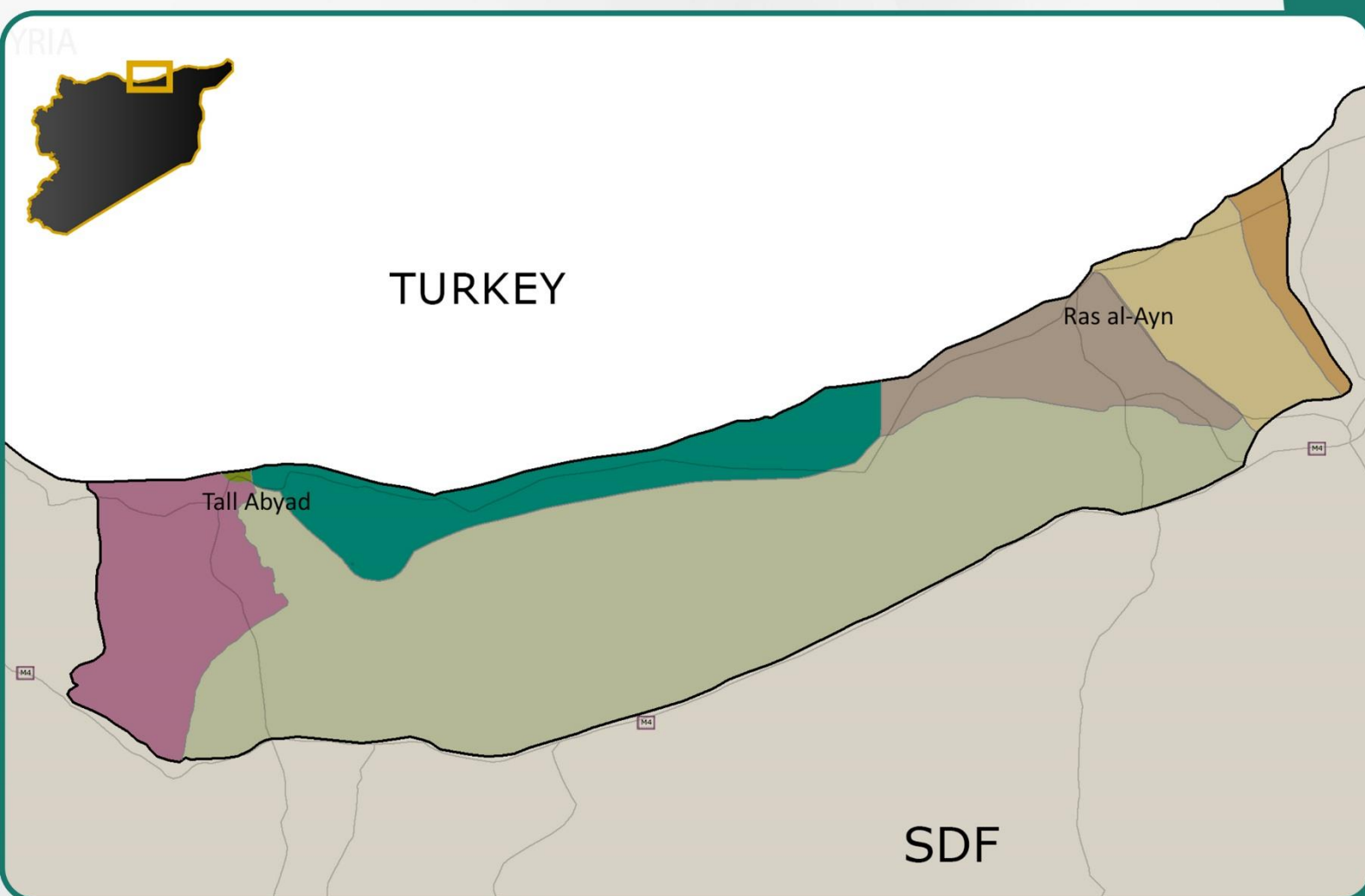


Peace Spring Strip: The Documentation of 228 Arrest Cases During 2022



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Introduction:

This report presents the total toll of the arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance operations, documented by Hevesti-Synergy Association for Victims during 2022, that were committed by the Turkish forces and the factions affiliated with the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) in “Peace Spring” strip which has been under the Turkish occupation since October 2019.

