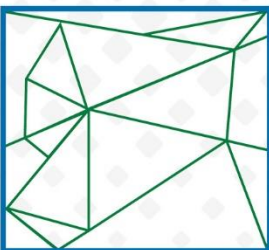


Northern Syria: Clashes Between Opposition Factions Lead to the Permanent Presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Afrin



Northern Syria: Clashes Between Opposition Factions Lead to the Permanent Presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Afrin

Using civilians as human shields was documented during the clashes that took place between the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the 32nd Division, Ahrar al-Sham Sector in Northwest Syria - June 2022

Recent clashes between the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya and the 32nd Division – Ahrar al-Sham sector has allowed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which controls the remaining areas in Idlib Governorate, to secure a permanent presence in the region of Afrin. The latter was controlled by the Turkish Army and factions of the opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA) during Operation Olive Branch in 2018.

On 18 June 2022, violent clashes erupted between the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, led by Muhannad al-Khalaf (Abu Ahmed Nour) and the Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam, led by 'Issam Buidani, on the one hand, and the 32nd Division (Ahrar al-Sham the eastern sector),¹ led by 'Mohammed Rami (Abu Haidara), on the other hand. Clashes continued for a day and a half in several towns and villages controlled by the factions in the Northern countryside of Aleppo. They resulted in casualties among civilians, in addition to several deaths and injuries on both sides of the conflict.



Image (1) - Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya fighters seen in the village of Hazwan, in al-Bab city's suburbs, during the clashes with a T-62 tank. ([Source](#)).

¹ Since the establishment of the "Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya", the "32nd Division" has been one of its battalions. Later, the Division led by 'Mohammed Rami Abu Haidara' moved to the Northern countryside of Aleppo. On 27 November 2017, it merged with the "Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya", led by 'Abu Yassin'. Subsequently, a new leadership took the control of the "Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya". Relations between the two parties were strained after the attack of the "Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya" on the Division's headquarters on 1 April 2022. On the same day, the "32nd Division" announced its defection and went back to work with the "Ahrar al-Sham", using the name: "the 32nd Division Ahrar al-Sham - Eastern Sector". On 23 May 2022, the Division joined the "Revolutionaries for Liberation". The Division consists of around 600 fighters, and is based in the village of [Aulan](#) in the Eastern countryside of Aleppo.

This clash was an extension of previous battles and disputes between the two parties. Heavy and medium weapons were used in populated areas and near IDP camps.

Notably, the Military Police and SNA factions refrained from intervening, disengaging, or protecting the population, which led to material damage and casualties among civilians, particularly in the vicinity of [al-Bab](#) city.

The 32nd Division requested support from the HTS. Accordingly, the latter sent huge military convoys, holding the banner of Ahrar al-Sham, from Idlib Governorate to Afrin region. Convoys were able to reach several villages in Afrin, due to the support of controlling factions and Military Police which cleared the checkpoints and opened the way. Nevertheless, the SNA factions did not act, ignoring orders of the Ministry of Defense to confront HTS, secure the supply routes, and protect the area of Olive Branch.

The military convoys withdrew after appointing several groups of fighters in various villages of Afrin, in order to support the 32nd Division. This was the first time for an organization classified in the Global Terrorism Index to reach Afrin and settle there permanently. This took place after an agreement with the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya to withdraw from the Division's headquarters and stop the fight.

Previously, STJ published an extensive report on the impact of the clashes between factions on civilians living in areas under Turkish control, as well as how the internal battles contribute to enhancing the danger and insecurity in areas that Turkey claims to be “safe”.

What Happened?

On 18 June 2022 at around 10:00am, the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya launched an attack on the headquarters of the 32nd Division in the village of [Abla](#), west of al-Bab city. Afterwards, the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya brought in new military reinforcements in order to attack [Tall Battal](#) and Aulan. Meanwhile, Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam sent forces to support the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Together, they launched a simultaneous attack on several headquarters of the Division, in the villages of Sousian, al-Wash, Duer al-Hawa, Hadath, Qar Kalbin, Ashdod, Baraan and Baruza in the countryside of al-Bab city.

