



# Cultivating Chaos: Afrin after Operation Olive Branch



**Cover photo:**

Syrian civilians ride their cars through Ain Dara in Syria's northern Afrin region as they flee Afrin city on March 12, 2018 amid battles between Turkish-backed forces and Kurdish fighters.

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This map is a cropped portion of a wider map showing "North West Syria Migration Crisis - Affected Districts (as of 23 Apr 2020)" kindly shared by Map Action at <https://maps.mapaction.org/dataset/202005-syr-act-cccm-ma003-v1> - This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 4.0 License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)

# 1

## Introduction

From its origins in largely peaceful protests in spring 2011, the uprising against the rule of Bashar Al-Assad swiftly developed into a conflict between government forces and armed opposition groups, and armed groups against each other. The conflict further spiralled into a major regional power struggle with the US, Turkey, Russia, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar as major players. Together with the emergence of ISIS, this has transformed the Syrian uprising into what is arguably the most complex and devastating conflict of the twenty-first century.

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From the outset, Turkey has been a central actor in the Syrian conflict. It provided military assistance and training to what became the first organized armed opposition group – the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – and became a member of the international coalition against ISIS. However, as Kurdish groups holding de facto authority in northern Syria grew in strength politically and militarily, Turkey’s strategy in the conflict increasingly involved direct military intervention. Turkey deems the strongest of the Syrian Kurdish armed groups, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) as an offshoot of a long-standing adversary on its own soil – the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

In January 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the beginning of military operations in Afrin, a Kurdish-majority enclave in north-western Syria and one of the original three cantons making up the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. While the military invasion, code-named Operation Olive Branch, was

launched with the justification of fighting terrorism and creating a ‘safe zone’ along Turkey’s borders, it was accompanied by rhetoric promising to return Afrin to its ‘rightful owners’, suggesting the invasion was a prelude to demographic change.

The invasion was spearheaded by Turkish air and ground forces, bolstered by tens of thousands of fighters belonging to Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions (for a discussion of the composition of the SNA, and its roots in the FSA, see chapter 3). By March 2018, Turkey and its allied fighters had managed to take complete control of the canton, displacing much of the Kurdish-majority population in the process. Turkish forces then proceeded to dismantle the governing structures put in place by the Autonomous Administration, replacing them with a series of institutions administratively linked to the Turkish state. Meanwhile, security and control over Afrin’s various sub-districts has been delegated to dozens of different SNA factions.

The result has been an environment of cultivated chaos for Afrin's residents. Civilians who remain in Afrin live in constant fear of being detained on allegations of support for Kurdish groups, subjected to torture, or killed. Those who left are afraid to return, while thousands of Arab and Turkmen families have been resettled into their empty houses. Local livelihoods have been all but decimated by the armed groups' destruction, theft, and expropriation of olive farms and harvests. Meanwhile, the same groups have accelerated the processes of destruction begun during the military invasion by continuing to loot, damage and destroy cultural and religious landmarks across Afrin, eroding the region's history and distinct character.

This report covers the situation of civilians in Afrin from the start of Operation Olive Branch on 20 January 2018 until the present, documenting violations of both human rights and international humanitarian law. While Turkey has carried out other direct military interventions in northern Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016–17, Operation Peace Spring in 2019 and Operation Peace Shield in 2020), nowhere has the process of demo-

graphic change been as complete or as organized as in Afrin, which justifies its treatment as a case study on its own.

This report is a collaborative undertaking between the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA – Kurdish Centre for Legal Studies and Consultancy. The primary source of data for this report consists of 120 interviews carried out with individuals from Afrin between November 2018 and February 2020. Interviewees included direct victims of violations as well as eyewitnesses to violations (such as close family members, neighbours, and first responders). Interviews were conducted by YASA's researchers, who recorded and transmitted case details using a secure, online reporting tool designed by Ceasefire.<sup>1</sup> Primary case data was supplemented by secondary data where necessary (including findings of other human rights monitoring groups, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria and media sources) in order to capture the full extent of the violations. To protect the safety and anonymity of all those involved in the documentation process, names and personal identifying details of victims and witnesses have been omitted in this report.

# 2

## Background: Afrin before Operation Olive Branch

Afrin is located in north-west Syria, and is bordered by Turkey to the north and west. It includes the town of Afrin, as well as six sub-districts: Jindires, Sharran, Ma'batli (Mobato), Rajo, Bulbul and Sheikh Al-Hadid (Shiye), encompassing some 366 villages in total. The hilly region, sometimes referred to as Kurd Dagħ or Çiyayê Kurmênc (Mountain of the Kurds), has historically been one of the most homogeneously Kurdish areas in Syria.

The pre-war population, estimated at around 200,000<sup>2</sup> was likely at 92 per cent Kurdish.<sup>3</sup> The region is also home to Arab communities, mostly in the south. Although the majority of the population could be classified as Sunni Muslim, there were also significant religious minorities. The Alevi community, centred in the town of Ma'batli (Mobato) and surrounding villages, numbered between 5,000 and 10,000.<sup>4</sup> The region's Yazidi population, found mainly in villages in the south and east of Afrin, was the largest in Syria prior to the war.<sup>5</sup> The region was also home to small Syriac Christian and evangelical Christian convert communities.<sup>6</sup>

As in other Kurdish-majority areas in Syria, Afrin's residents suffered from decades of discrimination under the Ba'ath regime. Arabization policies introduced under former president Hafez al-Assad saw the banning of Kurdish language teaching, the forcible transfer of Arab families onto Kurdish-owned lands, and the repression of cultural celebrations. Residents of border areas, including Afrin, faced restrictions on their ability to obtain property deeds or build and repair houses.<sup>7</sup> Afrin was also affected by the Arabization of village

names.<sup>8</sup> It should also be noted that hundreds of thousands of Kurds, mostly in north-eastern Syria, were rendered stateless due to a decision following the 1962 census that classified them as foreigners and stripped them of their citizenship.

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 represented a break in the Syrian government's strategy towards the Kurdish-majority regions, as the former become preoccupied with crushing the uprising in other parts of the country. Rather than become embroiled in conflict with the regime, the Kurdish-majority regions took the opportunity to carve out a path of their own. In July 2012, the Syrian government's forces withdrew from the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, ceding them to the control of Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), the dominant Kurdish political party in the region. The PYD established its own armed forces, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) in 2011 and the all-female Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (YPJ) in 2013.

The period that followed saw the formation of an Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria composed of the

three Kurdish-majority cantons of Afrin, Kobane and Jazira. In 2016, the administration declared the establishment of the Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria (later renamed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) and promulgated its own constitution. The YPG and YPJ were incorporated under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a key partner of the United States and its allies in their war against ISIS. Further districts were added to the Autonomous Administration as territories were captured from ISIS – Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

During these years, the Autonomous Administration made significant strides in establishing democratic institutions and promoting gender equality. In August 2015, the first Kurdish university in Syria was established in Afrin. The relatively peaceful conditions also allowed ethnic and religious minorities to flourish, with Afrin's Yazidis and Alevis opening their own cultural associations for the first time and participating in local councils established by the Autonomous Administration.<sup>9</sup> The Autonomous Administration was also, however, accused of human rights abuses, in particular the harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention of political opponents of the PYD.<sup>10</sup> Afrin also became a safe haven for internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing the fighting in other parts of the country. The population of the area swelled as around 200,000 to 300,000 IDPs sought refuge in Afrin from Aleppo, Hama and Raqqa and other conflict-affected areas.<sup>11</sup>

Across the border in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan clearly saw the Kurdish project of self-governance in Syria as a serious threat. Domestically, the Turkish government has a long history of repressing the linguistic, cultural and political rights of its own Kurdish population. In 2004, Erdogan was quoted as saying, 'I am opposed to Kurdish autonomy, even if it is in Argentina.'<sup>12</sup> He has violently quashed calls for self-determination led by the PKK, an armed secessionist movement that has been engaged in decades of conflict with the Turkish state. Erdogan's military repression of the Kurdish regions of Turkey increased after the Kurdish-majority Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) won 13 per cent of the vote in the 2015 general elections.<sup>13</sup>

Turkey considers the YPG to be an affiliate of the PKK, and therefore, a terrorist group. The Turkish government has vowed never to allow the formation of a 'terrorist state' or 'terror corridor' along its border.<sup>14</sup> Already in 2016, Erdogan launched a military campaign (Operation Euphrates Shield) to isolate Afrin from the rest of the Autonomous Administration and preclude the formation of a contiguous Kurdish-controlled territory.<sup>15</sup> In the lead-up to January 2018, Erdogan's threats against Afrin intensified. He presented the alleged configuration of 'PKK-PYD-ISIS terrorists' in Afrin as a danger to Turkey's stability – despite the fact that ISIS had no known presence in Afrin in 2018 and was in fact in direct conflict with Kurdish forces in other parts of Syria. Later, the Turkish government would claim that it had been the victim of over 700 incidents of cross-border fire originating in Afrin.<sup>16</sup> However, a subsequent BBC investigation found that the Turkish figures were grossly distorted.<sup>17</sup>

On 19 January 2018, Turkey announced the start of Operation Olive Branch. It claimed to be exercising the right of self-defence as outlined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, while the Syrian government called the operation an act of aggression and an attack on its territorial integrity.<sup>18</sup> The campaign began with cross-border shelling and airstrikes carried out by Turkish fighter jets. On 21 January, Turkish ground forces began their advance into Syrian territory, in coordination with some 25,000 Arab and Turkmen fighters<sup>19</sup> organized under the umbrella of the SNA (more about this grouping in the next chapter).

The initial phase of the military campaign targeted villages in the rural outskirts of Afrin. Turkish forces used airstrikes and intensive artillery shelling to push into the territory, preparing the way for the SNA factions to advance on the ground. Civilians from rural areas fled to the urban centre of Afrin as their villages fell under Turkish control. By mid-March, Turkish and SNA forces had encircled the town of Afrin. Within a few days, the YPG and YPJ were forced to withdraw, and almost the entire civilian population of the town was evacuated. On the morning of 18 March, Erdogan declared that Afrin had been taken.



# 3

## Political and military landscape in Turkish-occupied Afrin

The completion of Operation Olive Branch and the withdrawal of YPG and YPJ forces saw the complete restructuring of the political and security landscape in Afrin. The institutions of the Autonomous Administration were dissolved and partially replaced by a loose configuration of Turkish-backed political, judicial and administrative structures. In terms of security, while Turkish troops maintained a presence in several military bases established in the region, direct control over Afrin's districts and villages was handed to the dozens of Turkish-backed SNA factions that had participated in the invasion. The result has been a chaotic and wildly divergent experience for civilians, with little institutional oversight of the actions of the various armed groups.

After the occupation, all institutions connected to the PYD were immediately disbanded.<sup>20</sup> Turkish officials also made it clear that anyone affiliated with the party – or with its armed forces – would be barred from taking part in the governance of Afrin.<sup>21</sup> Instead, a series of newly created or restructured institutions came into existence in occupied Afrin with Turkish supervision.

As a first step, Turkey oversaw the formation of new local councils to replace the previous administration. While elected from the population of the area, the councils do not reflect local demographics and are formed of members politically aligned with Turkey. The 20-member Afrin local council formed in 26 April 2018 consisted of 11 Kurds, 8 Arabs, and 1 Turkman.<sup>22</sup> Additional local councils were also

elected to govern Afrin's sub-districts. Out of the total of 107 members elected to serve on the various councils, 100 were men and only 7 were women.<sup>23</sup>

While the local councils fall nominally under the structures of the opposition's Syrian Interim Government (SIG), in practice they are subordinate to Turkey. The office of the governor of Hatay supervises their work and provides them with monthly allocations.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the councils face daily restrictions on their work by Turkish-backed SNA factions, who exercise de facto power in Afrin.

Other local institutions in Afrin were also brought under Turkish oversight. In the health care sector, the province of Hatay took over the process of licensing hospitals and other

medical facilities, appointed a Turkish director of Afrin hospital, and began paying its employees' wages.<sup>25</sup> In education, the Turkish authorities cancelled the Kurdish curriculum being taught in Afrin's schools and replaced it with the SIG's curriculum.<sup>26</sup> While Afrin lacks functioning judicial institutions, the Turkish-built Palace of Justice opened in Al-Rai (part of the Euphrates Shield area) in September 2018 has been given jurisdiction over all Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria, including Afrin.<sup>27</sup>

## Military and security structures

Upon taking control of Afrin, Turkey also moved to establish a military, security and intelligence presence in the area. The Sarayi (old courthouse) building in the centre of Afrin was converted into a military headquarters for the Turkish occupation, while Turkish special forces units also established themselves in a local high school.<sup>28</sup> In addition, a number of military command centres and intelligence units were established across Afrin's sub-districts. However, the number of uniformed Turkish troops stationed in occupied Afrin is minimal. Instead, the main armed actors present on the ground are members of Turkish-backed SNA factions.

