

Kazakhstan Crisis Exposes Limits of Turkey’s Reach in Central Asia

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Rapid developments in Kazakhstan in January 2022 outpaced the Turkey-led Organization of Turkic States’ ability to respond with more than offers of support to the Kazakh government. Ankara’s initial response to the Kazakh crisis was limited to calling for stability and peace.¹ Turkey accelerated its outreach to Kazakhstan, however, after the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) agreed to deploy troops into the Central Asian country. The CSTO deployment, the first time the organization invoked its collective security provision, likely motivated Ankara to take more vigorous steps to ensure Turkey retains a role in Kazakhstan.² Kazakhstan remains under a state of emergency imposed in response to widespread unrest that began with localized fuel protests.

On January 6, more than two days after protests spread across Kazakhstan, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to offer “any assistance if needed”—a symbolic offer as CSTO troops had already arrived in Kazakhstan.³ Kazakhstan is a member of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS, previously the Turkic Council). Erdogan and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu spent January 6 on calls with other OTS member states, including Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and OTS observer state Turkmenistan, discussing the situation in Kazakhstan.⁴ The OTS issued a statement on January 6 and held an extraordinary session on January 11.⁵ Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the only OTS members who are also part of the CSTO.

Turkey and other OTS member states likely approached the developments in Kazakhstan with caution before January 6 to avoid alienating a major regional partner in the event the protests succeeded in pushing out President Tokayev. However, the Russian-led CSTO’s support and increasing violence on the ground solidified Tokayev’s position enough for Turkey to spearhead an OTS response in support of the president.

Turkey’s outreach to Central Asia has origins in shared Turkic language and culture, but Ankara seeks to build a deeper cooperation network. Ankara’s political outreach to Central Asia dates to the 1990s, where its shared linguistic and ethnic heritage with the Turkic population

served as a common denominator to encourage cultural, political, and economic networks between Turkey and the region. At the time, a Turkey-led network offered the relatively young Central Asian states an opportunity to diversify their diplomacy and trade beyond Russia. Former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev was the first to propose the creation of the OTS and has traditionally been the most influential pro-Turkey and Turkic-affiliated voice in Kazakhstan. Countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan draw large Turkish investments and aid to this day. They also export valuable goods like oil to Turkey and serve as lucrative markets for Turkish businesses.⁶ The Turkish government seeks to upgrade these ties to an institutionalized and cohesive political network through which Turkey can expand its influence in Central Asia.

The unrest in Kazakhstan poses an important opportunity and test for Turkey's efforts to make the Organization of Turkic States an effective intergovernmental organization.

The political turmoil in an OTS member state and the CSTO's rapid response presents a chance for the OTS to serve as a legitimate political mechanism that successfully supports its stated goal of attaining "regional peace, stability, and prosperity." Alternatively, an anemic, late, or ineffective response from the OTS would paint the organization as toothless, especially juxtaposed against the CSTO's quick military response. The CSTO deployment displayed Russia's reach and efficacy as a political and military actor in Central Asia, which some Central Asian states may seek to counterbalance or dilute. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan—the two CSTO members within the OTS—may seek to diversify their partnerships beyond Russia. Kyrgyzstan's initial hesitancy to send servicemen for the CSTO mission and the short time Kazakhstan was willing to host CSTO troops suggests that neither government desires an extended Russian-led military intervention, even if the intervention was critical for Kazakh President Tokayev to remain in power.⁷ OTS members outside the CSTO—Turkey, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and observer-state Turkmenistan—may also seek new political and economic ties with regional partners to build alternatives to Russian power structures in Central Asia.

