



ROJAVA  
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CENTER

# **TURKEY'S OCTOBER CAMPAIGN: AIRSTRIKES TARGETING NORTH AND EAST SYRIA'S ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

**DECEMBER 2023**



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 OVERVIEW

On the night of October 4<sup>th</sup>, Turkey began a multi-day airstrike campaign in the autonomous region of North and East Syria (NES) that systematically targeted essential civilian infrastructure, cutting electricity and water supplies for 2 million people. Turkey carried out 25 warplane strikes and 64 drone strikes, hitting oil fields, electricity plants, water stations, a hospital facility, gas production stations, and industrial sites. This was Ankara's worst military escalation in NES since 2019. This report outlines Turkey's campaign, describes the damage caused, and details the impacts on NES and its population.

Turkey's attacks killed 48 people, including 9 civilians, and wounded 47, including 15 civilians. The bulk of these deaths came on the night of October 8<sup>th</sup>, when Turkey targeted a training academy of the Asayish (NES' Internal Security Forces) near Derik, killing 29 Asayish trainees and injuring 28.<sup>1</sup>

Turkish attacks on NES are nothing new - drone strikes and shelling are a daily reality for NES' population, particularly in regions close to the Turkish-Syrian border, or close to the Turkish-occupied territories. Ground invasions in 2018 and 2019 saw Turkey occupy swathes of NES territory, which are now controlled by Turkey's proxy Syrian National Army (SNA) forces. Excluding the death toll from Turkey's October campaign, drone strikes have killed 83 people in NES in 2023 so far, and injured 83.<sup>2</sup> On two previous occasions, similar to the October campaign, Turkey has escalated from its 'baseline' level of attacks and carried out strings of airstrikes with warplanes, targeting NES' infrastructure.<sup>3,4,5</sup> This most recent airstrike campaign is on the one

1 <https://asayish.com/?p=9807>

2 RIC database, casualties from Turkish drone strikes 01.01.2023 - 07.12.2023

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

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

5 <https://m.reliefweb.int/report/3910613/syrian-arab-republic/uptick-hostilities-lead-power-cuts-and-result-increased-humanitarian-and-environmental-risks>

hand simply a continuation of a long established Turkish policy of attacking the region, and on the other hand is unprecedented as the number of infrastructure sites targeted and the scale of the impact has vastly exceeded that of previous rounds of airstrikes.

The overall casualty toll was lower than has been the case in previous Turkish military operations, yet the long-term effects of these attacks will be severe. Turkey's campaign put essential infrastructure out-of-service, cutting electricity and water serving homes, internally displaced peoples (IDP) camps, hospitals, bakeries, mills, pharmacies, and schools, stopping production of fuel and gas, and leaving the governing Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) with the unfeasible task of repairing the extensive damages. While quick-fix solutions and unsustainable stop-gap measures enabled a relatively swift restoration of basic humanitarian services, the AANES does not have the economic and logistical capacity to fully restore all infrastructure - even with the help of the region's smattering of NGOs. The Administration predicts gas bottle and fuel shortages, increased reliance on expensive trucked water due to water cuts, reduced electricity supply, and more expensive goods, just as winter arrives, and in the midst of a worsening economic crisis. Many areas, including IDP camps, risk going without adequate heating in the coming months.

Turkey began this wave of airstrikes following a bomb attack in Ankara on October 1<sup>st</sup>. The Ankara attack injured two policemen and was claimed by the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The Turkish government insisted, without evidence, that the Ankara attack was staged from NES, and publicly declared what it termed "YPG infrastructure" as legitimate military targets. NES' political and military leaders have emphasized they have no connection to the Ankara attack,<sup>6</sup> accusing Turkey of using the incident as a *casus belli*, meant to justify the attacks on people and infrastructure. The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) - a political assembly comprised of various political parties and organizations in NES - condemned Turkey's accusation as "nothing more than baseless and dangerous justifications," with the objective to "undermine the security and stability achieved by the Global Coalition forces against ISIS in collaboration with the Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF]." <sup>7</sup>

The U.S. is formally allied with the SDF to fight ISIS in NES. The SDF is the

6 <https://twitter.com/MazlounAbdi/status/1709600295540376019>

7 <https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6659>



main military force in NES. The AANES and SDC meanwhile, seek to offer a new political direction not only for NES but also for Syria as a whole and the wider Middle East. The AANES' political project is founded on principles of gender equality and decentralization of power, and aims to develop strong social cohesion in a multi-ethnic landscape. The SDC meanwhile, aims to bring about a democratic confederal Syria and asserts that formal political decentralization is "an urgent need in our country" that is "capable of reducing the intensity of conflict, tension, and hostilities that the country suffered".<sup>8</sup> On this basis, NES' top politicians claim that Turkey's attacks present serious threats to hopes of ending the Syrian crisis as they destabilize "the one region with the potential of enabling the transition of all of Syria to true democracy."<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 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.

## 1.3 METHODOLOGY

During the campaign, the Rojava Information Center (RIC) visited sites that Turkey had struck, documented and photographed the damage, spoke to witnesses, and interviewed workers within the power and healthcare sectors, AANES representatives, as well as civilians living under the bombardment and suffering its effects. Turkey's bombardment was mostly concentrated in NES' north-eastern-most Jazira region, hence the research for this report was primarily concentrated on this area too. This report is based on this RIC

8 <https://m-syria-d.com/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%b1%d9%83%d8%b2%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d9%83%d9%8a%d9%81-%d9%88%d9%84%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%b0%d8%a7%d8%9f/>

9 <https://twitter.com/ElhamAhmadSDC/status/1709635357182988373>

research as well as open-source intelligence (OSINT) research and discussions with local journalists and experts. In addition, this report has made particular use of a report from the North and East Syria NGO Forum (a coordinating body for NGO action in NES) released following Turkey's attacks, for confirming quantitative statistics.<sup>10</sup>

Quantifying the immediate impacts of Turkey's airstrikes - such as total material losses, costs of infrastructure repairs, or financial accounting for oil revenue drops - proved challenging, as estimates varied greatly. While those figures made available to RIC are included in this report, several AANES officials told RIC that it was currently difficult to make calculations with certainty. In addition, the humanitarian impacts of Turkey's October campaign will be most keenly felt in the medium to long term, as yet another layer of the multi-faceted war waged by Erdoğan against NES, its population, and the AANES and SDF. In light of this, beyond giving a sector-by-sector account of the principle effects of Turkey's campaign, in this report RIC has sought to also present a picture of some of the underlying difficulties NES is facing - humanitarian, security, and political - and review how Turkey's attacks will further these crises.



Qamishlo - city residents call for a "no fly zone" following Turkish airstrikes, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023

10 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/situation-report-2-october-16-2023-escalation-hostilities-targeting-critical-civilian-infrastructures-northeast-syria>

## 2. TIMELINE

### Night of October 4th into October 5th

1

Turkish airstrikes began in the early hours, targeting a factory and infrastructure near Heseke, **over 52 km from the Turkish border**. These were followed by **airstrikes close to the Washokani camp**, home to 17,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) who fled their homes when Turkey invaded the 'M4 Strip' in 2019. Residents from the camp say a factory and a chicken farm were damaged in the attacks. **Three civilian workers were injured**. The strikes caused panic and displacement according to the camp administrator, Berzan Abdullah. He told RIC. "[Turkey] struck four times with drones and warplanes. As a result, the residents of the camp on the western side had no choice but to leave their tents. There was fear in their hearts." Abdullah explained that the strikes re-awakened memories of Turkey's 2019 invasion for the camp residents: "They are very anxious, whenever they hear a sound, they fear it is the sound of a warplane, and that it will attack us." NGO staff completely withdrew from the camp following the strikes.

Also in the Heseke vicinity, **Turkey struck a brick factory in Safaya, killing two civilian guards and injuring three**. Turkey's strikes were primarily concentrated in the north-easternmost Jazira region, however on the first day Turkey also conducted **drone strikes on Sarrin and Khirab Esk in the Euphrates region, killing three military personnel and two civilians**. Turkey then began to target electricity, water, oil and other critical infrastructure sites in the Jazira region. On this first day, **Turkey struck three electrical stations and four oil fields**, putting them out of service.

