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Escalating human rights violations in Syria's Afrin: 2024 update

Submission to the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic,
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Introduction

In January 2018 Türkiye launched a military invasion, code-named Operation Olive Branch, of the Kurdish-majority enclave of Afrin in north-western Syria. Spearheaded by Turkish air and ground forces, and bolstered by tens of thousands of Arab and Turkmen fighters organized under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army (SNA), the operation managed to take complete control of Afrin by late March, displacing a large proportion of the civilian population in the process, and started a complete restructuring of the political and security landscape in Afrin. The institutions of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration were dissolved and partially replaced by a loose configuration of Turkish-backed political, judicial and administrative structures. Meanwhile, direct control over Afrin's sub-districts and villages was handed to the dozens of SNA factions that had participated in the invasion. Fighting for dominance between factions has since complicated an already dangerous and chaotic environment for the local population.

This briefing offers an updated account of the developments in Afrin, covering the period from November 2022 to November 2023. The findings – based on the documentation of 152 cases since the previous update¹ – show that the situation in the area is deteriorating. The incidents reported in this update encompass a wide spectrum of events of concern, including continued violations of rights to physical integrity of civilians in the area through arbitrary detention and torture, kidnapping for ransom, forced marriage and gender-based violence, in addition to the recruitment of children by the armed factions, the impact of the earthquake and discrimination in the distribution of aid, the Islamification and Turkification of Afrin, the persistent presence of Turkish forces in Afrin, and continued attacks on cultural celebrations such as Newroz.

Furthermore, findings show demographic shifts through forced migration, the destruction of graves and historical sites, illegal archaeological excavation, the deliberate destruction of olive trees, the burning of fields, and violations of housing, land, and property rights in the region.

*This report was written by Mariana Karkoutly.

¹ Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA, [Afrin after Operation Olive Branch: An Update on the Situation in North-west Syria](#), Submission to the UN International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, September 2021; [Cultivating Chaos: Afrin after Operation Olive Branch](#), London, Ceasefire, July 2020.



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The interviews upon which this briefing is based were conducted by researchers from YASA (Kurdish Center for Studies and Legal Consultancy), who recorded and transmitted case details using a secure, online reporting tool designed by Ceasefire. Interviewees included direct victims of violations as well as witnesses to violations (such as close family members, friends and neighbours). To protect the safety and anonymity of all those involved in the documentation process, names and personal identifying details of individual victims and witnesses have been omitted in this briefing.

Violations of rights to physical integrity

Arbitrary detention and torture

Since the last report published by Ceasefire and YASA on the situation in Afrin in 2021, the incidence of detention, torture and enforced disappearance has increased. In Afrin, much of the civilian population – the Kurdish population in particular – lives in a constant state of fear due to the threat of violence, primarily from Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions.

The dominance of SNA factions, granted unchecked authority following the Turkish invasion of Afrin, has enabled a culture of impunity, permitting frequent violations against the local population. Primarily targeting Kurdish civilians under the pretext of alleged affiliation with the previous Kurdish-led administration, the SNA's practice of detaining people arbitrarily serves as a trigger for displacement, forcing many to abandon their homes permanently to escape threats to their safety.

Detainees, predominantly Kurdish civilians, are subjected to systematic torture in SNA-run detention facilities, including beatings, electric shocks, scalding, and other dehumanizing practices. The mistreatment is often carried out with the purpose of extorting ransoms from the families of detainees.²

The prison system in northern Syria reflects a complex and sometimes confused patchwork of control on the ground. According to findings by YASA, detention facilities in northern Syria can be divided into four main categories:

(1) *Prisons affiliated with the civil police and the Ministry of Interior of the interim government.* These include the central civil prison in Afrin on Marata road, the central prison in Azaz on Qastal Jindo road, and Al-Bab prison. Additionally, courts within every branch of the civil police – the political branch, the counter-terrorism branch, and the criminal branch – contain cell blocks where detainees await trial for unspecified periods. A Turkish official stationed within each prison, branch and court, oversees matters, including arrests and releases, with no action taken without their approval.

(2) *Prisons affiliated with the Military Police Administration of the interim government.* Several prisons fall under this category, such as the central military prison in Afrin on Marata road, and the Black Prison near Raju, which was previously an olive press, and then served as a detention facility under the Autonomous Administration. There is also a military prison in Al-Rai and a prison within the military police department in the town of Qatma, which operates from what was formerly a cultural centre. These prisons are under the control of the Military Prosecution Office, which is supervised by a group of judges, most notably Arafat Hammoud and Jamal Al-Ashqar, who supervise the Military Criminal Court and are believed responsible for hundreds of arbitrary sentences against civilians in Afrin, including in some instances the death penalty.

² Syrians for Truth and Justice, Lêlûn, PÊL – Civil Waves, and Synergy Association for Victims, [Five Years of Injustice are Enough!](#) November 2023.

(3) *Faction-affiliated prisons*. These prisons, operated by faction intelligence branches, employ interrogation methods resembling the Syrian regime's practices of torture and forced disappearance. Prominent among these is the Al-Tala'i camp prison in Kafr Jannah, holding detainees transferred after the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) faction moved towards Azaz and the detainees were sent to a prison affiliated with Al-Shamye Front faction, in Sajo Garage in the town of Sajo. There is also a prison near the village of Tilal al-Sham on the border; a large prison under the control of Sultan Murad faction in Hawar Kilis on the border; and Al Ziraa prison belonging to Hamzat faction in Al-Bab. There is a prison under the control of Faylaq Al-Sham in the town of Maidan Ikbis, as well as prisons belonging to Ahrar al-Sharqiya in the countryside of Al-Bab, and other unknown secret prisons under the control of other factions.

