

**Q3 & Q4**  
**2022**

# **THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION**

**DOCUMENTING RIGHTS ABUSES IN TURKISH OCCUPIED  
REGIONS OF NORTH SYRIA**



**ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER**

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# OCCUPIED AFRIN 2022 Q3-Q4

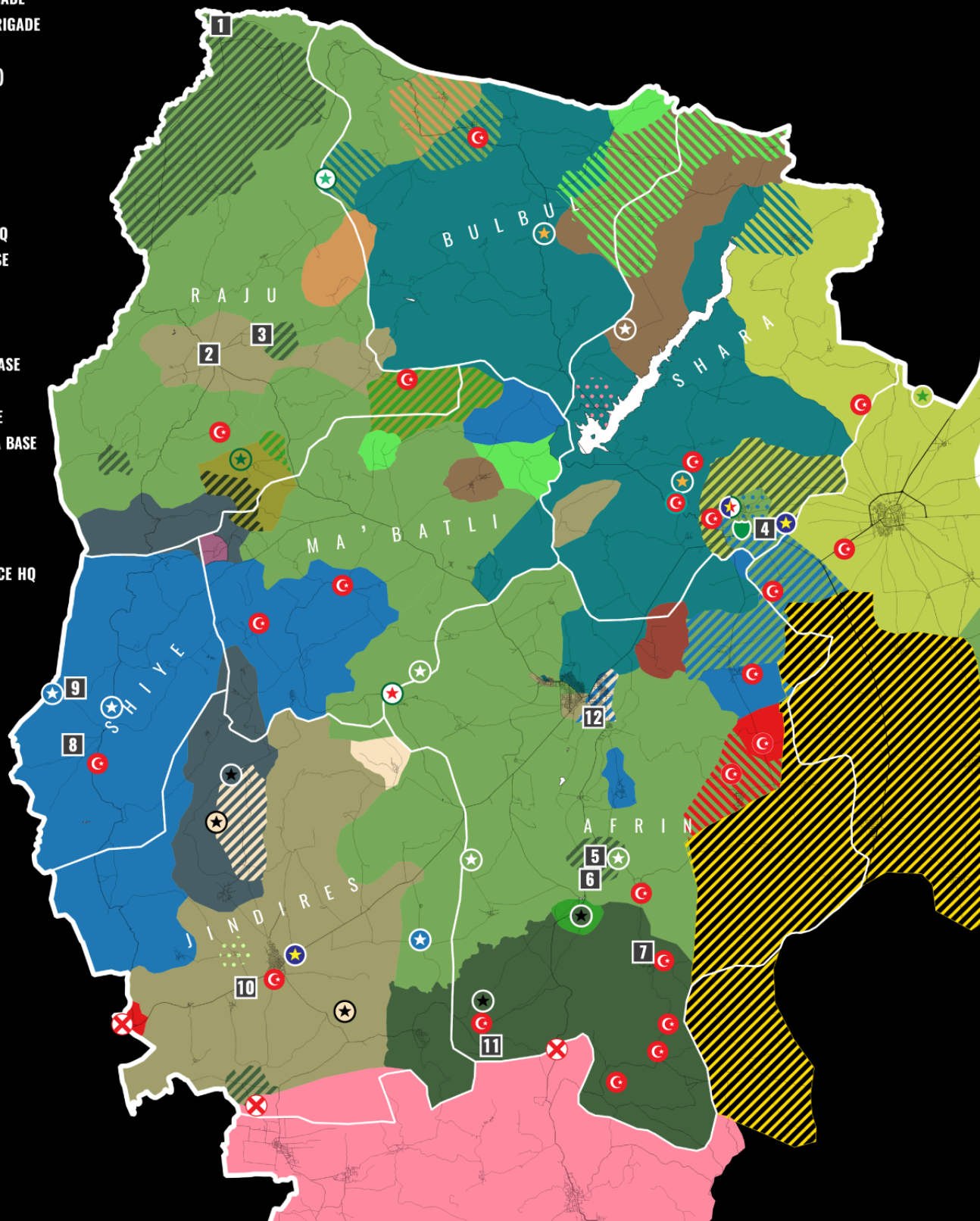
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB
- AL HAMZA, SULEIMAN SHAH, JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA & SUQOUR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- AL HAMZA DIVISION
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- 112TH DIVISION
- SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- 13TH DIVISION
- SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH DIV.
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION
- SUQOUR AL-SHAM BRIGADE
- SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA
- FAYLAQ AL-MAJD (ZINKI)
- JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA
- TURKISH CONTROL

TURKMEN  
FACTIONS

- 1 MAHATTA PRISON (MAYDAN IKBIS)
- 2 RAJU PRISON
- 3 GORAN PRISON
- 4 AHRAR AL SHAM PRISON (QATMAH)
- 5 AL HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- 6 AL HAMZA DIVISION PRISON
- 7 MIT PRISON (BARAD)
- 8 SULEIMAN SHAH PRISON (SHIYE)
- 9 QARMATLAQ HQ & PRISON
- 10 AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA PRISON
- 11 FAYLAQ AL-SHAM PRISON (ISKAN)
- 12 TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

- SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES
- GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
- EXTREMIST GROUPS

- MILITARY POLICE HQ
- SNA HQ
- SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ
- AL HAMZA DIVISION BASE
- SULTAN MURAD BASE
- SULEIMAN SHAH BASE
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM BASE
- LIWA REJAL AL-HARB BASE
- AHRAR AL-SHAM BASE
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA BASE
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA BASE
- 112TH DIVISION BASE
- SAMARKAND HQ
- TURKISH BASE
- MIT HQ
- SIG MINISTRY OF DEFENCE HQ
- MILITARY CROSSING



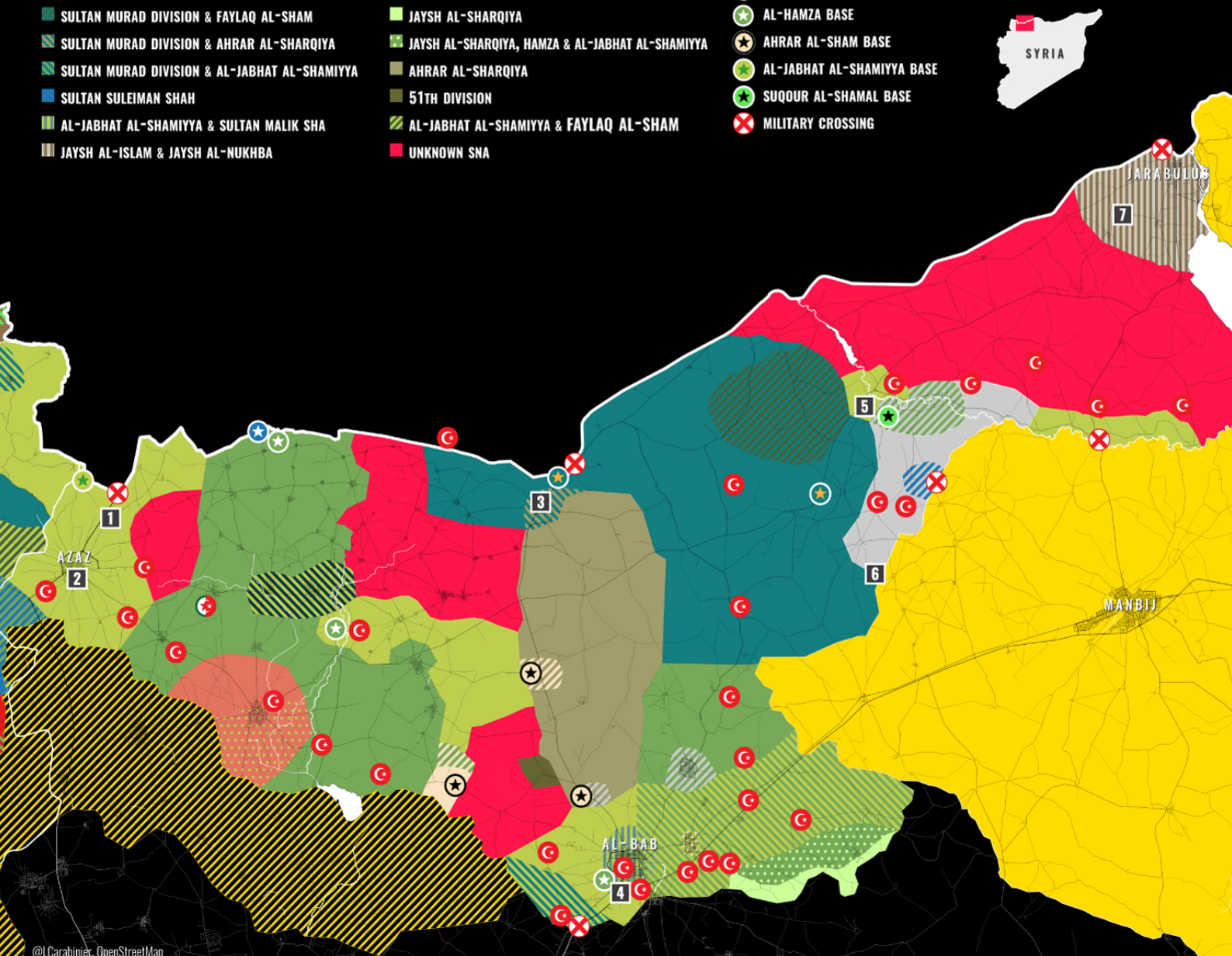
# EUPHRATES SHIELD 2022 Q3-Q4

- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA & SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- AL HAMZA DIVISION
- AL HAMZA DIVISION & AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- AL HAMZA DIVISION & SULEIMAN SHAH
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION & LIWA AL-SAFWA
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA & SULTAN MALIK SHA
- JAYSH AL-ISLAM & JAYSH AL-NUKHBA

- AHRAR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHAM & AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- AHRAR AL-SHAM & AL HAMZA
- AHRAR AL-SHAM EASTERN SECTOR & AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- AHRAR AL-SHAM EASTERN SECTOR & AL HAMZA
- SULEIMAN SHAH & AHRAR AL-SHAM EASTERN SECTOR
- AHRAR AL-SHAM EASTERN SECTOR
- AL HAMZA DIVISION & JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA
- JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA
- JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA, HAMZA & AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- 51TH DIVISION
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA & FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- UNKNOWN SNA

- SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES
- GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
- SDF & GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
- TURKISH BASE
- TURKISH/SNA BASE
- SULEIMAN SHAH BASE
- SULTAN MURAD BASE
- AL-HAMZA BASE
- AHRAR AL-SHAM BASE
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA BASE
- SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BASE
- MILITARY CROSSING

- 1 SAJO PRISON
- 2 AZAZ POLICE HQ
- 3 AL-RAI PRISON
- 4 AL-HAMZA DIVISION SECURITY HQ
- 5 AL-HAMZA DIVISION HQ
- 6 SNA POST
- 7 OLD TURKISH BASE



