



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

INCESSANT WAR: TURKEY'S DRONE CAMPAIGN IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA, 2022

MARCH 2023



CONTENTS

0	AUTHORS & METHODS	3
1	INTRODUCTION	4
2	DISTRIBUTION OF STRIKES	5
3	NOTABLE STRIKES	7
4	STRIKE PATTERNS	8
5	IMPACT OF STRIKES	11
6	CONCLUSION	13

0. AUTHORS & METHODS

0.1 AUTHORS

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.

0.2 METHODS

This report was written on the basis of RIC's research. RIC maintains a database of drone strikes conducted by Turkey in North and East Syria (NES), using Open Source Intelligence research, geolocation, military sources, and witness testimonies. The mapping of the strikes is as accurate as was possible with the available information, however due to the sensitive nature of some of the military locations struck, certain strikes could not be precisely mapped because the coordinates of their location could not be revealed. However, at the map scale used for the graphics in this report, the location of the strikes are plotted fairly.

1. INTRODUCTION

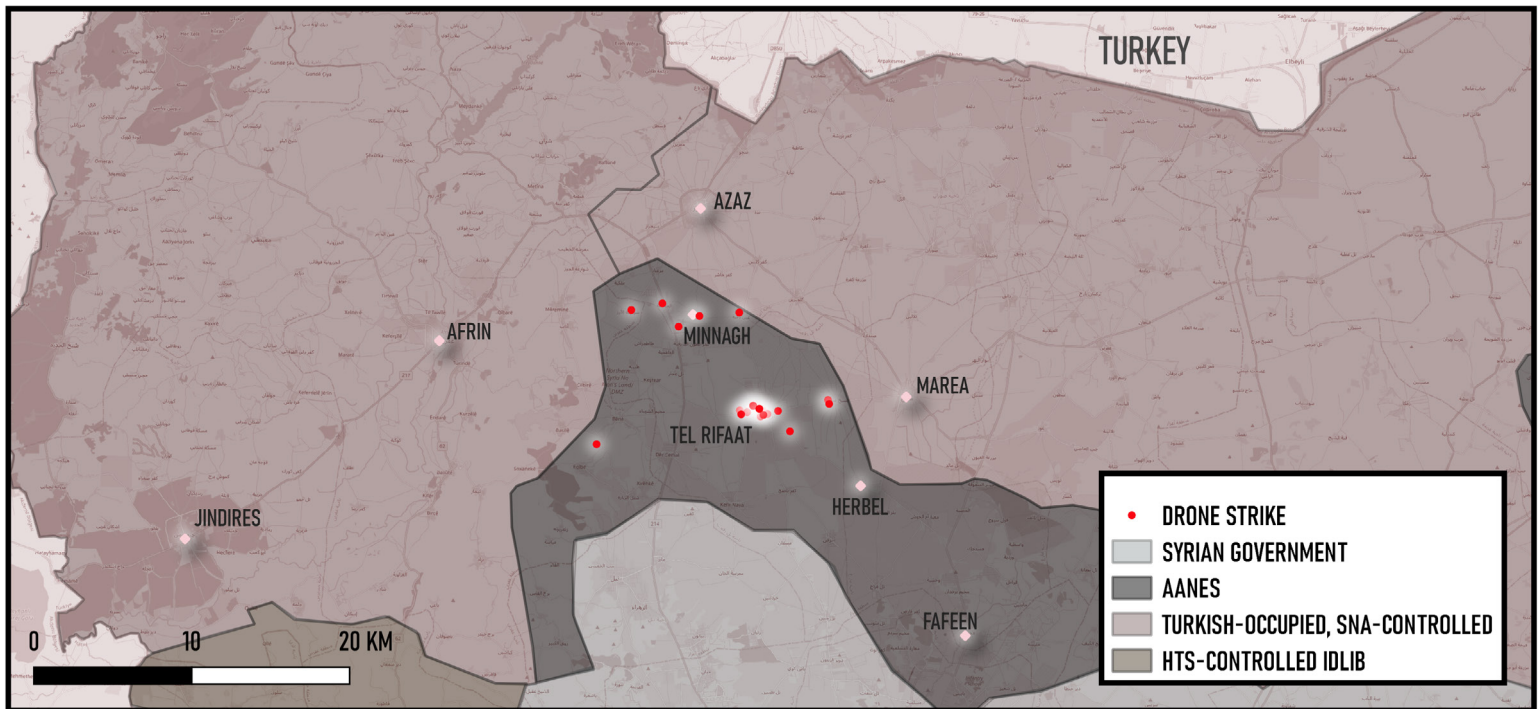
In 2008, the prototype of what would become Turkey's flagship UAV, the Bayraktar TB2, completed its maiden flight. 15 years later, Ankara has developed its drone program such that it is a key exporter and influential military force. In March 2020, the capabilities of Turkey's homegrown drone force flew to international prominence when the Turkish Air Force (TAF) launched hundreds of strikes against Syrian Arab Army (SAA) positions in Syria's Idlib, halting an SAA advance that had threatened to re-conquer swathes of territory held by assorted Turkish-backed rebel groups, including the al-Qaeda spinoff Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Turkey's Anka-S and Bayraktar drones took worldwide headlines and Idlib was kept out of the hands of the SAA, as Moscow arranged a regional cease-fire. This operation, codenamed 'Spring Shield' by Turkey, marked a significant escalation in terms of Turkey's drone employment in Syria. It was the first major episode in which Turkey used drones fighting Damascus forces. Turkey had also previously used drones against the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Afrin region in 2018, but on a lower scale.

