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TURKEY'S ATTACKS IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA, AL-HOL CAMP, AND THE BATTLE AGAINST ISIS.

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Background

Turkey has severely escalated its offensive in North and East Syria (NES), and Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is maintaining that plans remain in place for an eventual ground invasion. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have warned that Turkey's current attacks pose a threat to the region, and the world as a whole, because they severely undermine the fight against the so-called 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS). This explainer examines the current situation in al-Hol camp and the relationship between Turkish attacks and ISIS activity.

Turkey began an aerial military operation in NES at 00:00, November 20th, using the unclaimed bomb attack in Istanbul on November 13th as pretext for the offensive. Employing 70 warplanes and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs),¹ Turkey carried out a string of aerial attacks across NES (and parts of northern Iraq), over both United States (US)- and Russian-controlled airspace. Seemingly, both the US and Russia gave the green light for the attacks. In tandem, Turkey intensified its usual heavy weapons strikes on villages near its border and near the Turkish-occupied areas of NES. As of November 30th, Turkey's attacks have killed 14 civilians² (including 1 journalist) and injured 35 (including 1 journalist), according to RIC data. Turkey has also extensively and systematically targeted essential civilian infrastructure: oil fields, gas facilities, electricity power stations, medical buildings, schools, and grain silos.³ In addition to this, some military positions of the SDF, as well as of Damascus' Syrian Arab Army (SAA), were hit. Within this period of escalated Turkish offensive activity, three particular incidents again threw into the spotlight the relationship between Turkey's attacks in NES and the strength of ISIS in Syria and beyond.

1: Turkish drone strike on US-SDF base

On November 22nd, a Turkish drone strike on a joint US-led Coalition and SDF base killed two of the SDF's Anti-Terror Unit (YAT) members. A further three YAT members were injured. Coalition-SDF bases exist for enabling cooperation, planning, and training. While the SDF does the concrete legwork in Coalition operations, with its clear record of being the most willing and effective fighting force to battle ISIS on the ground, the US' role is more intelligence and aerial weapons-based.

2: Turkey shells the vicinity of "Jerkin" prison in Qamishlo

1 <https://tass.com/world/1540015>

2 An earlier version of this text said 16 civilians. It was later determined that two people killed who were working as guards at a grain silos were SDF soldiers, not civilians.

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

On the morning of November 23rd, Ferhad Shami, head of the SDF Media Center, stated that Turkish bombing had targeted the vicinity of the Jerkin prison, which holds ISIS detainees.⁴ Local news reported the attack was carried out by shelling on the perimeter of Jerkin, west of Qamishlo. Two shells were fired, landing 100m from prison, which a military source told RIC holds both ISIS members and informants from Turkey's intelligence agency, MIT. The source added that since this shelling, drones have unceasingly been circling the sky above the prison.

3: Turkish drones target a security post of al-Hol camp guards

On the evening of November 23, Turkish UAVs targeted three times a checkpoint of al-Hol camp security forces, close to the Iraqi border. This attack killed 8 SDF soldiers, who were camp guards. Initial reports indicated a breakout attempt occurred immediately after the strike, as camp inmates sought to take advantage of the chaotic situation. SDF Media stated soon after, "the exceptional security situation in Hol camp is now under control", and that 6 escapees - members of ISIS families - were caught and detained.⁵ A military source has told RIC that Turkish reconnaissance aircraft have remained hovering over the camp since.



The SDF released the identities of the soldiers killed in Turkey's strike on the camp security checkpoint.

4 https://twitter.com/farhad_shami/status/1595342572322529281
5 https://twitter.com/farhad_shami/status/1595491538230018054

Other attacks on NES' security forces in Turkey's recent assault included a suicide drone hitting an Asayish (internal security forces) checkpoint in Zirgan, leaving one Asayish member dead and two injured, and targeted shelling of the Syriac Sutoro forces' center near Tirbespi.

Al-Hol camp and ISIS

Al-Hol camp is a refugee camp located 45 km east of Heseke city in NES, initially set up to house Iraqi refugees fleeing from ISIS. However, following the defeat of ISIS in Baghouz, its final stronghold, thousands more women and children were brought to al-Hol, pushing the camp to its breaking point. Al-Hol camp was constructed to support 20,000 people, and later expansion efforts brought its intended capacity up to 40,000. It now houses 53,845, according to RIC data. The camp's resources are stretched thin, the humanitarian and security situation inside is dire,^{6,7} and camp staff are overburdened. The camp's residents include 18,470 Syrians and 27,459 Iraqis in the 'mixed' section, comprising of [1] local refugees who fled ISIS, [2] those who had lived under ISIS rule until the arrival of the SDF's "liberation campaign",⁸ and [3] ISIS-linked women and children with Syrian or Iraqi nationality. A separate 'annex' houses 7,916 foreign, ISIS-linked women and children.



