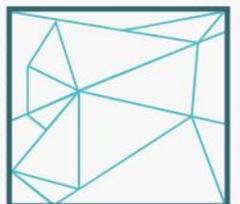


Syria\Afrin: Communication to the UN on Systematic HLP Violations: Seizure, Looting, and Extortion



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سوريون
من أجل
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Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



Syria\ Afrin: Communication to the UN on Systematic HLP Violations: Seizure, Looting, and Extortion

To the Attention of:

- The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing;
- The Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice and Reparation;
- The Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues;
- The Special Rapporteur on Internally Displaced Persons;

1. Introduction

This submission is respectfully presented by Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) to Your Excellencies, in your official capacities, to draw your distinguished attention to the consistent and systematic pattern of violations in the Kurdish-majority Afrin/Efrîn region of northwestern Syria, beginning with its takeover by Turkish forces and allied factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) during Operation Olive Branch in early 2018 and continuing through July 2025.

Based on 39 field interviews and corroborating open sources, this report documents housing, land, and property (HLP) violations in Afrin, including widespread seizures of private property, looting and destruction of homes and facilities, arbitrary detentions, and financial extortion. These acts collectively aim to dispossess owners or obstruct their access to their property.

According to testimonies collected by STJ, the violations have impacted at least 53 homes, 20 businesses, including olive mills, and 27 agricultural plots with approximately 11,000 olive trees, although the actual numbers are likely higher. The abuses also extended to agricultural and industrial equipment, as well as private vehicles. These acts took place under a hybrid de facto system that uses nominal civilian institutions to hide the exercise of real military and security control, effectively turning seizure, looting, and extortion into a pressure tactic targeting homes, property, and livelihoods, worsening patterns of forced displacement and increasing fears of return.

These facts give rise to direct legal responsibility on the part of both the Syrian Interim Government and the Government of Türkiye, given their effective control over the area and their international legal duties to maintain public order, protect civilians, prevent looting and unlawful property seizures, and provide justice and reparations for victims. We submit these complaints to call for urgent measures to end ongoing violations and to create an independent, binding mechanism that guarantees the unconditional and free restitution of rights to their rightful owners.

2. Background

On 20 January 2018, the Turkish Armed Forces, together with allied SNA factions, initiated a major military operation called Operation Olive Branch to seize control of the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin in the northwest countryside of Aleppo. The operation followed a heavy period

of aerial and artillery bombardment that struck many villages and towns, resulting in significant civilian casualties and widespread destruction of property and infrastructure.¹

By 18 March 2018, the military takeover of Afrin city and its surrounding areas was complete, with reports of hundreds of civilians killed and tens of thousands of original residents displaced. The events did not end with the military gaining control; they led to the creation of new administrative structures, including local councils, military and civil police forces, and courts. However, these bodies lacked genuine independence or credibility and mainly functioned as figureheads under the influence of armed factions. In reality, real power stayed in the hands of military and security leaders who operated under Ankara’s direct oversight.²

This overlap between civilian institutions and actual military power established a system based on dual authority, where official organizations act as a façade to manage a de facto order enforced by factions. Under this imbalance, violations such as property seizures, arbitrary arrests, and coercive taxes have become routine practices, sustained by an illegal economic system closely linked to armed strength.

In its December 2024 report, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI-Syria) documented that the patterns of looting and appropriation of Kurdish civilians’ property in Afrin had become coordinated and systematic, amounting to the war crime of pillage and violating the right to possession and property³.

3. Facts

Between May 2024 and July 2025, STJ carried out a series of field studies that included 39 interviews with direct victims or relatives of victims of property rights violations in Afrin. Of the participants, 37 were from the Kurdish community and only two from the Arab community, all of whom were residents of Afrin’s seven subdistricts: Afrin Center/Navenda Efrîn, Shaykh al-

¹ "Three Years on 'Operation Olive Branch'; Afrin Residents Enjoy Security (Report) [in Arabic]," Anadolu Agency, 20 December 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/3-%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%BA%D8%B5%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/2116133> (last accessed: 10 July 2025).

² " Türkiye Dominates the Military Structure in Northern Syria: Influence in Exchange for Loyalty," [in Arabic] An-Nahar, 18 May 2025, <https://www.annahar.com/arab-world/arabian-levant/209669/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7> (last accessed: 13 July 2025).

³ Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, (A/HRC/58/CRP.2), issued 6 December 2024, para. 87, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coisyria/a-hrc-58-crp2-coi-syria-20250206.pdf> (last accessed: 13 July 2025).

Hadid/Şiyê, Rajo/Reco/Raju, Maabatli/Mabeta, Jindires/Cindirês, Sharran/Şera, and Bulbul/Bible.

Interviewees include Syrians living both inside and outside the country. Twelve have returned to Afrin, either temporarily or permanently, in attempts to reclaim their confiscated properties. Others remain internally displaced in cities like Aleppo, Qamishli, Tell Rifaat, and Raqqa, while some have sought refuge abroad, including in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and several European countries.