Because of these clashes, all roads leading to the city were closed, and many civilians were injured, especially those residing in camps close to villages, such as al-Rawabi camp near Susyan. Moreover, four were injured—including a pregnant woman— by bullets near the Qatari Housing camp and al-Hadath. In the afternoon, the clashes reached Jarabulus city and a military camp of the 32nd Division in Tall Battal and al-Kornful village. Meanwhile, 10 were killed, and more than 23 were injured, in addition to the capture of several members of both parties.

On the same day, a number of civilians demonstrated in Qabasin town and in al-Bab city, demanding the Turkish guarantor to intervene and stop the fight. However, both factions escalated the clash until late at night. The battle resulted in the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-

Shamiya taking control of the entire headquarters of the 32nd Division in the Eastern countryside of Aleppo.



Image (2-3) – An Ahrar al-Sham frontline base outside the village of Abla seized by Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya during the clashes. ([Source](#)).



Image (4) – Satellite image of the Ahrar al-Sham frontline base. Coordinates: [36.429422, 37.366150](#).



Image (5) – Ahrar al-Sham’s “Martyr Ibrahim al-‘Alou Barracks” located in the village of Tell Battal. ([Source](#)).



Image (6) – Ahrar al-Sham’s “Martyr Ibrahim al-‘Alou Barracks” located in the village of Tell Battal. ([Source](#)).



Image (7) – Location of the “Martyr Ibrahim al-‘Alou Barracks,” [36.501700, 37.433674](#). The facility was built after this satellite image was captured (August 2020).



Image (8) – Ahrar al-Sham’s headquarters outside the village of ‘Awlan from a video shared on Telegram in early June 2022. ([Source](#)).

