

# TURKEY'S WAR AGAINST CIVILIANS



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## **Appendix 1**

Database of rights violations by TAF and TNA, 9 October to present

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Turkey's history of targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 A war against civilians

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Turkey has met with near-global condemnation for its 2019 offensive into North and East Syria. More than the figures – 200,000 displaced within a week, hundreds killed<sup>123</sup> – a number of high-profile rights violations have provoked an international response. Chief among these were the field executions of leading female Syrian politician Hevrin Khalef and other civilians by Turkish-backed faction Ahrar al-Sharqiya on 12 October, along with the 13 October airstrike on a civilian convoy heading into Sere Kaniye which left 12 civilians dead.

These crimes, graphically documented on video and broadcast around the world, should not be considered as isolated incidents conducted by individuals. This report documents systematic crimes against civilians committed by both the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and its proxy militias organized under the banner of the ‘Syrian National Army’, henceforth referred to as the ‘Turkish-backed National Army’ (TNA).<sup>4</sup>

The report begins by looking at:

- 1) Targeting press and obstruction of information-gathering – both direct attacks on press and other ways in which Turkey tries to limit information-gathering

The report then covers violations potentially amounting to war crimes in four main areas:

- 2) Targeting civilians – both the deliberate targeting of civilians as a tactic, and indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes which have killed scores of civilians
- 3) Targeting civilian and humanitarian infrastructure – attacks on water, electricity, roads, bakeries and other infrastructure, affecting hundreds of thousands of civilians including IDPs
- 4) Targeting medical staff and infrastructure – attacks on ambulances, hospitals and medical staff
- 5) Looting and property crimes – the seizure and/or destruction of private homes, businesses, and property; civilian infrastructure, buildings and resources; and cooperative property, precipitated by the expulsion of the civilian population

As we will explore in more detail below, actions committed by both the TAF and TNA across all four of these fields constitute violations potentially amounting to war-crimes. We have spoken with civilians affected in all four fields: the only survivor of a TNA attack which killed three civilians, IDPs living without access to drinking water, medical workers targeted in airstrikes, civilians who have lost their homes and livelihoods to looting.

Taken together, these testimonies paint a picture of what can be termed ‘Turkey’s war on civilians’ – a systematic attempt to make life unlivable for civilians in the zones Turkey aims to occupy, with the ultimate aim of forcibly displacing the civilian population in general and the Kurdish,

1 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/displacement-and-despair-turkish-invasion-northeast-syria>

2 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1050961>

3 The Health Authority of North and East Syria has recorded 478 civilian casualties

4 See below under ‘assigning responsibility’ for more information on the TNA, their chain of command and relationship to the TAF and Turkish intelligence (MIT)

Yazidi and Christian populations in particular, facilitating the installation of Turkmen and Arab militiamen and their families and the de facto expansion of Turkey's territorial control.

## 1.2 Methodology

We began by compiling a database of rights violations for which there is either i) reliable photographic or video evidence or ii) eyewitness testimony collected by our field teams. While by no means comprehensive, this database of over 150 incidents gives a broad picture of rights violations throughout the conflict. Working with this information, we were able to define the four categories listed above. You can find the full database on the Rojava Information Center website via the link below<sup>5</sup>.



*Civilian home in Siftek, west Kobane region, destroyed in Turkish shelling*

We then cross-referenced incidents documented on camera and video with testimony and original material collected by our field teams. Our field teams have been able to speak to a wide range of civilians directly affected by the four kinds of attacks we outlined above. They include civilians directly targeted by airstrikes and heavy weapons; medical staff targeted in the same way; those who have lost their homes, property and livelihood to looters; those who have returned into the zone of occupation and secretly observed and filmed the destruction of their own homes; those who have been asked to pay ransoms for the return of the bodies of family members killed by Turkish-backed factions; IDPs affected by damage to humanitarian infrastructure; and NGO staff, civil officials and civilian activists working to assist civilians and IDPs affected by the issues outlined above.

In this way, we have been able to verify scores of incidents reported in the press through eyewitness testimony, and uncover new violations potentially amounting to war crimes. The body

<sup>5</sup> <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/category/report/>

of the report explores particular incidents in detail, providing background and testimony to supplement the database linked to in Appendix 1, which we will continue to update. The full text and audio – or video in many cases – of the interviews quoted here are available on request to press, researchers and NGOs, along with direct contact to some of the individuals whose cases are highlighted here. Names appended with (\*) have been changed at witness' request to protect their identity.

Though the total civilian toll within the areas of Turkish occupation can never completely be known, the information we have been able to collect paints a clear picture of intentional, systematic and aggressive targeting of civilian targets.

## 2. TARGETING PRESS AND OBSTRUCTION OF INFORMATION-GATHERING

At least three journalists have been killed in Turkish airstrikes since the start of the invasion, while many international press have fled the region as the humanitarian and security situation has rapidly deteriorated<sup>6</sup>. RIC spoke to Zozan Berkele, a local journalist working for all-female station Jin TV, who was shot by Turkish forces while attempting to cover a joint Turkish-Russian patrol on 11 November in the east Kobane countryside



*Zozan Berkele, journalist shot by TAF on 11 November*

She said: “They fired because they saw we were filming. They struck our car, the car of [local TV station] Ronahi TV, and a Ronahi TV camera... I was struck by a bullet. My hand will be in plaster for a month. I won’t stop because of this bullet; on the contrary, I will go on working to break the blockade of information. There is nothing hidden about Turkey’s actions, but the world has closed its eyes.”

Significant difficulties face any journalist or researcher attempting to gather information on rights violations committed by Turkey and the TNA. It is not possible for journalists or researchers to enter areas under Turkish occupation, which are “closed to the media

except for those licensed by Turkey, and closed to local and international human rights organizations... Journalists and activists in these areas are also subjected to restrictions and abuses that amount to killing, kidnapping and torture,” per the Index On Censorship<sup>7</sup>.

As such, much reporting on war crimes committed by TNA militias has relied on camera-phone footage captured by the culprits themselves and spread via both official accounts operated by TNA factions and propaganda accounts supportive of these factions, principally using the secure messaging app Telegram. Videos circulated here have allowed researchers to document a fraction of the human rights abuses and war crimes carried out by the TNA.

Aware of the PR damage done by such videos when they inevitably resurface outside pro-TNA channels, in the current operation then Turkey has sought to prevent its militias from so obviously incriminating themselves. Following the global circulation of footage showing field executions and their aftermath committed by TNA militia Ahrar-al-Sharqiya on the M4 Highway on 12 October, Turkey issued orders to all fighters under the control of the TNA, specifically warning them against filming themselves on the battlefield (a copy of the order is shown here).

<sup>6</sup> <https://cpj.org/2019/11/cpj-safety-advisory-covering-rojava-and-northern-s.php>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2019/04/journalists-in-northern-syria-face-intimidation-and-insecurity-every-day/>

At least two TNA fighters in Afrin have recently been expelled from the Jaysh-al-Farqiya faction and struck from the Turkish payroll after filming themselves stealing firewood. Their crime was not the theft itself – such robberies are bread-and-butter to TNA militias in Afrin looking to supplement their income – but to film it and spread the footage online<sup>8</sup>. A number of videos have continued to make their way online, in particular those showing the abuse of prisoners – which TNA fighters are often keen to film and broadcast as proof of their victory in what they describe as a jihad against ‘infidel’ opposition<sup>9</sup>. Many more doubtless remain unrecorded. Other crimes, such as the seizure, looting or destruction of civilian property and homes, are even less likely to be captured on camera.

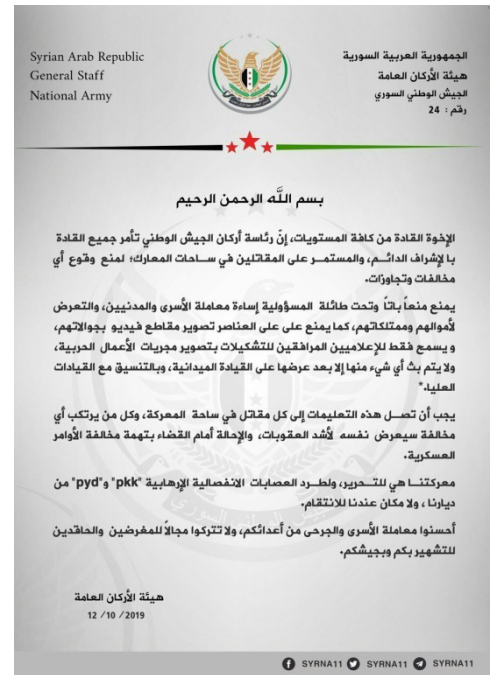
Moreover, those civilians who remain in areas under Turkish control are under extreme pressure. In newly-occupied Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, as in Afrin, TNA fighters seize civilians’ phones at checkpoints, looking for “YPG flags, photos of martyrs, or Kurdish songs.”<sup>10</sup> Any of these are enough to result in arrest. The small number of civilians who remain in Sere Kaniye – mostly women with young children and the very old – only use their telephones at night and in their own homes, when they are less likely to be detected by the occupying forces. Interviewees have told RIC that it is typically only women who can safely travel back into the zone of occupation, paying bribes at checkpoints ranging from 2000SYP to 5,000SYP.<sup>11</sup>

Typically, women have returned to check on their homes and property or try and retrieve personal effects, before leaving the city once again. All returnees face interrogation, with the first question at checkpoints reportedly “are you Kurdish or Arabic?”<sup>12</sup>

Khalte Akash from Sere Kaniye told RIC: “When someone returns to Sere Kaniye, his ID card is taken. They falsely accuse them of being criminals. Many of those who return are arrested, and their location is not known.” Internal security briefings circulated by an INGO and seen by RIC confirm reports of people accused of links to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) being abducted at checkpoints.<sup>13</sup>

Given that military service is compulsory for at least one member of every family in North and East Syria, this means virtually everyone is at potential risk.

