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OVERCOMING THE SIEGE: SHEHBA REGION BEYOND THE REFUGEE CAMPS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Shehba region is another example of the absence of a solution for the Syrian Civil War, and the consequences that this entails. The limbo in which the region finds itself is the result of the development of the war, but also of the aspirations for a democratic Syria. The region was the scenario of successive battles between the Syrian Arab Army, the rebel Free Syrian Army, ISIS, and the SDF. In February 2016 the Shehba canton, linked to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), started to recover from the previous clashes, but the 2018 invasion of the neighboring AANES linked Afrin canton by the Turkish Army and its proxy militias of the Syrian National Army (SNA) forced an estimated 300,000 people to leave the region.¹ Of these, more than 100,000 internally displaced people (IDP) remain in Shehba canton, waiting to one day return to Afrin. Currently 10,221 IDPs still live in five refugee camps in Shehba region.

Currently, the population suffers under a double threat: from the north, the Turkish-backed SNA militias shell the villages and towns, amongst Turkish drone airstrikes; in the south, the Syrian Government impose a severe siege that hinders or even makes the arrival of basic needs such as fuel, medicines, and industrial materials impossible. Beside these harsh conditions, the Shehba region also has become an example of democratic resilience. Starting from the camps, in the last five years the IDPs have improved their living conditions with almost no outside help. Almost all NGOs that, after the Afrin war, were supporting them are now gone. In more general terms, the infrastructure, health, education, and economic areas have also seen a progressive development, but remain far from being able to cover all the needs of this narrow exclave. Regardless of the embargo, new cooperatives, institutes, and hospitals show how the people in Shehba region aspire not only to survive, but to continue developing the democratic project for which they have been fighting since 2011.

In this report RIC aims to expose the current situation of the refugee camps located in Shehba region. Likewise, RIC found a gap in the information available about the Shehba region, today constituted as the Canton of Afrin and Shehba. Regardless of the constant attacks and the embargo under which the population is living, the assistance they receive from outside is

¹ rb.gy/ewo6z (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

insufficient and intermittent. This report should reach the public opinion, and especially encourage the relevant authorities and institutions to find sustainable solutions to the armed conflict in Syria.

1.1 AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from many countries across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists, and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

This report was written on the basis of RIC's interviews conducted in November 2022 in the Shehba region. RIC went to Shehba to investigate the conditions in the refugee camps and the general situation in the region. For this, interviews were conducted with the administration of the camps and testimonies were gathered from IDP families. In addition, RIC visited different institutions of the Afrin and Shehba administrations, to understand the development and work carried out so far. However, it has been necessary to contact the relevant administrations again to receive new data in order to publish an updated report. Due to the scarcity of information on the conditions in the refugee camps and the development of the region, this report is supported by two additional sources in the form of publications that the Democratic Administration of the Canton of Afrin published in 2018. Finally, to deliver the most accurate data and developments of the situation, in March and April 2023 RIC conducted further interviews with the Afrin and Shehba canton authorities.

2. SHEHBA REGION

2.1 GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The Shehba Canton is an administrative unit of the AANES. After the Turkish military’s 'Operation Olive Branch' (January 20th – March 24th 2018), Shehba became the exclave it is today, surrounded by Turkish occupied territory to the north, and Syrian government controlled areas to the south. The canton originally included parts of the Northern Aleppo Governorate as part of the Afrin region. In 2019 the canton was restructured: Manbij was excluded and Shehba Canton today envelopes the cities of Tel Rifaat and Menagh as well as the areas around these cities.

The historically defined Shehba region includes the area east of Afrin and north of Aleppo stretching east to the Euphrates, including the city of Manbij (see map at right). Due to the territorial development of the Syrian Civil War, families across the region found themselves spread over differently controlled areas (AANES, Syrian Government, Turkish-occupied). This separation prevents families from coming together, because the final geographical residential repartition generally didn't occur according to the support of the population to one political side or another, but to the location of the family residence. Residents of the original Shehba Canton, now resident within the newly defined area, have ended up with relatives living in different areas of control within Syria or abroad.

THE HISTORICAL REGION OF SHEHBA



Shehba is inhabited by Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen (see map next page). A 2016 report from Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) claims that there are about

1.8 million inhabitants in about 450 villages (217 of these are Kurdish), in the traditional Shehba region as shown on the map.² The Shehba region, as all of Syria, endured a forced arabization, imposed by Damascus before the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. According to Juma Kalo, co-chair of Shehba Council, the historical area of Shehba (composed of the area around the following 5 towns: Azaz, Bab, Jabal Semaan, Safira, and Jarabulus) before the war was home to 1.4 million inhabitants. The current population of the newly defined Shehba canton under the AANES government, without counting IDPs, is around 25,317 inhabitants, according to the RIC database.

HISTORICAL REGION OF SHEHBA ETHNICITIES



Since 2014, the Shehba population has been displaced by different armed factions such as ISIS, al-Nusra Front, the Sultan Murad militia and Ahrar al-Sham. These groups caused the displacement of about 90,000 people from the region to the Canton of Afrin. Four years later, due to the 2018 Turkish military operation ‘Olive Branch’, in which the

newly created Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Turkish army occupied the mainly Kurdish region of Afrin, many people fled to Shehba region. Until then, Afrin region was not only the most successful part of the AANES federal system, but a safe territory for tens of thousands of IDPs fleeing ISIS and the Syrian government. 300,000 residents have fled the Afrin region since Turkey’s 2018 invasion, of which around 100,000 people initially settled in five refugee camps and different villages and towns in the Shehba canton. From there, a smaller number continued to two towns under Syrian government control: Nubul and Zehra. Over the following years the number of IDPs in Shehba reduced to around 65,000 as people have moved to other areas of AANES control.

According to the RIC database, the population of AANES-governed Shehba region is at least 91,224 inhabitants (including IDPs settled in and outside refugee camps).

² rb.gy/durl8 (www.gfbv.de)

2.2 ADMINISTRATION AND POLITICS

Towards the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, in 2012 the area was under the newly founded al-Bab Council. Then, in 2015, the Council of Shehba Regions was created, appealing to the 4-5 big regions in the Shehba area. This was firstly established in Afrin, where IDPs needed to handle the needs of IDPs (mostly from Shehba region) living in Afrin due to the war against ISIS.³ Finally, in 2017 the council was renamed to the Council of Shehba Canton, as part of the Afrin region. Then, the Shehba Canton Electoral Commission was formed. Commune elections as scheduled, as well as the second phase of elections of the Local Councils, were announced in mid 2017 on behalf of the Council of Shehba Canton.⁴

The Shehba Canton Council is nowadays responsible for administration and services. The service aspect follows the problems of the people, the required services, the municipal aspect (water, electricity, waste); and the administrative aspect, such as managing politics, managing the situation in the region, organizing the people within the commune, and the commune committees.

After the invasion of Afrin and the massive displacement of IDPs to Shehba in 2018, the administrative structures of the Canton of Afrin have continued to function. This means, in the Shehba region, the administration of the canton of Shehba and the canton of Afrin coexist, with residents affiliated with their respective administrations.



Aqîbê village, April 2021

The municipality councils were founded in Shehba in 2016, alongside the recovery of territories from ISIS, to organize the 58 villages situated in the part of Shehba formally connected to Azaz. The municipalities all lacked technical staff and appropriate resources. On January 20th, 2018, a 7-member committee for Municipalities and Environmental Protection was elected, with

3 rb.gy/4qzro (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

4 rb.gy/4qzro (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

the aim of providing municipal services such as water, electricity, sanitation, waste, environmental protection, licenses, and contracts. However, in the wake of the mass exodus from Afrin, large numbers of workers and managers were diverted to provide aid and services to the displaced people. It was essential to allocate a budget sufficient to fulfill the varying needs of the displaced people, even though they had no municipal revenues from levies, fees, licenses or investments to fund them.⁵

At the basic administrative and political levels, the Shehba Canton consists of 47 communes, which have witnessed a ratio of 50% women in office since 2017.⁶ For in-depth information about the political System of NES read our [Beyond the Frontlines: The Political System of North and East Syria](#) report.

2.3 RECENT MILITARY HISTORY

On the military operation of the SDF in Shehba region, supporters of the Free Syrian Army claim that the Shehba region was taken from FSA groups by a joint YPG-SAA advance in February 2016, coinciding with Russian airstrikes. Previously the area was under the control of ISIS, who remained there from November 2013 until they withdrew in January 2014. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) alleges the region was liberated by People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG / YPJ) and the SDF (formed in 2015) from radical Islamist forces.⁷ At the time, its largest city — the Arab-majority Tel Rifaat — was in the hands of the Conquest Brigade (Liwa al Fatah), an Islamist FSA group and part of the Islamic Front.⁸ The Islamic Front had co-founded the North Operations Room two years before, in 2013, whose explicit goal it was to prevent YPG/YPJ forces from liberating Kurdish-majority territories.⁹ The Conquest Brigade would later dissolve into the Turkish-backed Levant Front (al-Jabha al-Shamiya), which participated in the 2019 invasion and occupation of Afrin region.

As a result of the SAA-SDF's coordinated advance into the Shehba region during the war against ISIS, tens of thousands of residents fled to the Turkish-backed SNA's newly controlled territories in the 'Euphrates Shield' area, many of whom have still not returned.¹⁰ The return of IDPs living in camps around the city

5 rb.gy/spjcg (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

6 rb.gy/4qzro (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

7 www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/3244-SDF-captures-Tel-Rifaat-in-northern-Syria

8 www.aymennjawad.org/15865/special-report-northern-storm-and-the-situation#_edn6

9 www.shahbapress.net/archives/1072

10 www.acu-sy.org/imu_reports/northern-syria-camps-2/

of Azaz in the SNA-controlled area to their original villages, now inside the Syrian government and AANES's territories, remains unsolved due to political and security dynamics.

The SAA (Syrian Arab Army), together with Russia, also maintains a strong presence in the current Shehba region today. Russia maintains its Military Police presence, while the Syrian military re-established a presence in the area for the first time in years. The retreat of the YPG from Shehba following the takeover of Afrin region has since then been a condition that Turkey imposed on Russia as a guarantee to prevent further invasion.¹¹ SAA checkpoints in and out of the exclave impose debilitating tariffs and occasionally block even basic necessities from getting to Shehba,¹² leading to a non-ending dispute between the Syrian government and the AANES.



