing proof for the fact that the attackers actually entered from Turkey, and did not attack the border crossing from the east, as has been suggested by some analysts of Saturday's attack.

Throughout the day clashes continued, not only at the border, but also on the eastern and southern fronts where the YPG/YPJ successfully repelled several attacks by ISIS and where a number of tanks were destroyed. According to a statement from the YPG Media Center [17] the fighting at the border continued throughout the day, and for a large part took place on Turkish soil. The defense forces pushed back ISIS into Turkey — from there they are believed to have crossed the border back into Kobanê.

Ironically, what was supposed to be a shift in the balance in the battle for Kobanê in favor of ISIS, who has been losing a lot of ground in recent weeks after the arrival of some contingents of the FSA and Peshmergas in support of the YPG/YPJ, turned out to be one of its most disastrous defeats. By the end of the weekend more than 80 ISIS fighters had lost their lives in and around Kobanê.

## **Allegations and Denials**

If ISIS' attack was actually launched from Turkish soil — and this is in fact what the available evidence points towards — it raises a number of important questions that as of yet remain unanswered. To what extent was Turkey involved in the attack? If the TSK were not involved, how was it possible for ISIS to cross the border into Turkey with at least one vehicle filled with explosives and several dozens of fighters without being spotted? If ISIS was indeed fighting on Turkish soil, as the footage of the clashes implies, what action will Turkey take to prevent the Islamist militants from entering the sovereign territory of one of NATO's key allies in the future?

For Asya Abdullah, co-chair of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Rojava, there is little doubt that the attack was launched from Turkish soil. "All three directions are under YPG control. We are 100 percent certain that the ISIS suicide vehicle entered Kobanê through Turkey," she stated in a phone interview [18], commenting on the attacks.

"After all failed attempts to attacks from within Kobanê, ISIS thugs tried to carry out attacks from outside, from the border gate with Turkey," Asya Adbullah added. "We always wanted good relations with Turkey but they need to clarify their position. If they are against ISIS why are they allowing them to use their soil to carry out attacks against us?"

Referring to the significance of ISIS attacking Kobanê from the north, Nawaf Khalil, spokesperson for the PYD stated that: "[ISIS] used to attack the town from three sides. Today, they are attacking from four sides."

A statement by the government press office at the border town of Suruç [19] acknowledged that the Mursitpinar border crossing had come under attack, but denied that the attack was launched from Turkey. "The allegation that the vehicle in the mentioned attack reached the border gate through Turkish land is definitely a lie," the statement reads. It also denied claims that some unspecified Turkish officials had made a statement admitting that "the bomb-laden vehicle has passed the border from Turkey."

Unsurprisingly, the Turkish military denied that ISIS had been present in Turkey for an extended period of time: "A few ISIL militants entered Turkish soil during the clashes. While armored units rushed toward that region, ISIL militants left Turkish soil," anonymous military sources told *Hurriyet Daily* [20]. "The total duration of the time they stayed in Turkey has been measured as 1 minute and 39 seconds. Everything can be seen in the recordings."

## **What's Next?**

For many observers Saturday's attacks have proven once again that in the battle for Kobanê Turkey has sided with the Islamist militants. Where Turkey's logistical, financial and military support for ISIS remains hard to prove, the fact that the country's government has refused to lend any kind of support to the defenders of Kobanê and have prevented military and humanitarian aid from reaching the city on numerous occasions, shows that it cares very little whether Kobanê stands or falls.

As stated above, the extent to which Turkey was involved in Saturday's attack remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that ISIS launched its attack on the border post from Turkish soil, and even though there might be ways the militants could have crossed the border secretly, this is highly unlikely in the light of the TSK's close monitoring of the border and the heavy military presence in the region.

Consequently, the most likely explanation is that the Turkish military was to a certain extent aware of ISIS' intentions to cross the border and attack Kobanê from the north, but it might have misjudged the situation as they did not expect ISIS to cross with two VBIEDs and several dozen fighters.

Since the attack was successfully repelled, Saturday's attack can in fact be considered a victory for the defenders of the city. The most profound effects will probably be felt by the Turkish military and political establishment who were thoroughly embarrassed when mainstream media across the globe headlined that ISIS had launched its attack from Turkish soil. Turkey's NATO allies will undoubtedly demand some explanations as to how this could happen, and what they are going to do about it. As the battle rages on inside Kobanê, Saturday's events could eventually work out in favor of the defenders as more political pressure might be exerted on Turkey to start actively opposing ISIS.

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**P.S.**

\* Roar Magazine. December 2, 2014:

<http://roarmag.org/2014/12/isis-attacks-kobane-from-turkey/>

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## Footnotes

[1] <http://turkeywonk.wordpress.com/2014/11/30/the-is-attack-on-kobane-open-source-analysis/>

[2] <https://twitter.com/aaronstein1/status/539102016417435648>

[3] [https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B3t6l\\_HCIAEXUQ0.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B3t6l_HCIAEXUQ0.jpg)

[4] <http://www.dw.de/european-jihadists-use-turkey-as-transit-country/a-17632725>

[5] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfUt2iVO0m0>

[6] <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-and-turkey-cooperate-destroy-kurds-former-isis-member-reveals-turkish-282920>

[7] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akbfplUcjLU>

[8] [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/world/middleeast/struggling-to-starve-isis-of-oil-revenue-us-seeks-assistance-from-turkey.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/world/middleeast/struggling-to-starve-isis-of-oil-revenue-us-seeks-assistance-from-turkey.html?_r=0)

[9] <http://www.wnd.com/2014/10/turkey-providing-direct-support-to-isis/>

[10] more here

<http://www.nuhaber.com/haber/208/iste-turkiye-isis-cetelerine-tank-ve-muhimmat-verirken-kame>

ralara-yakalandilar-iste-o-goruntuler], here [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmYjBUF2AOk>], and here [<http://roarmag.org/2014/10/kurdistan-kobane-turkey-isis/>].

[11] <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/10/turkey-iraq-syria-isis-hostages.html>

[12] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/video-islamists-attack-students-protesting-isis-at-istanbul-university.aspx?PageID=238&NID=72219&NewsCatID=341>

[13] [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html?_r=1)

[14] [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2bcc99\\_isid-kobani-ye-turkiye-den-saldirdi-saldiri-geri-pu skurtuldu\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2bcc99_isid-kobani-ye-turkiye-den-saldirdi-saldiri-geri-pu skurtuldu_news)

[15] [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2bc89i\\_iste-turkiye-isis-isbirligi-isis-turk-askeri-gozetimi nde-tmo-dan-kobani-ye-saldiriyor\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2bc89i_iste-turkiye-isis-isbirligi-isis-turk-askeri-gozetimi nde-tmo-dan-kobani-ye-saldiriyor_news)

[16] [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2bcxk\\_mursitpinar-ypg-nin-denetiminde\\_news?start=64](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2bcxk_mursitpinar-ypg-nin-denetiminde_news?start=64)

[17] [https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B3t6l\\_HCIAEXUQ0.jpg](https://pbs.twimg.com/media/B3t6l_HCIAEXUQ0.jpg)

[18] [http://civiroglu.net/2014/11/30/pyd\\_asya\\_kobane/](http://civiroglu.net/2014/11/30/pyd_asya_kobane/)

[19] <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/11/29/govt-denies-isis-attacked-kobani-through-turkish-soil>

[20] <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-kurds-not-isis-hid-in-turkish-soil-during-kobane-clashes-army-sources.aspx?PageID=238&NID=75077&NewsCatID=352>