In the present period, Turkey's drone deployment in Syria mainly targets military and civilian sites and personnel within the areas governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). In 2022, in North and East Syria (NES), RIC recorded 130 drone strikes, killing 87 people and injuring 151. This report presents the statistics gathered by RIC across the year and summarizes the impact of the strikes on NES. After several failed attempts to secure a greenlight from the United States of America (US) and Russia for a ground invasion in NES, Turkey has relied increasingly on drone attacks as a strategy to weaken the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the AANES. 2022's 130 strikes mark a 46% increase from the 89 strikes RIC recorded in 2021. Turkey's drone war in NES impacts the region in three key ways: obstructing the global mission to defeat ISIS, hampering democracy-building efforts, and engendering an unstable and insecure environment for civilians.

2. DISTRIBUTION OF STRIKES

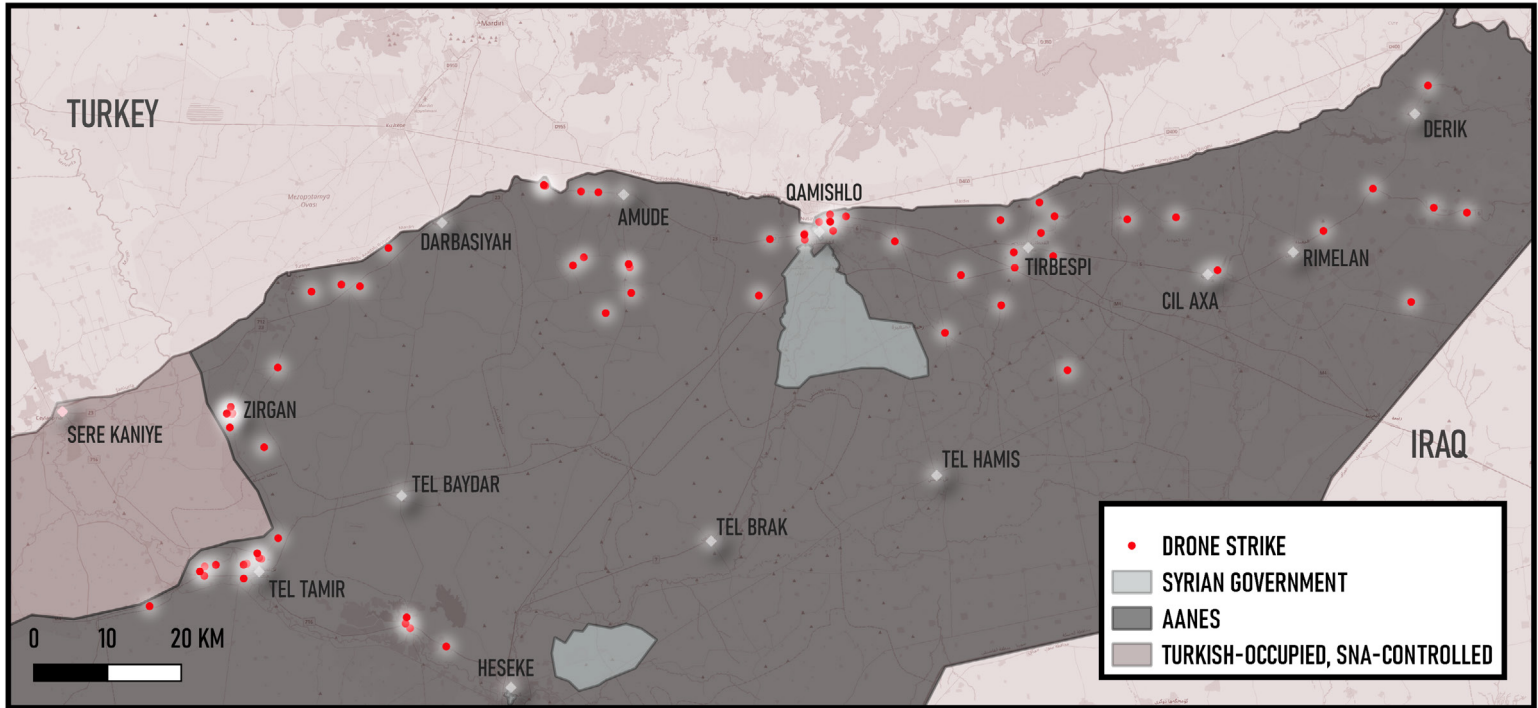


North and East Syria - Turkish drone strikes 2022

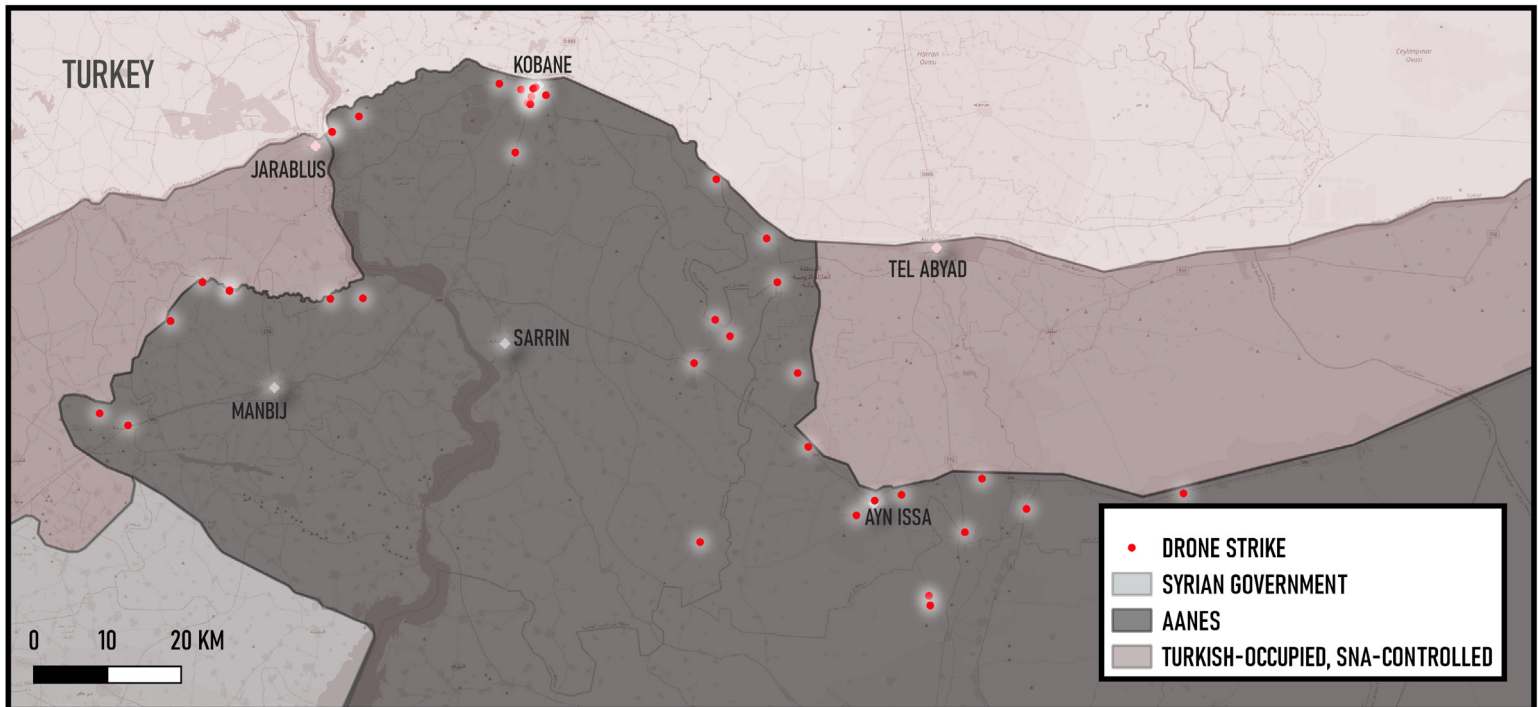


Shehba region - Turkish drone strikes 2022

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Jazira region - Turkish drone strikes 2022



Firat and Manbij regions - Turkish drone strikes 2022

3. NOTABLE STRIKES

- 21 JAN** TWEINA STRIKE ON CAR OF TEL TAMIR MILITARY COUNCIL, **KILLING 2**, AS SDF REINFORCEMENTS WERE DRIVING TO HESEKE TO HELP FIGHT AFTER ISIS' PRISON BREAKOUT
