

► Torture in the Peace Spring Strip: A Tool for Persecution and the Perpetuation of Forced Displacement



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For Truth  
& Justice



## **Torture in the Peace Spring Strip: A Tool for Persecution and the Perpetuation of Forced Displacement**

*This report builds on the testimonies of 62 victims, who were tortured and ill-treated by Syrian armed opposition groups in the areas of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad*

## Executive Summary

This report is based on **62** testimonies collected over 2022 by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) from survivors of torture in the areas of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad, which fell under the control of the Syrian armed opposition groups and the Turkish military following the offensive code-named Peace Spring in 2019.

Notably, this report is the second to be published under a larger project STJ and local partners have embarked on in 2021 in support of the victims of torture across Syria, particularly its northern territories. The first [joint report](#) was titled “**Arbitrary Detention and Torture are a Systemic Oppression Policy in Northwestern Syria**”. It presented the testimonies of **40** victims who were subjected to arbitrary arrest and torture by several Syrian armed opposition groups in northwest Syria in 2021.

The testimonies STJ obtained for the current report reveal that the **62** interviewed victims were tortured, ill-treated, and insulted. The victims confirmed that they were slapped on their faces, bunched, kicked, beaten with sticks, flogged with thick cables, electrocuted, burned with cigarettes, and subjected to the *al-Shabeh* using blanco torture method.

The testimony analysis STJ carried out demonstrates the blatant targeting of Kurds. Ethnically, the interviewed victims comprised **46** Kurds and **16** Arabs.

Even though the majority of the armed groups affiliated with the opposition’s Syrian National Army (SNA) were involved in the arbitrary arrests and the practice of torture, the names of specific groups were more recurrent than others in the victims’ accounts. These were:

- The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division,<sup>1</sup> accused of at least **20** cases of torture, ill-treatment, and degradation.
- The Sultan Murad Division,<sup>2</sup> accused of at least **12** cases.
- The Mu'tasim Division,<sup>3</sup> accused of at least **8** cases.

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<sup>1</sup> It was formed in April 2016. It is led by **Sayf Abu Bakr**. It is part of the 2nd corps of the Syrian National Army (SNA), affiliated with the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). It is active in northern rural Aleppo, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Libya’s Tripoli. The Division participated in all of the Turkish military operations in Syria, including Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring against the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). For additional information about the arrests and torture cases perpetrated by the Division, see:

“Afrin: How Eight Women were Forcibly Disappeared by the Hamza Division?”, STJ, 3 August 2020 (Last visited: 22 June 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-how-eight-women-were-forcibly-disappeared-by-the-hamza-division/>

<sup>2</sup> It was formed in March 2015. It is heavily supported by Turkey and led by **Fahim Eissa**, who was granted Turkish nationality. It is part of the 2nd corps of the Syrian National Army (SNA), affiliated with the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). It is active in northern rural Aleppo, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Libya’s Tripoli. What distinguished the Division from the other armed group is having Turkmen members. The Division participated in all of the Turkish military operations in Syria, including Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring against the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Reportedly, the former Turkish Minister of the Interior, Süleyman Soylu, visited the Division headquarters in Syria several times. For additional information about the violations perpetrated by the Division, see:

“‘Sultan Murad’ Division Kills Man Displaced from Rural Aleppo and Seizes His Factory in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê”, STJ, 13 May 2020 (Last visited: 22 June 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/sultan-murad-division-kills-man-displaced-from-rural-aleppo-and-seizes-his-factory-in-ras-al-ayn-sere-kaniye/>

<sup>3</sup> It was formed in December 2015 under the leadership of **al-Mu'tasim Abbas**. It operates mainly in Marea city and has a presence in northern rural Aleppo, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Libya’s Tripoli. The Division participated in all of the Turkish military operations in Syria, including Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring against the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The al-

Several victims confirmed that, on the surface, the involved armed groups deprived them of their liberty and subsequently subjected them to torture and/or ill-treatment on the alleged charges of their affiliation to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)—more specifically to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which controlled the two areas until October 2019. However, the victims' accounts demonstrate that the actual reasons that propelled the arrests and torture were primarily monetary. The testimonies corroborate that the armed groups initiated the arrests to financially blackmail the victims, coerce them into paying them ransoms, and ultimately force them to abandon their properties and flee their home areas.

It is worth mentioning that the violations this report documents are at odds with the Türkiye-U.S. Ceasefire agreement in Northeast Syria, signed on 17 October 2019. In provision 4 of the agreement, “[t]he two countries reiterate their pledge to uphold human life, human rights, and the protection of religious and ethnic communities.”<sup>4</sup>

Notably, the horrifying accounts the victims gave are consistent with the widespread arrests and cases of torture that numerous international and local organizations have documented as having been committed by all parties to the conflict across Syria.

In its March 2023 report,<sup>5</sup> the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria monitored that arbitrary detention and concurrent use of torture remain rampant in areas controlled by the Government of Syria, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the SDF, and the SNA. Regarding the SNA-held areas, including Kurdish populated Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, the Commission said: “It has reasonable grounds to believe that SNA members continued to arbitrarily deprive individuals of liberty, and hold detainees incommunicado and some in a manner tantamount to enforced disappearance. SNA members also continued to commit torture, including rape, and cruel treatment, murder, hostage-taking and pillaging, all of which may amount to separate war crimes.”