**Turkey hit the critical Suwaydiyah gas and electricity station** - NES' only gas bottling plant and primary power source for the Jazira region. Widespread black-outs occurred in hundreds of thousands of flats and houses, but also in hospitals, mills, pharmacies and bakeries. The AANES released a statement on their website, stating that "this aggression and targeting of civilians is a clear war crime and a flagrant violation of all international human rights and humanitarian laws and norms," adding that "the doors will open to a tragic humanitarian catastrophe."

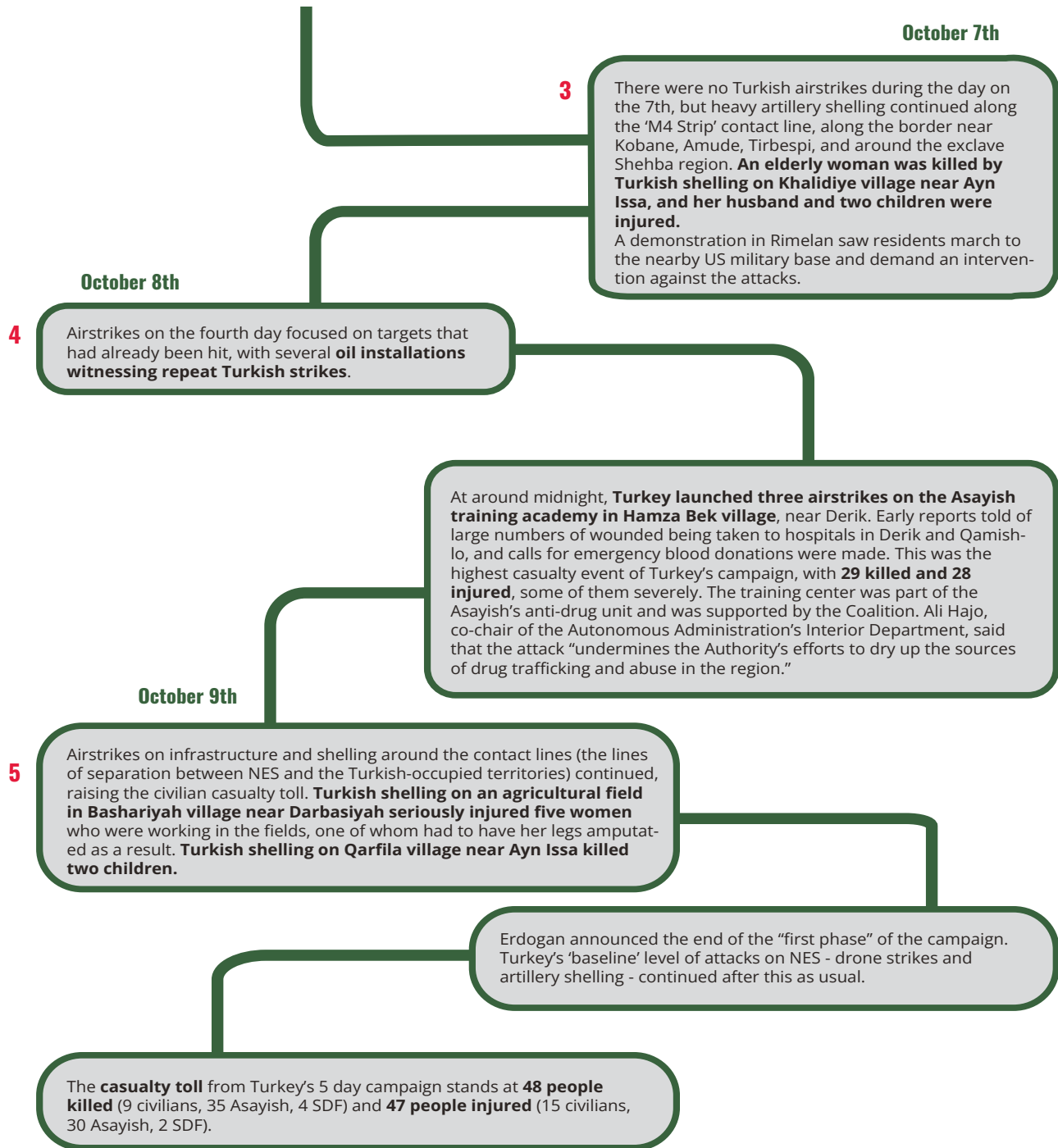
### October 6th

2

Turkey continued to target electricity, water, oil, gas, and other infrastructure. **Several locations were hit for the second time, including the electricity station in Qamishlo and the Suwaydiyah gas and electricity station**. Qamishlo electricity department's Muhemed Zeki told RIC that the first strike had only destroyed one of the station's two transformers, but "after the second targeting, the station is completely destroyed." With the damage to power plants and electricity stations, **an estimated 2 million people were left without mains electricity**, as were hospitals, pharmacies, bakeries, and water stations. In addition, **Turkey struck a COVID-19 hospital facility** near Derik. While the facility was not in use for patients, with no COVID-19 cases in NES, Derik Council told RIC that machines and medicines were being stored there, including valuable ventilators, all of which were destroyed.

While Turkey again concentrated its bombing in the oil-rich Jazira region, two locations in Kobane were also hit: Kanya Kurdan neighborhood in Kobane city and a cement factory outside the city.

Turkey and the SNA intensified shelling along the M4 road, as well as around Manbij. This **shelling killed a member of the SDF's Manbij Military Council (MMC)**. Civilians in all of NES' major cities held protest demonstrations in response to Turkey's attacks.



## 3. IMPACTS

The cascading effects of Turkey's intentional destruction of infrastructure touched all aspects of civilian life. The region enters winter without sufficient heat, power, or water while the significant damage done to oil infrastructure and fuel production has economic implications that will have further adverse effects on humanitarian services. The following sections present an overview of the situation regarding electricity, oil and gas, water, healthcare, education, and food and agriculture, before exploring the possibilities for repairing the damages, costs of doing so and challenges therein. The report then covers the impact of Turkey's attacks on the fight against ISIS and efforts to combat drug trafficking in NES. Zooming out, the subsequent sections consider Erdoğan's use of F-16 warplanes in the context of a potential impending sale of such warplanes from the U.S. to Turkey, as well as the Coalition's response to Turkey's attacks. The final paragraph considers Turkey's potential breaches of international law in reference to accusations that Turkey is committing war crimes in NES.

### 3.1 ELECTRICITY, OIL AND GAS

Energy and electrical infrastructure was Turkey's key target in this campaign. Turkey rendered Jazira region's primary electricity stations inoperable through airstrikes, cutting the general electricity supply for two million people, while also stopping gas bottle and fuel production through strikes on oil and gas field infrastructure. Crucially, NES' electricity infrastructure was already compromised prior to Turkey's campaign, and fuel and gas shortages were commonplace across NES. Turkey has deliberately worsened an already poor humanitarian situation.



Qamishlo North Electricity Station - fires are extinguished following a second Turkish airstrike on the station, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Turkey struck four of NES' key electrical transfer stations, putting them out of



service: Amude, Qamishlo North, Tirbespi, and Heseke Western Dam. Amude's station feeds electricity to the whole city of Amude, plus its countryside and the Darbasiyah transfer station. Heseke's supplies several of Heseke city's neighborhoods plus its western and northern countryside including the Washokani IDP camp.

Turkey hit Qamishlo's station twice - destroying its transformers and rendering the station inoperable. This bombing cut the city's power supply. Qamishlo electricity department's Muhemed Zeki told RIC: "We had been working hard this year, replacing 11,000 old electrical lines, establishing two new ports in the city, repairing other ports that were old. As a result, we had been seeing a decrease in electrical failures. Of course, we had not finished our work; there were many other things to do. But these attacks have stopped us. Turkey destroyed both transformers of our northern station. Actually, the first transformer could have been repaired within a week, with difficulty, but after the second targeting, the station is completely destroyed. This has caused huge damage to our essential services: hospitals depended on the station, including the specialty hospitals for kidneys and for hearts and eyes. Two of the big bread bakeries and the two main water stations also depended on our electricity; now they have nothing. This has huge repercussions for all the people here."

