



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

AFTER ASSAD – TURKEY AND SNA CRIMES AGAINST CIVILIANS IN NES

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1. INTRODUCTION

More than 50 years of Assad family rule in Syria was shattered last year. On November 27th, 2024, militant faction Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and an assortment of other armed groups burst out of their Idlib enclave and seized Aleppo before reaching the capital just days later, with almost no resistance from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) forces. The rule of president Bashar al-Assad was abruptly ended, the latter fleeing the country. After 14 years of devastating conflict in Syria - which saw over 600,000 people killed, gross human rights violations, and tens of thousands of forcible disappearances - this marked a momentous development. Sednaya prison - the symbol of the Assad government's brutality - was opened, and the regime's notorious security apparatus dissolved. From Damascus to Qamishlo, there were street celebrations and statues and symbols of the Baath party were torn down. For those millions forcibly exiled by war and repression too, the fall of Assad restored the possibility of a return to their homeland.

For the hundreds of thousands of people internally displaced by Turkey's military operations in the North and East Syria (NES) region however, return prospects remain distant. In 2018 and 2019, civilians fled Afrin and Sere Kaniye respectively in the masses when Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) attacked and seized control of the areas. Many who sought to return found that they had been dispossessed of their home.¹² Many others did not dare attempt a return to their locality, fearful of the abuses committed by the SNA: murder, torture, sexual and other gender-based violence, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest for ransom, looting and exaction of 'fines', with Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians particularly targeted. Although these abuses have not received much media attention, they have been widely documented by the UN,³ international and local human rights NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), as well as the RIC, which has produced seven "The State of the Occupation" reports since 2021. In 2024, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights filed a criminal complaint calling for "a comprehensive investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity," in Afrin.⁴

While the world's eyes were on the victorious HTS-led campaign that swept Damascus, Turkey and the SNA launched a separate offensive. Except rather than targeting Assad's forces, the Turkish-backed factions turned on the NES region, in a blatant display of aggression that expanded Turkey's occupation in Syria. On December 1st, the SNA attacked Shehba - a small territory geographically disconnected from the rest of NES, but still administratively connected to the governing Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES). Shehba had been home to around 100,000 people - two thirds of whom were internally displaced people who had fled Afrin when Turkey invaded in 2018. Almost the entire population living in Shehba fled upon the SNA's advance, creating a mass IDP crisis in NES. Rather than motivated from fear of fighting per se, those civilians who fled did so primarily due to knowing the nature of the groups attacking them. Indeed, this military

1 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/210/90/pdf/g2021090.pdf?OpenElement>
 2 <https://hevdesti.org/en/violations-of-property-rights-in-northern-syria/>
 3 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation>
 4 <https://www.ecchr.eu/en/case/crimes-in-syria-the-neglected-atrocities-of-afrin/>

advance by the SNA and Turkey once again brought in its wake a large number of human rights violations. One week later, the SNA, backed by Turkish airpower, launched a fresh attack to seize Manbij from NES' Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Within days, widespread reports of SNA murders, stealing, looting, gender-based violence and other crimes emerged. From the Turkish side, Human Rights Watch also recorded how "Turkish airstrikes targeted civilian facilities [...] putting livelihoods at risk and severing communities from electricity, medical care, and other essential services."⁵

Adding to the 381 military personnel (SDF, Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) and Asayish) killed in the attacks, RIC has documented how civilians and journalists and medical workers are also being killed - and purposefully targeted. Turkish airstrikes and SNA shelling on civilian areas, homes, and vehicles have left a trail of casualties. Aerial targeting of civilian convoys heading to the Tishreen Dam and civilian demonstrations at the dam has also killed 22 civilians dead and left over 200 injured. Turkey's targeting of ambulances travelling to and from the dam has been caught on video, while the SNA have publicized themselves celebrating the overt targeting of civilian demonstrators. Journalists and press workers have been attacked in drone strikes. All in all, civilians comprise over ¼ of the total death toll in Turkish and SNA attacks on NES from 01.12.2024 (the date of the start of the SNA's Shehba offensive) to 12.03.2025 (the time of writing).

This report presents the information RIC has gathered and documented regarding Turkish/SNA violations in the time period under review - some of which potentially amount to war crimes. This is divided into:

- 1 - Crimes against civilians in Shehba
- 2 - Crimes against civilians in Manbij
- 3 - Crimes against civilians at the Tishreen Dam
- 4 - Crimes against civilians elsewhere in NES
- 5 - Targeting press and obstruction of information-gathering

RIC has recorded purposeful targeting of civilians, attacking essential civilian infrastructure, the targeting of medical workers and ambulances, looting and property crimes and forced displacement carried out at the hands of Turkey and its Syrian proxy forces. These crimes are not isolated incidents. They follow what is now a well-established pattern of systematic crimes against civilians conducted by both the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and Turkey's proxy SNA militias. RIC has interviewed family members of civilians killed in Turkish and SNA attacks, those living without electricity and drinking water due to strikes on the Tishreen Dam, paramedic survivors of Turkish strikes targeting an ambulance that killed two medical workers, children who were injured in airstrikes on their family houses, civilians forced to flee Shehba leaving behind their homes and livelihoods, being harassed and abused as they left, and journalists injured in Turkish strikes.

While any attempt at presenting the total toll of Turkey's aggression and attacks in NES can never be complete, the information RIC has gathered presents a clear picture of intentional targeting of civilians and civil life by Turkey and its Syrian proxy force, the SNA, in NES in

the period after the fall of Assad. At the same time, the SNA's factions in theory dissolved themselves in January, folding under the new Ministry of Defence. Hence, Ahmed al-Sharaa and the interim Syrian government are formally responsible for their activity. The SNA's involvement in abuses committed against Alawite civilians in Syria's coastal region in early March underlines that these factions are continuing to conduct grievous crimes with no accountability as part of the new Syrian army.

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 North and East Syria, 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 METHODS

RIC compiled a database of rights violations, including all reports for which there is reliable photographic or video evidence, and/or eyewitness testimonies collected by RIC researchers. While this database is by no means comprehensive, it gives a snapshot into the human rights abuses conducted throughout the Turkish and SNA attacks.

Through interviewing a range of civilians directly affected by such violations, RIC verified cases reported in the press, as well as uncovered new violations potentially amounting to war crimes. RIC field teams spoke to families living under airstrikes and heavy weapons shelling, medical staff directly targeted, participants in the civilian convoys hit at the Tishreen Dam, press workers trying to cover the situation while their colleagues are killed during their reporting, IDPs who witnessed theft, kidnapping, murder and intimidation as they fled Shehba, those who lost their homes and property to looters, and NGO staff, civil officials and civilian activists working to assist those affected. RIC can also provide access to the full text of the interviews quoted herein upon request from press, researchers and NGOs, or pass on the contact details of the individuals quoted if further research is requiring this. Some names have been redacted or changed upon request from witnesses who wish to protect their identity.

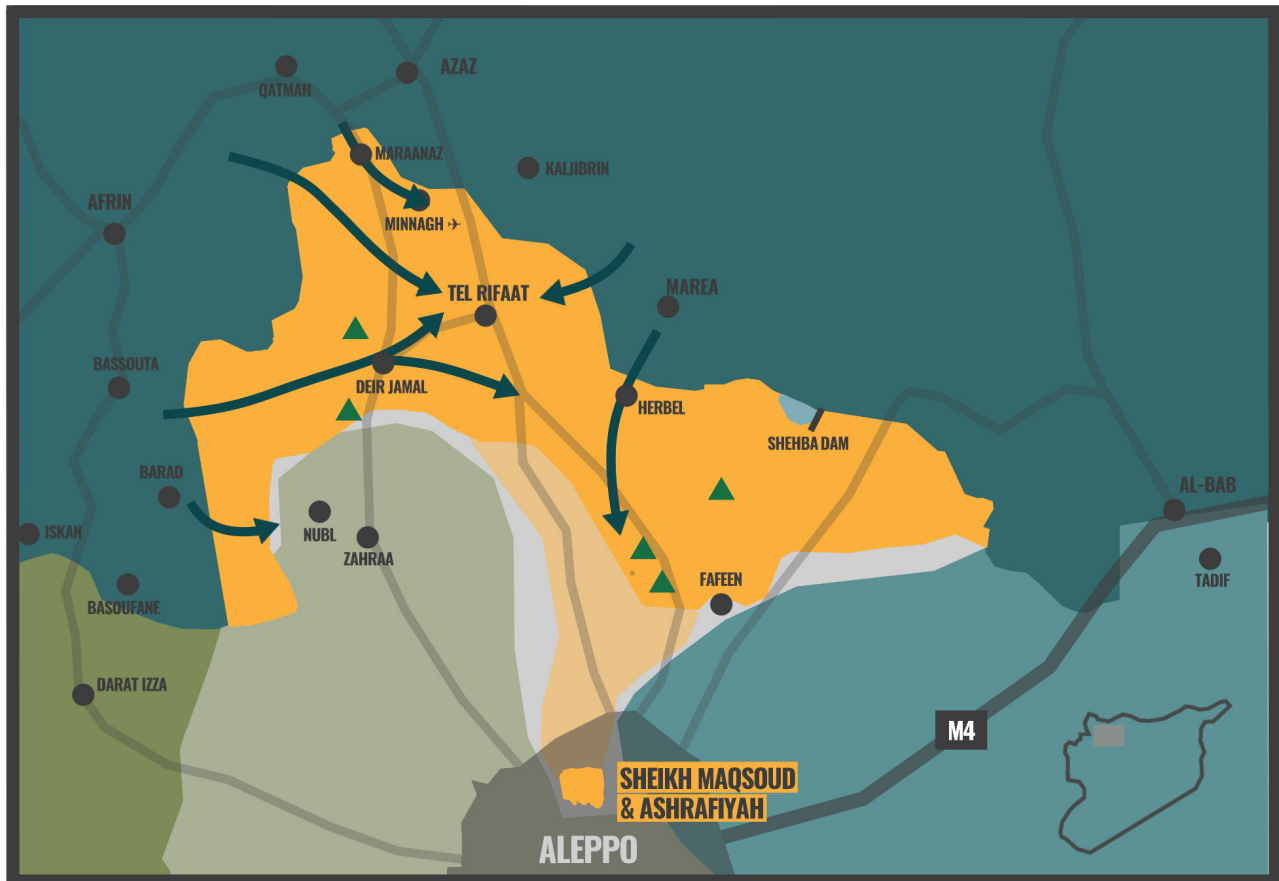
2. CRIMES AGAINST CIVILIANS

2.1 SHEHBA

According to a UNHCR flash survey in January 2025, 27% of Syrian refugee respondents in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt reported that they intend to return home in the next 12 months. This is a remarkable increase from findings of the same survey 9 months prior, in which less than 2% reported intending to return home.⁶ On March 4th, 2025, OCHA reported that almost 1.2 million people have now returned to their areas of origin in Syria since the beginning of the year, comprising nearly 900,000 IDPs and 300,000 Syrians who had fled abroad. On January 23rd, the al-Hol camp authorities and DAANES stated that the way is open for Syrians in al-Hol camp to voluntarily return to their areas of origin in Syria, and called on international humanitarian organizations to provide aid and assistance to Syrian IDPs in NES. On February 11th, a group of 305 Deir ez-Zor locals who had been living in Areesha camp in NES for eight years, returned to their homes, no longer fearing retribution from the GoS. 10 days later, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announced that a total of 1 million Syrians had returned to their towns of origin since December 8th, both from inside and outside the country.⁷ While the fall of Assad has allowed for many Syrians to imagine what was before unthinkable - that they could finally come home - little spotlight has been cast on those populations who have been newly ejected from their homes since Assad's regime crumbled, many of them for the second time.

On December 1st, the Turkish-backed SNA launched an attack on the DAANES' Shehba pocket - geographically disconnected from the rest of NES. Shehba was home to around 100,000 people, two thirds of whom were IDPs who had been forced out of the adjacent Afrin canton when Turkey invaded Afrin in 2018. The SDF and Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) - the two military forces present and active in the region at the time of the SNA's attack - did not initiate a formal defence response, although there was some fighting. Instead, the SDF negotiated an agreement in which the civilian population could leave the area safely if they wished, while withdrawing troops. The SDF and Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) - the two military forces present and active in the region at the time of the SNA's attack - did not initiate a formal defence response, although there was some fighting. Instead, the SDF negotiated an agreement in which the civilian population could leave the area safely if they wished, while withdrawing troops.

SHEHBA REGION



The SDF and Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) - the two military forces present and active in the region at the time of the SNA's attack - did not initiate a formal defence response, although there was some fighting. Instead, the SDF negotiated an agreement in which the civilian population could leave the area safely if they wished, while withdrawing troops.

Commander-in-Chief, Mazloun Abdi, stated that the SDF tried to open "a humanitarian corridor between our eastern regions, Aleppo and Tel Rifaat, to protect our people from massacres".⁸ This references the SDF's temporary advance into Nubl, al-Zahra, Sheikh Najjar, and the surrounding area, which briefly saw the DAANES' Sheikh Maqsoud pocket in Aleppo city connected to that of Shehba. The corridor was soon cut by the SNA and HTS - the SDF withdrew with almost no clashes. Abdi continued: "We are working to communicate with all actors in Syria to secure the protection of our people and to safely evacuate them from the Tal Rifaat and Shehba areas towards our safe areas in the northeast of the country."

The vast majority of Shehba's inhabitants rushed to leave the area. Until the evacuation arrangement was in-place, a mass civilian convoy - some in cars, some on foot - was waiting near the town of Ahdas for over 24 hours. When the convoy was finally able to proceed, on December 2nd, around 80,000 people left Shehba and headed towards the closest

SDF-held territory - Tabqa - where emergency preparations to receive the influx of IDPs were being made. Around 15,000 people did not or could not join the main exit convoy. The DAANES began organizing buses to send to retrieve those who wished to leave. While initially the SNA did not let the buses pass, on December 4th a further 3,500 people were able to leave Shehba and reach NES. A further 7,500 attempted to return to their native Afrin instead.



IDPs from Shehba in the Tabqa camp, 11.12.2024

Those who left in the main convoy from Shehba to Tabqa on December 2nd were subject to a slew of rights violations from the SNA. In testimonies collected by RIC, as well as documentation carried out by NGOs and human rights organizations plus local news channels, IDPs described witnessing and experiencing arbitrary arrests, murder, looting, verbal and physical abuse, threats and hate speech, and assaults on the convoy.⁹ On December 7th, a RIC field team headed to Tabqa and met with newly displaced people. Over the proceeding days and weeks, RIC also visited IDP families living in emergency collective shelters as well as the homes of their relatives in Kobane, Qamishlo, Raqqa and Heseke, as well as spoke via telephone with IDPs elsewhere in NES. The stories relayed during the interviews conducted indicate intentional efforts from the SNA to intimidate, harass and abuse the civilian population – targeting Kurds in particular – as they left in a convoy supposedly under a guarantee of protection.

Hassan Hassan made it out of Shehba to Tabqa and then moved to Amude shortly after. He told RIC that his cousin, Abdo Khalil Murshid, was killed on the road out of Shehba by SNA militiamen while he was in a convoy. Murshid was one of 12 civilians shot and killed by SNA forces while attempting to flee, whose names were documented by RIC and confirmed by the Afrin Human Rights organization. IDP Eymen witnessed the shooting of three of them while he was waiting in the convoy for permission to go: “In front of us in the convoy, some of them [SNA fighters] emerged, 2-3 people were walking, firing bullets. They killed three people. Who, I don’t know. This was in front of the Ahdas convoy.” RIC identified the three men shot and killed in Ahdas as Abdul Sheikh Musa Jumaa, Shaban Mahmoud, and Muhammad Majeed Jamo. Afrin Human Rights organization coordinator, Ibrahim Sheikho, said that their bodies could not be retrieved because “bullets were fired at those who approached the bodies”.

Mariyem Jindo, Shehba IDP originally from Afrin, co-chair of the Shehba “Yazidi House” organization, confirmed to RIC the killing of an elderly Yazidi man, Ahmed Jamo Hasso. “When it became clear how grave the situation was, I tried to call my fellow Yazidi families to alert them to flee. I called a family living in Tel Rifaat. An SNA mercenary picked up the telephone and said “I killed this whole family.” I shut the phone. When I got safely to Tabqa, I was trying to find out what had happened to this family. I discovered that when that family had been getting ready to exit Shehba, the mercenaries came with weapons. There were nine people in the family. One – Ahmed Jamo Hasso – was killed by shooting. His wife was seriously injured. A 14-year-old girl, Basma Nasser Jando, was also injured. No ambulance could get to them. The mercenaries also stole all of their stuff. Everything that was in their car, the money that was with them.”