Turkish strikes also took out electricity lines and telecommunications facilities in Sere Kaniye, and reception and communications in the city remain patchy at best. Indeed, since the start of the invasion internet blackouts have regularly occurred across North and East Syria, which has



Order warning TNA forces against filming themselves on the battlefield, issued after field execution of Hevrin Khalef

8 <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1191862589845889025>

9 See, for example, 16 October footage of Jaysh-al-Islam militants on the road east from Ceylanpinar

10 RIC field interview with former Sere Kaniye resident, 29 October

11 RIC field interviews with former Sere Kaniye residents, 24 October to 23 November

12 [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/11/17/kurds-watch-homes-burn-afar-picture-ethnic-cleansing-emerges/amp/?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/11/17/kurds-watch-homes-burn-afar-picture-ethnic-cleansing-emerges/amp/?_twitter_impression=true)

13 Security briefing from INGO, seen by RIC, 24 November



no indigenous internet of its own and relies on lines from Turkey, Damascus and the KRG.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that it has proven harder to access information from Tel Abyad than Sere Kaniye, particularly in terms of accessing verifiable information about looting for the fifth section of this report. Eyewitnesses and IDPs from both towns are scared of talking to reporters and researchers, with individuals in Tuweina (Washokani) camp for IDPs from Sere Kaniye reporting that other camp residents with connections to the TNA would arrange for their property in Sere Kaniye to be targeted if they spoke out. This is especially true for Tel Abyad, an Arab-majority city where the TNA is able to faster establish control over the civilian population, and whose residents are subsequently even less willing to speak on the record about violations there.

## 2.1 Impact on information-gathering

In such circumstances, it is difficult to give a full picture of the impact of Turkey's invasion. For example, journalists and researchers have told RIC they believe that the figures provided by OCHA for IDP returns to regions now under Turkish control are far too high to be accurate – for example giving figures of 22,050 to Sere Kaniye and 39,000 to Tel Abyad by 28 October, just a week after SDF withdrew from Sere Kaniye. These figures are gainsaid by interviews and observations on the ground, as well as footage of an empty city center populated primarily by men in military fatigues, with houses marked out as the new property of various factions. The same internal INGO report cited above states that 15 families have returned to Tel Abyad within the past week, and that families have begun to return to Sere Kaniye within the last week, but does not suggest anything like the wholesale return of thousands of households which the UN reported as taking place within days of the city's capture.

Echoing the comments of multiple IDPs interviewed by RIC, Mohammed Baaqi of the NGO Hevi



*Retrieval of bodies in Mishrafa, south Sere Kaniye, on 18 October*

14 <https://dig.watch/regional-updates/middle-east-and-north-africa>

Association told RIC: “The [OCHA] numbers aren’t accurate. Some of those who went back were arrested immediately, others after a couple of days. There are some people who went and came back because they saw that they can’t stay there – there is no food, no water, no electricity.

The majority of IDPs are still in Tel Tamer, Hasakah and Qamishlo. A small number of old men went back to check on their houses, but many of these who went came back out again. We are aware of a small number of IDP families going back to the Sere Kaniye countryside – only Arabs, not Kurds.”

The Humanitarian Affairs Committee of North and East Syria has likewise disputed OCHA figures showing around 130,000 total IDP returns, saying they have documented around 60,000 returns to areas still outside of Turkish control but very little movement back to Sere Kaniye or Tel Abyad, in contrast to OCHA figures<sup>15</sup>. Internal inconsistencies cast further doubt on the OCHA figures: for example, the claim that 40,000 people fled the Kobane region only to all return, bar 30, in the space of a week.

OCHA normally receives displacement figures via local humanitarian partners. However, with international and local humanitarian actors unable to safely access the zone of Turkish occupation, save those linked to the Turkish state apparatus, it is neither clear where the OCHA figure is derived from nor possible to put forward empirical evidence disproving it. The zone of Turkish occupation has become a black hole from which such figures emerge and are widely repeated by pro-Turkish media, with international humanitarian actors unable to operate safely on the ground to verify or disprove these figures.

To take another example of the difficulty in obtaining accurate data in the context of the Turkish invasion, the Kurdish Red Crescent has witnessed and documented at least 90 civilian deaths since 9 October, but note the real figure is likely to be considerably higher as they are unable to access many

## Case study:

*Sebah is a Turkmen woman from Sere Kaniye now resident in Newroz camp in Derik. She travelled back to Sere Kaniye at the start of November once the city was surrendered by SDF to check on her home spending around a week in the city before leaving again on 6 November:*

*“Our home was next to the wheat depot. Ten minutes after we left, it was struck with artillery and destroyed. We received information that our neighbors, those who we shared our food and drink with, have started working with the Turkish-backed proxies; the proxies seize our houses and rent them out and [our neighbors] point them out and say, ‘that was a Kurdish home,’ ‘that was the home of a family where a member died in the war.’ One in five houses was destroyed. Three thousand families left Sere Kaniye.*

*And now we cannot return. Because I have two children part of SDF, and three martyrs in my family. Now, the Free Syrian Army has taken our place from us. The city is full of ISIS and al-Nusra members, all of whom were in Turkey or under Turkish protection. We are all Muslim and I am Turkmen; but Erdogan is a pig.*

*I went back to check on my house. They have no mercy, they even charge us 2000SYR [to enter] the city. I found my house destroyed by bullets. There is no electricity, no water, nothing. They’ve stolen a lot of things. They’ve destroyed the TV and the refrigerator and even the satellite dish on the roof. One push is enough to collapse the whole house. It’s uninhabitable.*

*A [TNA] militia member spoke to me there, saying: ‘get out of here.’*

*I told him, ‘How can you say that? It’s my home, you destroyed it.’”*

<sup>15</sup> Humanitarian Affairs Committee statement provided to RIC, 14 November

areas to retrieve bodies or verify deaths known to have occurred<sup>16</sup>. The Health Authority of North and East Syria has issued 478 death certificates for civilians confirmed or assumed to have died<sup>17</sup>, giving some indication of the gap between empirically verifiable data and the reality on the ground.

RIC has spoken to the relatives of civilian victims not included in the KRC count. Speaking in Newroz IDP camp near Derik, Aisha\* told RIC that two of her children were killed during bombing in the city in the opening days of the invasion. She fled on foot with her surviving child, leaving her children's bodies under a carpet in her home. She intended to return home and bury them, only to learn from neighbors who remained in the city that her home had been burned down: "The children were burned, and because of Erdogan, we couldn't go back to collect the dead. There are dead people buried under rubble that we don't know about."

This account accords with testimonies RIC has received that the bodies of civilians and SDF fighters alike are being buried in mass graves in Sere Kaniye<sup>18</sup>. RIC researchers were also present in a humanitarian convoy attempting to reach Sere Kaniye on 18 October which happened to come across 12 bodies of civilians as they passed a blast site in Mishrafa village, then as now under Turkish control – raising the question of how many other similar casualties remain undetected in new areas of Turkish control. With both cities and nearly 5000KM<sup>2</sup> of countryside now off-limits to international observers, it is difficult to arrive at truly accurate figures.

16 <http://hskurd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/9th-october-to-14th-of-november-doc.pdf>

17 Humanitarian Affairs Committee of North and East Syria, statement provided to RIC, 20 November

18 RIC field interviews with former Sere Kaniye residents, 29 October

### 3. TARGETING CIVILIANS

The Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) has documented the names, ages and locations of at least 90 civilians killed in the course of the Turkish invasion so far. As noted above, the real figure is likely significantly higher. KRC has also recorded over 2400 injuries to civilians, principally shrapnel from artillery shelling and airstrikes but also gunshot wounds, burns and injuries from mines.<sup>19</sup>

The names of these positively-identified civilians can be found in the KRC report, while the database available via Appendix 1 includes a number of incidents where photographic or video evidence is publically available. RIC were able to speak with the survivors of a number of incidents where civilians were targeted, and we will here identify concerning trends within the wider civilian casualty count which indicate the international targeting of civilians.

#### 3.1 Targeting returnees

Two incidents in particular stand out, as civilians were targeted while attempting to return to homes and property in Sere Kaniye. Firstly, we were able to locate and speak to Abdulrezaq Sino, the only survivor of a shooting on 16 October which killed three people: Resho Mehmud Berkel, Mustafa Ehmed Sino, and Rezan Khelil Cholo. Based on Mr. Sino's description and photographs of the bodies of the three victims, this incident can be accurately traced to the location shown, near Mishrafa on the 716 road towards Sere Kaniye.<sup>20</sup>

Mr. Sino left Sere Kaniye as an IDP on the 11 October but was encouraged to return to Sere Kaniye by other IDPs where he was staying in Tel Tamer, to check on the private park he owned there, Mishwar Park. He and his nephew Mustafa Ahmed Sino, plus the other two victims, were driving north on the 716 road when they came under a "hail of bullets" fired by Turkish-backed forces. Mr. Sino himself was struck by one bullet.

He threw himself out of the car which stopped 15 to 20 meters ahead, and crawled into a nearby carwash shop. While hidden inside, he heard gunmen calling to one another in Arabic, including the takbir, enabling him to identify them as members of Turkish-backed factions. As night fell he moved to another building nearby and was eventually found by SDF fighters, recognizing them by the sound of women's voices: "I could hear the voice of a female fighter, and so I thought, they must be [the YPJ]," he told RIC.

Following rescue, Mr. Sino was transferred to hospital in Hasakah where his wounds were treated, but the other three passengers were killed.



*The blue box indicates where three bodies of civilians killed by TAF were photographed and sent to the victims' family*

19 <http://hskurd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/9th-october-to-14th-of-november-doc.pdf>  
 20 With thanks to Alexander McKeever for geolocation services

A conclusive autopsy has not been possible, however, as the bodies of the three men remain in the hands of Turkish-backed factions. Mr. Sino called the telephone of Mustafa Sino, his nephew, and was answered by a fighter in Turkish-backed forces: “One answered and said, ‘you must come now, bring money and you can bring back the bodies’. They wanted money for the 3 bodies, meeting at the place of the Hecir mosque.”



