

Q1
2021

THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION

DOCUMENTING RIGHTS ABUSES IN THE TURKISH
OCCUPIED REGIONS OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA



ROJAVA
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- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
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- SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- SAMARQAND BRIGADE
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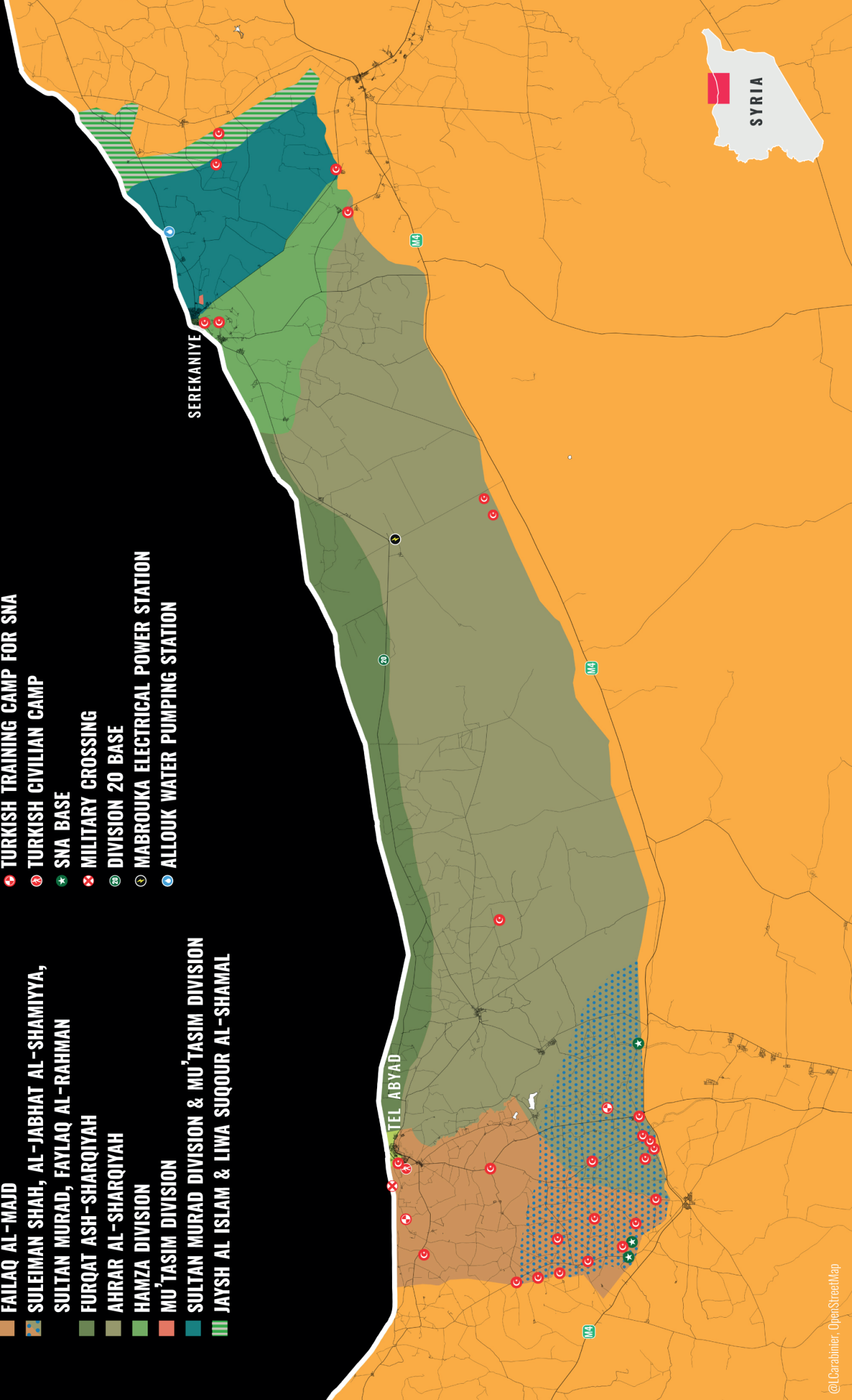


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- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- FAILAQ AL-MAJD
- SULEIMAN SHAH, AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA, SULTAN MURAD, FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
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SDF



INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Turkey has so far launched two major invasions into the territory of North and East Syria (NES) – in early 2018 and again in late 2019 - as well as further incursion into Syrian Arab-majority territory between Afrin and Kobane in 2016. While international human rights groups have rightly decried these invasions and their subsequent occupations for the litany of human rights abuses that they have caused, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Western governments, and international media do not yet treat the ethnic cleansing campaign conducted by a NATO-partner country with the gravity it deserves and, at times, obscure the true nature of the occupation. To name just one instance, a February 16th, 2021 New York Times article spoke of Turkish forces “protecting” Syrian Arab refugees who Turkey itself had resettled to Afrin in an attempt at engineering demographic change on their border.¹

This new quarterly report by the Rojava Information Center will shine a light on the gross human rights violations occurring in occupied Afrin and what we have termed the ‘M4 Strip’ (the territory north of the M4 highway occupied in 2019, including the cities of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad). The goal of these quarterly reports is to present foreign officials, fellow journalists and researchers, and interested readers with a clear picture of which crimes are being committed, how often, and by whom. We hope to provide up-to-date information and highlight trends in crime statistics. Additionally, the testimonies section seeks give a face and a name to the data we have collected.

METHODOLOGY

This report was written on the basis of RIC’s own OSINT research, in close collaboration with the ‘Afrin Human Rights Organization,’ a local NGO which collects on-the-ground, first-hand testimonies. We also shared information and cooperated with the ‘Hevdestî Association,’ an advocacy organization for victims of the Turkish occupation of the M4 Strip, based in Qamishlo. ‘Syrians for Truth and Justice,’ and the ‘Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria,’ two national NGOs who keep

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-erdogan-afrin.html>

independent databases on Afrin and the M4 Strip, were also consulted. These data were compared against research by the 'Syrian Observatory for Human Rights,' a UK-based organization. RIC faced particular challenges collecting reliable and complete data from the M4 Strip, as the area had a less well-established native news media landscape even before the invasion and fewer informants operate there. For this reason, graphs in the Quarterly Report section are based on Afrin only.

Additionally, RIC reviewed locals news articles from 'Afrin Post', 'Ezdina', and 'Documenting Rights Violations in Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ayn' in order to corroborate violations data.

Furthermore, RIC travelled to Shehba and Aleppo to collect in-depth testimonies from eight victims of human rights violations in Afrin, as well as interviews with dozens of other victims and with representatives from 'Afrin Human Rights Organization.' Due to security concerns for victims and their families, some accounts have had to be anonymized. Moreover, fearing for family members still in occupied areas, many victims refuse to speak on the record about their experiences, or do so only with people outside of NES. Collecting evidence of gender-based violence is especially difficult, as social stigma often prevents women and girls from speaking about their experiences.

RIC also drew on reports by the United Nations, the European Parliament, as well as academic articles. Historical information is based on previous RIC reports, or on third-party sources where quoted.

Maps were developed with the help of 'Afrin Human Rights Organization', the 'Hevdestî Association', as well as military sources and witness testimonies. RIC could not independently verify all faction ownerships, though some prison locations could be confirmed with the help of satellite data. Witness testimonies also helped to pinpoint militias to single villages and towns. Nonetheless, RIC makes no claim to completeness.

All maps and graphics were produced by mapmaker and designer Eduardo Artika (@LCarabinier).

THE TURKISH WAR OFFENSIVES & WAR CRIMES

2018 AFRIN INVASION

In January 2018, the Turkish army and accompanying proxy militias launched an invasion of Kurdish-majority Afrin, a canton of NES since 2014. The military operation against this olive-rich region of Syria, sardonically christened 'Operation Olive Branch,' included air strikes on over 100 locations, as well as an invasion force of 6,400 Turkish troops and up to 25,000 Syrian militiamen, including former members of ISIS, al-Nusra and other fundamentalist groups.^{2 3} Turkey based its aggression on the claim that Afrin had been the base for 700 cross-border attacks, though upon closer inspection, the BBC found only 26 such instances in the previous year, and merely 15 launched from Afrin itself.⁴ Afrin had seen virtually no fighting since 2011. The canton's population - 92% Kurdish by some estimates - swelled to up to half a million during the early stages of Syria's Civil War, as internally-displaced people (IDPs) settled in the area. As a result of the 2018 invasion, however, between 250,000 and 300,000 people were forced to flee Afrin. More than half settled in nearby Shehba . Thousands more were dispersed across NES, Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Europe.

