



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

**SIX MONTHS ON:
POLITICAL, SECURITY
AND HUMANITARIAN
OUTCOMES OF TURKEY'S
2019 INVASION OF
NORTH AND EAST SYRIA**

22ND MAY 2020

SUMMARY

On 9 October 2019, Turkey attacked border cities throughout North and East Syria (NES), with the aim of occupying the areas around Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. This resulted in the displacement of over 200,000 civilians and the capture and occupation of 5000KM² of land by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and Turkish-controlled militias. This dossier examines the still-evolving situation six months after the invasion, on a political, military and humanitarian level.

Some outcomes of the invasion have been immediately obvious, particularly in terms of their impact on the humanitarian situation in North and East Syria. Some major political shifts occurred in the first days of the invasion, with their shock-waves still unfolding. Others will take more time to fully emerge, as the balance of power in the region continues to shift and Russia and the USA jostle for position.

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1 OVERVIEW OF THE 2019 OPERATION

Following a telephone call between the presidents of the United States of America (USA) and Turkey on 6 October, the White House announced that Turkey would soon start an operation in the north of the Syrian Arab Republic and that U.S. forces would withdraw. On 9 October, President Erdogan declared the launch of Operation Peace Spring by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), together with Turkish-armed, funded and controlled militias under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA). Turkish forces, supported by the SNA, began attacking Kurdish positions in several border towns, including Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye.

The launch of Operation Peace Spring and the related withdrawal of United States troops had a significant impact on the population, with more than 200,000 people displaced in rapid and uncoordinated evacuations. The Minister of Defense of Turkey announced the seizure of 4,219 km² and 600 settlements, with checkpoints established on the M4 motorway.¹

Beyond active hostilities, civilians in and around Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad were subjected to myriad violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by Syrian National Army fighters. These violations instilled fear among Kurdish residents and caused further displacement.

Anticipating attacks on their community, Yazidi women, men and children, who populated some 13 villages across the district of Sere Kaniye, also left. Videos published by Syrian National Army fighters used language comparing their “enemies” to “infidels,” “atheists” and “pigs” when referring to civilians, detainees and property, which further amplified fears and created an environment conducive to abuse.^{2/3} In response, the U.S. declared it would continue to support the SDF and take action if Turkey took measures that were considered “off-limits.” The European Union, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel separately called on Turkey to halt the operation, while the League of Arab States adopted a resolution denouncing Turkey’s campaign.⁴

¹ Statement by the Minister of National Defence of Turkey, on 21 November 2019, to the Parliamentary Budget Committee; available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8h9-5AEzZQ

² <https://observers.france24.com/en/20191021-syria-turkey-militia-ahrar-sharqiya-investigation-abuses>

³ UN report, available at: <https://t.co/6K207FtgFF?amp=1>

⁴ Resolution 8454 was adopted by the League of Arab States on 12 October 2019

2 CURRENT SITUATION

However, none of this wide-spread condemnation resulted in concrete, rapid action to halt the Turkish invasion. Instead, the invasion resulted in two major agreements that have changed the political terrain in NES.

First, the SDF and Syrian government entered into a military agreement on 13 October, allowing Syrian Arab Army (SAA) units to return to AANES-controlled, SDF-defended regions. Second, Turkey and Russia signed the so-called Sochi Agreement on 22 October. This agreement called for the withdrawal of SDF units from the border regions with Turkey, the launching of joint-Russian Turkish patrols throughout this region, and the installation of SAA and Russian forces to take responsibility for security along the border via the establishment of 15 observation points there. (You can see our report on “Shifting Power Plays in North and East Syria” for a more in-depth overview of these two agreements.)⁵

Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump partially reversed his decision for a total withdrawal of U.S. troops from North and East Syria, with all U.S. Army forces remaining in NES redeployed to the eastern regions from Deir-ez-Zor through to Heseke, as Russian troops moved up to fill the void left by retreating U.S. forces from Heseke westward to Kobane, Raqqa and Manbij.

These decisions have had significant political outcomes. Turkish gains aside, the invasion has served to weaken AANES' negotiating position while handing significant gains to Russia and the Syrian government. Some outcomes have been immediately obvious but others will take more time to fully emerge, as the balance of power in the region continues to shift and Russia and the USA jostle for position.

⁵ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/10/explainer-shifting-power-plays-in-north-and-east-syria/>

2.1 MILITARY AND SECURITY SITUATION

Following the agreement, frontlines have more or less settled around the new zone of Turkish occupation, a 5000KM² box stretching from west of Tel Abyad to east of Sere Kaniye along the Turkish border, and down to the M4 highway at its southernmost extent. The two bottom corners of this box are located just north of the cities of Ain Issa and Til Temir, and it is on frontlines around these two cities that the bulk of military engagements still take place. While the SDF withdrew from the region between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, in line with the Sochi Agreement, this settlement does not extend to these active frontlines to the south of the newly-occupied region. SDF continue to fight on frontlines there, together with SAA units. In practice, it is SDF units who do the bulk of the fighting, particularly when it comes to close-quarters combat, rather than the often poorly-equipped SAA units.

Violations of the ceasefire agreement continue to this day. The independent monitoring site Airwars estimates that up to 258 civilians have been killed in airstrikes and shelling by Turkey throughout the invasion and occupation of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, with 69 of these killed from November 2019 through April 2020, despite the supposed ceasefire.⁶

Civilian vehicles have been struck and civilians killed in TAF drone strikes following the declaration of the ceasefire⁷, but the main danger facing civilians comes from indiscriminate shelling targeting their homes and properties. For example, throughout March 2020 local monitors documented 12 separate incidents of shelling on civilian homes and settlements, resulting in the injury of 19 civilians and 3 deaths, including 1 child.⁸

Aside from continued indiscriminate shelling, the main danger faced by civilians is within the zone of Turkish occupation (see below). However, Turkish-backed SNA fighters continue to encroach outside the lines of the ceasefire, carrying out or attempting to carry out attacks on military and civilian targets in Ayn Issa, Zirgan and Manbij within April 2020 alone. SNA fighters also continue to encroach on the stretch of the M4 highway between Ain Issa and Til Temir – now supposedly under the control of the SAA and Russian Military Police – and stop civilian vehicles attempting to make use of the road.

⁶<https://airwars.org/conflict/turkish-military-in-iraq-and-syria/>

⁷<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2019/11/21-Turkish-drone-strike-kills-injures-civilians-in-YPG-controlled-Syrian-area-Media>

⁸Violations Documentation Center of North and East Syria

“When the Turkish-backed factions stop cars on the M4, they aren’t looking for military or political figures. They stop civilian cars at random and take the people’s phones, jewelry, money, anything they can find,” a security source tells RIC.⁹

Ain Issa, the former seat of the Syrian Democratic Council and Autonomous Administration, has been largely abandoned, with few civilians remaining in the city, and shelling and drone attacks often reaching the city limits. Many of the political institutions of the SDC and AANES have relocated to Raqqa, with the city that was until recently ISIS’ de-facto capital in Syria now seen as a relatively safe option for conducting political affairs, in a striking illustration of ongoing changes in NES. The civilian population has largely relocated to camps and informal settlements in Raqqa and elsewhere, along with around 16,000 IDPs from Ayn Issa camp. The camp remains abandoned following Turkish attacks on the camp and the successful escape of hundreds of ISIS-linked individuals from a secure section within the camp limits.

Although Til Temir several times emptied and refilled following threats of further Turkish advances, a relatively higher proportion of the civilian population remains in the city, which also hosts tens of thousands of IDPs in its schools and abandoned villages in the surrounding countryside.

Frontlines around Til Temir have reached the historic Christian homeland of the Khabour Valley, with the Syriac-Assyrian Military Council (comprising the Syriac Military Council [MFS], Assyrian Khabour Guards and associated, autonomous women’s units) playing an active role in the defense of these villages, along with the Armenian Tabur. Christian villages have experienced regular shelling and further displacement of this highly-vulnerable minority group, with MFS General Command member and SDF spokesperson Kino Gabriel warning: “The Turkish threat of further military operations in northern border areas... threatens the existence of the Syriac Christian community in North and East Syria which needs to be safe and secure.”¹⁰

⁹ RIC interview, April 2020

¹⁰Kino Gabriel statement to press, October 2019

Formally, control of the M4 highway between Til Temir and Ain Issa was handed over to the Syrian Arab Army and Russian Military, with SNA and Turkish units officially pulling back from the road. In practice, however, SNA units still fire on or obstruct vehicles attempting to traverse this road. The M4 is not safe for civilian traffic, trade or humanitarian deliveries. Engineers working on the Mabruka electric station, for example, can only travel on the M4 to the adjacent station with a Russian Military Police escort.¹¹

This means that any vehicle wishing to avoid this danger when traveling between the eastern Jazira and western Euphrates regions of NES must take a poorly-developed road from Heseke south to Raqqa, and then drive back up north should they wish to reach cities such as Kobane or Manbij. This adds four hours to an already long and arduous journey, affecting the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Euphrates region, with the number of trucks of aid making this journey falling significantly following the Turkish invasion. Meanwhile, more than 440,000 hectares of productive farmland in conflict affected areas are at risk of not being planted due to access limitations for farmers; if planting does not occur, up to 763,000 tons of wheat will not be produced, endangering food security for many local civilians.¹²

There is no serious effort at present to push these frontlines forward and seize either Ain Issa or Til Temir, with any such operation made more difficult – though by no means precluded – by the presence of Russian troops in both cities. Military activity is largely limited to back-and-forth shelling, occasional drone strikes, and night raids in villages along the contact line.

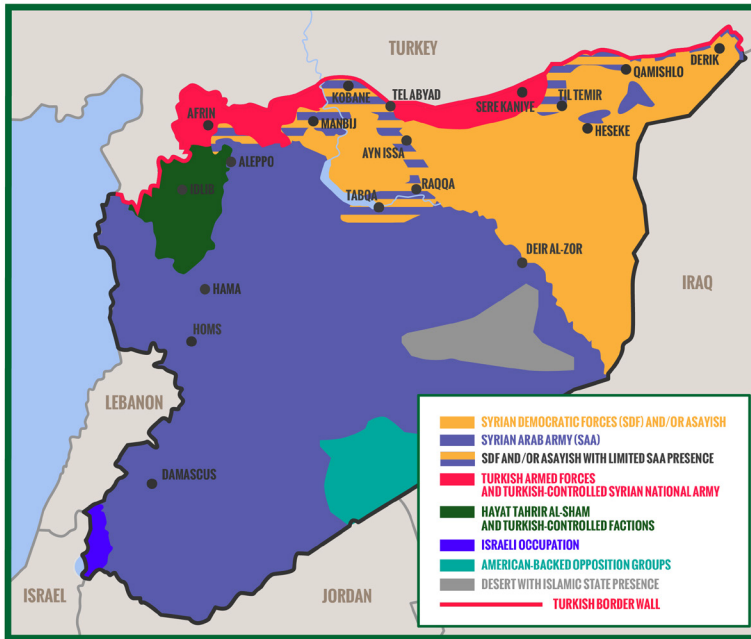
In April 2020, the SDF joined global calls for a ceasefire to combat coronavirus and stated its forces would halt all offensive military operations along the contact line. Formally, of course, a ceasefire has been in place since October, and this latest call for a cessation of hostilities has not brought any further respite from daily shelling around Til Temir and Ain Issa. As explained below, while the precise target of the next Turkish operation remains an open question, the likelihood of such an attack is not in doubt.