Additionally, Human Rights Watch reported that “Turkey and the SNA have arrested and illegally transferred at least 63 Syrian nationals from northeast Syria to Turkey to face trial on serious charges that could lead to life in prison.”<sup>6</sup>

For their part, in a March 2022 joint report, STJ and Synergy Association documented that over 120 people disappeared following the Turkish operation Peace Spring in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

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Mu'tasim Division used to receive support from the Military Operations Command (MOC) (Turkish: Müşterek Operasyon Merkezi (MOM)). For additional information about the Division's involvement in arbitrary arrests, see: “Afrin: Including Five Women, 66 Persons Arrested in January 2020”, STJ, 14 February 2020 (Last visited: 22 June 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-including-five-women-66-persons-arrested-in-january-2020/>

<sup>4</sup> “The United States and Turkey Agree to Ceasefire in Northeast Syria”, Trump White House Archives, 17 October 2019. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-turkey-agree-ceasefire-northeast-syria/>

<sup>5</sup> The report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syrian, 13 March 2023. A/HRC/52/69. Paras: 86-104. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation>

<sup>6</sup> “Illegal Transfers of Syrians to Turkey”, HRW, 3 February 2021 (Last visited: 18 June 2023). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/03/illegal-transfers-syrians-turkey>

<sup>7</sup> “Northeast Syria: More than 120 People Disappeared Following Operation Peace Spring”, STJ, 28 March 2022 (Last visited: 18 June 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/northeast-syria-more-than-120-people-disappeared-following-operation-peace-spring/>

## Methodology

This report builds on **62** testimonies that STJ collected between March and December **2022**. The field researchers with STJ met with the vast majority of the interviewees in person in northeast Syria, and only reached out to a few online.

Of the total interviewees, **52** were direct victims, among them **7** women, and **10** were relatives of victims and survivors, including **4** women. Notably, a female field researcher carried out face-to-face interviews with female victims in keeping with STJ's gender-responsive policies. Moreover, STJ concealed the identities of the interviewees for their safety, especially those who have relatives in SNA-held areas.

Furthermore, several of the interviewed victims consented to sharing their testimonies with international entities, including the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, and Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. They also agreed to share their accounts with national and international courts that may have jurisdiction in the future to consider the violations perpetrated across Syria, including the abuses this report documents.

Importantly, over the course of the interviewing process, STJ provided the survivors with various forms of assistance, including legal, medical, psychological, and social support. After the interviews, STJ helped a group of victims join a monthslong professional rehabilitation program aimed at their integration into the local job market. The majority of the victims who joined the program were internally displaced persons (IDPs), who fled their hometowns during Operation Peace Spring in 2019.

## Legal Opinion and Recommendations

### The Perspective of Syrian Legislation

The de facto forces in the areas covered by this report have themselves announced that their Turkish-financed courts apply Syrian laws—especially those issued before 2011.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, STJ legal experts will characterize the violations this report documents in the Peace Spring Strip from the perspective of these laws.

The Operative 2011 Syrian Constitution—replicating several texts and principles underpinning previous Syrian constitutions—has prohibited torture, rendered it an act punishable by the law, and delegated the designation of penalties to domestic laws.

Consequently, the 1949 Syrian Penal Code No. 148, in its Article 391, has stipulated that: **“Anyone who subjects a person to illegal acts of hardship with a view to obtaining from him a confession to an offense or information pertaining thereto shall be liable to a penalty of detention for a term of three months to three years. If such acts of hardship cause sickness or wounds, the minimum penalty shall be one year in detention.”**

Additionally, torture is often treated as an aggravating circumstance when accompanying another crime. For instance, Article 545 of the Penal Code imposes a harsher penalty against

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<sup>8</sup> The report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syrian, 31 January 2019. A/HRC/40/70. Paras: 69&70. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation>

murders, when accompanied by acts of torture or cruelty. Similarly, Article 556 of the code pushes for a severer penalty for the crime of deprivation of liberty, when the victim is correspondingly subjected to physical or mental torture.

Within this legal framework, the cited texts apply to the vast majority, if not all, of the torture cases documented in this report. The perpetrators did not only carry out the arrests and detentions without a reason, but they also had vile motives. The perpetrators intended to collect the most lucrative sums of money in ransoms in exchange for the release of the victims or to force them into fleeing their hometowns and properties.

## The Perspective of International Law

At a time when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is considering Canada and the Kingdom of the Netherlands' joint [application](#) instituting proceedings against the Syrian Arab Republic concerning alleged violations of the [Convention against Torture](#) and pursuant duties, victims subjected to torture, inhuman, and degrading treatment in the areas controlled by the Turkish occupation and affiliated armed groups are denied access to their inherent rights and the protection granted to them under international law.

