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## Syria: Did Turkey Really Discover a “Mass Grave” in Afrin?

Testimonies and visual evidence confirm that the alleged “mass grave” was a cemetery, hastily dug in March 2018. Both civilians and fighters were buried there until February 2019, when the cemetery was vandalized and destroyed

## **Syria: Did Turkey Really Discover a “Mass Grave” in Afrin?**

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## Background

The Turkish Ministry of Defense posted two tweets on their [official Twitter account](#) on 14 July 2021. In the [first tweet](#), the ministry claimed that “another war crime came to light”, accusing the People's Protection Units (YPG) of burying people in a "mass grave" in January 2018 before the Turkish army and the Syrian armed opposition factions controlled the Kurdish-majority Afrin region of Syria. In the [second tweet](#), the ministry claimed that “35 bodies were found in sacks following the excavation conducted under the supervision of the prosecutor.”



Image 1- Screenshot from the official [Twitter account](#) of the Turkish Ministry of Defense, of the [first tweet](#) the ministry posted in English of the alleged “mass grave” they discovered in Afrin.

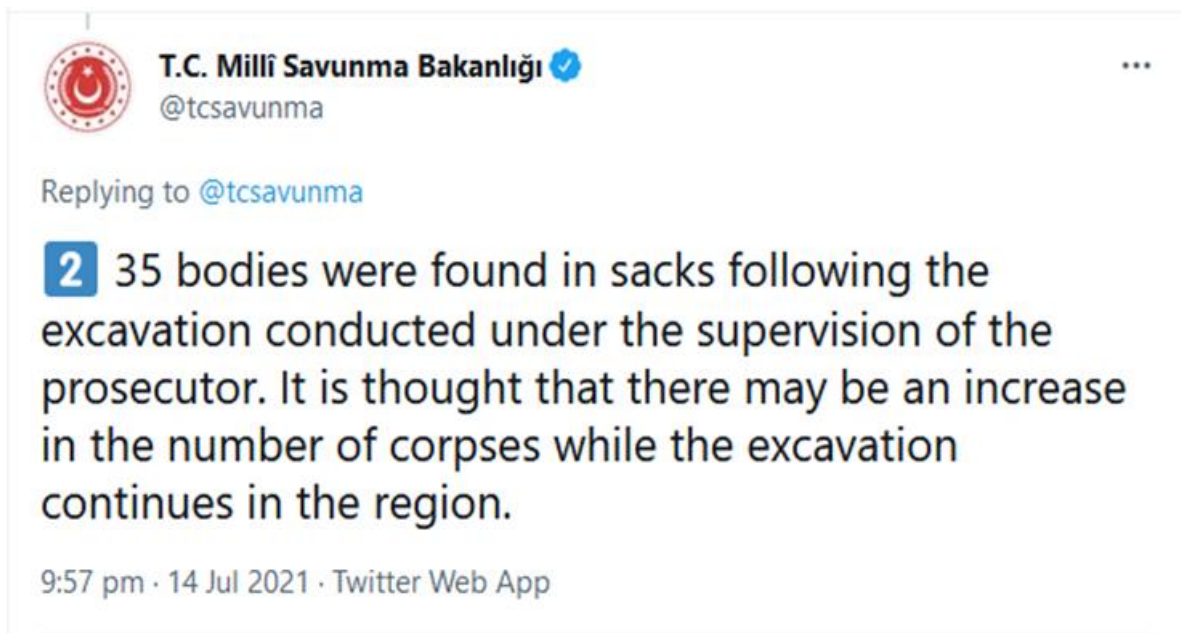


Image 2- Screenshot of the [second tweet](#) the ministry posted in English, reporting the number of bodies recovered from the alleged exposed “mass grave”.

On the same day, the state-run Anadolu Agency (AA) published a [news piece](#) alleging that the 35 people recovered from the “mass grave” had been executed. The AA cited the executions, which neither of the ministry’s tweets mentioned, as the findings of “preliminary investigations.” However, the AA did not cite the source of the findings, nor the entities running these investigations.



Image 3- Screenshot of the cover photo and title of [the news piece](#) Anadolu Agency published on 14 July 2021, addressing the Turkish Ministry of Defense's tweets on the "mass grave discovered" in Afrin.

On 15 July 2021, the governor of the Turkish province of Hatay/Antakya, Rahmi Dogan, [told](#) reporters that a "mass grave" had been found, from which 61 bodies were recovered. Dogan said that Turkish authorities believe the dead were civilians executed by the YPG before Turkey's Operation Olive Branch.



