

# 2023 in Kurdistan – a review of the year, part 2

The second part of this end of year review begins in North and East Syria, which is under attack from all sides but is still attempting to look forward to a democratic future. In Iraq, internal divisions mesh with external interference, and in Iran, internal repression is accompanied by an expanding world profile. The images of violence can seem overwhelming, but it is still possible to find hope in humanity.

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## North and East Syria

Turkey has never stopped its attacks on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and neither the United States nor Russia – the guarantors of their 2019 ceasefires – do anything noticeable to prevent them.

Turkish drones assassinate civilian leaders and defence fighters, and Turkish shells drive away the people living in the border areas. Turkey's holding back of river water impacts agriculture and electricity generation as well as basic water supplies. The constant insecurity inflicts every plan for the future.

But the situation became many times worse in October. The presence of American and Russian forces prevents Turkey from carrying out another ground invasion, however they don't stop Turkey attacking from the air. Anything can be made into an excuse for a major assault, as Turkey demonstrated after the Istanbul bomb in November 2022. On 1 October, two PKK suicide bombers attacked the police headquarters in Ankara, injuring two police officers. The PKK states that this was intended as a warning to the Turkish government on the first day of parliament. Turkey refuses to distinguish between the PKK and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and claimed, without evidence, that the attackers came from Syria. It was irrelevant to them that the Autonomous Administration is not the PKK and specifically makes a point of not allowing cross-border attacks. They wanted a *casus belli*, and now they had concocted one. They announced that they would attack infrastructure and energy facilities in North and East Syria as "legitimate targets". Like Israel in Gaza, they preannounced their intention to commit a war crime.

After four days of bombing, 44 people were dead and two million were left without electricity. Turkish bombs had also hit water stations, schools and two hospitals. This deliberate targeting of the basic infrastructure needed for life is contrary to international law on human rights. On 9 October, Erdoğan declared that they had completed the "first phase", but promised more and worse to come.

On 23 December, Turkey began another round of bombing in North and East Syria. This time the excuse given was a successful counterattack by PKK guerrillas against invading Turkish forces hundreds of kilometres away in a third country: Iraq. Turkey has admitted to the deaths of twelve of their soldiers, and the PKK claims that the figure was much higher. The Syrian targets of Turkey's revenge bombing – none of them military – included oil wells, power stations, grain stores, a printing press, various factories, a

manufacturer of medical oxygen that had been built by USAID, a dialysis centre, a health clinic, and many checkpoints used by the internal security forces. Ten people were killed by the attacks, including five workers at the printing press, and 31 were injured. Much of the infrastructure that had been hit before and been repaired was destroyed again. Mazloum Abdi, the Commander in Chief of the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [told](#) Al-Monitor's Amberin Zaman "Turkey's message is, 'Rebuild as much as you want, we will strike again. We will make life hell for you.'" And he concluded, "Turkey's aim is to prevent this region from achieving any form of security and stable governance. It wants to sabotage the democratic model that we are seeking to establish as a blueprint for the rest of Syria, one that ensures full rights to all its citizens no matter their gender, ethnicity or creed."

This was also a show of force for domestic consumption by a Turkish people who have been shocked by the loss of Turkish soldiers at the hands of an organisation they are told is as good as defeated.

There are ISIS cells still active in North and East Syria, and the instability resulting from the Turkish attacks plays straight into their hands. Ilhan Ahmed, former co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, is concerned that the danger is being ignored. She [told](#) the Rojava Information Centre, "When Turkey attacks like this, it risks everything returning to point zero and ISIS announcing their caliphate." This wouldn't bother Turkey, which has always given ISIS support, despite being nominally part of the Global Coalition against ISIS. Turkish closeness to ISIS seems to have been illustrated again this week with the claim by Turkish intelligence that Turkey had carried out the assassination of an "SDF collaborator" in June, despite an ISIS [claim](#) to the same assassination having been widely publicised four months ago.

The SDF works with the US-led coalition to find ISIS cells and capture their members, but ISIS is still able to carry out fatal attacks. And in the vast and unmanageable al Hol Camp, captured ISIS women are raising a new generation of fighters. In June, the Autonomous Administration announced a plan to put ISIS prisoners on trial themselves and to stop waiting for other countries to act, but there have been no more details of this.

The United States has 900 troops in Syria. Their professed mission is to work with the SDF to eliminate ISIS. No doubt, they also keep an eye on Iran; and their presence serves to ward off a further Turkish land invasion. The limits of their remit become very clear whenever Turkey bombs North and East Syria, and America does nothing to stop them – though the Americans have downed a Turkish drone that approached too close to their own base. The SDF have no air defence systems and will not be allowed any. Abdi commented to Al-Monitor, “The absence of any kind of meaningful response on the part of the United States and the coalition is one of the chief reasons that Turkey feels empowered to carry on its attacks against us.” And he observed how this was changing public perceptions of America: “The positive feelings felt for the United States are shifting to ones of disappointment and anger.”

