

# The scramble for Syria – a weekly news review

While all eyes have been on Gaza and Beirut, tensions in Syria have become increasingly violent, as well as complicated by the variety of different countries all jostling for position and ready to take advantage of any opening that they can use to increase their own power and influence. This week's review also looks at the run-up to tomorrow's important election in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, hopes for peace amidst continued oppression in Turkey, and news from Iran's prisons.

[11:02 am 19/10/2024](#)



Israel's wars are shaking the unstable equilibriums of Middle East politics, and the different powers active in the region are jostling for position, ready to take advantage of any opening that they can use to increase their own power and influence. Israel's killing of Hamas leader, Yahya Sinwar, has confirmed Israel's commitment to violence, and increased fears of all out regional war. While all eyes have been on Gaza and Beirut,

tensions in Syria have become increasingly violent, as well as complicated by the variety of different countries involved.

As a measure of the number of international actors, take the [report of a Russian airstrike](#) on Wednesday, in Idlib Governorate, which killed the chief engineer of a drone factory and two of his assistants. Idlib, in North-West Syria, is the area controlled by Al Qaeda descendent, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and has become home to people who resisted President Assad's government and embraced an Islamist alternative. The Russians are Assad's main backers. The engineer, himself Palestinian, worked for the Turkestan Islamic Party, which includes Uyghurs who came from China with their families in 2013 to support the Islamist revolt against Assad.

Idlib has been witnessing increasing military activity, and there is talk of a possible HTS attack on parts of Aleppo. HTS receives military backing from Turkey, which has been bringing reinforcements into the area. [Reports describe](#) the arrival of a Turkish convoy of around 50 military vehicles. On the other side, the Syrian government is also supported by Iran – as well as by Russia – and Syria has seen a growing presence of Iranian backed militias. In the Idlib region, Hezbollah left a week ago, but they are being replaced by other Iranian backed groups, including [some 200 fighters from an Iranian-backed Afghan militia](#). There have been attacks carried out by both sides – government and anti-government – and Russian airstrikes have destroyed local businesses and [killed 10 people](#).

### **Turkey's mercenaries**

In the areas occupied by Turkey, day to day control is in the hands of a collection of mercenary groups, which Turkey has designated the Syrian National Army (SNA), but which operate as criminal gangs, exploiting everything and everyone under their charge. This exploitation includes kidnap for ransom. [Twenty-seven people were recorded as kidnapped](#) in Afrîn in the first 10 days of this month. Others have been taken since, including [men who had only just escaped from the war in Lebanon](#). Olive crops are stolen, trees cut down, and [buildings seized](#). One faction leader was [videoed shooting the feet at close range](#) of men captured trying to cross the border into Turkey. Residents of Girê Spî (Tel Abyad) have been [protesting against the occupiers](#).

Infighting between these gangs is not uncommon, and in the last few days [heavy clashes](#) over control of parts of the Afrîn district are reported to have led to 10 deaths among the combatants, as well as killing two civilians and injuring 27 more. Hawar News Agency explains that these latest clashes were ordered by Turkey, who desired the dissolution of groups resistant to moving towards normalisation with Assad, and specifically to the opening of a border crossing to government-controlled areas. (While Erdoğan now wants to make a deal with Assad, Assad refuses to talk without plans for Turkish withdrawal from the occupied areas.)

## Turkey's war of attrition

Turkey has not been able to carry out another invasion since 2019 as Russia and America will not get out of the way, but they have never stopped their low-level attacks. This week, Turkey and their mercenaries attacked villages in Ain Issa, Shahba, unoccupied parts of Afrîn, and Manbij. In Manbij these killed a Syrian Government army officer and injured other Syrian Government soldiers.

## Deir ez-Zor

In Deir ez-Zor, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria controls the land northeast of the Euphrates, while the Syrian government controls the land to the southwest. Northeast Deir ez-Zor was the last place liberated from ISIS by the Kurds and their allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It is dominated by Arab tribes, and the Autonomous Administration's grassroots democracy is less developed here than in other areas. For those who do not want the Kurdish democratic experiment to succeed – which includes the Assad government, Turkey, and ISIS – this is North and East Syria's obvious Achilles heel; and it is also the part of Syria with the greatest oil wealth. Both the Syrian government and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) try and encourage discontent within local tribes and support raids across the Euphrates. On Monday there were [clashes between the SDF and fighters from the National Defence Forces](#), a Syrian government-supported militia. IRGC led militias undertook another [cross-river operation](#) on Thursday night.

## The United States

American involvement in Syria began with support for the militias that now make up Turkey's Syrian National Army, but when the United States realised that these were not going to oust Assad, they moved to supporting the Kurds in their fight against ISIS. Some 900 US troops are still there, helping to root out ISIS sleeper cells and pre-empt ISIS attacks, but America's greater concern is containing Iran and preventing the full restoration of Assad. The US has a base near Deir ez-Zor's Conoco oil field, and, since Israel, backed by America, began their genocidal attack on Gaza, this has become a favourite target for Iran-backed militias. At least twice this week, rockets have been fired at the base, and the US has responded with counter attacks. On Monday, [American airstrikes](#) killed four Iran-backed fighters and three Syrian army soldiers. On Thursday, the Americans [responded to three rockets](#) with artillery rounds.

