



TURKEY'S TRACK RECORD: The occupation of Afrin



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“People here, everyone has a dream, a dream of returning back to their farms and their homes in Afrin.”

Hassan Hassan, former Afrin resident



HISTORY OF AFRIN

The people of Afrin

“As Kurdish people, we see all of these people’s place as alongside us, organised together: Christians, Armenians, Arabs, Yazidis... we don’t make a difference between them. We lived together, and we worked together, all of those minorities worked as hard as they could to make a life together.”

Hamida Umma Mohammed

The region of Afrin, in the northwest of Syria, has been settled by Kurdish people since at least the Middle Ages, and possibly since pre-Christian times. In historic times, it was called “Çiyayê Kurmanç,” meaning “Mountain of the Kurds,” illustrating how the area was characterised by the Kurdish people who inhabited the region. The region hosts ancient pre-Christian monuments such as the temple in Ain Dara, which was damaged by Turkish air strikes in the 2018 attacks.

The population of the region was made up of five Kurdish “Ashiret” (clan federations), as well as large Kurdish-Alevi and Yazidi minorities. Afrin formed a region that was both ethnically and linguistically far more homogeneous Kurdish than the other regions of Kurdistan within Syrian borders. In addition to the Kurdish community, there was a small Armenian community, a few Arab families and a small group of Dūmī (Nawar) – related to European Roma. Estimates of the pre-Syrian civil war population of Afrin region set 400,000 as the maximum, but an additional 200,000 – 300,000 displaced people from regions of Syria experiencing conflict arrived in the region during the war.

Ethnic and religious minorities of Afrin

The south and the east of Afrin form the largest contiguous settlement area of Yazidis in Syria. The Yazidis are believed to have inhabited Afrin as far back as the 12th century, but were never officially recognised as a religious community under Baathist rule in Syria. It was only after the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from the Kurdish areas that Yazidis became able to form their own religious associations. In 2013, the first Yazidis organized themselves in local councils in North and East Syria in a move that was supported by the newly declared autonomous administration. Yazidis in Afrin established associations and a large community centre in the city of Afrin. The region of Afrin still hosted the largest Yazidi community within Syria, which included a number of villages whose inhabitants were all Yazidis. There were a number of old religious shrines of the Yazidis in the region and each of these villages had its local village cemetery.

The town of Mabeta and surrounding villages was where most of the 5,000 – 10,000 Alevis of Afrin, who are Anatolian rather than Alawi Alevis, were settled. Like the Yazidis they were not recognized as a religious community in Baathist Syria and established their first associations after the establishment of the autonomous administration in 2012. Since the invasion of Afrin, there have been several cases of abductions of Yazidis and desecration of shrines.

Afrin region hosts many historical relicts of early Christianity like Simon's Fortress, the monastery of Simon Stylites the Elder, the Tomb of Saint Maron in Beradê and several other ruins of churches and monasteries. After World War One, the region hosted an Armenian Christian community made up of refugees from the Ottoman Genocide in 1915, and more recently hosted a Syriac Christian community and an evangelical Christian community of Kurdish converts.

Political mobilisation and repression

For many decades Afrin was a centre for organising for Kurdish rights. These political mobilisations, which included support for the PKK, were tolerated by the Syrian regime as long as the focus was not on mobilising Kurds across Syria. However, the Syrian regime's repression of Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations in March 1986 triggered unrest in the region. Political agitation for Kurdish rights became increasingly repressed, and the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) that was established in 2003 faced oppression by the Syrian authorities. Nevertheless the PYD remained strong in Afrin.

Like everywhere else in Syria, the people of Afrin rose up against the Syrian regime during the Syrian civil war. Afrin residents had organised themselves into armed self defence units for protection against jihadist groups in the region. In a show of force, the residents of Afrin took to the streets, some with weapons, and drove the Syrian Army out of Afrin on the 20th July 2012. Upon withdrawal of Syrian government forces, a system of administration led by the PYD and local self defence forces stepped in. Similar processes occurred in other cities such Kobane, and the autonomous canton of Afrin, alongside the cantons of Kobane and Jazeera, was officially established on the 2nd January 2014. Afrin became the safest and most prosperous of all Kurdish cantons in Syria. During the civil war, many small factories for soap production or clothes relocated from Aleppo to Afrin. An estimated 316,000 internally displaced people – both Kurd and Arab - from other

regions in Syria fleeing the worsening conflict in places such as Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Raqqa found their way to safety in Afrin. During this time the region of Afrin developed a high level of local democracy in line with the Autonomous Administration's political project of democratic confederalism. The women's movement was highly organised and women's representation in political administration and civil society was very strong. This developing example of a political system and society based on women's liberation and local democracy was irrevocably damaged through the Turkish invasion and occupation of 2018.

