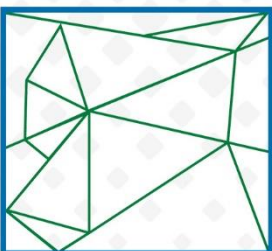


# Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Dismantle and Steal Ancient Railway Metal in Afrin

---



سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
والعدالة  
Syrians  
For Truth  
& Justice



March 2023

## **Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Dismantle and Steal Ancient Railway Metal in Afrin**

*Seven SNA-affiliated factions wrecked the railroad under the watch of the indifferent Turkish military*

## Background

On 10 September 2020, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) [published](#) a video documenting a metal theft on the Afrin railroad. The VDC reported that members of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division dismantled the tracks of the line located in the Rajo district, administratively affiliated with Afrin, adding that the video was filmed somewhere on the Rajo-Afrin-Ekbis road.

On 14 September, *North Press* [posted](#) exclusive photos of reported sabotage of the railroad near Rajo town, adding no further information about the incident.

For its part, *Al Modon* [published](#) a report revealing the names of the armed opposition groups involved in dismantling and selling parts of the railway. The outlet named as the perpetrators The Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham, Harakat al-Tahrir wal Bina (Liberation and Construction Movement)—whose members mostly hail from the provinces of Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and the Hayat Thaeroon for Liberation and its affiliated factions. The outlet added, “All these formations are involved in assaults on public properties and facilities, including cutting down trees and dismantling the rails.”

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) investigated the reported rails theft in the Afrin district, where perpetrators robbed chunks of the line running between [Rajo](#) and [Meidan Ekbis](#). To this end, STJ matched live ground and aerial footage with satellite imagery, corroborating the incident.

STJ obtained further insights on the incident from seven informed sources. Based on the information collected, seven armed opposition groups dismantled no less than 22 km of the railway tracks. Furthermore, the perpetrators sold some of the cut-up bars in al-Bab, Idlib, and Hama between July and August 2022. Over the same period, the Turkish military used parts of the unhinged tracks to fortify their stations, especially those in the Jabal al-Ahlam area. These fortifications followed Turkey’s [announcement](#) of an intended new military operation into northern Syria.

The sabotaged railway is a historical relic as it once served as a transit point for the Anatolia-Baghdad railroad, established in 1914. The railroad started at Aleppo city and advanced through Tall Rifaat, Qatmah, and then Rajo and Meidan Ekbis after it crossed Afrin 40km north of its center, all the way to İslahiye town in Gaziantep Province, south of Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

Notably, this is not the first rails theft that local armed groups stand behind in Afrin. In 2020, STJ investigated footage several media outlets [posted](#) in October and verified their reports of the wreck members of the Sultan Murad Division inflicted upon a railway in the Hasan Mishkeh area.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Rajo: Strategic Area that Resisted Occupation during the Ottoman Era" (In Arabic), Anadolu Agency, 5 March 2018.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%88-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AB%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-/1080044>

In 2017, members of the People's Protection Units (YPG) sabotaged and dismantled parts of the Afrin railway [near](#) Qatmah town. Nevertheless, the sabotage was of limited scale and continued only for a short time.

## Rails Sabotage Continues amidst Turkish Inaction

Monitoring and documenting violations in the Afrin region in the aftermath of the 2018 Turkey-led Operation Olive Branch, STJ verified the sabotage of rails extending between Rajo and Meidan Ekbis. However, the perpetrators targeted only small parts of the rails at the time. The sources STJ met with recounted that sabotage stopped because the Turkish authorities ordered the involved factions to refrain from disassembling the railway. Indeed, the cuts of the tracks ceased almost entirely until the factions resumed action in 2022, targeting substantial lengths of the rails and tearing apart those which extended over at least 22 km.

Three sources from the opposition's Syrian National Army (SNA) that STJ met with for the report have pointed to the following factions as the culprits of the recent sabotage of the Afrin rails:

- The Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East, led by Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes and nicknamed Abu Hatim Shaqra.
- The Eastern Army/Jaysh al-Sharqiya, led by Hussein Hamadi.
- The Sultan Murad Division, led by Fahim Issa.
- The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, led by Saif Abu Bakr.
- The Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat), led by Muhammad al-Jasim, and nicknamed Abu Amsha.
- The Special Forces Division, led by Abdullah Halawa.
- The Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham, led by Munther Saras.

The first source, a commander within the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, told STJ that the division's commander, Saif Abu Baker, ordered the 2018 sabotage of the Rajo and Meidan Ekbis rails. He added that the factions stopped dismantling the tracks under Turkey's instruction, only to resume it on a larger scale in 2022. The source stressed that the armed groups unhinged the railway metal for commercial ends, as each sold the chunks they obtained.

The source added:

"In 2022, [the factions] dismantled the rails extensively because the Turkish military was not as strict about the issue as before. [Turkey] changed several of the intelligence officers in charge of the matter, while its priorities also changed. I would not say that Turkey greenlighted the dismantling of the rails. However, what happened resulted from its negligence and the impunity it fostered."