Destroyed cement factory near Ma'arat al-Muslimiya village, November 2022

11 www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/19022019

12 www.twitter.com/rojvaic/status/1379934508842106882

3. REFUGEE CAMPS

When displaced people from the Afrin region arrived in Shehba in 2018, the region was unprepared. The area was itself recovering from the war against ISIS and the FSA. The AANES-linked Shehba region today consists of 58 towns and villages, including Kafr Naya, Tel Rifat, Ahris and Fafin.

According to the administration of Afrin canton, the water system and electrical grid were also damaged during the war. The only electricity in Shehba came from generators. ISIS destroyed the original electric grid, which once ran to Shehba from Aleppo. Some water pipes are partly intact, but most areas can only receive water from tanks. The water in Shehba is contaminated and produces different illnesses, especially in the children of the population. There were not adequate resources to test the water for specific contaminants, and so it led to many health problems.¹³

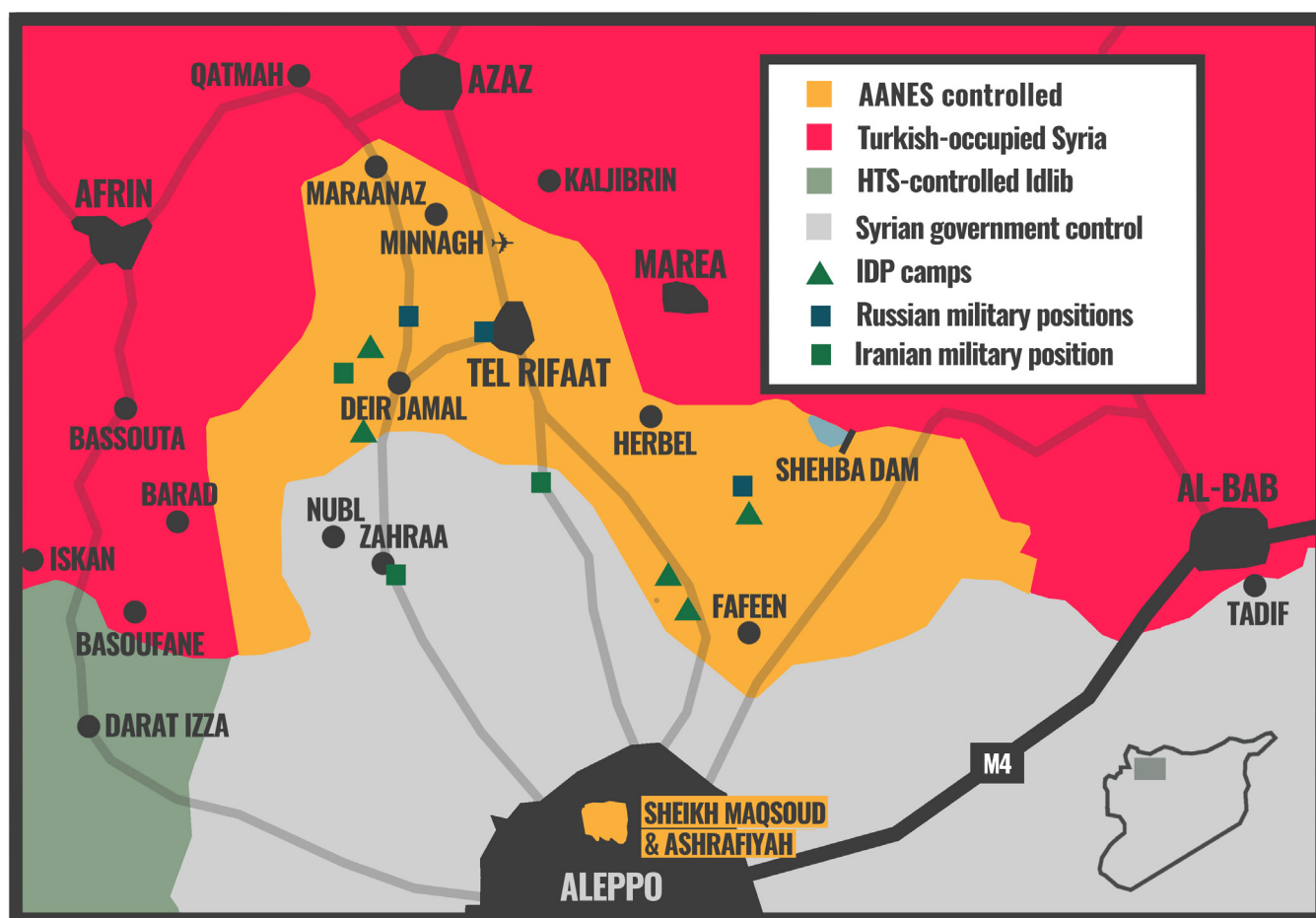
When the displaced population of Afrin arrived in Shehba, they found war-torn villages, none of which could properly accommodate hundreds of thousands of refugees. Most of the refugees were not able to bring any of their belongings with them, due to the horrible circumstances under which they had to leave their homes. To be able to meet the housing, health care, food, water, electricity and educational needs of the displaced people, Afrin's canton administration built refugee camps in Shehba, in which food, water and electricity were provided regularly and free of charge. Also, the residents had access to minimum health assistance in medical centers operated by the Kurdish Red Crescent (Heyva Sor a Kurd). Camp schools were organized to ensure that children could continue their education. Some IDP also went to villages and farms, many of which were still mined from when the region was occupied by ISIS.

“There has always been a lot of discussion as to whether the formation of camps is acceptable, or whether resources would be better directed towards supporting the local communities who host the majority of the IDPs. We know that camps usually present a higher risk than refugee settlements in open situations— they quickly become overcrowded, and it is less likely that utilities and services like water, electricity, and healthcare will be available when refugees first arrive. Nevertheless, relief work is more difficult to organize for very large population concentrations.” – **Municipality of Afrin and Shehba**

13 rb.gy/spjcg (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

There are currently five refugee camps in the Shehba region. Shehba camp was set up in 2016, for the returning Shehba population after the liberation from ISIS, as well as hosting Afrin and Arab IDPs nowadays. With the Afrin war in early 2018, three main refugee camps were set up: Berxwedan, Serdem and Afrin. Later, in 2019, the Vegere refugee camp was built. The current IDP population in the five camps is 10,221 residents, according to the RIC database.

SHEHBA REGION



Apart from the camps, many other families went to live in the towns and villages of Shehba region. In an area emptied by successive military offensives, most of the residential nuclei were almost vacant of their previous residents. Some Afrin displaced people took shelter in the ruined buildings, not willing to be settled in refugee camps. After five years, many towns and villages have recovered and even grown in population. The organization of the society and services falls under the AANES system, breathing new life into the Shehba region, particularly since many IDPs state that they don't wish to move again if not to return to the Afrin region.

“What was it like to be displaced and come here?

It was very difficult. There were no necessities for life in Tal Rifaat at all. It is known that the residents of Afrin, when they enter any place, provide and prepare the necessities for life. When we came to Tal Rifaat, there weren't even animals and the houses were all destroyed and deserted. Now there are many things, including shops, that have become like a city.

Now those difficulties have disappeared, has life become easier?

Yes, the population is managing themselves. Previously, there was no work. Now everyone has a place and a job to complete their lives. It is normal for us to face some difficulties and continue life. We have become displaced. We are not happy, but we are forced to continue life.

Why did you choose to stay here [Tel Rifaat]?

We stayed here for Afrin. I have a daughter and two sons. We did not leave here despite the bombing and shelling. We were forcibly displaced from Afrin and took refuge in Tel Rifaat, and there is no way we will leave Tel Rifaat if it's not to come back to Afrin. We promised ourselves in this way, we won't flee again. Whatever happens will happen. Whatever enemy falls upon us. We live among preparations.” – **Reshid Shekho Muhamed, Afrin IDP living in Tel Rifaat**

3.1 CONDITIONS IN THE CAMPS

There are many needs in the camps. Since their establishment, there have been slow improvements. During the last RIC visit to the Shehba camps, we noted that beside the efforts made by the AANES and the self organization of the IDPs, there is a general shortage of basic materials and external assistance: not enough to cover the basic needs and conditions of the residents.

As the occupation in Afrin reaches its fifth year, life has moved on. This means new generations of families have filled the camps. On average each family has three children, but there are also those who have six or eight, in addition to that there are some families who do not have children. Regardless of family size, each family generally gets one tent, sometimes leading to cramped conditions. The most growing and vulnerable collective are children. For them specifically, but also in general, camp life limits many aspects of the human necessities and capabilities. Despite the real solution being the return of the IDPs to Afrin, apart from the war and the Syrian government embargo circumstances, there is always room to direct improvements. Many of the testimonies RIC gathered pointed out the unavoidable need for humanitarian aid to survive in the camps.

“What is necessary are medicines because there are very few available, especially for children. In the winter, the tents are only 6 square meters, so there is no place for children to play. They play outside in the cold and fall ill. It is necessary to build a playground for them, and it would be desirable if an outside organization could build it.

Children naturally play outside and at school, so when they get sick, they go to the Kurdish Red Crescent points, but medicine is not available. Why? Because of the imposition of the siege on us by the Syrian government and preventing the passage of medicines. Secondly, we need diesel fuel, and thirdly, gas.” – **Administration of Serdem camp**

BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE

When the first three camps were set up in 2018 to shelter IDPs from Afrin, they were established very quickly due to the emergency situation, and resources there were limited. The tents had gravel floors and were made of soft nylon, which is not well-installed and is sometimes fixed with stones. There were few necessary living and kitchen items. The tents had gas cylinders to provide fuel. There have been several fires in the tents, due to the poor cooking conditions or accidents with diesel heaters.

The water supply consists of water tanks scattered around the camps. This water is used for drinking, cooking and sanitary facilities. In the Serdem and Berxwedan camps, the biggest ones, UNICEF is responsible for the water sterilization. The rest of the camps rely on their own resources.