Turkish invasion and war

When the Turkish army and its proxies from jihadist factions invaded in January 2018 with Turkish air support, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. In order to justify the invasion, the Turkish government claimed that Afrin presented a security threat to Turkey. Ibrahim Kalin, the spokesman for the Turkish President, wrote: "Over the last year alone, more than 700 attacks have been launched from the Afrin area under PYD/YPG control against Turkish cities." However, upon further investigation (conducted by the BBC), only 26 confirmed incidents of cross border attacks from Syria emerged, 15 of which came from Afrin. Looking even more closely, some of the incidents counted as "attacks" included reports of shots being fired into an empty field.

Turkey used the same tactic to justify its October 2019 attack east of the Euphrates, citing "security concerns" and claiming a high number of cross-border attacks. However, our research indicates that the level of threat is actually higher for those on the Syrian side of the border. Between January 2019 – July 2019 there were 30 attacks from Turkey targetting Syrians, but there was only one instance of an attack onto Turkey from Syrian soil (and in this attack the suspect was arrested by local security forces). In both the case of Afrin and the current invasion, Turkey is driven by the dual motivations of territorial expansion and deep anti-Kurdish sentiment.

As part of the so-called "Operation Olive Branch," Turkey launched air strikes on over 100 locations in Afrin alongside heavy artillery shelling, causing civilian mortalities and damage to crucial services such as the region's main hospital. Turkey's long-standing support of both ISIS and anti-Syrian government groups meant that as both ISIS and opposition groups began to lose ground, Turkey was able to absorb them as proxies in the attack on Afrin. After the retreat of the SDF in March 2018, Turkey took control of the region through military and administrative presence. Turkey also enacted control of the region through its proxy forces, which include former members and affiliates of ISIS, Al Nusra and other jihadist factions.

As a result of the occupation, 300,000 people have been displaced, representing over half of the population of Afrin. The on-the-ground presence of Turkish-backed factions combined with the financial, administrative and military oversight of Turkey sets the context for ongoing human rights violations and a policy of forced demographic change.

What does the United Nations say about Afrin?

United Nations, Human Rights Council, (15 August 2019), A/HRC/42/51

Individuals, including activists openly critical of the armed groups and those perceived to be supporters of the former administration, were regularly arrested, detained, tortured and extorted... in February, one journalist was arrested by an armed group in Afrin, and was accused of sharing information with foreign news agencies. He was severely beaten during his interrogation.

The victims of abductions by armed groups and/or criminal gangs were often of Kurdish origin, as well as civilians perceived as being prosperous, including doctors, businesspersons and merchants.

Reports received by the Commission also indicated that, particularly in areas under the control of armed factions following extremist ideologies, severe restrictions on women's rights had been imposed in recent months. Violations include the imposition of strict dress codes for women and girls and limitations on freedom of movement

Reportedly, officials of Kurdish origin who had previously worked in institutions had frequently been replaced by persons of Arab descent.

The Commission finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that members of the armed groups in Afrin continued to commit the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture... and pillage.

AFRIN: UNDER OCCUPATION

“[Displaced people from Afrin] arrive here and explain how it is under the Turkish occupation, how they are forcibly driven out of their homes, how they are raped, how they are tortured, how they are arrested... We have taken the testimonies of hundreds of people and sent them to the International Court of Human Rights in Europe, but until now, unfortunately, there has been no indication of a move toward putting the Turkish state on trial for all the human rights violations they have committed.”

Hediya Yousef - Co-Chair of the Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria

Afrin is currently under the control of Turkish-backed Islamist groups, including factions such as the Sultan Murad Brigade and Jaysh-al-Islam, who stand accused of numerous atrocities. This has been extensively documented, including in our factsheet “Factions in Turkish backed ‘Free Syrian Army.’” In occupied Afrin, Turkish-backed militias have engaged in looting, confiscation of property, abduction for ransom, forced displacement, extrajudicial killing, and sexual violence against women.

Local Turkish-backed councils have been set up to replace the democratic self-governance structures that previously existed in Afrin. They tend to under-represent the Kurdish population and are mostly made up of individuals with very close political ties to Turkey. They are also

overwhelmingly male, with the general committee for local councils selected in April 2018 containing 100 men and only seven women. Members of the local councils who do not fully collaborate with Turkey or its proxies have been kidnapped, tortured or murdered. Some Afrin residents chose not to flee from Afrin, believing they could participate in the new political system and continue living in Afrin. However, many came to regret their choice as this proved impossible. Police forces that have been set up to maintain order – particularly after extreme levels of looting following the invasion – are mostly made up of fighters from armed factions. Whether under the auspices of a “local police force,” as the “Syrian Special Forces Unit of Afrin,” or in the name of their faction, these groups continue to commit violations against civilians, and report directly to Turkish intelligence or special forces.

