

Putting the ISIS prison attack in context – a weekly news review

[12:23 pm 29/01/2022](#)

A A



“The ISIS attack on the Hasaka prison was long predicted. The response by the SDF was, as we have come to expect, largely considered and professional. The role of the Turkish and Syrian governments is unsurprising and un-talked about. The neglect and misrepresentation by international media and politicians has been simply astounding.”

SARAH GLYNN
Medya News

Sarah Glynn

The ISIS attack on Sina’a Prison in the Ghweiran District of Hasaka was long predicted. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) response was, as we have come to expect, largely considered and professional. The role of the Turkish and Syrian governments is unsurprising and un-talked about. The neglect and misrepresentation by international media and politicians have been simply astounding.

On Wednesday, as the SDF took back control of the greater part of the prison, people were celebrating the seventh anniversary of the expulsion of ISIS from Kobanê, and the turning of the tide against these conquerors for whom nothing seemed too brutal. Lights were lit on the long rows of graves in Kobanê's cemetery. Many of these graves are the final resting place of those who died in the battle of Kobanê, while others house those who died in later battles to liberate northern Syria from ISIS, both in the prominently Kurdish regions known as Rojava and in Arab-majority areas beyond. Their graves fill other cemeteries too. By 23 March 2019, when ISIS was forced from its last piece of territory, in Baghouz in the Deir ez-Zor Governate, more than 11,000 SDF fighters had lost their lives.

Despite warnings that this was not the end of ISIS, much of the world breathed a sigh of relief and turned its attention elsewhere. The inhabitants of Rojava and the newly liberated territories – Kurds and Arabs and people from a range of other ethnic groups – had to rebuild their towns and communities and their lives. Inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, the region now known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has tried not merely to remake the old society, but to create something better – more democratic, fairer, feminist; however, the hope that this brings has had to struggle against tremendous odds.

While the SDF were still fighting ISIS, Turkey invaded and occupied the Rojava canton of Afrîn. In October 2019, Turkey invaded Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî; and even when they have not been carrying out major campaigns, attacks by Turkey and their mercenaries have never stopped. This war of attrition, aimed at destabilising and destroying the Autonomous Administration, takes many forms, including cutting off the water supply to Hasaka for months on end, and reducing the water flow in the Euphrates to less than half the agreed rate.

At the same time, the Syrian regime in Damascus has used every opportunity to ferment unrest and isolate the region, restricting access for both trade and aid. The vultures are hovering on all sides, ready to exploit any weakness. And although the United States has provided the SDF with air support in its fight against ISIS, US sanctions, which apply to the whole of Syria, contribute to the economic instability on which ISIS thrives.

In the middle of this fragile world, ISIS fighters and their families, who had surrendered and been taken prisoner at Baghouz and elsewhere, have been housed in makeshift prisons and camps: thousands of people, including recruits from all over the world with radicalised and traumatised children, who other countries want to have nothing to do with. It is as much as the overstretched Autonomous Authority can do to provide for their basic needs and maintain security. However, they have attempted to help some of the boys with deradicalisation programmes.

The Administration's calls for international help, especially for the return of foreign nationals and for establishing an international tribunal that could try the prisoners for war crimes, have failed to gain a response, and even the many warnings that the prisons and camps are ticking time bombs have gone unheeded.

The Administration has helped nearly 10,000 Syrian women and children from Al Hol Camp who are deemed not to be a risk to return to their places of origin under the protection of local authorities in these areas, and 1,365 people have been returned to Iraq, but international inaction ensures that tens of thousands of people remain indefinitely in the camps and prisons, without even the possibility of a trial.

From the foreign fighters and their families, fewer than 2000 people have been taken back by their country of origin. The same narrow and short-sighted mindset that has allowed Europe to offload and outsource responsibility for refugees by binding themselves to a deal with Turkey has enabled European countries to offload the responsibility for taking care of their ISIS citizens to the Autonomous Administration, with little thought for the long-term and world-wide consequences.

The complex in Ghweiran was not designed to be a prison. It was originally built to be a college and had long been a barracks before it was converted to accommodate some of the thousands of ISIS fighters captured in Baghouz, including high ranking leaders and a large proportion of men from other countries. With some 4,000 inmates, it was hugely overcrowded. The complex also housed, in a separate building, around 700 boys aged between 12 and 17

who have been indoctrinated by ISIS as Cubs of the Caliphate. The prison has a history of riots and thwarted escape plans, and the attack that began on 20 January is the biggest ISIS attack since they lost their territorial gains. Hundreds of fighters attacked the prison from outside, while the prisoners rioted within. Confessions from captured fighters reveal that during months of preparation, some 200 ISIS fighters were settled under cover in the surrounding area and supplied with arms.

