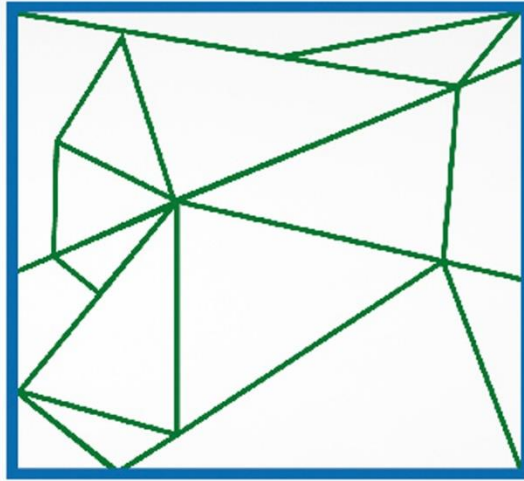


Syria: Input to Secretary of Indigenous Peoples and Minorities of United Nations

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة

Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) demands that current and upcoming Syrian governments criminalize attempts at integrating minorities' languages and cultures into a single linguistic or national pot. At the same time, we also demand that the Turkish State, as an occupying power, prohibit measures and institutional changes that restrict the right of linguistic minority communities to learn and use their mother tongue in daily life.

Submitted by: Syrians for Truth and Justice

31 March 2023.

Building from the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and other relevant existing national, regional, and international standards and legislation, including Resolution 76/168 adopted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 2021, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) makes this submission to provide insights into the situation of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities in the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), with a focus on the Kurdish communities and the status of their linguistic rights, whether in the areas held by the government of Syria (GOS) or those under Türkiye's occupation.¹

The diversity of Syria's minority groups and the different languages they speak make the country a unique and multicultural mosaic. Despite this, the operative 2012 Syrian Constitution neglects to establish the right of non-Arab groups to use their mother tongue. In Article 4—copied from the previous constitution, the constitution states that: **"The official language of the State is Arabic."** As it bestows this exclusive status on Arabic, the constitution fails to acknowledge the right of Syrian minorities to use their mother tongue or pass it on to their new generations through education. As such, the constitution fosters inequality between the different components of the Syrian people, favoring the majority group while ignoring the rest of existing groups, at odds with its mandates in Article 33(3), which states that **"Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties."** With this discrepancy, the following critical question surfaces, how can non-Arab communities learn or teach their mother tongue while being denied the tools to maintain and develop their languages?²

Notably, Article 9 of the 2012 Constitution guarantees **"the protection of cultural diversity of the Syrian society with all its components and the multiplicity of its tributaries, as it is a national heritage that promotes national unity within the framework of the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic."** However, this text is excessively ambiguous, overbroad, and applies only in theory. Since the GOS inscribed this article into the constitution, none of its areas have been implemented. For instance, Kurds in GOS-held areas are denied learning their language in government schools and banned from establishing private centers for teaching it.

On the other hand, the policies of the Syrian opposition regarding the mother tongue of non-Arab communities have failed to lay a foundation for institutional reform expected in the future, perpetuating the existing linguistic hegemony. The failure is evident in the political transition plan the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) unveiled in 2016. The first principle of the plan states: **"Syria is an integral part of the Arab World, and Arabic is the official language of the state. Arab Islamic culture represents a fertile source for intellectual production and social relations amongst all Syrians of different ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs as the majority of Syrians are Arabs and followers of Islam and its tolerant message which is distinctly moderate."** This stance prioritizes the interests of a specific religious and cultural group over others. Consequently, it not only undermines the potential for establishing an inclusive and authentic society open to all forms of social identity but also regenerates the discriminatory political environment created by the government of President

¹ "Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin," Amnesty International, August 2, 2018: [Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin - Amnesty International](#) (Last accessed: 31 March 2023)

² "Killing Mother Tongues as a form of the Continued Cultural Genocide in Syria," Syrian for Truth and Justice, February 22, 2021: [Killing Mother Tongues as a form of the Continued Cultural Genocide in Syria - Syrians for Truth and Justice \(stj-sy.org\)](#) (Last accessed: 31 March 2023)

Bashar al-Assad. Trends of disrupted inclusivity and anti-minority atmosphere are rife in Türkiye-backed opposition-held areas, especially in Syria's Kurdish-majority region of Afrin.³

In the Afrin region, the Ministry of Education of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG)—an offshoot of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), developed its curricula under the supervision of the Turkish Ministry of Education. Additionally, it changed school hours assigned to subjects, dedicating four hours to Turkish and four to Kurdish. Nevertheless, the ministry then cut the Kurdish language hours down to half, allowing for two hours only and, in some cases, one, while several schools dropped the subject altogether on the pretext of lacking Kurdish language teachers. Along with these critical educational changes, the number of Kurdish students also sharply dropped, dwindling to nearly 30% compared to 95% before Türkiye's occupation of the region in the aftermath of the 2018 Operation Olive Branch.