- 03 FEB** KHERZE IN THE AFTERMATH OF TURKEY'S 'OPERATION WINTER EAGLE', WHICH SAW ONE NIGHT OF COORDINATED WARPLANE STRIKES ACROSS NES AND NORTHERN IRAQ, A DRONE STRIKE ON A YPJ CAR **KILLED 1 WOMAN AND INJURED 2**.
- 09 FEB** BAHIRA ATTEMPTED STRIKE ON CAR IN TOWN OF BAHIRA MISSED, INSTEAD DESTROYING AN ELECTRICITY LINE, LEAVING 40 VILLAGES WITHOUT ELECTRICITY; SECOND ATTEMPT JUST AFTER THE TOWN HIT THE CARE ACCURATELY, **KILLING 1 CHILD**, AND **INJURING 3 CIVILIANS**, INCLUDING ANOTHER CHILD.
- 12 FEB** AMUDE CAR HIT, **INJURING 3 MILITARY PERSONNEL**, WHILE THE CAR WAS STATIONED IN FRONT OF THE OFFICE OF THE LOCAL CIVILIAN NEIGHBOURHOOD DEFENCE FORCE, HPC.
- 04 APR** TEL TAMIR STRIKE ON VEHICLE OF SYRIAC MILITARY COUNCIL GENERAL COMMAND AS IT ESCORTED RUSSIAN DELGATION TO TEL TAMIR POWER STATION, WHICH HAD BEEN DAMAGED BY TURKISH SHELLING, **INJURING 1 GENERAL COMMAND MEMBER AND HIS TRANSLATOR**.
- 20 APR** EDIQ-TAHTAK ROAD STRIKE ON YPJ CAR, **KILLING 3 YPJ WOMEN** - RANYA HENAN, RODIN EBDILQADIR MIHEMED, AND CIHAN NIDAL ELI - **AND THEIR DRIVER**. RODIN AND RANYA WERE VETERANS OF THE SDF'S COUNTER-ISIS CAMPAIGNS - THE FORMER IN KOBANE AND RAQQA, AND THE LATTER IN MANBIJ. RODIN WAS ALSO KOBANE CANTON'S DEFENSE COMMITTEE CO-CHAIR.
- 02 JUL** AYN ISSA-TEL SAMAN ROAD STRIKE ON CAR, **KILLING SDF COMMANDER AND YPJ MEMBER, MIZGIN KOBANE**, AND **INJURING 2 OTHER MILITARY PERSONNEL**.
