

**2023**

# **THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION**

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



**ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER**

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# OCCUPIED AFRIN 2023

 SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB

 AHRAR AL-SHAM

 AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

 FAYLAQ AL-SHAM

 FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN

 AL HAMZA DIVISION

 AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

 112TH DIVISION


 SULTAN MEHMED FATIH

 13TH DIVISION

 SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH DIV.

 SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

 SUQOUR AL-SHAM BRIGADE

 SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BRIGADE

 JAYSH AL-NUKHBA

 FAYLAQ AL-MAJD (ZINKI)

 JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA

 SHEHBA GATHERING

 TURKISH CONTROL

TURKMEN  
FACTIONS

 MILITARY POLICE HQ

 SNA HQ

 SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ

 AL HAMZA DIVISION BASE

 SULTAN MURAD BASE

 SULEIMAN SHAH BASE

 FAYLAQ AL-SHAM BASE

 LIWA REJAL AL-HARB BASE

 AHRAR AL-SHAM BASE

 JAYSH AL-NUKHBA BASE

 AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA BASE

 112TH DIVISION BASE

 SAMARKAND HQ

 TURKISH BASE

 MIT HQ

 SIG MINISTRY OF DEFENCE HQ

 MILITARY CROSSING

 MAHATTA PRISON (MAYDAN IKBIS)

 RAJU PRISON

 GORAN PRISON

 AHRAR AL SHAM PRISON (QATMAH)

 AL HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)

 AL HAMZA DIVISION PRISON

 MIT PRISON (BARAD)

 SULEIMAN SHAH PRISON (SHIYE)

 QARMATLAQ HQ & PRISON

 AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA PRISON

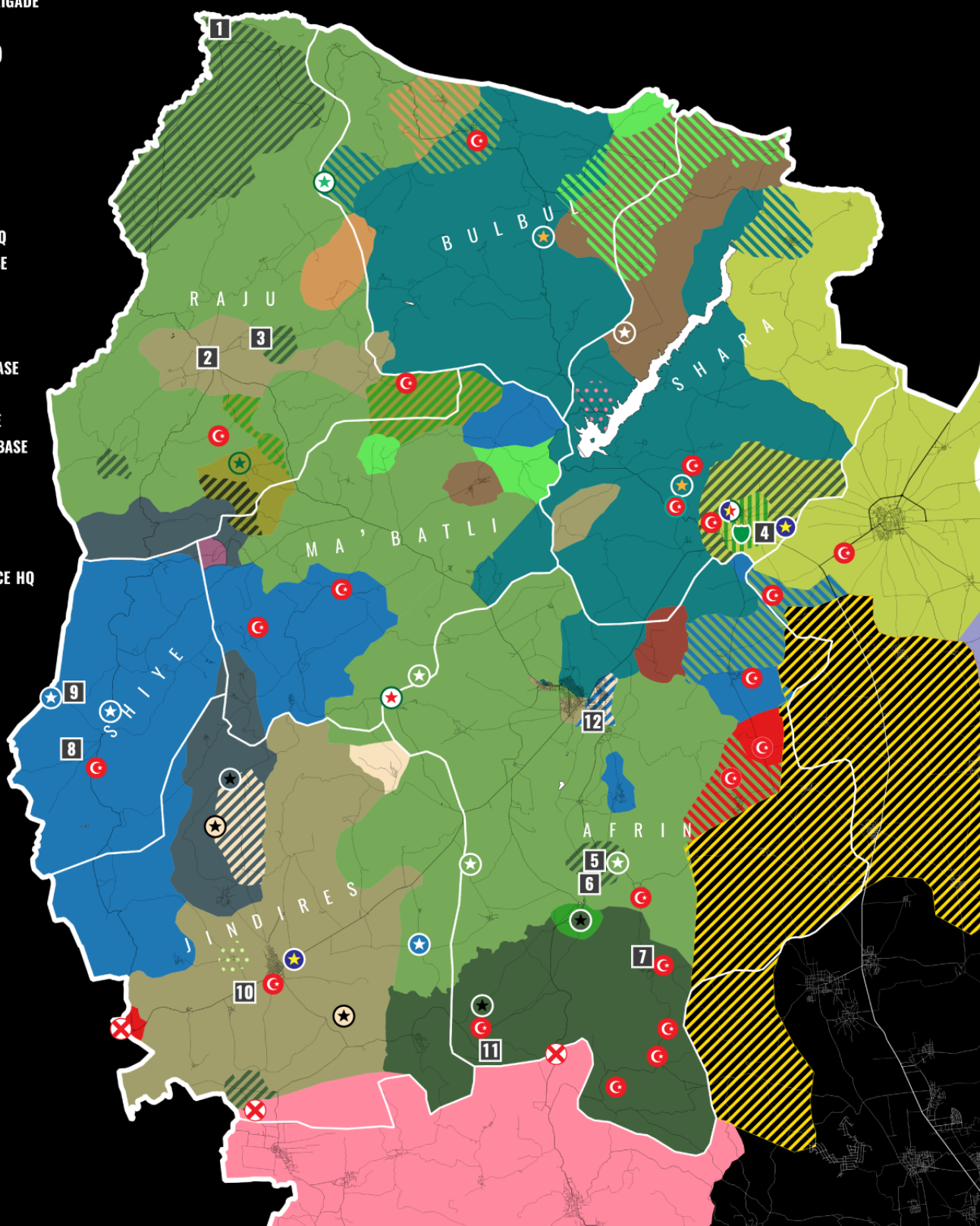
 FAYLAQ AL-SHAM PRISON (ISKAN)

 TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

 SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

 GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA

 EXTREMIST GROUPS



# EUPHRATES SHIELD 2023

AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA & SULTAN MEHMED FATIH

AL HAMZA DIVISION

AL HAMZA DIVISION & AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

MU'TASIM DIVISION

MU'TASIM DIVISION & LIWA AL-SAFWA

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & FAYLAQ AL-SHAM

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH

SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH & AL HAMZA

SULTAN MEHMED FATIH

AHRAR AL-SHAM

AHRAR AL-SHAM EASTERN SECTOR (2ND LEGION)

AHRAR AL-SHAM EASTERN SECTOR (AHRAR OLAN)

AHRAR OLAN & AL HAMZA DIVISION

AHRAR AL-SHAM EAST. SECT. (2ND LEGION) & AL HAMZA

AL HAMZA DIVISION & JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA

JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA

JAYSH AL-SHARQIYA, HAMZA & AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA

AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

51TH DIVISION

AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA & SULTAN MALIK SHA

JAYSH AL-ISLAM & JAYSH AL-NUKHBA

SHEHBA GATHERING

SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA

SDF & GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA

UNKNOWN SNA

TURKISH BASE

TURKISH/SNA BASE

SULEIMAN SHAH BASE

SULTAN MURAD BASE

AL-HAMZA BASE

AHRAR AL-SHAM BASE

AHRAR AL-SHAM NORTHERN SECTOR BASE

AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA BASE

SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL BASE

MILITARY CROSSING

1 SAJO PRISON

2 AZAZ POLICE HQ

3 AL-RAI PRISON

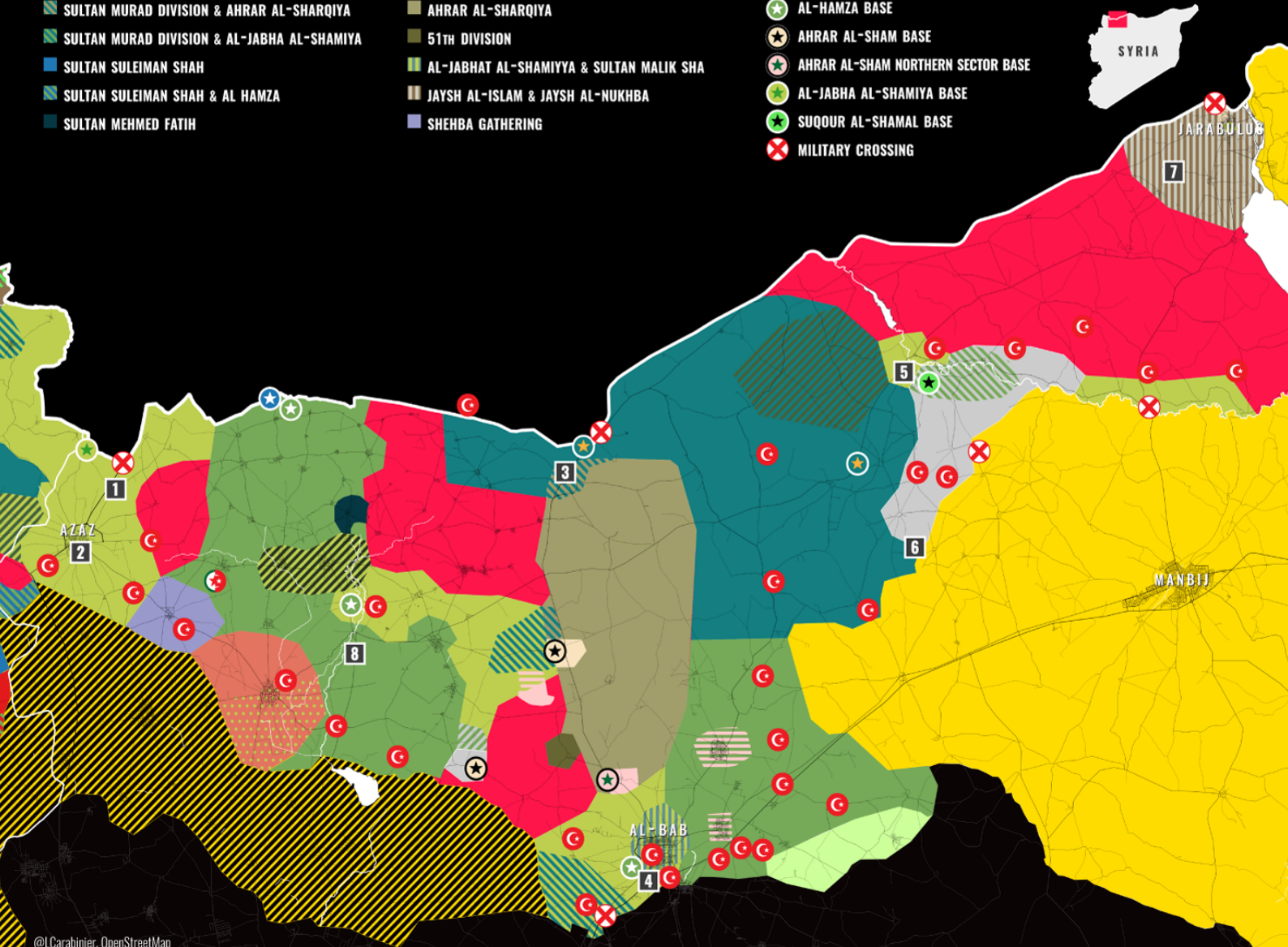
4 AL-HAMZA DIVISION SECURITY HQ

5 AL-HAMZA DIVISION HQ

6 SNA POST

7 OLD TURKISH BASE

8 MU'TASIM DIVISION HQ



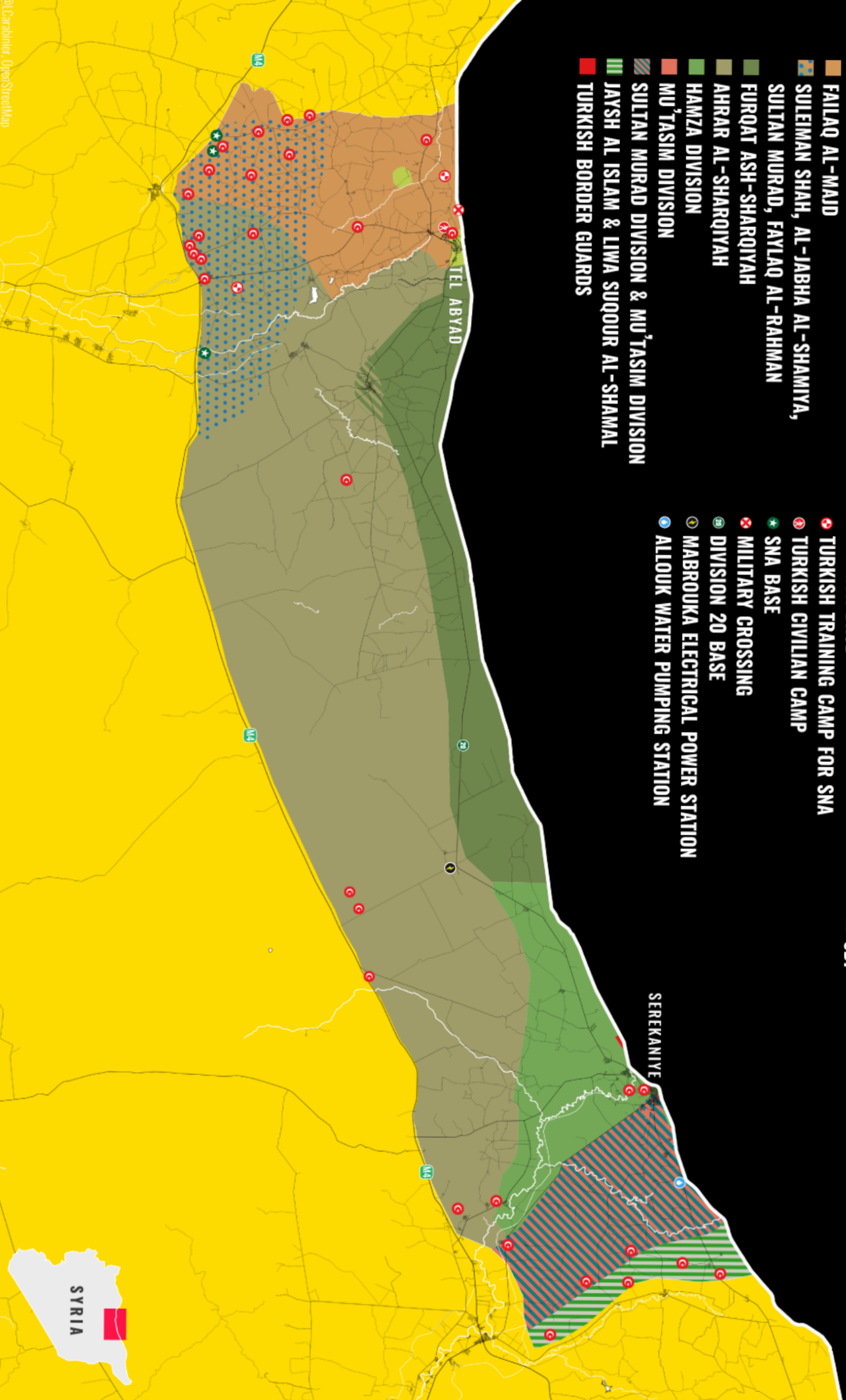


# OCCUPIED M4 STRIP 2023

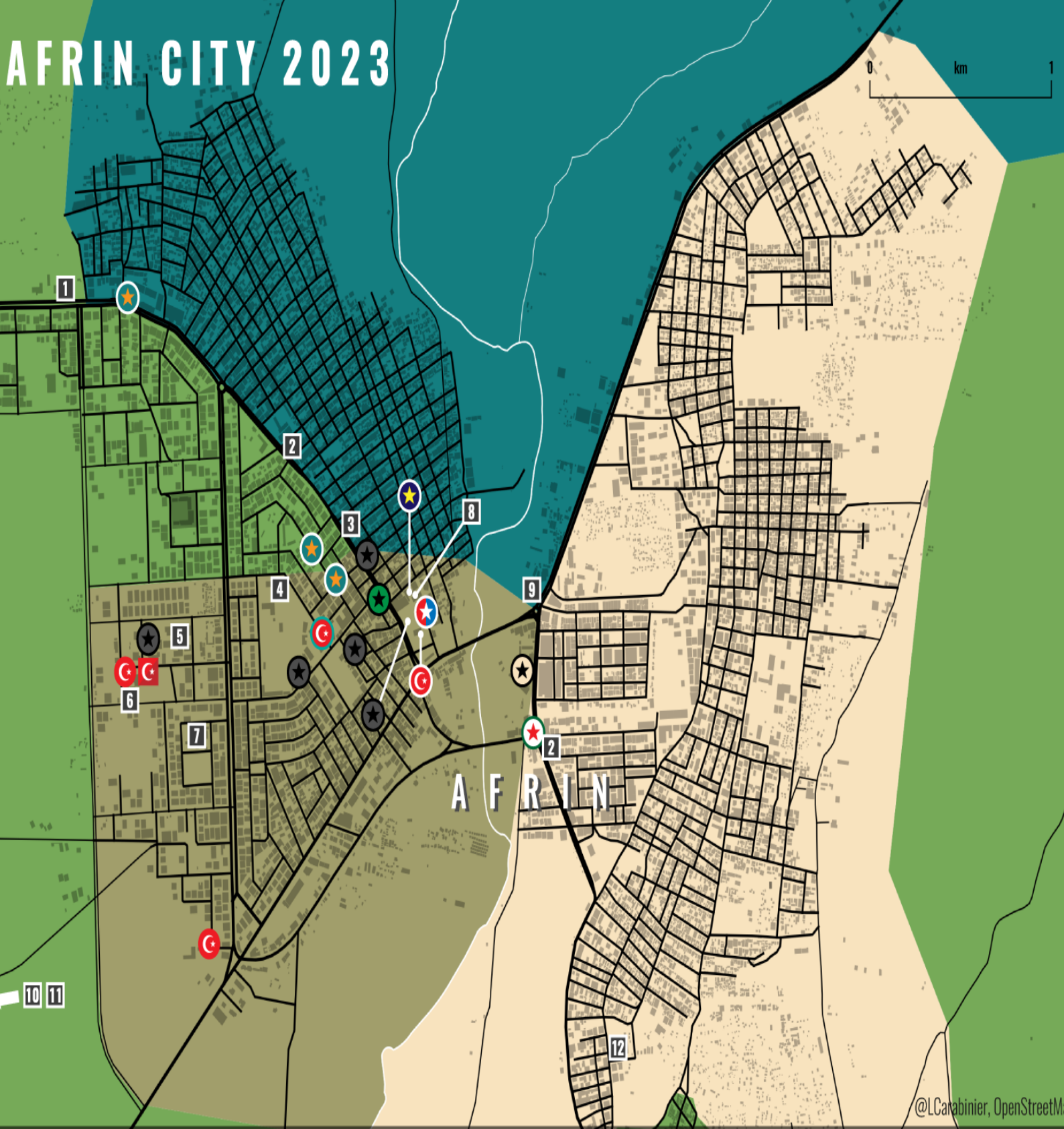
- AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA
- FAILAQ AL-MAJD
- SULEIMAN SHAH, AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA,
- SULTAN MURAD, FAIYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- FURQAT ASH-SHARQIYAH
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYAH
- HAMZA DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & MU'TASIM DIVISION
- JAYSH AL ISLAM & LIWA SUQOUR AL-SHAMAL
- TURKISH BORDER GUARDS

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

■ SDF



# AFRIN CITY 2023



1 AL-HAMZA DIVISION PRISON

2 PRISON

3 AHRAR AL-SHAM PRISON

4 'ITIHAD AL ARABI' PRISON

5 COURTHOUSE JAIL

6 'AZAHR' MIT PRISON

7 MILITARY POLICE HQ

8 'AL KARAMAH SCHOOL' COURT JAIL

9 SECURITY OF SULTAN MURAD AND AL-HAMZA

10 CIVILIAN CENTRAL PRISON (MARATA)

11 MILITARY CENTRAL PRISON (MARATA)

12 TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

★ SULTAN MURAD DIVISION BASE

★ LIWA AL-SALAM BASE

★ AHRAR AL-SHAM HQ

★ MILITARY POLICE

★ MIT MILITARY CENTER & CIVIL POLICE

★ SNA BASE (FORMERLY AL-JABHA AL-SHAMIYA)

★ UNKNOWN BASE

🇹🇷 TURKISH MAIN BASE

🇹🇷 TURKISH BASE

🇹🇷 MILITARY CENTER / MIT

🇹🇷 TURKISH SECURITY HQ

■ AHRAR AL-SHAM & SULTAN SULEIMAN SHAH

■ AL-HAMZA DIVISION

■ AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

■ SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

@LCarabinier, OpenStreetM



SYRIA

# INTRODUCTION & METHODS

## INTRODUCTION

RIC presents here the “State of the Occupation” report for the year 2023. We continue to focus on human rights violations in the three Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria.

1. Afrin canton, which was one of the three original cantons that declared autonomy from the Government of Syria (GoS) in 2012, has been occupied by Turkey since they invaded in a 2018 operation dubbed “Olive Branch” by the Turkish authorities.
2. The “M4 Strip” region, which encompasses the 5000 km<sup>2</sup> area north of the M4 highway, running east to west from the city of Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn) to that of Tel Abyad (Gire Spi), which Turkey invaded and occupied in 2019, in an operation dubbed “Peace Spring” by the Turkish authorities.
3. The “Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle”, the largest of the three regions, which Turkey has occupied since the “Euphrates Shield” operation in 2016.