A total of 21 interviews were conducted online using encrypted applications to ensure security, while 18 took place in person at carefully selected locations that provided privacy and protection for the witnesses. All interviewees were informed about the nature and goals of the research, and their informed consent was obtained. Due to fears of retaliation by Turkish forces or allied factions, participants chose to conceal their identities; therefore, STJ used pseudonyms in the report.

Along with the interviews, the researchers used various open sources: reports from human rights and UN organizations, video clips, social media posts, and property documents from some owners who managed to save them during displacement. This report helped verify and cross-check the testimonies, providing a clearer view of the scale and ongoing nature of the violations.

Testimonies suggest that the violations were not isolated incidents but rather ongoing policies implemented on a large scale. Reported practices included forced displacement, seizure of homes and land, arbitrary arrests, financial extortion for release, and systematic torture. These violations were linked to specific military units within the SNA and allied factions, and there was also documented direct and continuous oversight by Turkish authorities over the administrative and security structures that enabled these practices.

4. Patterns of HLP Violations in Afrin: Seizure, Looting, Destruction, and Extortion

Data from 39 interviews reveal interconnected and systematic patterns of Housing, Land, and Property violations (HLP violations) across Afrin. These violations impacted at least 53 homes, 20 businesses, including olive mills, and 27 agricultural plots with approximately 11,000 olive trees. Significant amounts of agricultural and industrial equipment, as well as private vehicles, were also confiscated. Witnesses consistently described the involvement of individuals, commanders, and civilians affiliated with multiple factions operating under the SNA umbrella, including well-known brigades, battalions, and local regiments. Some victims used the broad term the Free Syrian Army to refer to the perpetrators.

Destruction and looting emerged as the most prevalent pattern of abuse. Acts of demolition and theft peaked during the military operations and continued systematically after the Turkish

army and its allied SNA factions established control over the area.⁴ One witness described returning to his home after the bombardment,⁵

“The shelling left the roof full of holes. Then they entered, and the windows, doors, and furniture were stolen.”

He recounted how the family’s newly equipped olive mill became a target,

“We had brought in modern pressing machine. After the takeover, the equipment and production lines were stolen, and the mill was completely destroyed and turned into a military headquarters. Dozens of olive trees around it were uprooted, and others were cut down because they were near the base.”

“The house was left without windows or doors, as if we had never lived there.”, he added.

Owners of inherited olive mills reported that many had been leveled to the ground, not even a single stone left.

The looting extended far beyond ordinary property, reaching into priceless family and cultural belongings. One witness described the loss of antique glassware,⁶ brass pieces, traditional garments, sewing machines, tractors, and vehicles. When owners sought explanations, they were met with fabricated claims such as “this house belongs to supporters of the previous administration,” effectively transforming vague accusations into a blanket justification for theft.

The second pattern involves the seizure and illegal disposal of homes and shops without the owners’ permission. Many properties were turned into military headquarters, homes for faction members and their families, or housing for displaced families. Others were sold or rented to third parties without proper legal authority or due process.⁷

One affected person said,⁸ “They sold my house to a faction member. My sister told me that when he bought it, it was completely empty,” implying that it had already been looted. He also said, “One of our cars was displayed at a sales office. We managed to buy and repair it, then they came back and took it again.”

Another victim reported that his rented apartment was seized and sold for a small amount, with relatives witnessing the so-called “laying hand” process, justified by claims that the owner was absent and the tenant “had ties to the previous administration.”

A third witness confirmed that one house was turned into a detention site and later into a military headquarters after being looted, adding,⁹ “They took the women’s underwear out into the street and burned it in front of the neighbors,” an act that went beyond seizure to humiliation.

⁴ Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, (A/HRC/39/65), issued 12 September 2018, para. 17, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/39/65> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁵ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 9 April 2025.

⁶ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 23 March 2025.

⁷ Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (A/HRC/39/65), issued 2 March 2020, paras. 41-42, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/43/57> (last accessed: August 18, 2025).

⁸ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 1 March 2025.

⁹ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 31 January 2025.

The scope of appropriation expanded to include large commercial assets. One owner recounted that when he contacted the person who had taken over his large shop,¹⁰ which he had developed as a commercial project, he received a blunt reply, “The shop belongs to us, not you.” The shop then remained closed for months under the pretext of “danger,” with no legal action taken afterward. In other cases, household wells were used to fill tankers and sell water to the local population. At the same time, long-standing tenants of inherited shops were evicted, and the properties were turned into workshops and businesses without any compensation to the rightful owners.

The harm worsens with the third pattern: the seizure of agricultural lands and the prevention of owners from farming them. The violations mainly targeted olive groves, which are the main source of income for locals. Control methods ranged from direct occupation to leasing the lands through “economic offices” linked to factions under yearly contracts, with the profits never reaching the rightful owners. When owners tried to reclaim their lands, they faced a single reply, “The contract has been renewed for the same tenant,” and were prevented from entering, “You are forbidden to enter again,” as noted in one testimony¹¹.

This control was followed by various forms of coercive exactions, ranging from a “guard tax” imposed on every tree, even unproductive ones, to in-kind shares taken from the olive oil after it was pressed in predetermined mills. One farmer explained,¹² “I lost half of what I produced. I paid oil tins to the faction controlling the grove, amounts in [Turkish] lira as a guarding tax, and additional tins as a tax for pressing in their mills.”