6 <https://www.msf.org/danger-and-desperation-syria%E2%80%99s-al-hol-camp-report-msf>
 7 <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/deaths-two-girls-syria-s-al-hol-camp-highlights-risks-women-and-children-save-children>
 8 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/41106/>

Al-Hol camp, January 2022.

The SDF and camp administration have consistently warned the Global Coalition, and the international community more generally, that there is a heavy ISIS presence in the camp, and that ISIS activity inside the camp is enabled by - and coordinated with - that outside the camp, and vice versa. ISIS themselves have made direct threats to attack al-Hol camp, and SDF intelligence indicates that ISIS have been concretely planning such an assault in recent months.^{9,10} This, combined with escalating violence inside al-Hol, led NES' Asayish (internal security forces) to conduct an anti-ISIS campaign within the camp back in August, named 'Operation Humanity and Security'. The operation lasted 24 days. In this time, the Asayish and SDF report combing the camp section by section to locate and remove ISIS elements. In a final statement,¹¹ the Asayish announced the arrest of 226 suspected ISIS members, 36 of whom were women. They reportedly found a total of 25 tunnels/trenches, and seized 3 AK-47s, 10 magazines and 388 bullets, 2 RPGs, 2 pistols, 25 grenades, 25kg of TNT explosives, 9 assault vests, various torture tools, and communications devices.

As well as this, the Asayish uncovered educational materials appearing to be for the purpose of spreading ISIS ideology. The camp is reported to be an important space for ISIS, as a site of radicalization,¹² with numerous testimonies of children being recruited into joining the 'Cubs of the Caliphate'.¹³ The commander of US operations in the Middle East, Michael Kurilla, after a visit to al-Hol camp in September, stated that, "with approximately 80 births in the camp each month, this place is a literal breeding ground for the next generation of ISIS. [...] Young people are vulnerable to radicalization".¹⁴ Earlier this year, Iraqi national security advisor, Qasim Al-Araji, stated that the camp "poses a real danger to the region and the world".¹⁵

During the operation, YPJ also freed two Yazidi women from the camp, who had been forced to hide themselves and their identities for protection. They also found several other women chained up in tents, with torture marks on their body, testifying to the brutality of the activities of ISIS affiliates in the camp. Noteworthy is to mention that during 'Operation Humanity and Security', a seven-person group of ISIS affiliates attempted an armed escape from the camp, and two SDF members were killed in the resulting clashes.

9 <https://syrianobserver.com/news/73873/isis-plans-significant-attack-on-the-al-hol-camp.html>
10 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/09/22/politics/isis-attempts-suicide-attack-syria/>
11 <https://asayish.com/?p=6177>
12 <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/280420211>
13 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/women-isis-and-al-hol-camp>
14 <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/3154017/general-michael-erik-kurilla-on-visiting-the-al-hol-camp-on-sept-9/>
15 <https://ina.iq/eng/19069-al-araji-al-hol-camp-is-a-real-danger.html>

There was also a separate two-man breakout attempt from the camp – both persons were caught and arrested. Yet, not days after the end of the operation was announced, an ISIS flag was pictured flying from a water tank in the fifth section of the camp, testifying to the enduring presence of ISIS-linked individuals and ideology in al-Hol.¹⁶



The ISIS flag is raised from a water tank in al-Hol camp, September 26th, 2022.

According to camp officials, the camp costs over \$700,000 a day just for basic upkeep, which is over \$250,000,000 per year¹⁷ – a huge sum for the Autonomous Administration to find, and one which has seen wages cut for the SDF and other AANES employees as the AANES struggles to keep the camp working. While there is an NGO presence in the camp, there are limitations on international aid to North East Syria due to its lack of political status. For example, medical charities cannot work directly with the Autonomous Administration, meaning they cannot sponsor or support many of the hospitals and medical points inside the camp. Furthermore, those NGOs which do work in the camp are often forced to withdraw following episodes of violence. Usually this is violence from ISIS-linked camp residents.¹⁸ However, now violence from Turkey is also a factor. The day after the recent Turkish airstrikes, around half of the operating local and international organizations

16 <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1574284918745694209>

17 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/07/report-bringing-isis-to-justice-towards-an-international-tribunal-in-north-east-syria/>

18 <https://impactres.org/al-hol-camp/>

suspended their missions in the al-Hol Camp.¹⁹

Interviewed by RIC regarding the camp situation, Sheikmus Ehmed, co-chair of AANES' Office of IDPs and Refugees Affairs, stated that, "Turkish attacks have an impact on all of life in NES. Concerning the camp, there is a big negative influence. In this camp, we have the protective forces but still there is the fear of ISIS escaping. The help is sparse; for example, humanitarian organizations have stopped their work. They fear ISIS and fear attacks from Turkey. There have been attempts to flee, and that was the purpose of [Turkey's] attack. To create chaos in the place too. So, there have been efforts but they have not been successful. The situation right now is like this. There is worry that ISIS cells inside and outside will coordinate to create chaos inside the camp together. Anyway, twice there were soldiers killed by ISIS. At this time, with these attacks, ISIS is building itself up, making chaos. In this way, there is coordination between Turkey and ISIS".