Children playing in Berxwedan camp, April 2021

The sanitation and bathroom facilities do not meet the needs of the large number of displaced people leading to unclean conditions and diseases. In the best cases, the units are powered with two photo-voltaic solar panels and a solar-thermal panel to heat the water, but these systems do not work

reliably. Toilets and bathrooms are often haphazardly made and unsanitary hence some people even bathe in their tents. During the first years, there was no sewage system in the tents, which led to the accumulation of polluted water, the spread of insects, and an increase in cases of leishmaniasis, skin diseases and allergies. Heavy rains caused flooding in the camps. Over the years, the administration of the camps managed to improve the sewage system for the amount of sewage that must be processed, but the ecological impact of untreated sewage waste is a reality that falls outside the long list of priorities.

Over the years, some basic conditions have been improved. In some camps the tents already have a concrete floor and a brick base. There have also been successive expansions in the refugee camps. After five years in the camps, the population has evolved (marriages, children, deaths), for which more accommodation is needed. The services have also developed, with different shops and workshops; the residents of Berxwedan camp have set up a bazaar.



Bazaar inside Berxwedan camp, April 2021

HEALTH

Many of the IDPs live in confined spaces, which assists the spread of disease. Particularly common are bronchitis, tuberculosis, leishmaniasis, chickenpox, hepatitis B and C in Shehba canton.

As for health assistance, the situation differs from camp to camp. The Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) has fixed medical centers located in Berxwedan and Serdem camps. There are two ambulances, but they are not always available, as they must cover all the camps, as well as other Red Crescent medical centers in Shehba. Many patients are brought to KRC centers in private cars. In the case of Afrin and Vegere camps, there are no fixed medical centers, but there are various mobile clinics provided by several other organizations.

There are two main medical points in Shehba region: the Avrin Hospital, located in Fafin, and the Surgical Hospital in Tel Rifaat. Both facilities are overwhelmed

with too many patients and few resources. Furthermore, not all treatments and medicines are available in these centers, requiring assistance from the hospitals near Aleppo. Some of the patients are accepted to these hospitals, while others just rely on rare NGO opportunities to get their treatment.

“The people, especially the displaced, are all sick, as a result of the psychological state they are going through. They used to live peacefully in their homes without problems, and now they live in camps and endure the cold and heat amid the absence of basic materials, the siege, the bad economic situation, the attacks and the policy that the Turkish occupation carries out on these areas daily. This matter is very difficult, and the aim of all this is well known, which is to empty the area of the people.” – **Hevin Hussein, co-chair of the Health Board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

During the coronavirus pandemic, the camps witnessed several cases of the disease. The infections were treated in the Tel Rifaat Hospital. Regarding the wave of cholera that occurred in Syria last year (2022), the sterilization of water and better access to sanitation and bathroom facilities is key to prevent the expansion of the disease in the camps. In Serdem camp, the administration of the camp told RIC that during summer 2022, there were some cases of 40-50 infected with cholera, but they were treated and recovered.

Water replenishment team at Berxwedan camp, November 2022



EDUCATION

In the Afrin region, Kurdish and Arab children and youths attended primary, preparatory and secondary schools, as well as a dozen specialist institutes. A university was even inaugurated in Afrin city - the first for the Kurdish-majority territories in Syria. All schools were managed and run by local managers and teachers, and were funded by the Education Committee for the Democratic Society (KPC).

With the invasion of Afrin by Turkey and its SNA proxy militias, attendance at Afrin's schools became unsafe and had to be suspended. During the 'Olive Branch' military operation in 2018, 30 school children and 2 teachers lost their lives, and some 80 students were either wounded or disabled in the bombardment. Turkish air raids and artillery shelling caused the partial or total destruction of 68 schools, out of the 318 schools managed by the KPC before the war. At the end, 42,000 primary school students, 9,000 preparatory and secondary school students, 550 institute students, and 450 university students ended up out of school because of the war.¹⁴

As soon as the Afrin displaced people were settled in Shehba region, the administration opened tent schools for about 1,000 children in the three refugee camps: Berxwedan, Serdem and Afrin. The informal camp schools were run by volunteer KPC managers and teachers from Afrin.

In that situation, refugees needed simple, fast, low-cost and sustainable solutions, which is what was provided with these classrooms. But nowadays, there are tens of thousands of children packed into camps, villages and towns across Shehba who need to learn and need the daily routine offered by regular school attendance.

Currently, there is a school in each of the five camps of Shehba region, according to Sobhi Al-Ahmad, co-chair of Afrin and Shehba Education Board. The two largest schools are in Berxwedan and Serdem camps. Berxwedan camp contains an elementary school, a preparatory school and a high school. Serdem, Afrin, Vegere, and Shehba camps contain only elementary schools.

New textbooks needed to be printed since the previous textbooks were either looted or vandalized during the Afrin invasion, but nowadays only electronic books are available on USBs, and neither printers nor paper are available here. Due to the blockade, it is almost impossible to import printed books of the AANES curricula from the Jazira region through regime-controlled areas.

¹⁴ rb.gy/spjcyj (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

“At the state checkpoints, [for education] everything can enter except books, which are forbidden. We try as much as possible. We bought printers, but they are broken, and no one can, because of the checkpoints, repair and maintain the printers”, complained Sobhi Al-Ahmad.

3.2 SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE CAMPS

According to the self-administration of Afrin canton, of the total number of IDPs, most of them are women and children. They are residing in the refugee camps or scattered in decrepit houses in formerly depopulated towns and villages across Shehba.

Women live in fragile physical and psychological health in these difficult circumstances. As they broadly hold the leadership at home, work, education, and their need to secure the needs of their families, these harsh conditions lead to psychological pressure that increases diseases among women. Apart from keeping their families running, and maintaining social cohesion in light of the changes that have taken place during the displacement, women in the camp search for paid jobs in order to secure the needs of their families. In this way, women have a central social role: maintaining their culture and heritage as well as taking care of the present and the future. The more they are affected by the war and displacement, the more their strength to actively keep the community alive appears.



Nergiz Mohammed, Afrin IDP living in Vegere camp, November 2022

“The situation is bad, women face a lot of difficulties. With their families and children, to live is difficult. They don’t have lands to work on, there are no jobs. They face a lot of difficulties. Despite this, women are resisting, and they say ‘we won’t leave here until we can return to Afrin’. We are here, and we feel that the soul of Afrin is near. If we leave, we leave this behind. We won’t leave here, if we die or live, we will be here.” – **Nergiz Mohammed, Afrin IDP living in Vegere camp**

Pregnant women are especially suffering because of the lack of necessary medicines due to the siege imposed on roads leading to Shehba. Giving birth under the harsh conditions of the camps implies some risks. Due to the lack of appropriate medical equipment and procedures, some children die soon after being born. Sometimes it is not possible to give pregnant women emergency caesarean sections if they need them. In addition, cases of involuntary abortions have happened due to the psychological and physical stress resulting from the displacement and the lack of medical care.

Women take roles and positions of responsibility in all the structures, either in the camps or in the institutions of Shehba region. They take part in the co-presidency and the committees. The Kongra Star women's organization is also present in Shehba region, organizing women inside and outside the camps.

“It is true that there are difficulties in the province, as much as in the camps. Our people in the camps - the children, the women, our elder fathers, are in this embargo situation. We first gave help to our people that have been hurt and are tired. We gave fuel, some logistics, and medicine. A lot of children have died. We cannot send these children to Aleppo, to the hospital. We can not give them their historical rights. Children in the camps suffer the most, with their right to education denied and with few opportunities. Knowing this, using our structures, we try to give everything we can. We try to counter the lack of opportunities with the path of education, science, and visiting our people” – **Elif Muhamed - member of Kongra Star in Afrin and Shehba Canton**

3.3 ORGANIZATION OF THE CAMPS

All the refugee camps in Shehba region belong to the Autonomous Administration. Thus, they are organized according to the same social and administrative system as the rest of the NES territory, but keeping autonomy related to the committees. This means each camp is divided into communes, each of which is presided over by male and female co-chairs. The camps all have service, sanitary, and social reconciliation sub-committees that supervise the distribution of relief and maintain order. Then, on this basis, each camp has developed their own committees.

For example in Serdem camp, first they established communes, and secondly, the camp council and the municipality are present. They also have the Sports

Federation, the Intellectuals Union, Kongra Star, and the Martyrs Families Committee, as well as the self protection units. In the case of Berxwedan camp, the institutions present are as follows: the Municipality, which works on cleaning; the Education Committee, which is responsible for schools and the educational process in the camps and is affiliated with the Education Authority; the Reconciliation Committee, which works to solve problems between the people in the camps; the Fundamental Protection Committee, which works to protect the camp day and night; and the Martyrs' Families Committee, the Kongra Star, the Women's Committee, the Red Crescent, the Health Committee, and also the camp council.

3.4 NGOs

“There is no humanitarian support, and there is no interest on the part of the organizations towards these areas. Some of them came here and inquired about the status of the camps, the difficulties and the numbers of the displaced, but they left without returning.” – **Sheikho Ibrahim, an administrator in Berxwedan camp**

“This region is surrounded, and the people are refugees. Believe me, NGOs do nothing. They don't come, and they don't help. There is only the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, of course, because this is their country. We are in the Syrian state. But apart from them, no NGO comes, asking us what medicines we need, helping us to treat people - no-one takes up the burden.” – **Administration of Tel Rifaat Cirurgical Hospital**

Since the massive displacement from the Afrin region due to the Turkish invasion, the daily needs of the refugees in Afrin have been secured through the cooperation of the local people from Afrin, the AANES and Civil Society organizations. However, despite non-stop pleas to several relief agencies, including the UN's Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, UNICEF and Refugees' High Commission, these refugees were almost completely let down by the international community.¹⁵ Some international aid organizations and NGOs supported the IDPs, mostly in the refugee camps, materially and financially.

¹⁵ rb.gy/spjcg (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

For example, in the Serdem camp, there were many associations and humanitarian organizations that provided medical services in mobile clinics, but the number of the current active ones has decreased with the passing of the years. Overall, they have not been able to meet all of the needs of the residents. In winter, families need clothes, blankets and mattresses, most of which were given to them 5 years ago and which are very worn out. In Berxwedan camp, UNICEF provides some support represented by securing clean water for the people in the camps, and the Syrian Red Crescent provides a food basket every two or three months, and a detergent basket every six months.

