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# AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA: WAR CRIMES WITH IMPUNITY

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# CONTENTS

	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
	OVERVIEW: AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA IN THE CONTEXT OF TURKEY'S OPERATIONS AGAINST NES	
<b>1</b>	<b>ORIGINS OF THE FACTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>LEADERSHIP AND KEY MEMBERS</b>	<b>8</b>
	2.1 LINKS TO ISIS	<b>10</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>TURKEY'S RELATIONSHIP TO AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA</b>	<b>11</b>
	3.1 AHRAR AL SHARQIYA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER SNA FACTIONS	<b>15</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>CRIMES AGAINST THE CIVILIAN POPULATION</b>	<b>18</b>
	4.1 MURDER	<b>18</b>
	4.2 EXECUTION OF HEVRIN KHALEF	<b>20</b>
	4.3 KIDNAPPING OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN	<b>22</b>
	4.4 UNLAWFUL DETENTIONS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS	<b>24</b>
	4.5 THEFT, EXPROPRIATION AND EXTORTIONS	<b>25</b>
	4.6 OTHER CRIMES: DISPLACEMENT, DRUG TRAFFIC AND RECRUITMENT OF MINORS	<b>26</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>CONCLUSION: TURKISH CULPABILITY FOR SNA CRIMES</b>	<b>27</b>

# INTRODUCTION

On October 12th, 2019 - two years prior to the publication of this report – Syrian Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalef was dragged from her car and murdered on the M4 road by the Turkish-backed faction Ahrar al-Sharqiya, in scenes broadcast the world over. Ms. Khalef’s murder took place in the framework of successive Turkish-led military operations against North and East Syria (NES). This crime has been identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as a possible war crime.<sup>1</sup>

But the murder is only one of many abuses committed by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, one of Turkey’s key proxies on the ground in Syria: while in turn, Ahrar al-Sharqiya is only one of dozens of militias controlled by Turkey under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA). A closer look at Ahrar al-Sharqiya will illustrate how Turkey uses them and other proxy forces to conduct a reign of terror against the civilian population in the regions it has occupied, while maintaining a veneer of deniability towards its Western allies.

## OVERVIEW: AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA IN THE CONTEXT OF TURKEY’S OPERATIONS AGAINST NES

In 2017, Operation Euphrates Shield instigated Turkey’s campaign to invade and occupy regions of NES. This operation was followed by two major military operations against regions under the political control of the AANES and defended by the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF), dubbed ‘Operation Olive Branch’ and ‘Operation Peace Spring’ by the Turkish authorities. Both invasions were marked by egregious and well-documented human rights violations against the civilian population.

The Olive Branch operation resulted in the occupation of the Kurdish-majority Afrin region, which was previously part of the AANES. Peace Spring led to the occupation of the cities of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad and the surrounding territory, a strategic region located on the arterial M4 road that connects the different regions of NES.

Alongside Turkish armor, airpower and special forces, the invasion was conducted by the scores of militia factions which make up the SNA, a force controlled, funded, armed and directed by Turkey. At least seven factions, along with the military police, have been proven to recruit former members of ISIS.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292>

One of the most notorious is Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya, commonly known as Ahrar al-Sharqiya. The RIC published two reports in 2019 and 2020 including first-hand information on active members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya who had previously been members of ISIS.

Turkish intelligence organized the SNA into three legions in an attempt to mimic the structure of a regular state' army.

The SNA factions de facto operate under Turkey's orders. Turkey provides weapons and military training to factions and does nothing to prevent subsequent systematic crimes against the civilian population. The UN has documented the presence of Turkish intelligence officers as SNA members tortured civilians in their zones of occupation in Syria.

In Operation Peace Spring in 2019 alone, it is estimated that 218<sup>2</sup> civilians were killed. Human rights reports held Ahrar al-Sharqiya responsible for many of these deaths.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly to the other factions which make up the SNA, after the end of Operation Peace Spring, Ahrar al-Sharqiya was handed control of parts of Sere Kaniye, adding to the territory they already controlled in parts of northern rural Aleppo and Afrin. Various testimonies submitted to the UN and other rights monitors have detailed how Ahrar al-Sharqiya exercises control through brutal force against civilians, particularly directed against the Kurdish population. The crimes committed include murder, kidnapping, rapes, extortion, theft, and displacement amongst others. (For more detailed maps of the territory under their control, see RIC's Quarterly Occupation Report.)



Ahrar al-Sharqiya preparing its forces to enter Manbij, Operation Peace Spring, 2019

<sup>2</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/New-Evidence-Supporting-the-National-Army%E2%80%99s-Accusations-in-the-Murder-of-the-Kurdish-Politician-Hevrin-Khalaf.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/57>

Many of the abuses committed against the civilian population violate the Geneva Convention and some cases are believed to amount to war crimes.

In July 2021, the US Department of the Treasury announced sanctions on entities affiliated with the Syrian intelligence and Turkish-backed armed opposition factions, including Ahrar al-Sharqiya and two of its leaders, Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes and Raed Jassim al-Hayes.

The Treasury highlighted the fact that Ahrar al-Sharqiya and its leaders are responsible for the assassination of Hevrin Khalaf, as well as her driver Ferhat Ramadan, in October 2019. Furthermore, the Treasury noted, Ahrar al-Sharqiya for a period of time controlled a large prison complex outside of Aleppo where hundreds have been executed since 2018. The group has also used this prison to operate an extensive kidnapping for ransom operation, targeting prominent business and opposition figures from the Syrian provinces of Idlib and Aleppo.

# 1. ORIGINS OF THE FACTION

Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya appeared in northwestern Syria in January 2016. Although some researchers locate its origins in spring 2014, its formation was formally announced by video in January 2016.<sup>4-5</sup> The video was shot in rural northern Aleppo and featured a short statement read in front of approximately 50 members.

