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Turkish shelling in north Syria: upsurge in civilian casualties

Joint briefing paper from Casualty Recorders Network members¹

Background

The Turkish government has been conducting military operations in Syria since 2016. Since 2018 these have focused on Kurdish communities in northern Syria, under the pretext of protecting Turkey's borders and combating terrorism. These operations have included extensive aerial bombardment.

In 2019, Turkish military forces invaded the Afrin Region (northwest Syria) followed by Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) and Tel Abyad. Since then, Turkey has forcibly displaced over 700,000 people from these areas, which remain under Turkish control. Turkey has also carried out hundreds of airstrikes and drone attacks, causing widespread loss of life and damage to vital civilian infrastructure.

Despite documented evidence of ongoing violations of international humanitarian law, international criminal law, and international human rights law, to date there has been no international or independent investigation into Turkish military actions in northern Syria.

Casualties

Turkish forces renewed heavy shelling on 5 October 2023. The Monitoring and Documentation Department of North Press Agency ('NPA') recorded 264 sites in north east Syria targeted by the Turkish forces in the ten-day period between 5 October and 13 October. These sites included 185 residential areas and at least 31 civilian infrastructure sites including a school and a hospital. A total of 356 strikes were made, including 267 by artillery and heavy weapons, 25 by warplanes, and 64 by drones.

As a result of this shelling at least nine civilians were killed, including one woman and two children; 39 military personnel were also killed. At least 15 civilians were injured, including three women and four children; 34 military personnel were wounded.

From the beginning of 2023 to 13 October, the NPA has documented 324 casualties resulting from Turkish airstrikes in north Syria, of which 114 were civilians. The civilian fatalities included 19 men, seven women, and five children. The civilians injured included 63 men, eight women, and 12 children. Some of those interviewed by the NPA had suffered severe

¹ This briefing note was prepared collaboratively by Every Casualty Counts with CRN members North Press Agency and Airwars. It does not necessarily reflect the views of other CRN members.

injuries, including those living with shrapnel still embedded in their body. All individuals affected continue to suffer from psychological trauma.

Airwars has recorded at least 545 civilian fatalities and 1,406 civilian injuries resulting from Turkish actions across the whole of Syria, between 2018 and 5 October 2023. The majority of these occurred in Kurdish areas of northern Syria. Cumulative data trends and information on individual casualties is available at the [Airwars website](#).

Investigations by the NPA into incidents of civilian harm caused by Turkish shelling found that most civilian casualties occurred at their workplace, on the road, or at home. The scale and pattern of civilian casualties indicate a violation of Article 51 of [Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions](#), which prohibits indiscriminate attacks and requires parties to conflict to protect the civilian population. Similarly, deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians and essential civilian infrastructure may constitute war crimes under Article 8 of the [Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court](#).

Case study: 5 October 2023

On 5 October, the Turkish forces targeted the oil plant and village of Gerdahol with a drone.

A local man and his son were standing in front of their house, approximately 400 meters away from the oil plant, when it was hit. Witnesses reported that in a matter of seconds a massive explosion occurred, dust filled the surroundings, and shards were scattered in all directions. As a result, the father, Muhammad al-Alaiwi, was killed, and his 13-year-old son, Mu'tasim, was severely injured.

"My father pushed me inside and shielded me, then he received the deadly shrapnel. I lost consciousness and woke up in the hospital", Mu'tasim said. Mu'tasim sustained injuries to his left eye, with wounds to the face requiring stitches. Shrapnel fragments remain lodged in his chest.

The same day, on the outskirts of the city of Hasakah, a Turkish drone targeted a construction factory in the village of Meshirfa al-Hemmeh. The drone killed the factory's 52-year-old security guard, Adnan Abdi, a father of three children. The first shell hit the entrance where Adnan was standing, killing him immediately.

"I still cannot believe that my son was killed. He was a civilian, unarmed, and posed no threat to Turkey. How could they kill him like this?" said Adnan's mother, Sheikha Hassan.

Damage to essential infrastructure

Damage to essential civilian infrastructure is having reverberating effects on the wider local population of approximately three million people, including those living in the region's IDP camps. The targeting of oil fields, power stations, water and gas facilities has severely limited access to power, safe water, food, healthcare, and other essential services. These attacks and their impacts have been documented in the NPA's recent report '[War crime or crime against humanity: Turkish recent aggression in north and northeast Syria](#)'.

Turkish authorities have not denied targeting critical infrastructure, with [Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, declaring that Turkey considers all infrastructure in north and east Syria a 'legitimate' military target.](#)

Case study: 9 October 2023

On 9 October, 13-year-old Farah Adnan was with her mother and eight other women collecting cotton in the village of Bishriyah, Derbasiyah (Hasakah Governorate, northeast Syria). They were hit by Turkish artillery shelling, injuring five of them. Farah's injuries were severe, resulting in the amputation of both of her legs. Four women, including two sisters, received shrapnel injuries to the head, legs and abdomen.

"When the shell fell near Farah, my daughters and I tried to hide among the cotton. A few moments later, after that terrifying sound, I could not find my daughters and started searching for them", said Hamda al-Obaid, one of the injured women. She found her daughters in distant corners of the field, where they had been thrown by the power of the explosion.

On the same day Turkey shelled the village of Mastura, near the town of Ain Issa. Two children, 8-year-old Nadia al-Ayyash and her 6-year-old cousin Ali al-Ayyash, were killed near their home as a result.

Recommendations

We urge Third Committee to:

- Call on all parties to the conflict in Syria, including Turkish armed forces and armed groups operating under Turkey's effective control, to ensure that civilians and civilian objects and infrastructure are protected from attacks and the effects of hostilities;
- Condemn Turkey's indiscriminate aerial bombardment of civilians and vital civilian infrastructure in northern Syria, and call for an immediate cessation of such attacks;
- Remind all parties to the conflict that international law prohibits destroying, removing or "rendering useless" objects – such as water installations – that are indispensable to the survival of the civilian population;
- Call for an independent, impartial international investigation into possible crimes under international law and other gross violations of human rights, including the destruction of civilian property, homes and infrastructure.

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