As the three regions are militarily, economically and politically interlinked, and linked to the same Turkish proxy structures - the Syrian National Army (SNA) and its political counterparts - the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle area is included in our occupation reports in order to achieve a more complete analysis, despite the fact that it was never a geographic part of the North and East Syria region and never administratively inside the political system of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES), unlike Afrin and the M4 Strip. Turkey’s invasions of Afrin and the M4 Strip were both marked by egregious and well-documented human rights violations against the civilian population,<sup>1,2</sup> which have continued to the present day.

Since 2016, when the Turkish Army first attacked across the border and occupied the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, Ankara’s two main objectives within Syria have been to eliminate the Kurdish political project as constituted by the DAANES and the SDF as well as the communities that support them, and to create a nominally opposition-controlled “safe zone” to limit refugee outflow while permitting deportation of Syrian refugees residing within Turkey.

Despite Turkey’s claims that its invasion of the Afrin and M4 Strip regions created a ‘security buffer’ and ‘humanitarian zone’ for Syrian IDPs and refugees, RIC’s reports have consistently shown that Turkey’s occupation has turned these regions into a

1 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies-2/>

2 <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/syria-turkish-occupation-afrin-has-led-widespread-human-rights-violations-new>



patchwork of violently-enforced administration plagued by human rights abuses. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has confirmed the severity of the situation, stating that Turkish-backed SNA forces in the occupied areas have committed numerous violations against civilians, including war crimes such as hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture and rape.<sup>3</sup>

The Turkish-backed militias of the Syrian National Army (SNA) that control the three regions operate without accountability, as do their leaders, using intimidation tactics to consolidate their power over the local populations. In certain areas, particularly Afrin and Sere Kaniye, the indigenous Kurdish, Christian, and Yazidi populations are being systematically displaced and replaced with largely Arab and Turkmen settlers.<sup>4,5</sup> Leading human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UNHCR have documented Turkey's policy of intentional demographic change in the occupied areas.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup> Additionally, the Turkish-occupied regions have become a major hub for human smuggling, with hundreds of irregular border crossings and deaths occurring annually.<sup>10</sup>

Several factions of the Syrian National Army and their leaders are listed on sanctions lists of the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) due to their involvement in serious human rights violations in Syria. Ahrar al-Sharqiya and two of its leaders were classified in July 2021.<sup>11</sup> According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Ahrar al-Sharqiya has committed numerous crimes against civilians, particularly Syrian Kurds, including unlawful killings, abductions, torture, and seizures of private property. The group has also incorporated former Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) members into its ranks." Furthermore, the sanction notice asserted that the group is responsible for the "unlawful killing of Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish politician and Secretary General of the political party Future Syria, as well as her bodyguard in October 2019."<sup>12</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has identified these two murders as a possible war crime, but to date there has been no international criminal accountability. In August 2023, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced new sanctions on two SNA factions (Suleiman Shah Brigade and Hamza Division) and three members of their leadership, including the notorious 'Abu Amsha,' for "serious human rights abuses" in Turkish-occupied Afrin.<sup>13</sup> This sanctioning of Abu Amsha is notable. Previously, popular protests in Jindires (Afrin region) had demanded that he be held accountable for participation in murders, rapes, torture, kidnappings, and arms trafficking. Yet his apparent immunity from accountability stems from the Suleiman Shah Brigade's strict adherence to Turkish

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

4 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2020/05/RIC-Dossier-2205-SP.pdf>

5 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/storage/2019/11/Turkeys-track-record-The-occupation-of-Afrin.pdf>

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

7 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-thematic-humanitarian-access-snapshot-ras-al-ain-tell-abiad-area-november-2022>

8 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/rights-groups-abuses-rise-syria-s-afrin>

9 [https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR\\_Syria\\_EN\\_July20.pdf](https://www.ceasefire.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CFR_Syria_EN_July20.pdf)

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

11 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292>

12 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2021/10/ahrar-al-sharqiya-war-crimes-with-impunity/>

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



interests and Abu Amsha's closeness to Turkey's intelligence services, MIT, who went as far as threatening to cut off funding for the al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction due to their support of the protests against Abu Amsha.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, Turkey's invasions and installation of the SNA in its occupied regions have provided safe havens for globally-designated terrorists. U.S. airstrikes regularly target top-level militants linked to al-Qaeda or ISIS moving freely in Turkish-controlled territory,<sup>15</sup> and several former ISIS fighters hold or have held commanding positions in the SNA. RIC identified over 40 ISIS members within SNA factions in Afrin, living and operating freely on the Turkish payroll, including commanders, brigade leaders and coordinators working directly with the Turkish intelligence services.<sup>16</sup> In further research, RIC recorded over 40 former ISIS members safely sheltered within the Turkish-controlled SNA factions in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.<sup>17</sup> The U.S.' Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General report to Congress for Q2 2023 also stated that most SNA groups "continued to recruit and pay fighters, some of whom are former ISIS members," as well as engaged in "reportedly providing safe passage of ISIS members through the areas under their influence" all while benefiting from "funds extorted from civilians at checkpoints and by threatening or carrying out threats to detain, physically abuse, rape, or kill the individual and/or their family members."<sup>18</sup>

## AUTHORS

The RIC is an independent media organization based in NES. It is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from different countries. As there is a lack of clear and objective reporting on NES, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground, the RIC was set up to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced and 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.

## METHODS

This report is based on our own open-source research in collaboration with the Afrin Human Rights Organisation, a local NGO that collects first-hand testimony from the field. We also worked with and shared information with the Hevdesti-Synergy Association, a Qamishlo-based organization that advocates for victims of

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

15 <https://www.bostonherald.com/2019/10/28/isis-and-Turkeys-relationship-questioned-after-u-s-raid/>

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

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

18 <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/04/2003274797/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20FY23Q3.PDF>

the Turkish occupied M4 Strip. We also consulted with two national NGOs (Syrians for Truth and Justice and the Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria) that maintain independent databases on Afrin and the M4 Strip. This data was compared with research conducted by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a UK-based organization. A challenge to our data collection was the relative lack of reliable and complete data from the M4 Strip and the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle area, due to the less established local media in this area even before the Turkish invasion and fewer sources on the ground.

RIC also reviewed local news articles from the Afrin Post, a media network that monitors and follows up events in North and East Syria in Arabic, Kurdish and English. It focuses on the Afrin region and monitors human rights violations occurring in it. In addition, RIC observed reports from the United Nations and the European Parliament, as well as academic articles. Historical information is based on previous reports by the Rojava Information Center (RIC) or third-party sources where cited. The maps were created with the help of the Afrin Human Rights Organization, the Afrin Post, the Hevdesti Association, military sources and eyewitness accounts. RIC was unable to independently verify all factional affiliations, but some prison locations were confirmed using satellite data. Eyewitness testimony also helped us assign militias to individual villages and towns. However, we do not claim that our report is exhaustive.

In this report, as well as that of Q3&4 2022, RIC added a new category of perpetrators: "settlers." They are not a faction in the SNA, although many of them are also SNA militiamen. They may commit crimes both individually and in armed groups with the capability to cope with an infighting with an SNA faction. This criteria differs from the one used in occupation reports prior to Q3&4 2022. The previous criteria stated that crimes committed by settlers against Kurds did not need to be recorded unless there was clear indication of involvement by an SNA faction or Turkey. Through following the situation on the ground, RIC has observed a trend of demographic change, with systematic targeting of Kurdish civilians - also recorded by the UN<sup>19, 20, 21, 22</sup> - forcing many to leave, hence RIC considers crimes committed by settlers as part of this process of demographic change.

79% of all the crimes RIC recorded and confirmed took place in the Afrin region. Just 7% (205 crimes) occurred in the M4 Strip and 13% (366) occurred in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. RIC recorded but was unable to confirm a further 454 crimes taking place in the M4 Strip. This disparity between the regions - which are controlled by the same SNA structures - can be assigned to multiple factors. One key challenge RIC faced during the data collection process was the relative scarcity of reliable and complete data from the M4 Strip and al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. This is because the domestic media in the area was less well-established even before the Turkish invasion and occupation operations, with fewer sources on the ground. Now, reporting on crimes of the SNA factions risks reprisal if the reporter is

19 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/report-coi-syria-march2023>

20 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/report-coi-syria-september2022>

21 <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F48%2F70&Language=E&Device-Type=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

22 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-thematic-humanitarian-access-snapshot-ras-al-ain-tell-abiad-area-november-2022>

uncovered. In addition, the nature of Afrin's demography and that of the SNA likely plays a role in criminal activity. A comparative study of different Turkish-occupied Syrian towns and cities found that rights violations were more abundant in areas where the dominant SNA factions do not include local fighters, which is the case for Afrin.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, when local fighters dominate a faction, security is generally much better, for example in Azaz, where many al-Jabha al-Shamiya fighters are local. In a 2023 assessment of Turkish-backed governance and security structures in Afrin, researcher Alexander McKeever also noted that people with kinship ties to SNA factions are more protected from abuses, hence IDP populations with strong ties to factions originally from their home regions see fewer violations than Kurds in Afrin, because there are no Kurdish or Afrin-based local SNA factions.<sup>24</sup> This can also explain why the number of crimes recorded in Afrin is higher. Those without familial or financial ties to the SNA face more abuses.

Detailed information on the geopolitical context, history, and socio-political situation of the areas covered in this report can be found in previous RIC dossiers. The first RIC Quarterly Report in early 2021 included detailed background information on the occupation, as well as a longer section on the history of the occupation.<sup>25</sup> In July 2022, RIC published "[The Syrian National Army: The Turkish Proxy Militias in Northern Syria](#)," a comprehensive report on the current situation of the SNA militias and other armed groups operating in the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria, which examines in detail the relationship between the SNA and its political counterpart, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), as well as the Turkish authorities. Related to this topic, in June 2023 RIC published the report: "[When Jihadism Learns to Smile: HTS' Evolution and Current Presence in Northern and Northwestern Syria](#)." It deals specifically with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which holds territory around Idlib in northwestern Syria, but whose influence and alliances are growing in the Turkish-occupied areas of Afrin.

In July 2023, RIC also published "[After the Earthquake: Impacts of the Natural Disaster Within War-Torn AANES Territories](#)," covering the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Syria and Turkey in February of that year. The latter two topics are also covered in separate chapters of this report.

All reports are available on the [RIC website](#). All maps in this report were created by cartographer and designer Eduardo Artica (@Lcarabinier). All graphics were created by Lisa Lorenz.

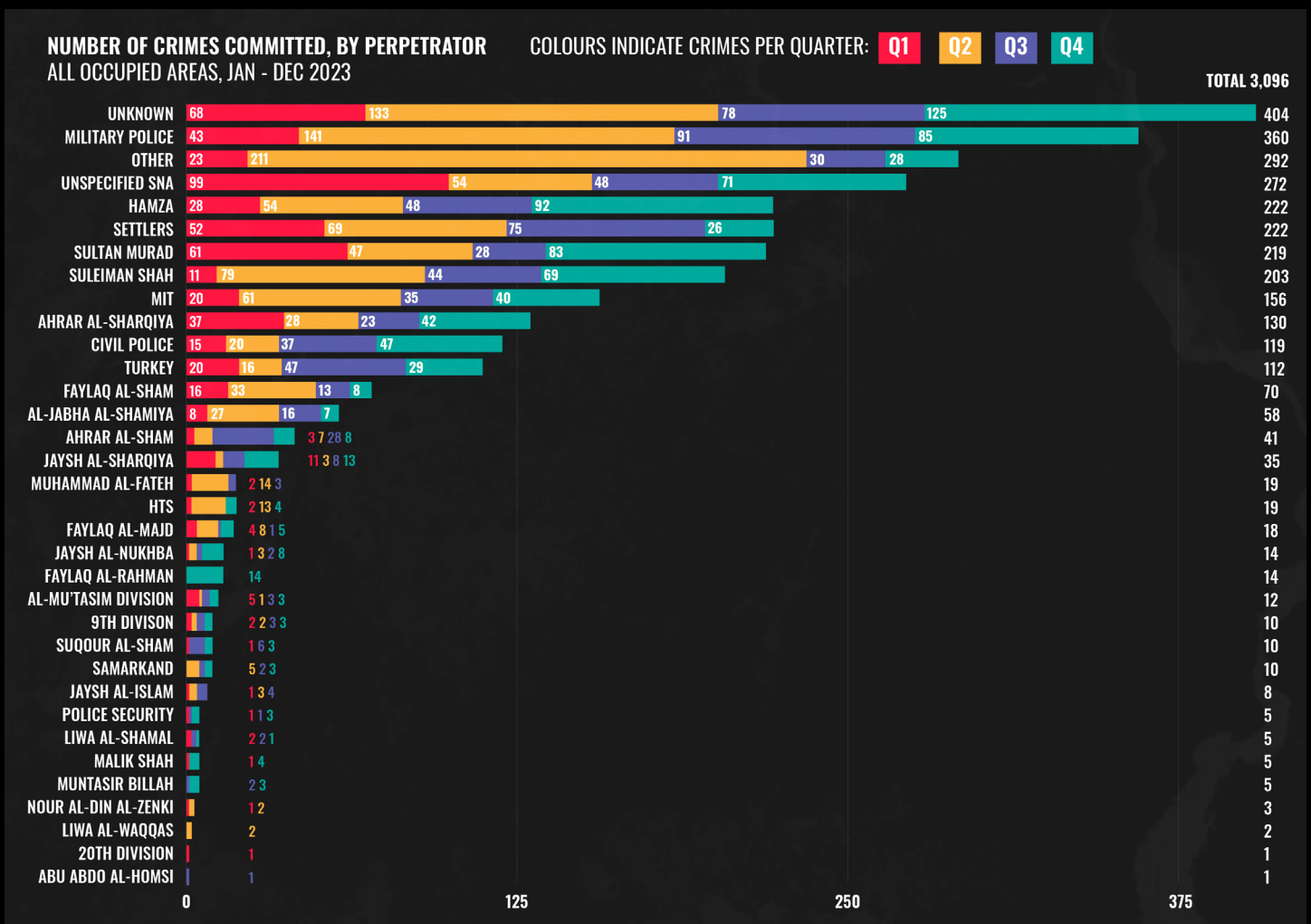
<sup>23</sup> [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/MED\\_RR\\_2021\\_01s.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69657/MED_RR_2021_01s.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y)

<sup>24</sup> <https://journals.tplondon.com/com/article/view/3081>

<sup>25</sup> <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2021/06/state-of-the-occupation-a-new-quarterly-report-on-rights-violations-in-turkish-occupied-nes/>

# QUARTERLY REPORT

## REGIONAL SITUATION AND CRIMES PER PERPETRATOR

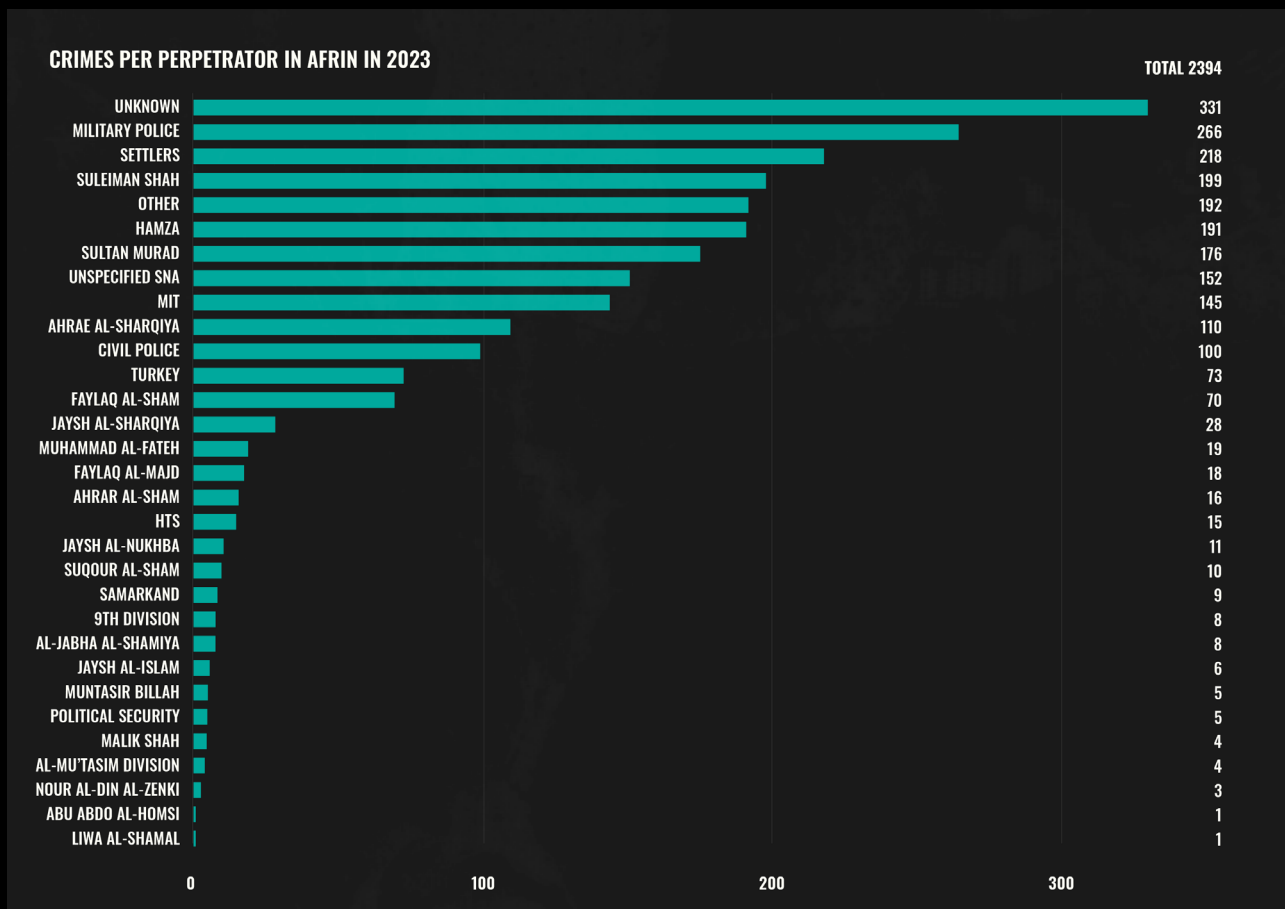




## AFRIN

During 2023, RIC documented 2,201 crimes in the Afrin Region. These crimes were committed in 1,201 separate incidents and impacted at least 1,710 victims. By plotting the number of crimes versus the perpetrators, it is evident that the Syrian National Army (SNA) is responsible for the vast majority of them, followed by unknown perpetrators and the Turkish-associated military police. Within the SNA the Suleiman Shah faction with 199 crimes was the most active.

Although 300,000 Kurdish inhabitants have fled since Turkey's 2018 invasion, the Afrin region still has a significant Kurdish population that is systematically targeted by the SNA and other Turkish-backed organizations. Before the Turkish military operation, there were 570,000 Kurds living in Afrin, representing an estimated 95-98% of the total population. With the occupation, more than 450,000 Arabs, Turkmen and Palestinians were settled, and the percentage of Kurds decreased to less than 25%, according to Afrin Human Rights Organisation.



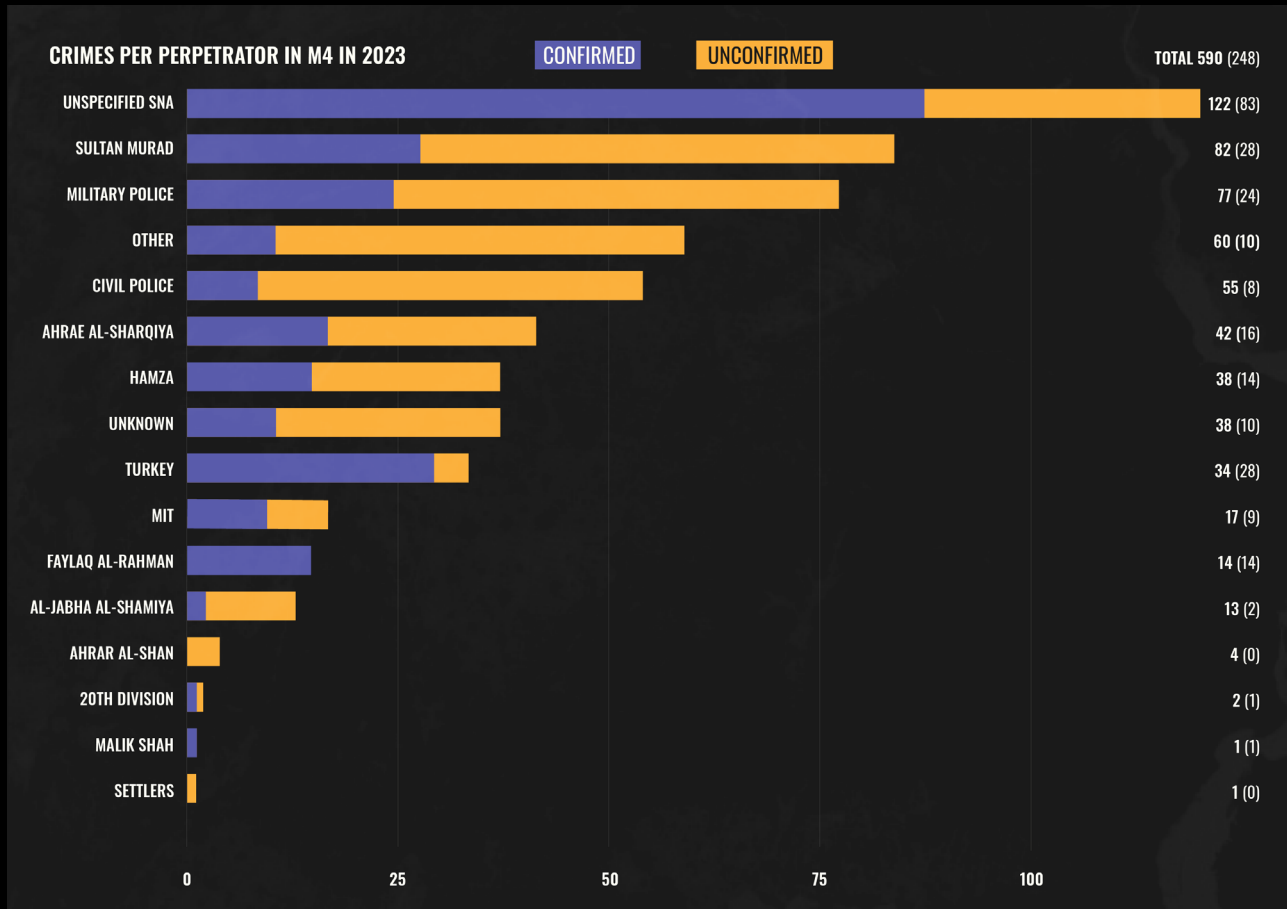
## M4

In 2023, RIC recorded a total of 205 crimes in 42 events in the M4 Strip. The majority of these crimes were related to human smuggling across the border with Turkey. Sultan Murad and Ahrar al-Sharqiya were identified as the two main perpetrators among the SNA militias. However, in the region, Turkish representatives, including military personnel and border guards, were also among the main actors committing crimes against civilians.

