

North and East Syria between imperialisms – a weekly news review

Turkey, Iran, and President Assad's government are in competition for control over the land of Syria, but there is one thing they all agree on: control should not be in the hands of the people who live there, especially if they are Kurds with dangerous ideas about radical democracy. This week's news review focusses on external powers active in northern Syria and what they gain from their involvement. It also looks at democratic difficulties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and resistance in Baluchistan.

[4:28 pm 12/10/2023](#)



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Turkey, Iran, and President Assad's government are in competition for control over the land of Syria, but there is one thing they all agree on: control should not be in the hands of the people who live there, especially if they are Kurds with dangerous ideas about radical democracy. This shared interest is not new, but there are suggestions that it has succeeded in generating new levels of co-operation aimed at destabilising the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. At the same time, the Autonomous Administration can expect no real help from the superpowers that are also active in the region. Russia is no enthusiast for democracy, and will not want other areas to be inspired by a well-functioning democratic example. And the United States, despite their tactical alliance with North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has given no real support to the region's autonomous administration and its democratic project. Not that this should realistically have been expected, given America's history of suppressing leftist movements across the world.

As described by Mazloun Abdi

The difficulties all this brings for North and East Syria were clearly set out by the SDF's Commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi, in an [interview](#) with Al Majalla, conducted on Saturday. When Abdi was asked if he thought Damascus, Ankara, and Tehran were coordinating in supporting the recent uprising by some tribal groups in Deir ez-Zor, he replied, "We believe there is clear coordination between Damascus and Tehran to support some tribes' leaders. Turkey also lent its support to the uprising by sending affiliated armed groups." After explaining that the Turkish-backed gangs attacked other parts of North and East Syria at the same time as the attacks in Deir ez-Zor, Abdi continued, "You can say the three capitals share the same desire to use these tribes to carry out their agendas — even though their agendas differ. Their shared goal is to undermine the formula the people living in the autonomous region have agreed upon. They want to undermine our relationships with the tribes but have failed to do so."

Russia has refused to move out of the way to let Turkey carry out their plans for another ground invasion, and they bombed the Turkish-backed gangs to stop the attacks just mentioned, but Abdi explained that this was not evidence

of Russian support for the Autonomous Administration, simply that, “Russia didn’t want Turkey to exploit the recent tensions to expand their influence.” He observed, “We have a longstanding understanding with Russia to maintain stability in the region when the international coalition withdrew from the west of the Euphrates in 2019. Russia doesn’t want to see any change in its areas of influence in this area.”

With respect to the Autonomous Administration’s relationship with the Syrian Government, Abdi yet again pointed out that they were ready to talk with Damascus and had requested Russian help with this, but that the Syrian Government remained intransigent and opposed to decentralisation in any form. For example, the Autonomous Administration envisage the SDF becoming part of the Syrian defence forces but retaining its separate structure and identity, while Damascus demands that the SDF be dissolved and its members absorbed into the Syrian Army.

Damascus and Tehran are continuing to try and destabilise the Autonomous Administration by infiltrating armed groups across the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor, as the Syrian Democratic Forces [reported](#) on Monday. Al-Quds Al-Arabi, a Qatari news source, spoke with some of these fighters who [described](#) the support they were getting from pro-Iranian militias on the Syrian regime-held west bank of the river, including supplies of weapons.

Iran and Russia

Recently, North Press published a [report](#) on the competition between Iran and Russia for control over Syria’s natural resources and economy. In the same way that Western businesses have been [eyeing up potential investment opportunities](#) in a post-war Ukraine, and Zelensky and his Western backers have been working with BlackRock and JP Morgan Chase to create the dream deregulated and privatised environment for private capital, these two supporters of the Syrian government are taking the opportunity to appropriate and control Syria’s future. In international politics, self-interest is the driving force.

The North Press report states that businesses and investors linked to Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have been involved in buying up Syrian land and commercial properties at rock bottom prices, including property that was owned by people displaced by the war. A Syrian law allows confiscation of property if the owners cannot prove their ownership, which many displaced people are not in a position to do. Syria has used land and property to pay off their debts to Iran, and families of Iranian militia members now occupy some of these homes. Syria has made contracts with Iran for Iran to take charge of Syrian roads, electricity, telecommunications, and oil industries; and contracts with Russia for controlling Syrian ports and Syrian phosphate production. These contracts are for many years and remain binding even if there is a change of regime. The agreements with Russia include a 49-year lease for the port of Tartus, a 50-year agreement that gives Russia 70% of the revenue from the Palmyra phosphate mines, and exclusive rights over 25 years for Russia to carry out oil exploration in Tartus. While Iran and Russia have focused on dominating different areas, both geographically and in kind, there have been disagreements between them, and even military clashes.