Rather than motivated solely from fear of fighting per se, the 90,000 civilians who fled from Shehba upon the SNA’s advance, did so primarily due to knowing the nature of the groups attacking them. “We had no choice [not to leave] because we don’t trust the armed groups. Never, never trust them. They are merciless and ruthless. I have seen their crimes against humanity, their abuse towards civilians, in Afrin and elsewhere,” said IDP Hassan Hassan.

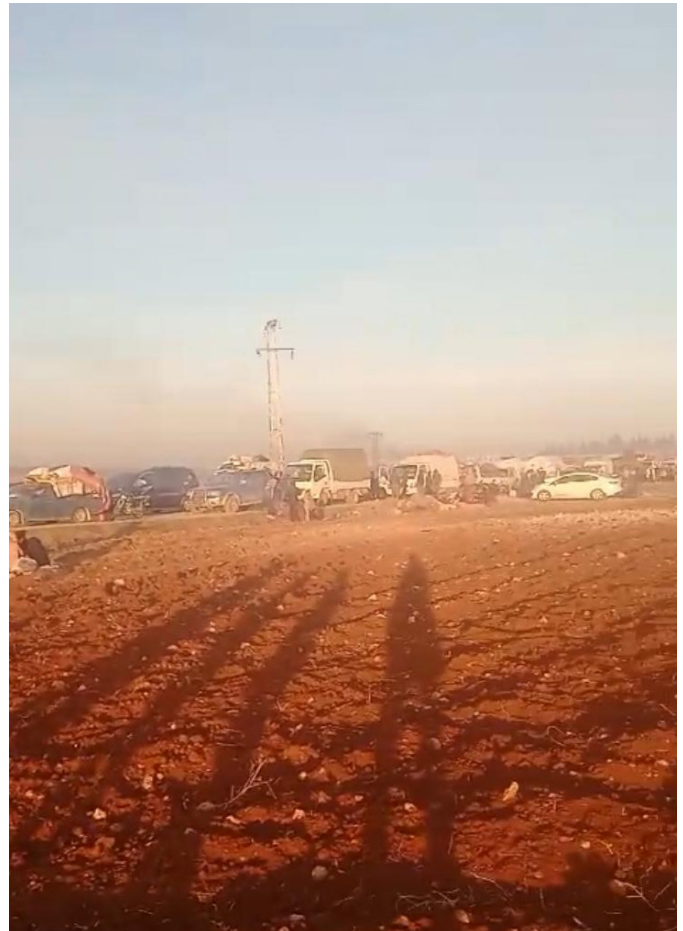
“In Afrin, they had divided the villages amongst themselves like the feudal lords of the Middle Ages. Each group was controlling several villages, living inside the best homes, bringing their relatives with them, and seizing the olive crops of the region. In each village, you could see dozens of armed men living inside. It was so hard for the local Kurds and Arabs to even breathe freely. Only 20% of the locals stayed [in Afrin after Turkey’s 2018 invasion].” As noted by the International Committee of the Red Cross: “Civilians have a long memory of IHL [International Humanitarian Law] violations and are aware of the impact of these violations on others. They might likely anticipate them happening or happening again and choose preventive displacement.”¹⁰ Many Afrin IDPs in Shehba chose to flee upon the SNA’s advance due to their past experiences of the SNA’s criminal and abusive practices in Afrin.

For IDP Nouri, there was never a choice between whether to stay or leave Shehba when the SNA attacked. “What they did to us in Afrin, and now in Shehba... how can I live with them? [...] If we had stayed there, we would have experienced worse than what we did now.” Sosin said that experiences from civilian life under SNA control in Afrin meant she sought to escape immediately when she heard the SNA has entered Shehba: “They arrest women, they rape women. They have been doing these things in Afrin. We know that from our relatives who are there. One relative, when she was 16 years old, she was arrested and gang raped. This was two years ago. She is from my village, from my family. All of this happens there, our people who stayed there experienced too much. An 11-year-old girl from my family was forcibly married. They entered the house, they liked her and took her, forcibly, against her and her family's desire. [...] This is not a life.” One man in Shehba committed suicide when he comprehended the situation. “We saw him just one hour before he killed himself. We were getting into the convoy,” one of his neighbours, Imjan, told RIC.



Imjan and her family wait in the convoy in Shehba. The man walking in the left of the photo committed suicide just one hour later.

Another IDP, who had been living in Serdem camp in Shehba since his displacement from



Afrin in 2018 and preferred to remain anonymous, said that all he wanted was to go back to Afrin but the SNA's presence there made it impossible. He left Shehba with the first convoy: "I was surrounded by four cars affiliated to the SNA and I hardly survived. When we were in the group of displaced people, the SNA kept swearing at us. One of them knew how to speak Kurdish and he was telling us to keep going and not stop. We were terrified. We couldn't do anything. They were threatening to kill our children and disrespecting us."

Every IDP RIC interviewed reported experiencing relentless verbal abuse from SNA militiamen as they left in the convoy, such as being called "pigs", "the dirt of mankind", or "unbelievers" as well as insults directed towards the Kurdish nationality. Furthermore, many IDPs said they were threatened. Speaking from a collective emergency center in Qamishlo, IDP Ilham said as she and her 18 family members left in their car, "the mercenaries said 'you can leave now but we will come to Jazira [region] in another 7 years and get you,'" in reference to the 7 years that had passed by between the SNA's attack on Afrin and that on Shehba. Others said they were told by the SNA that if they returned they would be killed. Eymen, an Afrin IDP who had been living in Ghurnate, Shehba, told RIC, "they spat on us, swore at us, and were saying nasty things to us".

Many IDPs told RIC they had heard stories of people being beheaded. RIC was unable to find a witness who could confirm any case of a beheading actually taking place. Eymen said he believed people were beheaded because he heard it being called out by attackers. He only left his house when the SNA arrived right next to his village. "I heard the loud sound of weapons. We put things into the car in a rush. I heard shouting, people saying 'one behead-

ed and one killed.' I rushed out." Additionally, swords were used to intimate civilians in the convoy: multiple interviewees reported to RIC that militiamen were brandishing swords in their faces. More still said that they saw ISIS flags or patches worn by SNA militiamen. As a combined effect of these things, terror was spread amongst the civilians in the convoy. The ease at which the stories of beheadings spread and were believed reflects the fear with which the Afrin IDPs living in Shehba regard the SNA - knowing that factions aligning to jihadism are among them and having experienced their brutality in Afrin - and the way the SNA militiamen are aware of that fear and enjoy exercising it.

Furthermore, all IDPs RIC spoke to testified to the presence of tens if not over one hundred bodies on the road near Deir Hafir. These corpses had been piled on top of one another, some were being burned, some desecrated. These were bodies of soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army who had been stationed there. Ilham said she was trying to cover the eyes of her children as they drove past, "scared to death" at the sight. "What we saw on the road makes us shiver," said Nouri. "We saw dead bodies that were hanging on tanks, we saw dead bodies that dogs were eating. There were other bodies that were burning. [...] My kids were jumping on me and saying, "Dad, don't leave us". It had been the same when we fled Afrin - and this time we were again left with terrifying memories. As we were walking we saw corpses that were still smoking, corpses with only the hands left. [...] If you ask the kids here, most of them will also tell you that they saw such things. There was another person that was stripped of his clothes, naked and dead, and laid down next to his motorcycle." The bodies were of soldiers rather than civilians, yet the psychological impact of the sight of them on those in the convoy was significant.

"We didn't dare to look at them [militiamen at a checkpoint] as women," said Solin. "They had long beards and hair, and dirty clothes. They were standing by us while we were moving. They would stop us by hitting our car with a fist, looking at our faces, and then saying "go". We were really afraid. We passed Ahdas, the other checkpoint there. They were opening the door of the car, spitting and saying "pigs, we are after you, we will reach you. Escape, but we will get you." They repeated this many times. [...] We did not dare to get out of the car [while on the road from Shehba to Tabqa]. Four days like this. They were stationed on the road; we did not dare to get out of the car. In front of us, they opened a car. There was a girl in it. They tried to take her phone, she threw the phone under the chairs of the car. They said to her "you are a pig". The girl was shivering. This was happening in front of us. We could not help her. We did not dare. There were two parents and a son in a car. The son was driving them. They wanted to arrest him, the woman was crying and saying "I don't have anyone else, he is my only son". After half an hour they left him."

Like many IDPs, Walid was witness to an incident of kidnapping while in the convoy: "On the road, we were surrounded by mercenaries. We were scared to death that they would kill us. We saw bodies on the road. We saw a young man being taken out of his car. They insulted him in front of his wife and little child, they hit him and stripped him naked and took him with his car. Where, we don't know." Saber Beker also told RIC that arbitrary arrests were commonplace. "Our journey was harrowing. SNA militiamen arrested a 14-year old girl and we don't know where she is. They took her. My aunt's husband died. My friend's cousin was trying to leave Shehba from Aqibe, and was arrested. Militiamen told his mother: 'come

take back your dog from us.”

The NGO Synergy-Hevdesti documented the arrest of 65 civilians in Shehba who lived in the villages on the former contact lines between the SDF and SNA. They were charged with “dealing with the SDF” - an accusation levelled at most of the civilians arbitrarily arrested in SNA-held areas. Synergy reports that those arrested faced physical and psychological torture. While some were released after paying a ransom, the fate of others remains unknown. Ibrahim Sheikho, the coordinator of the NGO Afrin Human Rights, also documented the arrest of around 500 Shehba IDPs who had chosen to try to return to their original homes in Afrin rather than leave to Tabqa. He told RIC that around 1,500 families made this choice “hoping it couldn’t be worse than being displaced a second time.”

Synergy documented arrests of civilians heading from Shehba to Afrin, citing extortion practices, violating their right to return following involuntary displacement.¹¹ “Civilians were forced to pay large sums of money to be allowed to return to their homes in Afrin, and those who refused or were unable to pay were arrested. Meanwhile, other families were denied the right to reclaim their houses and properties simply because the factions occupying them refused to restore these rights to their rightful owners.” Ibrahim Sheikho says those arrested were “mostly youth. But also older people. Anyone who had worked with the DAANES or completed military service was arrested.” With mandatory military service in the SDF for at least one person in every family - and many more volunteering to join YPG, YPJ or other forces within the SDF - almost anyone could be a target, but young males in particular.

RIC has found that there is little substantive video or photo evidence to corroborate testimonies of what happened on the road. Civilians told RIC that they were terrified to even look at the SNA fighters as they passed them on the road, and that theft of mobile phones was commonplace so they hid theirs if they could. This means SNA crimes have largely gone unrecorded – a trend also documented in all Turkish-occupied areas.¹²¹³

“No one dared to lift their telephone,” said Eymen. “Because on the road there were many groups of mercenaries. They were taking people’s telephones, from women too, and insulting them, degrading them. It was like this. No one dared lift their telephone inside the car. We hid our telephone inside other things, so nothing would happen to it. We deleted the photos we had from Shehba from the telephone and came.” Eymen also said that those who were still in Shehba did not dare film violations they saw: “If I knew who stayed in the village and could call them I would ask. There is a family I called. [...] I asked them ‘how is my house?’ Because we left most of our things there. Almost 13,000 dollars and all our things were stolen. They said to us ‘the things in your house were all stolen’. The mercenaries took everything out, put it into a car, and took it. I asked if they had been able to take a video of the things being loaded. They said ‘we don’t dare go onto the street because there are always bullets being fired. We can’t go out.’ The telephone [network] was also cut. We

11 <https://hevdesti.org/en/en-syrian-national-army-violations-dec2024/>

12 <https://stj-sy.org/en/northwestern-syria-journalists-live-in-constant-fear-of-assassinations/>

13 <https://rb.gy/h46o85> (Syria Direct)

couldn't talk to them. They heard we are on this side, the DAANES side, so they don't dare. They say 'we know we will get in trouble, money will be demanded from us, they will beat us. We can't be on the telephone.'"

Alia Muhammad, the Shehba Canton Health Board co-chair, was in the main convoy leaving. "We couldn't take out our phones," she said. "There were people whose phones were confiscated from them and others whose cars were taken from them. People were just trying to protect themselves and get out. Because when we were in Ahdas, militiamen were all around us, the whole road from there to Tabqa." Ibrahim Sheikho, the coordinator of the Afrin Human Rights organization, said: "Why were videos not taken? No one dared. To try to record was something very risky. In addition, the militiamen were taking phones. People were hiding their phones."

"The entrance of the mercenaries into Shehba was a sudden shock," explained Sheikhmus Mustafa, who works for the Afrin Social Association. "They were all around Shehba, then inside too, and even inside people's houses. No one had the courage to take photos. They took phones from people in the convoy. They looked at people's phones too, looking for photos and if there were photos they arrested people. Many people hid or even destroyed their phones. Then others had phones with no battery because there was no possibility to charge phones on the road. You have to understand that people were so afraid that they might be killed."

Widespread theft and petty looting by individual faction members or small groups was commonplace along the road out of Shehba. "They [militiamen] stole so many things from us, like phones, money, clothes, motorcycles, cars. Mostly they were approaching us when [...] somehow people were getting a little far from the convoy. [...] Some people's cars broke down. So they were forced to stop and try to fix it. Then some distance would form between them and the convoy. They were holding weapons. They took my friend's motorcycle. They took my kid's phone and we saw others from which they took cars, money, motorcycles," said Nouri. Another IDP, Juma Mohamed Beker, said he arrived in Tabqa with his car only because he staked his life on it: "When we saw the fighters, we were terrified. We feared for our lives. They approached us and told us to leave the car for them and walk away on foot. I bought my car for 165 million Syrian pounds. I told them I had nothing left but this car as I had left everything behind in Afrin. I told them 'I'm not leaving the car even if you shoot me.'"

At the time of writing, the IDPs from Shehba are spread as follows: 5,300 families in the Jazira canton, 2,300 in Tabqa canton, 1,200 in Raqqqa canton, 3,500 in Aleppo city (both inside and outside the DAANES neighbourhoods), 600 in Kobane and 1,500 in Turkish-occupied Afrin. The large-scale expulsion of the civilian population from Shehba has facilitated widespread looting and property crimes.

On January 18th, SNA militiamen entered the house of Afrin IDP Muhammad Hassan, in Ahdas town, Shehba canton. They stole his cattle and car, which Hassan had been unable to take with him when he fled Shehba following the SNA's advance. They ransacked his house and burnt part of it, as pictured below.



Ahmed Haj Hammoud also found out his farm had been looted and ransacked, with equipment worth over \$15,000 stolen. He went to the Military Police - the body supposedly responsible for checking the behaviour of the SNA - to file a complaint and was told “they are all thieves, we can’t do anything”. Indeed, RIC has found that the Military Police themselves are responsible for a lot of the criminal activity of the SNA in Afrin and the M4 Strip.¹⁴

Ahmad Adham Nasero reported that 40 of his sheep were stolen in Burj al-Qas village. Hussein Muhammed Mustafa stated that his workshop was robbed of its materials, including 50 PV panels, 100 inverters, 40 batteries and his pickup truck in Ziyara village. Furthermore, warehouses of the DAANES saw their contents robbed, as per Ibrahim Sheikho.

However, Shehba’s infrastructure was badly damaged by the battle to expel ISIS from the region in 2016. Unlike other cities ravaged by fighting, such as Raqqa and Tabqa, Shehba did not see much repair and reconstruction work. “There isn’t much there to steal,” Ibrahim Sheikho stated. “The region had very little in terms of functioning infrastructure and public buildings. The people living there also did not have much material wealth.” Still, in February 2024, video footage showed the ‘Avrin’ hospital located in Fafeen, Shehba, after it had been looted and ransacked by the SNA. RIC shared both videos on X (formerly Twitter). Stills of comparable sites from the videos are shown below.



The hospital exterior, before [L] and after [R], with the roof, air conditioning units, windows, and doors stolen





The main entrance before [L] and after [R]



Side rooms shown from the exterior before [R] and after [L]



Rooms inside the hospital [as shown on R] were ransacked [L].

