

Turkey in Syria

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Acronyms

Asayish	Kurdish Police
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
EU	European Union
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (coalition led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
KDP/PDK S	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Syria)
KNC/ENKS	Kurdish National Council (KDP-linked coalition of parties)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SAA	Syrian Arab Army (the national army of Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council, consisting of representatives from political parties , civil society and the AANES
SNA	Syrian National Army (established by Turkey from 41 Syrian militias)
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (Turkey-backed opposition)
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
TEV-DEM	Movement of Democratic Change, a body of professional unions and civil society groups that provide political and administrative feedback for the AANES and SDC unions and civil society
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
YPG	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i> - Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syria)

The term **Islamist extremists** denotes individuals who enforce a rigid repressive interpretation of religion throughout society using violent means. They include Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din, and inside the Turkish established Syrian National Army (SNA), Ahrar al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sharqiya and the Sultan Murad Brigade. The majority of Muslims consider their ideologies and practises to be outside Islam. Not all of Turkey's Syrian proxies are Islamist. Many are simply **criminal mercenaries**, so this term is also used. The term **Turkey's SNA** covers both Islamists and opportunists, both being responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.



Turkey in Syria

Abstract

This report offers recommendations for the international community to stop war and displacement in Syria and set the necessary conditions so diverse Syrian stakeholders can negotiate a political transition. Successful negotiations will have benefits beyond the immediate war zones of Syria, as they will require compromise, reconciliation and coordination between stakeholders in and outside the country and will reduce the number of asylum seekers, whose numbers have made significant impacts on recipient countries, national and international politics. The report focuses on Turkey's actions in Syria, as these are exacerbating and prolonging war and displacement. After providing a background to these actions, Turkey's destabilising influence, war crimes and crimes against humanity in north-east and north-west Syria are explored in three zones, where Turkey has established its own administrations and 'security' apparatus, and introduced its own 'laws', currency, school syllabus and businesses. The report ends with a time line of events (of Turkey's actions in relation to Syria) from August 2019 until April 2020. This timeline provides details omitted in the main report.

Sources for this report include think tanks, tertiary institutions and media, including social media, the last the most direct on-the-ground news available, especially as much of what happens in Turkey-occupied zones in Syria goes unreported in mainstream media.

Introduction

Many commentators claim that war in Syria is coming to an end, that Islamist extremists have hijacked the Opposition and victory is nigh for the Allawite minority regime of [Bashar al-Assad](#). In coming to these conclusions, commentators overestimate the capacities of the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran to bring stability, despite their clawing back of territory via the Astana process. Inside regime-controlled and reclaimed territory, people face a multitude of challenges, including a land grab by an entrenched corrupt elite, the actions of unruly pro-regime militias and resistance by remnants of a sincere [Opposition](#). Along with an unwillingness of displaced people to return to regime-controlled areas, these factors have delayed [reconstruction](#). Such overestimations of capacity are coupled with underestimations of the tenacity of Islamist extremists like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (or HTS, an umbrella group of militias that uphold the ideology of al-Qaida, varying in their degree of nationalist and internationalist focus), Hurras al-Din, ISIS and others in Turkey's proxy Syrian National Army (SNA), as well as the suffering of more than half the population. Many displaced Syrians refuse to return to their places of origin whilst Assad remains in power. These commentators that conclude war is ending in Syria also underestimate Turkey's intention to replace the current regime with a Sunni



Islamist state, or at least, extend its borders south to encompass a Kurdless Islamist belt across northern Syria. But perhaps the most game-changing omissions in such assessments of the state of Syria are that Syrian Kurds and their Christian and Sunni Arab allies offer a democratic alternative to both the Assad regime and the Turkey-backed Islamist extremists and criminal mercenaries that now dominate the Opposition. In helping to defeat the Islamic State Caliphate and in establishing administrative and security mechanisms over one third of Syria, this cohort of Syrians also have an unswerving determination, this being to uphold some form of autonomy within a united federal Syria. To add weight to their aspirations, at different times, both [Russia](#) and the [US](#) have [expressed](#) support for a federal system. So no: war in Syria and its destabilising implications for the Middle East and Europe will not be over until the international community seriously commits to creating the preconditions and inclusive mechanisms to enable a political settlement, which until now it has failed to do, at great cost to life and livelihood.

Recommendations

To enable a political settlement, Kurdish Lobby Australia (KLA) proposes a strong use of preferably economic and political levers to facilitate and implement, as part of a democratic process that is not hijacked by one party or a minority of parties:

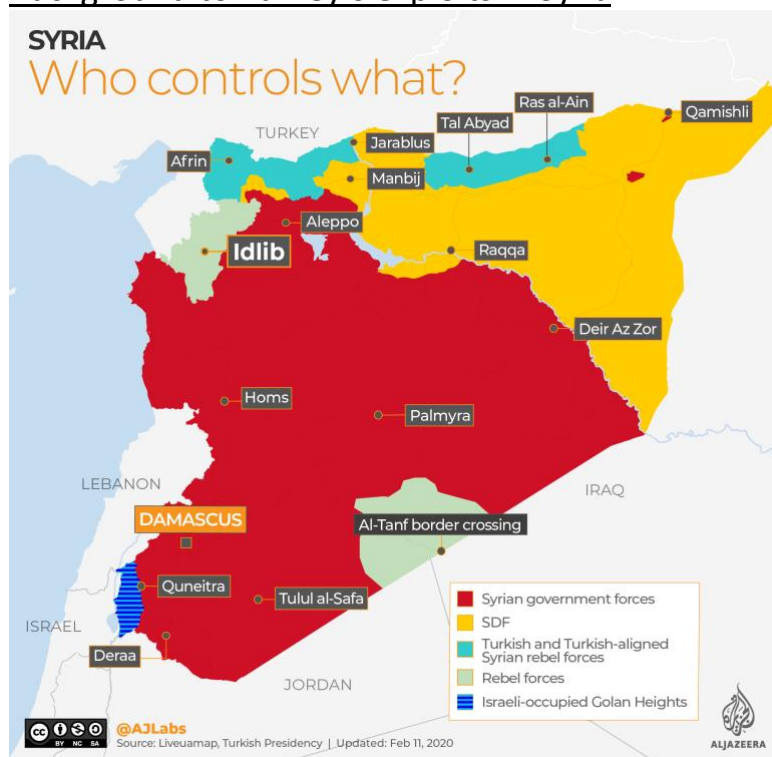
- Mechanisms to prevent the spread of coronavirus in northern Syria, including all IDP camps in the east and west, Syrian Democratic Force (SDF)-secured ISIS prisons and Turkey-secured prisons holding ‘neutralised [Kurds](#)’;
- An immediate internationally-monitored ceasefire across northern Syria;
- A multi-nation enforced no-fly zone;
- A multination-secured and de-weaponised ‘safe’ zone, ideally north as well as south of the Syria-Turkey border, but throughout northern Syria to prevent any form of ethnic cleansing, the weaponisation of water or other abuses;¹
- The removal of Turkey’s military forces from Syria and the disbandment of its proxies in the SNA in return for the Syrian regime to sincerely negotiate a new constitution resulting in a clear separation of powers, the removal or disbandment of pro-regime militia, a respect for human and property rights, etc. and, if the majority of Syrian stakeholders agree, a decentralised system of governance;
- Multi-nation supervised access points between Syria and neighbouring countries for the delivery of aid and supplies, and to cut off channels that supply ISIS, HTS, other Islamist extremists and criminal mercenaries;

¹ This [robust multi-nation peace-making force](#) would need to incorporate police, military and civilians. Countries that could contribute include Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, France, Germany, UK, Italy, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Canada and Australia. Such forces are unlikely to be formed by a paralysed UN Security Council.

- A multi-nation civilian screening process, allowing IDPs innocent of any violent crime, the option to return home or choose an alternative provided local authorities agree;
- Multi-nation resourced tribunals or courts to process those accused of breaking ceasefires, committing war crimes and/or crimes against humanity;
- Appropriate humanitarian aid consistent with international law, in addition to training and employment [programs](#) for demilitarised fighters and civilians;
- Representatives from the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and where appropriate, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria ([AANES](#)) the SDF and TEV-DEM (Movement of Democratic Change) participating in negotiations on the future of Syria, even if there are objections from Turkey, Syria, or some Turkey-paid Opposition;
- Negotiations between [Kurdish factions](#); between Turkey/Syria & the [SDC](#), [AANES](#) & SDF; between Turkey & the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK); and
- International recognition if the SDC, AANES, TEV-DEM and SDF.

In return for geographic zones in Syria meeting critical milestones within the aforementioned mechanisms, the international community could work with local councils, civil society, businesses, and security to prioritise needs and projects. An important component of reconciliation and reconstruction will be employing those rendered unemployed by demilitarisation. In the process, it must be emphasised, that no one nation-state government should be allowed to dictate, including the Syrian regime.

Background to Turkey's exploits in Syria



[Map](#) of Syria showing territory administered by AANES in yellow, and that administered by Turkey and its proxies in green, February 2020



From 2011, Turkey's political leaders and National Intelligence Agency (MIT) supported the Opposition in order to overthrow and replace the Allawite regime. Over the next five years the fortunes of different stakeholders radically changed, not least those of Syrian Kurds who, by early 2016 were well on their way to creating a contiguous Kurd-led multi-ethnic administration across northern Syria. Turkey's leaders were horrified at the prospect. Against international law and treaties Turkey unilaterally invaded and occupied three discrete zones in Syria motivated by an ultra-nationalistic agenda against the new status of Syrian Kurds, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's blatant neo-Ottoman land grab.

The Turkish state justifies its aggression by claiming the need to protect itself from Kurdish 'terrorists', deemed more threatening than ISIS, despite Syrian Kurd-led militia (Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and SDF) having not conducted an unprovoked military attack on Turkey, or a terrorist act inside Turkey, and nor having passed on the means to do so. Turkey's existential fear is that the relative success of the Syrian Kurd-led administration and security of a complex multi-ethnic and multi-religious society will inspire Kurds in Turkey to intensify their own struggle for self-determination. The tragic irony is that the more Turkey suppresses Kurds in and outside Turkey, the more determined Kurds are to attain what the UN acknowledges are universal human rights.

Hence, Turkey's unilateral aggression in Syria began in earnest in August 2016, on the pretext of going after ISIS. Leading up to Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield, the SDF and US-led coalition had successfully defeated ISIS in Manbij and the SDF and its allies were advancing on ISIS-held Jarablus. Before they could reach Jarablus, MIT convinced ISIS to evacuate Jarablus and the Turkish army and its Syrian proxies invaded. They went on to occupy the mixed ethnic towns of Jarablus, al-Rai, Azaz and al-Bab and the area in between. The territory became known as the Euphrates Shield Triangle, over which Turkey established its own administrative and security apparatus. But ensuring Kurd-led administrations were non-contiguous west of the Euphrates did not satisfy Turkey and in January 2018 Turkey invaded the Kurdish-majority and AANES administered district of Afrin, taking Afrin city in March. Again Turkey was dissatisfied. After a year of threats and preparation, with Turkey demanding the need for a Turkey controlled 'safe' zone free of Kurdish 'terrorists' in order to resettle Syrian (Sunni Arab) refugees along the entire border area of northern Syria, and Europe unwilling to offer troops for a multi-nation peace making force (partly because Trump did not want any US troops on the ground), in October 2019, President Donald Trump acquiesced to Turkey invading the AANES administered mixed ethnic towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain,² east of the Euphrates River, by withdrawing US troops from the vicinity.

² Kurds call Tel Abyad Girê Sipi/Spi. The town is on the other side of the border to the town of Akcakale in Turkey. Kurds call Ras al-Ain Sari Kani/Serê Kaniyê. It is on the other side of the border to Ceylanpinar in [Turkey](#). In 1923, the League of Nations established the current Syrian-Turkish border that artificially divided the towns, and their families and farms.



The overwhelming response to Turkey's unilateral aggression in north-east Syria in October 2019 was expressed by Gonul Tol, founding director of The Middle East Institute's Centre for Turkish Studies, and General Joseph Votel, former CENTCOM commander, when they argued that the 'safe' zone (in and around Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain) was NOT being implemented by impartial parties for humanitarian reasons, and would NOT enhance stability, OR satisfy Turkey. Instead, they warned that Turkey's actions would severely undermine the fight against ISIS and the containment of [Iran](#). This response is justified. Turkey openly claims its intentions to set up a Turkey-controlled military zone across northern Syria. This would mean north-east Syria would become an extension of Turkey's own militarised Kurd-majority south-east.

Tol and Votel's comments were just as relevant to Turkey's other occupied zones, and its on-going military provocations in and around Tel Rifaat and Manbij (east of Afrin but also in Aleppo and populated by mixed ethnicities), and in shelling areas outside Turkey's zone of control in north-east Syria. For instance, Turkey displaced 300,000 people from Afrin in 2018 and 300,000 people in north-east Syria between October and November 2019. The displaced were mainly Kurds, as well as Sunni Arabs and Christians Turkey suspected to be allied to Kurds. Turkey replaced these people with Turkey-allied Sunni Arab and Turkmen Islamists and their families. Even in Idlib, Turkey's presence from October 2017, as approved by Russia and Iran in the Astana Accord, provided Turkey separate extremists from any Opposition willing to negotiate a ceasefire, Turkey defied all agreements, collaborated with [HTS](#) and weaponised other Opposition militias.

In each invasion and occupation, Turkey used both its armed forces and proxies among the Syrian Opposition. Over time Turkey formed some Syrian militias into two armies, and in preparation for Operation Peace Spring in north-east Syria, amalgamated the two armies into an [80,000 strong](#) Syrian 'National' Army (SNA), also known as the Turkish Free Syrian Army (TFSA).

The SNA that Turkey has trained, weaponised and intermittently pays is made up of 41 militias, the most loyal sharing the Wahhabi Muslim Brotherhood ideology (e.g. Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham) or some form of 'kinship' (e.g. [Turkmen militias](#)). Others are less bound to Turkey or Islam. Having interviewed dozens of these militants, Elizabeth Tsurkov at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, notes, 'The main problem with these forces is their criminality'. In her assessment, rather than being motivated by a specific ideology, 'Hatred of Kurds, a sense of Arab chauvinism, complete intolerance for any dissent, and just a desire to make a profit is what's driving most of the [abuses](#)'.

