

# An end of year review: A world realigned – Part 1

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## Sarah Glynn

Ukraine has changed everything – including the balance of forces in Kurdistan. For President Erdoğan this has been a good war that has delivered some powerful cards into Turkey's hands. He is practised at playing Russia and NATO off against each other, and Turkey's enhanced geopolitical importance has allowed him to do this to an even greater advantage.

As we approach the turn of the year, the Turkish defence minister has been meeting with his Syrian and Russian counterparts to discuss a rapprochement between the two neighbours that would eliminate all Kurdish gains and regional autonomy in Syria. Typically, Turkey is backing up their negotiations with continued threats of a further land invasion. There are still many factors

that could get in the way of a Turkish/Syrian agreement, but the region's future will depend to a large extent on Putin's political calculus and the whims of Syria's President Assad, and that is not a good situation to be in. There are also questions around the future of ISIS and other violent Islamist groups that have flourished under Turkish support.

What happens in Syria is vital for Erdoğan's ambitions to retain power in Turkey. One way or another, he needs to demonstrate that Turkish intervention has resulted in a victory, and also to be able to fulfil his promise to return Syrian refugees, who have become a major political football. Ukraine has also enabled him to make new deals with Russia that have helped to buoy up Turkey's battered economy, and has ensured that Western nations are even more reluctant to put up any concrete resistance to Turkish foreign aggression and human rights abuses. So, Erdoğan continues to prepare for next year's general and presidential elections by cracking down on all opposition through Turkey's violent and politicised police and judiciary.

Turkey's foreign aggression includes their expanding invasion and occupation of the border areas of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where they have been accused of repeated use of chemical weapons. Despite this, the PKK's guerrillas have prevented Erdoğan from getting the victory here that he craves. Turkey's incursions into Iraq have been facilitated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government. The KDP's feudal leaders have become virtual vassals of the Turkish state, and the region has become further mired in corruption and government-sponsored violence.

In Iran, four decades of resistance to the dictatorship of the Ayatollahs has erupted in revolution. The Kurdish regions were the last areas to fall under the Ayatollah's control and they have been the epicentre of this still-growing resistance, which has adopted the Kurdish Freedom Movement's slogan of Jin, Jiyan, Azadi – Women, Life, Freedom. The regime's response has been bloody and brutal, but this has only increased support for the revolutionaries. Outwith the Kurdish areas, this [revolution](#) is less coordinated and less consistent in its aims, and it still lacks the overwhelming strike actions by industrial workers that proved so important in bringing down the shah, but

every act of violence by the authorities makes the people more determined not to let down those who have already given their lives.

In contrast to the inspiration of the people's resistance in Iran, this year has demonstrated, yet again, the deeply destructive impact of NATO, the self-serving nature of all political elites – including in the so-called liberal democracies – and the irrelevance of international organisations.

### **The Ukraine effect**

Turkey's geographic position between West and East, and their control over entry to the Black Sea, made them a strategic NATO member during the Cold War and now makes them a key player in the geopolitics surrounding the war in Ukraine. But Turkey has also increasingly courted Russia. They have used their potential to change sides to make deals with Moscow and win concessions from NATO members. They have also sold their drones to Ukraine, while helping Russia evade NATO sanctions, and they have managed to use this double-dealing role to step into the deplorably empty position of negotiator between the two sides, and win international plaudits for helping restart the vital export of Ukrainian grain.

NATO has never been a friend of the Kurds. The importance of Turkey makes sure of that, but so does the leftist politics of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. However, there has been some international recognition of the rights of Kurds facing persecution, and acknowledgement of the huge and central part played by the Kurds in the defeat of the ISIS caliphate. Now, fear of losing Turkey to Russia is cutting across even that. At the same time, Turkey has used their veto over NATO membership applications to coerce Sweden, which once prided itself on its rights and freedoms, to turn against Kurdish individuals and hopes. Only this April, the Swedish government sponsored a conference organised by the Syrian Democratic Council to discuss their proposals for a decentralised Syria. Now Sweden has agreed to distance themselves from the Peoples Defence Units (YPG), which led the fight against ISIS, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which dominates the regions politics, both of which Turkey brands as terrorists. Sweden has lifted the ban on exporting weapons to Turkey, even as Turkey threatens to invade Syria and Greece, and

they have deported a Kurdish Asylum seeker back to seven years in a Turkish prison. The Turkish government is holding out for more, while enjoying this demonstration of their power and the kudos that it gives them among potential voters.