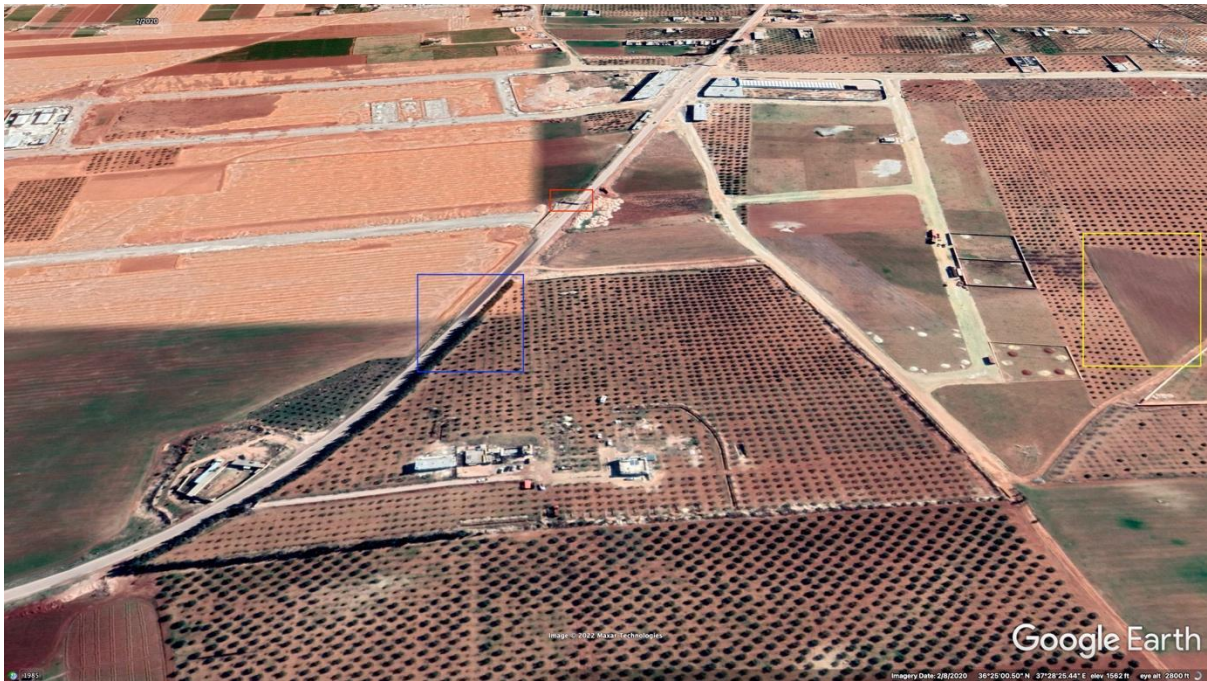


Image (9) - Location of Ahrar al-Sham's 'Awlan headquarters, [36.501700, 37.433674](#). Parts of the facility were built after this satellite image was captured (February 2020).



Image (10) – The interior of the 'Awlan headquarters prior to the clashes, during an April 2022 visit by Ahrar al-Sham leadership. ([Source](#)).



Image (11) – al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front fighters posing with a 3rd Legion flag after capturing Ahrar al-Sham's 'Awlan headquarters. Note the distinctive paint pattern around the windows. ([Source](#)).



Image (12) – The vandalized and burned interior of Ahrar al-Sham's 'Awlan headquarters after al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front vacated the facility. ([Source](#)).

STJ spoke to a number of civilians residing in the camps of Qatari Village and al-Hadath — close to the headquarters of the 32nd Division — where clashes took place. A resident of the [Qatari Village](#) informed STJ that members of the 32nd Division were stationed inside the camp and deployed snipers on the buildings' roofs, exposing civilians to danger. The witness narrated:

“On 18 June at 10:30 a.m, members of Raqqa 32nd Ahrar al-Sham entered the Qatari Village and hid between buildings. Some of them hid inside the mosque, while others climbed onto the roofs and set up their sniper positions. The clashes continued between the two parties until around midnight, causing great panic, especially as the residents are mostly widows and people with disabilities.”

The witness continued:

“Several women went out to the street and asked the fighters to leave. However, the fighters started shouting at the women and ordered them to close their doors, turn all the lights off, and be completely quiet. During the clashes, several civilians were wounded, but those civilians were outside the camp. It was a very scary day!”

Civilians in [al-Hadath](#) camp circulated audio recordings, using the newsrooms of the WhatsApp application. These recordings included appeals to both parties to stop the fighting temporarily in order to rescue injured civilians. One of the civilians residing in the camp confirmed to STJ that during clashes fighters of the 32nd Division were stationed inside the camp, putting civilians in danger.

A leader of the “Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam” informed STJ that:

“The decision to attack the 32nd Division Ahrar al-Sham was taken after our security official received information stating that the Division is the long arm of al-Julani in the areas of Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch. Also, security officials of HTS are moving there under the cover of the Division. This information was presented to the National Reform Committee which gave permission for a military confrontation.”

The source added:

“Commander Abu Ahmed Nour was aware of what happened, given that the 32nd Division was a part of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and because he had vainly tried to limit the presence of HTS peacefully. Subsequently, he asked for our military support. We were ready and moved quickly since the Division was already under our surveillance. We distributed the fighters to the headquarters and attacked them all at once. Thus, they were unable to communicate or support each other.”

