

TURKISH ATTACKS ON KEY CIVILIAN AND ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

**Impact report on threats to livelihoods
and the environment in northeast Syria**

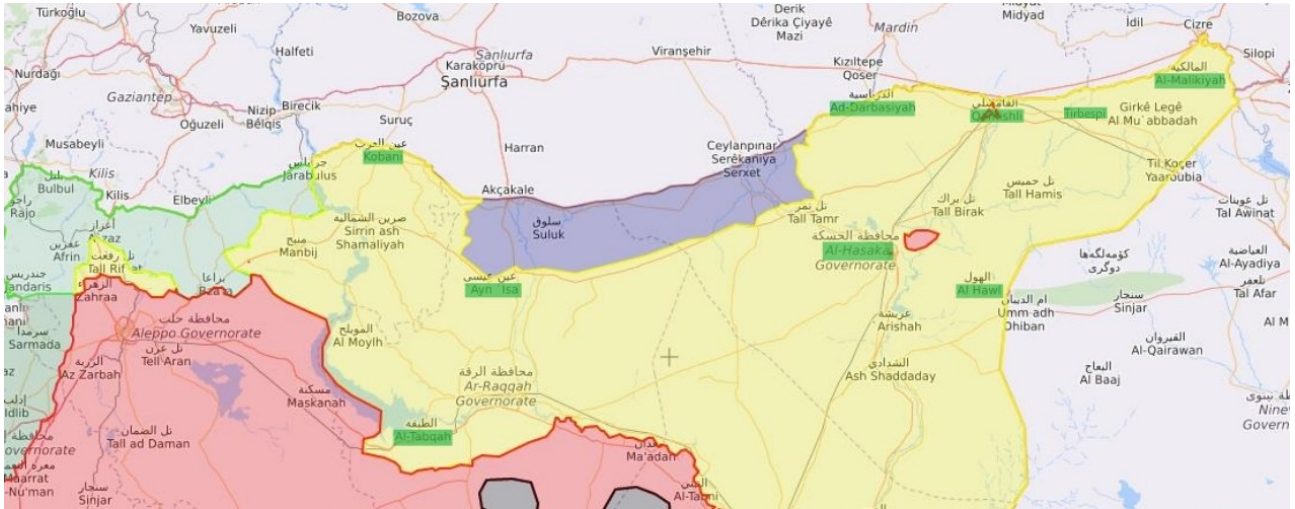


A Dossier by Make Rojava Green Again



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yellow: Region of the AANES (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria)

red: Syrian Government area

grey and blue: Area occupied by the Turkish state and its militias

green: from left to right: Kobane, Ayn issa, Tabqa, Derbasiye, Hasakeh, Al-Hol, Qamishlo, Tirbespi, Derik (Al-Malikiyah)¹

1 Map: <https://syria.liveuamap.com/> 10.12.2022

Picture on frontpage: www.voanews.com/a/us-official-urges-de-escalation-as-turkey-strikes-syria/6850484.html



1 INTRODUCTION

In this report we evaluate the impact of the recent Turkish attacks on northeast Syria. Since most of the attacks were aimed at key civilian and economic infrastructure, the everyday needs of the population are now in a precarious balance. This is in addition to the civilians and military personnel who have lost their lives. The latest attacks leaves little doubt as to their aim. By undermining the economic basis of the country and bombing crucial food supplies, the Turkish regime wants to force the population flee to open the way for demographic change following a planned ground invasion. Turkey has employed this tactic before in Afrin in 2018, and in Serekaniye and Gire Spi in 2019. These regions are still under Turkish occupation and have been drastically transformed demographically.

Northeast Syria is a unique region in the Middle East, differing in many ways from the countries around it. First and foremost it is not a state, but a democratic confederal system represented by an autonomous self-administration. In January 2014, three cantons of the region declared autonomy. Since then the people of the north, and afterwards also the east, of Syria have built up and developed the system. Its paradigm is based on three pillars: grass-roots democracy, women's liberation, and ecology (social ecology).

Social ecology is the science of people's relationship with their natural and social environments. The core of social ecology is an understanding that the global climate crisis cannot be divorced from the societal question. Social relations of power and domination as well as the population's mindset and lifestyle, are closely linked to the climate crisis that we are witnessing today.