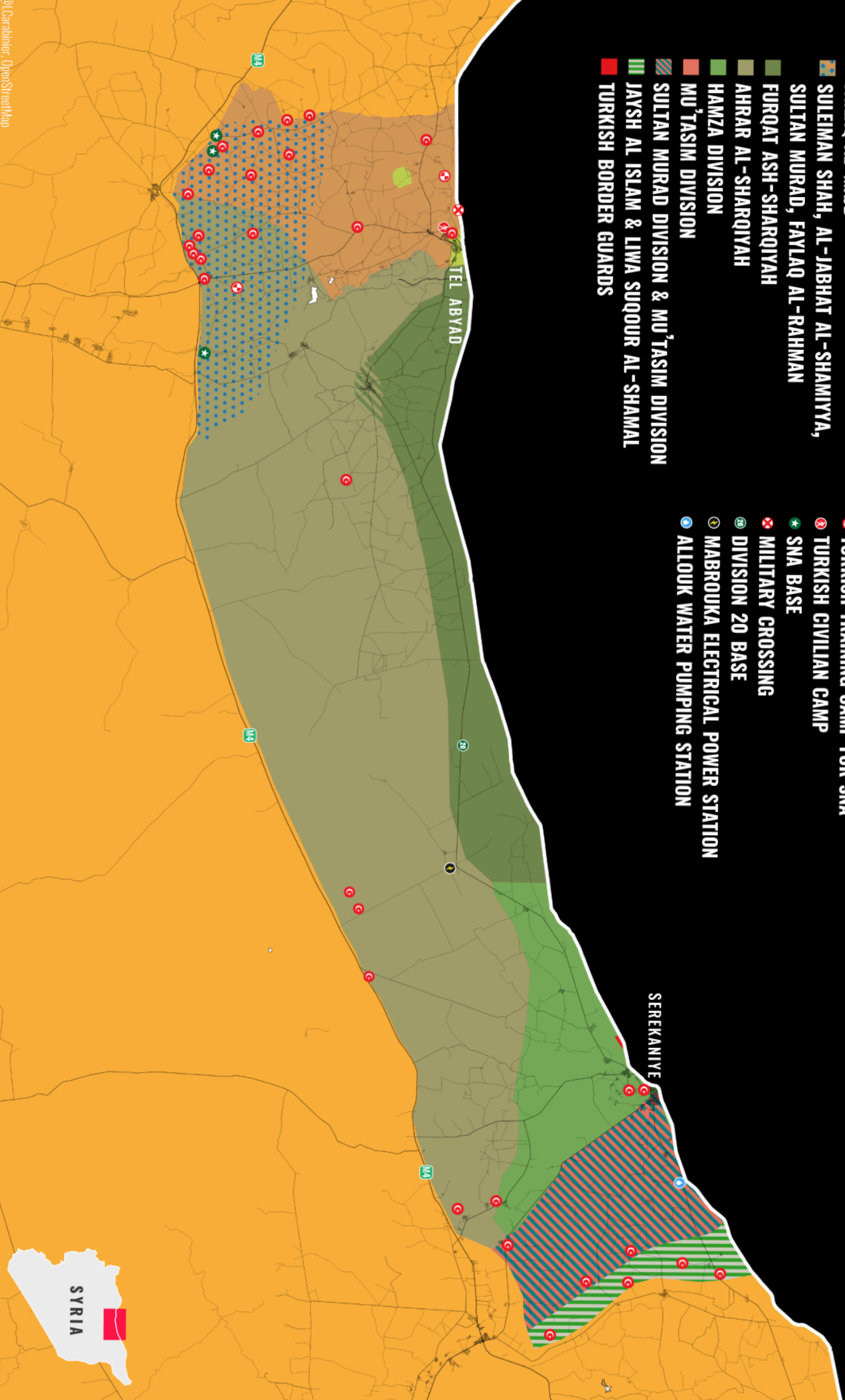


# OCCUPIED M4 STRIP 2022 Q3-Q4

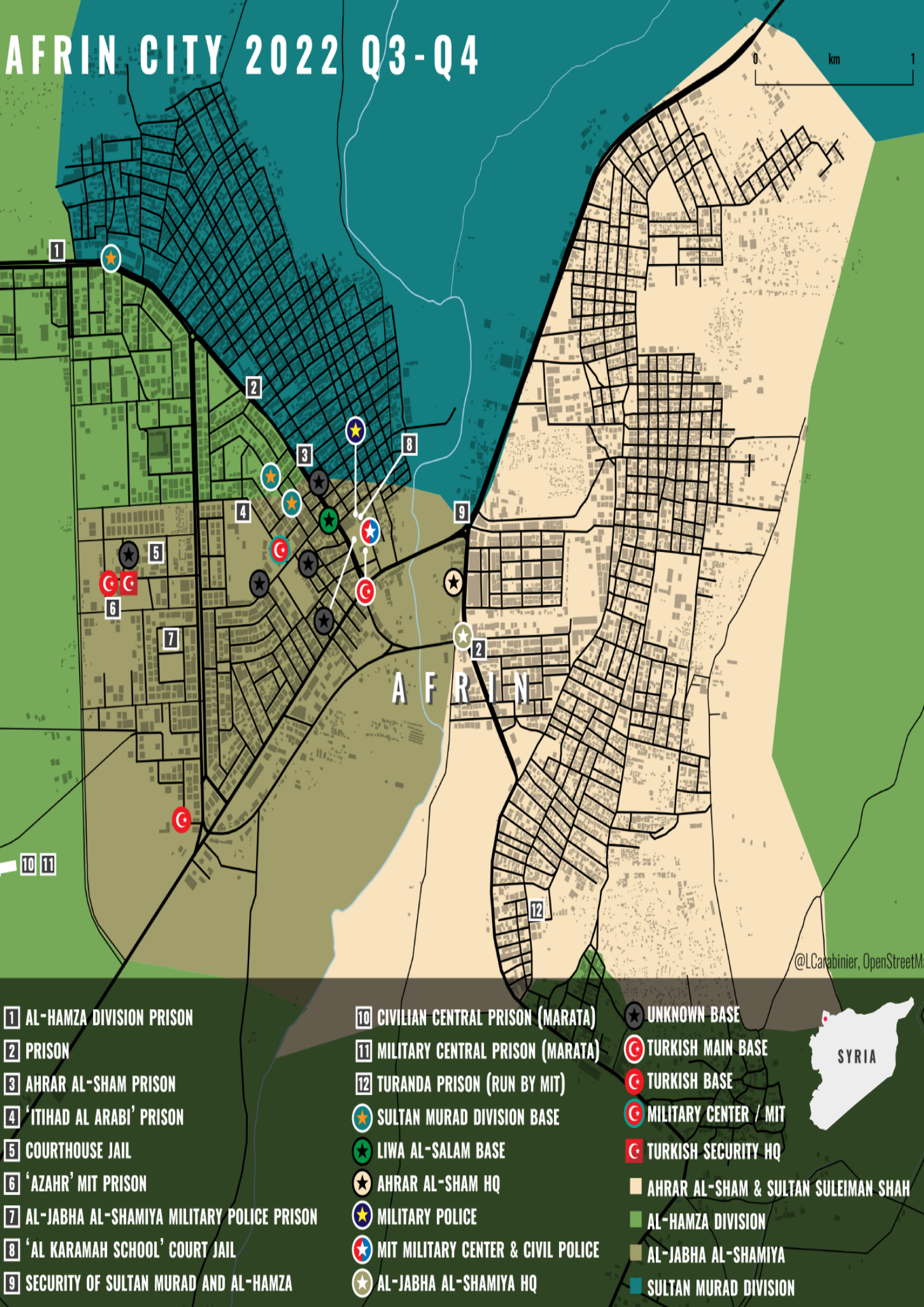
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMITIYA
- FAILAQ AL-MAJD
- SULEIMAN SHAH, AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMITIYA,
- SULTAN MURAD, FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- FURQAT ASH-SHARQIYAH
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYAH
- HAMZA DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & MU'TASIM DIVISION
- JAYSH AL ISLAM & LIWA SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL
- TURKISH BORDER GUARDS

- TURKISH BASE
- TURKISH TRAINING CAMP FOR SNA
- TURKISH CIVILIAN CAMP
- SNA BASE
- MILITARY CROSSING
- DIVISION 20 BASE
- MABROUKA ELECTRICAL POWER STATION
- ALLOUK WATER PUMPING STATION

SDF



# AFRIN CITY 2022 Q3-Q4



1 AL-HAMZA DIVISION PRISON

2 PRISON

3 AHRAR AL-SHAM PRISON

4 'ITIHAD AL ARABI' PRISON

5 COURTHOUSE JAIL

6 'AZAHR' MIT PRISON

7 AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA MILITARY POLICE PRISON

8 'AL KARAMAH SCHOOL' COURT JAIL

9 SECURITY OF SULTAN MURAD AND AL-HAMZA

10 CIVILIAN CENTRAL PRISON (MARATA)

11 MILITARY CENTRAL PRISON (MARATA)

12 TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

★ SULTAN MURAD DIVISION BASE

★ LIWA AL-SALAM BASE

★ AHRAR AL-SHAM HQ

★ MILITARY POLICE

★ MIT MILITARY CENTER & CIVIL POLICE

★ AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA HQ

★ UNKNOWN BASE

★ TURKISH MAIN BASE

★ TURKISH BASE

★ MILITARY CENTER / MIT

★ TURKISH SECURITY HQ

■ AHRAR AL-SHAM & SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH

■ AL-HAMZA DIVISION

■ AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

■ SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

@LCarabinier, OpenStreetM

SYRIA



# SEREKANIYE 2022 Q3-Q4



- AL-HAMZA DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & MU'TASIM DIVISION
- ★ MILITARY POLICE INTERROGATION POINT
- 🇹🇷 TURKISH BASE
- Ⓐ KHADIR AL-SHAMS ACADEMY
- Ⓢ SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE BASE
- Ⓜ MU'TASIM DIVISION BASE
- ★ CIVIL POLICE CENTER
- 1 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON
- 2 MIT / HAMZA PRISON
- 3 SULTAN MURAD JAIL
- 4 CIVIL POLICE PRISON
- 5 MILITARY POLICE JAIL

SEREKANIYE BORDER CROSSING  
(AL-HAMZA)

TURKIYE  
SYRIA

SEREKANIYE

0 km 1

# INTRODUCTION & METHODS

## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the third and fourth quarterly installments of the Rojava Information Center's (RIC) 'State of the Occupation Report' for the year 2022, focusing on human rights violations in the Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria (NES):

- The Afrin region: approximately 1800 km<sup>2</sup>, has been occupied since 2018 during Turkey's so-called 'Olive Branch Operation'. It is one of the three original "cantons" that declared autonomy from the Syrian Government in 2012, giving rise to what would have become the Democratic Autonomous Administration of the North and East Syria Region (AANES). Prior to Turkey's occupation, over 85% of Afrin's population was Kurdish. By 2022, it had fallen to around 25%.
- The 'M4 Strip' region: approximately 4000 km<sup>2</sup>, has been occupied since 2019 during Turkey's so-called 'Peace Spring Operation'. The region stretches south to north from the M4 road to the Turkish border, and west to east from Tel Abyad to Sere Kaniye.
- The 'Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle' region: approximately 2300 km<sup>2</sup>, has been occupied since 2016 during Turkey's so-called 'Euphrates Shield Operation'. It is an Arab-majority region where hundreds of thousands of IDPs from the Syrian Civil War took shelter.

The three regions are militarily, economically and politically connected under the same Turkish proxy structures – namely, the Syrian National Army (SNA) and its political counterparts, chiefly the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). While prior to 2022, RIC's Occupation Reports did not include the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle region (because this area was not under the governance of the AANES prior to Turkish occupation) the decision to newly include this area is based on this affinity.