2.2 MANBIJ

The SNA's offensive on Manbij - backed by Turkish airstrikes - began in earnest on December 8th, with Manbij city taken from the SDF in two days. Unlike the Kurdish IDPs in Shehba, familiar with the SNA's criminal practices, most of Manbij's majority-Arab population did not flee upon the SNA's advance. A portion of the city's residents also initially supported the arrival of new forces, although seemingly some regretted this support when the SNA began committing unrestrained rights violations towards the civilian population there. With mounting insecurity and blatant criminal activity from the SNA, on December 14th Manbij's prominent Bani Sayid tribe called for the SNA to withdraw from the city and demanded the new Syrian Government send a committee to investigate.¹⁵ The next day, some Manbij residents carry out a 'dignity strike', protesting a surge in violence, looting, theft, and arbitrary arrests following the SNA's seizure of the city.¹⁶

RIC recorded the names of 25 civilians killed in Manbij during and in the immediate aftermath of the SNA's invasion. A Turkish drone strike on Zerfan village, Manbij countryside, killed 10 civilians on December 9th. Turkish drone strikes also targeted civilian cars seeking to leave Manbij upon the SNA's advance. Two Arab women who worked within Zenobia - the main women's union in NES' Arab-majority regions - were killed in such strikes during

18 15 <https://rb.gy/xbwh1o> (Sama Manbij)

16 <https://npasyria.com/en/119750/>

the SNA's attack on Manbij. 18-year-old Aisha Abdel Qader worked in Zenobia's Archive and Media Department. When fighting reached the city, she and a number of others - including mother-of-four, Iman Ahmed, who was a Zenobia member and participant in Manbij city's civilian protection force, HPC - sought to flee the city. When the car they were travelling in approached Qaraqozak Bridge, a Turkish drone strike on the car killed both Aisha and Iman. On December 11th, Turkey hit another car carrying 11 people crossing the Bridge, killing an elderly woman, Zahid Kossi, and injuring her 8-year-old grandson.

On December 13th, SNA gunmen killed Adoula al-Hamo and her son Hussein al-Khaso in al-Asaliyah village, Manbij countryside. In the same village, they robbed the house of Ismail al-Haji, stole his car, money, gold and valuables amounting to \$80,000 in value. In Manbij city, SNA militiamen stormed the home of the 77-year-old Hilal al-Haj Saeed Hamdou, beating him to death and looting his home on December 19th. On December 20th, SNA militiamen killed civilian Muhammad Khalil al-Ayoub, his wife and his son while looting their house in al-Qashala village, Manbij countryside. Three days later the SNA committed two separate murders - Hussein al-Khaso and Khalil Abbou were shot and killed in their respective homes in Manbij. A member of the women's union Zenobia, Qamar al-Eswet, a single mother-of-two, was killed by her uncle- an SNA member stationed in Jarablus - in Manbij city. She had been receiving threats from him for some time before the SNA took Manbij. This was due to Qamar's participation in a number of women's educational programmes as well as the Democratic Islam Congress, after Manbij was liberated from ISIS in 2016. When her uncle arrived in Manbij he killed her in front of her children. On December 23rd, an SNA militiaman, identified as Abul Gawir, raped a 7-year-old girl, Amna Ibrahim al-Salih, in Manbij city.

The NGO Synergy documented the arrest of 52 civilians by the SNA upon the latter's seizure of Manbij, 16 of whom were released after paying a ransom.¹⁷ Those who were released reported that they were subject to torture while in prison. Synergy also verified the authenticity of videos circulating on social media, showing SNA militiamen abusing several civilian detainees in a village in the countryside of Manbij.

In Manbij too, there was widespread looting - both of private homes and shops as well as public property - once the SNA took control of the city. According to OCHA, nine health facilities, including seven primary health centers and one hospital, were vandalized and looted in Manbij.¹⁸ Kurdish Red Crescent also reported that "following the SNA's control of the city, most service facilities in Manbij and its countryside were subjected to looting and vandalism", including 6 medical facilities supported by international NGOs and 3 Kurdish Red Crescent centers, the Manbij central hospital and 4 ambulances.¹⁹

17 <https://rb.gy/3wtf9z> (Synergy)

18 <https://rb.gy/67xydw> (OCHA)

19 <https://hskurd.org/en/statement-2/>

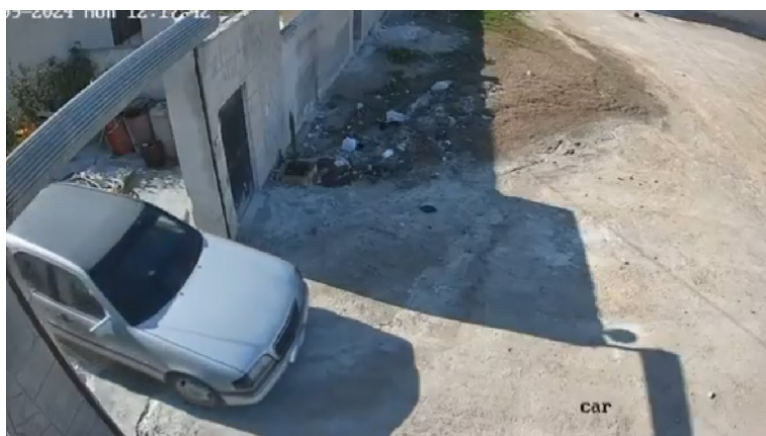


Manbij central hospital looted

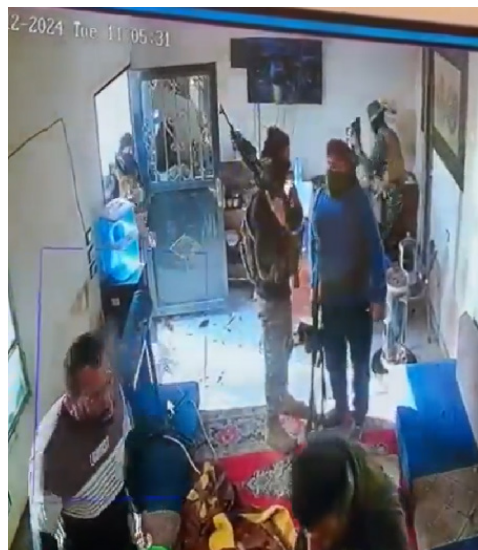
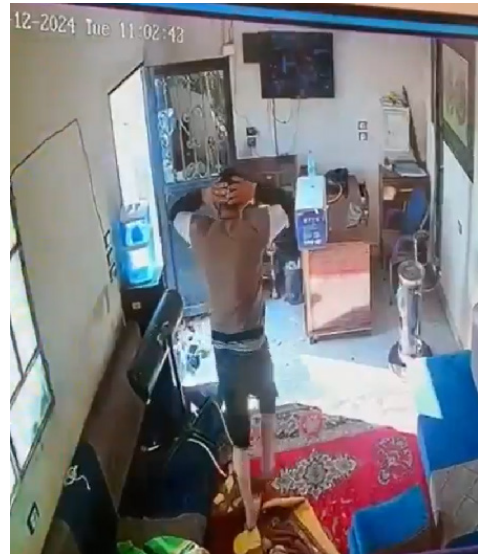
Ali Jamal Al-Sheikhani, a restaurant owner in the city, was killed while trying to prevent SNA militiamen from looting his restaurant.



RIC was told that a total of 70 civilian cars were stolen in the first week of SNA control of Manbij. One family published footage after two cars were stolen from their house by armed SNA militiamen, as caught on CCTV on December 9th. Another family also published the video of an SNA looting incident recorded by CCTV.



A group of SNA militiamen steal two cars from a house, 09.12.2024



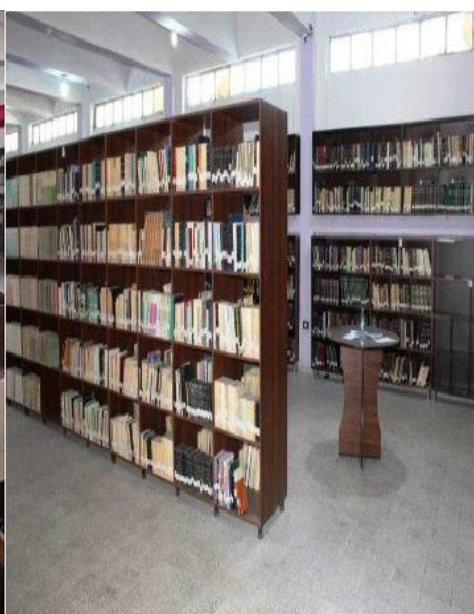
A group of SNA militiamen loot a property, 10.12.2024

These incidents were incidentally caught on camera; many more go unseen. Manbij's Kurdish minority was particularly targeted by SNA violence. Synergy documented over 20 houses belonging to Kurdish families marked as "confiscated". Those Kurdish civilians who were able to flee the city did so.²⁰

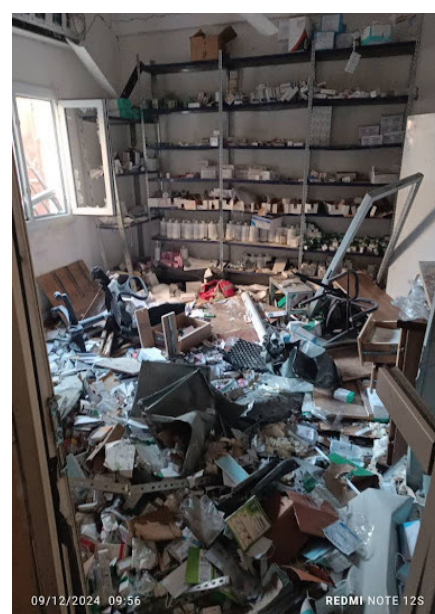
On February 8th, Suleiman Shah militiamen looted the home of Amina Mustafa Hajo, a 50-year-old Kurdish woman in Manbij. She was alone with her daughters when the militiamen entered - they fired bullets at her hands and feet when she tried to prevent them from coming in. A video published by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights later showed the house stripped of everything of value.²¹

On January 21st, in the Manbij village of al-Basha, a group of SNA fighters - reportedly from Suleiman Shah faction - looted the houses of several families, assaulting the inhabitants and arresting some of them. Among the victims whose names were confirmed to RIC were Hassan al-Haj Amiralag, who was stabbed twice while trying to prevent his house being robbed, and Haj Umair, who was also assaulted when he blocked militiamen entering his house. On the 19th of December, the 77-year-old Hilal Haj Saeed al-Haj Hamdou, was assaulted and killed in his house in Manbij city by SNA militiamen who wanted to steal from him. Also in Manbij city, two civilians - Issa and Mustafa Hamo Ismaili, reported their cars were stolen by members of the Hamza SNA faction.

Other incidents of public property being targeted included the SNA trashing the Mohammed Manla Ghazil library in Manbij.²² A video then showed the library burned.²³ During the offensive, Turkey also destroyed Manbij's Civil Council building with an airstrike.



Mohammed Manla Ghazil Library, before [L] and after [R]



Pharmacy trashed in Manbij

20 <https://rb.gy/h6bfk4> (Synergy)

21 https://fb.watch/xOTD_bUjv5/

22 <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/69121>

23 <https://t.me/vdcnsy/27875>



Manbij Civil Council building after Turkish airstrike on 08.12.2024

When seeking to investigate specific instances of rights violations, RIC found that many civilians in Manbij were too scared to testify to what they witnessed; or even talk about it anonymously on the phone. Even civilians who managed to flee Manbij and are now in DAANES-controlled areas are fearful to share on the phone what they know or saw out of fear of eventual SNA reprisal. “People don’t want to talk. They are afraid. They see what the SNA is doing, how they attack people – even people who are just going about their daily life. No one knows what the future of the region will be. They fear that the SNA will come for them,” a member of the Manbij People’s Council told RIC. She said she and many other people who worked within the DAANES in Manbij had to change their phone numbers after receiving death threats via telephone call from SNA militias. Most of the media organizations and institutions present in Manbij were forced to flee or cease their work when the SNA attacked. “No one dares to speak on the phone about what is going on there. Many people have changed their numbers because they are afraid. Those who I am still in contact with don’t dare to say anything about the current situation,” a civilian who fled Manbij, who had worked in the local administration there, told RIC, choosing to stay anonymous.

The decline in the security situation with the SNA’s entrance into Manbij also impeded humanitarian activities and affected IDP camps in Manbij. OCHA reported that all NGOs in Manbij closed their doors, with hygiene and health programs in Manbij IDP camp (home to 16,000 people) and other facilities suspended, with looting also reported.²⁴

2.3 TISHREEN DAM

After the Turkish and SNA assault on Manbij saw the city taken from the SDF, the front-line moved to the Tishreen Dam and Qereqozak Bridge. Both are strategically important gateways across the Euphrates River, linking the Kobane countryside to that of Manbij. If the SNA ground offensive manages to cross the River at either point, Kobane will soon be completely encircled.

The Tishreen Dam is located on the Syrian portion of the Euphrates River, in the eastern countryside of Manbij. SDF-SNA clashes in the immediate vicinity of the dam began on December 10th, as the SNA sought to cross the Euphrates River into Kobane countryside. Turkish airstrikes on the dam put its hydroelectric facilities out of service. As per the dam authorities, the strikes damaged turbines, cut essential cables, and caused leakages, with maintenance teams unable to enter the dam to reconnect cables and operate the dewatering pumps needed to prevent flooding and equipment damage due to the hostilities. The dam's structure itself was damaged, as was the power generation station and adjacent transformer and distribution infrastructure. OCHA reported that almost half a million people lost access to electricity. This electricity also supplied water stations serving Aleppo, Manbij, Kobane, Sarrin and Jarniyah with the power needed to function. With some stations having no suitable back-up power source, almost half a million people also lost access to water. Initially, an emergency technical team sought to prevent flooding inside the dam from water leakages, but the dewatering pumps were completely out of service, said dam management coordinator Imad Ubaid, adding that if critical equipment is flooded, control panels in the dam will be rendered permanently inoperative. On January 2nd, DAANES Energy Board co-chair, Ziyad Rustem, told RIC: "Attacks on the Tishreen have impacted everything – electricity, water, water for agriculture. [...] A main issue is that we cannot safely get to the Tishreen – there are Turkish drones and the SNA mercenaries attacking around there. We can't just go and come easily."

A stop-gap solution to temporarily restore electricity saw power delivered for one to three hours on 31 December and 1 January. However, this did not last due to heavy clashes around the al-Khafsa water pumping station.²⁵ OCHA reported that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and UNICEF conducted a joint mission to the Tishreen Dam's technical management facility on December 14th, "to facilitate urgent and critical repairs", plus "secured fuel to power the backup generator, enabling the safe drainage of the dam and safeguarding water supplies".²⁶ Despite this, the dam remains inoperable at the time of writing, and no non-government bodies have made any further trips to the dam since January 7th. Rustem says that Turkish officials - through the SNA - are no longer giving permission for UNICEF to come to the Tishreen from Aleppo. Speaking anonymously, a NES water official confirmed this to RIC. "UNICEF told the DAANES 'we know you want us to come, but the SNA are blocking our teams'. These NGOs request that Turkey hold fire when they visit. UNICEF came three or four times, but now they cannot anymore," he said.

25 <https://rb.gy/rmk7o9> (OCHA)

26 <https://rb.gy/ho60xs> (OCHA)

DAANES officials have also expressed concerns about segments of the dam collapsing - fears echoed by other parties. The NES NGO Forum warned of the risk of "flooding, loss of life, damage to agricultural land [... and] loss of electricity to large segments of Northeast Syria" should the dam collapse from repeated aerial bombardment.²⁷ The International Committee of the Red Cross also assessed that if the dam were damaged to the point of infrastructural collapse, "the destruction and humanitarian consequences of such release of flood waters would be devastating and could cause significant damage to the environment."²⁸

Turkish attacks on the Tishreen have compounded the "double crisis" of acute electricity and water shortages in the region, lamented the NES water official. Water stations require electricity to function. Without electricity from the main grid, water pumps cannot operate long-term. NES' main electrical grid has been systematically destroyed by Turkey in recent years. The Tishreen Dam is the first of three hydroelectric dams sitting on the portion of the Euphrates River that runs through NES. The largest dam is the Euphrates Dam, also known as the Tabqa Dam. The smallest is the Mansurah dam, also known as the Azadi Dam. All three dams form a key part of NES' main electricity grid. The other electricity production components to this grid - which should provide power free of charge to NES residents and public institutions and infrastructure - are the Suwaydiyah and Rimelan electricity stations near Derik and the Jibise station near Shaddadi. "NES is a large region," Ziyad Rustem told RIC in an interview in February 2025. "1,340 megawatts of electricity are needed if we want all households and institutions here to have uninterrupted electricity supply. Prior to Turkey's strikes on power stations in October 2023, we were producing almost 300MW, meeting 20-25% of our needs."