### The Syrian National Army (SNA)

The SNA is a collective of Turkish-backed, armed Syrian opposition groups. However, the SNA did not appear on the arrival of Turkish intervention in Syria. Its factions have roots in the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which took shape earlier in the conflict as an umbrella organization of opposition forces fighting Assad. The SNA, in its current form, has been bolstered by more recent recruitment, with new fighters joining for a myriad of reasons, including financial support for their families.

The evolution of the Syrian opposition, most notably from the FSA to the reorganized SNA, has gone through many phases, with groups often merging and breaking up, and sponsoring states attempting to exert their own influence. The establishment of the FSA as a unified collective cannot be linked to a specific date. However, a concentration of defectors from the (official) Syrian Arab Army can be traced to June–July 2011,<sup>29</sup> culminat-

ing in a YouTube video statement from Syrian Air Forces Colonel Riad Al-Ass'ad, along with six other officers, announcing the formation of the FSA.<sup>30</sup> Even during its inception, the FSA was not immune to criticism from opposition activists. In a placard photo dated 3 August 2012, one activist writes 'Mr. General Riad Al- Ass'ad, when the city of Salamiyah went out on its first protest, you were serving the Assad regime.'<sup>31</sup>

In the early days of the FSA, its members were often labelled as rebels.<sup>32</sup> As the armed resistance against the Assad regime, the FSA attracted international government funding. Under the Obama administration, the CIA Department of Defence launched the 'Timber Sycamore' programme, providing financial support to Syrian opposition fighters.<sup>33</sup> Regional Middle Eastern states also played an early role, with Saudi Arabia concurrently paying Syrian opposition fighters' salaries.<sup>34</sup> The shifting interests of regional and international state actors saw Syria become a proxy battlefield, with Russia and Turkey playing their respective roles to advance their interests.

The proliferation of private funding of some Syrian armed groups further complicated the picture. One such example is the Kuwaiti 'Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People'. Established in 2012 by two religiously conservative sheikhs, Hajaj al-Ajmi and Irshid al-Hajri (the former of whom has been known to fund Al-Qaida and the al-Nusra Front), the Commission previously funded the Islamist group Ahrar Al-Sham, currently operating in northern Syria.<sup>35</sup> Private individuals, often trans-Islamist sympathizers, have donated 'gifts' to armed groups; often in the form of a bag of cash smuggled across the Turkish border into Syria.<sup>36</sup>

Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition has evolved through periods of development and fragmentation. Launching a command centre in Istanbul to coordinate with FSA leaders in 2012, Turkey has adapted its policy approach in line with political developments in Syria. Most notably, the rise and growth of the Kurdish-majority YPG in the umbrella SDF in northern Syria<sup>37</sup> shifted Turkey's position to on the ground military action.

In 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield,<sup>38</sup> in which it supported anti-Assad Syrian factions that would eventually come to be collec-

tively known as the SNA. Turkey has since launched two further military operations in Syria, including Operation Olive Branch in Afrin in 2018, in which the SNA played a central role, and Operation Peace Spring in north-western Syria in 2019, where the SNA also played a key role in supporting Turkish military action against the SDF and Syrian regime.<sup>39</sup> Large recruitment drives in anticipation of these military operations led to the formation of new factions within the SNA and significant increases in the ranks of its fighters.<sup>40</sup>

The SNA brands itself as the Syrian regime's only serious opposition force. However, its military decisions are not determined by its leading officers, but rather through a chain of command that extends directly to Ankara.<sup>41</sup> Col. Haitham Afisi, the head of the SNA, told the *LA Times* in 2018 that 'every decision that is taken, we sit with the Turks and come to a decision'.<sup>42</sup> Turkey's financial support and training of the SNA factions allows them to be deployed in accordance with Turkish interests, with fighters in armed groups active in Afrin – such as the Sultan Murad Division and Faylaq Al-Sham – sent to fight in Libya against Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army.<sup>43</sup>

The branding of SNA armed groups often includes the use of both the Syrian opposition flag

and the Turkish flag. More recently formed factions bear names alluding to Ottoman nostalgia, such as the 'Sultan Murad Division', named after the Ottoman Sultan Murad I, or the 'Sultan Mehmet Fatih Brigade', named after the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet, also known as 'Mehmet the Conqueror' for his successful conquest of the Byzantine city of Constantinople in 1453, which eventually became the city of Istanbul.

Highly active on social media and attracting thousands of followers on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, some armed groups such as the Al-Hamza Division tweet in both Arabic and Turkish and are not shy to express Turkish nationalist sentiments.<sup>44</sup> Some prefer to use closed groups on the social media app Telegram, favoured for its end-to-end encryption, to update on their activities. While all SNA factions subscribe to the use of Syrian opposition symbology such as flags and other paraphernalia, they are broadly ideologically Islamist. The Syrian regime has played on this ideological orientation to justify its brutal military campaigns and oppression against civilians.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the main SNA factions operating in Afrin since Operation Olive Branch.

Figure 1: SNA factions active in Afrin








Name and insignia	Description
<b>Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya (the Levant Front)</b> 	<p>Established 25 December 2014<sup>45</sup> the Levant Front is an umbrella organization formed of five rebel groups.<sup>46</sup> It was disbanded four months into its alliance in 2015 and then re-established in June 2015 under the leadership of former Ahrar Al-Sham leader Abu Amro.<sup>47</sup> The Front's north-western faction in Afrin is financially backed by Turkey, but has previously received US support via the Turkish-based joint military intelligence and operations room (the MOM room).<sup>48</sup> The Front's distinctive Sunni Islamist character is a key part of its identity, with the historic Damascus Al-Ummawi mosque appearing on its logo. In the past, the Front has tried to brand itself as a 'moderate' Islamist group, releasing an ISIS-style mock execution video in which ISIS fighters are spared with the message 'Muslims are not criminals.'<sup>49</sup></p>
<b>Al-Hamza Division</b> 	<p>The Al-Hamza Division was initially established in April 2016, bringing together five different factions to combat ISIS.<sup>50</sup> It was initially funded under the CIA's Train and Equip Program, but is now backed by Turkey with Lt Saif Abu Bakr as its chief commander. Abu Bakr's Twitter feed has more than 26,000 followers.<sup>51</sup> In one tweet, an image of an SNA fighter gingerly holding and looking down at a Turkish flag is accompanied by the Turkish caption: <i>'You have become a refuge for all the oppressed, especially us Syrians. Every time we're in a tight place, you've been there for us. Now it's our turn. Like a place on the ground! Wherever you want to stand, tell me, let's sew you up!'</i></p>

Figure 1: SNA factions active in Afrin (continued...)

Name and insignia	Description
<p><b>Ahrar Al-Sharqiya</b></p> 	<p>Established in November 2016, Ahrar Al-Sharqiya consists of fighters primarily from Syria's largest eastern city, Deir el-Zor.<sup>52</sup> Backed by the Turkish government since 2017, Ahrar Al-Sharqiya has been on the frontlines of fighting against YPG. In October 2019, videos were found online of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya executing PYD party members, with one of Ahrar's leaders, Abu Hatem Shaqra, centre stage in the video.<sup>53</sup> Shaqra has also been accused of kidnapping and detaining Yezidi families in Afrin and smuggling them into Turkey for money.<sup>54</sup> Ahrar Al-Sharqiya is highly active on Twitter with more than 15,000 followers, and use the Syrian uprising flag as part of their branding.<sup>55</sup></p>
<p><b>Faylaq Al-Sham (Sham Legion)</b></p> 	<p>In March 2014, Faylaq Al-Sham established itself as a legion made up of 19 Islamist brigades.<sup>56</sup> Initially financially backed by Saudi Arabia,<sup>57</sup> the group is now supported by the Turkish government.<sup>58</sup> The group has also received US support via the MOM Operations Room in the past. In December 2019, Turkey announced that Faylaq Al-Sham would be one of three groups/divisions to be sent to Libya to fight Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA); the Syrian Interim Government denied that this was the case.<sup>59</sup> Faylaq Al-Sham is highly active on Twitter with more than 78,000 followers.<sup>60</sup></p>
<p><b>Sultan Murad Division</b></p> 	<p>According to its website, the Sultan Murad Division was established in March 2013 to fight the Syrian regime and the 'PYD/PKK'.<sup>61</sup> The division is formed primarily of Syrian Turkmen fighters<sup>62</sup> and consists of five member groups.<sup>63</sup> Sultan Murad Division is named after Turkey's famous Ottoman Sultan Murad I, who expanded the Ottoman Empire into Anatolia and the Balkans during his reign.</p>
<p><b>Sultan Mehmet Fatih Brigade</b></p> 	<p>Part of the Sultan Murad Division, the Sultan Mehmet Fatih Brigade is a Syrian Turkmen majority group and 13th division of the SNA. The group is anti-Assad and claims to have protected civilians during early protests in Aleppo.<sup>64</sup> The brigade is named after Turkey's famous Ottoman Sultan Mehmet Fatih who conquered Constantinople in 1453, bringing down the Byzantine Empire. The brigade has almost 9,000 followers on Twitter.<sup>65</sup></p>
<p><b>Samarkand Brigade</b></p> 	<p>The Samarkand Brigade was established in June 2016 and is also known as the 'First Legion'. It describes itself via its Twitter bio as a 'newly-formed brigade in northern Syria which includes a group of fighters known for fighting the brutal Assad regime, Kurdish separatist gangs and ISIS mercenaries of tomorrow' and has more than 7,000 followers.<sup>66</sup></p>
<p><b>Ahrar Al-Sham</b></p> 	<p>Established in December 2011, Ahrar Al-Sham translates to 'Free Men of the Levant'. In the early days of the uprising, Ahrar Al-Sham was one of the strongest rebel groups actively fighting against Assad's regime. Today, it is a coalition of Islamist groups. In 2013, the group's founder Hassan Abboud claimed in an Al-Jazeera English interview that 'We do not attack innocent civilians in their homes.'<sup>67</sup> Abboud was killed in 2014.<sup>68</sup> The coalition has struggled to define itself as a 'moderate' Islamist group, considering that it has had a working relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra in the past.<sup>69</sup> The group has 10,000 subscribers to its YouTube channel.<sup>70</sup></p>

### The military and civilian police

In May 2018, Turkey trained 620 Syrians at the Turkish Police Academy to work as police officers in Afrin. The force is referred to in Arabic as the 'military police'.<sup>71</sup> Backed by Turkey, the military police identifies its role as one of coordination with the 'Free National Syrian Army, factions participating in Operation Olive Branch and our Turkish brothers' in the city of Afrin.<sup>72</sup> Military police leadership is open in its allegiance to Turkey with the Turkish flag featured in its uniform and video statements.<sup>73</sup>

The same month, Turkey also created a civilian police force in Afrin. It should be noted that both the military and civilian police forces are composed primarily of former members of SNA factions.<sup>74</sup> A list of new recruits to the civilian police force issued in February 2019 showed that most of the members were from Eastern Ghouta, Homs, Idlib and Hama. There were only three Arab residents of Afrin on the list, and no Kurds.<sup>75</sup> Both the military and civilian police units take direct orders from Turkish intelligence or special forces. Within the civilian police, a Syrian special forces unit carries out raids with Turkish special forces against suspected members of 'Kurdish cells'.<sup>76</sup>

Turkey's deployment of Turkish-trained Syrian police officers dates from early 2017, when it announced its aim to train more than 5,000 Syrian police officers to secure its borders.<sup>77</sup> In line with Turkish support, a video released in 2017 shows Syrian police officers chanting 'Long live Erdogan,

long live Turkey, long live a free Syria' in Jarablus in northern Syria.<sup>78</sup>

### Pro-Kurdish insurgency groups

Following the Turkish occupation of Afrin city on 18 March 2018 and the retreat of YPG and YPJ, Kurdish-led forces promised to continue their armed resistance to the occupation. A spokesperson for the Autonomous Administration claimed that 'our forces are present all over Afrin's geography. These forces will strike the positions of the Turkish enemy and its mercenaries at every opportunity'.<sup>79</sup> Since then, YPG and a number of newly-formed resistance groups have maintained an insurgency in Afrin, carrying out attacks against Turkish military targets, members of Turkish-backed SNA factions, and alleged collaborators.