Another issue arises when the cultivation of olive groves, legally owned by their proprietors, is monopolized for years through proxy arrangements. One agent recounted,¹³ “I was told the official in charge had changed, but the situation remained the same. However, when harvest season arrived, I was shocked to find all the fruits stolen. When I demanded accountability, they evaded responsibility with vague accusations”.

In the same vein, testimonies described the seizure of entire agricultural facilities, including olive mills, which had their equipment and buildings leased for other purposes, such as bakeries. Although the owners filed complaints, control shifted among factions, leaving the equipment out of their reach despite its significant value.

In some villages, a “recovery bill” is presented to the landowner. One individual said, “They told me, ‘The bill to reclaim your land is known and priced. The trees have borne fruit, pay for the harvest, then take back your land’”, reinforcing the idea of spoils. Another recounted an even harsher reality,¹⁴ “We were told outright that the lands and houses now belong to them, and anyone who demands their rights faces assault or death,” transforming the control into an openly coercive system.

These patterns involve the physical destruction of production infrastructure, including cutting down hundreds of trees on archaeological hills under the guise of excavation and dredging

¹⁰ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 27 October 2024.

¹¹ During a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 21 December 2024.

¹² Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 31 May 2024.

¹³ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 27 January 2025.

¹⁴ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 22 December 2024.

riverbanks to create fish farms. These failing projects left the land in ruins. One farmer said, “Even the ancient well was demolished,” while another shared his feelings about losing his land for years: “I would take half the harvest and give the other half to the faction,” a forced distribution that seemed to become a de facto reality.

The violations do not end with seizure; they are reinforced by a system of extortion when the owner tries to reclaim his rights. One complainant who approached a local authority to “restore rights” reported hearing an explicit threat, “If you do not want your children to be orphaned, abandon your claim, and if you insist we will kill you”.

In another case, an apartment owner was asked to pay for the electricity and water meters before receiving the key.¹⁵ When he entered, he found that the interior doors, windows, sinks, and even the light switches had been dismantled and removed. In similar situations, a vulnerable family was told to pay a specific amount to vacate the property; otherwise, the windows, water tanks, and kitchen sink would be taken apart, effectively turning their exit into a coerced transaction.¹⁶

When victims sought redress through official grievance channels, they faced a wall of inaction and collusion. One remarked,¹⁷ “There is no law we can turn to,” while another explained,¹⁸ “Each faction governs a neighborhood and acts as its own judiciary.” Complaints submitted to the civil police were dismissed because the occupying party was military, and cases brought before civil courts were rejected as falling under military jurisdiction. As a result, grievances remained unresolved, caught between two authorities that essentially refused to address them. Even the committees set up to restore rights quickly proved ineffective and dysfunctional: they included representatives from the very factions being accused, issued formalistic decisions, such as monthly compensation amounts far below symbolic value, and were dissolved shortly thereafter.

Statements from checkpoint personnel and group leaders reveal an overbearing attitude that treats private property as “reserved for” a particular faction. They told a shop owner: “The shop belongs to us,”¹⁹ a farmer demanding his grove: “Pay to take it,”²⁰ and a family requesting their house: “The house is reserved, it will only be handed over on our terms.”²¹ These expressions recur in similar wording across multiple testimonies, forming an almost uniform language of coercive economic dominance.

The overall situation in Afrin shows that what is happening is not just a series of isolated events, but a planned campaign aimed at attacking private property directly. Homes are seized, sold, or rented out without permission; shops are unlawfully exploited; lands are sealed off from their owners and controlled through contracts whose profits never reach them; olive harvests are depleted through enforced exactions; presses are shut down and repurposed. A persistent cycle

¹⁵ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 22 December 2024.

¹⁶ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 23 December 2024.

¹⁷ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 21 December 2024.

¹⁸ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 22 December 2024.

¹⁹ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 21 December 2024.

²⁰ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 7 October 2024.

²¹ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 1 February 2025.

of threats, humiliation, and extortion is used to silence any objections. Between warnings of “You are forbidden to enter,” demands of “Pay to reclaim your right,” and notices that “The recovery bill is known,” a clear policy of poverty and theft develops, leaving owners with no real options: pay and comply, or be barred from what’s left of their homes, land, and livelihoods.

5. Forcing Property Surrender Through Arrest and Economic Pressure

One of the most persistent and deeply entrenched patterns of abuse faced by Afrin residents is arbitrary detention coupled with financial extortion. This tactic has become a primary means of forcing owners to abandon their homes and land or to pay exorbitant sums to reclaim them. The arrests were rarely linked to any legitimate crime or violation; instead, they became a systematic tool of extortion, designed to seize property and distribute it as spoils among the controlling factions.

One testimony recounts a farmer who was arrested three times in a short span. Each time, he was taken from his home at gunpoint to a local facility turned into a detention center, where he faced prearranged accusations, most notably that his family “supports the previous administration.” He said,²²

“They took me four times to their headquarters. Each time I was thrown into a narrow bathroom used as a solitary cell, then they took turns beating me with cables and water hoses. They used electricity and forms of torture I cannot describe. On one occasion, they staged an execution, firing a gun while my eyes were blindfolded, and I thought my life was over. Their only goal was to terrorize me so I would leave my home and land”.