(4) *Turkish-controlled prisons*. In Hawar Kilis, Kurdish fighters from the battle of Afrin are among those detained in a prison under direct Turkish supervision. Detainees within this prison rarely face trial.

The interplay of these institutions often involves Turkish officials exercising control over critical matters, such as arrests, release of prisoners and trials within the prisons, which raises concerns about accountability and due process. Prisons controlled by the factions often release detainees upon payment, facilitated through negotiations with prison officials, orchestrated under the supervision of Turkish officers and sometimes involving ransom payments for release of a detainee.³

Ceasefire and YASA documented numerous cases of detention, torture, killing and enforced disappearance perpetrated against civilians, including women and elderly people, over the reporting period.

In one case, a group of six unidentified armed men entered the home of a mother and her 18-year-old daughter in Afrin and kidnapped the daughter on charges related to working with the Autonomous Administration. The mother searched for her at various militant faction headquarters, providing her daughter's details and photo, but there were no leads on her whereabouts. Overwhelmed by fear following her daughter's kidnapping, the mother relocated from Afrin to Aleppo, seeking safety for her other children.⁴

According to the data collected by Ceasefire and YASA, abductions often involve assaults, torture and threats against the victims and their families. In one case, a 51-year-old Yazidi man residing in Qastal Jindo village was kidnapped from his home by an unidentified armed group consisting of more than eight armed men. The abduction was predicated on the victim's Yazidi faith, which the kidnappers deemed grounds for considering him an 'infidel'. During the assault, his family suffered severe beating and his wife was threatened with death. Additionally, all their mobile phones were stolen.

Following the attack, the armed men took the detainee to an undisclosed location for two days. He was later thrown down in front of his house, his health visibly affected by the torture and beatings he had

³ Interview with YASA member on the situation of detention facilities in north-east Syria, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9340, 11 May 2023). See also Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, ['While returning to their hometown, Military Police arrest entire family, including children and women, and Afrin court release civilian for ransom'](#), 29 December 2023. SOHR notes that civilians have been arbitrarily detained for various reasons and that the fate of some of those detained remains unknown.

⁴ Interview with the victim's mother, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8873: 22 November 2022).

endured. Currently, he and his family continue to reside in Qastal Jindo, unable to leave the village due to intense fear of further violence from the armed group members.⁵

Incidents involving Turkish intelligence and affiliated factions illustrate an alarming intensification in human rights violations in the area. In one case, a 62-year-old woman who had been actively involved with service institutions linked to the former Autonomous Administration, serving as a member of the commune, was arrested by a joint patrol comprising the civil police and Turkish intelligence officials. The group arrived at the woman's residence and arrested her, giving no reason for this action. There has been no further information regarding the detainee's whereabouts up to the date the case was documented.⁶

Another account concerns a 19-year-old woman from Qasim village in Raju district who was arrested by a combined patrol unit comprising Turkish intelligence and Raju police. The arrest occurred while the young woman was returning from school in the municipality of Raju. The charges against her included her alleged involvement in the school folklore band under the previous Autonomous Administration, despite her being a child at that time, as is evident from images depicting her participation. She was released the following day on a bail amounting to 1,300 Turkish lira. During her arrest by Turkish intelligence and the Raju police, she endured severe physical assaults.⁷

Another case documented by Ceasefire and YASA concerning a lawyer, Luqman Hanan, highlights an instance of extrajudicial killing and a lack of due process.⁸ Various reports surrounding Luqman Hanan's multiple arrests and death in custody raise significant concerns about the absence of any clear charges against him. Although he was ill with multiple sclerosis he was subjected to torture, leading to his tragic death. This case clearly demonstrates a profound absence of due process and accountability within the legal system, amplifying the sense of fear and insecurity among civilians in the area.

These cases collectively reveal a lived reality in Afrin where arrests and arbitrary detention have become everyday experiences for civilians. Different security entities and armed groups target individuals, particularly Kurds, based on perceived connections or past involvement with the Autonomous Administration. Notably, the recurring theme of property seizures emerges as a core reason for, and consequence of, many of these arrests. This pattern of arrests is not restricted to any particular age group, or by gender or occupation, underscoring the challenge of ensuring Afrin remains safe for its Kurdish residents.

Multiple incidents involving targeted assassinations or other extrajudicial killings committed by armed groups and Turkish intelligence have been documented by YASA and Ceasefire. In one case, a 32-year-old Kurdish man was abducted from his home in Kafrom village by an armed group associated with the Faylaq Al-Sham faction, in coordination with Turkish intelligence. He was taken to an undisclosed location on charges linked to his previous involvement with the Autonomous Administration. Fifteen days later, his body was found dumped on agricultural land in the village of Kafrom, showing signs of

⁵ Interview with the victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9027: 11 January 2023).

⁶ Interview with victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9031: 12 January 2023).

⁷ Interview with victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9209: 26 March 2023).

⁸ Interview with the victim's sister, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9018: 3 January 2023).

torture. His wife attempted to file a complaint at one of the Turkish centres in Afrin but received no response. The family continue to reside in Kafrom village under extremely challenging conditions.⁹

Political motives were apparent in specific instances of killings, while in other situations, civilians reportedly lost their lives either from stray bullets or as incidental casualties in conflicts they were not involved in. In one reported case, for example, a 22-year-old girl was killed due to a stray bullet fired by an armed man near Mare' city.¹⁰

The cases presented highlight a recurring pattern of persistent violations of the rights to physical integrity of civilians residing in Afrin. Here, political motives, religious beliefs, or perceived affiliations with the Autonomous Administration become grounds for violations against civilians, including women and children. The evident repercussions of these actions extend beyond the direct victims, affecting entire communities in the region.