The second source, a commander from the SNA's 1st Legion, narrated:

"After the Turkish military and armed opposition groups controlled the area in 2018, the Turkish Intelligence received a report on the railroad sabotage. Therefore, the issue made it to one of the annual meetings. The governor of Hatay and Afrin, several Turkish intelligence officers, and the factions' commanders attended that meeting. The present



Turkish officials highlighted the importance of the railway as an Ottoman symbol and a future project in the region. They demanded that the factions stop sabotaging the rails. Indeed, the dismantling of the tracks decreased markedly, with only smaller chunks torn apart and secretly."

The source added:

"In early 2022, the [factions] started sabotaging the rails extensively. I am not certain why. However, what matters is that Turkey's interest in the issue subsided that some factions are even fearlessly dismantling rails located near Turkish military stations."

STJ interviewed a third source, who is a commander within Ahrar al-Sharqiya. He said that the factions refuted having any role in the 2018 rails sabotage and soon [announced](#) capturing a network of vandals and thieves as the perpetrators of the attack on the railway.

Notably, STJ obtained exclusive footage from late 2022. The images show the rails in Afrin, extending between [Rajo and Meidan Ekbis](#), missing parts (Location:36.651051, 36.735199).



Image (1&2)- The two photos show Rajo-Meidan Ekbis railway missing tracks. Credit: STJ.



Image (2).

STJ obtained similar exclusive footage of missing tracks nearly a hundred meters from the location mentioned above ([Location](#): 36.728367, 36.651779).

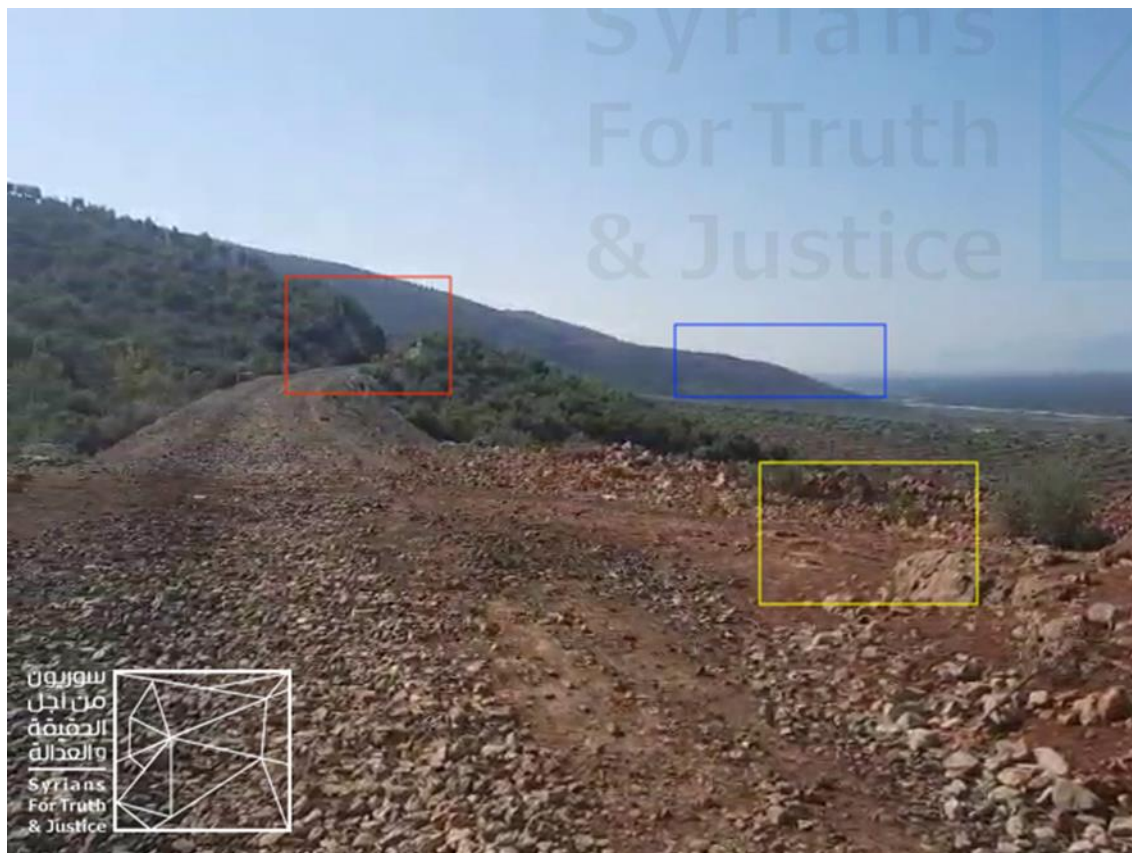


Image (3)- The photo shows Rajo-Meidan Ekbis railway missing parts. Credit: STJ.





Image (4)- Satellite footage matched with the live image above.