He added that water and food were denied, and he was forced to drink his own urine to survive. In his absence, the faction seized everything: the electric generator he used for commercial purposes, valued at \$50,000, his tractor, furniture, and even the olive groves from which his family was barred entry.

Another testimony from a man in his sixties exposes the same pattern of extortion. Four armed men broke into his home at dawn, confiscating his phone, wallet, watch, and even his shoes, then dragged him to a detention center. There, he faced conflicting accusations; at one point they claimed he was a member of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), at another that he was a communist, and a third time that he was a political activist. The purpose was not investigation but deliberate humiliation. He said,²³

“Every evening, a large man would enter carrying a metal rod and beat us until we lost consciousness. I felt like my body would collapse”. He added that he was released after two weeks on bail but was forced to report to the facility daily to sign documents. Meanwhile, the faction seized his house and hung a sign reading, “The house is reserved for the faction.” This

²² Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 7 October 2024.

²³ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 21 December 2024.

statement was not merely an announcement but a de facto sentence of permanent exclusion from his property.

Another testimony shows how simply claiming one's property could lead to arrest. A farmer tried to reclaim his car and tractor after they were seized by the faction. As a result, he and his two brothers were detained, and he was forcibly filmed holding a shell, with the video later used as a tool for extortion. He said, "They threatened to release the video portraying me as a [PKK] party member unless I paid \$50,000." The ordeal did not end there; he was handed over to the Turkish authorities managing a temporary detention center, where he remained under investigation for 20 days before being released on bail. He returned to find his home converted into a military headquarters, losing all hope of recovering it²⁴.

In the center of Afrin city, similar scenes unfolded repeatedly, though in different forms. A young man and his parents secretly returned to their home after being displaced, only to be detained together for 20 days in a house converted into a detention center. After their release, the pressure and threats shifted to his father. He recounted, "They kept coming to my father's house, threatening him over his children, claiming we were all agents of the previous administration. In the end, they told him he had no choice but to give up ownership of nine commercial shops."

Soon after, members of the faction raided the house and told the neighbors, "The owners of this house belong to the PKK, and the house is now ours. They have two options: leave or pay rent."²⁵ From that point on, the shops remained seized, used as if they belonged to the faction, rented out, and fully under their control.

The extortion went beyond threats and detention; it turned into a full-scale business. One owner explained,²⁶ "They returned one apartment to me after I paid \$2,300, but they forced me to sign a paper stating that I had received it free of charge".

In another case, a faction leader demanded \$10,000 to return a house, threatening the owner, "You are wealthy, and if you return to the village, we will arrest and loot you."²⁷ The man felt he had no choice but to leave the area to avoid being arrested.

The repeated testimonies from multiple sources confirm that arbitrary detention and financial extortion are not isolated incidents but a deliberate strategy to subjugate and impoverish the population, forcing them to abandon their homes and land. This approach functions as a method of reshaping the demographic landscape through coercion and violence, leaving property owners with stark choices: surrender or imprisonment, payment or torture. Property, which should be a protected right, has instead become a burden that punishes its owners.

²⁴ "Illegal Transfers of Syrians to Turkey", Human Rights Watch, 3 February 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/03/illegal-transfers-syrians-turkey> (last accessed: 20 July 2025).

²⁵ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 3 November 2024.

²⁶ Interviewed physically by an STJ field researcher on 3 November 2024.

²⁷ From an online interview conducted by an STJ researcher on 17 March 2025.

Personal freedom is held hostage to one's ability to meet extortionate demands, and homes and land are no longer safe havens but open avenues for extortion.

These actions constitute a blatant violation of international law, infringing on the right to property, the right to freedom and security, and the absolute prohibition of torture and cruel treatment. Most alarmingly, they amount to a policy of disguised forced displacement, coercing the indigenous population to abandon their homes under fear and extortion. One witness summarized this tragedy saying,²⁸ **"They told me that all my property was their spoils. They shot at me, and I thought I was dead. Then they demanded thousands of dollars to return my house."** These words capture the reality in Afrin: a systematic regime of oppression, seizure, and extortion, where the property right becomes a distant dream, and daily life is reduced to a constant nightmare.

6. Property Rights in the Wake of the 8 December 2024 Upheaval

Field testimonies collected after the political developments of December 8, 2024, indicate that property rights in Afrin saw no tangible improvement; rather, the violations took on a "recycled" form under the umbrella of new de facto authorities. A report by the COI-Syria released that same month captured the general sentiment among residents: deep frustration over the absence of effective mechanisms for justice or compensation, and a pervasive fear of approaching local authorities due to potential retaliation.²⁹ This was not a theoretical observation, it was vividly reflected in the testimonies of recently returned residents and their families, who sought to reclaim their homes, shops, or land after the regime's fall, only to find themselves trapped in cycles of extortion, arrest, or endless and fruitless complaints.