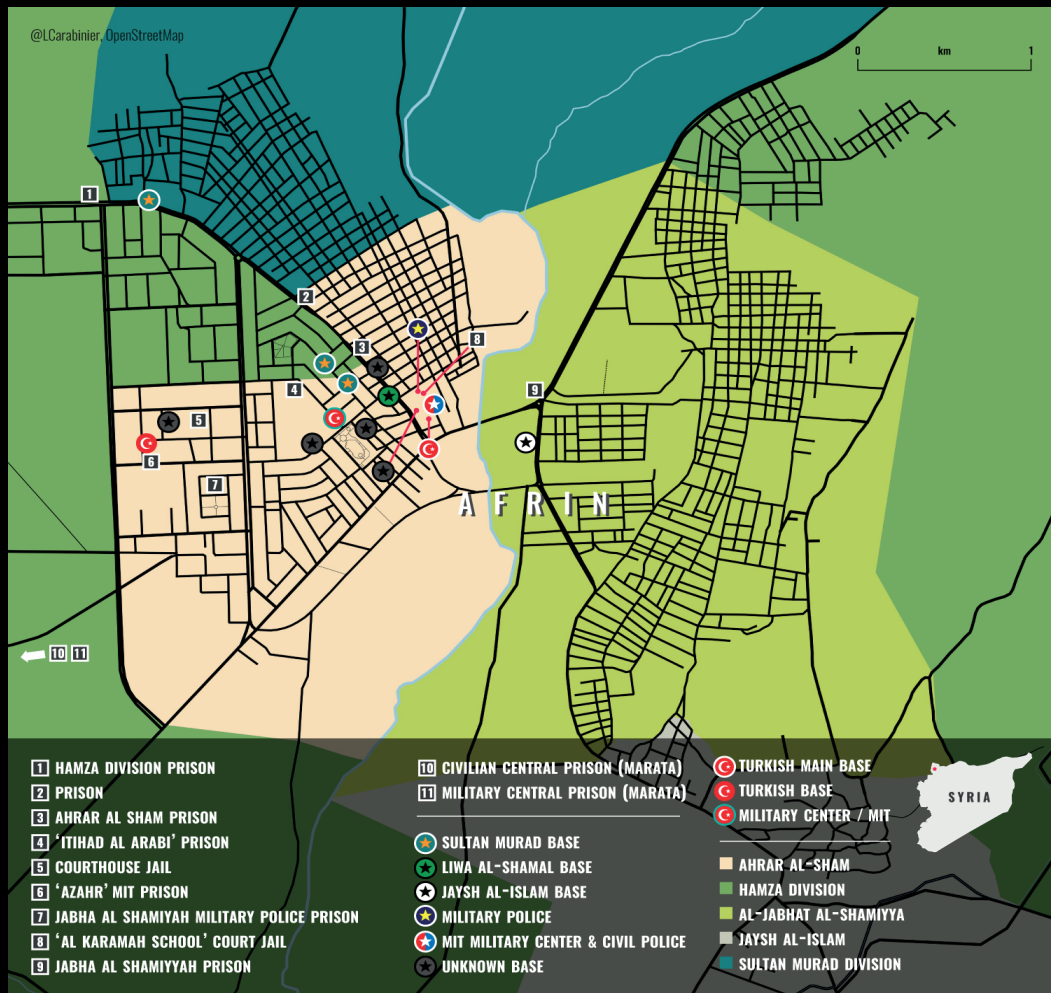
The operation furthermore led to the deaths of around 500 civilians and the injury of 700, as the invasion forces targeted health, education, and service facilities. Afrin Hospital alone was shelled thrice, as well as ambulances of the Kurdish Red Crescent. The destruction of water facilities furthermore led to acute water shortages. Under the Geneva Conventions, targeting "indispensable objects for the survival of the civilian population," such as water, as well as medical units are both prosecutable war crimes. Turkey's attacks on these facilities were not isolated incidents, but repeated and - in the case of water - ongoing attempts to hamper with or destroy them, and would thus fall within Geneva's Protocol I. In addition, Turkish-backed forces are accused of a multitude of crimes including: murder, kidnapping, torture, rape, religious persecution, extortion, and theft.

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-isis-afrin-syria-kurds-free-syrian-army-jihadi-video-fighters-recruits-a8199166.html>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-ria-turkey-rebels/fsa-commander-says-25000-syrian-rebels-back-turkish-force-in-syria-idUSKBN1FA00K>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-43262839>

The invading militias imposed laws reminiscent of ISIS' and other fundamentalist groups. Women in particular were targeted. A UN report commented that "severe restrictions on women's rights had been imposed in recent months. Violations include the imposition of strict dress codes for women and girls and limitations on freedom of movement."⁵ According to one account, around 90% of women now wear the hijab, where before Afrin had been the most progressive out of all Kurdish areas of Syria.⁶ Furthermore, Turkish-controlled militias committed acts of rape and desecration of female fighters' bodies during the war. Religious minorities were targeted for forced conversion. Over three-fourths of the 25,000 Yazidis inhabiting Afrin were forced to flee.⁷



⁵ United Nations, Human Rights Council, (15 August 2019), A/HRC/42/51

⁶ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

⁷ <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/03/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b1%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%83%d9%8a%d9%81-%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a5%d9%82%d9%84%d9%8a%d9%85-%d8%b9%d9%81%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%83%d9%8f%d8%b1%d8%af%d9%8a-%d8%a8/>

2019 M4 STRIP INVASION

Nearly two years later, after Turkey's President Erdogan's continuous advocacy for a 'security zone' stretching across the Kurdish-dominated Syrian, Turkey unilaterally began shelling the border cities of Tel Abyad (Gire Spi) and Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn) in the aftermath of an abrupt United States (US) troop pull-out. Within days, Turkish jets bombed these two cities as around 200,000 civilians fled from the advancing Turkish Army. Much as in Afrin, border insecurity was the *raison d'être* for the invasion, though only a single cross-border attack launched from Syria was recorded in 2019 (the suspect was arrested by security forces), while 30 attacks originating from Turkey were confirmed.⁸



⁸ <https://anfenglishmobile.com/rojava-northern-syria/six-injured-as-rocked-fired-into-ceylan-pinar-36438>

The so-called 'Operation Peace Springs' led to the deaths of 679 civilians and wounded 3,392, according to the 'Violations Documentation Center.'⁹ Turkey employed many of the same militias it had used in Afrin for its 2019 invasion. And as in Afrin, health facilities and personnel were targeted. 25 attacks on medical facilities were recorded, as well as the deliberate killing of five medical workers, and the injury of another eight. Four journalists were also killed – two alone when a Turkish air strike targeted a civilian convoy entering the city. Turkish air strikes led to the widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, including water pumping stations, dams, power stations and oil fields, in a strategy which the UN OCHR called "disturbing."¹⁰ The targeting of Alouk pumping station and other water facilities left 450,000 civilians without access to water, according to the UN.¹¹ Once again, this constitutes a violation of Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions. The execution of three health workers on October 13th in Suluk, and the October 16th killing of three civilians attempting to return home to Suluk constitute violations potentially amounting to war crimes in their own right.

Crimes directly targeting women were epitomized by the high-profile roadside assassination of Hevrin Khalef, a Kurdish politician, as well as the on-camera humiliation of captured YPJ fighter Çiçek Kobane and desecration of the body of YPJ (Female Protection Units) fighter Amara Rênas. Even though the victims were female fighters rather than civilians, the effect was to spread fear among civilian women of a repeat of the situation in Afrin, where rape, trafficking and kidnapping of women for forcible marriage are commonplace.

The invasion ended as a result of two bilateral agreements Turkey signed with the US and Russia, which fixed the limits of its zone of occupation. It is worth noting that Turkey's plan of establishing a 'security zone' along the border it shares with Syria for the roughly 3,6 million Syrian refugees it hosts is in itself an attempt at 'soft' demographic engineering, as 83% of those refugees are neither Kurdish nor native to NES. Since the end of the 2019 war, Turkey has repeatedly violated the ceasefire agreement. The occupied zone has furthermore insecurity within NES: Security officials at al-Hol camp tell RIC that recently-confiscated rifles in the hands of ISIS sleeper cells originate from Tel Abyad, while ISIS-linked women and children have been smuggled out of the camp and settled in Sere Kaniye. Militiamen active there have been encouraged to marry the widows by their superiors.

⁹ <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/43968>

¹⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25129&LangID=E>

¹¹ OCHA HNAP flash update, provided to RIC, 14 November

OCCUPATION & TURKISH RESPONSIBILITY

MILITARY AND SECURITY CONTROL

Following Turkey's 'Olive Branch' and 'Peace Spring' operations, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) system which had established Syria's best standards of security, rule of law and democratic participation was replaced by a patchwork of scores of warring militias conducting rights violations amounting to war crimes against the civilian population on a daily basis. These militias are technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government, a Turkish-sponsored body which lobbies on behalf of the Syrian National Army (SNA) in Geneva and other foreign capitals. In practice, they are trained, armed, funded and commanded by the Turkish government. The SNA 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)."¹²

On the battlefield, the SNA take their commands directly from Turkey. Day-to-day, they are granted very limited autonomy to extort civilians, loot and establish checkpoints in the balkanized zone of Turkish occupation, though inside sources have also revealed that most of the militias' actions are directed by Turkish orders. The militiamen are – as one member put it – nothing more than Turkey's "cannon fodder."¹³ Turkey is furthermore careful to retain ultimate control over both its proxy militias and the occupied territories as a whole. To this end, Turkey has established twelve major bases in Afrin, alongside dozens of small outposts along the frontlines with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There are also at least half-a-dozen Turkish bases in the 'Peace Spring' region, plus a string of observation points along the M4 highway. Turkish intelligence service MIT has also taken over local police stations throughout regions under their control.¹⁴

As research by Elizabeth Tsurkov, speaking to multiple sources within the ranks of the SNA, confirms: "All decisions, big and small, in the 'National Army' are made by the operations room run by Turkish intelligence."¹⁵ Turkey plays these factions off against one another, allowing them to clash over checkpoints and looted property

¹² <https://www.mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner>

¹³ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

¹⁴ <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20-%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Discrepant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹⁵ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

to prevent any one force growing too powerful, while maintaining ultimate control over the situation in its zones of occupation and ensuring that these factions ultimately conduct only Turkish military and political objectives.

As a result, the SNA has never fought in any battle or operation against the SAA. Turkey has gone so far as to arrest and hand a five-year prison sentence to a leading commander from an SNA faction as punishment for participating in an operation against the SAA in violation of Turkish wishes.¹⁶ Similarly, one of the few Kurdish commanders in the SNA was attacked, detained, tortured and removed from power by Turkey for speaking out against and refusing to participate in Turkey's operation against Afrin.¹⁷ When SNA fighters detained a number of SAA fighters during the Peace Spring operation, Turkey forced their immediate release, much to the chagrin of Syrian opposition activists and many SNA members.¹⁸ These high-profile incidents indicate the extent to which the SNA must remain focused on Turkish objectives of targeting the SDF, AANES and the indigenous (Kurdish) population.

