

Turkish Attacks on Civilian Infrastructure in Northeast Syria Facilitate Demographic Change

KURDISH PEACE INSTITUTE

FEBRUARY 19, 2024

INTRODUCTION

Systematic Turkish bombing of critical civilian infrastructure in North and East Syria has coincided with statements by senior Turkish officials claiming that infrastructure is a legitimate target or admitting to the targeting of infrastructure sites.

These developments take place in a context of a pattern of violence against civilians, particularly Kurdish civilians, by Turkish and Turkey-backed forces that has led to the removal of Kurdish populations from northern Syria and that is conducted in order to destroy the social base for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) or any other form of Kurdish self-rule.

Turkish strikes on protected sites have killed and injured civilians and been described as a violation of international law by various human rights watchdogs. Their second-order impact on the lives and livelihoods of millions, through widespread deprivation of access to electricity and fuel, is immense. Of particular concern are the impacts of the strikes on food security and access to clean water.

These impacts are reasonably predictable results of any partial or complete destruction of the targeted sites. They have impacted civilian populations previously targeted by Turkish military operations and supercharged the impact of other harmful Turkish policies in North and East Syria.

If existing damage is left unaddressed and strikes are allowed to continue, Turkey's actions will contribute to renewed humanitarian and security crises in the region.

BACKGROUND: ATTACKS ON CIVILIANS AND FORCED DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN NORTHERN SYRIA

In 2015, before Turkey first intervened on the ground in northern Syria, Erdogan said that Turkey would "never allow" a Kurdish state to exist in the region. This claim was repeated in subsequent statements.

Since then, Turkey has conducted two military operations into Syrian territory controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) in order to weaken the prospect of Kurdish self-rule by removing Kurdish populations from the Syrian-Turkish border.

The first was Operation Olive Branch (2018), which resulted in Turkish and Turkey-backed control of the northwestern Syrian region of Afrin (Efrîn). The second was Operation Peace Spring (2018), which resulted in Turkish and Turkey-backed militia control of the northeastern Syrian cities of Ras al-Ain (Serêkaniyê) and Tal Abyad.

In both cases, senior Turkish decision-makers made statements denying the existence of Kurdish majorities or pluralities in the impacted regions and suggesting that Syrian refugees, predominantly Sunni Arabs from parts of Syria now under regime control, would be moved into regions under Turkish control.

For example, in January 2018, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan falsely claimed that Kurds constituted just 35% of Afrin's population (most credible estimates ranged from 80% to 90%) and that the region was instead majority-Arab. He stated that Turkey's objective was to "hand Afrin over to its true owners" and "repatriate" Syrian refugees in Turkey to the region.

In October 2019, Erdogan said of territory captured in Operation Peace Spring that "What is important is to prepare a controlled life in this enormous area, and the most suitable people for it are Arabs. These areas are not suitable for the lifestyle of Kurds ... because these areas are virtually desert."

Both military operations resulted in severe and ongoing harm to Kurdish civilian populations. Human Rights Watch found that "Turkish military incursions into northeast Syria have been fraught with human rights abuses, and in Turkish-occupied territories today, Turkey and local Syrian factions are abusing civilians' rights and restricting their freedoms with impunity." Abuses documented included indiscriminate attacks, summary executions, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, torture, looting, pillaging and property theft.

Researchers have connected these severe human rights abuses in occupied zones to stated Turkish goals of demographic change and preventing any kind of Kurdish political entity from coming into existence in Syria's north. One study of governance in Afrin found that Turkey "has given a free hand to the SNA factions with the aim of expelling the Kurdish community and eliminating the risk of any Kurdish national entity arising on its southern border under the leadership of the PYD." Another reported that, "through facilitating demographic change to the detriment of the Afrin's native Kurdish inhabitants, has prevented potential re-emergence of Kurdish autonomy in the region for the foreseeable

future.” The resettlement of refugees is assessed to be another part of this process. Analysts find that Turkey “seeks to use the returnees to achieve lasting demographic change in Syria by settling them in Afrin...Turkey believes the settlement of non-Kurds in Kurdish areas will eliminate the possibility of Kurdish self-rule” and that “for Ankara, a safe zone to resettle refugees seems to be synonymous with creating an “ethnic belt” in order to contain a strong YPG/PYD presence at its Syrian border.”

Since U.S. and Russian-brokered ceasefires brought an end to Operation Peace Spring in 2019, Turkey has not carried out a new ground operation in Syria, despite repeated threats to do so. However, no evidence suggests that its goals of preventing Kurdish self-rule by changing demographics to the disfavor of Kurds have changed.