The testimonies highlight the ongoing operation of the exact economic control mechanisms that have been established over the past few years: first, a direct takeover; then, justifying appropriation through political or security claims; and finally, extorting owners for large sums if they wish to reclaim their property. A family fuel station owner recounted that he is still waiting for the factions to leave his premises so he can regain his facility, which was looted and then handed over to a local administration affiliated with one of the groups. When the family tried to resolve the issue, they were asked to pay \$50,000 "as a price for evacuation," while being told that the case was "military" and therefore beyond the jurisdiction of civil courts. The same witness was detained in 2021 for four days based on false reports accusing him of "selling fuel to the PKK party," and only regained his freedom after paying a ransom of \$6,000.³⁰ In this way, a fabricated accusation becomes a tool of extortion, and bail serves as an additional way to finance armed groups.

Another testimony from a returnee sheds light on a different aspect of the problem. After five years of displacement, he returned to find his home occupied by another displaced family, who refused to give up the keys unless he paid \$150, claiming they had covered his "water and

²⁸ Interviewed online by an STJ researcher on 17 April 2025.

²⁹ Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, (A/HRC/58/CRP.2), issued 6 December 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/pillageandplunder> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

³⁰ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 21 December 2024.

electricity bills.” When he finally regained access, he found the house had been stripped completely: doors, windows, faucets, even electrical outlets and wiring were gone. Restoring it to a livable condition, he said, cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000. “While those people were living in my house, I did not dare file a complaint,” he explained. “Each faction that controls a neighborhood, acts as its own judiciary.” He added that the intermediary who returned his keys was an armed man who bluntly warned that if he refused to pay, the house would be handed over to the faction controlling the area.³¹ This case shows that the issue goes well beyond just reclaiming property, it is about the basic right to feel safe when turning the key in your own home.

In a recurring pattern, a displaced family from rural Homs contacted the original homeowner just days after the deadline he had set for them to vacate his house, demanding \$600 for the handover and threatening to strip the property of its windows, sinks, and water tank if he refused. When the owner sought help from local authorities, he was told that the family was under the protection of a powerful faction controlling the area and that “it was not the right time” to pursue his complaint.³² This practice, assigning homes to families connected with armed groups and turning eviction into a transactional process, has effectively fostered a black market surrounding the very concept of the right to housing.

Even cases that resulted in partial restitution were not free from extortion. A resident of the al-Zaydia neighborhood regained his home after years of seizure and threats at gunpoint. He described the situation, “They returned the house to me after I paid for the electricity and water meters and an additional amount, but when I entered, it was empty: no doors, no windows, no faucets, no appliances.”³³ While the man approached local leaders and announced a “Grievance Redress Committee,” he was repeatedly asked for money “for mediation” without any real judicial outcome, making the so-called “settlement” just another way to reclaim what was already rightfully his.

Alongside financial extortion, detention continued to be a tool of pressure on returnees. A family returning to their village was told that all adult males must report to the military police for a “simple investigation.” However, one of them was kept in custody for 12 days and was only released after paying \$1,000. Now, the man lives with his brother in a small two-room house, while the family home remains seized by an influential local figure demanding \$7,000 to vacate it.³⁴ In another case, a property owner approached a security office linked to a faction controlling a rural subdistrict, requesting his house be returned to him, and was told that the occupant was “on leave,” with a clear implication that payment was the only way to reclaim it. Earlier, the same security official had demanded \$4,000 to return the owner’s house, as well as the homes of his son and daughter. The owner summarized his ordeal, “Where am I supposed to get that money to reclaim my own home?”³⁵

³¹ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 14 November 2024.

³² From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 23 December 2024.

³³ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 1 February 2025.

³⁴ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 23 January 2025.

³⁵ From a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 1 February 2025.

On the other hand, one positive case was recorded after the transitional government took control of the area on 6 February 2025, when an elderly owner was able to enter his home for the first time since 2018, after it was damaged by shelling, looted, and repeatedly seized. However, this remains an isolated incident that does not change the overall situation. The same man said that furniture from three of the family's houses, agricultural equipment, and livestock had disappeared, and the family's land, planted with wheat at great expense, was also out of their reach.

The challenges women face are even more severe. One woman returned home after her husband passed away, motivated by the high cost of living and the need for shelter. She found her house was locked and had been sold through a broker, who claimed it was purchased from an armed individual, and she was asked to pay \$3,500 to get the keys back. She said, "I contacted the person who supposedly bought the house, and he threatened that if I did not pay, he would remove the doors and windows. I tried to file a complaint, but I do not speak Arabic well, no one cared about my situation, and no one even came to inspect the house."³⁶ This statement serves as a warning: women, especially older or less linguistically empowered, are often too vulnerable to navigate complicated and politicized complaint channels on their own.