- 22 JUL** SHOREK STRIKE ON YPJ CAR, **KILLING 3 WOMEN** RETURNING FROM NES' "10 YEARS OF REVOLUTION" WOMEN'S FORUM IN QAMISHLO CITY: ANTI-TERROR UNITS (YAT) COMMANDER JIYAN TOLHILDAN, YPJ COMMANDER ROJ Khabur, AND YAT MEMBER BARIN BOTAN.
- 06 AUG** QAMISHLO STRIKE ON CAR IN CITY, **KILLING 4: 2 CHILDREN**, A LEADER IN THE KURDISTAN FREE LIFE PARTY (PJAK) - YUSIF MEHMUD REBANI - AND AN SDF OFFICER.
- 18 AUG** SHERNIKA STRIKE ON UN-AFFILIATED CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL CENTER, **KILLING 5 GIRLS AND INJURING 10**, WHILE THEY WERE PLAYING VOLLEYBALL OUTSIDE.
- 24 AUG** TEL RIFAAT STRIKE ON CROWDED CITY MARKET PLACE, **KILLING 4 CIVILIANS AND INJURING 7**.
- 26 SEP** KOBANE STRIKE ON AANES' EUPHRATES REGION EXECUTIVE COUNCIL BUILDING, **KILLING 1 YPG COMMANDER**, HASAN DEMIRTASH, WHO FOUGHT AGAINST ISIS IN KOBANE, RAQQA, MANBIJ, AYN ISSA, AND TABQA.
- 27 SEP** TEL JUMAN STRIKE ON CAR, **KILLING 2 CIVILIANS**: THE CO-CHAIRS OF AANES' JUSTICE AND REFORM OFFICE, WHO WERE ON A WORK VISIT
- 20 NOV** TEQIL BEQIL STRIKE ON CAR, **INJURING 2 CIVILIANS**, AMIDST TURKISH WARPLANE STRIKES ON THE SAME SITE, WHICH KILLED 11.
- 23 NOV** TIRBESPI OIL & GAS WITHIN TURKEY'S 'OPERATION CLAW-SWORD', STRIKES ON NES' KEY OIL AND GAS INFRASTRUCTURE IN JAZIRA REGION, CRIPPLING GAS PRODUCTION, CAUSING FIRES IN OIL FIELDS, AND RESULTING IN HEAVY DAMAGES.
- 17 DEC** RAQAS STRIKE ON CIVILIAN CAR, **KILLING 3**, INCLUDING 1 CHILD, AND **INJURING 1**.

