

**Q3**  
**2021**

# **THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION**

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



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 HTS

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 SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ

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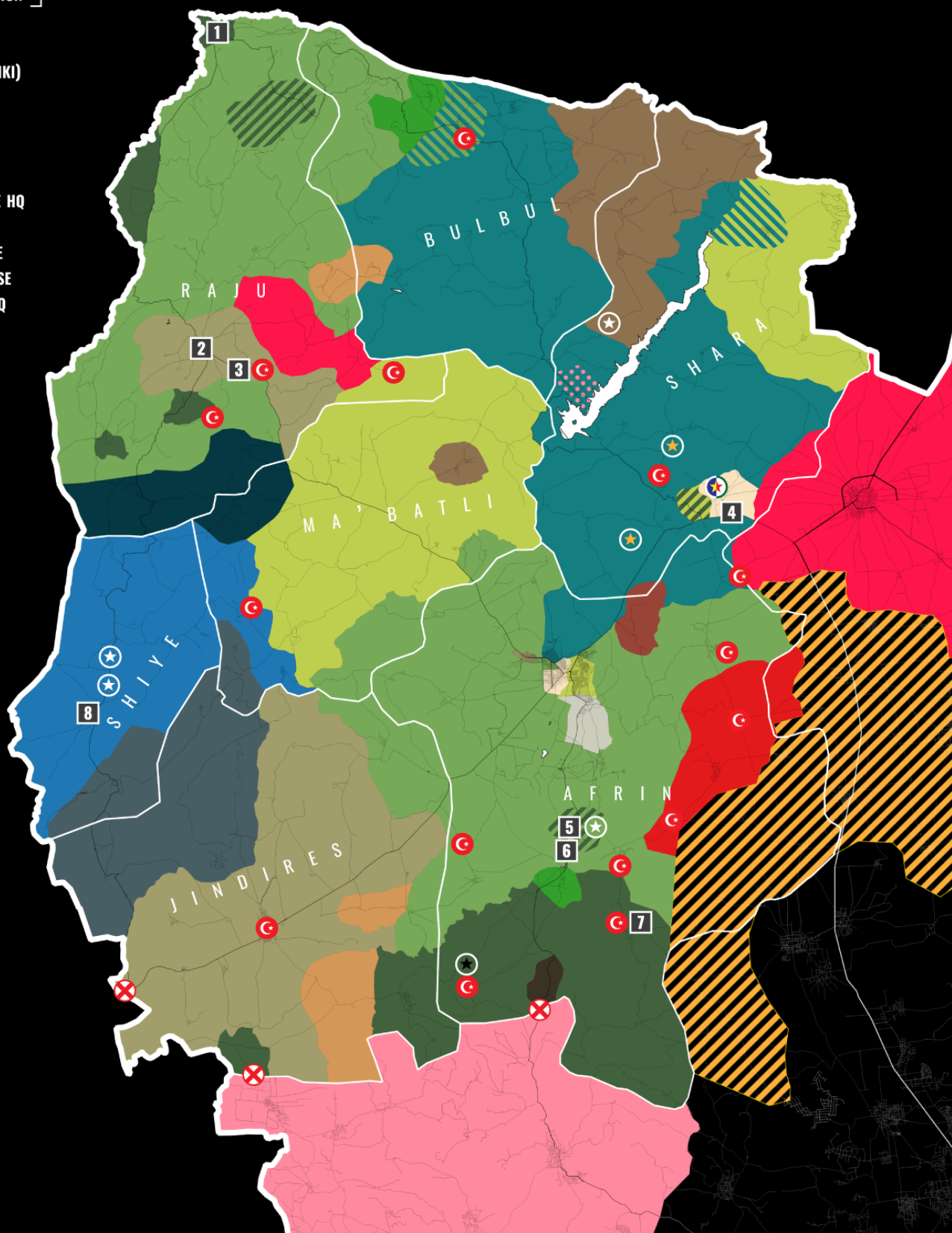
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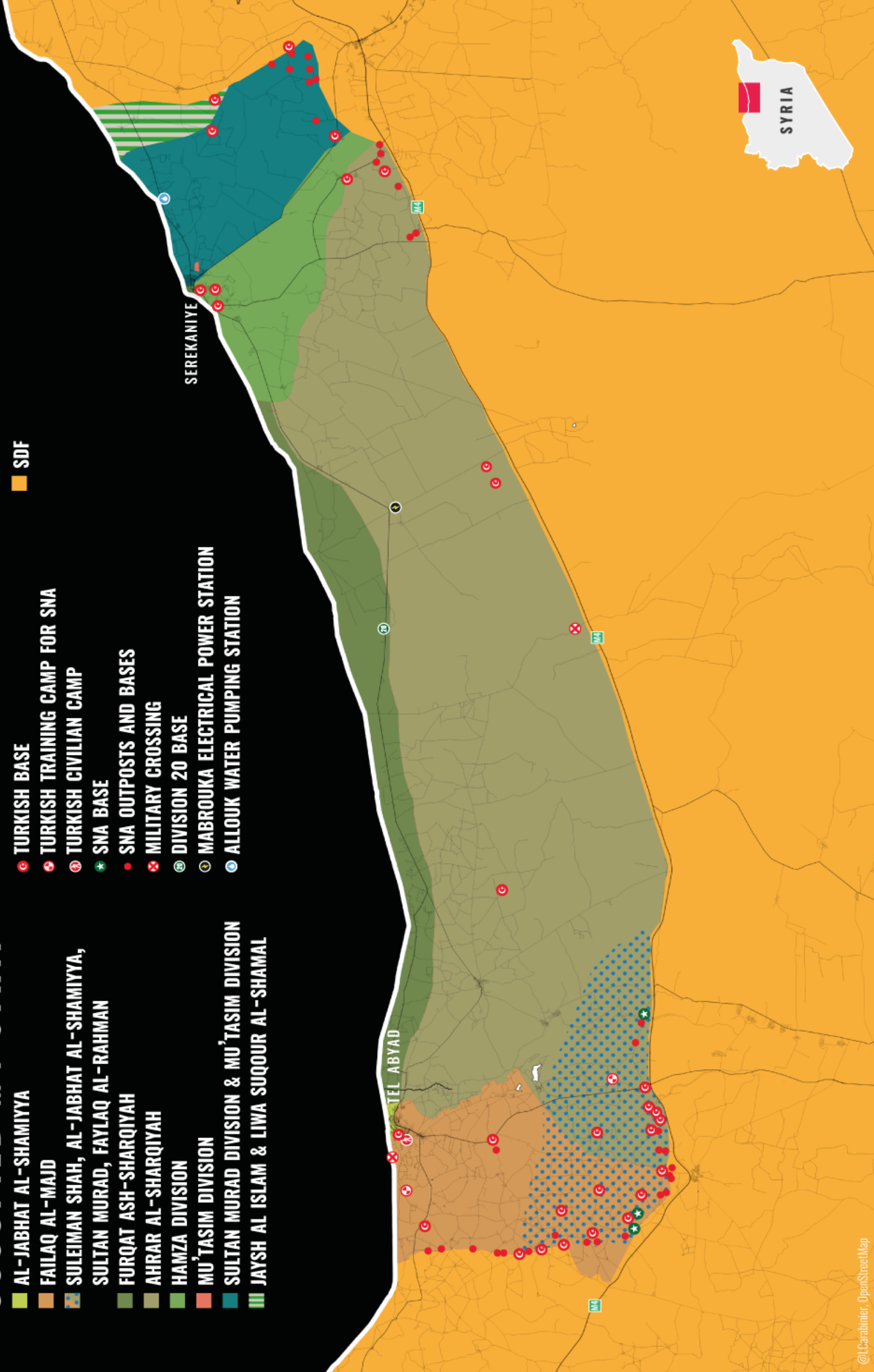
SYRIA