## TURKEY SAYS MASS GRAVE FOUND IN SYRIAN REGION

15 JULY 2021

BY AFP

0 min 50 Approximate reading time

Ankara said Thursday it had uncovered a mass grave containing dozens of bodies in a Turkish-held region of northern Syria, accusing a US-backed Kurdish militia of the killings.

Turkey and its Syrian proxies have seized control of territory inside Syria since 2016 in military operations against the Islamic State (IS) and the YPG Kurdish militia.

The governor of Turkey's Hatay province on the border with Syria told reporters a mass grave was found with 61 bodies in the Afrin area.

"This is a crime against humanity," Rahmi Dogan said, blaming the YPG, which is backed by Washington.

"I think the number of bodies recovered will rise," he added, after the Turkish defence ministry initially put the number at 35 on Wednesday.

Images on Turkish television showed officials in hazmat suits surrounded by what appeared to be bodies in bags.

Dogan said Turkish authorities believe the dead were civilians executed by the YPG days before Turkey launched its so-called Olive Branch operation in 2018 to capture Afrin.

AFP was unable to independently verify the claims.

Turkey accuses the YPG — a force backed by Western militaries against IS — of being a "terrorist" offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The PKK, blacklisted by Ankara and its Western allies, has been waging an insurgency against Turkey since 1984, in a conflict which has killed more than 40,000 people.

Image 4- Screenshot of the statement Hatay's governor, Rahmi Dogan, made to AFP regarding the alleged "mass grave" in Afrin. Credit: Justice Info.

The alleged "mass grave" grabbed the headlines of several [regional](#) and [international](#) media outlets, initially giving a unilateral account of the news. They adopted the Turkish official narrative without investigating the incident nor consulting with Syrian sources to verify the Turkish claims.

In response, activists and residents from Afrin took to social media providing testimonies and posting dozens of photos that debunked the Turkish allegations about the unearthed “mass grave.”

In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) investigates the “mass grave” recently found in Afrin and provides information on how it was dug and who was buried within it. Our findings are based on evidence which has been verified and cross-checked.

## Methodology

For the purposes of this report, STJ reviewed dozens of videos and photos posted of the cemetery and compared them to satellite images of the cemetery’s location. Additionally, field researchers with STJ interviewed male and female activists, as well as residents from Afrin, particularly those who were in the region around the time the cemetery was established. The field researchers also obtained statements from sources within the military and civil police in Afrin.

### 1. The Turkish Narrative about the Alleged “Mass Grave” in Afrin

Extensive media and official coverage followed the defense ministry’s two tweets. Media outlets and Turkish officials posted a large sum of footage and made numerous statements regarding the alleged discovery of the “mass grave.” Several of these statements claimed that the grave carried the bodies of civilians executed by the forces that controlled Afrin before Operation Olive Branch, which was launched in the region on 20 January 2018. The large-scale coverage enabled local authorities and STJ to accurately locate the cemetery by matching the published footage with satellite images, including the three photos below.





Image 5- Anadolu Agency published this photo of a group of bodies recovered from the cemetery.