In the images below, STJ also matched photos of dismantled tracks in two nearby sites, published by [North Press](#), with satellite footage of these coordinates (36.610907, 36.711714) and (36.618055, 36.708882).



Image (5)- Photo of the railway near Rajo, Afrin. Credit: North Press.





Image (6)- Satellite footage matched with the live image above.



Image (7)- The pathway of the Afrin railway that SNA-affiliated factions dismantled. Credit: North Press.



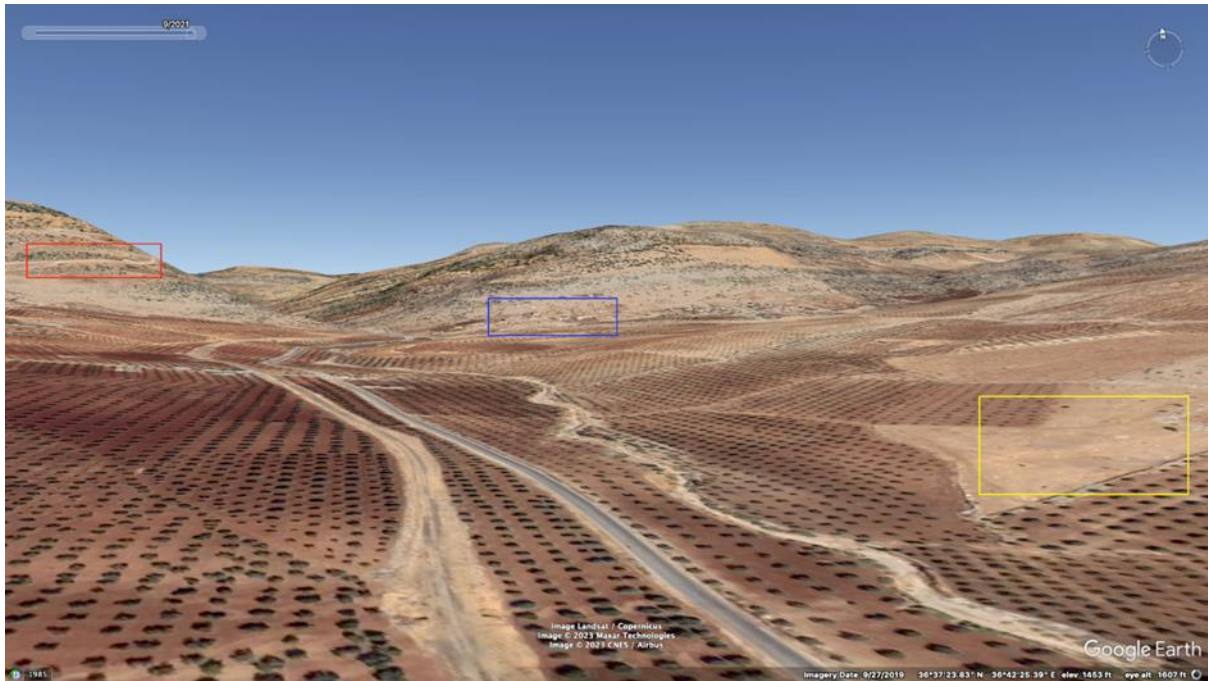


Image (8)- Satellite footage matched with the live image above.

STJ obtained footage of similar rails sabotage in Afrin from various open sources, including [Afrin Post](#) and [Yek-Dem](#). The footage documents the removal of chunks of the Haradara/Heşargê bridge tracks (36.710198, 36.640935), which rest only [a few kilometers](#) from the previously cited locations.



Image (9)- The Haradara/Heşargê bridge tracks while in service.





Image (10)- Aerial footage of the Haradara/Heşargê bridge tracks.