The membership of Ahrar al-Sharqiya primarily hails from eastern Syria. The group, which was originally formed by exiles from Deir ez-Zor,<sup>6</sup> developed as a merger of small Syrian opposition factions Liwa' al-Bara' ibn Malik, Liwa' al-Ahwaz, Liwa' Dir'al-Ansar and Liwa' Jund al-Tawheed.<sup>7</sup>



Screenshot from Ahrar al-Sharqiya's formation announcement video

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Ah6imaOmpo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ah6imaOmpo)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/syrie-ahrar-al-sharqiya-ces-anciens-dal-nosra-qui-combattent-avec-larmee?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/syrie-ahrar-al-sharqiya-ces-anciens-dal-nosra-qui-combattent-avec-larmee?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>7</sup> <https://akmckeeper.com/2020/01/22/ahrar-al-sharqiyah-additional-information-on-the-faction-and-its-founder/>



It began as a smaller subordinate group operating under Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, commonly known as Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>8</sup> Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of the Levant) is a coalition Islamist groups that used to be one of the strongest rebel groups at the beginning of the Syrian war, actively fighting against the Assad regime by drawing on the experience and funding of members loyal to Al-Qaeda.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth mentioning that at the origins of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, a man named Maysar Ali Musa Abdallah al-Juburi, alias 'Abu Mariya al-Qahtani', had contact with some fighters and played a very influential role.<sup>10-11</sup> Having moved from Iraq to implant al-Qaeda's ideology in Syria in 2011,<sup>12</sup> al-Qahtani was appointed in 2012 as a religious and military commander and advisor on issues of sharia (Islamic legal) law for the Al Qaeda front group, the al-Nusra Front.<sup>13</sup> He is also sanctioned by the US Department of the Treasury.<sup>14</sup>

The reasons of the split from Ahrar al-Sham are unclear. The current leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Abu Hatem Shaqra, is believed to have had a strong influence on some fighters during the time of the split. While still being part of Ahrar al-Sham, he is believed to have spent time establishing relations with potential funders for a new group.<sup>15</sup>



Ahrar al-Sharqiya's logo, and the Islamic rebel flag

<sup>8</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR\\_Syria\\_EN\\_July20.pdf](https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR_Syria_EN_July20.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/syrie-ahrar-al-sharqiya-ces-anciens-dal-nosra-qui-combattent-avec-larmee?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/06/25/remnants-of-the-deiri-opposition-contention-and-controversy-in-north-aleppo/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://jamestown.org/brief/april-2014-briefs/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>

<sup>14</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/06/islams-lawyers-in-arms/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>

## 2. LEADERSHIP AND KEY MEMBERS

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is headed by a man named Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes, commonly known as ‘Abu Hatem Shaqra’. Abu Hatem Shaqra was born in 1987 in the town of Shaqra in northwest rural Deir ez-Zor, as a member of the Bakkara tribe.<sup>16</sup> As a young man he worked as an agricultural laborer in his hometown, before spending some time working in construction in Jordan.<sup>17</sup> Before Ahrar al-Sharqiya he joined Ahrar al-Sham in 2012, from which he was later expelled for his conduct.<sup>18</sup> He is alleged to have committed multiple transgressions, such as stealing household utensils from civilians and using the finances of Ahrar al-Sham for his own benefit.<sup>19</sup>



Abu Hatem Shaqra, leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya

Abu Hatem Shaqra has earned the nickname ‘the octopus’<sup>20</sup> for his involvement in multiple illicit businesses, such as smuggling ISIS members into Turkey.

While he was preparing to launch Ahrar al-Sharqiya, he engaged with multiple pro-opposition funders who themselves have faced suspicions as to the origin of their business revenue.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/OALD24/status/1185638002384687105>

<sup>17</sup> <https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>



As the leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Abu Hatem Shaqra has been responsible for countless crimes. He commanded Ahrar al-Sharqiya's prison outside of Aleppo, where hundreds of detainees have been executed since 2018. He has also been pictured personally taking part in summary executions.<sup>22</sup>

He has been implicated in further crimes, such as the trafficking of Yazidi women and children and smuggling them into Turkey.<sup>23</sup> He has also personally overseen the recruitment and integration of former ISIS members into the ranks of Ahrar al-Sharqiya.<sup>24</sup>



Abu Hatem Shaqra with captives in October 2019

Abu Hatem Shaqra's right-hand man and most trusted military leader is his cousin from Deir ez-Zor, Raed Jassim al-Hayes, who goes by the nom-de-guerre 'Abu Jaafer Shaqra'. As a senior figure within the militia, Abu Jaafer Shaqra has personally supervised and profited from the militia's organized theft and sale of equipment from civilian homes and farms.



Abu Jaafer Shaqra,  
Abu Shaqra's cousin and military leader

Both, Abu Hatem Shaqra and Abu Jaafer Shaqra have been personally sanctioned by the United States Treasury, "pursuant to Executive Order 13894 for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Ahrar al-Sharqiya."<sup>25</sup>

In 2015, Ahrar al-Sharqiya's main media man al-Hareth Rabah, who directly filmed many of the crimes committed by Ahrar al-Sharqiya members under the leadership of Abu Hatem Shaqra and Abu Jaafer Shaqra, managed to travel to Germany as a refugee and apply for asylum.

<sup>22</sup> <https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1334199036635656202>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw\\_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM](https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM)

<sup>24</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292v>

<sup>25</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292>

He soon returned to Syria, claiming that Europe “is a place of infidels”. Upon his return, he brought technical equipment, two mobile phones, a camera and a laptop, likely purchased with money he received from the German government due to his refugee status.<sup>26</sup> Once back in Syria, he used this equipment to document human rights abuses carried out by Ahrar al-Sharqiya during the Peace Spring operation, including summary executions on the M4 highway.