Kidnapping and attacks

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“Some women haven’t left their homes for months.”

Elif Gulxeyri, former Afrin resident, Serdem Camp Committee of Reconciliation

In the year following the start of the occupation on the 18th March 2018, several sources documented between 2,600-3,000 instances of kidnapping. The Syrian Jurists’ Platform to Defend Afrin report that they have collected the evidence to file 50 instances of abduction of women and 55 instances of rape with international human rights bodies. As Rojava Information Center, we have been monitoring kidnappings, attacks and killing of civilians in Afrin since July 2019. Between July 2019 – October 2019, there were 313 kidnappings, and at least 11 injuries and 11 deaths officially registered. Overall there were

110 incidents recorded, with some involving several victims.

The aggressors in these incidents are largely members of Turkey-backed factions, or unknown armed groups who are likely to belong to these factions. The factions with the largest number of attacks attributed to them are Ahrar al-Sharqya, Sultan Murad, Faylaq al-Sham, Samarkand Brigade, Saed Bin Weqas and Al Hamzat. Most of the attacks fall loosely into four categories:

Abductions and attacks which are politically motivated, targetting those who had, or are suspected of having, links with the previous Autonomous Administration or SDF. These are the incidents most likely to be carried out directly by Turkish-backed forces.

Kidnappings for ransom made ostensibly for purely financial reasons.

Murders as a result of Afrin residents defending themselves against looting by armed gangs.

Shooting or shelling from across the border, such as the targetting of Khalil Suri Oso, 25, by a sniper because he was too close to the border. Similar incidents have occurred in the current Turkish invasion.

Both children and elders have been kidnapped, and some people are kidnapped several times, with ransoms collected each time. For example, Hussein Hamo was kidnapped and held for ransom last year, and this year was kidnapped again, beaten and tortured to death. Individuals can be targeted on a basis of ethnic profiling, as well as for purely financial motivations. The overall picture is one of persistent violence against any individuals who do not fully comply with the rule of Turkish-backed factions or the local councils that have been set up to consolidate Turkish control.

Table: Documented attacks on civilians, July 2019 – October 2019

These are the incidents that we were able to receive detailed information about. The real number of incidents is likely to be much higher. Many incidents involve several victims.

Month	Kidnappings/ De-tentions	Injuries	Deaths	# Incidents
July	88	0	3	33
August	58	5	4	28
September	95	2	0	16
October	72	4	4	33
Totals	313	11	11	110

Occupation and Erasure

In addition to occupation through military force, the Turkish state is conducting economic occupation through the theft of Afrin’s famous olive harvest. Through an agreement between Turkish proxies and the “local” councils they set up, more than three quarters of the region’s olive groves have been seized by Turkish-backed forces. The harvest – cited as being worth 80 million USD - is turned over and sold to other countries as “Turkish” olive oil, with profit split between all parties.

The Turkish Minister of Agriculture confirmed in 2018 that 600 tonnes of olives had “entered the country” and the revenues were intended for the Turkish economy. Factories and equipment have also been seized by armed factions, sometimes with exorbitant sums of money demanded for its return.

Further attempts to erase Kurdish identity manifest through a policy of making the Turkish language compulsory in schools, and used in public institutions. Kurdish is not