The violations presented in this report, as well as those documented in numerous other reports, make it abundantly clear that torture and inhumane treatment by these armed groups are not isolated incidents but rather amount to being a part of a systematic and widespread policy that coincides with other likely violations and crimes directed blatantly against a specific ethnic community, in this case the Kurds, for the purpose of persecution. Even though torture and inhuman treatment are crimes in and of themselves, what the residents of the occupied territories are subjected to by Türkiye requires not only consideration of the individual criminal responsibility of those who carry out these possible crimes but also consideration of the responsibility of the Turkish State for what could be considered “internationally wrongful acts” because those acts are likely to be attributed to it in the sense explained in the 2001 Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts of the International Law Commission.<sup>9</sup>

The prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment as a peremptory norm in international law entails obligations that cannot be relinquished or reduced by any party,<sup>10</sup> whether a State or a non-State armed group.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the duty of those authorities to prevent and not practice torture, they must hold accountable those involved in the practice and provide effective remedies for victims, including restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation, among others. However, the reality of the situation, as the testimonies show in this report, indicates that torture and inhuman treatment are used for various direct purposes, including coercion to obtain confessions and information, extortion, threatening other people, or accessing material gains. However, the general context emerges in light of a continuous pattern of manifestations of persecution that reflects not only the policy of the armed groups directly involved but also the policy of the occupying power.

Torture and inhuman treatment do not only invoke the responsibility of the perpetrators of these practices. They also call for the responsibility of other countries to confront these

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<sup>9</sup> International Law Commission, ‘Draft Articles on State Responsibility’, UN Doc. A/CN.4/L.602/Rev.1 (26 July 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The [Convention against Torture](#), Article (2)2.

<sup>11</sup> ICRC Study, Customary International Humanitarian Law, Rule 90.

internationally wrongful acts and work to stop them, hold their perpetrators to account, and redress victims. Torture and inhuman treatment are considered crimes that affect the human conscience of the international community as a whole. Moreover, because they are acts attributed to the occupying State—either through direct perpetration or via its proxies of the armed groups under its control, or because of its failure to adhere to its obligation to prevent and suppress these practices and hold those involved in them accountable—States are called to take practical positions to confront these practices. The law of State Responsibility provides for the right of States affected by internationally wrongful acts attributable to a State to take countermeasures against that State until it ceases violating its obligations under international law and makes necessary reparations targeting—in the case of torture—the direct individuals affected by those violations as ultimate beneficiaries.<sup>12</sup>

The duty of the international community to address crimes that affect the human conscience can only be fulfilled through effective deterrent measures. Otherwise, these practices will proceed and their perpetrators and those responsible for them will continue to escape punishment, while the number of victims increases and the societal rift deepens, undermining efforts seeking to achieve sustainable peace in Syria.

## Recommendations

- The international community, especially members of the UN Security Council, must act immediately to stop acts of torture and cruel and degrading punishments committed in the Turkish-backed SNA-held areas and other Syrian territories under different control. Ending these practices is considered one of the core tasks of the Security Council, which seeks to achieve international peace and security, as it is impossible to talk about peace and security in the shadow of these ongoing violations.
- The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria and the International, Independent and Impartial Mechanism should intensify reporting on acts of torture and cruel and inhuman treatment committed by the Syrian government, the opposition's SNA, and other de facto authorities in Syria.
- The U.S. must take appropriate countermeasures because Türkiye is committing internationally wrongful acts against the U.S. by violating the U.S.-Turkish [agreement of 2019](#), especially with regard to its pledge to protect human rights and religious and ethnic minorities in the region, as well as ensuring the protection of civilians in its areas of control.
- The SNA-affiliated armed groups, operating under the Ministry of Defense in the Syrian Interim Government, must end torture, cruel and degrading treatment, arbitrary detention, and other violations they are perpetrating against civilians in the areas they control. Additionally, these armed groups must grant access to their prisons and detention facilities to local and international entities and organizations concerned with monitoring and documenting these abuses. Furthermore, they must release all those detained arbitrarily, let them communicate with their loved ones about their whereabouts, and give them access to lawyers.
- As the political overarching body for the Syrian Interim Government and its military factions, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces must denounce these abuses and direct the involved factions to cease perpetrating these crimes.

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<sup>12</sup> ILC Draft Articles Commentary, Article 33, p. 95.

- Syrian civil society organizations should step up documentation of torture, inhuman treatment, arbitrary arrests and other violations committed by the SNA-affiliated armed groups in the areas they dominate.

## Torture Methods in Detention Facilities

The testimonies STJ collected for this report revealed that the vast majority of the victims were subjected to a range of brutal torture methods. As for their time in detention, the victims were held for periods spanning days to months.

Some of the interviewed victims said they were beaten across the body, adding that they were slapped on the face, bunched, or kicked. Others narrated that they were hit with sticks or with rifles' butts or flogged with thick cables or plastic pipes, locally known as "Lakhdar Brahim". A number recounted that they were electrocuted, given burns, or subjected to the *al-Shabeh* with a blanco,<sup>13</sup> *Dolab* (tire),<sup>14</sup> or *Farouj* (chicken on a spit) torture techniques.<sup>15</sup>

A Kurdish victim from a village in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê's western suburbs was detained twice by the Sultan Murad Division.<sup>16</sup> The armed group arrested and detained him because his brother was a fighter with the People's Protection Units (YPG) before and after Operation Peace Spring. He narrated that upon his first arrest, members of the Division told him they would not free him until after his brother had surrendered himself. On the second arrest, the Division demanded that his family pay a ransom of 10,000 USD in return for his release.

The victim was held at a detention facility on the Industrial Zone Road, leading to al-Dirbasiyah town. On the conditions in the facility and the torture methods he was subjected to by the Division's members, he narrated:

"I was tortured for four days in a row, for nearly two hours a day [. . .] I remember that instance when I blacked out after they burned parts of my body [. . .] They threw me in front of our house's door in the village. They asked my family to pay them 10,000 USD. We could not afford that sum back then. So, they detained me again nearly a week later. [They kept me in detention], until my family gathered the money and paid them."