Contrary to Turkey's claims that by invading the Afrin and M4 Strip regions it has created a "security buffer" and a "humanitarian zone" for Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as Syrian refugees residing in Turkish territory, RIC's reports continuously evidence that Turkey's occupation has turned the regions into what amounts to a patchwork of fiefdoms rife with human rights abuses. The gravity of this situation has been confirmed by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria who stated 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>

Furthermore, it has become a site where ISIS members have been able to live and move freely - for example several former ISIS fighters occupy commander positions in the SNA<sup>23</sup> - as well as a key arena for human smuggling, with hundreds of irregular crossings and border killings every year.<sup>4</sup>

The Turkish-backed SNA militias that govern the three regions operate with impunity, as do their leaders, using intimidation tactics to consolidate their control over the local populations, often for personal gain. In certain areas - most notably Afrin and Sere Kaniye - the indigenous Kurdish, Christian, and Yazidi populations are being systematically forced out and replaced with largely Arab and Turkmen settlers. Turkey's policy of deliberate demographic change in the occupied areas has been well documented by various human rights organizations.<sup>567</sup>

This report aims to fill a critical gap in the documentation of human rights abuses occurring in Syria's Turkish-occupied zones. This comes in the context of Turkey's efforts to strategically craft an alternative narrative in order to whitewash its occupation; a narrative which has been reproduced by some of the world's largest publications.<sup>8</sup>

1 Note: these numbers do not include data from Q1 and Q2 in Azaz/al-Bab/Jarablus Triangle.

2 See also “infighting” section.

3 We refer to our report for a more detailed description of these events. <https://rojavainformation-center.org/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

4 <https://sdf-press.com/en/2022/08/press-release-regarding-the-shelling-on-al-bab-city/>

5 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/09/un-commission-inquiry-syria-no-clean-hands-behind-frontlines-and-headlines?LangID=E&NewsID=26237>

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

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

8 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/27/turkish-border-guards-torture-kill-syrians>

## METHODS

The current work is based on RIC's Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Research and on ad hoc collaborations with local media outlets and human rights organizations.

The first and main phase of data gathering was comprised of analysis of all the materials published in the relevant time period by the following sources:

- Afrinpost, a media network that monitors and follows up events in North and East Syria in Arabic, Kurdish and English. It focuses on the Afrin region and monitors human rights violations occurring in it;
- Afrin Human Rights Organization, an Afrin organization that maintains a Facebook page through which it gathers and publishes information on violations of human rights in Afrin region;
- Synergy Associations for Victims (Hevdesti Association), a non-profit Qamishlo-based NGO whose stated aim is to provide a space for the victims of conflict in North and Northeastern Syria to represent themselves and claim their rights;
- Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based information office, founded in 2006, whose stated aim is to document human rights abuses in Syria;
- Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC), a national network of Syrian opposition activists whose aim is to document human rights violations perpetrated since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War;
- Ezdina, a website that publishes events related to Yazidis people, in Syria especially but also in other countries;
- Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), a national NGO documenting human rights violations. STJ's well-documented in-depth reports have been of particular use.

RIC mainly uses the Arabic version of the websites since materials are usually originally produced in Arabic and not all of them get translated into English. A database of all the recorded crimes committed against civilians in the Turkish-occupied territories was therefore constructed. This is different from RIC's Occupation Reports of 2021, where the focus was on crimes committed only by factions of the SNA. The categories defined in RIC's database are: killing, unlawful arrest and kidnapping, injury and beating, torture, economical crime, gender-based crime, infighting, bombing, and ecological crime.

Concomitantly, a collection of "trends of events" was also gathered. These, even if not directly criminal, were affecting or characterizing the reality of the regions in the second half of 2022.

One challenge RIC faced during the data collection process was the relative paucity of reliable and complete data from the M4 Strip and, especially, from the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. This is because the domestic media in the area was less well-established even before the Turkish invasion and occupation operations, with fewer sources on the ground. Reporting on crimes of the SNA factions also risks reprisal if the reporter is uncovered.

In addition, RIC relied on reports from the United Nations and the European Parliament, as well as academic articles. Historical information is based on previous RIC reports or third-party sources where cited.

The maps contained herein were created with the help of the Afrin Human Rights Organization, the Afrinpost, the Hevdesti Association, military sources, and witness testimonies. RIC was not able to independently verify all factional affiliations, but some prison locations were confirmed using satellite data. Witness testimonies also helped assign militias to individual villages and towns. Nevertheless, RIC does not claim this report to be exhaustive.

For wider reading regarding the geopolitical context, history, and sociopolitical situation of the areas covered in this report, previous RIC dossiers offer detailed information. The first RIC quarterly report from early 2021 provided in-depth background information on the occupation, as well as a longer section on the history of the occupation. In July 2022, RIC published '[The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria](#)'; a wide report about the current state of the SNA militias and other armed groups active in the Turkish-occupied territories of Syria, which thoroughly examines the relationship between the SNA, the SIG and the Turkish authorities. Furthermore, RIC's '[When Jihadism learns to smile: HTS' Evolution and its Current Presence in North and Northwestern Syria](#)' report examines HTS' strand of 'political jihadism', in the context of the latter's efforts to show itself as having abandoned its jihadist roots.

All the reports are available on the RIC website. All maps and graphics contained herein were created by cartographer and designer Eduardo Artica ([@Lcarabinier](#)).

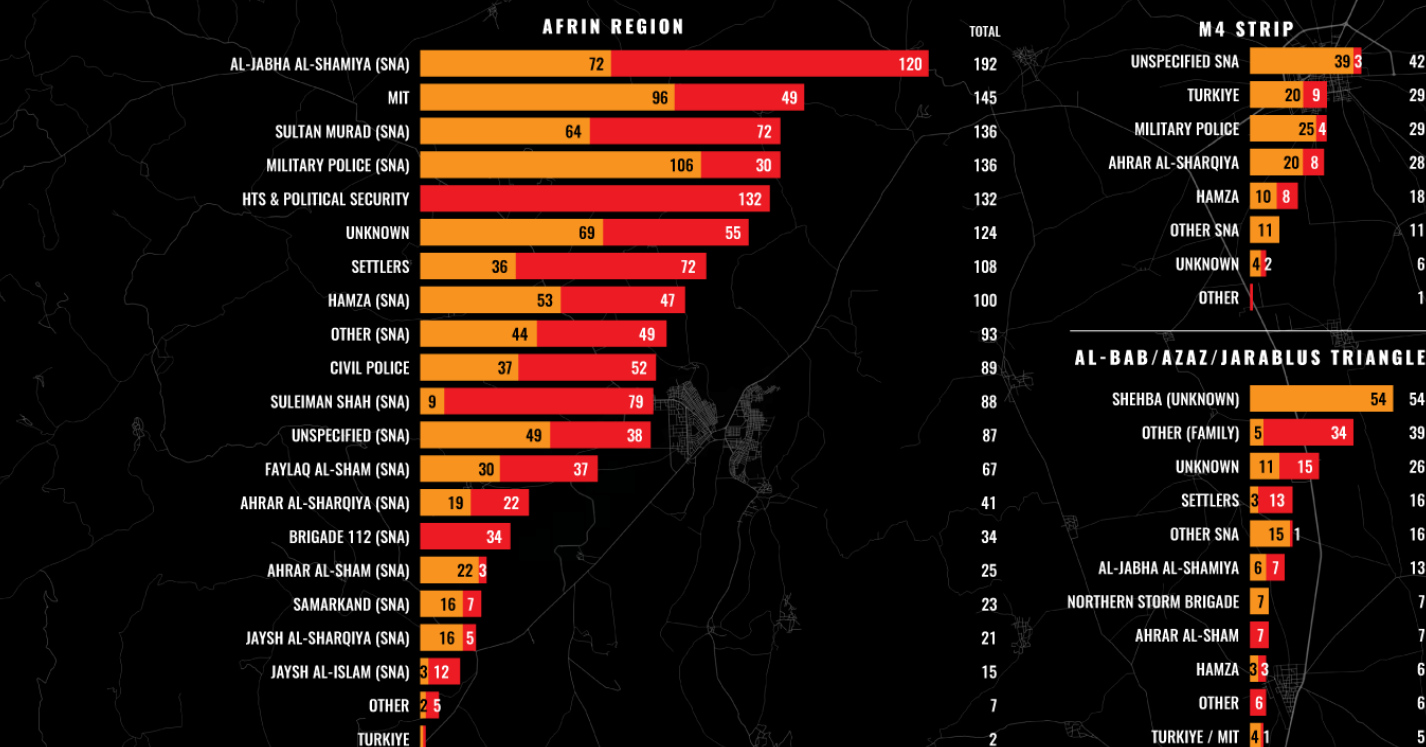
# QUARTERLY REPORT

## REGIONAL SITUATION AND CRIMES PER PERPETRATOR

### NUMBER OF CRIMES COMMITTED, BY PERPETRATOR

JULY-DECEMBER 2022

Q3 Q4



### AFRIN REGION

RIC recorded 630 and 814 crimes in Afrin Region in Q3 and Q4, respectively. These occurred in 324 and 386 different events, respectively, and affected 500 and 480 civilians.

By plotting the number of crimes versus the perpetrators, it is evident that the Syrian National Army (SNA) is responsible for the vast majority of them. In October, clashes between an SNA bloc connected to al-Jabha al-Shamiyah and another group of SNA factions allied to HTS altered the usual trends. The infighting between the two sides resulted in a surge of crimes. There



were 110 cases from al-Jabha al-Shamiyah, 117 from HTS, 39 from Suleiman Shah, and 31 from Hamza Division. This is because the “infighting” incidents that occurred led to the killing and injuring of many civilians. The October infighting outbreak brought al-Jabha al-Shamiya to the top of the list of perpetrators and HTS to the 5th position. It was a major incident in the region, and had strong consequences for the SNA’s internal power-games. As a result of the infighting, al-Jabha al-Shamiya was almost completely expelled by the Afrin Region. This is testified to by the drop of cases in November and December: from an average of 24 crimes per month in Q3, the faction passed to an average of 5 per month after October. The Military Police activity was also affected: from an average of 35 crimes per month, it passed to 12 per month. In 2018, in coordination with the Turkish authorities, the SIG established the Military Police, following unending serious human rights abuses committed by the SNA factions following the invasion of Afrin. The purpose of the Military Police was to investigate and prevent crimes committed by the SNA groups.<sup>9</sup> It answers directly to Turkish military and intelligence bodies. The Military Police is meant to curb abuses committed by the SNA but, as per Human Rights Watch, the opposite has occurred and “the force has itself been implicated in human rights abuses” as “members of the Military Police, tasked with maintaining discipline within the factions, often become embroiled in the fighting, taking sides and exacerbating the situation”.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from the expulsion of al-Jabha al-Shamiya, another consequence for the Afrin region was the entrenchment of HTS’ influence and the restructuring of the SNA that some assumed Turkey had been desiring. Indeed, the Second Legion was reconstituted, adding Ahrar al-Sham alongside old members Suleiman Shah, Hamza, and Sultan Murad; that is, the HTS-led bloc of factions plus Sultan Murad (which had played the role of cease-fire guarantor in the last days of fighting around Kafr Janna - a village between Afrin and Azaz of strategic importance). Of note is that Suleiman Shah, Sultan Murad, and Hamza are among the SNA factions that are closest to Turkey, economically and politically. RIC’s HTS report describes this episode in greater detail and discusses the possible long-term impacts on the region.<sup>11</sup>