In addition to its control of the SNA, Turkey also has a formal, direct control of the Syrian National Police and General Security Forces, using these internal security apparatuses to facilitate its control of its zones of operation. These forces are directly trained within Turkey, while Turkey also delivers training and support to special 'commando' forces within its zone of occupation, under the control of the Turkish General Security Directorate.¹⁹ Turkmen factions are singled out for especial support and favor by Turkey, due to their (perceived) loyalty to the Turkish state. As such, factions like the Hamza Division, Sultan Murad and the Mu'tasim Division are granted additional training and funding. These groups are now being manoeuvred by Ankara into a 'Turkmen belt' along the Turkish border, at the expense of other, Sunni Arab-led, factions. (See Occupied Afrin map)

TURKISH CULPABILITY FOR WAR CRIMES AND VIOLATIONS IN ITS ZONE OF OCCUPATION

Beyond the initial exodus in the aftermath of Turkey's military invasion of Afrin, almost 100,000 mostly-Kurdish inhabitants of the occupied region have been forcibly displaced by a systematic campaign of violence, arrests and torture.²⁰ They were replaced by up to 400,000 Arab IDPs from northern Homs and the Ghouta neighbourhood of Damascus, as well as Syrian Turkmen, in what the European Union Parliament said could "amount to ethnic cleansing."²¹ These refugees said they were

¹⁶ <https://deirezzor24.net/en/activists-from-deir-ezzor-launch-a-campaign-to-demand-the-release-of-abu-khawla-muhassan-a-military-commander-of-the-free-army/>

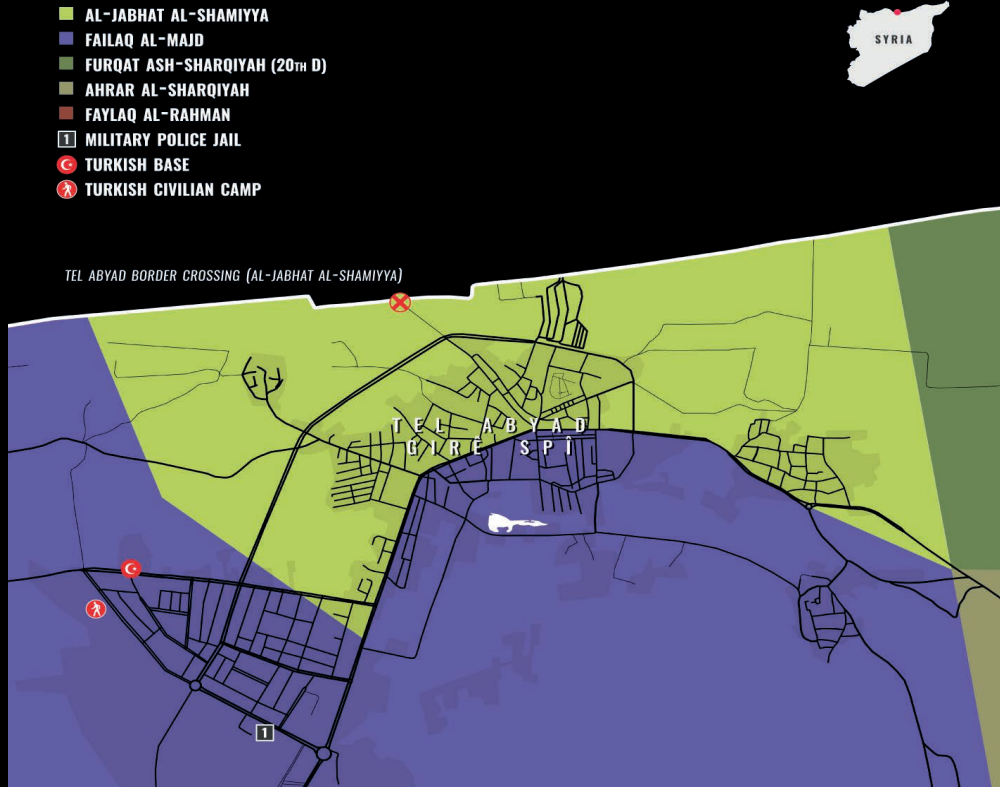
¹⁷ <http://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%98afrin-is-a-red-line%E2%80%99-kurdish-fsa-commander-loses-his-faction-after-refusing-to-fight/>

¹⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/syria-ypg-turkey-russia-national-army-handover-prisoners-war.html>

²⁰ <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/20694>

²¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0088_EN.pdf

part of an “organized demographic change” at the behest of Turkey,²² which has transformed an almost heterogeneously Kurdish region into one inhabited to 75% by Arabs and Turkmen.²³



Since the invasions, at least 172 civilians have been killed in Afrin and the M4 Strip, while up to 8,500 have been detained or kidnapped by the occupation forces. Though most recorded arrests occurred in occupied Afrin, in both regions, statistically, every 6th-7th arrest involved the use of torture. At least 1,100 of those arrested have not been heard of again.^{24 25} A further 63 Syrians with alleged ties to the Autonomous Administration or SDF have been illegally extradited to Turkey - a violation of the Geneva Conventions.²⁶ Additionally, over 150 women have been disappeared by the occupation’s militias. 69 women report having been raped, though the dark figure is believed to be several times that number.²⁷ Arrests are most often based on the suspects’ alleged collaboration with the AANES, though Human Rights Watch found that, in most cases, “the Turkish authorities have not produced evidence that the detainees were active fighters with the Kurdish-led authorities or

²² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-yazidis-isis-islam-conversion-af-rin-persecution-kurdish-a8310696.html>

²³ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/11/Turkey-track-record-The-occupation-of-Afrin.pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/210113/>

²⁵ <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/43968>

²⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/03/illegal-transfers-syrians-turkey>

²⁷ <https://missingafrinwomen.org/>

that they committed crimes.”²⁸ Instead, arrests serve to instil fear in the indigenous population, while extracting hefty ransom payments from the detainees’ relatives.

Turkish-controlled factions have turned the areas under their control into personal fiefdoms of criminal activity. At least 100km² of cultivated land (or over 10% of all arable land) has been expropriated in Afrin, as well as over 315,000 fruit-bearing trees.²⁹ Faction commanders line their pockets by exporting the world-famous Afrin olives through Turkey to Western supermarkets, while in the cities, the trade in loot, rent-extraction from stolen real estate, and extortion is booming.^{30 31} The UN noted in a report that this dispossession occurs in a “systematic” manner, on the basis of intimidation, and that it has indication that Turkey was aware of – and in select cases participated in – these crimes.³²

The same UN report found that Turkish-controlled forces have committed an “onslaught of violations” against civilians including the “war crimes” of “hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape.”^{33 34} The UN’s key findings in Turkish-occupied areas include:

- “Civilians ‘primarily of Kurdish origin’ beaten, tortured, denied food or water, and interrogated about their faith and ethnicity”
- “Prevalent and recurrent” hostage-taking and torture for extortion and to punish dissenters
- Kurds systematically and violently displaced from their homes, told: “if it were up to me, I would kill every Kurd from 1 to 80 years old”
- Women tortured and raped in presence of Turkish officers
- Mass rape, abduction, forced marriage, ‘climate of fear’ for women now unable to leave home
- Gang-rape of a minor as method of torture
- 30 women raped in Turkish-occupied Tel Abyad in one month
- Mass detention of Kurdish and Yezidi women in unknown black sites
- Yezidis, including women, pressured to convert to Islam
- Desecration and destruction of graveyards, historic & religious sites, threatening “precarious” Yezidi minority
- “Systematic” and “coordinated” looting and property appropriation
- “Coercing primarily-Kurdish residents to flee through threats, extortion, murder, abduction, torture, detention”

²⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/03/illegal-transfers-syrians-turkey>

²⁹ Rights defense initiative - A report on Human Rights Violations and Crimes Committed by the Turkish State and the Jihadists Factions in Afrin over three years of occupation

³⁰ https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/syrie-razzia-turque-sur-les-oliveraies-12-01-2019-2285205_24.php

³¹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/210113/>

³² <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>

³³ <https://rojavinformationcenter.com/2020/09/summary-un-report-on-war-crimes-atrocities-committed-by-turkish-and-other-forces-in-syria/>

³⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=E>

The report also condemned the poor security situation, a “barrage of IEDs and shelling” in Turkish-held areas, and child recruitment by the SNA. All in all, the Turkish incursion into Afrin and the M4 Strip has transformed two of the safest regions of Syria into two of perennial violence and insecurity in a process one researcher at the European Council on Foreign Relations has called the “Gazafication” of Turkish-occupied territory.³⁵

A 2021 US Commission on International Religious Freedom report described Turkey’s presence in Syria as a “significant part of the danger” and a “direct threat” to religious and ethnic minorities in the country. Turkey’s support for fundamentalist groups in Afrin is “equally insidious and damaging, as they engage in religious violence, abduction for ransom, and other atrocities,” including the desecration of Yazidi shrines.³⁶

It is of particular note that the UN has been able to document some instances of torture committed in the presence of Turkish officers. For example, an underage boy was detained, strung up and beaten with a plastic hose in the presence of both SNA and Turkish officers, while another woman was detained, beaten and threatened with rape in the presence of Turkish officers. A later UN report covering rampant torture and abuse in SNA detention facilities found multiple instances where Turkish officials were present during torture, as well as maintaining a permanent presence in detention centers notorious for torture, abuse and violence against detainees.³⁷ Other reports and testimony likewise indicate that Turkish officers have been present during the torture and sexual harassment of female detainees.³⁸ Some of the worst crimes recorded have been committed in prisons directly run by the Turkish secret service (MIT), like Barad prison.

More often, however, Turkey attempts to use its SNA militias as a smokescreen, blaming them for these repeated human rights violations and claiming, without follow-up, that it will locate and punish those responsible. As a recent report indicates, “direct interventions by Turkish intelligence are considered rare in all three regions as Turkey uses the SNA to track down and suppress its opponents. Ankara has even enjoined the SNA to establish prisons for this purpose in order to avoid direct involvement in such violations. Turkish intelligence also relies on investigators from the Syrian National Police and General Security Forces in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn, which are directly tied to the Turkish security apparatus.”³⁹ Turkey uses its de facto control over the SNA, as well as its formal control over the SNA-linked security apparatus

³⁵ https://ecfr.eu/publication/a_new_gaza_turkeys_border_policy_in_northern_syria/

³⁶ https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021%20Annual%20Report_0.pdf

³⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IIICISyria/Pages/Detention-report.aspx>

³⁸ <https://npasyria.com/en/55910/>

³⁹ <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20-%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Discrepant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁴⁰ <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>

mentioned above, to keep these crimes at an arm's length.⁴⁰ Moreover, Turkey has set up a Military Police, made up of SNA groups with particularly close ties to Turkey. This police force is responsible for most rights violations in the occupied areas (See Quarterly Report), yet operates seemingly independent of the Turkish Army. Nonetheless, as the UN observe:

“In areas under effective Turkish control, Turkey carries a responsibility to, as far as possible, ensure public order and safety, and to afford special protection to women and children... the Commission notes the allegations that Turkish forces were aware of incidents of looting and appropriation of civilian property and that they were present in detention facilities run by the Syrian National Army where the ill-treatment of detainees was rampant, including during interrogation sessions when torture took place.

