

Q1 & Q2
2022

THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION

**DOCUMENTING RIGHTS ABUSES IN TURKISH OCCUPIED
REGIONS OF NORTH SYRIA**



**ROJAVA
INFORMATION
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OCCUPIED AFRIN

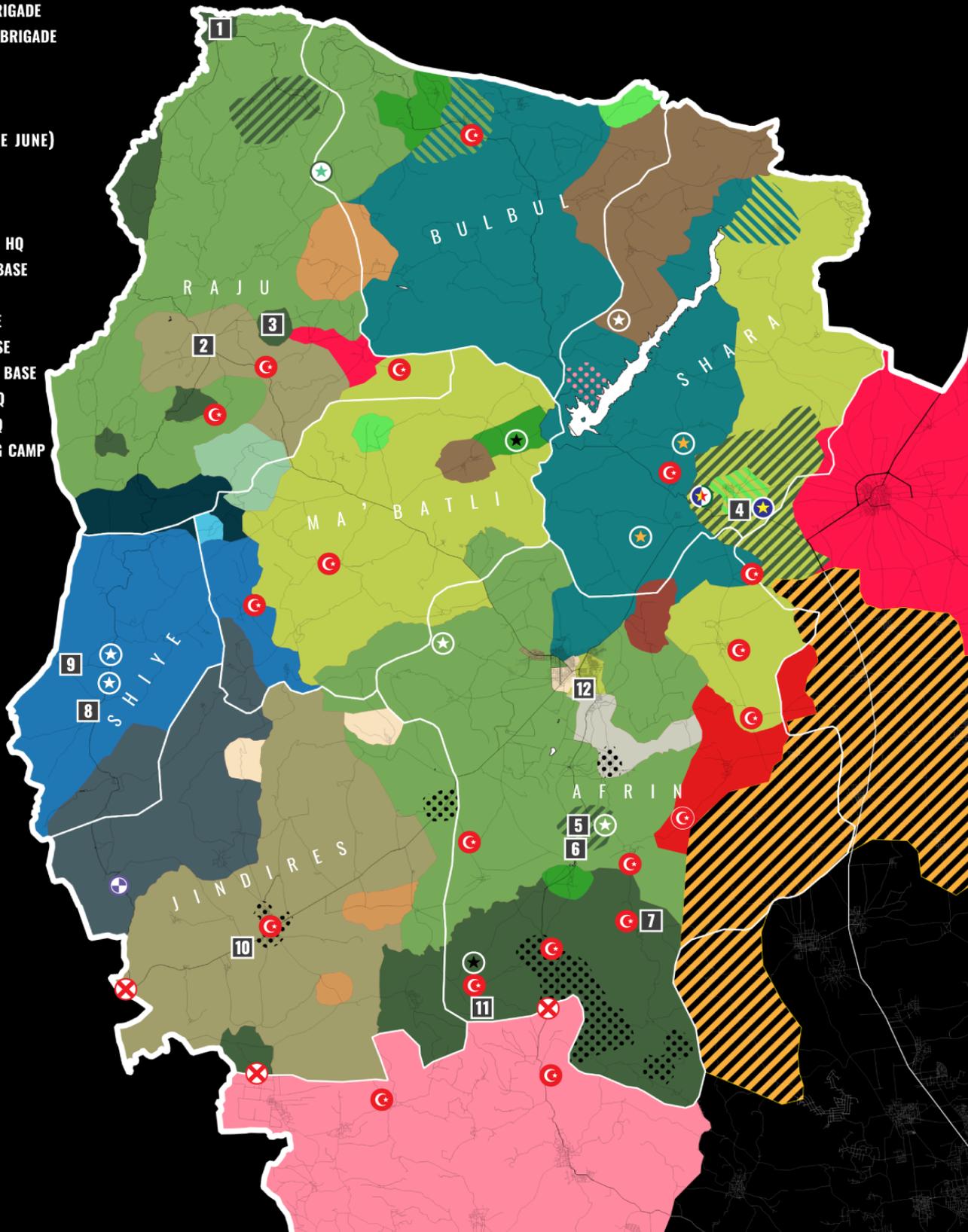
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB
- AHRAR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- AL-HAMZA DIVISION
- AL-JABHA AL-SAMIYA
- JAYSH AL-ISLAM
- SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- 13TH DIVISION
- SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION
- MUNTASIR BILLAH DIVISION
- SUQOUR AL-SHAM BRIGADE
- SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA
- FAYLAQ AL-MAJD
- 112TH DIVISION
- HTS PRESENCE (LATE JUNE)
- TURKISH CONTROL

TURKMEN
FACTIONS

- 1 MAHATTA PRISON (MAYDAN AKBIS)
- 2 RAJU PRISON
- 3 GORAN PRISON
- 4 PRISON (QATMAH)
- 5 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- 6 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- 7 MIT PRISON (BARAD)
- 8 SULEIMAN SHAH PRISON (SHIYE)
- 9 QARMATLAQ HQ & PRISON
- 10 AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA PRISON
- 11 FAYLAQ AL-SHAM PRISON (ISKAN)
- 12 TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

- SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES
- GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
- TURKISH ARMY AND
TURKISH-BACKED GROUPS
- HTS - EXTREMIST GROUPS

- ★ MILITARY POLICE HQ
- ★ SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ
- ★ AL-HAMZA DIVISION BASE
- ★ SULTAN MURAD BASE
- ★ SULEIMAN SHAH BASE
- ★ FAYLAQ AL-SHAM BASE
- ★ LIWA REJAL AL-HARB BASE
- ★ JAYSH AL-NUKHBA HQ
- ★ SUQOUR AL-SHAM HQ
- ★ AL-WAQQAS TRAINING CAMP
- ☪ TURKISH BASE
- ✘ MILITARY CROSSING

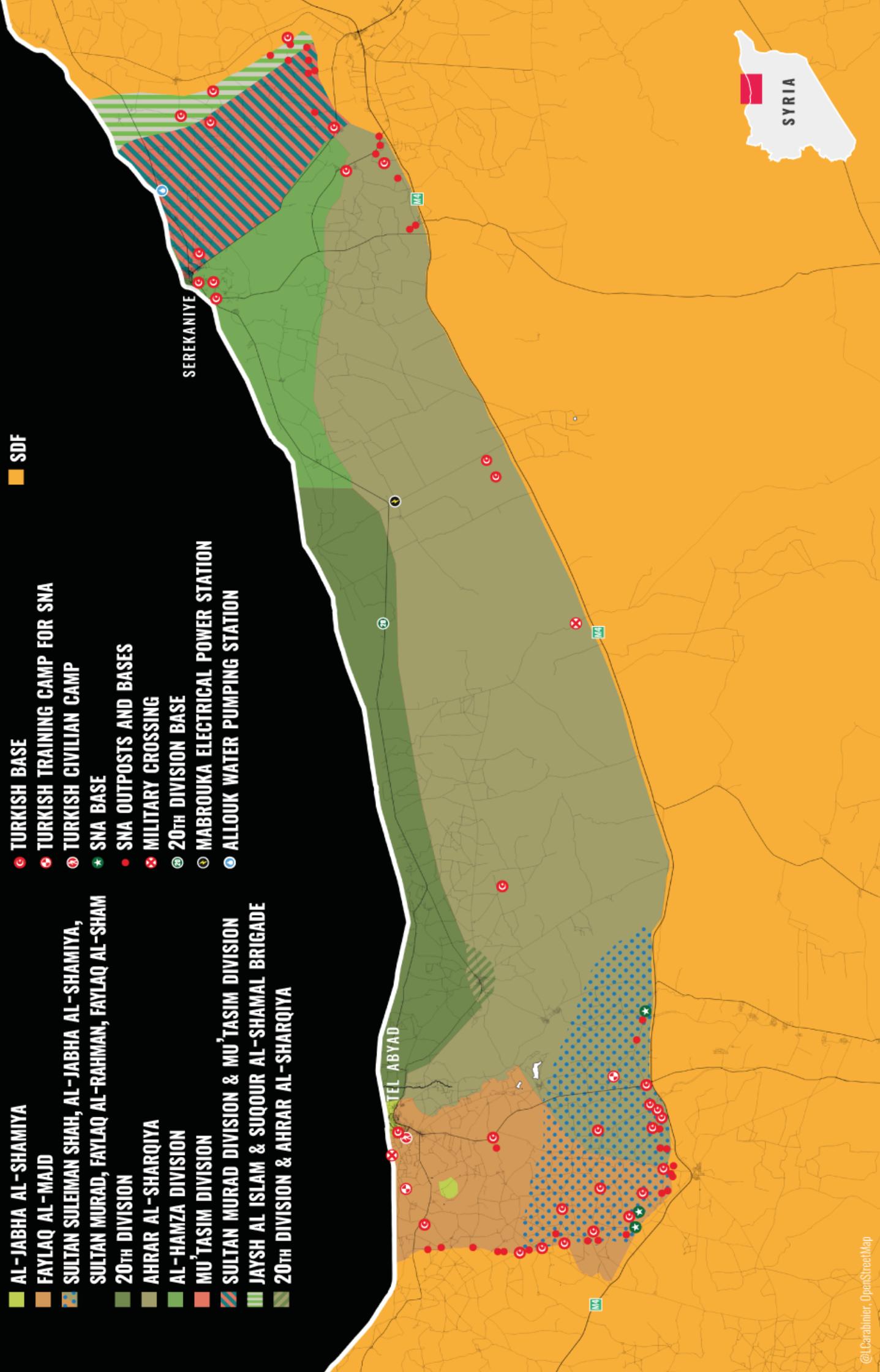


OCCUPIED M4 STRIP

- AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA
- FAYLAQ AL-MAJD
- SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH, AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA, SULTAN MURAD, FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN, FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- 20TH DIVISION
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- AL-HAMZA DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & MU'TASIM DIVISION
- JAYSH AL ISLAM & SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE
- 20TH DIVISION & AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

- TURKISH BASE
- TURKISH TRAINING CAMP FOR SNA
- TURKISH CIVILIAN CAMP
- SNA BASE
- SNA OUTPOSTS AND BASES
- MILITARY CROSSING
- 20TH DIVISION BASE
- MABROUKA ELECTRICAL POWER STATION
- ALLOUK WATER PUMPING STATION

■ SDF



INTRODUCTION & METHODS

INTRODUCTION

We present the first and second quarterly installment of our 'State of the Occupation Report' for the year 2022. We continue focusing on human rights violations in the Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria (NES): [1] Afrin, occupied since 2018; [2] What RIC has termed the 'M4 Strip': the 5000 km² territory north of the M4 highway, occupied in 2019, which includes the cities of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. As well as these two territories, which were formerly established Autonomous Administration (AANES) regions, in the current report we amplify the scope to include the third Syrian National Army (SNA)-controlled area, the so-called 'Euphrates Shield' area. This is a wide region, including Azaz, al-Bab, al-Rai, and Jarablus cities. Since the three regions are militarily, economically and politically connected under the same Turkish proxy structures – the SNA and its political counterparts – we will from now on be including 'Euphrates Shield' in our occupation reports, to achieve a more comprehensive analysis.

Contrary to Turkey's claims that by invading the Afrin and M4 strip regions it has created a "security buffer" and a "humanitarian zone" for Syrian IDPs from other areas, as well as those residing in Turkish territory, this report evidences that the occupation has turned the two regions into what amounts to a patchwork of fiefdoms rife with human rights abuses. The gravity of this situation has been confirmed by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria who stated that in the occupied areas, Turkish-backed SNA forces have committed an "onslaught of violations" against civilians, including the "war crimes" of "hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape".¹

The Turkish-backed SNA militias that govern the three regions operate with impunity, as do their leaders, using intimidation tactics to consolidate their control over the local populations, often for personal gain. The indigenous Kurdish, Christian and Yazidi populations are being systematically forced out and replaced with largely Arab and Turkmen settlers. Turkey's social engineering project in the occupied areas has been well documented by the world's leading human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the UNHCR.

1 www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=E

This report aims to fill a critical gap in the documentation of human rights abuses occurring in the occupied zones. This comes in the context of Turkey's efforts to strategically craft an alternative narrative in order to whitewash its occupation; a narrative which has been reproduced by some of the world's largest publications.²

METHODS

This report is based on our own Open-Source Intelligence Research in cooperation with the Afrin Human Rights Organization, a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that collects testimonies on the ground and first-hand. We also shared information and worked with the Hevdesti-Synergy Association, an organization based in Qamishlo that advocates for victims of the Turkish occupation of the M4 Strip. Furthermore, we consulted with two national NGOs (Syrians for Truth and Justice; Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria) that maintain independent databases on Afrin and the M4 Strip. This data was compared with research of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based organization. One challenge faced in our data collection was the relative paucity of reliable and complete data from the M4 Strip, and particularly from the 'Euphrates Shield' area, as the domestic media in the area was less well-established even before the Turkish invasion, with fewer sources on the ground.

We also reviewed local news articles from the Afrin Post and Documenting Rights Violations in Sere Kaniye to corroborate the rights violation data. In addition, we relied on reports from the United Nations and the European Parliament, as well as academic articles. Historical information is based on previous reports of the Rojava Information Center (RIC) or third-party sources where cited.

The maps were created with the help of the Afrin Human Rights Organization, the Afrin Post, the Hevdesti Association, military sources, and witness testimonies. We were not able to independently verify all factional affiliations, but some prison locations were confirmed using satellite data. Witness testimonies also helped assign militias to individual villages and towns. Nevertheless, we do not claim our report to be exhaustive.

For wider reading regarding the geopolitical context, history, and sociopolitical situation of the areas covered in this report, previous RIC dossiers offer detailed information. The first RIC quarterly report from early 2021 provided in-depth

2 www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-erdogan-afrin.html

background information on the occupation, as well as a longer section on the history of the occupation. Last July we published 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria', a wide report about the current state of the SNA militias and other armed groups active in the Turkish-occupied territories of Syria, which thoroughly examines the relationship between the SNA and its political counterpart, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), as well as the Turkish authorities. All the reports are available on our website.

All maps and graphics contained herein were created by cartographer and designer Eduardo Artica (@Lcarabinier).