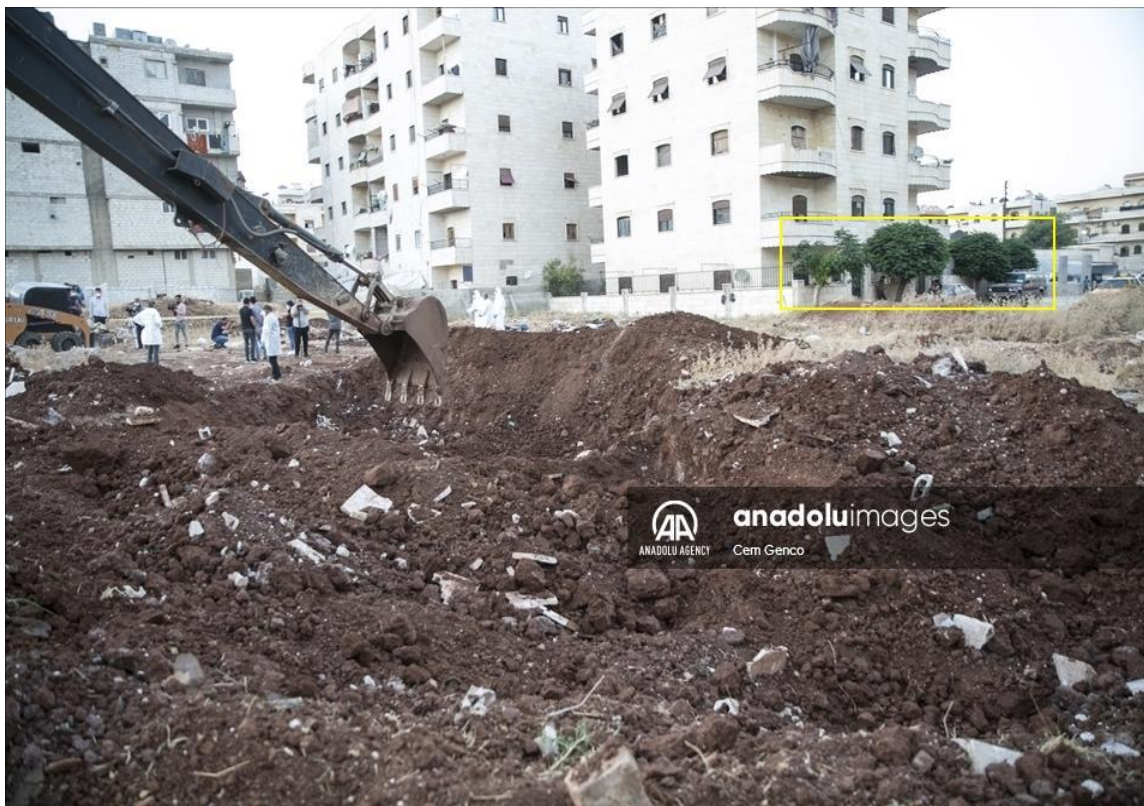


Image 6- Anadolu Agency published this photo of the excavation and recovery of bodies from the site of the makeshift cemetery.





Image 7- Satellite image of the location appearing in the photos published by Anadolu Agency. The satellite image was retrieved to [accurately locate the cemetery](#). Credit: Google Earth.

## 2. What Do Satellite Images and Witnesses Say?

Satellite images of the cemetery, along with corroborating testimonies of numerous sources and witnesses, and the findings of forensic digital experts, refute Turkish authorities' claim that the cemetery is a mass grave of civilians executed by the YPG before Operation Olive Branch. In fact, visual evidence and testimonies indicate that the cemetery did not exist in January or February 2018 – in other words, before the launch of Operation Olive Branch on 20 January 2018.



Image 8 – Satellite image taken in February 2018. The image shows that there were no excavations at the cemetery's site. Credit: Google Earth.

Instead, satellite images show excavation work at the cemetery's site in March 2018, indicating that the cemetery was dug then. Testimonies corroborate this timeline. Sources interviewed by STJ said that the cemetery was dug hastily under extreme circumstances during the first half of March 2018. Sources interviewed by STJ said that the graves were hastily dug in March 2018 when families and local authorities could not safely reach official cemeteries, forcing them to establish a makeshift cemetery at the location. They were denied access to official cemeteries by the siege Turkish forces and Syrian opposition armed groups had imposed on Afrin city and the shelling that targeted its neighborhoods several days before the city was occupied.



Image 9 – Satellite image taken in March 2018. The image shows excavation works at the cemetery’s site.

To gain insights on the circumstances that pressed local families and authorities to establish the cemetery, STJ interviewed photographer and film director Azad Abdikey. Abdikey stayed in Afrin until 17 March 2018, where he had been shooting a documentary about the city’s humanitarian situation. Abdikey recounted:

“I exactly remember the urgency with which the cemetery was dug in the first half of March 2018. It was difficult to reach official cemeteries under the Turkish army’s and affiliated factions’ continuous shelling, and the siege they imposed on the city.”

Abdikey added that the cemetery holds the bodies of dead fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces— the YPG and the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ)—and civilian victims of the random Turkish bombing of the city’s neighborhoods, many of which had been full of residents. . Abdikey narrated:

“I was there. I witnessed the burial of several civilians and fighters according to the area’s traditions and customs. They were buried in this cemetery, and another located closely to the same place. The second cemetery was dug for the same reasons. I still have the photos. Some people were even forced to bury the bodies of their loved ones in parks or just in the spots where they had been killed because death was around every corner in the city.”

Abdikey’s testimony echoes the scenes captured by a [video](#) journalist [Newroz Reşo](#) filmed and posted on her Facebook account. The video shows some of the city’s residents burying



their relatives in one of Afrin's parks on 16 March 2018 due to "extensive shelling and their inability to reach any cemetery or move towards any village":



Image 10- Screenshot of the post published by Kurdish journalist Newroz Reşo on her Facebook account.

STJ interviewed Reşo, who described the tragic situation in the city's streets that forced locals into establishing the makeshift cemetery in Afrin. Reşo recounted:

"The shelling escalated in Afrin city's center in the last days before Turkey and Syrian armed opposition groups entered the area. Attempts at navigating the streets were extremely dangerous. It was then that [locals] established the cemetery. The cemetery was not the sole exceptional place in the city where civilians were buried after they were killed during the Turkish shelling on the city's neighborhoods and the siege."