Overall, the claim of the refugee camps residents towards the NGOs stresses the need to engage in ensuring the fulfillment of their basic human needs and relieve their suffering. IDPs hope for the positive effect of aid donations and material support: they need more humanitarian aid and food aid, as well as moral support and substantial funding. The current situation in Shehba region requires hybridizing short-term humanitarian solutions with international support to ensure, if not increase the chances of, a future for the displaced population.

Nevertheless, with the loss of attention from the international community since the last Turkish military operations on Syrian soil, and the war in Ukraine, many NGOs and international donors finished their projects in northern Syrian territories and didn't renew them.

Serdem camp, November 2022



3.5 OTHER DISPLACED PEOPLES

Afrin was an isolated pocket of peace and security during the Syrian Civil War, providing a safe land for hundreds of thousands of civilians. Afrin’s population nearly doubled during the conflict, as hundreds of thousands of mostly Arab IDPs had taken shelter in the majority-Kurdish region. At the same time, the people of Afrin took advantage of the peace and stability they enjoyed to develop the democratic structures and institutions embraced throughout the majority-Kurdish regions of Northern Syria, under the frame of the AANES.

However, the 2018 “Olive Branch” military operation executed by the Turkish army and its proxies of the SNA blew up this last peaceful region of Syria. The already displaced people, now alongside the original Afrin population, had to flee to Shehba and other places, living side by side in new refugee camps and war-damaged homes. Despite this displacement, the same social mixture has been repeated in Shehba camps.

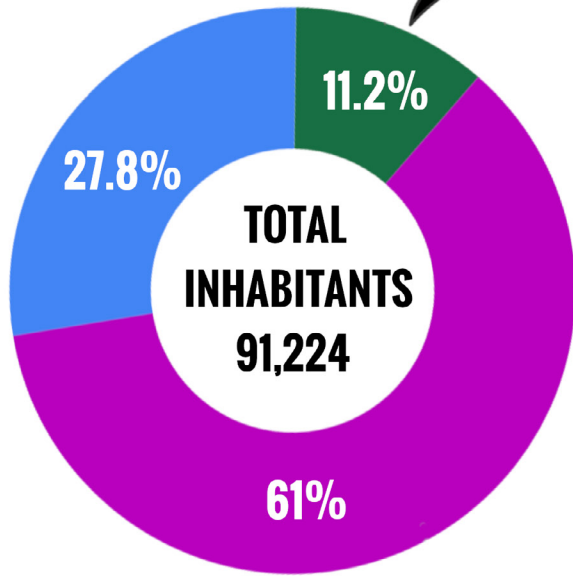
For example, in Berxwedan camp, most of the displaced people there are from Afrin. In addition, there are some displaced families from the neighboring areas of Idrin, Idlib, Deir Azza, and the southern Aleppo countryside, as well as other Syrian governorates.¹⁶ In the Serdem camp there are Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen families as well. Afrin camp was set up specially for the Roma people, at their request, to maintain their privacy.

“Approximately 300,000 people have been displaced from Afrin, and the semi-destroyed houses of Shehba were not enough to accommodate the people, so it was necessary to form camps. Five camps were formed on the land of Shehba, containing about 7,800 people of different sects and races (Kurds, Yazidis, Arabs, Christians) etc. from Homs, Damascus, Warqa and Idlib - they live together as a family. The doors of our camps are open to all the displaced, and it is worth noting that the Autonomous Administration is working on forming a sixth camp, which is now under implementation.” – **Sheikho Ibrahim, Administration of Berxwedan camp**

¹⁶ rb.gy/spjcj (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

SHEHBA REGION POPULATION

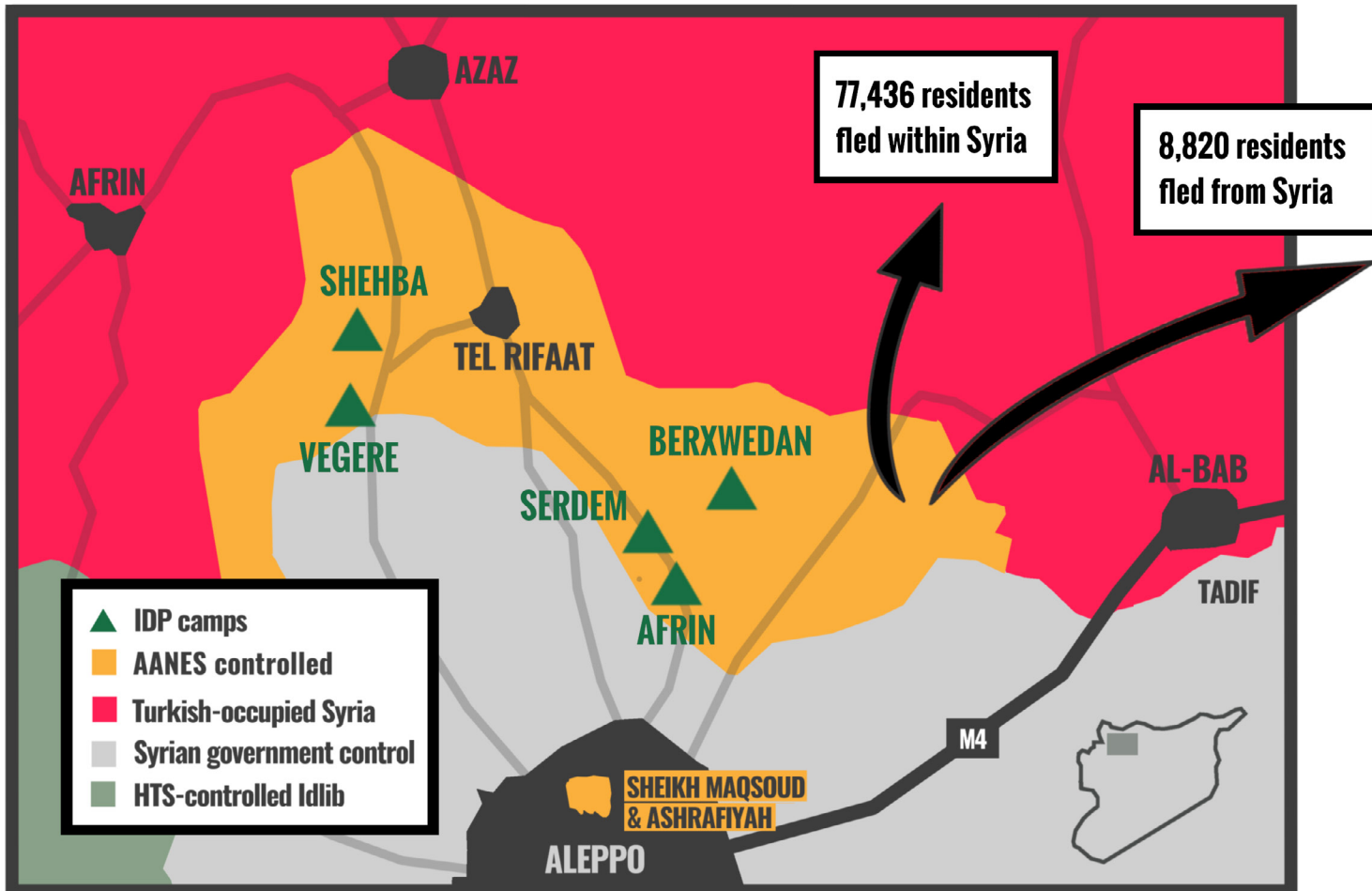
MAY 2023



■ Original population: 25,317
■ IDPs outside camps: 55,686
■ IDPs in camps: 10,221
 } total IDPs: 65,907

REFUGEE CAMPS IN SHEHBA

	FAMILIES	INDIVIDUALS
SERDEM	1,032	4,792
BERXWEDAN	784	3,578
VEGERE	164	777
AFRIN	122	548
SHEHBA	109	526
TOTAL	2,211	10,221



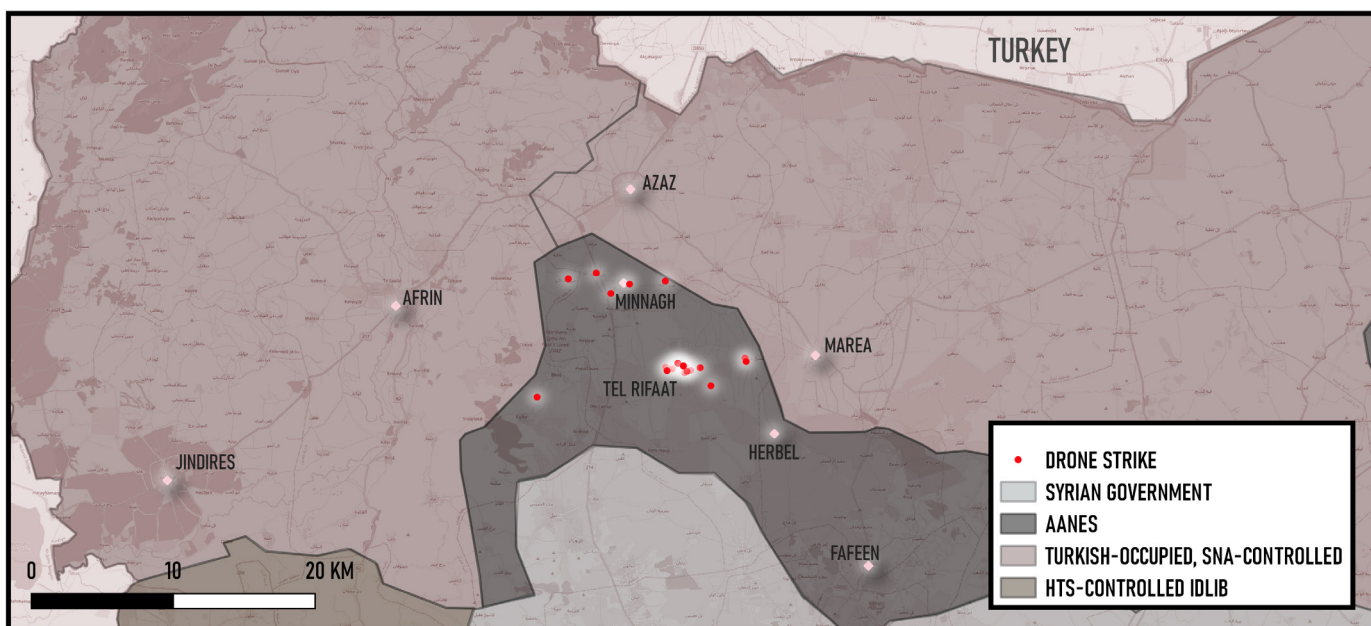
4. LIFE DESPITE THE WAR AND THE EMBARGO

4.1 UNDER ATTACK

The last territorial configuration of northern Syria leaves the AANES governed Shehba region under permanent threat of a further invasion. Since the invasion and occupation of the Afrin region by Turkey and its proxy militias in 2018, Shehba region holds a strategic location for all the armed actors surrounding it. Moreover, the region holds 63,715 IDPs from Afrin, becoming a priority for the Self Administration in terms of protection and services, as well as aiming for the return of the original population to the Afrin region.