The most prominent of these insurgent groups are the Wrath of the Olives (Ghadab Al-Zaytoun) Operations Room and the Afrin Liberation Forces or Hezen Rizgariya Efrine (HRE), established in June 2018 and December 2018 respectively. While YPG does claim any association with these groups, some analysts have speculated that they are connected.<sup>80</sup> Between March 2018 and January 2019, YPG, Ghadab Al-Zaytoun and/or HRE claimed responsibility for almost 220 attacks.<sup>81</sup> The insurgent attacks mostly involve bombings carried out using improvised explosive devices and roadside ambushes. Ghadab Al-Zaytoun has also carried out kidnappings and executions, while HRE launches attacks using anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM).<sup>82</sup>

# 4

## Patterns of violations

Both the Turkish armed forces, and members of Turkish-backed SNA factions, are implicated in violations of international humanitarian law and human rights in Afrin. Some violations took place during the first phase of military operations which resulted in the capture of Afrin, while others have continued since the area fell under the control of armed actors that participated in Operation Olive Branch. Despite Turkey's control over Afrin and of the armed groups active there, there have been very few efforts to curb the clear patterns of violations or provide remedies to civilians.

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### Civilian casualties

During the initial military campaign to take Afrin, which lasted from January to March 2018, the Turkish military carried out heavy artillery shelling across the area and launched air strikes on more than 100 locations.<sup>83</sup> On the first day of the invasion, nearly one quarter of Turkey's entire fighter aircraft arsenal was deployed to Afrin, making it Turkey's most intensive cross-border military campaign in a decade.<sup>84</sup>

International humanitarian law (IHL) requires parties to conflict to distinguish between military targets and civilian objects at all times, to take precautions in attack in order to avoid civilian harm, and to avoid launching any attack that may be expected to cause incidental civilian deaths, injuries, or damage to civilian objects that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage antici-

pated. However, during the course of Operation Olive Branch, the Turkish military appears to have repeatedly struck homes and residential areas without warning, leading to significant civilian deaths, injuries and property damage. Some of these attacks appear to have targeted locations in which there was no clear military target present, despite Turkey's command of precision-guided munitions.

The Turkish government categorically denies having caused any civilian casualties as part of its military operations in Afrin. On 22 February 2018, Turkey's deputy prime minister Bekir Bozdag stated in a media interview that 'to date, no civilians have died or even been hurt in Turkish Armed Forces operations'.<sup>85</sup> Later, in a communication to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the Turkish government boasted that 'Operation Olive Branch has shown to the entire world how a counter-terrorism operation can be conducted without harming civilians and civilian infrastructure.'<sup>86</sup>

Such statements fly in the face of testimonies from the ground, and the information documented by human rights groups. The monitoring group Airwars, which tracks civilian casualties caused by international air and artillery strikes in

Syria, found that between 543 and 699 civilians were killed in Afrin between January and March 2018. The deaths were the cumulative result of 87 separate civilian casualty incidents caused by the Turkish military (see Figure 2 for illus-

**Figure 2:** Selected list of Turkish bombing incidents resulting in civilian deaths

Date	Location	Incident details
21 January 2018	Anabka village	Between 11 and 24 civilians were killed as a result of a Turkish aerial attack on a poultry farm in Anabka village, where civilians displaced from Idlib province were taking shelter. The displaced civilians killed included 7 members of the same family (a woman and her 6 children). At least 7 others were injured.
23 January 2018	Jindires town	Between 5 and 7 civilians were killed and 49 wounded as the Turkish military bombarded Jindires, striking residential areas of the town.
26 January 2018	Ma'abatli village	Between 7 and 9 civilians from a single family died as a result of a Turkish airstrike on Ma'abatli village.
28 January 2018	Kobla village	Between 14 and 17 civilians from a single family died as a result of a Turkish airstrike on Kobla village, and at least 7 others were injured.
22 February 2018	Near Basuta village	One person was killed and 12 injured as a result of Turkish airstrikes on a convoy of buses and cars carrying activists, demonstrators, nurses and a doctor, as well as food and medical supplies.
15 March 2018	Afrin city	At least 5 civilians were killed in a Turkish airstrike on a checkpoint near Trinda village, striking the cars of civilians lined up to leave the area.
16 March 2018	Afrin city	At least 47 civilians in total were killed in a single day as a result of Turkish bombardment of the city of Afrin, including strikes on Afrin hospital and near a cattle market where civilian vehicles were queuing to leave the city.
17 March 2018	Afrin City	Between 11 and 13 civilians were killed in a Turkish airstrike on Mahmoudiya neighbourhood, which struck a convoy of cars carrying civilians attempting to flee towards Al-Shahba.

Sources: Airwars, UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/39/65.

trative examples). In addition, the Democratic Self Administration of Afrin documented 706 civilians injured between 20 January and 14 March 2018, noting that they were unable to continue documenting injuries for the last five days of the invasion (14–18 March) due to ‘the large number of casualties and the chaotic, violent situation’.

Ceasefire/YASA interviewed several survivors and eyewitnesses of Operation Olive Branch military attacks that resulted in civilian casualties. Turkish bombardment began in the villages of Afrin’s countryside following the announcement of the military campaign in January 2018. Civilians described being forced to shelter in the basements of their homes without access to basic necessities as war planes bombarded residential areas.

Some civilians, who did not have basements in their homes, recounted having to take shelter in caves for days at a time to escape the ongoing airstrikes and artillery shelling. A woman from the village of Kordan, Jenderes district described her experience as follows: ‘We can’t sleep. The shelling on the homes of civilians is indiscriminate. We hide in the caves to protect our children from the shelling.’<sup>89</sup> In the words of another woman, from Rajo sub-district: ‘There is nowhere but deserted caves to hide in. There may be snakes or dangerous animals there, but it is better than death under bombing.’<sup>90</sup>

Several incidents in the first phase of Operation Olive Branch, targeting Afrin’s countryside, led to high civilian death tolls. On 29 January 2018, Turkish air forces struck a family farm in Kobali, Shirwa district, killing at least five people and injuring seven. Of the victims who were identified by name, all were Arab IDPs from the same family. The injured included a 2-year-old, two 4-year-olds, a 6-year-old, a 17-year-old and two adults. According to a member of the Kurdish Red Crescent who witnessed the attack:

*We saw the plane bomb the village of Kobali and we were asked to go immediately. The scene was horrific – a whole family massacred, children, men and women. Some of the bodies were fragmented and unrecognizable.*<sup>91</sup>

On 19 February 2018, Turkish shelling descended on the village of Basouta, 10 km south of Afrin,

striking several houses. In one house, a 13-year-old girl was killed, while her 42-year-old uncle and seven other children from the same extended family were injured – some of them severely. The incident took place while the children were playing in front of the house. According to the uncle, whose injuries left him unable to walk, the village was far from any military installations. At the time, the front lines of the military operations were at least 20 kilometres away in Jindires countryside, as confirmed by a map published by Operation Olive Branch the day before the attack.<sup>92</sup>

According to another man from the village, about 10 shells had landed that afternoon, completely destroying some houses and damaging others. A woman in her fifties, also from the village, recounted her experience on the day as follows: ‘We went to the basement after we heard shells fall across from our house while we were eating lunch. We stayed until the afternoon, and when we went out, we found our house demolished, as well as my son’s house, and two of our neighbours’ houses.’<sup>93</sup>

On 5 March 2018, near the Berband (Berbenê) village junction in Rajo, Turkish aircraft bombed a bus full of civilians fleeing the military operations in the countryside. The bus was struck three times consecutively, killing between 2 and 7 people. The dead included an elderly woman in her 90s and an 8-year-old child. Many of the others on board the bus were injured, including several children.

Among the injured were three sisters from the village of Zarka. According to the mother of the girls, ‘We were in our village for 45 days, then we left to preserve our honour. The bus we were on was hit by an airstrike while we were en route. Three of my girls were injured, and one of them was struck in the face.’ According to the eldest of the three sisters, ‘We could not withstand the daily shelling so we left along with the rest of the people from the village. We don’t know what happened while we were on the bus. We were three sisters, and my grandmother was killed.’ The middle sister added, ‘We were injured, and there were no doctors to treat us, so we only received first aid from nurses. We left Afrin without receiving treatment.’<sup>94</sup>

A 3-year-old boy, who was also on board the bus, lost his vision in both eyes as a result of the in-



juries he sustained during the incident. At the time of the bombing, his pregnant mother was holding him on her lap. She was seated in a window seat, next to an elderly woman. According to a nurse close to the family:

*After the first strike, [the mother] was reassured that her son was still with her, but after a few seconds, she realized that the weight in her arms was the leg of the elderly woman. The boy had been flung out of the bus.*

The 3-year old was found by first responders a short distance away from the bus, where he was lying unconscious. Both of his eyes were badly injured and his eyelids were torn, such that he was no longer able to close them. When he regained consciousness, he cried that he could not see anything. The doctors in Afrin Hospital, where he was

taken after the incident, were unable to do anything other than bandage his eyes, due to lack of capacity and the high numbers of dead and wounded civilians flooding into the hospital at the time. As a result, the boy was permanently blinded.<sup>95</sup>

From 10 March, Turkish forces turned their focus on Afrin, having captured much of the countryside. By that time, the civilian population of Afrin city was approximately three times its normal size, due to the fact that most civilians who fled the bombardment of their villages in the countryside had taken refuge there by then.<sup>96</sup> The increasingly high death toll towards the middle of March reflects the shift in the military campaign towards densely populated, urban areas – particularly as Turkish forces allegedly bombarded civilian homes, and fired on the access routes in and out of the city.<sup>97</sup>

## Testimony of a man displaced from Kharabat Sharran village

The following testimony comes from a 40-year-old Kurdish man from Kharabat Sharran village, in the Sharran sub-district – located about 12 kilometres from Afrin centre. His experience of repeated displacement during the course of Operation Olive Branch is typical of many Afrin residents.

*On 20 February, Turkish shelling and airstrikes began to hit our village, despite there being no military installations there. We hid in the basement of our house for 20 days – me, my wife, my two young children, and my 80-year-old mother. We had no light, heating, water or food. We were living in a state of fear, terror and panic because of the continuous shelling.*

*As the Olive Branch factions began to approach from the east and the north, we were forced to flee, along with the rest of the people of the village. We headed to Afrin town by car. At first, we stayed in the Ashrafiyeh neighbourhood, in an unfinished housing structure, where we lacked the most basic life necessities.*

*The bombing continued in the villages surrounding Afrin, until the city was besieged from all sides, except for Trinda road – the only way out. On 10 March, air strikes and shelling started in the eastern neighbourhoods of the city, including Ashrafiyeh. We were forced to move towards Raju road, in the centre of Afrin city. We stayed there for six days with one of our relatives. There were 20 of us living in a two-room house.*

*The airstrikes and artillery shelling continued fiercely, as they attempted to take over the city. There was shrapnel flying towards the*

*buildings, and panic and fear began to spread as they started bombing the city centre directly. Fearing for our lives, and the lives of our children and our family, on 16 March we fled with most of the people of Afrin via Trinda road.*

*The road passes through Trinda village, towards Jabal Ahlam, and onwards to the Al-Shahba area – 20 kilometres from the centre of Afrin city. Our journey by car took 48 hours, due to the heavy congestion caused by the mass displacement. We didn't have enough water and food with us. The planes were bombing the sides of the route where civilians were fleeing. We would see displaced people who were injured and wounded, but we could not help them.*

*We arrived on 18 March to Deir Jameel village in Al-Shahba – leaving behind our properties, homes and lands.<sup>98</sup>*

In one case documented by Ceasefire/YASA, a married couple with three children, who had fled from their village to Afrin city, were hit by a Turkish airstrike two days before the city was taken. At the time of the strike, they were trying to take shelter in a building across the street with a basement, thinking they would be safer there. As soon as they stepped outside, they were struck. Their eldest child, an 8-year-old girl, was killed instantly. Their second child, a 5-year-old girl, was struck by shrapnel in her back, resulting in paralysis in her lower limbs. Their 3-year-old son lost two of his fingers and was injured by shrapnel to his head, which later caused him to suffer from a violent behavioural disorder. In the same incident, the children's 5-year-old cousin was also killed.<sup>99</sup>

### Civilian casualties since the Turkish occupation

In the period since Turkish forces took control in March 2018, sporadic bombing incidents have occurred in and around Afrin. It is often unclear who is responsible for the attacks, which are usually carried out using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) or other unconventional methods of warfare. While the bombings often appear to target military and security installations linked to Turkey or the Turkish-backed SNA factions, sometimes they have resulted in high civilian death tolls.