# OCCUPIED M4 STRIP

- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
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- DIVISION 20 BASE
- MABROUKA ELECTRICAL POWER STATION
- ALLOUK WATER PUMPING STATION

SDF



# INTRODUCTION & METHODS

## INTRODUCTION

We present the third installment of our ‘State of the Occupation Report’, focusing on human rights violations in the Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria (NES) - namely, Afrin, occupied since 2018, and what RIC has termed the M4 Strip (the 5000 km<sup>2</sup> territory north of the M4 highway occupied in 2019, including the cities of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad).

While Turkey claims it invaded these regions in order to create a “security buffer” and a “humanitarian zone” for Syrian IDPs from other areas, as well as those residing in Turkish territory, the occupation has turned the two regions into what amounts to a patchwork of fiefdoms rife with human rights abuses. A report from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has confirmed that in the occupied areas, Turkish-backed SNA forces have committed an “onslaught of violations” against civilians including the “war crimes” of “hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape.”<sup>1</sup>

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

This report aims to fill a critical gap in the documentation of human rights abuses occurring in the occupied zones, and to counteract a stage-managed narrative of the occupation strategically crafted by Turkey, and parroted by some of the world’s largest publications.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=E>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-erdogan-afrin.html>

## METHODS

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 independent databases on Afrin and the M4 Strip, were also consulted. This 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 local news articles from 'Afrin Post,' 'Ezdina,' and 'Documenting Rights Violations in Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ayn' in order to corroborate violations data.

Furthermore, RIC traveled 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.

RIC's first quarterly report from the beginning of 2021 provided detailed background to the occupation, including briefings on each major SNA faction operating in the area. The Q1 report also includes a longer context section detailing the history of the occupation. The Q1 and Q2 reports can be accessed on our website.