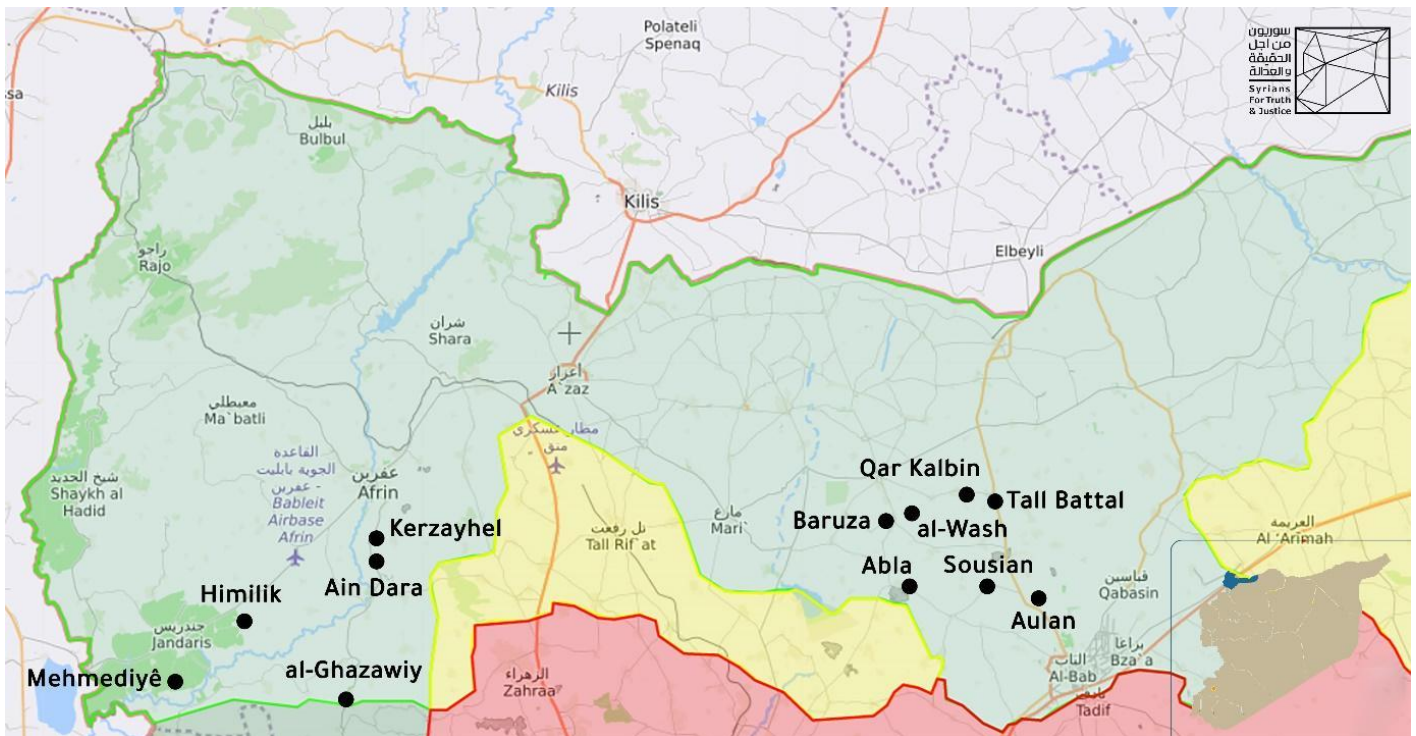


Image (13) – Map by STJ locating several areas in northwestern Syria where al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front and Ahrar al-Sham/32nd Division engaged in clashes in June 2022.



Image (14) – A plume of smoke rising during the shelling of al-Hadath camp. ([Source](#)).



Image (15) – Satellite image of the bombed al-Hadath camp. The shell appears to have fell at approximately [36.448315, 37.458972](#).



Image (16) – A military vehicle (see blue arrow) seen in the vicinity of al-Hadath camp. ([Source](#)).



Image (17) – Satellite image of al-Hadath camp, marking the location of the military vehicle, [36.447556, 37.459020](#).



Image (18) – “Qatari village,” officially known as Al-Hilal/the Crescent Residential City. Credit: Syria TV.



Image (19) – Location of “Qatari village,” [36.449382, 37.455277](#).



Image (20) – A shell found at the Rawabi camp in Susiyan, believed to be a 23mm round fired from a Zu-23 weapon system. ([Source](#)).



Image (21) – A truck-mounted Zu-23 cannon seen in Northern Aleppo on 18 June 2022. This system is quite common in Syria and is operated by numerous opposition groups. ([Source](#)).

Conflicting Information About Casualties

On 18 June, two children and a man of one family were killed in Abla village where clashes took place. Those responsible have not been identified. Activists and media in the opposition areas said that civilian victims were killed along with the members of the 32nd Division as a result of shelling with a guided missile from the People's Protection Units (YPG).

