

Northern Syria: Horrific Violations Against Syrian Refugees at the Turkish Border



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The direct targeted killings of asylum seekers, along with beating and torture, reflect a brutal pattern implemented by the Turkish border guards (Gendarmerie), with no effective intervention or investigation by the government. The Turkish government must initiate an investigation, hold those responsible accountable, and ensure such violations do not recur

Introduction:

On June 11, 2024, a Syrian woman attempting to cross the border into Turkey in search of a safer life ended up at "[Al-Jazeera Hospital](#)" in [Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê](#) after being beaten by the Turkish border guards (Gendarmerie). The woman, who was pregnant, suffered a severe deterioration in her health due to the beating she received to her abdomen.

Synergy Association for Victims spoke with a paramedic at the hospital, who confirmed that the doctors had to perform an abortion due to the woman's severe injuries. During the surgery, the Turkish intelligence restricted access to and from the hospital. After the procedure was completed, the victim was transferred into the Turkish territory despite her need for further medical care, in an apparent attempt to cover up the incident.

The victim was one of a group of asylum seekers who were beaten and abused while they were attempting to cross the Syrian-Turkish border illegally in Al-Aziziya Village, located in the west of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Witnesses confirmed to Synergy that four of those accompanying her were subjected to severe beatings with the butts of rifles, as well as punches and kicks, resulting in fractures to their hands and heads and multiple other injuries. It is worth noting that these men were also transferred into Turkish territory without disclosing any information on their fate.

Synergy has documented 17 similar cases of abuse against Syrian asylum seekers, including two instances of killings due to direct gunfire by Turkish Gendarmerie, in the first half of 2024. Furthermore, cases of detention and torture of asylum seekers by the Gendarmerie before handing them over to the Military Police of the Opposition Syrian National Army (SNA) were also documented. Out of 145 asylum seekers documented by Synergy as having been detained during this period, the fate of 36 individuals remains unknown.

A military source within the SNA narrated to Synergy that he witnessed the arrest of a group of approximately 50 individuals who were attempting to enter Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in order to cross into the Turkish territory. However, they were captured by the Sultan Murad Brigade. Forty-four of them were released after paying a financial ransom of approximately \$300 each, while six others were detained, accused of collaborating with the Autonomous Administration/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and subjected to severe torture.

An internal clash broke out in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê between the "Liwa Shuhada'a Badr", which is affiliated to al-Hamzat Division, and Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East due to disputes over crossing/trafficking points on the international road near [Al- Rzik Buffet and Restaurant](#). The clash resulted in the death of one member and injuries to three others.

The testimonies verified by Synergy Association confirm that commanders of the SNA are organizing human trafficking operations and smuggling people into Turkey through irregular routes in exchange for money. During the first half of 2024, the Association documented four internal clashes among SNA's factions, due to disputes over the distribution of human trafficking revenues to Turkey.

The direct targeted killings and physical assaults, including beating and torture, of asylum seekers are part of a brutal pattern employed by Turkish border guards. The Turkish government has neither effectively confronted nor investigated these actions. Turkey has violated its human rights obligations, including the respect for the right to life, bodily integrity, and the absolute prohibition of torture or inhumane treatment. The Turkish government must initiate an investigation, hold the perpetrators accountable, and ensure such severe human rights violations do not recur.

During 2023, Synergy [documented](#) the killing of 25 people, including a child, and the injury of 48 others (including women and children) among Syrian asylum seekers due to direct gunfire by the Turkish Gendarmerie while they attempted to cross the border into Turkey illegally from Turkish-occupied northern Syria. Additionally, 36 people, including seven children, were arrested by SNA factions in "Peace Spring" Strip during the same year for trying to seek asylum in Turkey.

A Plight Surrounded by Death:

The Turkish government adopts a "systematic aggression policy" to prevent the Syrian asylum seekers from crossing into its territory. The "Gendarmerie" stationed along the border beat, humiliate, and torture the individuals attempting to cross the border irregularly. Furthermore, they frequently target these individuals with direct gunfire, resulting in the death and injury of the dozens since the construction of the border wall.

The actual measures to prevent the entry of Syrian people into Turkey began in late 2015, when Turkey initiated the construction a 911-km-long border wall along the Turkish-Syrian border, made of concrete blocks, each 4m high. These restrictions have forced the Syrian asylum seekers and migrants to turn to irregular and dangerous crossing routes, making them vulnerable to organized human trafficking groups, which are often connected to the factions in control within the Syrian conflict, or whose activities are overlooked.

Syrian asylum seekers have become victims of both the Turkish forces and the opposition SNA, facing arrest at the hands of the latter's factions or being targeted with gunfire by the Gendarmerie to prevent their crossing. These violent practices coincided with the Turkish authorities' forced deportation of thousands of Syrian refugees, and their plans to return over a million refugees to northern Syria. According to the [Refugees Association in Turkey](#), the percentage of Syrian refugees in Turkey is the lowest since 2017, indicating widespread forced deportations.