In failing to intervene, Turkish forces may have violated the above-mentioned obligations. The Commission continues to investigate the precise extent to which various Syrian National Army brigades and Turkish forces have formed a joint command and control hierarchy and notes that, if any armed group members were shown to be acting under the effective command and control of Turkish forces, violations by these actors may entail criminal responsibility for such commanders who knew or should have known about the crimes.”⁴¹

POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND GOVERNMENTAL CONTROL

In areas under nominal SNA control, then, these militias are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population, while carrying out Turkish military and security objectives. 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.”⁴² Turkey’s Hatay province oversees Afrin, and Şanlıurfa province administrates Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, while the ‘Euphrates Shield’ region which Turkey seized in 2017 is administrated by Kilis and Gaziantep provinces.⁴³

A 2021 report by European-funded NGO ACAPS gives a clear overview of the depth and breadth of Turkish control in Afrin:

⁴¹ <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>

⁴² https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/63745/MED_2019_10.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

⁴³ <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20-%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Discrepant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

Following the Olive Branch operation in 2018, governing bodies known as local councils emerged throughout Afrin, supported by Turkish authorities, to fill a critical need for social and governmental organisation. The elected local councils in these areas officially follow the Syrian Interim Government and are connected to the Aleppo provincial council, with direct administrative, logistical, and financial support from Turkish authorities – mainly the governors of Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay in southern Turkey.

Overall, the provision of basic services at all levels, including education, health, telecommunications, electricity, and water, falls under Turkey. For example, the Hatay health directorate and health office in the local council oversee medical and health services. Humanitarian assistance in Afrin district is also coordinated through the Turkish government, in coordination with the local councils. The presence of humanitarian responders is limited and most NGOs operate remotely, primarily from Turkey, and must collaborate very closely with AFAD for full unhindered access to Afrin.⁴⁴

Turkish authorities also control the organization of and access to IDP camps; an education curriculum which forces all students to learn in Turkish and/or Arabic, despite the fact that almost all indigenous Afrinis speak Kurdish as their mother or sole tongue; and all NGO and press access to the zone of occupation. Turkish universities have opened branches in Afrin and elsewhere, while the Turkish postal service operates throughout Afrin and the Turkish zone of occupation, and is the sole provider of Turkish salaries for its formal apparatus of employees throughout the region. Alongside its use in paying salaries, Turkish lira is increasingly the de facto currency in the occupied regions.

The broader, Turkish-backed ‘Etilaf’ opposition council linked to the Syrian Interim Government and SNA has only ever held one General Assembly within Syria, primarily conducting its affairs from within Turkish territory.⁴⁵ (The same council recently came under heavy local criticism for meeting openly with the SNA commander who oversaw the brutal beating and execution of female Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalef.) Similarly, some local council members in the Turkish zone of occupation live in Turkey and cross into Syria only during office hours, in large part due to daily infighting between the Turkish-backed militias who exercise actual day-to-day dominance in these cities.

⁴⁴ https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200302_acaps_short_note_syria_huamitarian_needs_in_afrin.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1326484903236603905>

The new councils established by Turkey are thus little more than a fig-leaf for the occupation. They are “directly supervise[d]” by the Turkish Ministry of the Interior, with the ‘Interim Government’ playing “no real role” in the administration of councils where “absolute loyalty to Turkey is mandatory.”⁴⁶ Turkish coordinators are present at multiple levels throughout these councils, while Turkey’s own ministries also maintain operatives in all the zones of Turkish occupation. Superficial ‘elections’ can only take place with Turkish supervision and approval, while salaries and budgets are directly provided by the neighbouring Turkish provinces, with appointment on the basis of cronyism and loyalty to Turkey rather than merit. These councils tend to under-represent the Kurdish population and are mostly made up of individuals with political ties to Turkey, or economic interests in the ongoing plunder of Afrin’s natural resources.

⁴⁶ <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/Khayrallah%20al-Hilu%20-%20The%20Turkish%20Intervention%20in%20Northern%20Syria%20One%20Strategy%20Discrepant%20Policies.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

FACTIONS IN THE OCCUPIED AREAS

The 'Syrian National Army', in its current form, was established in late 2017 by the Turkish Army. Initially, the bulk of the group was composed mainly of Turkmen factions, such as Sultan Murad Division and Hamza Division, which had participated in Turkey's 2016 invasion of Syrian territory west of the Euphrates. After the 2018 merger with the National Front for Liberation (NFL), the SNA grew to include a kaleidoscope of militias, including former Free Syrian Army (FSA) militias, armed groups from Deir-ez-Zor in eastern Syria, as well as some Sunni Muslim extremist groups. It now numbers between 40,000 and 100,000 men.⁴⁷ Of some 37 major factions at the SNA's inception, 21 had at one point received CIA or Pentagon backing.⁴⁸ Yet many groups also harbour extremist sentiments. RIC was able to identify at least 40 former ISIS members now embedded with Turkish-controlled forces.⁴⁹

Most of SNA's groups participated in the 2018 and 2019 invasions and continue to control different areas of the occupied territories. While the SNA proclaims to be the army of Syria's opposition, the coalition group is really under the thumb of the Turkish Army. Turkey pays the militiamen's salaries; Turkish hospitals care for their wounded; and Turkish forces and SADAT International Defence Consultancy, a private military contractor close to President Erdogan, trains them.⁵⁰ In the past, Syrian militiamen have been hired as Turkish mercenaries in conflicts from Libya to Armenia.⁵¹ Between 5,000 and 17,000 SNA militiamen were sent to Libya, while an unknown number were sent to aid Azerbaijan with its assault on Armenia in 2020.⁵²

In the occupied regions of NES, the SNA is organized into three legions, each with varying numbers of division; the divisions at times breaking into brigades. These groupings escape logic and only serve to give the SNA the appearance of a professional standing army. While it is true that legions occasionally cluster around certain geographical areas (the 1st Legion in the south-west of Afrin; the 2nd Legion around Sere Kaniye; the 3rd Legion around Tel Abyad), these observations are broken by multiple exceptions. Legions are also not organized by ethnicity, with Turkmen and Arab divisions strewn across all three. Moreover, bloody infighting often occurs within legions, divisions, and even brigades.

⁴⁷ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/10/turkey-syria-kurds-militias-in-operation-peace-spring.html>

⁴⁸ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/10/turkey-syria-kurds-militias-in-operation-peace-spring.html>

⁴⁹ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/188513/>

⁵¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/issues/Mercenaries/WG/OtherStakeholders/syrians-for-truth-and-justice-submission.pdf>

⁵² <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-middle-east/long-read-how-erdogan-built-his-own-private-military-and-paramilitary-system-dr#>

STRUCTURE OF THE SNA

FIRST LEGION

DIVISION 11

BRIGADE 111: LIWA AL-SHAMAL
BRIGADE 112: JAYSH AL-AHFAD
BRIGADE 113: JAYSH AL-AHFAD

DIVISION 12

BRIGADE 121: LIWA SAMARKAND
BRIGADE 122: LIWA AL-MUNTASIR BILLAH
BRIGADE 123: TAJAMMU' AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

DIVISION 13

BRIGADE 131: LIWA AL-SULTAN MUHAMMAD AL-FATIH
BRIGADE 132: GHAZAL BASE
BRIGADE 133: LIWA AL-WAQQAS

DIVISION 14

BRIGADE 141: FAYLAQ AL-SHAM (NORTH ALEPPO CONTINGENT)
BRIGADE 143: NINTH DIVISION
BRIGADE 144: DIVISION 20
BRIGADE 145: JAYSH AL-NUKHBA
BRIGADE 146: JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA

SECOND LEGION

DIVISION 21: SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

BRIGADE 211
BRIGADE 212
BRIGADE 213

DIVISION 22: AL-HAMZA DIVISION

BRIGADE 221
BRIGADE 222
BRIGADE 223

DIVISION 23: AL-MU'ATASIM DIVISION

BRIGADE 231
BRIGADE 232
BRIGADE 233: MEN OF WAR BRIGADE

DIVISION 24: SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

BRIGADE 241
BRIGADE 242 (CF. HERE)
BRIGADE 243

DIVISION 25: JAYSH AL-ISLAM

BRIGADE 251
BRIGADE 252
BRIGADE 253
BRIGADE 254
BRIGADE 255
BRIGADE 256
BRIGADE 257

DIVISION 26: FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN

BRIGADE 261
BRIGADE 262
BRIGADE 263

DIVISION 27: SULTAN MALEK SHAH DIVISION

BRIGADE 271
BRIGADE 272
BRIGADE 273

SULEMAN SHAH DIVISION

THIRD LEGION

DIVISION 31

BRIGADE 311: NORTHERN STORM BRIGADE
BRIGADE 312: AHRAR MENNAGH
BRIGADE 313: EMERGENCY FORCE

DIVISION 32

BRIGADE 320
BRIGADE 321
BRIGADE 322
BRIGADE 323

DIVISION 33

BRIGADE 331: FACTIONS OF MARE'A. LIWA FURSAN AL-SHAMAL.
BRIGADE 332: FORCE 55 OF TEL REF'AT
BRIGADE 333: GROUP OF FACTIONS INCLUDING LIWA JUND AL-ISLAM, SUYUF AL-SHAM, SAJIDUN AND LIWA AL-FATAH.

DIVISION 34

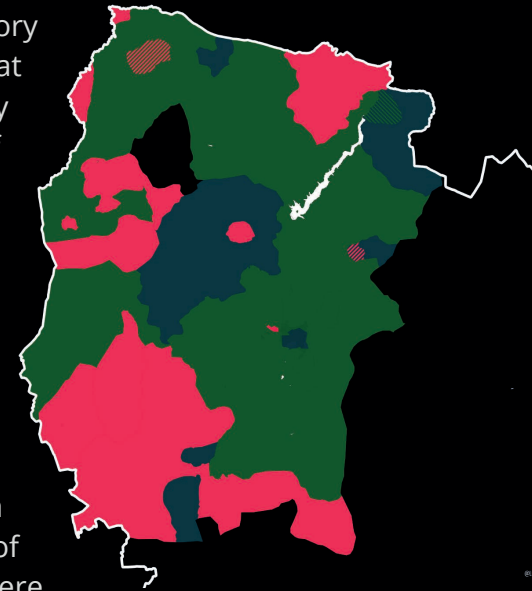
BRIGADE 341: DIVISION 51
BRIGADE 342: FAWJ AL-MUSTAFA AND AL-FAWJ AL-AWAL
BRIGADE 343: LIWA AL-SULTAN OSMAN AND THUWAR AL-JAZEERA
BRIGADE 344: LIWA AL-SALAM, DIVISION 23 AND TAJAMMU' FASTAQIM KAMA UMIRTA.

What follows is a brief description of the major factions active in the occupied areas of NES.