Regarding the same incident, the Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) [published](#) on its YouTube Channel a video of targeting a group of opposition fighters in Abla village. The video states that the targeting took place on 17 June, one day before the outbreak of clashes and the killing of civilians. However, the video was actually published on 21 June, which prompted some activists and media to accuse the Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) of manipulating the video information and changing the actual filming date.

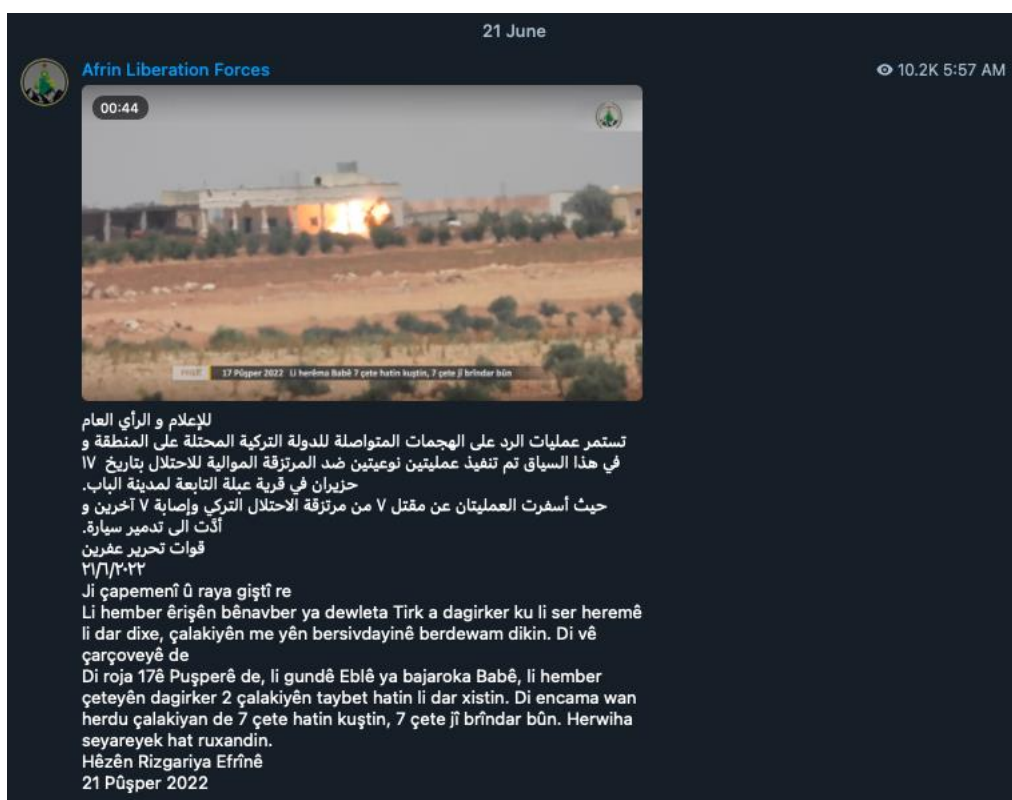


Image (22) – The statement and video published on 21 June 2022 by the Afrin Liberation Forces (HRE) via Telegram regarding an attack they claim was carried out on 17 June 2022. ([Source](#)).



Image (23) – The video shows a house being targeted with an anti-tank missile.



Image (24) – The location of the house targeted in the Afrin Liberation Forces’ (HRE) video. It’s on the road between the villages of ‘Awlan and Hazwan at [36.422669, 37.374010](#). The house lies on the front line, approximately two KM away from SDF/regime-controlled territory. Defensive berms can be seen around the property, pointing to the house and nearby buildings being used in a military capacity.