In fact, policies with a severe impact on the civilian population of AANES-held territory continue. These include:

- Drone strikes: Turkish drone strikes since the conclusion of Operation Peace Spring in 2019 have killed and injured civilians. In some instances, civilians appear to have been targeted directly, as in the cases of assassinations of AANES officials and affiliated political and civil society figures. The strikes restrict civilian movements; discourage economic activity; and contribute to migration out of the region.
- Water cuts: Turkey has repeatedly cut water access to Hasakah and surrounding areas by shutting off the Alouk Water Station, which came under Turkish control during Operation Peace Spring. These cuts have limited access to safe drinking water and facilitated the spread of disease.
- Reduction in Euphrates River water levels: Turkey has used dams on its territory to reduce the volume of water flowing into Syria, impacting irrigation for the agriculture-dependent region and power generation capabilities as well as water security and health outcomes.

INFRASTRUCTURE AS AN INTENTIONAL TARGET

In recent months, Turkey has used a new tactic to advance its strategy of changing regional demographics and weakening the prospect of Kurdish self-rule by means of serious violations of international law that primarily target the civilian social base of the AANES/SDF and of any other potential Kurdish political project.

This tactic is the systematic destruction of critical civilian infrastructure, particularly energy and power infrastructure, in Kurdish regions of North and East Syria through aerial bombardment.

Turkish decision-makers have repeatedly claimed that civilian infrastructure is a legitimate target (often by referring to it as ‘terrorist’ infrastructure—accusations of terrorism against people and institutions uninvolved in violence are pervasive in Turkey¹) and admitted to attacks on infrastructure sites. Particular emphasis has been put on the targeting of fuel and energy facilities. Examples include:

- On October 4, 2023, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated: “From now on, all infrastructure, large facilities and energy facilities belonging to [armed Kurdish groups] in Iraq and Syria are legitimate targets for our security forces, armed forces and intelligence elements.”
- On December 28, 2023, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan referred to protected sites in Syria as “terrorist infrastructure” and said “in this regard, 70 facilities, which were of critical importance to the terrorist organization, were hit. Among these, there are almost oil refineries. We hit all of these. These places burn for days. We will not stop.”
- On January 16, 2024, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan identified “critical infrastructure” sites among targets “destroyed” by Turkish forces and referred to orders to commit potentially indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks, stating that “we have instructed our security units to destroy any terrorist elements they detect, regardless of who is next to, in their vicinity, or behind them.”

TURKISH BOMBING CAMPAIGNS, OCT. 2023 - JAN. 2024

Turkey has conducted three bombing campaigns targeting critical civilian infrastructure in North and East Syria in the past four months.

- October 4, 2023 through October 8, 2023
- December 23, 2023 through December 25, 2023
- January 13, 2024 through January 16, 2024

¹ See *Turkey's Extrajudicial Killings of Politicians and Activists Abroad Threaten Regional Security* (Kurdish Peace Institute, 2022) for a discussion of Turkey's ultra-politicized use of terrorism accusations to legitimize serious violations of human rights.

These campaigns have had grave impacts on civilian populations and have been criticized by human rights organizations as a violation of international law.

Human Rights Watch warned that “attacks which cause disproportionate damage to civilians and civilian objects are prohibited under international humanitarian law, and deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure is a war crime,” finding that “the repeated strikes on civilian infrastructure have left many essential facilities in ruins, rendering hospitals, bakeries, and water facilities inoperable” and calling on Turkey to “immediately stop targeting critical civilian infrastructure, respect international humanitarian law and hold to account those responsible for serious violations.”

IMPACT OF STRIKES ON ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE

Energy infrastructure sites constitute 59% of the sites targeted according to sources in North and East Syria. These sites were specifically mentioned by senior Turkish decision-makers as targets (see Infrastructure As An Intentional Target).

Their destruction has particularly dire impacts on civilian lives and livelihoods. The lack of electricity, heat, and fuel is a problem in and of itself. It also puts fundamental needs like food and clean water out of reach for many. Thus, the attacks on these sites should not be seen only as attacks on protected installations, but also as attacks intended to significantly damage the entire civilian population of impacted regions and make these regions as unlivable as possible.

According to the NES NGO Forum, “critically damaged energy and electrical infrastructure from strikes in October through to the latest round of escalation include a major gas-powered electricity generation station [the Sweidiyeh gas-powered electricity generating facility] and seven strategic electrical transfer stations [the Northern Qamishli, Qahtaniyah, Amuda, Darbasiyah, Hasakah Western Dam, Kobane and Ain Issa substations].” Oil and gas infrastructure critically damaged includes “Tafla and Giri-Piri refineries, Rmeilan Oil fields, Saaidah Oil Station, Zurbah Oil Station, Oudeh Oil compound, an Oil Station in Rural Qahtaniyeh, and locations in Oudeh oil field.”