According to Hevdesti Association, before Turkey's 2019 invasion, the M4 Strip contained 292,500 inhabitants. In Sere Kaniye and the surrounding villages, 50% were Kurdish. In Tel Abyad and its surrounding villages this figure stood at 30%. With the Turkish occupation, the Sere Kaniye saw over 85% of the original inhabitants displaced. In the case of the Tel Abyad area, more than 35% of the original inhabitants were displaced.

As in previous reports, data is difficult to obtain and verify. When classifying the crimes by perpetrators, RIC finds that the first label in the list is "Unspecified SNA." This reflects a general lack of on-the-ground media sources. This, together with the fact that the confirmed cases represented only the 32% of all the cases RIC recorded in its database, hints that the numbers RIC are presenting for the region are still an underestimation of the real ones.

The second most active agents in the M4 Strip region were Turkey and Sultan Murad. Turkey's crimes included mainly those committed by the Turkish border police against Syrians who were trying to flee from the region by irregular border crossings and consisted of severe beatings and killings. Sultan Murad on the other hand, was mostly involved in economic crimes. It is the largest Turkmen faction within the SNA, and one of Turkey's closest allies.



## AL-BAB/AZAZ/JARABLUS TRIANGLE

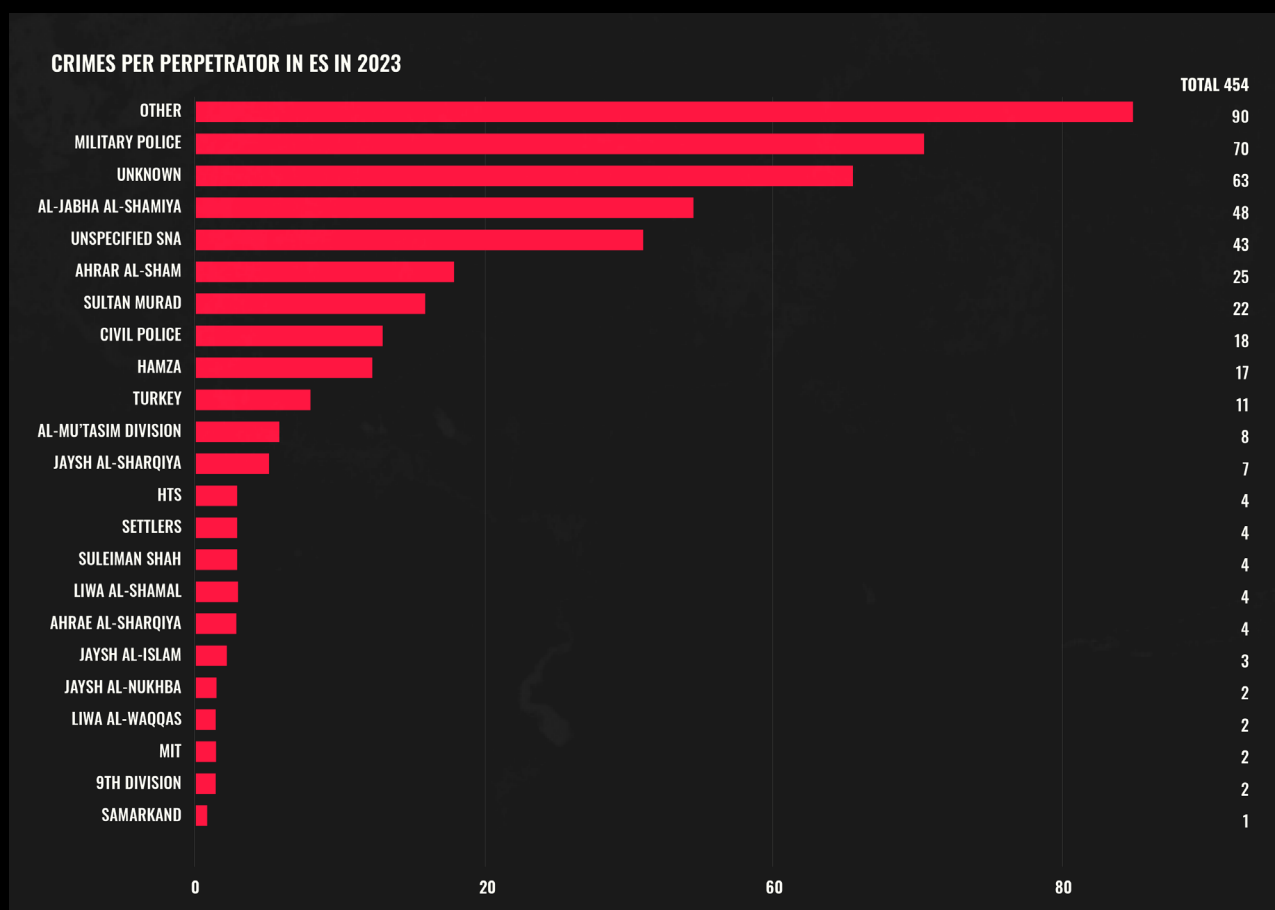
Similar to Q3 and Q4 in 2022, as discussed in the [RIC Occupation Report](#) for these quarters, in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle several demonstrations took place. In one example, protests took place against Ankara-Damascus reconciliation after the Turkish Interior Minister (at the time) Mevlut Cavusoglu confirmed Turkey's intention to transfer control in the areas it has in Syria to Damascus once political stability had been achieved. In response, the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 saw a wave of demonstrations against the expected Ankara-Damascus reconciliation. This spread through all northwestern Syria: people in Afrin, Azaz, Al-Bab, Marea, Akhtarín, Qabasin, Darat Azza, and Al-Atareb joined the protests.<sup>26</sup> Protests lasted until mid-June 2023 when, after the election, Turkey changed its tone. A single meeting occurred on June 20th between deputy foreign ministers.<sup>27</sup> With this, the overall situation returned to the impasse seen at the beginning of 2022: the Syrian government was demanding the complete withdrawal of the Turkish military from Syrian soil as sine qua non to enter negotiations, while Turkey was rejecting this. Erdogan re-stated his denial on July 17th, 2023. Three months later, on October 17th,

<sup>26</sup> <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25474>

<sup>27</sup> <https://rojainformationcenter.org/2024/07/the-occupied-areas-are-heating-up-reconciliation-and-on-going-protests/#dd65eb43-edb6-4123-a6a7-2ad1fc9387e8>

the Turkish Parliament voted to extend the mandate for Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq for another two years.

One observation applicable to all three regions concerns the number of crimes committed by the Military Police. It is worth noting that Military Police personnel are often members of one of the locally active SNA factions. This may be due in part to the fact that the SNA salary provided by Turkish municipalities is insufficient to support the militiamen's families.<sup>28</sup> Many crimes committed under the banner of the Military Police are actually perpetrated by individuals who belong to a SNA faction and hence have a guarantee of impunity. Additionally, some Military Police members' affiliation with an SNA faction can be the cause of committing crimes, particularly in cases of inter-faction infighting that involves the Military Police, some with a stronger allegiance to their faction than to the general SNA structure.



28 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/clashes-northern-syria-triumph-interests-over-language-brotherhood>



## Muslim Brotherhood

In the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus triangle, it is evident that a third party, in addition to the SNA, exerts considerable influence. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was established in 1928 with the objective of challenging British influence and promoting the implementation of Sharia law to islamize society. It eventually became the most influential pan-Arab Islamist organization, despite experiencing intermittent periods of suppression. It has retained a significant presence across the region. The group's political domination became more pronounced in Syria with the onset of the Syrian uprisings.<sup>29</sup> In September 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood was present at two meetings where opposition figures met in Turkey to form a representative political body. The MB then joined the Syrian National Council that was created in Istanbul in 2012.<sup>30</sup> This strategy proved successful, resulting in the Muslim Brotherhood gaining considerable influence within the Syrian opposition forces. For example, the MB secured the alliance of Colonel Riad al-Asaad, who subsequently formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>31</sup>

The MB then established military units across the country, many of which bore the name "shield," also connected to the "Operation Euphrates Shield" or simply "Euphrates Shield" region describing the area occupied in 2016 which RIC refers to as the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle.<sup>32</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood is renowned for its strategic use of front organizations, which include the National Union of Free Syria Students, led by Hassan Darwish; the Arab Orient Center for Strategic and Civilization Studies, headed by MB spokesman Zoheir Salem; and the Syrian Human Rights Committee, led by MB representative and the opposition's ambassador to Britain, Walid Saffour. Additionally, a group representing women and children is led by a daughter of Mohammed Farouk Tayfour, the deputy leader of Syria's MB branch.<sup>33</sup>

Until summer 2023, Turkey openly supported the Muslim Brotherhood hoping to shape Syria's future through it and challenge Saudi Arabia's influence in the Sunni Islamic world<sup>34,35</sup>. Several SNA factions have clear links to MB, as shown in [RIC's SNA Encyclopedia](#). Since summer 2023, Turkey has been turning away from the Muslim Brotherhood, partly to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE.<sup>36</sup>

Mozur Shiyar, Co-Chair of Rojava's Center for Strategic Studies explained to the RIC that the MB is a strong ideological force, whereas many SNA forces simply follow Turkish orders and have a strong interest in material gains. The MB's influence on the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle sets it apart from the other Turkish-occupied

29 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/07/muslim-brotherhood-turkey-survival/#selection-1347.236-1347.508>

30 <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/regional-competition/russia-turkey-and-the-syrian-muslim-brotherhood/>

31 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/13/how-the-muslim-brotherhood-hijacked-syrias-revolution/>

32 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/13/how-the-muslim-brotherhood-hijacked-syrias-revolution/>

33 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/13/how-the-muslim-brotherhood-hijacked-syrias-revolution/>

34 <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/regional-competition/russia-turkey-and-the-syrian-muslim-brotherhood/>

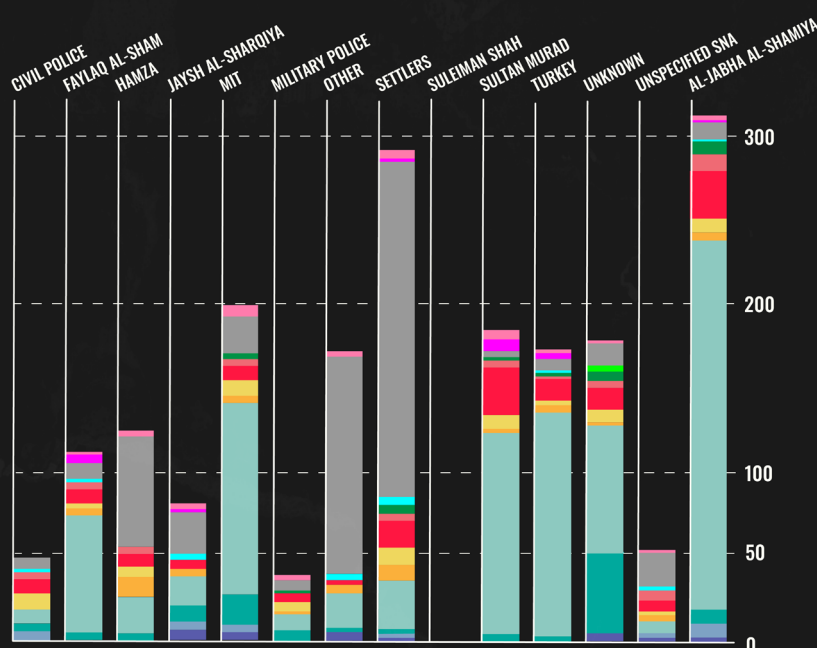
35 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/07/muslim-brotherhood-turkey-survival/#selection-1347.236-1347.508>

36 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/07/muslim-brotherhood-turkey-survival/#selection-1347.236-1347.508>

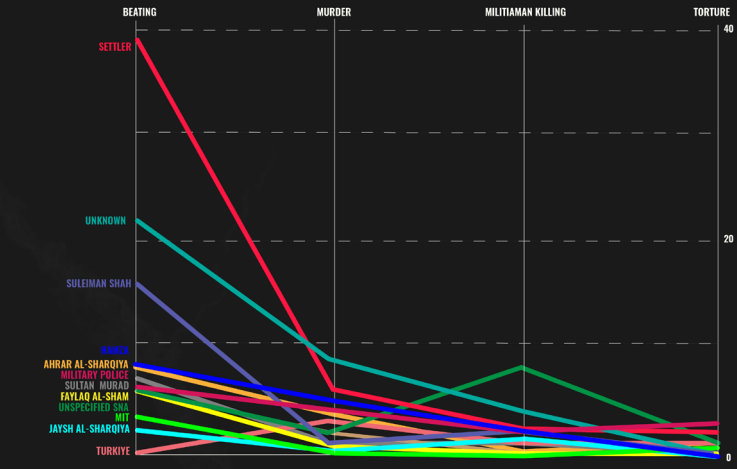
areas. Prior to the occupation, the MB did not exert significant influence in neither the Afrin region nor the M4 Strip, which were predominantly Kurdish. While SNA factions are primarily acting on orders from Turkey, the MB, similar to HTS, have been known to collaborate with Turkey while simultaneously pursuing their own strategic objectives. Given the MB's reputation for utilizing front organizations, it is challenging to ascertain an accurate representation of the circumstances within the triangle. The possibility exists that protests may be orchestrated by the MB, which could provide a potential explanation for why anti-rapprochement protests were more pronounced in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle than in other occupied areas.

### MOST ACTIVE CRIME PERPETRATORS IN 2023

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CRIME  
BOMBING  
ECOLOGICAL CRIME  
ECONOMICAL CRIME  
GENDER-BASED CRIME  
INFIGHTING  
INJURY/BEATING  
KILLING/MURDER  
MILITIA KILLINGS  
TORTURE  
SHELLING FROM FRONTLINE  
UNLAWFUL ARREST/KIDNAPPING  
RELIGIOUS/ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION  
OTHER



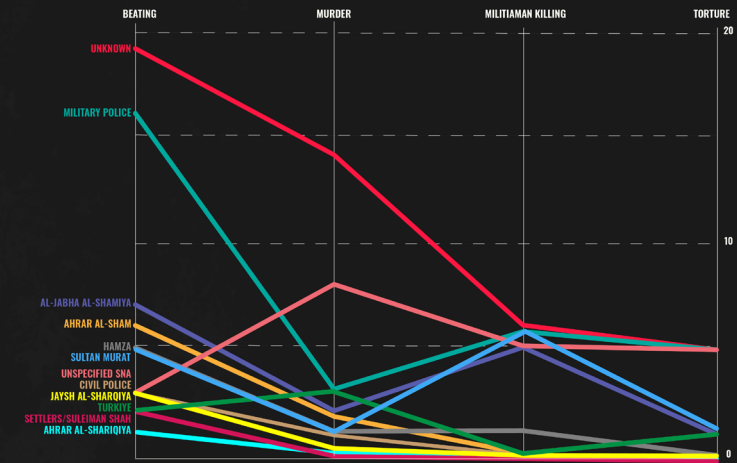
CRIMES PER PERPETRATOR IN AFRIN IN 2023



CRIMES PER PERPETRATOR IN M4 IN 2023

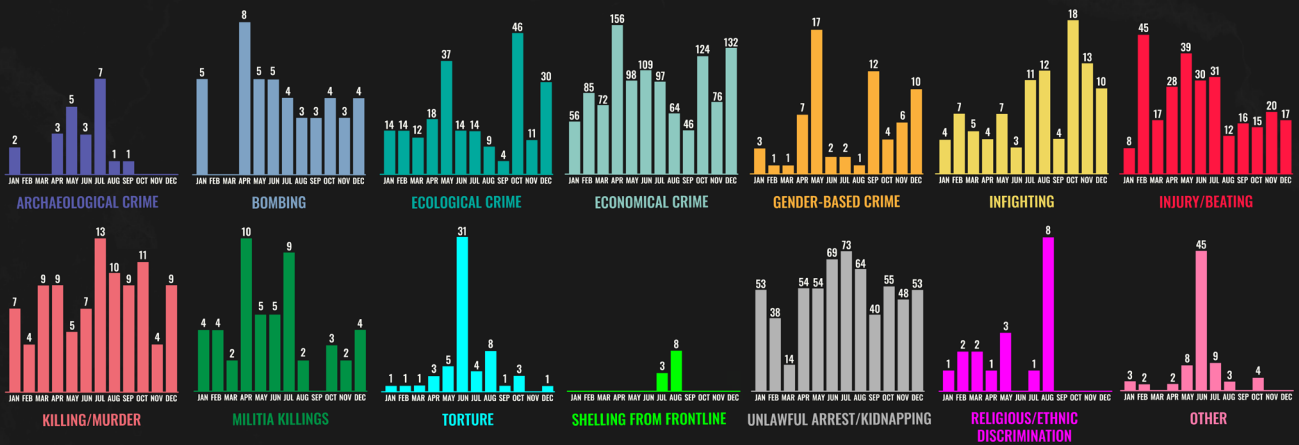
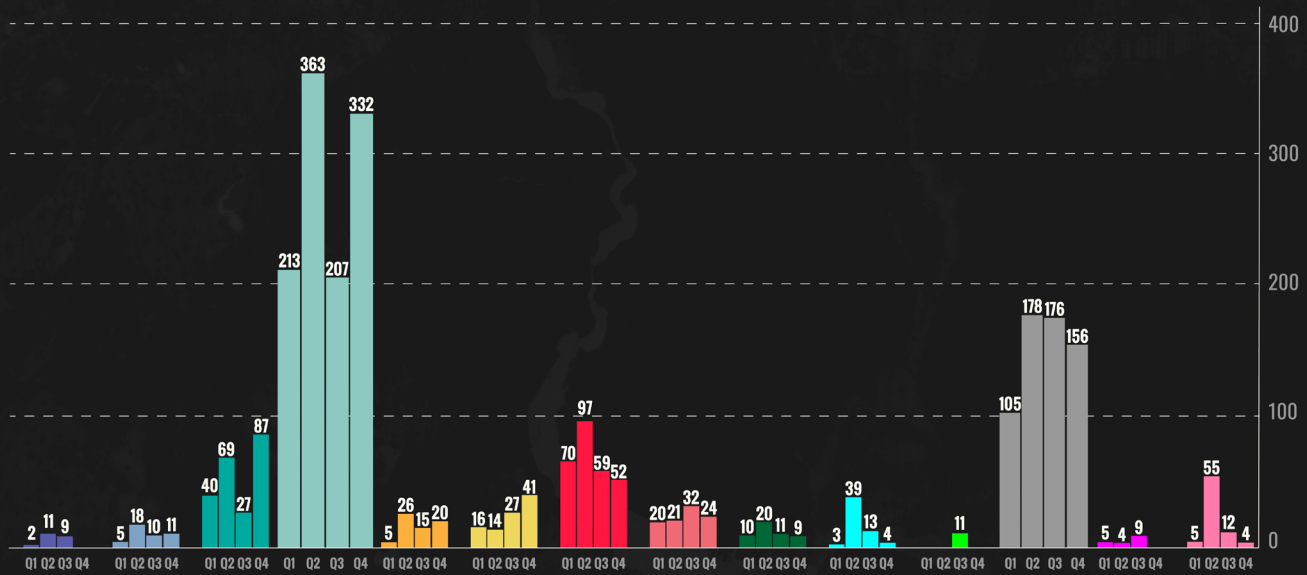