QUARTERLY REPORT

UNLAWFUL ARRESTS, TORTURE, & EXTORTION

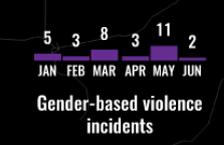
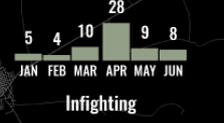
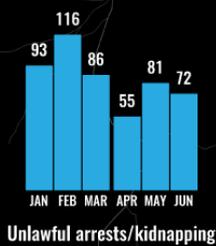
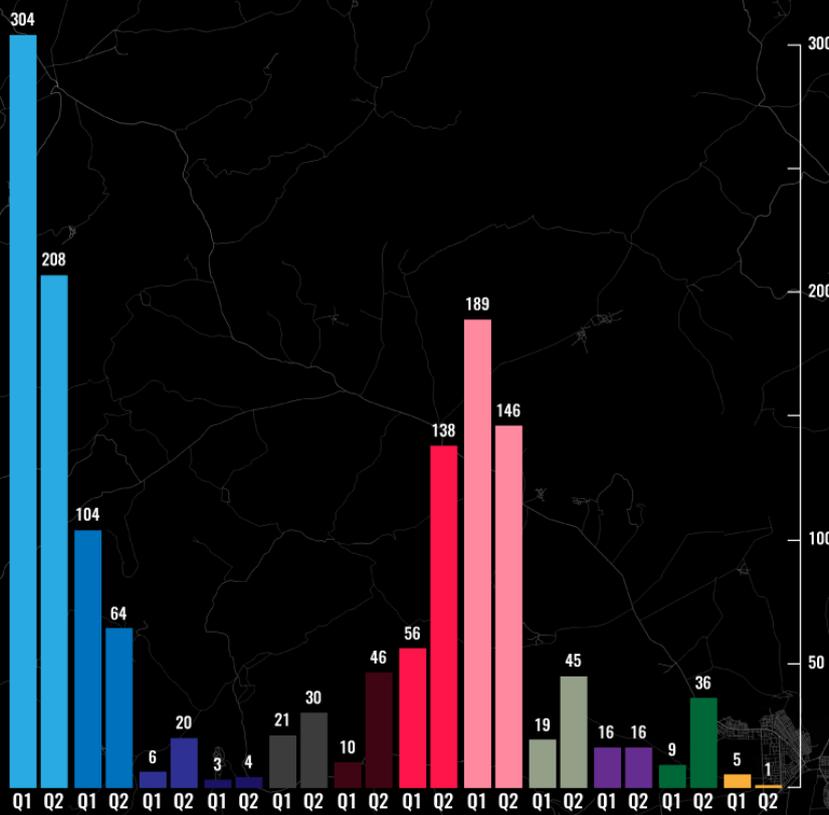
RIC recorded a total of 704 arrests across Turkish-occupied areas of Afrin and the M4 Strip in the first six months of 2022: 408 recorded in Q1 and 296 in Q2. These numbers include cases of unlawful arrest/kidnapping, unlawful arrest with extortion, unlawful arrest with torture, and unlawful arrest with torture and extortion. This is an increase of 10% on the total arrests from the same period in 2021 (644).

According to RIC's database, the arrest cases recorded are concentrated in the Afrin region. The M4 Strip arrest cases represent just 4.2% of the total. This enormous difference could be explained by a range of different factors. Firstly, Afrin region has a much higher population than that of the M4 Strip. Although 300,000 Kurdish inhabitants have fled since Turkey's 2019 invasion, the Afrin region still has a significant Kurdish population that is systematically targeted by the SNA and other Turkish-backed organizations. Before the Turkish military operation, there were 570,000 Kurds living in Afrin, representing an estimated 95-98% of the total population. With the occupation, more than 450,000 Arabs, Turkmen and Palestinians were settled, and the percentage of Kurds decreased to less than 25%, according to Afrin Human Rights Organisation. Meanwhile, in the M4 Strip, almost all the Kurdish population has been forcibly displaced, as well as Arab populations fearing retaliation for their link or sympathy with the Autonomous Administration. According to Hevdesti Association, before Turkey's 2019 invasion, the M4 Strip contained 292,500 inhabitants. In Sere Kaniye and the surrounding villages, 50% were Kurdish. In Tel Abyad and its surrounding villages this figure stood at 30%. But with the Turkish occupation, the Sere Kaniye saw over 85% of the original inhabitants displaced, after which only 48 Kurdish people returned. In the case of the Tel Abyad area, more than 35% of the original inhabitants were displaced and less than 10 Kurds returned.

These demographic factors have consequences for data gathering. The organizations recording rights violations rely on testimonies from original inhabitants of the areas, as the SNA or Turkey-linked settler inhabitants do not report such violations. Furthermore, since many of the SNA's crimes are directed specifically towards Kurdish inhabitants, as we elucidate in this report, areas with a higher Kurdish population tend to see more crimes reported. Henceforth, in Afrin the organizations

documenting human rights violations have a wide range of sources among the local population. In the M4 Strip it is more difficult to obtain information and testimonies of the situation on the ground. The lack of reliable sources from the M4 Strip partially explains the gap between the two region's records.

TOTAL CRIMES BY TYPE Q1 & Q2



@LCarabinieri, OpenStreetMap

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a non-profit organization documenting rights abuses in Syria, documented 311 people who were arrested in Afrin in the first half of 2022. In line with RIC, STJ identifies the arrests as occurring either for ransom or motivated by anti-Kurdish or Yazidi sentiments. The arbitrary arrests in Afrin continue to intimidate the local population with the aim of prompting them to leave their homes. In addition, STJ documented the release of 282 of those arrested in the Afrin region.³

In Afrin, the STJ report also confirmed that during the first half of 2022, Jindires (mainly controlled by the SNA militia Ahrar al-Sharqiya) became the most susceptible sub-district for the civilians to be arrested, followed by Sharan (controlled by Sultan Murad, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and Faylaq al-Sham militias) and Maabatli (mainly controlled by al-Jabha al-Shamiya). It is notable that Afrin city sub-district, the most populated area, did not record the highest score of arrests. On the other hand, Jindires sub-district is a key location when it comes to internal Afrin region mobility as it has the only official Turkish border crossing (Hemame) and Deir Balout crossing with Idlib region. Furthermore, Jindires town is the second largest city in Afrin region. Moreover, Jindires sub-district is the largest agricultural area of Afrin region, due to its flat terrain, and has become the center of the olive recollection to be exported to Turkey, thanks to its strong industrial fabric.

REASONS FOR THE ARBITRARY ARRESTS

As STJ statistics and RIC inquiry confirmed, the most frequent charges against those arrested in Afrin region include: performing the self-defense duty under the Autonomous Administration, fighting alongside or allegedly joining the PKK, working in civil institutions of the AANES, and participating in local guard committees and in transfers of money.⁴ The way that arrested civilians are charged with criminal files and released depends on their captors. For those arrested by the Military Police, they are brought to court and fined depending on the nature of their charges (in ranges of 250-700 Turkish Lira and 15 to 60 days in prison). Secondly, SNA militias' arbitrarily detained citizens are released in exchange for a variable payment negotiated by their relatives, with amounts usually ranging from \$1,200 to \$1,500, but sometimes up to \$3,000.

For M4 Strip, the most common charge in cases of arrest is related to crossing the border with Turkey (generally associated with a subsequent extortion to release the victims). The second most common charge is that of previous relations with

³ www.stj-sy.org/en/afrin-311-arbitrary-arrests-in-the-first-half-of-2022/

⁴ www.stj-sy.org/en/afrin-311-arbitrary-arrests-in-the-first-half-of-2022/

the AANES. The irregular border crossings and human smuggling activity happening in the M4 Strip needs to be taken into account while analyzing the numbers of that territory. During the first six months of 2022 the numbers of cases of arrest and kidnapping were low because there were fewer individuals attempting to cross to Turkey. However, when gathering data for the second half of 2022, a clear spike in arrest cases was seen. Discussion with Hevdesti Association confirmed this, indicating that

many more people, particularly youth, were attempting to cross the border in this period. Most of the individuals seeking to cross irregularly are from the AANES-governed areas. In these cases, both Military and Civil Police conducted the arrests, with most of the imprisoned people being released after a monetary payment. Those caught in the Tel Abyad area were all returned to the AANES territories, but in the case of those arrested in the Sere Kaniye area, some were allowed to continue heading to Turkey after their money was seized, instead of being sent back.



Occupation of Afrin Canton's General Council by SNA militiamen, March 2018

RELATION BETWEEN UNLAWFUL ARRESTS AND INFIGHTINGS

RIC's database shows a slight difference within the first and the second quarter of 2022. The months of January, February, and March registered higher amount of crimes related to arrests, either together with or apart from cases of extortion or torture; a tendency also recorded in 2021. Another insight extracted from the database is that there was a general decrease in the total number of arrests in the month of April. Although there are multiple factors behind the cases of unlawful arrests, we observe that April was also by far the month with more cases of infighting within SNA militias, as well as other armed groups (specially in Afrin region).

This could suggest a broader dynamic in the Turkish occupied territories: that the intra- and inter-militia feuds and activities of the SNA impact the intensity and type of crimes they are committing. The graphic 'Evolution of crimes Q1-Q2 2022' shows that when SNA infighting severely increased in April (44% of all infighting incidents

occurred in this month), there was simultaneously a decrease of the unlawful arrest/kidnapping cases, and particularly a strong decrease in the number of arrests coupled with extortion. Furthermore, RIC’s database attests that the Military Police, which is the main perpetrator of arrests, maintained its average number of arrests with extortion cases. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that it is specifically the SNA militia’s arrests that fell in frequency. In other words, the reason behind the decrease of arrest cases is that numerous SNA militias were involved in heavy infighting, with a need to protect themselves, thus reducing their possibilities for arresting and extorting civilian populations. The state of fear and armed violence turned towards the SNA militias themselves, temporarily relieving arrest pressure on civilians.



HOMICIDE OF THE CIVILIAN RIZAN KHALIL

A case that illustrates the array of abuses to which the population in the SNA-controlled territories, particularly the Kurdish inhabitants, are subjected, is the death of the 42-year-old civilian Rizan Khalil. Afrin Human Rights Organization pinpointed the SNA’s Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia as responsible for the death of Khalil.⁵ The latter was tortured in one of the detention centers of the militia in the center of Afrin city. This incident was also documented by STJ.⁶

5 www.m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02iL87VMyajZVpm1VyEwkmmDAgVFqWxH2Z7n-WiBCX7oSex5Bv15Kc3eNviK1uoMmHI&id=482863525796937&mibextid=Nif5oz

6 www.rb.gy/t6ebzx (www.stj-sy.org)

Rizan Khalil repeatedly visited the headquarters of the Ahrar Al-Sharqiya militia, in the middle of January 2022, to inquire about the fate of his nephew, Azad Ismat Khalil, 20 years old, who was being held by them. The SNA militia had kept the young Kurdish man under arrest for more than a month, on unsupported charges of belonging to the PKK. Ahrar Al-Sharqiya militiamen demanded that he vacate his residence, which is located in the al-Zaydiyah neighborhood of Afrin city, next to the school that was previously seized by the members of the same militia. When Rizan Khalil went to demand the release of his nephew, the officers asked him to pay 5 million Syrian pounds for his release. Rizan, thanks to the support of his relatives in Europe, was able to secure \$2,000, i.e. approximately 7,2 million Syrian pounds at the time, which he gave to a lawyer for the release of Azad. But, the faction then demanded another, separate amount. When Rizan went again to Ahrar Al-Sharqiya's headquarters in Afrin city, he was accused of obtaining money from the Shehba region (which is under the control of the SDF) and immediately arrested. In the prison, he was subjected to torture, and while he was being beaten, he was hit on the head with a blunt object. This caused a cerebral hemorrhage that led to his death on January 31st, after being transferred from Afrin Military Hospital to Turkey via an ambulance on January 24th. Following this, Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia started to threaten Rizan's family and relatives with arrest if they had published any information about the case. Meanwhile, Azad Ismat Khalil, Rizan's nephew, is still in detention at the time this information is being published, and his house was taken over by the militia's members.



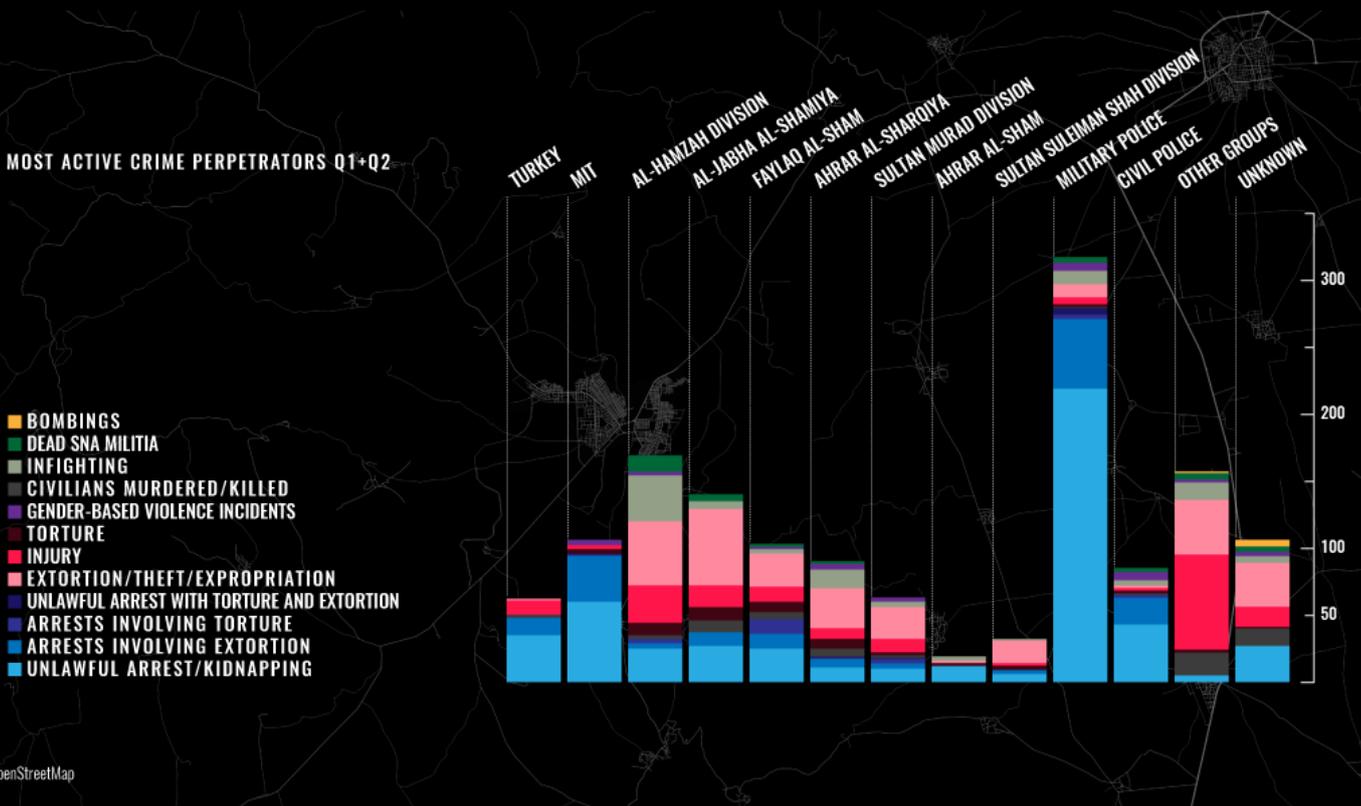
Rizan Khalil, photo from Afrin Human Rights Organization

Concerning detention centers and prisons, reports appeared in March declaring the closure of Faylaq al-Sham's Iska prison; one of the most infamous prisons in Afrin region. Located in the village of Iska, Sherawa area, the building was converted into a prison in March 2018. Since then, the militia have used it to hold abductees and detainees from various villages and towns. According to the local news site Afrin Post, in March, the Military Police arrested seven members of the "Sham Legion" militia, and completely evacuated Iska prison, transferring the prisoners to another place.⁷ Contacted by the RIC, Afrin Human Rights Organization spokesperson refuted the report of this evacuation: "The prison of Iska is connected to Faylaq al-Sham. It has not been closed. The people still arrested, also sentenced. It continues until now".