## ISIS

ISIS no longer controls territory, but its sleeper cells are capable of attacks that contribute to insecurity and instability, especially in Deir ez-Zor, where they attack both the SDF and Syrian Government forces. An ISIS attack last Saturday killed two senior Syrian Army officers, two Russian officers, and three further Syrian Army soldiers. On Sunday, ISIS militants on motorcycles [damaged two tankers](#) transporting oil for the Autonomous Administration. On Monday night, [ISIS gunmen attacked](#) an SDF

checkpoint – injuring an SDF fighter – and an SDF headquarters. On Wednesday, ISIS attacks on Syrian Army sites [killed one government soldier](#) and injured others.

## **Israel**

Israel's war also impacts Syria directly, with Israeli attacks on Syrian territory, and the war has forced thousands of civilians to escape to Syria from Lebanon. Iran-linked militia – including Hezbollah – and their equipment are all Israeli targets. On Thursday, two people were [injured in an airstrike](#) that targeted an ammunition warehouse, in the 113th Israeli attack this year. Israeli air and ground attacks have killed 257 fighters.

A week ago, Israeli forces were [reported entering 500m into Syria's Quneitra Governorate](#), levelling and fencing off the captured area.

## **Refugees and IDPs**

Over ¼ million people have crossed into Syria to flee the war in Lebanon, putting further strain on severely stretched resources. The [World Food Programme reports that](#) “The cost of living has tripled in Syria over the past three years, with the minimum wage buying only a fifth of a family's basic food needs and a tenth of essential needs.” And that “Both maternal malnutrition and acute malnutrition in children under 5 are at global emergency thresholds.” Even without the new arrivals, there are thousands of displaced families [stuck in seriously ill-equipped camps](#) dreading the arrival of another winter.

Some of the people coming from Lebanon were [detained by SNA mercenaries](#). The Sultan Murad Division charged \$100 for release.

By Thursday, [19,754 people](#) had reached the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Just 76 of these were Lebanese citizens. Others had gone to Lebanon to escape the Syrian war or to find work. Those from North and East Syria have gone back to their homes, while those from other parts of Syria are being accommodated by the Administration in temporary camps, where they are provided with food, fuel and medical care. The Administration is calling for international help – but have so far received none – and for the opening of further border crossings into the region.

Before leaving Syria, it is important to note that, amidst all the pressures and violence, life goes on and progress can continue to be made. On Sunday, Rojava University, founded in 2016, [held its fourth graduation ceremony](#), while Tuesday saw the opening of [Qamishli's annual book fair](#).

## **Run up to the election in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

Next door, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, tensions are running high in the run-up to tomorrow's regional election – so high that on Monday night [a clash broke out](#) in Erbil between the two main parties, and shots were fired.

Both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are parties dominated by a single family, but their visions for the region and the future of Kurdish politics are fundamentally different, making this election important in the wider geopolitical balance. The KDP has been helping the Turkish military take control of large areas in the north of the region, while the PUK refuses to succumb to Turkey's demands. They won't help Turkey attack the PKK, and they will continue to work with the Syrian SDF, which Turkey portrays as identical to the PKK. The PUK has castigated the KDP for becoming "mercenaries" of Turkey, while the KDP has shown off their closeness to their powerful neighbour, with a meeting between Nechirvan Barzani and Erdoğan just days before the vote. Hawar News Agency expressed the concern of many Kurds in Iraq and elsewhere in their [description of this meeting](#), noting that the two men discussed "how to consolidate the exploitation of Southern Kurdistan for the benefit of the Turkish economy, and how to consolidate [KDP] dominance at the expense of other political parties in the upcoming parliamentary elections."

If the KDP are returned to power this will strengthen Turkish influence way beyond the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) – the dominant party in the Autonomous Region of North and East Syria – has [called for a vote for the PUK](#). The Brussels-based Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) does not endorse parties, but [has made it clear](#) that they regard the KDP as collaborating with the Turkish occupiers.

The dominant KDP-owned media has ignored PUK rallies, while [Kurdistan Watch reports](#) that PUK media has been more balanced – as befits a party that is attempting to portray itself as the anti-corruption choice. The KDP has also spent much more money than other parties – so there is hardly a level playing field even before accusations of foul play. There have been reports of the KDP, with Turkey's help, [arranging to import voters from Turkey](#). All voters are being asked to hand over their mobile phones before voting so that they can't record and prove their votes to powerful people outside, which had become a common practice.