The victim's second arrest occurred in January 2020. He spent nearly a week in detention and was exposed to different torture methods. For instance, he was lashed with a whip and sprayed with cold water.

Another source that STJ met for the report is the father of a Kurdish detainee. His son, who had multiple impairments, returned to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city with his mother to check on their house in the al-Mahattah Neighborhood. The father relayed his wife's account of the visit and what happened with their son in the city:

"They had not yet crossed the house door when a high-pitched voice filled the place. The person said, 'Nothing of yours is here in this house!' When my wife turned around, she saw four young males, roughly of the same height, and carrying arms. She answered

<sup>13</sup> The detainee is hung from the wrists by a pulley (Blanco) rope roller, then hit and left to swing.

<sup>14</sup> The detainee is stuffed into a vehicle tire, rendered unable to move, and then hit on various parts of the body.

<sup>15</sup> The detainee's wrists are tied to his/her feet before being hoisted in the air from a wooden or metal pillar in an imitation of a rotisserie used to roast meat.

<sup>16</sup> The interview was carried out in March 2022.

them, 'As you wish, we have nothing here.' She tried to get our son out, but he refused. He addressed them, saying, 'I will come in. This is my house.' They attacked and severely hit him. He fell to the ground. They kept kicking and beating him with water hoses. [His mother] tried to get him out of their clutches. However, one of them put the muzzle of a rifle to [my son's] neck and threatened to kill him if she did not back down. Then they took him somewhere unknown."

The father added:

"We reached out to our Arab friends, who remained in the city [after the military operation], to obtain information about our son's situation and to see whether they could hand him his prescriptions. He had cerebral palsy, right-sided paralysis, hypoxia, and vision impairment. Indeed, our friends managed to communicate with a person [called Sh. Abu Ahmad], the commander of the sub-group under the al-Hamzat Division that controls the neighborhood. He is from Homs. (Sh) told our friends that he would deliver the medications to my son and that they had him detained and would release him soon. We remain unsure whether he really gave our son his medications or not. Additionally, when our friends asked about our son again, (Sh) told them that he would arrest them too if they ever inquired about him again."

Heartbroken, the father said that they waited seven months for the slightest clue about their son, who was detained by the SNA-affiliated al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division. Nevertheless, their hope was shattered when they learned that their son died from beatings and torture only a week after his arrest. The father added that the detaining group never handed them their son's body or evidence of his death.

An Arab survivor, who worked in Raqqa city and visited his family in Tell Abyad every month, was arrested by members of an armed group on the alleged charge of "espionage for the SDF." The victim was released only after his father paid the members 3.5 million Syrian Pound (3,500 USD at the time). He narrated:

"It was during the month of Ramadan. Nearly half an hour before *Iftar* (the fast-breaking meal corresponding to evening prayer), I heard loud noises. Just then, five armed men stormed our house, searching for me. They brutally beat me in front of my family and children, who were horrified by the sight and started to scream."

After the barbaric beating he suffered in front of his family, members—whom later he learned belonged to the Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd—took him to a detention facility in Tell Abyad, known as *al-Mukafaha* (Control) Prison. The victim spoke about the conditions in the facility and torture he suffered there:

"They tied my hands and suspended me by the wrists from the room's ceiling. Then they began flogging me with a thick cable for over two hours. They kept me hanging up there and left. I had a feeling that my back was bleeding because the pain was excruciating and the sweat only made it worse. I remained suspended until the next day. After two months in that detention center, which I later knew was called al-Mukafaha Prison in Tell Abyad, I was transferred to the Tell Abyad al-Kabir (Grand) Prison. There, they put me in solitary detention. The next day, three individuals came in; I identified them as three through their voices. One of them spoke Turkish. They interrogated me. The Turkish individual asked the questions, and another individual tackled the interpretation. They interrogated me about whether I was an SDF agent or whether I planned blasts in the

city. I held to my initial statement, namely, that I was a civilian and innocent of those charges. Then, an individual addressed me in Arabic and asked, 'Where does your body hurt?' I answered, 'My back is killing me.' He pushed me to the ground while blindfolded. Then they started kicking me on the back until I lost consciousness in front of the Turkish officer."

He also narrated how the wardens blindfolded him and led him to a different room in the same facility. Then, with the help of other jailers, they again suspended him from the ceiling. He added:

"Before the jailers left the room, I heard a dog approach the cell. Then the door was shut. I felt the dog nipping at my toes as I was raised above ground level. I screamed at the top of my lungs in pain [. . .]. Sometime later, a gunman came in, took the dog out, and made me sign a paper, the contents of which I did not know. He asked me, 'Do you realize what you just signed?' I replied, 'No!' He said, 'It is an ownership document for your house, and you have just sold it.' I was so distressed that I cried. However, I later discovered that he was fooling me, that this was a method of torture, and that I had not signed such a piece of paper."

## Violence against Women

Based on at least two testimonies of the female victims STJ interviewed for this report, verbal abuse, harassment, and beating were used by armed men as tools to scare women out of their properties in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city. The properties were among numerous confiscated after owners fled hostilities during Operation Peace Spring in 2019.