⁷ www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19787

UNLAWFUL ARREST PERPETRATORS

Regarding perpetrators of crimes, RIC's database shows that the Military Police appears to be responsible for the largest number of arrests, compared to the cases committed by SNA factions and other Turkish-backed organizations. The Military Police account for 43% of unlawful arrest/kidnapping cases, and 31% of cases of unlawful arrest with extortion. To have a comparative measure, the second biggest perpetrator, the Civil Police, comprised only 9% and 1% cases, respectively. STJ's report also makes this point: "Among them, the Military Police arrested 123 people, the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham arrested 57 people, and the Turkish intelligence arrested 42 people".⁸ Also in Afrin, the Political Security Agency - affiliated with Turkey's intelligence agency (MIT) and the Military Police - is still active and is tasked with locating and persecuting original residents of Afrin who are suspected of having previously worked with the AANES. The Political Security Agency was responsible for 26 unlawful arrest/kidnapping cases during the first six months of 2022.



As highlighted in RIC's 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria' report, the cases of arrest by the Military Police are increasing quarter-on-quarter, suggesting that the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and the MIT, which has ultimate control over this force, prefer to rely on the Military Police

8 <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-311-arbitrary-arrests-in-the-first-half-of-2022/>

to conduct arrests, rather than SNA militias. The three branches of the Military Police (Afrin region, M4 Strip and 'Euphrates Shield' area) are linked to each other through a central administration, named the 'Military Police Department', which has direct connections to the Turkish General Security Directorate and Turkish Intelligence in Ankara. Increasingly, the Military Police are being used as the primary armed force through which Turkey implements its agenda for the occupied territories (including high-profile arrests, and internal control over the SNA militias). Meanwhile, the Civil Police, operating under the Interior Ministry of the SIG, is tasked with policing public institutions and other civil entities. The Civil Police maintains a low profile with regards to committing unlawful arrests, however it is an important actor when it comes to cases of infighting with local militias, as explained in further chapters.

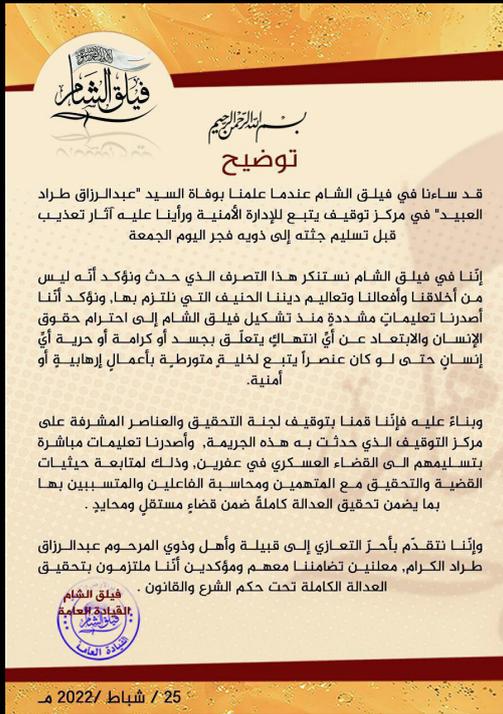
MIT ARRESTS

The second biggest perpetrator of unlawful arrest/kidnapping cases during the first six months of 2022 was the state intelligence agency of Turkey. According to RIC's database, MIT conducted 60 cases of unlawful arrest, either alone or in conjunction with other perpetrators. Gathering all the information to write this report, information regarding MIT agents being involved in arrests was numerous, either as reported directly by victims or from testimonies of witnesses. MIT has different centers spread across the three Turkish-occupied regions. During January 2022, Turkish intelligence published a list of the names of 1,400 people to be arrested at its checkpoints in the Afrin region.⁹ In the same vein, the Political Security Agency, and the Military and Civil Police have also been publishing lists with names of people who receive and send money transfers in the Afrin region. They periodically send these to the Turkish intelligence and the security services of SNA.¹⁰ These named individuals are then located through a surveillance system which is centered around systematic detention at checkpoints throughout the region. This occurs especially at the Al-Qaws checkpoint, at the eastern entrance of Afrin city from the Aleppo side, and at the Kokani village checkpoint, in Maabatli sub-district. The 34 cases of unlawful arrest with extortion in which the MIT was involved were all detentions of civilians under the accusation of previous connection with the AANES, and all arrestees were released by paying a fine. Along with this, Turkey was responsible for 35 cases of unlawful arrest/kidnapping and 13 cases of unlawful arrest with extortion. These cases encompass a range of different situations in which local sources could not confirm whether the perpetrator was specifically the MIT or a separate Turkish agency/military force.

Within the SNA factions, al-Jabha al-Shamiya (27), Faylaq al-Sham (25), and Hamza Division (25) record the highest number of cases of unlawful arrest/kidnapping. These three are among the biggest militias, with vast expanses of territory under their control. Regarding arrest with torture cases, after the entrance and withdrawal

⁹ www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19874

¹⁰ www.ezdina.com/2022/03/Reportag-Ezidi527.html



Faylaq al-Sham statement about Abdulrazaq al-Nuaimi dead, February 2022

of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in southern Afrin region in June 2022, Faylaq al-Sham launched a campaign of raids and arrests, charging people with “dealing with and welcoming HTS”. According to local sources, 10 inhabitants from the countryside of Afrin city and the Sherawa area were arrested, brought to the Iska prison, and subjected to torture by the militiamen. Four months prior, Faylaq al-Sham had published a statement admitting to the torture and subsequent death of Abdulrazaq al-Nuaimi (an IDP from Hama living in Jinderes sub-district) in a detention center affiliated with its security administration. The militia accused the victim of working for the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in the Shehba area, which proved counterfactual, as the YPG itself had arrested al-Nuaimi in the past. As STJ reports, according to a relative of the victim, the true reason behind al-Nuaimi’s arrest was that he was late on paying the faction the monthly tax/royalty it had imposed on the residents living in the areas under their control.¹¹

NEWROZ FESTIVITY AND ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

One final remarkable event related to arrest cases took place during the Newroz festivity. On March 21st of every year, the Kurdish and Iranian peoples celebrate the arrival of spring and new year, lighting big fires at the beginning of the evening and gathering around them. Under the Syrian Arab Republic, Afrin’s Newroz celebrations were muted under an official celebration of Mother’s Day. Even though, Afrin people managed to gather and celebrate it despite fear of political persecution. Similarly, nowadays, in the Turkish-controlled territories, the Kurdish population are afraid of the consequences of celebrating Newroz, forcing them to celebrate it in a private way. As in previous years, 2022 saw very few Kurds in the countryside of Afrin celebrating the holiday, in light of the banning of festivities in some localities by the Turkish affiliated Local Councils.¹² In the city of Afrin and other towns, announcements via loudspeaker instructed the Kurdish population to refrain from lighting fires, under threat of accountability for those who disobey. During Newroz, and in the days after, local sources reported that at various different checkpoints, agents from the MIT and the Political Security Agency, jointly with Military Police, carried out several arrests of Kurdish people returning from Newroz celebrations. The day of Newroz carries new significance since 2018: it was only one day prior to Newroz in that year, that the Turkish armed forces and their SNA proxies first entered the city of Afrin.

11 www.stj-sy.org/en/afrin-al-sham-legion-tortured-a-civilian-to-death/

12 www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/newroz-not-what-it-used-be-afrins-kurds

EXTORTION, THEFT, AND SEIZURE OF PROPERTY

In the first six months of 2022, there were 335 cases of extortion, robbery, unauthorized sale of property, and looting, apart from those cases of unlawful arrest involving extortion with or without torture (175). From the data available of these first two quarters of 2022 compared to those of the previous year 2021, two points emerge. Firstly, Q1 is the moment when the SNA militias are more active in committing these crimes. Secondly, Afrin is the region where the biggest economic extraction from the local population takes place (89% of all the cases).

RIC's database also shows a 66% increase of these crimes when compared to the same period last year, especially registered from January to March. One potential explanation of this rise, beyond potential differences in the publishing of data, relates to winter conditions.

Illegal seizure of wood is an activity that forms a key income stream for SNA militiamen. The 2021-2022 winter was colder than average, with a big snow storm that hit northern Syrian territories in January. The already impoverished population sought firewood to heat their homes, greatly increasing the demand for this product, and with it the illegal extraction of wood. During the three first months of 2022, through local media we recorded 97 cases of cutting trees, either in forests or in olive groves, almost always committed by SNA militiamen or settlers. The spokesperson of the Afrin Human Rights Organization told RIC that the Turkish-backed SNA militias have cut down 11,000 trees, burned more than 300, and uprooted another 2,000, during the first nine months of 2022.

Seizure of properties and unauthorized sale of property is also a popular activity amongst the SNA. Due to the Turkish invasions – the 2018 'Olive Branch' military operation in Afrin region, and the 2019 'Peace Spring' military operation in the M4 Strip – an estimated 300,000 people and 200,000 people respectively were displaced from those areas. Most of the empty houses and land plots were then occupied by SNA militiamen and their families as well as settlers coming from other parts of Syria, who were internally displaced from their original towns or cities. Furthermore, the new authorities, under the Syrian Interim Government and the local councils, continued to seize and sell properties without accountability from their legitimate owners.

Funding from external organizations or charities has allowed for unrestrained property development on seized land, often demolishing cultural and historical sites in the process. A recent report from STJ exposed the case of the construction of a school, funded by a Kuwaiti charity, built on the ruins of the Yezidi Cultural Union

(YCU).¹³ In 2018, during Turkey's invasion of Afrin, the SNA blew up the YCU and destroyed the Lalişa Nûranî monument and the Zoroaster statue, located in Afrin City. After the demolition of the building, the place remained unchanged until June 29th, 2020, when Afrin Local Council, operating under the SIG, announced it was laying the foundation stones for a new school on the ruins of the YCU, later named Al-Imam wa Al-Khateeb School. Afrin's local council, as confirmed by STJ, seized the land that was occupied by the YCU citing it as state property. A contract then was signed between Afrin Local Council, the White Hands Association/Beyaz Eller Derneği and the Kuwaiti Sheikh Abdullah Al Nouri Charity Society on the other. The school was opened on September 23rd, 2021, to start its first school year 2021-2022. A former member of the YCU, Sheikh Zahr al-Din Hasan Abdalo, who is currently residing in AANES' Shehba region, testified to STJ: "The Yezidi Cultural Union used to run all fields of the Yezidis' lives. The Union served as a civil registry, a magistrate court, a religious education center, and a cultural center that familiarizes the Yezidis with their customs and traditions and organizes ceremonies for their religious events". In 2014, the number of Yezidis in Afrin was about 35,000, but today only 2,000 members of this community remain in the region. Nearly 95% of the Yezidi community left in 2018 – either fleeing other militias before the arrival of the Turkish army or being forcibly evicted after the forces arrived.¹⁴ Until today, various Human Rights organizations have continually reported that the remaining Yezidi community members are exposed to ethnic persecution and religiously motivated violence by the SNA militias.



The opening ceremony of the Al-Imam wa Al-Khateeb School, photo from STJ

CRIMES COMMITTED BY SETTLERS

Moreover, in the Afrin region, another typical criminal phenomenon flourishing under the SNA militias and Turkish authorities is the commission of extortion and theft of the property belonging to indigenous people at the hands of settlers. It's worth mentioning that the Afrin region has the highest internally displaced and settler population of the three SNA-controlled areas. As well as that, a large portion of the settlers are directly connected to the various SNA militias, via military, economic, or tribal affiliation, therefore the SNA are unwilling to act against settlers committing crimes, as this would entail an internal or intergroup confrontation.

¹³ www.rb.gy/mo4yyh (www.stj-sy.org)

¹⁴ www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/26072022

During the first quarter of 2022, RIC registered 12 cases of extortion and theft committed by settlers in the Afrin region, such as the seizure and sale of houses belonging to Kurds who left Afrin because of the war, the cutting down of trees, stealing from or the imposing of rents on shops under threat of eviction. In one case, settlers stole money and gold coins from an old woman's home claiming they were making an inventory of the house contents for a relief organization. An important detail in these cases is the origin and connection of the settlers, as the majority of the perpetrators are from Eastern Ghouta. On March 25th, 2018, thousands of militants and their families moved to northern Syria after being evacuated from Eastern Ghouta under an agreement with the Syrian government with a Russian guarantee. They headed to the Kurdish majority populated region of Afrin, which had seen massive displacement caused by the Turkish invasion in January 2018 under the Operation 'Olive Branch'. In particular, Jaysh al-Islam is an important SNA faction within these Eastern Ghouta militiamen and their families. Jaysh al-Islam's leader and commanders made public statements declaring Kurdish people to be their enemy in a visit to an IDP camp in the south-western countryside of Afrin.¹⁵ Accountability for those connected to cases of the seizure of properties and unauthorized sale of property until now has been almost nonexistent, as the SNA allows these crimes to be committed against Kurdish owners, whether they had fled from Afrin or are still residing there.