“Democracy is the antithesis to the state, dissociates itself from it and represents a self-organized regulation of the processes of societal self-coordination. In such a society, production of commodities can only take place in the sense of a cooperative, ecological and decentralized mode of production.”²

2 Quote: MRGA-Book, 2018 Dog Section Press

Picture: Internationalist Commune



Demonstration in Derik, October 2021

Through its social, political and economic system, northeast Syria has made important first steps in building social ecology, be it the communes at the base of the society's self-governance or the cooperatives building economic self-sufficiency.

However, building up an ecological society, especially in a region that has been colonized for hundreds of years and is in the midst of a decade long war, comes with many difficulties. Alongside ongoing military confrontations, the peoples of northeast Syria have been facing brutal colonial policies for decades instituted by both Syria and Turkey. These policies have targeted all areas of people's lives, from culture to politics, from ecology to the economy. In the following section we want to focus on Turkey's colonial policies towards northeast Syria and the long-term low-intensity war that Turkey has been waging on both humans and nature in the region.



2 TURKEYS LONG-TERM LOW-INTENSITY WARFARE

2.1 WATER SUPPLY UNDER THREAT

The most harmful natural resource that Turkey has employed as a weapon against the people of northeast Syria is water. More than 5 million people throughout the provinces of Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo and Deir Ez-zor in northeast Syria are dependent on water from the Euphrates river, which originates in Turkish territory. The river is of critical importance for water, food and energy security across the region, especially given that the summers in the region are getting hotter while rainfall is decreasing every year.

However, in the last years Turkey has built 22 dams along the Euphrates river in its territory as a part of its “Southeastern Anatolia Project”. The dams give them the ability to control and cut the water flow.

The Tishreen Dam in Tabqa in northeast Syria, which produces energy for the region, is forced to operate with less than half of the water volume required to ensure the dam’s optimal functionality and at just over one meter above the dam’s dead level.³

The Euphrates river is drying up, which will eventually lead to water pumping stations not being able to produce enough energy. Farmers are already forced to use diesel-run generators to irrigate agricultural crops.⁴

Using water as a weapon is of course an attack on a humanitarian level as well. In the past few months, the situation in the region regarding water reached a particularly acute point. As a result of lack of water for hygiene, and stagnant, dirty water in the river areas, diseases are spreading. In the last few months, more and more cases of cholera have been identified, transmitted via water.⁵

3 IMMAP, Water Dynamics, Crises and Challenges in North-Eastern Syria, 11 July 2021

4 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/05/syrian-government-calls-turkey-release-euphrates-water#ixzz7mUBcXtnY>

5 Northeast Syria Cholera Outbreak Brief, 21.9.2022 reliefweb.int



Turkish cuts to the water flow are a danger on a humanitarian and economic level. Destroying the lifeblood of the region's agriculture, which is the biggest sector of northeast Syria's economy, has disastrous effects on the economic situation of the region, which is already suffering from a long-term embargo.



The Euphrates river is drying up

2.2 DEFORESTATION IN TURKISH-OCCUPIED REGIONS

Another major threat to north Syria's environment is the large-scale felling of trees in the areas occupied by Turkey and Turkish-backed jihadists, such as Afrin, Gire Spi and Serekaniye. In Afrin, which has been occupied since 2018, millions of trees have been either cut down and sold on the market or simply burnt. In the first three years of the occupation, Turkish-backed Syrian militias cut down nearly 1.5 million trees, including 650,000 olive trees. Among those olive tree are many that were more than a hundred years old. The Afrin region is known for its olive tree rich landscape and was the greenest region in north Syria until the occupation.⁶

⁶ <https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-backed-militias-cut-down-nearly-1-5-mln-trees-in-afrin-report/>
Picture: <https://mesopotamia.coop/euphrates-river-is-drying-up/>



3 TARGETING CIVILIAN INFRASTRUCTURE IS A WAR CRIME

What constitutes a “war crime” has changed and evolved over time. Today the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines “war crimes”, as, among other things:

- “(i) Intentionally directing attacks against the civilian population as such or against individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities;
- (ii) Intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects, that is, objects which are not military objectives;”⁷



The ICC in The Hague



Turkey's President Erdoğan

⁷ <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/RS-Eng.pdf>
Pictures: Google Images



It is clear that attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure have to be understood and treated as war crimes. Like in any other international case there must be an investigation conducted by an independent authority, to gather evidence against the allegations in preparation for the trial. In the case of the Russian-Ukrainian War a UN-led investigation was recently launched.⁸ However in regards to the unrelenting Turkish aggression against northeast Syria, the United Nations has yet to meet their obligations of ensuring peace.