4. STRIKE PATTERNS

Turkey mostly uses fixed-wing drones (FWDs) for strikes in NES. These drones look more like an airplane and require a proper landing area. Meanwhile, Turkey's suicide drones are multirotor, so appear more like small helicopters, and can take off and land almost anywhere. Included in RIC's tally of suicide drone attacks are 4 occasions where the SDF shot down the suicide drone before it was about to be used for an attack.

Only around 25% of Turkey's strikes hit a car. However, 31 of the 33 car strikes left casualties, whereas 44 of the 97 non-car strikes left casualties. Hence, Turkey's strikes are cars are comparatively more deadly.

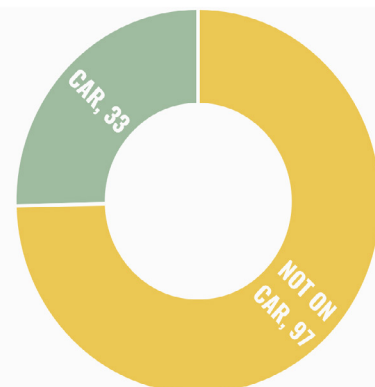
33 of the 130 drone attacks resulted in civilian casualties. In 24 of those instances, civilians were the only casualties, while in 9 of those instances there was a mix of civilian and military casualties. A further 42 of the attacks resulted in only military casualties, while the remaining 55 left no human casualties.

Just over half of Turkey's drone strikes hit NES' Jazira region. 8 of these were in Qamishlo city, with the roads leading from Qamishlo to Heseke, Derik, and Darbasiyah also key targets. While AANES' small Shehba exclave region did not see a high number of strikes overall in comparison to other regions, a full 14 of Turkey's strikes targeted the Shehba city of Tel Rifaat. Meanwhile, 6 strikes hit the city of Kobane, in the Firat region.