With Turkey using their veto over Sweden’s NATO membership application to leverage the maximum concessions possible, there are concerns that the United States will supply Turkey with the F16 planes that they have been demanding, in exchange for taking the NATO agreement over the line. Those planes would be used to attack the very people America is working with in North and East Syria.

Increasingly, the US bases themselves are becoming a risk. America’s unquestioning support of Israel as they carry out genocide in Gaza has made the bases into a prime target for the region’s Iranian-backed militias. If the Gaza war spreads further, the people of North and East Syria could find themselves unwittingly caught in the middle of it, and even punished for their American association. Abdi comments “We have been very clear with all parties that we do not want to be dragged into their conflict and are urging them to stop.” Israel’s prime minister Netanyahu may try and pose as a friend of the Kurds as he accuses Erdoğan of genocide, but Abdi is clear in his rejection of Israeli hypocrisy: “we do not condone the killing of civilians no matter where they are. The targeting of civilians is a war crime.”

It is not only Turkey that wants to see an end to the Autonomous Administration. Assad’s Syrian forces restrict supplies going into Shehba, Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashafrieh, leaving residents struggling to survive. In Deir-ez-Zor, Syrian forces, together with pro-Iranian militias, have been encouraging

discontent among tribal leaders, and facilitating attacks on the region from across the Euphrates. And Turkish intelligence recently claimed the assassination of an important SDF commander who had been improving relations with the local Arab tribes. In Syria as a whole, both Iran and Russia, have exploited the civil war to award themselves control over strategic parts of the economy.

Turkey, Iran, Russia, and Syria meet together to discuss Syria's future. They share a common wish to see the disintegration of the Autonomous Administration, but Syria has insisted that normalised relations require Turkey to first withdraw from the lands that they have occupied.

In the parts of northern Syria occupied by Turkey, conditions under the jihadi militias are brutal. There is horrific torture in their prisons, and prisoners are also illegally transported to Turkey. Syrian refugees who had found safety in Turkey are being forced to "return" to these occupied areas and contribute to Turkish plans for demographic change in what were once Kurdish majority regions.

Despite the constant attacks and threats of worse to come, the Autonomous Administration has continued to look to the future, and has produced a new Social Contract that sets out the workings of their radical bottom-up democracy. They are putting this forward as a potential solution for the whole of Syria, and they are ready to talk with Damascus, as they have been for a long time. However, President Assad has yet to be persuaded to give up his ambitions for a return to top-down centralised control over the whole country.

## **Iraq**

In Iraq, Turkey and Iran compete for influence. Members of Iraq's federal government are close to Iran, while the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the autonomous government of the Kurdistan region, is close to Turkey. The Turkish military occupies large areas in the mountainous north of the Kurdistan region where they are fighting the PKK guerrillas; and the KDP is helping Turkey in this fight. Turkish attacks in this region have caused civilian casualties, and their war has emptied out many of the region's

villages. The Iraqi government is not happy with this, but there is little they can do. They have no love for the PKK, but don't want to see Turkey's influence grow. Despite Turkish pressure – and the leverage provided by Turkey's control of upstream river water – they have refused to list the PKK as terrorists.

Turkey's use of new technologies – supplemented (the PKK reports) by illegal use of chemical weapons – makes it increasingly difficult for the PKK guerrillas to hide, but the guerrillas have adapted their own techniques. They continue to deny Turkey victory and to inflict casualties on the Turkish troops, including the twelve or more men who died a week ago. The PKK claim that Turkey consistently hides the extent of their losses. Turkey has also carried out targeted assassinations, both in the Kurdistan region and in the Yazidi area of Şengal, which is struggling to retain its own autonomy.

The second political party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – has been working with the SDF and the United States in the fight against ISIS. Turkey has made their displeasure clear. On 7 April, a Turkish drone hit the airport in Sulaymaniyah, the PUK's main city. The explosion was close to an American convoy carrying the SDF Commander, Mazloun Abdi, and the President of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council, Ilhan Ahmed. It is unclear if this was meant as a warning for the PUK to stop working with the SDF, or as an attempt at assassination. Another drone targeted the airport in September and killed three members of the PUK's counter terrorism group who had been combatting ISIS alongside the SDF and US. Since April, Turkey has denied access to Turkish airspace for all flights to and from Sulaymaniyah, with significant economic repercussions.