4 ONGOING ATTACKS ON KEY CIVILIAN AND ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE

On November 20th, Turkey launched a large-scale aerial assault using fighter jets as well as UAVs against the regions of northeast Syria, stretching from Derik on the Iraqi-Turkish-Syrian borders to the Beluniye village in Shehba district, 40 kilometers north of Aleppo city. The sites hit extend across both US and Russian-controlled airspace, suggesting that both countries gave the green light for the attacks. The aerial bombardment has so far focused on civilian infrastructure and service facilities. The Turkish aircraft also conducted double-tap strikes targeting civilian medics and journalists. While most of the critical infrastructure was hit between November 20th and 27th Turkey continues to hit villages with fighting jets as well as drones. The villages across the whole border region with Turkey and especially the ones nearest the previously occupied region of Serekanyie, get shelled on a daily basis by mortars and heavier artillery.

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/un-investigation-examining-devastating-attacks-ukraine-infrastructure-2022-12-02/>



4.1 FOOD, WATER AND OTHER CIVIL INFRASTRUCTURE

Six out of the ten Dahr Al-Arab grain silos in Derbasiye were heavily damaged or destroyed by airstrikes on the 20th of November. Repairs of the silos, which were storing 1,000 tons of corn, will reportedly cost \$150,000. Dahr Al-Arab⁹ was not the only target aimed at destroying the population's food supply. Grain silos in Zirgan, Ayn Issa and Tal Berhem were also attacked and damaged.¹⁰ These attacks have led to the loss of tons of grain, during a period of already precious food insecurity across all of Syria as a result of years of water shortages and damage to crops due to the war. Farmers, especially along the border with the Turkish state, have been experiencing military aggressions for years. The frontline and border villages are sporadically shelled throughout the whole year. Now, in the recent escalation of attacks, the areas under shelling have expanded to include civilians in new regions. The bombs have primarily hit

⁹ <https://npasyria.com/en/88101/>

¹⁰ <https://womendefendrojava.net/en/2022/11/29/dossier-overview-turkish-attacks-on-infrastructure/>
Picture: <http://hskurd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/KRC-Report-nb.-1-November-22-1.pdf>



family homes, streets and farming land, but have also fallen on schools, hospitals, mosques, churches and civilian cars. The only bread-factory in the region around Al Raba'at was shelled twice.¹¹ On November 23rd the Newroz Company in Qamishlo was hit by mortar and artillery shells. The company has the main responsibility for food distribution across the entirety of northeast Syria.¹²

Muhammad Ali Al-Hassan recalls the moment airstrikes hit the marble factory where he used to work: “We heard a drone flying above the village, and seconds later the first strike hit in front of the marble factory at the entrance of the village on November 20th. The second hit behind the village, and a mortar shell fell on empty fields.” Damaged, the factory closed, depriving Al-Hassan of work. But despite losing his weekly wage and some equipment, Al-Hassan is relieved to stay home since the bombing in the countryside of Al-Qahtaniyah. “We feel fear and danger here,” he said, trembling as another drone crossed the sky.¹³



A boy sitting on an oil-barrel in Hasakeh

11 <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/new-war-crime-turkish-occupation-targets-bakery-of-al-rabaat-village-h34216.html>

12 <http://hskurd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/KRC-Report-nb.-1-November-22-1.pdf>

13 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/escalating-turkish-strikes-cripple-civilian-infrastructure-across-northeast-syria>

Picture: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/escalating-turkish-strikes-cripple-civilian-infrastructure-across-northeast-syria>



4.2 GAS AND OIL INFRASTRUCTURE

Dozens of strikes have targeted the oil and gas rich region of Jazira. “Across the area ranging from Derik to Al-Qahtaniyah, all the oil fields are idle, and pumps have stopped,” Abdul Latif Ahmed, an employee of the oil company Oda states. By targeting oil fields, Turkey is crippling the AANES’ finances and its ability to pay SDF fighters. But the strikes also directly affect civilians. “This will impact the local population and the AANES, it will impact electricity, gas, gasoline and diesel... especially as we approach winter,” Latif Ahmed said.¹⁴