In addition, Turkey targeted and critically damaged both the Suwaydiyah and Rimelan electricity stations.

Suwaydiyah produces almost half of the electricity for Jazira region. This does not amount to much: households received around 4 hours of electricity from the general network per day prior to the attacks. A special 24/7 line from Suwaydiyah however, ensured key service infrastructure such as hospitals and bakeries were always powered. Suwaydiyah is the sole source of power for this 24/7 emergency line. Electricity from Suwaydiyah station is also of particular importance as the station feeds over 20 electricity transfer stations across Jazira region.

Furthermore, Suwaydiyah is NES' only domestic gas bottling plant. Most domestic cooking in NES is done with bottled gas. Suwaydiyah formerly produced 130 tons of household gas per day. Turkey's strikes completely halted gas production for domestic consumption. Gas bottle stocks are estimated to last 1 month, and imported gas is 10 times the cost. The situation is even more serious as the facilities producing oil for heating stoves have also been damaged and many areas have little-to-no power for electrical cooking.

Two days after Turkey's strikes on Suwaydiyah, Salman Barodo of the AANES' Economy Department told RIC: "The Suwaydiyah station supplies the Jazira



region with 50% of its regular electricity. Residents are now without electricity, and the continued operation of pumps responsible for procuring water is no longer assured. The plant's former output approached 130 tons of household gas or 13,000 cylinders per day. That this destruction and deliberate sabotage by the Turkish state has rendered more than two million people without municipal services, without power, and without water, means this act can be considered nothing less than tantamount to a war crime."

The Rimelan electricity station meanwhile, supplies oil and gas fields across the Jazira region with the electricity necessary to keep them functioning. These oil and gas fields in turn provide fuel and gas for household, industrial, and commercial use across NES. Repair costs here sit at \$25 million, according to the NES NGO Forum. With electricity distribution heavily impaired, households and services in NES became more reliant on benzine, gas, and diesel, hence fuel demand rose 30% following the attacks. At the same time, Turkey also struck oil, gas, and diesel production sites directly, causing a near cessation in fuel production and distribution in Jazira region. NES fuel production dropped 60% after the attacks, the NES NGO Forum stated.

Most households in NES are heated during the winter using locally produced fuel oil. As winter hits, rising fuel

Suwaydiyah gas and electricity station - damaged transformer, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023



prices will already be a heavy burden on the population for cooking and heating. The most affected population is the 168,000 IDPs of NES, who rely on subsidized fuel prices. IDPs are especially at risk of no longer having affordable fuel due to the Turkish attacks. With fuel production slashed, including that which is used for generators, safe methods of heating become a major challenge ahead of the winter. With no access to fuel, many may resort to more hazardous practices, such as burning materials.

Households who can afford it have a few extra hours of electricity provided from private generators, although the amount provided doesn't cover all needs. Simav, a teenager from Amude, told RIC: "The recent attacks hit our electricity. The general electricity was cut. It was difficult. People were killed too. Even now there is no general electricity still. We had our own small electricity generator before the attacks which is lucky for us but really there was so much hardship put on the people from the recent attacks. Without the general electricity we cannot have hot water so we have to use our gas to heat it on the stove, but our gas bottle is almost finished and probably we cannot get another one for some time."

Nisreen, a school teacher in Qamishlo, explained her situation to RIC a week after the end of Turkey's campaign: "We just had a really difficult time, the electricity was cut, the water was cut. Until the water came again we actually fell sick, we went to the doctor, in the end it was okay. For the electricity too, it has come back a little, for one hour or so. But we went through a really difficult period up before. My children struggled with the situation. I have been sick myself for a few days now. I don't know why. I think from the stress."

The AANES were able to restore power fairly swiftly, however the measures employed to do so are short-term and unsustainable.

Engineers brought one of Suwaydiyah's turbines back into operation. The station was therefore able to run at 8% of its full operating capacity, meaning that the 24/7 key services line could have a few hours of power per day. However, running a single turbine in isolation, without carrying out all necessary auxiliary repairs, degrades the infrastructure and means that the long-term scope of repairs required will be greater, reported the NES NGO Forum.

In addition, 30 megawatts of electricity from the Euphrates River's Tabqa dam were redirected to the Jazira region, leading to 11% of the region's electricity needs being met. At normal operating capacity, Tabqa dam would be able to supply up to 160 megawatts of electricity to Jazira region, but due to "Turkey cutting off the Euphrates River water, the least possible amount of electricity is being made," said Ziyad Rustem, co-chair of the AANES Energy Department, in interview with RIC. Only a small portion (roughly 19%) of the dam's capacity

is available. Even in the Euphrates region, the dam comes nowhere close to meeting electricity needs. The water level behind the dam has nearly dropped to the “dead point” where hydroelectric production ceases to function.

Other temporary solutions for electricity included physically moving transformers from stations that were not hit by Turkey to those that were.

“We took advantage of our intact stations, knowing that most of the intact stations have two 66/20kV transformers. For example, Tel Kocher station had two transformers: we took one and installed it in the targeted station in Rimelan for the sake of operating the turbines, which allowed us to generate electricity and supply it to the water station in Safan, which is next to Khana Seri, and provide water to Qamishlo and other regions, and to supply the other stations of Tirbespi and Derik with electricity. [...] We supplied electricity to important and necessary lines such as bakeries, health centers, hospitals, and water stations, after connecting the lines together. But it is far from an ideal solution. In terms of technical and international standards, it may not be allowed or may be dangerous and the electricity will be weaker overall, but we had no choice, we were forced to do so for getting water to the people.” – **Ziyad Rustem, AANES Energy Department co-chair**

Turkey's attacks erase the steady progress the AANES had been making in terms of powering the region. Over the past year, one of the AANES' priorities has been upgrading and expanding its electricity network, Ziyad Rustem told RIC. The AANES provides electricity free of charge to citizens, although this supply through the power grid was only available for 4 hours a day on average. As a result of the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS, power generation and electricity transmission infrastructure across the whole of Syria was heavily damaged. Direct shelling of power plants, destruction of sections of the transmission grid, the targeting of gas pipelines feeding electric generators, the loss of maintenance capacity of administering bodies, as well as looting and theft by Free Syrian Army factions, the al-Nusra Front and ISIS, meant that Syria's already-weak electricity infrastructure fell apart.<sup>11</sup> In NES, electricity supply is better than in areas controlled by the Syrian government, yet power shortages remain a chronic problem, impacting vital services, hampering economic activity and hurting people's livelihoods. Turkey's campaign has intensified an already bad situation.

## 3.2 WATER

<sup>11</sup> <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/72182/QM-02-21-984-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1>

Electricity and fuel cuts have had a widespread impact on the availability of clean water. The Jazira region experienced water cuts following Turkey's strikes, particularly because the critical Alouk water station lost power. In a region already facing water scarcity, this threatens public health and sanitation.

Much of NES' water in the Jazira region is electrically pumped from deep wells. The NESNGO Forum reports that over 55% of the boreholes receiving electricity from the damaged stations don't have backup generators, so are unable to continue functioning without electricity from the general network. Even for those boreholes with backup generators, the damages to fuel production and distribution mean procuring fuel for the generators is more challenging and expensive. In Qamishlo city, the water network is not uniform - different boreholes supply different areas - so certain neighborhoods saw total water cuts while others did not. A family living in the Kornish neighborhood told RIC that once Turkey's strikes began, no water could be pumped to their neighborhood, so they were forced to buy trucked water at prohibitive costs.