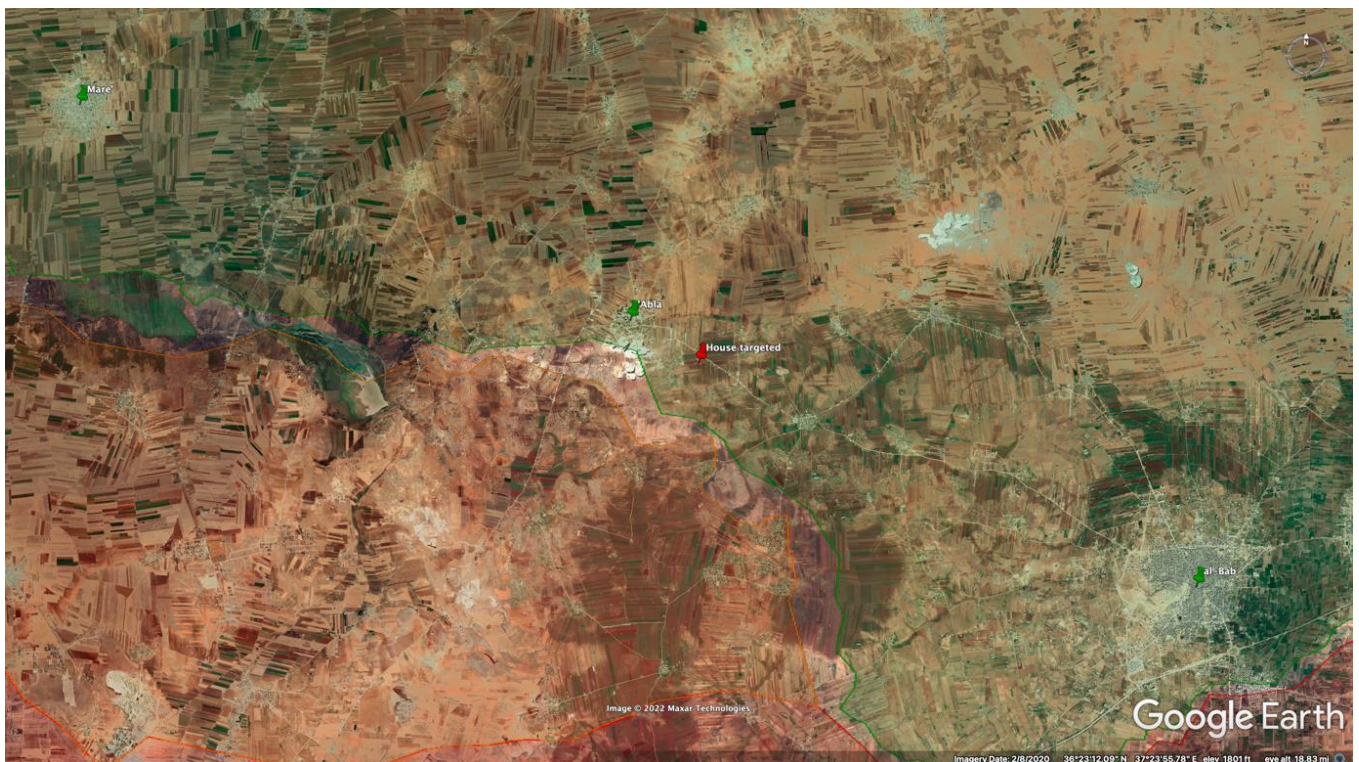


Image (25) – Location of the house in relations to SNA and SDF/regime-controlled territory.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) Enters Villages in Afrin

HTS took advantage of the ongoing fight. On the pretext of providing support to the 32nd Division, HTS headed to Afrin, where small groups of the 32nd division are located. HTS's military convoys entered from the al-Ghazawiya crossing in the evening of 18 June, after the withdrawal of al-Sham Legion. Moreover, the Military police withdrew from checkpoints, and the factions in Afrin took a neutral stance.

The Ministry of Defense in the Interim Government issued a [statement](#) demanding factions to stop the fight and "not to seek the assistance of parties from outside the military establishment to implement non-revolutionary agendas."



Image (26) – A patch of HTS's Talha bin Ubaid Allah brigade held in front of an Afrin sign, located south of the city on the al-Ghazawiyah road. ([Source](#)).