During Turkey's recent offensive, another escape attempt took place in al-Hol Camp, on November 25th. "Some ISIS families managed to escape the camp, but they were soon captured by the Internal Security Forces", stated the SDF Press Center. According to a report from local media, "a group of women and minors known as Cubs of the Caliphate sought to escape from the Foreign Sector after they crossed the fence surrounding the camp. [...] Two of the cubs were injured and three of them fled and the security forces are trying to find them, and also three of them were arrested".²⁰ The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported this incident involved armed clashes as well.²¹

The security situation of al-Hol camp is crucial with regards to the overall situation of ISIS in NES, and beyond. Yet "Turkey can easily attack these forces that are responsible for maintaining safety in the camp", explains YPJ commander Dilbirin Kobane.²² She adds, "those who were playing the role of the shield on behalf of the international community to inhibit the threat [of ISIS] from expanding are being bombed by Turkey". Kobane reflects that Turkey's targeting of al-Hol camp security forces is "a promise for the Islamic State to be able to rebuild itself and gain strength, to reorganize, to again become a threat for the whole world".

The global fight against ISIS

19 <https://npasyria.com/en/87994/>

20 <https://npasyria.com/en/88057/>

21 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/277578/>

22 <https://ypj-info.org/articles/until-today-no-clear-and-sufficient-position-has-been-taken-up-against-the-brutality-of-the-turkish-state/>

The SDF do the groundwork within the Global Coalition's anti-ISIS operations in NES. The US-led Coalition are allied with the SDF in Syria because of the SDF's proven record of being the most effective fighting force on the ground, willing to and capable of fighting ISIS.²³ The US' role primarily consists of offering aerial support and intelligence gathering/sharing. YAT is the SDF's counter-terrorism body. The Asayish also partake in ISIS raids, with its Anti-Terror Forces (HAT). In total, excluding 'Operation Humanity and Security', NES' forces have conducted a total of at least 166 raids in 2022 thus far. These raids saw 806 suspected ISIS members arrested, and 42 killed. RIC publishes monthly reports concerning the state of ISIS sleeper cells in NES, and the SDF's work each month as part of the Coalition.²⁴

The SDF is also tasked with guarding the roughly 10,000 ISIS members held in NES' prisons. In January this year, ISIS attacked the Sina'a Prison in the Ghweiran District of Heseke city,²⁵ marking its largest coordinated attack since the final dissolution of its territorial caliphate in Baghouz in 2019. ISIS sleeper cells outside the prison coordinated with prisoners, using a bomb outside prison gates on January 20th to initiate the attack. As guards inside were killed or taken hostage, and prisoners fled into the surrounding streets, it escalated into a weeklong battle.²⁶ Ultimately, SDF and Coalition were able to regain control of the prison in a joint operation, with 3,500 of the prison inmates surrendering, yet it remains unclear how many prisoners were able to escape. Of note, is that a Turkish drone struck an SDF vehicle from the Tel Tamir Military Council that was on its way to provide reinforcements to Heseke.²⁷ Coinciding with this, Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) ramped up their shelling along the M4 road and surrounding villages. 121 SDF soldiers were killed in Heseke, adding still more to the estimated total of 11,000 soldiers that the SDF have lost during their years of fighting against ISIS.^{28,29}

23 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/23/isis-defeated-us-backed-syrian-democratic-forces-announce>

24 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/category/report/sleeper-cells/>

25 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/03/syria-hasakah-isis-prison-attack/>

26 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/middleeast/isis-prison-syria-jail.html>

27 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2022/01/the-battle-of-heseke-timeline-and-analysis/>

28 <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/sdf-casualties-isis-syria/>

29 <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/03/23/sdf-victory-isis-syria/>



Asayish Anti-Terror Forces (HAT) conduct a raid in Ghweiran neighbourhood in the aftermath of the ISIS prison breakout attempt.