Turkey targeted oil fields in Laylan, Cil Axa, as well as Al-Odeh and the Dicle oil field close to Tirbespi, where they attacked three days in a row starting on November 22nd. AANES' Energy Board co-chair, Ziyad Rostem, stated that proper repair works are unable to go forward in many of the locations hit, due to fear of another strike. Even before these strikes, the production of fuel in northeast Syria was conducted at a very low level technically due to the lack of parts and expertise, and a material and intellectual embargo on the region. Since the existing demand exceeds the capacity of the existing refineries, much of the crude oil is processed to a very basic level of purity. This reinforces the negative impact of an already heavily polluting oil industry. Both the production and transportation of oil products are associated with pollution of the environment, in the soil, water and air. This damage is particularly visible in the ponds created by the extraction and processing of the oil. Due to the embargo, there are currently no technically or financially feasible methods for avoiding this ecological burden in northeast Syria.¹⁵ The oil-processing and distributing stations in Dahol, Ali Agha, Eloqose, Al-Saieda, Waziriya, near Tirbespi as well as Mashouk and Gel Hesnak station close to Qamishlo, were widely attacked by the Turkish state. Dijla next to Qereçox was targeted on two different occasions. In addition the fuel distribution stations in Al-Odeh, Tirbespi, Al-Tifleh & Deirna Qalenga in Qamishlo canton were targeted.¹⁶ The biggest fuel needs in northeast Syria are for emergency electricity (provided by small generators) and transportation. In winter, stoves heated with diesel are, next to electro-heaters when electricity is available, the main way residents heat their homes.

14 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/escalating-turkish-strikes-cripple-civilian-infrastructure-across-northeast-syria>

15 MRGA-Book, 2018 Dog Section Press

16 <https://womendefendrojava.net/en/2022/11/29/dossier-overview-turkish-attacks-on-infrastructure/>



Oil tank in Al-Odeh



Destroyed gas infrastructure in Suwaidiyah



2 out of 3 gas turbines destroyed
5 out of 6 oil turbines destroyed
2 remaining turbines damaged

Hours after the airstrike in Suwaidiyah



Aside from the oil-infrastructure, Turkey also targeted the gas plants in Alkamia, South of Afrin, Al-Suwaidiyah, Derik and in Til Koçer where three civilians were injured. The attacks on the infrastructure in Al-Suwaidiyah put two of the three gas turbines, and five of the six oil turbines completely out of service. Both of the remaining turbines were damaged. The gas factory produces all the household gas bottles for the whole region of northeast Syria. It has to be noted that imported gas-bottles are around five times more expensive than those that are locally produced. In addition, power was cut off from the areas around Derik, Kocherat, Cil Axa, Qamishlo, Tirbespi, and Girke Lege, an area which includes several hundred villages. The power plant of the gas field normally supplies around 50% of the region's electricity.¹⁷

Ekrem Suleyman works in the Jazira region's Department of Electricity, "these places which have been attacked, they are very well-known spots, and have been precisely targeted. The oil fields and the power stations, where all the power of the region is produced. By targeting and collapsing these spots, these buildings, these fields, Turkey knows how to make instability here. In the region in general, if the fields and power stations are gone, this is a massive problem. It will cause displacement and force migration. It is also a big economic problem".

In the oil and gas facilities bombardments, at least six civilian injuries were reported: two engineers, Yasser Sattam and Abdul Karim Abdo, as well as four other workers, Abdurrahman al-Ahmad and Ibrahim al-Muhammad, Abdul Munim Khalifa, Ziyad El Habib.¹⁸

17 <https://womendefendrojava.net/en/2022/11/29/dossier-overview-turkish-attacks-on-infrastructure/>

18 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/>

Pictures: <https://npasyria.com/en/>



Injured engineer

The power station Mezkefta, near T'irbespi, Teqil Beqil and Tal Fares, Hasakeh were directly targeted by the strikes with heavy artillery, UAV strikes, and air raids. In Mezkefta and Tal Fares two workers were injured and the station was damaged. The attack on the power station in Teqil Beqil, close to Derik on the 20th of November, had the most severe consequences. The station was destroyed and caused a power outage in the 65 surrounding villages. The attacks caused an estimated half a million dollars in material damage. The power station was also responsible for providing electricity to a water pumping station in the district which is now out of service, as well as the local hospital. In the initial strike, one worker at the station was killed. Civilians and medical personnel quickly came to the site to help. Turkey then bombed the same location again, killing eleven of the civilians who had gathered there, and injuring six.