Notably, the victims' reports complement earlier documentation of the instrumentalization of violence against IDP women in the area. In an October 2022 report,<sup>17</sup> STJ cited two cases of women harassed and violently denied access to their seized homes in the city by members of armed groups in control. Additionally, in a June 2022 report, STJ verified the involvement of fighters in several cases of sexual abuse against IDP women, who tried to relocate from the areas held by AANES to those held by opposition armed groups in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.<sup>18</sup>

One of the Kurdish female survivors interviewed for this report tried to return to her home in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, which she fled during Operation Peace Spring in 2019. However, upon arrival, she was shocked to see her house occupied by bearded militants. Additionally, the house contents were looted, especially expensive furniture. Then she headed to her grandparents' home. There too, she was surprised by a stout gunman who had seized the house. Upon learning that the house belonged to her grandparents, the armed man told her:

"[Your] aunt is a traitor. She worked for international rights organizations against us. We confirmed that through the information we found on her computer."

<sup>17</sup> "Syria: 'Get out of Here before You See Things You Would Not Like, and Never Return!'", STJ, 8 October 2022 (Last visited: 23 June 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-get-out-of-here-before-you-see-things-you-would-not-like-and-never-return/>

<sup>18</sup> "Peace Spring: Violations Against Women at Opposition-Run Smuggling Points", STJ, 20 June 2022 (Last visited: 23 June 2023). <https://stj-sy.org/en/peace-spring-violations-against-women-at-opposition-run-smuggling-points/>

She attempted to refute the charges and protest the profane language the gunman used to speak about her aunt. In response, the gunman pushed her to the floor and fired his rifle, aiming between her legs. She was left horrified. On this, she narrated:

“When he threw me down on the ground, I felt an acute pain in my back and abdomen. I then started to bleed. I immediately called the driver, who brought me to the city and asked him to pick me up. On the way back, I had a severe hemorrhage caused by the fear and horror that gripped me. I was two months pregnant and lost my baby.”

A second Kurdish woman wanted to get her home back and was violently forced to relinquish it. Turkish-backed opposition armed groups had seized her home after Operation Peace Spring in 2019. She narrated the details of her journey to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê:

“We arrived in Ras al-Ayn in the morning. At one of the military checkpoints, armed members opened the door of our bus. They asked whether any pigs (in reference to Kurds) were in the bus [ . . . ]. None of us dared declare our ethnicity, fearing a likely assault. We crossed seven checkpoints. At several of these barriers, the personnel showered Kurds with insults.”

She added that she sought a Military Council, operated by opposition armed groups in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city, to obtain a security permit. She needed the permit to return to her house in one of the city’s northern neighborhoods. She narrated:

“Upon entering the neighborhood I used to live in, I could clearly see that the area witnessed extensive looting operations. I also saw houses spray-painted with phrases that declared ownership of the armed groups, which divided the properties of the local owners amongst themselves. When I entered my home, I was stunned, as there was nothing left [ . . . ]. The furniture was stolen, and a number of rooms were almost destroyed in the mortar shelling. I was shocked and distressed over the loss of my belongings [ . . . ]. Suddenly, I heard the strong, rough voice of a person asking, ‘Who is there?’ I left the room to see a gunman with a long beard, hair reaching the shoulders, and a hefty body. With a sneering grin on his face, he asked me: ‘Where is your *Muhram* (A relative male companion)?’ I answered, ‘This is my house. I came with my husband, who just went out to bring some items and will be back in a minute.’ I told him that to drive him to leave because his abusive examination of my body was terrifying. He gazed at me passionately and drew closer. I panicked and was about to faint. I began shaking. So, he hit me on my lower back with the butt of the rifle, and said, ‘You look so young.’ I slapped him. He slapped me back and shoved me to the ground. He insulted me using foul language. I started to scream. In response, he blocked my mouth with his boots and threatened to rape me if I made a sound. He said that he stays nearby and that he will confront me if I ever return again. I left the house immediately because it was no longer safe and there were no doors left to shut myself off; even the doors were looted. While I wandered the neighborhood’s streets in search for a passer-by to help me leave the city [ . . . ], I saw a family preparing to leave and begged them to take me with them. I left with them; they were residents of the city, [Arabs from the al-Hilo household]. They drove me to Tal Tamer town. There, I admitted myself to a health center and spent the night there. In the early morning, I took the bus and headed to Raqqa, to the Mahmoudli IDP camp, where I live now.”

## Victim Demographics

Analyzing the testimonies, which ground this report, STJ found out that the vast majority of the torture victims are Kurds. However, members of the area's Arab community were not spared the violations that Turkish-backed SNA-affiliated armed groups have committed, albeit at a lower rate. The number of Kurdish victims reached **48**, while the number of Arab victims was **16**, out of **62**.

Geographically, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad had the highest number of torture victims, with **42** and **15**, respectively. STJ documented the other incidents across Syria, with **three** from al-Hasakah city, **one** from Kobani/Ayn al-Arab city, **one** from Raqqa city, and **one** from Tal Tamer town.

In terms of gender, STJ observed that men were targeted at a higher rate than women, with **7** women tortured at the hands of the reported armed groups out of 62 victims. The remaining **54** victims were men. The incarceration of these women lasted only a few hours, as opposed to men, who were deprived of their liberty for days, months, and even over a year or two.