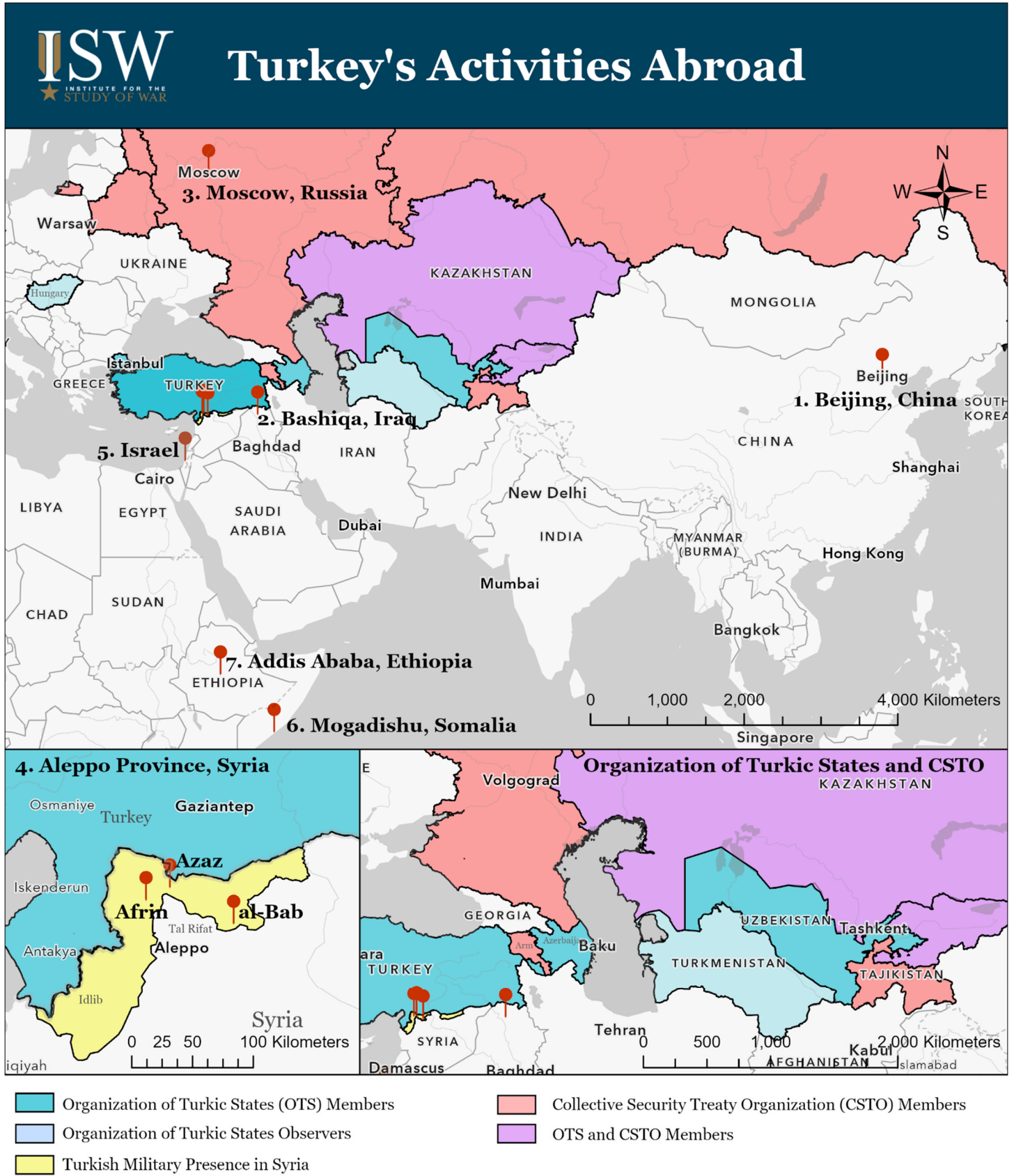
Russia's swift military and political play in Kazakhstan demonstrates the limits of Turkey's power.

