

Behind Closed Doors: Afrin's People Between Detention and Denial

STJ Urges The Syrian Transitional Government To Acknowledge Violations In Afrin Ensure Accountability Dismantle Unofficial Detention Centers And Uphold Victims' Rights All Essential To A Credible Rule-Of-Law-Based Political Transition



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1. Executive Summary

This report presents a detailed, evidence-based account of a systematic pattern of grave human rights violations in Afrin and its surrounding areas, committed by armed factions formerly operating under the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). These violations, which began in the aftermath of the 2018 Operation Olive Branch, have persisted and remain in place even after the fall of the Assad regime and the establishment of the Syrian Transitional Government in late 2024. The findings of this expanded investigation fall within a period of significant institutional restructuring. Following the conclusion of Operation Deterrence of Aggression, the SNA announced its formal dissolution and the integration of its constituent factions into the Ministry of Defense under the Transitional Government. This transition was officially ratified at the Victory Conference on 29 January 2025.¹

The report is based on 41 direct testimonies and a range of open-source materials, revealing systematic patterns of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, financial extortion, and discrimination based on ethnic identity, amid an almost complete absence of accountability and judicial oversight².

The findings show that arbitrary detention was the primary entry point into a broader cycle of violations. Civilians were arrested without judicial warrants, often at checkpoints or while returning from displacement, and subsequently transferred to an extensive network of formal and informal detention facilities. These sites included schools, factories, warehouses, and confiscated civilian homes, all repurposed as detention centers operating outside any legal framework and governed by a security-driven approach rooted in violence and humiliation.

The report further reveals that these practices continued after 2024, underscoring that the violations are not confined to the wartime period or solely linked to the former regime. Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documented arrests of civilians returning to Afrin after the fall of the regime, who were detained under the pretext of “inspection” or “security screening” and then subjected to beatings and ill-treatment without being

¹“Decisions of the Syrian Victory Conference... A Point of Order,” [in Arabic], Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 5 February 2025, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85> (Last accessed: 28 March 2026).

² See, for example: “Everything is by the Power of the Weapon: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria”, Human Rights Watch, 29 February 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026);

See also: Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/49/77, 8 February 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/49/77> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026).

brought before judicial authorities. This demonstrates that the same repressive structures remain in place despite the changing political context.

The report also documents recurring patterns of torture and inhuman treatment, including severe beatings, electric shocks, suspension, burning, starvation, verbal abuse, and threats of sexual violence. These practices were not isolated incidents but part of a systematic policy used to extract forced confessions or coerce families into paying financial ransoms. Notably, torture was inflicted in front of family members or on relatives to exert psychological pressure on detainees, methods that stand out as among the most brutal and impactful.

The report also shows that the release of detainees was often contingent on paying large sums of money, without any written judicial decisions or official receipts, effectively turning deprivation of liberty into a tool of extortion and a parallel economy that benefits armed factions and their leaders. Arrests were also accompanied by looting and property seizures, either during raids or as an undeclared condition for release.

At the level of identity, testimonies reveal a systematic policy of discrimination against Kurdish residents, in which the “ready-made accusation” of affiliation with Kurdish entities or involvement in the structures of the former self-administration was used to justify arrest and torture. These accusations were often accompanied by degrading rhetoric and ethnically charged insults, indicating that the violations specifically targeted Kurds on the basis of their identity.

The report further highlights that the integration of armed factions into the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian transitional government, and the appointment of their leaders to official positions, occurred without any genuine accountability for documented violations. On the contrary, it included individuals named in international human rights reports and on sanctions lists. This reality underscores the continued policy of impunity and the reproduction of a repressive system in new institutional forms.

The report finds that the violations documented in Afrin constitute a systematic and ongoing policy that has persisted since 2018, despite changes in authority. As such, they amount to continuous violations that require comprehensive redress within a transitional justice framework that excludes no party.

In light of these findings, the report concludes with a set of recommendations addressed to the Syrian transitional government and the international community, calling for official recognition of the violations, the opening of independent investigations, linking the integration of armed factions to effective accountability mechanisms, the closure of unofficial detention centers, and the guarantee of victims’

rights to truth, justice, and reparations, conditions considered essential for any political transition grounded in the rule of law and the prevention of future violations.