Turkey's economy is still in a [parlous state](#), with huge inflation rates that are climbing even higher; but the situation could be even worse if it weren't for their relationship with Russia. Mutually beneficial arrangements are tying the two countries closer together, and, as the Wall Street Journal [observes](#), "Inflows of Russian money, along with a discount on Russian energy, are important cushions against an economic crisis that has wiped more than half the value off the Turkish lira since late last year." Russian firms have relocated to Turkey. Turkey has almost doubled their imports of Russian crude, and Russia is building a nuclear power plant in Turkey and plans a gas hub. Meanwhile, Turkey is exporting more goods to Russia.

This growing interdependence feeds into Russian support for Erdoğan and his bid to stay in power.

### **Rojava/North and East Syria**

Syria is divided between areas run by the Assad government in Damascus, areas run by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and areas controlled by Turkey. These last include areas Turkey has invaded and occupied, where daily life is controlled by violent Islamist mercenaries, and the Idlib area, which is dominated by al Qaeda descendent, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and which is effectively under Turkish protection. Since October, HTS has also expanded its area of control into Turkish occupied Afrîn, pushing out other Islamist groups. As the Financial Times [pointed out](#), when you include the Syrian refugees in Turkey itself, Turkey has a level of responsibility over almost half of Syria's pre-war population. Although the Islamist groups emerged out of the Syrian opposition, Turkey has diverted most of their fire onto the Autonomous Administration areas rather than on the areas controlled by the regime. The Syrian Government is supported by Russia, for whom Syria has long been a strategic ally, and by Iran, which uses Syria to boost its own regional power. The United States works with the Autonomous

Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), but, as the Americans make clear, their remit is limited to the fight against ISIS. No one seriously expects the US to fight against Turkey.

The Autonomous Administration was able to emerge in the power vacuum of the Syrian Civil war. This allowed local people to begin to put into practice the communitarian ideas of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, based around grassroots democracy, women's rights, multiculturalism, and ecology. What began as a Kurdish project, now encompasses everyone living in the region. North and East Syria is not looking for independence but for local autonomy within Syria, and the Administration argues that their region could become a model for the democratisation of the whole of Syria. This proposal has been left unanswered by the international powers, while Turkey is determined to extinguish all hope of autonomy involving Kurds and especially anything associated with Öcalan. The Administration has made repeated attempts to negotiate with Syria's President Assad for a future, more democratic Syria, and the SDF has a military agreement with Syrian regime forces for the joint defence of Syria against Turkish invasion. But Assad still hopes to turn the clock back and regain the centralised power that he had in 2011.

Russia supports Assad's desire for all of Syria to be under Syrian control, and they want to get rid of, and embarrass, the United States, and pull Turkey tighter into their own orbit. They have long been pushing for a rapprochement between their old ally Syria, and their would be ally, Turkey. They would have no difficulty treating the Kurds as bargaining counters, as happened in 1998 when Turkey forced Syria to expel Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK in exchange for better bilateral relations. The 1998 agreement, signed in Adana, even has an annex that is said to give Turkey the right to go 5km into Syrian territory if Syria doesn't keep their side of the bargain. In 2019, Russia and Turkey both reaffirmed the importance of the Adana Agreement. After this year of unstable and deteriorating equilibrium, the situation could be about to get a lot worse.

Turkish threats to carry out another invasion into North and East Syria have not materialised – at least not yet – but, every day, somewhere in the border areas has come under fire from Turkey or from the Islamist militias in their pay, or been targeted by a Turkish drone. After Turkey's last invasion, in

October 2019, they signed ceasefire agreements with the United States and with Russia, who both have some troops on the ground and who, between them, control the airspace – Russia in the West and America in the East. A further Turkish invasion would require either Russia or America to move out of the way, and, so far, this time, neither has done so. The two imperial powers are supposed to act as guarantors for their respective ceasefire agreements, but they have done nothing to stop Turkey's ongoing low level aggression, which only encourages Turkey to push further. Turkey's attacks target civilian areas and basic infrastructure, and are aimed at driving away the local population and preventing the Autonomous Administration from achieving a secure environment. Turkish drones have assassinated key figures in the fight against ISIS or in the local administration. Besides the casualties and the physical damage, the constant pressure and uncertainty takes a heavy toll on mental health and on people's ability to plan for the future.

