

Northern Syria: Documentation of 82 Arrests in “Olive Branch” and “Peace Spring” Strips During the First Quarter of 2023



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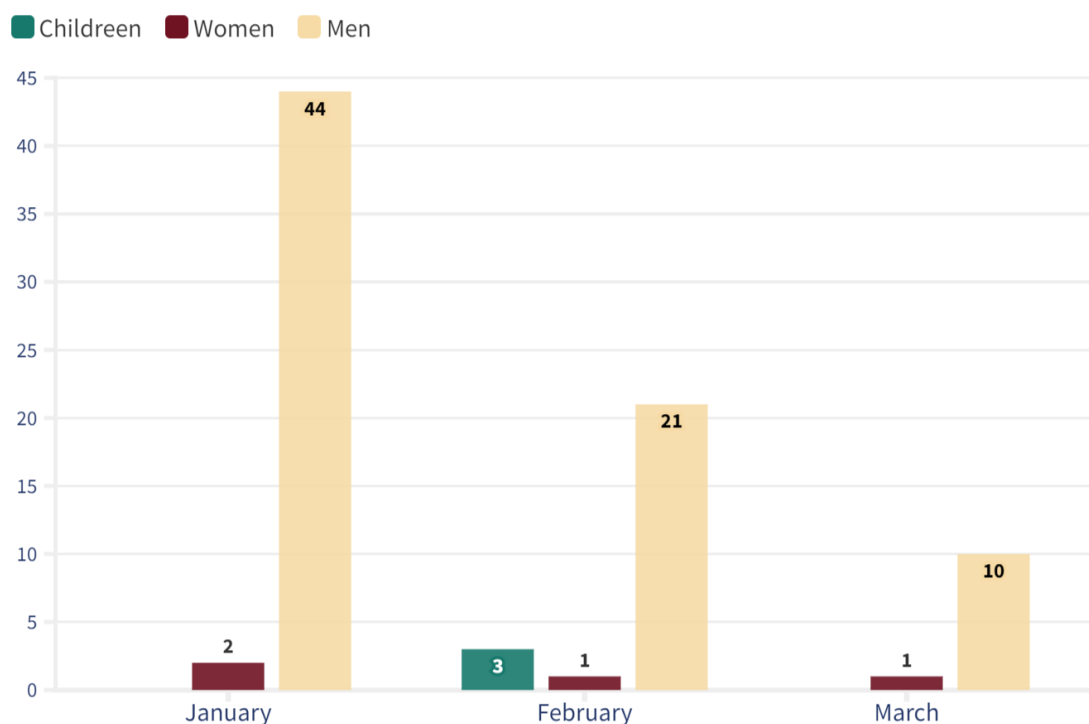
Regions of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad are rife with arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearance along with other human rights violations, such as systematic confiscation of victims’ properties, blackmailing, beating and even killing under torture

Introduction:

Arrests and arbitrary detention committed by Turkish forces and Turkish-backed factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) continue to take place in the regions of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad, which are occupied by Turkey as a result of “Olive Branch” Operation in 2018 and “Peace Spring” Operation in 2019.

During the first quarter of 2023, Synergy Association for Victims documented the arrest of at least 82 persons, including four women and three children, in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad at the hands of Turkish forces and Turkish-backed SNA’s factions.

In the first three months of 2023, 63 persons, among them four women and three children, were arrested in Afrin, while 19 persons were arbitrarily detained in the areas of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad. Only 15 out of the total toll of arrestees were released, including two women and one child. The fate of the remaining 67, among them two women and two children, remains unknown.



The toll of arbitrary arrests in the regions of Afrin, Ras al-Ain/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad during the first quarter of 2023



The majority of detention and deprivation of liberty cases in areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad took place with a view to extort the victims and their families, or to get financial ransoms from them. Others were detained for the purpose of intimidating them and driving them to leave the region.

The statements collected by Synergy showed that Turkish officials were present regularly in SNA-run detention facilities, and former detainees stated that the Turkish officials were also present during interrogation sessions, in which torture was used.

The detainees, mostly Kurds, were interrogated routinely about their alleged connection with the Autonomous Administration and/or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). They were denied the right to retain a defense attorney and were released only after paying sums of money to members of the SNA's factions.

The released persons, whom Synergy interviewed, narrated that they were continuously subjected to ill-treatment and torture. They were also blindfolded during interrogation sessions in the opposition SNA-run prisons in areas of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad.

In most of the cases documented by Synergy, the civilians were held either in the Military Police-run prisons based in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad, or in [Hawar Kilis](#) prison which is run by the Sultan Murad Division, or in Sijin al-Ma'sara (al-Ma'sara prison) based in [A'zaz](#) in the northern countryside of Aleppo, or in prisons run by the specific factions that arrested them. Some others were kept in anonymous detention places.