Related to Turkey’s direct influence on the region, it’s possible to notice that the MIT was the second most active perpetrator of crimes in the second half of 2022. The crimes the MIT committed were mainly targeted group arrests. For example, on September 13th, 2022, the MIT raided houses of Kurdish families in the town of Maabatli and arrested 8 people, including women and elderly people.<sup>12</sup> On the following day, with the support of Sultan Murad, it

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/en/215995/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/housing-settlements-in-afrin-demographic-engineering-or-idp-housing-projects/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://syriadirect.org/turkeys-housing-projects-in-northwestern-syria-an-expanding-contested-policy/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/RojavaIC/status/1362105854930075648>

continued in Afrin city: claiming charges - allegedly fabricated - of receiving financial support from the Democratic Union Party (PYD), it raided the houses of 21 people. The MIT arrested and beat the people, then released them the following day due to lack of evidence.<sup>13</sup>

In this report, RIC decided to group together under the single label of “Other SNA” all the SNA factions that in the 6 months under study had committed less than 15 crimes. They highlight once more the presence of a jumble of criminal factions that - even if small and not collectively organized - singularly contribute to the daily violation of human rights in the region. Grouped together, they were responsible for 93 crimes in the semester under study. These factions are Liwa al-Waqqas (14), Faylaq al-Majd (14), Liwa Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh (13), Nour al-Din al-Zinki (12), Azaz Anti-Terror Unit (8), al-Mu'tasim Division (7), Liwa Sultan Malik Shah (7), Jaysh al-Nukhba (6), Liwa Suqour al-Shamal (6), Liwa al-Shamal (4), Liwa Rijal al-Harb (4), Jaysh al-Nasr (1), Faylaq al-Rahman (1), and Harikat Thaeroon (1). Among the unconfirmed cases, more crimes from all the factions were found as well.

As evidence of the current security situation in the Afrin Region, and specifically the role played by the SNA and the MIT, the case of Luqman Hamid Hanan is illuminating. He was a lawyer in Afrin city, who had already been kidnapped in 2020 by the Military Police and released upon the payment of a ransom. In December 2022, he oversaw the sale of a house as appointed by the forcibly displaced owner. The house was bought and the money sent to the owner. During the process, he did not consult with any SNA faction. Allegedly as retaliation - and possibly also as a measure towards his open position against the Turkish occupation - he was kidnapped on December 20th by Ahrar al-Sharqiyah and the MIT. His family was called to receive his body in Afrin Hospital two days later, where a forensic physician provided a false death certificate. According to evidence gathered by local media, he was severely beaten and he died because of the injuries he sustained while still in custody. His body then was brought to the hospital in order to cover up the crime of the SNA faction and MIT.<sup>1415</sup>

## M4 STRIP REGION

RIC recorded 117 and 29 crimes in the M4 Strip Region in Q3 and Q4, respectively. These occurred in 20 and 15 different events, respectively, and affected 75 and 15 civilians. The majority of these crimes were related to human smuggling across the border with Turkey. The two main perpetra-

13 <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

14 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria>

15 <https://www.facebook.com/syriaig/posts/1546877558722928>

tors among the SNA militias were Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Hamza Division. Nonetheless, in the region, representatives of Turkey itself, as military personnel deployed on the ground or as border guards, were also one of the main actors committing crimes against civilians.

In Q3 data, the gap between the number of crimes (117) and the number of events (20) is because once in July and three times in September campaigns of arrests, each time targeting between 10 and 20 civilians, took place. Furthermore, at least in one of these instances, 14 people were not only arrested, but also beaten.<sup>16</sup>

When classifying the crimes by perpetrators, RIC finds that the first label in the list is "Unspecified SNA". This reflects a general lack of on-the-ground media sources. This, together with the fact that the confirmed cases represented only the 68% of all the cases RIC recorded in its database, hints that the numbers RIC are presenting for the region are still an underestimation of the real ones. This is true also for the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle.

In the second half of 2022, the second most active agent in the M4 Strip region was Turkey itself. Its crimes included mainly those committed by the Turkish border police against Syrians who were trying to flee from the region by irregular border crossings and consisted of severe beatings and killings. On October 24th, 2022, for example, the Turkish border police arrested five people who were trying to cross to Turkey from the Sere Kaniye area, beat them severely causing bone fractures and expelled them back to Syrian territory.<sup>17</sup> On December 24th, 2022, the Turkish border police shot dead two citizens from Deir ez-Zor while they were trying to cross, leaving their bodies lying on the ground.<sup>18</sup> According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) organization, in 2022, the Turkish border police shot dead 23 people, including 1 woman and 3 children, and wounded another 26, including 3 children.<sup>19</sup> Other crimes were committed by members of the Turkish army on Syrian territory. Even if representing a small percentage of the totality, they stand out for their gravity, for example the case of the killing of the 9-year-old Naranj Suleiman Al-Hafez. On November 3rd, 2022, a Turkish armored vehicle ran her over while she was walking to school, west of Sere Kaniye. The Turkish military personnel did not stop to provide support to the child, who died a few hours after residents brought her to the closest hospital.<sup>20</sup> This marked a repeat of an incident that had already happened

16 [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0MUHdrS3iQi66MDqJj5cofitS5t-J1ByDoh4ywAG5oQ8hxK93ojYw1ytQxME3ZJk8l&id=100055799197176](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0MUHdrS3iQi66MDqJj5cofitS5t-J1ByDoh4ywAG5oQ8hxK93ojYw1ytQxME3ZJk8l&id=100055799197176)

17 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23312>

18 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25222>

19 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25248>

20 <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%A2%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A7%D8%AA/560862/>

a few months before, on March 29th, 2022, to the 9-year-old Aya Dibo Dak on the outskirts of the city of Azaz, in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle region.<sup>21</sup>

Another observation, valid for all the three regions, is related to the numbers of crimes committed by the Military Police. Often, the personnel of the Military Police are also members of one of the locally active SNA factions. This may partly be due to the fact that the SNA salary provided by the Turkish municipalities is not enough for the militiamen to sustain their families. In turn though, a lot of crimes that are committed under the banner of the Military Police are actually perpetrated by people who, belonging also to a SNA faction, have a guarantee that they can act with impunity. Connected to this, the affiliation of some Military Police members to an SNA faction can also be not only a facilitator but the actual cause for committing crimes. This is especially the case for inter-faction infighting that ends up involving the Military Police. On October 11th, 2022, for example, Ahrar al-Sharqiya attacked the headquarters of the Military Police in Sere Kaniye because the latter was de facto run by the Hamza Division. During the clashes, a woman was killed by a stray bullet and a number of civilians, including women and children, were injured.<sup>22</sup> This is a structural flaw of the body of the Military Police itself, whose task should be that of preventing SNA factions from acting criminally. In the end, the Turkish-funded SNA apparatus remains, year after year, the main cause of crimes and violations of human rights in the region.

The “Other SNA” label included Liwa Sultan Malik Shah (5 crimes), al-Mutasim Division (2), Jaysh al-Islam (2), and Liwa Suqour al-Sham (2). All of these crimes were committed in Q3 only.

Finally, the aftermath of the October events in Afrin and the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle also reached the M4 Strip. Less than two weeks after HTS’ campaign, some local media cited the deployment of 60 HTS fighters in a border village 3km west of Tel Abyad. This marked the first time HTS had ever entered the M4 strip. Allegedly, this happened through Turkish facilitation, which allowed HTS’ cell to travel through its territories. For more details, see RIC’s report.<sup>23</sup>

21 <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%88%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B9%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AA/566872/>

22 <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A3%D8%AB%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%88-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC/578153/>

23 <https://rojainformationcenter.org/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>



## AL-BAB/ AZAZ/JARABLUS TRIANGLE REGION

RIC recorded 95 and 67 crimes in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle region in Q3 and Q4, respectively. These occurred in 22 and 25 different events, respectively, and affected 80 and 46 civilians. The majority of these crimes were related to one big event - the shelling of al-Bab market on August 19th, 2022 - and to a series of armed clashes occurring between and within families throughout the second half of the year. Among the three regions under survey, al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus appeared to be, in the six months under examination, the one with the highest number of killings of civilians.

The shelling of the al-Bab city market, described later, was the worst event. It caused by itself the death of 17 civilians, including 6 children, and the injury of at least 35 others. As for inter-familial fighting, frequently a dispute over a minor issue degenerated into armed clashes between the members of the families of the two quarreling parties (see the “infighting” section). Such armed spats then often continue into longer feuds. For example, the armed clash on August 22nd in al-Bab between the al-Remo Family and the Salqini family was followed by another one two days after, between members of the same families. Eventually, a number of civilians were injured on both occasions.<sup>24</sup> Another common cause of civilian killing is due to fights inside the same family.

The published numbers are, as previously mentioned, suspected to significantly underestimate the real situation. According to our criteria for reliability of data, RIC labeled an event as “confirmed” only if it was described in at least two different media sources. Unfortunately, due to the general lack of press activity in the region, RIC had to discard a lot of events from analysis. RIC was able to confirm only 41% of all the crimes we recorded, which built the numbers published in the above table.

Among the unconfirmed cases, the shelling coming from the direction of the Government of Syria areas and the AANES-governed Shehba region were representing the biggest phenomenon. Since the contact-line was passing through villages, the shelling also caused civilian casualties. Therefore, RIC also recorded these events in the database. Between July and December 2022, 90 crimes against civilians were caused by shelling coming from the Shehba area, and 5 from the Government of Syria areas. Notice that it was not possible to assess if the perpetrators of the shelling coming from the Shehba area was the Government of Syria’s Syrian Arab Army (SAA) or the AANES-affiliated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), since both are deployed in the region today (as further discussed later).

24 <https://www.ezdina.com/2022/11/News-public1222.html>

The “Other SNA” label included the Civil Police (4), unspecified SNA factions (4), Liwa al-Waqqas (3), Military Police (2), the Tel Rifaat Military Council (2) and Jaysh al-Islam (1), Liwa Sultan Malik Shah (5 crimes), al-Mutasim Division (2), Jaysh al-Islam (2), and Liwa Suqour al-Sham (2). 15 out of these 16 crimes were committed in Q3.