UN, Amnesty and Human Rights Watch reports of the war crimes of Turkey's Syrian proxies back up such character references, but no amount of evidence has stopped Turkey and the international community enabling representatives of many of these militias and their political, administrative and civil counterparts to participate in the



Geneva and Astana negotiations on the future of Syria. In contrast, Turkey has successfully convinced the international community to reject the democratic intentioned, multi-ethnic SDC, AANES, TEV-DEM and SDF from participating in negotiations.

Turkey appeared to be getting its way in Syria. Russia negotiated Turkey's presence in Idlib to curb Islamist 'terrorists' in September 2018, and patiently waited to see results. In October 2019, US President Donald Trump agreed to withdraw US troops from around Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain to allow Turkey to move in. Turkey signed agreements with the US and Russia to geographically limit this invasion, but immediately disregarded both agreements with apparent impunity.

But Turkey hit a block in 2020. In November 2019, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) advanced into the last Opposition stronghold of Idlib, and neighbouring areas of Aleppo, Hama and Latakia. By February 2020, Turkey had deployed [up to 7,000 Turkish soldiers](#), 1,250 military vehicles and tens of thousands of Syrian mercenaries to Idlib, to increase the number of its observation posts to [36](#), and fortify existing ones. But advancing pro-regime forces simply bypassed them, shelled a few, and succeeded in opening the M5 highway and parts of the M4, both of which Turkey had been tasked to clear of 'terrorists' back in 2018.

Turkey's credibility and influence were at stake. Against the Russian-backed SAA and the pro-regime militias of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC), Turkey decided that Turkish soldiers and Syrian mercenaries would overtly fight and die alongside Islamist extremists, including up to 20,000 HTS and 3,500 [Hurras al-Din](#). The SNA mercenaries used in Idlib were those who had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Turkey-occupied Afrin, Azaz, Jarablus, al-Rai and al-Bab, Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. In Idlib, it was these mercenaries and Turkey's armed forces, backed by Turkish drones that retook Nayrab and went on to capture Saraqeb at the junction of the M5 and M4 highways in February 2020. But the victories were short lived. Within a day, Saraqeb was reclaimed by Russian airstrikes, the SAA and pro-regime militia, and this and other wins determined the current demarcation lines. (More details of events are provided in an Appendix of 'A timeline of events August 2019 – April 2020'.)

The impacts of all this fighting on the civilian population – many opposing both Assad and the Islamist extremists – were devastating. Between November 2019 and February 2020 some 1,041,233 people in Idlib, Hama and Aleppo were forced to flee their [homes](#). It was the middle of winter. Most headed north to tent camps on the Syrian side of the heavily fortified concrete wall Turkey has built along the border. Some went east to [Manbij](#) and others went further east to the SDF-secured areas of Raqqa and Hasaka. After much bloodshed on both sides, a deal between Russia and Turkey on March 5 halted hostilities. Yet this deal is temporary. It does not solve the problem of what to do with fanatic militants in and outside Turkey's SNA that refuse any ceasefire. Nor can Russian President Vladimir Putin curb Assad's determination to kill or capture all Opposition, especially Sunni Islamists, and force Turkey out of



Syria, given Assad has the backing of the IRGC and its militias in Idlib, the [south](#) (Daraa and Quneitra), south-east and ultimately the north-east. Yet this temporary and partial lull in some war fronts presents a window of opportunity to pursue KLA's recommendations, despite or because of the world's paradigm shift due to the Covid-19 pandemic in which the UN General Secretary calls for a total ceasefire in Syria, some groups, including the SDF [agreeing](#), but Turkey's army and Syrian proxies fight on.

Insecurity in Turkey-occupied northern Syria

Turkey's handpicked councils administer the three Turkey-occupied zones in northern Syria. Each council answers to a Turkish governor. Undisciplined, poorly and intermittently paid, corrupt militia and police provide security. Through these structures, Turkey oversees the Turkification and Islamisation of the two Aleppo zones, and is in the process of doing the same in the north-east. Yet all three territories remain unstable. Apart from Turkey's Syrian proxies arbitrarily killing, arresting and kidnapping civilians, fighting each other, and confiscating and sabotaging property (covered later), terrorist attacks are frequent. For instance, in north-east Syria the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded at least 49 IED attacks between October 22 and December 3. These attacks have killed Turkish soldiers, Turkey's Syrian proxies, SDF, Asayish and at least 78 civilians. Forty-three of these attacks were in Turkey-occupied [territory](#). In most cases, no group claims responsibility. Turkey does not allow journalists into these zones and rarely provides a breakdown of who was killed. Nor does Turkey provide [evidence](#) regarding the perpetrators, but in each case, Turkey blames the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), YPG and YPG-led SDF,³ making no distinction between them.

The YPG, YPJ, SDF and other Kurdish militias *are* conducting a counterinsurgency against Turkey's presence in Syria, but there are also many other actors that have the motivation and capacity to carry out attacks, especially those that target civilians, for their own purpose or to undermine the credibility of Kurd-led forces. They include Turkey's Syrian proxies, pro-Assad groups and individuals, IRGC-linked groups, ISIS, HTS, and individuals with a tribal or personal vendetta. The following list of events is the tip of the iceberg of what is happening, and to identify the perpetrators, independent investigations, not reliant on information supplied by Turkey, are urgently required.

³ YPJ is not usually mentioned.



NORTH-EAST SYRIA

Tel Abyad

- On November 2, a bomb blast killed [13 people](#) and injured about 20 in Tel Abyad. Turkey immediately blamed [Syrian Kurdish fighters](#);
- On November 10, another bomb blast killed eight people;
- On November 11, an attack involving a booby-trapped vehicle outside a bakery in Suluk, 10 kilometres from the border and just south of Tel Abyad, killed eight people and wounded another twenty. Turkey immediately [blamed YPG](#);
- On November 23, a car bomb killed nine people including four civilians, including [two children](#). No one claimed responsibility for these attacks but Turkey blamed PKK/YPG/SDF.
- On January 16, a car bomb exploded in Suluk killing seven of Turkey's mercenaries and three Turkish soldiers. Turkey blamed the [SDF](#).
- On February 16, a car bomb in Tel Abyad killed [four people](#).
- On March 6, a car bomb exploded at a Tel Abyad checkpoint killing two Turkish soldiers and two [SNA](#) militants.

The number of attacks in and around Tel Abyad is possibly due to the presence of a major border crossing between Turkey and Syria, this crossing generating much revenue, weapons and power for the militia that control/s it. For instance, in February 2020, the SDF stopped trucks that were bringing mines and IEDs from Turkey-occupied Tel Abyad into Ain Issa.⁴

Qamishli, Shaddadi, Tel Tamr, Ras al-Ain, Tabqa

- On October 11, two days after Turkey's ground offensive started, two car bombings in the AANES-controlled section of Qamishli city killed five civilians and wounded another 41 people. Internal security captured the four ISIS members responsible. They claimed their orders came from their commander based in [Turkey](#).
- On October 23, there was an explosion in AANES-controlled Qamishli and another in AANES-controlled Shaddadi. A third explosion occurred in Turkey-controlled Suluk. No one claimed responsibility although ISIS claimed an attack on SDF forces between Shaddadi and [Ragga](#).
- On November 11, three explosions in the AANES-controlled centre of Qamishli city killed six people, and injured between 20 and 47 [people](#) (depending on the source).

⁴ Tweet, Elhan Ahmad, SDC February 2, 2020.



- Also on November 11, a priest and his father were assassinated travelling between Qamishli and Deir Ezzor. [ISIS](#) claimed responsibility.
- On January 8, four Turkish soldiers were killed in a car bomb in al-Arbaeen on the west side of Tel Tamr. Turkey blamed [Kurdish fighters](#).
- On March 12, a car bomb killed and injured several SNA mercenaries at a checkpoint in Tal Halaf, near Ras al-Ain but outside Turkey's zone of [control](#).
- On March 16, a motorbike exploded in AANES-controlled Shaddadi killing at least one civilian and injuring [others](#).
- On March 21, a Syrian regime cell exploded three IEDs in AANES-controlled [Tabqa](#).

NORTH WEST SYRIA

Afrin

- On July 11, 2019, a car bomb killed 11 people at a checkpoint on the outskirts of [Afrin city](#). No one claimed responsibility.
- On October 31, another car bomb in the early hours of the morning targeted people setting up stalls in a popular vegetable market in Afrin, killing at least eight and wounding another [thirty](#).
- On March 8, a booby-trapped motorbike exploded near the Sultan Murad Brigade's headquarters in the city centre killing one and injuring [another](#).
- On March 10, an IED exploded in the centre of Afrin city, injuring at least [one](#).

Euphrates Shield Triangle

- In early November, a bomb exploded in a bus and taxi terminal in al-Bab, killing 19 people. Turkey immediately blamed YPG. The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights established that the person arrested for the attack was a former-ISIS fighter and one of Turkey's Syrian [proxy militants](#).
- On December 4, a car bomb killed five Turkish soldiers and wounded 12 in [Jarablus](#).
- In late January, a car bomb killed several people near a restaurant in [Azaz](#).
- On March 8, an explosion in Al-Rai injured many [people](#).
- On March 19, two civilians were killed in a car bomb explosion in [Azaz](#).
- On March 23, four civilians were injured by a car bomb in [Al-Bab](#).
- On March 22 and 23, another 2 IED explosions in Al-Bab killed one lawyer and injured [two](#).
- On April 4 a car bomb in al-Bab caused material [damage](#).

Unable to curb violent crime in Jarablus and Azaz, local councils
Have banned all civilians and security personnel from covering their [faces](#).



Turkey in north-east and eastern Syria

Background

Although Turkey's military and Syrian proxies crossed into north-east Syria and attacked Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain on October 9, and the SDF subsequently negotiated with the SAA and Russian military police to be deployed to the border and some towns, including Kobani and Tel Temr, most of Syria east of the Euphrates remains under the administration of the AANES, SDC, and TEV-DEM and continues to be secured by *Asayish* (police), the YPG, YPJ, the multi-ethnic SDF⁵ and local military councils. All these structures are overseen by the SDC, established in December 2015 to political represent the SDF and administrative structures. The SDC has basically become the unelected parliament, made up of representatives from the AANES, TEV-DEM and all political parties, except for those belonging to the Barzani-linked Kurdish National Council (KNC), such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Syria) or KDPS, after the dominant Syrian Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), abandoned the alliance in 2013.

Good reports on how democratic confederalism is working in northern and eastern Syria include:

[Beyond the Front Lines](#): The Building of the Democratic System in North and East Syria (December 2019) *Rojava Information Centre*.

Haenni P. and Quesnay A. (February 2020) [Surviving the Aftermath of the Islamic State: the Syrian Kurdish Movement's Resilience Strategy](#). *European University Institute*.

Gina Lennox (2018) [What is happening in territory secured by the Syrian Democratic Forces \(Raqqa, Deir Ezzor & Hasaka\)](#) *Kurdish Lobby Australia*.

These institutions oversee a territory divided into seven administrative regions that cover the majority of Raqqa, Hasaka and Deir Ezzor provinces east of the Euphrates, as well as Manbij, and until 2018, Afrin, in the west. All regions are known for their mixed ethnicities and religions, with most towns and villages having a majority Kurdish population despite having been subjected to periods of Arabisation since the

⁵ The SDF was established in 2015, with YPG veterans at its core, joined by Syriac, Arab, Chechan & Turkmen militias. As the areas of operation spread into Deir Ezzor the composition of the SDF became more Sunni Arab.



1960s. The exception is Deir Ezzor, where the vast majority of people are Sunni Arab (as is the population of Syria).

Turkey blocks journalists, NGOs, supplies and aid from entering north-east Syria, which leaves the Semalka border crossing into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as the only route in and out of the region other than traversing Syrian regime-controlled territory to the west and south. Through Semalka, the administration exports oil and some agricultural produce, and imports essential food and medical items. Taxes generate additional revenue and the US pays some SDF salaries. [Other countries](#), including Australia, provide stabilisation funds, with the US doing so until 2019, and resuming funding in 2020, while France has contributed 45 million Euros to humanitarian and stabilisation [projects](#). After the SDF and US-led coalition defeated the last of the ISIS caliphate in Baghouz in March 2019, delegations from the UN, US, [UK](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), Sweden, Norway, several Arab States and [other countries](#) met with AANES representatives to talk about what should happen next. Such inputs and local people's initiatives have helped in the reconstruction of towns like Kobani and Raqqa, and in paying the salaries of 60,000 fighters in the YPG, SDF, and units involved in counter-insurgency operations, as well as 30,000 *Asayish* police, and 140,000 civil servants. Their salaries are about [double](#) that paid to their counterparts in the Syrian regime or Turkey-controlled territory.

The SDF, which lost [12,700 fighters](#) in defeating the ISIS [caliphate](#), with double that number having been severely injured, holds about 7,000 hard core ISIS fighters, including 2,000 foreigners, and more than 60,000 ISIS family members in two dozen [prison camps](#). The largest is al-Hol on the outskirts of Ain Issa on the M4 highway in Raqqa province. Others are in Arisha, al-Tweinah, and Tel Aswad in [Hasaka province](#). Many prisons are small and unidentified. All are overcrowded, and provide opportunities for inmates to educate each other and make future plans, as did the US detention camps in Iraq in 2004/2005. With sparse resources the administration has established local courts, including special courts for those on terrorist charges, that feature a male and female judge to process Syrians, but usually the person on trial has no lawyer and there is no right of [appeal](#). At least there is no death penalty.

In May 2019, the SDF negotiated with Sunni Arab tribal sheikhs from Tabqa, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor to begin releasing ISIS prisoners who had not committed a crime or who had completed their prison sentence. Returnees face isolation, discrimination, suspicion and shame, particularly women, even if the woman did not choose to be married to an ISIS fighter. Others are protected by their extensive kinship [networks](#). In releasing ISIS prisoners, the SDF is motivated by fostering good relations with Arab tribes and money, as they are often paid for a prisoner's release. The latter can be a source of corruption. In return, the Council of Arab Tribal Chiefs must guarantee each former prisoner will not re-join ISIS or threaten the [SDF](#).

The SDF has asked countries to take back their citizens who joined ISIS, or provide resources and expertise for an international tribunal to process ISIS prisoners. The



lack of action has led to the SDF announcing that trials for prisoners will commence in March [2020](#) but they have yet to start.