America

America is still determined to bring down Syria's Russia-friendly president and his government and force regime change. And they want to halt the momentum of Assad's acceptance back into international politics. To that end, a [bill](#) has been introduced in the US Senate to ban Syrian normalisation and extend the current severe sanctions regime beyond its expiry date of December 2024. America has applied sanctions to Syria since 1979, and Syria is also sanctioned by the European Union, but America's current comprehensive system, which includes secondary sanctions on those who do business with Syria, has been implemented since 2020.

Sanctions are portrayed as an alternative to war, but they are themselves a form of warfare and can be just as devastating in their damage to the people of the targeted country. Sanctions are worse than a blunt implement because ruling elites can escape their impacts. While their people suffer, autocrats may remain unmoved – as we saw in Saddam Hussein's Iraq and are seeing now

in Assad's Syria. A recent review of the impacts of sanctions in various countries [observed](#), "It is hard to think of other cases of policy interventions that continue to be pursued despite the accumulation of a similar array of evidence of their adverse effects on vulnerable populations. This is perhaps even more surprising in light of the extremely spotty record of economic sanctions in terms of achieving their intended objectives of inducing changes in the conduct of targeted states."

The United States has always made it clear that their alliance with the SDF is only concerned with the fight against ISIS. As Abdi describes it, "Our relationship with the US military is based on our joint efforts in combatting IS and safeguarding regional security."

China

A week ago, President Assad went to Beijing for talks that brought China more firmly into the mix. President Xi Jinping has [stressed](#) China's firm support for the Syrian Government and has promised help with reconstruction. China has used its economic power to tie large parts of the globe into the Chinese economy. Massive Chinese investments through the Belt and Road Initiative, which has been joined by over 150 countries, are developing many regions in ways that benefit China's interests. Comparisons have been made to America's post World War 2 Marshall Plan. Syria joined the Belt and Road Initiative in January 2022, and has now agreed a Strategic Partnership with China. Kasia Houghton [explains in AI Monitor](#) that Russia has encouraged these links to bring in much needed investment, but that China may wait for a more stable political environment before committing to any actual projects in Syria.

Turkey

The foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey have held yet another meeting on the future of Syria, this time on the fringes of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The [official statement](#) put out by the three foreign powers refers – without a hint of irony – to promoting a "political process led and owned by the Syrian people with the assistance of the United

Nations”. It goes on to talk about “the need to ensure the effective activities of the intra-Syrian Constitutional Committee”. This committee, which is facilitated by the UN, brings together representatives of the Syrian Government and Turkish-supported Islamist opposition groups, but, at Turkey’s insistence, includes no representative from the 4-5 million people who live in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Turkey has supported opposition groups that were trying to bring down the Syrian government and that became dominated by violent Islamist militias. They have invaded and occupied large parts of northern Syria, especially Kurdish areas. Russia has long been pressing for the Syrian and Turkish governments to end their antagonism and work together, but Damascus states that they won’t take talks further unless Turkey withdraws their troops from Syrian soil. Turkey claims that their occupation is to protect Turkey’s borders from Kurdish aggression, though the only threat that the Autonomous Administration poses to Turkey is that of an example of democracy and cultural freedoms. A week ago, Iran [proposed](#) that Turkey carry out a phased withdrawal, with Syria guaranteeing security of the border and with Iran and Russia acting as guarantors. Turkey would be wary of any agreement that gave more power to their rival, Iran, but there remains a possibility that these competing powers will come to some agreement at the expense of the Kurds – as in 1998, when Turkey forced Syria, with the threat of invasion, to expel Abdullah Öcalan and clamp down on the PKK.

The Turkish presence in Syria, and in northern Iraq, can also be understood as contributing to irredentist ambitions to regain the Ottoman territories that the 1920 National Pact claimed for the Turkish homeland. Troop withdrawal would run counter to that ambition, though Turkey might be able to retain significant control without actual occupation.