Kidnapping for ransom

Ceasefire and YASA have documented kidnapping incidents targeting civilians for the purposes of financial extortion. Men, women and children alike have been subjected to kidnapping.

In one case, a civilian from Marata village, aged 78, was arrested by eight armed men associated with the Hamzat faction. During the arrest, the man's wife was violently assaulted. Afterwards, the armed men took him to their headquarters in Marata village, where he was subjected to interrogation. He was threatened with losing his house unless he paid a sum of US \$3,000¹¹ to the armed group. Unable to gather the full amount, he handed over his house to the armed men in lieu of the money. The family, expelled from their house, sought refuge with one of their relatives in the village. This arrest and the subsequent confiscation of the house led to his death, leaving his family living in their relatives' house.¹²

The Sultan Murad faction was repeatedly mentioned in the documentation, demonstrating a consistent pattern of arbitrary detention, torture and financial extortion. In one case, armed men affiliated with the Sultan Murad faction forcibly entered the house of a man aged 43 in Qara Tappah and arrested him for no reason. He was held in detention for two months until his family paid a \$450 ransom for his release. Afterwards, the same faction arrested the same man again together with his wife and held them in Afrin city. The armed group demanded \$3,000 for the release of both detainees. To ensure their safety, the children borrowed money and paid the full ransom within two days, resulting in their parents' release. As of the case filing, they continue to reside in Qara Tappah village.¹³

Similarly, a 15-year-old girl was forcibly taken from her home in Ba'adino village by an armed group affiliated with the Montasser Billah faction. When the mother attempted to protect her child, the armed men assaulted her before taking the daughter to an undisclosed location. A week before the kidnapping, one of the armed men, named Faisal, had approached the family seeking the girl's hand in marriage, but the father declined. Despite their efforts, the family was unable to gather any information about their daughter's whereabouts. The father offered \$3,500 to the Montasser Billah faction, but was threatened

⁹ Interview with the victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9039: 14 January 2023).

¹⁰ Documentation by a YASA member on the situation in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9827, 30 November 2023).

¹¹ All references to dollars or the \$ sign in this report refer to US dollars.

¹² Interview with the son of the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8915, 26 November 2022).

¹³ Interview with the daughter of the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8921: 29 November 2022).

that he would be harmed if he asked again about his daughter, and false accusations were made against his daughter regarding her involvement with the Autonomous Administration. As of the date of documentation, the girl remains missing.¹⁴

The consequences of these kidnappings extend beyond those abducted. Families are left traumatized, often unable to find out any information about their loved ones, enduring threats, and blackmail attempts. Some kidnappers demand significant amounts of money as ransom, exploiting these families.

Forced marriage and gender-based violence

Some accounts presented patterns of forced marriage, driven by intimidation and coercion. In one incident, a girl had been persistently pursued for over a year by a man in the neighbourhood connected with an armed group. Her father was abducted in front of his house by five masked and armed men and released after three hours. Upon his return, the father ordered his daughter, to prepare herself for marriage. Her suitor then arrived with his family to formally propose marriage to the young girl, coercing her family with threats into consenting to the arrangement on the same day.

This account is one of many that highlight the prevalence of forced marriages in the area, facilitated through tactics of intimidation employed by armed groups. These forms of coercion significantly trespass upon the rights and autonomy of young individuals, constituting an attack on their personal liberties and choices.¹⁵

Some cases involved families compelling their daughters to marry, either because of economic hardship or as a result of intimidation and threats by members of armed groups in the region.

In one case, a 15-year-old Yazidi girl from a village near Afrin was forced into marriage with a man thirteen years older than her due to her family's economic difficulties. Enduring physical and psychological abuse throughout the six-month marriage, the girl eventually managed to get a divorce. However, the family faced threats, and the man who married her demanded \$25,000 for allowing the divorce. To escape this situation, the family had to abandon their village and relocate to Aleppo. Although the girl is now back in school and in a more secure environment, this incident represents one of many occurrences in the region arising from the challenging economic circumstances faced by families. Families marrying off their young daughters often becomes the sole viable means of financial support.¹⁶

In another incident, a 17-year-old girl from the village of Maidan Ikbes committed suicide when she was forced to marry a militiaman from one of the factions. This man, accompanied by his family, came to the girl's house to request her father's consent for the marriage, and the father was threatened. The day after the visit, the young girl took her own life. As a result, a group of armed men from the Faylaq Al-Sham faction came to the girl's house and detained her father for 24 hours to investigate the suicide.¹⁷ This incident underscores the severe consequences of such coercive practices, and the persistent fear of persecution experienced by the families who continue to reside in the same area as the perpetrators.

¹⁴ Interview with the victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9088: 31 January 2023).

¹⁵ Interview with a victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9204: 26 March 2023).

¹⁶ Interview with the victim's sister, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9332: 30 April 2023).

¹⁷ Interview with the victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9114: 19 February 2023).

The cases reported by Ceasefire and YASA highlight a pattern of forced marriages in the Afrin region, with many other incidents going unreported due to the continual fear of societal stigma and potential repercussions. The narratives reveal a trend where armed groups employ intimidation and coercion to enforce marriages, violating the rights and autonomy of young women.