Other challenges include Syria, Russia, Turkey, Iran and ISIS undermining security and reconstruction efforts and a level of corruption that causes tensions between civilians, and between civilians and local civilian councils and between these and the AANES. There is resentment arising from a perception that the SDF and councils are run by Kurds, but as time goes by Sunni Arabs are learning to work the system and get their voices heard. There is tension over conscription, assassinations and kidnappings targeting Arabs, the SDF and people working for the local civilian [councils](#). For instance, on November 2, Sheikh Bashir Faisal Huwaidi of the powerful Afadala tribe was killed, with ISIS claiming responsibility. A week later, a [car bomb exploded](#) near the headquarters of a SDF leader (Abu Jassim al-Raqawi), and on November 27, another [bomb exploded](#) near the headquarters of the SDF-affiliated Future Movement.

Erdogan and Trump's infamous phone conversation on December 14, 2018, after which Trump announced an immediate withdrawal of US troops from north-east Syria, upended the status quo. From this time people of north and east Syria lived in fear of a Turkish invasion. In the time it took to walk back Trump's decision to withdraw all US troops, Turkey prepared. In the meantime, the US failed to gather support for a multi-nation secured buffer zone, two reasons being that Trump wanted no US forces on the ground, and Turkey demanded full control over air space and all urban settlements. Given Turkey's record of treating Kurds in south-east Turkey and Afrin, the SDF refused these [demands](#). Europe was cautious. But Erdogan was determined to create a Kurd free zone extending 30 kilometres south of the border and 900 kilometres from the Mediterranean Sea to the KRI, and for this area to be settled with 3.5 million Sunni Arab and Turkmen refugees⁶ currently living in Turkey, as well as Islamist extremists in and outside the SNA.

Before 2011, Ras al-Ain was 70 percent Kurdish, 15 percent Arab, and 15 percent Christian Syriac, Chechen and Turkmen. In Tel Abyad, the population was 70 percent Arab and 25 percent Kurdish. The Syrian Opposition captured these towns in 2012. Ras al-Ain came under YPG control in July 2013, but Tel Abyad fell to ISIS in January 2014. YPG finally defeated ISIS in Tel Abyad in June 2015.

Five years later, Turkey's Operation 'Peace Spring' or 'Source of Peace' began on October 9, 2019, initially displacing 300,000 people in and around Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. Days later, Turkey's effort to demographically change the character of the area involved Syrian refugees in Turkey and IDPs west of the Euphrates River only having to register their names with Turkish forces for them to join an escorted convoy that departed Turkey for north-east Syria twice a [day](#). Yet voluntary

⁶ This 3.5 million figure is a mantra, which Turkey occasionally raises to 4 million. Some sources say the real figure is closer to 2.7 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. No-one knows for sure, especially as there are refugees from other countries also living in Turkey.



returnees were less in number than Erdogan had hoped, perhaps deterred by ongoing war, insecurity and a lack of [services](#), including electricity and water especially in Ras al-Ain because in its invasion Turkey had damaged the electrical power plant and water pumping station. These circumstances, and Turkey signing separate ceasefire agreements with the US and Russia reduced Turkey's capacity to significantly expand its offensive outside the 120 by 30 kilometre region on the pretext that 'YPG' had not withdrawn from Turkey's stipulated [territory](#). Despite these agreements, Turkey continues low level offensives outside the zone on a daily basis seemingly without consequence except for the resistance of the SDF and location specific Military Councils.

The Syrian regime, Turkey and [ISIS](#) continue to try and [undermine](#) the Kurd-led democratic confederalist initiative. In May and [June 2019](#) man-lit fires burned thousands of hectares of wheat, barley and lentil crops in Tabqa, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Kobani, Hasaka, Qamishli and Manbij, causing inter-ethnic tensions. The Syrian [regime](#) repeatedly attempts to persuade Sunni Arab tribes to desert the SDF and local councils, or protest the local military councils. Since being invited into north-east Syria to defend the Syrian border, the regime has introduced teachers, administrators and [tax collectors](#) to Aleppo, Qamishli and Tel Tamr, and works with tribal sheikhs to incite trouble for the SDF and local councils. But despite these destabilising forces, the SDF, SDC and AANES are providing a relatively secure and politically representative environment,⁷ compared to that provided by regime, HTS and Turkey-controlled administrations. Those that predicted that there would be mass defections from the AANES and SDF after the Turkish invasion and deployment of Syrian forces have been proved wrong. Most people do not want to be ruled by Turkey or the Assad regime. The latter would mean conscription, prison or [worse](#). In fact, the opposite has occurred: thousands of civilians and Opposition militants from Damascus, Homs and Idlib are migrating east. The military among them can join the [SDF](#) or return to civilian life.

Turkey's Operation Peace Spring inspired a new round of Russian-mediated negotiations between the Syrian regime and SDF and AANES. As SDF Commander in Chief, General Mazloum Abdi Kobani, said, 'If we have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our [people](#).' The meetings resulted in the deployment of SAA soldiers along the border but failed to deliver any political progress, despite Kurds and their allies presenting a detailed road map. General Kobani again articulates the SDC's demands – that an autonomous region in north and east Syria be recognised in a new constitution and that the SDF join the SAA as

⁷ An individual can engage with the political system in multiple ways. For example, a resident village teacher would be a member of the village commune, and therefore could be elected to higher level councils within the AANES. The teacher can also organize within TEV-DEM through the teachers' union, as well as choose to be a member of a political party, which is represented in the SDC. If a woman she can also organise through the women's structures within each [institution](#).



one or more battalions, not as individuals. In return, the institutions in north and east Syria will recognise the Assad regime and the integrity of the state. But Assad has not budged from his position of keeping power centralised, with local councils being given token responsibilities. Another sticking point in negotiations was Russia wanting Kurds to hand over all Sunni Arab areas in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor to the regime. The Arabs feared the Kurds would do just that, but the Kurds [refused](#).

With so many factors stacked against the experiment in democratic confederalism, numerous commentators assume there is no future for the AANES and associated [institutions](#). This assessment may not account for the people's determination and the quality of leadership, and that half of the regions leaders are women, including the articulate Co-Chair and chief spokesperson of the SDC, Illham Ahmad. General Kobani is also proving an able politician, having been vital in getting rival Kurdish political parties to begin a process of reconciliation, and in gaining the material and/or political support of the [US](#), Europe, Israel, [Egypt](#),⁸ [Saudi Arabia](#), and the United Arab Emirates, including having the Arab states help in negotiations with Arab tribes. Nor does the assessment take into account that Kurdish leaders have learned not to rely on one ally and the value of quiet diplomacy through multiple diplomatic channels, including Russia, the Assad regime, Egypt, Jordan and the [KRI](#). Even Iran is said to be partial to accommodating Syrian Kurds' demands to counteract the hubris of [Erdogan](#). But nothing is guaranteed in Syria, especially as there are so many forces operating in the north-east: Russian, Syrian, Turkish, Turkey's Syrian proxies, the IRGC, IRGC's proxies, ISIS, the US-led coalition and the SDF. At this time when anything is possible the international community needs to take decisive action.

Turkey's War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in north-east Syria

Since Turkey's invasion of north-east Syria, its soldiers and Syrian mercenaries, whether Islamist extremists or mere criminals have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. The scale of Turkey's crimes in Syria is so great, some people and organisations are working on taking President Erdogan and fellow decision makers to court, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), given that they are ultimately responsible for:

1. Allowing members of ISIS to transit Turkey, live in Turkey, set up financial hubs and receive medical assistance in Turkey, and for ISIS logistics to be supplied through Turkey;
2. Turkey unilaterally invading and occupying three zones in Syria;

⁸ Egypt has provided significant political support over the years, for instance, organising a meeting of the Arab League after Turkey's invasion to discuss what could be done to help the Kurds and their [allies](#). Subsequently it has provided [military support](#) to the SDF, as has Saudi Arabia and Gulf States.



3. Incorporating former [ISIS fighters](#) into the ranks and as [commanders](#) of Turkey's [SNA](#), with some of these former ISIS fighters being in charge of Turkey-occupied Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. These individuals are responsible for bombing Ain Issa camp causing 800+ ISIS members to [escape](#) to Tel Abyad. They also maintain contact with ISIS in Deir Ezzor, enabling ISIS in Deir Ezzor to be more active;
4. More ISIS attacks and less ISIS SDF-US-led Coalition raids in north and east [Syria](#);
5. Training, [weaponising](#) and employing 80,000 Islamist extremists and criminal mercenaries in the SNA;
6. Being unwilling or unable to stop **SNA mercenaries arbitrarily killing civilians**, including a well known [political leader](#), Hevrin Khalaf, who was dragged from her car, raped, mutilated and murdered,⁹ the perpetrators often filming everything and publishing their acts on social media; SNA Islamist extremists also killing four journalists, five medical workers, and a [foreign aid worker](#), and seriously injuring [seven other medics](#) as they tried to report what was happening or evacuate or treat the [injured](#);
7. Sexually assaulting at least 30 women in Ras al-Ain – 23 Arab women, five Chechens and two Kurds between mid October and the end of January;
8. Desecrating the bodies of dead [SDF fighters](#);
9. Arbitrarily [arresting civilians](#) and taking them to unknown locations;
10. [Looting](#) and confiscating public and private [property](#), including houses, small [businesses](#), 130 factories, seven cotton gins (taking 3,000 tons of cotton), farms covering 1.5 million acres of land, livestock, agricultural equipment, water pumps, [diesel engines](#), electricity wires; 8,000 sacks of flour from Abu Julud village in [Ras Al-Ain](#); emptying Sergirak wheat silos and carting off the grain under the eyes of Russian [forces](#), sometimes returning the loot to its owner for a ransom, or otherwise selling it;
11. Vandalising property, including the Armenian church in [Tel Abyad](#). Erdogan blamed 'PYD' but video evidence proved otherwise;
12. Destroying olive groves and bombing wheat warehouses in Ain Issa.
13. Preventing farmers from cultivating their lands adjacent to the Turkish border and blocking trade [routes](#);
14. Facilitating child marriages, forcing women to [cover](#) completely and creating a threatening environment of violence that prevents women from participating in [community life](#);
15. Militias within the SNA clashing with each other over the distribution of territory, checkpoints and loot. For instance, in and around Turkey-occupied Tel Abyad, Al Majd Corps and Northern Brigade clashed on March 4; Al-Majd Corps and Al Jabha Al-Shamiya clashed on [March 6](#); and Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya clashed on March 8. All instances incurred [casualties](#). At the end of March, Ahrar al-Sharqiya and the Turkish military

⁹ For a BBC-produced, ABC-broadcast documentary on Hevrin Khalaf see <https://www.abc.net.au/foreign/the-peacemaker-of-syria/12042876>



Kurdish Lobby Australia

clashed with Faylak al-Majd;¹⁰ fighters of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya and Hammam Al-Turkman fired their machine guns at each other over some fighters repeatedly harassing women in a Tel Abyad village. Three [fighters](#) were injured; On April 5 at least eight militants were killed in clashes between rivals in [Ras al-Ain](#) and on April 7 fighting among Sultan Murad in Ras al-Ain over loot and occupation of houses got so intense Turkey had to send in outside forces to stop the [fighting](#).

16. Turkey's **soldiers** shooting and killing people protesting Russian-Turkey patrols near [Kobani](#);

Turkey's soldiers and SNA mercenaries:

17. Using white phosphorous as a weapon on SDF fighters and civilians, including children, causing serious [burns](#);
18. Using [drones](#), heavy artillery and mortars to bomb [ambulances](#), [two hospitals](#), [medical centres](#), schools, markets, [civilian convoys](#) and civilian homes in Kurdish and Christian populated towns and surrounding villages of [Ain Issa](#), [Ras al-Ain](#), Tel Abyad and Tel Tamr in the east, and Tel Rifaat and Arima west of Manbij, i.e. in and outside Turkey's occupied zones;
19. Damaging, seizing and rendering inoperable Mabrouka electric power station and the grid supplying electricity to Ras al-Ain. As a result Russia negotiated that the AANES divert power from elsewhere to supply electricity to Turkey-occupied Ras al-Ain until Damascus helped the ANNES fix the power station in December;
20. [Weaponising water](#) from October to April: When Turkey damaged the Mabrouka electric power station supplying electricity to Alouk water pumping station, it cut water to [460,000 people in Hasaka and elsewhere](#). The power station was repaired in December but three times in March Turkey closed the water pumping [station](#) each time cutting water for many days at a time, despite an agreement in December, mediated and guaranteed by Russia, that in return for the AANES supplying electricity to [Ras al-Ain](#), Turkey would guarantee water supplied via Alouk water pumping station to AANE-controlled Hasaka and Raqqa, including IDP camps. Turkey kept demanding an increase on the agreed amount of electricity to be supplied so despite the threat of Covid-19 had no compunction in stopping the water supply to force the AANES to increase the electricity supplied to Ras al-Ain. On April 2, Turkey's forces shelled a water pipeline from Alouk, cutting water to people in [Hasaka](#) for a fifth time;¹¹
21. Refusing to let people [stay in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain](#), or to [return](#) to these towns, instead bringing in Sunni Arab families from Turkey-occupied north-west Syria and Syrian refugees living in Turkey to settle in homes left vacant by others forced to flee;

¹⁰ Tweet, @NotWoofers 25 March 2020

¹¹ Tweet. Elham Ahmad. @ElhamAhmedSDC April 3, 2020



[Wasted water](#) after Turkey shells water pipes, 2 April 2020

22. Denying humanitarian and NGO access;
23. Denying journalists access so that since December little news is getting out except from Turkish sources and social media;
24. Making arbitrary arrests or worse on the flimsiest of evidence, for example, claiming 10 PKK were neutralised near Tel Abyad for 'plotting an [attack](#)';
25. Recruiting locals at gunpoint, including children, to join Turkey's SNA;
26. Demolishing Kurdish and Christian houses in Ras al-Ain;¹² and
27. Inciting hatred of Syrian Kurds in Turkey and among Turkey's Syrian mercenaries by spreading fake videos on [social media](#) showing the SDF mistreating Arab women and men, and through a constant bombardment of media misinformation, for instance, in claiming the SDF is responsible for all crimes being perpetrated by Syrian mercenaries.

Rojava Information Centre has a comprehensive list of crimes committed in October and November 2019 at <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/12/database-documenting-war-crimes/>

Remember Operation Peace Spring was not meant to be a 'war'. These actions are being done in the name of creating a 'safe' zone free of 'terrorists'. Reports by [Amnesty International](#) and the [UN](#) confirm that war crimes are being committed. Turkey claims that the SNA is taking action against guilty militants, but this only results in some perpetrators being fined, dismissed or [arrested](#) for an unknown lengthy of time – inadequate punishments for multiple murder, rape and kidnapping. Independent investigations are required to ascertain if those guilty of war crimes are being brought to justice.