For example, on 16 December 2018, the detonation of a car bomb at a market close to the base of an SNA faction killed 8 people.<sup>100</sup> On 20 January 2019, exactly one year after the start of Operation Olive Branch, a bomb planted in a public bus in Afrin exploded, killing 3 civilians and injuring 20.<sup>101</sup> On 31 October 2019, another car bomb went off in a vegetable market, killing at least 8 people and injuring 30.<sup>102</sup> On 28 April 2020, in what was possibly the bloodiest attack since the occupation of Afrin, a fuel tanker was detonated in the crowded marketplace of Souq Ali in central Afrin, killing at least 40 civilians (including 11 children) and wounding 47 others.<sup>103</sup>

Turkish authorities are usually quick to place blame on 'PKK/YPG' for such attacks.<sup>104</sup> There is also speculation among analysts that some attacks could have been carried out by Syrian Islamist groups, in the context of frequent in-fighting between the factions.<sup>105</sup> While YPG openly conducts

attacks against military targets in Afrin, it usually distances itself from incidents involving civilian casualties. However, insurgent groups such as Ghadab Al-Zaytoun and HRE have admitted to carrying out attacks against civilians, including those they consider 'collaborators' with the occupation and 'settlers' from other parts of Syria. For example, Ghadab Al-Zaytoun assassinated Akash Haji Ahmed, a member of the Sharran Local Council, in July 2018.<sup>106</sup> The same group took responsibility for the 16 December 2019 market bombing, claiming it was targeting a passing patrol from Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya faction.<sup>107</sup>

## Targeting of civilian infrastructure

In addition to causing significant civilian casualties, the Turkish invasion of Afrin also resulted in damage to prohibited civilian objects, including schools, medical facilities and other public infrastructure. This caused disruption to essential services, exacerbated civilian suffering, and served to further drive displacement. Under international law, intentionally targeting civilian objects constitutes a war crime.

Beginning in January 2018, Turkish strikes repeatedly struck the Midanki dam on the Afrin river, which holds most of the region's water supply.<sup>108</sup> Turkish shelling also disrupted the operation of a water pumping station in Matina village.<sup>109</sup> In early March, Turkey and the SNA factions gained complete control of Midanki dam, which prevented workers from accessing the site. As a result, the water supply in Afrin was completely cut off.<sup>110</sup> Mobile phone service was also cut off for several weeks in March due to the extensive attacks that were carried out by the Turkish military on cell towers.<sup>111</sup>

In February 2018, the Afrin Education Commission reported that 40,000 students were out of school in the region as a result of the Turkish offensive, which forced them to shut down some 300 schools – some of which were directly hit in the bombing.<sup>112</sup> On 18 March, UN OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) reported that a total of 48 schools in Afrin district had been struck, causing partial damage in most cases. Afrin Uni-

versity was damaged, looted and forced to shut down.<sup>113</sup> In addition, the Turkish military and allied SNA factions took over a number of schools, converting them into police stations or military bases.<sup>114</sup>

One of the bloodiest attacks of the invasion, however, targeted Afrin hospital. As the main medical facility in the area, the hospital had been providing treatment to victims wounded in the Olive Branch military operations.<sup>115</sup> On the afternoon of 16 March, Turkish airstrikes reportedly hit the hospital without warning. Between 9 and 16 civilians were killed<sup>116</sup> as a result of the attack, and the hospital was partially damaged.<sup>117</sup> Earlier in the military campaign, Turkish war planes had also struck the Syrian Red Crescent centre in Jindires, where one volunteer was wounded.<sup>118</sup>

Turkish airstrikes also resulted in damage to houses of worship. For example, on the morning of 26 January 2018, bombardment by Turkish forces led to the partial destruction of the Al-Sharqi mosque in Jindires (also known as the Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq mosque), which civilians had previously been using as a shelter. At around 7:00 in the morning, the local residents heard the sound of airstrikes and stayed in their homes. When the attacks stopped, they emerged to find the mosque half destroyed. In the words of one local resident, ‘We thought they wouldn’t strike the mosque, so we would shelter there. Then we realized they were striking everything.’<sup>119</sup>

## Forced displacement and demographic change

The military operations carried out under Operation Olive Branch caused the mass displacement of Afrin’s Kurdish-majority population. While the UN initially counted 137,070 people displaced (as of March 2018), the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights later put the total number of people displaced at 300,000.<sup>120</sup> Most of those forcibly displaced from Afrin are staying in temporary shelter arrangements in the nearby al-Shahba region, or in the towns of Nabul and Zahraa, which are controlled by the Syrian government. Others have gone further to Kurdish-controlled areas of north-eastern Syria, or to Aleppo.

‘We thought they wouldn’t strike the mosque, so we would shelter there. Then we realized they were striking everything’

Few of those displaced between January and March 2018 have been able to return to Afrin. Those who attempted to go back were either blocked from going to their villages at SNA-manned checkpoints, or were admitted only after paying a bribe.<sup>121</sup> According to some reports, the YPG also blocked official routes back to Afrin.<sup>122</sup> As a result, the demographic landscape in Afrin has shifted significantly. Fighters belonging to SNA factions, their family members, and people displaced from other parts of Syria have moved in to take the place of displaced Kurdish residents. By prevailing estimates, Afrin is now 50 to 75 per cent Arab.<sup>123</sup> Arabic and Turkish have replaced Kurdish as the language used in all official communications and public signage, and as the language of the school curriculum.

These changes, far from being a secondary effect of the military operation, appear to have been one of its central goals. In the prelude to the occupation, President Erdogan’s rhetoric was replete with references to the need to return Afrin to its ‘rightful owners’. He claimed that ‘55 percent of Afrin is Arab, 35 percent are the Kurds who were later relocated, and about 7 percent are Turkmen.’<sup>124</sup> Given that these figures differed wildly from the reality on the ground prior to the invasion, such comments can be interpreted as a prelude to demographic change. Furthermore, Turkish officials repeatedly announced their intentions to ‘return’ hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees from Turkey to Afrin following the occupation – keeping in mind that most Syrian refugees in Turkey are Sunni Arabs, and certainly not from Afrin.<sup>125</sup>

Population transfers into Afrin started almost as soon as military operations were complete. Following the surrender of rebel forces in eastern Ghouta in March–April 2018, around 60,000 people

were transferred to north-western Syria as part of a deal between the rebels the government— many of whom ended up in Afrin.<sup>126</sup> On 21 April, 31 buses carrying rebels and families from rural Damascus were seen arriving in Afrin.<sup>127</sup> Mass transfers of families from Homs, Idlib, and Hama were also reported.<sup>128</sup> According to a census conducted by Afrin local council in May 2019, there were 87,936 displaced persons living in Afrin – 51 per cent of whom were from Ghouta, and 20 per cent from Aleppo Governorate.<sup>129</sup>

Large numbers of Turkmen families have also been brought to Afrin, ostensibly as part of a Turkish strategy to establish a ‘Turkmen belt’ along the Turkish border.<sup>130</sup> Sunni Turkmen from Iraq – most of whom fled Tel Afar after ISIS was pushed out of the town – were among the first to be resettled in Afrin.<sup>131</sup> The Sultan Murad Division, a Turkmen-majority faction, also relocated hundreds of its fighters’ families to Sharran<sup>132</sup> and villages along the border.<sup>133</sup>

Newly arrived families were often housed in properties belonging to Afrin’s displaced Kurdish residents. In some cases, armed factions offered up the empty houses for free, while in other cases they rented out houses they did not own.<sup>134</sup> In March 2020, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the factions had begun selling the houses of displaced Kurds for extremely low prices – ranging from US \$3,000 to \$5,000 for a two-storey house.<sup>135</sup>

Ceasefire/YASA interviewed 11 victims whose properties had been taken over by SNA factions. Usually, fighters took up residence in their unattended homes after they were displaced. In one case, a 27-year-old former commune leader from the village of Ali Bek in Bulbula sub-district was displaced with his family to Al-Shahba at the beginning of the Turkish occupation. When he returned in May 2018, he found his home occupied by fighters from Ghouta. When he confronted them and demanded they leave his home, they closed the door in his face. Within minutes, fighters from Ahrar al-Sham surrounded the house, detained him, and demanded a ransom of 5 million Syrian pounds for his release. He was forced to borrow from relatives and rent out his shop to come up with a sum, which he gave to the faction before fleeing to Al-Shahba again with his family.<sup>136</sup>

Some victims whose houses were taken over by armed factions were forced to pay sums of money in order to reclaim their personal belongings from within. In one case, a 25-year-old woman from Berband (Berbenê) village who was displaced during the Turkish invasion returned in May 2018 to find her house occupied by fighters from Ahrar Al-Sharqiya. She was forced to pay the fighters 500,000 Syrian pounds in order to take her personal belongings, civil status documents and her husband’s passport from the house.<sup>137</sup> In another case, a 39-year-old woman from Rajo district who returned in April 2018 found her house occupied by Ahrar Al-Sham. When she asked for her house back, one of the fighters threatened to arrest her son. She paid 200,000 Syrian pounds to get some of her daughters’ belongings from her house and then fled, fearing for her children’s safety after the faction’s threats.<sup>138</sup>

In other cases, people who remained in Afrin after the occupation were threatened and intimidated into giving up their properties. In Kouran village, members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya expelled an 80-year-old woman from her home and forced her to go to her son’s house to live so they could settle people displaced from Idlib in her home.<sup>139</sup> In Kafr Safra village, a 42-year-old man reported that fighters surrounded his home in August 2019 and demanded that his family vacate the property within 24 hours and pay 1.5 million Syrian pounds to the faction. After coming up with the sum and leaving the house, the man, his wife and his children fled to Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>140</sup>

In a number of cases, residents who continued living in their homes were forced to open their doors to families settled by the armed factions. In Kafr Safra village, a man was confined to one room in his house after members of the Samarkand Brigade took over the other two rooms, and was forced to share his kitchen and bathroom with the fighters. In his words, ‘I didn’t dare refuse because they threatened to kill me before and drew a gun on my sister when I returned home. They also looted everything from the house.’<sup>141</sup> Members of the Samarkand Brigade also broke into a large heritage house belonging to a man in the same village and forced his daughter, who was living there, to make room for 20 people resettled from Idlib.<sup>142</sup>

Residents who have tried to resist the factions’ incursions on their homes have faced retaliation

and violence. In December 2019, the Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction occupied a home belonging to a widowed woman in the city of Afrin. They took away all her belongings on two trucks and proceeded to offer the house for rent, despite the fact that there had already been a tenant living there for two years. When the tenant refused to vacate the house, the militia detained and tortured him. They then released him and warned they would arrest him again if he did not leave the house within a day. He subsequently vacated the property and fled the city.<sup>143</sup>

Victims who had their houses taken over received little support when they tried to report the incidents to local or Turkish authorities. A 55-year-old man from the village of Midan Akbas, whose house was taken over by fighters belonging to Faylaq Al-Sham, sought assistance from his son who was living in Turkey. The son tried to make complaints in both Gaziantep and Antakya, to no avail. The father also tried to make complaints locally and offered the faction 1 million Syrian pounds, but he could not get his house back. As a result, he was forced to take up residence in a house belonging to one of his acquaintances.<sup>144</sup>

While the local councils in Afrin and its sub-districts are theoretically responsible for resolving property ownership disputes, in practice they have little control over the actions of the armed groups. The Afrin local council opened up a Property and Real Estate Documentation Office to which civilians have been instructed to bring proof of property ownership to secure their rights to their houses. It has also stated that it 'does not consider any new sales, which are completely illegitimate and carry no legal weight'.<sup>145</sup> However, even when civilians submit property deeds, the councils do not appear to have any mechanism or ability to enforce the return of homes to their legal owners. One member of a local council was reportedly taken away and beaten up by an armed faction when he began assisting local residents with their housing complaints.<sup>146</sup>