Reşo pointed out that the cemetery was established near Avrin Hospital and that the dead were given official burial rituals. She added:

“Both civilians and fighters were buried in the hastily established cemetery. Photos and names of the dead were placed at the gravestones. Additionally, the word ‘anonymous’ was inscribed on gravestones where unidentified persons were buried. All this is evident in the photos circulated by Afrin’s activists following the Turkish allegations.”

Reşo— displaced from Afrin herself— provided STJ with the video she took on 16 March 2018. Reşo said that the people in the video are a family from Afrin who buried their dead son in the park at the Maratah roundabout. They buried him there because moving across the city was extremely dangerous and reaching the makeshift cemetery—the subject of this report— was next to impossible despite its proximity. She added:

“That day, Turkey extensively bombarded the city’s neighborhoods. The shelling killed at least 20 persons in the [al-Mahmoudiyah neighborhood](#) alone. They were all buried in the makeshift cemetery which Turkey recently allegedly called a mass grave.”

Other satellite images confirmed that the cemetery existed for months after the Turkish army took control of Afrin on 18 March 2018. The images refute the Turkish allegations and debunk the “discovery” claims.



Image 11- Satellite image taken in April 2018. The image locates the cemetery and shows the arrangement of the graves. Credit: Twitter account of [Benjamin Strick](#), an open-source researcher. In his [tweet](#), Strick attributed the image to [Maxar Technologies](#), a space technology company.

An [open source researcher, Benjamin Strick](#), matched the satellite imagery with photos from the ground taken by activists in Afrin.





Image 12- This photo matches a photo from the ground, taken by the Syrian Kurdish photographer and director Azad Abidkey on 16 March 2018. The photo shows the graves, with headstones and attached photos of civilians and fighters buried in the makeshift cemetery.