*Photograph of a TNA fighter posing with the bodies of killed civilians [face obscured in original], sent to their families to demand ransom*

Photos showing an unidentified member of Turkish-backed faction Sultan Murad Division posing with the victims’ bloodied corpses, in scenes familiar from battlefields throughout the invasion, were sent to Rezan Khalil Chilo’s mother, with a fighter identified as Heytham of Sultan Murad Division demanding payment for its return. Kurdish journalist Vedat Erdemci was similarly killed by Turkish fire during the offensive. TNA fighters then sent a photo of his decapitated corpse to his mother when she called his phone to try and trace him, kicking the head around to expose his face. Demanding money for the return of corpses could itself be considered a war-crime.<sup>21</sup>

Our team was also present in Tel Tamer hospital on 22 October for the arrival of Mahir Abdo Sadon and Ednan Abdulaziz Juma, two civilians who likewise tried to return to their shop in Sere Kaniye only to be targeted by Turkish-backed fighters near Mishrafa, and were later able to conduct interviews with both of these individuals.

Mahir told RIC:

“At Mishrafa, we took the non-concreted road [moving west off the main road]. We were driving as normal on the motorbike when there was a blow on my face. Something exploded and the world fell apart.” He and Ednan came around lying on the floor with the motorbike destroyed, and crawled back to the main road where they were able to flag down another car to bring them to Tel Tamer hospital. His account likewise indicates that Turkish-backed forces have been targeting civilians in circumstances where they could not be



*he attempted to return to his home on 22 October*

21 [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_rul\\_rule113](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule113)

mistaken for combatants. In another, similar, incident in Tel Abyad, on 20 October two elderly villagers in Eriyada village who had been sleeping in the desert tried to return to their homes to collect blankets. Mehmud Aloseyad and Mustafa al Heseni were both shot dead.

## 3.2 Attacks outside the field of conflict

It is also important to note that Turkish shelling against civilian neighborhoods has not been limited to the supposed field of operations between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. Speaking in Ayn Diwar, a village near Derik on the Turkish border, Abdullah Shero described random shelling which destroyed his family home on 11 October: "all our four buildings and two homes were burned. We haven't got anything left. Now, we have got together nylon to set up tents. We are civilian people. I haven't been near any war."

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*Destruction of Abdullah's home in Ayn Diwar, well outside the supposed field of conflict*

In nearby Perrik, a Christian village, Bave Dani Hannah described to RIC researchers a similar incident on 12 October: "My son Dani and the shepherd were struck while they were tending the sheep. Salah [the shepherd] was killed, and my son's leg was broken. There were five or six families left in the village, but there's no one left now."

The same can be said for Qamishlo, which saw the highest rate of civilian casualties in the opening days of the war despite not forming part of the planned sphere of invasion. Two victims were Mohammed Yousef Hussein (12), who was killed, and his sister Sara Yousef Hussein (8), who lost her leg in the same incident when a shell struck their home in Qidurbek neighborhood on 10 Oc-

tober. Speaking in Qamishlo, their mother Dayika Sara told RIC: “Why did they target us? We did nothing. There is no military point near to our home.”

Villagers in the west Kobane countryside described similar attacks to RIC field team there. Speaking in Siftek village, Qahraman Devan Shekho told RIC: “We fled due to the shelling. A week later I returned to the village, and I couldn’t open my door. When I forced it open I realized that the inside was full of mud and stones. A shell damaged the whole wall, a tank struck our home. If we had been here, we would have been killed. I don’t understand why they would do this. I am a civilian; I have never worked as a soldier.”

The total destruction of civilian homes RIC witnessed in Ayn Diwar, Perrik, Siftek and Kobane, among other locations, is significant because these villages are located far outside the field of conflict between SDF and Turkey.

### 3.3 Indiscriminate shelling and targeting of civilians

These accounts are indicative of a wider trend. An airstrike on a humanitarian convoy in Sere Kaniye on 13 October, graphically captured on video, was the biggest single civilian loss of life, with twelve civilians killed. (You can see the case study attached here for more information on this incident, in which a caravan of civilian activists driving into the city to deliver aid and extract the wounded was struck by what is believed to have been a shell fired from a Bayraktar strike drone, killing twelve.) However, civilians have consistently been targeted by both the TAF and the TNA. US military sources have revealed that they watched Turkish-backed forces apparently executing civilians via their own drone footage.<sup>22</sup>

IDPs who fled Sere Kaniye described indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes provoking mass panic, with many IDPs fleeing on foot, leaving personal possessions and family members behind. RIC researchers were present in the city as shelling started. Dayika Asi from Sere Kaniye told RIC: “They were shelling everywhere, schools, homes, children, they don’t care. Who are these people, that do not care who they strike?”

Ahmed Chilo from Sere Kaniye told RIC: “I got out with my family and we travelled to Tel Tam-

#### Targeting civilians: case study

*Bedua Tamo, a civilian from Chil Akha, near Derik, was present in the humanitarian convoy on 13 October when it was hit by an airstrike, killing 11 civilians – including two journalists. She told RIC:*

*“I decided to go to Sere Kaniye when I saw all the injured people who couldn’t leave the city. We were approximately 350 to 400 people, ready to remove the civilians and wounded trapped in the city... a lot of women were in our group. We took the road to the city at around 3PM.*

*We heard the sound of some bullets, and we were a bit afraid, but it was too important [to turn back]. We gathered together, and we were going to give a statement. There were local and international press there, ready to work. For civilians stuck in the city, our arrival was like a miracle. In the middle of our celebrations, we heard an explosion. Dust surrounded us. I saw one person lying in pieces; I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. We were told to leave, it was too dangerous. We took three injured people with us, two men and a woman, and two dead people. One was a boy of 23 to 24 years, and the other an older woman from Girkelege.*

*We saw dead and injured people, also among our friends in the press, their cameras were burned. It is difficult to believe that Turkey targeted civilians in this way.”*

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-drones-appear-to-show-turkish-backed-forces-accosting-civilians-in-syria-11573558898>

er. There were other members of my family still there, so I went back again. On my way, near the Safiyah Wedding Hall, mortars started to fall on us again. it was chaos, mortars falling on the people...”

Throughout the conflict, random shelling along the border and away from military targets has caused mass civilian death and displacement without incurring any military gain for Turkey, while Turkish-backed forces have intentionally opened fire on civilians on multiple occasions. The targeted attacks on civilians attempting to return<sup>23</sup> to their homes and property highlighted here constitute a violation of their right to return following their involuntary displacement. The indiscriminate shelling described to RIC by multiple interviewees, primarily from Sere Kaniye but also from settlements along the border from Derik through to Kobane, may also constitute a war crime.<sup>24</sup>

23 [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_rul\\_rule132](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule132)

24 [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2\\_rul\\_rule11](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule11)



## 4. TARGETING HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE



*A Kurdish Red Crescent worker helps a colleague injured in a Turkish air strike*

my colleague who was driving were wounded... it is difficult for us to reach the wounded and evacuate them. The Turkish drones strike civilians and ambulances.”

The Kurdish Red Crescent and RIC have confirmed a number of other such attacks, included in the panel here.

One trend which clearly emerges from the database is Turkey’s targeting of health workers, vehicles and infrastructure – primarily belonging to the Kurdish Red Crescent and the local health authority, but also to international NGOs. Five health workers have been killed by Turkish forces thus far, as well as at least seven wounded.

RIC has interviewed two health workers who survived such attacks. Kurdish Red Crescent worker Kawa told RIC:

“We had a medical base in the village Salihiye. We were waiting there for the arrival of wounded civilians [on 12 October]. Our ambulance was with us, and we were ready there. Early in the morning there was an airstrike [likely from a Turkish strike drone], and some of us were injured.

“Our ambulance was damaged and we couldn’t go on to the city because planes would strike us there. It was our furthest forward medical base and we couldn’t stay there. They were from Turkey, those that struck. They were war planes that struck us, first there were drones overhead, and after the warplane struck.”

Much the same occurred on 9 November, when an ambulance owned by German NGO Cadus but operated by local staff came under fire while moving toward the frontline near Sere Kaniye. Driver Aram Hamidi told RIC: “As we were heading out to get the wounded, Turkey struck us. Both I and

## TIMELINE

DATE	TARGET
9 October	Shelling on MSF-run hospital in Tel Abyad puts it out of service
12 October	Artillery strikes near Kobane hospital put it temporarily out of service
12 October	Airstrike on KRC trauma stabilization point in Salihiye village, two KRC staff injured and two ambulances put out of service
12 October – 13 October	Abduction and execution of three health workers of the local health authority near Suluk
13 October	airstrike on KRC trauma stabilization point in Asadiye village, two medical staff injured and one killed
Up to 20 October	Roj Hospital in Sere Kaniye comes under repeated heavy weapons fire from Turkish-backed forces as it is slowly surrounded and ultimately abandoned
Up to 24 October	Five KRC hospitals and subsidiary health points around Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye permanently abandoned by this date
29 October	Turkish shelling targets Kurdish Red Crescent ambulance in Souda village, north of Tel Tamer
3 November	Turkish shelling targets Free Burma Rangers north of Tel Tamer, one member of medical team killed and one wounded
3 November	Turkish drone strikes Kurdish Red Crescent ambulance north of Tel Tamer in separate attack
6 November	Turkish shelling targets ambulance in Sharkarak village, Ayn Issa
9 November	Turkish shelling targets Cadus/Kurdish Red Crescent ambulance north of Tel Tamer, two medical staff wounded

On the 13 October, meanwhile, three health workers were executed by Turkish-backed factions at or near the Suluk roundabout near Tel Abyad. See the pullout below for RIC’s full investigation into this incident, including the first eyewitness testimony of the attack on the medical team.

An international medical worker who was in the Sere Kaniye hospital until an evacuation on the 19 October described to RIC how Turkish-backed forces had surrounded the hospital on three sides, and would spray it with fire “every two to three hours” from an armored vehicle. Raman Suleiman Oso, a KRC anesthesiologist, described his own experience during the final days in the hospital: “I can’t describe my feeling when shells were falling around and through the walls of the hospital. We had been forced to amputate the limbs of injured people, due to difficult conditions inside the hospital - not enough adequate medicine or medical equipment, and no electricity.”

The denial of humanitarian access to Roj Hospital as it came under repeated fire, with humanitarian and medical convoys being forced back by fire from Turkish-backed militias, directly cost civilian lives. More broadly, attacks on medical staff and infrastructure have occurred from the first day of the conflict until the current advance on Tel Tamer, with a significant negative impact on their ability to provide care. Attacks on medical infrastruc



*This photograph of the body of health worker Mohammed Bozan was circulated in pro-TNA channels, with a YPJ flag thrown on top in a crude attempt to portray him as a combatant*

ture compound the other forms of attack on humanitarian and civil structure outlined in this dossier.