CRIMES PER PERPETRATOR IN ES IN 2023



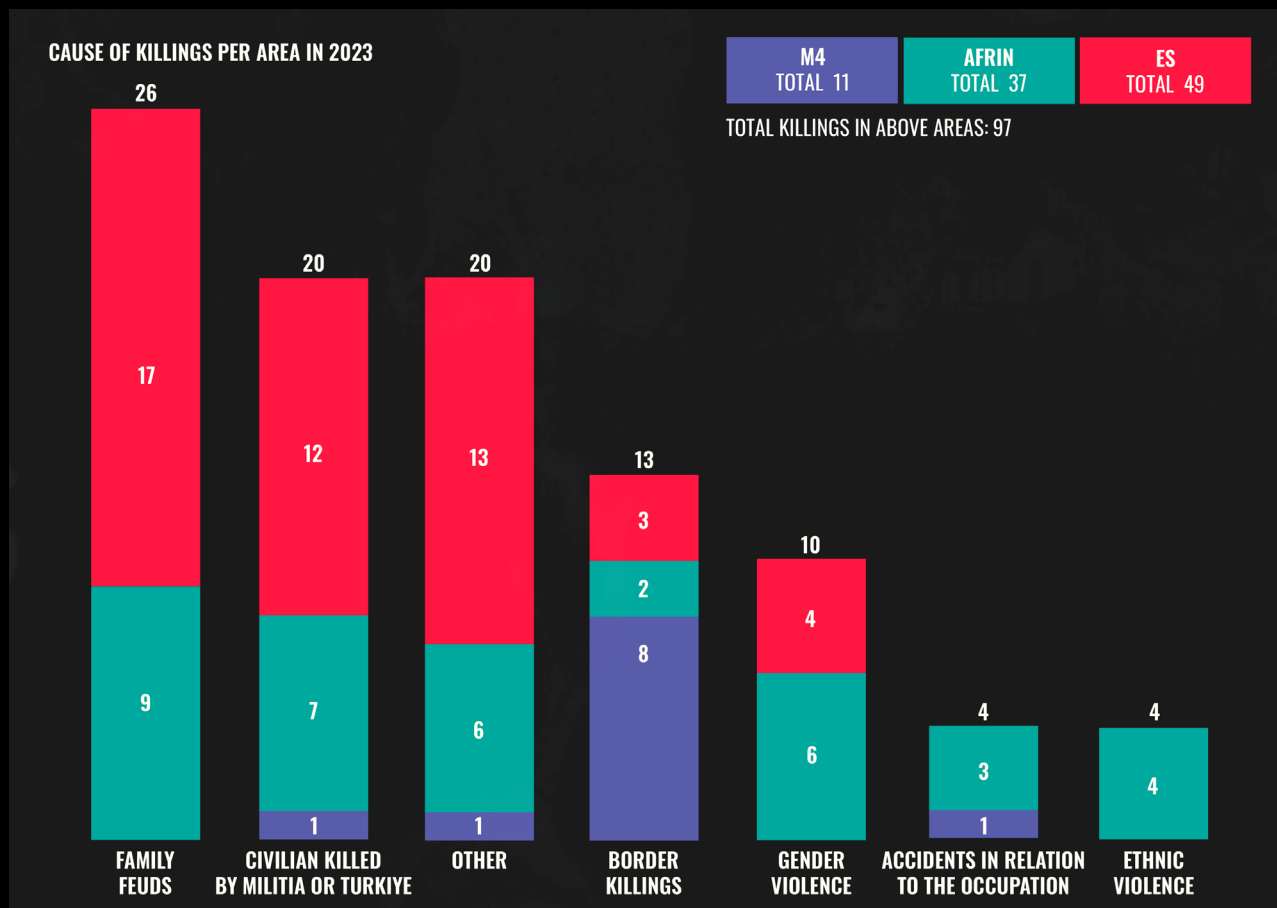
# CRIMES BY TYPE

**CRIMES PER QUARTER IN 2023**  
ALL OCCUPIED AREAS





## KILLING AND BEATING



In 2023, at least 97 cases of killing occurred in the Turkish-occupied territories: 37 in Afrin, 25 recorded, 11 of which confirmed, in the M4 Strip, and 49 in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle. The relative scarcity of reporting on crimes in the M4 Strip meant RIC could confirm just 11 cases of killings in 2023 for that region. These individual killings occurred under various circumstances.

The most common cause for murder in the M4 Strip with 8 out of 11 confirmed cases, is people being killed while trying to cross the border. A report Human Rights Watch released in April 2023 evidenced how Turkish border guards are “indiscriminately shooting at Syrian civilians on the border with Syria, as well as torturing and using excessive force against asylum seekers and migrants trying to cross into Turkey,” in what HRW’s Europe and Central Asia director described as “a pattern of brutality.”<sup>37</sup> Until late 2023 border killings were almost exclusively executed by the Turkish border guards, but Turkey then began delegating border responsibilities to the SNA and Military Police, with the creation of SNA border guards unit Alwiyyat Haras al-Hudoud. The handover is made visible through the murder of a civilian. On November 18th, members of Furqat al-Sultan Malikshah are reported to have shot

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/04/27/turkish-border-guards-torture-kill-syrians>

and killed a civilian attempting to cross into Turkey near Sere Kaniye.<sup>38</sup>

A second common circumstance of murders in the occupied areas is that of victims who were unlawfully arrested and tortured. On April 10th civilian Muhammed Yasser Khair Ramadan was reportedly killed in a hospital in Azaz, the Army of Islam militia is suspected of being the perpetrators, as Muhammed was held in their prison in Azaz city before his murder. He was brought to hospital with grave injuries, as his relatives confirmed, before dying there.<sup>39</sup>

In the context of gender-based violence, 10 murders were confirmed, as well as 4 murders related to ethnic and religious discrimination. More details are in the respective sections of the report.

The apparent impunity the SNA have to act means that violence and subsequent civilian casualties are a fact of daily life in the Turkish-occupied areas. On November 12th, members of the Suleiman Shah Division raided a newly-built IDP village near Maabatli, wounding at least three civilians via shooting.<sup>40</sup> The Suleiman Shah members were apparently attempting to seize some of the village apartments.<sup>41</sup>

Inter-family fights are a further cause of killings in the Turkish-occupied regions, exacerbated by factional affiliations. In October, renewed feuding between the Tamrou and Zinou families in the town of Akhtarin (Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle) led to the killing of one Tamrou notable.<sup>42</sup> The bad blood between the families was not new – it was linked to previous killings.<sup>43</sup> Tamrou family members are affiliated with the Hamza Division, and Zinou family members are affiliated with the al-Mutasim Division. Following the murder of the Tamrou notable, some members of the Tamrou family took to the streets in Akhtarin protesting against abuses committed by the al-Mutasim Division in the area. The Zinou family's Harb tribe then published a statement accusing the Akhtarin city council president and a local commander of the Hamza Division of purposefully obstructing familial reconciliation efforts in order to engineer inter-factional infighting.<sup>44</sup> The Tamrou's Al-Damalkhah clan then demanded that the al-Mutasim Division hand over the men who killed the Tamrou notable.<sup>45</sup>

Several civilians died in accidents related to Turkey's military presence and the general increase of firearms in 2023. At least 4 civilians died in car accidents involving military vehicles. On January 28th, two people riding a motorcycle were run over by a Turkish military vehicle in Afrin city.

A general omnipresence of guns is evident through the data, exemplified by the killing of Fadi Mahdi Tuwayraj al-Mar'i on August 24th by the 10-year-old son of his cousin. Local sources reported that they were picking cucumbers together, when

38 <https://www.rasdsyria.org/news/10255/>

39 <http://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/27553>

40 <https://t.me/AbomosaabSharkea/105208>

41 SyriaTV

42 <https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1718303771866903003>

43 SyriaTV

44 <https://t.me/ehemlat2/35575>

45 <https://t.me/khalil124kh/38605>

a disagreement broke out and the 10-year-old ran to the house to get a firearm, pointed it at Fadi Mahdi Tuwayraj al-Mar'i's chest and shot.<sup>46</sup> Following Erdogan's election victory in May 2023, SNA fighters were seen celebrating in the streets by firing weapons. At least five civilians, including three children, were injured from stray bullets on the 28th.<sup>47</sup>

Many killings have been reported in relation to the drug trade. Syria overall has been flooded by captagon and other drugs, with research showing that Assad is economically benefiting from the captagon trade.<sup>48,49</sup> As an IDP from Tel Abyad explained to RIC: "Drugs have gone wild in Tel Abyad and Serekaniye. Young people especially are suffering from addictions. In Slok, a region in Tel Abyad, many military commanders have suddenly become rich. We suspect that it comes from the drug trade. Moreover, the only way to import things into the M4 Strip is through Turkey, so we suspect that Turkey is aware, if not involved in the drug trade." As Dr. Feras Fares reported to a German newspaper TAZ: "1 out of 3 people aged 16 to 32 suffers from addictions [in north-western Syria]." As a result of the drug taking "the number of crimes has increased in north-western Syria, with a noticeable rise in robberies and murders."<sup>50</sup>

RIC recorded killings of militiamen separately. The separation between civilians and militiamen is not always clear cut, as many people are loosely linked to militias, or their families are. RIC recorded a total of 47 militiamen killings: 14 in Afrin, 27 in the M4 Strip of which 8 were confirmed, and 25 in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle area. On 8th of November 2023, unidentified gunmen riding a motorcycle opened fire in front of the Turkish base in Ghandoura town on Hamza Zaki Wiso, a member of the Military Police. Allegedly, Wiso had falsely reported instances of criminal activity in order to have people arrested.

When analyzing crime data by perpetrator, the number one perpetrator, having committed 423 of the 3,006 crimes RIC documented in 2023, was the category of "unknown." The prevalence of criminal activity by unknown persons raises questions about the SNA, Civil Police and SIG in their maintenance of public safety. On January 5th Ismail Ismail (Abu Muslim al-Iraqi), who was the Mukhtar [village chief] of displaced Iraqis in Sere Kaniye, was killed by unknown gunmen by his home in Ayn Hisan village.<sup>51</sup> And on October 21st Mahmoud al-Abd al-Rahman, a prominent figure of the Bushaaban tribe, was killed by unknown men after leaving a mosque. As a result, the city of Qabasin witnessed a major military alert by members of the Al-Bu Shaaban tribe.<sup>52</sup>

Second on the list of crime perpetrators recorded by RIC is the Military Police. The Military Police's purpose is to curb rights abuses within the SNA. As highlighted in a

46 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/30480>

47 SyriaTV

48 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-66002450>

49 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/21/how-important-is-captagon-in-al-assads-return-to-the-arab-fold>

50 <https://taz.de/Arzt-ueber-Drogenkrise-in-Syrien/!5981877/>

51 [https://t.me/shaeb\\_110/20313](https://t.me/shaeb_110/20313)

52 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/31550>

recent Human Rights Watch report,<sup>53</sup> the Military Police themselves are responsible for a great deal of criminal activity and human rights violations - a finding backed up by RIC research. On May 28th, Basil Jakish, a young man arrested by the Military Police in Azaz, was killed in custody. Jakish was trying to cross into Turkey, but was caught by the border police. When it emerged that he had previously served in the pro-Syrian government National Defense Forces, two members of the Military Police beat him to death in his cell.<sup>54</sup> The Military Police published a statement two days later, claiming Jakish had died in hospital after being moved there from the Military Police prison "due to the deterioration of his health condition."<sup>55</sup> The statement claims that the Military Police members responsible for the beating were suspended and will face trial.

## UNLAWFUL ARREST AND TORTURE

Unlawful arrests are regularly carried out in all Turkish-controlled areas of Syria, often including acts of torture. The Syrian Interim Government (SIG), connected to the SNA, oversees the operation of the court system, prisons, and detention sites in the occupied areas. Turkish involvement is also notable. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic published a report on July 10, 2023, titled "**No End in Sight: Torture and Ill-Treatment in the Syrian Arab Republic 2020-2023**," which stated that "The Commission has previously found that in the context of detention, the SNA committed war crimes of torture and cruel treatment, hostage-taking, rape and sexual violence, as well as acts tantamount to enforced disappearances."<sup>56</sup>

RIC recorded a total of 534 unlawful arrests, 484 in Afrin, 50 in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle area and 184, 44 of which are confirmed cases, in the M4 Strip in 2023. These numbers include cases of unlawful arrest/kidnapping, unlawful arrest with extortion, unlawful arrest with torture, and unlawful arrest with torture and extortion. Most arrests are in the context of attempted border crossings, alleged collaboration with the DAANES or "without a stated reason." RIC interviewed a local resident of Tel Abyad, who fled to the DAANES at the beginning of the occupation. He reported: "People regularly get arrested under the false pretext of supporting the DAANES. This can happen, even if you are just talking to family or friends who have fled to the DAANES territories. Many of these arrests just aim to obtain ransoms. Tribal sheikhs have been one of the groups particularly targeted, as the SNA knows that they have great influence in their communities, and they want to keep them under control."

Militiamen are permitted to, and frequently do, enter houses to arrest anyone. This underscores the extent to which these agents of justice can act without limitation, targeting anyone and anything that is advantageous to them. In practice, within

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

54 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/643950/>

55 <https://t.me/MDPoliceSyy/548>

56 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/no-end-in-sight>

the SNA, there is no obligation to respect the civil rights of civilians. Furthermore, there is no set of collectively established rules regulating SNA conduct and providing pathways for accountability in the face of criminal activity. This is a further indication of the absent justice system of the region, and contributes to the elevated state of insecurity, and even terror, in which civilians are forced to live.

In line with RIC's findings, Synergy Association for Victims, a non-profit organization documenting rights abuses in Syria, documented the arrest of 431 people, including 22 women and 27 children, in areas of Afrin and the M4 Strip. Of these, only 93 persons out of the total toll of detainees were released by February 2024, while 338 remain detained. Furthermore, Synergy Association for Victims recorded 34 victims of torture after being arrested trying to cross the border or being accused of relations with the SDF.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, Synergy Association for Victims reported that all interviewees experienced maltreatment, for example: "being held in overcrowded places or solitary confinement cells for prolonged periods without any justification."<sup>58</sup> Included in this is overall poor conditions for women, who face interrogation by men and subjection to gender specific insults. The treatment of women has been documented as particularly egregious.<sup>59</sup> RIC uses Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993 to define gender-based violence. That is, the term "gender-based violence" is any act that is gender-based and that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering of the victim, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. In particular, due to the current conditions, RIC considers that any arrested woman, even if the arrest was legitimate, faces a risk of sexual harassment while in custody. Hence, any arrest of women is recorded as gender-based violence.

A number of reports have emerged concerning the inhumane conditions to which the victims were subjected. It is alleged that the perpetrators sought to exert further pressure on the victims with a view to extracting confessions, information and ransoms from their families. Such as in the example of Nazir Khalil Kalhu, who was arrested on August 6th by the Turkish Intelligence Service (MIT) on his way into Afrin city. As a result of being tortured, he lost his eyesight. Afterwards he was transferred to a Turkish prison.<sup>60</sup>

In May, a nine-year-old child and his father were reportedly physically abused to extract confessions at the al-Bab police station after they were arrested on charges of theft.<sup>61</sup>

57 <https://hevdesti.org/en/northern-syria-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-as-systematic-policy-in-sna-held-areas/>

58 <https://hevdesti.org/en/northern-syria-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-as-systematic-policy-in-sna-held-areas/>

59 <https://hevdesti.org/en/northern-syria-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-as-systematic-policy-in-sna-held-areas/>

60 [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0342par5EvGXL1KqDiug2WS9d9JighJb-j6eLDFfGhBVmQJbqo1no9aBB7LkfuRjp7xl&id=100066924643596](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0342par5EvGXL1KqDiug2WS9d9JighJb-j6eLDFfGhBVmQJbqo1no9aBB7LkfuRjp7xl&id=100066924643596)

61 <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/04/2003274797/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20FY23Q3.PDF>

Arrests are also used as a method of quashing dissent and protest. On December 18th, members of the Free Lawyers Union staged a protest outside the al-Rai 'Palace of Justice,' calling for judicial independence and the prevention of Turkish interference in the courts. The Civil Police attacked the protestors and arrested journalists who were covering the event, before later releasing them.<sup>62,63,64</sup> Activists, photographers and civil institution workers face regular harassment from the Civil Police and SNA. On May 3rd, Free Lawyers Union member Abd al-Latif was beaten up by Civil Police officers in Akhtarín, in the presence of a Turkish officer, according to the victim.<sup>65</sup> On May 15th, the al-Bab Civil Police took down a banner commemorating Abu Ghanoum, a prominent media activist who was shot dead by members of the SNA's Hamza Division in al-Bab on October 7th, 2022, alongside his pregnant wife.<sup>66</sup> His funeral was followed by mass protests against the SIG administration. Protestors not only demanded accountability for the killers, but also that the civil offices and the various military SNA factions leave northern Syria, considering them to be responsible for the ongoing dire security situation and poor provision of services. Abu Ghanoum's murderers never faced a justice proceeding in the local judicial system, as they were acquitted by the faction itself.

A witness from Afrin who fled Afrin in the beginning of the war explained to the RIC: "Before the war we managed to collectively gather enough money to buy a generator for our village and we took care of it together as the local commune. Through our commune we would also take care of the elderly and sick. Because I took part in the commune, I am wanted by the SNA- they convicted me for working with the DAANES, even though I did nothing but help my people.

## GENDER VIOLENCE

The development of women's rights has been particularly absent in the occupied areas. SNA militias' abuses against girls and women have been frequent and widespread with the aid of Turkish oversight. RIC recorded a total of 81 gender-based crimes, but could only confirm 66. This is a 43% increase from last year's 46 reported crimes.

In some cases there were numerous reports of serious injuries but follow-up news was absent, hence it is unknown if the persons died. Generally, news is scarce and women's rights organizations have been hindered in their work.<sup>67</sup> This hints to the fact that RIC's numbers are greatly underestimating the phenomenon. Even if the numbers alone are not able to show the situation, the details of the crimes

62 SyriaTV

63 <https://hibrpress.com/v2/%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81/>

64 SyriaTV

65 SyriaTV

66 SyriaTV

67 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/silenced-and-defamed-womens-organizations-north-western-syria-under-many-layers-oppression-enar>



committed hint to the fact that misogyny, rape and violence against women are a major and under-reported problem of the occupied areas. To mention just three cases of the Turkish-occupied territories in this regard: [1] Three SNA-affiliated militiamen abducted, raped, sexually assaulted and forcibly married a 14 year old girl in Afrin, [2] SNA Civil Police attacked women in Raju camp in Afrin as they gathered to demonstrate and [3] A women and her child were killed and thrown into a lake. Each case is described in more detail below.

On July 12th 2023 The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic published a report on "gendered impact of the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic on women and girls" documenting that widows without children in the occupied areas were left without adequate housing after SNA factions confiscated their houses under the pretext that they did not need a whole house. Furthermore, the report found again, that the SNA also committed the war crime of rape or other sexual violence.<sup>68</sup>

### GENDER-BASED CRIMES PER MONTH AFRIN, M4, ES JANUARY - DECEMBER 2023

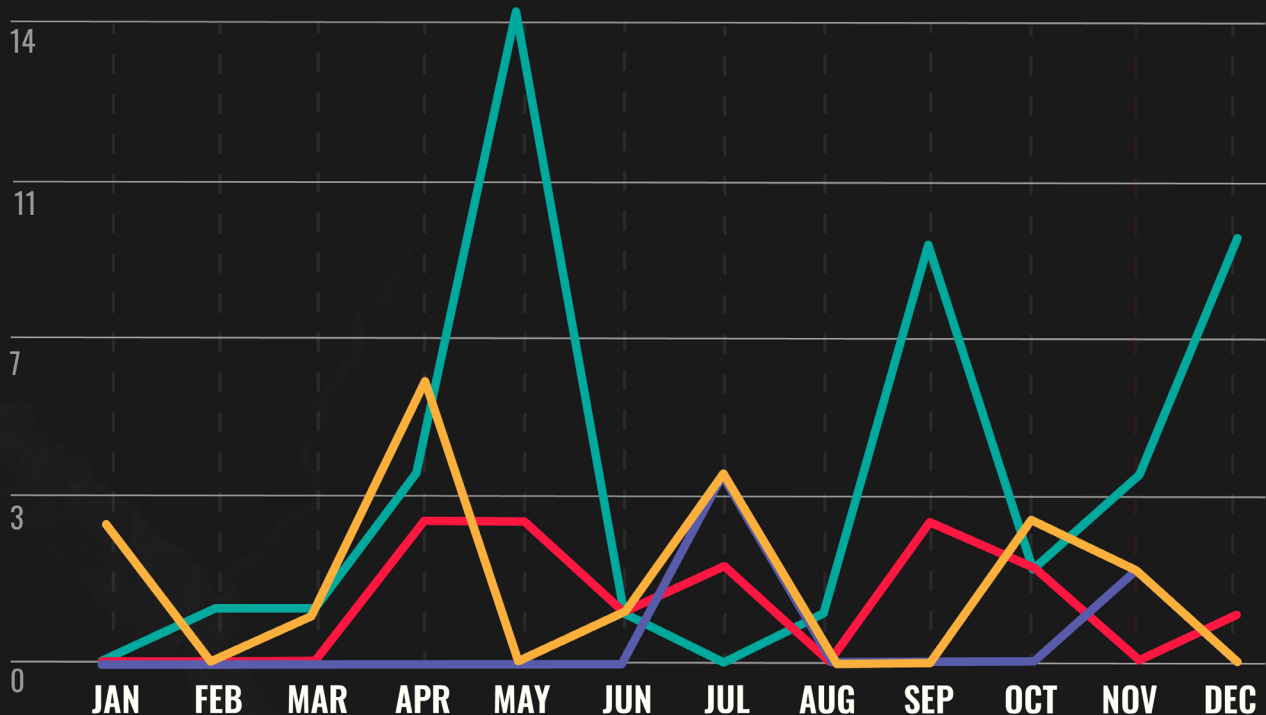
M4 UNCONFIRMED  
TOTAL 20

M4  
TOTAL 5

AFRIN  
TOTAL 46

ES  
TOTAL 15

TOTAL GENDER-BASED CRIMES: 81 (66)



68 <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisryria/policypapersiege-s29aywar/2023-06-12-Gendered-impact-women-girls-%20Syria.pdf>

As mentioned earlier, several reports emerged of the SNA blocking women's organization in the occupied areas. A reliefweb report found that "Women who work in institutions and organizations that do not comply with the SIG's or armed groups' mandates are attacked and face accusations of terrorism, treason, or cooperation with Kurdish forces."<sup>69</sup> In accordance, the U.S.' Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General report to Congress for Q2 2023 report stated that Turkey-supported Opposition groups continued to "propagate rumors that women's empowerment and gender related activities go against religious and societal norms."<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the SIG reportedly blocks women's organizations by "threatening their civic and legal work and constraining especially endeavors aimed at women's empowerment with stringent laws and regulations."<sup>71</sup>

In an interview with RIC one father from Tel Abyad, who has fled to NES explains: "Before the occupation, women were able to walk outside, nowadays women and girls, especially unmarried women, have to hide inside. The risk is too high that someone related to the SNA factions sees her and decides that she will be his future wife. The families and the girls and women have no way of denying such a request. I know families who fled in the middle of the night to avoid their daughters being forcefully married to SNA members."