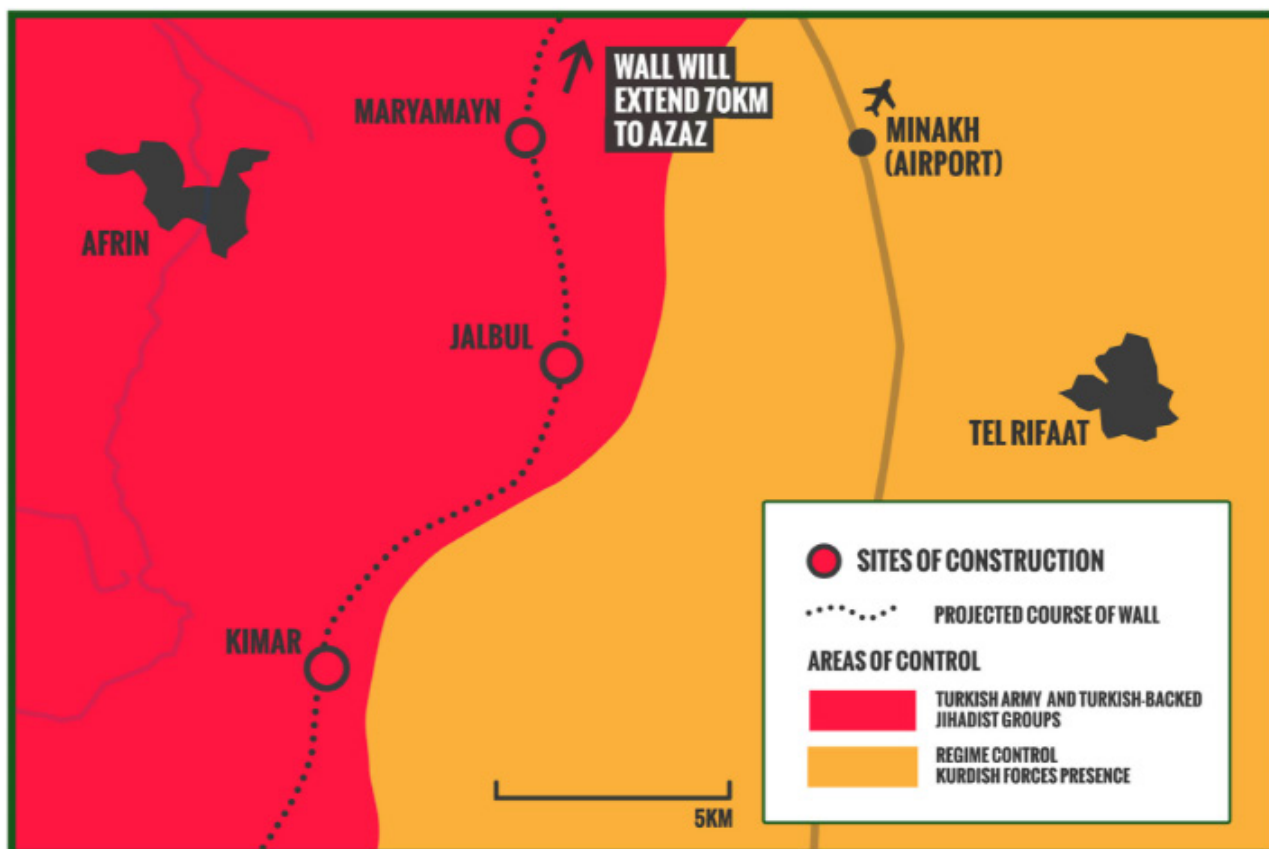
“A war economy based on theft, expropriation of land and kidnapping remains in the hands of the leaders of armed factions and their networks, all under Turkish control. The blind eye that Turkish forces turn toward the armed factions’ practices deepens their involvement, and the armed factions’ dependence on Turkey has reduced them to mercenaries.”

‘Afrin under Turkish control: Political, economic and social transformations,’
European University Institute

used officially, and is no longer taught in schools as one of the default languages. The occupation's authorities have removed the Kurdish names of public spaces and replaced them with Turkish names. In an example of cultural erasure, the statue of Kawa the Blacksmith – a legendary Kurdish figure, whose story is one of resistance to tyranny – was destroyed by the occupying Turkish paramilitaries. The roundabout where it stood has been renamed Olive Branch in reference to the military moniker of the Turkish and jihadist invasion. The main square in Afrin was renamed after president Erdoğan, and occupation authorities in Afrin even banned the celebration of Newroz – Kurdish New Year – this year.

Turkish-backed ethnic cleansing targets not only Kurdish residents, but also other ethnic and religious minorities. In 2018 most of the Yazidis fled the Turkish invasion, while those who stayed were subjects of violence and oppression. As in the ISIS genocide of Yazidis in Sinjar, many Yazidis have been kidnapped, raped, killed or forced to convert to Islam. Since the invasion at least 17 Yazidi shrines have been desecrated and destroyed, Yazidi villages have been occupied by settlers and houses of Yazidi families were converted into mosques. With the war of 2018 almost all Christians fled from Afrin as well. The few remaining try to pretend to be Muslims and live in permanent fear of being discovered.

TURKISH SEPARATION WALL IN AFRIN



Map produced by Rojava Information Center, May 2019

Converts to Christianity are at particularly high risk of violence from Islamist groups. As the campaign of violence and cultural erasure continues to unfold in occupied Afrin, in April 2019 Turkey started to bulldoze homes, public facilities, and orchards in order to construct a wall to separate Afrin from other areas of Syria. This move, widely seen as preparation to annex Afrin into the Turkish state, has come alongside Turkey's designation of Afrin and the other areas of northern Aleppo as part of neighbouring Turkish governorates, and the backing of the Turkish-installed "local" councils by Turkish banks.

Kurds who have attempted to return to their lands in Afrin have been blocked by the Turkish-backed groups controlling the region. Local human rights observers have been documenting the ongoing abuses carried out by the occupying forces, and are appealing to the international community to pressure Turkey to end the violations and end the occupation. For now, return to Afrin is an impossibility for the tens of thousands of the region's inhabitants, and the region continues to experience a net flow of original Afrin residents out of the region.