In contrast, Turkey's record during the time of ISIS' territorial caliphate is dubious. The Turkish government's sluggishness with regards to preventing IS fighters entering Syria through Turkey was seen by those fighting on the ground in Syria as a purposeful tactic.³⁰ Despite having the second largest army in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and an extensive national intelligence service, Turkey did very little to address the threat ISIS posed in Syria.³¹ That Turkey was unwilling to take any serious measures to stop the spread of ISIS was well-known. In 2015, US intelligence chief James Clapper was questioned by the Senate Armed Services Committee: was he optimistic that Turkey could take a more active role in the war against ISIS? Clapper was clear: "No, I'm not. I think Turkey has other priorities and other interests. And of course, the consequence of that is a permissive environment [for ISIS]".³² Furthermore, US officials were also aware that logistical hubs in Turkey were central to ISIS' operations,³³ and it became clear that Turkey was,

30 <https://www.memri.org/tv/sdf-commander-mazloun-abdi-turkey-orchestrated-isis-at-tacks-kurdish-land-occupation>

31 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/>

32 <https://www.ir-ia.com/news/isis-terrorists-is-not-a-priority-for-turkey-us-intelligence-chief/>

33 <https://oig.treasury.gov/sites/oig/files/2021-01/OIG-CA-21-012.pdf>

on some levels, cooperating with ISIS.^{34,35}

More recently, figures within the SDF and Autonomous Administration have drawn attention to the enduring ways in which Turkey remains connected to ISIS sleeper cells still operating in Syria. Chiefly, Turkey's occupied areas of [1] Afrin and [2] the 'M4 strip' running from Serekaniye to Tel Abyad, appear to have become spaces in which ISIS continues to feel safe and comfortable moving through, staying in, and operating from. Turkey's 2018 invasion and occupation of Afrin, and 2019 invasion and occupation of the 'M4 strip', were both carried out in the name of establishing 'safe zones'. Both - now controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA) - have proven to be extremely unsafe for civilians.^{36,37} In nearby Idlib, under the control of al-Qaeda spin-off, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the situation is similar.^{38,39,40} Turkey maintains a significant military presence in both the SNA and HTS-controlled areas. While the SNA is directly a Turkish proxy army, HTS is supported (politically and militarily) by Turkey, but less overtly.⁴¹ The presence of ISIS-linked individuals in both the SNA and HTS is well documented.^{42,43} Turkey is aware of and tolerates this. A 2022 United Nations (UN) report described Idlib as being a "limited safe haven" for ISIS.⁴⁴ Brett McGurk, following the end of his period as US special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition, described how initially, "the United States had sought to build a counter-Islamic State force with the support of Turkey, but two administrations found Turkish-backed forces too riddled with extremists to partner with".⁴⁵

34 <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-and-turkey-cooperate-destroy-kurds-former-isis-member-reveals-turkish-282920>

35 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/02/islamic-state-collaborators-received-turkish-citizenship-official-report-shows#ixzz7L3BxYE00>

36 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-turkish-occupation-afrin-has-led-wide-spread-human-rights-violations-new>

37 <https://medyanews.net/one-year-on-rights-violations-persist-in-serekaniye-and-gire-spi/>

38 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2020/11/press-briefing-note-syria-idlib-violations-and-abuses>

39 <https://stj-sy.org/en/idlib-hts-kills-two-civilians-in-february-2022/>

40 <https://www.newarab.com/news/residents-syrias-idlib-protest-against-hts-repression>

41 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2022/07/the-syrian-national-army-the-turkish-proxy-militias-of-northern-syria/>

42 <https://stj-sy.org/en/ongoing-violations-without-accountability-islamic-state-members-in-the-syrian-national-army/>

43 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/03/dossier-turkish-provision-of-material-support-to-al-qaeda-linked-groups-in-idlib/>

44 https://nordicmonitor.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/UNSC_report_al_Qaeda_ISIS.pdf

45 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/baghdadis-death-underscores-what-weve-lost-by-abandoning-syrias-kurds/2019/10/27/117c6688-f8db-11e9-8906-ab6b60de9124_story.html



HTS fighter in Idlib, with ISIS insignia on his uniform.

In total, in just the past 13 months, 6 top ranking ISIS members have been found in SNA and HTS-controlled areas through US-led operations. That ISIS leaders choose these locations, often close to the Turkish border, which have a significant Turkish military, intelligence, and political presence, indicates that, at the very least, they feel little threat from the Turkish authorities.

[1] 22.10.2021

Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi, killed in SNA-controlled Suluk town, near Tel Abyad.

[2] 25.10.2021

Abu Hamza al-Shuhail, killed in SNA-controlled al-Adwaniya, near Sere Kaniye.

[3] 03.02.2022

Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, killed in HTS-controlled Atmeh, Idlib, close to the Turkish border.

[4] 16.06.2022

Hani Ahmed al-Kurdi, captured in al-Humayra, only 4 km from the Turkish border, close to SNA-controlled Jarablus.

[5] 12.07.2022

Two senior ISIS officials, killed just outside SNA-controlled Jindires, Afrin.

[6] 10.10.2022

Mustafa al-Arouda, killed near SNA-controlled Hammam al-Turkman village.