Other security incidents affecting civilians

Recruitment of children

As outlined in the UN Security Council report from 23 April 2021,¹⁸ the recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict continues to be widespread and systematic across different areas in Syria. Among the 25 parties reported to be involved in child recruitment, including the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), Women's Protection Units (YPJ), Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ahrar al-Sham, and other armed groups under the Syrian national army, the HTS stands out for its extensive involvement in recruiting and training children.

The report highlights 507 cases of HTS's systematic recruitment of children aged 15 to 17. According to YASA,¹⁹ a recent training conducted by HTS involved approximately 25 children, most of whom are believed to be former ISIS children, smuggled into the region by Turkish occupation intelligence during the battle of Baghouz.

The training, conducted in areas such as Diwa near Jenderes, consists of two stages. The first stage includes Sharia courses aimed at influencing participants' beliefs and ideologies. The second involves practical training in assassination, handling individual weapons, and various military tactics, reminiscent of ISIS recruitment and training tactics for the infamous 'cubs of the caliphate'.

HTS has a long-standing history of recruiting children, dating back to the establishment of the Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) in January 2012, setting up numerous training centres and enticing children to join with Sharia courses and financial incentives.

Reports by organizations including Syrians for Truth and Justice in May 2020²⁰ indicated that HTS recruited dozens, possibly hundreds, of children under the age of 18 through recruitment campaigns aligned with Syrian regime forces' military campaigns in Idlib Governorate. These campaigns, for example, *Jahid be-Nafsak* (Invest Yourself in the Strife) and *'Infiro Khifafan wa-Thikalan* (Go Forth, whether Light or Heavy), primarily targeted residents of camps for displaced persons near the Turkish-Syrian border, attracting children with financial incentives and the promise of engaging in Jihad or holy struggle for the sake of God.

The recruitment of children in armed conflicts inflicts significant wider harm on communities and families. When children are forced into armed groups, it not only exposes them to danger and disrupts efforts aimed at peace building. Families endure distress as their children face violence, cultivating fear and instability. The lasting consequences of the recruitment of children contribute to a cycle of trauma, impacting the community's overall development and well-being.

¹⁸ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/document/report-of-the-secretary-general-on-children-and-armed-conflict-in-the-syrian-arab-republic-3/>

¹⁹ Reported by YASA on the situation of children recruitment in north-east Syria, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9817, 30 November 2023).

²⁰ Syrians for Truth and Justice, '[Child Recruitment](#)' by Parties to Conflict in Syria, a Lasting Phenomenon, May 2020.

Reshaping religious and cultural identity in Afrin

The strengthening of religious and Turkish influences in Afrin is evident in the deliberate inclusion of respective elements in the school curriculum, reflecting Türkiye's strategic efforts since the start of the occupation.

Analysis of the second-grade certificate curriculum reveals a disproportionate emphasis on religious subjects and the sidelining of the Kurdish language, despite the population of the region being predominantly Kurdish. Girls in school textbooks are now depicted wearing hijab.²¹ Students are engaged in three religious subjects, totalling five religion classes per week. Moreover, the Turkish language is taught as a mandatory subject like Arabic, while the Kurdish language is taught only twice a week and is the sole optional subject.²²

As well as researching the educational system, YASA also looked at newly constructed mosques in the district. An emblematic example is the construction of the Ibrahim Al-Khalil Mosque by Al-Shamye Front faction in the Yazidi village of Qastal Jindo, built despite residents' objections. It was paid for by the leader of Al-Shamye Front faction, who previously served as the head of the military police branch in the city of Azaz, using his authority to cover for smuggling operations on the Turkish border. The construction process commenced in 2021 and concluded in 2022.²³



Ibrahim Al-Khalil Mosque, Qastal Jindo, 2022. Photographer unknown

The construction of mosques such as the Ibrahim Al-Khalil mosque points to the imposition of particular forms of religion backed by military force, indicating a potential broader strategy to reshape Afrin's cultural and religious identity, raising concerns about the erosion of local identity and diversity in Afrin.

²¹ Interview with YASA member, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8868, 01 November 2022).

²² Interview with YASA member on the situation after the earthquake, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9177, 13 March 2023).

²³ Interview with YASA member on the situation after the earthquake, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9298, 25 April 2023).

Violations of housing, land and property rights

Theft of land and property

As mentioned in this and previous Ceasefire reports,²⁴ the Turkish occupation of Afrin has from the start involved widespread requisition of the property of local residents. Following the initial military invasion in March 2018, various factions systematically engaged in stealing from and taking over vacant houses and properties abandoned by those fleeing the invasion. Faction members occupied houses themselves, or sold them, or handed them over to newly-arrived families displaced from other parts of Syria.²⁵

In the documented incidents between 2021 and 2023, there are recurring patterns of forced evictions, property confiscation and threats to individuals' safety and security. The following cases are typical.