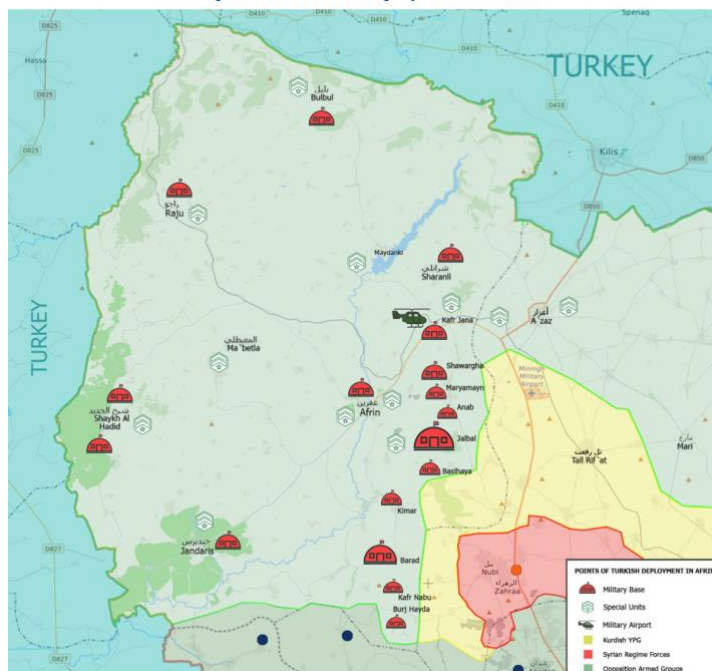
¹² Tweet Rojava journalist @_buka_barane, 23 March

Turkey in north-west Syria

Afrin

There is little news about what is happening in Afrin since Turkey consolidated its occupation in 2018. Turkey does not allow journalists or humanitarian workers into the district. What is known is that between January 20, 2018, and January 7, 2020, bombs killed 489 civilians. Another 54 civilians have been killed whilst undergoing torture, with at least 700 documented cases of torture. Between 20 March 2018 and February 2020, there have been more than 6,000 arbitrary arrests and [kidnappings](#), often for [ransom](#), of which 3,300 victims remain missing. Women and children are included in those that are kidnapped for [ransom](#). Between 20 March 2018 and 15 May 2019, 2,682 citizens were arrested and charged for ‘dealing with the YPG’ or ‘co-operating with the former PYD-led [administration](#)’. By May 15, 2019, 1,087 of these people remained in prison, with 600 of those kept in Sejju [al-Ma’sara] Prison in Azaz being moved to an unknown location. Arrests and detention in unknown locations are [ongoing](#).

Map 1. The Turkish deployment in Afrin



[Map](#) of Turkey’s deployment in Afrin.

Figures vary, but at least [150,000 Afrin residents](#) remain displaced, their empty houses taken by Sunni Arab IDPs, Islamist militants and criminal mercenaries, and their families. This formerly Kurdish-majority district is now cut off from the east by a three metre high, 70 kilometre long concrete wall with 22 watch towers stopping any hope of internally displaced people from returning to Afrin from the Shebha region where they continue to live in tents and vacant buildings. The wall does not



extend between Idlib and Afrin and in December 2019 and January 2020 thousands of people fleeing war in Idlib and Aleppo arrived in Afrin. In February 2020, 70 percent of Turkey's SNA left Idlib and came to Afrin to await orders. Many did not have a place to stay, but this was in Erdogan's interests.¹³ By early March, Turkey had recruited 6,650 of them for the Libyan civil war, 4,750 to 6,000 having already gone to Libya, on the promise of USD \$2,000 to \$3,000 a month (to be paid by the Libyan Government of National Accord or GNA), a house for their family, and Turkish citizenship. By mid March, 117 to [140](#) of those that went to Libya had died in Tripoli, and 150 had escaped to [Europe](#). Others claimed they have not been paid, and that they want to return to Syria.

KLA's reports on Turkey's war crimes and crimes against humanity in Afrin until May 17, 2019, can be found at www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com For another in depth understanding of what has happened in Afrin under Turkish occupation see Khayrallah al-Hilu's excellent report (July 2019) '[Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations](#)', *European University Institute*.

From 17 May 2019 onwards, the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Turkey's SNA Islamist extremists and criminal mercenaries include:

1. Arrest of civilians for 'communicating with Kurdish units' or for '[fighting](#) in its [ranks](#)', or for reasons unknown, with many being taken to unknown [destinations](#);
2. Prisoners kept in horrendous [conditions](#) and released only after their families pay a ransom of between USD\$1,000 and \$3,000.
3. Kidnapping for ransom, with 313 documented [kidnappings](#), 11 of these being killed between July and October 2019. Kidnapping for ransom [continues](#). In January 2020, various Turkey-backed militias kidnapped 65 civilians. In March, there were 43 [kidnappings](#);
4. 55 documented incidents of [rape](#);
5. Setting fire to fruit trees and [crops](#);
6. Demanding monthly 'taxes' from [businesses](#) and civilians, and if no money is forthcoming taking [livestock](#) or machinery;
7. Turkey-backed Hamza Division, Sultan Murad Brigade and Al-Jabha al-Shamiyyah 'selling' apartments in unfinished buildings or selling [houses](#) owned by displaced Kurds to Idlib IDPs for USD\$1,000 to [\\$6,000](#). The prospective buyers are told that the owners will not come back because if they do, they will be arrested for being PKK;¹⁴
8. Evacuating villages, with civilians taken to unknown [destinations](#);
9. Legalising the ethnic cleansing of Afrin. In May 2019, Turkey forced all residents in Afrin to register in Afrin. Turkey then dissolved the administration that had their original residency and ID registrations. By early

¹³ @LindsaySnell Tweet, February 17, 2020

¹⁴ @LindsaySnell Tweet, February 8, 2020



- 2020, 75 percent of the population was Arab and Turkmen, all having come from other [locations](#).
10. Forcing people to march in support of Turkey, and bashing and/or arresting people if they refuse;
 11. Militias fighting each [other](#). For instance, on February 22, 2020, a senior military police officer killed a senior leader of the Sultan Murad Brigade that 'controlled' shops and other businesses in 'old' [Afrin](#);
 12. Cultural genocide in the destruction of archaeological sites, a war crime according to Security Council Resolution 2347 of [2017](#); and
 13. Turkey not stopping these abuses, [as reported by the UN](#).

Manbij

Since being liberated from ISIS in 2016, Manbij has been run by the Manbij Civilian Council, linked to the AANES, and secured by the Manbij Military Council (MMC) linked to the SDF. After an ambiguous agreement between Turkey and the US regarding security in the district in [June 2018](#), some changes were made to the membership of these organisations and attacks by Turkey's Syrian proxy militias and ISIS increased inside and outside the town. For instance, in May 2019, a car bomb exploded in front of Manbij internal security office killing 10 people, including civilians, and injuring three children. Three days later, two IEDs exploded in front of locally owned stores causing property [damage](#). Turkey-backed militants constantly fire mortars and rockets in the vicinity, including on Tel Rifaat, an area between Afrin and Manbij, where people displaced from Afrin live, Turkey accusing the US, and then Russia, of failing to evacuate YPG from Tel [Rifaat](#). On December 2, 2019, a Turkish strike on Tel Rifaat, east of Afrin, killed [eight children](#). Some were orphans who had lost their parents in Turkey's invasion of Afrin. In the last days of February 2020, Turkey's artillery again targeted civilians in the Shebha – [Tel Rifaat](#) region several [times](#). Also in 2020, the MMC captured an ISIS smuggling ring that was helping ISIS women escape to Turkey from a SDF camp in the east.

The US and allied forces handed their bases to the Russian military police (rather than to their NATO ally, Turkey) in October 2019. Thereafter, the MMC co-ordinated with Russian military police and the SAA outside the town, for example at the former US base near Arima, while inside the city, security continues to be maintained by Internal Security [Forces](#). In February 2020, 200 families from Idlib arrived in Manbij. ISIS attacks have become less frequent but the Syrian regime is trying to conscript young people into the SAA.



Turkey's threats to world peace

Turkey's military intervention in Idlib has been called coercive diplomacy, a strategy that the West has been unwilling to [apply](#), and whose outcomes have yet to be realised, given Turkey is responsible for:

- Helping and collaborating with ISIS;
- Collaborating and/or supporting other Islamist extremists;
- Opening up new war fronts in Syria;
- The illegal occupation of three zones across northern Syria;
- Turkification and Islamisation of these zones;
- Ethnic cleansing by displacing more than half a million mostly Kurdish civilians and settling Sunni Arabs and Turkmen in their place;
- War crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Turkey's soldiers and Turkey's SNA proxies;
- Breaking every agreement it has made with the US, Russia and others;
- Refusing to let the AANES, SDF, SDC and TEV-REM be represented at negotiations in Geneva and Astana; and by all these actions
- Prolonging war, both the civil war and war with ISIS;
- Delaying political solutions for Syria;
- Supporting war in [Libya](#) by sending soldiers, Syrian mercenaries and hardware despite people in Turkey going through economic hardship; and
- Using refugees to blackmail Europe and otherwise militarily threaten Greece.

There are many reasons why the West and Russia give Turkey such latitude. Turkey became a highly valued geopolitical member of NATO during the Cold War, and now serves as a barrier between Europe and the Middle East. Now Turkey uses its relations with Russia to goad concessions from the US. Meanwhile, Turkey pays off officials and lobbyists to ensure its value is well respected in international institutions and Washington DC. Former National Security Advisor, Michael Flynn, was a lobbyist for Turkey, and many observers wonder if the current US envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey, is another. Otherwise, given that most Western military and political leaders have grown up in the Cold War era, they may find it difficult to adjust to Turkey's change in trajectory under Erdogan. For these and other reasons they appear to want to placate rather than confront the executive president who has used war and blackmail as political tools since 2015, and thinks nothing of threatening Europe with military exercises and unleashing a flood of refugees.

There is credible evidence that MIT and others have provided material support to [ISIS](#) and now the brains and financiers behind ISIS are based in Turkey. Although Turkey has increased its number of arrests of ISIS suspects to 1,100 in the first 10 months of 2019, some believe this is just a small indication of the growing numbers of ISIS members and sympathisers that conduct business and residing [Turkey](#). These are in regular contact with ISIS in Syria, as are Turkey-backed [militia](#), as outlined in the US Defence Department Inspector General's quarterly [report](#), released in



November 2019. In being one of the first to support the Syrian opposition to overthrow the Allawite regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011, and in defying international law and opening up new war fronts by invading Syria three times, Turkey has destabilised the zones, and in distracted YPG and SDF from fighting ISIS, thus providing opportunities for ISIS to [regroup](#). Turkey's invasion of the north-east has been particularly problematic, regarding an [ISIS resurgence](#) but also because it has led to a dangerous congestion of unco-ordinated forces in a small area: Russian, American, Syrian, Iranian, Turkish, and all their proxies, as well as Saudi, Gulf State, Egyptian, ISIS and the SDF.

The only group Turkey's invasion of north-east Syria seems to have advantaged is ISIS. There is growing evidence that Turkey's army and Syrian proxies are working alongside militia commanders who are former ISIS [commanders](#). Turkey's proxy militias, that include [ISIS](#) in their ranks, have helped ISIS fighters and family members escape from the detention camps and in Deir Ezzor, ISIS has become far more active. For instance, in the countryside, ISIS cells set up checkpoints along the roads at night to extract a 'tax', and by day extort 'taxes' from local oil traders, shop owners, heads of factories, directors of non-government organisations, doctors, landowners and others. ISIS publishes lists of people who work for AANES-affiliated local civilian councils and SDF-affiliated military councils, demanding they resign and publicly repent. People usually do so, in fear of retribution. In January 2020, a preacher spoke out at a forum against the marriage of underage girls but only on condition that no photo or recording was made, fearing retribution. There has been an increase in ISIS threatening to or actually [assassinating](#) those who work for the SDF and [AANES](#) or who pass intelligence to the [SDF](#). Whole families are being [murdered](#).

Officials and civilians in Arab-majority areas also report a surge in the activities of cells affiliated with the Assad regime, Iranian-backed militias and Turkey attempting to recruit locals to carry out sabotage attacks. People fear that if the pressure gets too great the SDF will surrender Arab-majority areas to the Syrian [regime](#).

Turkey's weaponising of Islamist extremists, and facilitating them and others, including ISIS and HTS, to settle in a band across northern Syria could create a terrorist corridor that could well pose a future international security threat. Of the SNA's 41 militias, 31 have fought the YPG/SDF, 30 have fought the Assad regime, 27 have fought ISIS and 11 have fought [HTS](#). The SNA has up to 80,000 fighters that do Turkey's bidding, which in Idlib, is to protect the Opposition, including [HTS](#). If Turkey is forced to betray these people, their revenge may not be sweet.

Turkey has broken every agreement it has made on Syria. In repeatedly threatening to flood Europe with refugees and acting on this threat in March 2020, Turkey is breaking its [March 2016](#) agreement. In allowing its Syrian proxies to attack Kurdish villages and IDPs in Manbij and the villages around Manbij, and possibly facilitating an ISIS presence in the area, it is breaking its June 2018 agreement with the US. In not keeping its Turkish military and Syrian mercenaries to a pre-allocated area of north-east Syria, unless participating in joint patrols, and in committing war crimes



and crimes against humanity in and outside this area, Turkey has not complied with its agreement with the US made on October 17, 2019, or its agreement with Russia made on October 22, 2019. In continuing to demand an increase in electricity for Ras al-Ain and cutting the water to 460,000 people to get its demands met, Turkey is breaking an agreement facilitated and guaranteed by Russia in December 2019.¹⁵

In allowing HTS et al to earn revenue by controlling [border crossings](#) with Turkey, in not disarming HTS and other extremists of heavy weapons or getting them to withdraw from the demilitarised zone so the M4 and M5 [highways](#) can be opened, and in fact, facilitating HTS to expand its territory in early 2019 (by ordering the withdrawal of its proxy militias), Turkey broke its September 2018 agreement with Russia. In making no headway with HTS and others Turkey is breaching its March 5 [agreement](#) with Russia. In fact, only 12 days after a cessation of hostilities, Turkey demonstrated it was unable to stop its proxies attacking towns and regime forces, blocking the M4, and even attacking Turkey's own observation posts (for non-payment of cash allowances).