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

As with all groups eponymized after Ottoman rulers, Sultan Murad Division is a Turkmen militia - the largest one operating in Turkish-occupied areas. It claims to have a manpower of 9000 fighters.⁵³ According to our own research, at least two former ISIS-members are part of Sultan Murad, including one of the militia's commanders.⁵⁴ The group was active in Aleppo during the early years of the Civil War, but now operates exclusively in Turkish-controlled territory as one of Turkey's closest proxies. Sultan Murad Division was at the helm of both the 2018 and 2019 invasions and currently controls large swaths of Afrin's north-east, the north flank of the city of Afrin, it shares Sere Kaniye with Hamza Division, and controls territory east of the city, including the important water-pumping station at Alouk.

Sultan Murad Division was found to have committed war crimes by the UN for participating in bombardment of a Kurdish neighbourhood in Aleppo, killing at least 83 civilians and 30 children.⁵⁵ Amnesty International has also documented cases of illegal detention and torture of POWs and media activists, and "beating men for fun."⁵⁶ In the Bulbul region of north Afrin, 600 families of Sultan Murad Division's fighters were brought in to settle formerly-Kurdish towns. They are integral to Turkey's demographic project of establishing a 'Turkmen Belt' on Afrin's border with the country. The militia was in charge of recruitment and supplied most of Turkey's mercenaries for the wars in Libya and Armenia, including most of around 180 minors who were sent to the two theatres from Syria.⁵⁷



Legion distribution in occupied Afrin

The base of Sultan Murad Division's leader, 'Abu Yazan', was raided by the Turkish military in January, allegedly because of his smuggling operation. 'Abu Yazan' escaped, while some militiamen were arrested.⁵⁸ The group also previously feud with al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya.

⁵³ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-armed-opposition-group-committing-war-crimes-aleppo-new-evidence>

⁵⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/issues/Mercenaries/WG/OtherStakeholders/syrians-for-truth-and-justice-submission.pdf>

⁵⁸ <http://afrinpost.net/en/2021/01/leader-in-sultan-murad-militia-fled-from-the-village-of-ikidam-and-turkish-intelligence-arrests-his-militants/>

HAMZA DIVISION

Hamza Division is a former FSA outfit formed in the countryside of Hasakah Governorate in 2013. It received weapons through the US 'Syrian Train and Equip Program'.⁵⁹ Its exact ethnic make-up is unclear, though the 'Samarkand Brigade', a Turkmen militia, once formed part of Hamza Division. The division closely collaborated with Turkish forces during the 2016 invasion and occupied the city of Jarablus. It again participated in the 2018 and 2019 invasion. Today, Hamza Division controls large swathes of territory in the north-west and south-east of Afrin, in the north of Afrin city, as well as Tel Halaf and the area south from there to the frontline, the western half of Sere Kaniye, and the Sere Kaniye border crossing, where they act as Turkey's middlemen. Many prisons known to RIC are under the Division's control.

In 2020, Turkish propaganda channel TRT claimed Hamza Division commanded 6,500 militiamen.⁶⁰ Many of them have been sent as mercenaries to Libya, and reportedly to Armenia as well.⁶¹ Hamza Division stands accused of torturing and raping women in their prisons and beating and humiliating captured Kurds.⁶² Of the three months in which RIC recorded crime statistics, Hamza Division was found to have committed the most violations out of any faction. (See Quarterly Report)

The militia has clashed with many other groups including Ahrar al-Sharqiyya, Ahrar al-Sham, al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya, and a splinter group within the division which stated its desire to merge with Faylaq al-Sham.

AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMYYA ('LEVANT FRONT')

Al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya was established in Aleppo in December of 2014 as an Islamist militia opposed to President Bashar al-Assad's rule. Its ideology ranges from hard-line Salafists to more moderate Islamists, though they received US military support, including TOW missiles.⁶³ In 2016, their fighting strength was estimated at 3,000 men.

Al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya has been accused of summary executions through its system of Sharia courts by Amnesty International.⁶⁴ In 2018 it was declared a "criminal or-

⁵⁹ The Syrian National Army (SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus, Ömer Özkizilcik, SETA Foundation

⁶⁰ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/syrian-opposition-forces-open-first-military-barracks-42056>

⁶¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/issues/Mercenaries/WG/OtherStakeholders/syrians-for-truth-and-justice-submission.pdf>

⁶² https://twitter.com/Mekut_Mallet/status/976147595679682571

⁶³ The Syrian National Army (SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus, Ömer Özkizilcik, SETA Foundation

⁶⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/07/syria-abductions-torture-and-summary-killings-at-the-hands-of-armed-groups/>

ganisation of terrorist intent” and a “salafist and jihadist” group that “strives for setting up of the caliphate” by the Dutch government, its former backers.⁶⁵ Crime data collected by RIC over the first three months of 2021 suggests that al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya is one of the groups with the highest number of violations. (See Quarterly Report)

It took part in both the 2016, 2018 and 2019 invasions and currently controls the border crossing at Tel Abyad, as well as part of the frontline at Ayn Issa, and central Afrin. Some of their militiamen were recruited to fight in Libya.⁶⁶ They have also targeted Kobane from their base at Jarablus. Al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya have recently clashed with Jaysh al-Islam and the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh brigade.

AHRAR AL-SHAM (HARAKAT AHRAR AL-SHAM AL-ISLAMIYYA, ‘ISLAMIC MOVEMENT OF THE FREE MEN OF THE LEVANT’)

Ahrar al-Sham is a Salafist outfit formed in 2011 in Idlib. They cooperated with ISIS until 2014, when a bloody feud with the terror group almost wiped out al-Sham. From 2015 they received Saudi and Turkish funding, and even attempted to negotiate with the Assad government. Before the merger, they were part of the NFL, though are not part of the SNA today. They currently control the town of Qatmah in Afrin, as well as some parts of west Afrin city.⁶⁷

AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA (TAJAMMU AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA, ‘GATHERING OF FREE MEN OF THE EAST’)

As their name denotes, Ahrar al-Sharqiya hails from eastern Syria. It established itself as an independent group in 2016, when it split from Ahrar al-Sham. Nonetheless, the majority of Ahrar al-Sharqiya’s militiamen are former members of Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria), including its leader, al-Nusra’s leading Shari’a judge in eastern Syria. Additionally, RIC has identified at least two former ISIS fighters who are now part of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, including a commander.⁶⁸ Citizens in Afrin have spoken to reporters about al-Sharqiya’s attempts to impose the veil and other sharia-law measures.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/03/TNA_report.pdf

⁶⁶ <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-middle-east/long-read-how-erdogan-built-his-own-private-military-and-paramilitary-system-dr#>

⁶⁷ <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/523>

⁶⁸ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

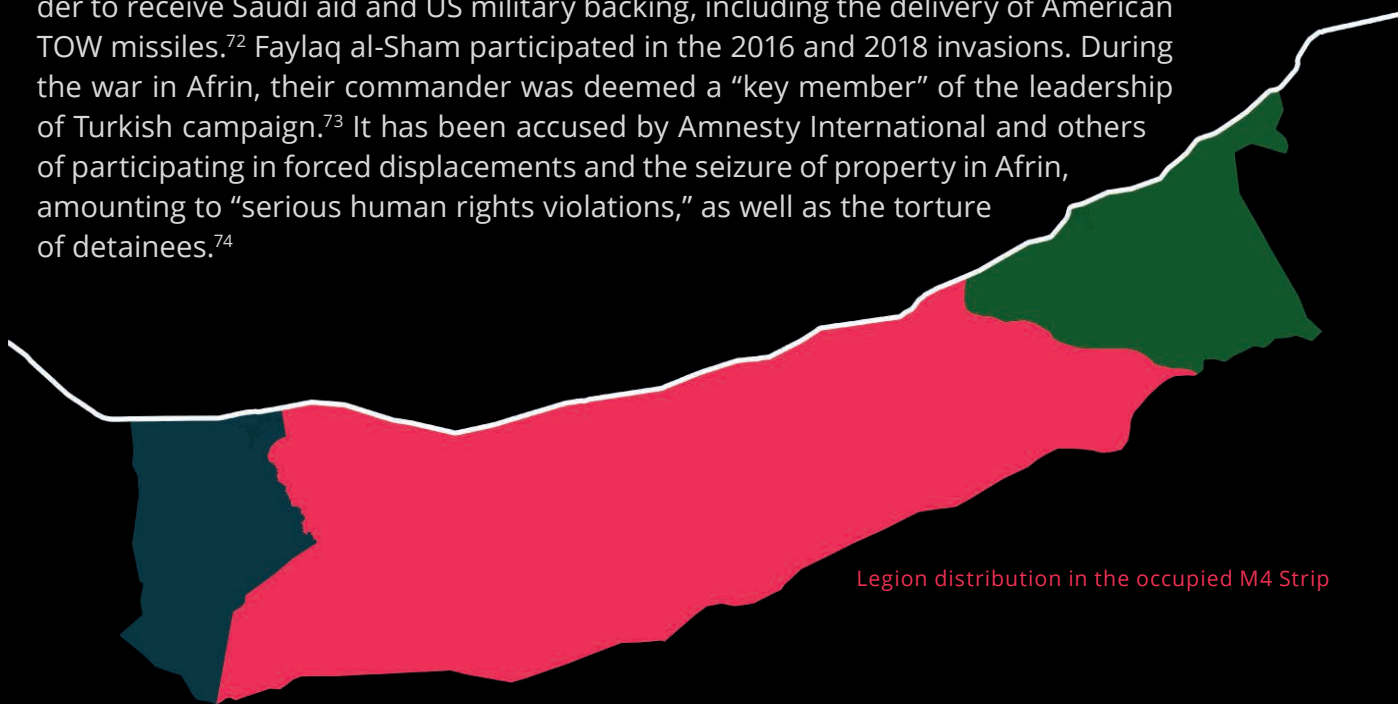
⁶⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/culture-clash-campaign-syrias-liberal-afrin-tells-women-cover-328145705>

They have been accused by Amnesty International and others of participating in forced displacements and the seizure of property in Afrin, amounting to “serious human rights violations.”⁷⁰ Most infamously, Ahrar-al-Sharqiya attracted particular media attention following their execution of Hevrin Khalef, a Kurdish politician, near Tel Abyad in 2019. The head of Ahrar al-Sharqiya’s branch in Jarabalus was also caught on video sexually abusing a 13- or 14-year-old girl.⁷¹

Ahrar al-Sharqiya commands around 2,000 men. It has taken part in all Turkish invasions and today controls the city of Rajo and surroundings, and the region of Jarablus in Afrin, as well as the old town of Afrin city, and over 1,800km² of territory between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, including the Mabrouka power station. Ahrar al-Sharqiya clashed with Hamza Division in 2018.

