

# Black waters: Oil spills pollute northeast Syria creeks

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Horses have reportedly died after drinking water polluted by oil in Syria's Kurdish-controlled northeastern Hasakeh province

In his village near a northeast Syria oil facility, Abdulkarim Matar said he has watched his horses die because of oil spills that have polluted waterways in the resource-rich region.

The landowner said winter floods caused oil waste from a nearby storage facility to spill over onto his land.

"The oil waste... sticks to our soil and agricultural lands" the 48-year-old said, complaining of a poor harvest in the village of Abu Hajar.

"I have lost two Arabian horses because of the river water", he added, explaining they had drunk water contaminated by oil.

Oil pollution in Syria has been a growing concern since the 2011 onset of a civil war that has taken a toll on oil infrastructure and seen rival powers compete over control of key hydrocarbon fields.

In the Kurdish-held northeast, a large storage facility in the Rmeilan oil field in Hasakeh province is of particular concern, according to the Dutch peace organisation PAX.

Oil leaks from the Gir Zero storage facility have been suspected since at least 2014, the latest in March, it said in a June report.

Thousands of barrels have leaked out into creeks in the area over the past five years, threatening the health and livelihoods of people in dozens of villages, according to PAX and Samir Madani, co-founder of oil shipping website TankerTrackers.com.



A man works at a makeshift refinery distilling crude oil in the village of Bishiriya in the countryside near Al-Qahtaniya in northeast Syria

Matar said the polluted tributary running past his land "contaminates our groundwater and constantly emits odours".

"It's also a hotbed for diseases, including skin infections," he added, of the waters that eventually feed into the Khabour river in the city of Hasakeh.

## **Oil-soaked sheep**

With the help of US forces, a semi-autonomous Kurdish administration

controls some of Syria's most sought-after oil fields in the northeast and relies on them as a key source of revenue.

The major Rmeilan field, located near a US airbase, has been among the Syrian Kurds' most prized assets since regime forces withdrew early on in the war.

But oil wealth comes at a heavy cost for livestock farmers like Hasan Abdul Mahmoud, who is in his thirties.

In another creekside village, he pointed to a thick coating of oil dripping from the fleece of one of his sheep, blaming it on oil waste floating down from the Gir Zero facility, near the village of Tall Adas.



Workers at informal refineries cover their faces with scarves, to provide a degree of protection against skin complaints and other negative reactions to pollutants

"Since the start of the conflict, the water coming from Tall Adas has become polluted with oil and the most affected are the sheep," Mahmoud said.

Around him, several herders explained how their sheep and cows have died because they drank oil contaminated water.

Residents too suffer heavily from the pollution, Mahmoud said, describing the foul odour of gas and crude oil wafting over the area at dusk.

"We regularly have to take our children to the doctor to put them on a respirator because of the fumes," he said.

Compounding the situation, makeshift oil refineries have cropped up across the northeast in recent years, dumping oil waste in the waterways, PAX said.

These informal refineries receive oil from nearby fields and process it to provide benzene, gasoline and diesel to locals.



Sheep graze and drink from a stream polluted by an oil spill near the village of Sukayriyah, in the countryside south of Rmeilan

### **'Difficult solutions'**

In one such refinery near the town of Al-Qahtaniya, plumes of black smoke rose overhead as workers walked past blackened storage tanks, their faces covered with scarves.

Exposure to oil and its waste products, whether through inhalation or skin contact, has created problems for many in the trade, including Ahmad Mohammad who works at the refinery.

He complained of constant headaches and chest pains because of fumes

and said the rudimentary set-ups used to burn the crude have burnt him and his coworkers.

"We have to do this because there are no other jobs," said the 37-year-old, his fingers tainted black. "I'm forced to do this to feed my children."

The oil contamination has tainted water supplies in a region also grappling with an outbreak of the novel coronavirus that has so far infected six people, one of whom died, according to data collated by the United Nations.

Wim Zwijnenburg, the author of the PAX report, said people along the creeks use local ground water, now likely contaminated, or surface water for basic household use.



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But "they are reluctant now to use these water sources due to the fact they are polluted", he said.

Kurdish authorities said they are aware of the problem but claim there is very little they can do.

"It is one of our biggest environmental concerns," said Berivan Omer, an environmental official with the Kurdish administration.

"But solutions at this stage are difficult to find because they require large finances and the right expertise," she told AFP from her office in Qamishli.

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