As for the academic backgrounds, the arrest and torture affected the victims regardless of their level of education. Out of the 62 victims, **10** were non-schooled, **17** had elementary school certificates, **16** had middle school certificates, **9** had high school certificates, and **10** had university and higher institution degrees. Moreover, all **62** victims are Muslims.

Regarding the targeted age groups, STJ noticed that the arrests and torture were arbitrary since the perpetrators' primary purpose was to profiteer and force the victims and their families to flee the area. Even the elderly were not immune to these violations, as there were five incidents involving adults over the age of 70 and three above 60.

## Perpetrators of Reported Cases

Most of the witnesses STJ interviewed were unable to identify the individuals who tortured them. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of the interviewees identified the military group that carried out the detention. Four sources named the SNA as the responsible party without being able to identify the name of the exact armed group. The rest of the witnesses and victims were able to determine the name of the faction, corps, or battalion and the involved armed group based on the areas of control of each group, as well as the ransom payment processes, as they had to contact the members of these groups. Additionally, some witnesses were able to identify the name of the armed group through badges on the militants' uniforms and cars and flags they displayed, whether during the arrest or in the detention centers.

Furthermore, 18 victims did not know the genuine names or aliases of those who tortured them. The rest of the witnesses, on the other hand, knew the names or nicknames of those who tortured them. They gained access to this information because they heard the individuals involved address each other by name, during the arrest or as they were tortured. Notably, some of these names or nicknames were recurrent in the accounts of these witnesses. For instance, four victims cited a name or a nickname (withheld by STJ) as a perpetrator.

#	Perpetrators of Detention and Ill-treatment	Number of Cases
1	The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division	20
2	The Sultan Murad Division	12
3	The Mu'tasim Division	8
4	Military Police <sup>19</sup>	6
5	Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Free Men of the East <sup>20</sup>	4
6	The Northern Hawks Brigade <sup>21</sup>	4
7	Civil Police <sup>22</sup>	3
8	Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba <sup>23</sup>	3
9	SNA-affiliated security office	2
10	Al-Hasakah Shield Brigade <sup>24</sup>	1
11	The Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham <sup>25</sup>	1
12	The Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd <sup>26</sup>	1

<sup>19</sup> It was established in March 2014 with direct support from Ankara. It operates under the Syrian National Army (SNA) and has a countering terrorism office, a complaints office, a Divan section and an investigation section. Its principal functions are holding the SNA members accountable and pursuing SDF and Islamic State members. It is active in northern rural Aleppo and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city. the majority of its members are former fighters in the SNA.

<sup>20</sup> It was formed in January 2016 under the leadership of **Ahmed Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes**, nicknamed **Abu Hatim Shaqra**. However, the latter has disassociated himself from the faction, only officially, after the U.S. sanctions in July 2021. The faction is part of the Syrian National Army (SNA's) 1st Corps and it is active in Afrin, al-Bab, Jarabulus and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. The faction united with other Syrian eastern factions in Liberation and Construction Movement, and it fought alongside the Turkish Army in Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring against the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

<sup>21</sup> It was established in early September 2012 as a division of the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya, affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA's) 1st Corps, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Division. It is called Brigade 224. Ahmed Haj Ali (Ahmed Al-Khairiya), who is now deceased, founded the brigade. The brigade's current commander is **Hassan Haj Ali (Hassan al-Khairiya)**. The brigade was established in Jabal al-Zawiya, Idlib Province, Syria. It is currently deployed in A'zaz as its main headquarters, and has a presence in Afrin.

<sup>22</sup> It was established in 2017 and trained by Turkey for its deployment in the countryside of Aleppo's Operation Euphrates Shield. Despite having the same name as the one set up by the Syrian armed opposition in Aleppo in 2013, it is different. Its duties include "taking over all of the FSA military checkpoints at the city and town entrances, conducting regular patrols, promoting the role of the traffic police, managing the traffic, and establishing an immediate-action rapid-deployment teams." For additional information, see:

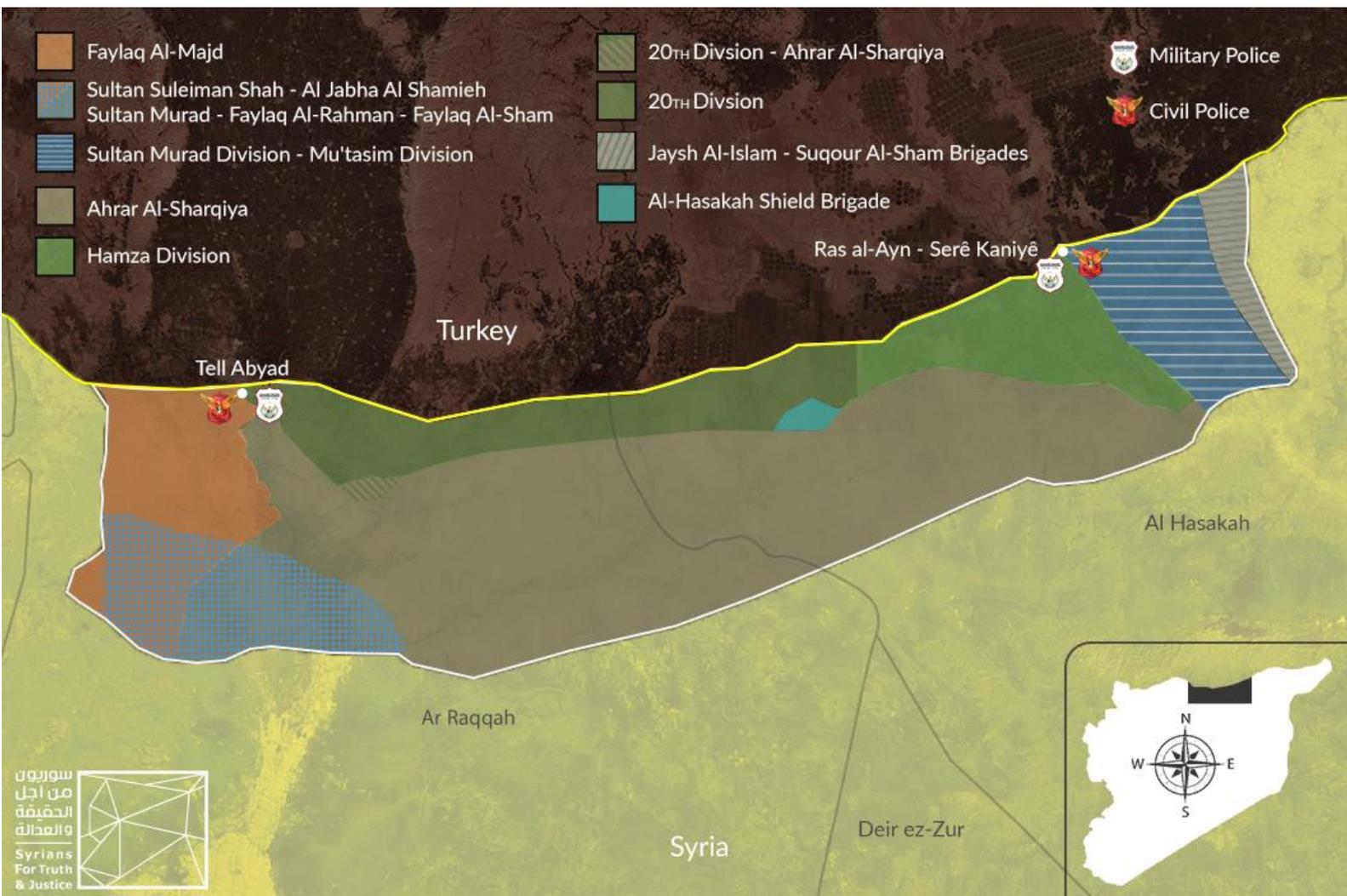
"Free Syrian Army getting backup from Turkish-trained police". Al-Monitor, 22 March 2017 (Last visited: 24 June 2023). <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/03/turkey-trained-free-syrian-police-deployed-in-northern-aleppo.html#ixzz85Yk1V5nz>

<sup>23</sup> The Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba (formerly the Liberation Army/Jaysh al-Tahrir) was formed in January 2017. It is part of the Syrian National Army (SNA's) 1st corps and they both are currently led by **Moutaz Arslan**. The Army is operating in northern rural Aleppo, Libya's Tripoli and it deployed in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê after its participation in Operation Peace Spring.

<sup>24</sup> It was established in 2016 under the leadership of **Hassan al-Laili**. It participated in all of the Turkish military operations in Syria, including Operation Olive Branch (Afrin), and Operation Peace Spring (Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad). Most of its fighters are from the city of al-Hasakah and its suburbs. It is part of the Syrian National Army.

<sup>25</sup> It was formed in March 2014 under the leadership of **Mondher Saras**, member of the Astana Delegation. The group is active in Idlib city and suburbs, northern and western rural Aleppo, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city, and Libya's Tripoli. The group has good links with the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), who backs it on Idlib fronts. It is known that the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham shares with the HTS the weapons it receives from the Turkish Army deployed in Idlib.

<sup>26</sup> It was established in 2019 under the leadership of **Yamen Taljo**, the former commander of the 10th Brigade and the northern sector of the Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam in Idlib. Taljo left the army after an attack by Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front terminated its presence in northern Syria. Then he obtained Turkish support and formed the



STJ-designed map locating military control territories across the Peace Spring strip, which covers the areas of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tell Abyad.

## Purposes of Torture According to Victims

The largest number of witnesses said that they were detained and/or subjected to torture for either of the three alleged charges of affiliation with the AANES, fighting within the ranks of the SDF, or carrying out or planning suicide attacks in the region. However, the witnesses stressed that the real reason was to force them or their relatives to pay sums of money (ransoms) to the armed group involved in the violation in return for their release. Notably, the attitude of the person in charge of the arrest determines whether or not the release will occur. They may agree to accept only a portion of the ransom or insist on the full sum. The witnesses added that raids and arrests were often accompanied by the theft of money and valuables from the victims' homes.

Glory Corps/Faylaq al-Majd which enlisted several of the fighters pursued by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The corps participated in Operation Peace Spring.

One of the witnesses was arrested by the Military Police for 27 days. He said that he was coerced to pay a lucrative sum of money in exchange for his release, even though he was detained without a reason. He narrated:

“In mid-2020, I returned to my city [of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê] to check on my properties. I visited the SNA-affiliated Military Police Branch on the Industrial Zone-al-Dirbasiyah Road. I wanted to obtain a written security permit that would allow me to move what was left of my house's furniture to al-Hasakah. However, once I arrived at the branch, the personnel arrested me on the allegation of being a Kurd dealing with the SDF. They held me in their prison for 24 days. Later, they relocated me to the Central Prison behind the Power Plant in al-Hawarneh Neighborhood. I spent three days in that prison. After 27 days of detention, during which I endured constant beatings and torture, they brought me before the Military Police Court. They released me after I paid them a ransom of 400USD. They claimed they found no evidence to convict me.”