¹¹ RIC interview with Ziyad Rustem, co-chair of Energy Bureau of the AANES, March 2020

¹²https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/nes_allocation_strategy_paper_final.pdf

2.2 USA-RUSSIA JOSTLING FOR POSITION

SYRIA: AREAS OF CONTROL MAY 2020



Map produced by Rojava Information Center, May 2020

As noted in 2.1, a key outcome of the Turkish invasion has been to redraw the map in NES, with U.S. troops previously present throughout the region now confined to the region east of Heseke and Qamishlo, and Russian troops to the west. The exact perimeters of the two forces' zone of control remain in dispute. Per the Sochi agreement, Russian forces should be present along the border,

but their efforts to patrol or establish military bases to the east of Qamishlo have repeatedly been blocked and frustrated by U.S. troops. U.S. and Russian patrols have come into friction around Qamishlo, Heseke and Til Temir, with the SDF on occasion mediating between the two groups. This friction has included verbal altercations, ramming incidents between military vehicles, the calling-in of air support and even a fistfight, but no military hostilities to date.

Joint Russian-Turkish patrols in the new 'buffer zone' have been met by hostility from the local population, with teargas and live rounds being fired against protesters and journalists. At least one civilian protester killed after being run over by a Turkish military vehicle. U.S. patrols have also run into opposition, particularly when trying to enter SAA-held districts in and around Qamishlo, with gunmen from the Syrian government-controlled National Defense Force (NDF) militia opening fire against the US on at least one occasion.

These minor clashes are merely a symptom of underlying tensions, as both Russia and the USA continue to try and exert control over and draw the SDF into their respective spheres of influence.

2.3 PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO THE U.S. AND DAMASCUS

The U.S position in NES has been significantly weakened as a result of the Turkish invasion. Along with the loss of physical presence and influence across swathes of NES – where Russian forces are now engaging in hearts-and-minds efforts such as aid distribution and meetings with local tribal dignitaries – they must contend with a general loss of faith in the US' willingness or ability to serve as a guarantor against further Turkish operations. In interviews, ordinary civilians frequently express fear that the USA will withdraw once again or at least not stand in the way of further Turkish operations.

In the Kurdish-majority border regions, at least, this has driven a pragmatic acceptance of the necessity of dealing with Damascus. In commonly-repeated sentiments, one interviewee told RIC: *"I know the regime well, I lived under [their rule] for 50 years. My heart is heavy, but we are forced to deal with them.... if we are going to be exterminated, we would not just make agreements with the regime, but with the devil."*¹³ A settlement with Damascus is now seen as the only long-term guarantor preventing further Turkish invasions.

"I know the regime well. I lived under [their rule] for 50 years. My heart is heavy, but we are forced to deal with them.... if we are going to be exterminated, we would not just make agreements with the regime, but with the devil."
- Kurdish civilian, Qamishlo

RIC researchers recently attended a meeting of Arab tribal and community leaders in Til Temir, bringing together representatives of tribes from the newly-occupied border regions through Heseke to Deir-ez-Zor. Delegates typically focused on the need for a united front between those loyal to Damascus and those close to the AANES in order to resist further Turkish aggressions. It was also clear that the AANES' call for a federal Syria has an appeal to tribal leaders seeking assurances they will be able to retain local power and autonomy as the Syrian conflict enters a new phase. Indeed, Kurdish tribes have historically played a mediation role between the AANES and Damascus for coordinating service provision in regions where they have a presence.

¹³ RIC interview with Ziyad Rustem, co-chair of Energy Bureau of the AANES, March 2020

Both the AANES and Russia are currently meeting with tribal leaders in an attempt to win their support in the ongoing negotiations. While a survey of political allegiances among the tribes of NES is beyond the scope of this dossier, it was nonetheless apparent that none of the tribal leaders who spoke to RIC wished to see their independence, prestige and land threatened by further Turkish incursions into Syria, and the concomitant instillation of militias from elsewhere in Syria in their historic territories.

Similarly, a report commissioned by the US Department of Defense recently found that despite pressure from Turkey and Damascus, “the majority of Arab communities in North and East Syria passively support the SDF and its associated civil institutions... the majority of Arabs in North and East Syria oppose the Syrian regime and many continue to support the SDF on the condition that the SDF includes Arab components in important discussions and provides equitable assistance to both Arab and Kurds.”¹⁴

“From Baghouz up to Qamishlo, our blood has flown as one and the politics of the Autonomous Administration has spread. Without the Administration, where would we be now?” – Arab tribal leader, Shedadi¹⁵

2.4 U.S. RELATIONS WITH NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

The same open attitude towards reconciliation with Damascus is reflected at the highest political levels, but sits alongside a continued willingness for cooperation with the U.S. and the U.S.-led International Coalition to Defeat Daesh. Per SDF General Commander Mazloun Abdi, *“The American policy has been terrible and was detrimental to the whole region. It played against Kurds, Arabs and Christians. But the Syrian crisis is an international crisis and the solution can only be international, with an involvement of those international powers.”*¹⁶

Sources with knowledge of diplomatic meetings between North and East Syria and Damascus tell RIC that a continued relationship with the US is seen as essential for securing leverage in these negotiations, with the AANES continuing to try and triangulate itself on a ‘third way’ between Russian and U.S. interests.

¹⁶ <https://www.revue-ballast.fr/rojawa-the-people-reject-turkeys-presence-and-the-return-of-the-syrian-regime/>

The U.S.' de facto presence in the east of the country is recognized as being motivated more by a desire to prevent Iran from extending its influence from Tehran through Iraq to the Mediterranean than its stated mission of continuing anti-ISIS operations and defending the oil fields in the Deir-ez-Zor and Heseke regions. International observers and AANES diplomatic officials alike expect the U.S.-Iranian confrontation to wax again as coronavirus wanes. This will create further pressure on the SDF to play an active role in a fight it has little appetite for.¹⁷

As noted below, RIC research indicates anti-ISIS operations have dwindled to a fraction of their former rate and intensity following the Turkish invasion, while media reports indicate that Republican politicians merely brought up the oil-fields in order to convince Donald Trump to permit US troops to retain a foothold in NES. Certainly, the U.S. does not appear to have any active designs on the relatively small oil-fields in NES¹⁸. The AANES continues to operate those oil fields in its territory which are still functional, continuing its discreet oil trade with Damascus despite U.S. disapproval. These fields constitute the key source of income for funding military and civil society programs in NES.

Prior to the Turkish invasion, the U.S. was seen as guarantors in preventing Turkish aggressions against North and East Syria. However, more recent statements by the U.S. military have done little to inspire confidence that they would stand in the way of a further Turkish invasion, even if it targeted their zone of influence between Qamishlo and the Iraqi border. Pressed about whether the U.S. would commit to opposing such an invasion, Coalition spokesperson Myles Caggins was dilatory: *"The Coalition is not part of the border tension... Our NATO Ally [Turkey]'s actions are independent of the military Coalition.... we're just here to protect the oil infrastructure, that's it, period. And defeat ISIS... We're not here to get entangled in anything else."*¹⁹

Of course, Russia has not had it all its own way in NES in recent months, with the U.S. frustrating Russian efforts to build up its own SDF Military Council-style force in Qamishlo and reportedly expanding its own recruitment programs in Jazira and Deir-ez-Zor. Reports of a U.S. return to the Raqqa and Kobane region, on the other hand, are without foundation.

¹⁸ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/graham-fox-news-star-showed-trump-map-change-his-mind-n1069901>

¹⁹ Col. Myles Caggins, press conference, March 2020

U.S. involvement in NES does continue, with limited anti-ISIS operations still underway alongside the SDF. More broadly, U.S. government pressure has contributed both to reversing Turkey's severing of the water flow into NES (see below) and the transfer of two coronavirus testing machines into North and East Syria from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

2.5 RUSSIA AND DAMASCUS RELATIONS WITH NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

It remains in Russia's interest to bring the AANES and Damascus to an agreement. Although commonly understood as a coup for Damascus, as noted below then the October agreement that brought SAA units into defensive positions throughout NES has resulted in no real gains on the ground for Damascus in terms of power or influence. "Far from being a capitulation by the SDF seeking protection from Damascus, the 'return of the regime' turns out to be a concession by Damascus,"²⁰ as Russia pressured Damascus into accepting what the AANES had been seeking all along – the return of the SAA to the border, but continued SDF and AANES control in the interior and on the political level.

This is not to say that relations have improved between the Autonomous Administration and Russia or its client in Damascus. As noted above, although the wind is blowing in its favor, Russia has not yet been able to draw the SDF or AANES away from its long-standing relationship with the US.

On the contrary, negotiations for a more meaningful political settlement than the purely military and largely symbolic agreement reached in October are making little headway. Sources with knowledge of these negotiations describe the Syrian government and the Russians alike as "not serious" about coming to a political agreement with the AANES²¹. Although recent weeks have seen sit-downs between Russian and SDF military representatives, they have also seen an uptick in petty but disruptive attacks in Qamishlo by the Syrian government-controlled NDF militia. An Asayish (internal security) commander in the city has told RIC he believes these attacks are a way for Russia to create pressure on North and East Syria.²²

²⁰ <http://middleeastdirections.eu/new-publication-wpcs-surviving-the-aftermath-of-islamic-state-the-syrian-kurdish-movements-resilience-strategy-patrick-haenni-and-arthur-quesnay/0>

²¹ RIC interviews with AANES diplomatic officials, January & February 2020

²² RIC interview with Asayish commander, Qamishlo, April 2020

AANES representatives say they have two red lines in negotiations toward a political settlement with Damascus: first, the preservation of the SDF as an autonomous military force based in North and East Syria (notwithstanding the possibility of SDF formally becoming a part of the SAA); and second, the preservation of the Autonomous Administration as an autonomous structure as part of a federal Syrian political system.²³

Neither of these appears to be acceptable to Damascus or Moscow. Though Russia has shown some willingness to serve as a broker between Damascus and NES, it has been pressuring representatives of NES to negotiate “as Kurds” (that is, as individual representatives of Kurdish institutions and parties such as PYD). This is connected to efforts to get representatives of NES to settle for cultural rights – such as the recognition of Kurdish identity, protection of Kurdish language and preservation of new Kurdish-language education – in isolation, rather than the wider preservation of the political project in NES.

