

# Manbij: The Rise of Human Rights Violations by Syrian National Army Factions (SNA)



## Introduction:

Manbij City and its countryside, have witnessed serious and unprecedented escalation in human rights violations committed by the Turkish-backed factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) since they [declared](#) their control over the city on December 8, 2024, following violent battles against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as part of the military operation dubbed “Dawn of Freedom”.

The assault launched by SNA factions on Manbij have caused the death of scores, among them civilians, amidst escalating violence and documented violations, such as summary executions, arbitrary detentions, torture, and property looting. Kurdish-owned properties were specifically targeted on a large scale, forcing residents into mass displacement as they fled the ongoing threats.

On the other hand, SNA attacks on areas in Northeast Syria, under a Turkish cover, persist, heightening fears among the Kurdish population and other communities and minorities in the region, which accommodates more than a million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), including tens of thousands who were previously displaced by crimes and violations committed by the same factions.

All this come at a critical moment when millions of Syrians breathed a sigh of relief with the fall of al-Assad Regime on December 8, 2024. The United Nations has called on all armed parties to halt the escalation, prioritize dialogue, and respect the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights law as an essential step toward rebuilding the Syrian society.

## Background:

Amid the fall of Bashar al-Assad's Regime, following the “Deterrence of Aggression” Operation, launched in November 27, by armed groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Turkish-backed SNA factions exploited the political and security vacuum to launch their own operation, dubbed “Dawn of Freedom”.

The operation, according to statements from the leaders of these factions, aims to “liberate” areas in Northern Aleppo. However, the results on the ground reveal a continuation of systematic displacement policies and violations against Kurdish civilians, which began with the factions' control of Afrin in 2018 following Turkish Operation “Olive Branch.”

Since November 30, these factions have taken control of the areas of Tell Rifaat and al-Shahba in Northern Aleppo, followed by Manbij, which had been a symbol of coexistence between Kurds and Arabs. This was accompanied by escalating human rights violations, including summary executions, arbitrary arrests, torture, and looting of property.

The SNA forces that launched the operation “Dawn of Freedom” are spearheaded by a group of criminals and factions previously [sanctioned](#) by the US Department of Treasury for their involvement in committing violations of human right, including murder, enforced

disappearance, and property looting. The most prominent factions and leaders designated were [al-Hamza Division](#) (al-Hamzat) and its leader “Sayf Boulad Abu Bakr”, [Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade](#) (Al-Amshat) and its leader “Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim” (Abu Amsha)<sup>1</sup>. The third group designated was “[Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya](#)” in addition to its leader “Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes” (Ahmad al-Hayes), commonly known as “[Abu Hatem Shaqra](#)”, whose group executed the Kurdish political figure “Hevrin Khalaf”, her driver and two of her companions during the first days of the Turkish operation “Peace Spring”<sup>2</sup>.

### Summary Executions:

Summary executions were among the most horrific violations perpetuated in Manbij City, where over 15 captives, including wounded individuals, were executed. All the victims were members of the SDF, Forces of the Internal Police (*Asayish*), as well as those who were forcibly conscripted by the Self-Defense Units (YPG).

Video evidence reveals multiple incidents of summary executions, including the execution of two wounded members of the “Manbij Military Council” Forces who were receiving treatment in a hospital near al-Matahen Roundabout, after the SNA encircled the hospital and prevented the evacuation of the injured. Moreover, several captives were shot in various locations across the city, including members who laid down their arms and did not take part in the fighting.

In a [statement](#) released on December 16, the independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI) emphasized that “all parties to the conflict in Syria must protect civilians, treat those who have laid down their arms humanely, and safeguard evidence of crimes to help ensure future accountability.”

### Killing Civilians and Neglecting Bodies:

As the battles intensified, the streets of Manbij were littered with the bodies of both the dead- fighters and civilians—without any efforts to bury them or return them to their families. Among the most tragic incidents was the killing of an entire family inside their car during the clashes, as well as the murder of three women from the “Zenobia Women's Gathering.”

Additionally, there were documented cases of looting, including the theft of weapons and mobile phones from the bodies of the deceased. Five killings were also recorded, four of which were motivated by theft and one as an act of retaliation.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Two Syria-Based Militias Responsible for Serious Human Rights Abuses in Northern Syria, 17 August 2023 (Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699>).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime Prisons, Officials, and Syrian Armed Group, 28 July 2021 (Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699>)

### **Arbitrary Detentions and Financial Ransoms:**

Synergy Association for Victims documented the arrest of no less than 52 civilians by the SNA factions. While 16 detainees were released after paying ransom, the fate of the remaining individuals remains unknown.