On the other side, Turkey has pursued a constantly hostile war strategy to empty the region of its civilian population, in order to facilitate ground invasions. Especially since mid-2022, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been threatening a new military offensive against the Shehba region.¹⁷ The official goal is to continue expanding the 30km deep “security zone” south of the Turkish state border (as was claimed for the ‘Peace Spring’ Operation in 2019).¹⁸ The other possible targets in the list are Manbij and Kobane. The attacks against Shehba region have been incessant in recent years. According to the SDF database, the Turkish military and its proxies of the SNA shelled Shehba region 27,498 times in 2022 alone. As a result of these attacks, 7 civilians were killed and 44 civilians were injured. In addition, according to RIC’s database, 14 of Turkey's strikes targeted the city of Tel Rifaat in Shehba by 2022.¹⁹

DRONE STRIKES IN SHEHBA REGION DURING 2022



17 twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1544668167653433345

18 twitter.com/RojavalC/status/1532255924525711361

19 rb.gy/lz04v (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

During the Turkish ‘Claw-Sword’ Operation in late 2022, the Shehba region was heavily targeted by Turkish artillery and drones. In this latest military operation against AANES territories, critical civilian infrastructure was targeted, causing a severe impact on daily life conditions of the population. Aram Hanna, spokesperson of the SDF pointed out: "Since the beginning of this April [2022], the Turkish occupation and its mercenaries have escalated their attacks on the region, including Kobani and its villages, Shehba, and Ain Issa areas, all the way to Tel Tamr and Zarkan district, and they have committed crimes against citizens".²⁰ He further evaluated: "Most of the air strikes are against safe and populated areas, and this is evident through the damage caused by them, and they target citizens and service centers in the area." RIC's own research and database provide evidence for the intense focus on infrastructure during "Operation Claw-Sword", following the general strategy to empty the region of its civilian population.²¹

“As we all know, the Turkish state’s plans are obvious. It seeks to put the entire region under its control, and to make demographic change. Right now in Shehba, one of its characteristics is that there are several components and ethnic groups within the region including Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen, as well Armenian and Christian families, some of them displaced. There are some villages of the Eram Ghout people, they came from Bulgaria in the past. They are only present in the Shehba region.

Now, what they do is they bring all the Turkmen who are in Homs and Hama and settle them up in those regions. They want to expand their areas, for that the situation of shelling and attacks is continuous. They also seek to displace people and society in order to divide and empty the region of its inhabitants to launch an attack. Also to make the region a land without people or society, in order to argue the legitimacy of their attacks. Thereby, there is continuous coordination between the Turkish and Syrian intelligence forces aimed at displacing people and occupying the region.” – **Juma Kalo, co-chair of Shehba Canton Council**

4.2 UNDER EMBARGO

If Turkey and its SNA proxy forces are attacking the region, in order to empty it, the Syrian government also tries to drown the local population through an embargo. Being isolated from the other AANES cantons, they cut off and weakened the region making it hard to supply a large amount of civilians, many

²⁰ calkurd.org/sdf-spokesman-calls-on-the-international-community-to-play-its-role/

²¹ twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1596806112673955840

of them IDPs. The pressure of the Syrian government embargo on AANES from an underserved population is already hard, even without a military ground campaign from Turkey.

“If you pay attention to Shehba, they are using once again the policy of blockade that had been used against us in Afrin for six years. At that time we were self-managing our work, with food production in the canton for self-sufficiency. The region was under embargo on one side by Turkey, and on the Aleppo side as well, exporting and importing of things was very difficult.

The same policy, however, that was used against Afrin is the same one used against Shehba. Of course, they have aims and purposes with this policy. Today you see a region like Shehba under siege, and 300,000 people from Afrin, we made our way towards refuge in Shehba. A lot of politics have been imposed against us, such as psychological warfare, and the policy of embargo. The aim of this is to displace people once again, whether Afrin people or those from Shehba.” – **Hevin Reshid, co-chair of the Economic and Agriculture board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

In Winter 2022 there was a shortage of fuel, heavily influencing the region's ability to prosper or regenerate from war. Due to a lack of fuel there is a lack of electricity and a reduced capacity of agriculture. Schools had to be closed and, most importantly, bakeries cannot work without fuel. Especially hard is the embargo on medicines. The ban or exorbitant prices needed to be paid to enter the region has become the biggest obstacle in terms of securing medicines of all of Shehba's health infrastructure.

“When we were displaced, about 300,000 people took refuge in the camps (Al-Awda, Afrin, Berxwedan, Serdem, Shehba), while others were distributed among 40 villages and towns in the northern countryside of Aleppo. I have been here in Serdem camp for five years. The Autonomous Administration helps us and provides us with what is available in all aspects of health, services, living, etc., but we are now in a state of siege by the regime and we live in a state of suffocation and the absence of basic materials, in addition to the bombing that occurs from time to time, which creates fear among young children and the elderly, and has a negative effect on their psyche. Most of the people here suffer from chest infections and breathing difficulties. This comes because of the small size of the tents and the extreme cold and heat that they are exposed to in summer and winter. I can say that we are exiles, like the Kurdish people. We are the ones who help each other, no one helps us.

I saw some civilians lose their lives, as a result of the absence of medicines in Avrin Hospital and the siege that did not allow patients to be taken to nearby hospitals in Aleppo. I do not know how long this siege will last. It started at the beginning of last November and has caused the suspension of several service institutions and the closure of schools, and now threatens to stop the work of the entire hospital, because of the prevention of the entry of fuel and food supplies by the Fourth Division of the regime, and the people are very afraid of this matter.” – **Muhammed Hussein Mustafa, IDP from Afrin, living in Serdem camp**



The SAA systematically imposes temporary embargoes, provoking acute shortages of basic goods, such as flour, baby food, and fuel, in order to pressure the AANES. In the past, the embargos on the Shehba region, as well as on the two majority-Kurdish neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyyeh in Aleppo city, have raised the tension between the Self Administration and the Syrian Government.²²

For example, at the end of April 2022, SAA-AANES agreement ended the mutual blockades on neighborhoods in Aleppo, Heseke and Qamishlo. The standoff came as a direct result of the SAA imposing levies on trucks carrying basic staples into Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyyeh, as well as the Shehba enclave to the north of the city. As part of the agreement, the SAA allowed flour to enter

the neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyyeh after a month and a half-long siege. In Qamishlo, Asayish forces ended their encircling of the SAA's "security square" and pulled away from the Baath bakery.²³

Last January 2023, Amnesty International stated that the “Syrian government forces must lift a brutal blockade on civilians in predominantly Kurdish areas in the northern Aleppo region that is obstructing residents’ access to fuel and other essential



Shehba residents waiting for diesel distribution, April 2021

22 twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1385841541042917377

23 twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1520289774879268866

supplies". In its research, the NGO found how the Syrian Government army forces, through the Fourth Division, have since August 2022 imposed a severe fuel restriction that is affecting crucial sectors, such as hospitals, bakeries and other essential facilities, as well as medication and aid. At the same time, testimonies collected by Amnesty International pointed out "that Fourth Division forces have opened a smuggling route, where small amounts of fuel are being sold at exorbitant prices".²⁴ The NGO remarked that in the past the Syrian Government pursued unlawful sieges of civilian areas, depriving civilians of access to food, medicine and other basic necessities, as part of a calculated military strategy. The dynamics of the Shehba embargo fall into this same pattern that the Syrian government has used previously, and can be seen as part of the wider negotiation process with other states.

"Since the government imposed the blockade in August 2022, tens of thousands of civilians, including internally displaced people, have faced severe shortages of fuel and aid. Medical supplies are now all but exhausted and people are burning household items and plastic to try and keep warm in freezing temperatures. [...] the start of the August blockade coincided with the start of normalization talks between Türkiye and Syria, both staunch opponents of the AANES rule in north-east Syria."
– **Amnesty International**

4.3 ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

"Here in Shehba, a policy of displacement has been pursued, forcing the people to leave the land. The Baath policy has always aimed at expelling people from these areas and deporting them to Aleppo in order to establish an industrial city, and it used to carry out this policy through employment or study.

When the people leave their land, first they move away from their culture, secondly they are dissolved within the cities, and thirdly they become slaves of the regime present there. A person becomes a machine only to work and people's creativity fades away. This is the policy that was being followed here.

We are now in Shehba, and as people who grew up under these conditions we are all affected by this previous Baath policy. There is no infrastructure, no agricultural and strategic projects." – **Emad Daoud, co-chair of the Economic and Agriculture board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

24 rb.gy/ikkv6 (www.amnesty.org)

The Council of Shehba Canton Administration started in 2016 to rebuild the civil infrastructure of the region, after the SDF liberated the area from ISIS forces. Heavily damaged streets, missing machines and constant security concerns still make the rebuilding process a major task. A lot of empty villages were rebuilt after the Turkish invasion of Afrin in 2018, when about one third of the 300,000 forcibly displaced population remained in the Shehba region.²⁵ The efforts to rebuild were focused on education and healthcare: schools were rehabilitated and affordable medical care was established first. On the other side, the municipalities focused on rebuilding the local infrastructure: water networks were repaired, local rubbish collection systems were established, and some of the main connecting roads were paved. Despite these general infrastructure rehabilitation efforts, electricity, water and other basic infrastructure faces



Aqîbê village, April 2021

“In Shehba, there is no lake. The people are forced to continue living, and this needs water, which is from wells, and this is the work of the municipality. Regular electricity is not available here, so you have to operate the generators, and the generators are the work of the municipality as well. The difficulties we face are the lack of fuel, so they know what is going on here, and that is why they impose a blockade on us and prevent fuel. Now we are in winter, and if we must protect ourselves from this season, heating must be provided. Electricity is not available, so you have to provide fuel. Fuel is not available, so firewood must be provided. If firewood is secured for a year...two years, but then how? The situation will be settled and then nature will also be affected.