### Case study – Execution of three medical workers in Suluk

*Confusion has surrounded the disappearance of Mohammed Bozan, Sozgin Khalil and Midya Abraham, three medical workers in Suluk on 13 October. An RIC field team spoke to two witnesses to the accident, medical workers Rim\* and Berivan\*, who were present in another ambulance and later left the scene; Mohammed Bozan's father and brother; Medya's cousin Nesrin, a co-worker at Kurdish Red Crescent; and a military source with intelligence from inside the zone of Turkish control.*

*These interviews provide the clearest evidence yet of more summary executions by Turkish-backed faction members, within 24 hours of the execution of Hevrin Khalef.*

- *Three ambulances, clearly marked with ambulance insignia and jointly operated by the Kurdistan Red Crescent and local Health Committee were in Suluk on the day in question, waiting to go and pick up the wounded*

- *One of these ambulances was staffed by three employees of the local health committee, namely: Mohammed Bozan, an 18-year-old man in civilian clothes; Midiya Ibrahim, a woman in medical uniform; and Sozgin Khalil, a woman in civilian clothes*

- *At 8:15 AM Mohammed was talking to his father on the phone. He told him: "we are fine, we are eating, nothing is happening, there are 20 [SDF] soldiers around us, nothing will happen to us." The sound of automatic fire suddenly broke out. The fathers heard a woman he believed to be Midiya screaming "Hamude, Hamude," – a Kurdish contraction of 'Mohammed'. Mohammed's phone fell on the floor. One of the attackers picked up the phone and said in Arabic, "we killed the boy and also the two beautiful girls." At this moment Mohammed was still alive. His father heard him saying "My father is sick [...] I am a civilian, I am an ambulance driver." After this the call was cut off. Mohammed's phone was still functioning at the time of writing on 24 November*

- *Berivan's eyewitness testimony contradicts Mohammed's father's report that Mohammed said there were "20 [SDF] soldiers" around them. She states it was early in the morning and that there was no military personnel or anybody else around apart from the ambulance crews. All elements indicate that Mohammed mentioned the "20 soldiers" so his father - who is suffering from heart issues - wouldn't worry for him. In the photo of Mohammed's body (see above) no other military elements, weapons, or killed soldiers are visible; had they been present, the TNA members who took the photo would surely have included it as proof they had targeted fighters*

- *Berivan's testimony confirms the rest of the information communicated to the father by Mohammed. She says the TNA forces who attacked the ambulance crew came "suddenly", "from nowhere." She heard the sound of gunfire at first, looked back and saw Mohammed on the floor with his leg wounded. Very fast, as it became clear to Berivan and her ambulance crew that they would not be able to do anything to help their friends against "several armed men", they escaped by driving towards Ayn Issa. The TNA did not pursue them. The third ambulance also escaped at the first outbreak of gunfire. Berivan says that the crew in this third ambulance "did not see anything, they ran away."*

- *The three medical workers were killed on the Suluk roundabout by the TNA. Civilians later took the bodies and buried them*

- *After this, Mohammed's phone remained open to calls and messages, and the TNA answered several times to messages on Facebook, saying: "he is dead." Three days after the events at the roundabout, they shared the picture of Mohammed's body*

## 5. TARGETING CIVILIAN AND HUMANITARIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

The indiscriminate shelling which has claimed civilian lives has also destroyed both private property and civilian and humanitarian infrastructure – water and electricity facilities, bakeries, roads, grain storage facilities, and so on. The following section of the report will look at one incident – the repeated targeting of Allouk water station – in detail, before giving an overview of the Turkish invasion’s impact on the civilian infrastructure of North and East Syria.

### 5.1 Allouk water station

The single incident which has had the greatest humanitarian impact is the immediate targeting of Allouk water station on 9 October in a Turkish airstrike. The water station is in a vulnerable position, close to the Turkish border. Indeed, Turkey controls water flow into North and East Syria via an extensive network of dams on the major rivers feeding the region. Even prior to the invasion, Turkey has manipulated the water flow into North and East Syria, drastically reducing the amount of water reaching the already-arid region – with plans to cut flow into Iraq and Syria by a further 50% following the completion of a new dam project, which will also result in the destruction of the 12,000 year-old archaeological and Kurdish heritage site Hasankeyf<sup>25</sup>. In past summers

water flows into North and Syria were cut on various occasions, while the opening of Turkish dams caused the flooding of agricultural lands in Tel Abyad and other areas as recently as the month prior to the invasion.<sup>26</sup> In March 2018, TAF also seized control of the main dam and water pumping station in Afrin.

Per UN figures, the strike on the Allouk pumping station left 450,000 people without access to water, with 22 out of 34 pumps put out of service. On the 29 October, powerlines leading from Dirbesiye to the station



*IDPs in Tel Tamer described ongoing water shortages as of 24 November*

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/turkey-syria-iraq-kurds/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.savethetigris.org/water-must-not-be-used-as-a-weapon-of-war-refrain-from-civilian-and-environmental-harm-in-northeast-syria/>

were struck as Turkey continued its invasion in areas east of Sere Kaniye, and since then the station - which never returned to more than 20% of its original capacity – has been inoperable. Turkish-backed forces have more than once prevented humanitarian actors from reaching the station to carry out essential repairs. On 9 November, following two weeks' negotiations, a team could finally reach the station to start carrying out repairs – only for the powerlines to be struck and the water-station put completely out of a service for a third time in the following days.<sup>27</sup> Some repairs have now been made, but at the time of writing on 22 November, hundreds of thousands of liters of water were still being trucked daily to at least 100,000 people in Hasakah, with Tel Tamer and rural communities still disconnected from the supply.<sup>28,29</sup>

As concerning as the repeated damage to the Allouk water station is the prevention of access by Turkish-backed forces, who continue to try and advance to the south and east of the station – backed by Turkish heavy firepower – in violation of the 'ceasefire' agreement. Four out of ten attempts by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to reach the station for repairs were unsuccessful.<sup>30</sup>

Speaking on 3 November, Sozdar Ahmed, co-chair of the water office in Hasakah Canton, told RIC: "It was one of the first bombardments of the war. This station was extracting water from an area of 6KM<sup>2</sup>, and pumping it to the city. For this reason [the cities and vicinities of] Hasakah, Hol, Arishah and Sheddadi are without water, including the refugee camps of Hol and Arishah.

The water station is under the control of Turkish proxy forces. We have been insisting to the UN to make it possible for our workers to go there and fix it in order to supply water, but they didn't do it. We have been waiting for this for twenty-four days."

Ms. Ahmed explained that to meet this vast shortcoming, the Autonomous Administration have repurposed an old water station in al-Himme, Hasakah, which can only supply unpotable water. They are also trucking water to refugee camps, ad-hoc settlements and private neighborhoods to meet demand. Emergency water trucking is also in effect to meet demand for Hol camp's 70,000 residents.

Mehabad Mohammed, from the Sere Kaniye Economic Committee, describes the same crisis in Tel Tamer: "When the water back came again it smelt bad. It stank like rotten meat. It cut out again after two or three days. Now, we bring water to the communes with tankers, and they spread it." Both he and Ms. Ahmed say that the Allouk station must be repaired, as there is no other long-term solution to meet demand in the regions south of the border. 131,000 IDPs have arrived in the Hasakah region alone to swell the city's pre-existing population – primarily 'hidden' IDPs staying with relations, along with a smaller but more visible IDP population hosted in schools and camps.<sup>31</sup> 150 water depots have been set up in the streets of the city to meet demand from the new IDP population.<sup>32</sup>



*Water distribution in Hasekah city (ICRC)*

27 OCHA HNAP flash update, provided to RIC, 14 November

28 OCHA situation report, 19 November

29 RIC field interviews in Hasekah and Tel Tamer, 24 November RIC field team interview with Hasekah NGO coordination committee, 28 October

30 OCHA situation report, 19 November

31 RIC field team interview with Hasekah NGO coordination committee, 28 October

32 RIC field team, 3 November

Speaking in Tuweina (Washokani) refugee camp near Hasakah, member of the camp co-ordination committee Freya Ahmed described the impact on the new site being set up to hold tens of thousands of new IDPs – and where hundreds have already arrived, despite the camp not yet having formally opened. She told RIC: “For a lot of people buying water is really expensive. The water is dirty even when you pour it in a small glass. Sickness will develop, specifically in the kidney and the stomach. We already had to bring some people to the hospital because of this water.”

RIC has spoken to IDPs across Hasakah city, Tel Tamer, and Tuweina camp in the Hasakah countryside who repeat these concerns about water shortages and long waits to access water. As IDP Fawaz Abdullah told RIC in Tel Tamer: “That’s the biggest difficulty we are facing, that water has been cut off. Water is the most essential thing for life. Turkey’s aim is not only a military defeat: they are making war against the civilian population.”

Apart from the repeated incidents at Allouk, shelling also drew near to a dam close Derik, far from the supposed field of operations, though our field team determined that water flow into the city was not affected in this instance.

## 5.2 Other attacks on civilian infrastructure

Turkey’s shelling has not only targeted Allouk. On 12 October, the tension line linking the Mabrouka station with the Tishreen dam was bombed, taking out electricity in most cities west of Qamishlo. Later that same day, an electrical substation was targeted, causing electricity blackouts across the city. As noted above, powerlines and telecommunications facilities have been targeted around Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye.

Omar Issa, from the Electrical Emergency Center in Qamishlo told RIC: “Turkey targeted these utilities deliberately, to force the people to abandon their home and their land. When the Mabrouka station was stuck, Sere Kaniye, Hasakah and Tel Tamer were left without electricity.” Similar strikes targeted the oil fields at Saida near Tirbespiye on 11 October, igniting fast-spreading fires which took out the electricity network throughout this region.

These strikes against basic civilian infrastructure appear to have driven IDP flight. Speaking in an ad-hoc camp in a school in Tel Tamer, Ibrahim Mohammed told RIC: “We went to Hasakah and there was no water, no electricity, we slept in the street. And so we came to Tel Tamer, to this school.”

