

A Complaint to Three UN Special Rapporteurs Addressing the Destruction of Graves and Cemeteries by Various Parties to the Syrian Conflict

*Syrian Organizations urge UN Special Rapporteurs to recall to Turkey
and Syria their obligations to international human rights law
regarding religious and cultural rights, as well as the rights of
indigenous peoples*

Over the last few years, parties in the Syrian conflict vandalized and destroyed several cemeteries, historic sites, and religious objects. In some cases, actors carried out the violence for revenge. In other disturbing cases, they desecrated cultural sites for religious and ideological reasons. [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ), the [Syria Justice and Accountability Centre](#) (SJAC), [PÊL – Civil Waves](#), and [Hevdestî – Synergy](#), submitted a complaint to the UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Field of Cultural Rights addressing the destruction of graves and cemeteries by various parties to the Syrian conflict. In our submissions, the organizations provided the details of 12 separate incidents involving the destruction and desecration of cemeteries, historic sites, and religious objects.

In the cases we highlighted in our submissions, graves and shrines were deliberately defiled as perpetrators sought revenge by setting sites aflame, vandalizing them, and looting their contents. The identifying features of some cemeteries were completely obliterated when perpetrators bulldozed them, turning them either into cattle markets or military posts. Three main parties were responsible for the cases of vandalism: Syrian regular forces, Turkish forces, and the opposition-affiliated armed groups of the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and the Turkistan Islamic Party.

For example, in 2020, Syrian regular forces and allied militias [vandalized](#) the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine in rural Idlib. In other incidents, Syrian regular forces vandalized, smashed, and set fire to headstones and graves belonging to pro-opposition civilians and militants. Similarly, Turkish-backed forces disturbed graves and vandalized headstones in northeastern and northwestern Syria. Notably, in August 2018, Turkish forces [bulldozed](#) the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery in Kafr Shīl village, Afrin and turned it into a cattle market.

Furthermore, groups affiliated with or protected by the Turkish-backed SNA raided and looted several shrines in Afrin region while searching for antiquities. One of the key shrines subjected to abuses in August 2018 was the Hannan Shrine in Masha’ala village, Afrin region. The shrine houses the graves of a Kurdish icon, Nuri Dersmi, and other Kurdish figures. In another incident, the Chail Khaneh Shrine, a Yezidi site in Qibar village, rural Afrin, was raided in May 2020. The shrine was previously a community site for “worship, blessings, and quietism.”

The incidents verified in our submissions are not the only cases of Turkish-backed groups disturbing cemeteries and destroying shrines. After taking over Afrin following a week of fierce battles with the Autonomous Administration’s People’s Protection Units (YPG) during Operation Olive Branch, Turkish forces bulldozed a large part of the 400-year old, al-Foqania Cemetery (the Upper Cemetery), in the village of Senarê/Sinnara of the Shaykh al-Hadid district, rural Afrin. They also completely [demolished](#) its historic Ali Dada Shrine.

The cases we highlighted in our submissions demonstrate that various parties to the Syrian conflict have vandalized places of worship, and in doing so, have often committed violations against the indigenous populations’ human rights. In multiple cases, the sites vandalized were culturally significant to the lives of the local community, driving tourism and essential to the history of the area. Systematically attacking the places of worship of indigenous communities

violates the rights of indigenous people proclaimed in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, it violates the freedom of religion, guaranteed by article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

The four Syrian organizations urge UN Special Rapporteurs to recall to Turkey and Syria the obligations of the forces under their control in light of international human rights law regarding religious and cultural rights, as well as the rights of indigenous peoples. Additionally, we call on Special Rapporteurs to document the violations to religious and cultural rights taking place as part of the ongoing Syrian conflict by all parties. This investigation should be done by travelling to the areas in question for the purpose of conducting in-depth, fieldwork-based research. Finally, we urge the Special Rapporteurs to engage with Syrian civil society organizations in its work, by training and collaborating with these organizations, to empower them and ensure they have the means and capacity to document these violations.



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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