## 2.1 LINKS TO ISIS

Furthermore, following a disturbing pattern, Ahrar al-Sharqiya has continued to recruit former ISIS members into its ranks. Starting when the International Coalition to Defeat ISIS and the SDF started fighting ISIS in Raqqa, many ISIS fighters tried to escape. Some SNA leaders, such as Hussein Hamadi, the leaders of Jaysh al-Sharqiya, and the leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Abu Hatem Shaqra, helped fighters and their families enter the areas under their control.<sup>27</sup> Ahrar al-Sharqiya and other SNA factions benefit from the military experience of these former ISIS members, using them in sniping operations, assassinations, and suicide attacks.

**In 2019 and 2020, RIC released reports where at least 14 Ahrar al-Sharqiya members were identified as former ISIS fighters.<sup>28-29</sup> This research was corroborated by the US government, which when sanctioning Ahrar al-Sharqiya confirmed the faction includes numerous former ISIS members among its ranks.<sup>30</sup>**

<sup>26</sup><https://euphratespost.net/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%82-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/ongoing-violations-without-accountability-islamic-state-members-in-the-syrian-national-army/>

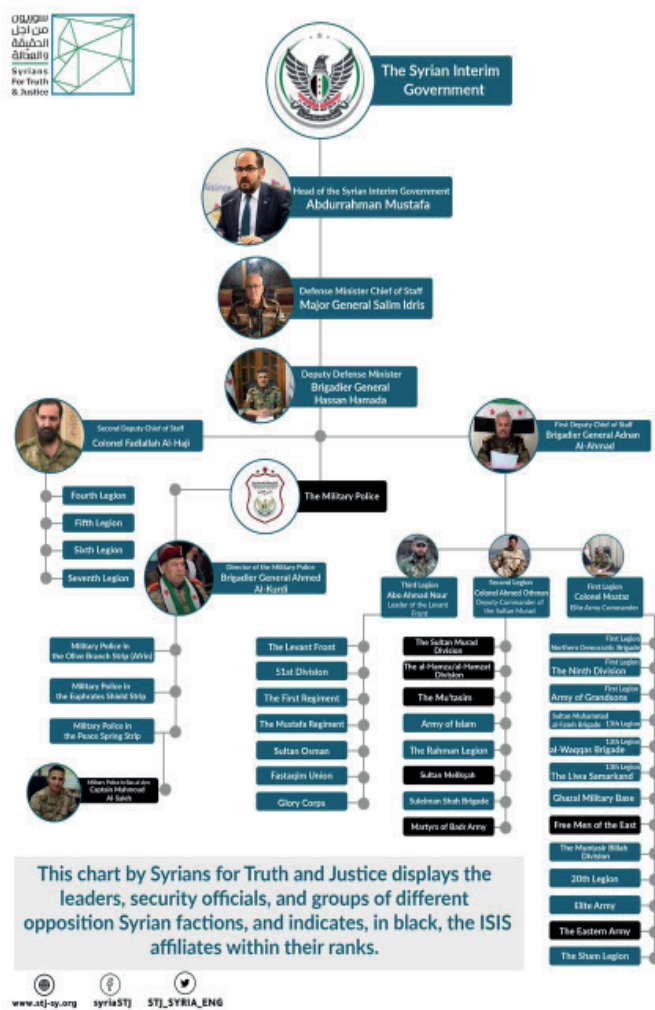
<sup>28</sup><https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/10/database-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces-in-sere-kaniye-and-tel-abyad/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292>

# 3. TURKEY’S RELATIONSHIP TO AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is one faction of the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA), a proxy military structure which is backed, funded, armed and controlled by Turkey.<sup>31</sup> The origins of the SNA lie in the fall of 2017, when al-Modon newspaper documented a meeting at the headquarters of the Turkish Special Forces, where a number of Free Syrian Army factions discussed integrating into a regular army structure under Turkish command.<sup>32</sup> The meeting was attended by the Governor of Gaziantep, the governor of Kilis, the commander of the Turkish Special Forces, representatives of the Syrian Interim Government, the deputy head of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the leaders of FSA groups active in the Euphrates Shield area.<sup>33</sup> It was also agreed that weapons, vehicles and equipment would be provided to the factions through the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government. A few months later, on 30 December 2017, the founding of the SNA was announced.



SNA organizational chart

<sup>31</sup> [https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw\\_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM](https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM)

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2017/10/24/%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A?fbclid=IwAR1S8CYkM3Rg0KoXkWIhIgoQNrkswnzIT8e6daY4SXVeZjZjMkDW8XUaf>

<sup>33</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IS-Members-to-the-SNA-1.pdf>

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is formally known as Brigade 123 within the SNA's 12th Division.<sup>34</sup> And as with many other SNA groups, their participation in the Euphrates Shield Operation consolidated Ahrar al-Sharqiya's role in the proxy force.<sup>35</sup>

A cursory investigation of the command and control structure of factions in the SNA shows that the chain of command flows directly up to the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and by extension their commander-in-chief, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. These factions are technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government, a Turkish-sponsored body that lobbies on behalf of the 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)." <sup>36</sup> In areas under nominal SNA control, they are granted limited autonomy to plunder and extort money from the local population. But the real power is retained by Turkey, exercised 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."



Ahrar al-Sharqiya in Afrin following the city's capture on March 18th, 2018

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/11/the-structure-of-the-syrian-national-army>

<sup>35</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.mei.edu/blog/turkish-backed-syrian-armed-opposition-groups-unite-under-one-banner>



On the battlefield, likewise, the SNA take their commands directly from Turkey. A piece of in-depth 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."