Iran, too, has carried out assassinations on Iraqi soil. In 2022, they also shelled the camps used by Kurdish guerrilla groups exiled from Rojhelat – Iranian Kurdistan. This year, Iran made an agreement with the Iraqi government that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) would remove these groups from their camps by 19 September or see Iraqi troops take over control of the border areas. The only fully armed Rojhelat guerrilla group left in Iraq is now the Kurdistan Free Life Party, PJAK, which is based in the remote mountains, along with the PKK.

There are long-running tensions between Iraq's federal government and the KRG over budget allocations and rights to sell the region's oil. The federal government successfully took Turkey to court over its highly favourable oil deal with the KRG, arguing that the oil was not the KRG's to sell. Establishing a new system acceptable to Iraq, the KRG, the oil companies, and Turkey has proved elusive. No oil has flowed through the Turkish pipeline since March, and with only relatively small quantities going out through Bagdad, the KRG is estimated to have lost \$5 billion.

The recent provincial elections demonstrate how Iraqi politics has become defined by differences of ethnicity and religion – as purposely envisaged by opposition politicians and their Western friends in the 1990s. This feeds destructive division and encourages clientism and endemic corruption.

## **Iran**

Hopes that Iran's revolutionary uprising would attract enough support across the country to bring down the government have proved premature. Apart from some radical pockets, Iran's central cities did not match the momentum of the peripheries, led by Rojhelat, where people have little to lose. From the earlier mix of reports on protests and on state violence, it is mainly just the state violence that remains. The Iranian regime has clamped down on protest with increasing brutality, and the news agenda has moved on, but the spirit of resistance ignited by the revolutionary movement is not so easily extinguished and is still smouldering.

In January, the European Parliament voted to list Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation, but this was rejected by the EU's Foreign Affairs Council.

Also in January, an Earthquake struck Khoy in Rojhelat. The response of the Iranian government demonstrated their dismissal of Kurdish lives. Little help was forthcoming, but anti-riot units arrived quickly, and, despite the cold, a water cannon was used to disperse people who were looking for aid. Those who tried to bring aid, were prevented from doing so.

An attempt by a group of well-healed Iranian exiles, including the son of the former Shah, to act as representatives of the revolution fell apart less than three months after its high-profile launch at Washington's Georgetown University.

In schools in different parts of Iran, thousands of girls – it was almost entirely girls – were struck with breathing problems and nausea, and some had to be hospitalised. Poisonous gas was suspected, but nothing was ever found, and there are even suggestions that what occurred was a mass psychogenic illness. The Iranian state does want to see its girls educated, but some people could want to punish them for their leading role in the revolution. We may never know what actually happened.

Newroz in Rojhelat was marked by commemorations at the graves of those killed by the security forces; and on the anniversary of the death of Jina Amini, whose manslaughter by Iran's "morality police" triggered the first protests, a general strike was held in Rojhelat and in some other areas, despite major security.

In October, the world learnt of another young woman who, like Jina, had been put into a coma by an attack from the "morality police". Armita Garawand, too, never recovered. And the authorities went to extraordinary lengths not to let anyone see her.

Despite alienating their own population through their brutal mechanisms of control, Iran has been building their profile in the new world order. They have joined BRICS and been accepted into full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. They have built up their influence in Syria and Iraq, they are supplying Russia with drones to use in Ukraine, and they are central to the resistance around Hamas.

## **Hope amidst the violence**

Scrolling through Twitter on Christmas day, I came across images that I would never want to see – images of Kurdish guerrillas being shot and tortured and of bodies being beheaded. The descriptions claimed that these were being shared by Turkish soldiers. I can't vouch for them being authentic, or know



how long ago they were taken, but the images and the comments below them provide another example of the corrupting impact of the virulent racism and prejudice that has become the hallmark of so much of today's politics, and that is being used to justify and normalise the most extreme violence. This is a racism that is promulgated by political leaders such as Netanyahu and Erdoğan, Itamar Ben-Gvir and Devlet Bahçeli, and that is given support by the more genteel racism of politicians such as Joe Biden and Jens Stoltenberg. It is easy, especially if you spend too much time on Twitter, to despair of a world that produces such mindless destructive violence; but what is much less obvious amidst all the opinionated confusion, often because it is not stated, is the strength of resistance to these destructive views and the refusal to allow them to dictate our understanding.

People are able to understand that the Israeli government does not represent all Jews, even if it claims to; that supporting the rights of Palestinians does not mean signing up to Hamas; that Turkish soldiers are mainly boys from poor families brainwashed by state-sponsored hate to turn them into killers. And in the very places where we might expect despair to take strongest root, we see the active insistence on hope in a better future: places such as North and East Syria, where, even after the violence of ISIS, different peoples are working together in pursuit of a better world.

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