

## Northern Aleppo: Ongoing Restrictions on Movement and Extortion of Afrin IDPs by Gunmen in Nubl and al-Zahraa



- Abuses by pro-government militias continue undeterred since 2018





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## 1. Background

In this report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) monitors a series of violations committed by armed militia groups in the towns of Nubl and al-Al-Zahraa, located in the northern Aleppo countryside controlled by the Syrian government (GOS). These violations specifically target internally displaced persons (IDPs) who were [forcibly displaced](#) from the former Kurdish-majority region of Afrin due to the 2018 Turkish military operation known as [Operation Olive Branch](#).

The violations include restrictions on the freedom of movement for IDPs and extortion tactics involving the cutting off of vital transportation routes. Members of these armed groups intercept the routes used by Afrin IDPs traveling to Aleppo, as well as those connecting the al-Shahba region and Sherawa. They seize the vehicles and belongings of IDPs, coercing them into complying with their demands or risking the loss of their seized vehicles and the continuation of blockade measures.

The motivations behind these violations vary. Some are financial; displaced individuals are often compelled to pay a ransom to retrieve their seized vehicles or even to buy them back from third parties. Other motives involve pressuring the security forces associated with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) to release militants from the towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa, as well as individuals connected to them who have been arrested in areas under its control.

IDPs from Afrin to the Sherawa villages—located in southeastern Afrin and not under Türkiye’s control during Operation Olive Branch—have no choice but to pass through Nubl and al-Zahraa. These areas serve as a crucial link between the regions held by the AANES. IDPs are forced to use this route to access medical care, conduct governmental procedures, and meet other essential needs in Aleppo. Alternative transit options are often fraught with challenges; some may involve a full day's travel to reach Aleppo, significantly increasing transportation costs and further straining their already [precarious economic situation](#).

Members of these groups set up unofficial checkpoints on the roads between al-Shahba and Sherawa to Aleppo, where they stop cars, question passengers about the regions they come from, and subject those who revealed to be from Afrin to seizure and extortion.

The towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa experienced economic benefits during the first year of the forced displacement of people from Afrin. The influx of displaced individuals increased the population density, which stimulated commercial activity and led to a rise in the rental market. Many men and young men from Afrin were hesitant to relocate to Aleppo due to fears of being compelled to join government forces, whether as conscripts or reserves. However, a significant number of families that had been displaced to Nubl and al-Zahraa were forced to leave within the same year due [to escalating harassment from the local community](#).

The armed groups in Nubl and al-Zahraa have begun to restrict the movement of and detain vehicles belonging to Afrin IDPs traveling to the villages in the Sherawa or the al-Shabaa regions. According to sources interviewed by STJ for this report, these groups continue to commit these violations without any deterrent, largely due to the inability of the military forces affiliated with the Syrian government to address the situation effectively.

The towns of [Nubl and al-Zahraa](#) have a combined population of approximately 70,000 people. They are [located 20 kilometers from the center of Aleppo city](#), along the main road that connects Aleppo to the regions of A'zaz and Afrin. Administratively, these towns are part of A'zaz. In 2013, opposition factions held the towns for three years, taking control of the surrounding areas except for the northern side, which remained under the control of the Autonomous Administration in Afrin. During the siege, the towns [managed to secure some of their needs through merchants in Afrin](#) until military forces allied with the Syrian government lifted the siege in [2016](#), with air support from Russian aircraft.

This report is based on interviews conducted by STJ's researchers with six local sources. These sources include individuals who are knowledgeable about the situation in the region, victims of car theft, and those who have experienced their cars being seized or their belongings or the passengers' stolen. The testimonies cover different periods from 2018 to August 2024, with witnesses confirming that these violations are ongoing.

All interviews were conducted online using a secure communication application. The sources were informed that the interviews were voluntary and were told how the information they provided would be used, including in this report. Due to concerns about reprisals from armed groups in Nubl and al-Zahraa, sources requested anonymity.

During [road interdiction](#) and vehicle seizure, Kurdish IDPs often feel [compelled](#) to comply with the militants' demands. They fear that refusing could lead to more severe consequences, possibly even jeopardizing their lives. This fear is exacerbated by instances where militants use live ammunition to intimidate them. According to witnesses, passengers were previously detained along with the seized cars. However, over the last three years, only the cars have been confiscated while the passengers are released.