In addition, Syrians for Truth and Justice has quoted a high-ranking officer in the SNA as saying that the Turkish security services are responsible for appointing the SNA's commanders and determining their assignments: "The Turkish intelligence service directly studies the files of officers who are nominated to assume leadership positions in the region, and appoints the leaders directly. All current commanders in the SNA and its affiliated agencies, including civil police, military police and others, have been approved by the same service."<sup>37</sup>



Ahrar al-Sharqiya commander Abu Hatem receiving an award of thanks from representative of the Turkish backed police force in Rajo

As of today, Ahrar al-Sharqiya maintains numerous training camps in northern rural Aleppo and Afrin, where fighters undergo professional military training under MIT and the Turkish Armed Forces.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, before the Peace Spring Operation the Minister of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government, Salim Idris, announced that the Syrian National Army had completed professional training for the upcoming military operation.<sup>39</sup> Ahrar al-Sharqiya's finance department pays single combatant 500TL (\$56) per month, while married fighters earn 800TL, (about \$90 USD).<sup>40</sup> Ahrar al-Sharqiya has played a leading role in Turkey's main operations against NES, namely 2017's Euphrates Shield, 2018's Olive Branch, and 2019's Peace Spring. As stated above, the faction's participation in Operation Euphrates Shield particularly enhanced its position and military legitimacy within the SNA.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/ongoing-violations-without-accountability-islamic-state-members-in-the-syrian-national-army/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.yenisafak.com/ar/news/3438458>

<sup>40</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/New-Evidence-Supporting-the-National-Army%E2%80%99s-Accusations-in-the-Murder-of-the-Kurdish-Politician-Hevrin-Khalaf.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>



Furthermore, in January 2018, when Ahrar al-Sharqiya took part in Operation Olive Branch Operation that concluded with the occupation of the Afrin region, they were the primary fighting force in the battle in the Rajo front. This would later grant them control of the region around Rajo.<sup>42</sup>

Where Ahrar al-Sharqiya has conducted military operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), it has received and continues to receive material support from Turkey.<sup>43</sup> Small arms and at least one Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), used in the Olive Branch operation, have been documented as part of that material support.<sup>44</sup> Ahrar al-Sharqiya conducts their operations under the cover of Turkish warplanes, drones, artillery and armor.

Further evidence proves that the leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya has held official meetings with Turkish representatives.<sup>45</sup> For instance, during a meeting held between Turkish representatives and the leaders of several factions in Gaziantep in September 2020 after the publication of a UN report on the human rights abuses by the SNA, Ahrar al-Sharqiya was reprehended for their conduct during the Peace Spring Operation, when they committed several murders of civilians, included the aforementioned killing of Hevrin Khalef.<sup>46</sup>

These meetings are something of a fig leaf, given that Turkey funds Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Ahrar al-Sharqiya is under the Turkish military command structure. As the UN Human Rights Council asserts in a report about abuses committed by SNA factions: "If any armed group members were shown to be acting under the effective command and control of Turkish forces, these violations may entail criminal responsibility for such commanders who knew or should have known about the crimes, or failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent or repress their commission."<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Abu Hatem Shaqra has been pictured meeting with the official, Turkish-backed opposition (or 'Syrian National Coalition'), meaning Ahrar al-Sharqiya has had a voice during official negotiations over the Syrian constitution and the future of the country, even as the AANES are denied any participation. Pictures shared on social media show Salem al-Meslet, the current president of the National Coalition, embracing Abu Hatem Shaqra.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>

<sup>43</sup> [https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw\\_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM](https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM)

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/syrie-ahrar-al-sharqiya-ces-anciens-dal-nosra-qui-combattent-avec-larmee?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>45</sup> <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1334199030843314178>

<sup>46</sup> <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1307297694910754816>

<sup>47</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/57>

<sup>48</sup> <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1426406625418616832>

### 3.1 AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER SNA FACTIONS

As stated above, Turkey exercises ultimate control over the various SNA factions, while allowing them limited rein to carry out petty crime for financial gain.<sup>49</sup> At times, this means acting as peace negotiator. Ahrar al-Sharqiya's media official affirmed that the faction has generally a fluid relationship with the other factions operating in northern rural Aleppo – ie. in the regions seized during Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, violent clashes often happen. For instance, directly after the occupation of Afrin, Ahrar al-Sharqiya and the faction Hamza Division briefly turned their guns on each other. Turkey stepped in to orchestrate a deal that ended the hostilities and resulted in the release of both parties' detainees and the handing over of the confiscated vehicles and weapons.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, such internecine clashes remain commonplace, as groups jostle over resources, trade routes and crossings where they can make money from bribery, extortion and kidnapping. In 2020 another such incident was reported, when Ahrar al-Sharqiya arrested 20th Division fighters, accusing them of being behind a car bombing.



Reconciliation meeting between Hamza Division and Ahrar al-Sharqiya, 2018



Consequently, Ahrar al-Sharqiya took over a 20th Division base in Mabrouka. The 20th Division attempted to reopen its bases and Ahrar al-Sharqiya prevented them from doing so. Turkey, again, pushed for negotiations between the two factions, and ordered both to release their detainees. As regards Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Turkey also ordered them to withdraw from the base and return property they had confiscated from 20th Division. After some months the commanders of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Jaysh al-Sharqiya and 20th Division held a reconciliation meeting under Turkey's auspice.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> <https://afripost.net/en/2020/05/new-photos-prove-the-relationship-between-the-turkish-occupation-and-the-extremists/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/11/ahrar-al-sharqiya-brigade-the-potential-spearhead-of-east-of-euphrates-battles/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://twitter.com/Elizrael/status/1217873718854275072>

According to a report by Syrians for Truth and Justice, Ahrar al-Sharqiya used their former ISIS fighters in another attack on the 20th Division in April 2020 in al-Bab.<sup>53</sup> Ahrar al-Sharqiya strategically employs the military experience of its former ISIS fighters for various missions, most notably infighting between factions.