[1] On August 13, a 14-year-old was abducted, raped, sexually assaulted and forcibly married by three SNA-affiliated militiamen. The crime took place in Tel Salour village, Jindires, Afrin and was committed by Nasr Bustani, his son "Zakari" and Anas Al-Hamdo. Nasr Bustani, an employee of the SNA-affiliated Jindires local council, and his son, who is affiliated with the Suleiman Shah faction, kidnapped the girl from her village before raping her at gunpoint. She was then sexually assaulted by Anas al-Hamdo before being forcibly married to cover up the crime.<sup>72</sup> The girl eventually escaped, and her family is pressing charges, although they are unlikely to succeed.

[2] On May 4th, fighting broke out between two tribes in al-Mahatta camp in Raju, Afrin. When the SNA-affiliated civil police arrived, they tried to arrest one of the men involved in the fight. Women gathered to protest the arrest and the civil police started beating the women present and arrested three of them. As mentioned above, any woman arrested in the occupied territories is at risk of being sexually assaulted or raped.<sup>73,74</sup>

[3] Halima Abdul Rahman Al-Shalili and her child were abducted and killed in Talalin, Azaz countryside and later thrown into Lake Maidanki in Afrin countryside. They were found, because her husband, Mutaz Suleiman Al-Shili, received a message

69 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/silenced-and-defamed-womens-organizations-north-western-syria-under-many-layers-oppression-enar>

70 <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/04/2003274797/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20FY23Q3.PDF>

71 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/silenced-and-defamed-womens-organizations-north-western-syria-under-many-layers-oppression-enar>

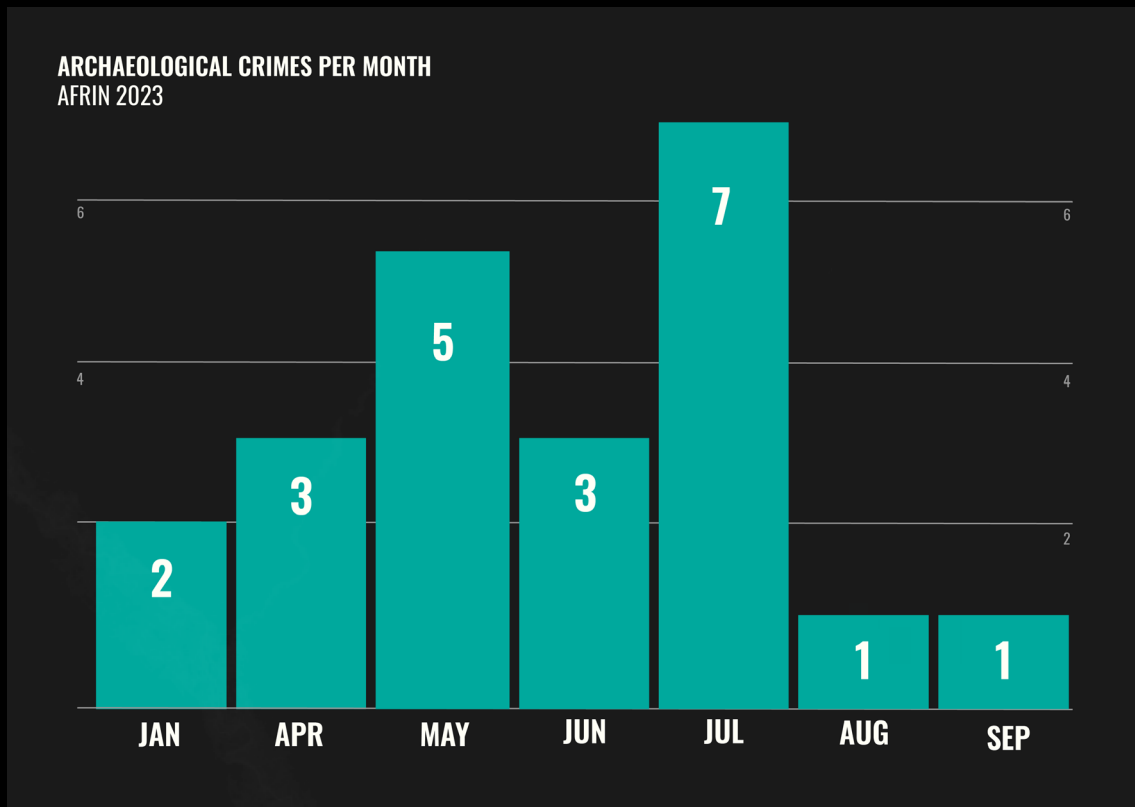
72 [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid02Z2DgEdUqXEkdWVS6oLJwupHDur-WByDcryGtSBwvzFPqr6kt4YqRuLgXCaj7Ep7sl&id=100066924643596](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02Z2DgEdUqXEkdWVS6oLJwupHDur-WByDcryGtSBwvzFPqr6kt4YqRuLgXCaj7Ep7sl&id=100066924643596)

73 <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/04/2003274797/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20FY23Q3.PDF>

74 [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid02RTFiH9rhDVtfvuyCCt448v7Yqd-Kz5WdZLNA6F8Uzqq5JdzRFZQ2eHsrwyUKaCCiXl&id=100066924643596](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02RTFiH9rhDVtfvuyCCt448v7Yqd-Kz5WdZLNA6F8Uzqq5JdzRFZQ2eHsrwyUKaCCiXl&id=100066924643596)

saying: "If you want the bodies of your wife and daughter, get their bodies from Medanki before the fish eat them." The perpetrators remain unknown.<sup>75</sup>

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL CRIMES



Since the beginning of the Turkish occupation, the historical heritage of these areas has been subjected to a campaign of looting and illicit trade. The pillaging of cultural sites represents not only a significant loss to the cultural history of the area, but also a direct attack on the memory and identity of the indigenous population of these regions, especially the Yazidi people.<sup>76</sup> The number of attacks on the regions' historical heritage is likely much higher than reported, as harsh punishments are meted out for documenting such crimes. Thus, many such attacks go unreported. Human Rights Organization Afrin has confirmed that since the occupation, Turkey and SNA factions have been responsible for digging up a majority of the 75 archaeological mounds in Afrin region.<sup>77</sup> These mounds were dug up in search of artifacts, which were then sold outside of Syria. In addition to this, more than 55 archaeological sites were destroyed, some of which listed by UNESCO. The temple of Ain Dara, Nabi Hori, Al-Dodriya Cave, and St. Maroun's Tomb, as well as more than 10 religious shrines of various religions and sects, were destroyed. Additionally, numerous cemeteries were bulldozed, and historical mosques, including the mosque of Kamrok, were

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/syrtelevision/videos/2765969036878157/>

<sup>76</sup> <https://npasyria.com/en/41290/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://targetplatform.net/en/?p=3244>

destroyed. UNESCO recently issued a global appeal, urging an immediate halt to Turkey's destruction of Syrian antiquities.<sup>78</sup>

In 2023 RIC recorded a total of 22 archaeological crimes in Afrin. Data for the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle area and M4 Strip were unavailable. The Sultan Murad Division was the top known perpetrator of archaeological crimes in 2023, committing 7 of the 22, however 4 of the crimes were committed by unknown persons and a further 5 by unspecified SNA factions..

The most frequent form of archaeological crime in 2023 was the bulldozing and exhumation of historical mounds and shrines in search for artifacts to sell. In December, media outlet Afrin News 24 reported that the Sultan Murad Division were engaging in new excavation operations at Tel Dayr Sawan archaeological site "under the pretext of establishing a new military point." The report claimed that "the antiquities are extracted and transferred to Turkey and displayed in museums on the basis that they belong to the Ottoman Empire."<sup>79</sup> Sultan Murad also bulldozed the archaeological site near Qastal Kishk, reportedly searching for valuables – after already carrying out "sabotage excavations" at this site twice in 2022.<sup>80</sup> In July, the Afrin Human Rights Organization reported that unknown persons "linked to Turkish intelligence" carried out excavation works on Arshqibar archaeological site, searching for valuables. The Military Police cordoned off the hill during the process.<sup>81</sup> Most reports of SNA faction members carrying out archaeological crimes reference bulldozing followed by search operations with metal detector devices. This repeated destruction of ancient heritage has not been met with any serious response or deterrence measures by the SIG authorities.

A further major trend in the category of archaeological crimes is the destruction of graves and cemeteries. They are often dug up in search of valuable material, such as gold or marble. In May, local news agency North Press published new pictures of Afrin's Yazidi Qara Journah shrine – which had previously been desecrated by the SNA in 2018.<sup>82,83</sup> The photos showed new structural damage to the shrine, although the perpetrator was unconfirmed. Noteworthy is also the destruction of Sheikh Hamid's shrine in a cemetery in the village of Qastal Jindo in the Sharean district in July. The shrine was of Yazidi origin. Alongside the shrine several gravestones were destroyed.<sup>84,85</sup>

On May 25, unidentified SNA, in collaboration with MIT, conducted an excavation and tree-cutting operation at a Yazidi graveyard in Xelcane. As documented by the RIC and other sources, Yazidi cultural heritage has been a primary target of the SNA

78 <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2024/01/30/unesco-condemns-turkish-encroachment-on-historic-aramaic-settlement-of-ain-dara-in-northern-syria/>

79 <https://t.me/efrinnews24/8660>

80 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26029>

81 [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0vgEhCo9sW4E2GonTssEvMgHzYS-jNY6NVdk8qAYxreMWg3DERps2U89uVuDe1EvVbl&id=100066924643596](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0vgEhCo9sW4E2GonTssEvMgHzYS-jNY6NVdk8qAYxreMWg3DERps2U89uVuDe1EvVbl&id=100066924643596)

82 [https://x.com/NPA\\_English/status/1663855278972911617](https://x.com/NPA_English/status/1663855278972911617)

83 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rITB3Q5ZUT8>

84 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/29631>

85 <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/63680>

and Turkish forces.

Besides graveyard looting and destruction, SNA militias and Turkish forces also engage in looting on non-graveyard sites. For example, in April, Samarkand militia seized a portion of land in the village of Rota/Mabate with the objective of conducting archaeological research. However, this is an area internationally-designated as of significant archaeological and historical importance, where the seizure of antiquities, as well as the planting and cutting of trees, is strictly prohibited internationally. Moreover, in December 2023, when Sultan Murad militiamen conducted illicit excavations with the intention of looting artifacts in Afrin. The site was a small hill situated in close proximity to the village of Esther on the Afrin River. The militiamen intended to loot, smuggle, and later sell the artifacts in Turkey.<sup>86</sup>

## RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

Since the inception of the occupation, religious and ethnic discrimination have been persistent. The demographic shift, construction of settlements, and cultural erasure have been well-documented in RIC's occupation reports. The indigenous population has now become a minority, resulting in a significant risk of religious and ethnic discrimination. As the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom notes: "Turkey posed one of the most significant threats to religious freedom in Syria via its occupation of territory and its military strikes in and near AANES [now known as DAANES] jurisdictions."<sup>87</sup> It also notes that HTS and "several Turkish-supported Syrian Islamist opposition groups," also known as the SNA, "were the primary drivers of severe religious freedom violations in Syria."<sup>88</sup> RIC recorded a total of 18 cases of religious and ethnic discrimination, although it is probable that this figure represents only a small proportion of the actual number of cases.

### The Newroz murders

Every year, Newroz – the Kurdish new year celebration – sees people across the region come together for festivities, with dancing and bonfires to welcome the spring. In Jindires, Afrin, on the night before Newroz, a Jaysh al-Sharqiya fighter reportedly ordered a Kurdish civilian, Farhan Din Othman, to put out a small fire that had been lit as part of family celebrations. A verbal dispute ensued and the fighter threw a rock at Othman before leaving and returning with two other armed Jaysh al-Sharqiya members. As per witness testimonies collected by Human Rights Watch, the men began shooting indiscriminately at the Othman family, killing Farhan, his nephew and one of his brothers instantly, and injuring two more of his brothers severely, one of whom later died of his wounds.<sup>89</sup> Jaysh al-Sharqiya's shooting spree also saw two other people lightly injured.

In their investigation of the incident, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) found that when the dead bodies were taken to the Turkish military hospital, the hospital staff

<sup>86</sup> <https://afripost.net/ar/archives/32750>

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/2024%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/2024%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/22/syria-Turkey-backed-fighters-kill-4-kurdish-civilians>



removed the bodies from the building and told the family to bury them. The Othman family refused to bury their kin at night and instead took the bodies to Atme, Idlib, where they were handled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the hospital morgue. When the bodies were returned to Jindires, a delegation from Idlib came with them. A witness close to the Othman's stated "the family sought Idlib because, to them, there were no other solutions."<sup>90</sup> HTS leader, Mohammad al-Jawlani, personally met the victims' families in Idlib, reportedly telling them "you are under our protection." STJ interviewed an SNA officer who described how HTS held a meeting with Jaysh al-Sharqiya commanders in which al-Jawlani requested he carry out an investigation. HTS forces spread throughout Jindires, taking over the Military Police station and Jaysh al-Sharqiya posts, before Turkish intelligence intervened and asked HTS to leave. The latter, however, did not pull out completely from Jindires, instead retaining a light security presence there, just like it did some months earlier in Afrin, under the guise of SNA factions loyal to HTS.<sup>91</sup> STJ described the episode as HTS "exploit[ing] the tragedy to expand" itself in the SNA-controlled regions. This case is another example of the efforts HTS – an internationally-designated terrorist organization – is making to build a perception of legitimacy in its administration while expanding both politically and militarily into SNA-controlled northern Syria. Al-Jawlani has sought to polish both his own image and that of HTS.<sup>92</sup> This time, al-Jawlani sought to take advantage of civilian grievances towards the SNA. All the while – despite a severe lack of substantial, independent, on-the-ground assessments of the human rights situation – the news that comes from Idlib tells of the ongoing construction of an increasingly totalitarian regime. As RIC's HTS report concluded, "the international community should be wary of considering the extension of HTS into the Turkish-occupied, SNA-controlled territories as a reasonable step to improve the catastrophic human rights situation there."<sup>93</sup>

The day after the murders, the SNA Military Police announced they had arrested the three shooters, while not commenting on their membership in Jaysh al-Sharqiya.<sup>94</sup> The Liberation and Construction Movement (the SNA coalition to which Jaysh al-Sharqiya was affiliated) made an official statement denying that the shooters were linked to Jaysh al-Sharqiya, and painted the case as a "fight between the victims and armed individuals."<sup>95</sup> In response to the killings and the attempts made to evade responsibility, Kurdish civilians in Afrin staged large-scale protests.<sup>96</sup> Protestors not only called for the killers to be held accountable but also demanded that the SNA leave the region.<sup>97</sup>

90 [https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Jindires\\_Afrin\\_The-Full-Story-of-the-Nowruz-Eve-Murder.pdf](https://stj-sy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Jindires_Afrin_The-Full-Story-of-the-Nowruz-Eve-Murder.pdf)

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

92 <https://syriadirect.org/al-Jawlani-in-jenderes-is-hts-using-minorities-as-a-way-into-northern-aleppo/>

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

94 [https://www.facebook.com/MD\\_PoliceSY/posts/pfbid02smKFpLFuT64EMZmu3RxYe1uKF5pehzrfck-dH2GVuLYtQ8fUUSrR7oASLsnESBwLl](https://www.facebook.com/MD_PoliceSY/posts/pfbid02smKFpLFuT64EMZmu3RxYe1uKF5pehzrfck-dH2GVuLYtQ8fUUSrR7oASLsnESBwLl)

95 [https://x.com/LBM\\_SY/status/1637926237526949894?s=20](https://x.com/LBM_SY/status/1637926237526949894?s=20)

96 al-Araby

97 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFIj5mKqmn0>



Protestors hold a sign saying "Five years of injustice, oppression and demographic change" at the funeral for the four members of the Othman family killed by Jaysh al-Sharqiya militiamen, 21st March, 2023.



Protestors in Jindires town hold a sign reading "Five years of injustice, enough" [Photo from photojournalist Ammar al-Zeer].

In a joint statement, 155 Syrian civil society organizations condemned the killings, noting that “this crime took place at a time when Jindires city, among other areas, has yet to recover from the impact of the destructive earthquake in February 2023, which claimed the lives of hundreds of residents.” The statement also called on the United Nations to “pressure the Turkish government to stop the demographic changes in Afrin [...] and hand over the administration of those areas to their Syrian indigenous people.”<sup>98</sup>

The Othman family continued to demand justice and made efforts to publicize their case. On April 8th, the wife of one of the victims appeared on Syria TV and openly expressed her anger at the absence of judicial proceedings against the arrested men.<sup>99</sup> Two days later, another family member of the victims told ARK News that the case was being “neglected and left to descend into oblivion.”<sup>100</sup> Seemingly in response to this in July, Jaysh al-Sharqiya targeted another member of the Othman family, 19-year-old Nazmi Ashraf Othman, severely beating him up and reportedly running over his arms with a car.<sup>101</sup> The next month, Nazmi was again beaten up, leaving him hospitalized.<sup>102</sup>

The defendants faced trial in the Military Court in al-Rai. The Othman family reported facing threats and interrogations at checkpoints each time they made the five-hour trip for a trial session. Finally, in January 2024, the court handed the death sentence to the Jaysh al-Sharqiya militiamen responsible for the murders.<sup>103</sup> Death sentences issued by the Military Court are not currently carried out: there is no body authorized to sign the court’s decision.<sup>104</sup> One day following the ruling, the SIG Prime Minister’s office condemned the court’s decision.<sup>105</sup> Ibrahim Sheikho, spokesperson of the NGO Human Rights Organization in Afrin, told RIC “the court made a ruling – to deceive public opinion – but never carried it out. The courts have no real authority over the [SNA] factions. They cannot enforce their judgements. Faction members can order judges to make certain rulings.”

Five years before his murder, Farhan Din Othman had faced abuse at the hands of Jaysh al-Sharqiya when the group first entered Afrin in Turkey’s 2018 invasion. The Othman family fled their home during the invasion. Farhan returned to his residence when the fighting was over, only to find that Jaysh al-Sharqiya had occupied his house. When he arrived, the faction abducted and severely tortured him. The Othmans were forced to move to a new home.<sup>106</sup> Their situation mirrored that of

98 <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-afrin-155-syrian-organizations-condemn-the-killing-of-kurdish-civilians-on-the-eve-of-celebrating-newroz/>

99 <https://www.facebook.com/syrtelevision/videos/2765969036878157/>

100 <https://www.arknews.net/node/43734>

101 <https://syriadirect.org/six-months-after-afrins-nowruz-killings-a-dead-end-road-to-justice-a-family-under-threat/>

102 <https://www.arknews.net/en/node/47309>

103 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/683434/%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84/>

104 <https://shaam.org/news/syria-news/bad-qrar-mhkmh-alraay-almuqth-tualn-altzamha-bth-qyq-aladalh-wdhman-hqwq-almwatnyn>

105 [https://t.me/syria\\_ig/1532](https://t.me/syria_ig/1532)

106 <https://www.hurriya.net/post/microcosm-the-newroz-killings-and-the-politics-of-northwest-syria>

many Kurdish Afrinis who were prevented from returning to their properties and had their possessions looted following Turkey's invasion of Afrin.<sup>107</sup> In their report on the Newroz murders, Human Rights Watch stated: "these killings come after 5 years of unaddressed human rights abuses at the hands of Turkish forces and the local Syrian factions they empower."<sup>108</sup>

Suffering violence as a result of celebrating Newroz has been a historical reality for Kurds living in many different countries – not a phenomenon unique to SNA-controlled northern Syria. Yet this case is another example of how SNA fighters use their positions to commit crimes against local civilians and evade accountability. Militiamen can perpetuate ethnic violence with impunity.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE, SETTLEMENT CONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL EASURE

The demographic landscape of Afrin and the M4 Strip, especially Sere Kaniye, has dramatically shifted since Turkey's invasions and subsequent occupation. Both times, mass displacement of the local populations was witnessed.