The names of the civilians killed have been confirmed as: Husin Ali, Isam Abdullah (Journalist), Chichak Harouni, Hilal Qasim, Hadia Abdullah, Mazin Osi, Husin Khilto, Noury Chafchi, Fayez Abdullah, Mahmoud Ali, Abid Khalid.¹⁹

¹⁹ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/>

Picture: <http://hskurd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/KRC-Report-nb.-1-November-22-1.pdf>



4.3 DESTROYING LIVELIHOODS

Turkey's widespread attacks are endangering the livelihood of the people in the region more than ever before. The destruction of villages, farmland, public buildings and even hospitals has taken a heavy toll, increasing poverty and robbing the population of a vision for the future. The attacks on industrial facilities have released toxic gases and chemicals resulting in further pollution of the air, water and agricultural land, which flows into the food. Mixed with dust from the destroyed buildings, the toxic remnants of war find their way into citizens' respiratory tracts. The long-term consequences are as yet unknown.

It will take months to bring the destroyed plants, grain silos and oil fields back into regular operation. Large parts of the population in northeast Syria had only limited access to electricity before the attacks, and now the situation has gotten even worse. Large-scale winter aid for the region, which seems to be a matter of course for Ukraine, or support for reconstruction, has not yet been announced by the international community. Instead, it can be assumed that the self-government and the population will once again be left to their own devices. Rojava's geographical reality and climatic conditions make it suitable for various forms of renewable energy production, especially solar. Renewable energy would reduce people's dependency on both the centralized hydro-electricity system and fossil fuels. A more decentralized system would be less easy to militarily target as well. As mentioned above, a huge factor preventing the further development of energy autonomy is the economic embargo on the region, which also affects the repair of existing infrastructure, such as the hydroelectric power plant in Tabqa.

The embargo influences the people's daily lives, which are marked more and more by rising hardship. The reality on the ground is contributing to increased migration out of the region. This is exactly Turkey's goal: to open the way to realize its own plans for demographic change in the area.



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.²⁰ Erdoğan will continue this war - whether with a ground offensive or 'just' through more drone strikes, shelling villages at the border and restricting the flow of water into the region. This war of aggression, which is destabilizing the entire region, economically as well as ecologically, has to end.



Public burial of the victims of the November 20th in Derik



Young women at the burial

20 <https://womendefendrojava.net/en/2022/11/22/dossier-background-information-turkish-war-against-rojava/>



5 CONCLUSION

The economic and environmental challenges in Rojava/northeast Syria are enormous. The ongoing war prevents, or at least slows down, any possibility for a rapid change and development in the ecological, economical as well as in the social dimension. Rojava exemplifies how strongly ecological problems are interwoven with social and economic issues, how state-imperialism, war and the exploitation of humans and nature are interconnected. For the foreseeable future, some contradictions cannot be resolved, but the heavy effects the escalating war has on the environment can be minimized as long as the military defense of the people keeps being successful. Appropriate measures can be implemented without major investments of resources or money. The defense against the Turkish state and its allied Islamist groups, including the IS, as well as the foundation for the ecological change and awareness lies in the organization of the villages and neighborhoods. It has to be rooted in decentralized communes. Like the resistance against the illegitimate, brutal attacks, the way out of the dead end of the ecological catastrophe, brought about by capitalist modernity, require effort, the courage to break new ground and sacrifice. What we witness in northeast Syria is not free of contradictions, and the people face huge challenges. But what is definitely existing and can be felt in many small moments, is the unbroken potential to revolutionize the fundamental way people live with each other.

After all the sacrifices the people of northeast Syria made in order to establish their self-governance, they have the right to live in peace and to have the chance to further develop their own system. The region can and should be able to flourish without being attacked by the Turkish, or any other, state.

The MRGA-Committee,

10. December 2022



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