Turkey-backed jihadis and demographic engineering

In addition to physical violence and economic appropriation, a policy of demographic change has been engineered and carried out by Turkey and its proxy groups occupying Afrin. In 2011, 92% of the population of Afrin was Kurdish, with Arabs and small minorities of Yezidis, Syrians and Armenians making up the remainder. Since the violent displacement of a huge proportion of the population, 75% of the population are the Turkmen and Arab settlers brought in by Turkey. The families of Turkish-backed mercenaries are being moved into the homes of displaced Afrin families. Arab families displaced from Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and other regions of Syria have also been resettled into houses that have been confiscated from their Kurdish owners.

In May 2019, figures from the authorities in Afrin indicated that at least 88,000 people had been resettled in Afrin, the majority from Ghouta.

At that time, Turkey dissolved the administrative bodies responsible for documenting the original residencies and ID documents of the displaced people, and forced them to register with the local authorities. This both undermines the future chances of return home for those who have been reluctantly resettled, but also strengthens new residents' hold on seized property. Conversely, original Afrin residents who want to return to

"My [family is] there and we speak on the phone every day. They tell me that people are being held in chains, one person has been killed, another has had their feet and hands cut off... Each day, they dig up so many trees. My own family had two hundred trees on our land, by the river, and they were all burned. We see photos of our produce being stolen every day... Now, there are jihadi fighters living in my house, and the shop I owned has been taken over by jihadis who have taken everything that was inside."

Erifa Bekir, Civil Affairs Bureau of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria, former Afrin resident

the region face many obstacles. The UN Human Rights Council has documented that “displaced civilians returning to Afrin have been frequently barred from accessing their property if it had been appropriated by members of armed groups and their families. Others were required to pay up to several thousand dollars to have their goods and vehicles returned to them after they had been stolen.”

Through its control of the various militias making up its proxy forces, Turkey is implementing a broad strategy of establishing a “Turkmen belt” along the areas where Afrin borders Turkey. In the border town of Bilbil, 340 families were brought in to settle the area, almost all of whom were Turkmen. Only 15 of the original Kurdish families remain. Sultan Murad Brigade, a Turkmen faction which has been a dominant force in both the 2018 invasion of Afrin and the October 2019 invasion of North and East Syria, settled the families of 600 of its fighters in 14 villages near the border.

Arab-majority factions such as Hamza Division, the Levant Front, Ahrar al Sharqiya and Jaysh al Islam have control of the area directly south of the “Turkemen belt” and of south Afrin, and are settling fighters and their families there. Most Kurdish families remain in central Afrin, driven out of the other regions and surrounded by areas occupied by the Arab settlers.

Many of the same groups who took part in the invasion and occupation of Afrin are also involved in the October 2019 invasion and occupation of North and East Syria. Ahrar-al-Sharqiya (the group responsible for the execution of Hevrin Khalaf), Jaysh-al-Islam, Sultan Murad Brigade, Hamza Division, Division 20, Amshat (aka Sultan Suleiman Shah), Liwa Samarkand and Hasakah Shield, among others, were present both in the attacks on Afrin in 2018 and the invasion east of the Euphrates. Faylaq Majid were brought in from Idlib to participate in the offensive, and Levant Front (aka Jabhat al Shamiya) have been targeting Kobane from their base in Jarablus. As in Afrin, there are also documented instances of looting, intimidation, assault and kidnapping of civilians in the occupied zone between and south of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye.

Case Study: Hassan Hassan

Hassan Hassan, Camp Serdem, Former Afrin Resident and University Lecturer, now human rights observer

I used to live in a small town. I had a home, and now my home is confiscated by Turkey backed rebels. I also had a home in the village, my home and my olive groves are also confiscated by Turkey backed rebels. The group who are operating in my village are called Ahrar Al Sharqiya. They come from Deir ez Zor, they are former ISIS remnants, regrouped by Turkey in 2016.

There are 53 factions operating under the banner of Turkish army in Afrin... but other smaller groups for example control villages, and there are also warlords. Each warlord is controlling 4 or 5 villages. They are doing whatever they like. The Turkish army has given them authority to do all kinds of crimes.

Up to now Turkey has been pressuring the few locals who remained in Afrin through kidnappings, confiscation, arbitrary detentions, to try to force them,

to drive them to get out of Afrin once and for all. So, people are still flocking out of Afrin. So in days still to come, maybe Afrin will be emptied of its original population - as planned by Turkey... The last thing the Turks care about is the refugees. Its a tool used by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for extortion, to take money from the Europeans.