Making matters worse, the Turkish occupation appears to be permanently cementing recent demographic changes through the introduction of a new identification card system. Implemented by the local councils, the new identification cards are issued through a Turkish-designed application that

does not allow the importation of data from the Syrian government's civil registry system. As a result, all newly issued identification cards list Afrin as the registry location regardless of whether or not the holder is originally from Afrin. Under the Syrian system previously in place, the identification card of a person born outside his or her family's original area would have his or her original area listed under the 'secretariat' field, referring to the civil registry division where the record is held. The new system contributes to the erasure of data pertaining to family origins and makes it impossible to distinguish between local residents, IDPs and refugees. After some local residents refused to register for the new card, the local council made having the card mandatory to access essential services, including humanitarian aid, health care and education – forcing many to relinquish their original records.<sup>147</sup>

## Abductions, torture and killings

Civilians who remain in occupied Afrin live in a state of constant fear due to the dominance of the Turkish-backed SNA factions over their areas. Since the invasion, these factions have been given free rein to commit violations against the local population, carrying out arbitrary detentions, torture, and killings with impunity. According to Syrians for Truth and Justice, 506 arrests took place in the last six months of 2019 alone.<sup>148</sup>

By and large, the victims of arbitrary detentions by SNA factions are usually Kurdish civilians, whom the factions accuse of loyalty to the previously dominant Kurdish parties and military units. The targeting of Kurdish civilians on this basis serves as an ongoing driver of displacement, causing many local residents to leave the area for good rather than live with the constant threats to their safety. In addition, it serves to prevent those who have already left from attempting to return to their areas and properties. From April 2018, SNA factions made it clear that they considered anyone who did not immediately return to Afrin as being affiliated with the former administration.<sup>149</sup>

Ceasefire/YASA documented 47 cases in which victims were kidnapped, tortured, and/or killed by

members of armed factions, based on interviews with victims or their close relatives. All of the victims were Kurdish. In nearly half of the cases, victims were targeted based on their real or alleged affiliation with the former Autonomous Administration, or other Kurdish political and military entities. Victims included a mechanic who had fixed vehicles for the YPG; former members of local communes in Afrin; men and boys who had undergone compulsory military service for the Autonomous Administration; and one man whose brother had posted an old picture with PKK thought-leader Abdullah Öcalan on social media.

However, in many cases, accusations of support for Kurdish parties or military groups appeared to be completely baseless. Sometimes, family members suspected the real reasons for detention to be connected to the victim having stood up to the actions of the armed groups. For example, a 35-year-old man from Kerzayhel (Kurzile) village was detained in October 2019 for a month and a half by the Al-Hamza Division, accused of selling weapons. His cousin explained that he was the owner of a large shop that the fighters frequented, and that he had refused to let them take fuel and diesel from the shop on credit.<sup>150</sup>

In another case, from June 2018, a man from Sheikh Al-Hadid (Shiyye) was detained by Al-Oumshaat faction as part of a mass arrest campaign targeting people from the village. As a member of the local council set up after the Turkish occupation, he had spoken out about the abuses being carried out by members of the faction against the people of the village. The faction released a YouTube video of themselves shooting the council member's leg with a gun while in detention, and he died of his injuries a day after being released.<sup>151</sup>

In September 2018, a married couple and their baby were travelling by motorcycle in Afrin city when they realized they were being followed by members of the military police. The police officers stopped them, accused them of photographing them, and detained them. The young man and woman were held in separate cells opposite from one another and banned from speaking to one another in Kurdish. Both of their mobile phones were sent to Turkey to be investigated for 'suspicious communications'. After three days, the

woman was released, but the man was held for nearly a month, during which time he was tortured and brought before a military court. He was then released by the judge with an order to pay 1,100 Turkish lira.<sup>152</sup>

In other cases, no clear reason was given for the detention or kidnapping, and the victim was only released after the payment of a ransom. In most of the cases documented, the ransoms set fell between 2 and 6 million Syrian pounds (between US \$9,300 and \$28,000). In one case, however, the faction demanded a ransom of \$100,000. Members of armed factions appeared to base their ransom requests on information they had about the family's profile, targeting those they knew had wealthy relatives abroad, for example.<sup>153</sup> According to a 23-year-old man from Ma'batli sub-district, who was released from kidnapping after his father paid a ransom of 5 million Syrian pounds, 'The fighters studied our financial situation very well, so they asked for a high ransom and gave us only a short period of time to deliver.'<sup>154</sup>

While in detention, the majority of the victims in the cases documented were subjected to torture and other forms of cruel treatment. The methods of torture described included severe beatings; whipping; electrocution; burning of the skin with boiling water, hot tea, or melted plastic; sleep deprivation; and death threats. According to a woman from Sharran, who lives across from the house that the Sultan Murad faction uses as a detention centre: 'We hear sounds of torture coming from the house constantly, and we can distinguish the type of torture they are carrying out based on the sounds we hear.'<sup>155</sup>

In cases where victims were released, the torture they underwent in detention often left them with permanent or life-threatening injuries. One man, who was beaten in the face while detained by Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya in Afrin city in September 2019, lost his vision permanently in one eye.<sup>156</sup> A man from Lower Goliya village, who was detained and tortured by the Al-Hamza Division for six days in December 2019, was unable to return to work due to serious injuries he sustained to the head and the ribcage.<sup>157</sup> In another case, a young man who had been missing for three weeks was dropped off from a car in the industrial district of Afrin in January 2020 after his family paid a

ransom to an intermediary in contact with his kidnappers. His family discovered that he had been severely beaten and tortured, injected repeatedly with hallucinogens, and had lost his memory.<sup>158</sup>

In six of the cases documented by Ceasefire/YASA, the torture was so severe that it resulted in the death of the victim. In one example, a 53-year-old man from Arab Oshagi (Arabo) village was kidnapped by the Mehmet Fatih Brigade following accusations that he was in contact with YPG. He was held and tortured by the faction for a week before they demanded a ransom. According to his son, who went to the faction's headquarters to pay the ransom and arrange his father's release:

*My father was in very bad health and the marks of beating and torture were clearly visible on his body. The day after his release, we took him to a hospital in Afrin, but his condition was very poor. The director of the hospital advised my mother to take him to Kilis, Turkey for treatment. A few hours after arriving at the hospital in Kilis, he passed away due to the effects of the torture.<sup>159</sup>*

In another case from November 2019, members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya tortured and killed a 73-year-old man in his home in the village of Kani Korka in the middle of the night. According to his brother, who lives close by:

*The night before, my brother was visiting me. He stayed until around midnight, then went home. At around 2:00 a.m., I heard the sound of screaming, but I didn't realize it was coming from my brother's house, so I stayed inside. The next morning, I went out and saw that the door to my brother's house was open. When I entered, I found my brother lying unconscious on the ground in a pool of blood. His face was completely disfigured, and there was blood-stained gas canister with a deep dent in it close by.*

The brother called for help and took the victim to the hospital, where he was later pronounced dead. According to him, the faction had left his home untouched and not taken any of the cash in his pockets, suggesting alternative motives for the killing.<sup>160</sup>

**'I am still holding on to hope that I will receive news about my son. I am ready to give up everything I own just to see him again'**

While most of the cases documented by Ceasefire/YASA involved adult victims, the armed factions also carried out kidnappings and killings of minors. In a case from May 2019, two adult men and a 9-year-old boy were kidnapped while on their way from Jindires to 'Azaz to buy a car. While the two men were killed a week later and their bodies dumped on the road to their village, the body of the young boy was never found.<sup>161</sup>

In another case, a 17-year-old boy from the village of Arab Oshagi (Arabo) in Ma'batli district was kidnapped by members Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya, who accused him of photographing them:

*On 6 July 2019, at around 1:00 p.m., I was returning from my lunch break to the garment workshop where I work. On the way there, I opened WhatsApp to call my brother. Shortly afterwards, around 15 fighters from Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya surrounded the workshop and accused me of taking pictures of them. They took me to their headquarters in the village. I stayed there for a whole night. They tortured me in every way, including with electricity. The next day, the owner of the workshop, who is close to the leader of the faction, came to the headquarters to try to convince them to let me go. The faction leader insisted on a ransom of 400,000 Syrian pounds for my release. My father paid the ransom and they set me free.<sup>162</sup>*

In September 2019, a 16-year-old boy accused of doing mandatory military service for the Autonomous Administration was kidnapped. His father was unable to find any information about his fate, despite paying over half a million Syrian pounds in ransom to Ahrar Al-Sharqiya and reporting the case to several local authorities. In his words, 'I am still holding on to hope that I will re-

ceive news about my son. I am ready to give up everything I own just to see him again.<sup>163</sup>

Given the widespread and ongoing nature of the kidnappings and killings carried out by SNA factions, it is implausible to conclude that the Turkish authorities are unaware of them. At the same time, they have shown little interest in curbing the behaviour of the armed groups. In several of the cases documented by Ceasefire/YASA, relatives of kidnapped victims submitted complaints to local and Turkish authorities but received no assistance.

In other cases, Turkish authorities were not only aware of the detentions, but directly involved in them. In one case, a man who was kidnapped by Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya and had managed to escape was caught by Turkish soldiers and returned to the faction.<sup>164</sup> In another case, a man who had been kidnapped and released by Faylaq Al-Sham was detained again by the Turkish-backed military police after posting pictures of the torture he had suffered at the hands of the faction.<sup>165</sup> Members of the civilian police also arbitrarily detained a number of young men in a case reported from Kafr Safra village in September 2019.<sup>166</sup>

## Sexual and gender-based violence

While the SNA factions appear to most often target men and boys for abductions and related violations, they have also carried out crimes against women and girls. The example of Emina Mustefa Umer (Barin Kobani), the slain YPJ fighter whose corpse was mutilated and abused by SNA fighters on video in February 2018, is often given as evidence of the factions' willingness to commit violence against women.<sup>167</sup>

Ceasefire/YASA documented nine cases involving attacks on women or girls. In one case, Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya kidnapped the 19-year-old, epileptic daughter of a *mokhtar* (village leader). Her father had been appointed to his position after the Turkish occupation. According to her sister-in-law, she was kidnapped as an act of revenge against him, because he had raised his voice against one of the faction's fighters. She was released after two days

when her father paid a ransom of 2.5 million Syrian pounds.<sup>168</sup> In another case, a woman was arrested from her home in Miskê village by members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya as a result of accusations of belonging to PYD. The faction members were accompanied by Turkish soldiers during the arrest. Her husband had been detained two weeks earlier.<sup>169</sup>

In another case, a 25-year-old woman was kidnapped from her home in Afrin by Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya on accusations of working with the YPG. After two and a half months and repeated attempts by her father to arrange her release, she was finally set free for a ransom of 6 million Syrian pounds. She had undergone beatings and death threats in detention and was suffering from a broken hand. Shortly after her release, the father arranged for the young woman and her siblings to leave Afrin by paying a bribe to a fighter who arranged their safe passage to Aleppo. According to her sister, 'She still suffers from nightmares every day and says the names of the fighters in her sleep.'<sup>170</sup>

Some of the violations against women and girls involved threats of sexual violence. For example, in November 2018, members of the Al-Hamza Division stormed the house of a 35-year-old woman and stole 2 million Syrian pounds in cash and 55g of gold jewellery. During the theft, they bound her wrists and threatened to rape and kill her if she resisted or screamed. The same faction had previously kidnapped and killed her husband.<sup>171</sup>

Despite the limited number of documented cases of sexual violence, there are reasons to believe that the phenomenon may be much more widespread, but under-reported due to stigma. The Syrian Jurists' Platform to Defend Afrin, a documentation project connected to the PYD, has reportedly documented 150 cases of rape since the beginning of the occupation.<sup>172</sup> From the statements given by many interviewees, it appeared to be common knowledge that the factions were carrying out violations against women. For example, the sister of a man who was kidnapped and tortured by the Al-Hamza Division reported that 'he used to always say that the torture he endured at their hands was nothing compared to the torture and pain of knowing that the armed groups were kidnapping girls and women of his village'.<sup>173</sup> In



another case, a 55-year-old man whose daughter was accused of working with the Asayish (the Kurdish internal security force) refused to let the Samarkand Brigade take her from his home ‘due to all the reports circulating of women being subjected to sexual harassment, rape and torture in the factions’ prisons’. As a result of his resistance, the faction detained him instead and killed him.<sup>174</sup>

According to media reports, since Operation Olive Branch there has been a rise in the phenomenon of forced marriage, with armed factions often intimidating and threatening families into marrying their daughters to fighters.<sup>175</sup> In a case documented by Ceasefire/YASA, a fighter showed up at the family home of an 18-year-old Kurdish woman who was engaged to be married to a man living in Turkey. After beating her brothers into revealing her location, the fighter went to her future father-

in-law’s house, where she was visiting, and threatened to kill him if he allowed the marriage to go ahead. The woman disappeared, and it was later discovered that she had been forced into marriage with the fighter and only appeared in public afterwards in a full-face veil.<sup>176</sup>

The fear of being subjected to harassment or forced marriage attempts by fighters has reportedly caused many women who remain in Afrin to withdraw from the public sphere completely. According to one media report, some women are choosing not to send their daughters to school out of fear that they would be preyed on by fighters.<sup>177</sup> Other women have stopped working due to fears of sexual harassment. In the countryside, in particular, some women and girls reportedly have no choice but to wear a headscarf when going out to avoid harassment from members of the factions.<sup>178</sup>

## Testimony of a Yazidi family attacked in their home

The following testimony comes from a 32-year-old Yazidi woman from Shah Al-Deir (Shadiriya) village in Afrin countryside, who is married with five children. The entire family was attacked in their home on the night of 15 June 2018 by members of the Faylaq Al-Sham faction.

