

## Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations



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## 1. Background:

In an unprecedented visit, on 15 February 2025, Syrian Transitional President, Ahmed al-Sharaa, [visited](#) Afrin in the northern countryside of Aleppo. This marked his first official visit to the Kurdish regions since assuming the presidency, as part of a domestic tour that included Aleppo, Idlib and their countrysides, as well as other governorates. The region of Afrin consists of seven districts: Raju, Shaykh al-Hadid/Şiyê, Maabatli/Mabeta, Bulbul, Sharran, and Jindires, in addition to Afrin city center, where Kurds constitute the overwhelming majority of the population.

According to a [statement](#) issued by the Local Council of the Kurdish National Council in Afrin on 16 February 2025, al-Sharaa held a meeting with Afrin residents, including members of local councils, religious leaders, and community figures. During the meeting, council representatives addressed the situation of Kurdish community and **“the ongoing violations stemming from the factions’ presence, the imposition of taxes, levies, arrests, the brutal and reckless deforestation, failure to return homes to returning owners, kidnappings, humiliation, whitewashing of prisons, and others.”**

The statement also mentioned that al-Sharaa promised that “the government will soon extend its authority over the entire region, and put an end to the factions’ situation. Additionally, rights will be restored to their owners. He also promised to open a complaints office in Afrin, allowing residents to submit their complaints.”

Monitoring and documentation efforts conducted by the Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) team highlights the importance of establishing an effective mechanism for reporting violations and submitting complaints in Afrin. The region continues to experience security and military instability, along with ongoing [grave violations](#). These violations were repeatedly and systematically committed at the hands of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), which assumed [effective control](#) of the area following Operation Olive Branch in 2018.

For years, the Kurdish-majority region has witnessed widespread and systematic violations, including [killings](#), [arbitrary arrest](#) and [enforced disappearance](#), ill-treatment, [torture](#), looting and [confiscation of property](#), in addition to [forcing](#) Kurdish residents to leave their homes, [obstructing the return](#) of indigenous people, and imposing various [forms](#) of [levies](#) on the remained population. The “Local Grievance Committees” established by the SNA factions in recent years have [failed to address](#) these issues and their effects.

This has also been accompanied by practices of [Turkification](#) and [demographic change](#), as well as other violations targeting the region’s natural identity, by [cutting down its forest trees](#), and its religious identity, by targeting [cemeteries and religious shrines](#).

The radical shift in the political landscape in Syria following the “fall of the Assad regime” on 8 December 2024, after the now-dissolved Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other opposition factions, including SNA-affiliated groups, launched the [Deterrence of Aggression](#) military operation, and assumed power, has yet to bring a noticeable change in the human rights situation in Afrin, particularly with regard to arbitrary detention and prisons.

Unlike [many other Syrian regions](#), prisons and detention centers in Afrin have not been opened. Several reports indicate that these centers hold a large number of Kurds [arrested](#) by various SNA factions on pretextual charges, such as working with or affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Türkiye considers the YPG - a key component of the Kurdish-led and US-backed SDF - to be an extension of the PKK in Syria, which it classifies as a terrorist organization. Meanwhile, the factions have widely used arbitrary detention and torture as [tools](#) to extract ransoms or to pressure residents to leave Afrin and abandon their properties, which has reinforced the reality of forced displacement they have endured.

Despite announcing the dissolution and integration of SNA's factions into the new Syrian Ministry of Defense following the [Victory Conference](#) held on 29 January 2025, information obtained by STJ from its field researchers in the region confirms that the SNA and Military Police factions continue to operate in their designated locations in Afrin, with some of their members redeployed to other parts of Syria.

The Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat led by [Mohammad al-Jasim](#) (Abu Amsha), remains active in the [Shaykh al-Hadid](#) district, while also expanding its activities to Manbij in northeastern Aleppo and the northern Hama countryside. On 3 February 2025, the Ministry of Defense in the Syrian Transitional Government had [appointed](#) Mohammad al-Jasim as commander of Hama Division, whose forces were stationed in the same location occupied by the former Syrian regime's [25th Division](#).

STJ monitored the arrest of a group of Afrin residents by several SNA factions and its affiliated Military Police, following the entry of military convoys from the General Security Forces, affiliated with the Transitional Government, into the area on 6 February 2025. These forces patrolled the streets amid a warm welcome from locals after an agreement was reached to hand over its [security file](#) to the Interim Government in Damascus.