During 2022, at least 228 persons, including 11 women and 15 children, were arbitrarily arrested in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad strips by Turkish forces and factions of the Turkish-backed opposition SNA.

Victims of the arbitrary detention were from different components of the region among them Kurds and Arabs. Only 98 persons out of the total toll of the detainees were released, while the fate of 130 persons, including 7 women and 2 children remains unknown.

The statements collected by Hevesti-Synergy indicate that motives behind the majority of detention and deprivation of liberty operations in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad strips were to extort the victims’ families and to get ransoms from them. Other reasons of detention were to intimidate the people and push them to leave the area so that the factions seize their properties.

Charges that were pressed against the detainees varied. Some were accused of dealing with the “Autonomous Administration” or formerly working with one of its institutions. Others were accused of attempting to cross to Turkey illegally or defaming the reputation of the SNA or criticizing it, such as in the case of “Khaled Daif”, a shop owner in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê who was arrested on July 1, 2022 while participating in a demonstration in Tell Halaf, west of Ras al-Ayn. The demonstration condemned the deteriorating living and security conditions in “Peace Spring” strip. A patrol of the “Civil Police” arbitrarily arrested “Daif” and released him the next day after he was forced to sign a document pledging not to participate in anti-SNA demonstrations once again.

The majority of the released detainees told Hevesti-Synergy that they were subject to ill-treatment and torture, and they were repeatedly deprived of food and water in the prisons run by factions affiliated with the opposition SNA in the Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad strips.

In most of the arrest cases documented by Hevesti-Synergy, the civilians were kept in prisons run by the Military Police or the Civil Police in the two cities in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad, in the prison of Mabrouka town in the west of Ras al-Ayn, in the prison of Suluk town, or in other prisons run by the factions that carried out the arrests. The prisoners were held in poor detention conditions and others were taken to unknown places.

One of the civilians who were released told Hevdesti-Synergy that in mid-August 2022, Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East faction extorted his family and forced it to pay 23,000 USD for his release. The civilian had been arrested in early August 2022 on the road linking Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê to Tall Abyad. He was kept in detention for eleven days in Suluk town that follows Tall Abyad city in poor detention conditions, according to the witness.

Since the occupation of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad from October 9, 2019 to the end of 2022, Hevdesti-Synergy documented at least 521 arrest cases among them were 72 women and 45 children at the hands of the Turkish forces and factions of the Turkish-backed SNA.

According to Hevdesti-Synergy's documentations, more than 189 of the detained people have been enforced disappeared in which their families still have no information concerning their fate. Further 328 detainees in the prisons run by the Syrian opposition were subject to torture and at least five of them had died under torture.