President Erdogan and Turkish state institutions regularly use blackmail to bend others to their will. At the end of November 2019, Turkey demanded NATO recognise YPG as a terrorist [organisation](#). At a NATO summit in early December 2019 Turkey delayed signing the Poland and Baltic State Defence Plan until NATO did so. After Turkish officials signed a preliminary draft, Erdogan announced Turkey would not approve the final plan unless NATO recognised the YPG as a terrorist [organisation](#). When clashes between Turkish and (pro-) Syrian regime forces escalated in February 2020 in Idlib, Erdogan used Articles 4 and 5 to insist NATO support Turkey's military adventures. Greece vetoed the vote on Article 4, and the US prevaricated about sending Patriot missiles to Turkey. On this occasion, the US and NATO rejected Erdogan's request for military support, uncomfortable that Turkey was threatening Syria's [sovereignty](#) and protecting 100,000 Islamist extremists and other mercenaries, even though these were serving to stop Assad from reclaiming more territory. Because NATO refused to help, [Turkey](#) then sent tens of thousands of refugees to the Greek and Bulgarian borders. When Greece blocked the border Turkey blocked the refugees from returning to [Turkey](#). Eventually Turkey accepted the return of refugees, but only because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Turkey's foreign minister warned that refugees would be sent to the Greek and Bulgarian borders as soon as the pandemic is over. The 2015 flood of refugees into Europe had a huge impact on European politics. One hopes another flood does not drag European politics into further extremes.

In defying alliances and playing so many players off each other, Erdogan has no honourable exit plan from Syria, Libya or Greece, or from his conflict with Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq. Under the circumstances it would be ideal for the West and Russia to devise an appropriate co-ordinated response. Instead, international institutions continue to cover up Turkey's crimes. For instance, the United Nations

¹⁵ Tweet Rojava Information Centre @RojavaIC 23 March 2020



International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) noted that water was being cut to 460,000 people in north east Syria, exacerbating the danger posed by Covid-19. But they did not name those responsible. In another curious instance, the World Health Organisation (WHO) distributed Covid-19 testing kits in [Idlib](#), where HTS dominate, but had no testing kits for the [north-east](#). Fortunately, the US began supplying [Covid-19 equipment](#) to north-east Syria institutions in early April.

Conclusion

Turkey's military offensives in Syria have cost Turkey an estimated [USD\\$40 billion](#). Despite a failing economy, Turkey has been willing to pay this price firstly in an effort to replace President Bashar al-Assad's Allawite regime with a compliant Sunni Arab Islamist government or, at least, move Turkey's borders south to create a Sunni Arab Islamist belt across northern Syria, an historical repeat of incorporating the Syrian province of Hatay in 1939.¹⁶ This objective is part of Erdogan's stated neo-Ottoman obsession to expand Turkey's political, cultural and economic reach throughout the Middle East and North Africa, if not beyond.

To achieve Turkey becoming a power beyond its considerable geopolitical value, Erdogan and his closest colleagues think they must squash Turkey's nemesis: Kurds achieving any sort of political power in or outside Turkey. Hence, Turkey fiercely opposed the formation of the KRI. It was not until 2011 that Turkey realised that the KRI offered a fountain of opportunities rather than threats. Likewise, Turkey's fear of Kurds achieving political and military power in Syria means denying Syrian Kurds the right to participate in political solutions and denying Syria the opportunity of adopting a federal system or even a united country, given Turkey's indoctrination of its Syrian proxies. That Syrian Kurds and their allies succeeded in realising a multi-ethnic autonomous region in a de facto sense is the main reason why Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring. These operations have opened up new war fronts, prolonged the fight against Islamist extremism, and changed the geopolitical balance inside Syria.

War in Syria grinds on, as events in Idlib, north-east Syria, and regime-controlled areas like Daraa make clear. The war has already killed [586,100 Syrians](#),¹⁷ and displaced half the population. Five million Syrian children have been born into war, 9,000 children have been killed or injured, 5,000 – some as young as seven – having been recruited to [fight](#).

These statistics are to every leader's shame. Every leader, country and international organisation has lost in or over Syria. The Syrian regime is a shell of its former self: ethically and financial bankrupt, and beholden to Russia and Iran. Turkey is unlikely

¹⁶ Syria still considers the province now called Hatay as part of Syria.

¹⁷ For a breakdown of those killed see <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=157193>



to succeed in creating a Sunni Islamist state or a 900-kilometre wide, 30 kilometre deep zone in northern Syria in the name of replacing Kurdish ‘terrorists’ with Islamist terrorists. Russia and the US have failed to curb Assad, [Turkey](#), Islamist extremists and Iran, and have failed to enforce safe zones and facilitate political negotiations. The US’ erratic changes in direction, largely due to Trump’s and Erdogan’s peculiar relationship, have severely undermined the credibility of the US as an ally and a world power. Russia’s Astana accord is a blatant betrayal of the Opposition, but has failed to defeat the Opposition. Instead, the process moved the most obstinate among them to Idlib, narrowing possible solutions until only one seems left, this being military extermination failing the establishment of a multi-nation supported court system to conduct trials. If only. Meanwhile, Russia is caught between Israel and Iran, and between Erdogan, Assad and the Kurds. Such balancing acts could easily unravel.

War in Syria has tested the international system and found it [broken](#), particularly the [UN Security Council](#). After a brief moment in October 2020, when a far from representative constitutional committee failed to progress the rewriting of the constitution, the UN effort to facilitate a political solution returned to a state of hibernation. Being played by Russia and Turkey as if they were chess pieces, the UN, NATO, EU and US are stuck in old habits of rhetoric, resolutions and transactions. Everyone seems to have lost any sort of moral compass. For instance, Europe and the US continue to sell military hardware to a NATO member that is arming and protecting Islamist extremists and other criminal mercenaries. Europe, the US and the UN continue to comply with this same NATO member’s wishes, despite this member waging a military and political war on the very institutions that have been instrumental in fighting ISIS and defeating the caliphate at great sacrifice, that continue to keep tens of thousands of ISIS and ISIS family members in prison because countries refuse to take responsibility for their citizens who joined ISIS, and that have helped stabilise nearly one third of Syria, and create a fledgling democracy that respects women’s rights and ethnic rights, and which serves to somewhat contain the influences of ISIS, Assad and Iran. If there is any justice in this world, one day the international community must address this negligence, for as the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Zizek, claims, ‘If Europe turns its eyes away from the Kurds, it will betray [itself](#).’

The international community should not placate an authoritarian Erdogan, or ignore his support of Islamist extremists and their war crimes. Erdogan’s policies and actions will not deliver a government acceptable to the majority of [Syrians](#). Instead, there is a unique opportunity to support [representatives](#) of institutions that empower women, [minorities](#) and civil society, and already administer and secure one third of Syria to participate in negotiations with others also willing to abide by a ceasefire and build a new Syria.

So where are the new strategies? In the vacuum, KLA’s recommendations, incorporating those of others, warrant serious consideration. Only when the challenges highlighted in this report are addressed can the demilitarisation of Syria

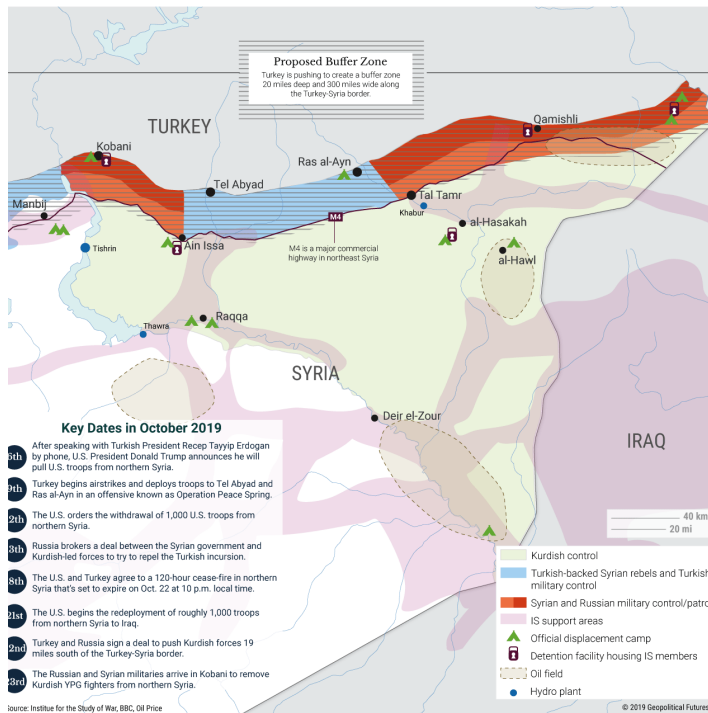


begin, free and fair elections be held, and a collaborative reconstruction process start. Only then can all those not guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity rebuild. Such initiatives are more critical than war to counteract the threats from [ISIS](#), Turkey, the Assad regime and [Iran](#).

There is still time to act on these recommendations. War in Syria may be entering its tenth year but it could go on for much longer and cost much more than implementing these recommendations or a version thereof. The US, Europe and [China](#) are waiting for a political [transition](#) to invest, and even [Russian companies](#) that want to exploit Syria's mineral and energy sectors are concerned that international sanctions will reduce [profits](#). The Syrian elite is split over Iran making long term investments in real estate, agriculture and [construction materials](#). In the process of rebuilding the international community needs to learn from Iraq and commit to a collaborative rebuilding of the political economy of Syria over decades. Only this has the chance to prevent the formation of parallel institutions that are crippling Iraq, and their designer, Iran.

Alternative scenarios for Syria include Assad continuing to rule a war torn, bankrupt country beholden to Russia and Iran, with half the population refusing to return to regime controlled [areas](#), or Turkey creating an Islamic State, or at least annexing a Wahhabi Muslim Brotherhood zone of control across northern Syria, and if possible, eastern Syria, 'secured' by Turkey's undisciplined [SNA](#) and ethnically cleansed of Kurds and Christians, forever unstable and a threat to Europe. This scenario is more likely if Erdogan cuts ties with Russia and becomes a 'true ally' of the US. The US could mistakenly attempt to use Turkey to contain Iran, to the detriment of Syrian Kurds, Christians and other minorities, and neighbouring Iraq (for Erdogan's Turkey has eyes on northern Iraq). What may prevent such an alliance is a mutual lack of trust. Or there is the potential for Syria to break up, or limp towards some form of democracy, if not a federation. Sources of optimism are the success of the Russian and American military de-confliction mechanism and handover of bases in north-east Syria, heralding a capacity to coordinate, and the survival of the multi ethnic, multi religious, [women friendly](#) fledgling democratic federal institutions of north and east Syria, despite many commentators assessing the project '[finished](#)'.

APPENDIX: Timeline of Events, August 2019 – April 2020



[Map](#) of north-east Syria showing zones of control

The following timeline of [events](#) from August 2019 to April 2020 juxtaposes what has been happening in north-east and north-west Syria.

August 4

After yet another Astana meeting Erdoğan reiterated his threat to launch a unilateral military operation in north-east Syria to establish a 'safe zone' along the Turkey-Syrian border.

August 7

Turkish and US military delegations agree to establish a joint operations centre to oversee the creation of a 'peace corridor' south of the Turkish border in north-east Syria. The US proposes a five kilometre wide YPG free corridor, and an additional nine kilometre corridor free of heavy [weapons](#) in the Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain areas, with the corridor remaining under US control, and Turkish forces not being allowed to enter [towns](#). SDF defence [fortifications](#) would be dismantled. Turkey did not formally agree to any of these [demands](#). The SDC and SDF agree that refugees in Turkey that originally came from the north-east could return home.

Third week in August

Russia-backed Syrian regime forces militarily take Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, with Putin claiming that Erdoğan had failed to live up to their September 2018 agreement and

contain HTS, disarm opposition militias in the demilitarised [zone](#), and get them to withdraw from the M5 and M4 highways.

September 2

Turkey's Islamist and criminal mercenary SNA ruling Afrin threaten people with a \$500 fine or expulsion from their home and the district if they do not march in support of Turkey and its Afrin administration. This was in response to people from Idlib protesting at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing denouncing Turkey's failures in protecting them from Russian-backed Syrian [attacks](#).

September 8

Despite predictions that a Turkey-influenced 'safe' zone could displace 90 percent of the [population](#) in north-east Syria, and Erdogan claiming Turkey wanted permanent joint US – Turkey bases in the region, US – Turkey joint patrols begin. By September 21, there had been six joint [patrols](#).

September 24

[Erdogan](#) presents a map of Syria to the UN General Assembly showing the proposed Turkey-controlled belt across northern Syria stretching from Hatay to the KRI. Erdogan proposes that three million Syrian [refugees](#) now living in Turkey could be resettled in this zone, with new towns being funded by a UN donor [conference](#).



Erdogan at the UN General [Assembly](#).

October 4

Turkey-backed Syrian Interim Government leader, Abdul Rahman Mustafa, announces the merger of all militias in Turkey's two Syrian armies: the National Liberation Front and the SNA, bringing the single SNA's strength to 80,000 militants. He also announces that this united army will fight PKK [terrorists](#) and return Syrian



land to Syrians! Apparently he does not regard Syrian Kurds and their Sunni Arab and Christian allies as Syrian.

October 6

After a second fateful phone call between Erdogan and Trump, Trump acquiesces to Turkey's 'long planned operation into north (east) Syria'. At 11 pm the White House Press Secretary announces that US forces will withdraw from the Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain area to allow Turkish forces to unilaterally invade and take full responsibility for the 12,000 ISIS fighters, and 58,000 ISIS women and [children](#) in more than two dozen camps run by the [SDF](#). Turkey immediately launches air strikes on the Semalka border crossing between north-east Syria (Rojava or west Kurdistan) and the KRI, which the AANES, SDF, TEV-DEM and aid organisations use for food and medicines, and people use to travel between Rojava and Bashur (the KRI or southern Kurdistan).

October 7

Fifty US Special Forces leave bases near Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain, although there is no reduction in overall US troop numbers in [Syria](#). The Pentagon removes Turkey from the 'air tasking order' in north-east Syria and revokes its access to surveillance [intelligence](#). Thereafter, Turkey relies on armed drones, which will cause 50 percent of all SDF [deaths](#).