STJ field researcher documented 10 cases of arrest in various areas of Afrin following the entry of the General Security convoy into the region. The Military Police was involved in nine of these arrests, while the Hamza/al-Hamzat Division was responsible for the remaining one.

The Military Police carried out six of the arrests on 7 February 2025, just one day after the convoy entered the city. Four of the detainees were accused of "raising pro-SDF slogans while welcoming the General Security delegation." They were released 18 days later.





A photo of the four young men arrested by the Military Police for “raising pro-SDF slogans while welcoming the General Security delegation.” Source: [Yeki Dam](#).

STJ field researcher also documented 31 arrests in various parts of Afrin during January 2025. The Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat was responsible for 12 of these arrests, while the Military Police carried out the remaining 19.

## 2. Violations against Kurds in Afrin did not cease after the fall of the Syrian regime:

The recent arrests in Afrin are a continuation of similar arrests and other violations committed by SNA factions and their affiliated bodies in the region, following Operation [Dawn of Freedom](#) launched by the SNA on 30 November 2024. The operation primarily targeted areas under the SDF control in Manbij, Tall Rifat, and al-Shahba area in the northern Aleppo countryside, [leading](#) to large [waves of displacement](#) from these areas.

Al-Shahba region housed [camps](#) set up to accommodate the people of Afrin, who were forcibly displaced from the region due to military operations in 2018.

According to three testimonies collected by STJ between January and February 2025, the arrests following Operation Dawn of Freedom targeted a number of forcibly displaced persons who had returned to Afrin. [Estimates](#) indicate that the arrested persons account for %70 of the total displaced population, some of whom headed back to the area after the SNA removed several of its security checkpoints there.

Among the returnees was Ramzia Sheikho, a housewife and mother of three, who lived with her family in al-Shahba, where her husband, Mohammed Sheikho, worked as a farmer, despite being a tailor by profession, due to the difficult living conditions in the area.

Ramzia<sup>1</sup> said that the SNA factions ordered residents to leave their homes as they entered al-Shahba at the start of Operation Dawn of Freedom, giving them only three days to gather their belongings. She added that she and her husband gave in to the inevitable and decided to leave. She added:

**“We rented a car and set off for Azaz. Our trip went smoothly until we reached the Military Police checkpoint in the city, where our IDs were checked. Suddenly, a police officer approached and told us that we had to accompany him to the military police station. At that moment, I was separated from my husband, and they told me that he had been arrested. When I inquired about the reason for his arrest, they said he was wanted, but did not provide further details.”**

Ramzia and her children headed to Afrin. Today, she and her family live under difficult living conditions with no source of income after her husband was arrested. She has been unable to see him or obtain any information about his condition. She said:

**“I visited the Military Police three times to inquire about his fate, but they denied having him. In my attempts to find information, I contacted several factions in the area, [al-Hamza/al-Hamzat](#) and [Suleiman Shah Brigade/al-Amshat](#), but they demanded money for his release. One of them asked for a thousand dollars, while another asked for five thousand, which is an amount we do not have.”**

Fatima Mustafa<sup>2</sup> lived with her husband, who suffers from physical and mental disabilities, and his 80-year-old mother in a house near Tall Rifat, where they had relocated from their village of Sa'aranjk/Se'rîncek in Afrin during the Turkish operation in 2018.

Fatima said that on 5 December 2024, armed members of the Free Army, referring to SNA, entered the village and demanded that they leave within half an hour. She added:

**“We left the house and as soon as we reached the main street corner, a Military Police patrol arrived, arrested us and transferred us to Afrin. There, they handed us over to the Military Police at their headquarters located on Villas Street in Afrin. We were separated, where we were put in one room and he was taken to another for interrogation. Later, they told me and his mother to leave and kept him in custody. I don't know what he said to them that led to his arrest. He has a mental disability, and his cognitive abilities are no more developed than those of a child, and it is impossible to predict what he might say.”**

Fatima said she stayed in Afrin with her mother-in-law, hoping to obtain more information about her husband's fate. However, she was unable to gather any details due to her limited

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym was used at the witness' request during an online interview conducted by STJ researcher on 12 February 2025.

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym was used at the witness' request during an online interview conducted by STJ researcher on 26 January 2025.



knowledge of Arabic. She was also denied permission to visit him at the police station, where they told her that he would be released in a few days.

