

Introduction:

Areas in Afrin and al-Shahba in Northern Aleppo have been experiencing a new wave of gross violations committed against the Kurdish civilians since the launch of the military operation dubbed “Dawn of Freedom” on November, 2024, by factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) on North and Northeast Syria.

Synergy Association has documented the arrest of 128 persons, including 20 women, most of whom are either returnees to their areas in Afrin or individuals trapped in the al-Shahba areas in Northern Aleppo, in addition to cases of torture and sexual assaults. While 52 of the detained have been released after enduring physical and psychological torture, the fate of the remaining 76 remains unaccounted for.

Civilians were forced to pay large sums of money to be allowed to return to their homes in Afrin, and those who refused or were unable to pay were arrested. Meanwhile, other families were denied the right to reclaim their houses and properties simply because the factions occupying them refused to restore these rights to their rightful owners.

The hostilities resulting from the SNA attacks on Northern and Northeastern Syria since November 30 have forcibly displaced more than 120,000 people, the majority of whom are Kurdish people from Afrin, echoing their tragic displacement in 2018 due to the Turkish Operation “Olive Branch”.

Today, the SNA attacks, under a Turkish cover, continue against the Kurdish city of Kobani- a city with significant symbolic importance in the fight to eliminate the Islamic State (ISIS). These attacks are escalating fear and concern among the Kurdish population and other peoples and minorities in Northeastern Syria, a region that hosts over one million Internally Displaced People (IDPs), including tens of thousands forcibly displaced by crimes and violations committed perpetuated 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. Meanwhile, the United Nations has called on all armed parties to exercise restraint and halt the escalation. The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pederson, underscored the importance of preserving law and order, protecting civilians and respecting public institutions. He also stressed the need to prioritize dialogue, respect the International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and human rights law as an essential step toward rebuilding 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)². Both leaders appeared in video clips inside Manbij City on the first day of attack. 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"³.

Wide scale Arrests and Targeting of Kurds Civilians:

Since early December, Synergy Association has documented the arrest of 128 persons (including 20 women) at the hands of the SNA's factions in Afrin and its countryside, including al-Shahba Region, Northern Aleppo. The Association documented the release of 52 persons after being subjected to physical and psychological torture, while the fate of 76 persons remains unknown.

More than 50% of the arrests occurred in the villages of al-Shahba Region, Northern Aleppo, among them were Deir Jmal, Aqiba (also *Aqîbê*), and others, as they were on the contact lines between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the SNA. The arrest of 65 persons, including women, have been documented, and they were subjected to physical and psychological torture under the pretext of dealing with the SDF. Some were released after several days in detention upon paying a ransom, while the fate of the others remains unknown.

² 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>).

³ 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>)

On the other hand, in Hijka Village, that follows Shia/Shaykh al-Hadid District, Western Afrin, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat) imposed amounts of money up to 10,000 USD on the returning families. Some families were unable to pay, leading to the arrest of their members, while others were forced to flee to neighborhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya in Aleppo, after failing to meet the demands.

Synergy has also verified the killing of four women in the villages of the al-Shahba Region in Northern Aleppo, who were raped before being murdered, following SNA's factions seizure of the area. Additionally, an elderly Kurdish man died after being arrested by these factions while returning to his hometown in the Afrin countryside. His family was informed of his death during interrogation.

Jailbreak from al-Rai Prison:

More than 300 detainees, including pregnant women, managed to escape from "the Military Police Prison" located in al-Rai, Northeast Aleppo after they carried out an internal mutiny and broke the locks of the cell doors. The majority of the liberated are Kurdish people from Afrin who endured horrific violations at the hands of the SNA.

The mutiny was a result of frustration over the [general amnesty decision](#) issued by the [Syrian Interim Government](#) affiliated with the opposition [Syrian National Coalition](#) (SNC), as the amnesty did not include Kurdish detainees who remained in custody without trails or clear charges.

Despite the success of the escape, SNA forces continues to pursue the freed detainees, heightening the risks they face while seeking safe refuge. Meanwhile, scores of detainees remain inside the prison, which has become a symbol of torture and violations.

Al-Rai Prison has gained infamy for systematic torture and violations. Many detainees were [killed](#) under [torture](#), mirroring practices and methods of torture used in Syrian regime detention centers. Numerous testimonies from the survivors confirmed that this prison represents one of the prominent examples of the absence of law and ongoing humanitarian suffering in the areas controlled by the Turkish-backed factions.