What Turkey did through the course of Syrian conflict, they had a lot of groups, of extremists, controlled by Turkey. But Turkey never allowed these groups to get united. Why? Because if these groups got united, they would have been able to topple the Syrian regime and take control of the Syrian land. In this case, Turkey would never have been able to achieve the nationalist covenant. What Turkey did is using them as proxies, according to the policy of divide and rule, not to topple the regime, but to use them in order to achieve its final goal, and now it's working on this goal.

The project carried by the Kurdish administration here is the only progressive project in the Middle East. It's part of the hope for all the minorities in the Middle East to be emancipated of the yoke of Islamist extremism, of the yoke of nationalism, so - Turkey sees this as a danger to its dreams. That's why Turkey is ferociously intent on fighting the Kurds.

Since people came here, the Kurdish administration has been providing 95% of aid to the refugees here. And the contribution of UNICEF and Syrian Red Crescent is about 5%. But unfortunately, the international community is not regarding the people, the Kurdish who were forcibly driven out of their land in Afrin, they no longer, the international community no longer considers them as IDPs or refugees here. So with zero international assistance, and with the winter at the door, the people expect and dream that they will get further assistance to be able to face the harsh winter of Shehba. They need for example a lot of things - from foodstuffs to winter materials, but, the most important thing that people want is going back to their lands, their stolen farms, their stolen homes, once Turkey is driven out of Afrin... People here, everyone has a dream, a dream of returning back to their farms and their homes in Afrin.

Because staying in Shehba is the closest area to Afrin. And this relieves some of their grievances, relieves them of some of their sadness. It gives them a spark of hope, with each breath of wind coming from the north, from the west. So the closer we are to Afrin, the closer we will be to liberating Afrin. So it's a kind of resistance. Even if Turkey attacked here, we will, people say, they will resist and resist, and they will not get out of this land.

As I have been told by my relatives who are still in Afrin, by my friends, when rebel groups certain rebel groups, especially the Turkmens, see a beautiful girl, the next day they will come to storm the home, looking for loyalists to the Kurdish administration. During this process, they will kidnap girls to be taken only for one purpose, sex slavery, I am certain. A lot of cases.


I have a message to the west, and as a Protestant - I am a Protestant - to the Christian world. That on days still to come, the consequences of Erdogan's dirty acts will even reach your countries. Even the same things Turkish bandits are committing inside Afrin, maybe will be committed on the streets of London, and Holland, Paris and other places if they don't stand firm to put an end to the depredations of this despot, this dictator, he's the Hitler of Anatolia.

Impact on children

The occupation is having a negative impact on the rights of children, making it impossible for children to access education and to live in safety. The number of children attending school has shrunk as widespread violence and kidnapping instil a climate of fear. Some residents of Afrin also report a rise in child labour, with children as young as 9 or 10 being made to work. Some schools have been converted into police stations or military bases.

In addition, there have been documented instances of children being abused and forced to do degrading work as 'punishment.' For example, in Sharran village in Afrin two children were forced to clean a toilet with their bare hands by the "police" force of a local faction. ds by the "police" force of a local faction.

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"[In occupied Afrin], children go to school, but perhaps only 20% of them. People are scared that their children will be arrested, kidnapped and taken to another place. The people are scared, and don't send their children to school."

Mohammed Arth

Impact on women

The documented violations of the rights of women and girls present a grim picture of institutionalized disenfranchisement and violence against women and girls. Many of the Turkish proxies who have control of the region seek to establish an Islamic caliphate and law based on the most conservative Islamist principles. Reminiscent of the atrocities committed under the ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq, there are reports of women and children being abducted and bought and sold in markets. There are also eyewitness accounts of violence and threats of violence against family members being used as a tool for rape. Accounts also describe brutal punishment for violations of the imposed dress code of full veiling in public. Many women do not leave the house for fear of punishment or abduction.

"Daily, the women of Afrin face rape, the forcible marriage of young girls aged 11 or 12. Several days ago, a young woman from my region killed herself, she shot herself, rather than face being raped by those who wanted to rape her. Women from Afrin, Jarabalus, Azaz, Bab, Idlib are being brought to Azaz and sold. Friends of mine in Afrin have seen this with their own eyes."

Hamida Umma Mohammed

Case study: Hamida Umma Mohammed

Hamida Umma Mohammed, 51, from the Sherawa region of Afrin, works in the women's movement

But some people remained there, they couldn't leave: they said, "I can't leave the land of Afrin behind," or that they couldn't leave their own home behind.

Those who remained there face new difficulties day by day. They are at the mercy of jihadist groups backed by the AKP government. The AKP government provides everything for them, it has effectively given them "green cards" and provides all their supplies.

