



## **A Complaint to the UN Working Groups and Rapporteurs Addressing Enforced Disappearances in Afrin, Syria**

*Four Syrian organizations called on the UN to pressure Turkey to put an end to the systematic practice of arbitrary arrests in Syria and invites UN Groups to interview victims of arbitrary arrests*

Every month, field researchers with [Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ) record the number and names of people arbitrarily arrested and disappeared by the Turkish-backed Military and Civil Police in Afrin, Syria. These arrests are verified using a network of researchers, civilian sources, eyewitnesses, and confidential sources within the opposition-led Syrian National Army.

This year, STJ joined the [Syria Justice and Accountability Centre](#) (SJAC), [PÊL – Civil Waves](#), and [Hevdestî – Synergy](#) to submit a complaint to the UN Working Groups on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and Arbitrary Detention and the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples concerning people arbitrarily arrested in Afrin.

In 2018, Turkey conducted the military operation “Olive Branch” into the majority-Kurdish province of Afrin, beginning a long-standing occupation of Syrian territory which would lead to the displacement of over 300,000 people and a campaign of targeting and harassing the local population. STJ’s investigations have revealed that Kurdish people, indigenous to the region where the arrests are taking place, are disproportionately at risk of being arbitrarily arrested — a finding [corroborated](#) by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

In 2020, the Military and Civil Police arrested 587 persons. Additionally, 206 persons were arrested by independent factions who handed them to Military Police. Out of 793 persons arrested, the Military Police released 680. From January 2021 to August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021, 289 people have been arrested in Afrin, and only 76 detainees have been released.

Before August 2018, the Military Police had received funding from the United States. However, since that support was withdrawn, Turkey has taken over the responsibility of funding the activities of the Military Police. Additionally, since mid-2020, arrests have largely been directed by Turkey through the Military Police, who rely on the opposition-aligned Syrian National Army (SNA) military groups to make the arrest, chiefly the Hamzat, Amshat, and Sultan Murad factions.

Many of those arrested have been held arbitrarily. For example, STJ spoke with A., a man who worked in an Afrin bookstore. While out to buy a pack of cigarettes, A. was arrested by members of the Military Police and taken to multiple locations, some he could not identify, before spending two months in Maaratah Central Prison. When A. finally was put on trial, he was released after paying a fine. Like A.’s case, investigations by monitoring organizations suggest that arrests are often conducted not in accordance with official summons and evidence, but arbitrarily for financial exploitation and gain.

*While A. eventually stood trial, other detainees have been transferred to Turkey, unbeknownst to their family. These detainees are “disappeared” – their families unable to hire a lawyer for their defense or determine where they are.*

Within the regular prisons where detainees are kept, sources have revealed a significant lack of hygiene, inducing the spread of scabies and lice. The lack of adequate windows and ventilation also causes undue suffering. Prescribed drugs are only provided and administered

if the detainee successfully bribes his/her guards. Those who become extremely ill are transferred to Turkey. While Syrian organizations monitored the return of several of these patients after several weeks, others have never returned.

By submitting their findings on arbitrary arrests and detentions, the listed Syrian organizations urged UN Groups to pressure Turkey to end the systematic practice of arbitrary arrests in areas under its occupation and by groups it supports. Furthermore, they recommended that the UN Groups keep a record of arbitrary arrests and releases for future accountability initiatives. The organizations also invited UN Groups to meet and interview victims of enforced disappearances and their families to better understand the impact of arrests and detention conditions in areas of Syria under Turkish occupation.



## 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.

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