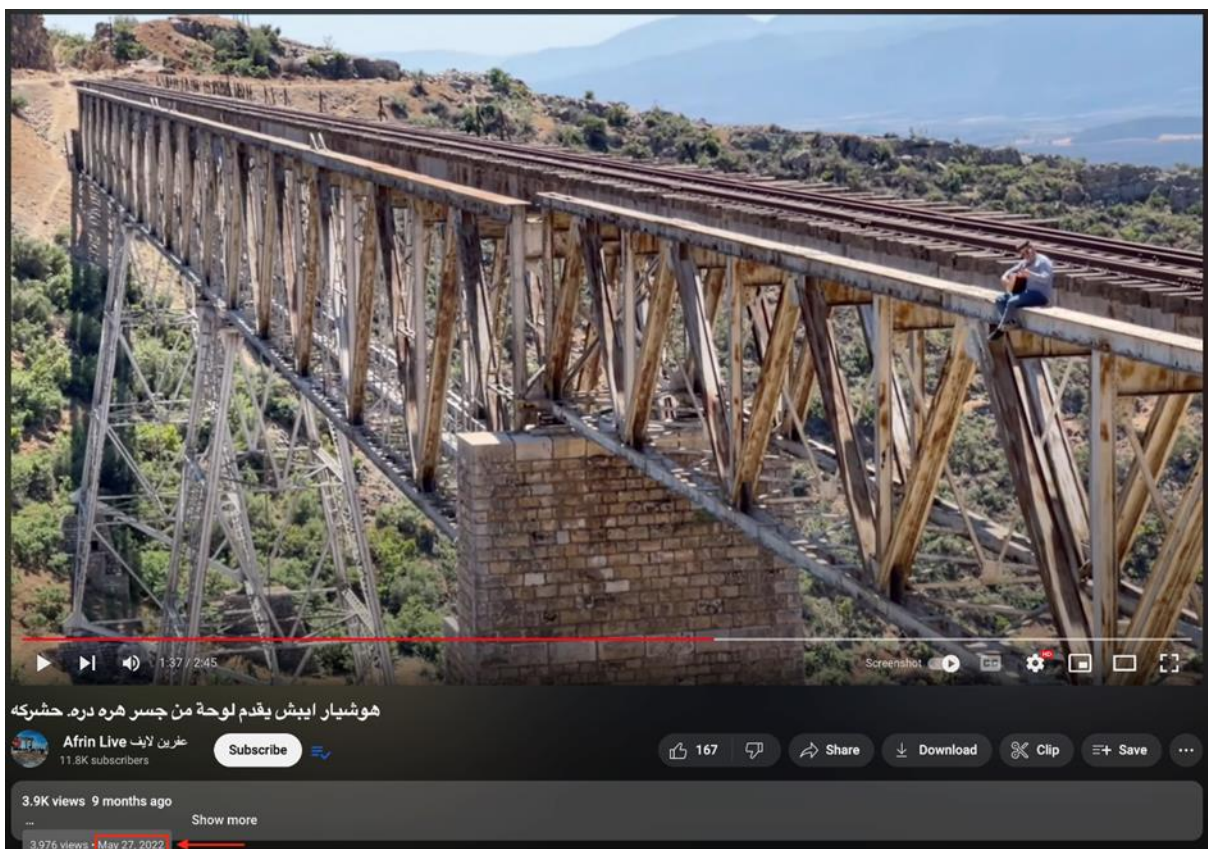


Image (11)- Screenshot from a video of a Kurdish artist, sitting on the Haradara/Heşargê bridge tracks before they were dismantled.





Image (12)- Photo collage of the Haradara/Heşargê bridge tracks before and after they were dismantled.



Image (13)- The Haradara/Heşargê bridge after the tracks were dismantled. Credit: Afrin Post.