As Hevdesti has shown in the statistics of its report "Armed Chaos and Insecurity in the 'Peace Spring' Strip",¹⁶ the phenomena of proliferation and use of weapons among civilians, without any supervision or authorization, has spread widely in the Turkish-occupied areas of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. The Ministry of Defense of the SIG issued a circular on April 12th to police the possession and use of arms in its areas of control and limit its use to training camps, confrontation zones and security points. Despite this, arms are still widely spread. According to RIC's database, armed violent crimes have increased, as well as normal disputes turning violent as arms are used, either with bullets fired in the air to frighten and intimidate, or else with live fire used with the intent to injure or kill. Despite the circular, the situation of insecurity in the SNA-controlled areas remains a daily obstacle for the local population, subject to abuses and crimes with hardly any convictions and compensation for damages. For example, local organizations reported a family infighting involving machine guns on April 28th. Due to the violent clashes between IDPs in a camp near Qatma village in Shara sub-district of Afrin, 15 people were injured, some severely, and transported to Azaz National Hospital to receive proper treatment.¹⁷

15 www.syriahr.com/en/92283/

16 www.hevdesti.org/en/insecurity-in-peace-spring/

17 www.syriahr.com/en/249175/

Another example of this crime, and the proliferation of weapons among civilians, occurred on June 30th. The jeweler Muhammad al-Barhawi, who belonged to the Chechen community, was killed when two masked gunmen riding a motorcycle shot him in front of his house in Sere Kaniye. In the same report about the security situation in the M4 Strip, Hevesti recorded that videos from the security surveillance cameras of al-Barhawi's house show the masked gunmen stealing a bag from his hand. The next day, a general strike took place in the city and dozens of people took to the street to bury al-Barhawi and protest against the state of insecurity and armed chaos which had spread throughout the region since Turkey occupied it and gave the opposition SNA-affiliated factions full control. The protesters chanted 'Peace Spring, no security' to indicate the blatant lack of safety in the 'safe area' and demanded Turkey to police the area and hold violators accountable. On July 1st, the Revolutionaries for Liberation Committee shared an official statement announcing that, in cooperation with the Internal Security Forces and the Military Police, the perpetrators had been arrested.



Footage from the demonstration for Mohamed Al-Barhawi dead, Al-Khabour Agency

LEVIES

Also within the issue of property seizures and unauthorized sale of property, are the cases of levying and looting crops. As an example, in mid February, the SNA faction al-Jabha al-Shamiya imposed fines and royalties on the people of the villages of Al-Mazra'a and Maryamin in the eastern countryside of Afrin city. According the local media report, due to the poor olive production, including oil for this year's season, in the villages of Al-Mazra'a and Mirimin, the militia imposed a levy of \$200 or two heads of sheep on each of the families of the two villages, as a substitute for the olive royalties that it did not collect. Previously, in October 2021, al-Jabha al-Shamiya issued a decision for the village of Mirimin to impose a 50% royalty on the olive crop in the fields located on the lines of contact with the AANES controlled Shehba region. The faction claimed the fields were within a military zone hence it had the right to impose royalties on these crops. The militia also issued another decision regarding mills in its areas of control, whereby the value of royalties was set at 25%. This includes all the villages of Maabatli sub-district and the villages of Maryamin, Kafr Jannah, Qatme, Jilbul, Maarin, and Qastal Jindo.¹⁸ In the Afrin region, Al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Sultan Suleiman Shah Division are the SNA militias which impose the highest number of levies on the civil population living in their controlled areas. They are also the top

¹⁸ www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19666

two perpetrators for the crime of crop looting. Suleiman Shah militia has managed to turn Shiye, a small frontier sub-district, into their private fiefdom, where locals are subjected to a systemic pattern of extortion. A recent STJ investigation revealed that the Suleiman Shah's leader's wealth, and that of his faction, comes mainly from the pockets of civilians, with annual revenues that exceed 30,000,000 USD.¹⁹

According to RIC's database, the SNA militias have been the most active perpetrators of extortion, robbery, unauthorized sale of property, and looting, being involved in 74% of all the cases that did not involved also arrest (335). The most active militias regarding this economic extraction from the local population are Al-Jabha al-Shamiya (57), Hamza Division (48) and Ahrar al- Sharqiya (30). The control of stolen goods and levies constitutes an important extra-income for the militias, amplified by the fact that the salaries Turkey pays to SNA soldiers are meager. While incomes from Turkey do differ from one faction to another, the lowest monthly salary a SNA soldier can receive is 400 TL, around 21 USD.²⁰ As an aside, hand in hand with stealing and extortion, control over smuggling routes is also a key income source for the factions. Overall, while the SNA factions are not the main groups embroiled in systematic practices of extortion, robbery, and looting, RIC also recorded 41 cases committed by other perpetrators. These include settlers, IDPs and small gangs. Furthermore, RIC recorded 33 cases in which the local source or report could not identify the perpetrator.

INFIGHTING

RIC recorded 64 cases of infighting in the Afrin region and M4 Strip in the first half of the year 2022. These numbers are almost double what RIC recorded in the same period of last year (33), when we started to compile data from the Turkish-occupied territories to write the Occupation Report. In the 'infighting' category, we collect data from all the armed clashes where at least one of the involved sides was either a SNA militia, the Military Police, or the Civil Police. Occasionally, the other side was a group of settlers or a gang. Regarding the most active perpetrators, Hamza Division ranked highest out of the SNA militias, with 34 infighting cases, followed by Ahrar al-Sharqiya and the Military Police, with 14 cases each.

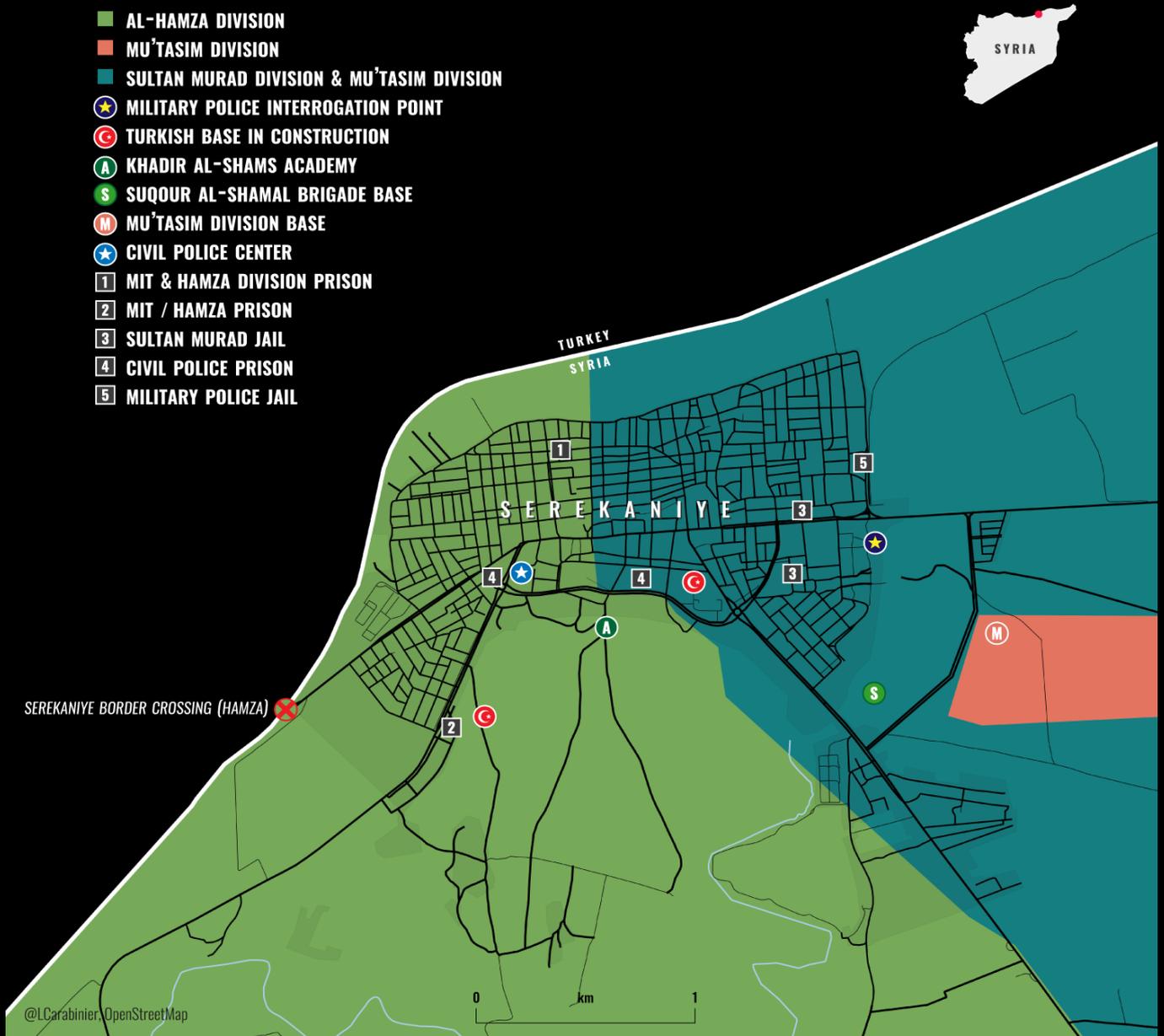
SNA INFIGHTINGS AND CONSEQUENCES ON CIVILIAN POPULATION

The clashes between SNA militias in the Turkish-occupied territories occur for a multitude of reasons, even due to seemingly insignificant events. Individual disputes between members of different factions surrounding a traffic accident are enough to trigger a clash. Any dispute can escalate into a fight with wide-scale armed violence.

¹⁹ www.stj-sy.org/en/how-is-abu-amsha-making-millions-of-dollars-every-year/

²⁰ www.rb.gy/phbi5j (www.enabbaladi.net)

According to the data available to the RIC, there is a power bloc struggle between the SNA militias in the 'M4 Strip', Afrin and 'Euphrates Shield' areas. Since the organization of the SNA militias in the timeframe of this report was based on operation rooms instead of legions, the infightings happened mostly between militias belonging to different operation rooms. Each operation room acted as a bloc and tried to secure control of checkpoints, smuggling routes, stolen goods, and levies. This has been the main driver behind the numerous infighting events. Hence, the July 2021 - February 2022 reorganization of the SNA into operations rooms, analyzed in our report *'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria'* is shown to be ineffective at ending inter-faction warring and the resulting violence.



Although June, with the involvement of HTS, saw the most important bout of fighting between SNA militias, April was the most violent month overall, comprising 44% of all incidents from Q1 and Q2 (28). Of those clashes, 18 took place in the Afrin region and 10 in the M4 Strip. Hamza Division was involved in more than half of the clashes of the SNA militias, especially in the M4 Strip. As one example, on April 13th, two groups belonging to the Hamza Division violently clashed in the village of Bassouta, south of Afrin, due to a dispute over IDP's houses. According to local media, an armed group, affiliated with the leader of the Bassouta police station, issued a decision to expel all the widows of a dead militiaman from the homes they occupied in the village. When that group tried to expel these families, they were met with resistance from the widows' relatives. Verbal arguments escalated into heavy gunfire, and soon the clashes expanded to reach the residential neighborhoods in the village.²¹ In the M4 Strip, almost all of April's infighting took place in or around the city of Sere Kaniye. Heavy clashes with machine guns erupted between members of two groups of Hamza Division in the countryside near the city due to disputes over people smuggling, resulting in one militiaman being killed and another seriously injured. Another infighting case saw two groups of the Mu'tasim Division clash inside the city over a house owned by a displaced person from the city. A further incident of infighting with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades sprang up between groups of Sultan Malik-Shah Brigade and Hamza Division in the west of the city, due to a dispute over thefts and passengers crossing smuggling routes into Turkey.

A main problem is that these clashes are erupting in residential neighborhoods and civilians are thus caught up in the violence, getting killed and injured by the bullets of the militiamen. In some cases, after a situation has calmed down, the local population has taken to the streets to demand a definitive solution to the endemic infighting. For example, on April 1st, after the end of violent clashes in the village of Awlan, near the city of al-Bab, a protest was staged in al-Bab calling for the infighting to cease, in order to spare bloodshed and in observance of the sanctity of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Protesters raised banners bearing slogans that read "internal fighting is a betrayal of the revolution", and others calling on faction leaders to stop the clashes. A third banner read, "The blood of the revolution's youth is too precious to be shed in infighting".²²

According to the RIC database, Q1 and Q2 infighting in the Afrin region and the M4 Strip resulted in the killing of 16 civilians and 37 militiamen. Alongside this, 73 persons were injured, including both civilians and militiamen. As we can see in the graphic of the evolution of crimes Q1 & Q2, there appears to be a direct relation between these three categories: when the cases of infighting go up, so do those of injury, murder of civilians, and dead SNA militiamen.

21 www.rb.gy/loiqeh (ww.afrinpost.net)

22 www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/factional-infighting-escalates-northern-syria

POLICE INFIGHTING

A case that exemplifies the volatility of security in the SNA-controlled regions is the infighting that took place at the end of February in Afrin city. A dispute occurred between members of the Military Police on the one hand and the Civil Police on the other, in front of the headquarters of the Turkish 'Shafak' organization. This was due to a dispute over the rations of relief baskets that were being distributed there. The Shafak Organization is a Syrian NGO that was officially established in Turkey in 2013, with different education, food, security, health, water, and sanitation programs. A beneficiary from Shafak organization has 300 points for its members, where the value of each share is about \$100 at least, with vulnerable groups benefiting from the support of Shafak organization. This is meant to exclude military personnel. The dispute evolved into an exchange of fire causing the wounding of two members of the Civil Police and a woman who accidentally was at the site of the shooting.²³ Days later, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 85 members of the Civil Police, including five officers of the special forces, resigned due to the wounding of their fellow members.²⁴ In the scale of the different armed forces in the occupied territories, the Civil Police is the least powerful and least connected to Turkey. Even though the Civil Police is tasked with policing public institutions and public spaces control, its authority always declines when it faces a dispute against the Military Police or the SNA militias.

