

Analysis

July, 2022



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Message of Analysis

- Additional food is needed for babies and children in Azez.
- Chronic patients may have difficulty in finding medication.
- Although Azez is in th safe zone, it is not safe enough yet.

Humanitarian Situation in Syrian Azez and Political Burdens

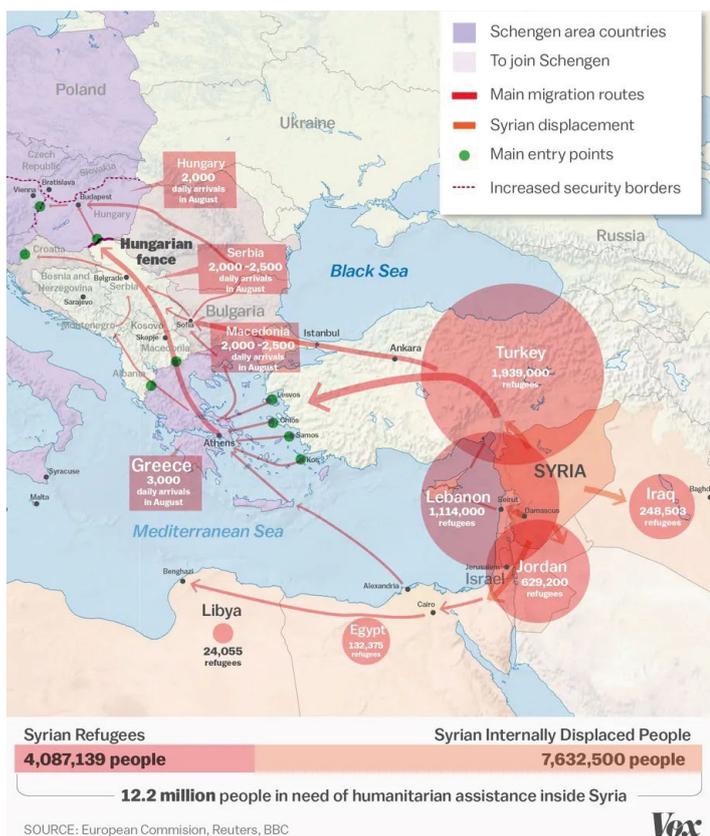
People have been trying to make a new life possible for 10 years in Azez, which is at the foot of the walls on the Turkey–Syria border. According to field interviews, although adults are relatively accustomed to the harsh conditions in the region, the immunity of young children is unfortunately still very weak. A sustainable economy has not yet been established in Azez and humanitarian aid is still needed. PYD attacks in the south, on the other hand, condemn people to live in fear.

Azez is a border city where approximately 300,000 people live on an area of 20,000 km² adjacent to the border with the Turkish province of Kilis. While the region was a district of Aleppo in the classical Syrian map, it was exposed to various complications, both demographically and militarily, due to the civil war that took place in Syria after 2011. One year later, the tension in the center of Syria spread to Azez located in the north, and many immigrants, especially from Eastern Ghouta and Aleppo regions, had to migrate to the southern part of the Turkish border.

While the instability and lack of authority in Syria caused foreign fighters to flock, multilateral conflicts broke out in a short time with the military groups that already existed in the region. For example, in 2015, it was noted that 16 different military groups were fighting each other in Syria and the areas of dominance of these groups were constantly changing.¹ The most suffered group from the conflicts was the civilian population, primarily women and children. Unfortunately, this reality has not changed today.



Around 300,000 people live in Azez, including tent cities and camps.



Map 1: Syrian immigration movements, 2011-2015. Reference: Vox.

How did Syria end up in the current situation?

Syria had a population of 20 million before the war, and 5 million of this population migrated to other countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq after 2012. In 2015, with a second wave of migration, some of the Syrian refugees reached the borders of Europe. In addition, it is also known that 7 million Syrians had to relocate within the country borders [IDP, Internally Displaced People].²

The migration movement also indirectly affected the sociological, economic and political dynamics especially in Turkey and Germany, where the Syrian population is dense. In 2022, when the war is now in its 10th year, it is clearly stated by NGOs, international organizations and some



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At this point, it is important to note that Turkey has moved beyond the acute aid it offered at the beginning of the migration wave and started to focus on integration approaches that seek for long-term solutions.³ Various studies are carried out especially by non-governmental organizations in order for the Syrians, whose return seems impossible in the short term, to adapt to Turkey and to envision their future. On the other hand, it should be stated that the rhetoric of sending back, occasionally adopted by decision makers with political concerns, has seriously damaged the harmonization process. There are two important risks in these discussions. First of all, the “fear of being sent back” makes the perception of trust of Syrians, who are still under temporary protection status in Turkey, fragile. It causes the postponement of long-term plans that will also be beneficial for Turkey. Secondly, the discussions continue about the extent to which a geography with political stability, where basic needs can be met and a reasonable life established, is possible in the “safe zone” that Turkey has built on its southern border.