October 8

ISIS snipers turned suicide bombers stage an attack in Raqqa [city](#). No other casualties are reported, but the US announces it was taking into custody some high profile ISIS [inmates](#). In the Turkish Parliament, parliamentarians from the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Republican People's Party (CHP) approve another year of military operations in Syria and [Iraq](#).

October 9

Erdogan announces Operation Peace Spring to 'prevent the creation of a terror corridor' inside Syria south of the border. After some initial airstrikes, at least 6,000 Turkish soldiers and [14,000 SNA mercenaries](#) commence a two pronged ground [offensive](#) backed by air power focusing on the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain and the 120 kilometres in [between](#) i.e. Turkey does not abide by the agreement with the US not to enter towns. The SDF responds with artillery fire. Turkey reiterates its claim that it will extend the 'safe' zone from the Euphrates River to the border with the KRI, claiming that the US has agreed to [this](#).

October 11

Turkey bombs Alouk Water Pumping Station, east of Ras al-Ain, cutting water to 460,000 people including those in Hasaka city, IDP camps and ISIS-filled prisons.

Turkey's SNA mercenaries shell a US Special Forces position in Kobani and French forces located elsewhere. The French forces retaliate. Germany announces it will no longer supply arms to [Turkey](#).



October 12

Turkey's Ahrar al-Sharqiya mercenaries open a third front, entering Syria between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. They drive across an unpopulated plain and arrive at the M4 [highway](#), where, dressed as Kurdish fighters, they shoot at a car on the highway. The driver, Ferhad Ramadan, is killed in the car but the other occupant is the Kurdish women's rights activist and Secretary General of the Syria Future Party, Hevrin Khalaf, who is known for her work in reconciling Arabs and Kurds. She is dragged from the car, raped, and her legs are broken. Her head and torso are bashed with stones and she is shot 20 times. Her face and chest are completely disfigured. The perpetrators filmed all of this. One militant was filmed standing on her [head](#). The militants go on to arrest other [civilians](#), and film themselves executing [six](#) to nine prisoners beside the [M4](#), calling them Kurdish 'pigs' and 'atheists'. The footage is distributed on social media.

October 13

Turkey's Ahrar al-Sharqiya mercenaries execute two nurses, Mediya Bouzan and Hafin Khalil al-Ibrahim, and their driver, Mohammed Bouzan, in Suluk, (their bodies are later found in the town's sewage [system](#)). Three other health [workers](#) are killed in Salihiye and Asadiya. An explosion targets a civilian convoy heading for Ras al-Ain and kills [14 people](#), including two Kurdish journalists. Four other [journalists](#) are injured. Killing health workers and journalists is a war crime.

Trump orders a full withdrawal of 1,000 US soldiers from Syria, except for those stationed at al-Tanf close to the borders of Iraq and Jordan with the added benefit of being close to Abu Kamal, a town and border crossing where the IRGC is building a large base. US-coalition aircraft conduct several airstrikes on Syrian regime convoys and positions in [Deir Ezzor](#). All US forces leave Kobani. The SAA and Russian military police move into [Manbij](#) city. In Manbij, US Special Forces directly hand over their positions to the Russians (rather than to their NATO ally, Turkey).

The SDF confirms it is in negotiations with Russia about the SAA being deployed along the border east of the Euphrates in return for the SDF's help in liberating all Syrian lands, including [Afrin](#).

Turkish forces shell three ISIS detention camps, including [al-Hol](#), designed for [20,000](#) but housing 60,000 foreign and local ISIS fighters, families and other refugees in separate areas. By this time, many of the SDF guards and YPG fighters have been reassigned to the war front. The lack of security enables about 200 women and [children](#) to be smuggled out. Turkey's subsequent shelling results in 859 foreign ISIS fighters breaking out of the camp. The breakouts prompt the SDF to again plea for countries to take back their citizens who had joined ISIS. (About 1,430 foreigners were repatriated by January 31, 2020.)

October 14

[Iran-facilitated](#) talks at Russia's Khmeimim air base in Latakia result in a YPG/SDF delegation headed by SDF Commander in Chief, Mazloum Abdi Kobani, and SDC



Foreign Affairs Officer, Salih Muslim, agreeing to the deployment of the SAA and Russian military police along the border east of the Euphrates, and outside some towns, so they and the SDF can 'jointly' protect the region from Turkey. The YPG/SDF and PYD representatives emphasise it is only a military agreement. The agreement states that, in return, the YPG/SDF will help in the liberation of all Syrian territory, especially Afrin. There is a verbal agreement that Russia and Syria will close the airspace in the north-east to Turkish [aircraft](#), but otherwise the agreement lacks delineations of responsibility and rules of engagement. Previously General Mazloum Abdi Kobani insisted that the AANES and SDC be enshrined in a new constitution and that the SDF must form its own battalions within the [SAA](#).

Following a worldwide backlash against the announced US withdrawal from north-east Syria, even within Trump's Republican party, critics claiming it was a betrayal of the Kurds who helped defeat ISIS, that the withdrawal would allow ISIS to regroup, and Russia, Syria and Iran to expand their [power](#), Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issues a press statement calling for Turkey to immediately cease its offensive and Trump signs an executive order to sanction three senior Turkish officials in the Ministries of Defence, Energy and the Interior, and to double tariffs on Turkish [steel](#). Trump threatens 'to swiftly destroy Turkey's economy if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive [path](#)' (of making war on US' allies in Syria).

The US-led coalition sends military reinforcements including armoured vehicles, rocket launchers and heavy weapons to the [Koniko and Al-Omar oil and gas fields in Deir Ezzor](#) to prevent pro-regime forces advancing. Many European countries stop selling arms to Turkey but an EU-wide arms embargo is not implemented.

October 15

By Day 6 of Turkey's offensive, aid groups have suspended operations and left the region, except for the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#), [Kurdish Red Crescent](#) and an American Christian group. Up to 300,000 people have fled their homes, many finding shelter in Tel Tamr, Qamishli and Hasaka's schools, resulting in an indefinite postponement of classes, others going to nearby towns, or crossing into the KRI. Among the last group are 16 to 18 year old Kurdish males fearing they will be conscripted into the [SAA](#). Turkey's forces have killed at least 71 civilians; and destroyed power lines, water supplies, [bakeries](#), ambulances and health facilities in Ras al-Ain, Kobani (Arabic: Ain al-Arab), Tel Abyad and al-Malikya (Kurdish: Derik).

Hours after Erdogan promises Trump that Turkey will not attack the town of Kobani, Turkey's SNA use artillery to barrage the town's outskirts and kidnap civilians. In the wake of the Turkish advance south-east of [Kobani](#), US and SDF troops withdraw from their regional headquarters at the La Farge Cement Factory where US troops from Manbij and Kobani had gathered. After all have left the SDF destroys the site so it will not fall into Turkey's hands. Meanwhile, Turkey's artillery shell Ain Issa killing two Syrian regime soldiers. At their checkpoints, the Syrian soldiers are friendly towards the SDF and US forces passing through. It is as if the Syrians know they are



guests especially as they are often forced to rely on the SDF to supply them [food](#) and medicines.

The fight for Ras al-Ain and Ain Issa continues. After days of fighting and Turkey's artillery fire that was trapping civilians and the SDF inside Ras al-Ain township, during which time the SDC's calls for a humanitarian corridor to evacuate the injured and other civilian goes unheeded, the Kurd-led SDF manages to take back the critical M4 highway and temporarily take back Ras al-Ain using a network of tunnels not destroyed as part of the security mechanism agreed to by Turkey, the US and SDF. In the process the SDF kills 103 of Turkey's Syrian mercenaries. But Tel Abyad remains under Turkey's control. To the west, Russian forces patrol [Manbij](#). A Russian Su-35 intercepts a Turkish F-16 before it can bomb the Manbij Military Council/SDF headquarters in [Manbij](#).

October 16

The SAA enters the outskirts of Kobani and [Tabqa](#), leaving each town's local police and administration in tact. Faced with multiple sanction packages on [Turkey](#) the US Congress continues to dither about one to implement.

October 17

A US delegation led by Vice President Mike Pence meets with Erdogan in Ankara, and devises a 13 point deal in which Ankara will halt operations for 120 hours to allow YPG to withdraw with their heavy weapons from Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. The deal does not specify red lines or boundaries, or what happens to the autonomous administrations and security outside Tel Abyad and [Ras al-Ain](#). After the 120-hour period, sanctions on Turkey are lifted despite daily clashes between Turkey's army, SNA and the SDF.

Also on October 17, Turkey's Furqat al-Sultan Murad mercenaries murder three men returning to [Ras al-Ain](#): Resho Mehmud Berkel, Mustafa Ehmed Sino, and Rezan Khelil Cholol. The killers take photos of them posing with the men's corpses, and send them to Cholol's mother demanding a ransom for the return of his body.

By Day 8 of the offensive, 62 people have died in Tel Tamr hospital. Mazloum Abdi Kobani claims that Turkish forces have killed 205 civilians, and the SDF has killed 64 Turkish [soldiers](#). Despite a supposed ceasefire, Turkey's forces continue to go on the offensive, using munitions loaded with [white phosphorous](#) in Ras al-Ain. This results in six children and SDF fighters being taken to Tel Tamr and hospitalised for horrific burns to their faces and bodies. The use of white phosphorus as a weapon (in contrast to its use as a smoke screen or source of light) is a war crime, but later the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) claims that these cases are outside its remit as phosphorous is not classified as a banned chemical weapon. Instead, the OPCW suggests International Humanitarian Law and Protocol III to the Convention on Certain Conventional [Weapons](#) should be used to address the use of phosphorous.



The zone Turkey controls includes eight Yezidi villages. Given what the Yezidis in 18 Afrin villages had suffered at the hands of Turkey's Syrian militias, the Yezidi in the north-east Syria immediately evacuate their villages, which are subsequently looted by Turkey's SNA mercenaries.¹⁸

The Russian oil company, Rosneft, suspends operations in the KR, just inside the border because of Turkey's offensive in north-east [Syria](#).

October 18

Despite the US-Turkey ceasefire deal, Turkey's forces continue to attack Ras al-Ain, including medical [personnel](#), and advance on the M4 highway, cutting this vital supply route between Kobani and Qamishli. Turkey's artillery again damages Alouk water pumping station that supplies water to 460,000 people. Afterwards the station can only operate at 20 percent capacity.

October 19

General Mazloum Kobani announces that Turkey is blocking the SDF retreating from Ras al-Ain and other areas in the demarcated zone. He asks the US to ensure Turkey adheres to the ceasefire [agreement](#). Erdogan's advisor announces that it would be a declaration of war if Syrian forces protect YPG from Turkey's [forces](#).

October 20

After days of clashes and [besiegement](#), Kurdish forces evacuate [Ras al-Ain](#) and the US withdraws from Raqqa to KRI. Senator Lindsay Graham claims that Trump's plan for north-east Syria is to set up a demilitarised zone between Turkey and Kurds policed by an international force and supported by US air power (This has yet to happen); partner with the SDF to defeat ISIS and be part of a joint venture with the SDF to develop the oil and gas fields so the US can pay for its on-going support of the SDF to prevent profits going to Assad or [Iran](#) (in progress). Ironically, some of the oil is being sold to [Syria](#) and [Turkey](#), as well as [Iraq](#).

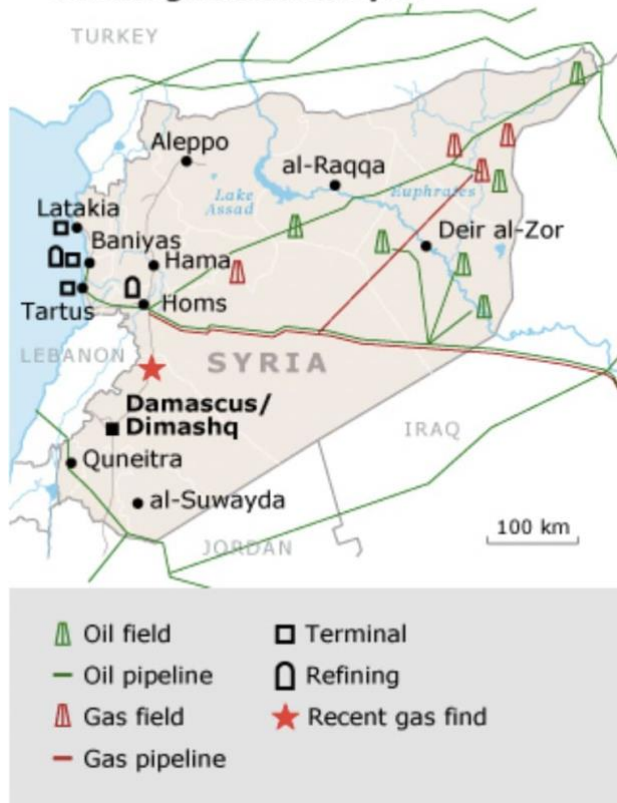
October 21

Trump announces that the US will leave a residual force in eastern Syria to protect oil and gas fields. See [map](#) on the next page.

Over the next week, the Syrian regime deploys 100 vehicles transporting 1,300 soldiers, weapons and supplies to border posts, particularly near Kobani and Tel Tamr. These soldiers do not deter Turkey's SNA from attacking them and the SDF outside Turkey's zone of control. When Turkey uses drones, artillery and Syrian mercenaries to attack the Christian-majority town of Tel Tamr (south of Tel Abyad), Syrian soldiers withdraw leaving the SDF to defend the town and surrounding villages. Elsewhere, the SAA has not tried to establish control over the regions under the AANES.

¹⁸ The source is a November 7 Tweet, the content of which has not been reported in mainstream media.

Oil and gasfields in Syria



[Map](#) of US and SDF secured oil and gas fields in north and east Syria

October 22

Contradicting US officials, Iraqi officials announce that US troops retreating from Syria into the KRI will not be allowed to stay in [Iraq](#).