The victims consistently described poor detention conditions, including overcrowding, limited access to food and water, and deprivation of medical care. The SNA's factions also deliberately concealed a large number of the detainees, and when the detainees' families contacted the factions to ask about the whereabouts of their loved ones, they were often given no information, or were threatened and extorted.

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

Hundreds of families of those forcibly disappeared by the SNA in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad are still suffering a general feeling of anguish, hardship, and confusion as protection was not provided to them, and they were left to manage their affairs alone. Many families have tirelessly worked to obtain information about their missing ones, but to no avail.

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

religion, national or ethnic origin as the victims were from different components of the region between Arabs, Kurds, Muslims, Yezidis, Christians, Armenians, Syriac, and Chechens.

Families of the majority of arbitrary arrests' victims were extorted by the SNA's affiliated factions, and they were eventually forced to pay financial ransoms for the release of their loved ones, confirming that the practice was systematic, aiming at displacing the indigenous people, notably the Kurds, and seize their properties.

Legal Liability:

The SNA violated the detainees' rights in accordance with international legal obligations. Various SNA's factions 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 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

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.

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.

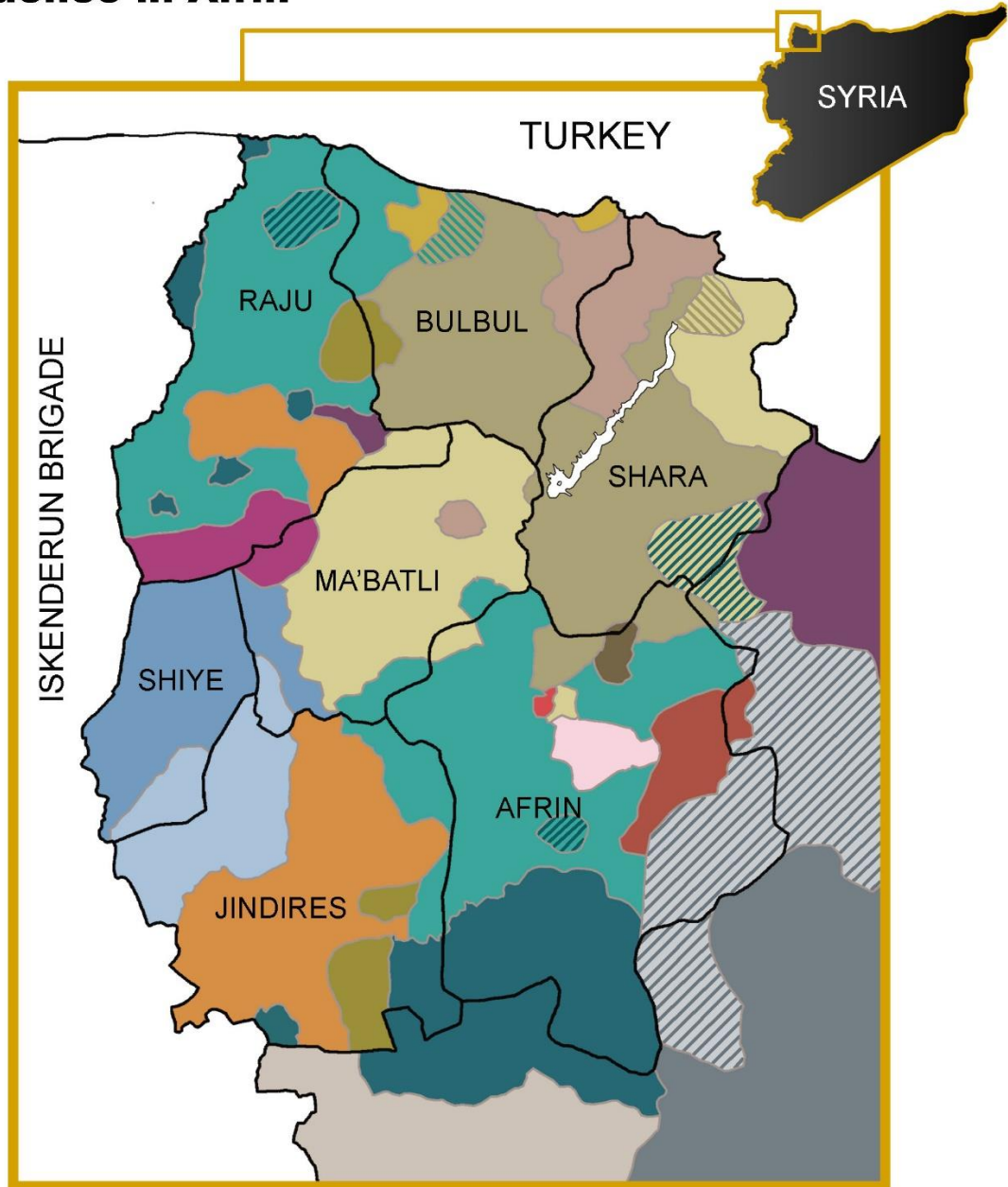
Toll of Arrests:

Synergy documented the arbitrary arrest of 63 persons, including four women and three children, in Afrin and its countryside during the first quarter of 2023 at the hands of Turkish forces and the Turkish-backed SNA's factions. 13 out of the total toll of the arrestees were released while the fate of the others remains unknown.