In May, clashes erupted again between the Military Police and the Civil Police in Sere Kaniye city, which left three members dead on both sides and four others injured. Moreover, two civilians were injured and a child was killed during the clashes due to indiscriminate gunfire.²⁵ Regarding the cases of infighting between the Civil and Military Police, STJ reports that both bodies are prone to being involved in clashes between factions or having fights among their fighters, due to gaps in their foundation. Since the two services are composed of SNA faction fighters and commanders, the fighters harbor loyalty to their faction, rather than to the police. Meanwhile, commanders maintain their position within the faction simultaneously with their police duties. Also, a majority of the members and commanders receive two salaries, one from the faction and the other from the police. That is the reason behind some police infighting cases: militia-affiliated personnel bring their militia-related problems into the police departments.²⁶

23 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19630

24 www.syriahr.com/en/240449/

25 www.syriahr.com/en/253347/

26 www.rb.gy/zslqou (www.stj-sy.org)

HTS JUNE INCURSION IN AFRIN REGION

The most important bout of infighting in this first half of the year occurred in mid-June. Two alliances centered around Ahrar al-Sham and al-Jabha al-Shamiya clashed in the ‘Euphrates Shield’ and Afrin regions. It was the most serious infighting between SNA militias since autumn 2021. For two days, violent clashes between the two SNA militias erupted in the villages of Abla and Tal Battal, on the outskirts of al-Bab. The clashes came amid heightened tensions between the two militias after the 32nd Division, also known as Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector, defected from the Third Legion in early April in order to rejoin Ahrar al-Sham, which they had previously left in 2017. Amid the fighting, Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector requested the support of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), who joined to form a united front against the Third Legion; especially against al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Jaysh al-Islam. HTS sent large military convoys to Jindires sub-district in the night between June 18th and 19th. In doing so, the authoritarian Islamist militia crossed through territories belonging to Faylaq al-Sham without facing resistance from the latter. The ensuing battles led to military casualties on both sides, as well as civilian deaths. The Third Legion and Ahrar al-Sham briefly detained each other’s militiamen.

At the end of June 19th, Turkey’s MIT forced all parties to negotiate a ceasefire agreement, whereby all militias would return to their pre-fighting positions, including the return of Ahrar al-Sham’s headquarters, and the release of captives.²⁷ That same day, the Turkish-backed, SNA-linked Syrian Islamic Council issued a statement, calling for confronting HTS: “HTS’ military movement toward the areas of the Syrian National Army in the liberated north of Syria is tantamount to a rebellion, and this is absolutely forbidden under Sharia”.²⁸ HTS took several days to withdraw all its forces to southern Afrin, showing that its intervention, apart from related to its alliance with Ahrar al-Sham, corresponds to its aspirations to show itself as a responsible and strong authority, even in the SNA-controlled territories. “The rebellious youth plunged into an absurd internal confrontation that led to harming



Fighters from HTS and Ahrar al-Sham at the entrance to southern Afrin’s Jindires sub-district, photo from Lindsey Snell

27 www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/why-are-turkeys-allies-fighting-each-other-syria

28 www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/06/syrian-armed-groups-clash-outside-aleppo

peace and security in the liberated areas. [...] the residents of the faction-controlled areas suffer from the spread of corruption in society such as drugs, theft and violations of all kinds within service institutions”, declared HTS in their official statement.²⁹

Finally, HTS kept the control, in contrast with what officially agreed, of a few villages located in the southernmost part of the Afrin district (Basoufan, Fafertin, Burj Haidar and Kabashin) which were previously under the control of Faylaq al-Sham. These are of strategic importance for HTS because they connect its territory with the AANES-governed region of Shehba. In the following months, HTS still maintained an influence on Afrin region, principally through its ties with some SNA factions (Ahrar al-Sham, Sultan Suleyman Shah Division, Hamza Division, and Faylaq al-Sham), and this laid the ground for HTS’ next – and deeper – attempted incursion in October.

TURKEY’S TACIT CONSENT

It is noteworthy that, as STJ highlights, the authorities and other military branches of the Turkish state in the three areas they control have refrained from acting in infighting cases. Neither the forces inside the Turkish bases nor the intelligence officers who maintain immediate contact with the commanders of the various militias took steps to limit the violent chaos or end the clashes between militias. Nor did they intervene to stop active confrontations, except in the cases in which doing so would have directly favored the Turkish government. With this response, the Turkish authorities turned a blind eye to dozens of clashes, which directly claimed civilian lives and shattered the already perilous conditions of security for the population.³⁰

For example, as we explain in our Occupation Report Q3 2021, on August 22nd, 2021, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division, and Suqour al-Shamal announced their departure from the newly created Azm Unified Command Room, allegedly due to a leadership dispute. As a result, militiamen of al-Jabha al-Shamiya closed the roads to Afrin city and a gun battle with heavy weapons against Hamza Division followed in the streets of Afrin. Meanwhile, in a joint statement, other SNA militias announced they would deploy their forces should a prolonged battle between Azm and the other factions break out. Further attacks by al-Jabha al-Shamiya against Hamza Division and threats to Suleiman Shah Brigade followed in September. At that moment, the Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar met with Azm Operations Room and Third Legion leaders near the Bab al-Salama crossing north of Azaz on September 9th. While the contents of the meeting are unknown, that same day the al-Mu’tasim Division and the 20th Division, in addition to the original three defectors from the Azm, announced the founding of a rival merger on the 9th of September – the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF). Turkish acquiescence to the Azm split should be understood as a calculated move, rather than as a lack of control.

29 www.rb.gy/r1mpex (www.syria.tv)

30 www.rb.gy/upoeyf (www.stj-sy.org)

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Regarding crimes of gender-based violence, RIC recorded 32 cases during the first six months of 2022. This is a decrease of almost 40% over the same period in last year (52 cases). Within these, we found cases of kidnapping of minors, in order to demand ransoms from the girls' families under the threat of early marriage or human organ trafficking. STJ also published a report compiling violations against women committed by SNA factions in the M4 Strip. The documented violations included a case of sexual assault, a case of sexual harassment, and one attempted sexual assault. These cases fall under a wider pattern of harassment led by faction fighters across the smuggling line, as an example of the several cases of sexual abuse against IDP women, who tried to relocate from AANES to SNA controlled territories.³¹

In any case, the gender-based cases are mainly connected to unlawful arrest and kidnapping (and extortion), especially under the accusation of 'dealing with the former Autonomous Administration'. It is important to highlight that the new political and social system imposed by the Turkish occupation relegates the role of women to the home and unskilled work. The leading role in the political sphere that women had achieved under the Autonomous Administration has been extinguished. And the arrests of women who had held public office in the different institutions of the AANES are one more consequence of this new policy. For example, according to local reports, a 20 year-old woman named Asya Ali Damerji, was arrested on March 15th in a joint patrol of the Civil Police and MIT agents. She was then transferred from Jindires to a Turkish intelligence detention center in the city of Afrin. There she was subjected to beatings and torture, particularly with electric shocks, to force her to confess her alleged former work with the Autonomous Administration.³² In another instance, Ilham Abd al-Rahman Suleiman, a 42 year-old Kurdish woman, was arrested on March 20th in the town of Rajo by the Military Police, on the same charges.³³ A further example is that of Khairiya Muhammad Musa, a 40 year-old woman who was arrested on January 12th in north Afrin and brought to Afrin city under the pretext that her husband, Ahmed Alou, was connected with the former Autonomous Administration. She was threatened with the seizure of their property if her husband did not return to Afrin to hand himself in to the Turkish authorities.³⁴ The decrease of gender-based violence cases during the Q1 and Q2 of 2022 has no clear explanatory factor, but it is highly doubtful that an improvement in gender equality and the prevention of violence against women is one of the reasons.

31 www.stj-sy.org/en/peace-spring-violations-against-women-at-opposition-run-smuggling-points/

32 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19932

33 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/20044

34 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19082

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SNA

Since 2019, women across the Turkish occupied regions of Afrin and M4 Strip have experienced acts of intimidation by members of the Syrian National Army, creating a climate of fear that has effectively locked them in their homes. Women and girls have also been held under arrest by SNA militias and subjected to rape and sexual violence, causing severe physical and psychological damage. This is both at the individual level and at the community level, due to the stigma and related cultural norms connected to ideas of “women’s honor”.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria have warned in the past of the deterioration of the human rights situation in the SNA-controlled territories. During investigations conducted from January 11th to July 1st 2020, the Commission documented the kidnapping and disappearance of civilians, including women and children, and other serious human rights violations. During the abovementioned period under review, cases of sexual violence against women and men were documented in one of the detention facilities in Afrin. On two occasions, in an apparent attempt to humiliate, extract confessions, and instill fear in male detainees, SNA military police officers forced male detainees to witness the rape of a minor.³⁵

The Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria, in a report issued on March 8th, 2022, pointed out that “the Turkish occupation army and its affiliated groups have arrested 693 women, out of 7,971 people in detention since March 2018, and the fate of half of them is unknown”.³⁶

BOMBING AND IEDS CASES

In the period from January to June 2022, RIC documented 6 cases of bombings, mines, and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) throughout the Turkish-occupied territories. Four of them were in the Afrin region and two were in the M4 Strip. The biggest event occurred on January 20th, when six people lost their lives and twenty-four people, including both civilians and military personnel, were wounded as a result of rocket shells falling on Afrin city. At least six missiles fell on different areas of the city, causing a fire in a house in the city center, in addition to the outbreak of fire in several cars that were parked in the streets of the city. This occurred after the Turkish forces intensively bombed 7 villages between Tel Rifaat and al-Zahraa. 5 of those villages were in AANES-governed Shehba region while 2 were in areas controlled by the SAA and Iranian militias.³⁷ January 20th also marked the fourth anniversary of the start

35 A-HRC-45-31- Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

36 www.vdc-nsy.com/archives/54637

37 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19115



of the Turkish military operation in the Afrin region. According to local media, the shelling that hit Afrin came from the countryside to the southeast of the city, which indeed comprises regions controlled by the above-mentioned military forces.³⁸ It is noteworthy to remember that on November 19th, 2021, an unclaimed attack with several missiles hit a residential neighborhood in Afrin city injuring thirteen civilians and killing two. Until now both attacks remain unclaimed.

38 www.ezdina.com/2022/01/News-public923.html

Also in January, four people, including children, were killed and others were wounded in an explosion of a vehicle-borne IED in the center of the city of Sere Kaniye.³⁹ On June 1st, in a bombing on Tel Abyad city, two persons lost their lives and six others were injured, as the rockets hit positions in 'Peace Spring' street, the Al-Hekma hospital area, and the area of the shopping center in the city, as reported by SOHR.⁴⁰ According to RIC's database, a total of 15 people lost their lives and 31 were injured due to shelling or mines during the first six months of the year. Regarding the perpetrators, it is difficult to verify the authority of the bombing or IED cases. Mostly, such cases just result in various parties denying involvement or responsibility.

THE TRIBES' ROLE IN THE TURKISH OCCUPATION

In the Syria's areas controlled by Turkish-backed SNA militias and the SIG institutions, the significance of the region's tribes is greatly increasing. The main tribal organization is the Syrian Council of Tribes and Clans, established in 2018, which includes representatives of more than 150 tribes and clans of different ethnicities in Syria, including Kurds, Turkmens, Syriacs, and Arabs. It joined the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), that is the diplomatic counterpart of the SNA-SIG, in May 2020. Since then, Turkey has pushed to strengthen the role of tribes, which will favor the figures and components close to it with the aim of establishing control over the Syrian opposition institutions. In areas still dominated by clans and tribes, as well as within the IDP and settler population who have come from other Syrian regions, Turkey's support for the Syrian Council of Tribes and Clans has had the effect of renewing, reviving, and giving fresh political importance to, tribal and clan-based alliances. This comes in the context of the abject failures of the founding political forces within the SOC, which were meant to be removed from traditional allegiances.⁴¹ In July 2021, the Head of Syrian Tribal Council, Salem Al-Meslet, also became the president of the SOC.

Asked about this topic, the spokesperson of the Afrin Human Rights Organization, explained to the RIC how the situation and role of the Arab tribes evolved in the Afrin region. Before the Turkish occupation of Afrin, the Bobini and Ameritah tribes had a strong presence, as well as some families of the Bukhamis and Ajeel tribes. These tribes had settled in the Afrin region between 50 and 70 years ago. The Ameritah had properties in Jinderes sub-district and inside the city of Afrin and its surrounding villages; the Bobini tribe is still present in the city of Afrin. Moreover, after the establishment of the Autonomous Administration, they played a key political role as an Arab demographic in the region and participated in the AANES' democratic project.

39 www.npasyria.com/en/52320/

40 www.syriaahr.com/en/253953/

41 www.rb.gy/wkeb8f (www.al-monitor.com)

With the Turkish invasion of Afrin, some of them left and others remained. Those who stayed, such as the Bobini tribe and its leader, Sheikh Faris Khalif, suffered retaliation because of previous relations to the AANES. They were forced to pay ransoms frequently and their houses were seized or looted. On the other hand, inside the Bobini tribe, some of its members created a military division affiliated with the new authorities. This new division then threatened some Arabs and other Bobini tribe members in order to pressure them into removing their support for Kurdish residents. This led to unsolved cases of assassination and house plundering.

The SOHR indicated that during the beginning of 2022, Turkish authorities had established the Kurdish and Arab Tribal Council in Afrin. It includes elected figures affiliated with the Kurdish National Council (ENKS) and former Kurdish officers who were dissidents from the Syrian government's security forces. In total, there are six Kurdish tribal councils, headed by a former officer who now lives in Europe. Turkish forces appointed and elected members of the ENKS and other affiliated figures, as chiefs in the six councils corresponding to the Afrin sub-district division. But the Kurdish population in the Afrin region was never strongly organized or identified with tribes. The importance of tribal familial relations were not as central as they are in other Kurdish populated areas in Syria. Instead, in Afrin, Kurds had identified themselves more around the name of the family and the sub-district/village of origin. Thus, this new organization should be understood as another effort to gain external legitimacy for the Turkish occupation, aligned with the demographic change happening in the Afrin region since the invasion.

Asked about this point, the Afrin Human Rights Organization's spokesperson clarified that the ENKS is not directly related to the Council, but the Association of Independent Kurds is related, and is also a member of the SOC. He furthermore pointed out that although the Council was sponsored and aligned with the Turkish interest in Afrin, the current situation so far is uncertain, and on the ground it doesn't have any clear role.