*Six masked fighters from Faylaq Al-Sham stormed our house around 9 o'clock at night and accused us of cooperating with YPG. They brandished their guns in our faces – me, my husband, our five children, and my sister, who was with us that night. They claimed we were hiding terrorists and weapons in our house.*

*With their guns to our heads, they ordered us to take out our mobile*

*phones. They tried several times to pat me down, but I resisted and insisted that a woman search me. They said that if they found a mobile phone on me, they would kill me.*

*More than once, they attempted to get close to me and my eldest daughter, who is 14 years old. They called her a terrorist and accused her of carrying weapons. One fighter tried to take her alone into her room to search her, claiming that she was hiding weapons under her blanket. She was covering herself with a blanket because she was in her sleeping clothes when they stormed the house. We were terrified that he would sexually assault her. I screamed in his face and refused to let him near her, insisting that a woman perform the search, and he backed off.*

*They searched the entire house. During the ordeal, they called us disbelievers who do not have any fear of God. They referred to us as*

*'Zoroastrians' and said that we deserved to be slaughtered. They asked my husband for his keys in order to search his car for weapons, and when they did not find any, they took the car and made us hand over all the money we had.*

*The terror and fear we experienced that night badly affected our 8-year-old daughter. She became mute and did not say a word for four months.*

*After the incident, we left the house and went to Afrin, where we stayed for a week, until the children calmed down. When we went back to the village, we found our house had turned to ashes. The fighters had burnt it to the ground in our absence. The neighbours had tried to put out the fire, but it had engulfed the whole house.*

Following this sequence of events, the family left Afrin for Al-Qamishli (Qamishlo), and eventually migrated to Iraq.<sup>179</sup>

## Looting and theft

Following the seizure of Afrin, members of Turkish-backed SNA factions engaged in widespread looting of properties belonging to civilians and business owners. While similar incidents have taken place after other SNA operations in Syria, the looting in Afrin was far more systematic.<sup>180</sup> Families relocated to Afrin after the military operations described arriving and finding house after house abandoned and completely ransacked of its contents.<sup>181</sup> Under international humanitarian law, the seizure of private property for personal use by combatants is prohibited and can amount to a war crime.

As the city of Afrin fell on 8 March 2018, videos rapidly circulated of the fighters jubilantly looting. Their actions were legitimated by a fatwa from the Turkey-based Syrian Islamic Council, which stated that the ‘mujahideen’ fighting alongside Turkey were free to seize properties, food and drinks belonging to SDF combatants.<sup>182</sup> At first, SNA fighters only stole from the houses and buildings directly associated with the Autonomous Administration. However, they soon extended their looting to the houses of the general civilian population by levelling unsubstantiated accusations of their affiliation to the institutions of the former administration.<sup>183</sup>

In a case reported to Ceasefire/YASA, a man had his car stolen by members of an armed faction soon after the entry of Operation Olive Branch forces into Afrin city:

*On the first day that the armed factions and Turkish forces entered Afrin, a group of fighters stole my car from in front of my home after breaking the windows and taking the keys from me at gunpoint. One of them yelled at me asking if I was Kurdish or Arab. When I replied that I was Kurdish, he yelled again saying that he would kill all of us Kurds. He told me to go inside and stay silent. After half an hour, when I felt that they had left, I went outside. There was one fighter standing there. He asked me if I was the owner of the car that was stolen and asked if I wanted to get my car back. When I said yes, he gave me his phone number and told me to call him later.*

The man was eventually able to get his car back by paying \$500 to the fighter and accompanying him to a rural area to retrieve the vehicle. He was also forced to cover the costs of repairing the damage to the car himself. The fighter threatened that if he informed the local authorities or filed a complaint about the incident, he would steal the car again or burn it.<sup>184</sup>

In numerous other cases documented by Ceasefire/YASA, victims who were forced to leave Afrin as a result of the military invasion had their houses looted by members of armed factions in their absence. They often found out by receiving photos from neighbours and relatives who had remained in the area. The looting in the aftermath of the military operation was so widespread that Turkey established the civilian police with the ostensible aim of restoring order to the area.<sup>185</sup> However, the civilian police was formed of former members of the same factions implicated in the looting and they have been ineffective at responding to complaints.

In a case documented by Ceasefire/YASA, a former judge in the Autonomous Administration, who fled to Amouda in Jazira canton after the Turkish occupation, received a call from one of his neighbours in Jindires. The neighbour told him he had gone over to stay in his house to protect it from being taken over, and that a leader from Faylaq Al-Sham had looted the contents of the living room in front of him. The faction leader stated that the house had been seized since its owner was a judge in the former administration, and that the neighbour would have to pay the faction if he wanted to use anything inside. The house owner’s father, who was still in Jindires, went to the local council to file a complaint on behalf of his son. However, the council told him they could not help him, and did not make a written record of the complaint out of fear of the factions, leaving the father only with a verbal warning: ‘We cannot do anything, and we advise you not to go to the faction leader, because if he finds out you are the father of a judge, your life will be in danger.’<sup>186</sup>

Others who tried to file complaints were threatened or retaliated against by the factions. For example, a man who reported his stolen property to an official from the governor of Hatay’s office was taken from a checkpoint and detained for 20 days,

according to a media report.<sup>187</sup> In a case documented by Ceasefire/YASA, a 39-year-old widow living in Afrin was arrested in November 2019 by Turkish intelligence and political security because she had filed a complaint against an armed group for impounding her late husband's car. She was held for a week before being released.<sup>188</sup>

Those who remain in Afrin are also subject to raids and theft of their personal property. Many of the cases of arbitrary arrest detailed in previous sections were accompanied by seizures of cash, gold jewellery and other valuables from the victims' home. Business owners were also the target of lootings. One interviewee reported to Ceasefire/YASA that the Sultan Mehmet Fatih Brigade had taken 250,000 Syrian pounds' worth of groceries from his brother's shop. When he asked them to pay, they beat him up and proceeded to steal more produce from his shop.<sup>189</sup>

Civilians have also been killed in the course of looting attempts by the armed groups. In a case reported to Ceasefire/YASA, members of Al-Hamza Division broke into the home of an 80-year-old woman in the village of Burj Abdullah (Burj Abdalu) in November 2018. When she started screaming in fear, they put a plastic bag over her head to silence her and went on to loot the home of money and gold jewellery. The woman suffocated to death as a result of the incident, while her son and daughter-in-law, who were also present, were threatened with death if they gave information or reported the case to any legal authority.<sup>190</sup> In a similar case from September 2019, members of Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya broke into the home of an elderly couple in the middle of the night. They beat and strangled the older man (aged 78) to death, stole 100,000 Syrian pounds, and then beat the elderly woman (aged 74), leaving her with a broken ribcage. She died 12 days later in hospital due to internal bleeding.<sup>191</sup>

Turkey, as an occupying power, is aware of the widespread looting that has occurred and continues to occur in Afrin. According to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, some incidents of looting took place in the presence of Turkish troops.<sup>192</sup> The SNA leadership is also aware of the incidents, but factions have denied responsibility for the actions of individual fighters.<sup>193</sup> While media sources report that there have been some cases of fighters

being charged in military courts for looting,<sup>194</sup> Ceasefire/YASA could not find any cases in which civilians had received compensation for their stolen property.

## Attacks on sources of livelihood

Afrin is famous for its olive groves. By some counts, there are as many as 26 million olive trees in the region, some of which are hundreds of years old.<sup>195</sup> Olive farming has long been the main source of livelihood for the majority of the population, with the sector bringing in an estimated €70 million a season.<sup>196</sup> Prior to the war, Afrin's olive oil was exported to Aleppo, where it was the main ingredient in the world-famous Aleppo soap.<sup>197</sup>

However, since the Turkish occupation of the area, olive farms have been subjected to widespread attacks, incursions and expropriation by Turkish-backed SNA factions. While the factions appear in most cases to be driven by profit incentives, it has been argued that the expropriation of olive farms by armed groups accelerates the process of demographic change by depriving local residents of their main source of livelihood and forcing them to leave.<sup>198</sup> Since March 2018, an estimated three quarters of Afrin's olive groves have been seized by armed groups.<sup>199</sup> In other cases, families were intimidated into leasing their farmlands to armed groups at nominal prices.<sup>200</sup> The factions have also looted dozens of factories and stolen production equipment, sometimes forcing residents to pay to have their machines returned.<sup>201</sup>

The olive harvest stolen from farms under the control of armed factions is exported to Turkey, where it is then marketed as 'Turkish' olive oil and sold cheaply in other markets.<sup>202</sup> The Turkish government has acknowledged the diversion of Afrin's olive harvest, with the Minister of Agriculture Bekir Pakdemirli announcing in 2018 that 600 tonnes of olives from Afrin had been funnelled into the Turkish economy.<sup>203</sup> He justified this by saying that Afrin was under Turkish hegemony, and that they did not want olive revenues to fall into 'PKK hands'.<sup>204</sup>

Olive farmers who remain in Afrin are subjected to a myriad of restrictions imposed by armed factions, which make continuing their trade complicated and unsustainable. They are reportedly required to obtain costly permits from the local councils in order to transport their harvest from their fields to local markets – and the permits are not always recognized by the factions controlling different areas.<sup>205</sup> They are also barred from selling their olive harvest to other parts of Syria.<sup>206</sup> Farmers wishing to cultivate land belonging to their displaced relatives are required to pay steep fees per tree to the factions.<sup>207</sup> Armed groups have also attempted to impose mandatory taxes or tributes on olive production, in an attempt to squeeze further revenue from locals.