From November 2022 up to the time of writing, Turkey has carried out five short airstrike campaigns in which it has systematically targeted essential infrastructure in NES - oil wells, gas plants, electricity and water stations, medical infrastructure and goods factories - with airstrikes across several days each time. "Hakan Fidan was proud to declare 'we will destroy NES infrastructure'," said the water official (who was speaking not for attribution), alluding to the Turkish Foreign Minister's comments in October 2023, in which the latter stated that Ankara will not refrain from "destroying" the sources of income, infrastructure and superstructure in the hands of YPG forces, since they constitute "legitimate targets".²⁹ "Suwaydiyah is gone. Rimelan is gone. Tishreen is gone. Turkey bombed them all," the water official continued.

The Suwaydiyah electricity station has five large turbines that should produce electricity for general consumption. Directly adjacent to it, Rimelan station has seven smaller turbines, which produce electricity that is fed to NES' oil wells for their functioning. These two key stations were targeted in Turkish airstrikes in November 2022, October 2023, January 2024 and October 2024. "Suwaydiyah was put out of service. None of its turbines are functioning

27 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1867187381868118088>

28 https://x.com/ICRC_sy/status/1881278316633882928

29 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c79zj7rz3l4o>

30 <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/18102023>

currently. For Rimelan, we got two of its turbines back into service. They are critical for the oil infrastructure. But the electricity from Suwaydiyah that was feeding all the local transfer stations and delivering energy to hospitals, homes, mills, bakeries, and water stations, is gone,” explained Rustem. The Jibise station has been untouched by Turkish airstrikes “but it is small, and only serves the local area around it, producing just 14 or 15 megawatts.”

The Tishreen Dam is now producing no electricity; before Turkish strikes began it was producing 60-70 megawatts. Through the Euphrates and Mansurah Dams, 60 megawatts are sent to the Jazira Canton - in lieu of power from Suwaydiyah - while 50 megawatts are channelled to Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor. However Ziyad Rustem said that most of this electricity “is just for getting the water stations to continue pumping, for the hospitals, for the mills to make flour and ovens to make bread. It is just this. This electricity doesn’t reach most people - apart from the tiny proportion who live near the stations and can get a line. But 90% of people are not getting any electricity from the general grid.” For daily-use electricity, most households rely on purchasing a few daily hours of electricity from local fuel-powered generators.

Currently, Kobane and its surroundings are cut from NES’ general electricity grid due to Turkey’s strikes on the Tishreen infrastructure. Unlike in the Jazira Canton, the cities and towns near the Euphrates River have no local system of neighbourhood fuel-powered generators. “We are living in darkness,” says Berivan Mohammed Jumaa from Kobane. “It has a massive impact: we are being stripped of the necessities we need to survive”. Kobane City Executive Council member Mizgin Khalil says that for daily use, households that can afford it are using solar panels or mini generators, but the amount of electricity produced is very little. These options are not feasible long-term for farms and large infrastructure like water stations. “[For large infrastructure] generators can be used temporarily, for one or two days, or even one month, but after that it is impossible,” Rustem said. Hence with power from the Tishreen gone, water pumping stations meeting the area’s domestic and agricultural consumption needs have lost their only long-term power source. “The Tishreen dam guarantees food and water security” in Kobane, the water official stated. At the water station feeding Kobane city, located in Shuyukh al-Fawqani village, staff resorted to generator use to power the pumps part-time. On February 2nd, Turkish warplane strikes destroyed the station there.



Shuyukh al-Fawqani water station after Turkish airstrikes

Now Kobane residents are reliant solely on purchasing trucked water - when it reaches them³¹ - or extracting water from small local wells, which is limited by the costly use of fuel it requires. Most of these wells, privately owned, were dug in 2014, when ISIS' siege on the city cut the main water supply. People are drilling new boreholes now. The underground water stores these boreholes extract from are replenished by rain and surface water run-off. The levels of pollutants in this surface run-off are high, and health staff say that diseases linked to consumption of dirty water have been on the rise in recent years. Additionally, drought conditions lead experts to warn that groundwater levels will soon fall critically low. "We actually can't be certain of the full status of the below-ground conditions. The most recent thorough and complete hydrological and geological studies of this region was completed in 1963, by Russia," the water official tells RIC. "To do fresh assessments is really important - but prohibitively expensive." Fearing the consequences of over-extracting from underground water stores, the DAANES issued a circular banning unregulated construction of new private wells in 2023, however they did not enforce the ban strictly, and such construction continues. "People here have no other resources for water. They are forced to do this drilling. If you ban something, you have to present an alternative to the community. People will keep digging wells even if it is banned unless there is an alternative," the water official explained. "We know Turkey wants to use everything it has against the community here. But it looks like no one cares internationally. So we need to find solutions here."

On January 3rd, Turkish airstrikes on the electricity conversion station in al-Jarniyah cut the power source for the area's water pumping stations. This was followed by direct strikes on two water pumps. Water was cut from 96 villages. The local authorities could replace the destroyed pumps, and rent a power line from the Euphrates Dam to enable partial restoration of water supply after 33 days of outage. Still, the co-chair of al-Jarniyah's water unit, Ahmed al-Jamal, said that the electricity line is weak, and that when water demand rises in summer, the supply will be insufficient.

"The situation is dire for civilians," says Kurdish Red Crescent medic Abdi Mahmoud al-Ali. "You can purchase water from trucks, but it isn't enough for all of Kobane. People are borrowing water from each other, saying 'today I need 10 L from you, I will give it back tomorrow.' When there is no water, hygiene takes a hit - both in homes and hospitals. This means sicknesses become more prevalent. When summer arrives and water needs rise, this problem will intensify." Shaheen Ali, a lawyer from Kobane, told RIC: "There is no electricity currently. No electricity means the water pumps don't have power so don't function. As a civilian living in Kobane, we are buying tanked water brought from wells. But there is no electricity. It's been a while now. Since the war began, until now. Some have solar power, but it's winter. The sun isn't so strong. Many times even those with solar panels have no power." At the Kobane hospital, triage nurse Khaled said he considered the aim of Turkey's attacks "to drive people out of the region". He said the hospital was relying on a generator for power, but they have struggled to procure sufficient diesel. "We have also spent two months without water, which creates many issues. Many medical conditions are worsened by unclean or insufficient water."

31 <https://theintercept.com/2025/02/03/kobane-syria-turkey-airstrikes-kurds-dam/>

Background - the Tishreen Dam

The Tishreen Dam's hydroelectric station powers much of NES - but since its liberation from ISIS in 2017, only 2 of its 6 turbines have been working, and low water levels mean electricity output is well-below maximum capacity. NES - and Syria as a whole - is facing a serious water crisis. A key factor is the dangerously low levels of water flowing into the Syria-held portion of the Euphrates river from Turkey. Over five million people in Syria rely directly on this water for their survival and livelihoods. Reduced water flow affects water authorities' ability to provide their services, and means contaminants in water rise in concentration, causing disease to spread. In 2021, officials noticed a sudden and dramatic drop in water levels in the Euphrates River, beginning on January 24th.³² In June that year, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that 54 of the 73 water stations along the western bank of the Euphrates were significantly or severely affected by critically low water levels.³³ The electricity produced by NES' 3 dams on the Euphrates plummeted to under 125MW, whereas at the beginning of the year 400MW were being produced, according to officials at Tabqa dam.³⁴ NES' Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, Euphrates and Deir ez-Zor cantons received their electricity entirely from these dams. The UN Humanitarian Coordinators for Syria also released a statement expressing "deep concern" about the "historic lows" recorded on the Euphrates river, which threaten to leave 5 million people without reliable drinking water or electricity.³⁵ While Turkey has denied responsibility for reduced water levels, and pointed out that it is facing its own water shortages, Human Rights Watch cited research showing that between January and May 2021, as water levels were rapidly declining in Syria's reservoirs, levels at Turkey's Atatürk Reservoir, one of several dams on the Turkish portion of the Euphrates, were actually climbing.³⁶

These conditions worsened in subsequent summers, as RIC also recorded.³⁷ In the summer of 2023, the DAANES announced it was suspending the Tishreen Dam's operations for 1 week, after the water fell below the 'dead level' of 320m, at which point the dam can no longer produce electricity. Hamouda al-Hammadi, the dam's administrative engineer, told RIC: "At full capacity, with enough water flowing, the dam's 6 turbines could provide 630MW of electricity, 24 hours a day". But, al-Hammadi said, they lack spare pieces to replace old or damaged parts, so usually only 2 or 3 turbines are functional. Furthermore, due to the severe reduction of water entering the Syrian portion of the Euphrates River from Turkey, the turbines that are running cannot produce so much electricity. For example in 2023, Kobane and its surrounding villages were receiving only 45MW for 4 hours/day from the dam on average. The issue of the Euphrates flow is key. While the Turkish government points to climate change and drought as the sole causes of the plummeting water levels in the Euphrates river, Human Rights Watch notes that "Turkey has also severely restricted the flow of water downstream to the Syrian-held portion of the river to well beneath the

32 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1407026120986447872>

33 <https://rb.gy/7zs0lm> (OCHA)

34 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1407026140959629316>

35 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1407026155056676865>

36 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/syria-parties-conflict-aggravate-cholera-epidemic>

37 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1522843806172864513>

500 cubic meters stipulated by a 1987 agreement between Turkey and Syria."³⁸ The reduction of water in the Euphrates is believed to have given rise to the deadly cholera outbreak in the summer of 2022. HRW stated: "Turkey can, and should, immediately stop aggravating Syria's water crisis."³⁹



On December 23rd, the SDF initiated a counter-offensive against the SNA, seeking to move the fighting away from the Tishreen Dam itself in order to protect it. Instead of clashes occurring directly on and around the Tishreen Dam, the SDF's move pushed the frontline several kilometers west. The SNA and Turkish attacks on the SDF since then have been primarily concentrated on the hills around seven kilometers south and southwest of Tishreen dam.

On January 7th, the DAANES stated⁴⁰ that repeated Turkish and SNA shelling on and around the Tishreen Dam "threatens a humanitarian disaster" and called on the UN and Interna-

38 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/26/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-disrupt-water-electricity>

39 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/07/syria-parties-conflict-aggravate-cholera-epidemic>

40 https://x.com/aanes_official/status/1876666348937637937

tional Coalition to “take urgent action to spare the region a major tragedy.” The statement then invited NES’ people to participate in a protest at the dam “to denounce the systematic bombing that threatens human lives and destroys infrastructure” and to support the SDF as the latter confront Turkish and SNA attacks.⁴¹

The following day, two civilian convoys headed towards the dam, one heading south to reach the dam from Kobane, the other heading north to reach the dam from Raqqa. Upon arriving at the dam, the civilian mass made a statement condemning Turkey for putting “the lives of thousands at great risk by targeting vital facilities, particularly Tishreen Dam, which feeds the area with electricity and water”, called on the Coalition to intervene, and expressed support for the SDF.⁴² Four days later, a second convoy departed from the Jazira region, and those who had taken part in the initial convoy returned home. Two days after that, another convoy of people from Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor arrived at the dam to swap places. The protest continued in this format, with new convoys arriving every few days. As of the time of writing, the civilian demonstration at the dam is ongoing.

On almost every occasion, Turkish and SNA aerial attacks have targeted the civilian convoys - both while they were on the road, and on the body of the dam itself. From the date of the departure of the first convoy (08.01.2025) to the time of writing (12.03.2025), RIC records the names of 22 civilians killed in such attacks. More than 200 have also been injured. Turkish state media accused the SDF of using civilians as “human shields for their own interests.”⁴³ Speaking to convoy participants, RIC found that the two main motivations for participating in the demonstration at the dam were [1] wanting to protect the dam as a vital energy source and piece of civilian infrastructure and [2] wanting to show support for the SDF in their efforts to hold off the Turkish-backed SNA advance. Nour Hussein, a demonstration participant from Amude, said: “We came here to support our fighters and the SDF. This dam also is essential for the lives of thousands of citizens. We want immediate intervention from peace activists, human rights organizations, and international powers to stop these attacks.”

On January 8th, Turkey targeted the first convoy while it was on the road, killing 3 civilians and injuring 15. “We wanted to highlight the dangers facing the dam. Turkish strikes could trigger its collapse - which would be catastrophic for millions,” Ahmed, who participated in the first convoy, told RIC. “Turkish planes hit the head of the convoy. The attacks did not stop, really close to the convoy.” Ruken, who had joined the same convoy, said: “People had flocked to the Tishreen - women, men, young and old. Turkey attacked the convoy unceasingly. The convoy coming from the Kobane direction was struck. So was the other convoy. When our convoy of cars was struck we decided to continue on foot. [...] We wanted to show support for the SDF, give morale to our forces, and say ‘we won’t let this dam fall into the hands of those mercenaries’. The dam is also in danger from Turkish airstrikes. If it collapses, many areas will be submerged. As the convoy neared the Tishreen, drones were always above us. One of those killed was a civilian woman from Zenobia [a women’s union in

41 <https://rb.gy/4znjao> (DAANES)

42 <https://hawarnews.com/en/civilian-convoy-confirms-its-stay-in-tishreen-dam-area>

43 <https://rb.gy/ov9ief> (Anadolu Ajansi)

NES' Arab-majority areas]. She was responsible for Raqqa's Zenobia education committee. [...] As well as directly striking the convoy, Turkey was hitting around it to scare us."into the hands of those mercenaries'. The dam is also in danger from Turkish airstrikes. If it collapses, many areas will be submerged. As the convoy neared the Tishreen, drones were always above us. One of those killed was a civilian woman from Zenobia [a women's union in NES' Arab-majority areas]. She was responsible for Raqqa's Zenobia education committee. [...] As well as directly striking the convoy, Turkey was hitting around it to scare us."

Ahmed Sheikho Jadid, who was also in the first convoy: "We planned to make a statement at the Tishreen Dam, with people gathered from Jazira, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Tabqa, and Kobane. We wanted to make a statement to the public opinion, and take the attention of the world and highlight the danger on the dam, in addition to the consequences that millions of people will suffer if this dam collapses. This was planned, aiming at getting the attention of public opinion. [...] As we arrived, the Turkish planes targeted a car at the head of the convoy, and the convoy had to pause; then we decided that we would continue to the dam and we will make the statement. As soon as we neared the dam, they targeted the middle of the convoy. Three people fell and others were injured. The convoy of civilians made a brave decision to go on to the dam, despite being targeted by Turkey's drone and warplanes. The attacks were really close to the convoy, but we did not stop; we continued to go to the dam. We stayed 3 or 4 days there."

Turkey conducted multiple strikes on the 8th: a video shows one landing mere meters away from the convoy, while a separate strike 500m away hit the road itself, around 3 km from the dam.⁴⁴ Convoy participant Ruken told RIC, "we patched up the road ourselves after it was struck, putting the concrete back in place with our hands so that the cars could still pass."



44 <https://x.com/baderkhanahmad/status/1877074453907009607>

Local channel RonahiTV also published pictures of a car damaged in the strike⁴⁵ as well as images from hospital of those injured.⁴⁶



Turkish air strikes on 08.01.2025 killed Karam Ahmad al-Shahab al-Hamad, who is visible in both photos in the brown coat on the ground

Other convoy participants reported strikes ongoing in the areas surrounding the convoy as they neared the dam, plus strikes around the dam when the group had reached the dam body. At the dam, civilians shouted chants in support of the SDF.⁴⁷ The three civilians killed in the strikes on the initial convoy were Azad Farhan Muhammad Hassan (who worked within the Revolutionary Youth organization, Zozan Hammou, and Karam Ahmad al-Shahab al-Hamad (who worked within the Zenobia Women's Gathering, the principal women's union in NES' Arab-majority regions).