Another peculiarity of the region was the activity regarding mass protests: relative to the rest of the Turkish-occupied territories, in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle the population spontaneously maintained demonstrations as a tool for manifesting their will. Demonstrations took place to denounce dire living conditions, the educational situation, the rampant insecurity, maladministration and more. Often, protests were organized in response to specific events and gathered hundreds of people. October 2022 offers several relevant examples. On the 3rd of the month, teachers sat in front of the Education Institution, striking and demanding better living conditions. This was followed by the case of Abu Ghannoun. He was a prominent activist in the city of al-Bab and, on October 7th, he and his pregnant wife were shot dead while traveling on a motorcycle in al-Bab city.<sup>25</sup> The following day, hundreds of people attended the funerals and subsequently took to the streets in what turned out to be a mass demonstration against the SIG administration. The people not only demanded the accountability of the killers, but also that the civil offices and the various military SNA factions leave northern Syria, considering them to be responsible for the ongoing dire security and poor provision of services. Indeed, the killing of Abu Ghannoun was just the latest instance of such violence. Related to this, other protests then followed: popular expressions against the expansion of HTS in the Turkish-occupied territories. During the days after HTS seized Kafr Janna, on October 12th, 15th, 16th, 17th and 21st, demonstrations took place in Azaz, al-Bab, Marea, Suran, Kaljabrin and at the Bab al-Salam crossing. The way the whole region manifested its rejection towards HTS bordered on an uprising. Then, on the 25th, the al-Bab City Council stopped supplying flour to the bakeries of 8 villages without prior notification: protests again followed. On the 30th, university students of the medical faculty went on protest, demanding for a university hospital to be opened. Finally, that same day, the Turkish Interior Minister (at that time) Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu confirmed Turkey's intention to transfer control in the areas it has in Syria to Damascus once political stability had been achieved. In response, the end of the year 2022 and the beginning of 2023 saw a wave of demonstrations against the expected Ankara-Damascus reconciliation. This spread through all northwestern Syria: people in Afrin, Azaz, Al-Bab, Marea,

25 <https://www.ezdina.com/2022/11/News-public1222.html>

Akhtarin, Qabasin, Darat Azza, and Al-Atareb joined the protests.<sup>26</sup>

## CRIMES BY TYPE

### KILLINGS, TORTURE, AND BEATINGS

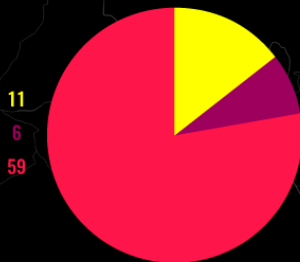
During 2022, in the Turkish-occupied territories, at least 123 civilians were killed: 60 from Afrin, 33 from the M4 strip, and 33 from al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle.<sup>27</sup>

CASES OF KILLINGS, TORTURE AND BEATINGS BY REGION

Q3 AND Q4 2022



AFRIN Q3 2022



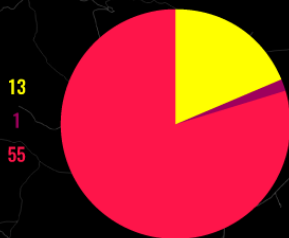
AZAZ AL-BAB JARABLUS Q3 2022



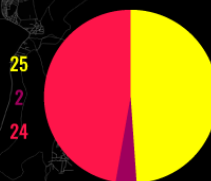
M4 STRIP Q3 2022



AFRIN Q4 2022



AZAZ AL-BAB JARABLUS Q4 2022



M4 STRIP Q4 2022



@LCarabinier, OpenStreetMap

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D9%86%D8%A8%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%87/564687/>

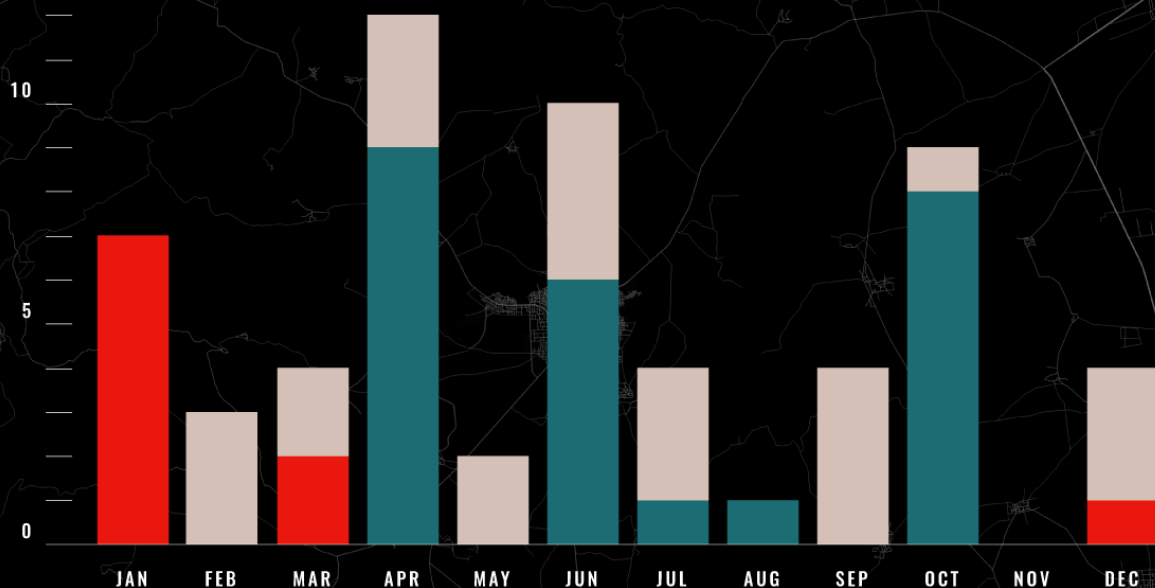
<sup>27</sup> <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

In the Afrin region, the two types of crimes that caused the highest number of casualties were “bombings” and “SNA infighting”. For example, the bombing on Afrin city on January 20th, 2022, caused the death of 7 people, and the injury of 24 others.<sup>28</sup> As for infighting, the following graph displays that the worst cases occurred in April (when a lot of scattered small infightings left a total of nine civilians dead) and in October (when the intra-SNA HTS-led campaign killed eight civilians).

CAUSES OF KILLINGS IN AFRIN REGION

2022

OTHER  
BOMBING  
INFIGHTING



@LCarabimier, OpenStreetMap

Besides this, single killings occurred in several circumstances:

- After the victims were unlawfully arrested and tortured, as it was the – previously mentioned – case for the lawyer Luqman Hanan.
- As a result of issues related to illegal activities involving the SNA factions, as happened around July 16th, 2022, in the village of Qastal Kashik, when the Sultan Murad faction murdered a settler following a dispute over drug trafficking.
- In the context of gender-based violence, as in the case of the assassina-

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B7/500711/>

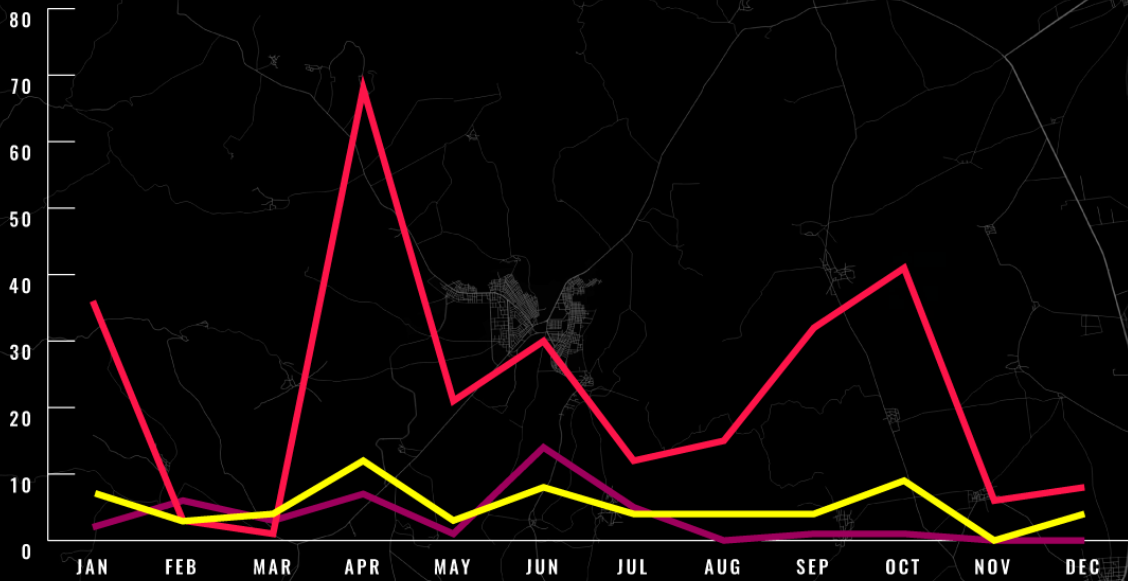
tion of the 18-year-old Mahasin Muhammad Hassan, on September 6th, 2022 by the hands of a rejected suitor.

- For unknown reasons, as when, on December 19th, the body of a newborn was found thrown near the Qastal Jindu road in Sharran District with signs of suffocation<sup>29</sup> and when, on October 4th, the corpse of an unknown 50-year-old was found in an abandoned house next to Afrin river, with signs of beating and torture.<sup>30</sup>

#### CASES OF KILLINGS AND BEATINGS, AFRIN REGION

2022

— KILLING  
— INJURY/BEATING  
— TORTURE



@LCarabinier, OpenStreetMap

As for the cause of newborn abandonment and killing, in its March 2023 report, STJ points to the dire economic conditions of families.<sup>31</sup> From their investigation it is interesting to notice how, even if also in the embargo-worn AANES region newborns are abandoned, they are commonly found when still alive, brought to the relevant authorities and eventually saved. This con-

29 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25474>

30 <https://rojvaimformationcenter.org/2023/02/state-of-the-occupation-q1-q2-2022-lack-of-accountability-of-sna-crimes-hts-incursion-in-afrin-isis-in-turkish-occupied-territories/>

31 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25159>



trasts with the reality of the Turkish-occupied areas, where abandonment commonly turns into death.

The tables for the period under review:

Q3 2022	Killings	Beatings	Torture
Afrin	11	6	59
Azaz al-Bab Jarablus	8	1	17
M4 Strip	5	1	10

Q4 2022	Killings	Beatings	Torture
Afrin	13	1	55
Azaz al-Bab Jarablus	25	2	24
M4 Strip	4	1	2

## GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

RIC had confirmation of the following gender-based crimes:



These 14 cases include 3 killings and 1 disappearing. Furthermore, RIC recorded another 10 gender-based crimes, of which 3 were killings, but were not able to confirm them using the established criteria of two sources. RIC learnt about one of the unconfirmed cases only indirectly, because the family of the victim started a vengeance campaign against the perpetrator and the murders that followed were covered by the local news. Furthermore, in some cases there were numerous reports of serious injuries but follow-up news was absent, hence it is unknown if the persons died. This hints to the fact that RIC's numbers are greatly underestimating the phenomenon. Even if the numbers alone are not able to show the situation, the details of the crimes committed hint to the fact that misogyny, rape and violence against women are a major and under-reported problem of the region. To mention just three cases that attest to the reality of the Turkish-occupied territories: [1] a refused marriage resulted in murder by a SNA member, [2] Turkish border guards violently abused a 50-year-old mother and [3] a woman was killed by unknown persons due to allegations of witchcraft, following the inaction of the security forces of the region. Each case is described in more detail below.