During Turkey's 2018 Afrin invasion, the UN estimated that 137,070 people fled from the region.<sup>109</sup> The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights calculated this number over double that, at 300,000.<sup>110</sup> Few were able – or willing – to return, with the risk of physical violence high and looting rampant. The UN Human Rights Council documented that "displaced civilians returning to Afrin have been frequently barred from accessing their property if it had been appropriated by members of armed groups and their families. Others were required to pay up to several thousand dollars to have their goods and vehicles returned to them after they had been stolen."<sup>111</sup> Prior to 2018, the Afrin region was the most homogeneous Kurdish area in Syria – both ethnically and linguistically. Kurds made up 92% of the population, with the remaining 8% composed of Yazidis, Syrians, Armenians and Arabs. This proportion of Kurdish residents has now fallen to an estimated 25%, with Turkmen and Arab settlers including the SNA personnel among them now comprising the majority of the population.<sup>112</sup> On February 19th, Sultan Suleiman Shah faction expelled 25 families from their houses, reportedly in preparation for handing them over to earthquake-affected settlers.<sup>113</sup> The displacement is still continuing.

In Sere Kaniye – previously home to a mix of Kurdish and Arab families comprising a majority, as well as Armenian, Yazidi, Turkmen, Assyrian and Chechen communities

107 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/27/syria-civilians-abused-safe-zones>

108 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/22/syria-Turkey-backed-fighters-kill-4-kurdish-civilians>

109 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-afrin-flash-update-no-2-29-march-2018-enar>

110 <https://www.syriahr.com/en/102951/>

111 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/243/69/pdf/g1924369.pdf?token=EOerbGjasIWeFm-8d9Y&fe=true>

112 <https://rojainformationcenter.org/2019/11/Turkeys-track-record-the-occupation-of-afrin/>

113 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26434>



– over 80% of the population displaced in Turkey’s 2019 invasion has not returned.<sup>114</sup> In interviews with RIC, displaced Sere Kaniye residents estimated that 30% of the city’s Arab population had returned, and no more than 10% of the Kurds.<sup>115</sup> Similar “repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation” have occurred there. As documented by the UN: “after civilian property was looted, Syrian National Army fighters and their families occupied houses after civilians had fled, or ultimately coerced residents, primarily of Kurdish origin, to flee their homes, through threats, extortion, murder, abduction, torture and detention.”<sup>116</sup> In May 2024, RIC interviewed a displaced Kurdish woman living in the Sere Kaniye refugee camp in Heseke region. She said: “The factions have taken my house in Sere Kaniye. They keep calling my sons on the phone and asking ‘Where is your mother, the bitch?’ I cannot return.”

While those – mainly Kurdish – families who have had their properties confiscated by SNA factions are largely unable to return to their places of origin, construction of new settlements is underway at the same time, intended to house Syrian IDPs from other regions of Syria.<sup>117</sup> Throughout 2023, RIC recorded the continued construction of new settlements in the Turkish-occupied territories.

On May 24th, Turkey’s then-Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu, crossed the border to inaugurate a newly-built 5,000 unit settlement in Jarablus’s al-Ghandourah town. Financed by the Qatar Development Fund, this settlement is the first step within the “Voluntary, Safe, Honorable Return Project” which plans to see the construction of 240,000 new housing units in Syria’s Turkish-occupied areas.<sup>118</sup> Supposedly, these will be able to house 1 million people.<sup>119</sup>



In the same month, local news agency North Press published a video showing the newly-completed, 250-unit Jabal al-Ahlam settlement south of Afrin, constructed in coordination with Turkey’s AFAD, intended to house IDPs from Damascus, Homs and Aleppo.<sup>120</sup>

On September 7th, Qatar Charity announced that it had signed an agreement to construct a new settlement near al-Bab, named “al-Karama city” (city of dignity). This settlement will house 8,500 Syrian IDPs, according to Qatar Charity.<sup>121</sup> Both the mayor and deputy governor of Gaziantep attended the signing, as did

114 <https://hevdesti.org/en/4-years-since-the-occupation-of-ras-alayn-and-tall-abyad/>

115 <https://rojavainformationcenter.org/2020/05/six-months-on-political-security-and-humanitarian-outcomes-of-Turkeys-2019-invasion-of-north-and-east-syria/>

116 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g20/210/90/pdf/g2021090.pdf?token=PcAFM7E-H1eb167QkIL&fe=true>

117 <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-jindires-ihsan-relief-and-development-cuts-down-hundreds-of-trees-to-build-an-illegal-village/>

118 <https://x.com/anadolujansi/status/1661810615235796994>

119 <https://x.com/suleymansoylu/status/1661377634226384898>

120 <https://npasyria.com/en/94304/>

121 <https://x.com/qcharityglobal/status/1699754398459548131>



representatives from Turkey's Red Crescent and AFAD. The 500,000m2 settlement will be constructed in cooperation with Turkey's Gaziantep Province.<sup>122</sup>



*Qatar Charity lay the foundation stone for the new 1,680-unit settlement named "al-Karama city."*

This construction was also packaged as post-earthquake support by the organization, who wrote in their settlement announcement post: "Qatar Charity emphasizes the importance of supporting reconstruction projects in the areas that were affected in both Turkey and northern Syria, especially after the devastating earthquake that struck these regions in February."

While the exact location is still unconfirmed, Middle East Monitor reports it as being "10km north of the center of al-Bab district."<sup>123</sup> Google's imagery for the region was updated in 2024. 10km north of al-Bab city, the construction of a new settlement is visible on Google maps, matching the stated size of al-Karama city.<sup>124</sup>

North Press cites a total of 21 settlements as having been constructed in 2023 in Syria's Turkish-occupied Afrin, financed by various Turkish, Qatari, Kuwaiti and Palestinian NGOs.<sup>125</sup> Such settlements are not intended for families local to the region, but for Syrian refugees deported from Turkey, most of whom are from other regions of Syria. Since 2016, Turkey has been deporting Syrian refugees to Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria, under the guise of 'voluntary return.' Indeed, one of Erdogan's justifications for carrying out invasions in Syria was that it would create the conditions in which Syrians in Turkey can be taken back to their country of origin. Turkish authorities carry out frequent raid and arrest campaigns targeting Syrian refugees. Those arrested are often accused of having wrong information on their government-issued 'kimliks' (temporary identity cards) and then detained. Their legal refugee status is ignored. Detainees are given the choice between indefinite detention or signing 'voluntary return' papers. Sometimes they are asked to give a

122 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/qatar-charity-lays-foundation-stone-al-karama-city-idps-northern-syria>

123 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230908-qatar-charity-lays-foundation-for-residential-city-project-in-northern-syria/>

124 <https://www.google.com/maps/@36.4705237,37.4818512,436m/data=!3m1!1e3?entry=ttu>

125 <https://npasyria.com/en/109748/>

signature whilst being told it is for their detention release papers or are violently coerced into signing.<sup>126</sup> The majority of those being resettled from Turkey to Syria's Turkish-occupied territories are not local to the area, instead coming from Ghouta, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, Homs & Latakia,<sup>127</sup> hence their resettlement "would involve a drastic demographic shift," as noted by Reuters prior to Turkey's 2019 invasion.<sup>128</sup> While RIC used to calculate numbers of deportations based on figures published by the three border crossings through which Syrian refugees are sent to the occupied areas, border crossing authorities now no longer continue this practice due to pressure from Turkish officials, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>129,130</sup>



In an exchange at a press briefing on August 2nd, U.S. State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller denied that Turkey's settlement construction and stated intention to settle Syrian refugees in formerly Kurdish-majority areas amounted to efforts to change the region's demographics.<sup>131</sup> RIC's documentation – alongside that of the UN, local and international NGOs, human rights organizations and experts<sup>132,133,134</sup> – runs counter to this claim. Turkish forces and their SNA proxies have systematically subjected Afrin's Kurdish population to significant human rights abuses, forcing Kurds to flee the region, while simultaneously transferring disproportionate

126 <https://newlinesinstitute.org/displacement-and-migration/protecting-syrian-refugees-in-Turkey-from-forced-repatriation/>

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

128 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-Turkey-refugees-graphi/Turkeys-plan-to-settle-refugees-in-northeast-syria-alarms-allies-idUSKBN1WN28J/>

129 <https://x.com/RojavaIC/status/1580871436758941696>

130 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/syrians-face-dire-conditions-turkish-occupied-safe-zone>

131 <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departement-press-briefing-august-2-2023/#post-467164-SYRIA>

132 <https://journals.tplondon.com/article/view/3081>

133 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-monthly-human-rights-digest-june-2018>

134 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/210/90/PDF/G2021090.pdf?OpenElement>

numbers of non-local and non-Kurdish Syrians into the region, many of whom living in the appropriated houses of those who fled Turkey's 2018 invasion.

Accompanying this process of demographic change have been Turkey's efforts towards altering the culture and character of the region. Kurdish street names, statues and signs have been replaced with Turkish and Arabic ones throughout Afrin, with references to Kurdish culture erased.<sup>135</sup><sup>136</sup> The Turkish flag flies over many public facilities and the Turkish Lira has become the official currency.<sup>137</sup> Arabic and Turkish have replaced Kurdish as the language used in all official communications, public signage and schooling. A 2023 report by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) described how the SIG's education system was contributing to the "Turkification" of Afrin.<sup>138</sup> STJ documented the use of Turkish language course books to promote Turkish nationalist and religious figures, the addition of Turkish language to the mandatory curricula and the parallel steep drop in school hours dedicated to Kurdish language, with some schools completely cutting the subject. Such policies lead to the marginalization of Kurdish in the formal sphere, while at the same time even informal Kurdish language use is also clamped down on: "Kurds continue to experience daily discrimination and harassment for speaking their language by teachers or IDPs," says STJ.<sup>139</sup> The SIG established a Turkish Ministry of Education in Afrin city, affiliated to Turkey's Gaziantep University.<sup>140</sup> STJ records several Turkey-funded organizations and centers as offering Turkish language courses. These include the Onder Organization for Cooperation and Development and Yunus Emre Institute, which seeks to promote the Turkish language and culture. The institute holds courses across all the Turkish-occupied areas. In Afrin, the new Anatolian Cultural Center holds cultural seminars and lectures about Turkish history and the Ottoman Empire. The SIG's Afrin City Local Council also runs annual Turkish language courses for teachers "in the attempt to mandate the Turkish language in schools," says STJ.<sup>141</sup> In January, reports surfaced that the School of Industry in Afrin had banned the speaking of Kurdish in classrooms, triggering protests from Kurdish students who refused to enter their classes until the ban was redacted.<sup>142</sup>

Turkey's occupation of Afrin has been marked by looting and destruction of cultural and religious sites, shrines, landmarks and cemeteries.<sup>143</sup> Also see section on Archaeological crimes.

In May 2023, footage circulating online showed a Muslim sheikh, Ahmed Abd al-Karim with two Yazidis. Al-Karim was announcing that the two Yazidis had converted

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.rudaw.net/kurmanci/kurdistan/2711201810>

<sup>136</sup> <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200m69u>

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/opinion/the-eu-must-take-a-stand-against-Turkeys-aggression/>

<sup>138</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/>

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.rudawarabia.net/arabic/kurdistan/14072018>

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/education/turkish-university-offering-education-in-northern-syria/1654838>

<sup>141</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/>

<sup>142</sup> <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/25527>

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/07/11/afrin-incidents-of-desecration-and-destruction-of-cultural-sites/>

to Islam. In the video, the Yazidi men are seen saying the Islamic shahada.<sup>144</sup> Local media activists later stated that the men had faced harassment and theft from SNA factions, pressured into reciting the Islamic prayer and told that the video would not be published.<sup>145</sup><sup>146</sup>

Turkey and the SNA have fundamentally changed the demography of Afrin and forcefully erased the region's history and character. These changes are not a side-effect of the Turkish occupation and SNA control, but rather their aim, as stated by Turkish President Erdogan himself. Speaking at a rally in the Bursa Province upon the 2018 invasion of Afrin, Erdogan stated: "The whole issue is this: 55 percent of Afrin is Arab, 35 percent are the Kurds who were later relocated, and about seven percent are Turkmen. [We aim] to give Afrin back to its rightful owners."<sup>147</sup> This speech, distorting facts to suit the interests of Turkish occupation, is complemented by a policy of demographic change.. Prior to the occupation, Afrin was a predominantly Kurdish region inhabited by Kurds for at least 10 centuries.<sup>148</sup> Therefore, the assertion that Afrin belongs exclusively to Arabs and Turkmen represents a clear attempt to alter historical facts.

144 <https://www.facebook.com/100014097518180/videos/528556456115935/>

145 [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0338sLq1KeVX6f9KZEbkDmdw3S-DaCqeirpMzqm4HM3gihmqF1KwQ1pf575tP7EHLpjI&id=100014097518180&mibextid=Ni-f5oz&paipv=0&eav=AfaWpDs81-LU-S4BW8cnpIL1102icFhXgRDWaEkvzeLozDq00qyw4OukcSNk-fSv1E5I&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0338sLq1KeVX6f9KZEbkDmdw3S-DaCqeirpMzqm4HM3gihmqF1KwQ1pf575tP7EHLpjI&id=100014097518180&mibextid=Ni-f5oz&paipv=0&eav=AfaWpDs81-LU-S4BW8cnpIL1102icFhXgRDWaEkvzeLozDq00qyw4OukcSNk-fSv1E5I&_rdr)

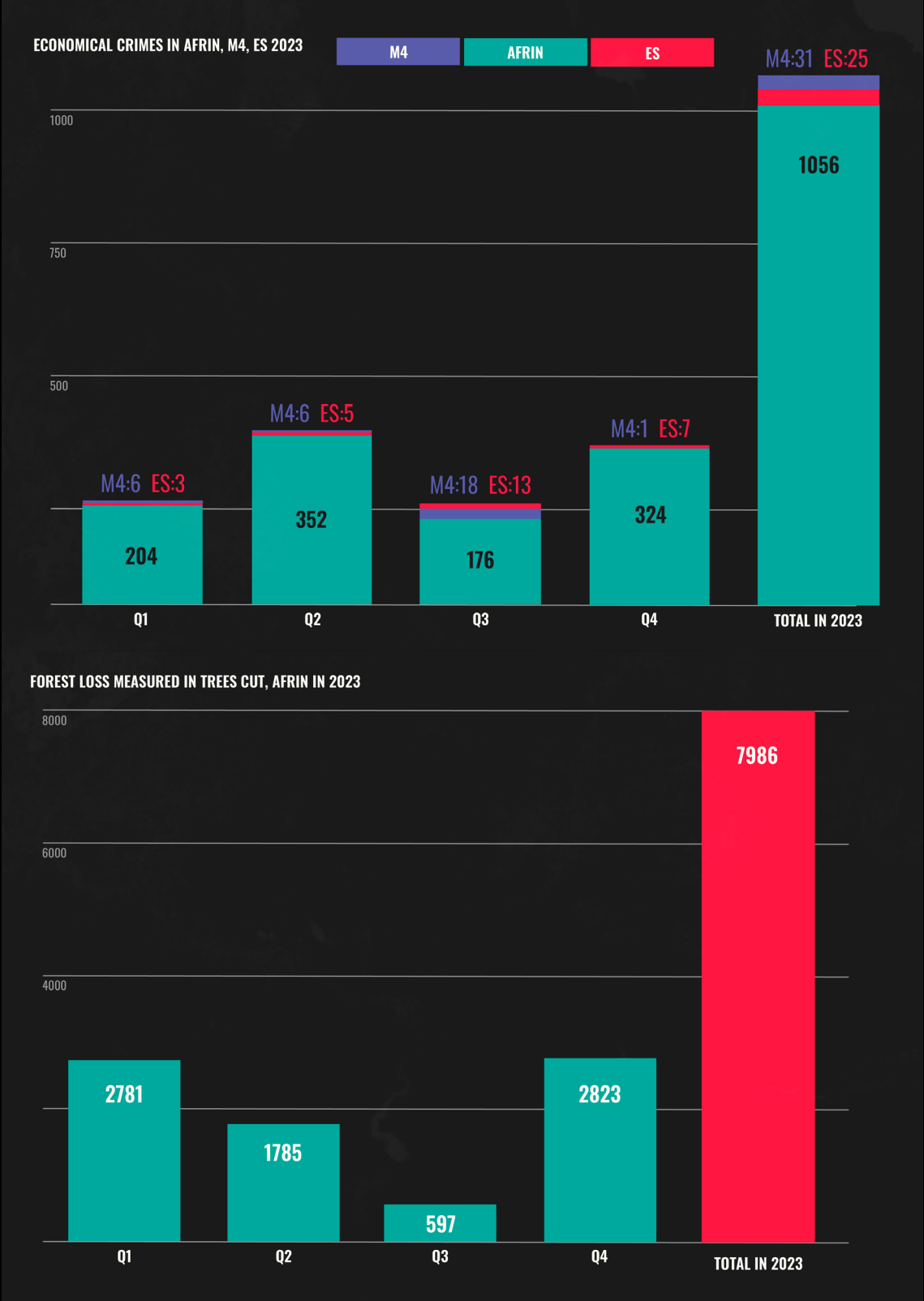
146 <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-role-of-international-agreements-in-forced-displacement-1/>

147 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/14337-Erdogan-says-Afrin-is-majority-Arab,-threatens-Arabi-zation>

148 Kreyenbroek, P.G.; Sperl, S. (1992). *The Kurds: A Contemporary Overview*. Routledge. pp. 114. ISBN 0415072654.



ECONOMIC CRIMES





Common economic crimes include seizure of property, extortion, theft, illegal appropriation of public resources, looting of archaeological sites, and illegal taxation on crops, essential items such as firewood, and checkpoint crossings. Unlawful arrests are also conducted for the purpose of blackmailing families, with the abducted person often released some time after a ransom is paid. The U.S.' Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General report to Congress for Q2 2023 found that "violent infighting among rival TSO [SNA] groups continued to negatively affect stabilization efforts, to deter investment, and to prevent economic growth."<sup>149</sup>

One common economic crime is the felling of trees. Primarily but not exclusively, as explained in the following section, the cutting of olive trees. As reported by Syrians for Truth and Justice, approximately tens of thousands of trees have been cut down since the invasion of Afrin, while several local sources insist that the number is higher, approaching hundreds of thousands. In the STJ report "[Syria: Satellite Images Reveal Extensive Logging in 114 Forest Patches in Afrin](#)," high forest degradation was reported in 57 locations, meaning that the forests have been almost completely cleared. This is accompanied by moderate forest degradation in at least 42 locations, and low forest degradation in 15 locations.<sup>150</sup> An illustrative example of the persistent deforestation crimes is an incident that occurred on May 14th. Feylaq al-Sham, in collaboration with the MIT, destroyed 1.5 hectares of forest land in an attempt to locate gold and valuable antiquities. During this process, both native trees and olive trees were felled.<sup>151</sup>

It is worth noting that RIC reported only 56 total economic crimes for the M4 Strip and Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarabulus Triangle, with 28 in each region, relative to 1,056 in Afrin region alone. It is important to approach this apparent contrast with caution in comparison to the Afrin region. Afrin is more ecologically diverse, holds many valuable olive crops and most significantly, has a higher proportion of properties belonging to Kurdish families relative to other Turkish-occupied regions. The SNA's anti-Kurdish sentiment and practices are well-documented. However, the absence of effective local reporting systems in the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarabulus Triangle area and the M4 Strip indicates that the reported figures for the latter two regions are underestimated.

## Olive harvest

Crimes related to the olive harvest and the seizure and sale of firewood have become prevalent in Afrin since the Turkish occupation in 2018. The two issues at stake here are [1] the SNA plundering the local olive trade through the imposition of taxes on olive harvests and forcibly seizing orchards from Afrin families to take harvest profits and [2] cutting or uprooting Afrin's olive trees to sell or transport to Turkey, causing deforestation. While the latter has been documented, it is in some way limited due to the fact that it comes at the expense of the former: fewer trees mean less income in the long-term for the SNA factions who predate on the olive

<sup>149</sup> <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Aug/04/2003274797/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20FY23Q3.PDF>

<sup>150</sup> <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-satellite-images-reveal-extensive-logging-in-114-forest-patches-in-afrin/>  
<sup>151</sup> Torra Çalakvanên Efrîne AAN - Facebook

trade.