Farmers and merchants who oppose these taxes or attempt to evade them have been subjected to harsh retribution. In one case reported to Ceasefire/YASA in February 2020, the corpse of an olive oil merchant was found in the hills near the village of Mirkan (Condi Hassa) in Ma'batli district, his body showing signs of torture. The merchant, a man in his fifties originally from Rajo district, had been called to a meeting by Ahrar Al-Sharqiya faction the previous November, along with other olive oil merchants. The faction had attempted to impose a series of restrictions on the merchants, including requiring them to obtain a license at a cost of US \$10,000 and to pay a 20 per cent tax on sales of oil, which they had vocally opposed. The victim was kidnapped the same day, while carrying a sum of cash that he had made from an oil transaction.<sup>208</sup> Another man, from Haj Qasem village, was kidnapped and beaten by the Sultan Murad faction in May 2018 after assisting his neighbour to sell his olive oil and leave Afrin.<sup>209</sup>

In November 2019, fighters from the Al-Hamza Division stormed the house of a 72-year old Kurdish man in a village in Rajo sub-district, demanding ten tanks of olive oil. After he told them that his olive harvest only amounted to three tanks of oil, the fighters began beating him. They then took him to their headquarters, where he was beaten and tortured further. The faction released him the next morning with instructions to come back with the ten tanks of oil, but he passed away within a day as a result of the physical and psychological trauma he had endured. According to his niece, 'he felt completely humiliated that he had been

beaten and dragged from his house by young men his grandchildren's age'. After his death, the fighters began blackmailing his son, who had returned from Istanbul – demanding a payment of 700,000 Syrian pounds to allow him to live in the village.<sup>210</sup>

There have also been numerous reported instances of armed factions cutting down olive trees in order to sell the wood for profit. In a case documented by Ceasefire/YASA in November 2019, members of Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya cut down dozens of olive trees in front of villagers from Sinka in Sharran district after stealing the entire harvest.<sup>211</sup> In another case from December 2019, members of the Sultan Mehmet Fatih Brigades cut down 60 olive trees belonging to a man from Arab Oshaghi (Arabo) village in Ma'abatli district, and sold them as firewood.<sup>212</sup> Another farmer from the same village reported that the group had cut down 100 of his olive trees, and 10 of his walnut trees. Also in December 2019, a family in Juwayq village, Afrin reported that Al-Hamza Division cut down 50 of their olive trees, which were reportedly more than 80 years old.<sup>213</sup>

These developments have had a profound psychological effect on farm owners, for many of whom olive production has been a part of their identity for generations. In December 2019, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights documented the case of an elderly woman in Kafr Janna village who suffered a heart attack after members of Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya cut down 200 of her olive trees – her only source of livelihood.<sup>214</sup>

While attacks on the olive sector have been the most widespread and systematic, other local farmers and merchants have also had their livelihoods threatened by armed groups. On 8 June 2019, two vegetable vendors living in Afrin city were shot and killed by an unknown armed group on the road between Afrin and Rajo district. The two vendors owned a Hyundai and would go from village to village selling vegetables. They had previously been threatened by Al-Jabha Al-Shamiya, which controls the Souq Al-Hal market complex in Afrin, for refusing to pay a tax.<sup>215</sup> On 11 February 2019, an 80-year-old Alevi farmer was shot in the back by a member of the civilian police in Ma'btali district. Prior to the altercation, the police officer had apparently tried to steal the man's sheep, and he had protested. The man died of his

injuries in a Turkish hospital. His funeral procession turned into a demonstration as local residents called on the armed groups to leave the area.<sup>216</sup>

## Attacks on religious and cultural heritage

Religious and cultural sites are considered specially protected objects under international humanitarian law, and attacking them during armed conflict is prohibited. However, during the initial military campaign to take Afrin and in the period since the occupation, Turkish forces and Turkish-backed SNA factions have been responsible for numerous instances of damage and destruction to religious and cultural sites. These have included Kurdish cultural and religious symbols, Alevi and Yezidi shrines, and historical and archaeological sites. These attacks appear to have been motivated by a desire to erase any remnants of Afrin's pre-invasion local cultural identity, as well as to gain profit from the looting of historical artifacts.

Attacks on cultural heritage sites started from the very beginning of Operation Olive Branch. Within the first few days of the military campaign, significant damage was reported to the Ain Dara archaeological site, south of Afrin city. Ain Dara, a neo-Hittite temple dating back to around 1300 BC, is a UNESCO World Heritage site. According to geospatial analysis by the ASOR (American Schools of Oriental Research) Cultural Heritage Initiatives, the damage is attributable to Turkish airstrikes carried out sometime between 20 and 22 January 2018, and there is evidence that precision-guided weapons were used in the attack.<sup>217</sup> The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the temple was at least 60 per cent destroyed as a result of the strikes.<sup>218</sup> Later, training videos filmed in the vicinity of the site led archaeologists to conclude that the temple's iconic basalt lion statue had also been stolen.<sup>219</sup>

The Syrian Directorate-General of Antiquities and Museums claims that Turkish warplanes also damaged the archaeological site of Brad, another UNESCO World Heritage site south of Afrin. It stated that several important buildings at the site had been destroyed in the bombing, including the

tomb of St Maron and the Julianus Church.<sup>220</sup> However, the Turkish government denied that any airstrike had targeted the site.<sup>221</sup>

On 18 March 2018, the day that Turkey took control of the city of Afrin, SNA fighters were filmed tearing down the statue of the blacksmith Kawa in the city's central roundabout. Kawa, a central figure in Kurdish folklore around the celebration of Newroz, was a symbol of emancipation and resistance to tyranny.<sup>222</sup> The roundabout where the statue stood was renamed Olive Branch roundabout, after the military operation, while the main square in Afrin was named after Erdogan.<sup>223</sup> Since the occupation, the new local authorities have also prohibited local residents from celebrating Newroz.<sup>224</sup>

In addition to cultural symbols, Turkish-backed SNA factions have looted, vandalized and destroyed countless religious sites in and around Afrin. The Yazidi Cultural Center in the city of Afrin, along with the statue of Zoroaster outside of it, was destroyed after the city was taken.<sup>225</sup> In May 2018, the Afrin church was reportedly looted by members of SNA factions.<sup>226</sup> The Turkish government claims that 'religious, cultural and historic sites were never targeted' during its military operations in Afrin.<sup>227</sup>

Afrin's countryside is dotted with shrines, which serve as places of pilgrimage and celebration and form an important part of local culture for Sufis, Yezidis and Alevis alike.<sup>228</sup> Reportedly, at least 17 Yezidi shrines have been damaged or destroyed since the beginning of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>229</sup> Examples include the Qara Jornah shrine and the Sheikh Junayd shrine, which were desecrated and damaged in March 2018 and May 2018 respectively.<sup>230</sup> Several historic Alevi shrines were destroyed as well. The Ali Dada shrine, which dates back to 1636, was bulldozed by the Turkish army, along with several hundred graves on the same site, in order to make room for a military base.<sup>231</sup> Another Alevi shrine, Af Ghiri, was looted and damaged in November 2018.<sup>232</sup> Other Islamic shrines, including the shrine of Sheikh Zaid in Afrin city, the shrine of Nabi Hourî in Cyrrhus, the Henan mosque at Mesh'ale, and the shrine of Sheikhmous in Gawando have been damaged and ransacked, with photos and videos showing their contents removed or scattered on the ground.<sup>233</sup>

Many of Afrin's shrines have sacred trees, to which visitors tie pieces of cloth as part of local rituals. In addition to ransacking shrines, members of SNA factions in several cases cut down shrine trees as well. For example, in December 2018, militants chopped down an oak tree more than a hundred years old outside the shrine of Sheikh Hamza in Ze'ire village, Bulbul.<sup>234</sup> Sacred trees outside the Yezidi shrine of Sheikh Humayd and the Alevi shrine of Aslan Dada were also cut down.<sup>235</sup> In a case documented by Ceasefire/YASA in January 2020, members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya cut down a 200-year-old tree from an endangered species in the village of Maskina (Maskanli) in Jindires district.<sup>236</sup>

Cemeteries are also among the sites that have been damaged extensively since the start of the occupation. The YPG's Martyr Seydo cemetery, north of Jindires, was shelled by the Turkish military in February 2018 and then vandalized further in subsequent months.<sup>237</sup> Another YPG cemetery, the Martyr Avesta Khabour cemetery west of Afrin city, was shown being levelled by construction equipment in a video released in August 2018.<sup>238</sup> Turkish-backed SNA factions also destroyed ceme-

## ' My son's grave was turned to rubble '

teries and individual Yezidi and Muslim graves in locations throughout Afrin countryside. For example, the Yezidi cemetery in the village of Gundê Feqîra was desecrated and damaged.<sup>239</sup>

In another case documented by Ceasefire/YASA, a woman from the village of Kafr Safra went to visit the grave of her son, who had been killed in a car accident, only to find that the iron fence surrounding the grave had been taken. She went to the headquarters of the Samarkand Brigade to complain, but they denied responsibility. She later returned to the cemetery to find that it had been further vandalized:

*I did not go back until just before Eid, when I found that the situation had gotten worse. They had completely destroyed the grave in order to steal the porcelain. My son's grave was turned to rubble.<sup>240</sup>*

# 5

## International legal obligations in occupied Afrin

Turkish military forces and Turkish-backed SNA factions appear to have committed serious violations of international law, including indiscriminate bombardment, arbitrary detentions, torture, killings, looting, and destruction of cultural heritage. To ensure accountability for past and ongoing violations, it is important to assign legal classification to Turkey's presence in Afrin and to the relationship with the armed forces it backs. Such classification carries important consequences in the international legal system. It is a prerequisite for identifying the applicable legal regimes and the corresponding rights and duties of those engaged in hostilities, and for assigning respective accountability. Putting actors on notice should hopefully also serve as a step towards reducing the brutality of the occupation.

### Legal classification of Turkey's involvement in Syria

International Humanitarian Law (IHL), or the law of armed conflict, distinguishes between international and non-international armed conflicts (IAC and NIAC, respectively). Whether or not a given situation amounts to an international or non-international armed conflict is assessed based on different criteria.<sup>241</sup> This determination activates corresponding legal regimes and imposes respective rights and duties on the involved parties.

### International armed conflict

An IAC is an armed conflict between two or more states. Pursuant to Common Article 2 to the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, each 'shall apply to all cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties, even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them'. According to the same article, there is an IAC if one state invades another and occupies it, even if there is no armed resistance at all. Importantly, if the state consents to a foreign state's use of force on its territory there is no IAC.<sup>242</sup>

Turkey has used force against non-state armed groups on the territory of Syria without the consent of the Syrian gov-

ernment.<sup>243</sup> Hence, Turkey became a party to an IAC with Syria. In the latest operations of Peace Spring and Peace Shield, Turkey's armed forces directly clashed with Syrian armed forces, which constitutes an obvious manifestation of IAC between Syria and Turkey.

There may also be an IAC when one state supports a non-state armed group operating in another state, and when given support is so significant that the foreign state is deemed to have 'overall control' over its actions.<sup>244</sup> If the control exercised can be legally qualified as 'overall control', then the non-state armed group is considered to have been 'absorbed' by the foreign intervening power.<sup>245</sup> 'Overall control' is achieved when the foreign state 'has a role in organising, coordinating or planning the military actions of the military group, in addition to financing, training and equipping or providing operational support to that group.'<sup>246</sup>

By all available indications, Turkey's initial support to its allied militias might have progressed into overall control of the latter. Turkey has hosted FSA's initial military headquarters, facilitated collaboration among its field commanders, launched intensive military training programs, funnelled them arms and military equipment, and now provides salaries to the group.<sup>247</sup> International actors have been forthcoming to point out Turkey's control over its allied militias.<sup>248</sup> Having established likely overall control on the part of Turkey, the conflict can be classified as an IAC between Syria and Turkey.

### Military occupation

Military occupations are a particular form of an IAC.<sup>249</sup> In the words of Common Article 2 of the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, they apply 'to all cases of partial or total occupation of the territory of a High Contracting Party, even if the said occupation meets with no armed resistance.' Article 42 of the Hague Regulations annexed to the Hague Convention IV (1907) prescribes that 'territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army'. Three cumulative conditions need to be met in order to establish occupation:

- *Physical presence of foreign military forces;*
- *Exercise of authority over the territory;*
- *Non-consensual nature of occupation.*<sup>250</sup>

Following the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 up to today, Turkey and its allies have seized control over areas of northern Syria consisting of 8,835 square km which encompass over 1,000 settlements. Even though, by March 2017, Turkey had announced the successful completion of Operation Euphrates Shield, its ground troops have remained in the territory seized during operation.<sup>251</sup> Ever since, Turkey has shown no inclination to pull its military back across the border.<sup>252</sup> In January 2018, Turkey and allied Syrian rebel groups initiated an offensive against the north-western city of Afrin and declared total control over it.<sup>253</sup>

Subsequent to taking control of these areas, Turkish forces assumed responsibility for local health care delivery, law enforcement, and public administration. Turkey has taken full control over the educational process in the zone and funds education services. Administration of hospitals was handed to the Turkish Red Crescent Society, a new civilian police force was established with officers trained in Turkey, and local administrators were replaced by persons selected by Turkey.<sup>254</sup>

Lastly, the above military presence in and control of parts of northern Syria is carried out without the consent of the Syrian government, which explicitly condemns the fact.<sup>255</sup>

In the light of the foregoing, the three cumulative criteria for establishing whether Turkey is in military occupation of parts of northern Syria appear to have been met. Turkey's occupation of parts of northern Syria is therefore an IAC under international law.