As reported by the Afrin Human Rights organization, on September 6th, 2022, a member of the Sultan Suleiman Shah militia murdered an 18-years-old settler from Homs, Mahasin Muhammad Hassan, by shooting her in the neck because she had refused to marry him.<sup>32</sup>

According to SOHR, on October 31st, 2022, a woman from Tel Tamir was found naked in the M4 strip region after she had been raped by the Turkish border guards. With her five sons, she had been arrested while trying to smuggle through the border. She was then severely beaten, abused, and sent to AANES territory with her sons, where she was found and accompanied to the hospital by a patrol of the SDF.<sup>33</sup>

On December 20th, 2022, a woman, Halima Nasser, was murdered by two unknown men who broke into her house in the town of Marea, in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. According to the Violation and Documentation Center (VDC), Halima had been recently subjected to defamation by local media, with allegations that she practiced witchcraft. After she received death threats, she contacted the security services, who took no action. VDC's sources reported the killers were suspected to be young members of the

<sup>32</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23656>

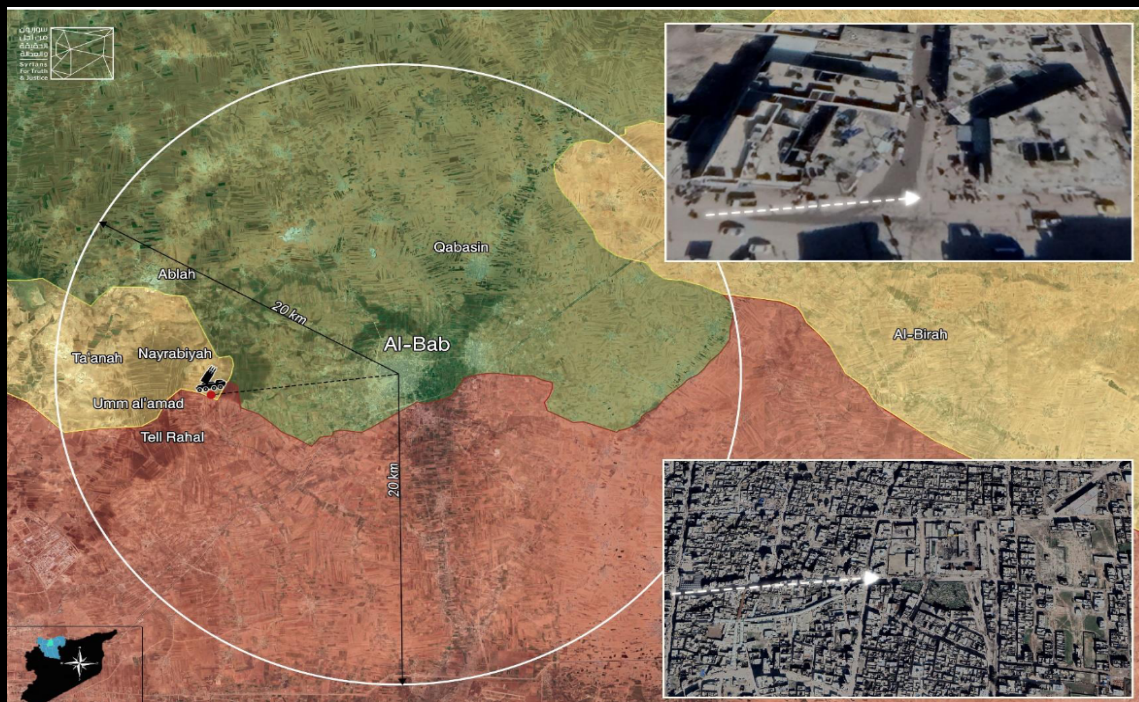
<sup>33</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/ar/%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%a3%d9%83%d8%ab%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86-100-%d8%ad%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%aa%d8%ae%d9%84%d9%8a-%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%a3%d8%b7%d9%81%d8%a7%d9%84-%d8%ae%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%84-2021/>

SNA. The two also seriously injured Halima's son.<sup>34</sup>

## BOMBING AND IED CASES

### Al-Bab Market bombing

On August 19th, 2022, 6 rockets fell on the al-Bab city market, causing the death of 17 civilians, including 6 children, and the injury of at least 35 others.<sup>35</sup> According to an STJ investigation,<sup>36</sup> the shelling came from the border at the southernmost corner of the Shehba Region, between the AANES (in yellow in the picture) and the Syrian Government territory (red in the picture). Due to this, it is not possible to identify with certainty the perpetrator.



*Picture: Reconstruction from STJ of the origin of the al-Bab shelling. SNA-controlled territories in green, AANES in yellow, Syrian Government in red.*

According to STJ's speculations, this happened the day after a Turkish drone attack on a UN-supported school between Heseke and Tel Tamir, in North and East Syria, which killed 5 girls and injured 11, thus could be a retaliation from the SDF. The SDF released a statement denying this, stating "our forces have nothing to do with this operation either directly or indirectly" and

34 [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid025Vxyzwr4i3fq3h5zyh21RGDdeb-D1E987A5rpWP8PgSAiWYuDqUZbRtLk1NCeScvRl&id=100055799197176](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid025Vxyzwr4i3fq3h5zyh21RGDdeb-D1E987A5rpWP8PgSAiWYuDqUZbRtLk1NCeScvRl&id=100055799197176)

35 [https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%af-%d8%a7%d8%ba%d8%aa%d9%80\\_%d9%80%d8%b5%d8%a7%d8%a8%d9%87%d8%a7-%d9%88%d8%aa%d8%b9%d8%b0%d9%8a%d9%80\\_%d9%80%d8%a8%d9%87%d8%a7-%d9%82%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%b3-%d8%a7%d9%84/568330/](https://www.syriahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%b9%d8%af-%d8%a7%d8%ba%d8%aa%d9%80_%d9%80%d8%b5%d8%a7%d8%a8%d9%87%d8%a7-%d9%88%d8%aa%d8%b9%d8%b0%d9%8a%d9%80_%d9%80%d8%a8%d9%87%d8%a7-%d9%82%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%b3-%d8%a7%d9%84/568330/)

36 <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/60938>

suggested that the strikes “were conducted by the parties who have been trying recently to prevent the people in the occupied areas from expressing their rage regarding the recent statements of the Turkish foreign minister,”<sup>37</sup> in reference to Turkey suggesting rapprochement with Assad would happen,<sup>38</sup> which had triggered popular protests.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, a retaliation by the Syrian Government is also conceivable, since on August 16th, nine Turkish warplanes had hit a Syrian government military post west of Kobane, killing at least three Syrian soldiers. Local news agency North Press reported that the actual number of soldiers may have been higher, with an eye-witness claiming 22 deaths. A Syrian military source stated, in line with the Syrian state news agency SANA, that “any attack on a military point for our armed forces will be met with a swift response on all fronts.”<sup>40</sup> To RIC’s knowledge, SDF “retaliation” operations so far have been conducted strictly against military targets. This has held true even when civilian casualties on the NES side have been heavy - heavier than was the case when Turkey bombed the UN school - for example following the Turkish warplane air-strike campaigns on NES in November 2022<sup>42</sup> and in October 2023.<sup>43</sup> When such retaliation operations have occurred, the SDF has publicized them.<sup>44</sup><sup>45</sup>

## Other bombings and IED cases

While the al-Bab bombing event stands out for its exceptionality, shelling is a regular occurrence for people living in villages close to the contact lines, and this poses constant threats to civilian lives. Until the current occupation report, RIC has not included cases of shelling along the contact lines. This appears in the numbers: for the current period of investigation, RIC recorded only two cases of bombing in Afrin, three in the M4 Strip, and three in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. RIC plans to change criteria, with the aim of giving a more full depiction of the living conditions that civilians throughout the Turkish-occupied territories are subject to. For example, on December 14th, a child, Gilan Hussein Ali Shuti, was killed by a shelling on Fafertin village, south of Afrin, less than 1km from the contact line with the Syrian

37 <https://www.syriahr.com/%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%AD%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%A8/499985/>

38 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-syria-cavusoglu-says-met-foreign-minister>

39 <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220812-syria-rebels-protest-against-turkey-s-reconciliation-proposal>

40 <https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Syria-Visual-Analysis-of-the-Bloody-Attack-on-al-Bab-City-Final.pdf>

41 <https://npasyria.com/en/82112/>

42 <https://npasyria.com/en/82139/>

43 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/12/turkeys-october-campaign-airstrikes-targeting-nes-essential-infrastructure/>

44 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2022/11/Turkey-Attacks-daily-24-11-22.pdf>

45 <https://sdf-press.com/en/2023/08/in-retaliation-for-our-martyrs-in-qamishlo-6-mercenaries-killed-in-a-surprise-operation-by-our-forces/>



Government.<sup>46</sup>

## ECONOMIC CRIMES

Common economic crimes are: seizure and sale of houses and lands, money extortion, ransoms, thefts, illegitimate appropriation of common goods, looting of archeological sites and imposition of royalties on crops, firewood, olive presses and for checkpoint crossings. In addition, unlawful arrests are often conducted with the aim of blackmailing families, with the abducted person being released a few days following the ransom payment.

In the Afrin region, RIC recorded a total of 715 economic crimes. 263 occurred in the Q3 period and 452 in the Q4. The Q4 high stands out in 2022 data, equalling one and a half times the average number of crimes per quarter (298).



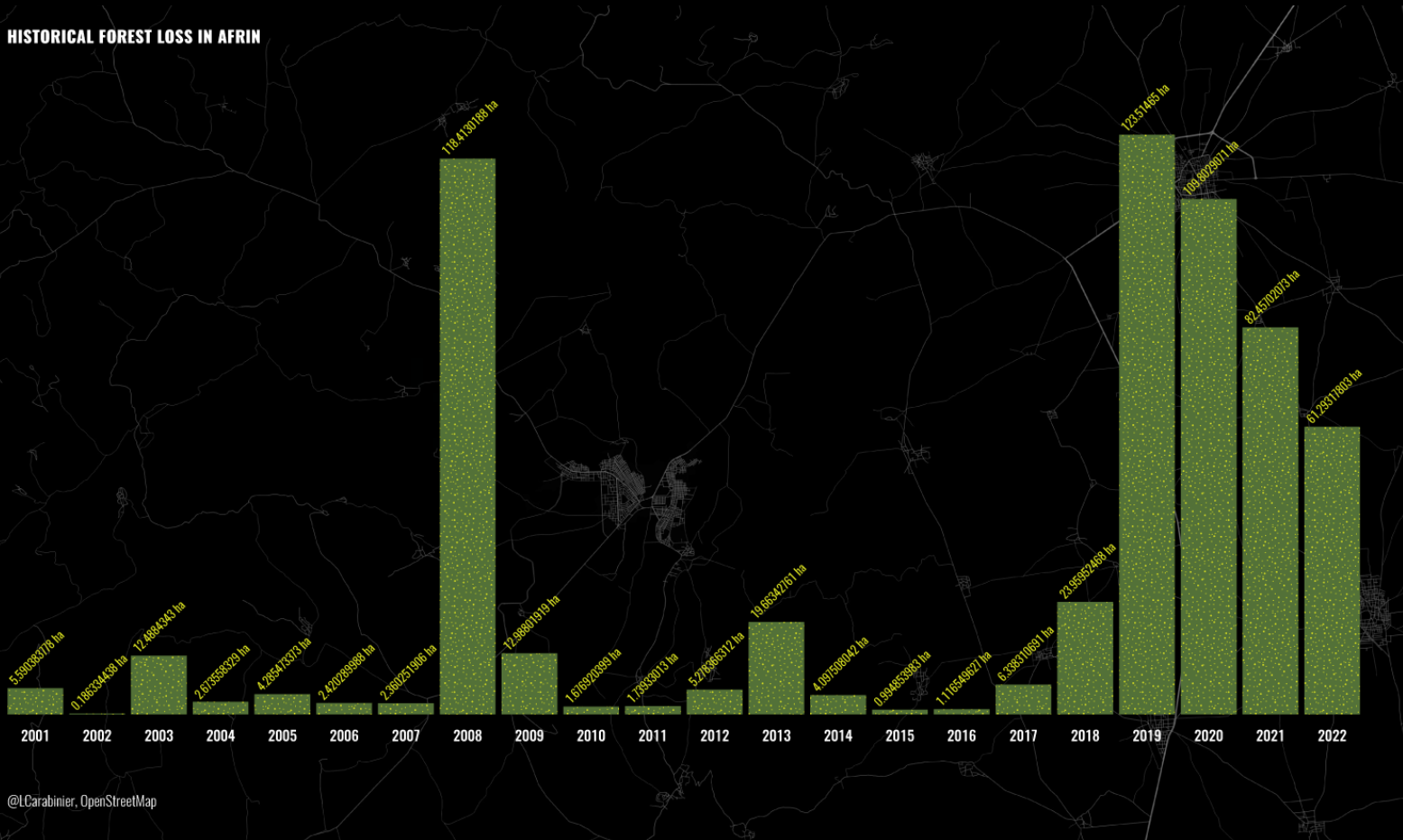
The Q4 increase is partially due to the crimes connected to the olive harvest and the seizure and sale of firewood. Olive farming was a traditional activity of Kurdish families of Afrin. Decades-old trees were taken care of year after year as is required for olive oil production, to guarantee the sustenance of the owner. After the Turkish occupation of Afrin in 2018, olive crop stealing and extortion practices, often accompanied by the cutting of the groves, began. This practice brings financial gain to the perpetrator of the crime, and undermines the source of income of the family in a definitive way, since