Such clashes have direct consequences on the civilian population. In August 2021, Ahrar al-Sharqiya violently clashed with another faction known as the 9th Division, storming their houses and beating their commander. The events took place in the center of Afrin city in the presence of civilians and a child was injured.<sup>54</sup>

Ahrar al-Sharqiya maintains a good relationship with a faction called Jaysh al-Sharqiya. At times Jaysh al-Sharqiya has worked as a mediator for Ahrar al-Sharqiya in disputes with other factions. Moreover, the militia Shuhada al-Sharqiya, formerly known as Katibat al-Hamza, is allegedly a sub-faction of Ahrar al-Sharqiya and has also been involved in clashes with other factions in western Afrin.<sup>55-56</sup>

Such incidents illustrate the way in which Turkey uses this militia system: allowing factions to indulge in abuses against the local population to keep their leaders in funds, playing them off against one another to prevent any one faction from growing too powerful, and at times intervening to present itself as a peacemaker and responsible state actor – as though it were not Turkey which backed and bankrolled all these warring militias in the first place.

Turkey doesn't only intervene in clashes between the different factions, but also decides the limits of the territory under their control. In summer 2021, it was reported by local sources that the Turkish army was deploying Jaysh al-Islam militiamen to replace fighters in some of Ahrar al-Sharqiya's positions.<sup>57</sup>

Turkey also uses its authority to urge militiamen to fight in conflicts outside Syria. In the fall of 2020, fighters from Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Sultan Murad were sent to Artskah (Nagorno-Karabakh) to fight alongside the Azerbaijani Army against Armenian and Armenian-backed indigenous forces. Some 2,300 fighters reportedly crossed from Afrin to Gaziantep and then boarded a flight to Azerbaijan.

According to local sources, imams appointed by the Turkish occupation authorities encouraged people in occupied Afrin to “join the jihad and fight against infidels” in Azerbaijan.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IS-Members-to-the-SNA-1.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/en/220557/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/06/25/remnants-of-the-deiri-opposition-contention-and-controversy-in-north-aleppo/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2018/7/6/%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B2%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%81>

<sup>57</sup> <https://twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1426406613460692994>

In early 2021, an unofficial border crossing began operating in an area called Tufaha (Arabic for apple),<sup>59</sup> which lies between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, connecting Turkish-backed, opposition-controlled areas and AANES-administered territories in northern Raqqa. According to local sources, Tufaha facilitates a booming illegal business run by Abu Hatem Shaqra, Ahrar al-Sharqiya's leader. Control of Tufaha is shared with two other factions, Jaysh al-Sharqiya and the 20th Division.<sup>60</sup>



Abu Hatem Shaqra and Abu Jafer Shaqra in 2018

<sup>58</sup> <https://afripost.net/en/2020/10/2300-contract-killers-head-to-azerbaijan-to-fulfill-turkish-interests/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkish-backed-rebels-leave-trail-abuse-and-criminality-syrias-aftrin#ixzz75ZrEuK71>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkish-backed-rebels-leave-trail-abuse-and-criminality-syrias-aftrin#ixzz75ZrEuK71>

## 4. CRIMES AGAINST THE CIVILIAN POPULATION

The anti-Kurdish and Islamic extremist spirit of Ahrar al-Sharqiya's rank and file was on full display during Operation Olive Branch. Members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya filmed themselves destroying businesses belonging to Afrin citizens and calling Kurdish fighters "pigs" and "infidels".<sup>61</sup> Ahrar al-Sharqiya fighters have also been caught on video perpetrating hate crimes against Kurds, and filmed conducting executions of civilians including nurses and chauffeurs, as well as captured combatants, in defiance of international law.<sup>62</sup>

There is at least one documented case of rape committed by a member of Ahrar al-Sharqiya. The head of Ahrar al-Sharqiya in the Jarablus district, Abu Khalid al-Sharqiya, was caught on video abusing a 13- or 14-year-old girl.<sup>63</sup> After this, some members of the faction, along with Abu Khalid al-Sharqiya, were arrested, which provoked clashes between the faction and the Turkish-controlled military police.<sup>64</sup>

What follows is an overview of some of the well-documented crimes committed by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, both during military operations and in regions over which it holds de facto control.

### 4.1 MURDER

Ahrar al-Sharqiya has committed murders that could be considered war crimes. Most notably, in the fall of 2019, the assassination of the Kurdish female politician Hevrin Khalef provoked world-wide disgust and cast Ahrar al-Sharqiya into the spotlight.

But this high-profile incident was just one of several reported cases of Ahrar al-Sharqiya murdering civilians. Ahrar al-Sharqiya was also the main perpetrator of the so-called "M4 executions", a series of summary executions, mostly of civilians, that took place on the M4 road and clearly targeted the local Kurdish population.

On 13 October 2019, Ahrar al-Sharqiya executed three people: two Tel Abyad hospital workers and a member of the SDF.

<sup>61</sup> <http://theregion.org/article/12722-disillusioned-jihadist-ahrar-al-sharqiya-members-defect-to-sdf-backed-council>

<sup>62</sup> [https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR\\_Syria\\_EN\\_July20.pdf](https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR_Syria_EN_July20.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/syrie-ahrar-al-sharqiya-ces-anciens-dal-nosra-qui-combattent-avec-larmee?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>64</sup> <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2017/4-october-clashes-between-ahrar-alsharqiya-and-free-police#>

<sup>19</sup> RIC interview with Sherwan Derwish, Manbij Military Council spokesperson August 2020



The first victim, Medea Khalil Issa (aged 18), from Tel Abyad, was a member of the Health Authority of the AANES.<sup>65</sup> Mohammad Bouzan (18) was originally from Kobane, although he also lived and worked in Tel Abyad. He had been a surveillance camera technician, but was working as an ambulance driver at the moment of the attack.<sup>66</sup> The final victim, Hevi Khalil, was an SDF fighter escorting the ambulance Bouzan was driving.<sup>67</sup>

In earlier 2019, meanwhile, RIC reported violence against civilians in occupied Afrin, including the execution of at least 10 civilians at a checkpoint set up during clashes between armed groups. The main culprits in this incident were the Hamza Division and Ahrar al-Sharqiya.<sup>68</sup>



Mohammad Bouzan and Medea Khalil Issa

In June 2021, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights activists reported that Maizer Aliwi al-Ahmed, from Tel Diyab in the Sere Kaniye countryside, was shot in the head by members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, when he requested to be paid for his work repairing their houses.<sup>69</sup> His body was later dumped outside the village. When the victim's family demanded accountability, his brother was arrested.