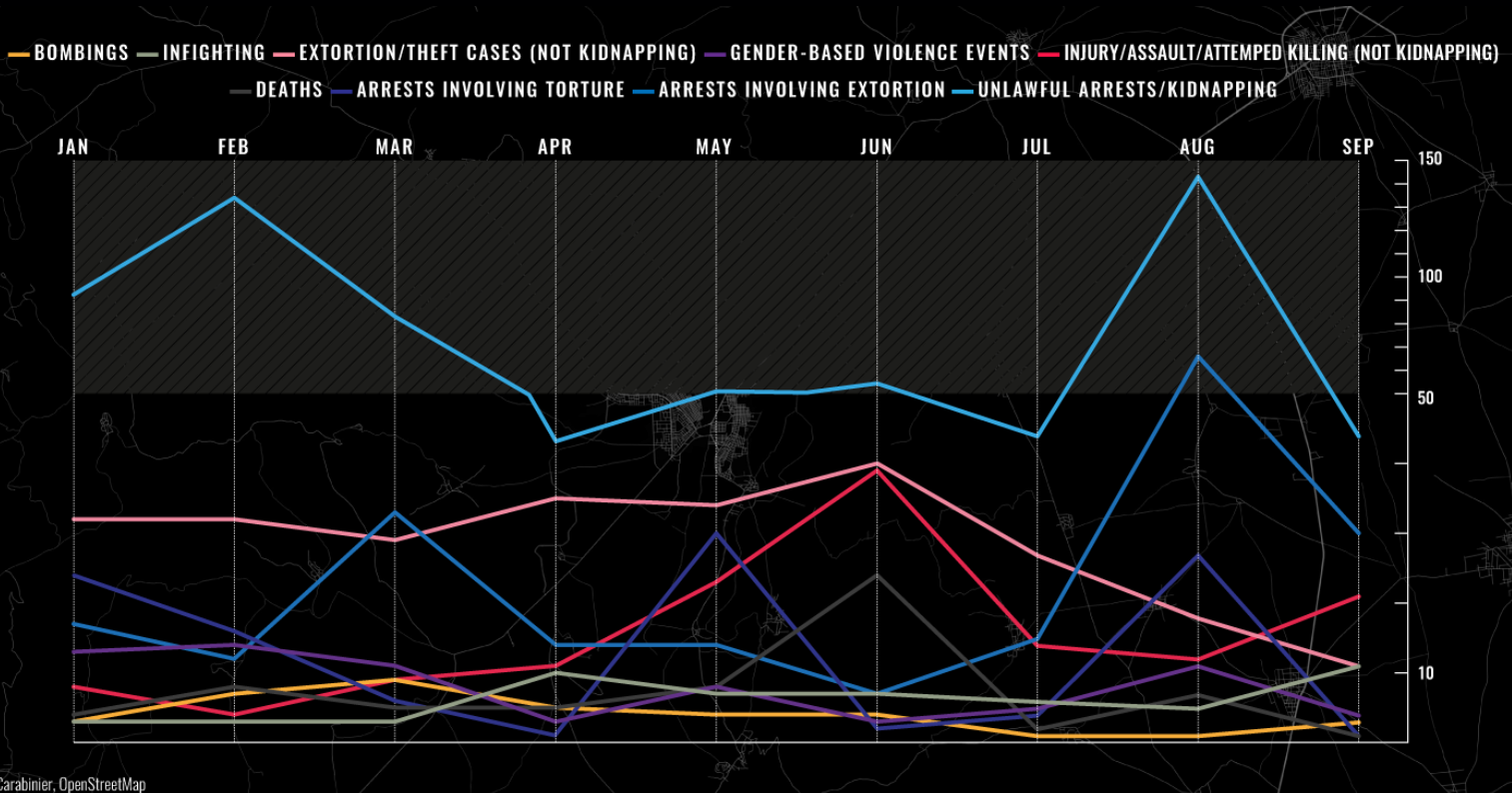
All maps and graphics were produced by mapmaker and designer Eduardo Artica (@LCarabinier).



# QUARTERLY REPORT

## UNLAWFUL ARRESTS, TORTURE AND EXTORTION

RIC recorded 313 arrests across Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria in the months of July to September - considerably higher than the number of arrests from April to June (150), though not as high as that from January to March (363). Most of the arrests recorded are from the Afrin region (231), though this is partly explained by the lack of reliable sources inside the M4 Strip. Arrests peaked in August (160) due to large raids on the village of Qurt Qulaq, Sharran district (see below), and the roundup of 30 followers of a religious order in Afrin city. The arrival in Shehba of **a caravan made up of around 30 escapees**, as well as the constant trickle of IDPs exiting Afrin, are evidence for the continued violations occurring in the Turkish-occupied region against its native population.





Most of those arrested are Kurds and were arrested arbitrarily. In nearly half of all arrest cases in Afrin (111), RIC can confirm that groups making the arrest demanded a money ransom in exchange for release. In Kokaneh village, Afrin district, two minors, Jamal Abdo and Ahmed Hassan, were forced to pay off militants of the Hamza Division in order for their house not to be raided. On July 13th, they did so anyway, arresting both minors, and extracting another ransom of 2,000 Turkish Lira (then worth around \$230).

Notably, a number of local council members and collaborators with the occupation were also arrested in June and July, such as Rajo council member Hassan Muhammad Khalil; the head of the Rajo Agriculture Committee; Haran Horo, the nephew of a former Rajo council member (for wearing “Kurdish clothes”); and a translator for Turkish intelligence service MIT in Rajo. These arrests suggest a decrease in tolerance for the indigenous population of Afrin on the side of Turkey and Turkish-backed groups, even for those who collaborated with the occupation.

Similarly, after calls by the Kurdish National Council - a body close to the ruling KDP party in Iraqi Kurdistan - for Afrin IDPs to return to their homes, a number were arrested by the ruling authorities. Out of a list provided by the Afrin Human Rights Organization of 79 Afrin residents who heeded the KNC’s call, RIC has confirmed 14 were arrested upon their return. The KNC promised returnees could claim their stolen property and land through local councils, but in at least two cases, Afrin IDPs were arrested for doing exactly that.

Torture and beatings continue to be used in tandem with arrests. At least 32 cases of torture or beatings in Afrin were confirmed for 2021’s third quarter. ‘Syrians for Truth and Justice’ [investigation](#) in September laid bare the brutal torture of a civilian by members of Suqour al-Sunna, a group affiliated with the SNA’s 20th Division in Suluk, southeast of Tel Abyad.