11 major cities and towns and over 2,750 villages across northeastern Syria, home to over one million people in total, now lack electricity. Access to various types of fuel for vehicles, generators, heating, and cooking is severely restricted.

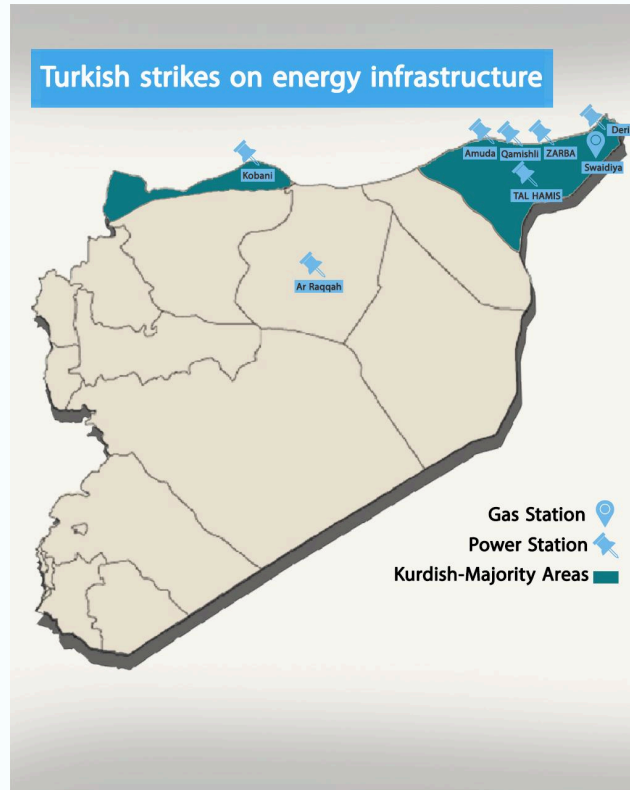
Strikes on energy infrastructure have further reduced access to clean water, compounding the water crisis Turkey has already inflamed in the region. Water stations that rely on electricity from the local power grid and boreholes operated by generators have been left partially or completely non-operational due to the destruction of power stations and the reduction in fuel production caused by attacks on oil and gas infrastructure. Civilians in impacted areas are now forced to rely on water trucked in from a distance. This water is often prohibitively expensive and unclean.

As North Press Agency reported, “ Turkish airstrikes on power stations in the town of Rmelan...and Sweidiya gas plant deprived nearly 200,000 individuals in hundreds of villages in Gerki Lege, and Derik (al-Malikiyah), northeast Syria, of drinking water.” The report quoted Majeda Ali, Co-chair of Water Directorate in Gerki Lege, as saying that “Plans were scheduled to connect the wells with electricity in Rmelan, and conditions were favorable for the implementation of the plans at the time...but the recent airstrikes knocked all electricity stations in the Sweidiya plant and Rmelan out of service.”

The strikes have also exacerbated food insecurity. The bombing of the Sweidiyeh facility alone destroyed North and East Syria’s only domestic cooking gas bottling plant; the region is now forced to import cooking gas from Iraqi Kurdistan at multiple times the cost. At least 70 bakeries are offline due to electricity and water shortages caused by Turkish strikes. Many farmers rely on generators to pump water for irrigation due to insufficient rainfall; fuel shortages will make agriculture even more difficult. Less extensive Turkish bombardment has already disrupted agriculture in border and front-line regions, with farmers complaining of fires destroying their crops and increased cross-line attacks at harvest times.

It is extremely unlikely that Turkish decision-makers were unaware that strikes on energy infrastructure would have these impacts. Notably, the choice of energy infrastructure in the border region as a target exacerbates documented humanitarian crises created by other Turkish actions and impacts populations Turkey has previously targeted.

Virtually all of the infrastructure targeted is in the Kurdish-majority border region that Erdogan refers to as a ‘safe zone’ in which Turkey may intervene. Equivalent infrastructure in Arab-majority Raqqa and Deir Ezzor has not been targeted to anywhere near the same extent.



IDP populations displaced from Efrin and Serekaniye in previous Turkish military interventions are among the most vulnerable of all populations in those areas. In fact, strikes have occurred in the direct vicinity of an IDP camp housing families displaced in October 2019, disrupting humanitarian access according to the NES NGO Forum.