Another infamous case of murder at the hands of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, is the case of Rashid Medawar from Afrin, who was arrested in August 2018 and tortured to death in June 2020. The news only reached his family in May 2021.<sup>70</sup>

These attacks indicate that Ahrar al-Sharqiya's crimes are not limited to the high-profile execution of Hevrin Khalef, but have targeted multiple civilians, medical staff and non-combatants, in attacks amounting to war crimes conducted in pursuit of Turkish military objectives.

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/10/31/video-evidence-sheds-light-on-executions-near-turkey-syria-border/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/new-evidence-pointing-to-ahrar-al-sharqiyas-responsibility-for-field-executions-in-suluk-during-operation-peace-spring/>

<sup>67</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/new-evidence-pointing-to-ahrar-al-sharqiyas-responsibility-for-field-executions-in-suluk-during-operation-peace-spring/>

<sup>68</sup> [https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/03/TNA\\_report.pdf](https://rojavainformationcenter.com/storage/2019/03/TNA_report.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/en/217446/>

<sup>70</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/06/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7-%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%8a%d9%88-%d8%a3%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%b1-2021-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87/>

## 4.2 EXECUTION OF HEVRIN KHALEF

Though well-documented elsewhere, it is worth highlighting the circumstances surrounding the execution of Ms. Khalef. According to a UN Human Rights Commission report: “In the early hours of 12 October, Hevrin Khalef, Secretary-General of the Future Party of Syria, was travelling with her driver in a black vehicle from Qamishlo on the M4 motorway. At around 7 a.m., between Suluk and Til Tamir, members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiyah (Brigade 123 of the Syrian National) Army executed Hevrin Khalef together with her driver, after dragging her out by her hair and mutilating her body.”<sup>71</sup>

Forensic investigation of the events established that the murder took place somewhere between 6:00 and 8:00.<sup>72</sup> Briefly before Ms. Khalef’s car passed by, members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya set up a checkpoint in Tirwaziya on the M4 road between Heseke and Raqqa, close to Sere Kaniye. They pulled over several vehicles to search for supporters of the AANES. According to their own account, those who stopped and surrendered were to be detained.

At some point during this timeframe Ms. Khalef and her driver Ferhad Ramadan ran into the checkpoint. The next visual evidence we have was a video recorded by members of the faction themselves. It shows Ms. Khalef’s vehicle, a black armored Toyota SUV, with approximately 30 bullet holes and shattered back and rear windows. The cameraman (al-Hareth Rabath – see above) is heard saying, “another pig was killed by the National Army, fleeing by an armored car”.



Hevrin Khalef, late Secretary General of the Future Syria Party

The camera then approaches a group of Ahrar al-Sharqiya members standing next to Ms. Khalef’s car. The dead body of a male is lying face down on the ground next to it, later identified as Mr. Ramadan. In the video one can hear the voice of a female coming from inside the car. The voice identifies herself as the leader of the Future Syria Party.<sup>73</sup> Ms. Khalef’s mother later confirmed the voice belonged to her daughter.

<sup>71</sup> <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/57>

<sup>72</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/New-Evidence-Supporting-the-National-Army%E2%80%99s-Accusations-in-the-Murder-of-the-Kurdish-Politician-Hevrin-Khalaf.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/New-Evidence-Supporting-the-National-Army%E2%80%99s-Accusations-in-the-Murder-of-the-Kurdish-Politician-Hevrin-Khalaf.pdf>

Hevrin Khalef was likely wounded at this point but clearly still alive. A forensic report suggests she was dragged out of the car and point-blank range executed by Ahrar al-Sharqiya members. She was shot in the head and back and chunks of her hair were pulled out. Her head and body were bruised from beating with a solid object. The official cause of death was cerebral hemorrhage. Blood-clothing patterns show that she was shot at several times after her death.<sup>74</sup>



Hevrin Khalef's car, after the attack

<sup>74</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/New-Evidence-Supporting-the-National-Army%E2%80%99s-Accusations-in-the-Murder-of-the-Kurdish-Politician-Hevrin-Khalaf.pdf>

### 4.3 KIDNAPPING OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is also responsible for the disappearance of a large number of women and girls in Afrin. Between the years 2019 and 2021 Ahrar al-Sharqiya is believed to be responsible for at least 13 women and girls who have been reported missing in the occupied area.<sup>75</sup> Only four of them have been released, while seven women and two girls are still missing.

#### REPORTED MISSING WOMEN

NAME	LOCATION	DATE
KHALEDA SHEIKH MURAD*	JINDERES	06 DEC 2020
AMINA ABDO MURAD*	JINDERES	06 DEC 2020
AISHA HASSOU HAMID**	BAFLORÊ	22 NOV 2020
FARIDA HAMMU HUSSEIN**	BAFLORÊ	22 NOV 2020
AMINA HAMID HANAN**	BAFLORÊ	22 NOV 2020
SHAFIQA MOHAMMED**	BAFLORÊ	22 NOV 2020
SIBRAN MUSTAFA RASHID***	MISKÊ JORÎN, SYRIA	15 SET 2019

\* accused of participating in a local neighborhood assembly under the AANES.<sup>76</sup>

\*\* targeted in a dispute over fines imposed on the olive harvest. Aisha Hassoud Amid's husband was also kidnapped. They were held for a ransom of 2,000TL (Turkish Lira),<sup>77</sup> or about \$225.