Russian officials are moderate in their response to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring, despite opposing any permanent presence of Turkey in Syria. Erdogan and Putin reach a memorandum of understanding in Sochi. As well as reiterating that each party must preserve Syria's territorial integrity and combat terrorism in all forms (Turkey complying with neither) the agreement imposes a 150-hour ceasefire guaranteed by Russia that extends outside the zone already under Turkish control. Syrian guards and Russian military police will remove YPG and their weapons (i.e. not SDF or internal security) from a zone 30 kilometres deep, south of the border, within this 150-hour time frame. The agreement authorises joint Russian police and Turkish army patrols in a 10 kilometre belt south of the [border](#), the removal of YPG from Manbij and Tel Rifaat (west of the Euphrates), and that both parties will oversee the return of refugees in a safe and voluntary [manner](#). Assad's view is that the agreement "reigns in the Turks, outmanoeuvres the Americans and aborts the call for internationalization ... (In so doing) It limits the damage and paves the way for the liberation of this region in ... the [future](#)."



The YPG/YPJ begin removing themselves and their weapons from the specified area and refuse an offer to join the SAA as individuals. Although the regime is willing to consider some administrative decentralisation it demands full central authority over all security [forces](#), and unsuccessfully tries to reach out to Arab components of the SDF to defect to the SAA.

October 23

The US announces it is sending at least 30 Abrams tanks and 1,000 personnel to guard the oil fields of [Deir Ezzor](#). Three unidentified aircraft leave the airspace of SDF-held territory in Deir Ezzor and strike Syrian and Iranian forces near [Abu Kamal](#) (on the Syrian-Iraqi border).

October 24

At Moscow's request, Asayish (police) accompany Russian military police on a patrol between Amouda and Qamishli. Later, other joint patrols are held around Manbij, Kobani and Dirbasiya.

The European Parliament passes a resolution saying Turkey's invasions of Syria defy international law, and calls for Turkey to withdraw its forces from Syria and for an UN-backed safe zone and no-fly zone to be established along the entire Syria-Turkey border. Mazloum Kobani claims the SDF, SDC and AANES support such a plan. Turkey rejects the plan and threatens to flood Europe with refugees if it is [implemented](#).

October 26

Turkey's drones and artillery continue to attack villages and SDF fighters outside the Tel Abyad – Ras al-Ain zone. There are allegations that Turkey's SNA gangs are going from house to house killing [Kurdish families](#). Nine Turkey-backed militants and six SDF fighters are killed fighting in an area between Tel Tamr and Ras al-Ain.

From late October, the Barzani-linked Kurdish National Congress (KNC) meets with Mazloum Abdi Kobani and representatives of the AANES to negotiate a path forward. Several follow up meetings lead to KNC offices being opened in north-east Syria in [January](#).

October 26/27

For some months, Syrian Kurd and Iraqi Kurd intelligence had been working with the CIA. Kurdish Intelligence confirmed the identification and location of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Idlib, five kilometres from the Turkish border, where he had been living in a village known for smuggling since May 2019. Learning that he and his entourage were about to move to Turkey-occupied Jarablus, on the night of October 26/27, the US 75th Ranger Regiment and Delta Force, as well as SDF Special Forces, arrive in the village by helicopter. During the raid Baghdadi uses his suicide vest to kill himself and three of his children. Turkey had not been informed of the [operation](#).



October 28

US Secretary of Defence, Mark Esper, claims SDF and US counter-terrorism operations against ISIS in eastern Syria will continue.

October 29

The first major clash between Turkey and Syria in north-east Syria kills seven Syrian [soldiers](#), injure another 14 and result in the [capture](#) of others. On Twitter, but not in the media, there are reports and videos of more civilians being killed by Turkey's proxies, and a video of them shelling Russian border police. The Russian Defence Ministry denies the incident.

Russia informs Turkey that 34,000 YPG militants and at least 3,200 heavy weapons have been removed from the buffer zone but Defence Minister Hulusi Akar questions this [assessment](#). Erdogan repeats his threat to extend the safe zone along the entire border. As a result of intense shelling, civilians in Tel Tamr (outside the agreed zone) begin evacuating, taking their livestock. Syrian military vehicles leave villages the SDF has handed over to them to protect. Videos on social media show Turkey's mercenaries mistreating Syrian soldiers they capture. The Syrian regime asks the population to support the [regime](#).

October 30

The Syrian regime calls on SDF members to join the SAA and for Asayish to join the Syrian police so together they can defeat their common enemy: Turkey. The call is rejected with SDF and Asayish commanders saying they would only join after a political agreement in which the forces join as whole units, not as [individuals](#).

Between October 9 and 30 there was a 48 percent increase in ISIS attacks. SDF and US-coalition raids on ISIS had fallen by [75 percent](#).

Finally, the 'new' UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pederson, hosts Syria's 150 member [Constitutional Committee](#) in Geneva, minus any representation from the SDF, SDC or AANES, despite the US and Russia advocating for these organisations to be represented. According to the former UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, both powers were reluctant to apply pressure on Turkey to allow the SDC etc. to be represented and both powers independently asked him to insist the Kurds and their allies participate. The [Constitutional Committee](#) has not met since and is predicted to fail, as the Syrian regime shows no sign of agreeing to any significant constitutional changes or any Opposition representation in a new government. The Opposition insists Assad must step down.

October 31

Clashes between Turkey's mercenaries and Syrian forces continue around Ras al-Ain and [Tel Tamr](#).

For the first time since the US withdrawal, and shortly after the expiry of the Turkey-Russia agreement, US forces patrol near the Turkish border between Rmeilan and



Qahtaniyah, the latter 20 kilometres west of Ras al-Ain, and also in Qamishli, 30 kilometres west of [Qahtaniyah](#). US forces appear determined to re-establish their presence.

November 1

The first joint Russia-Turkey patrol is conducted near Kobani. In this and subsequent patrols around Turkey's occupied [towns](#), people line the roads throwing stones and shoes at the huge armoured vehicles.

The Assad regime launches a major offensive in Idlib and surrounding areas.

November 2

The SDF announces that the Syriac¹⁹ Military Council and Assyrian fighters are being deployed to Tel Tamr to defend it from Turkey's [attacks](#).

Tens of Turkey's SNA mercenaries leave Turkey's SNA after the Russian Defence Ministry convinces Turkey to release 18 captured and abused SAA soldiers kept in Ras al-Ain. The mercenaries see this as a betrayal, given that many thousands of opposition fighters are held in Syrian prisons.

By now, Turkey's proxies in north-east Syria number 14,000. They include 'many' former [ISIS](#) members.

November 3

Turkey's Syrian [mercenaries fire](#) on a US convoy travelling east along the M4 highway near Tel Tamr.

November 9

Turkey's SNA and the SAA clash near Ras al-Ain, both sides using large calibre machine guns. The SDF also clash with Turkey's SNA around Ain Issa. The fighting kills 12 SDF fighters & 13 SNA [mercenaries](#).

Erdogan repeats his contention that Turkey will not leave Syria until the last terrorist (i.e. Kurd) leaves the 'region', and all foreign countries leave [Syria](#)!

150,000 residents of north-east Syria remain displaced, many facing the coming winter with no shelter or possessions. The influx into Hasaka city has increased rent prices while others find shelter in schools that can no longer perform their primary function. Many collective shelters do not have water or [sewerage](#).

November 10

Turkish artillery target the SAA in several places in north-east Syria, killing at least six [soldiers](#) and injuring at least fourteen.

¹⁹ Christians in Syria speak Armenian and Aramaic, with Aramaic speaking groups including Syriac, Assyrian and Chaldean.



November 11

Turkey escalates its bombardments on Christian villages around Tel Tamr, which are being defended by the Syriac Military Council and the [SAA](#).

November 12

On the fifth Russian-Turkey joint patrol, Turkish soldiers use live ammunition on protesters outside Kobani. Two civilians are [killed](#) and seven are [injured](#).

November 23

After weeks of fighting in and around [Tel Tamr](#), Turkey focuses on [Ain Issa](#) with drones, tanks, artillery batteries and a large number of SNA mercenaries. Both Tel Tamr and Ain Issa are on the strategic M4 highway.

November 24

Convoys of Islamist extremists and their families from Jarablus (in the Euphrates Shield Triangle) and Syrian refugees from Turkey are trucked into Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain on a daily basis. On November 24, three convoys of buses bring 600 families. These people take the empty houses of Kurds and Arabs who fled Turkey's [offensive](#).

First 11 days of December 2019

General Mazloum Abdi Kobani announces an agreement with the Russian military to deploy Russian military police to Tel Tamr, Ain Issa, Amuda and [Qamishli](#) in an attempt to regain some security. Russia has already taken over the US positions in Manbij, Tabqa and Sarrin. General Kobani continues to [push](#) for reconciliation between the Ocalan-inspired PYD and the Barzani-backed Kurdish National Congress.

By December 5, 252 of Turkey's Syrian mercenaries have been killed and 760 [wounded](#). They are being sent in as cannon fodder after drones kill SDF [fighters](#).

Turkey's mercenaries establish a military police force and a military court in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain and Turkey's hand picked Syrian Interim Government, based in Turkey, begins training 4,000 Syrian police for the towns and surrounding [areas](#). The interim 'government' appoints mayors and officials to the new local councils. The inexperienced councillors find it difficult to provide [services](#). Kurdish signs are removed and a new curriculum in schools excludes the [Kurdish language](#).

The Head of the Syrian National Security Bureau, Ali Mamlouk, meets with Sunni Arab tribal leaders in Qamishli to try and convince them to leave the [SDF](#).

Some of Turkey's Syrian mercenaries try to hand over their weapons to the SDF in return for safe passage to Idlib so they can help fight the Assad regime. Russian police intervene and stop [them from leaving](#).

December 9

The SDC holds a meeting in Qamishli to discuss administrative arrangements. What they recommend is incorporated into this [report's recommendations](#).



By mid-December, 99 people from north-east Syria have been transported to Turkish prisons for being members of an armed terrorist organisation or for attempted [murder](#). None are from Turkey's SNA.

December 19

Turkey's SNA abduct at least six civilians, including a child, working their olive groves near al-Bab (west of the Euphrates).

December 31

Russia arranges a meeting between Kurdish and Syrian officials in Damascus after a 20-month break in negotiations. It was agreed to set up joint committees but negotiations did not progress as events unfolding in Idlib were impacting the balance of interests in north-east [Syria](#).

Sunni Arab tribe delegations from Hama and Homs visit Tabqa and thank the SDF for offering to accept and help those displaced from Idlib. Sheikh Obaid Al-Nahar calls on 'all the Syrian mercenaries who were deceived by Turkish fascism and who abandoned the peoples of Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad, ... (to lay) down arms and returning to their [senses](#).'

Mid January, 2020

In north-east Syria, a total of 3,286 people are missing, including 2,368 abducted by Turkey's SNA, 544 by ISIS, and 374 by the Syrian regime. The SDF admits to being responsible for some missing KNC members and pledges to [investigate](#).

Turkey uses drones to kill civilians and [YPG and SDF fighters](#) at a checkpoint on January 9 and in Qamishli on January 13, the latter 200 metres away from Russian military police.

January 16

Turkey announces it has begun to construct houses to resettle Syrian refugees between Tel Abyad and Ras al-[Ain](#).

January 23

Turkey's SNA mercenaries shut down Alouk pumping station in Ras al-Ain, again causing 460,000 people in Raqqa and Hasaka to have no water for a [week](#). Thereafter, they intermittently cut the water supply by stopping maintenance crews entering the station.

January 30

From October until the end of January, there is no electricity or running water in Ras al-Ain. Fuel, food and jobs are in short supply.

The US has re-established some bases in north-east Syria to the east of Ras al-Ain and begins blocking Russian patrols on roads leading to these military



positions, including Rmeilan oil fields and the Semalka border crossing. This occurs more than a dozen times. In many of these stand-offs the SDF [mediates](#).

Over in Idlib, Turkey sends reinforcements across the border when it becomes obvious that the SAA is advancing on Saraqeb, a town at the junction of the M5 and M4 highways. The Kurds consider helping the SAA, especially around Manbij, Tel Rifaat and Afrin, if Assad offers them a political [deal](#).

February 3

Syrian regime artillery kills eight Turkish military and civilian support personnel in Idlib. Retaliatory strikes by Turkey result in dozens of Syrian soldiers being [killed](#).

February 4

The death toll as a result of Turkey's invasion of north-east Syria is 445 fighters in the SDF, military councils and internal security; 335 Turkey's SNA criminal mercenaries and 11 Turkish soldiers.

This is a second day of meetings between a SDC delegation and Russian ministers of defence and foreign affairs at Khmeimim air base in Latakia, before all met with Syrian officials in Damascus to discuss a way forward. Russians promised to support and guarantee a deal between the SDC delegation and Syrian regime, but nothing came of these [meetings](#).

February 13

Ten SNA fighters are killed in fierce clashes with SDF in Tel Tamr. Attacks continue on a [daily](#) basis.

February 14

Stone throwing pro-regime Arabs, including two gunmen, in a village near Qamishli accost a US patrol. Vehicles are damaged. More US armoured vehicles arrive, as do four Russian patrols. Syrian gunmen open fire and US soldier/s return fire killing one local resident and wounding another. Two US vehicles are towed back to a US base at [Rmeilin](#).

In northern [Aleppo](#) Kurd-led forces kill three and wound five in Turkey's SNA.

February 15

Turkey conducts daily shelling and clashes with the SDF in and around Ain Issa, including in an IDP [camp](#). A Turkish military convoy arrives in Ain Issa and deploys rocket launchers to Shirekrak wheat silos.

A two-day Islamic conference held in Raqqa city, with follow up workshops and forums, seeks to repair community understandings of Islam after the warped messages and practices of [ISIS](#).



In the north-west, Turkey's SNA attacks villages west of Manbij, causing injury to five regime [soldiers](#).

February 17

Joint Russian-Turkish patrols in north-east Syria resume after a hiatus following the death of Turkish soldiers in Idlib earlier in the [month](#). Yet back in [Idlib](#), Russian airstrikes destroy 23 tanks, 50 armoured personnel carriers and 18 MLRS installations crossing the border from Turkey.

By this time there are 15,000 Turkish troops in north-west Syria, with 900,000 people having fled the war zone to camps long the Turkish border, as well as to Afrin, Manbij and further east. By February 20, the SAA is targeting northern Idlib IDP camps.

Turkey asks HTS to dissolve or amalgamate into Turkey's SNA and deploy to Afrin. HTS says 'no', unable to trust Turkey given that Turkey was unable to protect al-Baghdadi, Nayrab, Saraqeb and other people and places in Aleppo and [Idlib](#).