Notably, the dogmatic currents underlying Turkish curricula are extensively projected onto the areas Turkey controls in Syria, including the Afrin region. Therefore, Türkiye continues to strangle the linguistic freedoms of Kurdish communities in these areas as it does to Kurdish populations in eastern Turkey, enforcing a pro- Türkiye ideology utilizing its educational departments, its military, intelligence services, and interior ministry. Türkiye openly declared its political dominance over the Afrin region by hoisting its flag in schools, public squares, service and administrative departments. With this, Türkiye became the only country that maintains a military presence in Syria to display a national symbol in non-military structures as proof of its administrative hegemony.⁴

The Turkish government continues to refute its occupation of large areas in north and northwest Syria. For instance, in its reply to the 2020 joint communication from Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council, Türkiye denied having effective control over Syrian territories, primarily through its proxies—the SIG and the Syrian National Army (SNA). However, STJ has repeatedly argued that the state of occupation applies to the Turkish authorities and their effective control over the Syrian territories. STJ's position builds on the findings of investigations by the International Commission of Inquiry and the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the situation on the ground.⁵

To prevent marginalization and lack of official recognition of the different languages in the country from further destabilizing Syria and jeopardizing future reform, STJ believes that the upcoming government and the transitional governing body, stipulated in the UN Resolution 2254, must take measures necessary to preserve and promote linguistic diversity. STJ demands that they:

- Constitutionally provide for the designation of other languages in Syria as official languages in addition to Arabic, at least in the areas where their speakers live, and oblige the government to take the necessary measures to achieve this.

³ "Inclusivity framework vital to achieving transitional justice in Syria," Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), SEP 20, 2016: [Inclusivity framework vital to achieving transitional justice in Syria \(syriaaccountability.org\)](https://www.syriaaccountability.org/inclusivity-framework-vital-to-achieving-transitional-justice-in-syria) (Last accessed: 31 March 2023)

⁴ "Curricula in Afrin: Between 'Turkification' and Restrictions on the Kurdish Language," Syrian for Truth and Justice, March 16, 2023: [Curricula in Afrin: Between "Turkification" and Restrictions on the Kurdish Language - Syrians for Truth and Justice \(stj-sy.org\)](https://www.stj-sy.org/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language-syrians-for-truth-and-justice) (Last accessed: 31 March 2023)

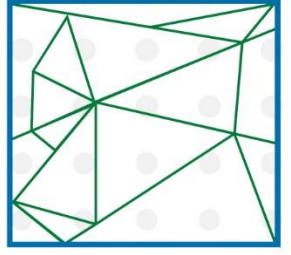
⁵ "Northern Syria: Prosecutions, Arrests on Charges of Offending Turkey," Syrian for Truth and Justice, October 27, 2022: [Northern Syria: Prosecutions, Arrests on Charges of Offending Turkey - Syrians for Truth and Justice \(stj-sy.org\)](https://www.stj-sy.org/northern-syria-prosecutions-arrests-on-charges-of-offending-turkey-syrians-for-truth-and-justice) (Last accessed: 31 March 2023)

- Refer to the responsibility of the State to provide the appropriate climate and the necessary support to maintain the existing languages in Syria, ensure that minorities can teach their languages, and help them preserve their cultures.
- Criminalize the attempted integration of minorities' languages and cultures into a single linguistic or national pot and consider them as crimes of racial discrimination.
- Evaluate linguistic and cultural pluralism as a source of wealth and strength for the new Syria.

Moreover, the Turkish State, as an occupying power in several Syrian territories, particularly in the Afrin region, must:

- Comply with the special articles of the Fourth Geneva Convention (50 and 94). The two articles expressly stipulate the duty of the occupying power to facilitate the work of educational institutions in occupied areas, ensure the continuation of education, guarantee that children and adolescents continue to have access to education and the use of their mother tongue, and provide teaching staff that would help students learn their mother tongue, which is the Kurdish language in the Afrin region.
 - Prohibit all measures and changes that lead to restricting a minority group's enjoyment of the right to learn and use their mother tongue in religious and national ceremonies, as well as in daily life.
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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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