2. Methodology

For this report, STJ conducted extensive research, including interviews with 41 victims of violations committed by the SNA in Afrin and its surrounding areas. The interviews were conducted either in person or online during the second half of 2025 and were conducted in both Arabic and Kurdish. In obtaining informed consent, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the interviews and how their information would be used. At their request, their identities were withheld, and STJ used pseudonyms when quoting their testimonies, out of concern for potential reprisals against them or their families³.

In addition to the interviews, STJ reviewed a wide range of open-source materials, including reports issued by United Nations (UN) bodies, human rights organizations, and local and international media outlets, as well as videos, photographs, and social media content. The organization also examined documents shared by interviewees that relate to the violations investigated in this report.

3. Background

This report documents violations in Afrin and its surrounding areas in northwestern Syria, particularly in detention centers run by armed factions affiliated with the Türkiye-backed SNA and operating in the areas of A'zaz, al-Rai, Kafr Naseh, Hawar Kilis, and Sajo. The report covers the period from the March 2018 takeover of the region by Turkish forces and allied SNA following Operation Olive Branch through the time of writing, including violations committed in 2024 and 2025 after the fall of the Assad regime, amid ongoing abuses and the continued presence of detainees and forcibly disappeared persons to this day.

The SNA comprises approximately 41 factions, including 15 factions within the National Front for Liberation and 26 factions organized into three corps within the army.⁴ The Afrin region has been divided into military and administrative sectors, each managed by factions affiliated with these corps.

Among the largest factions by manpower are Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya/Gathering of Free Men of the East (commonly referred to as Ahrar al-Sharqiya),⁵ The Sham

³ For more details on witness interviews, see the Annex.

⁴ Omer Ozkizilcik: "The Syrian National Army: Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus" [in Arabic], Geneva Centre for Security Policy, October 2020, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/doc/sna-structure-function-damascus-ar> (Last accessed: 15 March 2026).

⁵ Established in January 2016, the group is led by Ahmad Ihsan Fayad al-Hayes (Abu Hatim Shaqra), a member of the 1st Corps. Shaqra officially stepped down from leadership but still controls the movement's largest force.

Legion/Faylaq al-Sham,⁶ the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division,⁷ the Sultan Murad Division,⁸ the Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya,⁹ and Elite Army/Jaysh al-Nukhba.¹⁰ These factions are deployed across most districts of Afrin, exercising control over cities and towns through military headquarters, detention centers, courts, and both military and civilian police forces.

This fragmented military structure has created an overlapping network of authorities in which commanders and members rotate control of facilities and detainees. As a result, there is a de facto absence of accountability and no unified judicial authority to govern these areas.

The distribution of factions and their relationship with the Turkish side indicate that this structure operated under Turkish supervision, with Turkish forces maintaining a military presence in the region through bases, command centers, liaison officers, and advisors. These actors also assumed roles in security and military coordination and, in some cases, were involved in managing detention facilities or attending interrogations, according to corroborated testimonies consistent with findings in international human rights reports¹¹.

This followed US Treasury sanctions on the faction and its leader in July 2021. It operates in Afrin, al-Bab, Jarabulus, and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and participated in Operations Olive Branch and Peace Spring alongside the Turkish army against the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

⁶ Established in March 2014 and led by Munther Serras, a member of the Astana delegation, it operated in Idlib and its countryside, the northern and western Aleppo countryside, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tripoli, Libya. It maintained a recent relationship with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), sharing front lines in Idlib. It is known to be affiliated with the 3rd Corps, which received direct Turkish support in Idlib.

⁷ Established in April 2016 and led by Sayf Abu Bakr, a Turkish citizen, the division is part of the SNA's 2nd Corps. In addition to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, it operates in al-Bab, Jarabulus, al-Ghandoura, al-Rai, Hawar Kilis, and Afrin. It participated in all Turkish military operations in Syria. The US Treasury sanctioned the division and its leader in 2023 for involvement in serious human rights abuses in northern Syria, including kidnapping, severe physical abuse, and rape.