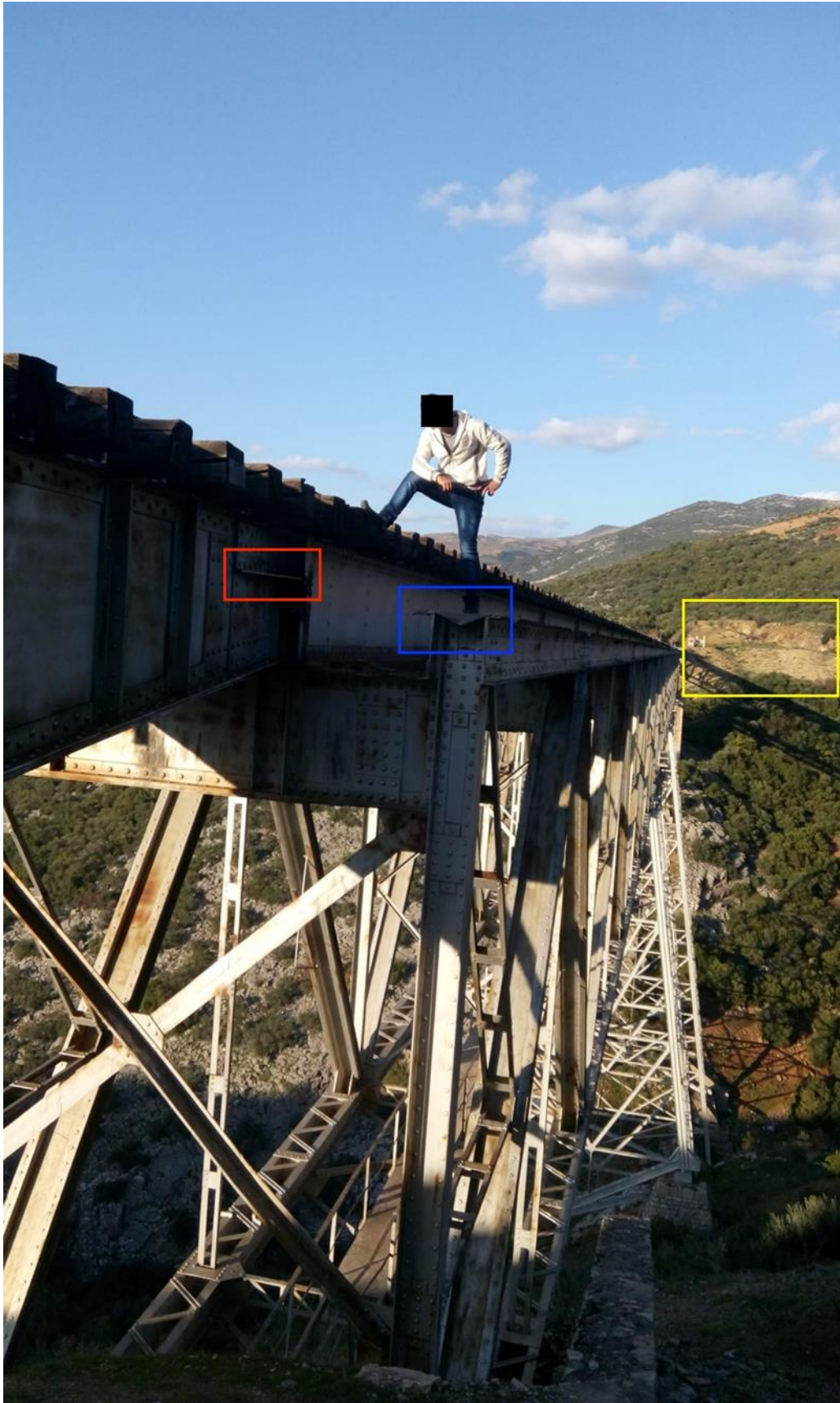


Image (14)- The Haradara/Heşargê bridge after the tracks were dismantled.



Additionally, STJ matched images published by local media outlets of Hasan Mishkeh bridge tracks with satellite images, verifying reported sabotage of the bridge's rails.

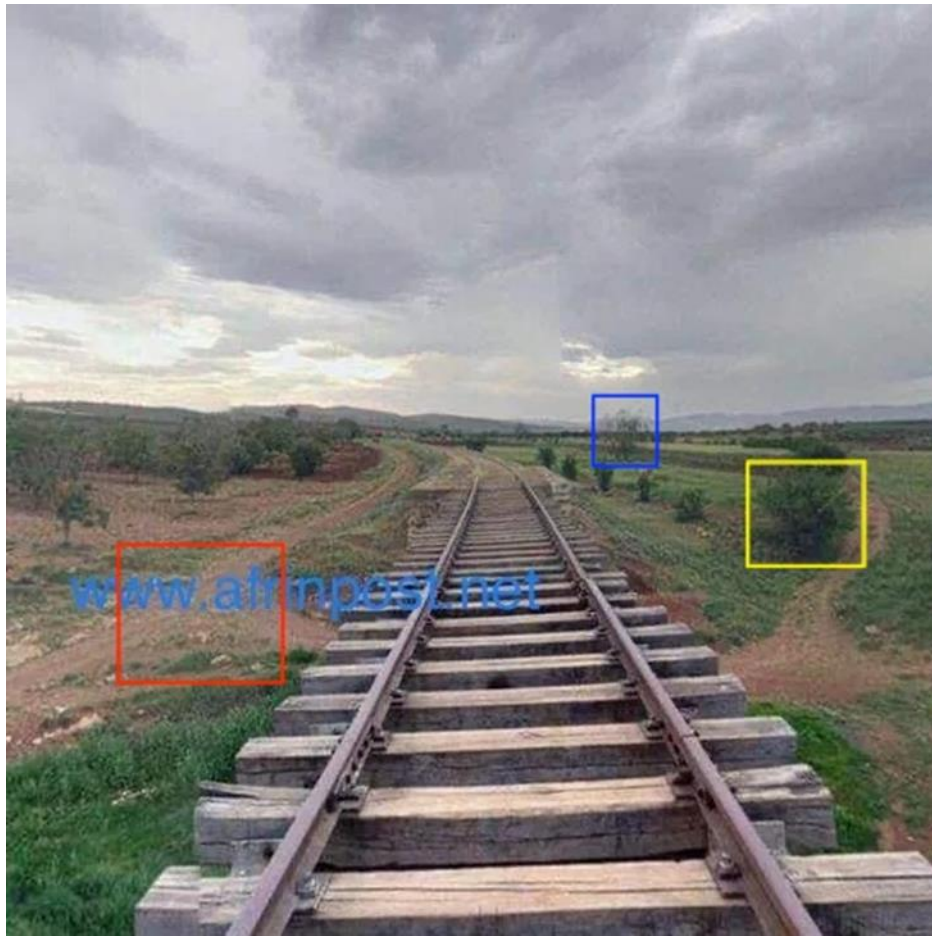


Image (15)- The Hasan Mishkeh bridge tracks. Credit: Afrin Post.