RIC spoke to a range of people from every convoy. All interviewees reported numerous strikes "day and night" occurring in the immediate vicinity of the dam, including on the water directly next to the dam body. In addition to these, Turkish/SNA strikes directly on the body of the dam occurred - although these were less frequent than the strikes around the dam.

On January 15th, Turkish drone strikes on a new convoy coming from Kobane killed two civilians - both ambulance drivers - and injured four, including three paramedics. Convoy participant Shahin Ali, a lawyer from Kobane, told RIC. "When we got close to the dam, the planes bombed us three times. They targeted an ambulance and the driver, Omar, was killed. When we reached the dam we were targeted by drones. [...] Those killed were all civilians." The targeting of medical staff is covered in more detail later in the report.

At least two Turkish airstrikes or artillery fire targeted the Kobane convoy heading to the Tishreen on the 15th, roughly two kilometres from the dam heading to the dam.⁴⁸



Aftermath of strikes on the road to the dam on 15.01.2025

47 <https://x.com/mutludc/status/1876993407786136001>

48 <https://t.me/radiorojava/14885>

Berivan Mohammed Jumaa, a convoy participant from Kobane, told RIC: "I came to the Tishreen Dam to protect our land and dam. Turkey and its mercenaries want to control this dam. This dam belongs to all Syrians - it is not the people of Kobane or the Kurds'. It provides electricity and water not only to the people of NES, but to all Syrians. Turkey tried to prevent us from reaching this area [the dam], as seen clearly from their attack on civilians on the way here [on the 15th]. They deliberately targeted ambulances, which is completely unacceptable. They targeted the road, cutting it after the attack, and many civilians were killed or wounded. The ambulances were completely destroyed, leaving no means to treat the wounded. The scenes are impossible to forget, and arriving here was extremely difficult. The convoy was targeted right in the middle. They definitely didn't want us to arrive here. Then yesterday [on the 16th] while we - the people who want to protect this dam from Turkey and its mercenaries - were dancing at midday in defiance of these attacks, fresh strikes began. Out of nowhere, we were attacked in the middle of the square. They bombed the civilians, causing people to fall down injured. I personally was wounded, but I was unfazed. I looked around and saw so many civilians lying around, wounded. These scenes were truly difficult to forget. [...] My health situation is dire. The pressure from the explosion has damaged my ears, and some shrapnel remains in my body and face."





Aftermath of strikes on the road to the dam on 15.01.2025

Later strikes at the western edge of the dam once the convoy had arrived there on the 15th killed 4 people and injured 17, plus destroyed and damaged parked cars.

Kobane resident Fatma Khalil, who works for the NES cultural association 'Hilala Zerin', was one of those injured from the strike on the road on the 15th. She continued to the dam and then witnessed the attacks there too. "Bodies were blown to the ground. There was a woman whose head was blown off her body. Her body was in one place and her head in another. She was killed alongside her husband, leaving behind a six-month-old baby. The baby stayed at home because both her parents wanted to come to the dam. [...] It was blood and brains on the ground - the dam structure was full of blood. We pulled out our friends. Many casualties were unrecognizable. One woman was recognized by the bracelet that she was wearing on her hand."



"The pressure blast as a result of the attack was big. When we heard the sound of the strike, we thought we were all going to die. 3 civilians were killed and 18 wounded [these numbers later became 4 and 17 respectively as one injured person died from their wounds]; not lightly but actually severely as some lost their teeth and and their jaws were cracked open. [...] Some were wounded in their legs, and with all of this we were running down [to the inside of the dam body]. We stayed down a bit, and after an hour we went up again, to continue defying Turkey. We are determined. We came here for this."

Macida, who is a member of the Euphrates Canton branch of Kongra Star (the main women's umbrella organization in NES), said "people were gathered together and among the cars" when the strike hit, "so the attack had a bigger impact as shrapnel and glasses were blown around". She directly witnessed the killing of husband and wife, Heba Omar Aziz and Adhem Ali: "I carried [their bodies] with my hands."



Civilian casualties from strikes at the dam on the 15.01.2025

Bekir, a Kurd from Kobane, said he came to the dam when he heard there would be a civilian protest there, because he wanted to participate in protecting the dam. If the dam fell into SNA hands "it would have severe consequences for us". "I've been here for four days now," he told RIC on the 18th, "and we've witnessed a lot. Turkey's aircraft were constantly overhead, never stopping. On our way here they bombed the road, trying to stop us from arriving. When night fell there was also bombing. In the morning we got up and danced to raise motivation. On the first day they bombed us three times. I ran to the wounded to help them. [...] The next day] I heard a strike targeting a car. People were shouting to get down. There were cars bombed and fires broke out. They bombed five times." An end to Turkish strikes at the dam and on NES would mean real steps towards a new Syria, Bekir lamented. "We came here to stop the war. We want a solution and an end to the fighting. We are exhausted."

On the 16th several strikes in quick succession on the dam killed one man, Mohammed Qasmo, and injured 14 demonstrators and 3 journalists who were reporting at the scene.⁴⁹



Aftermath of strikes on the dam body on the 16.01.2025

Fatma Khalil said: "Turkey's aircraft had targeted the dam three times directly. People were present up there. Fire broke out amongst the cars in which we had travelled here. So we had no car to get back to Kobane. Smoke covered the place. [...] Turkey targeted the dam's surroundings, causing rubble to fall and shattering windows of the dam. Even doors were falling - the pressure impact of the attack was

big. Yet people were determined. Some refused to go down [inside the dam] until 5 am. Old fathers and mothers decided to stay on top of the dam until dawn. They sat around a fire and played music and shouted slogans for the SDF throughout the night. [...] I saw the attacks with my own eyes - there were no fighters. I swear to God, there was no fighter or any weapon. There is nothing but us: civilians with our blankets and some food. It is our duty to protect this dam, because it supplies water for us, it is providing us with the necessities of life."

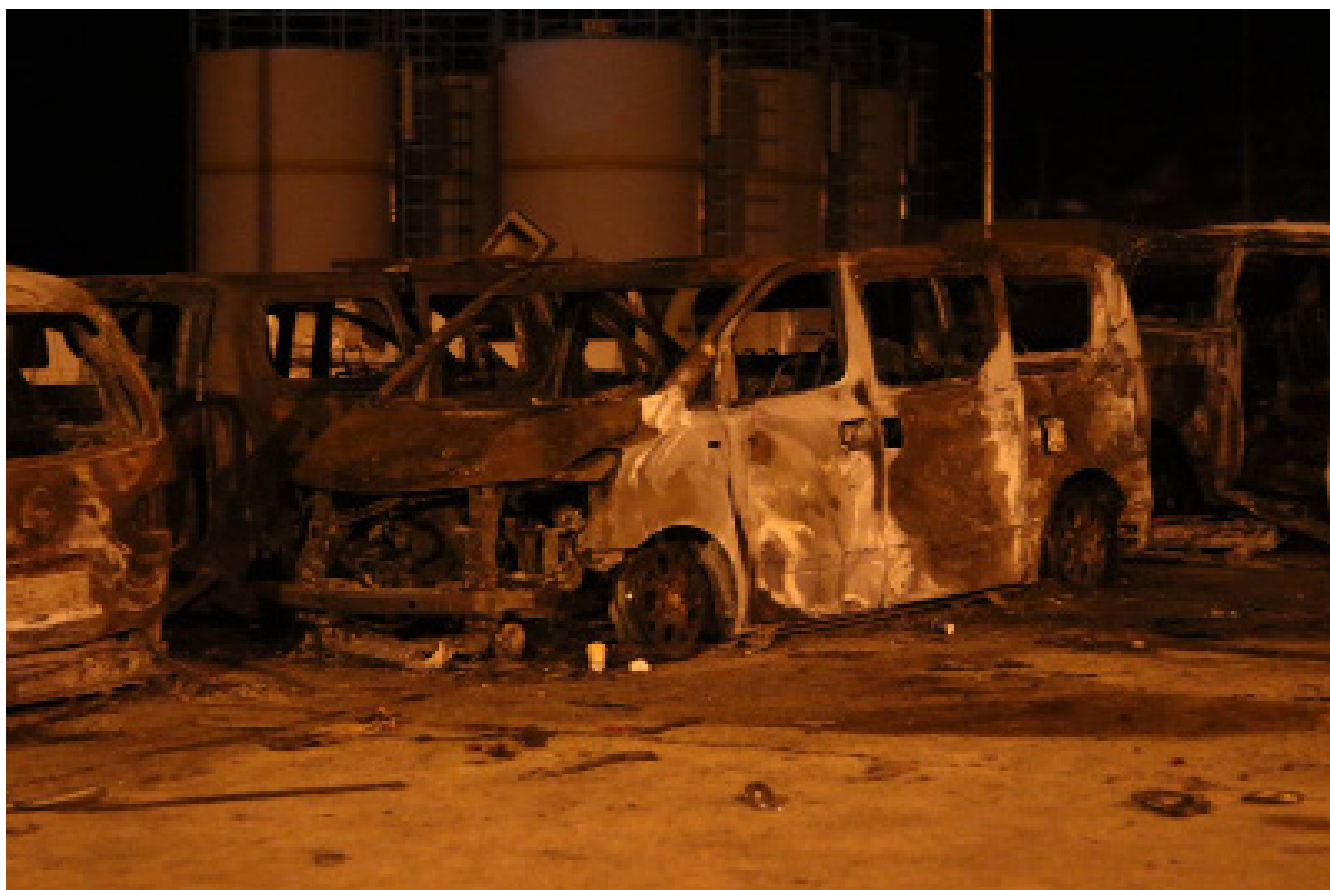
Another Kobane resident, Imam, was injured on the 16th when dancing on the dam close to parked cars. "I was with civilians who have nothing to do with the military nor weapons. We came to support our people, who have been without water or electricity for months. [...] We are here for peace. We do not seek war." He described the scene just before the strike happened: "People were among their cars. We were dancing together, delighted by the moment and unaware of what was to come. He [Erodgan] targeted cars, people—including kids and the elderly—not differentiating between anyone. Everyone was targeted. Some were killed." Kongra Star's Macida told RIC she was undeterred by the strikes. "The SNA wants to take over the dam and deprive us of water and electricity, and drive us out of our lands. We do not accept this. Attacks on the dam, including bombardment and aerial assaults, have a massive impact."

RIC published video interviews filmed on the 18th, with those who experienced the strikes on the 15th and 16th, which can be found on the RIC 'X' (formerly Twitter) account [here](#). A RIC field team visited the dam from 17th to 20th of January to observe the demonstration and conduct interviews with participants.

"On the one hand, the atmosphere resembles a festival, in that there is live music, singing, and dancing. People light bonfires in the evening, and come together to share songs and poems. Everyone is telling you 'we won't be intimidated by Turkey's attacks'. At the same

time, there are frequent airstrikes occurring around the dam. Around 13:00 there were Turkish warplane strikes on the western side of the Tishreen Dam. Half an hour later on the eastern side. We can see three planes circling in the sky and hear them too," reported a RIC field researcher at the dam on the 18th. Turkish drone strikes on the 15th, 16th and 18th hit many civilian cars parked at the dam. "There are two main areas where cars are parked. One is in the center - this is where the people stay, where the people are demonstrating, and everything is happening. This is where the first three strikes happened [on the 18th], two on this black car - which later exploded. This is also where the first strikes on the 15th and 16th happened, on a few cars. Then there's a long convoy of stationary cars by the red poles you see sticking up - this is the road along the dam, where cars are parked two by two. You see some cars damaged there. They were damaged on the 15th or 16th, then again on the 18th. Even at 2am, Turkey was hitting parked cars."





Cars destroyed in air strikes on the Tishreen Dam, 18.01.2025

6 civilians were killed and 19 injured from strikes on the dam body on the 18th, as witnessed by RIC's field team. The funeral of all six was held in Qamishlo. It saw an unprecedentedly large turn-out, with the graveyard packed to the brim, attesting to the fact that they were each well-known figures in the city.⁵⁰ A mother-of-four, Munija Haydar was the Democratic Union Party's Qamishlo branch co-chair, and previously was a spokesperson for Kongra Star, NES' women's umbrella organization. Kefo Osman was a much-loved football coach. Renowned Kurdish artist, Juma Khalil's (popularly known as 'Bave Teyar') impact on the Kurdish arts and culture scene in Syria was celebrated in statements from various artists and organizations in NES, such as the Rojava Higher Institute of Art and the Raqqa city arts and culture center. Muzefer Mihemed, and Abdulkadir Ibrahim both worked within Qamishlo's city council, while Akrem Rakhoul was a volunteer with Qamishlo's civilian protection teams (HPC⁵¹).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) also verified videos of the strike on the dam protest and its aftermath, plus spoke to witnesses, reporting that they "could not identify any visible military targets or weapons in the immediate vicinity of the protest".⁵²

On the 21st, an aerial strike killed 2 civilians and injured 20. "I came with the Derik and Girke Lege convoy," said Abu Jelal. "They hit us on the dam. The bombing was serious. Mihyedeen was killed. We had travelled there together. His house was just in front of mine in our village. I was wounded but thankfully not heavily". An SNA-linked account published footage taken by the drone that carried out the attack, titled "the loaded [drone] sends congratulations and blessings to the SDF celebrations at Tishreen dam."⁵³ The video - verified by HRW - shows two grenades being dropped on demonstrators dancing at the dam.



50 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1881749465754898936>

51 <https://rb.gy/ik7km3> (Rojava Information Center)

52 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/30/northeast-syria-apparent-war-crime-turkiye-backed-forces>

53 <https://x.com/MThwry54056/status/1881816744995741804>



Hiba Zayadin, senior Middle East and North Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch, commented on the incident: “The SNA and Turkish forces have demonstrated a clear and troubling pattern of unlawful attacks against civilians and civilian objects and even appear to be celebrating them.”⁵⁴

It is difficult to definitively attribute every attack on the dam to either Turkey or the SNA. Reviewing footage published of fragments of an American-made TOW missile (which the US extensively supplied to several Syrian opposition groups up until 2017, hence some SNA militias still have stocks) reportedly filmed at the scene of the strike on the dam on the 15th, researcher Alexander McKeever wrote: “While the video showing the fragments is not geolocatable its authenticity appears likely, implying SNA groups were at least in part responsible for the attack on the demonstration from their front line positions several kilometers

away.”⁵⁵ RIC also photographed TOW fragments at the dam.⁵⁶ The SNA use of TOWs against the SDF in the current fighting in Manbij has also been captured on film.⁵⁷ With regards to the video published showing the strike on the 21st, McKeever said: “The use of a quadcopter and that the video appears to have first circulated on opposition media implies that the SNA carried out the attack, however the SDF published footage the next day found on a downed drone showing Turkish soldiers operating similar devices meaning it could’ve been either.”⁵⁸

The protest has also attracted some limited international participation, with at least three people from outside Syria joining in. A German physiotherapist, Jakob Rihn, and a German ecological and women’s activist, Lea Bunse, travelled with the convoy that left the Jazira region on the 17th. Both were injured from strikes on the dam on separate occasions. RIC interviewed both Rihn following his injury. Rihn was filming at the dam at the moment of

54 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/30/northeast-syria-apparent-war-crime-turkiye-backed-forces>

55 <https://open.substack.com/pub/akmckeever/p/this-week-in-northern-syria-32025>

56 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1881017614992089549>

57 <https://x.com/NotWoofers/status/1880994893843349983>

58 <https://open.substack.com/pub/akmckeever/p/this-week-in-northern-syria-32025>

an explosion on the 18th, and hence caught it on camera.⁵⁹ RIC had also photographed the car that Rihn was standing by in the video, after it was hit, likely by a drone. A short time later, as Rihn and other civilians were inspecting the damage, a second explosion happened. Rihn told RIC his left side was injured from shrapnel. "I heard a huge explosion. I saw that the strike was near to me. I went to see if I could help people who were wounded, but others had already taken care of them. I returned to the site of the strike - the car. I wanted to record a video. Then there was another huge explosion. I was confused. It was black in front of my eyes. I saw I was wounded as a lot of blood was dropping. I was taken away by someone". On the 21st, Lea Bunse was dancing with other protestors on the dam when they were targeted. She was seriously injured when shrapnel from the bomb entered her stomach and legs. Speaking to the BBC in hospital later, she was able to identify herself in the aforementioned video the SNA published.⁶⁰ Two weeks later, a Scottish women's activist and writer, Jenni Keasden, published her experiences of the demonstration online while spending three days at the dam. On social media, she said "Turkey has repeatedly bombed the protests", describing this as "unjustified military aggression on Syrian territory". She has published numerous clips in English language sharing short interviews she made at the dam with demonstrators.⁶¹

In every convoy, medical professionals were present. Delil Ibrahim, a nurse, travelled in the first convoy on the 8th. "I went to support our people there, as a civilian and to protect the dam, because the dam is being targeted. We went with our ambulance, bringing medical supplies with us too, in case we would have to treat anyone. We had nurses and doctors with us, we had a full medical team. In my car there were three nurses including myself, plus one doctor." Three health workers have been killed in attacks on the Tishreen protest thus far, as well as six wounded, when their ambulances were directly targeted. RIC has interviewed several health workers who survived such attacks.