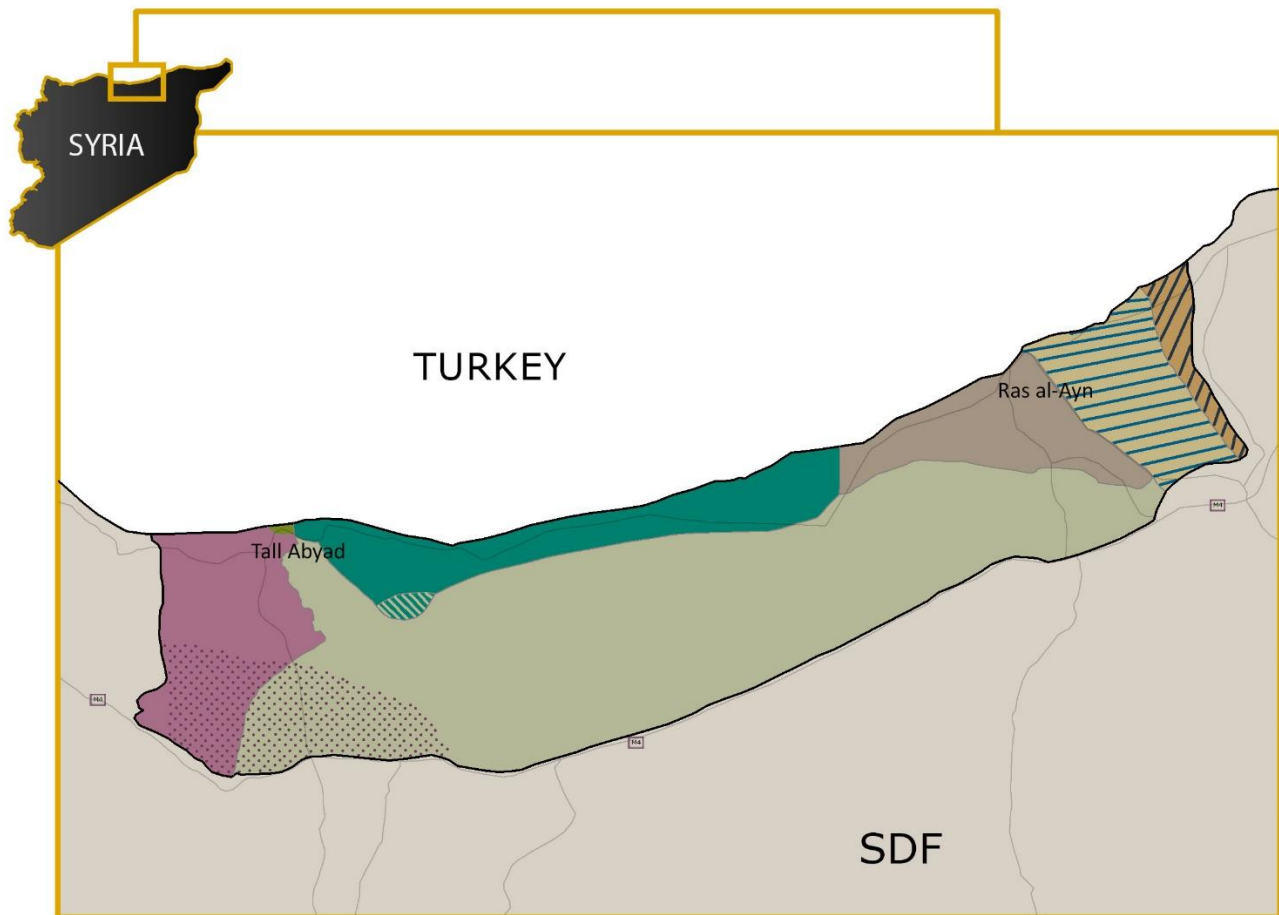
Hevdesti-Synergy confirmed Turkey's involvement in concealing citizens from Northeast Syria and transferring them to its territories, where at least 93 Syrian detainees were documented to be transferred into Turkish territory during and following Operation "Peace Spring". 52 of them were tried with arbitrary sentences ranging from 13 years to life imprisonment.

Detention has multi-faceted impacts on men, women and children including both physical and mental harm. Most of the former detainees described suffering from chronic physical pain resulting from torture they sustained in prisons and unhealthy conditions they experienced inside detention facilities, let alone suffering headaches and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Dozens of families of those forcibly disappeared by the SNA in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad strips since its occupation in "Peace Spring" operation in October 2019, are still suffering a general feeling of hardship and confusion as legal protection was not provided to them, and they were left to manage their affairs alone. Many families tirelessly worked to obtain information about their missing ones, but to no avail.

In 2021, Hevdesti-Synergy Association for Victims [documented](#) the arrest of at least 185 persons, including 12 children and 24 women, as well as the death of at least two persons under torture in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions at the hands of Turkish forces and factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA).

The Opposition Syrian National Army's Areas OF Influence In Ras al-Ayn and Tall Abyad



- al-Jabha al-Shamiya
- Faylaq al-Majd
- Ahrar al-Sharqiya
- 20rd Division
- The al-Hamza/ al-Hamzat Division
- The Sultan Murad Division
- The Mutasim Division
- Army of Isalm/ Jaysh al-Islam
- The Northern Hawks Brigade
- The Levant Front/ al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Faylaq al-Rahman,
The Sham Legion/ Faylaq al-Sham

Legal Liability:

The SNA violated the detainees' rights in accordance with international legal obligations. Various factions affiliated with the SNA have arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals and practiced cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment towards the detainees and the forcibly disappeared, as well as their families in various ways. One way is the deliberate concealment of the fate and whereabouts of the detainees and the disappeared persons in violation to the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Fundamental Principles of Human Rights¹. Furthermore, the effective removal of these people from the protection of the law, if protection is found originally, and the failure to establish their fate constitutes a violation to the right to life².