⁸ Established in March 2015 and led by Fahim Issa, a Turkish citizen who was appointed Deputy Defense Minister in the Interim Government, the division is part of the 2nd Corps. It operated in northern Aleppo, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and Tripoli, Libya. It distinguished itself by its Turkmen identity and participated in all Turkish operations: Euphrates Shield against ISIS, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring against the YPG and SDF. It is known for its direct affiliation with the Turkish Ministry of Interior and does not answer to any internal Syrian authority.

⁹ Established in 2014 through the merger of several major factions: Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Islamic Front, Fastaqim Kama Umirt Union, Authenticity and Development Front, and Suqour al-Sham. Led by Azzam al-Gharib, known as Abu al-Ezz Saraqib, it controlled the entire city of A'zaz, and its members form the bulk of the 3rd Corps.

¹⁰ Established in January 2017 as part of the 1st Corps, it is led by Col. Moataz Raslan, who also commands the 1st Corps. It was previously known as Jaysh al-Tahrir before being attacked by Jabhat al-Nusra/HTS. It moved from Idlib to northern Aleppo, where it currently operates. It participated in Operation Peace Spring, and some of its battalions were deployed to Tripoli, Libya.

¹¹ "Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin," Amnesty International, 2 August 2018,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>; (Last accessed: 1 April 2026).

see also: "Everything is by the Power of the Weapon:

This has consolidated a situation of de facto control, whereby Türkiye exercised institutional authority on the ground through financial, logistical, and military support to the factions, as well as direct field and administrative oversight¹².

Over several years, Afrin and its surrounding areas have witnessed grave and systematic violations committed by the SNA. These included killings,¹³ arbitrary arrests based on alleged affiliation with the People's Protection Units (YPG), the SDF, or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), enforced disappearances, ill-treatment, and torture,¹⁴ as well as looting, property confiscation,¹⁵ and the forced displacement of Kurdish residents from their homes¹⁶.

The violations also extended to policies of Turkification, particularly in educational curricula,¹⁷ and the alteration of prominent Kurdish cultural landmarks.¹⁸ They further included demographic engineering by targeting the region's cultural and natural identity,¹⁹ including the cutting of forest trees and the destruction of environmental the targeting of cemeteries and shrines in several villages and towns²¹.

Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria", Human Rights Watch, 29 February 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026).

¹² Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/58/CRP2, 6 December 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/pillageandplunder> (Last accessed: 25 March 2026).

¹³ "Syria: Turkey-Backed Fighters Kill 4 Kurdish Civilians", Human Rights Watch, 23 March 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/22/syria-turkey-backed-fighters-kill-4-kurdish-civilians> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026).

¹⁴ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/49/77, 8 February 2022, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/49/77> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026).

¹⁵ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/52/69, 7 February 2023, <https://docs.un.org/ar/A/HRC/52/69> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026).

¹⁶ "Where is My Home: Property Rights Violations in Northern Syria Perpetuate Demographic Change", Synergy/Hevdestî Association for Victims, 25 January 2023, <https://hevdesti.org/en/violations-of-property-rights-in-northern-syria/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

¹⁷ "Curricula in Afrin: Between "Turkification" and Restrictions on the Kurdish Language", STJ, 16 March 2023, <https://stj-sy.org/en/curricula-in-afrin-between-turkification-and-restrictions-on-the-kurdish-language/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

¹⁸ "Northern Syria: Replacement of Kurdish Landmarks in Afrin, Turkification in Al-Bab", STJ, 29 August 2024, <https://stj-sy.org/en/northern-syria-replacement-of-kurdish-landmarks-in-afrin-turkification-in-al-bab/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

¹⁹ "Housing Settlements in Afrin: Demographic Engineering or IDP Housing Projects?", STJ, 8 June 2022, <https://stj-sy.org/en/housing-settlements-in-afrin-demographic-engineering-or-idp-housing-projects/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

²⁰ "Syria: Satellite Images Reveal Extensive Logging in 114 Forest Patches in Afrin", STJ, 12 April 2023, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-satellite-images-reveal-extensive-logging-in-114-forest-patches-in-afrin/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

²¹ "'Blind Revenge': Cemeteries and Religious Shrines Vandalized by Parties to Syrian Conflict", STJ, 6 April 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/en/blind-revenge-cemeteries-and-religious-shrines-vandalized-by-parties-to-syrian-conflict/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

4. Legal Analysis of the Violations Documented in the Report

4.1. National Legal Framework

The patterns of arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, identity-based discrimination, financial extortion, and the desecration of religious symbols documented in the testimonies in this report constitute direct violations of the 2012 Syrian Constitution,²² which was in force at the time the violations occurred (2018–2024). In particular, Articles (33), (53), and (54) guarantee personal liberty and prohibit torture and arbitrary detention.

