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TURKEY'S AERIAL ASSAULT ON NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

19/20 NOVEMBER 2022

SUMMARY

At about midnight on November 19th, Turkey launched a large-scale aerial assault using 70 fighter jets as well as UAVs against the regions of north and east Syria (NES), stretching from Derik on the Iraqi-Turkish-Syrian borders to the Beluniye village in Shehba district, 40 kilometers north of Aleppo city. The sites hit extended across both US and Russian-controlled airspace, suggesting that both countries gave the green light for the attack.

The aerial bombardment hit infrastructure and service facilities and continued sporadically until the early hours of 20th. The Turkish aircraft also conducted double-tap strikes targeting civilian medics and journalists. In addition, they targeted the border outposts of the Damascus Government forces (SAA) deployed on the Syrian-Turkish borders, resulting in heavy casualties among them.

No troop movements occurred along the Turkish border, and no mobilization of SNA troops was seen, indicating from the start that this was likely not the beginning of a Turkish ground invasion into NES. Mid-morning on the 20th, Turkey's Defence Minister announced the conclusion of a "successful" attack, which Turkey codenamed "Operation Claw Sword". However, at that time, Mazloum Abdi, the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) General Commander, stated that despite this declaration, he expected air attacks to continue. This assessment proved shrewd, as more strikes, accompanied by extensive shelling from the Turkish-backed SNA, were launched on the night of the 20th in the Shehba region.

Sites around Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Shengal were also targeted in Iraq as part of Turkey's assault.

This attack was reminiscent of Turkey's "Operation Winter Eagle", which saw a string of airstrikes across NES (and Iraq) on the night of February 1st this year. Many of the same places were targeted this time. A key difference is that this time, many more SAA positions were hit: a total of 15 SAA soldiers were killed, while 12 were wounded.

A total of 11 civilians were killed, 9 civilians were injured, 1 SDF soldier was killed and 2 AANES 'guards' were killed.

THE KEY AREAS TARGETED:

DERIK

Turkey first targeted a power station in Teqil Beqil village, destroying it and causing a power outage in the 65 surrounding villages. In this initial strike, one worker at the station was killed. Civilians and medical personnel quickly came to the site to help. Turkey then bombed the same location again, killing 10 of the civilians who had gathered there, and injuring 6. Furthermore, a car was hit in a suspected drone strike as it drove away from the site.

The names of the civilians killed have been confirmed as: Husin Ali, Isam Abdullah (Journalist), Chichak Harouni, Hilal Qasim, Hadia Abdullah, Mazin Osi, Husin Khilto, Noury Chafchi, Fayez Abdullah, Mahmoud Ali, Abid Khalid.

In addition, Turkey hit sites around the villages of Karkandal, Tal Sheh, Duran Tel Shair, and Jabal Qarrah.



KOBANE

Turkey's warplanes conducted strikes on Meshtanour Hill, Kobane countryside. The hospital there, used as a coronavirus center during the peak of the pandemic, was destroyed. Following the arrival of journalists to the demolished site, Turkey carried out another airstrike, resulting in the injury of 3 civilians including 1 journalist.

In addition, a site on the Jarablus road, Halang village, Kanya Korda and Kobane forest were hit.



DARBASIYAH

Airstrikes targeted the grain silos in Dahir al-Arab village, killing two guards who were on duty there. Their names are Khalid Zouba Oso and Hasan Abbas Sadou.



ZIRGAN

In Abu Racin village, 1 SDF soldier was killed: Soufian Abbas al-Ahmad.

SHEHBA

Beluniye village saw extensive airstrikes, continuing intermittently until the early hours of the 21st, with shelling from the SNA as well at times. Tel Rifaat, Maranaz, Ain Daqnah, Sheikh Issa, Malkiyah, and Menagh Airport were also targeted.

TEL ABYAD WESTERN COUNTRYSIDE

In Qazali village, an SAA outpost was targeted.