The principal bakery was targeted in Qamishlo on 12 October, while grain silos have come under shelling and fire throughout the conflict. Structures such as grain silos may be a legitimate target if they are being used as a military position, as has been common throughout the conflict. However, indiscriminate shelling which destroys civilian infrastructure is a war crime. Grain silos have come under fire around Tel Abyad, Sere Kaniye and Tel Tamer. The bakery was also shelled in Tel Abyad, contributing to widespread bread shortages across the city which continue until the time of writing and enabling Turkish-backed factions to profit from the sale of looted grain (see below for more information).

At least one silo, in Sakhirat in Tel Abyad, was reportedly destroyed in Turkish shelling. It held more than 11,700 tons of wheat ready for processing and distribution as subsidized bread by the Auton-

omous Administration.<sup>33</sup> Eyewitnesses also confirmed to RIC the shelling of churches in Qamishlo and Tirbespiye and schools across Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, in addition to the targeting of hospitals outlined below.<sup>34</sup> Though it is difficult to get an accurate picture of the scale of destruction within the zones of occupation, the UN has documented the targeting and partial or complete destruction of 20 of 150 schools in Sere Kaniye district, giving some indication of the total but not absolute destruction of infrastructure in this region.<sup>35</sup>



Satellite imagery shows partial damage to grain silos in Sere Kaniye during the opening days of the war (Aurora Intel)

As noted above, roads in civilian use have been targeted not only by heavy weapons but by artillery and airstrikes targeting civilian vehicles, rendering these roads out of use. Likewise, Turkish-backed factions have seized parts of the M4 highway between Ayn Issa and Tel Tamer, with the road from Ayn Issa north to Kobane also cut off by Turkish-backed factions at the time of writing on 22 November. In addition to the field executions committed here, TNA factions do not allow for safe passage of civilians – with even US military convoys being twice forced to turn back as they attempted to travel along the M4 to reach their bases to the west.<sup>36</sup>

Other roads, such as the road north from Ayn Issa to Kobane, the road from Qamishlo to Tel Tamer, and the road from Amude to Dirbesiye, have all also been closed to civilians by fire targeting civilian vehicles on the road. These attacks have had a significant logistical impact, decreasing access both for humanitarian actors and for ordinary farmers and traders, with a subsequent 20% increase in food prices across markets and shortages of fresh produce. To take two local staples as examples, the price of sugar has increased from 400SYP to 500SYP per kilogram, while vegetable oil has increased in price from around 2000SYP to up to 3000SYP for 4 liters.<sup>37</sup>

The impact on local agriculture and economy is worsened by the loss to the local economy of large swathes of agricultural land around Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, with 475,000 hectares of agricultural land lost around Tel Abyad, and 144,000 around Sere Kaniye. These fields primarily grew local staples wheat and barley, as well as cotton. An estimated 275,000 head of sheep, goat and cattle have also been lost as Turkish-backed forces surged through the region.<sup>38</sup> With trade between the zones of Turkish occupation and the remainder of North and East Syria impossible, this shift in control will have a severe detrimental impact on the local economy and market in agricultural produce – compounded by individual instances of direct looting by Turkish-backed factions. See the section below on 'looting' for more information on the ongoing economic impact of the TNA's seizure of agricultural land, manufacturing facilities and private and co-operative property.

33 Qamishlo economic committee, forthcoming research paper provided to RIC  
 34 RIC field interviews conducted 9 October to 19 October  
 35 OCHA HNAP update provided to RIC, 14 November  
 36 RIC field team observations; OCHA HNAP update, 14 November  
 37 RIC field team, Qamishlo, 20 November  
 38 Qamishlo economic committee, forthcoming research paper provided to RIC

## 5.3 Impact on IDP camps and humanitarian access

Both IDP camps and secure facilities holding ISIS-linked detainees have been targeted by Turkish forces during the invasion. It is strikes on or near facilities holding ISIS detainees in Derik, Kobane, Qamishlo and Ayn Issa which have drawn the most international attention, with ISIS prisoners escaping in both Ayn Issa and Qamishlo following these strikes.

The large majority of those affected, however, have been ordinary IDPs without any link to ISIS. Firstly, Turkish strikes forced the evacuation of Mabrouka camp, home to IDPs originally displaced during the war against ISIS. 623 camp residents have now been returned to their home communities in Deir-ez-Zor. However, the majority of the camp's approximately 4000 residents were displaced once again, with the camp evacuated on 11 October. 84 residents, including four pregnant women, were stranded in the camp as it was seized by Turkish-backed forces on 14 October, and were only extracted following mediation by international actors.<sup>39</sup>

In Ayn Issa camp, meanwhile, sleeper cell attacks in and around the camp compounded Turkish bombing drawing near to the camp on 13 October, triggering widespread panic and mass break-out attempts from the secure section for ISIS-linked detainees. Humanitarian actors were forced

to withdraw as the situation descended into chaos. By 16 October, approximately 13,000 IDPs had been evacuated from the camp to Areeha camp, Mahmoudli camp near Tabqa and other, ad-hoc encampments.

The large IDP camp at Ayn Issa had been one of the most successful established by the Autonomous Administration together with international partners. Save for the secure section housing ISIS-linked foreigners, Ayn Issa was an open camp with strong participation from camp

residents in the local economy, and a steady rate of return back to home communities as reconstruction efforts advanced in nearby Raqqa<sup>40</sup>. However, Turkish targeting of this key piece of humanitarian infrastructure has caused years of humanitarian work to be erased overnight.

Attacks on logistical routes have compounded the crisis in Hol camp, already precipitated by the

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*Damage in the Ayn Issa camp, where 13,000 civilian IDPs were forced to flee by Turkish shelling*

<sup>39</sup> OCHA HNAP update, 14 November

<sup>40</sup> RIC field team visited camp on several occasions prior to its evacuation



withdrawal and reduction of INGO services and the withdrawal of military and security forces charged with ensuring security in the camp. Virtually no NGOs remained active in Hol camp by 10 October, all medical referrals from the camp to Hasakah were frozen, and as of 24 October international food aid was still not arriving in the camp. The camp has witnessed a string of break-out attempts from the first day of the Turkish invasion on October 9 through an uprising on 11 October and break-out attempts throughout October up to the latest break-out on 14 November.<sup>41</sup>



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*The Turkish invasion cut off aid and forced the withdrawal of security from secure camps housing ISIS detainees*

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Alan Dahir, a health official in the camp, told RIC: “At one time, the Autonomous Administration was spreading kitchen gas among the families, as they used to do each month. But due to the war, the route was cut, again there were problems. It was not enough for everyone. Sometimes a big tanker came to spread gas to everyone. And all this generated jealousy: “This isn’t enough, why didn’t you give to me, but to my neighbor you did...” Our resources aren’t enough; we cannot work with these resources: this generated more conflicts. And then they attacked offices in the camp, and the Asayish [camp security]...”

As of 21 November, some NGOs providing cross-border aid had announced their permanent withdrawal from the camp, while health points in the camp remained closed and referrals out of the camp for serious medical cases were more challenging than ever. The security situation remained poor, with at least 20 tent-burning incidents in the camp throughout November, com-

<sup>41</sup> RIC interviews with camp staff, 11 October to 24 November

pared to 9 the month before.<sup>42</sup>

NGOs have also seen a significant reduction in the services they are able to provide across North and East Syria. This is in part precipitated by the mass exodus of foreign NGO workers - by 15 October all foreign INGO staff were completely withdrawn, though some are now returning – but also as a result of consistent targeting and obstructing of vital arterial highways such as the M4, which was used by hundreds of trucks of aid every month prior to the invasion and is now impassable. Somewhat ironically, the long, poorly-maintained, sleeper-cell-plagued road south via ISIS' former stronghold Raqqa has become the safest option for travel through North and East Syria. As a result, the volume of aid reaching western regions has considerably decreased<sup>43</sup>.

At the time of writing on 23 November, Turkish attacks on the road network north of Ayn Issa had closed the road to Kobane and were threatening to close secondary routes, forcing a further four-hour detour via Tabqa to reach Kobane. Many of these secondary roads will become impassable to goods vehicles with the onset of the winter rains, with the UN warning of the further impact this will have on aid intended for the increasingly-isolated Kobane region.

As noted above, civilian infrastructure used for military purposes – a road used to transport military units as well as by civilians, for example – can constitute legitimate target during a military operation. However, under Protocol I of the Geneva Convention “it is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove, or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works, for the specific purpose of denying them for their sustenance value to the civilian population.”<sup>44</sup> Intentionality in such cases is difficult to prove, but the targeting of Allouk station – which stands well outside the city itself far from any other target and just 600M from the Turkish border – constitutes the clearest potential instance of war crimes committed by Turkish forces in this field. You can see our humanitarian update, published 4 November, for a broader picture of the impact of the Turkish invasion on civilian and humanitarian infrastructure across the region.

42 Hol camp snapshot, UN, 21 November

43 RIC field team interviews, Kobane, 19-23 November

44 [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2\\_rul\\_rule54](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule54)

## 6. LOOTING AND PROPERTY CRIMES

The large-scale expulsion of the civilian population – particularly Kurds and Christian minorities such as Armenians – has provided occasion for widespread looting and property crimes, committed both by individual members of Turkish-backed factions and on a more systematic basis. A fatwa issued by the Syrian Islamic Council, the Turkish-linked religious authority tied to the Syrian National Council, declares it permissible to wage jihad against the SDF, with the SDF's guns, belongings, and property legitimate war spoils<sup>45</sup>.

*Extract from Fatwa #11 of the Syrian Islamic Council:*

*“The SDF militia is a corrupt group that must be fought to protect souls, the homeland and its wealth...*

*The separatist militia referred to as “SDF” is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious coalition, with suspicious alliances with the regime, and American forces, and has the intention to divide the country and harm the Syrian revolution. It has come into confrontation with the rebels and even fought them and assisted the regime against them... some of their members are atheists and they mock religion, which confirms that this faction represents a separatist project hostile to the people, their identity and their aspirations... to fight against the SDF is jihad for the sake of Allah.*

*With regard to their belongings, properties, food and drink, which they used in combat, they may be taken and used by the mujahedeen in the fight [against SDF]. The furniture and property found in villages and houses belonging to the general population, Kurds and others, should not be attacked or harmed.”*

Though the fatwa does not grant permission to loot the property of private civilians, the reality on the ground is that TNA have been given free rein to loot private property and civilian infrastructure. With mandatory military service in the SDF for at least one person in every family – and many more volunteering to join YPG, YPJ or other forces within the SDF – every family *de facto* becomes a legitimate target. It is a pattern which will be familiar to any observers who have followed widespread property crimes committed by Turkish-backed factions in Afrin since its seizure in March 2019 – with Turkish-backed factions looting everything from ancient archaeological heritage sites through the region's olive groves to private homes<sup>46</sup>.