\*\*\* kidnapped along with her husband's brother several days after the kidnapping of her own husband.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> <https://missingafrinwomen.org/>

<sup>76</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/en/2020/12/new-campaign-of-arrests-in-baadina-and-jenderes-affected-6-kurdish-citizens-including-women/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/482863525796937/posts/855757041840915?sfns=mo>

<sup>78</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2404002076585574&id=1973304852988634](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2404002076585574&id=1973304852988634)



## REPORTED MISSING MINOR GIRLS

NAME	LOCATION	DATE
FATIMA MOHAMMED RASKELAH*	MÛSKÊ	21 DEC 2020
MARYAM AFDIK SHEIKHO**	QÊSIM	10 SET 2020

\* 16 years old, arrested along with her brother, who was released after some days.<sup>79</sup>  
 \*\* 17 years old.<sup>80</sup> IMPOSED ON THE OLIVE HARVEST. AISHA HASSOUD AMID'S HUSBAND WAS ALSO KIDNAPPED. THEY WERE HELD FOR A RANSOM OF 2,000TL (TURKISH LIRA), OR ABOUT \$225.

## WOMEN HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED AND RELEASED AFTERWARDS

NAME	LOCATION	DATE
KHALIDA HUSSEIN*	JINDERES	23 JAN 2021
JIHAN FAKHRI ALI**	QÎBARÊ, SYRIA	10 NOV 2019
FIKRAT ALIKO	MĀSKĀNLĪ, SYRIA	25 FEB 2019
NAWZAT YUSUF	MĀSKĀNLĪ, SYRIA	25 FEB 2019

\* a disabled woman, was held at a house belonging to one of the leaders of Ahrar al-Sharqiya.<sup>81</sup> The kidnap-  
 pers were identified as Hamad Jassim and Abu al-Aynaa.<sup>82</sup>  
 \*\* a Yezidi woman from the village of Qibar, was released on ransom; detained on grounds of having worked  
 with the AANES.<sup>83</sup>

Taken in the context of the abduction and murder of hundreds of women by the SNA in Afrin, as documented by the watchdog project Missing Afrin Women, these abductions illustrate the gender-based violence inherent in Ahrar al Sharqiya's control of occupied regions of NES. Women face special risk of rape, abuse and abduction under Ahrar al-Sharqiya's control.

<sup>79</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=880177229398896&id=482863525796937](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=880177229398896&id=482863525796937)

<sup>80</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1671835559662157&id=960856530760067](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1671835559662157&id=960856530760067)

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/260120212>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/afrin.activists/posts/919974558821702>

<sup>83</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=580921612657794&id=482863525796937](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=580921612657794&id=482863525796937)



## 4.4 UNLAWFUL DETENTIONS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

Similarly, RIC has recorded several specific cases of detentions and assaults on the civilian population of the areas occupied by Turkey and controlled by Ahrar al-Sharqiya from January to August 2021.

NAMES	LOCATION	DATE
PHARMACIST* (NAME UNKNOWN)	AFRIN CITY	07 JUN 2021
UNKNOWN	RAJO	26 APR 2021
FAMILY OF IDLIB SETTLERS	AFRIN CITY	19 MAR 2021
BASHIR HASAN BAYRAM**	HASAN, JENDERES	10 JAN 2021
HUSSAIN DAWUD OMA**	HASAN, JENDERES	10 JAN 2021
JALAL SABRI KAMAL**	HASAN, JENDERES	10 JAN 2021
RASHID OMAR OMAR	GAWANDA, MAYDANA	06 JAN 2021
HAYDAR BAKR SIDO***	SHEKHUTKA, MAABATLI	02 JAN 2021

\* ACCUSED OF PARTIALLY... \*\* TARGETED IN A DIS... HELD FOR A RANSOM... \* militiamen (former ISIS members) pulled a gun when he refused to give them medication.<sup>84</sup>  
 \*\* unlawfully arrested on 10 January 2021; afterwards asked to pay 400,000 – 700,000SYP(\$318-\$556).<sup>85</sup> ED. THEY WERE  
 \*\*\* unlawfully arrested for filing a complaint against the group and was forced to pay 1000TL as ransom to secure his release (about \$112).<sup>86</sup>

<sup>84</sup> [http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/06/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7\\_%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d8%a8%d9%88%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d9%88%d9%84-%d8%ad%d8%b2%d9%8a%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%86-2021-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82/](http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/06/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7_%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d8%a8%d9%88%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d9%88%d9%84-%d8%ad%d8%b2%d9%8a%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%86-2021-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82/)  
<sup>85</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/en/2021/01/10-kurdish-citizens-were-arrested-in-separate-areas-of-the-occupied-afrin-region/>  
<sup>86</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/en/2021/01/kurdish-citizen-kidnapped-from-shekhutka-village-due-to-his-objec-tion-to-the-seizure-of-his-property/>

## 4.5 THEFT, EXPROPRIATION AND EXTORTIONS

Ahrar al-Sharqiya has stolen and expropriated property from the population and committed extortion in both Afrin and Sere Kaniye. In the first half of 2021 (from January to August), at least 10 cases have been reported.