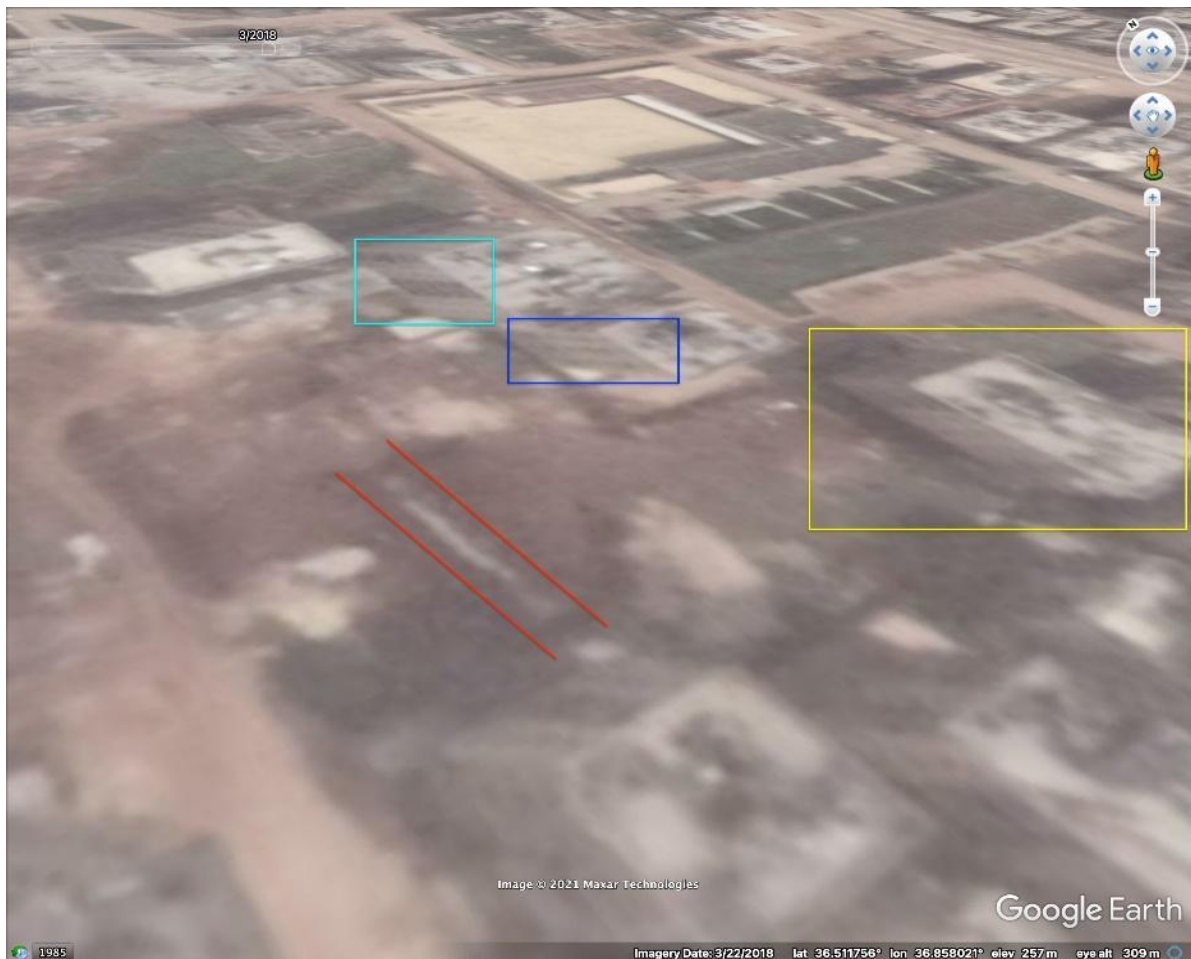


Image 13- The satellite image matched with the photo above. The image locates the cemetery and the graves—delineated in red— in the center. Credit: Google Earth.

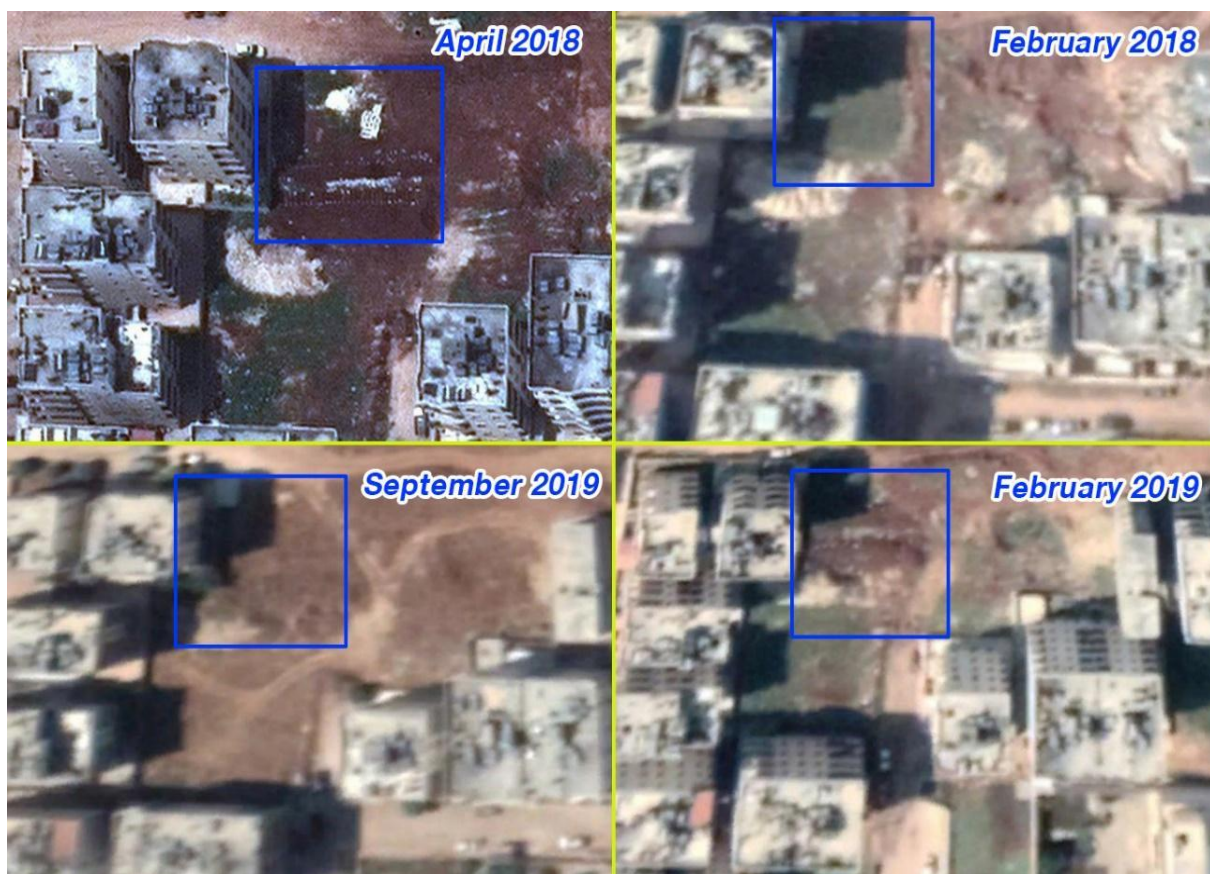


Image 14- STJ carried out these image comparisons. The images show that the cemetery was not there in February 2018, while it was clearly identifiable from April 2018 until February 2019.