In an interview back in October, Nuri al-Khalil, a commander in Deir ez-Zor's Military Council, stated that he sees Turkey as covertly supporting sleeper cells, through practices like facilitating ISIS' movements and logistics, or turning a blind eye to their presence, in the Turkish-occupied territories, in order to further its own ambitions in NES. In the aftermath of the Heseke prison outbreak, the SDF declared in a statement⁴⁶ that this was "not a purely local attack", explaining that "some of the terrorist attackers came from the [Turkish] occupied areas of Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ayn and Gire Spi/Tel Abyad". The statement continued, "the Turkish state is the most responsible for the Daesh terrorist attack on the al-Sina'a prison and the continued existence of the Daesh terrorist organization. The Turkish State's attacks and constant threats on North and East Syria give the Daesh terrorist organization moral strength to catch its breath again and prepare the ground for a regrouping. Occupied areas such as Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ayn and Gire Spi/Tel Abyad have also been transformed into the safest and most protected areas for Daesh to organize itself and train its elements". Months prior to Heseke, Mazloum Abdi, of the SDF's General Command, had stated in an interview, "everyone knows that the lands occupied by the Turkish state have become headquarters from which ISIS is re-organising and attacking other areas".⁴⁷ Security officials at al-Hol camp have also told RIC that weapons used by ISIS sleeper cells originate from Tel Abyad, while most of the ISIS-linked women and children who get smuggled out of al-Hol camp head for and settle in Sere Kaniye.⁴⁸

Many working on the ground in NES take this one step further, arguing that Turkey is providing active help to ensure sleeper cell activities successfully harm the SDF and AANES. The recent Turkish strikes on al-Hol camp's security guards, Jerkin prison, and YAT fighters, lend credence to these claims. Turkey is directly targeting the personnel tasked with ensuring ISIS does not make a resurgence. Back in July, SDF General Commander, Mazloum Abdi, gave a press conference where he stated, "one of Turkey's aims is to hit efforts of the SDF and Global Coalition to defeat ISIS [...] Any attack by [Turkey] will curb the war against ISIS". Local media report al-Hol camp administrator, Jihan Hanan, stating in August that, "Turkish interference in the region is leaving the region insecure which again helps ISIS to organize themselves in Syria. This may weaken the monitoring of the camp and the incidents of attempts

46 <https://sdf-press.com/en/2022/01/the-sdf-general-command-statement-regarding-the-last-terrorist-attack-on-al-sinaa-prison-by-daesh/>

47 <https://medyanews.net/mazloum-abdi-isis-is-reorganising-in-places-controlled-by-turkey/>

48 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2021/06/state-of-the-occupation-a-new-quarterly-report-on-rights-violations-in-turkish-occupied-nes/>

to escape from the camp".⁴⁹

The SDF's current position

The SDF has repeatedly said that it cannot adequately cope with safely managing al-Hol camp, securely guarding ISIS prisons, and undertaking counter-ISIS raids to bust sleeper cells, while at the same time preparing to defend against Turkish attacks. Back in June, SDF spokesperson Farhad Shami, stated that the SDF was anticipating a potential Turkish invasion, and that "in the event of an attack, we will pause our war against the Islamic State group and start military measures against the Turkish invasion".⁵⁰ Mazloum Abdi reiterated this position recently, stating, "if Turkey attacks [...] the war will spread to all regions. [...] We can say that our work against ISIS with the international coalition has stopped because we are preoccupied with the Turkish attacks".⁵¹

Indeed, in the aftermath of Turkey's strikes on al-Hol camp security forces, Farhad Shami quoted Mazloum Abdi as saying, "due to our forces' preoccupation with addressing the Turkish occupation, they cannot continue their mission of pursuing ISIS cells. Currently, we're forced to be preoccupied with confronting Turkish aggression".⁵² RIC interviewed Newroz Ahmed, General Commander of the SDF, regarding the SDF's current situation in the wake of Turkey's attacks, and Abdi's recent comments. When asked if counter-terrorism operations would actually have to be paused she said, "we aren't fully stopping our counter-ISIS operations, but under these threats and attacks from the Turkish side, of course our forces are trying to maintain security and protect the border side. This affects our work against ISIS. It is natural that we are made weaker against ISIS when we have to protect ourselves from the Turkish side. The first threat is Turkish. Our work against ISIS has to be second. And this makes ISIS ten times stronger, more powerful. ISIS gets a big opportunity from this situation, to strengthen their plans, prepare for attacks. The situation affects our relationship with the Coalition. Our relationship still continues; we carry out a great deal of work together against ISIS. Furthermore, there are crucial outcomes from this work together: detaining a lot of members or families of ISIS. Turkish attacks make this work slow. We all know that Turkey has tried to make ISIS freer here, targeting the camps and prisons. If ISIS gets out of control, it is not dangerous just