Turkey is obligated to uphold the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning asylum seekers to places where they face the risk of persecution, torture, or where their lives and freedom are threatened. This obligation includes refusing to admit them at the border without properly considering their claims.

In a [report](#) published on April 27, 2023, Human Rights Watch stated that, “The 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”.

Arbitrary Arrests and Financial Extortion; The Suffering of Syrian Asylum Seekers:

On April 22, 2024, 50 civilians were arrested by the "Sultan Murad" Brigade near [“al-Alya Silos”](#) on the M4 International Highway as they were heading towards the Syrian-Turkish border to seek asylum. A military source told Synergy that 44 individuals from the group were released after paying a financial ransom estimated at \$300 per each, while six of them were detained and handed over to the Military Police, accused of collaborating with the Autonomous Administration\ SDF.

The witness confirmed that the six detainees are still in custody, enduring various forms of torture during interrogation. There are often no clear reasons behind the arrests, as two of the detainees are from areas outside the control of the SDF. It is worth mentioning that these arrests are often based on common charges, such as collaborating with the Autonomous Administration, aimed at extorting financial ransom.

Field sources and victims' testimonies obtained by Synergy indicate that all smuggling operations are conducted through intermediaries that are directly connected to military factions. Yet, the arrests occur occasionally, often on the dividing line between the SDF-controlled areas and the Turkish-controlled ones. While other times on the Turkish border, after asylum seekers are tortured and intimidated by the Turkish Gendarmerie or shot at, with the intent to kill and intimidate them.

In a separate incident that occurred on May 8, 2024, Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East Faction arrested 10 individuals, including two women. The faction took them to the Military Police headquarters in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and their fate remains unknown to date. A military source told Synergy that around \$600 and the women's personal phones were confiscated.

The group was arrested near the power station on the M4 International Road, and they are from Deir ez-Zor, Al-Hasakah, and rural Damascus areas. The two women were placed in a separate cell, while the remaining eight individuals were put in another cell, awaiting investigations.

Live Fire Casualties:

On the morning of Monday, March 4, 2024, Hamid Al-Ahmad (a pseudonym) went to his agricultural land in Al-Aziziya Village, near the Syrian-Turkish border, in the west of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, to repair a well pump. Hamid was accompanied by a maintenance team of three people. While they were working, they saw a group of 13 people attempting to cross into Turkey, but the Turkish Gendarmerie opened fire on them.

Twelve of them fled towards Hamid and the maintenance team, seeking help. Hamid informed them that he could not take responsibility for them, however, less than half an hour later, a patrol from the "Military Police" arrived in three vehicles and arrested all of them. When four of them attempted to escape, the police brutally beat them. They also took the contact numbers of Hamid and the maintenance team.

One of the group members, a young man from Deir ez-Zor, named Adnan Al-Faisal (35 years old), chose to stay near the crossing point and managed to avoid arrest. Unfortunately, it seems that death was his fate. Hamid described to Synergy what happened, as follows:

“We were working on the pump’s maintenance in the afternoon when we heard gunshots coming from the direction of the border—more than five shots, it seemed. Later, we saw a person placed lying near the border, but we didn't dare approach him, fearing that we might be shot by the border guards.”

One of the maintenance workers notified the Military Police about the deceased body. The police arrived in a vehicle and transported the body to the national hospital in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

Legal Liability:

Based on the cases of arrests, killings and torture mentioned in this report, these acts are, undoubtedly, flagrant crimes and violations of many of these civilians' rights within the framework of [the International Humanitarian Law \(IHL\)](#)¹ and the [International Human Rights Law \(IHRL\)](#)². Additionally, they violate their right to asylum and involve forced return of those who survived to unsafe conflict areas.

The direct targeted killings and illegal executions on the border strip constitute a clear violation to the victims' rights to life and the insurance that no one shall be arbitrarily³ deprived of their life as pledged by [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#).

¹ The ICRC, [Sources of International Humanitarian Law \(IHL\)](#).

² The United Nation, [Foundation of International Human Rights Law](#).

³ [The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), Article 6, UN website- Human Rights- Office of the UN High Commissioner.

Regarding the arbitrary arrests of people who attempted to cross into Turkey illegally at the hands of the opposition SNA and the ill-treatment those detainees endured, these actions undoubtedly constitute torture. Therefore, they represent a clear violation and a crime that necessitates accountability based on the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment⁴ of 1984. It should be noted that all people, and particularly the detainees, enjoy full access to their rights of life and personal safety against all forms of torture and inhuman treatment as guaranteed by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL), in both times of war and peace.

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

⁴ The [Convention Against Torture](#) and Other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 1984.