A 25-year-old man from a village near Maabatli recounted that, following the occupation of Afrin, he was at work when he saw his wife and young children approaching his workplace, visibly fearful. His wife informed him that a group of armed men, identified as members of Al-Amshat faction, including their commander (Abu Hamza), had threatened and forcibly expelled her and her children from their house. When he approached Abu Hamza to discuss the situation and reclaim his home, he faced threats and physical assault at the faction's headquarters. His motorcycle was also taken. Concerned for their safety, the family sought refuge in his father-in-law's house in the village of Ikeji in the Sheikh Hadid district. As of the date of the report they continue to reside there and have had no success in reclaiming their own home.²⁶

In another case, a resident of the village of Haj Hassanli in the Jenderes district reported that an unidentified armed group forcibly entered his house, threatening him and ordering him to vacate it within 24 hours. They warned of consequences, including death, if he reported the incident, leaving him with no choice but to evacuate his home without taking any personal belongings with him. After living with his father for two months, he approached the armed men occupying his house, offering them \$2,000, but they rejected the offer and threatened him with death if he attempted to return home. In desperation, he filed a complaint at the military police station, providing a real estate document proving ownership of the house, but with no result. Fearing for his life, he decided to leave Afrin with his wife and child, seeking refuge in a European country.²⁷

The Sultan Murad and Hamzat factions have reportedly played a significant role in seizing houses, utilizing detention and violence to expropriate civilians' property. In one case, the Sultan Murad faction seized the house and lands of a 51-year-old man with five children from the village of Qara Tappah in the Sharan district. The faction justified their actions by claiming that the residents of the house currently live in Autonomous Administration areas. They cut down over a hundred olive trees, burned the remaining approximately five hundred trees, and repurposed the house as their shelter. Attempts by the owner to engage mediators and individuals close to the Sultan Murad faction in order to regain possession of the house all failed.²⁸

²⁴ See note 1.

²⁵ Ceasefire, [Afrin after Operation Olive Branch: An Update on the Situation in North-west Syria](#), Submission to the UN International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, September 2021.

²⁶ Interview with the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8917: 26 November 2022).

²⁷ Interview with the victim's father, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8918: 26 November 2022).

²⁸ Interview with the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8920: 29 November 2022).

In another case reported by YASA and Ceasefire, following the Turkish occupation and takeover of the village of Faqiran by the Hamzat faction, the victim, along with his wife and children, fled when their family home was repurposed as the faction's headquarters. They sought refuge in his father-in-law's house, but that too was raided by an armed group affiliated with the Hamzat faction. Nine armed men, under the control of Alaa Abu Najm, stole items from the house, including solar energy equipment, a television screen, and destroyed other belongings, justifying their actions by arguing that the victim's father-in-law is currently residing in the Autonomous Administration area. The father of the family was detained without any explanation and is currently still believed to be held by the faction. His wife does not know where he is.²⁹

These cases represent some of the many incidents documented by YASA and Ceasefire regarding property theft in Afrin. There is a consistent pattern of forced evictions, property confiscation, and threats to individuals' safety and security. Armed groups, including the Sultan Murad and Hamzat factions, are reported to exploit their power to forcibly seize homes. Unable to reclaim their properties, and in the face of violence and repeated threats to their lives, the owners are compelled to abandon their homes and seek refuge elsewhere, sometimes in foreign countries.

Cutting down olive trees and burning of fields

Afrin is known for its olive trees, boasting as many as 26 million, some of which are centuries old. Members of the SNA and other individuals affiliated with military factions are actively engaged in cutting down the olive trees. The destruction extends beyond Afrin sub-district to other sub-districts, including Sheikh al-Hadid, Maabatli, Sharan, Bulbul, Jenderes, and Raju, from the beginning of the Turkish occupation.³⁰

The trees are cut down for various reasons: to steal or sell the wood for financial gain, or to target the owners, as farming has been a primary livelihood for generations in the region. Deeply connected to the groves they have tended over the years, farmers experience not just material loss but psychological distress, feeling that they have nothing left after their main source of livelihood is gone.³¹

In one case reported by YASA, a video shows olive trees being cut down and stolen to be sold as firewood. The theft was carried out by armed men at night, despite the landowners having paid dues.³²

In another case, a 34-year-old Yazidi man from the village of Qastal Jindo in the Sharan district reported that an armed group affiliated with Al-Shamye Front faction forcibly entered his house without providing any explanation. He was then taken to his land, where members of the armed group tied him to an olive tree and proceeded to cut down his trees –133 olive trees and 16 almond trees –before his eyes. The men beat him, breaking two fingers of his right hand, and threatened him with death should he attempt to file a complaint against them. After remaining tied up for several hours, a passing shepherd discovered him and released him. As of the date of reporting, he continues to reside in the village but, out of fear, remains unable to file a complaint against the perpetrators. The damage to his hand prevents him from working to support his wife and four children.³³

²⁹ Interview with the victim's wife, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8968: 22 December 2022).

³⁰ [‘In front of the factions’ eyes, perennial olive trees are cut down in Afrin’](#), *Enab Baladi*, 15 February 2024.

³¹ Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, [Cultivating Chaos](#).

³² Interview with YASA member on trees being cut down in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8954, 13 December 2022).

³³ Interview with the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9028: 12 January 2023).

The cases discussed here represent only a fraction of the many incidents reported to YASA and Ceasefire. In some instances, fields were burned, destroying crops and impacting the environment. The loss of trees and farms resulting from such widespread attacks has profound effects on both individuals and the community at large, depriving them of livelihoods and of their historical connection to the land.

The aftermath of the earthquake

According to accounts collected by Ceasefire and YASA, incidents of property theft, misuse of aid and related human rights violations were reported to have taken place in Afrin and other areas in the northern part of Syria after the earthquake that struck the region on 6 February 2023.

On that day, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake occurred in southern Türkiye, near the northern border of Syria, followed by thousands of aftershocks.³⁴ The impact of this natural disaster on the population in Afrin was compounded by increased vulnerability to patterns of ongoing human rights violations.