46 [https://twitter.com/SDF\\_Syria/status/1557703174848495616](https://twitter.com/SDF_Syria/status/1557703174848495616)



to get a productive olive tree grove requires years of cultivation work. This criminal practice from the SNA is another factor driving the processes of demographic change that brought the Kurdish population from over 80% to around 25% in the 5 years since Turkey's invasion.<sup>47</sup> The SNA's widespread olive grove cutting practice furthermore contributes to the desertification of the Afrin landscape.<sup>48</sup> The Afrin region is becoming increasingly deforested, as can be seen in graphs from Global Forest Watch, an open-source web application that monitors global forests in near real-time.<sup>49</sup>

#### HISTORICAL FOREST LOSS IN AFRIN



*\*Data includes loss from fire, which caused the 2008 peak shown in the graph.*

As for the other regions under survey, RIC recorded a total of only seven economic crimes for the M4 Strip and six for the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. Even including the unconfirmed cases, RIC's numbers remain low, at 29 cases in the M4 Strip, and 15 in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. This

<sup>47</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25061>

<sup>48</sup> <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/01/explainer-afrin-5-years-under-turkish-occupation/>

<sup>49</sup> <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/01/in-front-of-the-factions-eyes-perennial-olive-trees-are-cut-down-in-afrin/>

apparent stark contrast with respect to the Afrin region should be taken cautiously. On one hand, it is true that Afrin is ecologically richer, characterized by fields of valuable olive crops and in a better geographic position regarding trade routes. Also, Afrin contains a higher proportion of properties belonging to Kurdish families than the other Turkish-occupied regions, and the SNA's anti-Kurdish sentiment and practices are well-documented. But on the other hand, a lack of functional local reporting systems in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle and in the M4 Strip - and the fact that all of the three regions are equally under the control of the SNA factions - strongly suggest that the obtained numbers for the latter two regions are underestimates.

## UNLAWFUL ARRESTS

In the second half of 2022, RIC recorded a total of 370 arrests in Afrin: 230 recorded in Q3 and 140 in Q4. In the M4 Strip, they were 79: 77 in Q3 and only 2 in Q4. In Q3 in Afrin, almost half (48%) of the arrests were reported as cases of people "arrested on charges of previous collaboration with the Autonomous Administration". This deliberately undefined charge of "collaboration" can be stretched to include almost anyone who lived in Afrin between 2012 and 2018, when the Autonomous Administration governed the region. The percentage of arrests carried out on this basis dropped dramatically to 2% in October, but already by November was again up to 43%. One quarter of all arrests were associated with the payment of a ransom by the family or the extortion of money in the form of a fine, after which the victim was released. Within this, the same pattern highlighted by the previous Occupation Reports is seen: the two main drivers of the unlawful arrests conducted in the Afrin region are political - arresting those with any connection to the Kurdish-led authorities - and economic - SNA financing. As a consequence, the political driver contributes to the demographic change in which the Kurdish population is forced out from Afrin, while the economic one instead has a more local character, providing a source of income to the SNA faction perpetrating the arrest.

Arrests are commonly associated with beatings and torture; and in some instances even killings have occurred. For example, 46% of the beating incidents that occurred in the Afrin Region in August, happened during an unlawful arrest. In Qabasin, in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, a civilian named Muhammad Hassoun was unlawfully arrested on November 9th by Ahrar al-Sham. He died under torture in the Qabasin prison, controlled by Ahrar al-Sham, and his body was secretly buried nearby. His family found him two days later and filed a complaint against the militia to the local ad-

ministration but received no response.<sup>50</sup>

Another phenomenon related to arrests is that very often cases are reported to occur “without knowing the reasons”. Militiamen are free to - and commonly do - burst into houses to arrest anybody. This underlines how these supposed agents of justice can act without any limitation, targeting whoever and whatever will be advantageous to them. In practice, within the SNA there is no obligation to respect any civil rights of the civilians, nor is there any set of collectively established rules regulating SNA conduct and providing pathways for accountability in the face of criminal activity. This is a further sign of the absent justice system of the region, and contributes to the profound state of insecurity - and even terror - in which civilians are forced to live.

## INFIGHTING

As a matter of definition, RIC considers infighting: a confrontation between two groups that involves the use of weapons. In the vast majority of cases from Afrin and the M4 Strip, at least one of the two clashing parties belonged to the SNA. In the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, a lot of instances were reported as clashes between two families. While bloody familial infighting is not a phenomenon unique to the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria, in the DAANES-controlled areas such disputes can be calmed through local reconciliation committees which seek to solve the matter and prevent violence. In contrast, in the SNA-controlled areas, the border between familial feuds and SNA infighting is often blurred, since members of SNA subfactions are often organized according to familial relationships and vice versa. In the Afrin Region, RIC recorded 14 different infighting episodes in Q3 and 39 in Q4. In the M4 Strip, only 7 cases occurred in total during the second half of 2022. In the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, there were 2 cases in Q3 and 10 in Q4. The clear cut difference with respect to Afrin might again be due to the lack of sources reporting from the other two regions. In many instances, RIC received information about infighting from only one source, not satisfying our criteria for reliability.

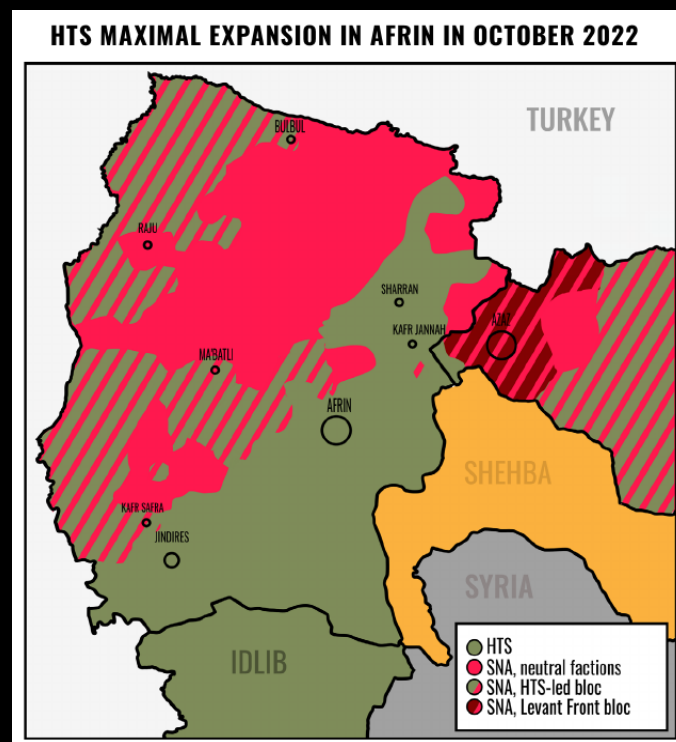
There was a large cluster of infighting incidents between October 7th and 17th in the Afrin and al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle regions. This included the involvement of Idlib’s Hay’at-Tahrir al-Sham militia.<sup>51</sup>

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a jihadist political and military organization which in recent years has become a key actor within the Syrian Civil War. It

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/SYR/2/3/?category=forest-change&location=WyJjb3VudHJ5IiwU1SIiwMiIsIjMiXQ%3D%3D&scrollTo=forest-gain>

<sup>51</sup> <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/24341>

is active in northwestern Syria, with the Idlib governorate as its stronghold. Throughout 2022, it made efforts to expand into northern Syria's Turkish-occupied territories, and HTS played a key role in the block of infighting episodes in October of that year. While the long-term consequences of that period of infighting are still unfolding, one clear outcome was that HTS managed to stretch its influence in the region. This was a product of the infighting episodes themselves, and then also the subsequent reorganization of the SNA. Indeed, the following months saw the Levant Front (belonging to the 3rd Legion of the SNA) being expelled from the Afrin Region, and the 2nd Legion (composed by Suleiman Shah, Hamza, and Sultan Murad, and Ahrar al-Sham Northern Sector) moving in. The factions now grouped



under the 2nd Legion are the ones in the SNA who are the most controlled by Turkey. Furthermore, they are the factions with the closest relationship with HTS, up to the point that, during the October infighting, they let HTS fighters wear their uniform badges, in order to attempt to conceal the presence of the latter militia.

The infighting episodes themselves started on October 7th in al-Bab, with the assassination of the activist known as Abu Ghannoum, by order of a commander of the Hamza Division. This was followed on the 11th by the beginning of a series of clashes between Hamza and the Levant Front. On the same day, the conflict expanded to the inter-regional level, with Suleiman Shah, Ahrar al-Sham and, above all, HTS entering the battlefield on the



side of Hamza. Clashes were also sparked around the town of Jinderes in the Afrin Region. This climaxed on October 13th, when the city of Afrin fell in the hands of the HTS-led coalition. A siege around the village of Kafr Jannah - controlling the access route between Afrin Region and the territories of Azaz and al-Bab - was carried out by the HTS-led coalition against the Levant Front faction, until a final agreement for a cease-fire came on October 17th.

These infighting episodes caused the death of at least five civilians, and the injury and the displacements of dozens more. Due to the chaotic and widespread conditions of insecurity, RIC found it difficult to gather more precise information on civilian casualties and temporary displacement. Regardless, all reports highlighted that significant numbers of people fled from their towns and IDPs camps to the countryside. Particularly in Kafr Jannah, people had to sleep outdoors, in the hills nearby, for several nights.