A second survivor was detained for 15 days. He too was forced to pay a ransom for his release after he was arrested by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division. He described the first moments of his arrest:

“One day in January 2020, my home in Tal Half town was raided at around 2:00 a.m. by a group of gunmen. Later, I learned they were affiliated with al-Hamza Division. [They invaded my home] barbarically and showed no respect for my privacy. They tied my hands, directed their rifles at my face, tampered with my furniture, and stole valuables.”

He added:

“Fifteen days into my arrest, the cell door was opened, and in came a gunman called [A. Z.]. He had a Deir ez-Zor accent. He said, ‘You must pay a sum of 400 USD if you want to get out of here. I can help you.’ I agreed instantly. I called my wife using his cell phone. I told her to reach out to my uncle in the city to collect the demanded money and immediately come to the Abdurrahman al-Ghafiqi School. Indeed, my uncle showed up on the same day. I was released right away.”

Through the testimony analysis, STJ observed another arrest pattern. Several victims were arrested without charges, whereby they were detained only to be coerced into leaving the area and their properties to the controlling armed group.

]One of the victims was arrested when he visited the Central Prison in Tell Abyad to inquire into the situation of his son held there. His son was arrested and detained because he refused to evacuate his house at the orders of SNA members who wanted to transform it into a military center. The victim narrated:

“During my detention, I was tortured for 12 days. They first took me to the room of a person called *al-Mu’alim* (The master). He is one of their commanders, or the prison officer. There, they sat me on the floor in front of the officer, who was in his chair. He said, ‘You will vanish now. And we shall never see you in the area again.’ He meant that I should leave the area and never return. Then he addressed his members, saying, ‘Take him back to his home. He must leave the house within a few hours only.’ They did return me home. However, a military patrol stood guard across from the house, waiting until I took my wife and daughters and left home with nothing except for personal and identity documents. We even left our clothes behind. I was coerced to abandon my house, fearing for my life and the lives of my family members.”

A third witness, a local of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, narrated how his old father (born in 1946) was arrested. The father died only a few months after his release, affected by the torture he suffered in detention. The father originally had cerebral atrophy, and torture caused his blood pressure to rise, leading to his death. The son recounted:

“My father returned to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê after the military hostilities halted. He wanted to check on our properties and live in our house in the Zor Ava neighborhood. The day he arrived; I received a call from his cell phone. When I answered, I heard someone speaking Arabic. The caller did not introduce himself, and through his accent, I detected that he was a resident of the area. He said, ‘Ahmad, your father has been arrested. He is with us now,’ and hang up [. . .]. The same person called me two days later. Later, I learned that the caller was a militant of an SNA-affiliated armed group, likely the Sultan Murad Division. The Division controlled the area at the time. He demanded a sum of two million Syrian Pound (nearly 2800 USD) in return for my father’s release [. . .]. We paid the money. My father was released and expelled from the area towards the SDF-held Abu Rasain/Zarkan town [. . .]. He died later, affected by torture and ill-treatment.”

The fourth witness was arrested three times by the Mu'tasim Division. Like all three witnesses cited above, he too said that his arrest, the torture, and the degrading treatment he was subjected to were all used to facilitate the seizure of his house and force him to abandon his city, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. He narrated:

“In January 2020, I managed to recover my house in Zor Ava neighborhood from the commander of the Mu'tasim Division after I paid 490,000 Syrian Pounds. However, only a few hours had passed before I was arrested from home. They led me on foot to the al-Za'im Market, which they have emptied of food items and transformed into a center for themselves. There, they asked for my ID. When they examined the ID, they spat on it and threw it in my face. One of them said, ‘You are a Kurdish pig, born in Amuda. What brought you to Ras al-Ayn?’ I replied, ‘This is my city, and this is my home.’ They all started hitting me. They kicked me in the stomach and genitals. They left me stretched on the floor, screaming in pain. They returned nearly three hours later and released me.”

However, the same armed members arrested the witness the next day. This time, they led him to his brother’s house, which they had turned into a military center. There, they beat and insulted him again before they let him go. The same members came back at night and arrested him for the third time. They took him to his neighbor, Suleiman al-Doushi's, house, which they had transformed into a military center and prison. On the third arrest, the witness narrated:

“The only purpose of the arrest and torture was to force me into fleeing the area. I was tortured by three masked gunmen. They kicked me in the stomach and genitals. They bunched me in the face and head. They pulled my ears until they were sour. Then they left me alone and did not return for a whole day. I was starving and craved water. Over the last few hours at night, I started to black out. After that, two gunmen came in. They neither hit me nor said a word. However, they carried me and stuffed me into the truck of a military vehicle. Within a short distance, in the same neighborhood, they threw me into a tunnel hole they had dug earlier. One of them, a Kurd from A'zaz, said, ‘Spare yourself and just escape. They would not let you live if you remained here.’ It was when I left [the city], never to return. They continue to provoke me. They film themselves in my house and ask me for an impossible ransom of nearly 5000 USD just not to burn it down.”

## ► About STJ:

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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