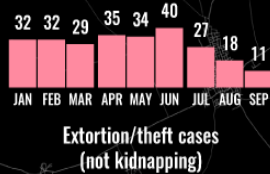
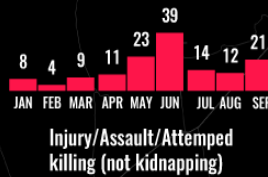
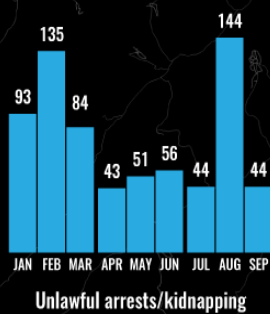
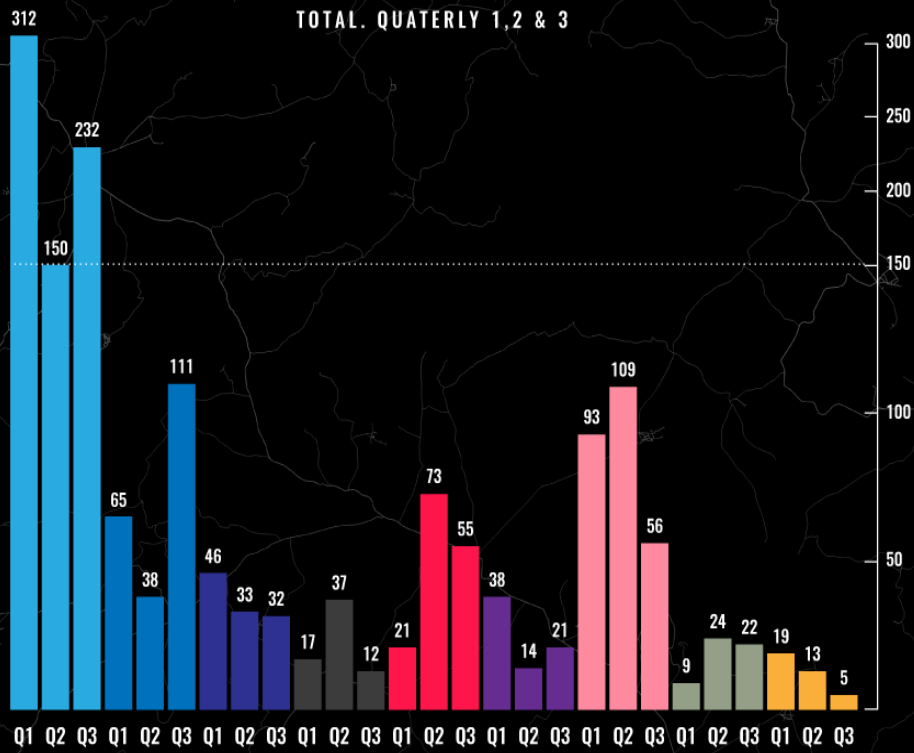
21 cases of gender-based violence were recorded across Afrin. In two particularly sordid cases in Maabatli district, the women were arrested while visiting their already-arrested husbands. Turkish-occupied areas continue to be some of the most dangerous for women and girls. Khawthar al-Abed, a girl of 17, was arrested in Tel Abyad in September; her whereabouts are still unknown. A 16-year-old from Shar-ran, Malik Nabi Khalil Juma’a, was returned to her family in September after nearly a year, during which she had been presumed dead. According to local reports, Juma’a

had been arrested by an unknown SNA militiaman and brought to Idlib, where he had enslaved her. Under pressure from one of his previous wives, she was returned to Sharran in poor physical and psychological conditions. Militiamen from the Jaysh al-Nukhba group released her after her health deteriorated.



A major raid by the Sultan Murad Division on the village of Qurt Qulaq in Sharran district took place in August during which 31 people were arrested. The first raid occurred on the 11th, when 15 villagers were arrested, allegedly following the killing of a shepherd, which the SNA militia used as their rationale for the mass arrests. Women and elderly men were arrested, including a gravely-ill man. A few were released after paying a ransom of \$1,000. Four days later, another 12 people were arrested. When Qurt Qulaq's mayor inquired about the fate of the arrested, he was beaten by militiamen from the Sultan Murad Division. Two more arrests of Qurt Qulaq villagers in Afrin occurred on the same day. On the 22nd of August, the wives of two of the arrested were taken as well, in addition to a daughter of 14. The fate of most of the arrested is not known.

In addition, RIC has identified a growing trend of members of indigenous Arab clans being harassed and persecuted by the reigning militias throughout the third quarter. In September alone, Muhammad Hammoud, a member of the Amirat clan was arrested in Afrin city, while the apartment Saleh Abu Khamsi, also of the Amirat clan, was seized following his escape from the region. Similarly, the properties of a Bu Khamis member were seized after he was forced to flee Afrin by local SNA militias. RIC interviewed members of the Bu Khamis clan for this report's Testimonies section. The leader of the Bu Banna clan, Faris al-Hajj Muhammad, continues to be imprisoned by the Military Police after more than a year for his earlier collaboration with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). His captors expressed their demand to be paid another SYP50 million in September. That same month, a young Arab al-Jaisal clan member was tortured by the Hamza Division in Suluk, leading to protests. Seven dignitaries from the al-Boasaf and Bu Khamis were also arrested, including a bed-ridden man suffering from cancer. In addition, 30 members of a local Arab Qadiriyya Order, a Sufi religious group, were arrested by SNA militiamen in Afrin in August.