The supply of water - particularly safe drinking water - in NES was already fragile before the recent bombing campaign.<sup>12,13,14</sup> Through extensive Turkish damming of the Euphrates and Khabour rivers, the flow of water into NES has been restricted, while over-extraction has caused wells to dry up across the region as the water table drops.<sup>15</sup>

The Alouk water station, located in the countryside of Turkish-occupied Sere Kaniye, which supplies water to over 610,000 people, was also affected by Turkey's attacks.<sup>16</sup> Alouk was captured by the Turkish-backed SNA in October 2019, during Turkey's invasion of the M4 Strip. The SNA and AANES reached an agreement whereby the latter would supply electricity to Alouk, and in return the SNA would supply water to NES' Heseke area. However, the station has been subject to interference from Turkish forces and SNA, who frequently

12 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-has-a-water-crisis-and-its-not-going-away/>

13 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/19/water-crisis-plagues-tens-of-thousands-in-northeast-syria-ngos>

14 <https://savethetigris.org/international-water-forum-discusses-the-water-crisis-in-north-east-syria/>

15 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/syria-parties-conflict-aggravate-cholera-epidemic>

16 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/313810/>



turn the station off or damage it.<sup>17</sup> Water cuts from Alouk are so common that civilians in these areas primarily rely on expensive trucked water.<sup>18,19</sup> Last year, the Autonomous Administration declared Heseke and surrounding IDP camps a “disaster area” given the dire situation of water.<sup>20</sup> The UN has also stated Alouk shut-downs are linked to worsening health and sanitation as “families are resorting to potentially unsafe sources of water or limiting consumption, which may contribute to growth in a range of potentially fatal water-borne diseases, and further undermine the already fragile public health.”<sup>21</sup>

Turkey's targeting of Amude's electrical station left Alouk water station without power on October 5<sup>th</sup>. Amude's station provides electricity to the Darbasiyah transfer station which then routes it to Alouk. Alouk had only just resumed service with some limited water provision, after an almost year-long closure.<sup>22,23</sup> Turkey's recent attacks cut water output from the crucial station again. Meanwhile, Turkey strikes close to the Himme water station in Heseke city triggered a staff evacuation, halting operations at the station temporarily.



Tishreen Dam, Euphrates River - low water levels curb electricity generation, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023

17 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/turkey/syria-weaponizing-water-global-pandemic>

18 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/26/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity>

19 <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/1-million-people-risk-due-severe-interruptions-alouk-water-station>

20 <https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1675865466718257152>

21 <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/syria-1-million-people-risk-due-severe-interruptions-alouk-water-station>

22 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/how-northern-syrias-triple-water-crisis-exacerbating-its-peoples-woes>

23 <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/03072023>

The AANES employed some emergency measures to restore electricity supply for water pumping. An extra service line from the Euphrates River's hydroelectric dams was activated to provide the affected boreholes in city areas with extra power. Yet the Euphrates dams themselves are almost dysfunctional due to the low level of the Euphrates River.<sup>24</sup> The amount of electricity redirected to the Jazira region was not enough to supply villages in the affected Jazira region subdistricts, reported the NES NGO Forum. Furthermore, the voltage from this extra service line is low and inconsistent, meaning infrastructure such as water pumps is exposed to potential damage.

### 3.3 HEALTHCARE

The most immediate impact of the recent attacks has been disruption and suspension of care services due to electricity and water cuts. This has affected both AANES services for the general population as well as NGO-supported services in IDP camps.

The NES NGO Forum reported that 46 health facilities in the Jazira region saw sharp reductions in electricity in the immediate aftermath of Turkey's attacks, which impacted the health services provided to over 100,000 people. Limited electricity means riskier night-births, surgeries without lighting - important

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/low-water-levels-force-halt-north-syria-hydropower-2023-03-01/> Derik - COVID-19 hospital facility destroyed following Turkish airstrikes, October 7<sup>th</sup>





since many Turkish attacks were occurring at night - and inhibits use of laboratory equipment, such as blood testing machines, meaning diagnosis of problems is delayed, along with X-ray machines, MRI scanners, dialysis units, and other essential equipment. Furthermore, many medications require refrigeration at specific and consistent temperatures, and expire without electricity. Electricity cuts mean hospitals can be forced to throw away medicines. The situation of medicine is already very difficult in NES with substantial price rises and diminished supplies of most common medicines, particularly for chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension.<sup>25,26</sup>

While hospitals in NES are not totally reliant on electricity from the general AANES supply, having one or two small private fuel-powered generators to ensure consistent supply, fuel shortages were soon reported by hospitals across the region, meaning generators could not always be operated. In the medium term, the AANES warned of closures to local and regional health facilities. This would disproportionately affect poor, rural populations.<sup>27</sup>

"With these latest attacks, there have been some temporary closures of clinics, delays to seeing patients. The bombings here in Qamishlo affected a lot of people who work in the hospitals and clinics, and affected their homes and families as well. We work with people who need prosthetics, many of whom were originally victims of Turkish or ISIS bombings, so there is a psychological warfare against the people who feel continuous persecution. In terms of funding, difficulties are already being faced due to decline in outside financial support, so this destruction of civilian infrastructure is another burden forced on the people of North East Syria from the war crimes of Turkey." – **Baran Hossein, Kurdish Red Crescent**

In the longer-term, the impact of Turkey's latest aerial campaign will be felt as a heavy additional burden on top of the already existing crises within NES' healthcare provision infrastructure.<sup>28</sup>

NES' healthcare system is already strained because of the embargo on the region and the lack of international political recognition for the AANES. Economic embargoes - imposed by Turkey, the Syrian government and the

25 <https://npasyria.com/en/102389/>

26 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-situation-over-view-syria-hsos-northeast-syria-december-2021>

27 <https://npasyria.com/en/106125/>

28 <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/1913/north-east-syria-millions-dealing-with-sporadic-water-shortages-crippled-health-services>

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq - have had a massive impact on medical care for people in NES. No medical supplies have been legally imported from Turkey since the beginning of 2016. Smuggling occurs under dangerous conditions, but not for all products. Dr. Bave Arras, who works as an anesthesiologist in Qamishlo city, stated: "The borders are closed. It is hard to get instruments inside our regions, because of the war and the embargo. The states do not let us get the needed instruments. [...] If we get them, it is very expensive." Meanwhile, without formal international recognition for the AANES, there can be no direct cooperation between its Department of Health and other countries. Currently, aid and funds from such countries cannot be given directly to the AANES. A mediator, such as an international NGO, is needed, and such middlemen take a not-insignificant cut in return for their services. Formal recognition of the AANES would not only alleviate this problem, but also place responsibility for healthcare in NES firmly in the hands of the AANES, rather than foreign NGOs. NGO funding waxes and wanes, meaning health projects in the region are unstable and run more according to donor whims rather than in tune with regional needs.



Qamishlo - Doctor Bave Arras

The region has been experiencing a severe water crisis in recent years, facing reduced precipitation and drought on the one hand, and a rapidly declining flow of water from Turkey into the Syrian portion of the Euphrates River on the other hand.<sup>29</sup> This also adversely impacts healthcare. The once-mighty Euphrates River flows at a trickle of its former rate, leading to stagnant pools emerging in some places, which has increased the spread of diseases such as leishmania<sup>30</sup> and made infection control more difficult both in healthcare settings and within the population. Populations relying on water from the

29 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/current-situation-water-crisis-northeast-syria-and-its-humanitarian-impacts-july-2023-northeast-syria>

30 <https://www.voanews.com/a/leishmania-cases-rampant-in-northeast-syria-town-/6515097.html>

Euphrates have experienced acute shortages of water in recent years - for drinking, cooking, washing, cleaning, and irrigation.<sup>1</sup> For those in IDP camps, or living in the area around the Khabour River (which has also become a dirty swamp or dried up completely in some places), the situation is even worse.<sup>2</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of water made even basic hand washing impossible in many parts of NES.<sup>3</sup> The vulnerability remains acute given the absence of many vaccination programs in NES, with only 1.3% of the population vaccinated for COVID-19 throughout 2021.<sup>4</sup>

Baran Hossein commented: "What these attacks do is add onto the long-running blocking of water caused by Turkey and the difficulty of getting medical supplies, particularly to the Shehba and Sheikh Maqsoud areas. This wave of attacks against the means of energy here in Rojava is nothing less than an attack on the civilian population's ability to live in their homes and on their own soil. I hope international organizations and agencies recognize that war crimes are not just a number of [people] killed: they are attacks on a whole population for the crime of living where we live."