With the Turkish government occupying Afrin since 2018, there has been a lack of efforts to care for the welfare of the civilian population, leaving them without essential humanitarian aid. Additionally, the situation was made worse by armed groups impeding aid deliveries and engaging in discriminatory practices during aid distribution.³⁵

According to incidents reported by Afrin residents to YASA members, when the earthquake occurred, there were insufficient efforts to rescue the injured and those trapped under the rubble in Afrin, including in Jenderes, the town most heavily affected. To begin with, only civilian volunteers came from local areas and the Civil Defence did not arrive until the second day. That was when heavy machinery was dispatched for the rescue operations.

The rescue efforts, particularly on the part of volunteers, also involved incidents of theft, including the theft of jewellery and valuables from homes that had collapsed and reportedly from the victim's bodies. A considerable number of those who claimed to be searching for survivors were, in fact, engaged in theft, carrying the stolen items back to their respective internal displacement camps and the Idlib countryside. As aid convoys started to arrive, the assistance was disproportionately directed towards people from Ghouta, those from the countryside to the west of Aleppo, and from Idlib, who were living in Jenderes as displaced persons. Camp residents brought family members and openly looted from aid vehicles.

The armed factions and local councils appointed representatives to compile lists of affected families, disproportionately registering Arab families of the displaced, while neglecting local Kurdish residents, discriminating against them in aid distribution. Following the arrival of the Barzani Foundation, some tents and other aid were distributed to the local population in Jenderes. However, the camp residents from Atma, Muhammadiyah, and Deir Ballut who were going to Jenderes to get humanitarian aid and then returning to their tents, ended up causing conflicts with the local council, and resulting in the cessation being more discriminatory against Kurds than before. Effectively excluded from humanitarian assistance, people in Jenderes resorted to purchasing tents at their own expense.

There were also reports that aid intended for Jenderes was diverted, with families from the Idlib countryside establishing fake camps to help themselves to relief materials at the entrance to the town. Furthermore, individuals managed to obtain aid with assistance from factions including Hamzat and Al-

³⁴ UN, [Türkiye-Syria Earthquake Response](#).

³⁵ Amnesty International, [‘Syria: Vital earthquake aid blocked or diverted in Aleppo’s desperate hour of need’](#), 6 March 2023.



Survivors of the earthquake in Jenderes, Syria, 27 February 2023, © Rami Alsayed/NurPhoto/Shutterstock

Amshat, and members of factions from eastern Ghouta and the western Aleppo countryside, who primarily directed aid to their relatives.³⁶

These incidents reflect at the least a lack of coordination and efficiency in the rescue operations in Afrin. The incidents of theft, particularly by those claiming to be volunteers in search of survivors, compromised the rescue efforts and directly affected the victims, as valuable belongings were stolen from homes in the aftermath of the earthquake. The consequences of these actions extended beyond the immediate material losses, contributing to a sense of vulnerability and distrust among the affected population.

In the days and weeks following the earthquake, there are also examples of personnel from armed groups abusing their power to steal property, with the *de facto* authorities failing to take any action.

In one incident, the security commander of the Faylaq Al-Sham faction in the city of Jenderes sold a civilian's house in the area to an individual from the Idlib countryside. When the victim's son returned to inspect the house after the earthquake, he found someone renovating it. In response to his inquiry, the man from Idlib stated that he had purchased the house from Abu Adam from Homs, who was security officer with Faylaq Al-Sham. All the furniture in the house had been stolen prior to its sale. When the victim's son attempted to prevent the buyer from completing the renovation, armed men

³⁶ Interview with YASA member on the situation after the earthquake, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9210, 27 March 2023).

arrived. They beat him and insulted him, threatening him if he ever returned to the house. He filed a complaint with the military police; but received no response.³⁷

In another incident, a woman reported to Ceasefire and YASA that, during the earthquake, she and her family left their home, along with all the residents of the area, seeking refuge in open yards. Upon their return the following day, they were attacked by an armed group affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham faction. Three armed men assaulted her husband and eldest son, forcing them to vacate the house, and threatening to kill them if they dared to file a complaint or report the incident to any official authority. The woman reported that she pleaded with them to allow her to take her personal belongings with her. Afterwards, she left the area with her family due to persistent threats, relocating to her husband's village, Awlad Al-Arab, in the Maabatli district.³⁸

Ceasefire and YASA also documented a case in which a former member of Jaysh Al-Islam faction and a member of the Sultan Murad faction unlawfully seized the land of an Afrin resident in the first week after the earthquake. They set up an estimated 500 tents among the olive trees on the land in the Mahmoudiya neighbourhood, expelling the landowner when he attempted to block their actions. He alleged that families were brought in to occupy the tents, even though their own houses were undamaged, in order to access the distribution of assistance from aid organizations. He also said that the residents of the camps returned to sleep in their homes in Afrin at night as part of their routine, only spending their days in the tents to acquire aid. He wanted to approach the local council and take the case to court, but he was threatened by the perpetrators who prevented him from filing a formal complaint.³⁹

In addition to thefts of land following the earthquake, civilians also reported armed robberies during the rescue operations. In one case, a 26-year-old man and his wife and children were living in the street for two days after the earthquake. He then contacted relatives who live in Europe, asking them for money to help secure a house for his family. The next day, his relatives transferred €1,200 in his name to the city of Afrin. After he collected the money and left the transfer office, three armed men attacked him, threatened to kill him and seized the money. Currently living in one of the Jenderes camps, he reports that As the victim recounted, he reports that his house lies in ruins, he is unable to repair it due to the theft and he is currently attempting to leave the city of Afrin due to the conduct of the armed factions.⁴⁰

The unjust distribution of aid, favouring some displaced groups over other (mainly local Kurdish) groups, and the subsequent organised theft of land and property by armed factions acting with impunity, have created new tensions and worsened existing social divisions within communities in Jenderes and other earthquake-affected areas.