### **Talk of peace and acts of oppression in Turkey**

In Turkey, debate continues over the meaning of Devlet Bahçeli's 1 October handshake with members of the pro-Kurdish leftist DEM Party. This change of approach by the leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party raised hopes of new peace talks, but there have been no actions from the government that might support hopes for peace. As threatened, protestors trying to get to the rally for Öcalan's freedom, planned for Diyarbakır last Sunday, were [stopped by police blockades](#). Wherever they were stuck – in other towns or cities or in different Diyarbakır neighbourhoods – they protested there and then. A central theme of the protests was Öcalan's vital role in any peace talks. Two days later, police [detained 269 people](#) in 36 cities in connection with these protests.

On Wednesday, a peace protest in Silopi, called by Peace Mothers and bringing together women from different cities, was [violently attacked by the gendarmes](#). 22 people were detained, including journalists and politicians, and one of the DEM Party Başköy Co-chairs was hospitalised with broken ribs.

Meanwhile, the biggest increase in Turkey's 2025 budget is for [defence and internal security](#), where expenditure will more than double.

The recently published [report on Turkey by the United Nations Committee Against Torture](#) serves as a reminder of how many changes need to be made for Turkey to meet international standards. It specifically calls for Turkey to end the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan and the other three prisoners in İmralı and to stop the practice of imprisonment without possibility of parole. Turkey has until next July to respond to the report.

There is neither space nor time to go into the detailed discussion about the prospects of new peace talks, but it is now clear that there never was any intention on the part of Bahçeli or Erdoğan to enter into negotiations that could result in a solution to the Kurdish Question. For them, Kurdish politicians can only be accepted on the government's terms: Öcalan must liquidate the PKK, the DEM Party must disassociate itself from Öcalan... However, as [Ertuğrul Kürkçü points out](#), history never proceeds according to plan, and the fact that these ideas are being discussed may not be without consequence.

Turkish media will not ask the views of the PKK themselves, but they would have to be part of any settlement. Their leading figures have made clear that they will not be taken in by mere rhetoric. As [Mustafa Karasu explains](#), Bahçeli's handshake is not part of a new policy, but rather of a "new game against the DEM Party" that is designed to stop the Kurdish struggle and generate confusion, and opposition towards the PKK.

Kurds have also noted [Öcalan's warning](#) from a previous occasion when Bahçeli shook the hand of a leader of the pro-Kurdish party. Then, in 2007, Öcalan told his lawyers, "A handshake just for the sake of symbolism cannot be."

## **In Iran's prisons**

Turning to Iran, there has been a rare bit good news from the courts. The death sentence against the women's and workers' rights campaigner, [Sharifeh Mohammadi](#), has been lifted; and the two women journalists who wrote the first report on Jina Amini's death have had their [sentences shortened](#). (The court now accepts that they were not acting on behalf of America.)

But Warisheh Moradi is still in Evin prison, and on the tenth day of a hunger strike to protest Iran's human rights abuses, especially the use of the death penalty. She has [written a second public letter](#), which provides a powerful reminder to those tempted to see Iran only in terms of its opposition to Israel's genocide. She writes, "If you see the toll of war and cry "No to War," you must also recognize the domestic killings and daily executions carried out under the guise of political Islam. Do not allow cross-border wars to obscure the issue of internal repression. Through this hunger strike, I aim to ensure that the voices of domestic fighters who have bravely stood up are not lost amidst the clamour of war and futile ventures. To this end, I announce my indefinite hunger strike in solidarity with the global campaigns of #No\_to\_Executions,

spearheaded by groups, institutions, and international organisations dedicated to abolishing the death penalty.”

The brutality of the Iranian regime was further underlined by the [mass shooting](#), last Sunday, of Afghan migrants attempting to cross the border into Iran.

## **Germany**

After writing about so much oppression in the Middle East, I will bring in an example from Europe – more specifically from Germany, which has always shown itself anxious to please Turkey. This week the [trial began in Stuttgart](#) of Emin Bayman, whose work for Kurdish organisations is being prosecuted under Germany’s counter terrorism law. And today, [Chancellor Olaf Scholz will meet with Erdoğan](#) in Istanbul to talk about migration control and about Turkey’s desire to purchase 40 Eurofighter jets. (The sale already has approval from the UK and Spain).

## **The dark side of the moon**

Finally, Twitter users were shocked to see the musician, Roger Waters, of Pink Floyd, [giving fulsome praise to Erdoğan](#) for Turkey’s video on the anniversary of the beginning of Israel’s genocide in Gaza. It was a good video, but before feeding Erdoğan’s propaganda, Rogers should have remembered his own previous stands against Turkish oppression, not least his support for imprisoned Kurdish singer [Nûdem Durak](#). Twitter users were quick to point out the shameful gap between Erdoğan’s speeches on Israel and his actions, including sharing an image, made by Metin Cihan, which shows that when Turkey claimed to be stopping all trade with Israel, all they were actually doing was relabelling it as trade with Palestine.

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