### 6.1 Public property, businesses and cooperatives

The same processes as took place in Afrin are now underway in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, with public property, businesses and cooperatives all seized by Turkish-backed forces. Wheat silos have been among the most prominent targets. Under the Autonomous Administration, wheat was purchased, processed into the local staple bread and then distributed via the commune system at subsidized cost. The following silos have now been seized by Turkish-backed factions, with

<sup>45</sup> [https://sy-sic.com/?p=6465&fbclid=IwAR07pknOEcl8-Z6JxhPJJHRTDxIjzluT2qwaqkj2Rcf6edRfUD8mGYpU\\_w0w](https://sy-sic.com/?p=6465&fbclid=IwAR07pknOEcl8-Z6JxhPJJHRTDxIjzluT2qwaqkj2Rcf6edRfUD8mGYpU_w0w)

<sup>46</sup> [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/63745/MED\\_2019\\_10.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/63745/MED_2019_10.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y)

some already being plundered and resold by Turkish factions<sup>47</sup>.

Name	Location	Contents	Outcome
Dehliz	Tel Abyad	700 tons of wheat, 21000 tons of barley	Looted
Sakhirat	Tel Abyad	11700 tons of wheat	Destroyed
Seed depot	Tel Abyad	800 tons of cleaned seeds	Seized
Suluk	Tel Abyad	Wheat, unknown quantity	Looted
Aliye	Sere Kaniye	15000 tons of wheat	Looted
Safih	Sere Kaniye	9000 tons of wheat	Looted
Mabrouka	Sere Kaniye	1500 tons of wheat	Looted
Safih/Mabrouka	Sere Kaniye	12,000 tons of barley total	Looted
Co-operative agricultural associations	Sere Kaniye countryside	800 tons of wheat, 1500 tons of fertilizer	Looted

It has further been reported that Turkish-backed factions have been transporting looted wheat to Turkey, where such staples command a higher price, for resale – leading to widespread bread shortages in both Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.<sup>48,49</sup> Mohammed Abdo, an official from Tel Abyad, has confirmed to RIC that in the days following 21 October wheat was likewise being transferred across the border in Suluk, near Tel Abyad. Similarly, looting of copper wire from electrical infrastructure by TNA faction Jabhat al-Shammiya in the Tel Abyad countryside has left the surrounding villages and settlements without power.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, an explosion at the border crossing from Sere Kaniye into Turkey took place as factions continued to illegally transfer the city’s 400,000L reserves of diesel fuel across the border into Turkey, while the Bedlo gas station in Ayn Arus near Tel Abyad has also been looted – contributing to fuel shortages in both cities.<sup>51</sup> All of these incidents underscore that looting does not only have an impact on the private individuals whose property is looted, but also creates a wider impact on the local community and economy.

Prior to the invasion, cooperatives were being introduced across North and East Syria as a third branch of the local economy, ultimately intended to become the foundation of a new ‘social economy.’ These cooperatives, which were particularly prominent in both Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, have been a natural target for looters. In Sere Kaniye, the cooperative Mesopotamia Bakery has been seized by Turkish-backed factions, resulting in the loss of machinery and reserves. Co-operative agricultural associations have also been plundered, with the total loss of 800 tons of wheat plus 1500 tons of fertilizer from six co-operatives in the Sere Kaniye countryside located in the villages of Qutaina, Qeshqa and Adamiya, Haroubi, Tal Thalaj, Ayn Hessian and Abu Shakay.<sup>52</sup>

RIC has also been able to document the looting of a number of specific homes and businesses in Sere Kaniye, interviewing small business owners and private individuals who have lost their homes and livelihoods.

Business owner Riad\*, who trades in household goods, told RIC that he had spoken directly with the TNA members who seized his warehouse:

47 Forthcoming research paper from Qamishlo Economic Committee provided to RIC; interviews conducted by RIC field team in Hasekah and Tel Tamer 29 Oct to 6 November; Syrian Observatory of Human Rights  
 48 RIC field interview, 26 November  
 49 <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=346669>  
 50 Footage provided to RIC field researchers  
 51 <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=147302>  
 52 Forthcoming research paper from Qamishlo economic committee; RIC field interviews



1The home of a prominent local doctor was seized and converted into a mosque by TNA fighters

“First, they contacted me via an Arab acquaintance. He said that the proxy forces had found SDF papers belonging to my son, but that it didn’t matter, I could come back. He said they wanted to sell me back my own goods for \$700,000 [USD].

“After, the proxy forces contacted me directly. They said the Arab acquaintance was trying to secure his own profits, and asking for extra money on top of the price. But they still wanted me to pay them \$500,000 for my own property. I told them no, of course. I don’t have the money to pay them. I have nothing left. I left in a car with only what I could carry, some small personal possessions.



“[In any case] I cannot safely travel back into the city: I am sure they would kidnap me. They are kidnapping many people who go back. I cannot trust them.”

Another prominent local property-owner, Fuad Pasha, told RIC: “I worked as a farmer, but I was also one of the most prominent citizens in Sere Kaniye, and for this reason I, like everybody who was connected to the Autonomous Administration, became a target. My home was burned, this is proof.

Turkish-backed fighters got into the fields that I owned and looted everything: my horses, my agricultural equipment and tractors, electrical generators and pumps, in particular my cotton fields. I owned 7 to 8 buildings, all of which have been seized and burned. The financial losses I incurred amounted to at least 100,000,000SYP [At least \$133,000 at current exchange rates.]

I owned 2000 dunum [200 hectares] of cotton. They are also digging up and stealing my cotton; my tractors, oil, water tankers. For example, I had an electrical generator worth 3,000,000SYP, but faction members damaged it and then sold it for 50,000SYP! If they had come to me and asked me for 100,000SYP, I would have accepted it.”

Still from footage provided to RIC by Hamid Sino, shot by his mother-in-law and capturing the ransacking of his home in Sere Kaniye

While the case studies here cover prominent property-owners in the city who have lost significant

amounts of capital, the same is true for small business owners across the city. Beyar Embine similarly described to RIC the looting of the Sere Kaniye industrial quarter where he used to work: “There were around 360 shops in the industrial area. I owned one of them, a shop for cutting steel. We had to abandon everything. Those who did this were members of armed groups, from Duma, Ghouta, Idlib... now armed groups are in possession of my shop, and all the wealth of the city.”



House in Sere Kaniye marked as the property of TNA faction Liwa-al-Mutasim, with the graffiti declaring the owners “forbidden to return”

## 6.2 Private homes

The same fate has befallen many private homes. RIC researchers have interviewed at least five IDPs from Tel Abyad and seven from Sere Kaniye who reported seizure or destruction of their property, as well as prevention of return in some instances. Fatma\*, an Arabic woman from Sere Kaniye, told RIC: "I saw on Facebook that my home had been looted. My husband is Kurdish and he isn't especially close to the Autonomous Administration: he just plays in a football team. And yet we have lost everything. We are living in a park. We didn't do anything to deserve this." She provided footage from the inside of her home to RIC, showing ransacked rooms stripped of everything of value: we are not republishing those images here due to Fatma's fear of reprisals against her family.

While it is sometimes difficult for locals to identify precisely which of the Turkish-backed factions has seized their homes, factions often write their names on private property which they claim as their own. Where these incidents are caught on camera, it is possible to identify the responsible factions. Clandestine footage included in the RIC database shows almost every property on main streets marked up with the names of factions including Sultan Murad and Liwa Mutasim, as well as individual fighters including one Abu Walid al-Homsi<sup>53</sup>. In another high-profile incident, homes belonging to Armenian Christian families in Tel Abyad were marked out as the new property of Jabhat-al-Shammiya<sup>54</sup>.

Likewise, a house in Sere Kaniye was marked as the property of one Abu Mohammed al-Janoudi of TNA faction Liwa-al-Mutasim, with the graffiti declaring the owners "forbidden to return". RIC researchers found the home's owner Saleh Ahmed in Hasakah.

He told RIC: "Our home has been looted by Turkish proxies, we cannot go back. In Sere Kaniye, civilians have been killed for their minivans, which were then stolen. Now there are no Kurds or Christians, including the Armenians, in Sere Kaniye. Before, Church Street [in Sere Kaniye] was all Christians; they were our neighbors and friends. Now it is impossible for us to go back. Only the Arabs can go back, and not all of them."

Similar incidents are reported in Tel Abyad, where the vegetable oil factory; chicken farms; factories and workshops producing pipes, bricks, ice, potato chips, cleaning products and confectionary; and grain and cotton processing stations have all been reported as looted.<sup>55</sup>

Mehmud Bave Julia, an IDP from Tel Abyad, gave RIC a picture of looting and prevention of return across the city in general and targeting the Kurdish minority population in particular:



*The home of Sere Kaniye resident Fuad Pasha was ransacked and burned by TNA fighters*

53 Footage provided Syria Independent Media Team, 15 November

54 <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=146432>

55 Qamishlo Economic Committee, forthcoming research paper provided to RIC

“There were thousands of Kurdish people living in Tel Abyad. Now, there are only about ten [Kurdish] families left, and they are those who were working with Turkey since the start. A Kurdish family who were returning to try and retrieve property from Qorfile village were struck by a drone, killing two of them and wounding three. The son lost his hand.

I speak to people in Tel Abyad every day, Arabs, friends of mine. We did not see any difference between Arabs, Kurds and Christians. Because of the looting there are shortages of water, oil, bread, and those who complain are beaten. From the mosques they announced that the homes and property of Kurdish people were halal to be looted, and now the Turkish-backed factions are fighting over our property.