As to the preservation of any degree of military or political autonomy in NES, Damascus’ tone in public and private has been uniformly hostile. For example, Damascus has for individual SDF members to desert and join the SAA, in a statement that generated much ire in NES. Fear of being forced to complete military service in the SAA rather than the SDF – which provides a much higher living standard, more reasonable terms, and adheres much more closely to international human rights standards – is a major concern for civilians in NES.²⁴

“As a Kurdish person I see Syria as my land, and if needed, I am prepared to defend it, but we must have status as Kurdish military forces... several times our Kurdish youth returned from their military service with a bullet in the back [ie. having been shot by their superiors]. For this reason, I don’t trust the SAA.” – Rudi Ahmed, Kurdish citizen from Qamishlo

A source with knowledge of the negotiations tells RIC that as a condition of facilitating further dialog between the AANES and Damascus – in other words, pressuring Damascus to accept more of the AANES’ demands – Russia has asked the AANES to distance itself from the U.S. Concretely, this would mean the AANES encouraging or facilitating public demonstrations opposing continued U.S. presence east of the Euphrates.²⁵

²³ RIC interviews with AANES diplomatic officials, January-February 2020

²⁴ RIC interviews with civilians, North and East Syria, October-November 2019

²⁵ RIC interview with AANES diplomatic official, February 2020

This would legitimate Russia's presence in Syria and allow them to undermine the U.S. position. As such, the AANES remains in a double-bind, unable to move closer to Damascus without angering the U.S. whose presence it needs in order to, in turn, keep up pressure on Damascus in negotiations.

2.6 OTHER POWERS' RELATIONS WITH NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

Turkey's 2019 invasion provoked near-global condemnation from state powers and supranational bodies. This condemnation has translated into some limited opportunities on the international level for NES' legislative political body, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), which takes responsibility for foreign diplomacy. Notably, the region has opened new relations with Egypt, with the SDC opening offices in Cairo and being invited for the first time to participate in Syrian opposition meetings taking place under Egypt's sponsorship. (Egypt's efforts to build a relationship with the SDC are also in part motivated by Turkey's sabre-rattling in the Mediterranean and increased involvement in the Libyan conflict.) There have also been reports of increased military support for the SDF, spearheaded by Egypt with Saudi Arabian and UAE involvement, but details of this program remain unclear.

Under U.S. sponsorship and pressure, there has also been a limited *détente* between the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and North and East Syria, two regions historically at ideological loggerheads, with the KRG operating as a Kurdish-nationalist statelet in opposition to the AANES' federal, pluralist program. Most notably, this has resulted in the AANES permitting the KDP-linked Kurdistan National Council (KNC) coalition to open offices in NES without registering with the AANES, as was previously required, as well as a flurry of diplomatic niceties between SDF commander Mazloun Abdi and officials in the KRG. April 2020 saw the first meeting in six years between the KNC and the leading Kurdish party in NES, the PYD.²⁶

Increased unity between KRG and NES will assist the AANES in any negotiations with Damascus, but the extent of progress in this field should not be overstated. During the coronavirus crisis, the KRG has been obstructing the passage of aid and aid workers into NES, even banning NGOs from purchasing personal protective equipment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) if they intend to transfer it

to North and East Syria. Recent hostilities between rival Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, namely the PUK, KDP and PKK, have not helped matters.

A recent diplomatic tour of Europe undertaken by both SDC and AANES officials, primarily focused on drumming up support for their proposed court for international ISIS fighters, found only muted support. Officials present on this trip were positive about the access they achieved, noting that meetings in Scandinavia and Brussels which previously occurred off-the-record in hotels, were now open, formal discussions. However, concrete offers of support for the legal process did not materialize, with most state actors indicating they would neither stand in the way of AANES' plans nor provide material support.²⁷

Via its intervention in Idlib, Turkey has recouped some of the diplomatic credit it lost during the 2019 invasion of NES – threats of flooding Europe with refugees notwithstanding. Of particular note was Angela Merkel's January 2020 proclamation of support for Turkey's plan to house Syrian refugees in newly-occupied regions of NES, with AANES officials angrily reacting to what they saw as a whitewashing of Turkey's ongoing program of forcible demographic change in these regions. In a public statement, the AANES noted it already willingly hosts hundreds of thousands of IDPs including those displaced in the latest offensive in Idlib. It reiterated its willingness to coordinate with the UN to host refugees rather than allowing Turkey to use them as a smokescreen for the forcible expulsion of Kurdish and Yazidi minorities along its border.²⁸

Statements like Merkel's serve as a reminder that widespread Western sympathy for "the Kurds" in October 2019 does not necessarily translate into concrete support today. Indeed, if negotiations with Damascus do proceed, North and East Syria will struggle to retain the moral credit and public interest it has undoubtedly earned in the West as a result of its fight against ISIS.

²⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/iraq-kurdistan-region-msf-aid-covid19-coronavirus-syria.html>

2.7 CONTINUED COHESION IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

As of now, the SDF-Damascus agreement of October 2019 has not directly affected the administration of NES on the civilian, political or internal security level. Except for those cities occupied by Turkey, the AANES retains the same political authority and autonomy as it did before the war. SAA units are confined to frontlines and posts along the border and are no more visible in cities or on the roads than they were prior to the 2019 invasion. Despite the continued closure of the M4 highway, travel from the Semalka border crossing through Derik to Qamishlo, Heseke, Til Temir and on to Raqqa, Kobane, and Manbij does not entail any interaction with SAA units or checkpoints. As before, it is the AANES-controlled Asayish (internal security) which operates checkpoints throughout the 'buffer zone' on the border and down into the interior.

Per Mazloum Abdi, "Following [the] agreement with Russia, the regime redeployed on the Turkish border in a few minor border outposts. It is more of a political presence than a military one. It's merely symbolic... In other parts of the area, the regime doesn't have more presence than before: no more than a few neighborhoods in Qamishlo and Heseke, but not in any territory controlled by the SDF."

The SAA and its proxies have been frustrated in attempts to expand their sphere of influence by setting up new checkpoints or taking over public buildings, and the SDF has ensured they remain confined to a limited number of military locations. As noted below, the SAA forces stationed in NES are primarily conscripted, underpaid, underfed and poorly armed, with SDF forces in Ayn Issa not even allowing SAA members to carry small arms in the city.

Predictions in some quarters of a breakdown in military cohesion of the SDF and/or political cohesion of the AANES have not been realized. In October, both pro- and anti-Syrian government protests in Raqqa, Manbij, and elsewhere attracted only scores of protesters, with the SDF dispersing some protests but allowing others to go ahead.³⁰ Neither pro-government nor Islamist opposition networks could muster any significant support among the civilian population even at this critical time, indicating an at least pragmatic acceptance of the AANES and SDF.

³⁰ RIC interviews, October 2019

A recent report from the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria Project found that despite recent geopolitical shifts, *“The Kurdish movement still manages to assert itself as a coherent political entity and the sole credible actor to hold the ground and maintain pressure on ISIS.”*³¹The report’s authors argue the AANES has retained legitimacy and popular support via:

- Increased participation of civilians in the AANES project, especially as employees in the military field, education system and civil service;
- Relative public content, with NES absorbing hundreds of thousands of IDPs and providing humanitarian support in many communities;
- Increased room for formal and informal dissent, via new trade unions, reconciliation committees and other programs – for example, accepting demands from civilian protesters in Deir-ez-Zor in 2019;
- Lack of political alternatives, with public hostility to the Syrian government remaining high and opposition to Turkish control all but universal.

While recognizing the significant shifts underway in the region, it is important to recognize that the SDF and AANES still retain significant advantages in NES and will not be supplanted overnight. That the Syrian government is yet to make any open move against the AANES or attempt to re-impose its rule by force is testament to this reality.

³¹ <http://middleeastdirections.eu/new-publication-wpcs-surviving-the-aftermath-of-islamic-state-the-syrian-kurdish-movements-resilience-strategy-patrick-haenni-and-arthur-quesnay/>

3 SITUATION IN NEWLY-OCCUPIED AREAS

3.1 COMMAND AND CONTROL IN THE AREAS OF TURKISH OCCUPATION

A cursory investigation of the command and control structure of factions in the SNA, shows that responsibility flows directly up to the TAF – and by extension their commander-in-chief, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

These factions are technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government, a Turkish-sponsored body which lobbies on behalf of the SNA in Geneva and other foreign capitals. In practice, they are trained, armed, funded and commanded by the Turkish government. The SNA number “at least 35,000 full-time fighters, all under the near-total control of Turkey’s Ministry of Defense and National Intelligence Organization (MIT).”³²

In areas under nominal SNA control, they are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population. But real power is retained by Turkey, through direct control of local political bodies, top-down exploitation of economic resources, and governance through proxies “dependent on Turkey’s political, economic and military backing for their survival.”

On the battlefield, likewise, the SNA take their commands directly from Turkey. A recent piece of in-depth research by Elizabeth Tsurkov, speaking to multiple sources within the ranks of the SNA, confirmed: “All decisions, big and small, in the ‘National Army’ are made by the operations room run by Turkish intelligence.”³³

Per local journalist Diyar Ahmed, this overall picture holds true in the new zone of occupation: “[The SNA factions] don’t have a well-organized structure. Because there are 20 armed groups in the city, and they fight with one another. What system there is has been imposed by Turkey.

The majority of those people who participate in the town council are those who left the city in 2013 [when YPG took the city from Jabhat al-Nusra], and went to Turkey. They returned during the recent invasion of Sere Kaniye, and work together with the Turkish intelligence services.

³² <https://www.mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner>

³³ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

The border crossing is under the control of the Turkish state. Recently, a number of the Turkish-backed fighters wanted to change their location, with fighters from Idlib wanting to return [to Idlib]. But Turkey closed the crossing and didn't allow them to return. At the same time, Turkey cut their salaries in order to apply pressure.”³⁴



On at least one occasion, Turkish media were caught passing off this member of SNA militia Hamza Division as a Kurdish civilian for propaganda purposes.

3.2 SNA FACTIONS IN SERE KANIYE AND TEL ABYAD

It is difficult to precisely map the location of particular factions in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. SNA factions still regularly clash over territory, control of checkpoints and smuggling routes or crossings, and the spoils of war looted from the towns. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, while some SNA groups have a major presence on the ground, others may number no more than a few dozen fighters. Groups may re-use the names of unrelated groups, or have their role exaggerated via propaganda channels, in order to gain legitimacy.

In particular, groups containing Kurds make up an extremely small fraction of the SNA's battle strength. However, such groups are mentioned via Turkish media channels to counter-act charges of carrying out forcible demographic change against the civilian Kurdish population. Likewise, despite their insignificant numbers, groups with a connection to or commanders from the local area are given prominence in order to shield Turkey from these allegations.

For example, the Kurdish-majority Descendants of Saladin Brigade was taken apart by Turkey and its leaders imprisoned, tortured and disarmed following a disagreement over Turkey's 2018 invasion of Afrin. However, remnants of this group still fight as the "Saladin Brigade" and form part of the SNA's order of battle. Likewise, Turkey deployed – or at least used the names of – small Kurdish groups like Ahrar Afrin and local groups like Sere Kaniye's Mashal Tamo Brigade in the 2019 operation.

The real fighting strength of the SNA, however, is made up of Arab militias originating from Deir-ez-Zor and Eastern Syria; Turkmen militias from the Aleppo region; and Arab militias from Western Syria, particularly Aleppo, Homs, Ghouta and Idlib.

It is possible to establish a rough picture of the major SNA factions active in the region, particularly based on troop movements during the opening weeks of the conflict, as well as interviews with local interlocutors.^{35/36} The SNA's 3rd Legion is predominant in Tel Abyad, with the strongest groups in the city being Jabhat al-Shammiyah and Faylaq al-Majd. The 2nd Legion is predominant in Sere Kaniye, with Sultan Murad and Firqat al-Hamza the strongest groups in the city. Sultan Murad is also the strongest group in the eastern countryside of the city, while Mutasim Division controls the manufacturing district.

