

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



6 October 2020



© STJ - Ivan Omar Hassib

**The US Must Take a Stronger
Position on Human Rights
Abuses in Occupied Afrin, Tal
Abyad, and Ras al Ayn**

The US Must Take a Stronger Position on Human Rights Abuses in Occupied Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al Ayn

42 organizations call on the United States to impose sanctions on and end military and political assistance to groups and individuals responsible for human rights violations in Turkish-occupied areas of northern Syria, and conduct fact-finding efforts in these regions

On September 15th, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria released its biannual report. The report included extensive evidence of brutal human rights abuses targeting ethnic and religious minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups in Turkish-occupied Afrin, Tel Abyad, and Ras al Ayn, and found that many of these violations amounted to war crimes.

“The Commission also has reasonable grounds to believe that Syrian National Army members committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment and torture, and rape. Syrian National Army members also looted and destroyed cultural property, in violation of international humanitarian law.”

The Commission found that Syrian National Army fighters, in particular members of Division 14, Brigade 142 (the Suleiman Shah Brigade), Division 22 (the Hamza Brigade) and Division 24 (the Sultan Murad Brigade), repeatedly perpetrated war crimes including destroying and seizing civilian property in Afrin, Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn regions.

The Commission underlined Turkey’s legal obligations under Common Article 2 to the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Regulations of 1907, noting its “responsibility, to as far as possible ensure public order and safety, and to afford special protection to women and children.”

Such findings by the Commission are in line with the ceasefire [agreement signed](#) between Turkey and the United States on 17 October 2019, whereby “Turkey expressed its commitment to ensure safety and well-being of residents of all population centers in the safe zone controlled by the Turkish Forces”. In that same agreement, the United States and Turkey agreed to “uphold human life, human rights, and the protection of religious and ethnic communities” in areas covered by the agreement, including Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn. The UN findings show that Turkey is clearly violating its commitment to these provisions of the agreement.

In addition, the Commission stated that in areas under its effective control, Turkey “remains bound by applicable human rights treaty obligations vis-à-vis all individuals present in such territories”, citing the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice. Human rights cases related to grave violations by Turkish-backed forces in Syria are admissible before the European Court of Human Rights, as Turkey has ratified the convention.

The Commission also warned that Turkey was aware of these abuses, and could be held responsible for allowing them to take place, in particular as “collaboration and joint operations between Turkey and the Syrian National Army for the purpose of detention and intelligence-gathering” continued to take place in such regions.

“In this regard, the Commission notes the allegations that Turkish forces were aware of incidents of looting and appropriation of civilian property and that they were present in detention facilities run by the Syrian National Army where the ill-treatment of detainees was rampant, including during interrogation sessions when torture took place. In failing to intervene in both cases, Turkish forces may have violated the above-mentioned obligations of Turkey.”

Evidence of these abuses was also put forward by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. On September 18th, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michele Bachelet warned that Turkey could be held responsible for rights violations in the occupied areas. “I also call on the Turkish authorities to respect international law and to ensure that violations committed by armed groups under Turkey’s effective control cease,” she stated.

Bachelet urged Turkey to conduct an “impartial, transparent and independent investigation” into abuses documented by the report, account for the fate of detainees, and hold perpetrators accountable for possible violations of international law.

We support the U.S. State Department’s strong statement about violations committed by the Syrian government that were also documented in the report. However, we note with deep concern that, despite now having evidence from an impartial international body that reports on human rights abuses by all parties to the conflict, the United States has ignored abuses committed by Turkey and the SNA, and did not comment on reports of such violations.

Turkey has already refused to acknowledge evidence of wrongdoing on the part of armed groups that it supports, and has denied all responsibility. It is clear that, if there is no real pressure and international accountability, Turkey and the SNA will continue to commit crimes against Kurds, Yazidis, Christians, women, and other groups. Therefore, we call on the United States to:

1. Establish an impartial fact-finding process to document war crimes in Turkish-occupied areas, particularly those that violate the terms of the ceasefire agreement. An individual should be appointed to monitor these violations in Ras al Ayn, Tal Abyad and Afrin, and should maintain connections with affected communities and local human rights defenders.
2. Impose sanctions on armed groups and individuals found to be responsible for human rights abuses in the occupied areas, under the authority provided by Executive Order 13894 of October 14, 2019. SNA groups implicated in human rights abuses by the UN report include Ahrar al Sharqiya, the Suleiman Shah Brigade, the

Hamza Brigade, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and the Syrian National Army Military Police.

3. Immediately end all arms transfers and security assistance to all individuals and security units implicated in human rights abuses in the occupied areas, including Turkish forces operating in Syria.
4. Provide support for victims of human rights abuses in Turkish-occupied areas, as well as for local documentation efforts.
5. Review the October 17th ceasefire agreement in order to create a mechanism to address the violations described above and help ensure that forced demographic change processes stop, displaced people are able to return to their homes, and stolen property is returned.

Signatory organizations:

1. Al Rajaa Association
2. Armanc Platform for Civil Society
3. Ashna for Development Org
4. Balsam Center for Health Education
5. Center for Justice and Building
6. DAN for Relief and Development
7. Doz for Civil Society
8. Emaar Mansura
9. Ezdina Foundation
10. Free Yezidi Foundation
11. Gav for Relief and Development
12. Hezen Civaka Sivil a Kurdistani (HCSK)
13. Hope Makers Organization
14. Human Rights Organization in Jazeera
15. Human Rights Organization in Syria- MAF
16. Inmaa al Furat
17. International War and Disaster Victims Protection Association
18. Jian Charity Association
19. Judy Charity for Development and Relief
20. Khunav Association for Relief and Development
21. Kurdish Committee for Human Rights - RASED
22. Kurdish Legal Committee
23. Kurdish Organisation For Human Rights in Syria (DAD)
24. Kurdish Women's Union Rojava
25. Media Development Association
26. Missing Afrin Women Project

27. National Democratic Movement Human Rights Office
28. Nawat
29. PÊL- Civil Waves
30. Roj Kar for Relief and Development
31. Sara Organization to Combat Violence Against Women
32. Shams Organization for Rehabilitation and Development
33. Shar for Development
34. Shawishkal Association for Women
35. Swaedna Organization for Relief and Development
36. Syrian Kurdish Journalists Network
37. Syrian Women's Council
38. Syrians for Truth and Justice
39. Ta Marbouta Foundation
40. TEVNA Kurdî
41. Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria
42. Yasna Rojava Organization for Development of Zoroastrian Philosophy



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.