The cycle of administrative obstruction affects both land and commercial properties. In February 2025, a returnee tried to reclaim an apartment, two shops, and a plot of land he had abandoned in 2018. The civil police first told him to "check back in two months," then "after the holidays." They ultimately refused to register his complaint about the land, stating that "a military faction has taken control of it."³⁷ His apartment was occupied by a displaced family from Ghouta, and each time he checked on them, they gave a new excuse to delay their departure. Meanwhile, his two shops were controlled by a former member of another faction, and no authority was willing to turn his complaint into any actionable response.³⁸ A similar case was reported by a young man detained for three days by the civil police after returning in mid-January 2025. His land, which had around 350 olive trees, remained under the control of an "economic office" affiliated with a well-known faction that demanded \$3,500 just to let him inspect his trees.

These examples are not isolated; they form a network of "de facto rules": local security authorities provide cover, economic offices facilitate seizures through formal contracts or outright extortion, civil courts justify their failures by claiming that the cases fall under "military jurisdiction," and complaint committees send victims back to square one or suggest "settlements" that require payment. The immediate result is a widespread sense of fear and helplessness, discouraging many from claiming their rights. One person said, "I went to the court and was told to be patient. Then they started threatening me: 'We will send the military police to arrest you.'" Another added, "There is no law we can trust. These are families working with factions, and the court official told us plainly: 'We cannot remove them.'"

³⁶ From an online interview conducted by STJ researcher on 13 April 2025.

³⁷ Form a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 7 April 2025.

³⁸ Form a physical interview conducted by an STJ field researcher on 7 April 2025.

In summary, neither the fall of the regime nor the change of administrative banners has resolved the core issue: a power-driven system of appropriation sustained by intimidation and a monetized right to housing and land. Those with financial means can pay to recover a portion of what is rightfully theirs, while those without remain trapped between hunger, social marginalization, and the threat of detention. Between these extremes, the very notion of ownership has been hollowed out; it no longer functions as a legal safeguard or social guarantee, but as an unequal bargaining chip in a coercive, open-ended market. Consistent testimonies; “The house is mine, but they demanded a price to hand it over,” “They returned the key after stripping everything,” “They rejected my complaint because the matter is military,” “They threatened to arrest me if I continued to claim”, all point to a persistent cycle of abuse. Breaking this cycle requires the establishment of an independent and enforceable mechanism to halt arbitrary arrests and extortion, and to restore property to its rightful owners without conditions or cost.

7. Legal Analysis

7.1. From the Perspective of International Law

All violations documented in these complaints, especially the systematic patterns of forced property seizure, the conversion of civilian property for military purposes, the imposition of financial extortion on the local population, and the use of arbitrary detention and torture to seize property or suppress claims, constitute clear breaches of peremptory norms under International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), including binding treaties and established international standards. Moreover, in several instances, these acts are likely to meet the threshold of war crimes and/or crimes against humanity, as defined by the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The right to property is recognized as a fundamental human right, protected under multiple binding international legal instruments. Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that “Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others, and no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.”³⁹ Similarly, Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) affirms everyone’s right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing, and housing for themselves and their families.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) explicitly prohibits arbitrary or unlawful interference with an individual’s privacy, family, home, or reputation. Taken together, these provisions make it clear that private property and the right to housing are inviolable and must be respected under all

³⁹ The full text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴⁰ The full text of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

circumstances. They cannot be lawfully undermined through coercion, extortion, or any form of arbitrary deprivation.⁴¹

Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, oblige parties to a conflict to respect private property and prohibit its destruction or seizure, except when strictly required by military necessity. Furthermore, Rule 50 of customary international humanitarian law (customary IHL), as codified by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), establishes a binding norm: “It is prohibited to destroy or seize the enemy’s property, unless the necessities imperatively demand such destruction or seizure of war.” The documented acts of uprooting thousands of olive trees and destroying agricultural land, including hills of historical and cultural significance, constitute clear violations of this rule. These actions cannot be justified by military necessity and instead demonstrate the systematic and arbitrary targeting of civilian property⁴².

Article 8(2)(b)(xiii) of the Rome Statute of the ICC states that the extensive destruction or seizure of property without military necessity is a war crime. Similarly, converting private residences into military headquarters or using civilian property for combat purposes breaches the principle of distinction between civilian objects and military objectives, as outlined in Article 52 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions⁴⁴. Moreover, Rule 10 of customary IHL emphasizes the ongoing obligation to distinguish between civilian objects and military targets.⁴⁵

Regarding protection against arbitrary deprivation of liberty, Article 9 of the ICCPR explicitly prohibits any arbitrary detention and guarantees every individual the right to personal freedom and security, as well as the right to challenge the lawfulness of their detention before a competent judicial authority.⁴⁶ The arrests of civilians solely for asserting their property rights, often accompanied by threats of killing or acts of torture, constitute clear violations of this provision. Such acts also fall within the scope of war crimes under Article 8(2)(c)(ii) of the Rome Statute of the ICC, which criminalizes arbitrary deprivation of liberty in the context of non-international armed conflicts. Furthermore, if it is established that these actions were carried

⁴¹ The full text of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴² "The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries", International Committee of the Red Cross, <https://www.icrc.org/en/law-and-policy/geneva-conventions-and-their-commentaries> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴³ The full text of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court is available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/rome-statute-international-criminal-court> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴⁴ The full text of the Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions is available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-additional-geneva-conventions-12-august-1949-and> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴⁵ Customary international humanitarian law, International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule 10, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule10> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴⁶ The full text of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

out as part of a systematic policy targeting Kurdish populations, they may additionally constitute crimes against humanity under Article 7(1)(e) of the same Statute⁴⁷.