FAYLAQ AL-SHAM (‘SHAM LEGION’)

Another former NFL group, Faylaq al-Sham was borne out of a 2014 alliance between 19 Aleppo region-based militias. Though the group had strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, Faylaq al-Sham distanced itself from the brotherhood in order to receive Saudi aid and US military backing, including the delivery of American TOW missiles.⁷² Faylaq al-Sham participated in the 2016 and 2018 invasions. During the war in Afrin, their commander was deemed a “key member” of the leadership of Turkish campaign.⁷³ It has been accused by Amnesty International and others of participating in forced displacements and the seizure of property in Afrin, amounting to “serious human rights violations,” as well as the torture of detainees.⁷⁴



⁷⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>

⁷¹ <http://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/syrie-ahrar-al-sharqiya-ces-anciens-dal-nosra-qui-combattent-avec-larmee?platform=hootsuite>

⁷² The Syrian National Army (SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus, Ömer Özkilcik, SETA Foundation

⁷³ <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/24118>

⁷⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>

Faylaq al-Sham counted between 8,500 and 10,000 militiamen in 2018,⁷⁵ and provided the SNA with its top commander, Fadlallah al-Haji. In Afrin, it shares much of Hamza Division's territory, controlling the region's southern flank, as well as positions along the north-west. It also provided mercenaries to Azerbaijan's war effort against Armenia in 2020.⁷⁶

JAYSH AL-ISLAM ('ARMY OF ISLAM')

Liwa al-Islam was established in the Eastern Ghouta neighbourhood of Damascus in late 2011, and in 2013 merged with 50 other Salafist factions to form Jaysh al-Islam. Partially funded by Saudi Arabia, it advocated for the "cleansing of the filth" of religious minorities, including Shi'a Muslims, in Syria.⁷⁷ With around 10-15,000 militiamen,⁷⁸ the Salafist group held East Ghouta under totalitarian rule for years, until it was forced out as the tide of war turned in Assad's favour. Around 1,500 fighters and their families escaped to Turkish-occupied territories.

Testimonies from its al-Tawba prison describe electrocution, beatings and mass detention of minors.⁷⁹ The Idlib branch of Jaysh al-Islam was also among the forces found to have committed war crimes by the United Nations for participating in bombardment of a Kurdish neighbourhood in Aleppo, killing at least 83 civilians and 30 children.⁸⁰ Since arriving in Afrin and joining the SNA, the group has made public statements declaring Kurdish people to be its enemy.⁸¹ Per the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, its members have been extorting local farmers, forcing them to hand over produce for half its value, and imprisoning those who refuse to obey; expropriating land from religious minorities; and raping women.⁸² They have also sent mercenaries to Libya.⁸³

Currently, Jaysh al-Islam controls the frontlines with the SDF around Tel Tamir, as well as territory south of Afrin city. It fued with al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya and Hamza Division in 2020, as well as with Faylaq al-Rahman in recent months.

⁷⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/pro-turkey-rebels-start-pullout-from-syrias-idlib-under-deal/a-45693917>

⁷⁶ <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-middle-east/long-read-how-erdogan-built-his-own-private-military-and-paramilitary-system-dr#>

⁷⁷ <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/zahran-alloush/>

⁷⁸ <https://medium.com/@ryanmofarrell/jabhat-al-shamiya-is-one-of-the-more-complicated-rebel-factions-and-has-gone-through-multiple-a7f24030e1f>

⁷⁹ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syria-torture-army-of-islam_us_56f54d0fe4b0143a9b47fc59

⁸⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-armed-opposition-group-committing-war-crimes-aleppo-new-evidence>

⁸¹ SOHR, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=92283>

⁸² SOHR, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=106133>

⁸³ <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-middle-east/long-read-how-erdogan-built-his-own-private-military-and-paramilitary-system-dr#>

FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN ('AL-RAHMAN LEGION')

Faylaq al-Rahman is a moderately Islamist militia from Eastern Ghouta, funded by Qatar. According to a 2018 surrender agreement with the Assad government, 5,000 of its militiamen left Damascus in 2018 toward Turkish-controlled territory. It currently holds some minor territory north-east of Afrin city, as well as south of Tel Abyad. In previous years, when the Gulf Crisis was at its peak, Faylaq al-Rahman fought a bloody war against Saudi-backed Jaysh al-Islam in Damascus.⁸⁴ Today, they are Division 26 and 25, respectively, of the SNA's 2nd Legion.

MU'TASIM DIVISION

Mu'tasim Division is a former FSA militia with a minor footprint within the occupied territories of NES, though it claimed to employ 1,000 fighters in 2017.⁸⁵ It has participated in all three Turkish invasions of Syria, having been accused of abusing, beating and trampling on captured Kurdish YPG soldiers in Afrin,⁸⁶ and reportedly sent a high number of mercenaries to Libya on behalf of Turkey, for which it also recruited militiamen from other factions.⁸⁷ It currently has training camps south of Rajo in Afrin and south-east of Sere Kaniye.

OTHER MILITIAS

A number of minor Turkmen militias are also active in Turkish-occupied areas. The **Suleiman Shah Brigade**, **Samarqand Brigade**, **Sultan Mehmed Fatih**, and **al-Waqqas Brigade** control territory along the south-western border between Afrin and Turkey. Suleiman Shah in particular is a close proxy of Turkey's, having recruited for and provided a large amount of mercenaries for the Libyan War as well as the 2020 assault on Nagorno-Karabakh.⁸⁸ All groups have been accused of crimes, though Suleiman Shah in particular has been accused of repeated grave human rights violations. The group provoked mass protests in Afrin following accusations of repeated rape of a local woman. Suleiman Shah additionally controls part of the frontline north of Ayn Issa. In April 2021, the militia left the 1st Legion for the 2nd, and changed from identifying as a brigade to identifying as a division. The three latter groups declared their intention to merge to form the 13th Division in May 2021.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-gulf-qatar-syria/gulf-crisis-seen-widening-split-in-syria-rebel-lion-idUKKBN19517W?edition-redirect=uk>

⁸⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/04/free-syrian-army-training-camps-turkey-islamic-state.html>

⁸⁶ <http://www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?pageid=242071>

⁸⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/issues/Mercenaries/WG/OtherStakeholders/syrians-for-truth-and-justice-submission.pdf>

⁸⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/issues/Mercenaries/WG/OtherStakeholders/syrians-for-truth-and-justice-submission.pdf>

⁸⁹ <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army>

Some smaller non-Turkmen militias are also active in the occupied areas, including **Jaysh al-Nukhba ('Elite Army')**, a former NFL group which now controls the important border area in the north of Afrin; **Suqour al-Sham ('Northern Falcons Brigade')**, an offshoot of Ahrar al-Sham which has sent mercenaries to Libya and is currently active on the Tell Tamir front and in the town of Sa'ra in Afrin⁹⁰; **Faylaq al-Majd ('Glory Corps')**, a group established in 2017 to serve in the 3rd Legion of the SNA under the helm of al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya and which incorporated a number of former **Nour al-Din al-Zinki Movement's** fighters in 2019; while also sending mercenaries to the war in Libya, and finally the **20th Division**, a militia made up mostly of fighters from Syria's east which controls the Turkish-Syrian border region between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye.

⁹⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-send-syrian-rebel-fighters-fight-haftar-libya>

QUARTERLY REPORT

In February of 2021, the Turkish occupation forces invited Carlotta Gall of the New York Times and Lluís Miquel Hurtado of the Spanish daily *El Mundo* on press tours of occupied Afrin.^{91 92} The subsequent articles they filed caused widespread indignation, as human rights workers, journalists, and activists familiar with Afrin saw them as an attempt at whitewashing a violent military occupation. Gall, for instance, called Afrin a “safe zone” for IDPs, concealing the fact that these refugees formed part of Turkey’s demographic engineering project. The Times article describes Turkey handling security “like any NATO force,” but does not mention the litany of rights violations committed by its own forces and the militias they have installed in Afrin, including many Sunni fundamentalist outfits. The cultural erasure of this majority-Kurdish region is branded “the choice of the people.” Barely one Afrin resident was quoted.

The press tours were only one of a multitude of strategies employed by the occupying forces to soften the brutal reality of life under Turkish occupation. For the first time since 2018, Kurds in Afrin were allowed to celebrate Newroz [Kurdish New Year] on March 21st of this year, albeit under Turkish supervision. As a direct response to such attempts at soft-pedaling their military occupation of Syrian-Kurdish territory, the Rojava Information Center began tallying the crimes committed under Turkish control from the start of 2021.

For the first quarter of 2021, RIC recorded 363 arrests across all Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria, with 312 arrests in Afrin and 51 in the M4 Strip. Nearly all those arrested are Kurdish, even where – as in Afrin – Kurds have been made a minority group. The reason given for their arrest in nearly all cases is the suspicion of harboring sympathies for the AANES. Arrests in Afrin spiked in February, with 135 arrests, due in part to the large raid on Bassouta, Afrin district, in which around 50 people were arrested, including five women and a young man who are still missing, and large amounts of property confiscated. The raid followed an IED explosion in one of the town’s houses, which Turkish media reported as a terrorist plot gone awry, but a reliable on-the-ground source tells us was planted by the military police of Hamza Division in order to rob a wealthy local tradesman. He and his niece were killed during the explosion. At least one of the detained women has been tortured.⁹³