On January 13th, dashcam footage from an ambulance on the road from the Tishreen showed it just avoiding being struck by a missile.⁶² On January 15th, Turkish airstrikes on the convoy from Kobane that was approaching the dam, which included medical teams in three ambulances from both the Kurdish Red Crescent and the local health authority, killed two ambulance drivers - Maher and Omar - and injured four paramedics. Fatma Khalil witnessed the attack: "planes targeted the ambulance directly. Shrapnel flew everywhere. I was wounded in my hand, belly and leg. I grabbed my wounds and ran to my friends who were also struck. The driver's head was cracked open, his brains splattered on the ground. The attack shattered all the ambulance's windows and blew up its tires. People were confused about which car to use to transport the wounded. They found another ambulance, but it was also wrecked. They took them with a civilian car. One wounded person lost his shoulder, and people tied his arm to his body with a string."

59 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1880992256808902842>

60 <https://x.com/mutludc/status/1894939278603383012>

61 <https://www.instagram.com/jkeasden/>

62 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1880628179041440071>



Kurdo Hesên

Kurdo Hesên, an ambulance driver working for the local Health Board, stated that two of the three ambulances were driving next to each other. "The road was targeted [on the way there]. We got out of the car to try to repair the road, and were targeted. It hit right next to us. Shrapnel flew around. I was wounded. Two of my friends - Mahir and Omar - were both killed. Fadila was wounded, as were two others. Myself and Mustafa [another ambulance driver] transported the deceased and wounded to hospital."

Nurse Zozan Abdi, described to RIC how she was injured and her friend and ambulance driver Maher was killed. "My companions and I went to provide help in the ambulance as there was a need at the Tishreen. Turkey was striking people there. We left from Kobane at 10:30. Our car was targeted - a car of medics coming to give first aid. Turkey's planes were above the convoy the whole time. They hit our surroundings. Then they targeted closer, in front of people. We were still unscathed. Then they hit really close to the ambulance. I didn't realize anything. I just heard the bomb and glass fell on me and the nurse next to me - Fadila Beki - screamed for help. I saw all her teeth were gone and her mouth was full of blood. I tried to help her. Then the ambulance driver [Maher] was shouting "Zozan, help me, I am dying." I opened the door. I wanted to go to the other side of the vehicle. I saw that the ambulance head had rammed into another car. I saw many people bleeding and wounded. I opened the driver's door. I saw shrapnel had hit his thigh, cutting the main artery. There was so much blood. I told him I would save him. I put pressure on the wound. As I did this I saw Fadila had fallen from the car. I went to give her some cloth to put on her mouth. I told her to hold it while I helped Maher. As I was doing this, others were getting Maher out of the car. Another ambulance had reached us. We tied his thigh, but he was bleeding so much. The artery had been punctured. In the other ambulance, I told the driver to get to Kobane fast. We were trying to treat him on the way. He was losing too much blood. We got close to Sarrin. Another ambulance was behind us - with Ahin and Kurdo inside. They were bringing other wounded people - Ahmed, Fadila and Omar - to hospital. Omar died on the road. Maher passed away the other day in hospital. My injuries were mild. I was advised not to return to the dam however, because Turkey is targeting the cars."

Two of the three ambulances in the convoy on the 15th hence returned to Kobane before reaching the dam. On the 16th, following further strikes on the dam body on the night of the 15th and morning of the 16th, which killed a total of 5 people and injured 36, the Euphrates Canton Health Board stated "there are seriously injured people who cannot be taken to hospitals because of [...] targeting of ambulances and their destruction." Ambulances coming under fire hence directly cost civilian lives, with one of those injured on the 16th later dying due to her wounds. More broadly, attacks on medical staff and infrastructure have had a significant negative impact on their ability to provide care. Kurdish Red Crescent medic Abdi Mahmoud al-Ali said that two of his team's ambulances have been destroyed and put out of service in airstrikes. "Another was struck, but we are still running it, having partially repaired it."



Zozan Abdi [L of photo] with Fadila [C of photo] and ambulance driver Maher [R of photo] on their way to the Tishreen Dam, 15.01.2024



Maher injured on the ground after the airstrike, 15.01.2024



Damages to a Kurdish Red Crescent ambulance from Turkish air strikes

Al-Ali said that his team are fearful in the current situation. "Health workers have the right to retrieve wounded people. But many times they have been targeted." Sarrin health center is the medical point closest to the Tishreen Dam - although it is not a hospital and only has limited resources. Taking precautions, the workers there have been parking the ambulances under a covered area instead of their normal spot, so that they cannot be easily targeted while stationed there. Having witnessed the direct targeting of medical vehicles, al-Ali's team are reluctant to go out in marked ambulances near the dam: "It's dangerous for us to ride in ambulances near the dam now. Ambulances have been targeted directly so we go in normal cars to the dam now. We keep our ambulances in Sarrin. We bring injured people from the dam to Sarrin in normal cars, then from Sarrin to Kobane hospital in ambulances." On the 18th, Turkey struck a Kurdish Red Crescent ambulance⁶³ that was carrying wounded people from the Tishreen who had been hit by strikes that day to hospital, according to witnesses. Human Rights Watch (HRW) also referred

enced "a drone strike by the Türkiye-Syrian National Army (SNA) coalition that hit a Kurdish Red Crescent (KRC) ambulance on January 18, 2025, in northern Syria", labelling it "an apparent war crime".⁶⁴ In an interview with HRW, one of the KRC ambulance drivers recounted: "While en route to the dam, just before Huriya village about 30 kilometers from the dam, a civilian car signaled us to stop, saying they had an injured girl." The girl had an abdominal wound due to the attack at the Dam that day. He transferred her into the ambulance. "Shortly after I re-entered the ambulance, we were struck by a drone attack. The explosion forced the ambulance doors to open and shattered both its windows and doors." While his colleague suffered a minor injury from a metal fragment to his hand, the driver was unharmed. "The second ambulance arrived at the scene, and the injured girl was transported to the emergency hospital along with us. Thankfully, everyone was safe." KRC also condemned the attack, stating: "According to international law, targeting the wounded, paramedics, ambulances and civilians are flagrant war crimes [...] We, as the

63 <https://t.me/SengerKurdistan/9022>

64 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/30/northeast-syria-apparent-war-crime-turkiye-backed-forces>

Kurdish Red Crescent, condemn in the strongest terms these violations targeting humanitarian work and condemn the international silence in the face of these acts". Hiba Zayadin, senior Middle East and North Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch, stated: "Striking an ambulance carrying wounded civilians on an open road is unlikely to be an accident. It looks like a war crime, and the Türkiye-SNA coalition should be held accountable."

Khaled, a triage nurse at Kobane hospital, tells RIC: "We received wounded people to the hospital on a daily basis. Our medical work is affected by the situation. Ambulances are being targeted so they can't get to the wounded people. Most of these attacks are on the road to the Tishreen dam, but they could happen anywhere."

On another note, Turkey has also carried out strikes targeting ambulances transporting wounded SDF fighters. On the 10th, Turkey targeted an ambulance on the road to Sarrin. The ambulance driver and one civilian in the car were killed, while the wounded fighter and two paramedics travelling in the ambulance were severely wounded. The ambulance driver, Kurdo Najdat Buzi, was commemorated by his fellow medical team in Kobane.



Ambulance targeted on 10.01.2025

2.4 ELSEWHERE IN NES

Turkish and SNA airstrikes or ground shelling on civilian homes and cars outside the immediate field of conflict was responsible for the majority of civilian deaths.

Near the end of January, 18 civilians were killed in 3 attacks across 24 hours. A further 18 were left wounded in the same strikes. A Turkish drone strike on a fruit and vegetable market in Sarrin, south of Kobane, killed 12 civilians and injured 13. In Kobane hospital, RIC spoke to survivors and family members of those killed. "It's a civilian market; there are no military targets there," said Khalil Abdo. "Three of my nephews were there [at the market at the time it was struck]. One, aged 13, was killed. One's arm was wounded, the other's leg. [...] They strike around Sarrin regularly, but this is the first strike directly on the city center. Turkish forces also regularly and indiscriminately fire rockets and mortars across the Euphrates. It's making us think about packing our bags and leaving."





Khalil Abdo and his injured nephew in Kobane hospital

Yassem helped out in the market, selling fruit and vegetables. His father ran to the market when he heard the sound of a huge explosion: "The strike was on the covered fruit & vegetable market in Sarrin. There have been 3 or 4 such strikes lately but this was the first in the city center. [...] We rushed there and came with them to the hospital."



Yassem [L of picture] in Kobane hospital

At the hospital, triage nurse Khaled told RIC: "Those killed were all civilians. There were no combatants among them."

Just a few hours prior, Turkish/SNA shelling on a house in Zirgan had killed three people including one child, and injured four, all from the same family. The next day, a Turkish drone strike on a house in Kobane city killed two civilians and injured a third.



Turkish/SNA shelling on Zirgan kills three civilians, injures four, 28.01.2025



Turkish drone strike on Kobane killed two civilians

On several occasions, bombing on civilian homes left a slew of casualties within families. On December 8th, 12 family members, including 6 children, were killed when their house in al-Musteriha village was struck by a Turkish warplane. Two days later, Turkish/SNA shelling on a house in the village of Safiya killed eight family members, including two children. Both villages were close to Ayn Issa - a town sitting just on the contact line separating SDF-held territory from the Turkish-occupied, SNA-controlled 'M4 Strip' territory from Sere Kaniye to Tel Abyad. There has been no active ground fighting on the contact line since 2019, but Turkish shelling on the villages around there has frequently damaged civilian property, made agricultural work on the fields unfeasible and claimed civilian lives, leaving families with no option but to abandon their homes.



Turkish/SNA shelling on Safiya village, Ayn Issa, kills 8 family members



Victims of Turkish warplane strike on civilian home in al-Musteriha village, Ayn Issa, 08.12.2024





Drone strike on civilian car near Zirgan kills one civilian, wounds two

On February 8th, Turkish/SNA shelling on Ashme village, Kobane countryside, killed a baby and injured nine other civilians. Teenager Ibrahim Salih Hemo was injured in the strike. Speaking to RIC after returning from hospital 10 days later, he said: "I lost part of my foot and heel. I also have a knee injury and fractures in my leg. I'm now at home. I'm already sick and have health problems; my body is weak. Five people from my family were wounded. My brother's daughter was killed. She was only six months old. My sister Aishan still has shrapnel in her head and is incapable of moving her body or hand. [...] Other people were hit too, including some shepherds waiting for their sheep. They were our neighbors. One of them now has to have his two legs amputated soon. The others were wounded and got shrapnel in their bodies. [...] A couple of days ago our village was bombed again, targeting homes."





Turkish shelling on Ashme village on 08.02.2025: the site where the missile hit; the injured older sister; Ibrahim himself; the baby that was killed (Jeylan)

On December 10th, a Turkish air strike on a civilian home in Jaada village, Kobane countryside, killed Abdullah Mahmoud Sheikh Ali and his 12-year-old daughter and wounded two of his sons, aged 10 and 7. In a video widely shared on local social media later, civilians are seen trying to pull their family members out from under the rubble of the destroyed house.⁶⁵ “We were bombed. I had my artery ruptured, so I was taken to Raqqa and had surgery,” 10-year-old Omar told RIC. His grandfather said “Our house is destroyed. We are three families living together within this house. We have both human and material losses. Our situation is really difficult. We now have no house, no fuel, nothing to live from, we even cannot afford our medicine. We are really sick of this, we can not stand this anymore. This is an awful situation, we are sick of it. [...] At the time of the bombing, the kids and their father were together. We others - around 19 people - were in another room. The daughters were drinking water in the kitchen. Out of nowhere, this missile targeted us. We really don't know if it came from the sky or the ground. Dust entered our rooms. My son and his kids were together. He was killed and his daughter was killed. We pulled out his son from under the rubble.” Their house was reduced to rubble. 12 days later, Turkish/SNA artillery shelling on the same village killed a mother and daughter - Sawsan Khalaf (35) and Naseem Khalaf (12). Shelling on Kobane's western villages near the Euphrates River has impacted civilian life in general, such as preventing children from going to school.⁶⁶







Air strike on Jaada, Kobane, 10.12.2024, kills a father and daughter, both pictured individually and injures two sons, pictured in hospital and in their house after. The site of the bombing is also pictured.

Turkish drone strikes targeting cars in the Jazira Canton, hundreds of kilometers from the frontline, also killed nine civilians during the time period under review. A Turkish drone strike near Tel Brak on December 21st killed three civilians - Bassem Shaddadi, Tel Brak City Council member, Abeer al-Khalif, a member of the local Civilian Protection Forces member, and Ahmed al-Tami, a mullah of the region - and injured one - Tel Brak Elders' Council chair, Bunyan Hasnawi Jadou.



Tel Brak Elders' Council chair, Bunyan Hasnawi Jadou, injured in a Turkish drone strike on 21.12.2024

On December 1st, a Turkish drone targeted a car on the Heseke-Qamsihlo road, killing the 20-year-old Aziz Salah al-Din Sheikho. Three days later, a strike on a car wash in Derik killed two civilians - Abdullah Ali al-Ahmad and Anas Tammam Mohammed - and injured a further two. In early January, two Turkish drone strikes on cars in the Derik countryside killed three civilians, including a Kongra Star administrator, Shehnaz Omer. One additional killing came on January 9th. With the fall of Assad having been announced the day prior, Israel carried out a slew of airstrikes targeting military infrastructure and depots belonging to the former SAA, reportedly destroying 90% of the military capacity of the Government of Syria. At the same time, Turkish intelligence services, MIT, claimed responsibility⁶⁷ for similar airstrikes⁶⁸ on SAA weapons depots in Qamishlo, in the former GoS-controlled airport pocket. In these Turkish strikes, one civilian was killed: Hesen Ferid Ahmed.

67 <https://x.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1866515107926139020>

68 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1866219097496891791>

Electricity infrastructure far from the active Manbij frontline has come under fire around Ayn Issa and Tel Tamir. Repeated strikes on the high-voltage cables of the Tel Tamir electrical substation put it out of service three times in the span of just over two weeks in December, reported Amin Mouseqli, the head of the Tel Tamir electricity center. Thousands were left without electricity, as fresh strikes occurred after cables were repaired. Turkish/SNA artillery shelling on the Ayn Issa countryside has also put local power stations out of service several times, cutting power from the city and 60 villages in its countryside. In Hamara village, Tirbespi - 300km from the frontline - a Turkish drone strike on a water tank on January 20th put it out of service.



Power station shelled 24.12.2024 near Ayn Issa cut power from the city and its countryside

Municipal buildings in Raqqa, Tabqa and Manbij have also been targeted in drone strikes. On January 3rd, a Turkish drone strike on the municipality building in al-Hurriyah town, Tabqa, prompted a public statement of condemnation from the local authorities.⁶⁹

On December 21st, a Turkish drone strike hit a grain center near Sarrin (Kobane countryside). "It was a sudden attack on one of the wheat storage units in the outer section [of the center]. The strike led to the burning & destruction of 300 tonnes of wheat," a source in Kobane told RIC.