In the light of the continuous documented use of torture against detainees and the failure of the factions' commanders as well as leaders of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)/the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) to take effective steps to prevent such practices, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the SNA may be practicing such conduct in pursuance of an organizational policy. Therefore, such conduct may be part of a systematic attack against the detainees in its custody, amounting to a crime against humanity; the crime of torture.

The SNA conducted no investigations in its forces' practices, which continue to arrest civilians ensuing them forcibly disappeared persons and violating their rights, nor did the Turkish government that has effective command and control on these forces to change their arbitrary conduct. On the contrary, it appears in some cases that the Turkish government was involved as a partner in committing such violations.

Therefore, the Turkish military commanders are held criminally responsible for violations committed by these parties [the SNA forces] in instances where the Turkish leaders knew or should have known about such crimes or failed to take all necessary and reasonable measures to prevent their commission.³

As an occupying power, Turkish authorities must ensure that their own officials and those under their command in the SNA do not arbitrarily detain or mistreat anyone. The Turkish authorities are also obliged to investigate alleged violations and ensure that those responsible are appropriately punished.

¹ ICRC Rule 98. Enforced disappearance are also characterized as a composite war crime by ICRC; See Rule 156.

² UN Human Rights Committee, general comment no. 36 (2018), para 58.

³ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 28.

Arbitrary Arrest as Money-Making Approach:

As the SNA's factions expanded their control over Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions since Turkey occupied them in October 2019, arbitrary arrest and detention have become widespread practices, in addition to other ones, such as the systematic confiscation of the victims' properties, extortion and beating.

The various violations committed by the SNA's factions in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions were characterized with a racist and discriminatory trend, most notably against the Kurds and the Yezidis, yet other violations were also perpetuated, such as arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and property seizure among others on the motives of making money. No distinction was made among the victims on the basis of affiliation, religion, national or ethnic origin as the victims were from different components of the region between Kurds, Arabs, Muslims, Yezidis, Christians, Armenians, Syriac, and Chechens.

Families of the majority of the arbitrary arrests' victims were forced to pay financial ransoms for the victims' release. When the detainees' families contacted the SNA's fighters asking about the whereabouts of their loved ones, they were often given no information and they were threatened and extorted until they agreed to pay the financial ransom.

Syrian Asylum Seekers are Victims of Both Turkish Forces and SNA:

Three Syrian asylum-seekers were killed, and others were injured in 2022 as they were directly fired at by the Turkish border guards (Gendarmerie). More than 113 people, including 7 women and 3 children were arrested by the SNA's factions while attempting to cross the Turkey-Syria border illegally in the area lying between Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad.