In this regard, a notable warring dynamic within the infighting cases of the first two quarterlies of the year is the overlapping of tribal clashes and inter-SNA infighting. Indeed, most of the SNA militias were formed on a regional and tribal basis, each tribe being grouped into one faction that



Association of Independent Kurds and Syrian Tribal Council's logos, image from Zaitun Agency

held its name. So, when clashes between SNA factions erupt, these can suddenly evolve into tribal disputes, with the faction harnessing all of their weaponry to ensure victory for their tribe. Vice versa, any tribal dispute has the potential to evolve into infightings between SNA factions. That was the case of a tribal revenge attack in late May, which started in Sere Kaniye city, and later expanded to Afrin-Jinderes road with the involvement of SNA militias too. Gunmen from the al-Akidat tribe, who are also fighters with the SNA, attacked some Hamza Division-affiliated groups, because its members were from the Al-Muwali tribe. This resulted in heavy clashes with the use of machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades within residential neighborhoods, triggering dozens of families to temporarily flee the city. The infighting killed three Hamza fighters, and injured eight others, who were also members of al-Muwali tribe, as well as injured three SNA fighters who were also members of the al-Akidat tribe. Moreover, Hevdesti and SOHR documented considerable material damage to civilian cars and houses.^{42, 43}

According to Mudar Hammad al-Assaad, spokesman for the Council of Syrian Tribes and Clans, "The SNA factions are exploiting the differences between their members to turn them into tribal disputes that completely plunge the area into chaos and bloodshed. The factions resort to this tactic to absolve themselves of disputes and absolve their members of committing violations, by dressing up these disputes as tribal disputes".⁴⁴

The introduction of the tribal axis, combined with the inability of the judiciary system and military police to resolve disputes, means that tribal elders are effectively left to play a role as an unofficial judiciary authority. Since the disputes and armed clashes are unfolding in an environment with an incapable official judiciary and associated political institutions, disputes are resolved with the mediation of the SNA military leadership, together with tribal sheikhs. Although there are currently a large number and multiplicity of judicial committees, the absence of a central reference body is notable and there is a clear state of judicial chaos. SNA militias have repeatedly tried to influence, coerce, and infiltrate judiciary branches so as to not be held accountable. Most judicial committees are supported by or affiliated with one or more factions.

ABU AMSHA FILE

In late 2021 and early 2022, tensions and internal clashes broke out between al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division. This occurred in parallel with popular protests in Jindires sub-district of Afrin, demanding that the leadership of Suleiman Shah Division – especially its commander, the so-called Abu Amsha

42 www.syriahr.com/en/253954/

43 www.hevdesti.org/en/insecurity-in-peace-spring/

44 www.rb.gy/t7dxzj (www.al-monitor.com)

– be held legally accountable for their participation in murders, rapes, torture, kidnappings, and arms trafficking.^{45,46} The Azm Unified Command Room, in which al-Jabha al-Shamiya was holding the leadership, intervened and formed a “committee acceptable to all to investigate this special case,” supervised by the leader of the Revolutionaries Movement. A new ensemble, called the Revolutionaries for Liberation, was created to counterbalance the weight of al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and Suleiman Shah Division was absorbed into this, providing it with backing following its diminished prominence following the accusations.

In mid-February 2022, after a two-month investigation, the special committee consisting of three members of the Islamic Council called for the removal of Abu Amsha from the leadership of the division. The former furthermore declared that the latter was not to be assigned to any other position in the future, “because of the allegations that have been proven against him and to avoid exposing the region to the possibilities of fighting, sedition and blood”. The committee also decided to dismiss five other of the division’s leaders. The tripartite investigation committee placed the responsibility for effecting justice and compensating the affected parties on decision-makers on the ground. Yet it appears that the committee did not have the final say, since the response of the militia’s lawyer to the verdict was that it held “no legal, lawful, or customary importance”.⁴⁷ So, on March 8th, after a short break, Abu Amsha returned to the limelight, attending a meeting with the President of the SIG and military leaders of the SNA.⁴⁸ Abu Amsha’s immunity from any accountability results from the Suleiman Shah Division’s strict adherence to the Turkish agenda and its leader’s close relationship with the Turkish MIT, who went as far as threatening to cut off its funding for al-Jabha al-Shamiya due to the latter stirring up the popular protests against Abu Amsha.⁴⁹

In addition, during the previous months, rumors had begun to grow surrounding negotiations between the Suleiman Shah Division and the SNA’s main regional rival: HTS, formerly al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda spin-off. The rumors were seemingly confirmed by HTS’ October incursion into Afrin, where the latter and Suleiman Shah fought side by side.⁵⁰ When people took the streets demanding the trial and expulsion of Suleiman Shah Division leadership, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, the strongest militia in the the Azm Unified Command Room, presented itself as a moral authority willing to hold Abu Amsha and its militia to account for the outrageous crimes committed against the local population in order to gain popular support. In the

45 www.vdc-nsy.com/archives/52338

46 www.enabbaladi.net/archives/538597

47 www.rb.gy/ufsdzv (www.rozana.fm)

48 www.vdc-nsy.com/archives/56732

49 www.rb.gy/khvgi2 (www.syriadirect.org)

50 www.rb.gy/atgm2l (www.alquds.co.uk)



Meeting of the Revolutionaries for Liberation, with the presence of 'Abu Amsha' (2nd from left), SIG Minister of Defense (3rd from right in the front) and SIG President (4th from right in the front), March 8th, 2022

end, this case demonstrated that al-Jabha al-Shamiya was not indeed willing to hold the Suleiman Shah Division leadership truly accountable for their crimes, but rather held as its primary aim the weakening of HTS' main ally within the Syrian National Army and the Afrin region.

SETTLEMENTS & LARGE-SCALE DEPORTATIONS

Since its invasions, Turkey has promoted the construction of numerous settlement projects in Afrin and the M4 Strip to house Arabs and Turkmens. This is occurring in coordination with NGOs from Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, and Palestine.⁵¹ These settlements are being approved by Turkish officials, funded by international NGOs, and populated mainly by Arab fighters within Turkish-backed SNA groups. Each SNA group is responsible for raising funds in order to pay for construction material, while the financing for the projects comes from NGOs, particularly from the Gulf-region. In an in-depth report,⁵² STJ stresses that the extensive construction of new settlements is not having the effect that homes seized and occupied by SNA militiamen get handed back to their original owners. Rather, STJ asserts that these settlements are "part of [the] systematic process of altering the demographic composition of Afrin".

51 www.nrls.net/en/settlers-and-settlements-in-afrin/

52 www.rb.gy/eytzdt (www.stj-sy.org)

JABAL AL-AHMAL SETTLEMENTS

According to STJ, members of al-Jabhat al-Shamiya, Hamza Division, Jaysh al-Islam, Sultan Murad Division, Sultan Malek Shah Division, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, and 9th Division are all involved in the ‘Jabal al-Ahlam’ settlement near Afrin. SNA fighters and their families from Rif Dimashq, Homs, and Hama “were the key beneficiaries of the project,” with civilians making up only 25% of the settlers in Jabal al-Ahlam. The project plans for the construction of 5,000 residential units on an area totalling 122,533m²; over 1,000 are already built. STJ alleges that the settlements were requested by SNA groups, among them al-Jabha al-Shamiya, directly to Turkish authorities. Concealing this, “the project had to be given a [civilian character] to persuade local and international organizations to contribute to the construction process”.⁵³ Rahmi Doğan, governor of Turkey’s Hatay Province, gave local councils permission to begin construction. One notable example of these settlements is the so-called of ‘Kuwait al-Rahma’, which has been already completed and which was built with the support of donors from Kuwait.

These settlements are not leading to homes seized and occupied by SNA militiamen being handed back to their original owners, “on the contrary, several cases were monitored of fighters who rented those seized houses in Afrin to other people after moving into the residential settlement”, writes STJ. It seems these settlements are making room for Syrian IDPs expelled from Turkey to settle in Afrin, hence STJ conclusion that these settlements are geared towards demographic change in Afrin, with indigenous Kurdish residents being expelled and replaced.

TURKISH POLICIES FOR REFUGEES AND SETTLEMENT PLANS

In early May 2022, Erdoğan announced plans for re-settling roughly one million Syrian refugees in 13 Syrian areas; chiefly, Afrin, Azaz, Jarablus, al-Bab, and Tel Abyad. In most cases, these areas do not correspond to those that the refugees had fled from.⁵⁴ Erdoğan’s resettlement plan catered to domestic grievances regarding perceived disastrous impacts due to the influx of refugees. Meanwhile, the proportion of Syrian refugees in Turkey who say they do not plan on returning increased from 17% in 2017 to 77% in 2020, according to a survey sponsored by the UN refugee agency.⁵⁵ The Turkish government has pressed on with its plans to resettle those Syrian refugees residing in its territory. Ankara has drawn media attention to the construction of new units in Syria’s occupied north, presenting the plans as “humanitarian”. In early June, the Turkish Minister for Interior Affairs Soleyman Soyly, in a meeting called “Idlib 100 Thousand Briquette House Promotion”,

⁵³ [www.rb.gy/eytzt \(www.stj-sy.org\)](http://www.rb.gy/eytzt (www.stj-sy.org))

⁵⁴ [www.rb.gy/3ylbyx \(www.al-monitor.com\)](http://www.rb.gy/3ylbyx (www.al-monitor.com))

⁵⁵ www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/03/SB-2020-Ingilizce-son.pdf

declared that there were 259 briquettes construction points in the north of Syria, thanked the 19 NGOs and other institutions that supported the project, and stated, “We will have completed 100 thousand briquette houses before the end of the year. 100 thousand houses will have saved at least 600 thousand people from the tent.”⁵⁶ Later that month, Soylyu visited a settlement that was built by the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) in the Tel Abyad area, M4 Strip, and announced 240,000 housing units would soon be built.⁵⁷

This unstoppable growth of construction of new settlements in Syria’s Turkish-occupied territories has been effectively accompanied by a tightening of persecution and deportation measures against asylum seekers within Turkey. For several years, Turkey has been deporting Syrian refugees to Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria, under the guise of ‘voluntary return’. 2022 has seen this practice surge. While the Turkish government claims that its aggressive approach is restricted to new asylum seekers, STJ have documented how hundreds of Syrian refugees have been transferred to collective camps even though they did not belong to the supposed target group. The Turkish authorities engage in systematic forced return of refugees to Syria, ignoring their legal status, established by government-issued documents that warrant their presence and guarantee them protection, including work permits, student residence permits, and ‘kimliks’ (the temporary Protection Identification Document). The new measures did not even spare Syrian refugees who were in the process of getting Turkish nationality from also being deported back to Syria. Turkish authorities frequently carry out raids and arrest campaigns targeting Syrian refugees. Those arrested are generally baselessly accused of having wrong information on their government-issued kimliks and then detained. Their formal refugee status is ignored. On March 30th, 2022, Turkey deactivated thousands of kimliks. Following this, the police intensified their activity of stopping people in the streets and asking to see their kimlik. As STJ records, detainees are given the choice between indefinite detention or signing ‘voluntary return’ papers. Sometimes they are asked to give a signature whilst being told it is for their detention release papers or are violently coerced into signing.



Syrians out of the Turkish Ongo Pinar border crossing towards the Bab al-Salam crossing (next to Azaz city), photo from Anadolu Agency

56 www.rb.gy/v4jh94 (www.aa.com.tr)

57 www.rb.gy/liiegg (www.syriadirect.org)

Monitoring what effectively amounts to large-scale deportations, STJ corroborated the ‘voluntary return’ of over 155,000 Syrian refugees between 2019 and 2021.⁵⁸ Based on figures published by the three border crossings used by Turkey, RIC calculates that 16,912 Syrians were forcibly sent back across the first two quarters of 2022. This total is likely a little short, as for the month of May, one of the crossings did not publish their data. The three crossings are Bab al-Hawa in Idlib province, Bab al-Salameh in Aleppo province, and Tal Abyad in Raqqa province. Notably, the reported number of forced returnees does not include those who were caught by Turkish gendarmerie while attempting to irregularly cross the border strip into Turkey, and subsequently sent back.

LIVING CONDITIONS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

During the first half of 2022, successive explosions of popular anger and demonstrations demanding improvement of living conditions and services occurred in the Syrian territories controlled by the Turkish-backed militias.

ELECTRICITY

In January, the Afrin region, as well other cities in the ‘Euphrates Shield’ area, saw massive protests because of an increase in electricity prices from the Turkish private company which is responsible for importing and distributing electricity to this area.⁵⁹ Electricity provision in the Turkish-occupied regions of Syria is monopolized by Turkish-owned electricity companies, and arrives from the Kilis and Gaziantep provinces in Turkey. They sell the electricity in Turkish liras, rather than Syrian pounds. There are three private electricity supply companies in northwestern Syria. The Syrian-Turkish Electric Energy Company (STE) supervises the distribution of electricity in the occupied city of Afrin and its surrounding areas (also in Marea, Suran, and Akhtar in cities).⁶⁰ The Turkish AK Energy company operates electricity in the majority of ‘Euphrates Shield’ area and the M4 Strip (Azaz, Al-Bab, Jarablus, Al-Rai, Sere Kaniye, and Tel Abyad). Finally, Green Energy company has the monopoly over electricity distribution in Idlib city and its countryside, which is under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.⁶¹

At the start of the year, in the M4 Strip, the residents of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye protested against the general deterioration of their living conditions, mainly due to the increasing cost of basic living materials. Particularly, there was a sharp

58 www.rb.gy/xnqrd6 (www.stj-sy.org)

59 www.syriaahr.com/en/234208/

60 www.rb.gy/scu9ud (www.syria.tv)

61 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19260

increase in the price of the oil used for domestic heating during an exceptionally cold season. This forced residents to buy firewood for heating. The price of electricity for residential units rose from 0.85 to 1.47 Turkish liras; a 73% increase. The demonstrators pointed to the corruption of the so-called Local Council, the administrative institution ruling the municipalities in the SNA-controlled areas.^{62 63}



Ak Energy center in Azaz, photo from Afrin Post

One month later, residents of Sere Kaniye complained that electricity had been cut off from the countryside since January 16th. The electric current that reaches the city and its countryside partly also comes from the Autonomous Administration areas, but, according to residents, the Local Council declares to people that all the electricity is coming from Turkey.⁶⁴ AANES supplies some electricity here as part of a Russian-brokered deal from 2019, in which they are given access to the SNA-controlled Allouk water pumping station, which supplies water to Heseke. As long as AANES receives this water, they agree to feed the occupied territories some electricity from a power station in Darbasiyah. In the M4 strip, the Local Council sells electricity service

cards to citizens in the city's neighborhoods and its countryside. If residents' cards run-out, their electricity supply is cut until they buy recharge cards. However, while each card initially gave 125 kilowatts of electricity for 100 Turkish liras, they were soon reduced to only 54 kilowatts at the same price.