We lost our home in Tel Abyad city, two cars, and we cannot return to our village either, though it is 20KM to the west of Tel Abyad. There are Turkish-backed proxies in our village, though the agreement was supposed to be between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye. Where are the UN and America?

Some say the Arabs who remained in the city are working with the Turkish proxies, but they are also being looted.”

Emina, an IDP from Tel Abyad, likewise described prevention of return to RIC:

“After we left, our home was looted. Now it is full of proxy forces’ militants, they have even spray painted the name of their group across the walls of our home. Our home was looted and destroyed. Some days ago, my cousin wanted to return to our home and see what condition it was in. He wasn’t able to even get close to it.

No one can return to our village. I have already said, my cousin tried to go home but was not able to return. He was clever, and tried again, but members of the proxy forces told him he no longer has business in Tel Abyad and should not return.”

The implicit and explicit denial of the right of return described both here and earlier in this report, especially to Kurds and Christians, works to facilitate the expropriation of civilians’ property and livelihood.

## 6.3 Theft and petty looting

Widespread petty looting by individual faction members or small groups is also commonplace. Khalte Akash from Sere Kaniye told RIC: “When someone returns to Sere Kaniye, their ID card is taken. [TNA] falsely accuse them of being criminals. Many of those who return are arrested, and their location is not known.”

Ms. Akash’s report accords with testimony from other interviewees of phones being seized and their owners being detained following a search of the contents, as well as the seizure of phones from anyone seen to be filming the actions of Turkish-backed groups in the city. Other civilians report flying checkpoints controlled by factions within the Turkish-backed forces demanding payments of up to 5000SYP to cross from street to street within the city, as well as to enter the city itself<sup>56</sup>. Internal security briefings circulated by an INGO and seen by RIC confirm these reports.

CCTV footage from Asadiye village, Sere Kaniye, shows Turkish-backed fighters arriving in a Turk-

56 RIC field interviews, 24 October to 23 November

ish military vehicle to a shop before breaking in and looting the cash register, while in Suluk, Turkish-backed fighters filmed themselves as a member of their group removed the watch from a corpse. These incidents were incidentally caught on camera; many more go unseen. A market was reportedly established in Tel Khalef, west of Sere Kaniye, where Turkish-backed fighters bought and sold looted private property such as motorbikes, white goods and mobile phones<sup>57</sup>.

Elizabeth Tsurkov is a researcher who speaks directly with members of Turkish-backed factions, and was able to confirm some of these reports from the Turkish side. She told RIC that members of the Turkish-backed factions' military police theoretically tasked with controlling private looting were "constantly catching guys with mobile phones and lira on them... it's so widespread I don't think they would remember anyone incident in particular... In Sere Kaniye, looting began after the complete capture of the city, in a more systematic way." TNA members speaking to Ms. Tsurkov painted an overall picture of lawlessness, with it "impossible" for the military police to control factions' criminality, and frequent infighting over the control of checkpoints as a way to extort cash from passers-by<sup>58</sup>.

Such thefts are compounded by incidents of kidnap for ransom. In Raqqa, RIC researchers spoke to Mohammed Brahim Bin Mohammed, whose family paid a ransom of 400,000SYP (around \$500) to secure his release following ten days' imprisonment and torture: "I don't know what to say, they attacked me, they took all the money and the car I and my brother's child were riding in. They beat me and took me to a prison. My brother's child was wounded and we were leaving the city. But they arrested me and put me in prison. They said, until you give us money we won't let you go. I was there for ten days. I am seventy years old."

Family members confirmed Mohammed's story, further explaining that Mohammed was seized in Sheba village along with his relatives Fadel Ibrahim, Juma Ibrahim, and Khalil Ibrahim. Mohammed's son-in-law, Mustafa Mahmud Horsalan, provided a second eyewitness account describing how the arrestees' homes were burned in front of them, with the family reporting a 10,000,000SYP ransom to secure their most elderly relative's release. The other three – two elderly civilians as well as one SDF member – remain detained.

Civilians both entering and leaving the zone of Turkish control are at risk of arbitrary arrest, which serves to facilitate the appropriation of property as well as demanding ransom from family mem-

### Case study

*Hej Juma is a civilian from Sere Kaniye. He told RIC:*

*"I had two car-part shops in the industrial neighborhood. I had just brought new material from Iraqi Kurdistan; the shops were full when I had to leave Sere Kaniye. I had also a depot for homeware, which I had only recently opened. Approximately 70% of my goods have been taken. I have lost \$170,000 [USD] in my general shop and \$500,000 in my shops selling car parts.*

*Apart from the shops, I have lost my home. They have looted and destroyed my property. They have taken everything valuable that they can carry easily such as the TV and internet router and destroyed the rest. I took some car parts in a people carrier to Tel Tamer, but it was only a small amount.*

*I am exhausted, I was always on the road, I worked day and night. I used to load and unload all the goods myself. Sometimes, I used to get home at 4AM. The Turkish proxies have called me three times; they have left me voice messages saying that I am worse than a pig. I will not go back as long as Turkish proxies are there. If I had gone back, they could have attacked me."*

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=144696>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>



bers. As noted above, RIC has documented two incidents of TNA members demanding a ransom for the return of the corpses of killed civilians.

This 'systematic looting' is harder for rights organizations and observers to document than other crimes detailed in this dossier, and has not captured the same media attention as more flagrant abuses of power. Nonetheless, it constitutes a war crime which has a devastating effect on both private individuals and the wider economy.

**Table: businesses looted by Turkish-backed factions in Sere Kaniye**

Location	Business	Owner
Tel Khalaf road	Bulgur factory	Amar Abdu and associates
Allouk	Grain processing station	Ahmed Izedin Abdulah
Kerach Hajiz	Sweet shop	Hasen Ali Shekho
Near Sinaha (manufacturing district)	Grain processing station	Muhammad Nayif Meo
Sere Kaniye- close to Sinaha	Cotton factory	Muhammad Nayif Meo
Near Sinaha (manufacturing district)	Cotton factory	Khaled Abdulhamid Jawish
Safeh	Grain processing station	Khaled Abdulhamid Jawish
Aliye	Ice factory	Fadi Hamid Muhammad
Tel Khalaf	Oil press	Amar Abdu and associates
Um Jefre	Manufacturing plant	Mihemed Nayif Meo
Ekar Nedas	Potato chips factory	Muhammad Nayif Meo
Sere Kaniye	Potato chips factory	Rodi Ismet Lali
Diwelan	Grain processing station	Ferech Jasim Abdu
Near Tel Khalaf	Industrial bakery	Abduljabar Sioud
Sinaha	Car-part shops	Hej Juma
Sinaha	Homeware depot	Hej Juma

## 7. CONCLUSION

### 7.1 Compound violations

Some of the individual violations identified in this report – the execution of three health workers on 13 October in Suluk, the 16 October killing of three civilians attempting to return home to Suluk - constitute violations potentially amounting to war crimes in their own right. More broadly, the different forms of attacks compound and build upon one another to constitute a multifaceted assault on all civilians' right to a free, safe and peaceful existence.

Civilians targeted by shelling are not reached by medical teams as Turkish forces deny ambulances safe access: looting of civil infrastructure denies civilians access to bread, electricity and other staples. The four fields of concern identified here combine into a unified policy. Despite Turkey's efforts to whitewash the image of the TNA even as it uses them to distance itself from responsibility on the battlefield, civilians have consistently faced and continue to face abuses directed at their persons, property and way of life. The accusation of links to the SDF is enough to ensure arrest, and with mandatory military service for at least one person from every family, every family in the region becomes a legitimate target for the TNA under the terms of their fatwa to wage jihad against the SDF.

### 7.2 Assigning responsibility: TAF and SNA

These compound abuses are not solely committed by TNA members. As Zainab, a mother in Dirbesiye, told RIC:

"The women run away because of the jihadis... Because they aren't Turkish soldiers, they have long hair, [they] carry knives... they take women and sell them, they take women for themselves and trade them among themselves. For this reason, women flee the city. Why do they bring their children? Because Turkey bombs and burns the children... This is why the women and children leave, they say, 'if it were only Turkish soldiers, if they didn't attack with warplanes, we would remain here and support our fighters.'"

Her comments illustrate the dual strategy behind Turkey's preferred mode of warfare, using warplanes, main battle tanks, strike drones and artillery to break down the opposition while sending in waves of TNA ground troops. These extremist factions themselves serve a dual purpose on the battlefield: while terrifying the local civilian population through acts of extreme violence, they also allow Turkey to disavow responsibility and vow to seek out individual 'bad actors' responsible for those war-crimes which happen to be caught on camera.

The TAF bear clear responsibility for some of the incidents detailed above. Air strikes targeting civilians, clearly-marked medical and humanitarian convoys and civilian infrastructure are the most obvious examples of war crimes which could only be committed by the TAF, since it is only they who operate warplanes and strike drones. However, a cursory investigation of the command and control structure of jihadist factions like Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, Jaysh-al-Islam and Sultan

Murad shows that responsibility flows directly up to the TAF – and by extension their commander-in-chief, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

TNA factions are grouped under the banner of the “Syrian National Army,” and technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government<sup>59</sup>, a Turkish-sponsored body which lobbies on behalf of the TNA in Geneva and other foreign capitals. In practice, they are trained, armed, funded and commanded by the Turkish government.<sup>60</sup> The TNA number “at least 35,000 full-time fighters, all under the near-total control of Turkey’s Ministry of Defense and National Intelligence Organization (MIT).”<sup>61</sup>

Though these groups’ stated *raison-d’être* is the “downfall of the Syrian regime,”<sup>62</sup> in reality they serve as Turkey’s mercenaries, carrying out Turkish foreign policy objectives and denied any real opportunity to attack the Damascus regime in favor of repeated operations against areas under the protection of the Kurdish-led SDF.