Beyond the October events, RIC's database also revealed a worrying increase in tribal infighting in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle during Q4 2022. These infighting incidents were different in nature from the ones that shook the region in mid-October. Indeed, they consisted of a number of isolated cases. They occurred between two families and started from a dispute on a minor topic, before spiraling into an armed confrontation, thus triggering bloody tit-for-tat attacks. The worst event occurred on October 23rd. Gunmen from one clan in Jarablus launched an attack against members of another clan while they were in a commercial store in the center of the town. This resulted in 5 cars burned, several injuries, and 9 deaths, including that of the 14-year old Qasim Ali Al-Kadhal. Allegedly, it occurred as retaliation from a clash that had happened the previous day. This had begun as a disagreement between young men of the two clans.<sup>52</sup> Then, in the eight weeks after, at least six other infighting events took place: almost one per week. They left at least three people dead, and several others injured. The last case of 2022 was on December 24th, in the countryside of Azaz, where Youssef Al-Hamwi was shot dead due to a quarrel regarding garbage disposal.<sup>53</sup>

## OTHER RELEVANT EVENTS

### ANKARA-DAMASCUS RECONCILIATION PROCESS

In the middle of Q3 2022, on August 11th, Turkey's then-Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu called for reconciliation between the Syrian Opposition and the government of President Bashar al-Assad. On that occasion, it was

<sup>52</sup> <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/59618>

<sup>53</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25281>

also revealed that Turkish and Syrian intelligence services had already resumed their communication near the end of 2021.<sup>54</sup> After almost 10 years of separation due to the decision of Turkey to break all diplomatic ties with Syria in 2012, following the brutal repression of the Assad government on the popular demonstrations in Syria, this step towards full rapprochement was major. A small number of the population in northwestern Syria reacted furiously to Cavusoglu's statement, taking to the streets to manifest their rejection of any kind of rapprochement.<sup>55</sup> The possibility of a reconciliation was also met with fear by some of the SNA factions, since they feared that Turkey could withdraw its material support in the near future. As a consequence, some economic crimes were committed for this reason, with members of the SNA planning their escape from the region and carrying out extensive looting in order to secure themselves financially.<sup>5657</sup>

This appeared in the database of September 2022, but it is also possible that it affected crimes in Q4, since the process had been slowly evolving - and indeed continued evolving up until June 2023. For example, in October 2022, Cavusoglu reiterated his call for reconciliation. In November in Afrin, the 3rd Legion's expulsion from the region and the restructuring of the SNA 2nd Legion that followed the HTS campaign can also be read in relation to the Turkish-Syrian relations at that time. Those aforementioned events allowed Afrin to fall under the control of that section of the SNA factions that is closest to the Turkish political agenda. On December 9th, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov commented on the possibility of Russia acting as a mediator in the Turkey-Syria rapprochement process. On that occasion, he stated the importance of stopping the military clashes between the Syrian Opposition and the Government of Syria, adding that "the fate of the opposition that refuses to reconcile with Damascus will be termination".<sup>58</sup> On December 15th, 2022, Turkish President Erdogan paved a possible reconciliation roadmap, by anticipating a series of tripartite meetings: between the three (Russia included) countries' intelligence services, followed by defense ministers and finally by the foreign ministers.<sup>59</sup> On December 28th, the respective defense ministers and the intelligence chiefs met in Moscow<sup>60</sup> and evaluated the meeting positively, agreeing to continue the process. In response, protests rocked all of northern Syria. As mentioned earlier, the wave of demonstrations touched both the Turkish-occupied territories, involving the cities of Afrin, Azaz, al-Bab, Marea, Akhtarın, Qabasin, as well as the Idlib governorate

54 <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglu-dunyanin-5-kitasinda-gozu-kulagi-ve-eli-olan-bir-disisleri-bakanligimiz-var/2659312>

55 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-turkey-reconciliation-assad-react-furiously>

56 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23324>

57 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23471>

58 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/24990>

59 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-syria-erdogan-roadmap-reconciliation>

60 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/turkish-syrian-defense-chiefs-hold-land-mark-meeting-russia>

and North and East Syria.<sup>61</sup>

In January, Iran started to get involved in the process as a second mediator. Talks were suspended during February and March due to the earthquake that struck the region on February 6th, 2023.<sup>62</sup> They were resumed in the period prior to the May 14th Turkish presidential and parliamentary election, with meetings on April 4th, April 25th, and May 10th. After the election however, Turkey changed tone. A single meeting occurred on June 20th, between deputy foreign ministers.<sup>63</sup> With this, the overall situation returned to the impasse seen at the beginning 2022: the Syrian government was demanding the complete withdrawal of the Turkish military from Syrian soil as sine qua non to enter negotiations, while Turkey was rejecting this. Erdogan re-stated his denial on July 17th, 2023. Three months later, on October 17th, the Turkish Parliament voted to extend the mandate for Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq for another two years.<sup>6465</sup>

It is relevant to mention the potential role that Turkish internal politics played on its foreign relations with Syria, especially with respect to the May elections. Public discontent regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey had been reaching new highs. For this reason, the possibility of Turkey's reconciliation with Damascus as a means to allow Syrians in Turkey to return home, had originally been pushed forward by the Turkish opposition.<sup>66</sup> From August 2022, the AKP-led government started to include this in their agenda as well. In the time period prior to the May election, Erdogan made efforts to show that his administration was responsible for advances on that front, and the series of tripartite meetings proved winning. But after the elections, the topic of rapprochement was again deprioritized by the AKP. While public pressure and geopolitical tensions may mean Erdogan will be forced to address it again,<sup>67</sup> the Turkish government may wait until the March 2024 local elections in Turkey to re-seize upon the issue.<sup>68</sup>

61 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25474>

62 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/07/after-the-earthquake/>

63 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/08/ankara-damascus-rapprochement-varia-bles-and-unfriendly-messages/>

64 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/32821-There-is-little-progress-in-relations-between-Syria-and-Turkey:-Russian-FM>

65 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/10/turkey-extends-mandate-military-operations-syria-iraq>

66 <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-elections-refugees-are-a-top-political-issue/a-65374605>

67 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/05/erdogan-assad-meeting-turkey-syria-kurds-russia-putin-diplomacy/>

68 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/08/ankara-damascus-rapprochement-varia-bles-and-unfriendly-messages/>

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND FORCED REPATRIATIONS

Concerns regarding evidence pointing at an ongoing process of demographic change in the Afrin region have been already raised in RIC's past Occupation Reports. On the one hand, RIC's reports show how the building of the new settlements in Afrin was internationally called for and approved by Turkish officials, conducted by charitable foundations and associations from, among others, Egypt, Qatar, and Kuwait, but eventually allocated mainly to the members of the SNA rather than to the IDPs it was supposedly intended for.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, it started to become apparent that Turkey is systematically and forcibly repatriating Syrian refugees from Turkey. On October 24th, 2022, Human Rights Watch published a report on the topic, calling for the European Union to "publicly clarify that Turkey is not a safe third country under the criteria set out in Article 38 of the EU Asylum Procedures Directive".<sup>70</sup> This was the basis for deals for EU-Turkey migration control, by which the EU is financing Turkey to provide a safe space for Syrian refugees. Nonetheless, these funds have been channeled to build removal centers for forced repatriation. Thousands of Syrian refugees have been involuntarily sent back to northern Syria - mainly either to the Idlib or Afrin regions - notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of these people originate from areas which are still controlled by the Syrian government. To actually return to their homes would equate to likely being arrested by Assad's police and military forces.

Therefore, repatriated individuals have been obliged to settle in Idlib or Afrin, hence contributing to demographic change in a more indirect and insidious way. This is while many Kurdish and other indigenous people are still displaced and are unable to return to their homelands. Afrin's settler population now also includes victims of the Syrian Civil War, who have never committed any crime against civilians, who have their own right to safety. The people belonging to this new category number in the order of hundreds of thousands. Hence, the effect that they have on the composition of the population of the region is determining. The security and living conditions in the SNA-controlled areas are dire and besides, in many cases the repatriated Syrians have been beaten and subjected to ill-treatment by the SNA. Finally, the principle of non refoulement - by which a person who would face persecution in their country of origin cannot be repatriated - is contained with international law and by treaties that Turkey has ratified. Its violation is an international crime.<sup>71</sup> For the Turkish government however, this policy is win-win aiding both its internal political dilemmas and its anti-Kurdish sentiments, the latter phenomenon reflected not only in Turkey's actions in Syria but also in Turkey's oppressive stance towards its own domestic Kurdish

69 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/02/state-of-the-occupation-q1-q2-2022-lack-of-accountability-of-sna-crimes-hts-incursion-in-afrin-isis-in-turkish-occupied-territories/>

70 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/turkey-hundreds-refugees-deported-syria>

71 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/turkey-hundreds-refugees-deported-syria>



population.<sup>727374</sup>

An incident from December well-illustrates the above points. On December 20th, 2022, a 15-year-old Kurdish teenager was found living homeless in Afrin city, sleeping in the streets of the town. He was from Afrin, but had been living with his family in Istanbul until a few weeks before, when the Turkish authorities arrested him and deported him to northern Syria without informing his family. In Afrin, he went back to his old house, which meanwhile had been seized by settlers. The settlers beat him and chased him away.<sup>75</sup> It is of note that not all settlers are criminals or members of the SNA. Some are IDP families obliged to flee from the Government of Syria areas, who bought houses from the SNA that the latter has seized from families who fled Afrin due to the Turkey's invasion in 2018, or who were forced out later due to the worsening security and living conditions under SNA rule.

## CONCLUSION

In Syria's Turkish-occupied territories, civilians face daily threats and violations of their fundamental rights. Rampant infighting between SNA factions translates to unending insecurity in the so-called Safe Zone. Criminal activity, unlawful arrests - mainly for political or economic reasons - and beatings and torture from the SNA occur with no means of accountability for the victims.

It is apparent that Turkey did not create a Safe Zone, but rather is occupying land for its own interest and the Occupation is displacing thousands of refugees. The international community should acknowledge this reality and condemn the Occupation and ongoing demographic change.

Prior to October 2022, al-Jabha al-Shamiya was one of the strongest forces in the Afrin region, and was the de facto leading faction in the 3rd Legion of the SNA. Different attempts to restructure the SNA had already occurred in the past, unsuccessfully. Turkey was unable to organically control the various different factions in the SNA, and the 3rd Legion proved especially prone to acting according to their own localized whims and interests. The HTS-led campaign in October altered this equilibrium: the 2nd Legion reformed,

72 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/07/turkey-kurdish-mayors-removal-violates-voters-rights>

73 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/25/turkey-pre-election-crackdown-kurds>

74 <https://projects.research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/en/projects/success-stories/all/echr-and-human-rights-violations-against-kurds-turkey>

75 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25189>

composed of the SNA factions that are the most loyal Turkish proxies (Suleiman Shah, Hamza, Sultan Murad, and Ahrar al-Sham Northern Sector), and ousted the 3rd Legion from the region. This came alongside a significant increase in HTS influence and presence in the region, both through ties with members of the 2nd Legion and directly on the ground, although often acting and moving under the banner of its ally factions.

In the M4 Strip, crimes related to human-smuggling remain one of the main scourges. Often, they are perpetrated directly by the Turkish border police and associated with physical violence and murder.

In the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, RIC's data gathering efforts were confronted with a lack of proper reporting aside from coverage of bloody inter-familial feuds and the mass demonstrations.

Since its creation, the SNA has been a tool for Turkey to implement its policies in the region. From the perspective of the population, it has brought harm, criminality, insecurity and human rights violations. Together with the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG), it has prevented the development of proper institutions, capable of implementing justice and guaranteeing the fundamental rights of Syrian people. A process of stark demographic change is ongoing, especially in the Afrin region at the expense of the original, mainly Kurdish, population. Turkey's forced deportations are a part of this process: Syrians not native to Afrin are being settled in the houses of those forced out during the Turkish invasion. European migration policies based on the definition of Turkey as a "safe third-country" are short-sighted, ineffective, expensive and eventually contribute to human rights violations. A reassessment of this mechanism to handle the immigration file is urgent and paramount.

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