Moreover, On 19 June, the Ministry of Defense issued another statement demanding factions to raise the revolutionary readiness to prevent HTS from entering the Olive Branch area. Hours later, the Syrian Islamic Council issued another [statement](#) in which it described the entry as “an oppression that Sharia prohibits, and it is the duty of leaders and members of the SNA to repel the aggression”. However, the factions in Afrin ignored both statements and refrained from confronting HTS. On the contrary, the factions [al-Sham Legion led by Munther Sarras, The Sultan Murad Division led by Fahim Issa, Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East led by Abu Hatem Shaqra, al-Hamzat Division led by Saif Abu Bakr, and Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat led by Mohammed al-Jasem/Abu Amsha] facilitated the crossing and stationing of HTS forces in five areas in Afrin.

An agreement was reached to end the fight between the 32nd Division and the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, providing that the latter withdraws from the headquarters of the Division. Although HTS withdrew its military convoys from the villages of the Olive Branch area (al-Ghazawiya, Basufan, Faftertin, Kabashin, Kerzayhel, Ain Dara and Al-Bassouta), it kept some forces there in order to provide emergency support for the 32nd Division in the event of renewed clashes or in case their headquarters in Afrin are attacked.



Image (27) - Map by STJ showing some of the areas where HTS maintained permanent presence in Afrin region that Turkey occupied during Operation Olive Branch.



Image (28) – Images reportedly showing an HTS checkpoint in the town of Basoufan, located southeast of Afrin, 20 June 2022. ([Source](#)).



Image (29) – Satellite image matched with the live images locating the supposed HTS checkpoint in Afrin, at [36.337090, 36.870257](#).

Regarding the entry of HTS into the Olive Branch area, a commander of the Military Police in Afrin informed STJ that:

“According to the information we received, the Revolutionaries for Liberation - including the 32nd Division- contacted Abu Muhammad al-Julani directly. The latter said that his military incursion into Afrin would be a disciplinary measure for both the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam. He assured that he would not enter any area under the control of the Revolutionaries for Liberation. Moreover, he said that he shall leave the area after achieving his goal. Therefore, the Revolutionaries for Liberation demanded its officers in the Military Police to open the roads for HTS, to wear civilian clothes, and to avoid any confrontation. Indeed, this is what happened”.

The source continued:

“There is an understanding between HTS and factions of al-Sham Legion, al-Hamzat Division, Sultan Murad Division, and Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat. We saw al-Sham Legion withdrawing from the crossing and evacuating their headquarters. We and the rest of the factions withdrew as well from our checkpoints to allow HTS to reach the checkpoints of Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya easily, with full gear”.

Regarding the agreement of ending the fight and the withdrawal of HTS, A high ranked leader of the First Corps told STJ:

“The Turkish officers were in direct contact with Abu Ahmad Nour, the leader of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, and Abu Ahmad Hudoud, the representative of HTS. It was agreed on the withdrawal of HTS forces, as well as the restoration of the Division's headquarters. The agreement was implemented step by step: the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya left the headquarters, while the Division's fighters went back with small groups of HTS fighters. The latter remained there to ensure no attack would take place. Turkish drones observed the withdrawal of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya from the headquarters, as well as the withdrawal of HTS to Idlib”.



Image (30) – A military vehicle reportedly belonging to Jaysh al-Islam destroyed by HTS in the village of Qurzeyhel/Qurzêlê while advancing towards Afrin city.



Image (31) – Location of the destroyed military vehicle in the village of Qurzeyhel/Qurzêlê, at [36.337090, 36.870257](#). The satellite image was captured on 16 March 2022 and provided to STJ by Planet Labs Inc.



Image (32) - Location of the destroyed military vehicle in the village of Qurzeyhel/Qurzêlê, at [36.337090, 36.870257](#).



Image (33) – A convoy of fighters with HTS flags seen leaving Jindires city in the direction of Idlib on 19 June 2022. ([Source](#)).



Image (34) – Satellite image matched with the live image, locating the HTS convoy seen leaving Jindires via the southeastern exit road, [36.386621](#), [36.694658](#).

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About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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