*Ibrahim Khalef, the civilian victim of a bombing by a TAF strike drone on 31 October, dies on the operating table*

In areas under nominal TNA control, they are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population. But real power is retained by Turkey, through direct control of local political bodies, top-down exploitation of economic resources, and governance through proxies “dependent on Turkey’s political, economic and military backing for their survival.”<sup>63</sup>

On the battlefield, likewise, TNA take their commands directly from Turkey<sup>64</sup>. A recent piece of in-depth research by Elizabeth Tsurkov, speaking to multiple sources within the ranks of the TNA, confirmed:

“All decisions, big and small, in the ‘National Army’ are made by the operations room run by Turkish intelligence.”<sup>65</sup> Turkey bussed these fighters across Turkish soil in their thousands to participate in the offensive, and they advance only in coordination with Turkey’s wishes – and its warplanes. The TNA serve as both ‘shock troops’ and ‘cannon fodder’<sup>66</sup>, but little more. Even as he downplayed the scale of violations during the Turkish invasion, US special envoy for Syria James Jeffrey made clear the US government’s position on where responsibility for the TNA’s actions lies: “We’d say that Turkey-supported Syrian opposition forces who were under general

59 <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2019/10/A54En.pdf>

60 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50250330>

61 <https://www.mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner>

62 <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/31991>

63 [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/PB\\_Turkey\\_in\\_Northwestern\\_Syria\\_June\\_2019.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/PB_Turkey_in_Northwestern_Syria_June_2019.pdf)

64 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50250330>

65 “

66 <https://www.meforum.org/59647/us-policy-on-syria-unravels-ceasefire-fails>

Turkish command, at least in one instance did carry out war crimes.”<sup>67</sup>

No matter if the culprits wear the insignia of the Turkish Air Force or Jaysh-al-Islam, it is Turkey which bears ultimate responsibility for arming, training and funding these militias, and finally transporting them hundreds of miles to territory they have never seen before to wage war. Erdogan’s rhetoric – “we will be violent among the heathens, as we are in Syria”<sup>68</sup> – is echoed on the ground by TNA fighters issuing death threats against “infidels.”<sup>69</sup>

## 7.3 Taking action

Turkey has proven itself neither capable of nor willing to control the actions of its proxy militias under the banner of the TNA, while members of its own Armed Forces are directly culpable for some of the incidents outlined above. As such, it is the international community which must take action. We hope that this report will broaden the discussion around war crimes committed by TAF and the TNA from focusing on a couple of important but isolated incidents into a wider framework whereby Turkey’s systematic aggressions against the local civilian population are understood as inevitably leading to atrocities like the execution of Hevrin Khalef.

The responsibility now lies with international news organizations to document these offenses, particularly as the news cycle moves away from North and East Syria following an initial flurry of interest; with international humanitarian organizations to move to mitigate the human cost of the Turkish invasion; and with both state and non-state international actors to act on this evidence base to hold Turkey to account for its actions through legal and political channels.

We will close this report by providing three concrete proposals for next steps in holding the TNA, TAF and Turkish government to account for its actions since the 9 October, namely: identifying at-risk groups; understanding the Turkish invasion as intentional, forced demographic change; and conducting an independent fact-finding mission into the zone newly occupied by Turkey.

Firstly, it is important to note that Turkey’s multifaceted assault on civilians disproportionately affects at-risk and minority groups. As has been documented in more detail elsewhere, local Christian and Yazidi minorities have been displaced from their homes – with Armenian Christian houses specially marked out for looting in Tel Abyad, where an Armenian Church was also desecrated by Turkish-backed forces. These actions in Tel Abyad send a message to the Christian community concentrated in the Khabour valley close to Tel Tamer, where war is drawing close and displacing more villagers every day. The Christian community there, like the Yazidi community displaced from villages around Sere Kaniye, has repeatedly voiced its alarm at the advance of what its community leaders describe as a jihadi army indistinguishable from ISIS’ ‘army of the caliphate’ as it swept through the same region back in 2015. Yazidi and Christian minorities in Afrin have faced expulsion from their villages, desecration of their holy sites and forced conversion at the hands of TNA factions. The same process is now repeating itself in the new zone of Turkish occupation.

Crimes directly targeting women were epitomized by the high-profile killing of Hevrin Khalef, as well as the on-camera humiliation of captured YPJ fighter Chichek Kobane and desecration of the

67 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50250330>

68 <https://ahvalnews.com/operation-peace-spring/erdogan-gives-conquest-sermon-support-turkeys-syria-operation>

69 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/syria-kurds-turkey-women.html>

body of YPJ fighter Amara Renas. Even where the victims were female fighters rather than civilians, the effect is to spread fear among civilian women of a repeat of the situation in Afrin, where enforced prostitution, trafficking and kidnapping of women for forcible marriage are commonplace. Women are also disproportionately represented among the new IDP population, driven into flight along with their children, where they then bear the responsibility of care for their family among the hostile circumstances outlined above<sup>70</sup>. UN reports note the increased risk of gender-based violence which inevitably accompanies civilian flight into displacement camps. The impact of the Turkish invasion and occupation on women and local religious minorities should be explored in more depth by specialists in these fields.

Secondly, and linked to these observations, the Kurds who have borne the brunt of the invasion should be understood as a regional minority group being subjected to forcible demographic engineering. The violence targeting civilians identified throughout this report should be contextualized as part of an intentional effort on Ankara's behalf to drive the Kurdish population in particular from the border regions, in order to facilitate a program of forced demographic change which some experts say "shows the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing."<sup>71</sup> International actors should consider the violations detailed in this report in the context of President Erdogan's domestic and regional political program, and his assertions that Kurds 'do not belong' in their ancestral homeland.



*Women and children displaced by the Turkish invasion sheltering in a school in Hasekah*

70 This does not mean that men are more likely to remain behind in the zone of occupation; rather, men are more likely to be fighting with the SDF, working elsewhere or abroad, or have been killed in previous SDF campaigns. It is also women who typically bear the responsibility for returning to the zone of occupation to check on their property, with men running a higher risk of kidnap or execution of they do so.

71 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-syria-safe-zone-ethnic-cleansing-death-toll-sna-a9225896.html>

Thirdly, the failure of the international community to take action over the occupation of Afrin should not be repeated. Local human rights defenders have protesting over rampant rights abuses conducted from the time of its occupation onward, but their documentation of systematic rape, kidnapping, extortion, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, Arabization of the population and socio-political Turkification has yet to make an impact in terms of international actors' attitudes towards Turkey and President Erdogan's government.<sup>72</sup>

Part of the problem is that Turkey does not allow independent journalists, rights monitors or humanitarian observers into the zones it occupies in Syria, while violently crushing civilian journalism and activism within these zones, as outlined above. International actors should insist that Turkey allows an independent fact-finding mission to enter both Afrin and the newly-occupied zone between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, comprising UN observers as well as independent journalists, and to conduct a thorough assessment of the rights violations being conducted there. Such a fact-finding mission could make a parallel visit to border regions still under the control of the SDF, to assess whether Turkey's own claims of a terror threat emanating from these regions are well-founded.

Prompt action could prevent both the loss of evidence, and the entrenchment of systematic rights abuses in the newly-occupied areas of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, as has previously been observed in Afrin. With Turkey now threatening to expand its zone of occupation into Kobane, it could also prevent a third, equally catastrophic invasion from taking place.

<sup>72</sup> <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/11/turkeys-track-record-the-occupation-of-afrin/>

## APPENDIX 1:

A database detailing over 150 rights violations committed by TAF and TNA since the start of the invasion, and sortable by date, type, location and outcome, is available online [here](#).

## APPENDIX 2:

### Turkey's history of targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure

39

For decades, Turkey's campaigns against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on its own soil have been marked by a scorched-earth policy against civilian populations in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iraq. Whole villages, forests and mountainsides have been burned down by Turkish forces during the 40-year conflict<sup>73,74</sup>. During campaigns in the 1990s, between 2500 and 4000 Kurdish villages and hamlets were destroyed or forcibly evacuated<sup>75</sup>.

The urban conflict which erupted between PKK-aligned youth militias and the TAF in 2015 saw similar tactics used in urban environments. Indiscriminate use of artillery and warplanes brought "unprecedented destruction" to cities such as Nuseybin, Dicle and Cizre, where 11,000 civilian homes were destroyed<sup>76</sup>. 189 people were killed in a single incident when Turkish forces stormed a basement where civilians were sheltering from bombardment<sup>77</sup>.

The invasion and occupation of Afrin was marked by trends identifiable in the present invasion east of the Euphrates, such as the death of civilians in indiscriminate shelling; the targeting of health infrastructure; and attempting to isolate population centers and cut them off from humanitarian aid, in violation of international law<sup>78,79,80</sup>. In general the war was conducted via much the same strategy as the present invasion: heavy bombardment backed up by the same jihadist factions.

Neither the invasion of Afrin nor the present invasion east of the Euphrates have seen the total, blanket destruction that Turkey proved itself capable of during its 2015 campaigns against Kurdish militants within its own borders. Indeed, Turkish propaganda has set side-by-side photos of total destruction in Raqqa following the US-led Coalition's bombing campaign against ISIS and the relatively intact skyline of Afrin city to suggest restraint and good practice on behalf of the TAF.

A fairer comparison would be with the campaign in 2015, when Turkey – like the US-led Coalition

73 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/turkish-army-razed-mountain-villages-in-search-for-pkk-3rqm33sjv0m>

74 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/turks-hold-victory-march-in-pkk-city-1103548.html>

75 <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/24/world/kurds-are-finally-heard-turkey-burned-our-villages.html>

76 <https://www.dw.com/en/unprecedented-destruction-of-kurdish-city-of-cizre/a-19265927>

77 [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR\\_South-East\\_TurkeyReport\\_10March2017.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TR/OHCHR_South-East_TurkeyReport_10March2017.pdf)

78 <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/w/turkey-2018-invasion-of-afrin-created-a-human-rights-catastrophe-research-concludes>

79 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/23/syria-civilian-deaths-turkish-attacks-may-be-unlawful>

80 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43228472>

- faced opposition which refused to retreat. In such circumstances, Turkey has indeed proven itself willing to raze civilian homes and infrastructure to the ground, with massive loss of civilian life. In both Afrin and Sere Kaniye, the SDF ultimately opted for retreat rather than remaining in indefensible positions. As such, though Sere Kaniye incurred significant damage - 20 of its 150 schools were destroyed, for example<sup>81</sup> - the cities which Turkey has invaded and occupied appear relatively intact.

<sup>81</sup> UN Flash update provided to RIC, 14 November



*Rojava Information Center, 1 December 2019*

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