DOUBLE-TAP STRIKES

Twice (once in Teqil Beqil and once on Meshtanour Hill) Turkey conducted 'double-tap strikes'. Double-tap strikes refer to situations whereby a target is bombed, time is left for first responders to arrive, and then the same site is hit again. The ways in which double-tap strikes violate Common Article 3¹ of the 1949 Geneva Convention have been extensively discussed², mostly with regards to cases where Russia³, the USA⁴, or the Syrian government^{5,6} in Damascus were the perpetrators.

A grave breach of Common Article 3 is considered a war crime under international law. Common Article 3 prohibits the targeting of civilians or the wounded. For double-tap strikes it is difficult for governments to claim that the targets of the strikes are militants and that the aim is to weaken a military enemy. Rather, civilians or wounded people are clearly being targeted, and as such, these strikes seek to cause damage to civilian objects and induce fear or panic in the population. Article 15⁷ of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Convention states that medical personnel and humanitarian relief personnel should be respected. As the first responders to a scene, these are likely the people who will be killed in double-tap strikes.

In Teqil Beqil, one of the 11 civilians killed, Isam Abdullah, was a journalist who came immediately to cover the first attack. Another of the civilians killed, Hadia Abdullah, was a participant in her local branch of 'HPC-Jin', the women's section of NES' civilian community guards. HPC-Jin is made up of members of local communities who check on the security of local residents and ensure everyone is prepared for potential attacks. In Meshtanour Hill, one of the civilians injured was also a journalist. It is these 'first responder' personnel that are targeted in double-tap strikes.

¹ <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Geneva-Conventions-art-3.pdf>

² <https://syriaaccountability.org/press-release-new-investigation-shows-syrian-and-russian-governments-responsible-for-58-double-tap-airstrikes-on-civilian-and-humanitarian-targets-in-syria/>

³ <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-double-tap-ukrainian-rescuers-bombing-same-targets-twice-2022-4>

⁴ <https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/flr/vol69/iss1/7/>

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/03/un-commission-inquiry-syria-unprecedented-levels-displacement-and-dire>

⁶ <https://www.msf.org/syria-double-tap-bombing-msf-supported-hospital-%E2%80%93-hospital-partially-destroyed-%E2%80%93-patients-under>

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-additional-geneva-conventions-12-august-1949-and>

RESPONSE FROM AANES/SDF PERSONNEL

In an interview with RIC, Aram Hanna, SDF spokesperson, said, “as usual, the Turkish forces carried out attacks expressing their barbarism and hostility to the residents of north and east Syria. Hostile air raids directly targeted civilians, including civilian workers in the Dahir al-Arab grain silos, and those working in the Teqil Beqil power station. This indicates and confirms that the Turkish army commits real war crimes. These past years have seen Turkey target service, education, and religious sites, as well as ambulance teams and medics heading to help the wounded, as happened during the recent attack.”

In a formal statement, the SDF declared, “[Turkey] cannot bear to see stability and coexistence among the people in the regions of north and eastern Syria. These attacks do not only target the Kurdish people, but also all components of north and eastern Syria.”

NES’ Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) co-chair, Ruken Ehmed, linked Turkey’s attacks to Erdogan’s domestic woes and attempts to recover popularity before the upcoming 2023 Turkish elections, stating, “these attacks show the desperation of the Turkish state [... It] resorted to such an attack in order to get results in the elections.”

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) released a declaration calling attention to the complicity of the international community, writing that, “we also call on the sponsors of the cessation of hostilities, the Russian Federation and the United States of America, and with them the international community, to show a clear position towards the arrogance of the Turkish state and its continuous war towards the peoples and components of the region.”

NES’ Democratic Union Party (PYD), the biggest party in NES’ Syrian Democratic Council, stated, “we also appeal to all forces defending democracy and human values and call on them to stand by our people in the face of [Turkey’s] terrorism and machinations and brutality [...] which has become a threat to all peoples of the Middle East. We also hold both the Russian Federation and the American-led international coalition against terrorism fully responsible for the brutality of the Turkish [attacks].”

RESPONSE FROM CIVILIANS

Residents in many of NES' main cities organised street protests the morning after the strikes took place, marching to protest Turkey's attacks, mourn those killed, and express resilience. Protests took place in Raqqa, Kobane, Qamishlo, Derik, and Shehba.





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