[...] We are being imposed on things outside morality and humanity. These difficulties that we face as an administration, not only one institution, but all institutions. This starts with the commune and the council, then the administration. These difficulties are linked together as a chain that you cannot cut.” – **Emad Daoud, co-chair of the Economic and Agriculture board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

25 rb.gy/4qzro (www. rojavainformationcenter.com)

daily challenges to ensure the needs of the local population, which suddenly multiplied after the Afrin invasion. The infrastructure problem requires a complex and general solution to cover all the basic needs of the population, but limited resources and the embargo are still preventing the solid recovery of the Shehba region.

Regarding the economic situation, there has been uneven progress, mainly affected by the Syrian government embargo and the constant shelling from the SNA Turkish backed militias. Shehba's soil is fertile and the area has high crop yields. In the past, wheat, barley, chickpeas and peanuts were cultivated, and the Shehba region was an important contributor to the economy of Aleppo governorate and Syria. Though, lots of the necessary infrastructure to cultivate the land was destroyed or stolen during the period of occupation by Free Syrian Army militias before 2016.

Regardless of the war, the Shehba region was already affected by a poor economic infrastructure due to Syrian Government policies. Even though the area is highly suitable for different crops, irrigation projects did not reach the Shehba or Afrin regions, but the areas east of Aleppo from the Euphrates river. The lack of agricultural and industrial infrastructure shaped the economic relations of Shehba and its regional economic epicenter Aleppo city. The same mechanism was used in the Jazira region for decades, making

Fields next to Qaramil village, April 2021



these regions inevitably dependent on other Syrian economic poles. Emad Daoud, co-chair of the Economic Board, explained: “there are no strategic factories. Here is an agricultural area, but there is no factory for agricultural medicines or fertilizers. As a country, Syria did not build strategic factories here, but rather they are all in Aleppo, so that the people can be pulled from here to there”.

Nowadays, the Economic and Agriculture Board provides fertilizer and diesel fuel, but for the 2022-23 season it is facing an increasing shortage of fertilizer for agriculture or other purposes. When diesel reaches the Committee's tanks, it is spread to farmers and other economic sectors, as well as to the general public. “Last year was better than this year. Last year, about 8,000 to 9,000 people worked for us on an hourly basis. Among the aforementioned number many were women, 3-4 thousand, for example, most of them worked in harvesting (loading potatoes, cleaning lentils and onions), they do manual work”, explained Hêvîn Reshid, co-chair of the Economic and Agriculture Authority of Afrin. In 2022 part of the harvest in the Shehba region was set on fire by Turkish shelling. Dry wheat catches fire quickly and whole fields burn down before they can be harvested, illustrating the problem of rebuilding under pressure from Turkey and Damascus.²⁶

“We know that the Shehba area is an agricultural area, and even in the past, it was known that Shehba was the food basket of Aleppo, and it was self-sufficient and its geography was agricultural, for example, the cultivation of potatoes, wheat, barley, and all kinds that could be cultivated. Certainly, during the siege, there are many things that are difficult to provide, especially those that meet all one's needs, namely fuel.

Now that we have the harvest season, the harvest must be completed and the sowing phase must begin again. And we know that there is no diesel. A barrel of diesel has reached nearly one and a half million [Syrian Pounds], and this is very difficult for farmers, and this is the result of the imposed blockade.” – **Hevin Reshid, co-chair of the Economic and Agriculture board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

Among this pressing need for resources, the emergence of solar energy has become a key tool to sustain the agriculture and other economic sectors in Shehba - as in many other regions of Syria. Through solar energy, it is possible to run irrigation systems that previously were using diesel, but the adoption of solar energy is halted by the embargo.

²⁶ npasyria.com/en/78357/

As the main economic sector of Shehba, agriculture, is constrained by the material needs, the job opportunities in general are scarce. Agriculture has been the traditional occupation for the local people, passing from elder to young generations, but other economic sectors have more narrow opportunities in the embargo conditions. According to Emad Daoud, co-chair of the Economic Board, “the industrial shops that are present here are small, but the medium ones have all disappeared, and the heads of their businesses have migrated to Jazira and Aleppo. This had a huge impact on workers, and led to high unemployment. That is why, economically, you are forced to continue the plans and how you can secure work for the people. On this basis, we have developed agricultural projects and we want the people to work with them. On the other hand, we have developed cooperatives. Now, economically, we are developing more cooperatives. We want the community to join the work.” Emad Daoud points out the cooperative policy that has constituted one of the main pillars of the AANES economic model. Across all AANES territories there has been an indefatigable effort to build a cooperative economy, to bring self-sustained economic opportunities according to the needs of every local community.

“The cooperative system is that every 5-6 families come together to serve and cultivate that land. Of course, there are other details about the cooperative. We have prepared a special committee on cooperatives, and it is carrying out its work. We, as a body, supervise it and the projects and studies that they set up for those projects, and then we discuss them together.

We hope that this will be an experience in all regions, such as Jazira and Kobane. It is a joint, cooperative action, and it must start from the commune. When we started with cooperatives, it was a series of meetings, such as introducing cooperatives to all the families, especially as there are families who do not have a breadwinner and there is no one to support them.

The Autonomous Administration is helping, but it is really not enough, so we said to give them a greater importance and role, in other words, to put them specifically in cooperatives because they are unemployed. Therefore, we said that they can enter this cooperative and work hard, and at the end of the year they will see the fruits of their labor.” – **Hevin Reshid, co-chair of the Economic and Agriculture board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

A first attempt to implement a cooperative started in 2020 in Tel Rifaat, with a small area of about 70 hectares given by the Economic and Agriculture Committee. In 2021, weather and climate conditions had a negative impact on the wheat crop, among disputes over the land and the procedures of distribution by the institution. By 2022, the cooperative policy became more consistent, with statutes for the Cooperative and the Livestock committees officially declared. That year 178 hectares, in addition to 74-75 thousand olive trees, were also given to cooperative projects. In 2023, the plan of the committee is to give the cooperatives 110,000 olive trees and 100,000 hectares of arable land. In February, the committee already handed over 2,100 hectares of agricultural land to the cooperatives. Additionally, 1,700 hectares were distributed to displaced families from Afrin, with one or one-and-a-half hectares per family.²⁷

In January 2023, the Economic Board finally established the Cooperative Center of Afrin and Shehba. The aim of the Cooperative Center is to organize citizens, provide the basis and methods of cooperative work, create labor alliances, establish monitoring committees and provide support to poor families.

Another perspective of the Economic and Agriculture Committee is to pivot to self-sufficiency strategy. For crops this means: focusing more on coriander, cumin, black seed, chickpeas and legumes, instead of wheat and barley. The cultivation of wheat and barley takes ten months, and produces 1,000 tons of wheat, yet the needs of Shehba region reaches 2000-3000 tons. Most importantly, during the ten months that the crops need to be grown, the populations need to keep buying flour. “We farm and waste a lot of effort, because when the climate worsens, so does our farming. For that, the wheat is not enough. That's why we said we buy flour [to continue making bread], so we give importance to other crops for farming”, explains Hevin Reshid. Broadly, the Economic and Agriculture Board is focusing the efforts on the lands and trees, to then boost the industrial and commercial cooperatives, as well as for the livestock.



Appliance repair shop in Berxwedan camp, April 2021

27 www.hawarnews.com/kr/haber/li-sehbay-pergala-kooperatfan-t-geskirin-h71266.html

4.4 HEALTH CARE AND DISEASE OCCURRENCE

Health care remains an important task in Shehba Canton. Despite there being medical support from other regions of AANES, the situation remains precarious, with scarce personnel and material. The health system of Shehba region is supported in two pillars: the Kurdish Red Crescent facilities, and the two AANES hospitals.

“In the beginning, we established a small group of two doctors and a number of nurses in the village of Ahraz in Shehba, because we lacked experience and we worked on opening nursing courses, and then we gradually expanded the field until we reached the stage of rehabilitating Avrin Hospital.

We really needed this hospital. The number of patients is large and the wounded are also due to the attacks they are subjected to. We receive these cases every day and treat them within the available capabilities.” – **Hevin Hussein, co-chair of the Health Board of Afrin and Shehba Canton**

The population of Shehba region relies on two main hospitals. The biggest one is the Avrin Hospital, located near Faffen town. The hospital has five departments (women, children, operation, care, ultrasound) and five clinics (bones, interior, urinary, general surgery, heart). However, these clinics and departments do not cover the needs and treatment of all patients. According to Hevin Hussein, co-chair of the Health Authority in Afrin canton, “most of the cases that we receive are due to strokes and some internal diseases as a result of the psychological state they are going through, and for this we are in dire need of some devices in order to deal with these cases, such as axial plate, magnetic resonance and digestive endoscopy, in the event that we receive such cases we work in various ways. The means are to get the patient to other areas, but the blockade imposed by the regime prevents this and hinders the process of transferring the patient, and the patient is transported by ambulances, knowing that we have one car.”



Hevin Hussein, co-chair of the Health Board of Afrin and Shehba Canton, November 2022



Patients in Avrin Hospital, November 2022

All medical and health services in Avrin Hospital are free of charge, and there is no discrimination against different social factions. According to the administration of the hospital, every month more than more than 15,000 patients are attended to, performing up to 400 surgeries, and 200 births. The cost of this health care relies entirely on the Shehba Health Committee, taking the responsibility for the local population plus 10,000 IDPs living in the camps. “No one provides us with help, whether humanitarian or relief organizations. They do not think about how these

patients who live in the camps are treated amidst daily attacks on them. We didn't get any chance or help from abroad to supply this hospital - this hospital is helping people for free. We only help with the food or available supplies that we have. Although we have called on responsible groups, such as the World Health Organization, Human Rights Watch and others, until now there is no answer”, points out Hevin Hussein.