TYPE OF DRONE BOMB



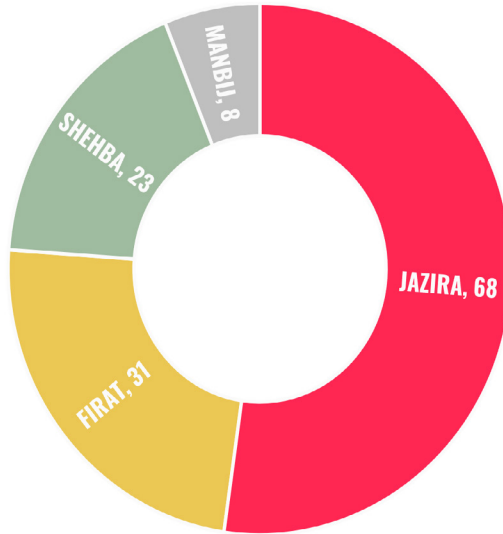
CAR STRIKES



CIVILIANS KILLED/INJURED IN STRIKE

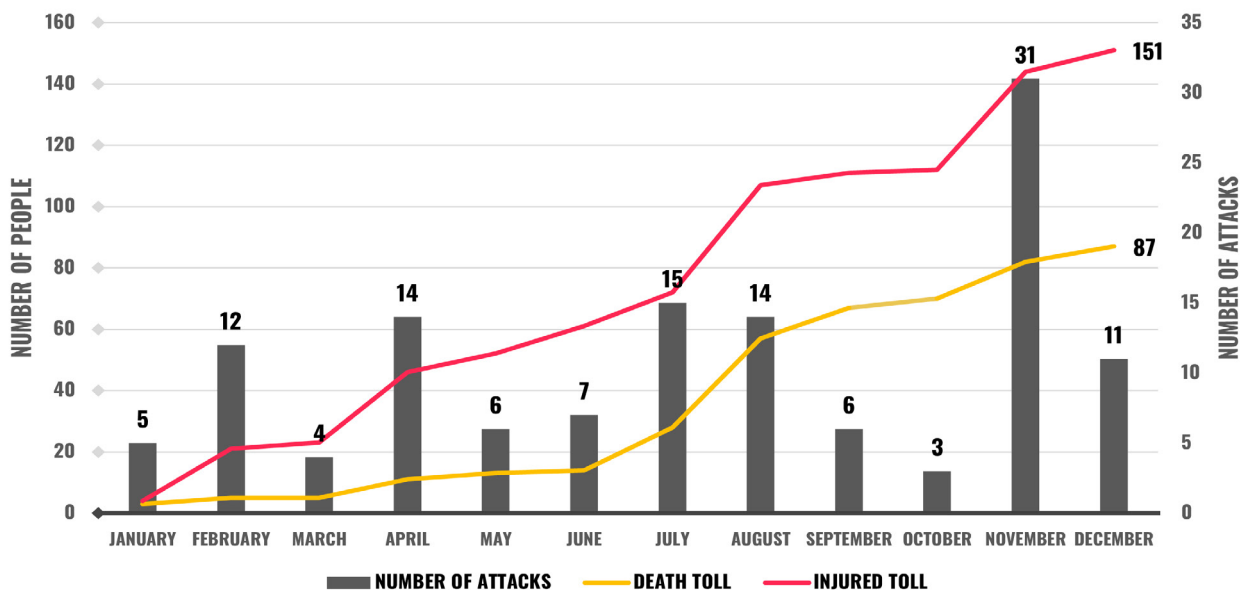


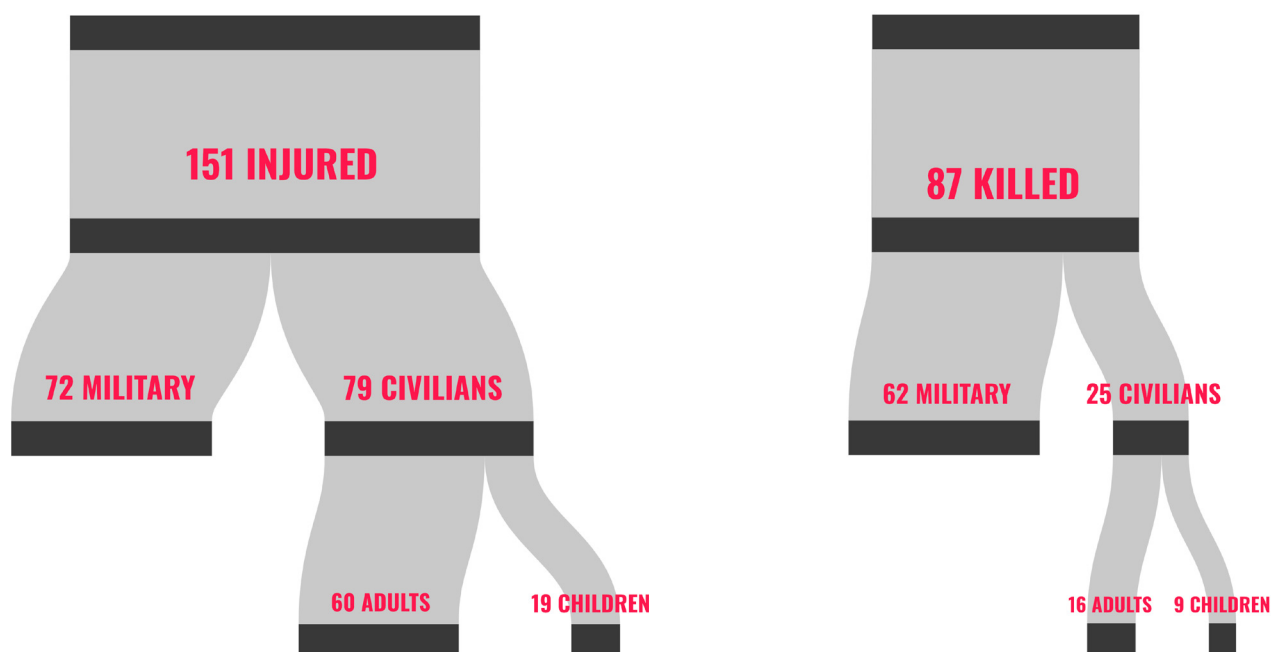
BY REGION



The summer months of July and August saw a high number of attacks and a high casualty toll too, following a tripartite meeting between Turkey, Iran and Russia in mid-July. RIC's coverage of the month following this meeting can be found [here](#). November saw by far the highest number of drone strikes as it was in this month that Turkey launched 'Operation Claw-Sword', in which Ankara carried out a slew of warplane and drone strikes across several days. RIC's coverage of that Turkish offensive can be found on our [website](#).

TURKISH DRONE ATTACKS 2022
FREQUENCY BY MONTH AND CASUALTY TOLL





Breakdown of the casualties of Turkey's drone strikes in NES, 2022

Turkey's willingness to strike in densely populated civilian areas, as well as target civilian employees of the Autonomous Administration, means that the civilian casualty toll is significant, and children are amongst these. Turkey does not formally recognize the civilian casualties that its strikes incur. Meanwhile, on the few occasions when the US or Coalition pays homage to the civilian casualties resulting from Turkish drone strikes, the former does not mention Ankara as the perpetrator, condemning violence while leaving the statement deliberately ambiguous. Such a lack of accountability emboldens Turkey to continue striking civilian targets. Strikes with high casualty numbers, or which targeted key political or military personnel, occasionally drew the attention of global media,^{1,2,3} however such events mostly occurred without note from the international community.

1 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/female-kurdish-commander-saved-american-lives-killed-turkish-drone-str-rcna40354>

2 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/turkish-airstrike-kills-members-us-backed-kurdish-force-syria>

3 <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/23/politics/us-military-turkey-drone-strike/index.html>

5. IMPACT OF STRIKES

Fight against ISIS curtailed