49 <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/al-hol-camp-administration-thousands-of-isis-members-waiting-for-attacks-by-turkish-state-to-revive-them-h32397.html>

50 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/turkey-renews-threat-military-offensive-syria>

51 <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/kurdish-forces-preparing-repel-turkish-ground-invasion-93839659>

52 https://twitter.com/farhad_shami/status/1595488304425844742

for us, but for the entire world. We have a number of people in our hands, our prisons, who held a key position within ISIS before they were caught. Of course, we have explained this situation to the Coalition. Our operations against ISIS are not being fully stopped. But we are forced to stop some things. We do not like having to do this. This is not as we want. Yet, we have to defend ourselves on other sides. Under these conditions, these threats, we cannot continue our anti-ISIS operations like we did before. We suffer because we are hit from two sides: Turkey and ISIS. How can our forces defend from two sides? Regardless, our work continues and is going well. But, if these attacks and threats continue, the situation will naturally be changed in this region, and not just for us, but for the entire world”.



SDF General Commander, Newroz Ahmed

In a formal statement, the SDF argued that Turkey's latest wave of attacks “aims to enable ISIS terrorist detainees and their families to escape the camp, and pave the way for the terrorist organization to resurge.”⁵³ The statement declared that Turkey's airstrikes were not coincidental, but were coordinated and planned, with the aim of facilitating the escape of ISIS members and their families from the camp and the organization's revival. The SDF also blamed the international community on the growing danger of an ISIS comeback, warning that failure to condemn and prevent Turkish attacks amplifies the

⁵³ <https://sdf-press.com/en/2022/11/isis-threat-increased-following-the-turkish-occupation-airstrikes-on-the-al-hol-camp-and-the-jerkin-prison/>

risks of the resurgence of the organization.⁵⁴

On November 29th, Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder, Press Secretary for the US Department of Defense, was also asked about Abdi's comment that the SDF would pause counter-ISIS operations during a press conference. Ryder stated that the SDF and Coalition "have reduced the number of partnered patrols" undertaken against ISIS in NES due to the Turkish attacks, yet at the same time "the D-ISIS [defeating ISIS] mission does continue".⁵⁵ Two days later, however, Reuters reported a US military source as stating that the US and SDF had "paused all partnered operations" against ISIS in Syria.⁵⁶ Seemingly to clear up confusion over the state of the SDF's counter-ISIS operations, the day after Reuters' report, on the 2nd of December, Mahmoud Berkhdan, SDF General Command member, gave a statement declaring, "we had to stop operations against ISIS cells for several days, but today, we started preparing a new schedule to start pursuing ISIS operations in coordination and participation with the Global Coalition".⁵⁷ This news came at the same time as ISIS cells all around the world were posting pictures of themselves on their news channels, swearing allegiance to the new ISIS leader, Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi.

After Turkey's strikes on al-Hol camp security forces, and the subsequent breakout attempt, the SDF declared: "The Turkish occupation is trying to revive the terrorist organization ISIS. The bombing by warplanes on our forces charged with protecting Al-Hol camp, in which thousands of ISIS members and families are housed, is a complete and clear proof of the relationship between Turkey and the terrorist organization."⁵⁸

The AANES stated, "in spite of having suffered a decisive military defeat in Syria in 2019, the Islamic State continues to pose a major risk for everyone as the terrorist organization is susceptible to its resurgence and revival at any time, as also proven during the days-lasting siege of the Al-Sina'a prison, near Heseke, by hundreds of ISIS fighters in January of this year. The Turkish military operation against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria not only severely impairs and undermines any efforts of the fight against the terrorist organization, but also signifies the strengthening and invigoration of ISIS. This military offensive particularly makes use of the

54 <https://npasyria.com/131163/>

55 <https://twitter.com/DeptofDefense/status/1597653652608495617>

56 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-kurds-halt-all-joint-ops-with-us-led-coalition-after-turkish-fire-2022-12-02/>

57 <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/berkhadan-we-prepare-a-new-schedule-to-start-operations-to-pursue-isis-in-coordination-with-coalition-h34124.html>

58 <https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/sdf-reveal-martyrs-of-turkish-occupation-bombing-on-al-hol-and-zarkan-camps-h33975.html>

resurgence of the terrorist organization, which bears severe repercussions that would not solely affect the Autonomous Administration, but also the European nations”.