³⁵With thanks to Alexander McKeever for providing an overview of SNA deployment in October 2019

³⁶RIC field interviews, May 2020

The bulk of the fighting on the Ain Issa front has been done by 1st Legion groups like Suleiman Shah, Samarkand Division and Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, while the Til Temir front has been led by Sultan Murad and Jaysh-al-Islam. The zone between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad is in general under the control of groups originating from Deir-ez-Zor, with as Ahrar-al-Sharqiya and Jaysh-al-Sharqiya the most powerful.

Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, who have attracted particular media attention following their execution of Hevrin Khalef, have been expanding their field of influence. Based in Suluk, a town east of Tel Abyad, during a bout of in-fighting they took control of the strategic town of Mabrouka from the 1st Legion's Division 20. Near the M4 highway, Mabrouka is the site of a key electrical power station. Meanwhile, the town of Allouk to the east of Sere Kaniye is controlled by Sultan Murad, along with its vital water station. (See below for more on the strategic importance of these pieces of infrastructure.)

3.3 FORMER ISIS FIGHTERS IN SNA FACTIONS

Particularly concerning is the presence of former ISIS members among the ranks of SNA militias now installed in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. A widely-circulated list originally published by monitoring group Violations Documentation Center of North Syria identified 74 former ISIS members now in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.

A forthcoming RIC report will corroborate the identities of a number of these individuals, particularly those originating from regions now part of the AANES, such as Heseke, Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. The same report will identify a number of other former ISIS members now part of Turkish-controlled groups present in the newly-occupied area, particularly those originating from Sere Kaniye or Tel Abyad, who RIC's local interlocutors were able to positively identify. Limited as it is for the most part to those former ISIS members with pre-existing ties to what is now North and East Syria, RIC's list of over 50 former ISIS members likely only constitutes a fraction of the true total currently present in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.

³⁵With thanks to Alexander McKeever for providing an overview of SNA deployment in October 2019

³⁶RIC field interviews, May 2020

Case study: Mohammed Baaqi, Sere Kaniye IDP

RIC has continued to document cases of denial of return, kidnapping, and other abuses such as the case of 60-year-old Mohammed Baaqi.³⁷ When he returned to his property in the countryside east of Sere Kaniye, he found it was occupied by Turkish-backed SNA fighters. They told him his home was in use as a military point but that he could return once it was abandoned. However, as he walked away through his cotton fields a pickup arrived and he was bundled inside. He spent ten days being held by the SNA, suffering beatings, with his son making a \$2000 (200,000SYP) payment to secure his release.

3.4 ARBITRARY ARRESTS, TORTURE AND ABDUCTION IN SERE KANIYE AND TEL ABYAD

RIC has met and interviewed eight civilians who have returned to the zone of occupation in Sere Kaniye or its surroundings and suffered arbitrary arrest, torture and extortion. Those arrested included Kurds and Arabs, men and women, and were aged from 18 up to over 70.³⁸

In general, RIC found that Kurds were too scared to go back. For example, in one school hosting 27 Kurdish IDP families in Til Temir not one individual could be found who had returned to the occupied region, with all citing fear of arbitrary detention as the determining factor: *"We are all patriotic families here. If we go back, they will arrest us and accuse of being part of Asayish or SDF. We know we cannot go back for as long as one [SNA member] remains in the city."*³⁹

While it is possible that some interlocutors had in fact returned to the zone of occupation and were too scared to relay this to our researchers, in general Kurds are much less likely to have returned to the zone of occupation than Arabs. Given that there is compulsory military service under the SDF, the accusation of 'SDF membership' or having a family member in the SDF serves as a de facto excuse for SNA groups to seize any individual they choose.

Those interlocutors who'd been back into the occupied areas and prepared to discuss this with RIC were typically Arabs who'd experienced violence, kidnapping, extortion, and as such were angry and happy to speak on record.

³⁸ RIC field interviews, here and ibid, May 2020

³⁹ RIC field interview, May 2020

In Washokani IDP camp, many interlocutors reported that Arabs with family links to the SNA come and go freely in the area of occupation for business, or even receive aid in AANES areas which they then bring to their relatives in the occupied areas.

Those without familial or financial ties to SNA, however, face arbitrary detention and arrest by SNA factions pursuing financial reward. Typically, security concerns were invoked as a pretext for the arrest. For example, a 65-year-old former head of an AANES-linked commune was arrested in his Arab village and accused of hiding weapons for the YPG, paying 350,000SYP (\$350)⁴⁰ to secure his release. Young men, in particular, are at risk of arrest, torture and extortion.

One young man was arrested, detained and beaten until he lost consciousness for having a Whatsapp voice note on his phone asking if 'the women of the Free Syrian Army were beautiful.' Other interlocutors report that having a camera-phone capable of taking pictures is enough to incur suspicion and detention at checkpoints.

In only one instance does there appear to have been a clear political motivation (see example below), in which the brother of a prominent local Kurdish journalist was detained and tortured for three months by SNA fighters seeking information about and access to his brother, paying \$10,000 to secure his release. Other instances of abduction and arbitrary detention include two Arab women tending to sheep who had half their flock stolen by SNA gunmen: a young man who went back to check on his property only to be detained and tortured for three and a half months until he paid a 2,200,000SYP ransom to secure his release: and a young man who returned to the city and lived there for nine days until SNA gunmen arrested and tortured him, accusing him of SDF membership.

"In the space of a hundred and fifty meters in the souq, you come to five checkpoints belonging to five different armed groups," per one interlocutor.⁴¹ All these groups appear to act autonomously in seizing locals with the intention of securing ransoms. Mutasim Division in the manufacturing district, Sultan Murad in the eastern Sere Kaniye countryside, and Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Suqqour al-Sham in the city proper were all identified by interlocutors as having abducted and tortured them for ransom.

⁴⁰ With the Syrian Pound (SYP) plummeting against the dollar, it is difficult to give any precise conversion figure, and so this dossier uses the April 2020 rate of 1000SYP to \$1 for convenience. At the time of writing in mid-May, the rate has reached 1600SYP to \$1.

⁴¹ RIC field interview, May 2020

Civilians who have returned to check on their property variously report that their home has been completely looted; that they have returned to find Arab families living in their property; or that their homes have been turned into military bases. In some instances, the SNA factions in charge of neighborhoods have offered to sell residents' own property back to them.

By utilising these armed groups, Turkey is able to conduct forcible demographic change by leaving Kurds, Christians and Yazidis too scared to return to the zone of occupation, while keeping this process at arm's length. These groups have used jihadi rhetoric during the invasion, while Kurdish interlocutors detained by SNA factions report anti-Kurdish abuse: "It was very hard as a Kurd. If you said a Kurdish name to them, it was like they didn't understand what you were saying. They said that the Kurds were traitors. They said 'how many martyrs did we lose in Kobane [i.e. ISIS fighters killed by YPG] only to be betrayed?' Their commander said this to me."⁴²

However, the primary motivation for conducting these arbitrary detentions and abuses is evidently financial, with Arabs also targeted – particularly those who worked with the AANES, but also civilian workers with no connection to the administration. In general, a three-way division emerges among the displaced population. Very few Kurds go back into the area of occupation and face violence and extortion if they do so: Arabs with ties to the SNA militias can go back as they please: Arabs without ties to these militias go back but at risk of violence and extortion.

In this way, a de facto demographic change takes place, as Kurds and other minorities are forced to flee while some Arabs are able to remain in the city, alongside the new Arab arrivals transferred into the city from elsewhere in Syria.

Case Study: Adil Haji Hassan

Adil Haji Hassan returned to Sere Kaniye to check on his shop in the manufacturing district, when he was arbitrarily detained, tortured, and denied access to food and water for over two months. He told RIC:

"I was waiting in the [Turkish-controlled] local council in Sere Kaniye for a stamp for my file. Afterward, two people came to me and said, 'come with us, we want to ask you a couple of questions.' There were five or six men sitting in the house, wearing jihadi clothes.

⁴² RIC field interview, May 2020

They were very tall, and they had pistols and long beards, like ISIS members. They said I made weapons for YPG in my workshop. I said, 'It's not true. You can ask anybody, I have no connection to YPG, I don't work for them. I just work in my own shop and afterward go home to my house.'

Five or six people started beating me, until I was unconscious. Then they flung me into a bathroom. I remained there for three or four days until I came to my senses.

Those who arrested me were the Mutasim Division, who control the whole manufacturing district. Because I didn't give them any information, they punished me by putting me in solitary confinement for a month. I didn't see anyone and no one saw me.

They wanted me to ask my wife to steal the laptop and phone of my brother Heysem [a prominent local journalist with the Kurdistan 24 TV channel]. But my wife didn't accept. So they said to me, 'if you don't have the laptop and phone, you have to give us \$15,000.' I was forced to accept.

There was another prisoner there. He was also from Sere Kaniye. They brought him into another cell and shot him several times in the head. They brought his body out. Whether he survived or not, we don't know. Ten people came and beat [another detainee] with a plastic hose, until he was close to madness. [Another detainee] was beaten a lot, until he couldn't take any more. They brought his wife to see him, and he threw himself at her feet and said, 'give them money so that I can be freed from this situation.'

I wasn't beaten with the hose. They just beat me with their fists and feet. Sometimes they tied my hands and feet behind me so I couldn't move or resist. Then they beat me until I lost consciousness, and only then stopped. The things they did to me are too hard to recall. Whenever they were angry, they came and took their anger out on us. They don't distinguish between old and young, there was that one old man aged around 70 who could only walk with difficulty and could barely eat. They beat him until his hands were all grazed.

They brought me food and water once every four or five days. The toilet was in the same cell as where I slept. We stored away our bread and hid our water when they stopped giving us water, so we could survive. When they gave us a little water, we would hold it in our mouths for as long as possible to make our mouths moist. They would give us a bottle of water between us to last two to three days. We were so hungry that when we saw a grain of bulgur on the ground we picked it up and put it in our mouths.

My relatives in Germany borrowed money and transferred \$10,000 [to the Mutasim division via an intermediary in Turkey]. I was held for two months and ten days until I was released. When I was in the prison, I sometimes felt like I wanted to kill myself, because of the wicked things that were being done to me."

³⁵With thanks to Alexander McKeever for providing an overview of SNA deployment in October 2019

³⁶RIC field interviews, May 2020

3.5 HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SERE KANIYE & TEL ABYAD

Per the UN, “civilians in and around Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad have reported numerous cases of looting and property appropriation by members of the Syrian National Army, primarily affecting Kurdish residents and, on occasions, Yazidi owners who had fled in October. Schools and businesses, such as bakeries, were also looted or expropriated, along with land for making olive oil, agricultural tools and vehicles.”

The situation is compounded by food shortages, power outages and price hikes. For example, sources in the zone of occupation report that a canister of cooking gas now costs 13,000SYP (c. \$13), compared to 2,500SYP (c. \$2.50) in the rest of North and East Syria, while a barrel of diesel oil for a car or generator can cost up to 70,000SYP (c. \$70). By way of comparison, an average monthly wage for a day labourer in the region is around 50,000SYP (c. \$50). “Life in Sere Kaniye is very hard,” one interlocutor still in Sere Kaniye told RIC. “Following the arrival of the Turkish-backed fighters, there is no work, there is poverty, we cannot move around freely.”⁴³

The effect of these practices has been to prevent the Kurdish population, in particular, from returning home (see below for an assessment of the methodology behind the UN-published figures for IDP returns, and how these fail to match up to observations on the ground). Interviewees estimate that 30% of the Arab population and no more than 10% of the Kurdish population has returned to Sere Kaniye.