Moreover, the image taken in September 2019 shows that the cemetery has disappeared. The September image confirms testimonies STJ obtained claiming that the opposition's SNA's factions sabotaged and bulldozed the cemetery.





Image 15- Photo showing that the cemetery held the bodies of YPG and YPJ fighters. Credit: Activists from Afrin.



Image 16- The photo shows headstones marked as belonging to unidentified persons. Credit: Activists from Afrin.





Image 17 – The cemetery from another angle. Credit: Photographer and director Azad Abdikey.



Image 18- The previous photo from the ground matched with a satellite image.

In addition to activists, STJ consulted sources within the military and civil police. Some of the interviewed officers were at the cemetery's location when the Turkish forces recovered the buried bodies. Police sources recounted:

"It was evident that the bodies were buried in keeping with common Syrian methods. Each of the bodies had a separate shroud and was placed in a separate grave. The bodies were not buried in a manner typically recognized as a mass grave."

The police sources pointed out that Turkish intelligence services removed the headstones to erase the cemetery's defining characteristics. This testimony corroborates the satellite images which demonstrate that the cemetery was destroyed sometime between February and September 2019. The sources added:

"The Turkish intelligence services did not allow any person to approach the cemetery when they were digging it, including local media outlets. The coverage was exclusively reserved for state-run Turkish media [the military, represented by the defense ministry, and civil media, represented by Anadolu Agency]. A total of 73 bodies were recovered and transferred to the military hospital's morgue. Then, all the bodies were transported to an unknown place."

The accounts provided by civil and military police sources corroborate the findings of STJ's investigations pertaining to the number of recovered bodies. STJ obtained a list of names confirming that out of the 73 bodies buried in the cemetery, 35 were fighters, four were civilians. The additional 30 are likely civilian victims killed in the massacres at the [al-Mahmoudiyah neighborhood](#) and the [al-Qaban Roundabout](#), as well as the shelling on [Avrin Hospital](#).

The accounts of the police officers we spoke to are also corroborated by screenshots from a video Firat News Agency (FNA) took in March 2018. The [video](#) documents the burial of several bodies in the makeshift cemetery.