The majority of arbitrary arrests was felt in January in which 33 persons, among them two women, were arrested. Followed by March, in which 23 arrest cases arose, including three children and one woman, were documented. The least cases of arrests occurred in February in which only six persons, among them a woman, were arrested.

The factions behind the arrest cases documented in Afrin region and its countryside are cited as follows: the Police Forces and Turkish Intelligence were responsible for 18 arrest cases, the Civil Police (affiliated with the SNA) 17 cases, the Military Police 16 cases, the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham six cases, and other factions including Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East, Jaysh al-Sharqiya, Suleiman Shah Brigade/also known as al-Amshat six cases.

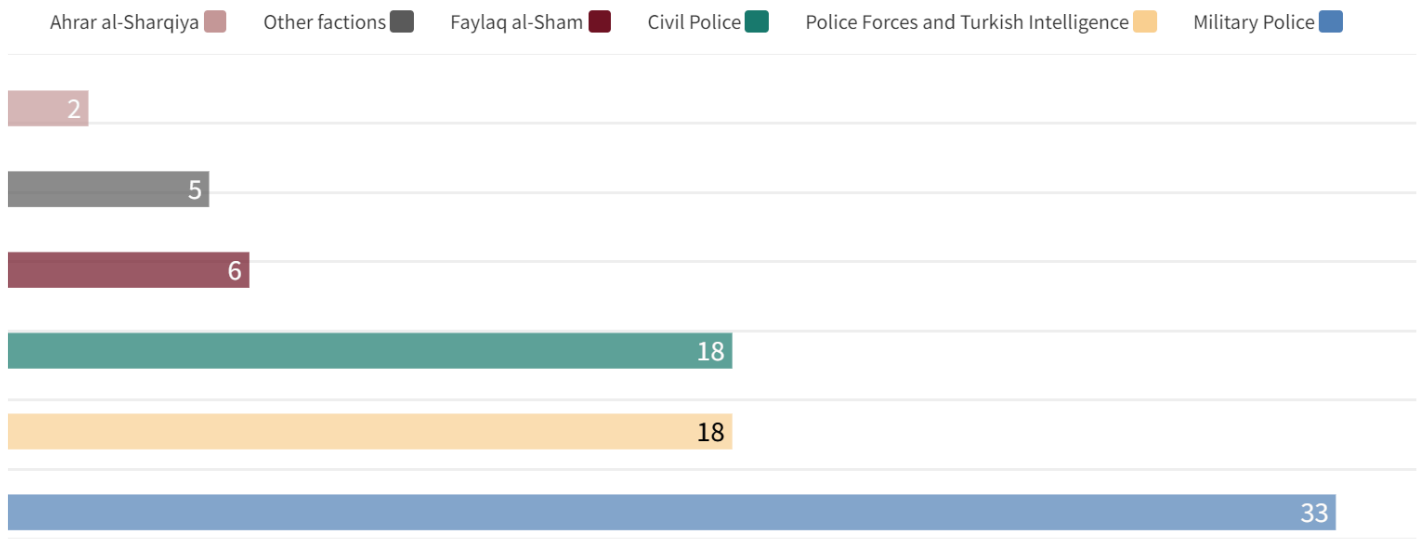
The Opposition Syrian National Army's Areas of Influence in Afrin



-  The Sultan Murad Division, Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba
-  Ahrar al-Sham
-  Ahrar al-Sherqiya
-  The Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham
-  Faylaq al-Rahman
-  The al-Hamza/al-Hamza Division
-  The Levant Front/al-jabha al-Shamiya
-  Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam
-  Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade
-  13th Division
-  Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat
-  The Northern Hawks Brigade
-  Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba
-  The Glory Corps/Faylaq Al-Majd
-  Turkish Control

In the areas of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad, occupied by Turkey since October 2019 due to “Peace Spring” Operation, Synergy documented the arbitrary arrest of 19 persons at the hands of the Turkish-backed SNA’s factions, during the first quarter of 2023.

The Military Police of the SNA was responsible for the arrest of at least 17 persons, the Civil Police and Ahrar al-Sharqiya each conducted one case of arrest. Only two persons out of the total toll of arrestees have been released while the fate of the rest 17 is uncounted for.