Those accused of working with the SDF or AANES are also singled out for other forms of abuse and collective punishment besides abduction for ransom. Between 22 October 2019 and 30 March 2020, TAF and SNA have carried out 127 home demolitions in the area under their control,⁴⁴ in particular targeting villages and homes belonging to people with suspected links to the former administration in the region.

Local sources indicate that there are around 3000 Arab SNA fighters in Sere Kaniye alone, plus around 200 to 300 TAF soldiers. The fighters are accompanied by around 3500 family members, with 1500 of these concentrated in the Hawwarna neighbourhood.

⁴³ RIC interview with Sere Kaniye resident, April 2020

⁴⁴ Violations Documentation Center of Northern Syria

⁴⁵ RIC interviews, April 2020

Similarly, local sources indicate there are around 2000 family members of SNA fighters now installed in Tel Abyad.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights has documented transfers totalling at least hundreds of individuals from the early days of the invasion up until the time of writing, particularly into Tel Abyad.⁴⁶

With would-be returnees facing kidnap for ransom, the destruction, loss or expropriation of their homes and property – compounded by shortages of bread, food, fuel and electricity – the stage is set for Turkey's program of forcible demographic change, mirroring a process now well underway in Afrin.

4 SITUATION OF IDPS

Per UN figures, 10 years of war have left 700,000 people displaced in NES even before the further displacement of over 200,000 people in the 2019 invasion. These include 225,000 IDPs⁴⁷ and refugees living in last-resort sites without reliable or sufficient access to essential services such as healthcare, shelter and WASH (access to sanitation and water). This comprises a reported 118,879 people in 10 formal/informal camps, 41,165 people in over 200 Collective Centers (mostly schools) and 65,264 people in 142 informal, ad-hoc settlements.⁴⁸ The remaining over 500,000 IDPs are what might be considered “hidden” IDPs, living in rented apartments or with relatives, often in crowded or unsanitary conditions and struggling to access the local labor market.

The recent crisis has contributed to a significant increase in the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in NES, many of whom are from areas previously considered as facing less acute needs (in terms of scale and severity). At the same time there continues to be widespread humanitarian needs across AANES-administered territory. Prior to this crisis, there were 1.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, a number that has risen to 1.94 million following the Turkish invasion. This includes 100,000 people in formal camps receiving regular assistance, and over 381,000 people - including some 80,000 people in Raqqa city and 179,000 people in Deir-ez-Zor - targeted for winter assistance, plus over 80,000 people in Raqqa city receiving monthly food assistance.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ RIC interviews, April 2020

⁴⁶ See <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=148147>, among other reports
⁴⁷ NGO briefing on Corona-virus in North and East Syria, seen by RIC

⁴⁸ NES Forum, Covid-19 Update No 6. 17-24 April 2020

⁴⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-update-syrian-arab-republic-issue-06-14-november-2019>

While there have been improvements in service availability in Raqqa city, such as improved access to school or water networks, there are still considerable difficulties. These include limited opportunities to earn a livelihood and enter the local economy, health services reliant on support of humanitarian actors, and a high level of damage to schools preventing access to education services. Moreover, the USAID program in Raqqa is likely to come to a close as a result of the U.S. military's withdrawal from this region, cutting off another key source of aid in the region.

“Of course, as a child of Sere Kaniye I see every town of Rojava as my home (...) but my memories, the stories of my childhood, my dreams are all in Sere Kaniye. So I felt myself falling far from my dreams, far from my childhood, far from the stories we told one another as children, how we sat together with our neighbours and drank tea. If something happened in the evening, the neighbours all worked together, the people came together and drank coffee.... now, these things feel far away. I've come far from those days, those memories, which seem so beautiful to me. It's not a good feeling.” — Azad Evdike, film-maker from Sere Kaniye.



4.1 IDP CAMPS

The displacement figures from 2019 include those who were already living in IDP camps, like Mabrouka and Ayn Issa camps, who were evacuated and displaced for a second time due to the proximity of attacks.

Camps evacuated during the war:

Ayn Issa camp: Now empty. Formerly home to around 16,000 IDPs. 249 women and 700 children with family links to ISIS were also held in the camp. Civilian IDPs have been transferred to Mahmoudi camp in Raqqa Governorate, moved to ad-hoc settlements around Raqqa or returned home. The majority of the ISIS-linked women escaped behind Turkish lines, with a handful of high-profile residents reported as captured and transferred to Turkey.

Mabruka camp (near Sere Kaniye): Now empty. The camp housed approximately 4,000 IDPs, who were evacuated and relocated to Areesha camp, south of Heseke city.

Camps housing IDPs displaced during 2019 invasion:

Mahmoudli camp (near Raqqa): Houses 8,000 IDPs from Ayn Issa and Tal Abyad.⁵⁰ Located near Raqqa.

Areesha camp (near Heseke): Houses 13,505 IDPs as of April 2020, including former residents of Mabruka camp.⁵¹

Washokani camp (near Heseke): Houses 11,919 IDPs, primarily from Sere Kaniye. Newly constructed following invasion. Otherwise known as Tuweina camp.⁵²

Newroz camp (near Derik): Houses 410 IDPs displaced during the 2019 invasion. The camp, which had hosted Yazidi refugees who fled the genocide in Shengal and was closed as they returned home, and then re-opened a few months later to meet new needs.⁵³

Dahan Camp (near Raqqa): Houses 1800 IDPs from Tal Abyad.⁵⁴

Tel el-Semin Camp (north of Raqqa): Houses 2700 IDPs from Tal Abyad. Newly constructed following invasion.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ UN figures

⁵¹ RIC interview with camp administration, April 2020

⁵² RIC interview with camp administration, April 2020

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ UN figures

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Case Study: Washokani camp

The Washokani camp hosts 11,919 IDPs, constituting 1889 families in 1608 tents, plus around 100 families living in 'temporary' tents. Camp co-chair Estêra Rashid tells RIC: *"refugees are still coming to the camp from Til Temir, because of the non-stop Turkish attacks on this region. Since a month ago we have stopped accepting new IDPs in this camp because we have reached the maximum capacity, and so we are preparing a new camp."*⁵⁶

The camp also faces new challenges due to the spread of coronavirus, with its epicenter in NES in neighboring Heseke. Camp residents have been placed under lockdown, meaning they cannot go and seek work in the city, placing further barriers between them and a return to normal life. Nonetheless, medical staff forecast an up to 10% death rate if the virus is transmitted into the camp.

Ms. Rashid told RIC: *"Working with the very limited resources we've got, we have taken measures. We have carried out a campaign with the Kurdish Red Crescent to raise awareness of preventative measures. We are encountering difficulties because we cannot really convince people that the coronavirus is a real danger and has no cure. They do not understand that it is everyone's responsibility to protect themselves. Our people want to continue leaving the camp but we have forbidden it."*

Camps in Iraq

According to UNHCR figures, as of 13 February 2020, 20,634 refugees had fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). 8,519 of these have obtained clearance to reunite with family members in KRI, or to otherwise reside outside of camps. There are still about 10,000 refugees in two camps:

Bardarash Camp: 7840 refugees

Gawilan Camp: 1924 refugees

Meanwhile, 809 of these new arrivals have voluntarily returned to Syria in recent months.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ RIC interview with camp administration, April 2020

⁵⁷ According to UN figures

Coronavirus in the camps

Due to the coronavirus threat, various precautions have been implemented in these IDP camps. The AANES camp administrations, with the support of humanitarian actors, have established temperature screening and mandatory hand-washing stations at the entrance of the camps. All non-essential visits to, and travel in and out of, camps have been banned, along with community gatherings and meetings comprising more than seven individuals. These measures have had an effect on other services within the camps, with education services and non-essential health services cancelled and others reduced to skeleton services.

Inadequate services limit the impact of population-level prevention measures, such as hand hygiene, and are likely to contribute to high attack rates if the virus is introduced to these settings. The severing of UN aid, plus obstacles on aid imposed by the KRG and the Damascus government, also affect the delivery of essential health services in the camps. For further information on this ongoing crisis and how it affects IDPs, see our report 'The Coronavirus crisis in North and East Syria'.⁵⁸

Key international NGOs working in IDP camps include:

- **Blumont**, a USAID-funded entity who provide camp management services
- **ACTED**, who also provide camp management services
- **Mercy Corps**, who provide supplies

In general, international NGOs send supplies while local NGOs such as Hevi and Udaan work on the ground to deliver humanitarian services. Their work focuses on meeting emergency needs in the fields of food, healthcare and children's services. Likewise, the Kurdish Red Crescent runs health centers directly inside the camps in coordination with international suppliers.

Case study: Mohammed Baaqi

Mohammed Baaqi, livelihood officer with local NGO Hevi: *"The international NGOs send supplies and we work on the ground. But there are significant needs not being met, which cannot be solved by the NGOs.*

⁵⁸ <https://rojainformationcenter.com/2020/04/coronavirus-crisis-in-north-and-east-syria-22-april-update/>

The biggest shortcomings at the moment are in the health sector, also in terms of psychological care. What we call 'inclusion' is also difficult, finding ways for IDPs to enter the local economy. The biggest shortcomings are for children. We cannot establish a 'safe place' for them, or provide psychosocial support. The camps need to be expanded and proper infrastructure put in place. The infrastructure is much better in Hol camp than it is in those camps for IDPs who fled the Turkish invasion - they need WCs, wash stations, and so on.

The quarantine which has been imposed for coronavirus has made a lot of problems for the international NGOs. In terms of their staff, many have stopped working, and our suppliers cannot send us the products that are needed for our distributions, as the gate has been closed. There are a lot of shortages at the moment. Particularly emergency supplies, such as health kits, medicine, hygiene kits and so on, which is a particular concern during coronavirus. Agricultural supplies that we need for our local economic projects have also run out."

4.2 COLLECTIVE CENTERS (SCHOOLS)

When war started, placing refugees under a roof was a priority. Schools in Til Temir, Raqqa and Heseke were used as a temporary solution to place people escaping war. However, this temporary solution is rapidly becoming a permanent reality, with interlocutors in the schools telling RIC they are unwilling to leave the relative shelter and proximity to employment opportunities in the city and move into camps outside the cities. This has left 86,000 schoolchildren unable to access education services since October 2019.⁵⁹

When the IDP population arrived in these schools, they received aid and assistance from NGOs, but the amount of aid being delivered has dropped off significantly since the closing of the UN's aid crossing at Yaroubiah in January 2020 and subsequent closure of the Semalka border crossing in April 2020 due to the spread of coronavirus. IDPs tell RIC they have not received food aid, baby formula or sanitary supplies for over a month, making it impossible for them to take coronavirus precautions.

⁵⁹ RIC interview with Êstera, co-responsible of the Washokani Camp, April 2020

Case Study: Deham Bozo school in Heseke

12,000 refugees from Sere Kaniye live across 85 schools in Heseke region. RIC visited Deham Bozo school, a center that hosts 38 families, each one in a different classroom.