The Biden administration has echoed the SDF's sentiments, acknowledging that Turkish operations in NES undermine the fight against ISIS.⁵⁹ On the 23rd, the US State Department commented, “We have consistently communicated our serious concerns to Turkey, in public and private, about the impact of escalation on our D-ISIS [defeating ISIS] goals”.⁶⁰ Back in July, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence, Dana Stroul, was already speaking out against a new Turkish military operation in NES, stating, “ISIS is going to take advantage of that campaign.” Stroul added, “ISIS views the detention facilities where its fighters are housed as the population to reconstitute its army. If there are military operations that would cause the SDF to focus on moving north to protect their communities from an air campaign or a ground campaign, there’s only so many SDF to go around”.⁶¹

The US has stated it is against a Turkish ground invasion. There has also been acknowledgement from the US side that former President Trump’s decision to allow Turkey to invade NES in 2019 was a seriously damaging move with regards to the counter-ISIS fight. Indeed, the rate of SDF/Coalition ISIS raids had been steadily increasing in the months leading up to Turkey’s 2019 invasion; then fell 75% in October when the invasion began.⁶² Furthermore, once the invasion began, RIC - amongst others⁶³ - recorded the frequency of sleeper cell attacks as rising almost 50%.⁶⁴ Brett McGurk, former US special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition, evaluated the US’ withdrawal, and subsequent Turkish invasion, decisively negatively: “The decision to evacuate established positions and permit Turkey to attack the SDF with extremist forces [that] it supports was so strategically backward. It unraveled what had been a stable part of the country, injected new actors into the former Islamic State caliphate that harbor and enable Islamic State and al-Qaeda, and sent hundreds of thousands of mostly Syrian Kurds fleeing for their lives.”⁶⁵ Yet, the US does not take serious public action, beyond statements of

59 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/us-officials-say-turkey-well-aware-their-concerns-over-syria-offensive>

60 <https://twitter.com/ElizHagedorn/status/1595054206515396608>

61 <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-officials-speak-out-against-turkish-plans-for-northern-syria-/6658184.html>

62 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/10/sdf-and-coalition-conduct-347-anti-isis-raids-and-476-arrests-in-2019-75-decrease-since-turkish-invasion/>

63 <https://warsawinstitute.org/turkeys-invasion-syria-consequences-europe/>

64 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/11/new-data-turkish-invasion-provokes-48-rise-in-isis-sleeper-cell-attacks/>

65 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/baghdadis-death-underscores-what-weve-lost-by-abandoning-syrias-kurds/2019/10/27/117c6688-f8db-11e9-8906-ab6b60de9124_story.html

light condemnation, to alleviate the current situation. Former US Department of Defense official, Michael Rubin, stated earlier this year that until the US recognizes that "Turkey shelters and provides safe-haven for ISIS in its territory, ISIS will survive."⁶⁶

Will the US - and other Coalition countries - stand by as its key partner against ISIS is attacked?

The SDF continues to make its situation explicit: defending itself from ISIS and Turkey at the same time is impossible, and it is only a matter of time before this leads to another crisis situation like Heseke. The US is thus under pressure from the SDF, its closest ally in Syria, yet Turkey is currently also a strategic ally to the US and the west within the war in Ukraine. It remains to be seen if the US will take concrete steps to force Turkey to cease its offensives. Meanwhile, Turkish elections are soon approaching, and a domestic economic crisis is threatening Erdogan's chance of retaining presidency for a third term.^{67,68} Erdogan has been shown previously to use foreign military offensives to boost public opinion and distract his voters from their domestic woes.^{69,70} All year, the US has continued to allow Turkey to carry out limited offensive assaults on NES, culminating in this most recent string of warplane and drone strikes.⁷¹ The US seems to be unwilling or unable to stop Turkey as the latter continually pushes the limit, testing how far it can go in terms of achieving its goal of hurting the AANES and SDF without incurring the wrath of the US. So far, it appears that the US will not publicly act against Turkey beyond releasing statements requesting de-escalation. Potentially, the US does not appreciate the degree to which the success of the SDF in the fight against ISIS is hinged upon the legitimacy that SDF and AANES have in NES due to their popular support base. On the other hand, Turkey does seem to appreciate this; and directly acts to undermine it. Prior to its recent assault wave, which commenced on the 19th, Turkey had carried out 89 drone strikes in 2022. Many of these were targeted strikes on individuals involved in civil society or political work.⁷² Assassinating them is a method to chip away at NES' burgeoning democracy and AANES' public legitimacy. Removing experienced, competent, and respected leaders from communities inevitably

66 <https://npasyria.com/en/72106/>

67 <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/economy-and-ecology/erdogans-economic-miscalculations-5715/>

68 <https://tittlepress.com/recep-tayyip-erdogan/2112993/>

69 https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Siccardi_-_Turkey_Syria-V3.pdf

70 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2022/07/the-syrian-national-army-the-turkish-proxy-militias-of-northern-syria/>

71 <https://www.kurdishpeace.org/research/security-and-defense/turkeys-drone-war-threatens-civilians-counter-isis-forces-in-syria/>

72 <https://www.kurdishpeace.org/policy/turkeys-targeted-killings-threaten-stability-security-in-syria/>

has a significant negative influence on civil society. The people – military and civilian– who have been targeted this year by Turkey are those with years of involvement, who have been engaged in building security, stability, and democracy in NES for such a time that they have gained trust from local populations, and who have used their considerable acumen to teach others. Hence it can be seen that Turkey calculates its attacks, targeting civilian life in NES, and targeting the Autonomous Administration. The US separates the strength of NES' democracy and AANES from the strength of the SDF's fight against ISIS to its own detriment.