In its third year running, Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital is different from Avrin Hospital in some aspects. First, it lacks experienced doctors. The fact that it is located in the Tel Rifaat area that witnesses daily shelling, prevented the arrival of experienced personnel due to fear of being targeted and their distance from other more secure residential areas. Also, health services are charged for, although only a nominal amount.

“We don't have many doctors here, not many at all. Because the Tel Rifaat region is a military frontline, and there are often injured people, daily bombardments. This means that many doctors and nurses have fled from this region. But a number of doctors and nurses, may they be thanked for it, come and work here and go on with their work until the roads are closed - and still they come.” – **Administration of Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital**

Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital performs three surgeries per day, and within a month receives about 3,500 patients. Birth cases reach 100 cases per month, and most of them are referred to Avrin Hospital because treatment there is free, and also due to the availability of blood there. There is not a blood bank in Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital, making any surgery or other interventions highly risky as it won't be possible to perform a blood transfusion. Constant lack of fuel prevents any possibility to store blood donations in safety conditions. Moreover, medicines provision face many difficulties, as many times roads leading to the Tel Rifaat area are closed and storage conditions are not suitable.



Operating room of Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital, November 2022

During the period of the Corona pandemic, Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital became the official health facility to treat infected patients, but the lack of proper equipment threatened to exacerbate the situation. “We saw many positive cases that we referred to the hospital designated for Corona, so that a number of our staff were also injured. During the period of the Corona pandemic, we faced great difficulty. We saw many positive cases that we referred to the hospital designated for Corona, and so a number of our staff also became infected”, explained the administration of the hospital.

During the 2022 summer season, in some Syrian areas there were outbreaks of cholera. The Shehba region was affected, both in refugee camps and in villages and towns. “At the beginning, cholera spread among the population. There were very serious cases. But now, we are focusing on it, and the rate has reduced. It's not as bad as the start. Also we are now entering winter, which plays a role in the reduction. This region had issues particularly in the camps, as the people there live close together, which contributed to the rapid spread. If sickness breaks out, it spreads quickly”, confirmed the Administration of Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital to RIC back in November 2022. “Unfortunately, though, treatment of cholera is also reliant on IV transfusions. Because people suffer dehydration, this can reach the level where people die. And we have no way to help them, as we have no IV transfusions.”

The other pillar of the health system of Shehba region is constituted by the Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) facilities. The KRC started to work in Afrin

during 2014 and in Shehba after Turkey's occupation of Afrin. After the displacement, the KRC set up centers in the camps. To date, the KRC has 7 medical points here in Shehba (Ziyarat, Burj Qassa, Tal Rifaat, Ahraz, Serdem camp, Berxwedan camp, Juveniles), operating 24 hours a day. Doctors are present in three points only (Ehrez, Sardam camp, Berkhdan camp) on an administrative basis. These points provide vaccinations for leishmaniasis, treatments for blood pressure and diabetes, first aid, and medicines. People take medicines from KRC points through cards monthly, and the KRC has a caravan dedicated to Leishmaniasis vaccinations for outlying villages, twice a week. During RIC's visit the KRC administrator, Alia Muhammad, criticized the lack of medical personnel, equipment, medicines, ambulances, clean water, and a lack of premises for medical treatments.

“We are facing difficulty in bringing medicines into this region. The international community and the whole world knows that we witness this suffocating situation every year, and there are no humanitarian organizations here. Sometimes we are unable to secure chronic medicines. A while ago we were unable to secure medicines for heart and diabetes, and this matter was difficult.” – **Alia Muhammad, administrator at the Kurdish Red Crescent in Shehba and Afrin**

International aid, from Medico International for example, has many hurdles to jump before it can actually be distributed to people. The staff and personnel can only come into AANES territory through the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) controlled Iraqi-Kurdistan, due to embargos from both Syrian and Turkish states, but KRG is making it more and more difficult to transfer medical goods into the Autonomous Administration territories.^{28 29} Even when medical goods or personnel from outside Syria arrive in AANES, they cannot access Shehba without the approval of the Syrian Government.

“The lack of living basics, the rise of the dollar against the Syrian pound, and the daily attacks and siege have greatly affected the families and their psyche. There are families who keep their young children behind and search for how to procure fuel, bread and medicine. Sometimes we receive wounded and sick people in the hospital and treat them coinciding with the sounds of shelling. There were shells falling near the hospital and its surroundings, and this aim is to weaken the psyche of the people as well as influence the medical staff and form their fears, and this is by targeting health centers and medical points, noting that most of the medical staff are also displaced.” – **Administration of Tel Rifaat Surgical Hospital**

28 www.medico.de/durch-rojava-17120/

29 www.bullmed.ch/article/doi/saez.2018.17079

4.5 EDUCATION

According to the Education Committee for the Democratic Society (KPC), in June 2018 there were 30,000 elementary pupils and 7,000 intermediate and secondary students in the Shehba region. Likewise, there were 1,536 teachers and managers on standby to teach and train students, waiting for needed basic supplies to run schools.³⁰

By the end of 2022, the number of students decreased due to the imposed blockade, the living conditions, and the lack of fuel and work. According to Sobhi Al-Ahmad, co-presidency of Afrin and Shehba regions education board, the number of students from the primary, preparatory and secondary levels was approximately 15,000 students. The primary stage is approximately 10,000 students, the middle stage is approximately 3,500 students, and the secondary stage is approximately 1,500 students, and this number is for both the Arab and Kurdish components.

Material needs have hampered the establishment of a proper education system in Shehba region. Today, only electronic books are available on USBs, and neither printers nor paper are available. It is almost impossible to import printed books from the Jazira region through Syrian regime controlled areas.

As for the education buildings, there have been constant efforts to rehabilitate and expand the facilities. “We have tried as much as possible to rehabilitate them, but so far there are many shortcomings. There are schools that are in new buildings and old ones. Some are under the construction or haven’t been finished yet - the lighting is low, the number of students in some schools is very large, meaning that the academic atmosphere of a regular school is not available yet”, explains Sobhi Al-Ahmad, co-president of the Afrin and Shehba Education Board. There are a total of 70 education buildings in Shehba region, of which 22 are



Students at the Health Institute of Afrin Region, November 2022

³⁰ rb.gy/spjcg (www.rojavainformationcenter.com)

government schools and the rest are residential homes. In addition, there is a school in each of the five refugee camps of Shehba region. There are also Syrian government schools located in Shehba region, but they are few and often in the places of Sherawa, due to a majority of Arab population villages that are still connected with the government.

Moreover, the basic education stage consists of two cycles: primary, preparatory, and secondary education. Education is free and private courses are even prohibited. Curricula and regulations of the education system in Shehba region are inscribed within the Education Authority in North and East Syria. In Shehba, the Education Board has no direct deal with UNICEF, but rather it deals with the Syrian Red Crescent only. However, the agreement to cover the educational needs together is hampered by curricular and material quarrels. As Sobhi Al-Ahmad explains:

“As for the Syrian Red Crescent, they cooperated and tried to implement the UNICEF curriculum within the camps. We did not refuse the cooperation, but we had some conditions for it. Also, they only worked in the camps. The obstacle is that they will give only the primary stage [of education] and only one language, Arabic, and we in our primary schools give Arabic and Kurdish.

Our students in the fourth grade take Arabic, and this will be difficult. And the other point is that they will carry out the educational process in a tent, and we said it should be in a solid structure, because even in the camps, the Autonomous Administration commissioned and built schools.” – **Sobhi Al-Ahmad, co-president of the Afrin and Shehba Education Board**

In addition to these stages, there is the Institute of Martyr Viyan Amara, for the training of teachers, which opened four years ago. The number of students in the first and second year is approximately 150-180 students, all coming from Afrin or Shehba cantons. The Institute has a department of Teaching, English, Computer, Mathematics, Science, Literature, and Kurdish language. Two years ago the Health Institute of Afrin Region was reopened in Shehba, specializing in training workers for the health sector. Despite the adverse conditions, some students reached university studies. It is possible to finish the studies at the University of Rojava, based in the city of Qamishlo in the Jazira Region. During the year 2022-23, at least 35 students from Shehba region are studying at the University of Rojava.

The consequences of the ongoing war remain the biggest obstacles that jeopardize the development of the Education system in Shehba region. On one side, there are the attacks of the Turkish-backed SNA militias.

“All of Shehba is under bombardment, from Sherawa to the south of Shehba, approximately 22 students from all stages were killed. The bombing was even targeting the schools. We have three schools that were directly damaged as a result of the bombing. One of the schools that was bombed is a joint school between us and the state. We run in the morning and they run in the evening and vice versa.

Of course, when the bombing takes place, we have to stop the schools. Last year, the work was stopped for 15 days, and most of the schools that are being bombed are near the border - they are along the front line in almost every village.” – **Sobhi Al-Ahmad, co-president of the Afrin and Shehba Education Board**

The embargo of the Syrian Government produces a general scarcity in Shehba region. “As for the difficulties of the students, it is the same for families in general, the high cost of living and the siege. The families are poor, there is no work or a monthly income, so it came to pass that the students come to school in the winter and have no jackets or shoes to wear”, explains Sobhi Al-Ahmad. In addition, the embargo hampers the access to fuel, precluding the Education board to secure heating fuel for schools during the cold seasons.

Graduation ceremony at Institute of Martyr Viyan Amara, November 2022



4.6 COHABITATION OF SHEHBA AND AFRIN CANTONS

The formation of Afrin canton was announced in 2014 and the Shehba canton in 2016, later grouped in the officially named Afrin region. Since the Afrin invasion and mass displacement in 2018, in this narrow area there are both cantons running in parallel. Each canton has its own co-presidency. As a system, there are communes, then towns, and then the canton. The system of two cantons faces some problems. For example, in a village there are the Afrin and the Shehba communes, but the necessities of the different residents are not the same. Despite this, division at the administrative level is not found at the social level, as the population of Shehba lives together with the displaced population of Afrin, the fact that in the same village one family is connected to one commune and its neighbors are connected to another brought many complications.