Mohamed Said Ahmed, co-director of the school, explains: "Since January the aid has been stopped, and we have been facing shortages and great difficulties. We are told that all routes are closed for moment and no help can be sent. Nobody helped us save for the NGO Solidarity and Development Community Djudi, which brought us water tankers. Outside this we received no help, no household bleach or soap for hygiene for example."

The situation has worsened with the arrival of the Covid-19 quarantine. It is required that everyone remains inside the school, so IDP's cannot seek work to have incomes. Medya Hesén Xiso, an IDP and housewife living in Deham Bozo, says: "It is necessary that someone brings us help because there is no opportunity to work now. We have many needs, like food, infant formula and sanitary products for our children."



4.3 HOST COMMUNITIES

Around 73,859 IDPs displaced in the most recent invasion are residing with relatives and host communities, including an estimated 35,000-40,000 in Heseke city and almost 20,000 in Raqqa.⁶⁰ These people also face challenging and overcrowded living conditions, with many residing in multi-family households. This increase in population and disruption to livelihoods has put already stretched household incomes under additional strain.

While Raqqa was already home to many IDPs and a number of NGO and AANES programs to support them, enabling a swift response to the new demand, in Heseke the humanitarian response has traditionally been more limited, and as such there are significant unmet needs.

Case Study: Abdulqader, IDP from Sere Kaniye

“Our family alone lost 40,000,000SYP (\$40,000) with the loss of our home and property in Sere Kaniye. Our home was looted by the Turkish-backed factions. They even removed the doors and windows. Staying in Qamishlo is not a solution for us. I am 60 years old. I can’t go out and find work.

We could live well in Sere Kaniye. Now, we are ten people in one house. Only one of us works, he is our only hope. He makes 80,000SYP (\$80) salary a month – it’s not sufficient for our needs. Before, we had our own home, and we could provide for ourselves, despite the difficult circumstances. Now, everything is in the hands of the Turkish-backed factions. We don’t know anything more.”

4.4 INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

Informal settlements have been built using a huge number of tents in the outskirts of Raqqa. There is also a huge number of IDPs living in empty, ruined houses. Another temporary solution has been for IDPs to fill empty villages, even those close to the frontlines.

⁶⁰ https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/nes_allocation_strategy_paper_final.pdf

For both informal settlements and host communities, there is a high risk of under-reporting by the UN and of INGOs failing to register or support all displaced people in need of aid. For example, local NGO Hevi makes regular deliveries to 63 villages along the line between Heseke and Til Temir, and 40 between Til Temir and Qamishlo, all of which are partially or wholly inhabited by IDPs. Per NGO staff, “these IDPs suffer a lot, because Turkey shells these villages and continues attacks in the near vicinity, so INGOs won’t go there. Only our local NGOs go there to support them.”

Case study: Empty villages hosting IDPs in Khabour Valley⁶¹

There are scores of villages housing IDPs in the Khabour Valley, between Heseke and Til Temir. Following ISIS’ invasion of the region, those mainly Christian villages were left largely empty, as the majority of their residents fled to the relative safety of nearby cities like Til Temir or Heseke— or, more commonly, left Syria altogether and traveled to Europe as refugees.

Following Turkey’s invasion of Afrin in January 2018, hundreds of thousands of primarily Kurdish IDPs fled the region and travelled eastward into Jazira. Recognizing the urgent need, the local committee charged with administering Christian land held in abeyance offered to open the villages to IDPs. The offer was repeated in October 2019 during the Turkish Peace Spring Operation.

One such village is Tel Nasri, south of Til Temir, now home to hundreds of IDP families. In some cases, there are five or six families living in a single home in the village, as well as occupying a large hall originally built as a meeting-place for the villagers.

4.5 RETURNS TO AREAS UNDER OCCUPATION: QUESTIONING THE UN FIGURES

The UN’s OCHA reported 61,050 former residents returning to Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad by 28 October and the return of 84,600 people by January 2020, comprising 42,869 in Sere Kaniye and 41,817 to Tel Abyad.⁶²

⁶¹ RIC interviews with Tel Nasri village co-chair, January 2020
⁶² <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-flash-update-12-05-18-january-2020>

These figures, which indicate an extremely sudden turnaround following the initial flight of around 225,000 IDPs across the region, are not supported by RIC's observations on the ground. Humanitarians and NGO officials have also challenged the OCHA figures, particularly as they relate to the formerly majority-Kurdish city of Sere Kaniye.

There are other discrepancies in the UN-published figures. To take one example, OCHA somewhat improbably briefed that over 40,000 people were displaced from Kobane on 13 October, only for all of them save 30 individuals to have returned home in just over a week by 24 October. Similarly, despite finding very high rates of return during the first days and weeks of the occupation, UN figures for IDPs have now once again flatlined – recording zero returns to Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad between January and February 2020, for example^{63/64}. This does not seem any more plausible than the return of tens of thousands of IDPs to the newly-occupied region within a week of the Sochi Agreement being signed.

At times, there has been an up to 90,000 person discrepancy between IDP return figures reported by the OCHA and other UN sources such as HNAP⁶⁵.

An RIC-supported investigation by Syria Direct has cast doubt on the OCHA figures⁶⁶. Though OCHA's methodology is not transparent, UN employees indicated that the UN agency relies on figures provided by local partner agencies, community figures and NGOs to reach its figures. It therefore appears likely that as Turkey seized control of the border regions, the UN simply switched from relying on sources indigenous to North and East Syria to sources directly or indirectly affiliated with the Turkish invasion. This would explain the extremely rapid turnaround in UN figures, with 200,000 people initially reported displaced only for this figure to appear to plummet in a matter of days even as fighting still raged around Sere Kaniye.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, NGO and UN officials indicated to RIC that they doubted the veracity of the figures as published by the UN, with one UN employee saying: *"Has Turkey blackmailed the UN into publishing certain numbers? I wouldn't be surprised. They do whatever they want these days..."*⁶⁷

⁶³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-flash-update-13-01-29-february-2020>

⁶⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-east-syria-flash-update-12-05-18-january-2020>

⁶⁵ <https://syriadirect.org/news/how-many-civilians-are-returning-to-the-turkish-%E2%80%98safe-zone%E2%80%99/>

⁶⁶ <https://syriadirect.org/news/how-many-civilians-are-returning-to-the-turkish-%E2%80%98safe-zone%E2%80%99/>

⁶⁷ RIC interview with UN official, November 2019

Another NGO employee tells RIC: *"It is not just local NGOs saying this. Blumont, Mercy Corps, ACTED - these international NGOs also know very well that people cannot go back and live there. We know full well that 50,000 people have not gone back. This would mean that the entire population had returned. Scores of people have returned to Sere Kaniye, not tens of thousands."*⁶⁸ RIC's interlocutors estimate that 30% of the Arab and no more than 10% of the Kurdish populations have returned to the occupied areas.

Despite these apparent discrepancies, with access to the newly-occupied region impossible for independent journalists or researchers, it is difficult to directly challenge the UN figures. Research is made more challenging by the fact that the AANES does not have the capacity to record precise IDP figures and locations, meaning there is no concrete figure to place against the UN's number.

Images shared by media activists in Sere Kaniye continue to show the city proper is largely depopulated. Activists in the city continue to share images of formerly-busting streets standing empty, and there are regular reports of infighting between Turkish-controlled SNA factions. Media reports indicate the relatives of fighters and IDPs from elsewhere in Syria, primarily Ghouta, Homs and Idlib, have been transferred into the new zone of occupation, where they are offered free housing and utilities in expropriated properties as an enticement. Even if accurate, simple population movement figures will mask the instillation of Arabs from elsewhere in the country in place of the region's formerly diverse population.

What is certain is that, as documented above, Kurdish returnees to Sere Kaniye have faced beatings, extortion, kidnapping and even field executions: "Almost every civilian who spoke to Syria Direct had experienced some form of abuse at the hands of the [Turkish-controlled] SNA." Some interlocutors were able to access their properties during day trips to gather their belongings. Per the UN, "When attempting to return to their properties, individuals found that locks had been changed or SNA fighters had occupied their homes. This prevented potential returns and further facilitated the transfer of families and communities supported by SNA fighters to the private residences of displaced persons."

⁶⁸ RIC interview with UN official, November 2019

While it is difficult for any party to establish accurate figures on returns, UN's publication of these figures without sharing their methodology has proved a propaganda boon for Turkey, with Turkish government-linked media institutions using the figures to deny allegations of demographic change. With OCHA itself elsewhere documenting the significant displacement of the Kurdish population and near-total displacement of the Yazidi population, it seems apparent that these return figures mask ongoing forcible demographic change being carried out by Turkey in the newly-occupied regions and particularly in Sere Kaniye.

4.5 CLOSURE OF UN AID CROSSING

Russia has also taken advantage of the Turkish invasion to exert humanitarian pressure on NES, with the same goal of promoting the Syrian government as the de facto victor in the ongoing Syrian conflict and the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

As noted above, practically speaking then four million Syrians in the north-east remain under the political, civil and effective military administration of the AANES and SDF, while millions also live outside of government control in Idlib and the Turkish-occupied Northwest. As such, until January 2020, there was a special dispensation in place for Syria, meaning the normal requirement for all UN aid to be sent into the country in coordination with the official, central government was waived. "Cross-border" UN aid could be delivered via specially-designated gates into regions of the country outside Syrian government control. North and East Syria was served by one such gate, at al-Yaroubiah on the Iraqi border.

However, this program had to be renewed every year via the UN Security Council. In January 2020, Russia exercised its veto, arguing that the twin agreements in October – plus recent SAA advances in Idlib – mean that the Syrian government has effectively won the civil war. As a result of this veto, which was backed by China, the only UN aid crossing into North and East Syria was closed, while crossings into regions held by al-Qaeda offshoot Hayat Tahrir-al-Sham and Turkey remain open.

This means all UN aid into Syria is now sent into areas controlled by HTS, factions under the control of the Turkish intelligence service, or directly to the Assad government. The AANES is forced to try and access UN aid via Damascus, but the reality is that most aid sent to Damascus lines the pockets of those close to the

Assad government, or at most is distributed in areas loyal to Damascus. Little or nothing ever arrives to the AANES. Recently, the WHO announced a 20-ton-aid delivery to the Northeast. It failed to clarify that this aid was sent directly to the Syrian government-controlled National Hospital in Qamishlo, and that most of it never left the small 'security box' in Qamishlo, which has been under SAA control since the start of the war. Only some non-coronavirus supplies, described as "basically useless" by a health official interviewed by RIC, were delivered to AANES-administered hospitals.⁶⁹

A recent report by UN agency OCHA indicated this decision will seriously reduce NES' ability to combat coronavirus.⁷⁰ Seven health centers in Raqqa are facing severe shortages of medicines and supplies as a direct result of this decision, with one soon to close, while the health center in Hol Camp is also severely affected. The lack of WHO and UN presence in NES means NGOs working in the region will not be able to access the \$2 billion UN fund earmarked for combating coronavirus.