Turkey's goals in Central Asia are misaligned with its capabilities in that region. Turkey has occasionally been able to balance or compete with Russia, but only under the right circumstances. For example, in Syria, Azerbaijan, and Libya, Turkey was able to leverage its competitive advantages to shape external conflicts in competition or cooperation with Russia. Turkey lacks such advantages in Central Asia. The Kremlin's swift action in Kazakhstan was a stark reminder to Turkey of Russia's greater capacity and willingness to take significant political and military actions for its partners. Russia was able to pass a CSTO decision and deploy troops to successfully protect Tokayev's position within hours. In contrast, Turkey's offer for "support" was late and mostly symbolic to a country with Russian troops already on the ground.⁸ Moreover, the waning influence of former Kazakh President Nazarbayev over Kazakh politics may further disrupt Turkish-Kazakh ties. The Turkish government also likely does not possess the decades-old institutional knowledge, personnel expertise, or political networks for Central Asia that it has for Europe, the United States, or the Middle East.

Turkey's outreach into Central Asia will likely aim to maneuver within Russia's superior and entrenched sphere of influence.

The OTS' ability to eventually coordinate and issue a joint response about Kazakhstan sets a new precedent in solidifying the network's focus on state diplomacy beyond language and culture commonalities. Moreover, it offers a precedent for Turkey's intent to be a stakeholder in the region's politics, despite its limitations. In the near term, Turkey will likely prioritize economic and energy outreach to the region as it strengthens the foundations of its political and security networks. Turkey can lay the groundwork for a greater footprint in the region by prioritizing

strengthened diplomatic channels, joint personnel training programs, counter-terrorism cooperation, and defense sales to OTS member states.



- 1. China hosted Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu on January 12 in a week that featured several Middle Eastern visits to Beijing.** Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing, China, on January 12 to discuss bilateral relations and economic cooperation opportunities between Turkey and China.⁹ The Chinese Foreign Ministry readout said that Cavusoglu and Yi discussed Belt and Road Initiative routes to Europe, cooperation in energy, technology, big data. Yi also called for Turkey to support China's security interests and non-interference in its domestic affairs and restated China's commitment to its 2019 currency swap agreement with Turkey.¹⁰ Turkey likely seeks to further economic cooperation with China to stabilize its struggling economy and may be willing to offer political concessions in return. The foreign ministers of several Middle East countries visited China the same week as Cavusoglu. China hosted Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian on January 14 and the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council secretary-general, between January 10-14.¹¹
- 2. Likely Iranian proxy militants attacked a Turkish military base in Ninewa Province, Iraq, on January 2, 15, and 16.** The attacks mark a significant uptick compared to 2021, when five similar attacks occurred over the entire year. Unidentified militants fired up to 13 122mm rockets from a truck in Abu Jarboua near Bashiqa, Ninewa Province, Iraq, at the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) base on January 26.¹² The militants fired two or three rockets at the same base on January 15 and three or four on January 16.¹³ On January 15, Iranian proxy-affiliated Telegram channels reported that the TSK shelled an unspecified location near where it claimed the attack originated.¹⁴ The increasing frequency of attacks could be retaliation for perceived Turkish interference in Iraqi Sunni coalition building and Iraq's government formation process to the detriment of Iranian interests. Turkey's increasing activities in the Caucasus and attempt to improve ties with Israel could also be triggers for the recent uptick in attacks. Iran's proxies are likely expanding their narrative of "resisting the occupation" to include the TSK as well as the US military presence in Iraq. The Turkish Defense Ministry has not commented on likely Iranian proxy attacks against TSK forces in Iraq since the first attack in April 2021, which killed one TSK soldier.
- 3. Turkish and Armenian envoys held their first meeting in Moscow on January 14 amid Armenian-Azerbaijani clashes.** Turkey and Armenia's appointed envoys for the Turkish-Armenian normalization process met for the first time in Moscow, Russia, on January 14.¹⁵ Turkish envoy Serdar Kilic and Armenian envoy Ruben Rubinyan exchanged "preliminary views" and agreed to continue the negotiations.¹⁶ The parties did not settle on the location or date of the second meeting, indicating outstanding disagreements. The normalization process aims to establish diplomatic ties and open the long-shut Turkish-Armenian border. Armenia seeks economic relief by gaining access to trade and energy routes that excluded the country as its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey have remained closed since its independence. Turkey seeks greater economic and diplomatic access into the Caucasus where it can position itself as a crucial trade lifeline for landlocked Armenia. Separately, the Russian mediation role indicates that the Kremlin seeks to insert itself into the normalization process to ensure regional stability efforts continue under Kremlin-preferred terms and to elbow out any formal US and European mediation role. However, ongoing clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces will likely set the pace of and possibly jeopardize the Turkish-Armenian talks.¹⁷
- 4. Unidentified militants conducted three IED attacks in Turkish-controlled Syria on January 13, marking the first IED attacks since November.** Unidentified militants