## 2. Who are the Militants of Nubl and al-Zahraa?

Despite the presence of pro-Iranian militias in the two [towns](#) and the fact that the area is under the control of the GOS, various sources indicate that these armed groups operate independently of the GOS' authority. In this context, Shiyar Nouri,<sup>1</sup> a Kurdish IDP from Afrin now living in Tall Rifat, states:

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym used at the witness's request in an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher on 19 August 2024.

**“They are uncontrolled armed groups that do not answer to any authority. They drive civilian vehicles and wear civilian clothing, while the militias affiliated with Iran typically wear military attire. These groups previously operated in al-Zahraa in 2018. Generally, the Iran-affiliated militias are not present within the cities; instead, they are positioned on the front lines”.**

The same point is made by Judy Mohammed,<sup>2</sup> a resident of Az-Ziyara village in Sherawa. He states:

**“Despite the presence of a police station, a district center, and security detachments, their effectiveness on the ground is lacking. They do not adequately support the people of Afrin or the residents of Nubl and al-Zahraa. Their role is primarily limited to monitoring activities and recording complaints, and they are unable to return anything [from the seized property].”**

The armed groups in Nubl and al-Zahraa are linked to influential families in these towns, according to Shiyar, who added:

**“The most prominent militias in Nubl and al-Zahraa are linked to the Zam and Sharbo families, although not all of their members. It is important to note that many residents of Nubl and al-Zahraa are also dissatisfied with the current situation. In the areas of al-Shahba, particularly in Tall Rifat, we previously had direct commercial relationships with Nubl and Zahraa. However, due to recurring issues, we decided to discontinue our commercial work with them and turned our focus directly to Aleppo. This decision has negatively impacted the people of Nubl and Zahraa. I have friends in both al-Zahraa and Nubl, and they share their concerns about the situation, as they are affected by these developments.”**

### 3. IDPs as a Bargaining Chip for the Release of Drug Dealers

According to sources for this report, the [drug trade operated by militants of Nubl and al-Zahraa](#) is a significant motive behind their violations. These militants aim to sell part of their drugs in areas controlled by the AANES military forces in north Aleppo while also seeking to [transport another portion to regions controlled by the Turkish army and allied factions of the Syrian National Army \(SNA\)](#). To pressure the AANES to release drug smugglers or dealers [arrested](#) in their controlled areas, the militants have been obstructing roads used by Afrin IDPs.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym used at the witness's request in an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher on 21 August 2024.

Zakaria Ali,<sup>3</sup> an IDP from Badena/Badenli village in rural Afrin, has been living in Az-Ziyara village of Sherawa since 2018. He explained that drug trafficking is prevalent among individuals affiliated with the militants in Nubl and al-Zahraa and went on to say,

**“They smuggle narcotic pills into the al-Shabaa region. When the Asayish forces (internal security and police force) of the AANES arrest individuals from Nubl and al-Zahraa in al-Shahba or Sherawa, armed men from these towns seize the vehicles belonging to people from Afrin and detain those inside them. They justify these actions by the arrest of individuals connected to them [by the Asayish]. They demand the release of those detained by the Asayish in exchange for the return of the vehicles taken from the people of Afrin.”**

Judy was one of the victims of these acts. In September 2019, an armed group intercepted him in Nubl and seized his car, claiming it was due to a dispute between them and the AANES military forces. Judy stated that he had no choice but to buy his car back, as it had become a common practice among militants in the area to sell stolen goods. Judy recounted,

**“The person who stole my car is named A.J.M. He sold it to someone else. I was able to buy my car back from him about two and a half months after it was stolen, for approximately \$5,500. It is common for the gunmen in Nubl and al-Zahraa to buy stolen vehicles and trade them among themselves. The person I bought my car from had originally purchased it from the kidnapper for \$5,000, so I paid him \$500 as a profit when I bought my car back.”**

A number of sources indicate that Nubl and al-Zahraa benefited economically from the displacement of the people of Afrin. Judy explained,

**“During the displacement of the people from Afrin to Nubl and al-Zahraa, the two towns experienced an economic revival. Goods were plentiful and available cheaply, leading to a surplus of money. The residents of Nubl and al-Zahraa became accustomed to a lifestyle of extravagance and developed addictions to drugs and cannabis. However, after the Afrin residents withdrew from Nubl and al-Zahraa due to ongoing harassment, they moved to Fafeen, Aleppo, and other locations. This led to an economic recession in Nubl and al-Zahraa, leaving little work or income available. At the same time, some residents fell deeper into their addictions, increasing road-blocking, robberies, and theft from others in the community”.**

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym used at the witness's request in an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher on 25 August 2024.