Mohammed Baaqi, the livelihood officer with local NGO Hevi, tells RIC: *"The closure of the only UN aid crossing has created a lot of difficulties. The connection between the AANES and the UN was working well, but when aid is sent via Damascus, a lot of difficulties emerge.*

It becomes a political subject, and Damascus creates a lot of problems with the UN, and uses bureaucracy to make it difficult for aid to arrive from the UN to NES. When deliveries come from Damascus, they are very delayed, or there are many things that are missing, or [supplies] never arrive at all."

⁶⁹ RIC interview with Kurdish Red Crescent employee, April 2020

⁷⁰ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_stES0QiY4_I9YHn7dA16mYgpC8LHE3K/view

5 EFFECT ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The political system under construction in NES puts the liberation of women as a priority, and encourages them to play an active role in both civil society and political structures. A recent OCHA report found that “Within the [AANES], efforts have been made to advance women’s rights and their roles in decision-making processes. Each administrative institution is co-led by a woman and, in addition to all-female councils, a 40 per cent quota reinforces female representation and participation in economic initiatives and civil society organizations.”⁷¹

As such, Turkey’s invasion of NES and dismantlement of these structures has had a significant detrimental effect on women’s rights and livelihood, both in the areas under occupation and among women forced to flee the invasion. Per the UN, “Recent gender-based violations committed against Kurdish women by armed groups with extremist ideologies have, however, demonstrated an attempt to dismantle the efforts [of the AANES].”⁷²

Situation of displaced women

There is no general data on the gender or age of all the IDPs displaced in 2019, but it is clear the majority of IDPS are women and children. For example, RIC recently visited the school Deham Bozo, currently housing 131 IDPS, 79% (102) of which were women and children. Another example can be found in Areesha camp, where there are 2,708 women as opposed to only 1,886 men.

Women are disproportionately affected by displacement, dealing on a daily basis with a lack of resources such as clean water, cleaning supplies, infant formula and diesel for cooking and keeping warm. The risk of spreading of infection, especially coronavirus, is extremely high in overcrowded camps and schools. This puts women and children at higher risk. Nor are camps equipped to deal with the specific medical needs of women, or the spread of coronavirus.

As always, there is a high risk of gender-based violence for displaced women, while children also face significant shortcomings, with 86,000 children denied access to education as a result of the Turkish invasion.⁷³ NGOs state that they cannot establish a safe environment for children or provide psychosocial support, with medical provision in IDP camps offering only skeleton services.

The situation of women inside the newly-occupied zone

Per the UN, “By targeting almost every aspect of Kurdish women’s lives in the Afrin District, and – progressively – in areas affected by Operation Peace Spring – armed groups generated a palpable fear of violence and duress among the female Kurdish population. This resulted in an undermining of women’s ability to meaningfully participate and contribute to their community. “

“Indeed, to avoid being harassed, women described opting to remain at home, relinquish their jobs, or wear a headscarf if venturing outside without a male relative. One interviewee described being sexually harassed and referred to as *ka-fir* for not wearing a headscarf by members of armed groups at a checkpoint... Following the murder of Hevrin Khalaf on 12 October, Kurdish women recalled feeling increasingly insecure. Armed groups threatened and harassed women in positions in the political, military, medical and educational sector or otherwise taking active part in civil society.”⁷⁴

Those who remain in the occupied region are primarily women, children and the elderly, while it is also typically women who are charged with travelling back into the occupied region to check on homes and property. For example, RIC spoke with an Arab woman whose sewing machines were seized by the SNA’s Sultan Murad Division. She travelled back into the occupied region and handed over 50,000SYP (\$50) for the return of her two machines, but the Turkish-backed fighters pocketed the money and refused to complete the deal. She left empty-handed, with no way to support her family, now resident in Washokani camp.

Per women’s activists from Sere Kaniye with contact to those still in the city, there are two main groups still resident in the zone of occupation. First, there are women whose husbands work with the occupying forces, and have been linked since 2013 with Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS: and second, local women who were too poor to flee, knowing they wouldn’t be able to afford a house elsewhere. These are often women caring for elderly or sick relatives. Poor local women without any link to the Turkish-backed forces can typically only find work cooking and cleaning for armed groups under the SNA banner, with women’s activists reporting that this group faces especial risk of physical and sexual abuse and GBV.⁷⁵

In households where a man is still resident, it is typically only the man who leaves the house to secure bread and other essentials, with women and children alike confined to the home, and local interlocutors reporting negligible uptake of the new schooling system being offered by the occupying forces. Again, this contributes to both the prevalence of GBV and a general decrease in status, protections and freedoms from those women enjoyed under the AANES. General shortages and exorbitant price-gouging of bread, utilities and other essentials also disproportionately impact women responsible for running households and caring for minors.

Mona Yousef, an Arab woman from Sere Kaniye who worked with the women's movement Kongra-Star as a member of their executive committee and was forced to flee when Turkey invaded, tells RIC that she is being specifically targeted for her work with women in civil society:

"Women I know who are still living in the city send me messages, saying they miss me, and asking me to send a picture of myself. But I know they are just trying to get my photo so they can put it up with the images of wanted people on a roundabout in Sere Kaniye. My husband and brother are already pictured there. The Turkish-backed factions burned down my sister's house, as a threat to me for my work with the women's movement, and to other people in my family."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ RIC interview with Mona Yousef, Kongra-Star Executive Committee, May 2020

6 TURKEY CUTTING WATER SUPPLY

Turkey launched an airstrike or shelling (reports vary) against the water station at Allouk, beside Sere Kaniye, on day one of its invasion, putting it out of service. Now Turkey is in control of the water station, and though it has been fixed under international mediation, Turkey regularly cuts the water flow to the AANES areas to apply political pressure on the administration.⁷⁷

Allouk is a critical piece of infrastructure, providing drinking water to at least 650,000 and likely over a million people in the cities of Hasekah, Til Temir, Sheddadi and Hol, among others; 65,000 IDPs and ISIS-linked individuals in Hol Camp; IDPs in Washokani and Aresha camps, including those displaced by the Turkish invasion; the largest detention facility for ISIS fighters in the world, housing some 5000 fighters and the scene of a recent uprising; and NES' main quarantine hospital.

After a long outage, the water station was repaired and started delivering water again following an agreement under Russian mediation, whereby Turkey would send water in return for AANES sending electricity, Turkey initially only wanted 5 megawatts because the Sere Kaniye line is out of order and can't handle more. AANES were sending the Turkish-occupied region electricity and receiving water in return for just four days in February. At this time, Turkish-backed fighters from Sultan Murad Division closed Allouk and threw out the engineers, cutting off the water.

In total, Turkey cut the flow off four times throughout February and March 2020, starting on 24 February, each time demanding the AANES send more and more electricity into and pay for repairs in the areas Turkey occupied in 2019.

Turkey is demanding far more power than is proportional to its needs – around a quarter of the station's total capacity, though proportionally the residents of Sere Kaniye make up well under 10% of those in need of the station's services. On these occasions, water has remained switched off for between two and seven days until international pressure, including from the US State Department, and Russian mediation have forced Turkey to turn it on again. Most recently, on 2 April Turkish forces shelled the water pipe from Allouk to Hasekah, cutting off water for the fifth time, until it was fixed two days later. As the occupying power, Turkey is in any case responsible under international law for meeting the need for electricity in Sere Kaniye.

⁷⁷ This section based on multiple interviews conducted with Sozda Ahmed of Heseke Water Bureau and Ziyad Rustem of the AANES Electricity Bureau, February-April 2020

These cutoffs have led to a severe shortage of water. NGOs aim to provide 3.5 million liters per day, while the SDF's administration is trucking 200,000 liters.⁷⁸ This means 7.8 liters per day per person if aim is reached, barely enough for survival when constant hand-washing isn't required. (WHO recommends a minimum of 20L a day per person.) Water is trucked from other regions of NES which means there are then shortages elsewhere, and this is not sustainable in the long-term.

**Interview with Sozda Ahmed,
co-chair of the AANES Water Bureau for Heseke region:**

Allouk Water Station is the most important water station for the whole Heseke region, and is strategically located. There are 30 wells at the station, which draw up groundwater and store it in a depot, but [the Turkish-backed forces] are only using 18 wells. For this reason the pressure is low. Yet they don't give our officials permission to go and fix it.

When there is no water because Turkey has cut the water flow, it creates a big impact on the population, and on the whole city. If there is no water, and people cannot clean, it creates a big opportunity for coronavirus to spread in our city. Until now, we haven't seen a major spread of coronavirus in Heseke [note: NES' first death from corona was just confirmed in a man from Heseke who died on 2 April]. If corona starts to spread in Heseke, the whole city will succumb to it. The fundamental point is that we must have enough water to keep our city clean.

Turkey knows how important the water station is to the Heseke region as a whole. They are using it as a political weapon, and whenever they want to exert pressure on the AANES they cut the water flow right away and leave the people thirsty, knowing we will give them whatever they ask, because water is necessary to life. The Turkish state used the same method in Afrin, striking a water plant.

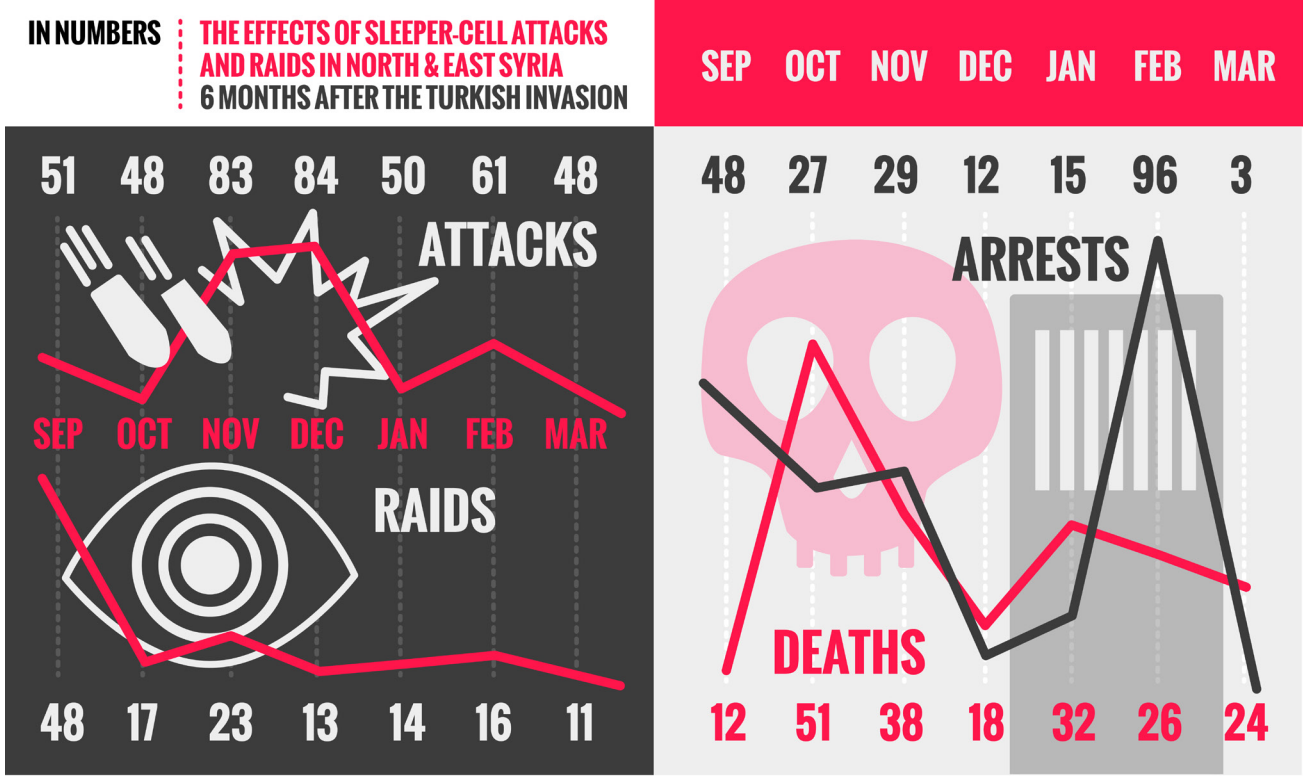
⁷⁸ Tweet by Elizabeth Tsurkov, accessed via: <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1243153259482791937>, May 2020

7 EFFECT ON WAR ON ISIS

In September 2019, the month prior to Turkey's military operation, sleeper-cell attacks steeply decreased, with 95 documented attacks in August and only 51 in September. Deaths also dropped in September, with 35 confirmed the previous month and only 12 in September. On the other hand, raids increased 23% (from 39 to 48), showing that joint SDF and Coalition raids, with the support of Asayish (internal security forces), were making progress in securing the region. For several months prior the invasion we were seeing a general trend of decline in attacks, with the exception of August, when the rate of attacks rose again – the same month Erdogan launched a previous round of invasion threats against North and East Syria, until the temporary agreement over the first so-called “safe zone” was put in place in September and attacks once again declined.