Sometimes, the density of the attacks has increased. The worst of these times was following the bomb attack in Istanbul on 13 November, which Turkey used as a casus belli although it was quite clear that it had nothing to do with the Autonomous Administration. That time, Turkey's targets included the SDF guards of al Hol detention camp, which houses captured ISIS families, and some families were able, temporarily, to escape. Another bomb fell near a prison housing ISIS fighters.

The SDF has [published](#) a summary of this year's attacks. They record that Turkey killed 59 civilians, including 12 children, and 95 members of the SDF. The list of the damage caused includes electricity and water infrastructure, religious buildings, hospitals, and schools. Meanwhile Turkey continues to reduce the flow of the Euphrates into Syria, seriously affecting agriculture, health, and electricity production, and to stop the flow of water from the Alouk pumping station, which supplies one and a half million people in Hesekê Canton.

The future of the ISIS prisons and camps is a huge source of concern. When the last ISIS stronghold surrendered to the SDF in March 2019, the Autonomous Administration was left to secure and care for the fighters and their radicalised families. The rest of the world wiped their hands of any

responsibility beyond a small bit of less-than-minimal funding. The Administration does not have sufficient resources or manpower, and even the physical buildings are far from adequate. Prisoners have set up ISIS organisations within the prisons and camps and are in communication with ISIS sleeper cells in the surrounding areas, especially in the areas occupied by Turkey, which have become safe havens for ISIS operatives. Every action against ISIS has provided more evidence of Turkey's support for the organisation, both historically and today.

ISIS is far from dead, and the social and economic instability generated by Turkey's constant attacks is helping them recruit new members. There have been many plans to instigate a prison break and release a force big enough to attempt to rebuild the ISIS caliphate, and last January these nearly succeeded. A prisoner uprising combined with an external attack at Al-Sina'a prison in Heseke was only made safe after ten days, and with the loss of 40 members of the SDF and internal security forces, 77 prison staff and guards, and 4 civilians. 374 ISIS members were also killed, and three and a half thousand surrendered, but it has been suggested that hundreds may have managed to get away.

The Administration does not have the resources to keep control of what happens in the camps, but sometimes they have had to bring in extra security forces and make a thorough sweep of camp structures. This autumn, thousands of security personnel combed through al Hol for more than three weeks, and two SDF members were killed in the course of the operation. The search uncovered two young Yazidi women who had been taken as sex slaves when young girls, as well as weapons, places for training and punishment, and equipment for torture and murder

Just this Monday, an ISIS attack on a centre of the Internal Security Forces in Raqqa killed six force members, and the city is still under partial curfew. On Thursday, a major operation was begun by the Internal Security Forces, the SDF, and the US-led Coalition, and yesterday, they [announced](#) that they had "arrested 52 terrorists and facilitators who were sheltering in residential areas and farms".

When November's Turkish bombardment was at its worst, the SDF had to withdraw their forces from the anti-ISIS mission. During previous invasions, forces were moved from the camps to the front line. Another Turkish invasion could enable a serious ISIS resurgence. And any settlement with Damascus would require HTS and Turkey's Islamist mercenaries to be either crushed or incorporated.

Besides attacks from Turkey and their mercenaries, and attacks from ISIS, the Autonomous areas also face pressure from the Syrian Government. This is aimed at forcing them to give up their treasured autonomy and to come back fully under Assad's control. Pressure is focussed on those areas that are isolated from the main autonomous region: Shehba, where most of the people displaced by Turkey's 2018 occupation of Afrîn have taken shelter, and the Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh. Syrian forces frequently put these areas under blockade, depriving them of basic necessities such as fuel, flour and medicines. Generally, these blockades are eventually lifted after negotiations, but, in April, the Autonomous Administration was forced to resort to counter pressures, putting restrictions on goods going into the government-controlled area in Qamishli.

Alongside all these targeted attacks, the whole of Syria faces an economic collapse of disastrous proportions, which has been exacerbated by US sanctions. Although sanctions were officially lifted in May for North and East Syria and most of the other non-government areas, the region is still economically affected by what happens in Damascus, and the insecurity puts off any potential foreign investment.

Despite all of this, the people of North and East Syria have not only got on with their daily lives – they have little option over that – but have continued to grow their new universities, construct hospitals, plant trees, update the region's social contract, and come together to share in communal demonstrations of resistance.

[In Part 2](#), tomorrow, I will look at Bakur/southeast Turkey, Başur/the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Rojhelat/northwest Iran

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