As the primary ground force in Syria that is working to defeat ISIS, the effectiveness of the global fight against ISIS depends on the SDF's military competency and strength. Turkish attacks on the SDF undermine the latter's counter-ISIS operations. In particular, the assassination of key SDF commanders who are not easily replaceable due to their high level of skill, honed through years of experience and participation in key battles against ISIS, is damaging to the international project of defeating ISIS. The US has mostly stayed quiet throughout Turkey's drone strikes, despite the fact that officials working on counter-ISIS operations that are paramount to US and Coalition interests are continually targeted. Meanwhile, ISIS' attack on Sina'a prison last January was a grave reminder of the manpower ISIS still holds and the threat it poses, to Syria, the Middle East, and the world. If the SDF's counter-terrorism operations are to continue, a stable geopolitical situation in NES is paramount. Turkey's drone campaign flies against achieving this.

US colonel Myles Caggins, Coalition spox. from 2019 to 2020: *"At a minimum, these attacks by Turkey are a distraction from the fight against ISIS. But, even worse, these attacks can be harmful against the mission to defeat ISIS, especially when the attacks from Turkey kill the YPG/YPJ who are responsible for fighting ISIS".*⁴

Newroz Ahmed, SDF General Commander: *"By the targeting of leaders, commanders and the people, they [Turkey] want to empty the region and weaken our military forces and leave it without leadership. This is how they attempt to achieve their goals".*

Attrition of the Autonomous Administration and democratic life

Targeted killings of competent and respected figures within the Autonomous Administration weaken the burgeoning democracy in NES. Furthermore, such attacks force all community leaders and people working for the AANES to take security precautions, limiting their travel and ability to work. Compounding this, Turkey's overt targeting of people important to NES' democratic project deters new people from participating. With NES' fledgling democratic system a stark contrast to the repressive political regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and offering a potential model for the wider region, Turkey's actions are not only impacting this part of Syria, but have a destructive influence on the future of the whole Middle East.