Azerbaijan

Any examination of the powers acting on the region needs to take account of Azerbaijan’s recapture of Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh. This has been a brutal inhumane action and should be a source of shame to international organisations that purport to protect human rights. It also foreshadows

further attacks by Azerbaijan, and [new instabilities](#) between regional powers. Turkey and Azerbaijan are attempting to boost pan-Turkic identity and to carve out a connecting corridor through Armenia that would further link, via the Caspian Sea, to the resource-rich countries of Central Asia.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

This week I have concentrated on the forces trying to destabilise and destroy the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Two weeks ago, I looked at how these same forces are putting pressure on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. On Wednesday, [another Turkish drone strike](#) injured two villagers in the region, one of whom, Estî Muhammed, subsequently died of her wounds.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the dominant political party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has allowed itself to become completely subservient to Turkey and to Turkey's interests. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which controls the south of the region, refuses to follow the KDP's example, and – despite Turkish threats – refuses to follow Turkey's instructions to stop working with the SDF in the fight against ISIS. However, the PUK has its own internal problems. This week's PUK congress – only the fifth in its 48-year history – has agreed a new constitution that [consolidates power](#) in the hands of its leader, Bafal Talabani, who ousted his cousin from their joint leadership two years ago. Several prominent party figures [chose not to attend](#).

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is continuing to accumulate tensions with Iraq's Federal Government and its courts. Last year, disagreement between the KDP and PUK over election rules and other issues forced the postponement of the elections to the Kurdistan parliament. The two parties agreed to retain the existing parliament while they continued their negotiations, but, in May, the federal court declared this illegal, shutting down the parliament and cancelling all decisions made in the extended period. Now, a similar scenario has taken place with respect to the provincial councils in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. These were elected in 2014 for four years, but had been extended until the provincial elections due this December. The extension has [now been](#)

[found unconstitutional](#), and the federal court has also ruled that the cost of all council salaries paid since 2018 must be returned to the Iraqi treasury.

In Turkey

In Turkey itself, news reports tell of [further detentions](#) under the expansive terrorism law, with twelve people being taken into custody in Mersin on Wednesday; of protests against a Village Guard who had [abused his state given power](#) to shut villagers out of their village and cut down the trees on their land; of a Kurdish political activist [sentenced for life](#) without any evidence given for his involvement in the crime but just on the basis of his previous history with the PKK, for which he had already served time in prison; and of the [confirmation](#) by the Court of Cassation of the sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole given to businessman-philanthropist Osman Kavala, despite the European Court of Human Rights demanding his immediate release.

The European Court [found against Turkey](#) again this week in a case concerning a schoolteacher who was imprisoned for six years on the grounds that he had ties to the Gülen movement, which Turkey has labelled as terrorists. The Court specifically criticised the fact that the defendant's use of the encrypted messaging app ByLock was cited as evidence of his involvement. This could impact on many other cases that have also been based on the use of ByLock. But, on the other hand, Turkey has proved more than ready to ignore the European Court when it suits them.

A film about a doctor and a teacher who lost their jobs in the purge that followed the 2016 coup attempt, when tens of thousands of people critical of the government were accused of being Gülenists, was due to be shown at the Antalya film festival. It's government-backed removal from the programme has [caused chaos](#), with film-makers and prize jury members walking away from Turkey's oldest international film festival.

Bargaining with F-16s

Despite all this, President Biden seems determined to [sell F16 fighter planes](#) to Turkey. The biggest obstacle to this deal – the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Bob Menendez – has had to step down from his post after being charged with bribery. Biden wants to use the F-16 deal to make Turkey drop their veto on Sweden joining NATO. Turkey is continuing to use that veto to squeeze every concession they can.

In Iran

And finally to Baluchistan in Iran, where, a year ago today, state security forces murdered at least 105 anti-government protestors in what has become known as Zahedan's Bloody Friday. Every week since, the Baluch of Zahedan and neighbouring towns have held anti-government protests outside the mosque after Friday prayers. With yesterday's protests marking the anniversary of the massacre, the government was not going to miss the opportunity of punishing the protestors, including with direct gunfire from military weapons. Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights [reports](#) that at least 29 people were wounded, of whom four were children under fourteen, and dozens of people have been detained. Undeterred, protestors continued their action into the night. Internet outage has limited communication, but [videos show burning street blockades](#).

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