detonated three improvised explosive devices (IED) in Azaz, al-Bab, and Afrin in Aleppo Governorate, Syria on January 13. Militants detonated a car bomb in Azaz, killing a military police officer.¹⁸ Another militant detonated what was likely a suicide vest (SVEST) near a vehicle in a marketplace in al-Bab a few hours later.¹⁹ Local sources reported another IED attack near a Turkish-backed military base in Afrin that occurred simultaneously with the al-Bab attack.²⁰ Syria Civil Defense (commonly called the White Helmets) stated that the al-Bab and Afrin attacks killed two people and injured three. The Syrian Opposition Coalition and the Governor of Hatay Province in southern Turkey issued statements condemning the attacks.²¹ Separately, unknown militants detonated an IED at Faylaq al-Sham headquarters in Jinderes village, southwest of Afrin, in Aleppo, Syria on January 15.²² The IED attack killed two Turkish-backed Syrian National Army fighters from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. No group claimed the attacks, but, the local pro-Turkish and the Syrian opposition sources attribute them to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). On January 8, likely YPG militants killed three Turkish Armed Forces soldiers with an IED in Akcakale, Turkey, near Tal Abyad, Raqqa Governorate, Syria.²³ On January 11, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar announced that Turkey was conducting retaliatory strikes against the YPG; those strikes may have motivated the YPG to target Turkish-controlled northern Syria.²⁴

5. **Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says the Israeli President may visit Turkey for the first time since 2007.** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on January 18 that Israeli President Isaac Herzog may visit Turkey “soon.”²⁵ Herzog would be the first Israeli president to visit Turkey since Simon Perez’s visit in 2007. Erdogan held phone calls with President Herzog and Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on November 18 after Turkey released an Israeli couple who had been arrested on espionage charges; both the release and the calls indicate Turkey’s willingness to improve ties with Israel.²⁶ Erdogan also called President Herzog to offer condolences for Herzog’s mother’s passing on January 13.²⁷ Ankara’s outreach to Israel comes at a time of wider normalization efforts by Ankara toward Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Armenia, and others. Ankara likely seeks to improve its standing in the energy-rich eastern Mediterranean and mend ties with key regional players after its isolation in 2020.
6. **Al Shabaab targeted the Turkish military base in Mogadishu, Somalia on January 18, killing Turkish-trained Somali soldiers.** An al Shabaab militant detonated a suicide vest targeting off-duty Somali soldiers near a Turkish military training camp in Wadajir District, Mogadishu, Somalia. The explosion killed at least four people and injured ten others. Al Shabaab, al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, regularly targets Turkish and Turkish-linked targets in Somalia. The group conducted a similar attack targeting the Turkish base in Somalia in July 2021. The Turkish Armed Forces base in Mogadishu is part of TSK’s capacity-building missions to train partner forces abroad. The TSK has trained Somali security forces in its Mogadishu base since 2017, as part of a close Turkish partnership with the Somali Federal Government (SFG) that also includes humanitarian missions, economic ties, and educational exchanges. Turkish-trained forces are active in counter-al Shabaab operations. Al Shabaab seeks to remove the Turkish presence from Somalia and has focused on Turkey in its propaganda, including accusing Turkey of exploiting Muslims by participating in NATO.²⁸
7. **December satellite imagery confirms Turkish armed drone sales to the Ethiopian Government.** December 9, 2021 satellite imagery released in January 2022 confirms the presence of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 armed drones at the Harar Meda military airport in Bishoftu, south of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.²⁹ Diplomatic sources previously claimed Turkey negotiated the sales of its armed drones to Ethiopia on October 14.³⁰ The Turkish government did not confirm the sale despite a stark rise reported in Turkish defense and aviation exports to Ethiopia. The