During the vehicle interception operations, Afrin IDPs faced insults. In this regard, Shiyar states,

**“In 2018, I owned a mobile phone shop and frequently traveled to al-Zahraa to purchase goods. On one occasion, I encountered a checkpoint operated by the people of Nubl at the intersection near the village of Az-Ziyara (of Afrin). They forced me to exit my car, and one of the officers asked me where I was headed. I explained that I owned an [phone] accessories store and would buy inventory. In response, he insulted me with obscene language and attempted to belittle me”.**

#### 4. Targeting Public Transport Vehicles and Blocking Roads

Microbuses transporting passengers between Aleppo and the regions of al-Shahba and Sherawa are significantly affected by the actions of militants from the towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa. In many cases, these militants use live ammunition to intimidate passengers and force them out of the vehicles to seize them. This information is based on various sources, including Sherwan Kali,<sup>4</sup> a microbus driver on the Aleppo-Tall Rifat route. He experienced having his vehicle seized for more than 40 days two years ago, in 2022. Sherwan states,

**“We were intercepted by an armed group at the junction near Nubl town. My car was filled with passengers, and the blockade caused significant fear among them; the women were crying in terror. However, no one was arrested, but we were forced to continue on foot, and the car was impounded. We then returned to Tall Rifat, where our homes are located”.**

Adnan Khalil,<sup>5</sup> whose father is also a driver on the same route, stated that his father’s car was held for more than 40 days, during which their Sherwan’s car was hijacked. Adnan detailed,

**“My father loaded his passengers from Aleppo, heading to Tall Rifat. As soon as his car reached the Nubl junction, four gunmen intercepted them and stopped them. When the passengers were upset with their behavior, they fired live bullets into the air to intimidate them. The passengers refused to get out of the car, while the gunmen insisted on getting the passengers out under the threat of the weapons they held”.**

Adnan added,

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym used at the witness's request in an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher on 27 August 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym used at the witness's request in an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher on 31 August 2024.

**“My father was traveling with around 14 passengers, most of whom were women. They became frightened, and their cries raised during the altercation between my father and the gunmen. Once the passengers were unloaded, the gunmen started shooting into the air again.”**

When the militants returned the vehicles, they were not in the same condition as before the seizure and detention; they had been stolen and vandalized. Sherwan explained,

**“After about 40 days, my car was returned. It had been stripped of several items, including the battery, spare tire, and interior trim, and they replaced two new tires with old ones”.**

This is what happened to Adnan's father's car as well. Adnan said,

**“The car was returned but very different from our previous vehicle. The front tires had been replaced three weeks before the car was impounded. In addition, the battery, radio, and several other items had been stolen, and the car had been rear-ended, leading to significant damage. All of these issues resulted in high costs.”**

About a year and a month after the first incident, in 2023, Adnan's father's car was targeted in a new kidnapping operation carried out by gunmen associated with the Hamza family in Nubl. Similar to the previous incident, the method used to intimidate the civilian passengers remained unchanged. Adnan recounted,

**“The passengers were subjected to a double act of intimidation compared to what happened the first time, as the gunmen stole the passengers' bags along with the car, including women's bags and children's supplies. They did not allow the passengers to take their belongings that they had brought from Aleppo.”**

This time, the car was detained for 15 days and returned with some of its contents stolen, such as the recorder and speakers, and the diesel fuel drained from its tank.

In addition to seizing and looting cars, the militants also occasionally block roads,

**“They close the roads at the Nubl and al-Zahraa junctions, preventing Kurdish drivers from crossing, while Arab drivers are allowed to continue on their way,” Sherwan confirmed.**

For his part, Adnan stated,



**“The current situation with the militants is unbearable. Their roadblocks continue to date. In the past month, the roads were only open for one day and closed for two or three days. The status of the road depends entirely on the militants’ moods, as they control when it can be opened or closed based on their whims”.**

Delsoz Horo,<sup>6</sup> a recent victim of the roadblocks, was the latest driver that STJ met. His car was detained for four hours on August 21. Delsoz detailed,

**“After I arrived and passed the Nubl town junction, I was approached by two armed men on a motorcycle. They stopped me, and I complied. They instructed us to exit the car. When I inquired about the reason, they explained that their issue was not with me personally but rather with the party (the AANES). They stated that if the problem was resolved, they would release my car. The armed men asked me to inform the party that they were from al-Zahraa militias. They mentioned that they had a detainee with the party and that they had also arrested someone else. Furthermore, they indicated they would take my car to help resolve the situation.”**