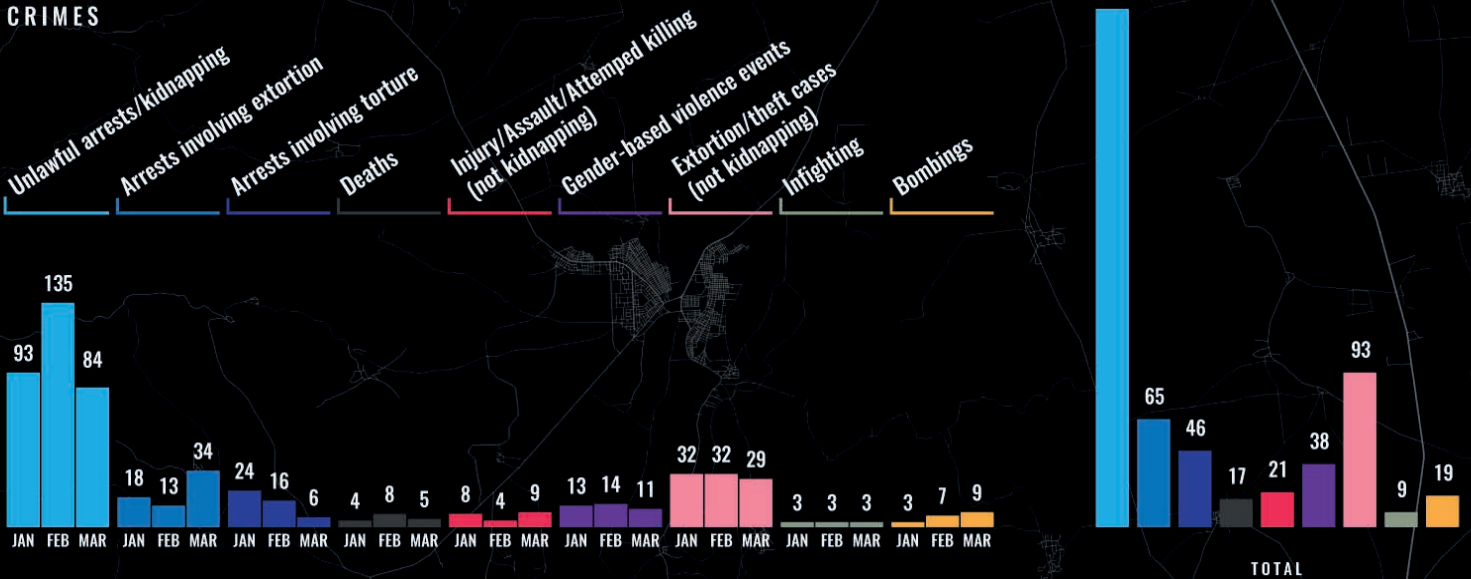
⁹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-erdogan-afrin.html?searchResultPosition=1>

⁹² <https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2021/02/07/601ef0e021efa0144d8b4685.html>

⁹³ <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/206413/>

Maydan Ikbis, in north Rajo district, also saw a large raid by Hamza Division in which 11 people were arrested and one, Sheikmous Mustafa Qasim, was tortured to death while imprisoned. His crime was his alleged work for the AANES. In a January raid in the town of Kakheres, Maabatli, by the Suleiman Shah brigade following the burning of an official's car, 17 men were arrested and tortured – one so severely that he is now permanently disabled. (See testimonies section) During the first quarter of 2021, RIC was able to identify 46 cases out of 312 in Afrin in which those arrested had been tortured. The true figure is likely higher. A representative of 'Hevdestî Association', a documentation center for crimes committed in the occupied areas, told RIC that in the M4 Strip "most arrests include the use of torture." Turkish intelligence services (MIT) were present in at least one case of torture during the first three months of 2021. In 65 cases in Afrin, monetary gain seems to have been the motivating factor for citizen's arrests. Ransom payments usually ranged from \$1,000 to several thousand dollars. Torture and ransom extraction are by no means mutually exclusive categories, as torture is often employed to pressure families into paying.

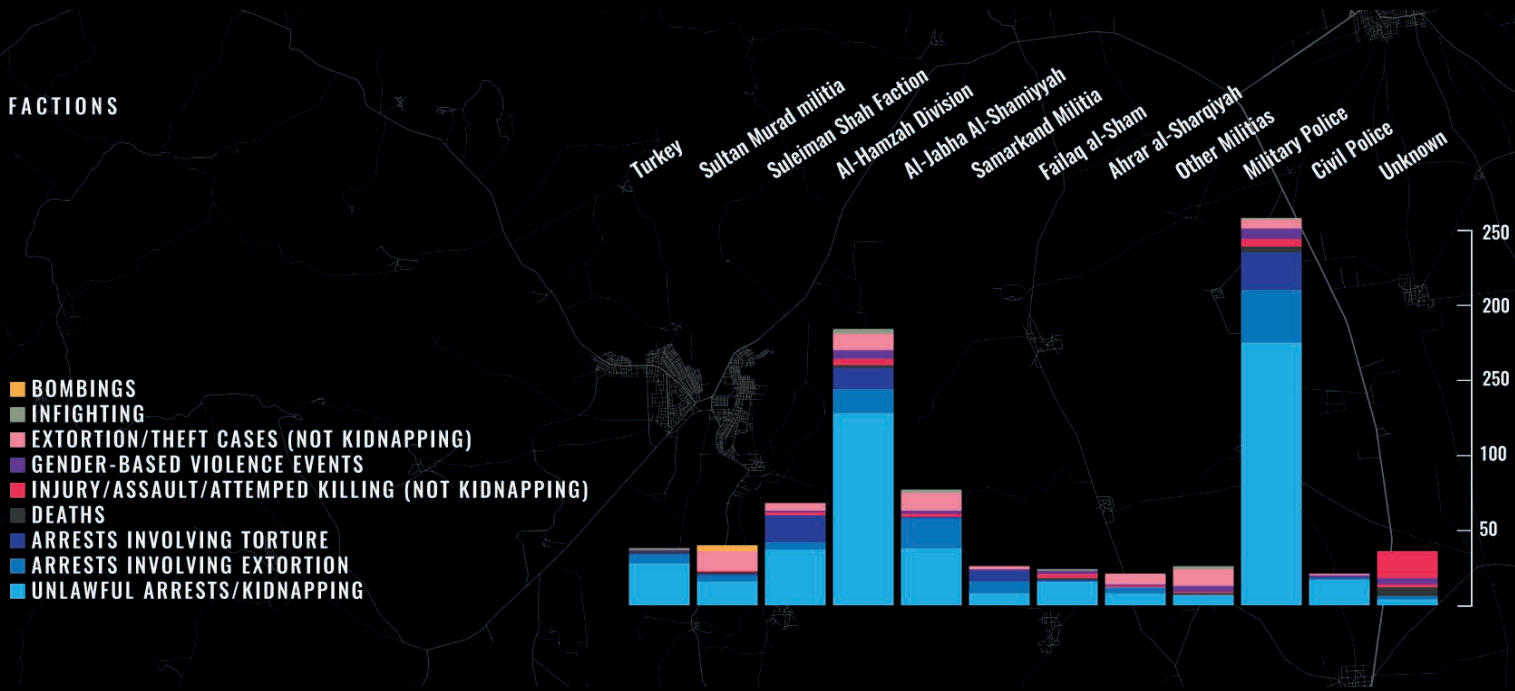
CRIMES



Furthermore, no less than 25 people died across all occupied areas as a direct result of Turkish forces or Turkish-backed militias, with at least three murdered Afrin women among them. These form part of 38 gender-based violence events recorded across the three months. They include the arrests of a minor as well as that of a disabled woman in night-time raids,⁹⁴ and the temporary extradition to

⁹⁴ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/202337/>

Turkey of Ghezale Mannan Salmo, an elderly Yazidi woman who was tortured so severely by her captors that she suffered severe memory loss. (See testimonies section) The aforementioned USCIRF report, released in May, made use of her story to highlight Turkey’s appalling track record in relation to religious minorities, and to call for a Turkish withdrawal from its occupation zones in Syria.⁹⁵ RIC visited friends of Mrs. Salmo’s in Shehba, who accuse Turkish authorities of delaying her release in order to cover up their crimes.



Mrs. Salmo’s is only the latest case of illegal extraditions to Turkey from the occupied areas. In March 2021, Çiçek Kobane, an SDF soldier illegally extradited from near occupied Sere Kaniye in 2019, was sentenced to life-long imprisonment in Turkey.⁹⁶ March also brought to light the experience of Nadia Suleiman, a young Kurdish woman who was repeatedly tortured and raped during her over two-year imprisonment by Hamza Division and MIT.

Across the first quarter of 2021, RIC was able to identify 93 instances of theft and extortion. These include the imposition of fees by militias, the expropriation and sale of real estate, as well as the theft of harvest trees, particularly olive trees. At least 2,877 privately-owned trees were cut down by militiamen from January to March. In March, Turkish-backed Afrin local councils in Afrin issued a decree legalizing the sei-

⁹⁵ https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/2021%20Annual%20Report_0.pdf
⁹⁶ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/240320211>

zure of property of those forcibly displaced.⁹⁷ A report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights depicts money laundering as endemic among militias and conducted with the tacit approval of Turkish superiors. According to them, one particularly astonishing case,

is the businesses of the commander of Suleiman Shah Division, Mohammed Al-Jasem 'Abu Amsha'. Abu Amsha has turned Sheikh Hadid district into a private kingdom, appointed himself as the 'Sultan' of hundreds of affiliated members, opened a mall, coffee shop and other businesses with Turkish support and after looting the residents' properties and deducting 300 to 600 USD from the salary of every affiliated militiaman sent to Libya and Azerbaijan, 1,250 of who have been sent to Libya only.⁹⁸

Another Observatory report alleged that an unnamed SNA group is conducting illegal excavations at the Roman amphitheater of Cyrrhus (Nebi Hurri), in territory RIC can ascribe to Jaysh al-Nukhba. According to the Syrian Observatory, militiamen conduct excavations in full view of Turkish soldiers. As was the case with earlier instances of archaeological plunder, the finds will likely be transported to Turkey and find private buyers there.⁹⁹

In Sere Kaniye, sources tell RIC that efforts continue to settle ISIS women and their children in the al-'Abra and Zerdesht neighborhoods. These families - Iraqi escapees from al-Hol camp 40km to the southeast - were first observed in the city at the end of 2020. According to Ezdina, a Yazidi news website, they were smuggled into the city with the help of Sultan Murad Division and Ahrar al-Sharqiya under the supervision of MIT.¹⁰⁰ SNA militiamen have been encouraged to marry the ISIS widows and adopt their children. In al-Hol camp, security officials told RIC that rifles confiscated from ISIS sleeper cells during a recent security operation originated from occupied Tel Abyad.