Is the safe zone really safe?

A safe zone is defined as a region that is kept away from all kinds of attacks, where impartial military units and humanitarian aid organizations can move freely, whose borders are determined, and which is under international protection.⁴ Turkey first expressed its safe zone plan in Syria in 2013 and tried to persuade both national and international public opinion to create a safe zone for immigrants. In this context, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan presented the Safe Zone plan at the United Nations in 2019, which includes police, hospital, government and school buildings, a total of 200,000 residences, 10 districts and 140 villages, and a line length of 35–50 km.⁵ However, it should be stated that the USA and Europe abstain from this plan, and that they are not partial to the creation of a living space in the region where immigrants can live safely. At this point, Turkey needs to address both internal and cross-border concerns. Everyone clearly knows that it is not possible to resolve the instability in the region in the short term. Therefore, it should be said that political decision makers need to listen to a transparent consensus on their long-term plans.

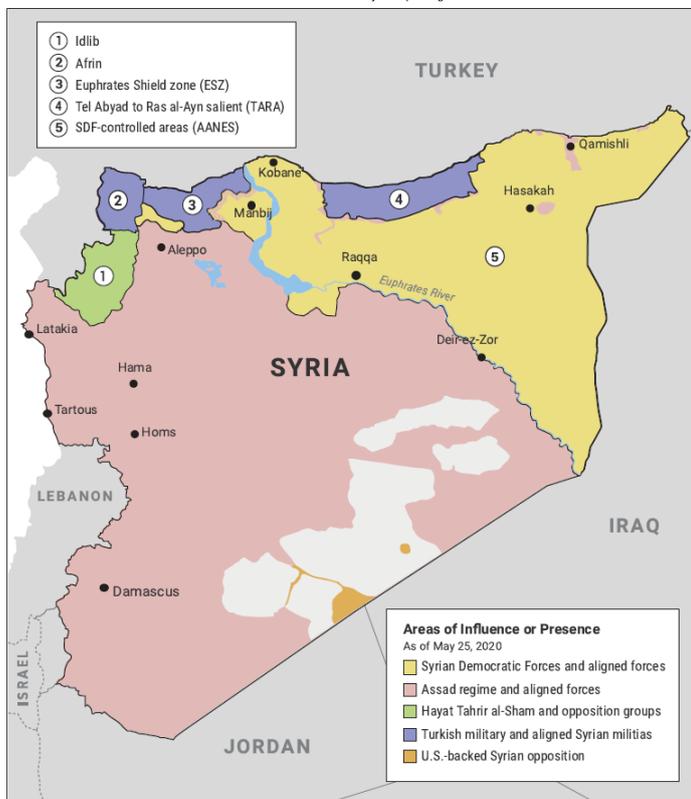
As a result of the instabilities in its south and the fear that terrorist organizations will dominate the region in the long term, Turkey carried out its first operation in the region, with the name of “Operation Euphrates Shield” [2016] against ISIS, in the Jarablus and Al-Bab districts. Afterwards, it performed the second operation named “Operation Olive Branch” [2018], against ISIS and PYD/YPG in Afrin and Azez regions, and finally the third operation named “Operation Peace Spring” [2019] in Rasulayn and Tel-Abyad districts. As a result of these operations, safe zones, dominated by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army, were created in certain areas of Turkey’s

Syrian border.⁶ It was seen that the negative effects over the survivors after the missile attacks were also among the reasons for the operations. In the research carried out by the doctors in the region with 160 people from border city Kilis, it was noted that the majority of the people have high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression after the missile attacks carried out by ISIS.

This data seems to be remarkable for Turkey's public safety. Kilis was exposed to constant missile attacks, especially between 2016 and 2018. The effects of these attacks on the people of Kilis still continue today. Emphasizing that it is not possible to eliminate the attacks of non-state terrorist organizations at the adjacent border, Turkey is trying to carry the risk of attack beyond the border.



According to Turkish officials, missile attacks from Azez and its south were threatening the public safety of Kilis.



Map 2: Actors in Syria, Reference: American Progress [Syrian Democratic Forces, Esed Regime, Hayat Tahrir el-Şam, Turkish Armed Forces, US-backed forces.]