### 3.4 EDUCATION

Education was another casualty of Turkey's campaign. Schools in villages near the Turkish-Syrian border are often damaged or directly targeted by Turkish shelling.<sup>5</sup> Following these latest attacks, the Autonomous Administration's Foreign Relations Department's Bedran Kurd, stated that 48 schools were damaged by shelling, leaving thousands of children unable to study.

*Does the AANES have plans to enable education to continue through the attacks?*

"The attacks impact all parts of life. Under these conditions, all students are impacted. As long as this continues, it is hard for students to continue their studies. Until stability and security is re-established and the attacks stop, there are no plans to ensure education continues." – **Bedran Kurd, AANES Foreign Relations Dept.**

1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/current-situation-water-crisis-north-east-syria-and-its-humanitarian-impacts-july-2023-northeast-syria>

2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/three-years-water-crisis-northeast-syria-main-gaps-and-adaptation-efforts-going-ahead-november-2023-northeast-syria>

3 <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/water-crisis-in-iraq-and-north-sast-syria-is-creeping-into-every>

4 <https://www.emro.who.int/images/stories/syria/Covid-19-in-NES-2021-update.pdf?ua=1>

5 <https://npasyria.com/en/88288/>

Evin Khaled, a mother of four in Qamishlo city, told RIC that her children refused to attend school during the bombing, even though their schools remained open. "Whenever they hear loud sounds they are so scared. All the children are. They fear the bombing. They also know that people here are getting killed by Turkey frequently, including children."

The NES NGO Forum reports that schools in the Washokani IDP camp and the Roj camp for ISIS-linked families were closed during the bombing campaign, "due to parents' and school staff's concerns that military activities were too close to the camps."

School attendance is also strongly linked to the economic situation. When economic difficulties increase, so do school drop-out rates.<sup>31</sup> In poorer families, children often work with their parents from a young age rather than attend school. In the Jazira region, almost ¼ of children do not attend school. Reduced supplies of water, heating, and cooking gas will increase the cost of living over the winter, increasing the likelihood that more children will need to go to work instead of attending school.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.5 FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Turkish attacks threaten both agriculture and bread production. Direct attacks on agricultural lands curtail productivity, while shortages of electricity and fuel impact mills and ovens.

Agricultural production near the Turkish-Syrian border is particularly vulnerable to Turkish attacks. In recent years, farmers have had to abandon their fields and livelihoods due to the risk of Turkish and SNA shelling. In Turkey's October campaign, five women who were working picking cotton near Darbasiyah were injured from shelling, with one losing both of her legs. The NES NGO Forum estimates that 3,500 farmers in NES (14% of the total number of farmers) face "significant challenges accessing their lands" during hostilities. They also warn that "reductions in oil production and rising fuel prices will have major effects on irrigation, harvesting, and processing of wheat, as fuel has already become increasingly scarce and, thus, prohibitively costly for many farmers."

31 <https://reporting.unhcr.org/files/2023-06/MENA%20-Syrian%20Arab%20Republic.pdf>

32 <https://inee.org/jobs/consultancy-strengthening-northeast-syria-education-working-groups-response-education-crisis>

Bread is a staple food in NES and is heavily subsidized by the administration. Every year, the entire grain harvest is purchased at above market rate and then provided at below market rate to mills. Bakeries in each city then use this flour to produce bread which is sold at a controlled price to the public. This is especially important for poorer families and has become a vital lifeline for many as the economic crisis has deepened.

The wheat harvest has suffered from direct and indirect attacks in recent years. In 2019 and 2020, ISIS sleeper cells carried out a campaign of arson against wheat fields.<sup>33</sup> Around the same time, Turkish shelling of wheat fields close to the Syrian-Turkish border exacerbated the crisis.<sup>34,35</sup> Increased security efforts managed to largely prevent ISIS' attacks after 2020. Another problem for agriculture is water supply. Since 2020, the water flow entering Syria from Turkey in the Euphrates and Khabour rivers has been greatly reduced. Turkish damming upstream is the primary cause. Numerous human rights organizations have noted Turkey's weaponization of its control over water flow entering NES.<sup>36</sup> This has caused severe water shortages in agricultural areas and reduced the grain harvest. In 2023, full rains led to a good harvest compared to previous years, over-filling the region's grain silos.



Darbasiyah - Farah Adnan had to have her legs amputated following Turkish shelling while picking cotton, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023

33 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mystery-crop-fires-scorch-thousands-of-acres-in-syria-and-iraq--and-isis-claims-responsibility/2019/06/07/8507eb00-87a1-11e9-9d73-e2ba6bbf1b9b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mystery-crop-fires-scorch-thousands-of-acres-in-syria-and-iraq--and-isis-claims-responsibility/2019/06/07/8507eb00-87a1-11e9-9d73-e2ba6bbf1b9b_story.html)

34 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/farmland-fire-northeast-syria>

35 <https://npasyria.com/en/78289/>

36 <https://stj-sy.org/en/110-syrian-organizations-condemn-the-deprivation-of-civilians-in-northeast-syria-of-their-right-to-access-adequate-and-safe-water/>



This should have secured the supply of bread for the year, but the damage from Turkish attacks on grain infrastructure threaten this. Turkey directly attacked grain silos near Amude, Ayn Issa, and Tel Tamir.

The industrial production of bread requires significant amounts of electricity and fuel – to run the mills, the mixers and the ovens. With the electricity supply from the general grid disrupted by Turkish attacks on the power stations and transformers, the mills have to generate electricity locally from private generators, putting another strain on fuel supply, hence threatening to reduce the production of flour and limit the production of bread and its availability to the public.

### 3.6 REPAIRING THE DAMAGE

The NES NGO Forum highlights that repairing the damage quickly is the only way to avert a humanitarian catastrophe, stating that “the scale of damage far supersedes the capacity of the humanitarian community to sustain emergency life-saving service provision” and that “if significant civilian infrastructural damage is not addressed, no further escalation is required for the situation to worsen from dire to catastrophic.” Such comprehensive repairs however, are far beyond the capacity of the AANES, both financially and logistically. Importing replacement parts is challenging, and funding this is even more so, with the AANES’ small budget adversely impacted by losses from the oil sector due to Turkish strikes.

Repairing the damaged infrastructure is costly. The NES NGO Forum report estimates that primary repairs for the just electrical infrastructure from the four key damaged electrical substations (Heseke Western Dam, Qamishlo north, Tirbespi, and Amude), plus the Rimelan and Suwaydiayh stations will cost \$37 million. However, in an interview with local independent news agency North Press, Agid Abdulmajid, the director of Suwadiyah station, quoted the damage figure for that station alone at \$100 million.<sup>37</sup> In conversation with AANES officials, RIC was told that estimating the repair costs is difficult as it depends on where certain replacement parts can come from and if they can pass into NES easily or not.

37 <https://npasyria.com/en/105899/>



"For broken parts it is hard to find parts and get them brought in due to the border customs. We don't fully know how we will get them. The financial losses, the price of these tools [in reference to electricity infrastructure], is close to \$37 million. But bringing them here, with the customs taxes and stuff, brings it to more like \$50 million with our calculations - until we can get those stations working like before. This is a problem we face due to the economic siege we are under 100%." – **Ziyad Rustem, AANES Energy Department co-chair**

Furthermore it depends on the depth of the repairs undertaken. Some of the electricity infrastructure was not working at its full potential capacity prior to Turkey's campaign, because it was already damaged and was not able to be repaired due to lack of replacement parts. Hence repairing infrastructure to restore it to the capacity it was functioning at prior to the latest attacks and restoring it to full capacity are not the same thing. Other parts of the social infrastructure will also take scarce money and time to repair. Local news agency North Press also interviewed the deputy co-chair of AANES' Health Board, Dr. Mahmoud Abdullah, who said that the damages to the healthcare sector also could not be easily quantified, rather emphasizing that there will be "a humanitarian catastrophe on all levels, mainly on providing the most basic medical services."<sup>38</sup>

This will be a burden on the region's small economy: the administration's total income for 2022 was less than \$800 million. On this small budget, the AANES' overall efforts to meet local needs across the past few years has been impressive, despite operating in the context of years of war, which destroyed distribution networks and markets, caused price fluctuations, and saw productive machinery looted and infrastructure destroyed. These efforts rely heavily on oil income. Roughly 76% of the AANES' revenue comes from oil, according to the AANES Economy Department's Ahmad Youssef. Turkey's strikes on oil infrastructure undermine the AANES' economic base. Over 1/3rd of the budget is spent subsidizing fuel, bread, and medicine for the population, according to Muhammad Bakr of the AANES Finance Commission. Running schools and hospitals, post-conflict reconstruction, and maintenance of the electricity grid also eat large proportions of the budget. Turkey's strikes set the region backwards socio-economically, while Syria is in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the war began, with rapidly rising prices making basic goods unaffordable.