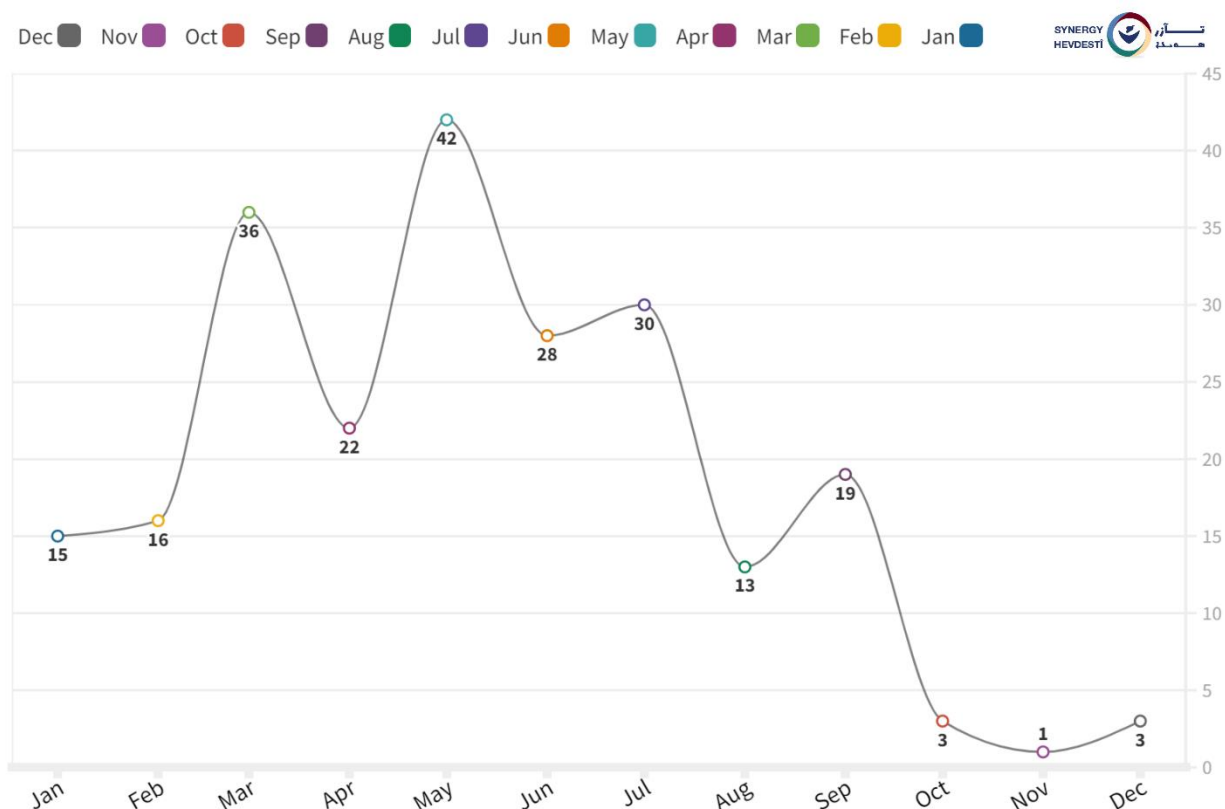
"Fake news/rumors" have contributed in increasing the number of asylum seekers who tried to enter Turkey from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad but later became victims. They were either arrested by the SNA on charges of heading to the border or attempting to cross it to seek asylum, or they were the target of live fire by the Gendarmerie with the intent to kill to prevent them from doing so.

The testimonies and information verified by Hevesti-Synergy confirm that fighters and leaders of factions affiliated with the opposition SNA themselves run the human trafficking operations and smuggling people illegally to Turkey for the exchange of money. In a [report](#) published on August 20, 2022, Hevesti-Synergy documented that at least nine intra-factional clashes/internal fighting that broke out between the SNA's factions in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and its countryside during the first half of 2022 due to disputes over dividing human trafficking profits.

Toll of the Arbitrary Arrests in “Peace Spring” Strip:

According to Hevesti-Synergy’s documentations, the biggest toll of detention and enforced disappearance cases was felt in May in which 42 cases were recorded. 36 cases were recorded in March while the lowest toll of arbitrary detention cases in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions was felt in November, with at least one recorded case.

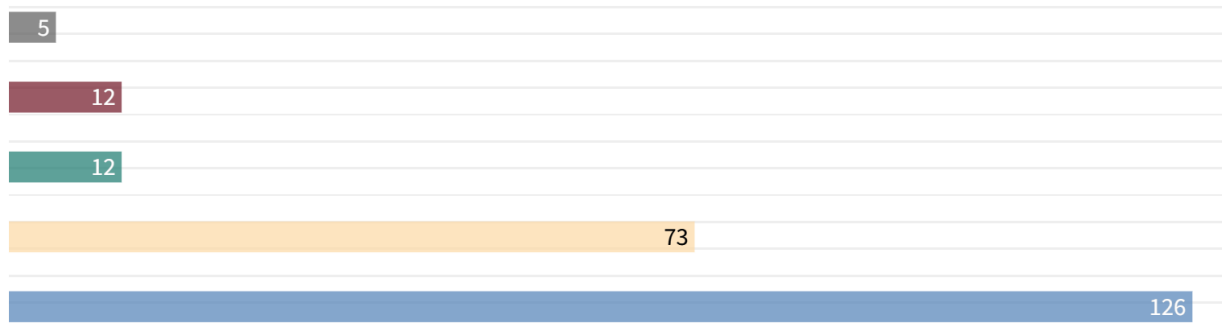
The biggest toll of arbitrary arrests in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions was recorded in the second quarter of 2022, in which the arrest of 92 persons were documented. 67 arrest cases took place in the first quarter, 62 cases in the third quarter and finally 7 cases took place in the fourth quarter.