These practices are also inconsistent with the 2025 Syrian Constitutional Declaration,²³ which states in Article (18) that the State “shall protect human dignity and the sanctity of the body and shall prohibit enforced disappearance and physical and moral torture. Torture crimes shall not be subject to a statute of limitations.” It further stipulates that, except in cases of flagrante delicto, no person may be arrested, detained, or have his freedom restricted except by a judicial decision.”

Moreover, Article (10) of the Declaration enshrines the principle of equality and non-discrimination, which is directly violated by practices targeting Kurdish residents based on their identity.

Field testimonies collected by STJ demonstrate the complete collapse of these constitutional safeguards in areas under SNA control. Civilians are arrested without judicial warrants or prosecutorial oversight, and detainees are tortured and denied access to their families or legal counsel, in clear violation of the very essence of the constitutional provisions cited above.

Article 358 of the Syrian Penal Code,²⁴ enshrines the principle that no person may be detained without a proper judicial warrant and provides that prison directors or staff are liable to imprisonment for one to three years if they detain an individual without a warrant or judicial order. However, the facts documented in this report demonstrate that detention facilities operated by armed factions, such as al-Ma'sara Prison, the Military Police Prison in Afrin, and al-Rai Prison, operate entirely outside judicial

²² Syrian Constitution of 2012, <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/syrian-Arab-Republic-Constitution.pdf> (Last accessed 25 March 2026).

²³ The Syrian Constitutional Declaration of 2025, <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025.03.13%20-%20Constitutional%20declaration%20%28English%29.pdf> (Last accessed: 25 March 2026).

²⁴ General Penal Code No. 148 of 1949, amended by Legislative Decree No. 1 of 2011 [in Arabic], <http://jus.moj.gov.sy/ar/node/574> (Last accessed: 25 March 2026).

oversight. Detention in these facilities is used as a tool of repression and financial extortion, in clear disregard of that provision.

This practice also directly violates Article 425 of the Syrian Code of Criminal Procedure,²⁵ which requires the Public Prosecutor, the Investigating Judge, or the Magistrate Judge (as applicable) to visit the location of an arrest or detention, order the immediate release of any person unlawfully detained, and, if grounds for detention exist, refer the detainee without delay to the competent Public Prosecutor or Magistrate Judge.

In addition, the Syrian Penal Code criminalizes the acts documented in this report. Articles (555–556) prohibit unlawful deprivation of liberty and impose aggravated penalties, including temporary hard labor of no less than three years, when the deprivation exceeds one month or when the victim is subjected to torture. Furthermore, arresting individuals without legal justification to obtain ransom or as an act of retaliation, particularly when the victim is targeted on the basis of ethnic identity, violates Legislative Decree No. 20 of 2013,²⁶ which provides that “Any person who kidnaps another, depriving them of their liberty for political or material gain, for revenge or retaliation, for sectarian reasons, or for ransom, shall be punished with life hard labor.”

The practice of torturing detainees and subjecting them to inhuman and degrading treatment also violates Article 391 of the Syrian Penal Code, which criminalizes the use of “coercion” or any form of violence against detainees and provides for imprisonment for such acts.

Law No. 16 of 2022 was the first Syrian legislation to explicitly criminalize torture,²⁷ imposing aggravated penalties on perpetrators, prohibiting the use of confessions obtained under torture, banning orders to commit torture, mandating compensation for victims, and providing protection for complainants, witnesses, and their family members.

The seizure, appropriation, or confiscation of civilians’ property without legal justification violates Article 16 of the 2025 Constitutional Declaration, which provides that “The right to private property is protected, and it may not be expropriated except for the public benefit, and in return for fair compensation.”