### Non-international armed conflict

According to Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, IHL applies in the case of 'armed conflict not of an international character'. The customary criteria for the existence of an NIAC were laid down in the landmark *Tadic* case as 'protracted armed violence between government authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a State'.<sup>256</sup> According to the ICRC, the leading authority on interpreting IHL, if, as in Syria, within one state's territory an armed conflict takes place between two or more states (*Turkey v. Syria*) in parallel to an armed conflict in which at least one side is a non-state-armed group



(e.g. *Turkey v. YPG*), an international armed conflict coexists with a non-international armed conflict on the same territory.<sup>257</sup> Hence, Turkey's advances on YPG can be classified as an NIAC.

## Legal consequences of Turkish occupation of parts of northern Syria

### International humanitarian law

The duties of an occupying power are spelled out in the law of occupation, that is, in the 1907 Hague Regulations, the Fourth Geneva Convention, Additional Protocol I to the Four Geneva Conventions (Turkey is not a party to Additional Protocol I, but, the protocol has largely codified pre-existing rules of customary international law), and customary international law.<sup>258</sup> Turkey as an occupying power in northern Syria has adopted the following non-exhaustive IHL duties and obligations vis-à-vis persons within the territory it controls:

- Turkey must take measures to restore and ensure, as far as possible, civil life and public order and safety;
- To the fullest extent of the means available to it, Turkey must ensure sufficient hygiene and public health standards, as well as the provision of food and medical care to the population under occupation;
- The population in occupied territory cannot be forced to enlist in Turkey's armed forces;
- Collective or individual forcible transfers of population from and within the occupied territory are prohibited;
- Transfers of the civilian population of Turkey into the occupied territory, regardless whether forcible or voluntary, are prohibited;
- Collective punishment and measures of intimidation are prohibited;
- The taking of hostages is prohibited;
- Reprisals against protected persons or their property are prohibited;
- The confiscation of private property by Turkey is prohibited.<sup>259</sup>

### International human rights law

An occupying power must abide by international human rights law.<sup>260</sup> This has been confirmed by nu-

merous international bodies, including the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ has ruled that an occupying power remains bound by those human rights treaties which it ratified in all areas under its jurisdiction – including outside its own territory.<sup>261</sup>

Turkey is a party to major human rights mechanisms, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention against Torture (CAT), and so on.<sup>262</sup> Turkey is also a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which, in exceptional circumstances, is extraterritorial in application and therefore the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) could, in theory, become a forum for holding Turkey liable for human rights violations in northern Syria. According to the jurisprudence of the ECtHR, a:

*State may be held accountable for violations of the Convention rights and freedoms of persons who are in the territory of another State which does not necessarily fall within the legal space of the Contracting States, but who are found to be under the former State's authority and control through its agents operating – whether lawfully or unlawfully – in the latter State.*<sup>263</sup>

Notably, the ECtHR has on numerous occasions established one of the Contracting States' jurisdiction over the acts occurring on territory outside of ECHR space, such as in Iran and Iraq, within different military presence and occupation contexts.<sup>264</sup>

### International law of state responsibility

Not only the actions of a state's own armed forces but also the behaviour of non-state armed groups under its control can directly engage state responsibility. Such a possibility is foreseen by Article 8 of the Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, which represent customary international law.<sup>265</sup> Under Article 8, a state may, either by specific directions or by exercising control over a group, in effect assume responsibility for their conduct.<sup>266</sup>

The level of control that a state must exercise over a non-state armed group in order to trigger state

responsibility has been debated in international law. International jurisprudence has long hesitated between the more demanding option of ‘effective control’ adopted by the ICJ for the purposes of state responsibility in the *Nicaragua*<sup>267</sup> and *Bosnian genocide*<sup>268</sup> cases and the broader notion of ‘overall control’ adopted by the ICTY in the *Tadic* case,<sup>269</sup> lowering the threshold of requisite control.<sup>270</sup> This hesitation is also found in the International Law Commission’s (ILC) commentaries on the 2001 Draft Articles on State Responsibility. The ILC does not choose between effective and overall control, and simply states that: ‘In any event it is a matter for appreciation in each case whether particular conduct was or was not carried out under the control of a State, to such an extent that the conduct controlled should be attributed to it.’<sup>271</sup>

As discussed, ample evidence of control can be discerned in Turkey’s relationship vis-à-vis the armed groups it backs. Coupled with Turkey’s military presence, direct involvement in armed hostilities, and occupation of the areas of northern Syria, it can be argued that the level of control Turkey wields over the relevant armed groups would satisfy both the more demanding effective control test, as well as the overall control test.

International actors have confirmed the possibility of such control, and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria took the view on various violations committed in Afrin by Turkish-backed militias that the violations committed could be attributable to Turkey by way of ‘acting under effective command and control of Turkish forces’.<sup>272</sup> OHCHR also urged Turkey to

ensure that all armed groups over which it exercises control in Afrin and other areas of Syria strictly adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law.<sup>273</sup>

### Responsibilities of non-state armed groups

State practice, international case law and scholarship all agree that Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and customary IHL apply to all categories of non-state armed groups that are parties in NIAC.<sup>274</sup> The Appeals Chamber of the Sierra Leone Special Court held that: ‘it is well settled that all parties to an armed conflict, whether states or non-state actors, are bound by international humanitarian law, even though only states may become parties to international treaties.’<sup>275</sup>

Whether non-state armed groups also have obligations under international human rights law in situations of armed conflict remains controversial. However, non-state armed groups are at a minimum obligated to respect the fundamental human rights of persons under customary international law.<sup>276</sup> The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria deemed that: ‘at a minimum, human rights obligations constituting peremptory international law (*jus cogens*) bind States, individuals and non-State collective entities, including armed groups. Acts violating *jus cogens* – for instance, torture or enforced disappearances – can never be justified.’<sup>277</sup>

It is noteworthy that the FSA, at an earlier stage of the conflict in Syria, distributed a Code of Conduct, Article II of which pledges ‘respect of human rights in accordance with ... international laws governing human rights’.<sup>278</sup>

# 6

## Conclusion

Civilians living under the control of Turkish forces and Turkish-backed militias are facing ongoing violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law in Afrin. While there has been no accountability for the violations of international humanitarian law committed during the military invasion, since then, civilians have faced the added daily threat of arbitrary detention, torture, property theft, sexual harassment, and killing at the hands of SNA factions. The lack of effective judicial, administrative or political mechanisms in Afrin leaves civilians with no recourse when they are subjected to violations by the multiple armed actors active in the area.

The atmosphere of fear and impunity in Afrin serves as an ongoing driver of displacement and a barrier to the return of Afrin's Kurdish-majority population. Meanwhile, the widespread attacks on the region's religious and cultural landscape, and mass resettlement of fighters and their families from Arab-majority parts of Syria, indicate a motivation on the part of Turkey and its proxy forces to cause permanent changes to the demographic character of the area. These developments are jeopardizing the possibility of future processes of return and reconciliation, and will likely have wider negative implications for conflict dynamics in Syria.

Turkey, as an occupying power in Afrin, should adhere to its duties and responsibilities under IHL and human rights law, in particular when it comes to the protection of civilians. Additionally, Turkey should ensure that all the armed forces over which it exercises control are acting in compliance with international law, as violations committed by those forces could be attributable to Turkey. At the same time, members of the Turkish-backed militias, as well as members of regular Turkish armed forces, YPG members

and members of all other parties to the Syria conflict remain individually responsible for any war crimes or other violations of international criminal law they may commit.

## Recommendations

### To all parties to the conflict in Afrin and northern Syria

- Conduct independent, impartial and thorough investigations into any incidents in which military actions are alleged to have resulted in civilian harm or damage to civilian objects;
- Ensure that military officers responsible for authorizing attacks that violate international humanitarian law are suitably penalized;
- Publish and publicly disseminate the findings of investigations into civilian harm caused by military actions;
- Ensure that civilians harmed as a result of military actions in Afrin have access to prompt, effective, and adequate compensation and other forms of reparation;
- Facilitate the free and voluntary return of all displaced persons to Afrin and allow them to access their lands and properties without hindrance;
- Facilitate the arrival of humanitarian aid to civilians displaced by military operations in Afrin, including by simplifying access procedures for humanitarian organizations operating in Al-Shahba region;
- Ensure that all armed actors in Afrin are acting in compliance with human rights and international humanitarian law, and immediately investigate instances of misconduct and prosecute the individuals responsible;
- Cease support for armed groups that are responsible

for widespread violations of international humanitarian law and gross abuses of human rights;

- Ensure that any detentions carried out are done in accordance with applicable criminal procedure codes and that detainees are held only in officially recognized detention places;
- Incorporate human rights standards into the training of police officers and any other security forces in Afrin;
- Provide access to psychosocial support and rehabilitation for victims of torture and other traumatic human rights violations;
- Allow for the rapid and unhindered evacuation of patients requiring medical treatment outside of Afrin;
- Strengthen the complaints mechanism administered by the Afrin local council and take measures to protect both complainants and council staff from retaliation;
- Set up a property commission to resolve ownership disputes related to housing and other immovable property in Afrin;
- Guarantee the right to restitution to all civilians affected by looting, or, if restitution is unfeasible, to other suitable forms of reparation;
- Ensure that local governance bodies are freely elected and representative of the local population;
- Issue a general amnesty for all those formerly affiliated with the civilian or military structures of the Autonomous Administration in Afrin, allowing them to return without fear of harm;
- Ensure that any regulations on olive production and trade are unified and overseen by the competent local authorities in Afrin, and do not place an undue burden on farmers' livelihoods;
- Invest adequate material and technical resources into the reconstruction of damaged or destroyed religious and cultural heritage sites, in consultation with international experts;
- Allow human rights monitors, journalists, and other independent observers to access Afrin for the purpose of information gathering.

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# Cultivating Chaos: Afrin after Operation Olive Branch

## In brief

On 19 January 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the beginning of military operations in the Kurdish-majority enclave of Afrin in north-western Syria. The military invasion, code-named Operation Olive Branch, was spearheaded by Turkish air and ground forces, bolstered by tens of thousands of Arab and Turkmen fighters organized under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army (SNA). By 18 March 2018, Turkey and its allied fighters had managed to take complete control of the canton, displacing much of the civilian population in the process.

The completion of Operation Olive Branch saw the complete restructuring of the political and security landscape in Afrin. The institutions of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration were dissolved and partially replaced by a loose configuration of Turkish-backed political, judicial and administrative structures. Meanwhile, direct control over Afrin's districts and villages was handed to the dozens of SNA factions that had participated in the invasion. The result has been a chaotic and wildly divergent experience for civilians, with little institutional oversight of the actions of the various armed groups.

Civilians who remain in occupied Afrin live in a state of constant fear due to the dominance of the Turkish-backed SNA factions over their areas. Since the invasion, these factions have been given free rein to commit violations against the local population, carrying out arbitrary detentions, torture, and killings with impunity. Civilians who left are afraid to return, while thousands of Arab and Turkmen families have been resettled into their empty houses. Local livelihoods have been all but decimated by the armed groups' destruction, theft, and expropriation of olive farms and harvests. Meanwhile, the

same groups have accelerated the processes of destruction begun during the military invasion by continuing to loot, damage and destroy cultural and religious landmarks across Afrin, eroding the region's history and distinct character.

The atmosphere of fear and impunity in Afrin serves as an ongoing driver of displacement and a barrier to the return of Afrin's Kurdish-majority population. Meanwhile, the widespread attacks on the region's religious and cultural landscape, and mass resettlement of fighters and their families from Arab-majority parts of Syria, indicate a motivation on the part of Turkey and its proxy forces to cause permanent changes to the demographic character of the area. These developments are jeopardizing the possibility of future processes of return and reconciliation, and will likely have wider negative implications for conflict dynamics in Syria.

### This report recommends:

- Ensuring that all armed actors in Afrin are acting in compliance with human rights and international humanitarian law, and immediately investigating instances of misconduct and prosecuting the individuals responsible;
- Facilitating the free and voluntary return of all displaced persons to Afrin and allowing them to access their lands and properties without hindrance;
- Ensuring that civilians harmed as a result of military actions in Afrin have access to prompt, effective, and adequate compensation and other forms of reparation;
- Allowing human rights monitors, journalists, and other independent observers to access Afrin for the purpose of information gathering.

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