People have remained living there under these groups for a year and a half now, most of them families - like my family, some of whom are still there. My family were driven from their home, they are not allowed to return to their own land. Because we are known to have worked with the Autonomous Administration, they know that we have relatives in YPG and YPJ, as well as relatives like me who work in the civilian sector. And so my family are regularly threatened.

Perhaps 20% of people have remained in their homes since the invasion, the other 80% have been driven out. Many of them now live on other people's property. Large homes and those in strategic locations have been occupied by jihadist groups - including my home. We had a lot of space in our home and on our land, and now a jihadist group has taken it over.

Daily, the women of Afrin face rape, the forcible marriage of young girls aged 11 or 12. Several days ago, a young woman from my region killed herself, she shot herself, rather than face being raped by those who wanted to rape her. Women are being bought and sold in a slave market - not in Afrin itself, but in Azaz [part of the conjoined Euphrates Shield zone, part of the same area of Turkish control]. Women are being sold, and so are children, and so are men. Women from Afrin, Jarabulus, Azaz, Bab, Idlib are being brought to Azaz and sold. Friends of mine in Afrin have seen this with their own eyes, how women are bought and sold, children... both younger children and older, up to the ages of 18 to 22...

Before, children in Afrin went to school, they lived under olive trees and pomegranate trees, on precious soil... Now, small children are being made to work, aged 9 or 10 years old.

We must not forget that as well as the Kurds in Afrin, whose language is banned, there are many minorities who are facing great hardship - Yazidis, for example. There are many Yazidis in Afrin and their situation is very hard. They are being forcibly converted, driven into the mosques at gunpoint.

There are also Arab people living there. They also suffer under the occupation, we should not make a difference between Arab civilians there and the Kurds. Then there are Armenians and Christians living there: one can say that the genocidal project which Turkey started against them is being continued on Afrin's soil. They are likewise being forcibly driven into the mosques. Imagine, to be Christian or Ezidi and forced into a mosque - it is something terribly brutal.

As Kurdish people, we see all of these people's place as alongside us, organised together: Christians, Armenians, Arabs, Yazidis... we don't make a difference between them. We lived together, and we worked together, all of those minorities worked as hard as they could to make a life together. That was it... We say, let there be no states, let there be no difference between people, let all the peoples live together in equality... Yet criminal groups have descended on our land to fill their pockets, to carry out sexual crimes. Where is the humanity? pockets, to carry out sexual crimes. Where is the humanity?





REFUGEES FROM AFRIN

An estimated 300,000 people fled the Turkish assault on Afrin, and more continue to flee as those who initially decided to stay are unable to cope with the brutality, chaos and repression of the Turkish proxies who have control over the region.

Many of those who fled Afrin travelled further east, staying with family or finding new homes in the Kurdish regions to the east. The village of Tel Nasri, near Tel Tamer in Jazeera, had been abandoned by the original Christian inhabitants who mostly fled abroad while ISIS was at the height of its power. The village then hosted hundreds of displaced Afrin residents, though all but 33 families fled in October 2019 as Turkish-backed forces advanced on the region. There are also former Afrin residents scattered throughout the cities and villages of North and East Syria.

“We live here like a flower among fires. We are living in an open prison, a wide prison. The occupying forces and the jihadis are about 6km from our camp. On the other side of us, there is the regime, who until now don’t accept our presence here.”

Mohammed Arth, former Afrin resident

Those who chose to stay close to Afrin are now settled largely in the region of Shehba, where 157,000 people now live in camps, temporary shelters and repurposed buildings. Nearly 3,000 live in Berxwedan refugee camp – established initially to host those fleeing regions south of Afrin – as well as Afrin, Serdem, Shehba, and Veger camps which were built in order to house newly displaced Afrin residents. The population in these camps continues to grow as people continue to flee Afrin.

“The absence of cross-border NGOs in Shehba makes the situation critical... Because the work we do in Shehba is not visible, it’s harder for Kurdish Red Crescent to get donors to support it”

Şêrwan Berî, Head Manager of Kurdish Red Crescent

The refugees in Shehba region face a different and more serious absence of aid. In keeping with the international community’s silence on the Turkish-backed invasion and occupation of Afrin, the severe lack of humanitarian support is often overlooked and unaddressed. The geographical realities of the region – physically occupied

by Turkish-backed jihadist forces, bordered by Turkey and surrounded by Regime-held territory – puts the region at a disadvantage. Throughout North and East Syria, NGOs who are not registered with the Assad regime work as “cross border NGOs,” operating from regional bases in surrounding countries rather than having to coordinate with the Syrian government. However, the Syrian government’s control of the territory surrounding the refugee camps means that restrictions on cross-border NGO operation are so strictly enforced that it is virtually impossible to work as an international NGO in Shehba that is not registered in Damascus.