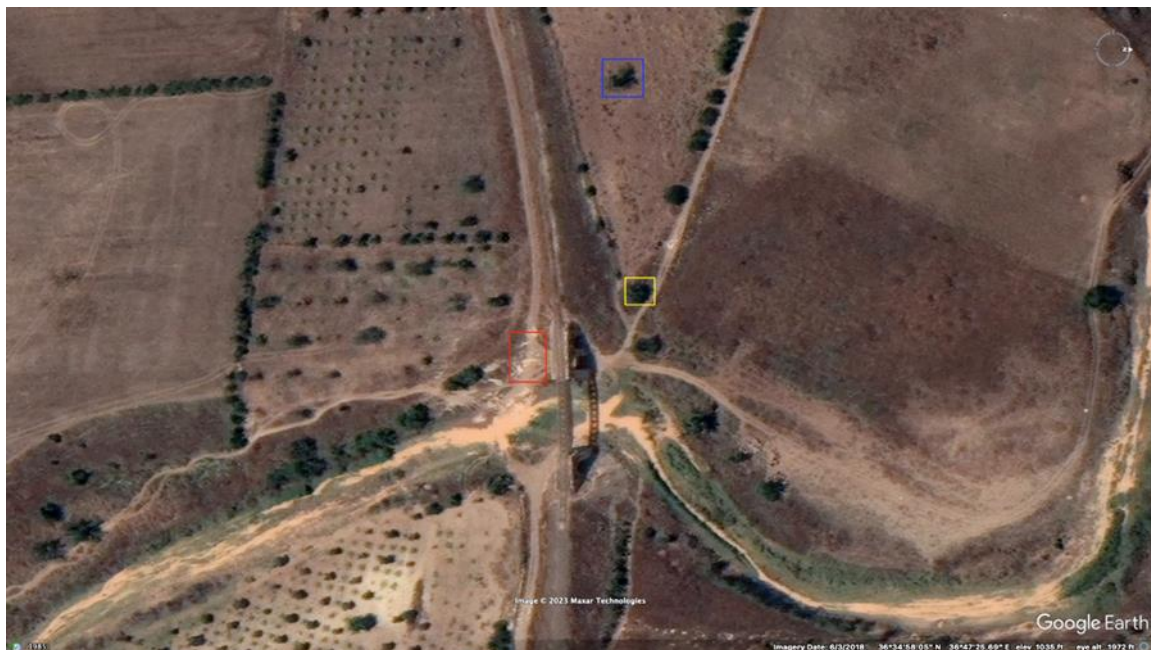


Image (16)- Satellite footage matched with the live image above.

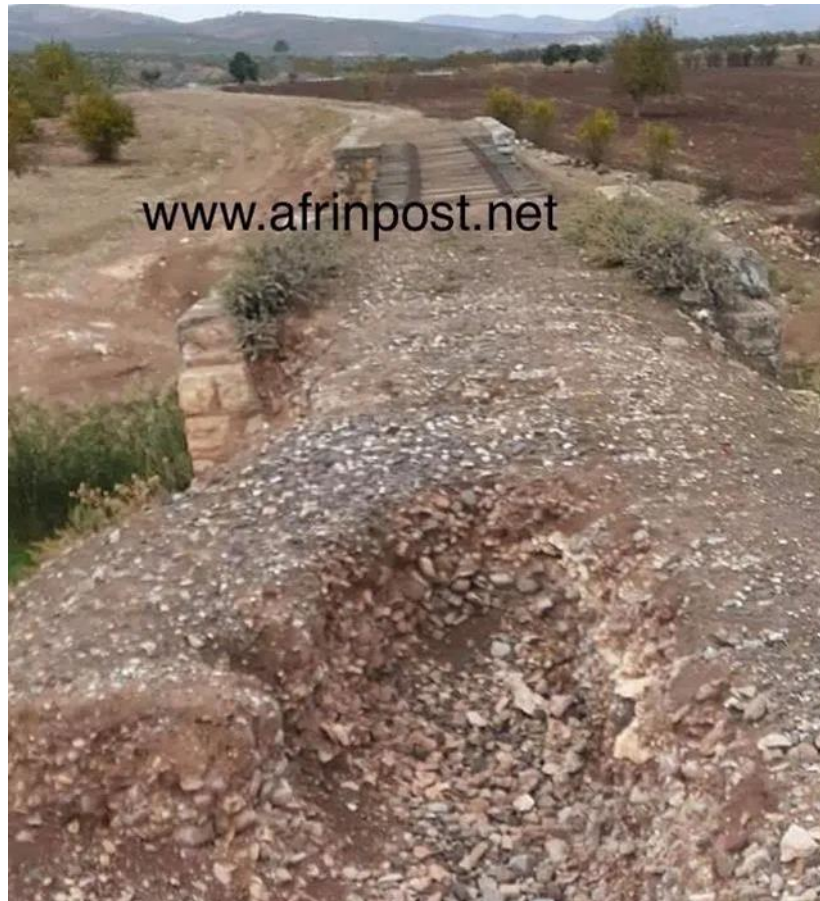


Image (17)- The bridge after the tracks were dismantled.