Factions of the opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) and Turkish forces that carried out arbitrary arrests in “Peace Spring” and “Olive Branch” strips during the first quarter of 2023



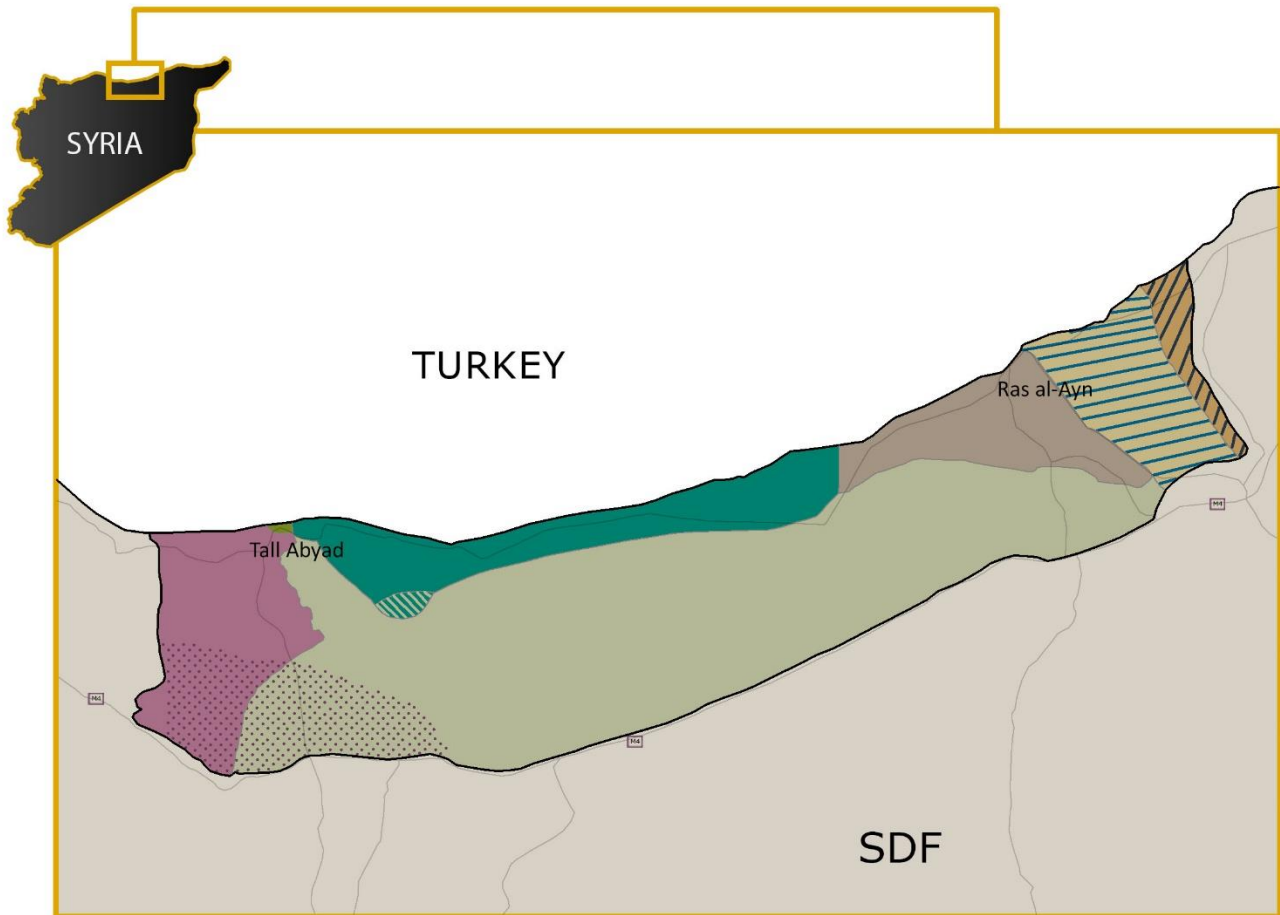
- **A Frequent Pretext:**


Since the Turkish occupation of Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad regions in 2018 and 2019, thousands of the native people, notably the Kurds, have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance on alleged ties with the Autonomous Administrations and/or the SDF. Such pretext has become frequent to arrest civilians and extort their families.

In mid-March 2023, forces of the Military Police, affiliated with the SNA, arrested a young man in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. One of his relatives narrated to Synergy details of the arrest, saying:

“The guy was arrested inside his shop located in the center of the city’s public market. He was taken to the Military Police headquarter, where he was charged of alleged dealing with the Autonomous Administration. We have never heard about him since then. They have not allowed his family to see him, nor has he been presented before the court like dozens of others who were arrested for the same alleged charges.”

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