Settlements and demographic change

Turkish presence in Afrin

Türkiye exerts control over the administration of Afrin, including military and security aspects, by strategically placing Turkish personnel in key positions, who operate behind the scenes. Two Turkish

³⁷ Interview with a victim's relative, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9268: 5 April 2023).

³⁸ Interview with the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9330: 30 April 2023).

³⁹ Interview with YASA member on the situation after the earthquake, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9192, 23 March 2023).

⁴⁰ Interview with the victim, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9202: 26 March 2023).

Security assessments are sanctioned through Political Security branch, overseen discreetly by an individual (‘Hamza’) who issues arrest orders to police branches. A Turkish coordinator in the military police supervises branch operations and all security prosecution orders. Military investigation and intelligence branches directly affiliated with Turkish officers involve Syrian personnel on the ground, with supervision and direction provided by Turks. This arrangement spans all sub-districts, local councils, and intelligence detachments, with each detachment featuring a Turkish official issuing orders to personnel on the ground, often with Syrians acting in a nominal capacity.

Thus, Türkiye maintains control over the governance and security dynamics in the region through its personnel and Turkish-backed armed groups, which institutionally implement Turkish tactics and strategies in Afrin.

In a report published in September 2021,⁴⁴ Ceasefire and YASA highlighted that construction projects aimed at accommodating Syrians from other governorates failed to address the needs of displaced local Kurdish residents, who were forced to flee their lands due to Operation Olive Branch and its aftermath, and contributed to their further marginalization. The displacement of Kurdish residents has intensified as ongoing hostilities in northern Syria have forced more displaced Syrians from Idlib, Ghouta, northern Hama, and rural Damascus into the Afrin area.

Certain organizations supporting these settlements have extended their roles beyond providing services to the families of fighters. In some instances, they have undertaken the construction of entire villages, often behind a façade of benefiting civilians when, in reality, the projects primarily serve the housing

⁴⁵ Syrians for Truth and Justice, *Housing Settlements in Afrin: Demographic Engineering or IDP Housing Projects?*, 2022.

needs of fighters and their families. In fact, many local Kurdish people have been forcibly displaced from their homes to make way for the construction of new settlements.

The Basma residential village, situated near Shadir, approximately 16 km south of the city of Afrin, serves as an example of such settlement activities. Reconstruction of the village commenced on 1 March 2021, led by the White Hands Association. The village development comprised three stages. The initial phase included eight residential blocks, totalling 96 apartments, each covering an area of 45 square meters. The second phase, which commenced in March 2022, consisted of 16 residential blocks containing 126 apartments and has been successfully completed. The third phase, comprising 60 apartments, is positioned to the west of the second block. The residential complex incorporates a mosque and a Quran memorization institute. The construction of a school for children and the entire village received support from 48 Arab donors, as well as the Kuwaiti International Charitable Society for Construction and Development, along with various Gulf Islamic associations.

Financial resources are managed by the White Hands Association, overseeing disbursement through local building contractors. The land on which the village stands belongs to a civilian from the village of Shekh. The association secured a five-year lease for the land, and the Faylaq Al-Sham faction, in control of the village, claimed a portion of the amount to facilitate their own rebuilding efforts.

The residents include the families of Faylaq Al-Sham militants and individuals relocated from Idlib camps, supported by the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). Additionally, there are widows and orphans. The village, located near the Ziad Habib Monastery, houses displaced residents, including Kurdish Yazidi families. Notably, the third phase of the village is still in progress, supported by a Saudi individual named Abu Turki. The ongoing construction is justified under the pretext of providing shelter for those affected by an earthquake. About 70% of Yazidi families in Shadiriya village were displaced, with the homes of about 35 of the remaining 125 people being seized by members of Faylaq Al-Sham.⁴⁶

Another example of recent settlements built in the region is Da'wat Al-Khair settlement, situated to the north near the town of Maabatli, along the road to the city of Afrin. Construction of the project, which is managed by a local contractor from the Damascus countryside, began on 1 July 2022. In the initial phase, a mosque, a dispensary and 50 two-room houses and their annexes were constructed. A second phase, comprising 100 houses, was planned to be completed by the end of January 2023. These houses are intended for families from the countryside of Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo. Additionally, 15 houses from the settlement were allocated to families of the Al-Amshat faction, which controls the area and is responsible for constructing and equipping the settlement.⁴⁷

The construction of these settlements often leads to the forced displacement of local Kurdish residents, contributing to their marginalization and causing the majority of the Kurdish population in the region to leave their homes. Settlement activities, especially those influenced by Turkish political agendas, contribute to ongoing instability in the region and involve various violations, including infringements of property rights, the denial of essential services, and discrimination against Kurds and other marginalized ethnic groups.

⁴⁶ Interview with YASA member on settlements in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9174, 10 March 2023).

⁴⁷ Interview with YASA member on settlements in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9819, 30 November 2023).