Concerning the arrests carried out by the factions, an eyewitness told STJ that the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham detained a civilian Kurd after he dismantled chunks of the railway for the legion and the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East in mid-2019. The source recounted:

"Ahmad hails from Masha'ala village. He is an IDP in a village near A'zaz and a father of seven. He owns a loader. One day, members from the Aharar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East approached him and offered him a job dismantling the rails in Meidan Ekbis in return for a sum of money (the source did not specify how much). He worked disassembled the tracks in April for almost a month. On his way to the village after he finished work in the area held by Ahrar al-Sharqiya, a checkpoint of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham stopped him and asked him to take apart the rails in their area, also in Meidan Ekbis. After he finished working and got the money, another checkpoint affiliated with the legion stopped Ahmad on his way home. They arrested him on the charge of dismantling the rails and confiscated the loader. Then, the checkpoint transferred him to the legion's General Security Center in Meidan Ekbis. At the time, a dissident officer from Homs, called Abu Abdullah, ran the center. Ahmad remained in detention for ten days before the legion forced him to pay them 1000 USD to release him. A faction member from his village mediated the release."



## Using the Railway Metal for Military Purposes

Five of the sources STJ interviewed confirmed that the Turkish military used large parts of the unhinged tracks to fortify the stations and observatories they established on the front lines with the forces of the government of Syrian (GOS) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), particularly those in the areas of Jabal al-Halam and al-Kahlidiya. The sources added that scrap merchants and brokers affiliated with the factions sold other parts of the rails in Idlib, al-Bab, and Hama.

Commenting on the military repurposing of the rails, a commander from the SNA's 1<sup>st</sup> Legion narrated:

"Curiously enough, after the [Turkish command] ordered the factions to cease rails sabotage, the Turkish military used steel and wood dismantled from the tracks to fortify their posts near Tall Rifaat and al-Kahlidiya. They propped up the posts following several statements about an approaching new [Turkish] military operation. The [Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham] dismantled parts of the tracks and transported the unhinged steel and wood to the Turkish military posts, particularly in the al-Khalidiya area."

A second source, a commander from the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, recounted:

"The 2022 rails dismantling extended along nearly 22 KM of the Rajo-Meidan Ekbis tracks. The Hamza/al-Hamzat Division disassembled large parts of the tracks and used them to fortify military posts on the fronts with the SDF and the Syrian regime forces in Tall Rifaat, Nubl, and al-Zahraa. The division's militants contributed largely to the dismantling operations."

## Profiteering from the Railway

Following leads on the rails sabotage, STJ documented a spike in dismantled wood and steel sales between June and September 2022. Additionally, STJ learned that the perpetrators sold these items to merchants in Hama's GOS-held areas, local merchants in Idlib and al-Bab city, and the factions in Idlib that relocated them to their posts on fronts in the al-Kabineh.

Commenting on how the opposition's armed groups are profiteering from the rails, a source from one of the factions active in Afrin narrated:

Commenting on how the opposition's armed groups are profiteering from the rails, a source from one of the factions active in Afrin narrated:

"In [Meidan Ekbis] area, there is a group affiliated with [Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham], led by [Khaldoun Mdawar, who is known as Abu Hassan]. In August 2022, members of this group hired civilian smiths from Idlib's countryside to dismantle parts of the rails and provided them with protection as they worked. Disassembling the rails is slow, arduous, costly, and requires special equipment. [The group] obtained some of the machinery from Turkey, including the oxygen torches used in cutting steel. However, if the quantities of the tracks cut are large, dismantling rails might turn into a profitable business."

The source added:

“Some of the rails chunks dismantled over these months were transported to Idlib city and sold to small merchants in the scrap market. Merchants usually use these parts to construct hangers and chicken farms. Selling such parts to small merchants does not involve brokers.”

An Idlib-based civilian source, a steel merchant, provided STJ with a matching account regarding the steel sales. He confirmed that large amounts of steel arrived in Idlib from Afrin. He added that steel pieces sold in the local market were likely cut from a railway, drawing from his experience in the steel business and considering the shape of the fragments.

The source added that the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) had purchased a quantity of the steel sold on the local market and transported it to the al-Kabineh area, where they would likely use it in military fortifications.

On the role of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East in the rails metal trade, one of the faction's commanders said that Raed Jasim al-Hayes—nicknamed Abu Ja'afar Shaqra and one of the faction's key commanders, runs the entire process, from dismantling to sales. He added that Shaqra cooperates with civilian merchants affiliated with the faction to transport the dismantled steel and sell it in the al-Bab city's industrial zone. The source recounted:

“Between June and September, [the faction] sold some quantities of steel to merchants in the al-Bab city. The faction's commerce office delivered the steel shipments within the city. Then, the merchants sold the steel in the industrial zone. Additionally, [the faction] dismantled large parts of the railway wood, which is saturated with oil and grease and is highly flammable. The wood is not for household consumption and is reserved for industrial carpentry. The [faction] sold the wood in Rajo city, not al-Bab.”

Giving an account of the involvement of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division in the railway metal trade, a commander within the division narrated:

“The division usually opts for dismantling sections of the railway that are far from populated areas. The person primarily in charge of rails removal and sales is Mahmoud al-Boushi, known as [Abu Abdo]. He is the director of the division's Security Office. His last sale operation was in mid-July 2022. He sold steel to merchants in the regime-held areas in Hama province. The price of one kilogram of steel varies between 2500 and 3000 Syrian Pounds.”