Those who were released reported being subjected to severe torture. Synergy Association verified videos showing detainees being humiliated and their dignity degraded. Two particularly prominent videos documented the abuse and severe torture of three civilians, including an elderly man, by members of the SNA, in a village in the countryside of Manbij. The first video shows three detainees, two young men and an elderly man over 60 years old, who had been working in a local service committee in the village. In the footage, an SNA member is seen raising his foot toward the detainees' faces, hurling verbal insults at them, and forcing them to perform degrading acts, such as imitating barking sounds, all while subjecting them to a barrage of insults and threats. Whereas the second video, filmed at the same location, shows five to six detainees, including the three ones featured in the first video, and all of them were subjected to physical torture and continuous humiliations by the same armed members.

### **Targeting the Kurds and Looting their Properties:**

A widespread looting of homes and shops owned by Kurds civilians occurred in Manbij. The property violations targeted more than 20 houses belonging to Kurdish families, with some marked as “confiscated”. Fearing murder or arrest, the majority of Kurdish civilians fled the city in a mass displacement, while others remained trapped inside, living under constant threats.

Amid the chaos, demonstrations were held in the city demanding the intervention of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to expel the SNA. Arab tribes have also called on the Damascus government to assume its responsibilities towards the ongoing violations.

### **Turkish Drone Strikes: Civilians Bear the Burnt:**

Between 8 and 23 December, Synergy Association documented the killing of 45 persons, including 14 children, in addition to the injury of 14 civilians, among them 3 children and two women, due to Turkish drone strikes and artillery shelling on the SDF-held areas.

In one of the deadliest attacks, on December 8, a Turkish drone against Al-Mistriha Village, in the countryside of Ayn Issa Town, Northern Raqqa, killed 12 civilians, including six children, and injured others in varying degrees of severity.

Furthermore, journalists Jihan Belki and Nazim Dashdam were killed by a Turkish drone attack near Tishrin Dam. The attack was described by The Women Press Freedom as a war crime entailing an independent investigation.

In a [statement](#) issued on December 19, the Women Press Freedom reported that the two journalists were documenting the attacks on Tishrin Dam when a Turkish drone directly targeted their vehicle. Their driver was also injured in the strike. The organization strongly condemned the attack and demanded an immediate, independent investigation to determine whether the journalists were deliberately targeted.

Deliberately targeting journalists in conflict zones constitutes a war crime. Turkey must be held accountable for the growing number of Kurdish journalists killed or injured in its airstrikes. Jihan Belki is the third female journalist killed this year by Turkish strikes, following the [deaths](#) of Gulistan Tara and Hêro Bahadin in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in August 2024.

### **Tishrin Dam: Potential Humanitarian Catastrophe:**

On December 12, Synergy Association directed an [Urgent Appeal](#) to the international community to warn against the imminent risks against the Tishrin Dam due to the persistence of hostilities in its surrounding. Tishrin Dam represents a lifeline and vital resource for millions of people in Northern Syria, providing essential water and electricity to the region. The ongoing shelling of the Dam threatens its collapse, which would result in a major environmental and humanitarian crisis

On December 14, [the International Committee of the Red Cross in Syria](#) (ICRC), in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, announced that it had provided significant support for urgent assessments and maintenance of the Tishrin Dam, aiming at ensuring its safety, continued operation, and protection of residents in the surrounding villages from potential risks.

Nonetheless, Synergy Association has received reports confirming that hostilities continues in the vicinity of Tishrin Dam, posing a real threat to both - the dam and the residents of the surrounding areas.

### **Legal Liability:**

Under IHL, gross violations committed by the SNA's factions, with a direct support from Turkey, constitute flagrant violations of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Arbitrary detentions and torture are among the prohibited violations in accordance with the Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which obligates all parties in non-international armed conflicts to respect and protect the individuals who do not participate in the hostilities, and strictly prohibits practicing torture and cruel or inhumane treatment.

Turkey, as the supporting and overseeing power of the SNA factions, bears legal liability for these violations. This obligates Turkey to ensure that the armed factions adhere to international laws, cease violations, and hold the perpetrators accountable. Additionally, the failure to take effective measures to prevent these crimes or punish those responsible

constitutes implicit complicity, making Turkey liable to accountability before international bodies and courts.

### **Recommendations:**

The escalation of violations in Manbij requires urgent action from the international community to ensure the protection of civilians and hold those responsible for the crimes accountable, through:

1. Conducting independent and transparent investigations to hold perpetrators accountable and ensure they are not granted impunity.
2. Pressuring all parties involved in the Syrian conflict to respect human rights and protect civilians.
3. Providing the necessary support for the victims, enhancing local and international accountability mechanisms to ensure perpetrators are brought before justice and achieving justice for the victims.