The attackers used suicide car bombs, as well as a large array of weapons, and they infiltrated the surrounding neighbourhood, taking over strategic buildings and using the cover of people's homes.

The majority of the prisoners failed to escape, but they took control of the prison complex. They killed some of the prison staff and held others hostage, and they used the boy detainees as human shields. At the same time, ISIS carried out attacks in Deir Ez-Zor. On Wednesday, the SDF announced that they had regained control of the prison, but by the next day – in an indication of the size and complexity of the action – they had discovered a further 60-90 prisoners still defending one of the buildings. SDF soldiers are continuing to comb the city for ISIS cells.

The operation to combat the ISIS attack brought together thousands of SDF troops alongside local security forces. It was supported by planes and helicopters from the US-led Coalition, and also by some Coalition military vehicles and snipers. The SDF made clear that they had to move with caution when retaking the prison so as to minimise the risk to the boy detainees. They managed to persuade the prisoners to release hostages in exchange for medical care. On Wednesday, Rojava Information Centre published some initial figures for those killed: SDF – 27, civilians – 7, attackers – 251, prisoners and minors – unknown.

While the SDF strained every sinew to defeat this attempted ISIS resurgence, Turkey doubled down on their attacks on other parts of North and East Syria, and even bombed a convoy on its way to reinforce the SDF defence against ISIS in Hasaka. A Turkish attack on Ayn Issa villages last Saturday killed three civilians. ISIS captives confirmed to the SDF that many of the attackers came

from the Turkish-occupied areas of Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî. The new chief of police in Serêkaniyê, appointed by Turkey, is said to be a former member of ISIS.

Salih Muslim, former co-chair of North and East Syria's dominant Democratic Union Party (PYD), has stressed the role of outside forces. He has noted that a recently-captured ISIS leader – who had admitted to an earlier, foiled, plot to attack the prison – described getting weapons and support via the Turkish occupied areas. Muslim also claims that the decision to allow ISIS to destabilise the region was made at the Astana talks between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

The 17th Astana meeting, held on 22 December, agreed “to oppose separatist activities that threaten the national security of neighbouring countries in the east of the Euphrates” and the “illegal seizure of Syrian oil revenues”: comments clearly targeted at the Autonomous Administration and also at the US-led Coalition.

Ersin Çaksu, writing for Firat News Agency on Monday, highlighted, as well, the meeting, eight days later, between the intelligence services of Turkey and Syria. He argued that “Most of the data obtained so far (NATO weapons with Turkish serial numbers used by ISIS members, the records of the phone calls of imprisoned ISIS members with Turkey, the confessions of the captured ISIS members and their attempt to go to Serêkaniyê, the newly issued Syrian IDs of the sleeper cells, the mobility of the Syrian regime in the region) show that the Turkish and Syrian governments are behind this rebellion-escape-massacre plot of ISIS.”

The roles of Russia and Iran and of the Syrian regime that they back need not involve active engagement. The Brussels-based Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) states that “the Syrian regime assisted by turning a blind eye to ISIS infiltrations”.

The regime also contributes to the instability on which ISIS thrives.

The public response from Damascus to this week's dangerous events was to accuse the SDF of committing war crimes. A statement from the Autonomous Administration commented, "They forgot that Hasaka is a city in Syria and is fighting against ISIS."

Not long ago, ISIS was front page news, and people learnt with horror of each new atrocity. The group is widely regarded as the epitome of brutality, and is associated with some of the worst terrorist atrocities that Europe has witnessed. But it was some days before this week's attack made any significant impression on international news schedules, and when it did appear, coverage was sketchy, lacking crucial context, and extraordinarily focused on criticising the SDF rather than ISIS.

We have become used to non-Western lives counting for less when it comes to prioritising news stories. We have also seen the long reluctance from international media to show the same empathy for the people of Rojava that they readily gave to people in Idlib. Perhaps we shouldn't have expected more from them this time, even though the ISIS threat affects us all.

The first time I saw the attack mentioned by the BBC was on Monday, over two days after it had started. In this brief account, the reporter made no attempt to get a comment from the SDF, but did give the views of ISIS prisoners. The report also played into the hands of those seeking to destabilise the Autonomous Authority by noting, without context, complaints of "discontent among the Arab population with the Kurdish-led administration". You would never guess from this that the Administration makes a point of multi-ethnic rights, including promoting multi-ethnic leadership.

A statement put out on Tuesday by YPG International has pointed out that most articles appearing in the international media "disregard the fact that the majority of the population that makes up the Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria as well as the majority of the SDF itself is in fact Arab... These reports are the greatest gift one can give to ISIS propagandists, who have always attempted to spin the fable of racial division among the peoples who

together bore the terrible consequences of ISIS' advance and together expelled them from their homes at the cost of many martyrs."