Destruction of cultural heritage

The destruction of cultural heritage sites, alongside the persistence of illegal archaeological excavations and attacks on Newroz celebrations in Afrin have continued since Ceasefire and YASA's last report in 2021.⁴⁸ In 2019, Al-Shamye Front faction began illegal drilling and excavation operations lasting approximately a year.⁴⁹ Faylaq Al-Sham faction began drilling in 2019 and continued its activities until 2020, causing irreparable damage to the historical Kafar Zeit hill.⁵⁰

Contributing to these destructive activities, armed group members destroyed the Bir Sadiq shrine, a Yazidi religious site located to the west of Qatma, further targeting both cultural and religious symbols.⁵¹

The Nabi Hori area, too, has fallen victim to extensive destruction owing to illegal excavations and the trafficking of artifacts on the black market. According to information from YASA's source, these excavations were carried out openly during daylight hours, often employing heavy machinery such as bulldozers to facilitate access to valuable artifacts.

Nabi Hori is a site of archaeological importance, distinguished by its tower (later transformed into a mosque post-Operation Olive Branch) and the Roman theatre located approximately 300 meters from the tower. Archaeological missions successfully uncovered an entire city in this region until excavation activities ceased for unknown reasons in 2009. Dating back to around 300 BC, the city of Nabi Hori has historical roots in the Roman era. It is culturally significant and preservation efforts are essential in the face of ongoing threats.

Other cases involved the destruction of graves of Yazidi groups in the region. Images shared by a member of the Operation Olive Branch faction showed evidence of damaged graves in the Yazidi cemetery located in the village of Basoufan. This occurred on a day significant to the Yazidi community as they celebrate one of their major holidays, the Feast of Fasting, on the third Friday of December. YASA also reported that dozens of graves in the Yazidi cemetery near the village of Qibar were destroyed by unknown individuals, mentioning that this village is under the control of Al Mutassim Billah faction.⁵² It is important to note that this is not an isolated occurrence; there have been previous instances of destruction targeting Yazidi graves and shrines.⁵³



Damaged graves in Yazidi cemetery, Afrin, Syria.

Photo: name withheld

⁴⁸ Afrin after Operation Olive Branch, September 2021

⁴⁹ Interview with YASA member on the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9297, 25 April 2023).

⁵⁰ Interview with YASA member on the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9299, 25 April 2023).

⁵¹ Interview with YASA member on the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9292, 25 April 2023).

⁵² Interview with YASA member on the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9274, 06 April 2023).

⁵³ Interview with YASA member on the destruction of cultural heritage sites in Afrin, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 8961, 16 December 2022).

For years, the Syrian regime suppressed Kurds in the region, forbidding Newroz celebrations, carrying out mass arrests and launching attacks on these celebrations. Instances of violence, restrictions, and clashes were prevalent under the Assad government, with Kurds forced to display Syrian flags and photos of Bashar al-Assad during their celebrations.⁵⁴

This longstanding repression persists today under a new guise in Afrin. On 20 March 2023, four Kurdish civilians were murdered while celebrating Newroz in Jenderes. Armed individuals affiliated with Jaysh Al-Sharqiya of the SNA opened fire on them as they were lighting fires to mark the Newroz festivities. Two others sustained injuries.⁵⁵ According to YASA's reported cases, Ahrar al-Sham faction, which has effective control of Qarzihel village, stopped the residents from kindling a Newroz flame in the village on Newroz night. An official from the village intervened and ordered the people to return to their homes, issuing threats that any gatherings outside residences would lead to imprisonment and prohibiting the lighting of fires near their homes.⁵⁶

The destruction of cultural heritage in Afrin, characterized by illegal excavations, attacks on celebrations and the desecration of religious sites, reflects more than a pattern of disregard for objects of historical and cultural significance. Yazidis and Muslim Kurds as well as other marginalized groups in the region continue to live in an unsafe and unstable situation, as evidenced by violations documented by YASA and Ceasefire and supported by other sources. With no authority accountable for the actions of armed groups in the area, the vulnerability of such communities is further aggravated.

Recommendations

The human rights situation in Afrin requires urgent international attention and remedial measures at both domestic and international levels. It is recommended that:

1. Allegations of arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances by Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions should be thoroughly investigated and accountability measures promptly implemented in order to eliminate the culture of impunity surrounding the armed factions.
2. Urgent efforts should be made to tackle the issue of forced marriages in Afrin. The legal framework should be strengthened to impose penalties on perpetrators, and support systems established for victims. Awareness campaigns should be implemented on individuals' rights, particularly those of young girls.
3. Forced property seizures by members of the armed factions should be prohibited by the *de facto* authorities in Afrin and strict penalties imposed on perpetrators. Effective procedures should be established to hear property-related complaints and to ensure that requisitioned or stolen property is returned to the rightful owners.
4. Aid should be directed to local communities who continue to endure hardship in the aftermath of the earthquake, with steps taken to ensure that it reaches those in need without any discrimination.

⁵⁴ [‘Newroz celebrations bring much needed joy for Syrians’](#), *Enab Baladi*, 22 March 2017.

⁵⁵ [‘Pro-Turkey National Army accused of massacre against Kurds on Nowruz’](#), *The Syrian Observer*, 22 March 2023.

⁵⁶ Interview with YASA member, documented via the Ceasefire-MENA platform (post ID: 9211, 27 March 2023).

5. Urgent measures are needed to protect the olive groves and agricultural fields in Afrin through enhancing security measures, implementing stricter regulations against illegal logging, and providing support and compensation to affected farmers.
6. International monitoring and protective measures are imperative to safeguard Afrin's cultural heritage. In line with the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should monitor and verify attacks on cultural property in Afrin and initiate proposals to assist with the protection of cultural property. Diplomatic efforts should be intensified to hold accountable those responsible for illegal excavations and attacks on cultural sites, and to ensure the safety of affected communities and protection of their cultural identity.

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