Regarding cases of torture and degrading treatment, Article 2 of the 1984 Convention Against Torture (CAT) requires States Parties to take adequate measures to prevent torture in all situations, including during public emergencies or armed conflicts.⁴⁸ Article 1 of the Convention defines torture as any act causing severe physical or mental pain intentionally inflicted for coercive, punitive, or discriminatory purposes by a public official or someone acting in an official capacity. This definition directly relates to documented testimonies that describe the use of violence, detention, and deprivation of necessities as methods to seize property.⁴⁹ Under Article 7(1)(f) of the Rome Statute, such actions qualify as a crime against humanity when carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians.⁵⁰

Regarding the rights of internally displaced persons (IDPs), the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, especially Principle 21, state that IDPs have the right to have their property and homes protected from looting, seizure, or unlawful use.⁵¹ Additionally, Rules 132 and 133 of customary IHL confirm the right of displaced persons to return to their original homes and to recover their property or receive fair compensation. The testimonies indicate that returns to Afrin are often conditional on paying sums of money or relinquishing ownership, constituting a clear violation of these principles and reflecting a form of economic and political extortion aimed at forcing demographic change⁵².

When these various violations are considered together and analyzed within a single context, a clear and widespread pattern of abuses targeting a specific population becomes apparent, carried out through repeated policies of seizure, extortion, and intimidation. Such conduct qualifies as crimes against humanity under Article 7 of the Rome Statute. It also highlights the need to implement the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle, especially its preventive aspect, given the lack of effective local remedies or avenues for redress. According to the Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 31 on Article 2 of the ICCPR, states have the obligation to investigate serious violations, bring perpetrators to justice, and provide effective

⁴⁷ The full text of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/rome-statute-international-criminal-court> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴⁸ The full text of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment is available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁴⁹ Ibid., article 1.

⁵⁰ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 7(1)(f).

⁵¹ Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, principle 21, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/guiding-principles-internal-displacement> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁵² Customary international humanitarian law, International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule 132 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule132>, Rule 133, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule133> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁵³ 2005 World Summit Outcome, United Nations General Assembly, Document A/RES/60/1, dated 24 October 2005, paras 138–139 https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

remedies.⁵⁴ This duty still applies when violations are committed by non-state actors who exercise public functions or act with the acquiescence or tolerance of de facto authorities or the State. Given the testimonies confirming the failure of local mechanisms, such as the “Grievances Redress Committee” and “General Security,” to prevent or offer basic protection against these violations, there is systemic impunity that violates the core obligations of the Syrian State under international law. Accordingly, these incidents cannot be dismissed as simple domestic property disputes or civil conflicts. They represent serious violations of the international legal order, requiring immediate global action to protect victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and implement remedies such as reparations and transitional justice mechanisms.

7.2. From the Perspective of Syrian Legislation

The documented violations in the submitted complaints, including the unlawful seizure of homes, businesses, and agricultural lands in Afrin; the conversion of civilian properties into military headquarters; their exploitation or rental without the owners’ consent; the uprooting of trees and destruction of farmland; as well as the arbitrary detention, torture, and extortion of owners to force displacement or the loss of property, constitute serious breaches of the 2025 Syrian Constitutional Declaration and applicable Syrian laws that remain in effect under it.⁵⁵ These actions are not just isolated administrative irregularities but are systematic violations intended to dispossess lawful owners and strip them of rights explicitly protected by the Constitution and national law.

The 2025 Constitutional Declaration explicitly guarantees the protection of private property in Article 16.1, which states, “The right to private property is protected, and it may not be expropriated except for the public benefit and in return for fair compensation.” The Preamble further emphasizes the principles of the rule of law, victim redress, and the establishment of a state based on citizenship, freedom, and dignity. Accordingly, any form of forced seizure or interference with individuals’ property without a legal basis or due process, whether through converting it into military headquarters, exploiting it without consent, or engaging in coerced sales or transfers, constitutes a clear violation of the constitutional text. Such actions cannot be justified on any security, political, or military grounds.

Syrian civil law reinforces this constitutional protection with clear provisions. Article 768 of the Syrian Civil Code grants the owner, within legal boundaries, the exclusive right to use, exploit, and dispose of their property. Article 770 affirms the owner’s right to all fruits, products, and appurtenances of that property, while Article 771 forbids depriving anyone of their property except as prescribed by law and following proper legal procedures, with fair compensation.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Human Rights Committee, General comment no. 31 (80), the nature of the general legal obligation imposed on States Parties to the Covenant, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13, 26 May 2004, paras 15–18 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/533996?ln=en&v=pdf> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁵⁵ The full text of the 2025 Constitutional Declaration of the Syrian Arab Republic is available at: <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

⁵⁶ The full text of the Syrian Civil Code is available at: <https://www.syrian-lawyer.club/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A.pdf> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