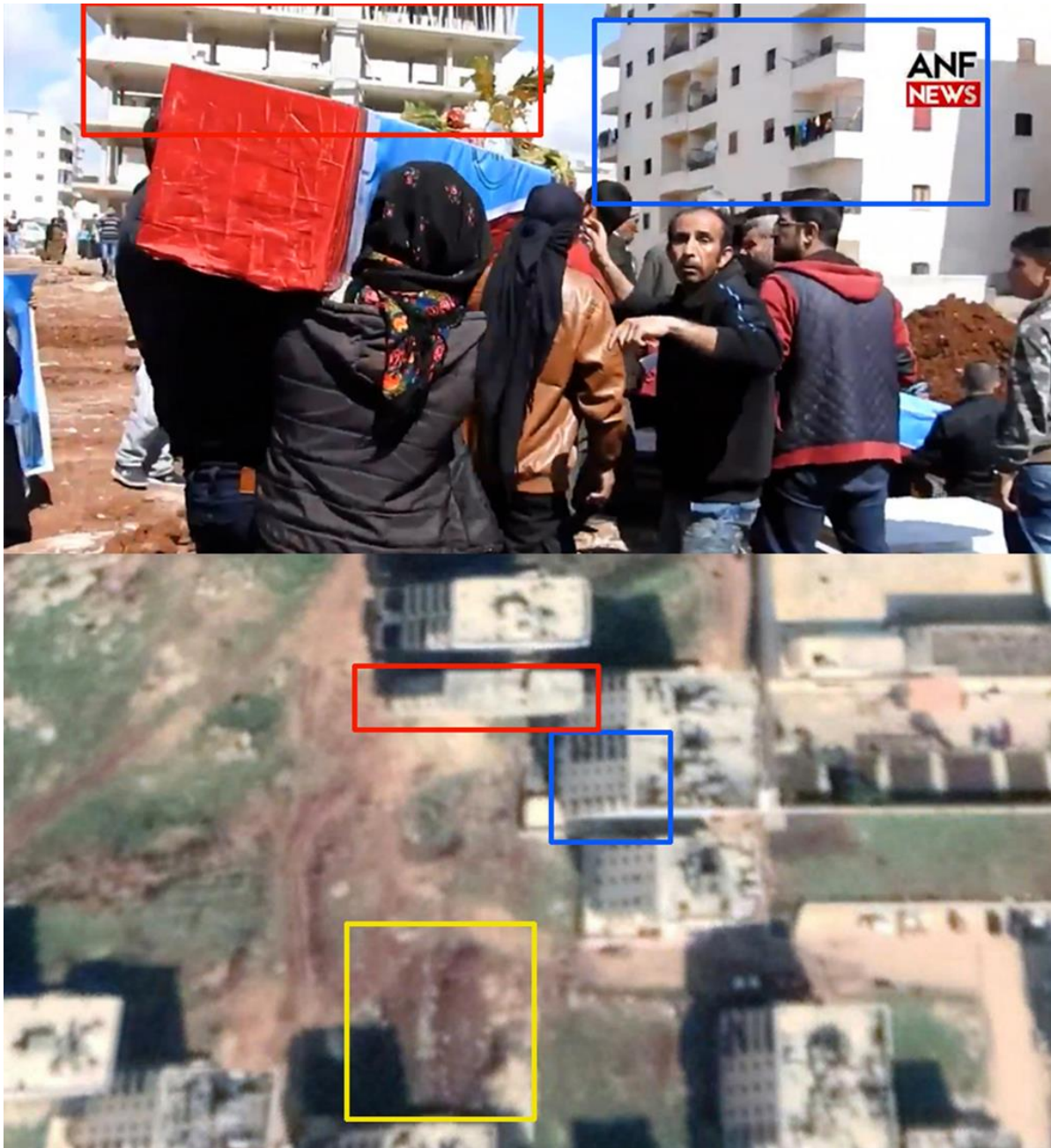


Image 19- Screenshot from a video showing the burial of several bodies in the makeshift cemetery in March 2018. The cemetery's location is highlighted in yellow. Credit: First News Agency (FNA).





Image 20- Screenshot taken from the same video documenting that the bodies were buried according to common burial methods in Syria. The photo contradicts the accusation of a “mass grave” and refutes the allegations of the Anadolu Agency that recovered bodies were buried in 15-20 m deep holes.

الدول العربية السورية

## العثور على 35 جثة مجهولة الهوية في عفرين السورية

تم إعدامها قبل فترة قصيرة من عملية "غصن الزيتون" التي نفذها الجيش التركي عام 2018..

14.07.2021



Afrin

عفرين / لالا كوكلو قره غوز / الأناضول

عُثر في منطقة عفرين التابعة لمحافظة حلب، شمال غربي سوريا، على جثث 35 شخصاً أعدموا قبل فترة قصيرة من عملية "غصن الزيتون" التي نفذها الجيش التركي عام 2018.

وعلى إثر بلاغ، توجهت السلطات الأمنية المحلية في المنطقة، إلى حي عفرين الجديدة وأطلقت أعمال حفر في حقل بالحي، وفق مراسل الأناضول.

وأسفرت عمليات الحفر عن العثور على 35 جثة ملفوفة بأكياس ومدفونة على عمق 15 - 20 متراً.

Image 21- Screenshot of the article in which the Anadolu Agency claimed that the bodies were buried at 15-20 m depth.





Image 22- Screenshot from the video, showing the burial of several fighters of the local police/Asayish, the People's Protection Units (YPG), and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

Notably, the makeshift cemetery was clearly identifiable for over a year after the Turkish army and the SNA controlled Afrin city before it was ultimately obliterated. The cemetery was located near several official facilities and structures, including the Local Council of the Syrian Interim Government, the Justice Palace, Afrin Security Directorate, and the Military Police Department, among others. This debunks the Turkish narrative and confirms that Turkey was involved in desecrating the cemetery and waited for over three years to claim the discovery of a "mass grave."