## FAKE NEWS: AFRIN MASS GRAVE

On July 16th, the Turkish state media outlet 'Anadolu Agency' released pictures of multiple dead bodies found in the al-Filat neighborhood of Afrin, near Afrin Hospital. The agency claimed these bodies were those of a mass grave of civilians killed by Kurdish forces before the 2018 occupation of the region. RIC quickly disproved these accusations, releasing pictures of the same location during the Turkish invasion, when it served as an impromptu and clearly-marked cemetery for around 77 civilians and soldiers killed by Turkey and Turkish-backed SNA militias during the 2018 invasion. This was not an issue of mistaken identity on the side of Turkey, who directed the invasion, but rather a conscious effort to discredit the YPG in Afrin. Cemeteries in Afrin have been vandalized multiple times before by Turkish-backed SNA militias, though this marks the first time their desecration has been used as a tool for Turkish propaganda.



The same location in downtown Afrin in 2018 (L) and 2021 (R). The first picture clearly shows a makeshift cemetery.

Though other fact-checkers have since debunked this accusation (for example, STJ), the Turkish fake news campaign spread quickly, with the state narrative being picked up - and not corrected - by 'Al Jazeera' and the 'Times of India', among others. This episode of blatant disinformation is only the newest installment of a common strategy by the Turkish government. During the second quarter of 2021, Turkey had claimed that Kurdish forces had shelled Afrin Hospital, despite no evidence to indicate that was true. The shelling of Afrin city in July, later attributed to Damascus or Russia, was also blamed on Kurdish forces by Turkish media. (See 'Shelling' section below)



## SNA MILITIAS: BAD PRESS, RESTRUCTURING & INFIGHTING

The three-dozen or so SNA militias which operate in Afrin and the M4 Strip did not have a good third quarter. Internationally, Turkish-backed militias have begun to be noticed and sanctioned. The Turkish government attempted to cover for these militias, yet splits quickly emerged in the newly-formed 'Azm' ('Determination') Operations Room.

In July, the United States Treasury announced sanctions on Ahrar al-Sharqiya, as well as two of its leaders, 'Abu Hatem Shaqra' and 'Ja'afar Shaqra', for "numerous crimes against civilians, particularly Syrian Kurds, including unlawful killings, abductions, torture, and seizures of private property [...] The group has also incorporated former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members into its ranks," according to the [Treasury's reasoning](#). Read more about the group [here](#).

Earlier that month, Turkey was placed on the list of countries implicated in the use of child soldiers by the US State Department's '[2021 Trafficking in Persons Report](#)' - the first time any NATO partner was placed on this list. According to the report, the Turkish government provided "operational, equipment, and financial support" to Turkish-backed SNA groups which made use of at least 91 child soldiers in 2020. Reporting at the time made clear that one of the main reasons for the State Department's decision was Turkey's use of underage mercenaries in the Syrian and Libyan wars, [particularly by the Sultan Murad Division](#).

A [DW investigation](#) in July put the blame for the 2013 disappearance and likely killing of human rights lawyer Raza Zaytouneh and three other activists from the Violations Documentation Center in Douma squarely on Jaysh al-Islam, an SNA group. The Salafist Jaysh al-Islam outfit operated in the opposition-held Damascus suburb of East Ghouta, including Douma, during the early years of the Syrian revolution, but fled into Turkish-held territory as the tide of war turned in the central government's favour. Since then, it has worked as part of the Turkish-controlled Second Legion of the SNA, even sending mercenaries to Libya for Turkey's war effort.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the investigation alleges that the man who threatened Zaytouneh's life on behalf of the Jaysh al-Islam leadership currently lives in Turkish-occupied al-Bab. Last year, 'Muhammad Alloush', a former top ranking officer within the group, was arrested in France, where a criminal investigation into Jaysh al-Islam is ongoing.

<sup>3</sup><https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-middle-east/long-read-how-erdogan-built-his-own-private-military-and-paramilitary-system-dr#>

That same month, an **extensive report by STJ** uncovered 27 former ISIS members in the ranks of the SNA and the Turkish-backed Military Police, including commanding officers. Among the accused are the Directorate of Security for A'zaz, the Military Police Chief of Tel Abyad, as well as commanders in the Sultan Murad Division, the Hamza Division, Aharar al-Sharqiya, and Jaysh al-Sharqiya.

Partly as a way to prevent further international embarrassment, as well as to mend the relationship between the often-warring parties, the SNA went through a process of restructuring throughout the third quarter of 2021, likely at the behest of their Turkish overlords. On July 15th, al-Jabha al-Shamiyyah and the Sultan Murad Division merged to become the Azm Operations Room, with Jaysh al-Islam, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the Hamza Division, the Malik Shah Division, Suqour al-Shamal, and the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade quickly joining as well. Smaller militias joined Azm in mid-August. Initially, Azm concentrated on joint security operations in the cities of A'zaz and al-Bab.

On August 22nd, however, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade, the Hamza Division, and Suqour al-Shamal announced their departure from Azm, allegedly due to a leadership dispute. As a result, militiamen of al-Jabha al-Shamiyyah closed the roads to Afrin city and surrounded the Hamza Division headquarter on Rajo Road. A gun battle with heavy weapons followed in the streets of Afrin, while, in a joint statement, the 20th Division, al-Mu'tasim Division, and Faylaq al-Rahman announced they would deploy their forces should a prolonged battle between Azm and the other factions break out. Further attacks by al-Jabha al-Shamiyyah followed in September, when they took villages north of Maabatli from the Hamza Division, while threatening others held by the Suleiman Shah Brigade. A visit by Turkey's Defence Minister (see below) also failed to ease tension. As a consequence, the al-Mu'tasim Division and the 20th Division, in addition to the original three defectors from the Azm Operations Room, founded a rival merger on the 9th of September - the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF). Major fighting continued in Afrin throughout this month, with as many infighting events (11) as in the previous two months combined.