Furthermore, a source from the SNA-affiliated Military Police told STJ that the 9<sup>th</sup> Division arrested Military Police officers red-handed. The officers were dismantling parts of the railway near Rajo. The source added:

“In September 2022, members from the 9th Division caught officers from the Military Police while cutting parts of the railway near Rajo town. The officers were arrested even though dismantling the rails was an official task the administration assigned them. The administration of the Military Police decided that it could profit from selling the metal, intending to use the revenues as bounces for the officers. The division's militants did not interfere to protect the railway, but rather they were retaliating against us. We prevented them from seizing shops. Therefore, the arrests they carried out were an attempt to restore their reputation. Ultimately, the commanders from both sides resolved the issue, and [the division] released our officers.”



Notably, STJ obtained exclusive footage of a location where railways were sabotaged in Afrin, near Atmeh town, in 2017. Several opposition media outlets attributed the wreckage in this [spot](#) (36.585554, 36.968581) to the YPG.



Image (18)- Pathway of the dismantled railway near Atmeh town. Credit: STJ.

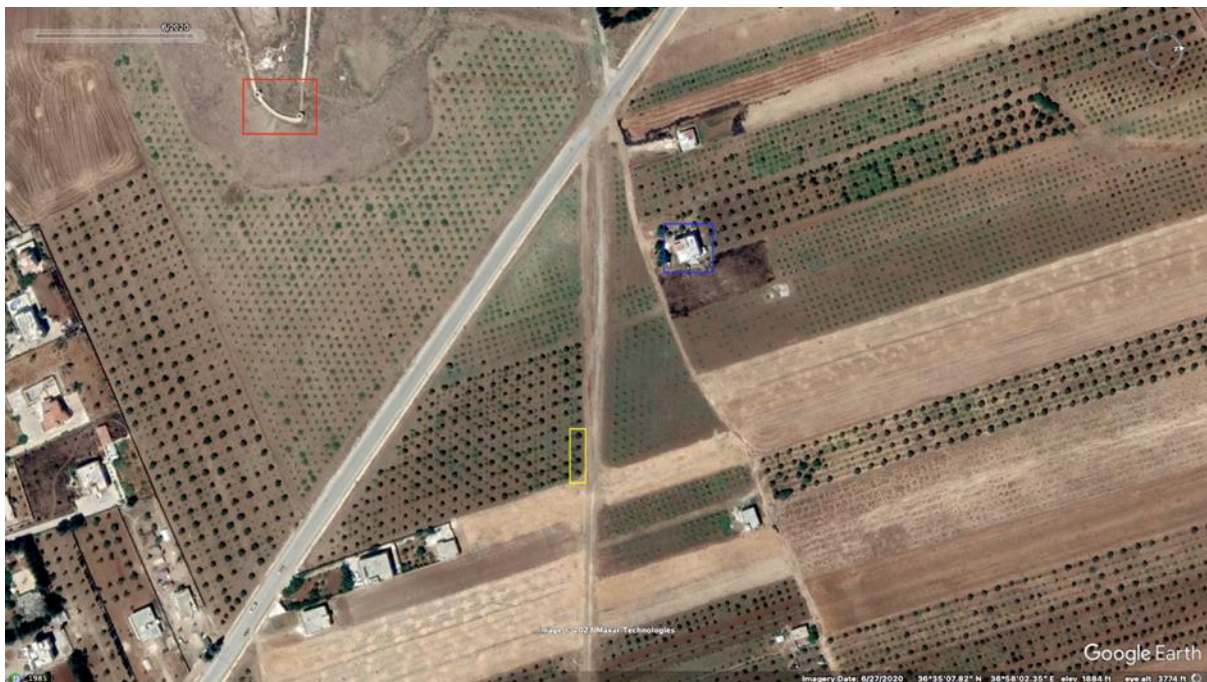


Image (19)- Satellite footage matched with the image above.



STJ obtained exclusive footage of another railway sabotage in Afrin dating back to 2017, which opposition media outlets also blame on the YPG. STJ identified the [site](#) from the footage, and it has these coordinates(36.958224 ,36.584312).

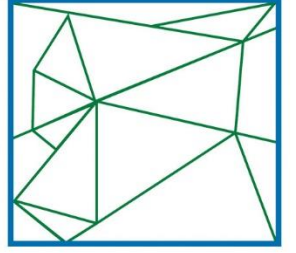


Image (20)- Pathway of dismantled railway in Afrin. Credit: STJ.



Image (21)- Satellite footage matched with the image above.





## 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.



[WWW.STJ-SY.ORG](http://WWW.STJ-SY.ORG)



[STJ\\_SYRIA\\_ENG](https://twitter.com/STJ_SYRIA_ENG)



[EDITOR@STJ-SY.ORG](mailto:EDITOR@STJ-SY.ORG)