38 <https://npasyria.com/en/106632/>

An economic embargo on NES, imposed from all sides - Turkey, Iraq, the Government of Syria, plus the effects of US sanctions on Syria - hinders the reconstruction of power infrastructure. The capacity of non-domestic companies to engage with the AANES is limited. The AANES cannot make financial transactions through the international banking system. The AANES struggles to access global markets.

Importing foreign-produced parts necessary for repairs is a challenge. Nothing can be imported from Turkey or the Turkish-occupied areas, except small parts at prohibitive black-market prices, while importing from areas controlled by the Syrian government is difficult. Most of the region's external trade has to go through the Semalka border crossing into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This crossing has often been closed for months at a time due to political tensions, and the Kurdistan Regional Government restricts the passage of certain goods.

Salman Barodo of the AANES' Economy Department told RIC: "The economy of North and East Syria has fallen into a general recession and into a crisis of suffocation as a result of the targeting of its infrastructure and vital economic sectors. There will be a resultant crisis of gas, diesel, benzine, drinking water and bread, stagnation in economic activity, and a protraction of the trend of rising costs for goods and services. The immediate effect will be to increase the rate of migration, to intensify the shortage of and decrease in aid available to camps, and to cause a rise in poverty and unemployment." He added that merely finding replacement parts for the aging infrastructure will be difficult. "The [Suwaydiyah gas] plant was founded by a European company more than 30 years ago, and without any modernization in the intervening decades, the procurement of replacement parts is extremely difficult under present conditions."

Ziyad Rustem, co-chair of the AANES Energy Department shared these concerns, stating for electricity infrastructure: "There are absences of these electrical items, the basic things for essential infrastructure, due to the embargo and the war around us. These materials aren't found in our region, they come from outside. International contracts are needed for them, and the companies that produce them until now do not have communication with AANES. Wherever we bring the parts from - the West, Middle East, America - the cost will be expensive. This is a massive obstacle for us. Firstly, the price itself, and secondly how things can actually get here; if the way is open for them."



Suwaydiyah gas and electricity station - repair works commence, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023

The U.S. first imposed sanctions on Syria - nominally targeting President Assad and assets of the Syrian government - in August 2011, which caused a fuel procurement crisis in the electricity sector. Following this, U.S. President Obama's Executive Order 13582 prohibited transactions with certain designated entities in the Syrian energy sector, meaning transfers of funds, goods, and services halted.<sup>39</sup> Sanctions from Arab states and Turkey, as well as the EU, piled on top of this. In June 2020, the U.S. "Caesar Act" allowed the U.S. government to sanction foreign entities or individuals doing business with the Syrian government. This served to discourage foreign investments in Syria, and hit the electricity sector hard. While the U.S. decided to partially lift the Caesar sanctions in May 2022, allowing outside companies to engage with the NES region for certain sectors such as agriculture, this did not include dealings over oil and gas. Given the AANES' heavy reliance on the latter sector for income, this impact of the partial lifting was underwhelming in terms of easing NES' economic woes. Furthermore, an insecure environment discourages economic investment. At the time of the U.S.' partial lifting of sanctions, Salmon Barodo told RIC that "while we in the AANES welcomed this decision [the partial lifting] and considered it a positive step, our areas are still unstable in terms of security, which hinders the possibility of the desired economic development. There are sleeper cells in addition to the

39 <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2012-title3-vol1/CFR-2012-title3-vol1-eo13582/summary>

omnipresent Turkish threat of invasion and ongoing attacks.”

### 3.7 DRUG TRAFFICKING

In contrast to the Government of Syria areas, where Captagon production and trafficking is escalating - despite promises from Assad to clamp down on such practices in return for regional diplomatic rehabilitation by political heavyweights like Saudi Arabia<sup>40,41</sup> - there is “no significant local [drug] production”<sup>42</sup> within the AANES regions. In 2022, the AANES opened a specific anti-drugs branch of the Asayish in order to combat drugs in NES and contribute to wider regional efforts to pursue producers and dealers.

In Turkey’s October campaign, the Asayish anti-drugs branch was targeted. On the night of October 8<sup>th</sup>, Turkey carried out 3 airstrikes on anti-drugs Asayish training center in Hamza Bek, leading to the deaths of 29 Asayish trainees and injuring 28 more.

The relatively new anti-drugs branch, formed on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022, has been notably active in its campaign to confront drug trafficking over the past year, engaging in almost daily operations against drug trafficking across NES. RIC spoke with Hasan Kano, leader of the Asayish anti-drugs branch following the attacks.

“Before [the creation of the anti-drugs branch], anti-drug operations were conducted but there was no specialized section regarding drug control. So, the anti-drugs branch was formed. The results were impressive. We have been preventing drug dealers from spreading production. In fact, a lot of work has been done and large quantities of drugs have been seized, with many drug dealers arrested and smuggling roads cut off. At the same time, the number of our forces is growing and they have undergone training courses successfully.”

Meanwhile, Syrian government forces south of the Euphrates struggle against the latest wave of the captagon trade, worth upwards of \$5.7 billion USD in Syria

40 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/captagon-arab-normalization-syria-caroline-rose/>

41 <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/syria-arab-league-captagon/>

42 <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74364/QM-AX-22-016-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

alone.<sup>43</sup> Despite promising to step up its efforts in curbing the captagon trade upon its re-entry into the Arab League, the Syrian government's approach to the drug trade has run into questioning from its Arab League partners. Since Syria's re-entry into the Arab League, the Jordanian state has consistently accused the Syrian government and its Iranian allies of complicity in the drug trade, which often finds itself flowing into Jordan from government-held areas of Syria.<sup>44</sup> In September, the Arab League suspended meetings with the Syrian government, with reports citing an impasse on managing the drug trade.<sup>45</sup>



Qamishlo - crowds at the funeral of the members of the Asayish anti-drugs branch killed in Turkish airstrikes on the night of October 8<sup>th</sup>.

Kano said: "Turkey aims to spread drugs in NES with its attack on our anti-narcotics academy. Its goals are obvious: Turkey is trying to create distance between the people and the Autonomous Administration. Drugs destroy societies ethics and increase the number of crimes, violence, and robberies when they spread among the people and community. The effect of drugs on society is major. Turkey's main reason for committing all of this is to harm and destroy the Autonomous Administration. In general, all the enemies of the Autonomous Administration try to bring drugs into NES."

With a fragile economy subjected to numerous blockades and a hyperinflating Syrian pound, each series of Turkish attacks creates a new opportunity to aggravate the already extensive challenge of drug trafficking in NES. This in turn applies increased pressure on Asayish to confront the underground

43 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/311279/>

44 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/311969/>

45 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230928-arab-league-suspends-talks-with-syria-regime-amid-failure-to-address-regional-issues-reports/>



narcotics trade and diverts more attention from security matters such as ISIS sleeper cells. At a time when drug trafficking in Syria is becoming an increasingly severe problem for the wider Middle East, Turkey's targeting of the Asayish anti-drugs branch contradicts regional efforts to stem the flow of drugs in and out of Syria, and emboldens the drug trade in NES, said SDC co-president Ilham Ahmed in an online press conference. "When Turkey targets the training space of this new section [the anti-drugs branch] it is trying to target the efforts of the AANES in combating drugs, which directly favors the Syrian regime and its apparatus and affiliated institutions that are directly engaging in drug dealing."