In Afrin meanwhile, at the end of March, the Turkish AK energy company again announced a rise of electricity prices by more than 30%. The company increased the price of one domestic kilowatt to 2.45 Turkish liras. Previously, it was 1.85 Turkish liras. The price of one commercial kilowatt increased to TL 3.20. Previously, it was TL 3. The decision ignited anger in the population, with allegations that the household bills in Turkey do not reach half the cost of the bill in the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria. Furthermore, the protesters accused the company of exploiting them, enabled by the lack of oversight of local councils and the complicity of officials in the electricity companies.⁶⁵

62 www.ezdina.com/2022/01/News-public908.html

63 www.ezdina.com/2022/01/Reportag-Ezidi562.html

64 www.ezdina.com/2022/02/Reportag-Ezidi576.html

65 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/20041

ANIMAL FARMING

The economic activities of local people have been also directly affected by corruption and the deterioration of basic services. Residents of the occupied city of Sere Kaniye complain about their problems farming livestock in the region. The ever-rising prices of fodder, the lack of pastures due to drought, and the constantly-interrupted water and electricity in the countryside threaten animal farming activities. Farmers have argued that the rise in fodder prices is due to monopolization by traders affiliated with the Turkish-backed militias controlling each territory. This in turn is permitted by the inaction of the Local Council authorities, who do not play their role in supporting farmers, sheep, and livestock breeders. The result is that farmers are left alone to save their remaining herds, whose numbers are constantly declining.⁶⁶ In Afrin, farmers alleged that the Agricultural Office was only distributing half of the specified amount of fertilizer allocated to farmers in Afrin villages, while selling the other quantities for large profits. The local council in Afrin had been distributing three bags of fertilizer out of the six bags allocated to each farmer in the villages of Qastal, Steer, Qara Tabeh, Jomke and Qort Qolaq, while selling the remaining three at \$33 each to Al-Drouzi shops selling seeds and fertilizers in Afrin city.⁶⁷

AGRICULTURE

The severely deteriorating economic situation has also affected the harvest season in the SNA-controlled areas. This amplifies the effects of a larger-scale food crisis. Syria ranks among the 10 most food insecure countries in the world this year, according to the United Nations. In a February report, the UN said that 12 million people suffer from limited or unsustainable access to food. In its 2021 annual Country Report Feedback, the World Food Program said that three out of five Syrians suffer from food insecurity.⁶⁸ In this context, the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government has been trying to prevent the smuggling of strategic crops, particularly wheat, towards areas under the control of the Syrian government or the AANES.

Nonetheless, it set the price of a ton of first-quality soft wheat for the 2022 agricultural season at \$460, while the Self Administration set the price at about \$550, and the Syrian government at about \$500 dollars.⁶⁹ This difference of price (a phenomena of recent years) has prompted some traders and smugglers to smuggle wheat outside the SNA-controlled territories. Traders linked to each local SNA militia,

66 www.ezdina.com/2022/03/Reportag-Ezidi52.html

67 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/20059

68 www.rb.gy/p119dc (www.al-monitor.com)

69 www.rb.gy/lcllns (www.syria.tv)

use smuggling corridors widely spread in the countryside of Aleppo. Therefore, the SIG has struggled to buy wheat from farmers but has also been incapable of preventing the smuggling. Hence, it relies heavily on flour imported through Turkey to produce bread. As of June 27th, the SIG had purchased a total of only 11,510 tons from farmers, while the Syrian Government's Ministry of Agriculture announced a purchase of 304,954 tons, and the AANES one of around 320,100 tons. To have a comparative idea, in the smaller and more mountainous region of Idlib, the HTS-backed Salvation Government received only 11 tons of wheat.⁷⁰ It is noteworthy that the 'Euphrates Shield' area and M4 Strip, both under control of the Turkish-backed SIG, are the most fertile areas for wheat production in northern Syria.

Near the start of summer, the SIG's minister of finance and economy, Abdel-Hakim al-Masri, had estimated a production output of between 40,000 and 50,000 tons of wheat in the areas of Tal Abyad and Sere Kaniye.⁷¹ In this regard, the SIG's ban on the export of strategic crops issued on May 19th, that prohibited the export or transport of any of the strategic crops outside of its areas, appeared to be widely ineffective. Against the 40,000 expected, only 11,000 was collected. It can safely be assumed that the SNA and the Military Police actively facilitated, or at least turned a blind eye to, the smuggling out of the remaining 29,000 tons, since those two bodies were officially appointed by the SIG to ensure the execution of the ban.



Harvesting works in Afrin city's countryside, photo from Getty Images

YOUTH LABOR AND LABOR EXPLOITATION

A new report from Ezdina Foundation highlights how the SNA militias in Afrin are deliberately exploiting Kurdish youth in particular for the labor force. These are both military- and nonmilitary-related works, including fortifying and cementing contact points, digging tunnels for military factions, building projects for some SNA leaders, and working in the field of cultivating lands previously seized by the Turkish-backed armed factions. The three most prominent militias that employ and exploit Kurdish youth are, in descending order, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Sultan Murad Division,

70 www.rb.gy/gqtygt (www.syria.tv)

71 www.rb.gy/p119dc (www.al-monitor.com)

and Faylaq al-Sham. Local sources report that the militias allocate a sum of money for the fortification and building process, where about 50 Turkish liras (equivalent to 12,900 Syrian pounds) is allocated to the worker's daily wage. However, the leaders exploit the Kurdish youth and their need for money and employ them for a very small portion of their due wages, or even nothing at all.⁷²

In the olive harvesting season in late 2021, Ezdina collected testimonies regarding the labor exploitation practices of al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Those working for that faction mainly consisted of Kurdish young men and women from Afrin. They worked for ten hours a day, for a wage that did not exceed 20 Turkish liras (equivalent to approximately \$1). In the olive picking sector, the majority of workers are women. Furthermore, they are working within lands that are owned by civilians, but that have been confiscated for the benefit of al-Jabha al-Shamiya, whether the original owners still reside in occupied Afrin or have been displaced from it. Those giving the testimonies said that they were forced to do this work because of lack of other options and their difficult living conditions.

LIFTING OF US CAESAR SANCTIONS

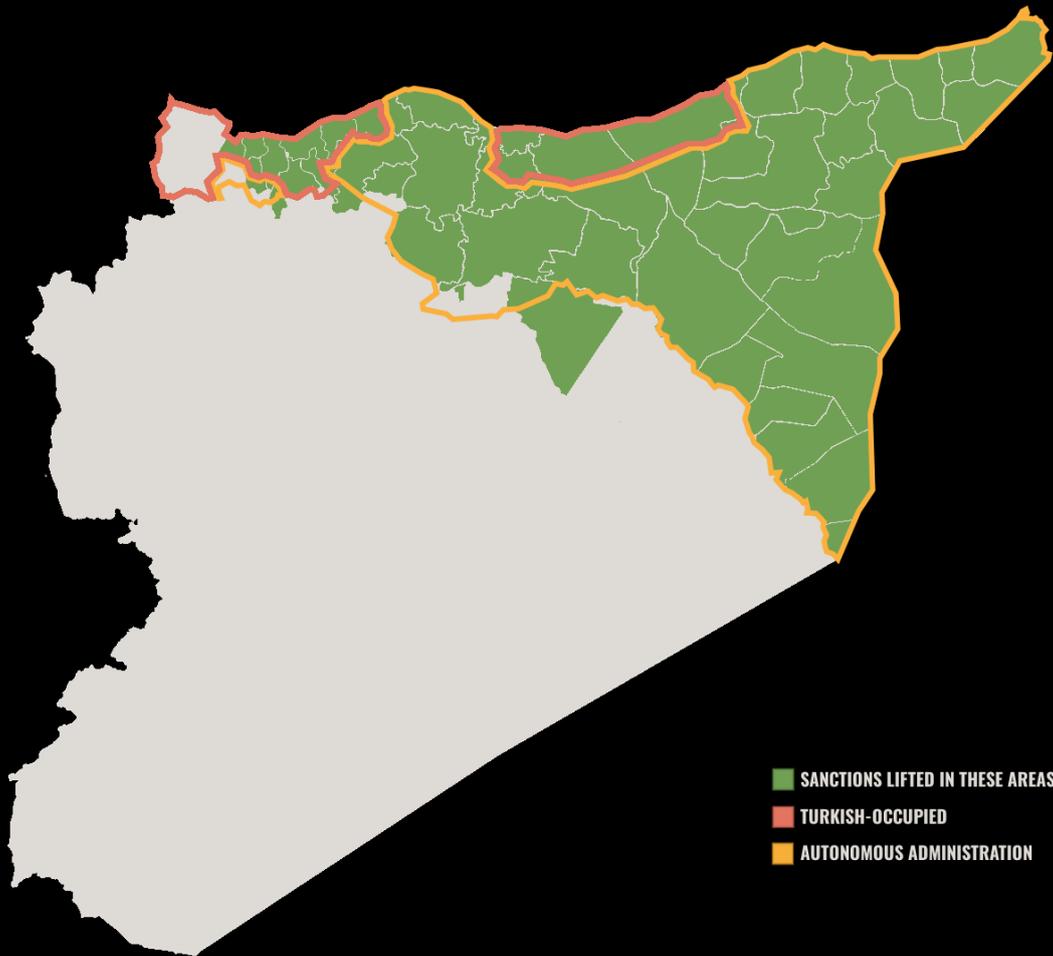
The US' 2019 Caesar Sanctions on the Syrian Government have been the subject of much debate regarding their effectiveness in targeting Assad and his cronies, and their impact on the whole Syrian population more broadly. Rumors of a Caesar waiver first emerged in February. Then, during the Global Coalition's Marrakech meeting on May 6th, the US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Victoria Nuland, announced the beginning of the issuing of general licenses for US firms to operate in the "areas not under the control of the regime and liberated from ISIS in Syria".⁷³ Additionally, the US said it spent \$45 million on NES in 2021 and pledged \$350 million for 2022. Then, on May 11th, the US Treasury released 'Syria General License 22'; an official decision delineating the lifting of sanctions just for certain areas of Syria (in green).

The area specified covers most of NES (orange contour), though not the Shehba enclave, home to tens of thousands of Afrin IDPs. Conversely, the Turkish-occupied Afrin region will continue to be affected by US sanctions. Yet, the Syrian territory that Turkey occupied in 2016 and 2019 (red contour), including Kurdish-majority Sere Kaniye, will be able to receive outside investment. The US decision authorizes transactions in the fields of agriculture, information and telecommunication, power grid infrastructure, construction, finance, clean energy, transportation and warehousing, water and waste management, health services, education, manufacturing, and trade.⁷⁴

72 www.ezdina.com/2022/03/Reportag-Ezidi528.html

73 www.twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1524489438759428098

74 www.twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1524995656938668032



The partial lifting of the Caesar sanctions acknowledges the powerful effect that until now these have had on all Syrian territories. While the sanctions were intended to target Assad's government, they have impacted the whole of the country, regardless of the governing authority in any particular area. The deteriorating economic situation in which the civil population lives is partly the result of the financial and commercial blockade achieved since the imposition of sanctions. However, the lifting of this is not having a significant effect in the territories organized by the AANES, since the strategic oil sector still remains sanctioned. But, for the Turkish-occupied territories of the M4 Strip and 'Euphrates Shield' area, the lifting of the Caesar sanctions has allowed Turkey and other foreign countries and companies to invest and trade with the SNA-SIG authorities.

This exemption of the SNA-controlled territories could be seen as a concession to the Turkish interest in Syria, as well as a continuation of the US support to the so-called Syrian opposition under the Syrian Opposition Coalition. It also comprises

a part from the ongoing economic integration of all SNA-controlled areas into the Turkish economy, even in the case of the Afrin region. For Afrin, the maintenance of the Caesar sanctions does not entirely block foreign investment in practice, as the cases of multiple ongoing building settlements show. The sanctions essentially prevent any foreign entity dealing with American institutions from doing business in Syria; this does not apply to the mostly Turkish or Arab countries companies, relief organizations and charities active in those areas.⁷⁵

INCREASING CHILD-MARRIAGE AND SUICIDE

CHILD-MARRIAGE

The transformation of social relations after the Turkish occupation has triggered the re-emergence of the phenomena of girls being married at a young age. This is particularly notable in Afrin, where a Kurdish indigenous majority population has been displaced and replaced by settlers and IDPs from other parts of Syria. According to a report of the media network Afrin Post, Kurdish girls and women are subjected to daily harassment, in addition to the violations of killing, beating, torture, kidnapping, extortion, and humiliation. These are systematically and publicly practiced with the intent of pushing the original Kurdish population to leave their land and abandon Afrin. Many girls in Afrin have been harassed and have started to wear a veil and loose clothes so that they are not easily identifiable as Kurdish. In schools, meanwhile, the veil was imposed on girls after religious subjects were introduced into the school curricula. Kurdish women in Afrin now cannot leave the house unless accompanied by a man and wearing a cover on their head.⁷⁶

Either by the practice of forced marriage of minors, or to avoid harassment, many Kurdish girls marry now at an early age, often based on the desire of their parents. Many girls ranging from 13 to 16 years old are married off, mostly to young Kurds who live outside Afrin. However, child marriage is more extended within the Arab population. There has also been an increase in divorce cases, although the possibility for young girls to convince their families to break their marriages are very few. The Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria documented the forced marriage of 12 girls to the leaders of SNA militias in Afrin (alongside threats to and extortion of their families), 9 cases of forced marriage in Jarablus, 1 case in Azaz, and 1 in Al-Bab. Besides that, it documented that 16 women were raped by leaders and mercenaries since the Turkish incursion into northern Syria. Of them, three reported the incident and in all of these cases, neither the judiciary nor the security services of the occupied territories intervened.