Overall, despite the Turkish invasion, the rate of attacks remained stable from September through October (51 to 48). However, the week leading up to the Turkish invasion saw a little over 1 ISIS sleeper-cell attack a day (1.1/day), whereas the three weeks to the end of the month following the invasion saw 38 attacks in 21 days, or 1.8 attacks a day – an immediate 48% increase. Subsequent to the operation, all of North and East Syria saw a spike in death claims, with 51 claimed deaths from sleeper-cell attacks compared to 12 in September, or a 325% increase.

The partnership between SDF and the International Coalition against ISIS was disrupted by the Turkish invasion. The three months prior to the Turkish invasion saw an average of approximately 2 raids a day, while the October average was just a raid every two days – a 75% decrease. The total number of raids was only 17 in October compared to 48 the month before (down 65%).



As our graphic shows, after October attacks generally remained quite high, until the coronavirus pandemic began, perhaps causing the decrease in both raids and attacks we saw in March.

Despite the U.S. Coalition asserting that their tactical partnership with SDF continues, raids have not only not recovered since October, but have reached the lowest rate seen since the territorial defeat of ISIS in March 2019, with March 2020 seeing only 11 documented raids yielding only 3 confirmed arrests. After ISIS's defeat in Baghouz every month saw between 30 and 60 raids, until October when they instantly fell. Since October, the number of raids has not exceeded 25, with most months seeing 10 to 20 raids.

Claimed deaths spiked after October, and despite a subsequent decrease the fatality rates have consistently remained higher than we were seeing in September before the Turkish invasion.

Confirmed arrests have been on a general downward trend since October, with February as an exception which saw an unusual increase. Despite this increase, March saw an all-time low since RIC began documenting, with only 3 arrests confirmed. All of this indicates instability, worsened security, and a strengthening of ISIS' hand as a direct result of the Turkish invasion.⁷⁹

**Case study:
Qamishlo market bombing**

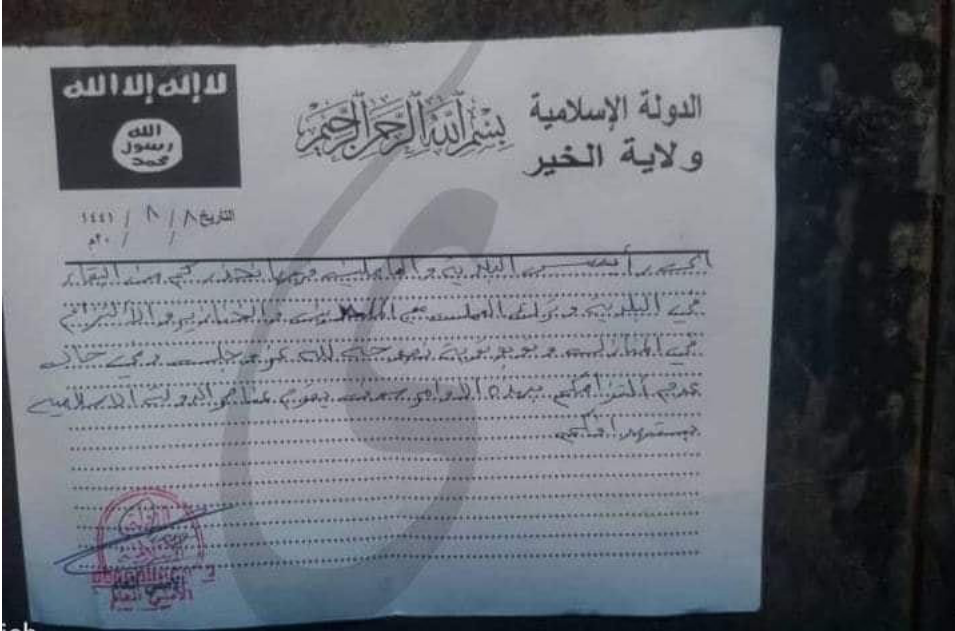
An unclaimed bombing in Qamishlo souk on 11 November 2019 killed five civilians and injured some dozens. The attack was not claimed by ISIS, usually quick to lay claim to any explosion, lending credence to reports from local security forces that those who conducted the attack were arrested and confessed to receiving direction and payment from Turkey.

Speaking at the scene, an eyewitness told RIC: *"My name is Nidal. I was in a telephone shop. There were two explosions, with four minutes between them. Everyone ran away, the security forces moved them back. There was nobody left. Fire started up there and I extinguished it. After we finished we took bodies out of the car. There were three dead people. They were burned, you couldn't recognize them. No injuries... They were burned.*

Also a young woman died, from Asayish (internal security services), and the owner of a business as well. The structure collapsed on them. They were all killed. They were all killed. That's the work of the jihadists and their sleeper cells."



⁷⁹Numbers of arrests and deaths are approximations, with death counts based on sleeper cell groups' own claims, while not every instance of arrest is always released to the public. Nonetheless, when compared month-on-month these figures can give a clear indication of trends in the region.



Translation: “For the head of the municipality and its employees: we forbid you from moving around and remaining in the municipality. Stay in your homes, give up your work with the infidel pigs, and seek forgiveness from God. If you do not do this, the members of ISIS will target you.”

8 LATEST DEVELOPMENTS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS: THREADING THE NEEDLE

It only needs constant rumors of Turkish invasion to materialize into a concrete threat for the scales to be tipped once again, with the U.S. now appearing unreliable as a partner and Damascus thus unwilling to accept anything other than total capitulation as a condition for closing the airspace in NES.

The situation in NES is to a great extent contingent on developments in HTS-controlled Idlib. The latest Russian-SAA operation in Idlib resulted in the recapture of 2500KM² of territory to the south of Idlib, incorporating the M5 highway and a number of strategic towns. February saw a major deterioration between Russia and Turkey, marked by the targeting of a Turkish convoy by what are widely believed to have been Russian warplanes, killing scores of Turkish soldiers. This added fuel to rumors of SDF participation in the operation, assisting the SAA in retaking Idlib in return for a joint SAA-SDF operation to retake Afrin.

However, for the reasons outlined above, SDF were unable to come to any such settlement with Damascus. Instead, it was Russia and Turkey who reached a cease-

⁷⁹Numbers of arrests and deaths are approximations, with death counts based on sleeper cell groups' own claims, while not every instance of arrest is always released to the public. Nonetheless, when compared month-on-month these figures can give a clear indication of trends in the region.

fire deal in March 2020, guaranteeing all of the SAA's gains and establishing a secure corridor along the M4 highway. This deal was widely seen as a capitulation on behalf of Turkey, whose armed forces had become increasingly entrenched in Idlib and suffered significant loss of life. As such, political and military officials in North and East Syria express fear that Turkey has been granted permission to seize more of their territory in a quid pro quo exchange.⁸⁰

This would likely mean an operation on Shebha, the enclave home to 200,000 primarily-Kurdish IDPs who fled Turkey's 2018 invasion and occupation of Afrin. Shebha is under the political administration of the AANES but militarily defended by the SAA and Russia, along with some local Kurdish units. A military source in Shebha tells RIC that April 2020 has seen increased shelling along the contact line; frequent overflight of Turkish drones; and the massing of fighters and their families from the local region in Turkish-held Azaz, with the aim of building up a new battalion with links to the local area to be deployed as a figleaf during Turkish operations against the region.⁸¹ All of this is seen as pointing to the likelihood of a further Turkish operation, albeit that any such attack is of course expected to be delayed by the spread of coronavirus.

In general, the months since October 2019 have been marked by frequent rumors of further Turkish operations, perhaps seeking to cut off Kobane from the rest of NES by attacking towns on the highway to the south of the city, or else attacking between Derik and Tirbespi to cut off NES' main artery to the outside world at the Semalka border crossing. Troop movement indicating a serious move toward a further military operation has not yet been observed, but it seems it is only a matter of time until Turkey launches its next operation on one or more of these three axes.

Though military conflicts and diplomatic negotiations alike have been slowed by coronavirus, the focus therefore remains on reaching a political settlement with Damascus, and with it a solid reassurance that further Turkish aggressions will be prevented – along, perhaps, with joint military operations to restore sovereignty on Syrian soil and expel Turkey from Afrin, Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye. However, these negotiations have been stalled for years, and North and East Syria's position is currently weaker than at any other point in recent years. Damascus recognizes SDF's strength as a fighting force and AANES' popular legitimacy on the ground and so would not overstretch itself in seeking to take NES by force. However, both

⁸⁰ RIC interview with AANES diplomatic official, March 2020

⁸¹ RIC interview with commander of Kurdish units in Shebha, April 2020

Russia and their client in Damascus are willing to allow NES to suffer further attacks by the Turkish air force in order to weaken its leaders' political resolve and force NES to accept the terms Damascus is offering.

In the context of Russia and the Syrian government's intractability on the one hand and U.S.-Iranian polarization in the Middle East in the other, threading the needle of a "third way" distinct from both U.S. and Russian interests seems an increasingly impossible task.

9 APPENDIX

WHO ARE ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER?

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

RIC has assisted reporters and researchers from all leading international newspapers, websites and news sources with their work, including: BBC, CNN, ITV, NBC, Fox News, ABC and Al Jazeera; New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, LA Times; Die Welt, Die Zeit, El Pais, El Monde, Corriere Della Sera; TFI, France 24, ZDF, ARD, DW, ARTE; Associated Press, AFP, DPA, EFE, ANSA; Cambridge, Yale and Madrid Universities; Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations; and many other national and international news sources.

**ROJAVA INFORMATION CENTER
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**WWW.ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.COM
PRESS@ROJAVAIC.COM
TEL +963 996 827 521**



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