3. TARGETING OF PRESS AND OBSTRUCTION OF INFORMATION GATHERING

At around 15:20 on December 19th, two Kurdish journalists, Nazim Dashtan and Cihan Bilgin, were killed by a Turkish drone strike on the road between the Tishreen dam and the town of Sarrin, in the southern Kobane countryside. Both had been in Manbij covering the offensive of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and had subsequently been following the ongoing clashes at the Tishreen Dam and Qaraqozak Bridge since Manbij city was taken from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) by the SNA.⁷⁰



Nazim Dashtan

Nazim Dashtan was a Kurdish journalist holding Turkish citizenship. His journalistic work began in 2012 with the Dicle news agency (DIHA) in Turkey. Amongst other things, he covered the mobilizations for Kobane from the Turkish side during ISIS' siege on the city in 2014. He also was part of the investigation into the murder of Syrian journalist Nazi el Derf, who was shot in the head in 2015 in Antep while working on a documentary about ISIS. Dashtan himself was arrested for his investigations and threatened by the intelligence services.⁷¹ In 2016, he was sent to prison for "belonging to a terrorist organization" – an accusation levelled against many Kurdish journalists critical of President Erdogan⁷² – and was cleared of all charges and released after five months. Later that year, he fled Turkey and came to North and East Syria (NES). Alongside many other journalists from the internation-

70 <https://x.com/nazimodastan/status/1868933736777347164>

71 <https://mapanel36.com/tum-haberler/content/view/262028>

72 <https://ifex.org/international-mission-finds-that-turkeys-press-freedom-crisis-has-deepened/>

al press, he covered the SDF's fight against ISIS until its completion in Baghouz. Dashtan was currently employed by Mezopotamya Ajansi, a pro-Kurdish Turkish news agency – and one that is regularly targeted by the Erdogan government's crackdown on press, subject to office-searchings and employee arrests.



Cihan Bilgin reporting from al-Hol camp, 2022

Cihan Bilgin was a Kurdish journalist holding Turkish citizenship. She studied law in Turkey and then began working in press in 2014, following the mobilizations in defence of Kobane in Suruc. She came to NES in 2017 due to the pressure she was under from the Turkish state. As an employee of the Syrian news agency ANHA, her first press assignment in NES was covering the SDF's campaign against ISIS in Raqqa, before going on to report on both war and civil-related developments in the region, with a particular focus on women and gender-issues. During the Turkish-backed SNA's attack on Manbij, Bilgin was covering the situation day-by-day. The final interview she conducted was with a commander of the all-female YPJ units on the frontlines.⁷³

73 Video with English subtitles can be seen here: <https://x.com/YpgInt/status/1870385840653771007>



Funeral of Bilgin and Dashtan, Qamishlo, 06.01.2025

On February 15th, journalist Agid Roj was killed in a drone strike while covering the civilian protest at the Tishreen Dam. Originally from Afrin, Roj had reported from the frontlines when Turkey and the SNA attacked the canton in 2018 and covered the subsequent mass IDP crisis and situation of the camps in Shehba. Well-known amongst local press, his killing triggered widespread condemnation.



Agid Roj filming the civilian protest at the Tishreen Dam, 15.02.2024

A total of 9 media workers have been injured so far in Turkish strikes while at the Tishreen Dam demonstration.

Dashtan, Bilgin and Roj are not the first journalists killed in Turkish attacks in NES. RIC has tracked journalist casualties of Turkish strikes since the 2019 M4 Strip invasion.

On 23 August, 2023, Delila Agit, reporter for the all-female station Jin TV, was injured when her car was targeted by a Turkish drone. Agit's car was struck as she travelled to cover a ceremony commemorating the killing of three civilian political figures who had been targeted in a previous Turkish drone strike.⁷⁴ She lost her arm and her driver was killed. On 20 November, 2022, Isam Abdullah, an ANHA correspondent, was killed in a Turkish airstrike on Teqil Beqil, near Derik.⁷⁵ On the night of his killing, Abdullah had gone to Teqil Beqil immediately after a Turkish attack there which had killed a civilian worker and caused major damage to critical power facilities, alongside a group of first-responders. A follow-up airstrike – occurring as Abdullah was reporting the news – killed him and six other civilians.⁷⁶ During his final broadcast, Abdullah relayed that Turkish bombardment of Derik's Kocher-at region was ongoing, with drones continuously flying overhead. He had been reporting from the region since 2013. On 20 November, 2022, Mihemed Jerada, who works for the Kurdish channel Sterk TV, was severely wounded and suffered a cerebral hemorrhage from a Turkish airstrike, while conducting a live broadcast outside a hospital in the outskirts of Kobane that Turkey had targeted the day prior.⁷⁷ In an interview with Reporters Without Borders, Jerada said he believed the attack was deliberate: "The Turks want to target Kurdish journalists to cover up the atrocities they are committing in the region. They want to silence the media that are showing the world what they are doing."⁷⁸

During and in the aftermath of Turkey's 2019 invasion of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, RIC recorded several instances in which journalists were targeted. On 11 November, 2019, Zozan Berkele – a local Jin TV journalist – was shot by Turkish forces while attempting to cover a joint Turkish-Russian patrol in the east Kobane countryside. Berkele told RIC: "They fired because they saw we were filming. They struck our car, the car of [local TV station] Ronahi TV and a Ronahi TV camera... I was struck by a bullet. My hand will be in plaster for a month."⁷⁹

On 11 November, 2019, the 27-year old father-of-two Vedat Erdemci, a Kurdish film-maker and journalist from Turkey, was killed in a Turkish airstrike, as he was filming Turkish war-planes flying over Sere Kaniye.⁸⁰ Turkish-backed SNA militiamen then proceeded to send

74 <https://rb.gy/qsjv9> (Committee to Protect Justice)

75 <https://bit.ly/4bWOH5g> (International Federation of Journalists)

76 <https://bit.ly/4iyPrjr> (Kurdish Peace Institute)

77 <https://x.com/SalehMaslem/status/1594267097034625029>

78 <https://bit.ly/4bWOH5g> (International Federation of Journalists)

79 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2019/12/report-turkeys-war-against-civilians-1/>

80 <https://rb.gy/zn94mo> (UNESCO)

pictures of his decapitated body to his mother.⁸¹ On 13 November, 2019, a Turkish airstrike on a civilian convoy on its way to Sere Kaniye killed eleven people – including two journalists – and wounded scores more.⁸² The two journalists were 19-year-old Saad Ahmed, a reporter for ANHA and native of Bab al-Khair village near Tel Tamr, who was killed instantly and Mohamed Resho, a journalist for the Yezidi station Cira TV, who died of his injuries the next day.⁸³ Several other journalists travelling with the convoy sustained injuries: Dilsöz Youssef (North Press Agency), Ersin Chaksu (ANF), Emre Yunis (Sterk TV), Mehmet Ekiçi (ANHA), Huner Ehmed (Rudaw), Birjan Yildiz, Rojbin Ekin and Abdreshid Mihemed (all freelancers).⁸⁴⁸⁵ On November 9, Fadel Hammad, a Syrian reporter for the al-Akhbariya TV channel, was hit in the foot by Turkish shelling near Tel Tamir.⁸⁶

Turkey's domestic repression of journalism has been well-documented. Over the past decade, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's establishment of a hyper-presidential system has grievously undermined press freedom and media pluralism. The 2023 elections, won by Erdogan's AKP (Justice and Development Party), featured the arrests of dozens of Kurdish journalists, extensive online censorship, arbitrary lawsuits against critical media outlets, and naked exploitation of the judicial system generating a culture of impunity. 90% of the national media is under government control.⁸⁷ Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2024 World Press Freedom Index ranks Turkey 158th out of 180 countries, describing the situation as "very serious". What has been less investigated however, are Erdogan's efforts to stifle press south of the Turkish border, by targeting those reporting on Turkey's war and occupation in the region of North and East Syria (NES).

In the Turkish-occupied regions of Syria, journalists and researchers attempting to gather information and report on rights violations committed by Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA face significant obstacles. Turkish restrictions on media there suffocate the possibilities for independent journalism, while most civilians are too fearful of SNA reprisal to dare to participate in media activism or even record evidence of and report the crimes they witness and experience.⁸⁸ Those seeking to expose SNA and Turkish crimes face harassment, imprisonment, or killing for their work – discouraging most from even considering such activities.²³ Following the SNA's assassination of media activist Muhammad Abdul Latif (Abu Ghannoum) in al-Bab in 2022, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor commented: "Civilian activists [in SNA-controlled Syria] including journalists and opinion holders are increasingly subject to illegal attacks and harassment, despite and because of their legitimate

81 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2019/12/report-turkeys-war-against-civilians-1/>

82 <https://nlka.net/eng/kurdish-journalists-in-turkey-jailed-at-home-murdered-abroad/>

83 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1183822252959252483>

84 <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/ts335-october-13-2019/>

85 <https://rb.gy/wiwjmt> (ANF)

86 <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/ts389-november-9-2019/>

87 <https://rsf.org/en/country-türkiye>

88 <https://rb.gy/iem5y0> (Rojava Information Center)

activities.”⁸⁹ Following the SNA’s assassination of media activist Muhammad Abdul Latif (Abu Ghannoum) in al-Bab in 2022, Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor commented: “Civilian activists [in SNA-controlled Syria] including journalists and opinion holders are increasingly subject to illegal attacks and harassment, despite and because of their legitimate activities.”⁹¹

Press freedom in Turkey’s occupied territories is in an even worse condition than within Turkey itself. As already mentioned, the latter has been heavily condemned by various watchdogs in recent years, with Human Rights Watch citing “growing state capture of media, the lack of independence of regulatory institutions, and a new social media law designed to clamp down on the remaining spaces for free comment, [...] continued jailing and prosecution of journalists as well as ongoing concerns over the safety of journalists and judicial independence.”⁹² This warning was on the basis of the findings from a coalition of 11 international press freedom, journalism and human rights groups who had undertaken four-day investigation mission in Turkey. Such a mission is not even possible in NES’ Turkish-occupied areas. No impartial and thorough, on-the-ground assessment of the human rights situation in Manbij or Shehba has been conducted since the SNA took control.

The civilians who live in the SNA-controlled regions are under extreme pressure, particularly Kurds. SNA fighters frequently seize civilian phones at checkpoints, searching for excuses to arrest people, such as “YPG flags, photos of martyrs, or Kurdish songs,” as a civilian in Sere Kaniye told RIC. Any of those are enough to result in imprisonment. As reported by those fleeing Shehba, many civilians are afraid to use their phones to film any violations, or even talk to people living in the DAANES-held areas about what they witness, in case their phone is confiscated and searched.

Evidence-gathering for crimes committed in the occupied territories largely relies on camera-phone footage recorded by the SNA themselves and spread via official SNA media or informal propaganda accounts supportive of these factions, mostly via Telegram. Videos circulated there have allowed researchers to document at least some of the human rights abuses carried out by the SNA.

The most prominent case of this was on October 12th, 2019, when the SNA’s Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction recorded footage of their field execution of Future Syria Party co-chair Hevrin Khalef during the Turkish invasion of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.⁹³ After the footage caught international attention, Turkey issued orders to all SNA fighters to not film themselves on the battlefield.⁹⁴ Despite this order, such photos and videos are still sometimes published on SNA media channels, but they display only a small fraction of the crimes committed.

89 <https://apnews.com/article/syria-afp-journalist-arrested-94619647eb1581047243327732e8e085>

90 <https://rb.gy/53kprd> (Human Rights Watch)

91 <https://rb.gy/pc37dd> (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor)

92 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/turkey-press-freedom-under-attack>

93 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-51068522>

94 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2019/12/report-turkeys-war-against-civilians-1/>

During data analysis for the 2023 Occupation Report, RIC found that when classifying the crimes by perpetrators, the first label in the list is “Unspecified SNA” (meaning the perpetrator of a crime was identified as an individual or group from the SNA with no verified information pertaining as to which SNA faction they were from). This reflects a general lack of informed, on-the-ground media sources. It has proved difficult for RIC to gather sufficient corroborative information to confirm and verify all reported crimes. For the 2023 Occupation Report, of all the cases RIC recorded in the crime database, only 32% could be confirmed according to the standards of RIC’s verification criteria. This all hints that the confirmed numbers RIC presents for rights violations in the Turkish-occupied regions are a significant underestimation of the real ones. In this line, the data gathered for this report should not be considered as a complete account of SNA and Turkish crimes against civilians - rather it provides a window into the kinds of practices that are occurring and highlights some key examples.

Co-chair of NES’ Union of Media, Dilyar Jizire, tells RIC he thinks stifling the press in northern Syria is a deliberate Turkish strategy: “Turkey and the SNA want to conceal the crimes and rights violations they are carrying out in Syria. They want to avert documentation. As far as I know, there is like an order – a decision within the SNA – that no one should be filming. This is so that crimes not be exposed or seen. Some of the crimes committed in the Turkish-occupied regions would be counted as war crimes. Turkey and SNA are targeting media workers, by drone strikes and other means. Turkey is afraid of the media. Those who expose Turkey’s lies and reveal the truth are media workers, like Nazim and Cihan. One of Turkey’s objectives is to suffocate or eliminate proper journalism. For this reason, both as far as it can reach in NES itself and then also in the occupied-regions, Turkey threatens and endangers journalists and media workers.”

In such circumstances, it is difficult to accurately document human rights violations and give a full picture of Turkish and SNA crimes. Turkey targets local journalists who report on Turkey’s war on NES and does not allow independent journalists, rights monitors or humanitarian observers into the zones it occupies in Syria, while the SNA violently crushes civilian journalism and activism within these zones.

4. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Protection in armed conflict is grounded in international humanitarian law (IHL), which lays down rules and standards for conduct of hostilities. IHL was created aiming to limit human suffering in armed conflicts. IHL is found in the four 1949 Geneva Conventions and their two 1977 Additional Protocols (AP). These treaty laws are complemented by customary international law, which applies universally. ICRC’s searchable database⁹⁵ of customary IHL is the most comprehensive collection of the rules of customary IHL and their corresponding practices. The main principles of IHL regarding the treatment of civilians are: [1] to distinguish between civilians and combatants, [2] to take all possible precautions to protect civilians against the effects of attacks, and [3] to not cause damage that is excessive in relation

to the direct military advantage expected.

While many powerful states, including Turkey, have not ratified the Additional Protocols, much of what is inked within the latter is already contained in customary IHL. Violations and abuses of IHL and HRL are frequent within many armed conflicts. These violations can constitute international crimes under international criminal law, which denotes individual criminal responsibility for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. Serious violations of IHL entailing individual responsibility are war crimes.

In Shehba and Manbij, at the Tishreen Dam demonstration, and in other places across NES, far from the active frontline, Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA have committed violations potentially amounting to war crimes in four main areas:

[1] Targeting of civilians

This includes both the deliberate targeting of civilians as a tactic, and indiscriminate shelling and airstrikes which have killed scores of civilians. RIC has documented the names of 129 civilians killed by Turkish or SNA attacks on NES since the SNA launched the attack on Shehba (01.12.2024), up to the time of writing (12.03.2025). In the same time period, RIC recorded over 300 injuries to civilians - most of which occurred at the Tishreen Dam. RIC was able to speak with the survivors of a number of incidents where civilians were targeted. The concerning trend of civilian casualties and the circumstances in which such killings and injuries took place indicate international targeting of civilians. Throughout the conflict, shelling of civilian houses and villages away from the active frontline has caused civilian death and displacement without incurring any significant military gains for the SNA, which may constitute a war crime. Inasmuch as they are civilians, journalists are also protected against direct attacks under IHL, unless and for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities.

[2] Targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure

The disastrous, immediate and large-scale humanitarian impact of Turkish and SNA attacks on the Tishreen Dam were documented and commented upon by a number of international organizations and watchdogs. Less discussed was the fact that this is just the latest episode in a long chain of Turkish targeting of essential infrastructure in NES. Recent strikes on water stations, electricity infrastructure, roads and more, affecting hundreds of thousands of civilians including IDPs, are compounded by the five rounds of airstrike campaigns Turkey has conducted since November 2022, which seriously degraded the capacity of NES' public service infrastructure. Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), structures such as dams are given special protection, requiring that they be treated with "particular care" in conflict. Even in cases in which the dam is located close to military operations - such as was the case in Manbij in mid-December - IHL stipulates that attacks must be proportionate, and all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid excessive incidental damage to infrastructure and harm to civilian life. IHL also requires that repair teams be

guaranteed safe passage to repair damaged essential infrastructure. Civilian infrastructure used for military purposes – such as roads used both for transporting military units and civilians – can constitute legitimate targets during a military operation. However, under Protocol I of the Geneva Convention “it is prohibited to attack, destroy, remove, or render useless objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works, for the specific purpose of denying them for their sustenance value to the civilian population.”⁹⁶ Intentionality in such cases is difficult to prove but, as already noted, Turkey has denied international organizations safe passage to the dam to enable repairs.