February 23

People in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain are dissatisfied with the services Turkey provides. Because Turkey destroyed the Mabrouka electric power station that supplies electricity to Ras al-Ain in October, Turkey was forced to negotiate through Russia for the AANES to supply five megawatts of electricity per hour to the town. But this was not sufficient and Turkey demanded 25 megawatts per hour. To get their way, Turkey's SNA again [cuts water to 460,000 people](#) in Raqqa and Hasaka provinces by entering Alouk water pumping station in the district of Ras al-Ain, stopping the pumps and throwing out the technicians. There was no water for [12 days](#). People in the countryside could at least access [wells](#) but people in towns are denied water for many days between October 29 and February 24, and from February 24 to [March 5](#).

Manbij Military Council calls on Turkey's SNA fighters from Manbij to stop aiding Turkey's neo Ottoman expansion and return to Manbij to either join the SDF or be integrated into [civilian life](#).

February 27

The YPG covertly helps Assad's forces near Afrin, Tel Rifaat and Manbij, and would not be adverse to doing the same if Assad attacked Turkish forces in Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ain and Tel Tamr. The US envoy to Syria, James Jeffrey, tells Kurds they will not get US support if they fight Turkey, that the US will never choose Kurds over [Turkey](#).

In Idlib [two Russian Sukhoi Su-34s and two Syrian Su-22's](#) strike a convoy of 400 Turkish soldiers in an area they should not have been in. Between [33](#) and [113](#) [Turkish soldiers](#) are killed. [Russia](#) claims they were embedded with 'terrorists'.



Kurdish Lobby Australia

February 28

In response to at least [59 Turkish soldiers' deaths](#) in Idlib in the month of February, Turkey shells more than 100 Syrian regime positions, including Arima west of Manbij, leaving casualties among the SAA and [civilians](#). In these attacks, Turkey claims to have killed [309 \(pro\) Syrian soldiers](#).

Erdogan asks NATO and the US for Patriot air cover from Russian airstrikes, but also asks Russia for airspace over Idlib. A week earlier Kaylan wrote: 'NATO is in a position to make Erdogan a final offer – leave (Idlib) quietly or we leave you to the Russian bear. ... To some degree Europeans care what happens to Turkey. ... For (Russians), a pro-Moscow Turkey is great. But a destabilized Turkey is just as good – no threat to Syria, no more [NATO flank](#)'.

NATO and the US reject Erdogan's requests. In response, Erdogan announces that Turkey will no longer stop Syrian refugees going to [Europe](#). The same day, Turkey provides [buses](#) for Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian refugees to be taken from Istanbul to the land border with Greece. Greece blocks their entry and Turkey blocks their return. By March 1 Turkey claims [47,000 refugees](#) are trapped in no-man's land at the border. Greek patrols also push back boats filled with refugees at sea. By March 17, Turkey claims 147,000 refugees have crossed into Greece under cover of smoke screens provided by Turkish police firing tear gas. Greek authorities question the figures claiming 73 people crossed into Greece and were arrested. It appeared most Syrians preferred to stay in Turkey. Erdogan may have lost his capacity to blackmail Europe with their [wish to go to Europe](#).

March 1

Turkey has 20,000 armed force personnel and 2,000 armoured vehicles in [Idlib](#). Russia allows Turkey to use drones to attack from the [air](#). From Turkish airspace Turkey uses F-16s to shoot down two Syrian [Sukhoi Su-24](#) jets. Turkish artillery damages Nayrab and Aleppo airports. Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar claims that Turkey has 'neutralised' (killed, injured or captured) 2,212 Syrian troops, including [three generals](#), (another article says Turkey has neutralised [3,000](#) (pro) Syrian troops) and destroyed more than 100 tanks in the previous three weeks. This is done in what Akar calls Operation Peace Spring, all without declaring war on [Syria](#). Most in the SAA are conscripts, some fought in the Opposition before Assad took the three 'de-escalation' zones. Some of those who had 'reconciled' were conscripted and sent to the front lines in Idlib, with an unknown number receiving no [training](#). Likely included among the total Turkey killed are IRGC-backed militants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and [Iran](#).

March 2

According to Turkey up to [80,000](#)²⁰ Syrian refugees made their way by land or boat to the Greek islands or were stuck at the border without shelter, and subject to tear gas, water cannons, beatings and live [fire](#).

²⁰ This is probably an example of Turkey's use of statistics to make a political point.

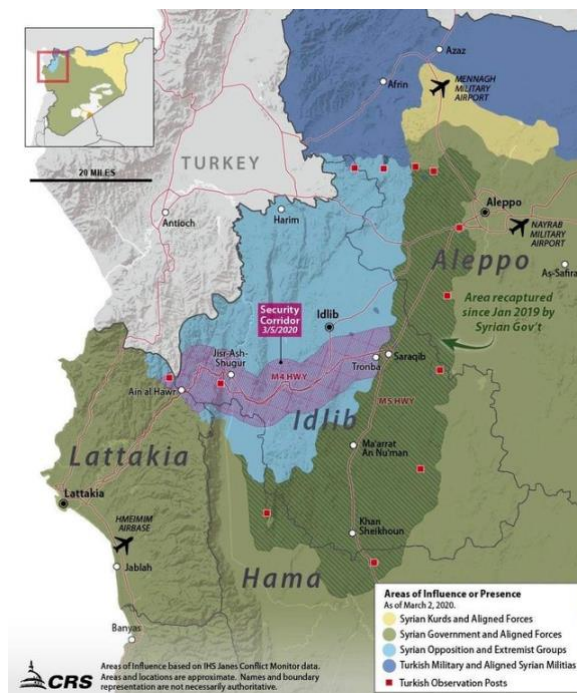
March 3

Social media shows a Turkish army vehicle pulling down the Greek border fence and Turkish Special Forces providing a cover of smoke screen for refugees to cross into Greece. Other social media shows Turkish security beating refugees. It does not make sense.

Turkey shoots down a third Syrian warplane over Idlib – a [L-39](#) attack plane. The SAA shoots down five Turkish drones. Russian military police are deployed to [Saregeb](#).

March 5

Putin and Erdogan meet in Moscow under a statue of Catherine the Great, and [agree](#) to a cessation of hostilities, and to joint patrols in a six-kilometre deep security corridor either side of the M4 highway, 'provided that the fight to eradicate terrorist groups continues.' The corridor includes towns like Jisr al-Shughour that is controlled by foreign Islamist extremists such as the Turkistan Islamic [Party](#). These groups will not give up their positions without a fight.



Map of Idlib showing new zones of control, March 5, 2020

'Turkey's' 'safe' zone in [Idlib](#) will be limited to 12 kilometres south of the Turkey - Syria border. This means Erdogan signed off on losing 4,000 square kilometres, or two thirds of Turkey's zone of [control](#) in Idlib. The agreement does not specify if recently displaced civilians can return [home](#). i.e. no one is addressing what is going



to happen to [950,000 IDPs](#), half being children.²¹ The cessation of hostilities (which Erdogan calls a ceasefire) is temporary: Putin says Turkey has to use all necessary measures to deal with those who continue to attack the SAA, that the fight against terrorism is unfinished. The SAA remains in their positions surrounding at least six of Turkey's observation posts, and both Syria and Turkey are reinforcing their [positions](#). Erdogan says Turkey will retaliate if its soldiers are targeted. The Opposition, including HTS and Hurras al-Din, and Turkey's SNA militia like Ahrar al-Sham and Sultan Murad Brigade announce they will [fight on](#).

Six thousand of Turkey's SNA fighters are stationed in and around [Tel Abyad](#). Never one to miss an opportunity, Erdogan proposes to Putin that Turkey take over the SDF-controlled Qamishli and Deir Ezzor oil wells to pay for constructing settlements for Sunni Arab refugees and IDPs across north-east [Syria](#). Erdogan allegedly proposes the same to Trump. An added incentive for Turkey is that taking over the US-SDF secured oil wells and all territory under the jurisdiction of the AANES, SDC, TEV-DEM and [SDF](#), would mean Turkey could dismantle these structures.

March 6

In Idlib, nine of Turkey's SNA mercenaries and six Syrian soldiers are killed in [clashes](#); [Russia](#) and [Turkey](#) continue to send military reinforcements to Idlib by sea and [land](#); and Erdogan claims that Turkey will start deploying the Russian made S400 missile systems in [April](#).

President Assad claims Syria does not have a Kurdish problem, (repeating what Erdogan often says about Turkey), as most came from Turkey. This reminded Kurds of how his father had made 300,000 Kurds non-citizens and would seem to indicate that Assad has no interest in a [negotiated settlement](#).

March 13

Turkey starts to bus refugees at the Greek border back to Istanbul, and continues to send hundreds of military vehicles and supplies to [Idlib](#), as does [Russia](#).

SNA militia protest in Tel Abyad because they have not been paid for two months.²²

March 14

Turkey's military and Turkey's SNA shell [Tel Tamr](#) and Ain Issa. These daily low level attacks are not being stopped by Russia, Syria or the US. Turkey sets up a military base near the M4 highway. If a civilian uses the M4 Turkey's SNA mercenaries confiscate their [car](#).

²¹ Of 960,000 civilians displaced in Idlib, 327,000 live in camps, 165,000 live in houses and buildings that are unfit for human habitation, 93,000 reside in schools and mosques, and 366,000 live in rented houses or with host [families](#).

²² Tweet Elisabeth Tsurkov @Elizrael March 12, 2020. Two weeks later they were paid for two months, but at a rate of USD\$1 a day.



Commander of the National Front and Deputy Chief of Staff of Turkey's SNA, Colonel Fadhl Al-Haji (who defected from the SAA in 2012) resigns following a series of meetings among top rebel [commanders](#).

March 15

Russia and Turkey's first joint patrol along the M4 highway in Idlib is cut short because [Islamist militia](#) threaten to attack and gather [hundreds of civilians](#) to stage a sit-in [protest](#) on the road, these civilians also blocking the road by burning [tyres](#) and clambering over Turkish tanks and other military vehicles. The protesters claim Russia is an occupying force. The Russian Defence Ministry concludes that Turkey needs more time to 'neutralise' the [terrorists](#).

March 16

The Russian Defence Ministry accuses HTS and Hurras al-Din of launching counterattacks on the [SAA](#) in Idlib. In the east, 300 families from regime-controlled Deir Ezzor cross into SDF territory without being tested for [Covid-19](#). IDPs in Hasaka, Tel Rifaat and [Idlib](#) are particularly vulnerable to coronavirus.

March 17

HTS erects soil barriers blocking the M4 near [Nayrab](#). Days later Turkey clears the road, but more soil barriers go [up](#). More Turkish tanks arrive in [Idlib](#).

March 19

Since March 5, Turkey has deployed thousands of soldiers and 1,400 military vehicles to Idlib, but on March 19 unidentified 'radical groups' kill two [Turkish soldiers](#). Observers consider HTS or an offshoot to be [responsible](#). Turkish forces and proxies shell [Tel Rifaat](#).

March 22

As a result of non-payment of cash '[allowances](#)' Turkey's SNA mercenaries launch an attack on a Turkish observation post and threaten to leave Idlib to the SAA. Turkey now has 50 observation posts in [Idlib](#).

March 23

With no medical facilities to cope with a coronavirus pandemic, the AANES announces a complete lockdown of up to five million people for 15 days, and the closure of all borders except for Semalka. General Kobani proclaims medical staff are 'our new leaders'. WHO, the US-led coalition and Assad regime do not respond to requests for help, despite Turkey cutting off water to nearly half a million people on [March 22](#) and for several days [thereafter](#). However, the US supplies Covid-19 equipment in early April.

Turkey attacks a SDF base and kills 15 SDF fighters. Turkey also shells the M4 highway and villages near Ain Issa and Tel Abyad. There are heavy clashes between Turkey and the SDF near [Tel Abyad](#).



At the border with Greece, Turkish police fire tear gas as a smokescreen for refugees to cross over. Four days later, Turkey burned down the tents where refugees had stayed. Turkey busses back 5,800 refugees to detention centres in nine provinces. Turkey's minister of the interior promises that after the coronavirus threat ends Turkey will resume facilitating refugees to cross into Europe.²³

March 24

SDF announces they are willing to abide by a ceasefire due to the coronavirus pandemic after the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, calls for a complete and immediate nationwide ceasefire in line with [Resolution 2254](#). But the Turkish army and SNA continue to shell villages around [Tel Tamr](#).

March 25

Islamist extremists blow up a bridge on the [M4](#) in Idlib. General Kobani meets a Russian delegation in Qamishli in an effort to progress a political [solution](#).

March 27

Turkey sets up US HAWK (Homing all the Way Killer) MIM-23 all-weather low to medium altitude ground-to-air missile system in Idlib. IRGC-backed militia establish more bases and the SAA moves in more [troops](#).

Turkey's SNA shell the centre of Tel Rifaat and damaged the water supply for 25,000 people.²⁴

March 29

The decapitated body of a 14-year old recruit to SNA Brigade 51 is dumped in the centre of Afrin city. He was killed in Brigade 51 fighting with Jabhag al-Shamiya.²⁵

ISIS prisoners riot in Geweran Prison in Hasaka, Twelve or more [escape](#) by smashing through a prison wall but are quickly captured.

April 1

Turkish rocket attacks kill one Syrian regime officer and one soldier and injure others in rural [Tel Tamr](#). Turkey heavily shells the Ras al-Ain countryside as well as west of Manbij causing casualties and [damage](#), killing two Syrian army [officers](#).

April 2/3

Turkish howitzers and MLRS open fire on a 46th Regiment SAA base in [Aleppo](#).

²³ Tweet Abdullah Bozkurt @abdbozkurt March 28, 2020, confirmed by Interior Minister

²⁴ Tweet Rojava Information Centre. @RojavaIC March 27, 2020

²⁵ Tweet Rojava Information Centre. @RojavaIC March 30, 2020



April 4

Turkey claims it has neutralised 24 YPG fighters attempting to infiltrate Turkey's occupied zone in north-east [Syria](#). Other sources say 2 YPG fighters were killed in Turkey's intensifying [offensives](#) that are causing more people to [flee](#) their homes.

The Syrian Regime's National Defence Force opens fire on Asayish in Qamishli, injuring several Asayish and killing one civilian passing by. Russians in military vehicles arrive and [mediate](#).

April 6

The AANES extends the lockdown due to Covid-19 for another 15 days, suspends conscription for three months and exempts people paying water and electricity bills for May and [June](#).

Otherwise, English language news of what is happening in and outside the Operation Peace Spring zone of north-east Syria, and in Afrin and Manbij in the West is practically non-existent.