Total toll of the arbitrary arrests carried out by Turkish forces and factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions during 2022

The “Military Police” was responsible for most of the arrest cases in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions during 2022 as it carried out 126 arrests out of the total toll of the cases documented by Hevesti-Synergy. The Civil Police implemented 73 arrest cases, “Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya” faction carried out 12 cases, the Police forces and the Turkish intelligence participated in at least 5 cases other SNA’s factions implemented the other cases of arrests. Hevesti-Synergy could not identify precisely the factions responsible for other cases of arrests.

Turkish intelligence ■ Other SNA's factions ■ Ahrar al-Sharqiya ■ Civil Police ■ Military Police ■



Factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) and Turkish forces that carried out cases of arbitrary arrest in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions during 2022



The following table illustrates the arbitrary arrests in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad during 2022 according to Hevesti-Synergy Association for Victims:

MONTH	TOTAL TOLL OF THE ARRESTS	MEN	WOMEN	CHILDREN	RELEASED	STILL DETAINED
JANUARY	15	14	0	1	6	9
FEBRUARY	16	14	2	0	4	12
MARCH	36	32	1	3	11	25
APRIL	22	21	0	1	5	17
MAY	42	38	2	2	12	30
JUNE	28	26	1	1	12	16
JULY	30	29	0	1	21	9
AUGUST	13	10	2	1	6	7
SEPTEMBER	19	13	1	5	15	4
OCTOBER	3	2	1	0	3	0
NOVEMBER	1	0	1	0	1	0
DECEMBER	3	3	0	0	2	1
SUM	228	202	11	15	98	130

Hevesti-Synergy Association relied in its documentation process on the information collected in its database provided by a network of field researchers in the region, and on information they obtained from local sources and eyewitnesses. Furthermore, it verified the information from publicly available sources (open sources).

Hevesti-Synergy Association notes that violations committed by Turkey and the SNA-affiliated factions in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad are far more than what have been documented and verified by name, surname, place and date of the detention, as the Association believes that the actual number of arrest cases is significantly higher than the figure given in this statistic report.

Detainees Released in Exchange for Financial Ransoms:

Hevesti-Synergy interviewed families of the detainees and the survivors in 2022 and documented their accounts and testimonies since it is well aware of the bulk of its responsibility towards the victims. Hevesti-Synergy's strategy depends on an approach that focuses on experiences, points of views and priorities of the victims/survivors as an essential part of its daily work. In addition, it searches for multiple points of views in order to develop a thorough and analytical understanding of the events and commits to the highest degree of integrity and accuracy.

Motives behind arresting most of the detainees in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad were the willingness to extort their families and ask for financial ransoms for the detainees' release.

One of the released civilians told Hevesti-Synergy that "Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya" faction, affiliated with the SNA, extorted and forced his family to pay 23,000 USD for his release. He was arrested on his way back from his work place near Suluk town in the countryside of Tall Abyad.⁴

The witness narrated to Hevesti-Synergy the details of his arrest:

"On August 3, 2022, I was arrested on the road linking Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê to Tall Abyad. A group of armed men affiliating with the Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction stopped the public transportation vehicle that was driving us at one of the faction's checkpoints. They arrested me along with some other young men. They handcuffed and blindfolded us all the way long to the detention center, where they insulted us using abusive phrases without telling us the reason behind the arrest."

The witness was transferred to a prison run by Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction in Suluk town and was kept there for 11 days. In regard to the detention conditions, he said:

"They never interrogated me during the detention period. All the time in the prison, I was handcuffed which wounded my wrist, and I suffered terrible pain. Despite that, they did not uncuff my hands nor they brought medicine though I

⁴ The interview was conducted via the Internet on August 25, 2022. The witness's information is not promulgated upon his request.

kept asking them to bring some. They asked me to give them the phone number of one of my family members in order to contact him. I learned from their conversation with each other that they would ask him to pay money for my release.”