The Asayish launched a series of anti-narcotics operations across NES following the attacks. They reported that in Qamishlo, a number of drug dealers were arrested during an operation on October 16<sup>th</sup>, while in Raqqa, 10 drug dealers were arrested and one member of Asayish was killed during anti-narcotics operations on October 17<sup>th</sup>. The same day, a member of Asayish was killed during a raid on the house of a drug dealer in Tabqa. The dealer was later arrested.<sup>46</sup> Drug trafficking and anti-narcotics operations often occur in areas of high ISIS sleeper cell activity. Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Tabqa and Manbij remain the most active regions for drug trafficking in NES. Narcotics from Turkish-occupied areas flow into NES largely through Manbij, where they are smuggled illicitly.<sup>47</sup> Kano remarked on the types of drugs that flow into NES: "The regime uses captagon pills, and the Turkish-backed factions use crystal meth, which they try to spread here on a daily basis. Before the occupation of Sere Kaniye by Turkey and its [proxy SNA] factions, there was no presence of this drug called crystal meth."

### 3.7 THE FIGHT AGAINST ISIS

For years the SDF has stated that it is being forced to juggle an impossible multi-front war, with Turkish and Turkish-backed forces in the north on the one hand and ISIS on the other.<sup>48,49</sup> With each round of attacks from Turkey, the fight against ISIS becomes increasingly challenging for both the SDF and

46 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/314210/>

47 [https://coar-global.org/2021/04/27/the-syrian-economy-at-war-captagon-hashish-and-the-syrian-narco-state/#\\_ftn25](https://coar-global.org/2021/04/27/the-syrian-economy-at-war-captagon-hashish-and-the-syrian-narco-state/#_ftn25)

48 <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3609636/sdf-chief-turkey-hinders-anti-isis-operations>

49 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-and-sdf-stop-all-joint-operations-against-islamic-state-amid-turkish-bombardment>



Asayish, says military spokespeople.<sup>50</sup> Although ISIS no longer holds territory in Syria, it continues to take advantage of instability caused by Turkish attacks through its sleeper cells. While ISIS sleeper cell attacks in NES are not attracting the same level of media attention that was seen during the years of the so-called caliphate, they are still deadly. ISIS sleeper cells in NES have launched 212 attacks in the last year and killed 123 people.<sup>51</sup> ISIS also retains the organizational capacity for large scale attacks.<sup>52</sup> In January 2022, 121 SDF fighters were killed in an attack on a prison in Heseke holding captured ISIS fighters.<sup>53</sup>

"[Turkey's campaign was] an attack on an administration that has struggled to eliminate terrorism and return governance to a territory ravaged by ISIS [...] undermining our grave sacrifices in combating ISIS terror with our partners in the Global Coalition. [...] The destabilization the region has witnessed due to these drone attacks has made the Global Coalition's mission in Syria tougher. [...] These attacks have forced the SDF to refocus on addressing the fallout, which by necessity draws attention away from the SDF's ongoing anti-ISIS measures and provides more space for ISIS to revive its activity in SDF-controlled territories in the future." – **Mazloun Abdi, SDF General Commander**

The Syrian Democratic Council echoed these concerns, accusing Turkey of aiming "to create a conducive environment for ISIS to reorganize itself and carry out new terrorist acts."<sup>54</sup> Amina Osi, the Deputy Co-President of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration, said the attack "would create suitable conditions for ISIS activity throughout the regions of northern and eastern Syria."<sup>55</sup> The Coalition expressed their worry too - a statement from U.S. President Joe Biden on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October read: "The situation in and in relation to Syria, and in particular the actions by the Government of Turkey to conduct a military offensive into northeast Syria, undermines the

50 <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88619>

51 RIC database, ISIS sleeper cell attacks from September 2022 to September 2023

52 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north>

53 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2022/01/the-battle-of-heseke-time-line-and-analysis/>

54 <https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6659>

55 <https://aanesgov.org/ar/?p=7725>

campaign to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, endangers civilians, and further threatens to undermine the peace, security, and stability in the region.”<sup>56</sup>

The risk of another attack on a prison or one of the camps holding ISIS-linked families remains high. The escape of significant numbers of prisoners could revitalize ISIS and allow them to launch large attacks on the region again. The AANES’ fear of ISIS reaping benefits from Turkish attacks is not without reason: Turkish shelling allowed 800 detainees to escape from Ayn Issa camp in 2019.<sup>57</sup> In November 2022, Turkey bombed security checkpoints of al-Hol camp in Heseke and Jerkin prison in Qamishlo, leading to the deaths of 8 guards and the escape of 6 ISIS prisoners who were later recaptured.<sup>58</sup> The Hori and Urkish reform centers, which work to de-radicalize the children of ISIS militants, suspended their work during the most recent attacks. The centers said they were concerned for the safety of their workers, and that the attacks could provide an opportunity for ISIS militants to launch attacks on the rehabilitation centers.<sup>59</sup>

56 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/10/12/notice-on-the-continuation-of-the-national-emergency-with-respect-to-the-situation-in-and-in-relation-to-syria-3/>

57 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/north-east-syria-is-still-dealing-with-the-world-s-forgotten-isis-problem/ar-AA1gMfNy>

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

59 <https://npasyria.com/en/105803/>

## 4. ZOOMING OUT

### 4.1 TURKEY'S F-16 WARPLANES

Turkey's aerial attacks in NES primarily uses uncrewed drones, such as the Bayraktar TB-2. These lightly armed aircraft are adequate for targeted assassinations and small targets. For larger targets, the Turkish Air Force relies on their fleet of F-4 and F-16 aircraft. These planes generally carry NATO JDAM bombs with Mk 82 or Mk 83 warheads. These contain 89kg or 202kg of explosives - the TB-2's MAM-L missile contains 10kg.<sup>60</sup> Local Kurdish journalist Baderkhan Ahmad documented the damage at multiple sites during Turkey's recent bombings. His footage from the Odeh oil field, near Tirbespi, shows a crater several meters deep and more than 6 meters across.<sup>61</sup> RIC documented damage at Derik's COVID-19 hospital facility and found a similar sized crater. In conversation with a NATO weapons expert, RIC was told that this is consistent with the explosion of 100-200kg of explosives. The smaller MAM-L missiles leave much smaller craters, such as those seen at the Qamishlo electricity station. Official videos from the Turkish Ministry of Defense also show F-16s taking off,<sup>62,63</sup> followed by targeting system footage of airstrikes in NES. It is unclear if the latter footage is from the F-16s or from unmanned drones.

Turkey is currently in negotiations to purchase upgrade kits for their F-16s. A NATO weapons expert told RIC: "Turkey has been running out of spare parts for their [older F-16s]. They've been cannibalizing them to keep others flying. So they want to upgrade them to block 70 standard, which essentially makes them up to date and extends their service life a lot. Otherwise over time their serviceability will keep dropping until they're no longer an effective force." However, the deal has been opposed by a number of US lawmakers, citing Turkey's track record of using the planes aggressively against Greece, Cyprus, and NES. Senator Robert Menendez, who is a member and former chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said "President Erdoğan continues to undermine international law, disregard human rights and democratic norms, and engage in alarming and destabilizing behavior in Turkey and against neighboring NATO allies. Until Erdoğan ceases his threats, improves his human rights record at home – including by releasing journalists and political opposition – and begins to act like a trusted ally should, I will not approve this

60 <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/idef-2023-roketsan-grows-smart-micro-munition-family-with-new-variants>

61 <https://twitter.com/baderkhanahmad/status/1710318316441468997>

62 <https://x.com/tcsavunma/status/1710184733383000111?t=iwSnhKvjsAhzQqt-e5yEKzQ&s=09>