Local livelihoods have been practically decimated due to the SNA's targeted appropriation of olive farms and harvests. Olive farming has been a traditional activity for Kurdish families in the region, with decades-old trees carefully tended year after year to ensure the production of high-quality olive oil and the sustenance of the owners. The significance of the cutting of olive groves should not be underestimated. Olives are one of the main economic resources for the original inhabitants of the region. Once slashed, these pastures need decades to be restored to their full previous productive capacity. The SNA's appropriation of olive groves has grievously threatened and damaged the livelihoods of these families.

The cutting of olive groves also contributes to the desertification of the Afrin landscape.<sup>152</sup> The deforestation of the Afrin region is becoming increasingly evident, as shown in graphs from Global Forest Watch, an open-source web application that monitors global forests in near real-time.<sup>153</sup> In October 2023, a video allegedly filmed in Afrin circulated on local social media.<sup>154</sup> It showed olive trees that had been dug up and were ready to be transported, supposedly to Turkey. Ahrar al-Sharqiya was accused of being behind this incident, although these details are difficult to verify. RIC recorded the cutting of 7,986 trees in Afrin in 2023. As is usually the case, the majority of the tree cutting occurred in the coldest months of the year.

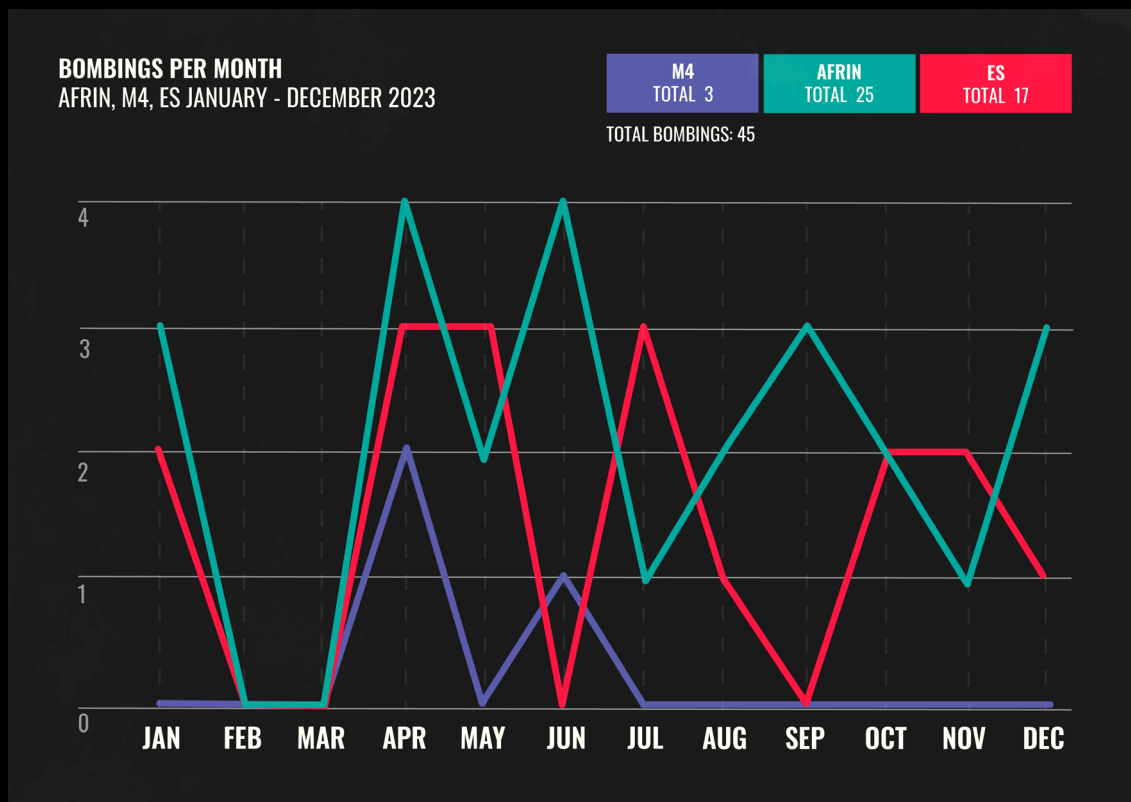
A witness from Afrin provided the following testimony to the RIC: "When we were young, we knew exactly where we were in our region simply by looking at the trees. The trees were often used as landmarks, with people saying, 'See you under the fig tree or between these trees.' We grew up with an attachment to our trees. The deforestation is not just harming our environment, they are also targeting our memories and heritage. If we were to return to Afrin, our children would be unable to recognize their homeland unless the trees remain. It is a disgrace that even our children's memories of our trees and lands are at risk of being lost."

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

153 <https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/SYR/2/3/?category=forest-change&location=WYJjb3VudHJ5IiwU1lSIiwMiIsIjMiXQ%3D%3D&scrollTo=forest-gain>

154 [https://t.me/afrin\\_human\\_rights\\_observatory/507](https://t.me/afrin_human_rights_observatory/507)

## CASES OF BOMB ATTACKS AND BOOBY TRAPS



The Turkish-occupied areas have always witnessed occasional incidents of IED bombing. Usually these attacks are unclaimed. They primarily target Turkish or SNA security and military, but have sometimes left high civilian casualty tolls. The Turkish authorities most often attribute blame to the SDF,<sup>155</sup> while some analysts point to the SNA's frequent and bloody intra and inter-factional feuds as likely being the reason for bomb attacks.<sup>156</sup> Other possible perpetrators include ISIS and HTS. Some additional groups, such as the Afrin Liberation Forces (ALF), also conduct sporadic bomb attacks targeting the SNA. While these are mostly on the frontlines, it is not unknown for the ALF to carry out attacks further inside SNA-controlled territory. On October 16th, 2023, the ALF claimed responsibility for an IED attack on the vehicle of an official from the SNA's Sultan Murad Division near Jarablus.<sup>157</sup>

In Afrin city on November 18th, an IED planted on a truck exploded at an SNA Military Police checkpoint.<sup>158</sup> Syrian Civil Defense (the White Helmets) reported that 19 people – including 2 children – were injured.<sup>159</sup> The attack was unclaimed.

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52454134>

<sup>156</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/infighting-reported-among-Turkey-backed-rebels-in-syria-s-afrin/4665413.html>

<sup>157</sup> <https://hevdesti.org/en/northern-syria-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-as-systematic-policy-in-sna-held-areas/>

<sup>158</sup> <https://x.com/mzmgr941/status/1725892333487489265>

<sup>159</sup> <https://t.me/SyriaDefence/19144>

## SUICIDE

Another ongoing social issue is the elevated rate of suicides, which is a consequence of the deterioration in living and economic conditions, as well as the lack of job opportunities. The Syria Response Coordinators team has reported that, from the beginning of 2023 until November 29th, 62 cases have been reported in northwestern Syria, including 34 failed attempts. There has been a notable increase in suicide cases in the second half of 2023, with a total of 40 cases reported.<sup>160</sup> This indicates that the numbers are almost even when compared to 2022, when 88 cases were reported, 33 of which were unsuccessful.<sup>161</sup>

There are many reasons behind the rise of suicides in Syria, especially in the Turkish-occupied areas. The northwestern-based Syria Response Coordinators organization points to the great pressures on civilians that come from the state of continuous displacement, the continuation of financial hardship, the constant state of anxiety over the interruption of sources of income, and the constant threats and lack of security.<sup>162</sup> Also, the victims of most of the suicide cases in the region were women. This could be due to the lack of help they have to overcome the specific difficulties they are experiencing (mostly linked to their family environment or economic situation). In addition, the murder of women is sometimes being purposefully hidden as suicide.

Minors and young adults were particularly affected, connected to their inability to change the various pressures they face. In addition to all these factors, indigenous populations in the Turkish-occupied areas have to face harassment, threats of arrest, and financial blackmail from the SNA militias.

## INTERNAL BATTLES IN THE SNA

RIC recorded 96 instances of infighting in the Turkish-occupied areas in 2023: 31 in the Afrin region, 65 in the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle and 2 in the M4 Strip. A further 11 cases in the M4 Strip were recorded but could not be confirmed by RIC. Such intra and inter-factional spats frequently leave civilian casualties and engender a climate of insecurity and fear.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, disputes over the distribution of relief materials and shelter supplies by international relief organizations led to clashes between Jaysh al-Sharqiya and Nour al-Din al-Zinki on March 29th.<sup>163</sup>

On August 18th clashes erupted in al-Bab, when armed men from the Shammar clan

160 <https://syrianobserver.com/society/40-cases-since-june-significant-increase-in-suicide-rates-in-northwestern-syria.html>

161 <http://www.english.aawsat.com/home/article/3857811/over-124-suicides-confirmed-syria-2022>

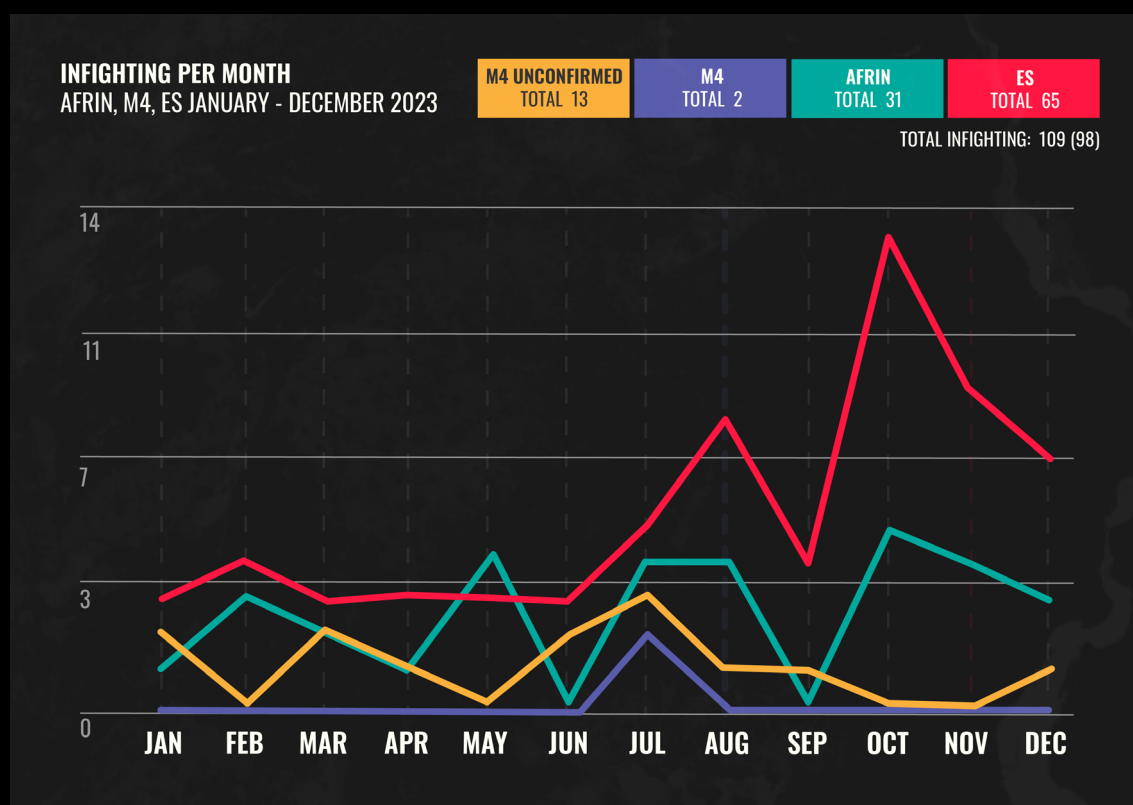
162 <https://syrianobserver.com/society/40-cases-since-june-significant-increase-in-suicide-rates-in-northwestern-syria.html>

163 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/27336>

(dissidents of Hamza Division) tried to avenge one of their sons, who was killed by the al-Hamza faction. They attacked and took over several checkpoints of the al-Hamza faction in al-Amaya village, before attacking and taking over the headquarters of the local al-Hamza leader Abu Al-Baraa, who is suspected of having killed their son. The clashes then expanded to al-Fikha, al-Sukariyah and al-Yateem villages, until the military police ended the clashes by supporting the al-Hamza faction.

Further infighting occurred in al-Bab on November 1st, when the Civil Police arrested a member of Ahrar al-Sharqiya for aggressive driving. The Ahrar al-Sharqiya contingent opened fire on the Civil Police to avoid arrest.<sup>164165</sup>

On December 3rd, clashes within the SNA's Third Legion in Tel Abyad injured 17 people, both fighters and civilians. Reportedly, a group close to Third Legion commander Husam Yassin feuded with al-Jabha al-Shamiya commander Azzam Gharib regarding the proceeds of the Tel Abyad border crossing.<sup>166</sup> Turkey allegedly ended the fighting by deploying its forces at the city entrances. According to local media, throughout hours of clashes, Tel Abyad's population were confined to their homes in fear, with electricity cut off and bakeries closed, as well as most shops and markets.<sup>167</sup>



164 <https://t.me/khalil124kh/38622>

165 SyriaTV

166 SyriaTV

167 <https://x.com/HalabTodayTV/status/1731665858814963921>



## HTS AND INTERNAL DISPUTES WITHIN THE SNA

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a Sunni Salafi political and military organization that has become a significant actor in the Syrian Civil War, competing for influence with the SNA in the occupied areas. It is authoritarian, and is designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the UN Security Council, the U.S., Russia, and Turkey. It is widely considered to be jihadist but in a novel 'political' way. It operates primarily in northwestern Syria, with its stronghold in the Idlib governorate. RIC's HTS report (available [here](#) on the RIC website) describes the organization and its implementation of what appears to be a new form of jihadism, and analyzes the events that have allowed HTS to extend its influence within the SNA-controlled Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria since the beginning of 2022.

As covered in greater detail in RIC's report, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham started its efforts to spread to the SNA-controlled Afrin region in early 2022, when it held discussions with the leadership of the SNA's al-Jabha al-Shamiya to attempt to draw Idlib closer to the Turkish-occupied areas. While HTS' proposal to unify the two militias did not go through, this move was widely seen as an effort by HTS to intrude into the Afrin region. With the SNA evidently unable to engender security in the areas under its control, HTS tried to show itself as an actor capable of providing civilians with relative stability. HTS turned to other SNA factions, and took the side of the Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector in the al-Bab, Jarablus and Afrin countryside when the latter fought with the al-Jabha al-Shamiya-led Third Legion bloc in June 2022. On the pretext of supporting the Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector, HTS was able to send fighters into Afrin. In October 2022, under the guise of supporting Hamza Division against al-Jabha al-Shamiya, HTS again sent its militiamen into the Turkish-occupied territories.

While HTS formally withdrew back to Idlib, an extensive range of local media reported that HTS fighters remained in Afrin's SNA-controlled areas, disguising themselves under the banners of their allied SNA factions. In Afrin city, this military presence extended to efforts at political control.<sup>168</sup> In 2023 in the Afrin region, RIC recorded 15 crimes in which HTS was involved. In the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle region, this figure was 4. The actual figure is likely higher, in part because HTS conceal their presence within the SNA factions who ally with them.

The Shehba Gathering was one such ally. It announced itself on 2nd of February 2023.<sup>169</sup> Enab Baladi put the membership of Shehba Gathering at 7,000 fighters in its initial stages.<sup>170</sup> When its formation was officially announced, the SIG denounced the group, saying it was not within the SNA. The Shehba Gathering also never attributed itself to any of the three SNA Legions. It denied affiliation with HTS officially, but was widely seen as an HTS proxy from the start, initially composed of Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector, Ahrar al-Tawhid (50th brigade) and Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement. Days after its formation, the Azaz Falcons Brigade (Liwa Suqour Azaz) also joined, a group mainly comprising of defectors from the Northern Storm Brigade. All but

<sup>168</sup> <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/23945>

<sup>169</sup> <https://youtu.be/wD9KP5dEE0Y>

<sup>170</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/631214/>

Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector were splinter groups that had left al-Jabha al-Shamiya. When Ahrar al-Tawhid joined, al-Fatah Brigade split from Shehba Gathering, as did some other small brigades within Ahrar al-Tawhid and Nour al-Din al-Zenki due to Turkish pressure.

HTS has been aiming to encroach into the SNA areas, working to entice SNA factions to work under its umbrella. HTS first intervened on the ground in Afrin in June 2022, when it sent militiamen to counter al-Jabha al-Shamiya attacks on Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector (who had defected from the Third Legion). In October 2022, HTS intervened in clashes between the Hamza Division and al-Jabha al-Shamiya, with the latter almost entirely expelled from the Afrin region. At the same time, Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector pushed out al-Jabha al-Shamiya from the al-Hamran crossing and the frontlines west of Manbij. Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector had previously been part of the al-Jabha al-Shamiya-dominated Third Legion, under the name of 32nd Division, but defected in April 2022. When it initially broke off, it took the name 37th Division.<sup>171</sup>

Since al-Hamran crossing was captured from the SNA's Third Legion by Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector, the SNA and Turkey have been pushing for it to be turned over to the SIG Ministry of Defense, so that its immense revenue can be more equally divided amongst the SNA legions. The Second Legion's Fahim Isa – Sultan Murad's commander – has been one of the most vocal on this matter. Ahrar al-Sham is supposedly a part of the Second Legion, but has refused to hand over the crossing unless 1/7th of the profits are reserved for HTS. In January, tensions began to rise between HTS and Sultan Murad due to this issue.

On the evening of January 25th, one of Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector's Leaders, Saddam al-Mousa (Abu Uday al-Bab) was killed in what was likely a targeted drone strike while walking on the road outside his house in the northern al-Bab countryside.<sup>172 173</sup> While there is no confirmation of who conducted the drone strike – the Coalition, Russia or Turkey – the latter is the most likely perpetrator, which would mark the first time an SNA figure was assassinated in a Turkish drone strike. Several days after the attack, photos appeared that showed fragments from a Turkish MAM-L laser-guided munition, which is used by Turkey's TB-2 drones.<sup>174</sup> These missile remnants were reportedly photographed at the scene of Mousa's killing, however there is no concrete evidence of this.

In September 2023, Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector experienced a split, with sector commander Muhammad Rami (Abu Haidar Maskana) cutting off communication with HTS and joining the Second Legion, while also formally dismissing his pro-HTS deputy, Hussein al-Talib (Abu al-Dahdah Manbij), and military commander Zakaria al-Sharidah (Abu Omar al-Homsi), another pro-HTS figure, stating that the two had exceeded the powers granted to them.<sup>175</sup> This angered HTS, who feared losing hold of the al-Hamran crossing and associated revenues. The Ahrar al-Sham Eastern

<sup>171</sup> SyriaTV

<sup>172</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=7mSWbpU4yNw&utm>

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/625651>

<sup>174</sup> <https://twitter.com/QalaatM/status/1619390933866512384>

<sup>175</sup> SyriaTV

Sector Shura Council proceeded to announce that Abu Haider was dismissed as commander and replaced him with Abu al-Dahdah, who was coordinating directly with HTS and the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib.<sup>176</sup> The latter faction is not a part of the SNA and is commanded by Amer al-Sheikh. This created a split down the middle of the Eastern Sector, with component brigades in Ablah and around al-Hamran allying with Abu Haidar while those in Olan and al-Bab sided with Abu al-Dahdah.<sup>177</sup>

On September 7th, the Abu al-Dahdah-led, HTS-loyal part of Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector mobilized with the aim of taking the al-Hamran crossing from Abu Haidar's forces. HTS backed up this mobilization, sending its own militiamen (many of whom had already entered the Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle region over the preceding days, labeled as "tribal forces" coming to fight the SDF). Reportedly, Turkey pushed Hamza and Sultan Suleiman Shah divisions (both in the SNA's Second Legion) to prevent HTS' advance, and the TAF themselves erected a checkpoint in Kafr Janneh in order to block HTS fighters entering from Afrin. While HTS' efforts were ultimately unsuccessful on this occasion, the episode illuminated how the conflicts within Ahrar al-Sham can hardly be described as an internal phenomenon, and rather reflects the broader chasm between the HTS-aligned factions of the SNA and the Second Legion (which is led by Sultan Murad Division).