⁷⁵ www.rb.gy/uqtyck (www.stj-sy.org)

⁷⁶ www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19866

The phenomena of early marriage, prevalent among the settler population, especially among girls, is an unfamiliar phenomena for Afrin's indigenous population. When the Autonomous Administration was organizing the Afrin canton, strict laws regarding the prevention of marriage of minors as well as the prevention of polygamy were enacted, and the equal participation of women with men in all spheres of life was emphasized too. The contrast with the current situation is marked. On March 2nd, an art exhibition from the "Voice of a Woman" organization in Afrin city was canceled after the exhibition participants, including organizers and artists, received explicit threats from settlers, as well as members of Sultan Murad Division, if they had insisted on holding the exhibition. The art exhibition was planned to display paintings by local artists over a period of three days, which dealt with the issue of the marriage of minors and raising awareness of its dangers; psychologically and physically.⁷⁷ The Azm operations room, one of the main SNA militias ensemble, moved to cancel the exhibition with a petition of the Ifta Department in Afrin, which is directly supervised by the Turkish Diyanet Endowment. The latter later clarified in a statement that such activities "aimed to spread ideas and opinions that are far from our religion, our morals and our customs..." and that it is a 'missionary call' that negatively affects society.⁷⁸



Exhibition's invitation by "Voice of Woman", photo from Afrin Post

Meanwhile, on March 3rd, the "College of Education in Afrin / Gaziantep University" held a symposium entitled "Marriage between Science, Media and the West", in which three lectures were given on marriage from the perspective of Islamic law. The lecturers claimed that the Western media is trying to "distort marriage from its legitimate purpose and concept", that "marriage is not determined by a specific age," and that there is a "suspicious role of some organizations in introducing false concepts about marriage and restricting it to an age".⁷⁹

77 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19853

78 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19884

79 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/19884

SUICIDES

Another growing social issue is the significant increase in suicide cases, especially by teenage young men, in light of the deteriorating living and economic conditions and the lack of job opportunities. “From the beginning of 2022, until July 20th, [in all Syria] the Authority recorded 101 suicides, distributed among 77 males and 24 females,” said Dr. Zaher Hajjo, General Director of the Syrian government General Authority for Forensic Medicine. The Aleppo governorate (where SNA-controlled Afrin canton and ‘Euphrates Shield’ area are) holds the highest numbers of all Syrian territories. Dr. Hajjo also noted that the youngest case recorded this year was that of a 14-year-old girl, and that 19 cases were of people under the age of 18 (9 males and 10 females).⁸⁰ On the other hand, the Syria Response Coordinators team counted 53 suicide cases in northwestern Syria in the first five months of 2022, a statistic that exceeds what has been documented during each of the last three years. The cases that led to death amounted to 40 cases (13 children, 16 women, and 11 men).⁸¹ By September 2022, 31 cases of suicide have been reported in the Turkish-occupied regions since the beginning of the year. They include 11 youths, 11 women, and 9 men.⁸²

There are many reasons behind the rise of suicides in Syria, especially in the Turkish-occupied areas. The northwestern-based Syria Response Coordinators organization points to the great pressures on civilians that come from the state of continuous displacement, the continuation of financial hardship, the constant state of anxiety over the interruption of sources of income, and the constant threats and lack of security. Also, the victims of most of the suicide cases in the region were women. This could be due to the lack of help they have to overcome the specific difficulties they are experiencing (mostly linked to their family environment or economic situation). In addition, the murder of women is sometimes being purposefully hidden as suicide. As for the young age of some of the people, they were particularly affected due to their inability to deal with the various pressures they face.⁸³ In addition to all these factors, Kurdish and other indigenous populations in the Turkish-occupied areas have to face harassment, threats of arrest, and financial blackmail from the SNA militias.

‘EUPHRATES SHIELD’ AREA

The SNA-controlled ‘Euphrates Shield’ Area, also saw a general degradation of the social, economic and security conditions. The cities of al-Bab, Marea, Azaz, Jarablus, and Akhtarín witnessed demonstrations in the first three months of 2022, against the Turkish-backed local councils and the electricity companies. The Turkish AK Energy company operates electricity in the city of al-Bab, and raised the electricity

80 www.rb.gy/zigdkp (www.syrianobserver.com)

81 www.enabbaladi.net/archives/575138

82 www.english.aawsat.com/home/article/3857811/over-124-suicides-confirmed-syria-2022

83 www.enabbaladi.net/archives/575138

prices by over 30%. They cited this as the result of the deterioration of the Turkish lira against the dollar and the high cost of electricity production in Turkey.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Turkish company has adopted a rationing policy by which there is blackout for 12 hours each day. The protesters in al-Bab city stormed the building of the electricity station and took it over, demanding electricity be provided throughout the whole day, in addition to the reduction of the price of electricity to what it was before.⁸⁵ At the same time, this area too is suffering from the aforementioned food insecurity and the problematic of strategic crops smuggling.

Regarding security conditions, STJ reports that the 'Euphrates Shield' Area remains the most insecure SNA-controlled region for the civilian population, with growing infightings and assassination campaigns by military actors. According to STJ's figures, which include only those cases and numbers that STJ can individually verify, from early 2022 until late June, the three Turkish-held areas witnessed nearly triple the number of fights that occurred in 2021, more than the number of fights in all 2020, and about twice the number of those the factions engaged in over 2018, 2019, and 2021 collectively. STJ records that from 2018 up to present, in the 'Euphrates Shield' area, the SNA factions (most of them part of the former Free Syrian Army) engaged in 28 clashes. STJ states that these hostilities killed 7 civilians and injured 16 others, while they killed 13 fighters and injured 18 others. In addition to this, STJ also registered several car-bomb and IEDs attacks, many of which were blamed on the security services of the Syrian government, ISIS, and the Afrin Liberation Forces – a local Kurdish paramilitary force established after the occupation of Afrin. Furthermore, according to STJ's records, the 'Euphrates Shield' area also records the most cases of indiscriminate instances of shelling against SNA-controlled populated areas (especially al-Bab and Azaz cities), referencing ammunition fired from the AANES-governed Shehba territory and military outposts controlled by Syria-Russia.⁸⁶

The region also witnessed a rare incident on June 13th, when the SNA and the Syrian government exchanged prisoners at the Abu Al-Zandin crossing near the city of al-Bab. The operation included the release of five prisoners from each side, under a Russian-Turkish guarantee and supervision from the United Nations (UN), the International Red Cross, and the leader of the Revolutionaries for Liberation Committee, Fahim Issa.⁸⁷



International Red Cross and the Syrian Red Crescent members in Abu al-Zandin crossing, photo from Zaitun Agency

84 www.afrinpost.net/ar/archives/20041

85 www.syriahr.com/en/237470/

86 www.rb.gy/zslqou (www.stj-sy.org)

87 www.npasyria.com/en/79019/

ISIS REMAINS IN THE SNA-CONTROLLED REGIONS

A variety of ties exist between ISIS and the SNA militias. Some are more overt, such as the documented presence of former ISIS members among the ranks of the SNA. Others are more subtle, such as the fact that key ISIS leadership figures continue to base themselves in, comfortably move around, and operate from the Turkish-occupied territory, as periodic Global Coalition raids and drone strikes in the area attest to.

On July 12th, a US drone strike outside Jindires, south of Afrin region, targeted two senior ISIS officials who were in the territory controlled by Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia. One of the two men, Maher al-Aqal, was one of the top five ISIS leaders and the leader of ISIS in Syria, in charge of strengthening the organization's networks outside Syria and Iraq.⁸⁸ SDF-spokesperson Farhad Shami alleged that the ISIS members held formal identity documents issued by the Turkish-backed Afrin local council.⁸⁹ On June 16th, troops of the Global Coalition captured a senior ISIS leader, Hani Ahmed al-Kurdi, who was an experienced bomb maker and operational facilitator of ISIS' Syria branch. He was arrested only 4 km from the Turkish border, west of SNA-controlled Jarablus, in the 'Euphrates Shield' area.



Alleged ID card from one of the two senior ISIS officials from Jindires US drone strike, photo from SDF-spokeperson Farhad Shami

Previous operations against ISIS leaders living in SNA regions were carried out by the Global Coalition during October 2021: two in the M4 Strip and one in the 'Euphrates Shield' area. In the former region, near the village of Suluk, an airstrike killed a senior former ISIS commander, Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi. Al-Raqqawi held a pre-eminent position in the jihadist group Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion), a group that controls areas of southern Idlib and Latakia. Then, on October 25th, 2021, a British Royal Air Force drone strike in a camp near Sere Kaniye killed Abu Hamza al-Shuhail, another former ISIS leader, along with three of his accomplices. Al-Shuhail was known to be a major arms dealer. Another ISIS leader, Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, an ISIS spokesman known to be "the right-hand man of Abu Bakr Baghdadi", was targeted around Jarablus in October 2019.

88 www.npasyria.com/en/80326/

89 www.twitter.com/farhad_shami/status/1547304518672695296

The SDF alleges that the SNA-controlled territories have become an operative backup field for ISIS, with Turkish tacit consent. In the aftermath of the Heseke prison outbreak, in January 2022, the SDF declared in a statement that this was “not a purely local attack”, explaining that “some of the terrorist attackers came from the [Turkish] occupied areas of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad”.⁹⁰ Months prior to Heseke, Mazloun Abdi, of the SDF’s General Command, had stated in an interview, “everyone knows that the lands occupied by the Turkish state have become headquarters from which ISIS is re-organising and attacking other areas”.⁹¹ Security officials at al-Hol camp have also told RIC that weapons used by ISIS sleeper cells originate from Tel Abyad, while most of the ISIS-linked women and children who get smuggled out of al-Hol camp head for and settle in Sere Kaniye.⁹² In a recent investigation by the Conflict Armament Research (CAR) investigation team carried out in NES, the CAR documented a total of 9 weapons recovered from ISIS forces used in 3 prison break operations, including that of Heseke in January 2022. Analyzing unique marks on the weapons, the CAR concluded that the weapons recovered from ISIS were once held by 6 different SNA brigades. CAR proposes that the unique marks are post production marks applied by the SNA to their weapons.⁹³

Although the SNA and Syrian Interim Government publicly condemn ISIS, continued collusion with ISIS is tolerated by the SNA leadership, and ultimately by Turkey. It is highly unlikely ISIS’ presence in the region has gone completely unnoticed by Turkish intelligence. In this sense, practices like facilitating ISIS’ movements and logistics, or turning a blind eye to their presence in the Turkish-occupied territories, help Turkey to further its own ambitions in NES. Such negligence should be of particular concern to other NATO partners and the international community.

90 www.rb.gy/5td7uy (www.sdf-press.com)

91 www.medyanews.net/mazloun-abdi-isis-is-reorganising-in-places-controlled-by-turkey/

92 www.rb.gy/sorlme (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

93 www.storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/74cf18349183476483dbb3492472d7fb

CONCLUSION

Rights violations in the Turkish-occupied territories in northern Syria are a quotidian reality. As per the indices that we evaluated in our Occupation Report, in the first half of 2022 crimes and abuses continued to be committed against the civilian population of the three areas under the control of the SNA proxy militias, particularly in the Afrin region. In this sense, the ethnic nature of many of the crimes must be highlighted once again; the Kurdish and Yezidi populations are systematically persecuted. However it is also notable that the Arabic indigenous populations who do not comply with the SNA, or who are accused of sympathizing with AANES, are also victims of these crimes. Whether through continual arrests and kidnappings, or the imposition of taxes and violations of their properties, these indigenous communities have been enduring and suffering the imposition of an occupation that has no sign of ending.

Despite the 'safe zone' rhetoric promoted by the Turkish government and parroted by many international media outlets, the realities attested to in this new report should deserve the attention of the international community and human rights organizations. After more than a year of publishing quarterly reports on the situation in the Afrin region, M4 Strip and 'Euphrates Shield' area, RIC has a sufficiently large database to confirm that the local population of these territories suffers systematic violations of their most basic rights. The perpetrators of these crimes are also clearly established: the militias of the Syrian National Army, the police institutions of the Syrian Interim Government, and the actors from MIT and other Turkish agencies present on Syrian soil.

Some extremely worrying trends are consolidating, such as the prolific cutting of trees, either in forests or from olive groves, almost always committed by SNA militiamen. 2022's Q1 and Q2 also saw the continuation of the Turkish promotion of the construction of numerous settlement projects in Afrin and M4 Strip to house Arabs and Turkmen, in coordination with NGOs from Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and Palestine. Alongside this, Turkey's ongoing implementation of its plan for large-scale deportations of its Syrian refugees paints a grim picture regarding forced demographic change being carried in those areas. The rights of women and religious minorities also continue to decrease, bringing about a markedly repressive social situation.

Numerous practices, combined together, are slowly transforming the region, making it inhospitable for its previous population. The significance of the cutting of olive groves should not be underestimated. Olives are one of the main economic resources for the original inhabitants of the region. Once slashed, these pastures need decades to be restored to their full previous productive capacity. Beyond this example, others stand likewise, as the increasingly unbearable living conditions, the settlement projects, and the unlawful seizure of properties. All together this can be seen as a continuation of the warfare started by the Turkish military interventions on Syrian soil, whose target is shifting year by year more towards civil society.

The gender-based crimes committed in the Turkish-controlled areas continue without end. There are two main targets in these cases. The first are those women that were victims of unlawful arrest (and extortion), especially under the accusation of “dealing with the former Autonomous Administration”. The new political and social system imposed by the Turkish occupation relegates the role of women to that of the home and unskilled work. Then there are the arrests of women who had held public office in the different institutions of the AANES. Furthermore, women are victims of sexual violence and harassment led by SNA faction fighters across the AANES-SNA territories smuggling lines. Added to this are the cases of kidnapping of minors, in order to demand ransoms from girls’ families under the threat of early marriage or human organ trafficking. The increase in child marriage, within the Kurdish population, and particularly the Arab population, is also worrying. The number of divorces have also increased. This has happened in parallel with the marked harassment that girls have suffered if they don’t wear the veil and certain clothes, as well as the imposition of the veil in school.

Moreover, successive explosions of popular anger and demonstrations demanding an improvement of living conditions and services showed the inability of the new local authorities to provide a safe and stable environment. In this sense, the SNA militias, and the actions of the SIG through the local councils, exhibit their lack of any social, economic, and legal project for the region. The latter parties prioritize short term gains for those loyal to them, through the exploitation of natural resources and the economic extortion of the local population. The region is characterized by a lack of accountability regarding crimes committed by the militias and settlers. This was made particularly evident in the case of the head of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division, Abu Amsha. Amidst this, civilian life sees perpetual insecurity due to the prevalence of fighting between SNA militias and the new police forces. These fights have a direct and heavy impact on the lives of the civilian population. The successive reorganization of the SNA into operations rooms, through which Turkey hoped to solve this problem, has been shown to be ineffective.

The power bloc struggles between the SNA militias in the M4 Strip, Afrin region and 'Euphrates Shield' area over the control of checkpoints, smuggling routes, stolen goods, and levies are the main driver behind the Turkish proxy internal fracturing and violence. The economic, military, and diplomatic support that Turkey gives to the SNA and SIG has been the main pillar that has kept them from falling apart. This perpetuation of the occupation has disastrous consequences for the lives of thousands of people in these northern Syrian territories. The international community should ask again who are their true partners in seeking a sustainable solution for the Syrian Civil war.

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