“As you know, the region is small and not that big. So regarding the system of these cantons, there was a need to establish this system. But now there are difficulties because of the establishment of this system, and the main reason for these difficulties and problems is, because there are two cantons in one region, for example: if we talk about communes in one of the villages, we will see that there are two communes in each village, one for the displaced people from Afrin, and the second for the residents of Shehba.

There are differences between them [the residents from Afrin and Shehba], for example, sometimes the decisions are not the same, which means an imbalance between the decisions of the Afrin commune and Shehba. Despite that, the needs are different between two communes, and this leads to problems. This is why we needed to join the two cantons into one. Accordingly, we could not wait until the Social Contract. This is also why the people are on two sides, some of them are from Afrin and some are from Shehba, and each one of them follows a system according to the commune and the canton, even in the villages the system depends on the canton whether Afrin or Shehba.” – **Juma Kalo, co-chair of Shehba Canton Council**

In order to improve the cohabitation of Shehba and Afrin residents, and reduce bureaucracy, in the last discussions of the new version of the NES Social Contract during 2022, the Afrin and Shehba cantons presented a proposal to merge these duplicate structures into one canton. The approval

of the final draft has since then been paused because of threats of war. In view of the delay in approving the Social Contract, in January 2023 the administration and the people of the Afrin region decided to merge the two administrations (cantons, councils and communes) into one sole canton under the name of Afrin and Shehba canton. “As a result of unification, the number of councils and communes was reduced, as all institutions became common between Afrin and Shehba. The goal is to unite efforts organizationally and intellectually for the success of the Autonomous Administration in its project”, Melek Hasen, co-chair of the Executive Council of the new Afrin and Shehba canton, explained recently to RIC.

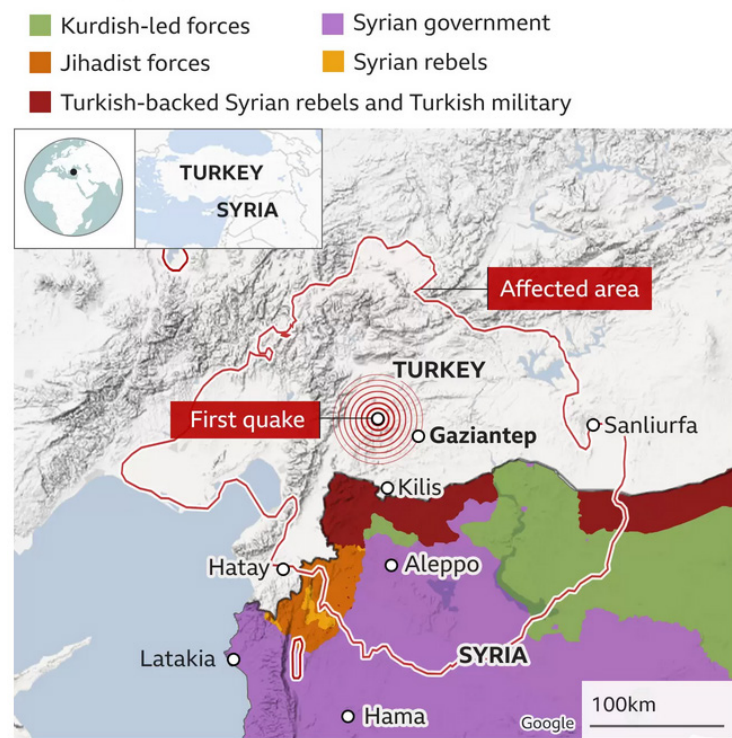
Road to Aleppo from the vicinity of Serdem camp, April 2021



5. SHEHBA AFTER THE FEBRUARY EARTHQUAKE

Although the Shehba region is situated in the area heavily shaken by the earthquakes that hit the region of southern Turkey and northwest Syria on February 6th (see map, right), the destruction felt there is not as far reaching as in the Afrin, Idlib and Aleppo regions. While these latter regions have more urban centers, the Shehba region in large parts comprises rural areas, within which hardly any multi-storey buildings can be found and with agriculture as its key sector.

Due to these divergent compositions of architecture and living spaces, no casualties directly linked to the disaster were reported, but on the other hand the dire conditions caused by the economic siege of the canton deteriorated even further. The Shehba administrations have faced the vast challenge to shelter and take care of several thousand inhabitants originally based in Aleppo's neighborhoods of Sheikh Masqoud and Ashrafiyah that headed toward Shehba as their homes were severely damaged and left behind inhabitable. Within the first days after the earthquake, 2,205 families from the city of Aleppo, whose homes were damaged by the earthquake, were settled in the existing Shehba refugee camps.³¹ The Afrin and Shehba Executive Council counted up to more than 1,200 uninhabitable homes. Moreover, due to the damage to eight schools and an institute, more than 6,000 students in Shehba region were deprived of pursuing their studies.



Source: Janes, 6 Feb 2023

Areas affected by the February earthquakes, map from BBC

Melek Hussein, the co-chair of the Executive Council of the Shehba and Afrin canton, told RIC that the embargo, which is imposed on the region by the Syrian Government, causes comprehensive difficulties to the administration to ensure basic materials and fundamental needs. According to Hussein, these difficulties have continued and increased: “until now at all levels, whether

31 rb.gy/2rndo (www.kongra-star.org)

food, medicine or fuel, especially at the current stage with a complete lack of fuel, which will lead to cutting off the electricity and stopping the water pumps and tractors that deliver water to the people". Due to the lack of fuel in the region under the embargo, the daily working hours of the electricity generators were reported to be reduced from four hours to just two hours a day.

Despite the influx of IDPs caused by the earthquake, the embargo has remained largely untouched. Fee Baumann, a member of the KRC coordination staff, who was on the ground in Shehba and Aleppo's majority-Kurdish neighborhoods, told RIC that no international humanitarian assistance had arrived in the Canton, except local initiatives and a humanitarian aid convoy she was part of, until March 4th (almost one month after the earthquake), when she herself left the region. Only aid provided by the people of Sulaymaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan and some Kurdish communities in Europe through the Kurdish Red Crescent and aid from the Autonomous Administration reached, after negotiations with the Syrian Government, Shehba region. AANES' 100 fuel trucks did successfully pass the governmental blockade, but 60 were given over to Damascus, while 30 tanks reached AANES' Shehba enclave, and 10 reached the AANES-governed Aleppo neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah.

This embargo of basic supply goods in the aftermath of the earthquake was not only restricted to Shehba, but also to the two other AANES-linked Aleppo neighborhoods, as well as for the other above mentioned regions, framed in a broader strategy of the Syrian Government to obtain political and material compensations in exchange for the authorization of the passage of humanitarian aid.

6. CONCLUSION

Shehba region is an exclave in Syrian territory, contradictory in nature. In this narrow land surrounded by hostile forces, thousands of local people struggle to rebuild their lives after the war against ISIS. Likewise, tens of thousands more are still waiting to go back to the Afrin region to rebuild their lives. In Shehba, the population suffers a double threat: from the north, the Turkish-backed SNA militias shell the villages and towns, amongst Turkish drone airstrikes; in the south, the Syrian Government imposes a severe siege that hinders or even makes impossible the arrival of basic needs, as fuel, medicines and industrial materials. Under these circumstances though, the population is self-organizing to make Shehba the most suitable environment possible to pursue with the life they long for and desire.

Despite taking place 5 years ago, the massive displacement of the Afrin population due to the Turkish invasion in 2018 means that the situation of the almost 66,000 IDPs still living in Shehba remains precarious. There are currently five refugee camps in the region. Apart from the camps, many other families from Afrin went to live in the towns and villages of Shehba region. While it is true that at first there was support from international institutions and NGOs, the current reality is that the support received by refugees comes only from AANES, UNICEF, the Kurdish Red Crescent and the Syrian Red Crescent. Despite some material conditions improving, the needs of the refugee camps developed to those of a de facto settled population. Settled, because new generations are coming and the Afrin refugees have been integrated into the Shehba land and social network. But de facto, because all the Afrin IDPs are still expecting and willing to come back to their own region. Unfortunately, the geopolitical situation is far from this scenario. Still, in the face of the humanitarian crisis in which the Shehba region is confined, NGOs should take responsibility for their relevant areas of action, instead of the political and administration bodies delivering humanitarian support.

The political and military situation in which the Shehba region exists has exacerbated the isolation of its population. Turkey and its SNA proxy forces are attacking the region, in order to empty it, and at the same time, the Syrian government is also trying to drown the local population through an embargo. This offensive has wider effects in all spheres of life in Shehba. The war situation, apart from the direct death and wounded victims, is impacting the mental health of all the residents, and at the same time, preventing fully agricultural activity, the main economic sector in the region. Added to the

precarious living conditions, due to the lack of job opportunities and the embargo, the population have a high need of health care that right now is impossible to cover with the weak health infrastructure rehabilitated in the last years. Similarly, the economic sector has been hampered to develop due to the constant threat of a new Turkish invasion, that prevented further investments, but especially the embargo that hampered the access to agricultural and industrial materials. However, it seems that it is in the educational system that the most successful steps have been taken, although it continues to be a difficult subject. Although in recent years different schools have been rehabilitated and higher education training centers have even been opened, the shortage of books, and diesel to heat the schools, are daily obstacles to ensuring the right to education for the entire population.

The closer we look at the Shehba region, the more evident the need for humanitarian intervention becomes, which in the end must also be political. After the end of the Afrin invasion in 2018, Shehba seems to have also fallen into a media embargo, since the region only appears in the international and regional media outlets when there is an imminent threat of invasion from the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The situation in the region, and in the refugee camps in particular, needs to be taken seriously by the humanitarian organizations that one day left the region not to return. Further than this, Shehba will remain entrenched in the long list of negotiations between the disputed powers of the Syrian Civil War. For its part, the Autonomous Administration, without success with its proposal for a federal and democratic Syria, continues to support its westernmost territory with all possible means. In it, more than a hundred thousand people sustain their lives in the hope of returning to Afrin one day. Therefore, the Shehba and Afrin population, in addition to hundreds of other Syrian IDPs, have no alternative but to continue to organize in silence to become an island of democratic resilience. The recently unified Afrin and Shehba canton is its latest example.

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