Overall, the new formations have done little to unify or professionalize the SNA militias. On the contrary, the two new formations seem to have been the cause for an increase in fraternal violence between the occupation militias. Azm and the SLF, however, seem to have superseded the Turkish-imposed legions system, which never quite fit the internal power balance. Yet one ought to be careful not to fall for the groups' narratives. Both have made statements describing the new structures as a



fusion of the old militias, with a unified leadership. This risks concealing the crimes of individual militias behind a new, clean-cut facade, which seems to be the reason the Turkish government has for the moment acquiesced to the new formations. Yet both the internal power structures of the militias remain intact within the groups, with the heavyweights in each (al-Jabha al-Shamiyyah and the Hamza Division, respectively) effecting control.

The creation of the Azm Operations Room is very likely a Turkish invention. Every major Turkish incursion into Syria has been preceded by a restructuring of Turkish-backed militias on the ground. The Hewan Kilis Operations Room unified a kaleidoscope of militias in opposition to the Damascus government under Turkish helm for the first time in April 2016 before the 'Euphrates Shield Operation' in August of that year. The SNA was created in December 2017, and Afrin invaded in January of the following year. A merger between the SNA and the National Front for Liberation, a different opposition coalition, occurred at a press conference in Urfa in October 2019, days before the invasion of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. The Azm Operations Room inauguration in July was followed by Turkish threats of a renewed invasion of North and East Syria throughout September and October, though, lacking international support, these threats never materialized. Nevertheless, they are the most explicit indication of how serious Turkey's calls for war are.

The new formations seem to have brought Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) attempts to woo individual SNA militias to a temporary halt, yet the Idlib-based Islamist group caused controversies throughout Q3 regardless. A split of the Mu'tasim Billah Brigade from the Suleiman Shah Division in September was allegedly caused by Suleiman Shah's close dealings with HTS. In August, HTS entered Turkish-occupied Afrin and shut down a number of gas stations belonging to Faylaq al-Sham close to the Ghazawiyah crossing.<sup>4</sup> The likely reason for this was the gas station's prices undercutting HTS' in Idlib. Nevertheless, this territorial violation did not lead to major fighting between the groups.

Protests against Turkey and the local administrations, however, were widespread. In Rajo, civilians demanded better services, particularly water, in August. That same month, the village of al-Rawi, west of Sere Kaniye, organized a sit-down against the Hamza Division, which they said wantonly raided homes and confiscated property. A subgroup of the Division then crushed the protests. In addition, **videos** from Libya allegedly show Syrian SNA mercenaries violently protesting for their withheld wages.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/syrian-jihadi-group-idlib-goes-after-gas-stations>

## ONGOING TURKISH INVOLVEMENT

Turkish involvement in its occupied regions is ongoing. For Eid al-Adha (July 20th), Süleyman Soylu, the Turkish Interior Minister, visited Afrin together with Hatay Province Governor Rahmi Doğan, Kilis Province Governor Recep Soytürk, Gendarmerie General Commander Arif Çetin and Chief of Police Mehmet Aktaş, as well as Hatay Provincial Police Chief Nadir Örtten, who also acts as the Coordinator Police Chief for occupied Afrin, according to **OSINT research by Alexander McKeever**.

The visit of Turkey's Interior Minister is telling of how the occupied territory in Syria is being managed. Afrin, as well as the 'Euphrates Shield' region and the M4 Strip are neither locally-run, nor run exclusively by military governments. Instead, the Turkish government is increasingly tying these territories to the civilian government in the mainland. Basic provisions are run from the provinces across the border, the Turkish Lira is legal tender, while agricultural produce from the occupied regions is finding markets in Turkey or re-packaged as Turkish products to be sold abroad. Over two years since the last Turkish invasion, these territories are not finding their own footing, but instead becoming increasingly dependent on Ankara.

Yet these regions also continue to form the frontline in Turkey's war against North and East Syria. It was thus not surprising to see Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar meet with Azm Operations Room and Third Legion leaders near the Bab al-Salama crossing north of Azaz on September 9th, coinciding with the split between Azm and the SLF. While the contents of the meeting are unknown, it is indicative of the direct relationship between the Turkish government and the SNA militias.

Turkey established 13 new recruiting offices across Afrin in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan. The SNA mercenaries would be paid between \$2,000-3,000 for their service.<sup>5</sup> In addition, around 2,600 Suleiman Shah Division fighters graduated under the Turkish flag in early July, due to be shipped



Turkish flags & patches at a Suleiman Shah Division graduation in July

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/en/219053/>

as mercenaries to Afghanistan, where they would guard Kabul Airport as US forces retreated. As a result of the rapid Taliban take-over of the country, Turkey's deployment never materialized. Nevertheless, the Taliban's victory was greeted with jubilation by local militias and mosques in a sign of the close ideological proximity of some SNA militias and the Islamist fundamentalist armed group which today controls Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Settlement projects in Afrin are ongoing. According to President Erdoğan, 50,000 out of a planned 100,000 houses for 'refugees' from outside Afrin have been constructed to date.<sup>7</sup> September 2021 saw the completion of construction of a 'Kuwaiti village' settlement in Khalta, Jinderes, financed by some of the Gulf country's charitable foundations.<sup>8</sup> Another such 'Kuwaiti village' began construction near Turandah, a suburb of Afrin city in July.

Additionally, in July, RIC photographed the new high-tech frontlines close to Ayn Issa. They include radar towers, cameras, and automated grenade launchers - an investment indicative of Turkey's increasing belligerence against North and East Syria.