The witness’s family acquiesced to Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya’s blackmail, fearful for their son’s life. The witness was released on August 14, 2022 after the armed group obtained 23,000 USD, according to the witness. He continued:

“Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya requested my family to pay 22,000 USD for my release and my family had no other choice, but to obey. They were forced to secure the amount of money to pay it to the armed group who also took 1,000 USD that was in my pocket. After that, they released me.”

A witness whose four members of his family were arrested in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê told Hevdesti-Synergy that forces of the “Military Police” asked them to pay financial ransom for the release of the detained ones. He recounted:⁵

“In late July 2022, the Military Police arrested four individuals of our relatives in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê while they were trying to cross to Turkey illegally. Three of them were released on 5 August 2022 after we paid 2,500 USD to those forces. One of the detained persons remained in the prison and was released later in the same month.”

The witness said that the released detainees had undergone severe physical and psychological torture, adding that they had no information regarding the proceeding of the prosecution or the mechanism of their release in terms of the legal aspect.

Another witness told Hevdesti-Synergy Association that his brother along with three other detainees were brought before a military court prior to their release. He narrated the details of his brother’s arrest as following:⁶

“On 5 July 2022, my brother along with three other young men were heading to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê coming from the direction of the Autonomous Administration-controlled areas. The Military Police forces arrested them on the M4 Highway, interrogated them and kept them in a custody in Mabrouka town for 25 days in poor imprisonment situations. The detainees were subject to verbal abuse, mental pressure and shortage of food. In early August 2022, they were released after they were brought before a military court.”

⁵ The interview was conducted via the Internet on August 6, 2022. The witness’s identity is withheld for his family members’ safety.

⁶ The interview was conducted via the Internet on August 5, 2022. The witness’s identity is withheld upon his request.

Hevdesti-Synergy interviewed another witness who was arrested by the Turkish Gendarmerie on 5th October 2022, in the village of al-Aziziya in the west countryside of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê while attempting to enter Turkey illegally. He narrated to Hevdesti-Synergy the details of his arrest:⁷

“The Turkish Gendarmerie arrested me and interrogated with me for 24 hours. They handed me over to fighters of the Civil Police and The Sultan Murad Division in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Then, I was transferred to a military headquarter near the public hospital in the city, where I remained there for three days.”

The witness did not dare confess his Kurdish origins during the time of arrest or interrogation because he was fearful of being killed. Hevdesti-Synergy and local and international organizations have previously documented the SNA's factions commission of human rights violations and discrimination on the basis of race, mostly against the Kurds. In this regard, the witness recalled:

“I did not tell them I was a Kurd during interrogation because I was fearful of being assassinated. Some members of the faction checked my shoulder to make sure if I had ever carried a gun after they charged me of fighting alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces/SDF against the SNA's factions.”

The witness was released after he spent three days in custody in a difficult situation. He was compelled to pay a ransom for his release. He concluded:

“Three days later, I was released after paying 500 Turkish Liras as a financial ransom.”

Members of the SNA took the detainee to a sand berm separating them and the SDF in the west of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê near the M4 Highway. They discharged him there after they stole his mobile phone and \$400 that was in his pocket.

⁷ The interview was conducted via the Internet on October 12, 2022. The witness's information is not promulgated upon his request.



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Hevdestî - Synergy Association for Victims, is a non-governmental, non-profit organization, aimed at educating and providing a platform and a space for victims to represent themselves and claim their rights. Synergy was founded on March 11, 2021, to seek justice for the victims of conflict in North and East Syria and to contribute to the process of accountability and justice.

We work to document all human rights violations in North and East Syria, and preserve evidence, documents and testimonies in order to contribute to the processes of truth-revealing, accountability and justice. In addition to build the capacities of the victims and advocate for their issues, with the aim of building a society demanding its rights.

We are committed to the highest degrees of accuracy and integrity, including seeking multiple perspectives to develop an in-depth and analytical understanding of events. We are cognizant of our responsibility towards the victims and witnesses who share their experiences with us. We are working closely with a wide range of actors in local and international civil society to achieve the greatest possible impact.