As can be seen from Map 2, it is possible to talk about the dominance of Turkish soldiers and Syrian Democratic Forces in Afrin [number 2], Azez [number 3], Tel Abyad and Rasulayn [number 4] in the Euphrates Shield region. In other parts of Syria, on the other hand, there is a dominance of the Assad regime forces, the HTS government [Idlib region], and PYD/YPG forces. Therefore, it is possible to talk about a fragmented map of Syria, which is divided into four parts and where many actors are in conflict with each other.⁷



The "human" factor that largely contributes Azez's entity should not be ignored.

Why is Turkey sensitive about Azez?

One of Turkey's biggest concerns regarding the de facto disintegration of Syria is the dominance of non-state actors, which it considers as terrorist organizations, in the southern area. Turkey frequently emphasizes this argument in all its operations in the region. However, it is also necessary to mention the skeptical attitude of the international community [Western national and supranational actors are meant here] regarding Turkey's military engagement. After the US and Russia's "stop firing" warning in 2016, the France, the EU representative and the United Nations also expressed their concerns. As a matter of fact, there were various comments in the international media regarding the "expansionist tendency" of Turkey. These claims were criticized by Turkish media on the grounds that the security concerns in the region were ignored by the West.

Another point that is seen as strategically important by Azez regarding Turkey is that there is a corridor between the center of Aleppo and Turkey. According to Can Acun, Azez is also a link that connects the PYD/YPG-controlled Afrin and Kobani cantons. The seizure of the aforementioned region by an actor recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey may bring along a domino effect that Jarablus is also "lost".

There are predominantly Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen located in Azez. Besides the Arabs and Kurds, the Turkmen population also plays a significant role in the delicate balance for Turkey.⁸ This situation has been expressed by the nationalist tendencies in Turkey with the rhetoric of "our brothers in Azez". Moreover, the possible expansion risk of fundamentalist ISIS terrorism that could reach Azez region via the Jarablus-Rai line is indirectly one of the motivations for the proactive intervention of Turkish forces.

The official discourse of Turkish government was also important for multilateral diplomatic contacts on safe zone operations. According to an anonymous report, referenced by Hürriyet Daily Newspaper, following reasons have been stated for indicating Turkey's intervention in Azaz 1) PYD and Assad forces want to enter Azaz and this may create a new wave of migration to Turkey [it is safe to say that the same concern already exists in Idlib with different actors.] 2) The operation is not within the scope of the fights against ISIS and 3) the PYD/YPG has an aim to take a share from the lands. After all, political stability is trying to be established in Azez with the "Azez and Rural Region Council" at the moment.

What are the current humanitarian conditions?

Besides all the strategic and military showdowns, the human factor, that is the most essential characteristic of Azez, should not be ignored. One of Azez's biggest problems is the inadequate infrastructure after the great migration from its south and the constant need for humanitarian aid. Babüselam tent city welcomes you right after you leave the Öncüpinar gate on Turkey's border in Kilis. The first visits to Babüselam date back to the first years of the civil war in Syria, 2012. At this point, it is seen that those in Babüselam have been trying to maintain their lives in the briquette houses [These houses were tents before], which they built with the help of Turkey that comes from the borderline for about 10 years.



Children in the Babüselam camps. Arif Hüdaverdi Yaman, Anadolu Ajansı 2018.

Although the conditions of Babüselam Refugee Camp are relatively better than other irregular camps in the region, the ground is usually getting covered with mud, especially in winters, due to the weak water channels. The roofs covered with tent canvas leak water. Additionally, one of the biggest problems in the region is heating. Syrians are heating with fuel in Azez. The usage of fuel also brings a very heavy odor to the air. It is expected to fuel would be replaced with coal due to the rise in international oil prices. However, it is stated that coal will also cause air pollution. Therefore, it is essential to use natural gas for environmentally-friendly heating. But, it does not seem possible in the short term.

It is safe to say that Turkish non-governmental organizations such as IHH, Sadaka Taşı, Beşir, Yetim Foundation, Fetih Association play an effective role in the context of humanitarian aid in Azez within the state-sanctioned Turkish Red Crescent, Religious Affairs Directorate, and AFAD, particularly in sheltering and food aid. However, Western-based NGOs are rather weak. Turkish NGOs bear the burden of humanitarian needs in Azez to a large extent.



The biggest issue in Azez is poverty. The coronavirus was almost last on Azez's agenda. The main concern is to hold on to life..



In Azez, men are trying to bring the region to life through trade, even though it is in the small scale.