On November 31st, U.S. Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, speaking to his Turkish counterpart, voiced his “strong opposition” to any new Turkish military operation in Syria and expressed concern over the escalating situation in the region.⁷³ While the US could be expected to take decisive measures if Turkey launches an invasion in the areas under the former’s sphere of influence in NES, there are more question marks over how swiftly and seriously the US would respond to an invasion in areas under Russian remit: Tel Rifaat, Manbij, and Kobane. Those three have all been named as targets by Erdogan.⁷⁴ An attack on those areas would be just as devastating a blow for the fight against ISIS. It would destabilize the region further, creating space that ISIS can utilize, taking advantage of insecurity and chaos, and detract resources from the SDF.

The responsibility for preventing an invasion, and a resurgence of ISIS, does not just lie with the US. When Turkey invaded the ‘M4 strip’ in 2019, five UN Security Council member states tried to push through a resolution condemning the attacks due to the risk they posed regarding an ISIS resurgence, but the resolution was blocked by Russia, China, and the US.⁷⁵ In the end, several European Union (EU) politicians did announce sanctions on Turkey, but the measures taken were limited and could not effectively hit Turkey’s economy.⁷⁶ Several other international actors have recently verbally expressed their discontent with Turkey’s latest attacks in NES, and have called for the latter to cease operations. In one recent example, on November 31st, German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, stated that she “urgently appealed [Turkey] to refrain from measures that would further escalate violence — such as a potential ground invasion of northern Syria or

73 <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1700072/pentagon-chief-warns-turkey-against-new-military-operation-in-syria>

74 <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/erdogan-vows-ground-invasion-of-syria-kurds-prepare-response>

75 <https://warsawinstitute.org/turkeys-invasion-syria-consequences-europe/>

76 <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-sanctions-against-turkey-on-the-table-france-syria/>

military action in northern Iraq,” speaking at a NATO meeting in Bucharest.⁷⁷ Germany, and other European states, can do more than release statements against escalation of violence. Sanctions are again possible.

In 2021, Germany was Turkey's top trading partner.⁷⁸ Turkey's economy is fragile right now, and a concerted effort by other countries in the Global Coalition to halt an invasion to protect the global gains made against ISIS could prove effective. Closer to home, Damascus was slow to raise its voice, yet the Deputy Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), al-Hakam Dandi, said to the UN on the 29th, “Syria calls on United Nations Security Council to compel the Turkish regime to end its illegal military presence on Syrian lands”, accusing Ankara of “sponsoring” ISIS.⁷⁹

Turkey's targeted attacks on the vicinity of Jerkin prison, al-Hol camp security forces, and Coalition partners YAT, are the most recent events in a longer pattern of Turkish efforts to use ISIS to further its agenda in NES. Such attacks purposefully destabilize the region at a critical period. ISIS takes advantage of this. On November 30th, AANES' Justice and Reform Office announced a state of alert due to intelligence that ISIS is preparing for an attack on an ISIS prison in Qamishlo city. 2 days prior, a bomb had exploded in Raqqa's al-Hal market, which ISIS later claimed responsibility for.⁸⁰ Any fresh Turkish incursion into NES will have devastating consequences on the global fight against ISIS. This October, ISIS lost their leader, Abu al-Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, due to an operation of the “Free Syrian Army”⁸¹ in the Syrian government-held Daraa province. ISIS has now declared Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi as their new leader. However, preventing the unceasing and escalating Turkish aggression in NES will have an incomparably greater impact on vanquishing ISIS than the elimination of the latter's leader.

77 <https://news.am/eng/news/732772.html>

78 <https://www.worldstopexports.com/turkeys-top-import-partners/#::~:~:text=Turkey%E2%80%99s%20Top%20Trading%20Partners%201%20Germany%3A%20US%2419.3%20billion,%284.1%25%29%208%20Netherlands%3A%20%246.8%20billion%20%283%25%29%20More%20items>

79 <https://sana.sy/en/?p=291752>

80 <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1597872826014662657>

81 <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3232259/death-of-isis-leader/>



**ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER
04 DECEMBER 2022**

**WWW.ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.COM
PRESS@ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.ORG
TEL +963 932 160 108**