NAME	LOCATION	DATE
MOHAMMED NAJJAR*	AFRIN CITY	15 AUG 2021
MUHAMMADA SIDQI	AFRIN CITY	06 JUN 2021
HUSSEIN SEYDO ABDO	JINDERES	05 MAY 2021
QAQO FAMILY**	KHALNIREH	19 APR 2021
KHALED QADDO***	TARANDA	19 APR 2021
UNKNOWN	AFRIN CITY	28 MAR 2021
ABD AL-MANAN MUHAMMAD	AFRIN CITY	23 MAR 2021
MUHAMMAD AMIN	JUQA	20 MAR 2021
MUHAMMAD MUSA	JUQA	20 MAR 2021
SHEIKH MUS MUHAMMAD	AFRIN CITY	02 JAN 2021

\* music shop owner, forced to pay a bribe of \$2,000 and threatened with having his shop taken.<sup>87</sup>

\*\* 80 olive trees from their property cut down.<sup>88</sup>

\*\*\* 40 pomegranates trees cut down.<sup>89</sup>

In addition, in June 2021, near the village of Qarba, 5km away from Jendires district, members of Ahrar al-Sharqiya illegally excavated an archaeological site.<sup>90</sup> Reportedly, the members brought machinery to search for antiquities and uprooted several olive trees in the process.

<sup>87</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/en/2021/08/ahrar-al-sharqiya-militia-demands-2000-from-kurdish-musical-instruments-store-owner-in-afrin/>

<sup>88</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=509789273737966&id=114977619885802](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=509789273737966&id=114977619885802)

<sup>89</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=509789273737966&id=114977619885802](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=509789273737966&id=114977619885802)

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/218636/>

## 4.6 OTHER CRIMES: DISPLACEMENT, DRUG TRAFFIC AND RECRUITMENT OF MINORS

Ahrar al-Sharqiya has contributed to the displacement of the local population from the occupied areas. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, since Afrin fell under the control of Turkey and the SNA, more than 300,000 people have been displaced from Afrin. Of those, only 25,000 have been able to return.<sup>91</sup>

Ahrar al-Sharqiya has been accused by Amnesty International and others of participating in forced displacements and the seizure of property in Afrin, in incidents that amount to “serious human rights violations”.<sup>92</sup> Residents have been denied access to their property and belongings, with homes and land seized by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, along with other groups like Ferqa 55, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Faylaq al-Sham and Sultan Murad. Some of the appropriated properties have been used as military facilities.<sup>93</sup>

For example, in December 2019 Ahrar al-Sharqiya occupied a house belonging to a widowed woman in Afrin city. The house was emptied and offered for rent even though there was a tenant living there. The tenant was detained and tortured after refusing to leave.<sup>94</sup>

In Afrin in winter 2021 it was reported that some factions, including Ahrar al-Sharqiya, were growing hashish on a large scale.<sup>95</sup>

There are at least three documented cases where Ahrar al-Sharqiya has recruited minors.

Abbass M., 16, was recruited in late 2019 from his hometown of Tal Halaf. Reportedly, when his father asked to see him, the request was denied and he was told that the boy had become an SNA fighter and that his duty was “joining the jihad and fighting along with the Turkish army.”<sup>96</sup>

Abdullah H., 16, was also recruited in Tel Halaf in late 2019. Another 16-year-old member of Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Samir B., was reportedly captured by the SDF in 2021.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/06/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7-%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%8a%d9%88-%d8%a3%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%b1-2021-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87/>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>

<sup>94</sup> [https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw\\_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM](https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM)

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/en/206939/>

<sup>96</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/child-recruitment-by-parties-to-conflict-in-syria-a-lasting-phenomenon/>

<sup>97</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/child-recruitment-by-parties-to-conflict-in-syria-a-lasting-phenomenon/>

## CONCLUSION: TURKISH CULPABILITY FOR SNA CRIMES

Not only does Ahrar al-Sharqiya act with impunity in the areas under its control, but it does so with the full support of NATO member Turkey. There are regular and extensive reports of violations committed by Turkish-backed militias, such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya, in the occupied Olive Branch and Peace Spring regions. Despite the mounting evidence of human rights abuses committed under Turkish command and control, the international community has failed to call for the exclusion of their proxy, the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government from the Syrian peace process.

Moreover, under international law, states are responsible for the actions of their armed forces take against civilians. In the case of the SNA factions, such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya, no attempt has been made to hide their subordination to Turkish military command (see above). According to the analysis of Syrians for Truth and Justice regarding the assassination of Hevrin Kahlef, “if the courts were to find that the attack against civilians was implemented pursuant to a state policy, Turkey’s officials could incur criminal accountability for crimes against humanity, while members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya could for instance argue that they were in a superior/subordinate relationship with regards to Turkey’s command.”<sup>98</sup>

As noted above, in the summer of 2021, the US State Department announced sanctions against Ahrar al-Sharqiya and its leaders. However, the crimes committed by the faction and its leaders would not have been possible had the faction not been developed, directed and backed by Turkey.

While the US has taken laudable steps to sanction Ahrar al-Sharqiya, more must be done to investigate Turkish command and control of all SNA factions, including Ahrar al-Sharqiya, and to take action against Turkish officials, army officers and ultimately the Turkish Government itself, with knowledge of SNA abuses. Turkish control of the SNA is an open secret, but the international community’s refusal to acknowledge this fact grants Turkey license to continue sponsoring rampant abuses via the smokescreen of the SNA’s ‘independence’.

<sup>98</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/New-Evidence-Supporting-the-National-Army%E2%80%99s-Accusations-in-the-Murder-of-the-Kurdish-Politician-Hevrin-Khalaf.pdf>

A peaceful solution to the Syrian situation will require the international community to acknowledge the occupation of Syrian territory by Turkey and seek criminal accountability for the conduct of the occupying forces via international legal mechanisms. Hevrin Khalef's execution highlighted an uncomfortable truth: that Turkey is acting with impunity as a state sponsor of terror, using radicalized criminal factions such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya to commit rampant war crimes in the territories under its control.





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