63 <https://x.com/tcsavunma/status/1710654083877454005?t=s9SWJr7XofBSAqcunon-7pw&s=09>

sale.” Menendez is currently facing corruption charges and is thus unlikely to retain his responsibilities on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, leaving the F-16 modernization deal with an easier path to passage.<sup>64</sup>



Derik, COVID-19 hospital facility - crater following Turkish airstrikes, October 7<sup>th</sup>

## 4.2 COALITION RESPONSE

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, the U.S. shot down a Turkish drone near the village of Tel Baydar, northeast of the city of Heseke. According to Pentagon spokesperson Brigadier General Patrick Ryder, U.S. forces had been monitoring Turkish drones that were seen carrying out strikes in Heseke about 1km from the U.S. base. Ryder said that after a Turkish drone came within less than half a kilometer of U.S. troops, it was deemed a threat and was shot down by F-16 aircraft. “We have no indication that Turkey was intentionally targeting US forces.”<sup>65</sup> At the beginning of the incident a Turkish defense ministry official said the drone did not belong to the Turkish armed forces. However, later the event was recognized by the Turkish government. Erdoğan said in

64 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/us-senator-menendez-indicted-corruption-charges-involving-egypt>

65 <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2023/10/pentagon-us-downed-turkish-drone-when-it-became-potential-threat/390987/>



a news conference: "We experienced the biggest problem with our ally [the U.S.]...There is no doubt that the incident has been engraved in our national memory and necessary action will certainly be taken when the time comes."<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, James Jeffrey, former U.S. Representative for Syria, heavily criticized Turkey for flying its drones close to U.S. bases in Syria.<sup>67</sup>

The event marked the first time that U.S. forces shot down an aircraft of a NATO ally, heightening tensions between the two states and reigniting questions on their interests in the region. In a briefing, the U.S. State Department said it was "concerned about military activity in northern Syria, its impacts on the civilian population and infrastructure, and the impact on the effectiveness of our operations to ensure the lasting defeat of ISIS."<sup>68</sup>

In a post on the 'X' platform (formerly Twitter) the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR - a multinational military formation established by the U.S.-led Coalition against ISIS) condemned the Turkish attacks in NES: "We oppose actions which threaten regional stability and security; jeopardize the safety of our forces, partner forces, and the civilian population; and distract from our shared commitment to the enduring defeat of Daesh." However, the post was swiftly deleted.<sup>69</sup>

Statements without concrete action were not enough for NES' political and military actors, who openly expressed their disappointment with the international response. Berivan Khaled, the co-chair of AANES' Executive Council called on "the international community and the guarantor countries, Russia and America, to show a serious and practical position on these attacks, which threaten the security and stability of the region".<sup>70</sup> In an online press conference, SDC co-president Ilham Ahmed said: "The clear position from the Global Coalition and the U.S. regarding the attacks is silence." SDF General Commander, Mazloun Abdi, said in an interview with Al-Monitor that "we are extremely critical of the weakness the United States is displaying certainly with regard to the attacks coming from Turkey. This stance is causing our people to lose faith in the United States [...], and leading them to question our partnership with them and what they would do if called upon to make similar sacrifices in the future."<sup>71</sup>

66 <https://twitter.com/iletisim/status/1711446272882704647>

67 <https://npasyria.com/en/107553/>

68 <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-october-10-2023/#post-489499-SYRIA>

69 <https://twitter.com/ScharoMaroof/status/1710410347767648502>

70 <https://aanesgov.org/ar/?p=7538>

71 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/11/syrian-kurdish-commander-we->



## 4.3 INFRASTRUCTURE ATTACKS AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

The deliberate striking of civilian infrastructure is considered a war crime. Multiple political and military figures within the AANES, SDC, and SDF, have accused Turkey of war crimes on this basis.<sup>72</sup>

In a similar aerial campaign in November 2022, Turkey denied accusations of targeting civilian infrastructure. Even as investigations showed strikes on power stations and hospital buildings, the Turkish defense ministry claimed that they were military “shelters, tunnels and ammunition depots.”<sup>73</sup> This rhetoric has now changed. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan declared so-called “YPG infrastructure” to be a legitimate target,<sup>74</sup> and videos shared by the defense ministry show airstrikes on civilian infrastructure targets labeled as “oil facility” and “oil plant.”<sup>75</sup>

The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 additional protocols forbid attacks on civilian infrastructure unless any such single attack provides the attacker with a “definite military advantage.”<sup>76</sup> Although it can be argued that infrastructure is used by both armed forces and civilians, the notion of proportionality is used in the legal literature: it is not proportional to attack infrastructure that is mostly for civilian use. Striking a range of infrastructure in the name of “self-defense,”<sup>77</sup> as Turkey has invoked, is far too broad for a legal argument. Purposeful targeting of essential civilian infrastructure could amount to collective punishment, which is prohibited by international humanitarian law (IHL).<sup>78</sup> Collective punishment refers to situations when a penalty is inflicted upon a whole group of persons who are “protected” under IHL (such as civilians) following the actions of individuals.

dont-want-become-battleground-between-us-iran

72 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/syrian-kurds-accuse-tur-key-war-crimes-erdogan-vows-escalation>

73 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkish-air-strikes-hit-villages-north-ern-syria-sdf-2022-11-19/>

74 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/turkeys-fidan-de-clarates-all-pkk-ypg-facilities-syria-iraq-legitimate-targets>

75 <https://twitter.com/tcsavunma/status/1710184733383000111>

76 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/apii-1977>

77 <https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/928383eac1b04c42a191ae70467b2e6c>

78 [https://casebook.icrc.org/a\\_to\\_z/glossary/collective-punishments](https://casebook.icrc.org/a_to_z/glossary/collective-punishments)

## 5. CONCLUSION

Turkey's October campaign shattered NES' fragile humanitarian infrastructure and has left the population heading into winter without adequate fuel, electricity or water. The impacts on civilians are cascading and - given that the AANES cannot carry out the necessary repairs - will be long lasting. As emphasized in this dossier, the effects of Turkey's airstrikes are as debilitating as they are because the underlying humanitarian and infrastructure situation in NES was already bad prior to Turkey's escalation. From 2012 - when some of Syria's northern regions began seizing autonomy from the Syrian government, marking the start of the "Rojava Revolution," which was followed by the inception of the AANES in 2018 - up to the present day, the people of NES have been facing aerial and ground attacks, worsening economic conditions, water cuts, and acute shortages of essential goods such as fuel and gas, meaning that while NES today still manages to be the most stable region in Syria, the humanitarian situation is dire. Turkey's recurring attacks compound this situation, engineer insecurity and hamper the AANES' progressive steps.

Regional political figures stress that hopes for a de-escalation of the conflict in Syria as a whole and a sustainable political resolution of the crisis are pushed further away with each new round of Turkish strikes on NES. It is the region of Syria offering the highest standards of minority rights, gender protections, and democratic practice, yet the most significant external threat to it remains Turkish aggression.

The SDF meanwhile, has proven to be a capable and serious force fighting ISIS and is a trusted U.S. partner for this reason. As the SDF and Asayish focus on confronting ISIS sleeper cells and drug trafficking in NES, Turkish attacks remain a highly burdensome distraction. NES' political and military leaders have continually called for greater action from the international community in response to Turkey, lambasting the U.S.-led Coalition's position of acting only within a limited security framework, rather than taking "effective steps" to ensure greater security and stability that would engender the kind of environment in which ISIS is unable to thrive.<sup>79</sup>

Turkey has long been threatening to launch another ground invasion into NES but has not received the necessary green-light from the U.S. or Russia, so has resorted to other means of warfare. Targeted drone strikes kill civilian and

79 <https://m-syria-d.com/en/?p=6670>

military leaders, frequent shelling making the border regions uninhabitable, and strikes on physical and social infrastructure make civilian life intolerable. By limiting water supply, damaging the power grid, and impeding the production and distribution of fuel, Turkey has a profoundly negative impact on the ability of the population to sustain itself, and encourages displacement.

Qamishlo - smoke rises into the sky following Turkey's second airstrike on the city's electricity station, October 6<sup>th</sup>



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DECEMBER 2023**

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