Many reports have focused on the boy detainees and the spartan conditions that they have had to endure. The Autonomous Administration would be the first to agree that these radicalised youths should be being given intensive help to integrate into a normal community. They are also aware that any failure to maintain ethical standards is a blow to their project of building a better society. But, despite repeated requests for help, they do not have the resources to do much more than keep these young people safe from harming the wider community.

On Tuesday, UNICEF put out a statement calling for the boys' safe evacuation, which, at best, demonstrates an extraordinary naivety as to the nature of ISIS, who haven't shown much interest in humanitarian pleas.

It completely ignores the fact that these young people have been trained to be a danger to society; and, in making a 'call on all parties', appears to suggest some sort of equivalence between the SDF and ISIS. It is also not helpful to refer to 'possible war crimes'. The SDF's response details what they have done and tried to do, and ends with a call to UNICEF and humanitarian organisations "to provide, through a clear action plan, sustainable support to the Autonomous Administration to construct rehabilitation centers that meet humanitarian and international standards, away from the detention environment."

UNICEF's statement impacted the tone and focus of subsequent media reports, and was followed on Tuesday by a string of tweets from Letta Tayler of Human Rights Watch that were based on messages from some of the teenage detainees about the dangers they were facing.

Tayler refers to the ongoing events simply as a 'prison crisis' and gives no context whatsoever.

As the extent of the attack became apparent, reports became longer, but no less problematic. Take the BBC OS news programme that was broadcast on BBC World Service radio on Wednesday afternoon.

The section on Hasaka began by highlighting concern for the boy detainees, and questioned the reasons given by the SDF – which they depict simply as Kurdish – for the boys’ detention, quoting complaints from ‘Arab and tribal groups’. They then played an account of the current situation in the city from a man who lives in Hasaka. He raised the issue of Turkish attacks and Turkish mercenaries cutting off the water supply, and the programme turned to their expert to explain Turkey’s actions. We were told that Turkey had ‘retaken towns from the Kurds’ – though these had not been ruled by Turkey since the Ottoman empire – and had sealed off a ‘buffer zone’. A buffer zone is a neutral area separating hostile forces. The SDF had shown no hostility towards Turkey; and the so-called “buffer zone” is a strip of land invaded and occupied by Turkey and now under the control of their mercenary militias, who specialise in extreme brutality and share many characteristics with ISIS. The two main towns in this zone – Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî – have become safe havens for ISIS, including for many of the organisers of the prison attack. And, of course, we were told, without counter argument, that Turkey sees “the Kurds” as being a terrorist organisation.

Media reticence over covering the attack reflects the neglect shown by politicians. Although Europe has suffered major ISIS attacks in the past, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, didn’t even find events in Hasaka worthy of a Tweet. Despite the involvement of US troops, there is no tweet from US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, either.

The US military recognises, in the words of the commander of the Coalition’s Joint Task Force, that “This is a global problem that requires many nations to come together to develop an enduring long-term solution.”

What will it take for the world to wake up to what is happening, and, even if it does, how many people will look beyond the immediate security issues and

examine and address the role being played by external forces, especially by America's NATO ally, Turkey?

Postscript

The need to put the events at Hasaka prison in context has left me no space to discuss events happening elsewhere, but I will make a brief list of some things that shouldn't be left to pass unnoticed.

Turkey's courts continue to be busy. In the Deniz Poyraz murder case, the defendant expressed no regrets except that he had not killed more people, and the family's lawyer raised serious suspicions about spoliation and deficient collection of evidence.

Selahattin Demirtaş was given another prison sentence, this time for insulting the former prime minister.

Imprisoned and severely ill former MP, Aysel Tuğluk, will undergo another assessment by İstanbul Forensic Medicine Institution, which previously disallowed her release and has kept many seriously ill prisoners behind bars.

The European Court of Human Rights found in favour of Die Welt journalist, Deniz Yücel, who was imprisoned in Turkey for almost a year in 2017. Bianet notes that, "With this recent ruling, the ECtHR has convicted Turkey over the files of nine jailed journalists in total since 2021."

Journalist Sedef Kabaş was arrested for insulting the president by quoting a proverb. There have also been criminal complaints filed against two CHP MPs for insulting the president with comments made on the same television programme.

However, President Erdoğan rowed back from his attack on the hugely popular singer, Sezen Aksu, after his party showed their discomfort, and artists and writers spoke up in her support.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) agreed to reopen the border between North and East Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq after families calling for the return of the bodies of their children killed in a KDP ambush were persuaded to end their peaceful vigil. The families have stated that they will continue their action in a different form.

Activists arrested for a sit-in protest at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons at The Hague on 3 December have now all been released; however, in Germany, two Kurdish cultural institutions banned three years ago lost their challenge to the ministerial decision. They will appeal this ruling in a higher court.