The impact on water access is particularly important in light of what appears to be a concentrated Turkish strategy of depriving the region of water through cuts to the Alouk water station and reduction in the flow of the Euphrates river (see Background).

In line with known Turkish objectives related to demographic change, the strikes are contributing to preventable displacement in impacted regions. In early January, before the third wave of strikes, local media was already reporting that the destruction of infrastructure had exacerbated the region's economic crisis. North Press Agency cited a local economist as claiming that "Turkish targeting has led to the forced sale of properties and lands belonging to hundreds of families, pushing them to consider migration to Europe as a means to escape the dire circumstances" and that "individuals who had previously purchased lands and properties in the region, while residing abroad, now intend to sell their investments and redirect their capital overseas."

FORECAST

The current level of damage will have an irreparable impact on civilian lives and livelihoods if not addressed immediately. Subsequent air campaigns could cause more damage to infrastructure, exacerbate all the above problems, and kill, injure, or displace more civilians. The threat of future violence alone limits the distribution of assistance to impacted populations and the possibility for even partially rebuilding damaged sites.

Kurdya Dire'i, a researcher at the Rojava Center for Strategic Studies in Qamishli, told the Kurdish Peace Institute that people in the region "cannot avoid" the strikes, as "they happen anywhere and any time...Turkey bombs the energy infrastructure and other vital facilities with no warning given to the workers in the facilities nor to civilians."

Dire'i stated that Turkey appeared to be "seeking to create the greatest possible damage and losses." While locals could take measures to mitigate the damage by "securing shelters, reducing the number of workers in these facilities, and working only when necessary," he assessed that only international efforts to either dissuade Turkey from bombing or directly protect infrastructure could truly address the problem.

Further bombing campaigns targeting infrastructure are likely to occur if Turkish authorities are incentivised by certain domestic or international political developments. Domestically, a perception that the government is weak on issues of national security created by military losses within Turkey or in Iraqi Kurdistan or a perception that the opposition could succeed in upcoming local elections could cause the government to choose more airstrikes to appear strong and bolster nationalist sentiment.

Internationally, the lifting of restrictions on arms and arms components used in the bombardment of critical civilian infrastructure in conjunction with Turkey's approval of Sweden's NATO accession could create perceptions in Turkey that the use of these weapons is acceptable, incentivising further strikes. Uncritical international diplomatic engagement with Turkey amidst a humanitarian crisis in northern Syria caused by Turkish strikes could also suggest to Turkish decision-makers that the cost of such actions is low.

If attacks on infrastructure continue and damaged infrastructure is not restored, the lack of fuel, electricity, and clean water caused by the strikes will contribute to preventable death and displacement. Irregular migration to regional countries already struggling to serve refugee and IDP populations, like the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as well as to Europe, will increase.

The ability of the AANES and SDF to provide basic security and public services will be vastly diminished, creating an ideal opportunity for ISIS, Iran-backed militias, the Syrian government, and other actors to expand their influence in northeast Syria. Without fundamental services and resources, there will be virtually no military, political, economic or social capacity for resistance to the spread of malign actors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All parties should immediately cease hostilities in northeast Syria. The international community, particularly the United States and other members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, should work to ensure that an end to conflict is permanent by building on and strengthening existing weak or failed ceasefire agreements. This could include mechanisms for the monitoring of the Syria-Turkey border to ensure compliance with agreements and efforts to resolve the status of Turkish-occupied areas and their displaced populations through allowing NGOs access to these regions and pursuing peacebuilding and governance programs within them².

The international community should commit resources to restoring critical infrastructure, particularly energy, power, and water infrastructure. Rebuilding should be done in a way that responds to the needs of the most impacted populations and is resilient to potential future bombing campaigns.

To deter future attacks, Turkish officials involved in the bombing of critical infrastructure should be held accountable for their actions and made to understand that further attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure will have meaningful consequences. To promote accountability, the United States can:

- Impose sanctions under [Executive Order 13894](#) on all Turkish officials responsible for the targeting of critical civilian infrastructure in northeast Syria.
- Support civil society in efforts to document Turkish strikes on critical civilian infrastructure, the cumulative impact of these bombing campaigns on civilians in the region, and the pattern of violations leading to demographic change in Turkish-occupied regions of northern Syria.
- Provide support for legal proceedings against Turkish officials involved in the bombing of critical civilian infrastructure.

² For more information and detailed recommendations on the role of NGOs and human rights documentation activities in Turkish-occupied Syria in de-escalation efforts, see [The Peace and Security Implications of Enforced Disappearances in Turkey's Kurdish Conflict](#) (Kurdish Peace Institute, 2023).