

# Bitter winds and green shoots – a review of 2021, Part II

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## **THE AUTONONMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA**

Turkish threats of another major attack in Syria have not been realised, but that doesn't mean that the region has been allowed to develop in peace. Despite the ceasefire agreements negotiated by the US and Russia, Turkey and their mercenaries have continued with relentless attacks on the villages of North and East Syria. Sometimes increasing in intensity, but never letting up, they are aimed at driving away the local people and destabilising the administration. As I write, pictures are coming in of the bombing of homes

and a mosque that killed two women and a young child, the latest of many civilian deaths; but even when no-one is physically hurt, these constant attacks can shatter lives and communities. There are so many displaced families that the IDP [Internationally Displaced People] camps can't cope. Schools are being used for temporary accommodation leaving children without access to education. At the same time, targeted assassinations have hit YPG and YPJ leaders (leaders of People's and Women's Protection Units).

The areas of Northern Syria that have been occupied by Turkey continue to be sites of pillage and terror carried out by rival mercenary gangs that include former ISIS fighters and others of similar mindset. Dedicated activists have carefully recorded a litany of human rights abuses and unimaginable horror, but a wider world doesn't want to know.

In July, Turkey claimed that they had uncovered a mass grave of people killed by the YPG in Afrîn, and their propaganda was widely shared before it was shown that their bulldozers were actually desecrating a graveyard of YPG fighters killed by the Turkish-backed invaders.

Turkey's attacks on North and East Syria are not only military. They have imposed repeated cuts to the water supply to Hasakah since capturing the Alouk pumping station in 2019, and, since late January, they have reduced the flow in the Eurphrates. Instead of the minimum 500 cubic metres a second stipulated in an international agreement from 1987, only 200 cubic metres a second now flows into Syria. Combined with unusually low rainfall, the result has been catastrophic. This region that used to be Syria's bread basket has seen wheat yields drop by over two thirds. Hydroelectric turbines, which produce most of the region's power, can turn for only a fraction of the time. Water supplies are limited and polluted. But this war crime is barely mentioned.

Despite Turkey's bellicose statements promising an imminent attack in October, this time Russia and the United States, who control the airspace, have chosen not to let Turkey carry out another full-scale invasion and take control of more land.

Relations between the Autonomous Administration and Damascus have been difficult, as President Assad wants to force the region back under central control. The Syrian regime has restricted movement in and out of Shehba, provoked unrest in Manbij and Qamishli, and held back North and East Syria's share of international aid. However there has recently been growing optimism about the possibility of a dialogue with Damascus facilitated by Russia

Attacks from ISIS sleeper cells have never stopped and are aimed at disrupting trust and sowing fear. They have found shelter in the Turkish occupied areas, and the lack of stability resulting from Turkey's attacks encourages recruitment.

Although defeat of ISIS is regarded as an international priority, calls from the Autonomous Administration for help with managing the thousands of ISIS prisoners left to their care are still falling on deaf ears. Syrian prisoners who are shown not to have been involved in atrocities are being released into the care of local leaders, but huge numbers of Iraqis and other foreigners remain. There is no prospect of help with trials, or even with rehabilitating a generation of children being brought up by their ISIS mothers as 'cubs of the caliphate'. Some women in Al-Hol Camp, which houses ISIS families, try to impose Islamic State rules, and will murder those who don't comply. Despite a large-scale action in April to clear weapons from the camp, relief was only temporary. Supporters in Turkish occupied areas help send weapons in, and bring escapees out.

## **IRAN**

Iran has continued to see both strong protests and brutal repression, and to care little about the opinion of the wider world. Among Iran's Kurds, there has been a growth of activity by guerrilla groups based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and also by civil society activists in ecological movements and Kurdish cultural and language associations. Kurds suffer exceptionally high rates of imprisonment and execution, and Iranian Kurds continue to be targeted on Iraqi territory, via missiles and drones in the mountains or assassination in the cities. Iran applies pressure for the Iranian Kurdish guerrillas to be expelled from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Pro-Iranian Popular Mobilisation Units have gained a powerful position in Iraq, where they will resist the spread of Turkish influence outwith the Kurdistan Region, and Iran has won the trust of the Syrian government.

## **INTERACTING WITH THE WIDER WORLD**

Turkish politics spill over into other European countries. In February, the former head of the General Staff's Intelligence Department admitted Turkey's responsibility for the murder of three leading Kurdish women in Paris in 2013; and the Turkish Ambassador who left Paris in March has been accused of coordinating (unfulfilled) plans for assassinating leading Kurds in Europe. In July, hit-lists of dissidents inspired attacks in Berlin and Cardiff.

Most international responses reflect national interests.

Turkey's relations with the EU continue to be dominated by the concerns of EU members – especially the deal whereby Turkey acts as a holding centre for refugees who might otherwise come to Europe, but also by trade deals and NATO interests. MEPs have shown concern over Turkey's slide towards fascism, but it is the presidents of the European Council and the European Commission who do the negotiating, and they would probably describe themselves as 'pragmatic'.

European governments have proved ready to dance to Turkey's tune, especially in Germany, where peace activists were prevented from going to Iraq to argue against Turkey's attacks.

Although Greece has, at times, seemed close to war with Turkey, that has not prevented it from illegally pushing refugees back across the Turkish border.

The United States has found itself working with the YPG in Syria, while at the same time supporting Turkey's attacks on the PKK. President Biden may not share Trump's awe of Erdoğan, but he has renewed the US bounty on PKK leaders. And US support for North and East Syria does not extend to supporting formal recognition. American public statements often let Turkey off the hook by attempting to blame both 'sides.'

Russia would like to see North and East Syria forced back under Assad's full control. Both Russia and China continue to veto the opening of a border crossing that could allow international aid into the region.

More positively, this December, there has finally been some progress in addressing Turkey's failure to comply with judgements of the European Court of Human Rights. In the case of Turkey's refusal to release the businessman/philanthropist, Osman Kavala, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has stopped prevaricating and has begun the glacial process that could eventually result in Turkey facing sanctions, or even expulsion from Council membership. They also discussed the Court's ruling that Öcalan's imprisonment without the possibility of parole amounted to torture. This ruling was made back in 2014, and had not been brought to the Committee until now.

And steps are being taken towards normalising the idea of delisting the PKK [as a terrorist organisation]. Delisting is supported by legal arguments, and it could also facilitate peace negotiations, and help stop terrorism charges being used to delegitimise all criticism of the Turkish government. The possibility of delisting was raised in a UK Parliament Westminster Hall debate in November – though quickly dismissed by the government minister. In December, the list of supporters for a new international call for the PKK's removal from the EU terrorism list demonstrated that this is an idea that has support among many elected politicians and lawyers as well as among activists.

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Looking through this last year we can see much to cause anger and concern, but we can also find reasons for hope that next year may bring better news – and so reasons to inspire us to do our utmost to make this so.