[3] Targeting of health workers

Attacks on ambulances and medical staff of the Kurdish Red Crescent and the local health authority have seen three health workers have been killed thus far, as well as six wounded. Two ambulances have been destroyed in strikes. As per, international humanitarian law (IHL) warring parties are required to care for the wounded. Medical infrastructure such as ambulances and hospitals have special protection. Under IHL, it is forbidden to target such infrastructure if it is being used to provide medical care of any kind, this includes treatment of enemy fighters. Whatever the circumstances, medical transportation must be allowed to function.

[4] Displacement facilitating looting and property crimes

Observers who have followed the widespread property crimes committed by Turkish-backed factions, from Afrin since its seizure in March 2018, whereby the SNA looted everything from ancient archaeological heritage sites through the region’s olive groves to private homes,⁹⁷ to Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad in 2019,⁹⁸ will be unsurprised at the same practices now being recorded taking place in Shehba and Manbij. In Shehba, this was precipitated by the expulsion of the civilian population. The exit of the vast majority of Shehba’s population out of the small region constitutes forced displacement, defined as individuals and communities being forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence or human rights abuses. This includes both incidents of people being forcibly removed from their homes, or those in which people flee situations. The defining factor is the absence of will. In conflict, violations of IHL frequently trigger displacement, either directly or indirectly, including pre-emptive displacement. While there is no specific right to protection against forced displacement as such, it is inherent in a number of human rights, including the rights to freedom of movement and choice of residence, the right to respect for the home and for privacy, the right to an adequate standard of living, including food and housing, and the right to respect for the family. In situations of armed conflict, forcible displacement is unlawful unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative

96 https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule54

97 https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/63745/MED_2019_10.pdf

98 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2019/12/report-turkeys-war-against-civilians-1/>

military reasons so demand. Furthermore, if the manner in which it is carried out violates other rights such as to liberty and security, and the prohibition against torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, then forced displacement is likely unlawful. Practices such as arbitrary detentions, torture, cruel or inhumane treatment, are among those prohibited in accordance with the Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. Targeted arrests of Afrin IDPs attempting to return to their homes and property following their second displacement from Shehba constitute a violation of their right to return following involuntary displacement.

5. THE SNA'S FUTURE IN SYRIA

As was the case in the Turkish invasions of Afrin and Sere Kaniye, the SNA forces acted as the troops on the ground in the attack on Shehba and Manbij. Turkey provided aerial coverage during the Manbij operation.

These SNA factions are both used to terrify the local civilian population while also allowing Turkey to disavow responsibility and vow to hold accountable individual 'bad actors' responsible for those war-crimes which happen to be caught on camera. This has been the case in the Turkish-occupied regions too. The TAF bears clear responsibility for some of the incidents detailed above. Air strikes targeting civilians, clearly-marked medical and humanitarian convoys and civilian infrastructure are the most obvious examples of war crimes which could only be committed by the TAF, since it is only they who operate warplanes and fixed-wing drones. However, a cursory investigation of the command and control structure of SNA factions shows that responsibility there too flows directly up to the TAF – and by extension their commander-in-chief, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

While the SNA long proclaimed to be the army of Syria's opposition, the coalition group has been from its inception in 2017 under the thumb of the Turkish Army. Turkey pays the militiamen's salaries; Turkish hospitals care for their wounded; and Turkish forces and SADAT International Defence Consultancy, a private military contractor close to Erdoğan, trains them. In the past, Syrian militiamen have been hired as Turkish mercenaries in conflicts from Libya to Armenia. While the SNA has presented itself as a regular standing army, technically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), such subordination does not exist in practice, since it is Turkey that appoints the SNA's senior positions and organizes the groups militarily.

RIC presented a summary of the major SNA militias in its report 'The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias of Northern Syria' in July 2021. An updated report, the 'SNA Encyclopedia', was published in August 2022, detailing the factions' history and connections with Turkey.

SNA militias have been recorded committing wide range of war crimes by the UN and in some instances been sanctioned by the US Treasury for rights abuses against civilians including murder, torture, rape and kidnapping for ransom, specifically targeting women, Kurds, and Yazidi and Christian minorities. Both Suleiman Shah leader, Abu Amsha and that

of Hamza Division, Abu Bakir, are US-sanctioned as individuals due to their involvement in human rights violations. Their factions led the SNA's offensive into NES in December, with both leaders pictured on the field during the attack on Manbij. Researcher Alexander McKeever assessed that "overall al-Quwwah al-Mushtarikah [...] appears to be the most active group in the battle though many factions are reportedly present in some capacity, including al-Jabhah al-Shamiah".⁹⁹ Al-Quwwah al-Mushtarikah (the Joint Force) is a bloc composed of the SNA's Hamza and Sultan Suleiman Shah divisions, plus Liwa Jund al-Haramain, a group which defected from the SDF during the attack on Manbij.

When HTS-leader Ahmed al-Sharaa was formally appointed Syrian president in an orchestrated 'Victory Conference' on January 29th,¹⁰⁰ individual factions within the SNA officially agreed to dissolve and integrate into the new Syrian army and Syrian Caretaker Government Ministry of Defence. At the 'Victory Conference', Hassan Abdul Ghani, a Military Operations Command spokesperson declared that a new Syrian army would be rebuilt "on national grounds", while all military factions and revolutionary civil bodies would be dissolved and integrated into state institutions.¹⁰¹ The practicalities of this integration are still being worked out on the ground. It currently cannot be said that the SNA has dissolved. In the Turkish-occupied, SNA-controlled regions of NES, while the General Security from the Damascus administration is present, the SNA forces still maintain control in practice. In Shehba, the 'Joint Force' of Hamza and Suleiman Shah remain in power. In name, the SNA has been dissolved, but their role on the ground in the Turkish-occupied regions remains largely unchanged up until now.

The roles that faction leaders and fighters will play within the new Syrian army going forwards is still unclear. Unelected, Ahmed al-Sharaa is now leading a new political process in Syria, geared towards reconstructing both the civil and military administrations and institutions of the country. While the majority of the control remains in the hands of HTS personnel, al-Sharaa has pulled a number of different figures and groups into this process – including several of the most notorious SNA commanders.

From the beginning of the HTS-led campaign to seize Damascus – which began before, occurred militarily separately yet in parallel to the SNA's attack on Shehba and Manbij – SNA factions participated. In the early days of the offensive, some HTS-SNA tensions emerged: the latter's 'Dawn of Freedom' operations room publish a statement condemning HTS "policies of domination and monopolization" and calling on HTS to "immediately stop its aggression against the [Syrian] National Army factions and Dawn of Freedom operations room" and restore areas supposedly seized by the SNA back to the SNA.¹⁰² Reportedly, this is related to HTS demanding that the SNA evacuate some positions they controlled north of Aleppo and integrate them into HTS' territory.¹⁰³

99 <https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/this-week-in-northern-syria-587>

100 <https://rb.gy/4d0tbc> (Enab Baladi)

101 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8d9r0vg6v7o>

102 https://t.me/Dawn_of_Freedom1/192

103 <https://963media.com/31916/>

On December 17th, 2024, two of the SNA's leaders were pictured with HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus: Abu Amsha (Suleiman Shah Bridge) and Abu Bakir (Hamza Division).



HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa meets with Abu Amsha [left of photo] and Abu Bakir [right of photo] in Damascus, 17.12.2024

The HTS-Hamza and Suleiman Shah relationship came into the spotlight when HTS intervened in the SNA's October 2022 infighting, entering Afrin. After HTS formally exited Afrin, many of its fighters and commanders covertly remained stationed there under the banners of their SNA allies.¹⁰⁴ The groundwork for this alliance had been laid in March 2022, when (as per interviews conducted by STJ with a Hamza officer) "an undeclared security agreement" stipulated exchange of weapons and fighters and mutual attack/defence support.¹⁰⁵ Both Abu Amsha and Abu Bakir are US-sanctioned for "serious human rights abuses" in Turkish-occupied Afrin.¹⁰⁶ In 2022, Jindires (Afrin) saw popular protests demanding that Abu Amsha be held accountable for participation in murders, rapes, torture, kidnapping and arms trafficking. Yet he evaded accountability - likely due to Suleiman Shah's strict adherence to Turkey's agenda, and Abu Amsha's closeness to Turkish intelligence (MIT), who went as far as to threaten to cut off funding for the SNA's al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction due to their support of the protests.¹⁰⁷ Hamza Division meanwhile, stands accused of torturing and raping women in their prisons, beating and humiliating Kurdish captives, looting, destroying public and private infrastructure, and conducting arbitrary arrests in

104 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2023/06/when-jihadism-learns-to-smile/>

105 <https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-scales-up-its-presence-in-afrin-after-the-turkiye-syria-quake/>

106 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699>

107 <https://rb.gy/hjv4sn> (Rojava Information Center)

Syria's Turkish-occupied regions.¹⁰⁸

At the conference, several SNA personnel were present. Most notably speeches were made by the aforementioned Abu Amsha, plus US-sanctioned Hatem Abu Shaqra, leader of Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction, infamous for the extra-judicial execution of Syrian Kurdish politician, Hevrin Khalef, during Turkey's 2019 invasion into Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.



Ahrar al-Sharqiya's Hatem Abu Shaqra speaks at the Victory Conference, 29.01.2025

Al-Jabha al-Shamiyah, the SNA faction that had in the past attempted to act most independently of Turkey, joined the HTS-led offensive from its very beginning, on November 27th. Following victory in Damascus, faction commander Azzam Gharib, was appointed to the position of Governor of Aleppo. The leader of HTS ally Ahrar al-Sham has also been awarded the position of governor of Rural Damascus. Abu Amsha has been assigned to lead the Hama Military Division (25th Division). Reportedly, this decision was taken with the aim to benefit from Abu Amsha's tribal power base and appease the tribal networks that underpin Suleiman Shah.¹⁰⁹

Having detailed the grievous human rights violations conducted by the SNA factions during their attacks on NES, the role that they will play in Syria going forward is important to monitor. Recent events in Syria's coastal region¹¹⁰ suggest that as part of the new Syrian army, the SNA is continuing its criminal practices, just as it did and does in the Turkish-oc-

108 <https://rb.gy/rcccfu> (Rojava Information Center)

109 <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/syrias-new-rulers-are-working-to-unify-military-power/>

110 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx20p0pj931o>

cupied territories. On February 6th, clashes between Assad-linked insurgents and Syrian Caretaker Government (SCG) General Security occurred. The SCG responded by initiating a mass mobilization of its troops towards the coast. In the subsequent days, over 1,000 Alawite civilians were killed by SCG forces, with the latter carrying out mass arrest campaigns, looting and burning Alawite homes, and abusing and humiliating Alawite captives. Not only did SNA forces participate in the SCG mobilization, but reports suggest that the aforementioned 'Joint Force' – Abu Amsha's Suleiman Shah faction plus the Hamza Division – are one of the main groups responsible for violations against civilians that occurred in these days,¹¹¹ alongside other factions previously aligned with HTS in Idlib, including foreign jihadist outfits.¹¹²

6. CONCLUSION

Across Syria, millions are hoping for a genuinely democratic and inclusive political process for building the 'new Syria'. In the period since the fall of Assad, Turkish and SNA aggression in NES has instead prolonged the suffering of civilians and threatened the stability of the region. Some of the individual incidents identified in this report constitute violations potentially amounting to war crimes in their own right. Put together however, the various forms of attacks evidenced build upon one another to constitute a multifaceted assault on all civilians' right to a free, safe and peaceful existence. Those targeted at the Tishreen Dam protest can not reach hospitals as ambulances are denied safe access; children and the elderly living in villages near the contact lines experience shelling and drone strikes; accusation of links to the DAANES is enough to ensure arrest for Kurds in SNA-held areas; thousands are left without electricity and water due to the targeting of essential infrastructure. The various fields of concern identified here - targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, targeting medical staff, looting and property crimes, forced displacement, and targeting press - combine into a unified policy. These compound abuses directed at civilian persons, property and livelihoods are committed by SNA and Turkey together. As the directing, supervising and supporting power behind the SNA, Turkey bears legal liability for violations committed by the SNA as well.

Even after SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi, and President of the Syrian interim government, Ahmed al-Sharaa, signed an agreement on March 10th which stipulated a commitment to a ceasefire across all of Syria, the SNA continued its attacks on NES.¹¹³ At the same time, the SNA's factions in theory had dissolved themselves in January, agreeing to fold under the new Ministry of Defence. Hence, Ahmed al-Sharaa and the interim Syrian government are formally responsible for their activity. So far, the Syrian Ministry of Defence has not addressed the issue of the SNA's track record of criminality. Furthermore, the SNA's involvement in abuses committed against Alawite civilians in Syria's coastal region in early March underlines that these factions are continuing to conduct potential war crimes

111 <https://bit.ly/4hTRRZ4> (Almondon)

112 <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/syria-1000-dead-assad-supporters-latakia-b1215545.html>

113 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1899787501302141426>

with no accountability as part of the new Syrian army.¹¹⁴

Going forward, ensuring minorities across Syria - not just in NES - are protected and represented as the country rebuilds itself is important. The Syrian interim government is currently composed mostly of former HTS affiliates. HTS' openly jihadist past as Jabhat al-Nusra means there is well-founded scepticism that those within the government are genuine in their stated commitment towards preserving and defending Syria's diversity. The SNA's track record of targeted persecution and abuse of minorities in Afrin, Sere Kaniye and Shehba leaves similar room for doubt. On this issue, actors in the NES region have an important role to play in sharing practical ways of empowering and safeguarding minorities, given the progress made in the region in this regard in the past 12 years.

The practices of the SNA and Turkey in NES from December 2024 to February 2025 warrant a response from the international community to both protect human rights and achieve justice. State and non-state international actors have a responsibility to act on the evidence presented herein of offences committed by Turkey and the SNA and, through legal and political channels, to hold them accountable for their actions since 01.12.2024, prevent future such violations from occurring, and widen the opportunities for a genuine peace to be built in Syria. There are several possible pathways here.

International organizations can:

[1] Conduct an independent, comprehensive and transparent fact-finding mission in the two latest zones to have fallen under SNA control - Shehba and Manbij - to document violations of international law, and identify groups at risk of further violence such as Kurds and other minorities

[2] Pressure Turkey to halt its aggression, to prevent further damage to essential civilian infrastructure and displacement.

[3] Support the demands of those displaced and attacked for justice and accountability in international institutions such as the International Criminal Court.

Global powers can:

[1] Closely monitor violations of the intra-Syria ceasefire stipulated in the March 10th SDF-Damascus agreement

[2] Closely monitor the activities of the SNA within the new Syrian army and push the Syrian Ministry of Defence to take responsibility for them; while many foreign powers have been keen to quickly establish relations with the Damascus interim authorities, they must take care this does not lead to a legitimization of the abuses conducted by forces inside the new Syrian army

[3] Push for and assist with a Turkish withdrawal from the Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria, which the Syrian interim government in Damascus can facilitate, enabled by implementation of the Damascus-NES integration deal which could alleviate Turkish security concerns

The Syrian Caretaker Government and President Ahmed al-Sharaa can:

[1] Take a zero-tolerance policy with regards to criminality and rights violations committed by the forces under its wing and establish genuinely independent committees to investigate such crimes

[2] Show it is taking genuine steps to protect Syria's minorities by engaging with experts on the topic from the NES region

[3] Commit to implementing the Syria-wide ceasefire, including by pressuring Turkey to halt its airstrikes on NES

The DAANES and SDF can:

[1] Share its experiences of and mechanisms for ensuring the rights and existence of minorities across Syria are protected. For example, in the process of implementing the Damascus-NES administrative, economic and military integration, the institutions established in NES for minorities can be expanded to all of Syria.

[2] Commit to implementing the Syria-wide ceasefire

All actors can:

[1] Identify the key factors preventing all of Syria's IDPs from returning to their home locations and address them, in line with achieving the implementation of article 5 of the Damascus-NES agreement signed on March 10th.

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