The territorial isolation of Afrin also means that information as well as materials are difficult to transport in and out of the area. It is particularly hard to transport physical materials such as medicine and gas into Shehba, with Syrian regime authorities and checkpoints often claiming up to 50% of the value of materials as tax in order to obtain permission to bring them into the region. However, the strong community and grassroots democratic culture that characterized Afrin before Turkish invasion have taken root in the Shehba region camps. The camp residents organise themselves in order to coordinate daily life, governance, security and a rich cultural life within the camps and settlements.

Case study: Mohammed Arth

Mohammed Arth, originally from the Bilbil region of Afrin. Teacher, living in Berxwedan camp.

Until now, no NGO has officially come to the camp, but sometimes they have come as private individuals. Individuals from Britain, Sweden, Germany... [but] it’s not an answer to the problems here. From Europe, from America, one thing we want is not aid or medical support... it is knowledge of our case. We want them to open our eyes to some things, these attacks which are being carried out daily by the fascist Turkish state against us. Until today, all the threats have come from Turkey against us, because their leader is ravenous, he is an enemy of the Kurds. We don’t accept this, and from international organisations and the EU and the American congress we want that they recognise our case, and support us on this basis.

We live here like a flower among fires. We are living in an open prison, a wide prison. The occupying forces and the jihadis are about 6KM from our camp. On the other side of us, there is the regime, who until now don’t accept our

presence here.

There are people who get seriously sick and have the need for assistance from outside... some people need to be transferred to Aleppo, urgently transferred, but it can take up to two months until they are allowed to leave. In those two months, it's likely they will die. This has sometimes happened in the camp.

I have relations in Afrin, many families are in this situation... They face pillaging, violence, personal betrayals, rape... pressure on their homes and property... so they cannot leave their homes in a free way, they cannot sleep easy in their beds. Here, we have peace, of a sort; we are more relaxed, we don't face everything they face in Afrin. Afrin has become hell.

In Afrin, the situation for women is very difficult. They face rape, they are kidnapped... often, they are kidnapped for money. For example, some people kidnap a woman, they telephone her relatives and say, "we will let this woman go, if you give us money." Because the woman's revolution advanced so far in Afrin, our enemies now take revenge by way of women.

CONCLUSION

The case of Afrin requires immediate and urgent attention by the international community. The control of Turkish-backed armed factions over the region has created a situation of chaos, violence and the absence of the rule of law. Local governance structures and police forces are either made up of these same factions, or by individuals whose power rests on the maintenance of the status quo. Individuals who do not align themselves with Turkish-backed factions are at high risk of kidnap, attack or execution. With the recent announcement of a Turkish-backed "local council" being set up in Tel Abyad, it is probable that a similar pattern will emerge.

"I have a message to the west, and as a Protestant - I am a Protestant - to the Christian world. That in days still to come, the consequences of Erdogan's dirty acts will reach even your countries. The same things Turkish gangs are committing inside Afrin, maybe will be committed on the streets of London, Holland, Paris and other places if they don't stand firm to put an end to the depredations of this despot, this dictator..."

Hassan Hassan, former Afrin resident

The widespread human rights abuses which target specific ethnicities or religions, as well as the mass displacement of the original Kurdish-majority population should be investigated through a framework of ethnic cleansing. Furthermore, the situation has a particularly negative impact on the rights of women, children and ethnic and religious minorities such as Yazidis, Syrian Christians and Armenian Christians. A similar situation is evolving in areas occupied by Turkish-backed forces east of the Euphrates, with reports of women in Tel Abyad being

forced to wear full veiling and videos of Turkish-proxies shouting jihadist slogans emerging from the occupied region.

Many of the factions supported by Turkey subscribe to jihadist ideology, with a high presence of groups who have been aligned with ISIS and al Nusra. In addition to the impact of this ideology on the lives of Afrin residents, this presents a serious security concern for the region and globally. For as long as Afrin remains a safe haven for adherents to a violent, fundamentalist ideology, it will be used as a base for terrorist activity. Coalition raids to capture ISIS leaders on the 27th - 28th October targetted at least one location within Afrin region alongside Idlib and Jarablus, acting on information indicating that these areas were being used as bases for ISIS. Because many of the same factions are present in Afrin as in the Turkish-occupied zone of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye and 32km south, similar security concerns are likely to present themselves.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to the war, we were in the process of compiling research about the situation of refugees from Afrin. We had already conducted research into the current situation in Afrin, particularly the factions making up Turkish proxy forces. In order to produce this report, we drew on interviews with over 50 displaced Afrin residents in Jazeera, Kobane and Shehba regions. We also spent two weeks in Shehba, conducting first hand research on the situation in the region as well as speaking to a range of military sources and officials from the administration. In addition we consulted a range of academic and journalistic sources.

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