Delsoz mentioned the challenges drivers face due to roadblocks saying,

**“When militants block the primary roads connecting Aleppo, al-Shahba, and Sherawa, we take alternative routes to avoid their positions, such as the road through the town of al-Ahdath”.**

This results in longer travel distances and increased travel times, raising the financial burden on the IDPs, many of whom are already experiencing financial hardship after losing everything they owned in Afrin. In this context, Sherwan explained,

**“The closure of roads for the people of Afrin has significantly increased their transportation costs to Aleppo. Instead of the usual fare of 10,000 Syrian pounds (SP), they are now forced to pay around 30,000 SP. Many cannot afford these higher costs, so drivers are taking alternative routes that pass through the towns of al-Ahdath or Haritan. These routes lead to the town of Bayanoun before reaching Haritan, where the names of individuals entering and leaving Aleppo are recorded.”**

Since Türkiye occupied the Afrin region in March 2018, the GOS and its security forces have restricted access for residents of Afrin trying to enter Aleppo. They are required to register their names at the main checkpoint located near Haritan town in northern rural Aleppo. As a result, people from Afrin are often forced to travel to Aleppo using smuggling routes for the first time. Then they register their names at the Haritan checkpoint, and thus be permitted to

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudonym used at the witness's request in an online interview conducted by STJ's researcher on 28 August 2024.

move from Aleppo to al-Shahba and Sherawa for any reason, and also allows them to return to Aleppo.

## 5. Description of Violations According to Syrian Legislation

Restricting civilians from moving freely between cities in Syria or depriving them of transportation options, whether public or private, contradicts a fundamental human right: the right to movement. Individuals can only be deprived of this right under specific legal justifications and through a judicial decision, such as in the case of a crime for which a detention sentence has been issued. Successive Syrian constitutions have upheld this right, affirming that every Syrian has the freedom to reside and move within the country unless restricted by a judicial ruling or in accordance with public health and safety regulations<sup>7</sup>.

The assault on people's property and livelihoods without legal justification violates the principle of the sanctity of private property, as outlined in successive Syrian constitutions.<sup>8</sup> These constitutions emphasize that private property is protected and can only be taken away by law and in exchange for fair compensation. Additionally, confiscation can only be enforced through a final court ruling. The actions carried out by these armed individuals against unarmed civilians – such as depriving them of their cars and personal belongings under the pretext of a dispute or hostility with elements of the AANES – are violations of Syrian civil law. Testimonies collected for this report indicate that these acts include the coercion to release detainees held by the AANES forces in exchange for the return of their cars in contravention of the Syrian Civil Code, which states, “The owner has the exclusive right to use, exploit and dispose of this property within the limits of the law.”...“The owner of a thing has the right to all its fruits, products, and accessories unless there is a text or agreement to the contrary.”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the act of gathering two or more individuals who threaten and intimidate civilians with weapons, including firing gunshots into the air to instill terror, is classified as the crime of “forming a criminal gang” under Article 326 of the Syrian Penal Code, which states, “Any group of three or more persons roaming the public highways and countryside in the form of armed gangs seeking to rob passers-by, attack persons and property or commit any other act of banditry shall be punished with temporary hard labor for a minimum period of seven years.”

The acts described above also fall under the definition of public road robbery as outlined in Article 623 of the Syrian Penal Code. This article states that anyone convicted of public road robbery shall face a punishment of hard labor for a period ranging from 15 to 20 years, mainly if two of the circumstances listed in Article 622 occur simultaneously. According to the victims' accounts, most of the conditions specified in Article 622 apply to the violations committed by these armed individuals. These violations include commissioning the crime by two or more

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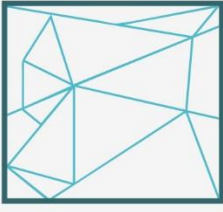
<sup>7</sup> Art. 19 of the 1950 Constitution, Art. 33 of the 1973 Constitution, and Art. 38 of the 2012 Constitution.

<sup>8</sup> Art. 21 of the 1950 Constitution, Art. 15 of the 1973 Constitution, and the 2012 Constitution.

<sup>9</sup> Arts. 768, 770 and 771 of the Syrian Civil Code No. 84 of 1949.

persons, the possession of a visible or concealed weapon, and using threats with a weapon to facilitate the theft.

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## ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.

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