Ethiopian Government uses armed drones for airstrikes in its Tigray region, including against civilians.³¹ The possible use of Turkish drones may draw domestic and international criticism of Ankara's opaque process for defense exports and arms sales. The sale could also challenge Turkey's attempts to normalize ties with Egypt, as Ankara seeks to mend ties with its Eastern Mediterranean neighbors.³² Egyptian security sources told Reuters that Egypt asked the US and European nations to "help it freeze any deal [between Turkey and Ethiopia]" and that Turkey would need to discuss the drone sales in ongoing normalization talks between Cairo and Ankara.³³

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¹ https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-2_-kazakistan-da-duzenlenen-protesto-gosterileri-hk.tr.mfa

² The CSTO declined Kyrgyzstan's request for its domestic unrest in 2010. Armenia also requested CSTO consultations during Azerbaijan's offensive into Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. Although, Armenia did not formally invoke.

<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2010/06/15/mirotvorcy-odkb-ne-budut-napravleny-v-kirgiziyu>

<https://www.interfax.ru/world/768966>

³ <https://twitter.com/tcbestepe/status/1479110004439347201>

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-in-solidarity-with-kazakhstan-erdogan-tells-tokayev>

⁴ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held one-on-one phone calls with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev about the developments in Kazakhstan on January 6. Erdogan did not talk with Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov despite Turkmenistan observer state status in the Organization. Cavusoglu also had a call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and the Caucasus.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-in-solidarity-with-kazakhstan-erdogan-tells-tokayev>

<https://twitter.com/iletisim/status/1479108211898601475>

<https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/bakan-cavusoglu-rus-mevkidasi-lavrov-ile-gorustu-642507.html>

⁵ https://www.turkkon.org/en/haberler/statement-of-the-organization-of-turkic-states-on-the-events-taking-place-in-kazakhstan_2430

⁶ <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/kaz/partner/tur>

<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/tur/partner/tkm>

<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/tur/partner/kgz>

<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/uzb/partner/tur>

⁷ Kyrgyzstan's presidential spokesperson said that "Kyrgyz servicemen will not be involved in any actions with the participants in the actions in the Republic of Kazakhstan" on January 6.^{xxxvii} Kyrgyzstan refrained from participating in the initial January 6 CSTO vote to send peacekeepers to Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Parliament only voted to do so on January 7

<https://ria.ru/20220106/kirgiziya-1766723008.html>

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-csto-troop-russia-analysis/31642847.html>;

<https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-sends-troops-to-kazakhstan-but-not-everybody-is-happy>

Kazakh Presidential Press Secretary Berik Uali said that CSTO peacekeeping forces will remain in Kazakhstan for no more than a week on January 9. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/09/01/2022/61db05649a79476d5a9ae996>

⁸ China made a similar security assistance offer <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-takes-terrorists-kazakhstan-china-offers-security-assistance-1667615>

⁹ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/xybfs_663590/gjlb_663594/2898_663796/2900_663800/202201/t20220113_10492427.html

¹⁰ https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202201/t20220113_10495243.html

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/china-meeting-gulf-iran-turkey-foreign-ministers-quick-order-2022-01-11/>

¹² <https://t.me/sabreenS1/38077>

<https://twitter.com/remilitari/status/1477939406350733313>

¹³ "In the Second Attack of its Kind a Missile Attacks Targets the Zlikan Base," *Shafaq*, January 15, 2022. [shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%80%D9%86/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86-](https://www.shafaq.com/ar/%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%80%D9%86/%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86-)

%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%87-%D9%82%D8%B5%D9%81-
%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AE%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81-
%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B2%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-
%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AF; “At least 3 missiles targeted the Turkish Zlikan base in Bashiqa, Mosul Governorate,” *Sabereen News Telegram*, January 15, 2022. t dot me/sabreenS1/39133