For example, in the pharmacy established by IHH, people with health problems can get medicine support with their prescriptions. In the interview meetings, it was stated that pharmacists do not encounter any problems in the supply of periodically used drugs, but it is more difficult to supply the drugs that should be used continuously in chronic diseases.



Clothe Distribution Centre established by IHH in Azez.

In Azez, the coronavirus cannot become a hot topic due to basic life necessities. It is stated that in 2020, the population of Azez started to be infected by the coronavirus pandemic, and especially in the summer of 2021, many elderly people lost their lives in the region. In addition to the fact that lack of hygienic conditions that refugees have because of the non-access to water, it is also not possible to implement social measures such as full lockdown or quarantine in Azez.

Therewithal, children need more vitamins. It is reported that adults' immune system has become more accustomed to the unhygienic conditions in the past ten years in the interviews that we held in the region. However, it is not applicable for infants and children between the age of 2 and 6. Since infant mortality is quite high due to inadequate conditions, a new formula support is needed. Children's clothing is also extremely important, especially in difficult winter conditions. During visits to the region, it has been observed that the clothes of children need to be constantly renewed because they wear out earlier than expected.

Conclusion

This analysis has stressed that Azez is a significant cross-section as a safe zone and future of Idlib. All of the problems of Azez are also the problems of Syria. First of all, it is necessary to approach the issue holistically. In the short term, a solution does not seem possible in Syria and it is also difficult to mention a reconstruction in the conventional [classical] map of Syria.

There are various scenarios regarding the state structure for the next ten years, but in Syria, where multiple actors exist, the share of sovereignty in the areas of domination does not seem to be able to unite under one authority. This situation brings with it the risk of fragmentation. The unitary map imagination continues to be assumed by the Western international community. This assumption makes the legitimacy of other actors in the region open to debate since Assad's existence continues. While the states that borders with Syria have to consider their security concerns, the main subject that is stuck in this turmoil is civilians. Today, in Azez:

- The need for humanitarian aid for babies, especially vitamins, baby food, diapers and hygiene materials, continues.
- The vision for a better future in Azez is very weak.
- Security concerns in the region also continue due to missile attacks from the south.
- There is a need for a political strategy that will take into account the long-term consequences of Turkey's presence in the region. Otherwise, the safe zone line, which includes Azez, may bring a chronic foreign policy burden for Turkey.

About 7 million people immigrated from Syria. Some of those who have not yet migrated are located on Syria's northern border. Azez is included as one of the regions of Turkey's borderline. A population of about 300,000 had to build tents and briquette houses on the lands that were once fertile olive fields. But even this migration has not yet resolved their security concerns. Because the PYD/YPG missile attacks from the south of Azez continue. Unfortunately, civilians lose their lives due to missile attacks in monthly periods. Although their power of survival has been increasing day by day, missile fires are pushing the residents of the region to fear.

The dream of women is to have a clean kitchen where they can lean their backs beyond the political struggle. The tent does not offer people the possibility of a wall to lean on. As a matter of fact, living in tents for a long time has even caused some to become hunched over. The minors, on the other hand, are aware of the security problems, but they do not have cognizance of it yet.

In Azez, men try to bring life to the region through trade, even if it is small scale. Barbershops, the auto industry, grocery stores, and even cafes have been established. In addition, Saddam Hussein posters at the back of some cars draw attention.

Poverty is a fundamental problem. Children are not getting enough nutrition. While non-governmental organizations are rebuilding the region with sustainable projects in Azez, unfortunately the need for humanitarian aid goes on.



Azez is actually a cross section for the safe zone and the future of Idlib!

ENDNOTES

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- ⁷ Musa Şahpolat and Duygu Ayar. "Türkiye- Suriye Sınırdaki Kilis'te Füze Saldırıları Sonrası Anksiyete, Depresyon ve Stres Tepkisi Düzeyleri." Klinik Psikiyatri Dergisi. no. 23 (2020): 423-29.
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The main motivation for missile attacks from the south is to "terrorize" people.

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He was born in Rize in 1987. He completed his undergraduate education in International Relations at Uludağ University in 2010. He received his master's degree with his thesis on transformation in civil-military relations in Turkish politics at Kocaeli University in 2017. Between 2012 and 2019, he worked as a Researcher & Editor at the Center for Wise Men Strategic Studies (BİLGESAM), ILKE Foundation, and Humanitarian and Social Research Center (İNSAMER). Currently, he is the Coordinator of the Reporting Dept. of the International Refugee Rights Association and continues his Ph.D. studies in at Istanbul University.

Whoever saves a life, it will be as if they saved all of humanity.



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