Under the general amnesty decision, dozens of detainees were released from the SNA-run prisons in different areas, including Ma'arata, Rajo, and Azaz prisons. Yet, questions remain about the integrity of the amnesty's implementation, especially as many Kurdish detainees were excluded from the amnesty, and arbitrary detention continue to be practiced against them, let alone the absence of transparency concerning the adopted criteria for releasing the detainees.

Displacement Worsens the Humanitarian Crisis in Northeast Syria:

As military operations spearheaded by the Turkish-backed SNA's factions intensify in North and Northeast Syria, al-Shahba Region in Northern Aleppo, has witnessed a new wave of mass displacement. More than 120,000 people, mostly Kurds from Afrin, displaced, marking a tragic repetition of their plight in 2018 during Turkey's "Olive Branch" Operation.

Synergy Association received reports of multiple violations faced by displaced people at the hands of the SNA's factions en route from Tall Rifaat and al-Shahba Region in Northern Aleppo towards Syria's Northeast. These violations include targeting and humiliating convoys of the IDPs, arbitrary arrests and financial extortion.

According to local authorities, more than 90,000 people displaced to Northeast Syria where they were accommodated temporarily in schools and stadiums in the two cities of Tabqa and Raqqa. Later, thousands of them were distributed between Kobani and al-Jazira regions. However, the humanitarian conditions in the accommodation centers are still disastrous as many of the displaced suffer acute shortage of shelter, food, water, and medical services, amid limited efforts provided from local and international organizations.

According to a [report](#) published by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Organization on December 12, the displaced live in dire situations, as temperatures have dropped below freezing and people do not have blankets or heating. The facilities are not equipped to accommodate people and latrines, clean water, and food are all insufficient, as authorities have not had enough time or resources to prepare for people's arrival. Existing medical services in some of the areas receiving displaced people have quickly become overwhelmed.

Amid the ongoing conflict and military operations, more than 10,000 people- among them thousands of Kurds- remain and/or are trapped in villages and towns of al-Shahba Region in Northern Aleppo, which has become under the control of the SNA's factions. Grave violations have been documented against those people, such as murder, arbitrary detention, and torture, including sexual violence, in addition to looting and property seizure.

Legal liability:

Under IHL, gross violations committed by the SNA's factions in North and Northeast Syria, 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. The same article strictly prohibits practicing torture and cruel or inhumane treatment. In addition to that, enforced displacement of the civilian population is a war crime pursuant to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which prohibits the enforced transfer of the population from their land for unjustified military imperatives.

As the supporting and supervising power behind the SNA's factions, Turkey 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. 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:

Synergy Association joined 129 Syrian organizations in a joint [statement](#), issued on December 5, calling on the UN Security Council to protect the civilians and promptly intervene to halt the military escalation in Northern Syria, and enhance the humanitarian response. The Syrian organizations warn that this military escalation forms a serious turning point in the Syrian conflict and raises real concerns for many Syrian societies, notably the religious and ethnic minorities. Therefore, the statement recommends:

1. The United Nations Security Council:

- Issue an urgent resolution to cease fire and halt military escalations in all conflict zones in Syria.
- Take practical measures to ensure the protection of civilians, hold perpetrators of violations accountable, and enhance the delivery of humanitarian aid.

2. United Nations Agencies and International Humanitarian Organizations:

- Launch an emergency response to meet the basic needs of tens of thousands of displaced persons, including shelter, food, water, and medical care.
- Ensure the safe and non-discriminatory delivery of humanitarian aid to all affected areas.
- Support initiatives to enhance food security and address the long-term needs of the displaced persons.

3. Parties to the Conflict in Syria:

- Comply with the IHL and protect civilians from both direct and indirect targeting.
- Cease all military operations resulting in forced displacement and violations against civilians.
- Allow independent organizations to access affected areas to document violations and assess the needs.

4. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) and the United Nations International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM):

- Conduct a comprehensive, thorough and transparent investigation into the crimes committed in Northern Syria during the recent military escalation and publish a report on them.
- Collect and analyze evidence related to the crimes committed in Northern Syria, as well as coordinate with international judicial bodies to ensure accountability for the perpetrators.

5. War Crimes Units in Countries with Laws Allowing Prosecutions Under Universal Jurisdiction Principle:

Expand structural investigations into crimes committed in Syria to include those occurring across Northern Syria by all parties to the conflict.