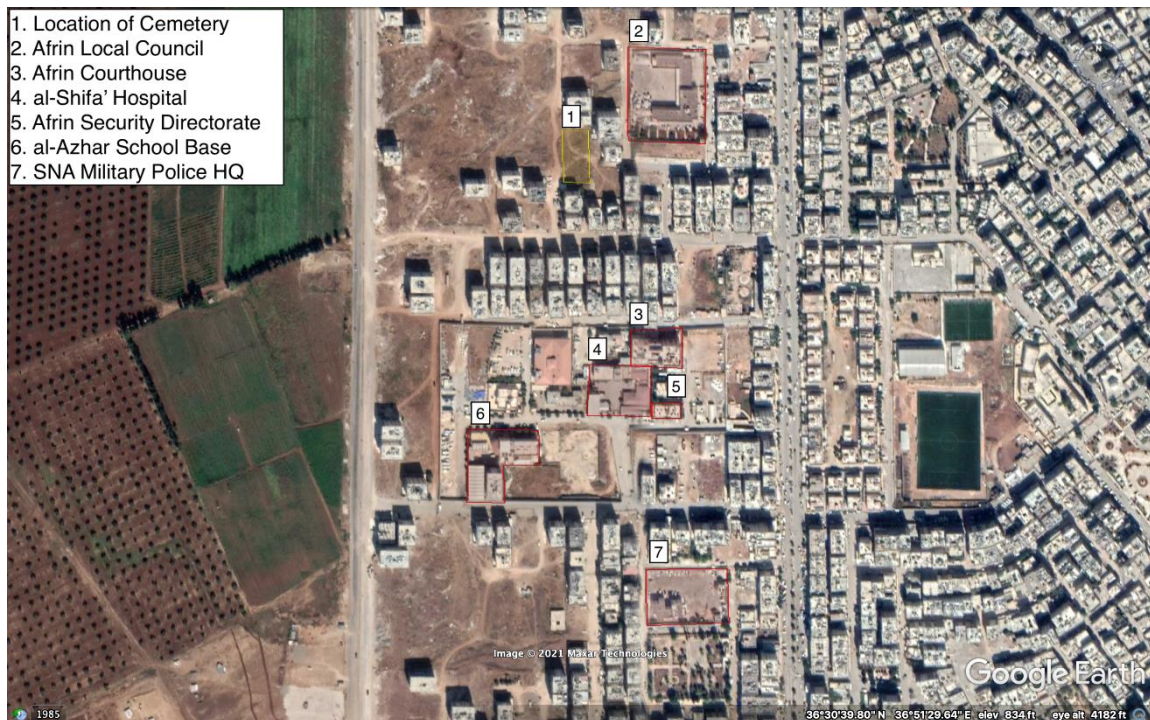


Image 23- Satellite image locating some of the official facilities and buildings near the cemetery.

Muhammad Ballou, a second journalist from Afrin now based in Qamishli/Qamishlo city, confirmed to STJ that the makeshift cemetery, and many like it, were deliberately destroyed and obliterated after Turkey and allies took control of Afrin as an act of vengeance against the Autonomous Administration. Journalist Ballou narrated:

“The cemetery stood there under the full sight of the Turkish army and its allies in the SNA for over a year. Some families even visited the graves of their loved ones before the opposition gradually erased the cemetery from existence, leaving no trace of it. They first stole the headstones. Then, they bulldozed the cemetery and covered its site with the debris of construction works and trash to obliterate the graves and conceal them.”

This would not be the first cemetery site Turkey and its allied forces destroyed. STJ previously published a [report](#) on 6 April 2021 documenting the vandalization of cemeteries and the obliteration of other landmarks by Turkish forces, Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), Syrian government forces, and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).

### 3. Who was Buried in the Cemetery?

STJ carried out an investigation to collect and verify the names of the people buried in the cemetery. For the purposes of the investigation, STJ reached out to several entities, including the Martyrs' Families Directorate, operated by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The directorate provided STJ with a list containing the names of 39 of the buried fighters and civilians.

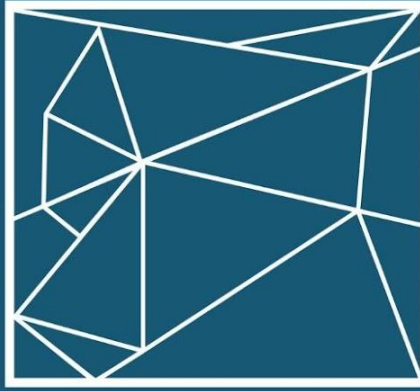
In addition to the list, STJ confirmed that over 23 unidentified persons were buried in the cemetery, including the bodies of civilians killed in Turkish shelling near the [al-Qaban Roundabout](#) on 15 March 2018; more than 20 others killed in a similar shelling on the [al-Mahmoudiyah neighborhood](#) on 16 March 2018, as well as the bodies of those killed in the Turkish bombing of [Avrin Hospital](#).

Those who were buried in the makeshift cemetery in Afrin, which for a few weeks has garnered international attention, are counted among others who were deprived of official burials during the ongoing shelling and siege imposed on Afrin in the days preceding Turkey and its allies' entry into the city. STJ spoke with families who buried their loved ones right where they died, and others whose loved ones, particularly YPG and YPJ fighters, were left unburied because it was impossible to retrieve their bodies.

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## 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.