Accordingly, blocking owners from accessing their land, imposing unlawful levies on agricultural production, or exploiting businesses without the owners' consent violates property rights and clearly breaches these statutory provisions. At the criminal law level, the acts described in these complaints clearly involve elements of multiple crimes punishable under Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949.⁵⁷

Unlawful seizure of homes, agricultural lands, or businesses, whether for use as military headquarters, exploitation, or to house others, constitutes the crime of property usurpation under Article 723. Theft of household contents, agricultural equipment, or olive press production lines, especially when committed during or after military operations, falls under the offense of "theft committed during disturbances" as outlined in Article 627. Threatening owners with detention, killing, or harm to family members to prevent them from asserting their rights constitutes the crime of threats under Articles 559 et seq., with harsher penalties when such acts are carried out by armed groups or involve weapons. Occupying another person's property and refusing to leave despite repeated demands breaches the sanctity of the home, punishable under Article 557.

Cases of arbitrary detention, torture, and degrading treatment reported by victims constitute the crimes of unlawful deprivation of liberty and torture under Articles 555–556 of the Syrian Penal Code, as well as under the Anti-Torture Law No. 16 of 2022. The latter law affirms that torture offenses are not subject to prescription, obliges the State to ensure bodily integrity and human dignity, and to prevent all forms of torture, as further reaffirmed in Article 18 of the Constitutional Declaration. These violations not only contravene specific provisions of the Penal Code but also undermine fundamental constitutional guarantees that protect individuals from arbitrary actions.

Expressions quoted in testimonies, such as "war spoils" or "we liberated Afrin; you no longer have a place here," reveal an unjust mentality that treats private property as loot. Such justifications have no basis in Syrian law and imply violations of both constitutional and criminal provisions. By substituting the rule of law with the rule of force, these practices fundamentally undermine the principles of legality and justice.

Despite the existence of "Grievance Redress Committees" and local authorities, victim testimonies indicate that these bodies are mostly ineffective because they lack real jurisdiction over the factions or fail to act properly. This leaves victims without legal remedies and violates their right to access justice, as guaranteed under Article 17 of the Constitutional Declaration. Therefore, these violations are not isolated incidents but are part of a systemic pattern of impunity.

8. Recommendations

Based on the testimonies and documented evidence presented in this paper, which reveal systematic patterns of violations of property and housing rights in Afrin since 2018, particularly

⁵⁷ The full text of the Syrian Penal Code is available at: <https://learningpartnership.org/sites/default/files/resources/pdfs/Syria-Penal-Cade-1949-Arabic.pdf> (last accessed: 18 August 2025).

in the context of de facto occupation by armed factions supported by a foreign state, including forcible appropriation of property, financial extortion, arbitrary detention, and systematic discrimination based on identity, we recommend the following measures at both the local and international levels, in accordance with obligations under IHRL, IHL, and International Criminal Law (ICL):

1. Issue an urgent call to the de facto authorities in Afrin, including the Syrian Interim Government and affiliated armed factions, to immediately and unconditionally evacuate all seized private properties, restore them to their rightful owners, and offer guarantees against future recurrences, ensuring prompt and fair recovery of property;
2. Cease all forms of financial extortion or “ransom” demands for recovering homes, businesses, or agricultural lands. Initiate transparent investigations with independent local authorities into all imposed levies or coerced contracts, and suspend the validity of such property transactions until judicial review is completed;
3. Hold all armed and civilian actors responsible for violations, including the unlawful conversion of civilian property for military purposes and acts that endanger civilians, based on the principle of individual responsibility under international humanitarian law, including conduct that may amount to war crimes;
4. Enable independent civil courts or temporary international support to resolve property disputes involving confiscated, looted, or destroyed assets, ensuring victims have access to justice, the right to appeal, and entitlement to adequate compensation;
5. Enhance the mandate of any existing or proposed local transitional justice committee or body to include violations committed by all parties to the conflict since 2011, rather than restricting its scope to a single actor, and to carry out programs for the restitution of collective and looted properties, along with voluntary, safe, and comprehensive plans for the return and reintegration of IDPs and forcibly displaced persons;
6. Create an independent compensation fund, overseen jointly by local and international bodies, to provide both material and moral reparations to affected individuals. Ensure transparent eligibility criteria, an appeal process, and safeguards to prevent discrimination or politicization in distributing rights;
7. Provide technical and legal support to civil society organizations documenting property and housing violations, including the development of secure databases, training monitoring teams, and preserving evidence for potential future criminal proceedings;
8. Urge international donors to prioritize respect for human rights, especially property rights, as a prerequisite for reconstruction or humanitarian projects in Afrin. This includes conditions to return properties to their rightful owners and to reject outcomes resulting from forced confiscation or demographic shifts;
9. Support the development of communication and coordination channels between victims and relevant international mechanisms, including UN Special Rapporteurs on adequate housing, IDPs, and human rights in Syria, to facilitate individual or collective submissions and ensure patterns of violations are reflected in periodic reports;
10. Urge the COI-Syria and the UN Fact-Finding Mission to conduct thematic missions or issue special reports on the Afrin region, focusing on property violations and identity-based discrimination, within the broader context of potential crimes under ICL.

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.