Having lost hope of her husband's release, Fatima and her mother-in-law headed to their village, Sa'aranjk/Se'rincek, only to find that their home had been completely looted, even the doors and windows were stolen.

Today, Fatima lives in the village, waiting to reclaim land owned by her husband's family, which was seized by a person whose identity she does not know.

The last information she received about her husband's fate was that he was being held in [Maratah prison](#). She obtained this information from a former detainee who had been released from the same prison. However, she was unable to visit him there due to her difficult living conditions.

From Tall Rifat as well, Azza al-Mohammad<sup>3</sup> was displaced on 5 December 2024, after being trapped in the city with her family for four days following the start of Operation Dawn of Freedom. They were unable to secure transportation until an organization helped them move to their village, Meidan Ekbis, in Afrin.

Azza stated that they were stopped and interrogated at every checkpoint of the Free Syrian Army, referring to SNA, along the way. The questioning focused on her son, Adnan, who didn't carry an ID, only a family register, as his ID was confiscated by the former Syrian regime forces when he was conscripted for reserve military service in Damascus, from which he later escaped during a visit and moved with his family to Tall Rifat.

The checkpoints allowed the family to pass each time, until they reached Rajo district, where the Military Police stopped them and took them to their main headquarters in the district in the area, located next to al-Rashid gas station.

At the headquarters, Azza said they were interrogated again and photographed, before being released, except for her son Adnan, who remained there pending investigation. She added that neither her nor her husband could object due to fear, exhaustion, and hunger, as they had gone days without food.

Later, the family learned, from people who had been released from the same prison, that Adnan had been transferred to Maratah prison and was awaiting their visit, in need of clothes.

However, due to her health condition, as she suffers from asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, Azza was unable to visit Adnan until later.

Before visiting Adnan in prison, Azza said she first went to Afrin court to obtain a visitation permit and submit a request for his release. The next day, she handed the request, signed by Adnan, at the General Security headquarters in Rajo, where she met with the assigned judge. He informed her that her son's release was conditional on paying a \$1,000 fine. He later

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym was used at the witness' request during an online interview conducted by STJ researcher on 26 January 2025.





reduced the fine to \$400 after Azza explained the family's financial situation and that they had no other income other than what their daughter abroad sent them. Azza added:

**“When I told him I did not have that amount either, he told me that my son would remain in prison. He asked me to go home, reflect on my situation, and try to secure the money. He asked me to come back after a week with another release request and \$400, then he would sign his release. However, if we didn't pay, he (Adnan) would not be released.**

**To this day, I haven't been able to secure that amount, so I have not gone back, as the cost of transportation from the village to the prison and then to Rajo exceeds \$100, not to mention expenses accumulated on Adnan in prison, because they told us that prisoners have to provide and support themselves.”**

Azza said that they tried to use connections. However, their attempts to intervene failed, as the court insisted on paying the fine. They still do not know the charges against Adnan or the court's ruling regarding his case. She adds that she struggles to move around due to the checkpoints, where she is interrogated every time.

While Azza was working to secure Adnan's release, her husband traveled to Damascus to search for their other son, who had been arrested there since 2013, only to return empty-handed, without any information about his fate.

### 3. Recommendations to the Syrian Transitional Authorities:

While al-Sharaa's visit to Afrin, which took place before the announcement of an [agreement](#) between the Interim Government and the Autonomous Administration, represents a positive indicator toward achieving stability in the region, STJ recommends the following to the government:

- Taking serious steps to establish an effective complaints office and implementing measures to ensure that the violations suffered by the Kurdish residents of the region before and after 8 December 2024, are not repeated;
- Revealing the unofficial prisons run by various SNA factions, and releasing detainees held in these prisons and others in the region, who investigations show were arbitrarily arrested and detained;
- Conducting public investigations into the violations that took place in the region and ensuring that those responsible are held accountable through fair legal proceedings, guaranteeing justice for the victims, survivors, and their families;
- Creating conditions that ensure the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of forcibly displaced persons to their homes and lands, by addressing the obstacles preventing their return, such as the threat of arrest and property confiscation, and protecting those seeking to reclaim their properties from retaliation and violence;

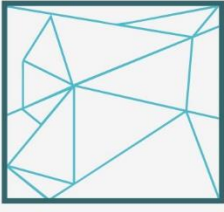






- Ensuring that the victimized community in Afrin is included in future reparations and compensation programs, helping them recover from the effects of the violations they have endured.
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## ABOUT STJ

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.