Then on September 20th, Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector's pro-HTS bloc (often cited as Ahrar Olan in reference to their headquarters in the town of Olan) launched another attempt to take al-Hamran, which the Second Legion's Sultan Murad had been supervising. The fighting spread, with Ahrar Olan attacking other villages under the control of the Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector bloc affiliated with the Second Legion of the SNA. On the 21st, the Shehba Gathering umbrella declared its support for Ahrar Olan.<sup>178</sup> Clashes continued, chiefly between the Shehba Gathering on the one side, and the Sultan Murad and Sultan Malikshah factions (both Second Legion) on the other. Civilian casualties were recorded, alongside the displacement of dozens of families due to the clashes. While Al-Jabha al-Shamiya, the Mu'tasim Division and Sultan Mehmet al-Fatih factions are also present in the concerned areas, they mostly remained neutral in the fighting. The Joint Force factions of Hamza Division and Suleiman Shah were sent to the concerned towns as a neutral 'peacekeeping' force on the 27th, with Turkey reportedly ordering a cessation of hostilities.<sup>179</sup> <sup>180</sup> By October 15th, the Joint Force announced it was returning to its original areas.<sup>181</sup>

As a result of the period of infighting, and the new split within Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector, the number of factions operating in northern Syria under the name of Ahrar al-Sham became five. There is Ahrar al-Sham in HTS-controlled Idlib, led by Amir al-Sheikh and Hassan Soufan, which is completely loyal to HTS and not part of the SNA. Then there is Ahrar al-Sham in Afrin, with Youssef al-Hamawi (Abu Suleiman) as leader, in opposition to Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib. They reportedly are within the

<sup>176</sup> SyriaTV

<sup>177</sup> SyriaTV

<sup>178</sup> <https://t.me/ShahbaaGathering/59>

<sup>179</sup> [https://t.me/ortak\\_kuvvet/3](https://t.me/ortak_kuvvet/3)

<sup>180</sup> SyriaTV

<sup>181</sup> <https://x.com/OrtakKuvvetMuha/status/1713621037919662113>

SNA's Second Legion. Additionally, there is Ahrar al-Sham as affiliated with the Third Legion and al-Jabha al-Shamiya, led by Ala Faham (Abu al-Iz Ariha), which also opposes both HTS and Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib. In the al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle, there is Ahrar al-Sham Eastern Sector (Ahrar Olan), headed by Hussein Talib (Abu al-Dahdah), which is loyal to HTS. Finally, there is the Second Legion-affiliated Ahrar al-Sham led by Abu Haidar Maskanah, which acted as an HTS proxy in October 2022, fighting against the Third Legion, only to reject HTS and turn towards the Second Legion in order to continue managing the lucrative al-Hamran crossing.

On November 5th, a new SNA alliance announced itself, named al-Quwah al-Muwahidah (the Unified Force), composed of Third Legion heavyweight al-Jabha al-Shamiya, the Second Legion's Mutasim Division and the Shehba Gathering.<sup>182</sup> While al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the Shehba Gathering were fighting each other in October 2022, the former took a neutral stance during the September 2023 infighting period between Sultan Murad and the Shehba Gathering.

On November 23rd, another coalition emerged in the SNA: al-Quwah al-Mushtarikah (the Joint Force). This brought together the large Hamza and Sultan Suleiman Shah divisions, plus some smaller, less influential factions such as Liwa al-Safwah and Harakat al-Tahrir wa al-Binaa. This means the SNA can be seen as roughly split between three poles: the newest entity of the Joint Force, the Second Legion's Sultan Murad and the also newly-created Unified Force.

## HTS AND THE DEIR EZ-ZOR UNREST

On the 27th of August, with the advent of "Security Enhancement Operation" in the Deir ez-Zor area, reportedly targeting ISIS sleeper cells and drug dealers, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) arrested the Deir ez-Zor Military Council (DMC) leader, Ahmed Al-Khabil, popularly known as Abu Khawla. The DMC is officially part of the SDF, but conflicts have been brewing for a long time between the SDF leadership and an Abu Khawla-led subset of the DMC. Over the years of his leadership in the DMC, he had built up a militia of his relatives and friends inside. He is regarded as a corrupt and brutal ruler by many in Deir ez-Zor, with accusations such as rape, looting, and violence against civilians from his forces abounding. Indeed, there had previously been numerous protests in Deir ez-Zor to remove and replace Abu Khawla as DMC leader. When the SDF announced the launching of "Security Enhancement Operation" in Deir ez-Zor, they sent a large amount of reinforcements from other regions to partake. Meanwhile, when news of the arrested DMC leaders spread, Abu Khawla's affiliates responded by calling on their clansmen to arrest SDF leaders and attack SDF headquarters (HQs) in Deir ez-Zor, as described by RIC in an [explainer](#).

Taking advantage of the moment of instability, several groups of clansmen made statements against the SDF in Deir ez-Zor and launched fresh attacks on SDF checkpoints. Meanwhile, actors within the Syrian National Army (SNA) and affiliated political structures in Turkish-occupied northern Syria, as well as HTS in Idlib, also sought to profit from the situation.

<sup>182</sup> [https://t.me/Unified\\_forc0e/3](https://t.me/Unified_forc0e/3)

The SNA mobilized themselves on the Manbij contact line (separating the SNA-controlled areas from the DAANES-governed territory), with a supposed participation of “Arab tribal fighters,” presenting themselves as acting in solidarity with those attacking the SDF in Deir ez-Zor.<sup>183</sup> While some fighters from Arab tribes were present, it is misleading to represent the subsequent fighting that occurred on the Manbij contact line as an effort from Arab tribal fighters, when it is the SNA who control and command the frontline. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reported that HTS also sent 700-1,000 fighters towards the Manbij frontlines and expanded to take over the al-Hamran crossing.<sup>184</sup> This influx occurred in coordination with the Hamza and Suleiman Shah divisions. A media worker present on the Manbij frontline interviewed by STJ stated that HTS “tried to delude the public that it was responding to calls from Arab tribes to fight alongside them against the SDF in order to establish a military presence on Manbij fronts.” This mobilization resulted in attacks against SDF positions in Arab Hassan Kabir, al-Mahmoudiyah, al-Mohsenli, al-Boghaz, al-Buheetj, Tel Turin and the road to Arima point, although there were no lasting losses or gains of territory.

This episode was another manifestation of HTS’ aim to establish a permanent presence in the Turkish-occupied areas.

## TURKEY-SYRIA EARTHQUAKE FEBRUARY 2023

On February 6th 2023 an earthquake hit southern Turkey and northwestern Syria. With a magnitude of 7.8, it was the strongest in this region since 1939. The epicenter was located in the city of Pazarcik in Turkey. While the affected area was mainly in southern Turkey and northwestern Syria, the earthquake was felt as far away as Egypt, Georgia and Greece. The official death toll from the disaster is 53,537 in Turkey and 8,476 in Syria, although the number of unreported deaths is also estimated as high.<sup>185</sup> Within the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria, Jindires town in Afrin was the place most affected. In this town alone, over 1,100 people were killed, 278 buildings were completely destroyed and 2,000 families were left without shelter or life-saving materials.<sup>186</sup>

As evidenced in RIC’s earthquake report (available [here](#) on the RIC website), this natural disaster collided with a situation already characterized by dire living conditions in northern Syria. Following the earthquake, the affected areas did not receive adequate humanitarian aid within the first 72 hours, a crucial time frame for search and rescue operations. About four hours after the earthquake, the SIG declared northern Syria a disaster area and appealed to “all international and humanitarian organizations to provide urgent assistance to the areas affected by the disaster.”<sup>187</sup> Yet, even as border crossing closures meant little to no aid was able to enter in the initial hours, attempts by the DAANES and independent NGOs operating in NES

183 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/658409/>

184 <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-hts-expands-in-manbij-under-the-cover-of-arab-tribes/>

185 <https://reliefweb.int/report/Turkey/devastating-earthquakes-southern-Turkey-and-northern-syria-18-may-2023-situation-report-23-entr>

186 SyriaTV

187 <https://x.com/syriagovernment/status/1622501811583074304>



to send humanitarian assistance to the affected areas were prevented, with the head of the SIG, Abd al-Rahman Mustafa, saying that receiving aid “from the areas controlled by the SDF militia” is unacceptable.<sup>188</sup> Amnesty International described the SNA as engaging in “politically motivated obstructions of critical aid.”<sup>189</sup>

Blockading of humanitarian aid was followed by theft of humanitarian supplies by SNA militias. The post-earthquake situation was marked by a continuation of the previous human rights violations perpetrated by the SNA. RIC’s report concluded that the people living in the Turkish-occupied areas were highly affected by the exploitation of humanitarian aid as a “weapon of war.” Local media made specific accusations against the Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Faylaq al-Sham militias of aid theft and post-earthquake looting carried out “on a daily basis.”<sup>190</sup> These allegations were backed up by the Afrin Human Rights Organization who said, when RIC reached out to them for confirmation, that “hundreds of such cases have been documented.” A report for the European University Institute’s Syrian Trajectories Project also noted that the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade were accused by several humanitarian groups “of intervening in aid distribution, of claiming credit for NGO interventions, and of extortion” and highlighted that competition and infighting between SNA factions prevented any kind of effective humanitarian response to the earthquake: “the governance challenges in the earthquake response efforts were closely intertwined with the local security context, including security breaches and factional infighting, which consistently threatened and hindered the dynamic response.” The report also cited “discrimination against the local Kurdish population” with regards to aid distribution.<sup>191</sup> As per an Amnesty International interview with an earthquake survivor in Afrin, Kurdish people “have been living in fear since Turkey and armed groups occupied the area. Now our situation is worse. We are not receiving aid and, for those who did, it was barely enough. But, we are afraid to complain or even ask why we are not receiving aid out of fear of arrest.”<sup>192</sup> A report from the Synergy-Hevdesti organization also evidenced the SNA arresting earthquake victims.<sup>193</sup>

Two days after the quake, North Press reported that dozens of Afrin city residents attacked the local council’s relief office, supposedly due to the council’s refusal to distribute aid, and that the Military Police then opened fire to prevent people approaching the office.<sup>194</sup> Amnesty International also verified footage of suspected members of the SNA’s Military Police shooting into the air to disperse crowds who had gathered to take aid boxes from a humanitarian organization’s truck. Furthermore, Amnesty’s interviewees in Afrin spoke of SNA groups siphoning off aid for their own families and relatives, and selling aid materials rather than giving them to those in

188 <https://x.com/STMAbdurrahman/status/1623696583438094336>

189 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppo-desperate-hour-of-need/>

190 <https://afrinpost.net/ar/archives/26229>

191 <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/75631/QM-04-23-589-EN-N.pdf?sequence=5>

192 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppo-desperate-hour-of-need/>

193 <https://hevdesti.org/en/northern-syria-arbitrary-detention-and-torture-as-systematic-policy-in-sna-held-areas/>

194 <https://npasyria.com/en/92471/>

need.<sup>195</sup> Local news agency North Press reported that Ibrahim al-Qadi, leader of the SNA's Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Division, stole 29 tents and emergency aid kits attached to them that were intended to be delivered to earthquake victims in Jindires town. Al-Qadi reportedly sold each tent for \$200-300.<sup>196</sup>

## ANKARA-DAMASCUS RECONCILIATION PROSPECTS

On August 11th, 2022, Turkey's then Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, called for reconciliation between the Syrian Opposition and the Government of Syria, and revealed that Turkish and Syrian intelligence services had resumed communication near the end of 2021.<sup>197</sup> This announcement signaled a break from the years of separation that had resulted from Turkey's decision to sever all diplomatic ties with Syria and back the Opposition at the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2012. Cavusoglu's call triggered widespread protests in the Turkish-occupied areas.<sup>198</sup> On December 28th, 2022, Turkey's Minister of Defense and head of MIT met with their Syrian counterparts in Moscow, marking the first official engagement between Ankara and Damascus in over a decade.<sup>199</sup> While this summit did not produce concrete changes in terms of policy, both sides agreed to establish joint committees to meet in the near future.<sup>200</sup> In Syria's Turkish-occupied territories, Syrian Opposition organizations condemned the summit and rallies rejecting reconciliation were held in various towns.<sup>201202203</sup> There were also reports that the Civil Police fired bullets over demonstrators in Tel Abyad and tried to arrest those on the streets in order to disperse the rally.<sup>204</sup> On the 3rd of January, 2023, Turkey's Cavusoglu met with both the SIG and National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC) presidents, with the issue of rapprochement on the agenda.<sup>205</sup> While large anti-reconciliation demonstrations continued to rock the Turkish-occupied territories over the next few days,<sup>206</sup> SIG President Abd al-Rahman Mustafa told Turkey's TRT Haber that "Turkey is acting in line with the expectations of the Syrian people."<sup>207</sup> The SNC and SIG are completely reliant on Turkey for political and economic backing, hence do not openly criticize Turkish policy. This is also reflected in the relative lack of open identification of Turkey during protests by Opposition organizations. On May 1st, a collection of Opposition bodies and individuals held a conference in Turkish-occupied al-Rai, "rejecting normalization with Assad the criminal," but steered clear

195 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/syria-vital-earthquake-aid-blocked-or-diverted-in-aleppo-desperate-hour-of-need/>

196 <https://npasyria.com/en/93386/>

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

198 <https://x.com/SChikhmousa/status/1558110906399309824>

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

200 <https://x.com/aronlund/status/1608514125659004929>

201 [https://x.com/syr\\_television/status/1608780076287500292](https://x.com/syr_television/status/1608780076287500292)

202 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulHHMpsSODQ>

203 [https://x.com/backstage\\_24/status/1608784831605002242](https://x.com/backstage_24/status/1608784831605002242)

204 <https://t.me/ehtemlat2/29698>

205 <https://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/al-meslet-reaffirms-commitment-of-forces-of-syrian-revolution-and-opposition-to-revolution-goals>

206 <https://t.me/AbomosaabSharkea/85256>

207 <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/suriye-gecici-hukumeti-baskani-mustafa-trt-habere-konus-tu-736353.html>

of making any references to Turkey's recent steps towards reconciliation.<sup>208</sup> This situation threatens the legitimacy of the SIG and SNC in the eyes of their constituents. When then-President of the SNC, Salem al-Meslet, visited Azaz in January 2023, he was met by unfriendly protestors rejecting rapprochement.<sup>209</sup> Five protestors assaulted him and a judicial investigation was initiated at the request of al-Meslet.<sup>210</sup>

In January 2023, Iran started to get involved in the process as a second mediator, but talks were suspended due to the earthquake that struck the region. They were resumed in the period prior to the May 14th Turkish presidential and parliamentary election, with meetings between Turkish and Syrian government officials on April 4th, April 25th and May 10th. After the elections however, Turkey changed tone. A single meeting occurred on June 20th, between both deputy foreign ministers.<sup>211</sup> With this, the overall situation returned to the impasse seen at the beginning 2022: the Syrian government demanding the complete withdrawal of the Turkish military from Syrian soil as sine qua non to enter negotiations, and Turkey rejecting this. Erdogan re-stated his denial on July 17th. During his victory speech following the elections, Erdogan again referenced the need for elimination of so-called security threats at Turkey's southern border, indicating that Ankara was not planning to leave Syria any time soon.<sup>212</sup> 3 months later, on October 17th, the Turkish Parliament voted to extend the mandate for Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq for another 2 years, with Russia also admitting that in the end "little progress" had been made regarding Turkey-Syria rapprochement.<sup>213 214</sup>

From Turkey's side, such rapprochement has been heavily tied to Turkish internal politics. Public discontent regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey reached new highs in 2023. For this reason, the possibility of reconciliation with Damascus as a means to allow Syrians residing in Turkey to return home had originally been pushed forward by the Turkish opposition as an electoral push.<sup>215</sup> From August 2022, the AKP-led government started to include this on their agenda as well. In the run-up to the May election, Erdogan made efforts to show that his administration was responsible for advances on that front, and that the series of tripartite meetings proved successful. After their success in the elections, the AKP government again deprioritized the topic of rapprochement, although public pressure and geopolitical tensions may mean Erdogan will be forced to address it again.<sup>216</sup>

208 <https://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-revolution-institutions-host-extensive-conference-to-reject-normalization-with-the-assad-regime>

209 [https://x.com/NPA\\_English/status/1613862417468952576](https://x.com/NPA_English/status/1613862417468952576)

210 SyriaTV

211 <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2023/08/ankara-damascus-rapprochement-variables-and-unfriendly-messages/>

212 <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/06/erdogans-syria-policy-continuation-of-the-status-quo/>

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

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

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

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

## SNC ELECTIONS DISPUTES

The legitimacy of the political wing of the SNA - the SIG - within Syrian Opposition circles was weakened in the latter months of 2023, following elections within the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the SNC - within which the SIG is included). On September 12th, the SNC's General Authority, comprising roughly 80 people, elected a new president: Hadi al-Bahrah. This election was controversial, marred by allegations that SIG President Abd al-Rahman Mustafa appointed al-Bahrah to be chosen in line with Turkey's wishes, with the outcome known before the election had taken place.<sup>217, 218</sup> Although the SIG is nominally within the SNC, in practice it is the higher authority. The SIG is backed by Ankara and holds the most votes within the SNC.<sup>219</sup> Within the SNC, a group known as the 'G4' (four individuals closely tied to Turkey and Abd al-Rahman Mustafa) have managed to dominate influence over the chamber. Both al-Bahrah and his predecessor are included within the G4. Al-Bahrah's election was seen by many as reflecting the control the G4 possesses over the SNC. Even before the results were announced, SNC General Authority member Hafez Karkout announced his withdrawal from the SNC due to the "illegal" manner of the election.<sup>220</sup> The following day, veteran Opposition figure Salim Idris, who was formerly the head of the SNA, announced he was withdrawing from the SNC.<sup>221</sup> While Idris did not state a reason, local media pointed to the election of al-Bahrah as the cause.<sup>222</sup> Then on the 19th, protestors in Azaz stormed the SNC headquarters and demanded that its members resign.<sup>223</sup> In light of the aforementioned strength of the Muslim Brotherhood in Azaz, one potential explanation is that the MB orchestrated the protest due to their recent severance of ties with Turkey, which has the effect of reducing their influence. Consequently, they may be motivated to prevent further loss of power. On the 9th of October, the SNC voted to dismiss its former president Nasr Hariri and former vice president Ruba Habboush, when the two publicly condemned the SNC's electoral process.

<sup>217</sup> <https://www.enabbaladi.net/659387/>

<sup>218</sup> <https://syriadirect.org/hadi-al-bahra-president-of-a-dead-institution/>

<sup>219</sup> <https://syriadirect.org/from-obscure-figure-to-syrian-opposition-heavyweight-how-did-abdurrah-man-mustafa-rise/>

<sup>220</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/hafez.karkout/posts/pfbid024zrUfMQqb8LXLCgmxkt8cPLQeuWPQrvK-6jmr4ptQUa8sgwVw5GQhTis6R1NpLmx9l>

<sup>221</sup> [https://x.com/Dr\\_S\\_Idris/status/1701959542785945723](https://x.com/Dr_S_Idris/status/1701959542785945723)

<sup>222</sup> SyriaTV

<sup>223</sup> SyriaTV

## CONCLUSIONS

Human rights violations remain at an all-time-high in the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria. The human rights situation in the Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria requires immediate and urgent attention from the international community. One option the U.S. has is to consider the policy recommendations of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: “exert pressure on Turkey to withdraw from all territory that it occupies as a result of cross-border operations into north and east Syria,” and “demand that Turkey order armed factions under its control or influence to cease all activities negatively impacting religious and ethnic minorities in Syria.”<sup>224</sup>

It is important to reiterate that many of the crimes committed are ethnically motivated. The Kurdish and Yazidi populations are facing systematic persecution. It is also important to note that the Arabs who do not comply with the SNA, or who are accused of sympathizing with DAANES, are victims of these crimes as well. Indigenous communities have endured and suffered the imposition of an occupation that shows no sign of ending, whether through continual arrests and kidnappings, or the imposition of taxes and violations of their properties. It is evident that the occupation has resulted in significant demographic change and displacement. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds, Yazidis, and other ethnic minorities have been compelled to flee their homes and are currently residing in numerous IDP camps in NES or seeking refuge in other countries. It is estimated that 80% of the original population of Sere Kaniye has been forcibly displaced and approximately 300,000 people have fled from Afrin. The displaced population has been replaced predominantly by Arabs from other parts of Syria. This is achieved through the construction of new settlements by Erdogan and his allies, as well as the reinforcement of local militias and Islamist forces enjoying direct support from NATO’s second largest military. Many former ISIS combatants currently reside in the occupied regions while the displaced population awaits the opportunity to return to their homes.

Furthermore, the appalling situation of women’s rights must be mentioned. As detailed in this report, the situation for women has consistently deteriorated since the commencement of the Turkish occupation. An atmosphere of fear has emerged, accompanied by a troubling increase in the prevalence of child and forced marriages. While there is evidence to suggest that gender-related crimes are underreported, the events described in this report paint a stark picture of the atrocities that women face on a daily basis.

The international community has thus far been unable to halt these violations, in part due to a lack of acknowledgement of the realities that make this an occupation. It is accurate to assert that Turkey is failing to intervene against SNA militias when they commit human rights abuses. In fact, there is evidence that Turkey is directly involved in many cases of abuse, which often involve women and children. The construction of settler villages provides further insight into this matter. Funded by

<sup>224</sup> <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/2024%20Annual%20Report.pdf>



Turkey and its regional allies, and endorsed by Turkish politicians, these settlements represent a key component of the Turkish initiative to establish a “friendly” Arab and Turkmen zone along its border. Should Turkey undertake further incursion into Syria as it is threatening, the fate of Afrin and the M4 Strip would be replicated across the majority of North and East Syria.

Despite the ‘safe zone’ rhetoric promoted by the Turkish government and repeated by many international media outlets, the realities attested to in this report necessitate the attention of the international community and human rights organizations. After three years of publishing reports on the situation in the Afrin region, M4 Strip and ‘Al-Bab/Azaz/Jarablus Triangle’ area, RIC has a sufficiently large database to confirm that the local population of these territories suffers systematic violations of their most basic rights. The perpetrators of these crimes are also clearly established: the militias of the Syrian National Army, HTS, the police institutions of the Syrian Interim Government, and the actors from MIT and other Turkish agencies present on Syrian soil.

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AUGUST 2024**

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