Cameras on the Turkish side of the Ayn Issa front

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=585377306179162&id=114977619885802](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=585377306179162&id=114977619885802)

<sup>7</sup> <https://npasyria.com/en/62561/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://twitter.com/qasioun\\_en/status/1433728301722447885?s=24](https://twitter.com/qasioun_en/status/1433728301722447885?s=24)

## TURKEY'S WATER WAR & ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION

In July, farmers in the M4 Strip refrained from cultivating their fields, as fuel had become impermissibly expensive due to a monopoly on the fuel trade by Ahrar al-Sharqiya through their control with the informal Tufaha trade crossing to NES.<sup>9</sup> According to Syria TV, the fuel brought in from NES costs SYP 100,000, but is being sold for SYP 400,000 by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, leading farmers to stop growing and cultivating wheat and cotton, becoming increasingly dependent on agricultural imports.

A November **report by the Dutch NGO PAX** highlighted the construction of a series of temporary dams in Turkish-controlled territory along the Khabur River, which flows from Turkey to the Euphrates, passing Sere Kaniye, Tel Tamir and Heseke. The river is crucial for agriculture along the Khabur River Valley, Syria's main wheat cultivation area. The three dams identified by PAX halted 53.7% of the river flow between Turkey and Heseke this summer according to the report, leaving over 84 villages in NES without adequate water provision. The report condemns the construction of these dams as a "method of warfare" and urges the Turkish government to halt their construction.

Alouk water station, near Turkish-occupied Sere Kaniye, was completely shut down in late June after months of tampering with the water flow, which supplies the Heseke area. Renewed **Russian-mediated negotiations** with Turkey in mid-July failed to reach an understanding, as Turkey's electricity demands exceeded NES' capacities.

SNA militias continue to devastate Afrin's natural forest growth. Jinderes saw at least three arson attacks in the third quarter. The al-Waqqas militia was responsible for at least one of the fires, which burned down 200 hectares in July. A smaller fire set by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia in order to collect charcoal burned through 2 hectares. While an unattributed fire burned 100 hectares in July. Afrin Post calculates that around 1,100 of Afrin's 3,000 hectare woodlands have been deliberately set on fire since the invasion.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%82%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%81-35/](https://www.syria.tv/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%82%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%81-35/)

<sup>10</sup> [http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/10/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%81-35/](http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/10/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%81-35/)

## SHELLING

On July 25th, the White Helmets center in Afrin city was hit with BM-21 Grad rockets in a similar attack to that of June 12th, when al-Shifaa Hospital was targeted. One civilian was killed and eight others wounded in the July 25 attack. Turkish-linked news outlets were quick to blame the SDF for the attack, though an [STJ investigation](#) concluded the missiles likely originated from the vicinity of Menagh Air Base, and that the most likely culprits for both attacks were the Syrian Government and, more indirectly, Russia. A further attack on August 18th led to four civilian deaths and 12 wounded. Kurdish YPG forces vehemently denied being behind this attack as well, saying, "we have nothing to do with what happened in Afrin yesterday. Despite the fact that we have repeatedly stated that we have no forces in this area the Turkish Ministry of Defence is always trying to blame us for what is happening in this area. News and claims like this are far from the truth."

Russian forces furthermore bombed at least two SNA militia camps, the first time Russia has targeted any SNA military bases. On August 31st, Russia targeted a Faylaq al-Sham outpost near Iskan village, close to Idlib. [According to insights by OSI-NT researcher Alexander McKeever](#), the attack resulted only in material damage, as the group had cleared the base following a Turkish tip-off. It is not the first time the group was bombed by Russia, as it operates inside Idlib as well. In October 2020, a Russian attack in Kafr Takharim, Idlib, killed 78 Faylaq al-Sham members and injured 100 others.

According to Afrin Post, further Russian airstrikes followed on a Hamza Division camp on the 27th of September near Barad, 8km to the east of Iskan, which reportedly killed 10 militia members and injured a number of others. The Iskan and Barad air raids preceded an official meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart on the 29th of September. It appears the unprecedented airstrikes were conducted by Russia in an effort to increase pressure on Turkey to end its support for Idlib's Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) - both direct and indirect through SNA militias which operate both in Afrin and in Idlib.



Turkey and Turkish-backed forces repeatedly shelled North and East Syria (NES) during the third quarter, including major shelling on Shehba on July 15th and August 30th. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) estimate that NES was shelled 18,444 times from Turkish-occupied territory in 2021 - including 16,245 shells which fell on Shehba alone. 154 civilians across NES died due to these attacks, nearly half (76) in Afrin and Shehba. On August 4th, members of Jaysh al-Nukhba killed a father and three of his children, while injuring a woman and another child, when they shelled a village across the M4 highway.



The aftermath of shelling in Afrin on August 30th, 2021

## CONCLUSION

Violations in the occupied zones increased quarter-on-quarter, nearing the heights of the beginning of the year. The Turkish government continued to deflect blame away from the militia groups it backs in Afrin and the M4 Strip throughout the third quarter of 2022. Attempts to carry out targeted disinformation campaigns in order to accuse Kurdish forces of war crimes continued, such as attributing the repeated shelling of Afrin to Kurdish forces, or the disinterring of the victims of the Turkish occupation as an international media spectacle.