“A Missile Attack Targets the Turkish Zlikan Base in Northeast Mosul for the Second Time in 24 Hours,” *Al-Hadath*, January 16, 2022. <https://twitter.com/7dhn77/status/1482619377891655681?s=20>; “A Second Burst of 4 Missiles Target the Turkish Base Responding to the Artillery of the Turkish Occupation,” *Sabereen News Telegram*, January 16, 2022. t dot me/sabreenS1/39135

¹⁴ “A Second Burst of 4 Missiles Target the Turkish Base Responding to the Artillery of the Turkish Occupation,” *Sabereen News Telegram*, January 16, 2022. t dot me/sabreenS1/39135

¹⁵ https://www.mfa.am/en/interviews-articles-and-comments/2022/01/13/answers_Spox/11263

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-armenia-hold-talks-normalising-ties-2022-01-14/>

¹⁶ https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-18_-turkiye-ile-ermenistan-normallesme-sureci-gorusmeleri-hk.en.mfa

¹⁷ Most recently, Azerbaijan claimed Armenian forces attacked Azerbaijani positions near Kalbajar on January 8. Armenia claimed Azerbaijani forces attacked Armenian positions in Armenia on January 11.

<https://twitter.com/ArmeniaMODTeam/status/1480961521085730817>

<https://mod.gov.az/en/news/the-armed-forces-of-armenia-subjected-to-fire-the-positions-of-the-azerbaijan-army-in-the-direction-of-the-kalbajar-regi-38935.html>

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/SyriaCivilDef/status/1481638333889409024>

<https://twitter.com/khalediskef/status/1481666560720781313>

<https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1482269339298549761>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/Sy24ria/status/1481672396260081668>

https://twitter.com/syr_television/status/1481645484338913290?s=20

<https://twitter.com/SyriaCivilDef/status/1481682514682986504>

<https://www.yenisafak.com/ar/news/3553165>

²⁰ <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/234321/>

<https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1482269353961795586>

<https://twitter.com/nahermedia/status/1481672513805500418?s=20>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/SyrCoalition/status/1482238229327847424/photo/1>

<http://www.hatay.gov.tr/basin-aciklamasi130122>

²² <https://npasyria.com/en/70779/>

https://twitter.com/frank_william1/status/1482319086130544652

²³ <https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/812022-43273>

²⁴ <https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/1112022-53622>

²⁵ <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/israeli-president-herzog-may-visit-turkey-erdogan>

²⁶ <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/herzog-erdogan-make-diplomatic-overtures-after-jailed-israelis-freed-685350>

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-thanks-erdogan-for-releasing-israeli-couple-in-first-ever-call-between-them/>

²⁷ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-calls-herzog-to-offer-condolences-for-his-mothers-passing/>

²⁸ <https://kriterdergi.com/dosya-afrikada-turkiye/rekabetci-afrika-pazarinda-turk-savunma-sanayiinin-artan-varligi>

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/12/drone-sales-could-dampen-turkeys-african-venture>

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-to-train-13-of-entire-somali-military-envoy-says/news>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBcKMnTKZno> RUMINT on Somalia’s purchase of Bayraktar TB2 drones

²⁹ <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/blogs/turkish-drones-join-ethiopias-war-satellite-imagery-confirms>

³⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-expands-armed-drone-sales-ethiopia-morocco-sources-2021-10-14/>

³¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/8/dozens-killed-in-ethiopian-air-strike-on-idp-camp-in-tigray>

³² Ethiopia is at odds with Egypt and Sudan due to the former’s hydropower dam construction on the Nile. Egypt and Sudan are concerned that the dam’s construction will affect their downstream access to the river’s waters.

³³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-egypt-pledge-further-talks-normalise-ties-after-2nd-round-2021-09-08/>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-expands-armed-drone-sales-ethiopia-morocco-sources-2021-10-14/>