In the town of Qibare, near Afrin city, an extremist group close to Faylaq al-Rahman named Habibat Allah intimidated the local Yazidi population into attending Muslim prayer in late March. Its members furthermore asked passersby to recite the shahada (the Muslim profession of faith) and for women to wear the veil. According to one report, women affiliated with the group were also active in the region.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/03/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ac%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ad%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%a9-%d9%84%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%ad%d8%aa%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%84-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa/>

⁹⁸ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/206384/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.syriahr.com/en/206676/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.ezdina.com/2020/12/Reportag-Ezidi288.html?m=1>

¹⁰¹ <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/03/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%AA%D9%8C%D8%AC%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8F%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B2/>

The first three months of the year saw a large amount of infighting between various SNA groups. Hamza Division feud with Faylaq al-Sham over a splitter group, leaving several dead and more injured; with Ahrar al-Sharqiya for the village of Jolaqe, which they share; and with civil police for the border crossing in Sere Kaniye, likely in order to aid its smuggling business. The governor of Urfa has reportedly urged the civil police and Ahrar al-Sharqiya to expel Hamza Division from the city. Factions within Hamza Division also repeatedly fought among themselves, leaving at least three militiamen dead. In January, Turkish forces raided the village of Ikdam in order to arrest a Sultan Murad commander who had established a smuggling ring. Another commander was shot dead in occupied Azaz by his cousin, commander of Suqour al-Shamal. A shootout between military police and Sultan Murad militiamen killed one bystander and injured his daughter in Afrin city. Al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya feud with Jaysh al-Islam in February, leaving two dead and twelve injured. In March, militiamen from Sultan Mehmed Fatih shot at an al-Jabhat al-Shamiyya checkpoint.

Insecurity in both occupied regions is further augmented by periodic bombing attacks in their civilian centers. At least 14 of the attacks that rocked Afrin and 4 in Sere Kaniye can be attributed to local Kurdish liberation movements. These attacks tend to target buildings belonging to one of the militias, though bystanders are also often killed. At least 26 militiamen and settlers have been killed by such attacks, with dozens more injured. Seven children were also killed this month. In Afrin, these attacks were likely perpetrated by the 'Wrath of Olives', a clandestine Kurdish insurgent group, while others might have been executed by the 'Afrin Liberation Forces', a guerrilla group with ties to Kurdish armed forces which has also struck against Turkish military targets in the region.

While the year began with efforts to downplay and normalize the Turkish occupation, the figures for the first three months of 2021 paint a different picture. Arrests have continued at a steady pace month by month and even peaked in February. Human rights abuses are still widespread, as a March 2021 UN report on arbitrary imprisonment and detention in Syria shows. It found that human rights violations were "rampant" in SNA prisons, with 87% of victims belonging to minority groups (including Kurds). "Turkish forces," it said, "were regularly present" at these facilities.¹⁰² The data collected by RIC corroborates these findings. The fact that the groups with the closest ties to the Turkish army (the military police and Hamza Division) top the charts for rights violations this quarter betrays the fact that the SNA's crimes are not just 'militiamen gone amok', but rather part of a centrally-controlled intimidation campaign. Taken together, the figures for the first quarter of 2021 lay bare the fact that the Turkish occupation and ethnic cleansing project is far from over. More important still, the accounts of victims of the Turkish occupation provide a powerful counter-narrative to those spread on the pages of some of the world's leading newspapers.

¹⁰² <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/Detention-report.aspx>

TESTIMONIES

“AMINA SHERO”

My name is Amina Shero [name changed] from the village Basufanê, born in '98. Some of my family members still live in the village. On the day they took Ghezal Salmo, a 45-year-old woman, militiamen from Faylaq al-Sham were arresting the young men of the village, 15 to 20 of them, and they wanted to arrest her son as well. He is sick; he is only 13 years old. They came in plain clothes. They wanted to take him by force so they hit him and his father. Ghezale told [the militiamen] not to take her son because she wanted to bring him to the hospital, that he needed surgery. He had an infection. While in their house, the militiamen saw a picture of her other son, who is a shehid [martyr of the YPG]. They beat the younger son in their house, so Ghezale slapped a mercenary in the face and they arrested her and brought her to jail. It was the morning of the 5th of January. It's been four months since she was taken to jail. They brought her to Iska village. Afterwards, they extradited her to Turkey, to bring her before court, they said. But until now, she wasn't brought before any court. After less than a week – three or four days - they then returned her to Iska. She has been there until today.

I talked with her daughter, and she said that they had tortured her mother so much that she is unrecognizable. Everybody in the family tried to visit her, but they don't let anybody see her. Some time ago they asked for money. They asked for 1,100,000 SYP to release her. The family said, “OK, we will give you the money if you release her,” and the mercenary said, “no, we will release her whenever we want.” They said that she forgot everything, she doesn't recognize people she knows.

There was a car bomb attack in the village on the road from Basufane to Tahlê. One of the mercenaries of Liwa was killed and now they say that it was their mother who did it, they say that she has links to the YPG and that it's she who was responsible for the bombing. In their prison they told her she was an agent of the YPG and that she was feeding them information.

When they brought Ghezale to be interrogated, they said, “one of your children is a shehid [martyr] and your other daughter is in the YPJ,” and she answered, “yes, and I am proud of it.” They told her to change her answer in her statement, but she refused. Because she has two daughters in the YPJ, the mercenaries told her to bring her daughters. “We want your daughters,” they said. That’s also why they don’t release Ghezale: because they want her daughters to go there. Her youngest daughter went to see her [in the jail] on Thursday. [She said that] they had beaten her mother so much that she tried to cut open her veins with a sharp stone, so they had to bring her to the hospital, and she survived. She wanted to kill herself. Because of all the torture she has lost her mind. Her daughter told me, “sometimes my mother recognizes me, sometimes she does not.”

Ghezale’s husband also suffered: his eye popped out of the socket. Before she was arrested, the mercenaries had brought him in by force to cut wood one day, and he wounded himself with a piece of the tree. He lost his eye. The mercenary wanted to bring him to the hospital in Sermeda (next to Idlib), but in the end they didn’t. He was forcibly brought to work, without a salary. They are cutting the trees of the people, and they force them to cut the trees themselves. They didn’t give him money and didn’t bring him to the hospital, either. Now he is disabled.

A week ago, I told my own brother that I wanted to take him and my sister to Shehba. My brother said, “I am not coming, I am afraid of being arrested on the way, I have been tortured once, I don’t want to go through this again.” He is too afraid to come. My brother was beaten a lot. He was arrested again a month ago, in late March. The last time I wanted to get him out of Afrin, he was beaten. Every month they arrest the young men of the village, beat them up, and release them. My sister, who is only 15, was also arrested and beaten up. They also released her. Every time there is a bomb attack or an IED, they arrest people and put them in jail. They use electric cables to beat you. The thick ones. They are beating the body and the back, they are also using the butts of their weapon (Kalashnikov rifles). Sticks, too. When they arrested my sister, they were slapping her while she was in jail, but the one who was really being beaten was my brother.

Our village is a Yazidi village; the mercenaries tell them that they are kufar [unbelievers]. They destroyed all of our shrines. They built a lot of mosques and they force the people to go to the mosque five times a day or else they beat them. There used to be 300 Kurdish families in Basufanê, now there are only 40 left. Every couple of days they arrest someone and extract a ransom from them and then release them.

The mercenaries took most of the trees of the village; they rake in all of the harvest. I desperately want to get my family out, especially my sister. Because of the mercenaries and what they do to women. But they don't want to; they are too afraid. Now she is wearing long clothes and a hijab. I wanted to get her out and [the smugglers] wanted 250 dollars, but I told them I didn't have that kind of money. We also wanted to get my brother out, to Manbij, but he didn't accept out of fear.

“ALI SULEIMAN HASSAN”

My name is Ali Suleiman Hassan [name changed], from Afrin, Mabata district, Kaxrê village. Since I left Afrin, I hear what's happening in my village from my friends and parents, they are secretly communicating with me through WhatsApp. Nobody can talk freely about what's happening, so they have to hide to talk with me.

In our village, Kaxrê, there used to be 500 families, now about 300 families are gone, to Shehba, Aleppo and Jazeera. Less than 200 families stayed. A relative of mine is still there. Other than him, everybody in my family left the region. Only Kurdish Muslims lived in our village. After we left, they started with the violations. They gathered everybody in the village, forced them to the mosque, stole their houses. And for the properties of the ones that left, it's easy: they took everything. They looted everything from the houses, moved into them and took the olive trees and the land for themselves.

I know someone who had an olive oil factory. He and his family left Aleppo [at beginning of the Syrian Civil War], and brought all of their belongings with them. All the things that were in their shop in Aleppo, they brought to Afrin, about 20 million SYP's worth. All of this was stolen. And if you take into account all of their belongings from the different houses, you can add 100 million on top of that. They took everything.

I myself had 500 olive trees, and they stole everything, 100 walnut trees, too. They also cut down 200 olive trees. What did they do with our 500 trees? They cut one, left one, cut one, left one. Some time ago, I got the information that they were bringing refugees from Ghouta, Homs, Idlib, etc. to settle the village. The people of the village were really angry. Everybody had to give money to the mercenaries in order not to be thrown out of their houses. 1500 USD each.

Two months ago, a car was burned down in our village. In the aftermath, Ahrar al-Sham mercenaries arrested 17 people and surrounded the village for four days. Nobody could leave or enter the village. Of the ones that were arrested, some had their hand broken, some their rib cage, their legs broken or their teeth broken. They employed every method of torture. They beat them with sticks, cables. There was one who had all of his nails ripped off. Most of them were released by paying up 1000 USD, 1000 TL, as much as they could get together, and after all of this, they told them, "it was not your fault [ie. the arson attack]." At the end it was made clear that it had been them [the mercenaries] who burned it.

The torture was by order of the Turks, although the mercenaries were doing the torturing. The Turks are hiding behind the backs of the mercenaries. Everything that happens here is happening in full knowledge of Turkish forces. The mercenaries told the villagers, "if we'd do everything the Turks ask us to do, you wouldn't be able to survive half an hour here." Everything that happens in Afrin is happening by the orders of the Turks. We know this. If there were no Turks, the mercenaries couldn't last more than 24 hours in Afrin. The Turks help them with everything - with logistics, military planning, planes, weapons, everything.

In the village, they are forcing the people to go to the mosque. Every day, every prayer. The people, all of them, they are afraid at all times. Even when they hear someone knocking on their door they are afraid. They say, "we don't know when and where they will come to take us," "we don't know when a bomb will fall on our house," "when we want to go on our lands, we need to get an authorization from them," "if the land is my brother's, they don't let me cultivate it." I know one man who went and tried to harvest a bag of olives one day, from his own fields. And just for this they imprisoned him for two days and took 1000 USD from him. Nobody can do anything. Now my land's there, but they occupy it, take our trees, cut our trees, everything...

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