AANES: *[Turkey is] “striking the project of the Autonomous Administration as a national democratic project to extricate Syria from its historical and current crisis and draw the features of the future Syria to be Syria for all Syrians”.*

Executive council of Jazira region: *[Turkey is] “targeting of the Autonomous Administration institutions that seek and work to serve the peoples of the region, their stability and security, emptying the region of its original inhabitants and striking the Autonomous Administration project”.*

Instability and insecurity for civilians

Turkey’s willingness to conduct drone strikes in densely populated civilian areas and target essential infrastructure makes every day civilian life dangerous and difficult, discouraging people from planning a future in NES and triggering displacement. During November’s ‘Operation Claw-Sword’, Turkey systematically struck oil and gas facilities, knowing that these are [1] important lifelines of revenue for the administration and [2] vital for a population already lacking in affordable fuel and gas.

Ekrem Suleyman, of Jazira region’s Office of Electricity: *[regarding Turkey’s November bombardment of oil and gas infrastructure] “these places which have been attacked, they are very well-known spots, and have been precisely targeted. The oil fields and the power stations. Where all the power of the region is produced, the generation sites. By targeting and collapsing these spots, these buildings, these fields, Turkey knows how to make instability here. In the region in general, if the fields and power stations are gone, this is a massive problem. It will cause displacement and force migration. It is also a big economic problem”.*

Laila Ahmed, the co-chair of Kobane Canton’s council: *“Turkey fears the brotherhood of peoples in this region and aims to empty the region of its population and re-implement the scenario that happened in Afrin and Sere Kaniye.”*

6. CONCLUSION

In 2015, the international community professed a commitment to achieving stability in Syria, with UN Resolution 2254 supposed to pave the way for long-lasting peace.⁵ Over 7 years later, volatility and threats to civilian life still persist. While the people of NES and the AANES are charting their own democratic path, Turkey's drone campaign is a key destabilizing factor in the region. 2022's 130 strikes represent a 46% increase from the year prior, as per RIC's recording. While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly threatens a full-scale ground invasion into NES,⁵ drawing condemnation from international political and diplomatic figures of all stripes,^{7,8,9} his drone war goes by largely unremarked upon and unchallenged. If the international community is genuinely concerned with securing peace in Syria, a serious spotlight must be put on Turkey's drone attacks in NES.

However, Turkey's drone bombing can be seen as just one of many components in the war it waged in NES in 2022. The amount of water in the Syrian part of the Euphrates has drastically declined as Turkey limits the flow, spelling disaster for agricultural production and electricity provision alike.^{10,11} Turkey's sporadic bombing with warplanes across NES, and near-constant shelling along the contact lines separating NES from the Turkish-occupied areas, both hamper efforts to build stability in the region and leave civilian casualties.^{12,13} Turkey has heavily securitized and militarized its border with Syria; something it claimed it was unable to do when the international community was so requesting it when foreign fighters were flocking to join ISIS in 2014.¹⁴ The Turkish border gendarmerie regularly use lethal force against civilians living in border areas.¹⁵ Turkish attacks discourage long-term investment in a region already economically suffering as the Syrian pound plummets against the dollar. These practices from Ankara compound and intensify the negative impacts of its drone campaign.

5 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf

6 <https://www.icct.nl/publication/turkish-military-offensive-syria-consequences-counter-terrorism-operations>

7 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-again-tries-thwart-turkish-invasion-northern-syria>

8 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/2/russia-urges-turkey-not-to-launch-offensive-in-northern-syria>

9 <https://thearabweekly.com/western-countries-warn-turkey-against-new-military-operation-syria>

10 <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/blogs/killing-the-khabur-how-turkish-backed-armed-groups-blocked-northeast-syrias-water-lifeline>

11 <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/rights-group-turkey-water-cuts-worsen-syria-cholera-92803176>

12 <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-warns-turkish-offensive-endangering-us-troops-in-syria/6847380.html>

13 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-exacerbate-humanitarian-crisis>

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

15 <https://vdc-nsy.com/en/archives/9179>

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