International attention on the crimes of Turkish-backed SNA groups is sure to have caused the Turkish government much embarrassment, in particular Turkey's placement on the list of countries that employ child soldiers. Yet, to date, there have been no obvious punitive measures employed by the international community to punish Turkey for its support of SNA militias, and it seems unlikely that there will be in the future.

Turkey's restructuring of the largest militias into the Azm Operations Room should be understood as a step more pernicious than simply to cover the crimes of these groups. Judging by past patterns of reorganization, the Turkish government was preparing for a fourth military incursion into Syria. A fact which was supported by increased troop movement on the Turkish side of the border. Yet, lacking political opportunity, the threat of a ground invasion seems to have waned for the moment.

Infighting within the newly-created Azm demonstrated the breadth of power struggles inside the existing SNA groups. While Turkey maintains a tight grip on events in its occupied zones, the creation of a parallel structure (SFL) to that created at the behest of Turkey (Azm) is significant. Moreover, Turkish acquiescence to the split should be understood as a calculated move, rather than as a lack of control. A fact which is supported by the coincidence of the Turkish Defence Minister's visit to the Azm Operations Room headquarters with the split on September 9th. The reasons for the Turkish blessing are unknown, but could be rooted in realpolitik considerations about the power balance between SNA groups, as well as fears of some groups being lured by an alliance with HTS in Idlib.



## TESTIMONIES

*We sat down with Aosh Mihemed (65) and her two sons, Hilal Mohsen (39) and Yasser Abu Omer (31), in Shehba. The family hails from the Ashrafiyeh neighbourhood of Afrin city and are members of the Arab Bu Khamis clan, which is concentrated in the region south of Tabqa, but is present throughout Syria. According to the family, the Bu Khamis clan in Afrin constitutes 15 families, or around 125 people. The family escaped Afrin in late summer 2021.*

### AOSH

When the SNA groups occupied our areas, they started arresting my children and torturing them. My son, Darwish, was assaulted on the street [by militia members] as he was walking to his sister's house. He is dead now. My family's houses were constantly raided [by the SNA]. My children were arrested multiple times: Yasser was arrested twice; Muhammed and Hilal thrice. Ibrahim, who was killed, was beaten with an iron bar in the middle of his house. My son Ahmed's son was tortured in prison. He died after he was operated on multiple times at the hospital.

The treatment we were subjected to is unlike anything they [Islamist SNA militias] would do even to atheists or Jews, because we are Arabs, but our clan was allied with the Kurds. We lived and intermarried with them. We did not live with anyone but them and we cannot live with others. We have lived a peaceful existence [in Afrin] for 40 years, raising cows and chickens. But we had to leave everything behind to run away.

They took everything away. We didn't use to live like this. I had 8 boys and 7 girls. Now, only 6 boys are left, and my girls each live in a country that I don't know anything about.

## HILAL

We were living in peace on our lands in Afrin. When the [SNA] factions invaded Afrin, they arrested me and two of my brothers. I was arrested twice. Following my first arrest, I was incarcerated in the Rajo Prison, the Black Prison. I was put in a cave behind the prison with about 70 other people. They tortured us with cables, water, by yelling at us... it was a filthy place. Two prisoners died while I was there. I was jailed in the Black Prison for 12 days at the end of April 2018, after which I was released because my brothers paid \$2,000 in ransom; the second time they took me I paid \$3,000. Once I was released, they [the SNA] arrested my brother Yasser. We had to pay \$5,000 to get him out. After that, they took my brother Muhammad; we paid \$4,000 for his release.

They torture you whether you are an Arab or a Kurd, as long as you are from Afrin. A member of the Amirat clan [another Arab clan present in Afrin], Sami Gouj, went crazy while imprisoned.

We can't complain to the Turks. When prisoners get sick, they are transferred to Turkey. They don't return. We brought our uncle to the hospital one night; they returned his dead body two months ago. The factions steal our olives and sell them to Turkey for half the price. They give us next to nothing and take the rest [of the money]. You can't complain to the Turks. When you file a complaint during the day, they come to arrest you at night.

We came here [to Shehba] three months ago. They are pressuring the locals to flee. There are no jobs for the people of Afrin; many people have become beggars. The city of Afrin is like a jungle - many [SNA] factions operate there. They place a stranger [an Arab settler] in every other house to harass the neighbours. The youth can't safely go out onto the street anymore. Life is tragic in heart of Afrin; in the villages, it is a little better.

## YASSER

I was also arrested twice. The reasons for my arrests were that I'm from Afrin, as well as because my brother worked for the Autonomous Administration, and we used to participate in political demonstrations. I was arrested by al-Jabha al-Sham-iyah and brought to a farm near Azaz. During the 15 days I was there, I was tortured psychologically and physically. I was cursed at and beaten with cables. They released me after my family paid \$3,000. When I was arrested again three months later, my family had to sell their house to come up with the \$5,000 ransom.

Due to the prevalence of crime in Afrin, we can't send our children to school, which anyway only gives classes in Arabic and Turkish. During the olive season, we are prevented from harvesting our crops by the local councils. And when they do allow us to go to our lands, we find that the olives have already been harvested [by SNA militias] and sold to Turkey.

We ran away together one night with nothing but the clothes on our backs. We left everything behind. We - 35 people in all - were received by our friends [from the Autonomous Administration] and were able to settle down in Shehba. Thank God we made it here - it is safe here and at least we can sleep comfortably in our homes. We are provided with everything - from aid to diesel. We are comfortable, but job opportunities here are scarce.

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**WWW.ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.COM  
PRESS@ROJAVAINFORMATIONCENTER.ORG  
TEL +963 932 160 108**



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