²⁵ Syrian Code of Criminal Procedure No. 112 of 1950 [in Arabic], <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/torture/cfi-report-hrc52/submissions/csos/submission-srtorture-hrc52-cso-SyrianNGOs-2.pdf> (Last accessed: 25 March 2026).

²⁶ Legislative Decree No. 20 of 2013 [in Arabic], <https://thawra.sy/?p=35542> (Last accessed: 25 March 2026).

²⁷ Law No. 16 of 2022 [in Arabic], <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=5516&cat=22943&> (Last accessed: 25 March 2026).

It also constitutes the criminal offense of robbery with violence under Article 624 of the Syrian Penal Code when the property is movable. If the property is immovable, the act is classified as property usurpation under Article 723 of the same Code.

Furthermore, such practices contravene the Syrian Civil Code, which affirms that no person may be deprived of their property except in cases prescribed by law and only in return for fair compensation, and that the owner alone has, within the limits of the law, the right to use, exploit, and dispose of their property (Articles 768–771).

The use of abusive and degrading language against detainees, the denigration of their Kurdish identity, and attacks on religious symbols by targeting cemeteries and religious shrines in several villages and towns constitute acts criminalized under the Syrian Penal Code. The Code prohibits and punishes any act, writing, or speech intended to or resulting in the incitement of sectarian or racial strife or the provocation of conflict between religious groups, as well as any act aimed at belittling or desecrating religious rites (Articles 307 and 462).

Accordingly, all of these acts, from arbitrary arrest, torture, and enforced disappearance to looting, confiscation, financial extortion, and the desecration of religious symbols, constitute crimes punishable under Syrian law and amount to a serious breach of the duties of officials or commanders exercising de facto public authority.

4.2. International Legal Framework

The violations documented in this report constitute grave breaches of the obligations incumbent upon both the Syrian transitional government and Türkiye under international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL). In many respects, these violations may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity, particularly given that they appear to have been committed on a widespread basis and pursuant to a systematic policy implemented by the armed factions implicated in these abuses.

Torture, cruel treatment, and financial extortion violate Common Article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which absolutely prohibits violence to life and person, cruel treatment, and degrading treatment. They also violate Additional Protocol II of 1977, which affirms the protection of civilians and persons deprived of liberty in non-international armed conflicts²⁸.

²⁸ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-additional-geneva-conventions-12-august-1949-and-0> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

Torture, sexual violence, and inhuman or degrading treatment also constitute violations of Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),²⁹ Article 16 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) of 1984,³⁰ which affirms that no exceptional circumstances whatsoever may be invoked as a justification for torture, and Article 5 of of torture documented in this report, if allegedly committed pursuant to a plan or state policy, may amount to war crimes or crimes against humanity, depending on the applicable context, under Articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court³².

The detention of pregnant women, or the humiliation or medical neglect of them or their newborns, also violates Article 12 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),³³ and Article 6 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which obligates the State to protect children and ensure their survival, safety, and well-being³⁴.

The acts documented in this report also constitute clear violations of customary international humanitarian law (CIHL).³⁵ Torture and other forms of corporal punishment and inhuman treatment are prohibited under Rules 90–91. Arbitrary deprivation of liberty and enforced disappearance are prohibited under Rules 98–99. The failure to ensure the separation of women and children from male detainees violates Rules 119–120. The seizure of civilian property without imperative military necessity contravenes Rules 50–52. These rules are binding on all parties to the conflict, regardless of whether they have ratified specific treaties³⁶.

²⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

³⁰ Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

³¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

³² Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/rome-statute-international-criminal-court> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

³³ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, New York, 18 December 1979, United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

³⁴ Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> (Last accessed: 10 April 2026).

³⁵ Customary International Humanitarian Law, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/rules> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026)

³⁶ The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/index/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

The discriminatory and degrading language directed at detainees constitutes hate speech, as defined in the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech.³⁷ The Strategy defines hate speech as “Any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” Article 20 of the ICCPR explicitly prohibits any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence.

The Ministry of Defense of the new government is also responsible for holding accountable and prosecuting those implicated in such violations, given that factions of the SNA, including those involved in documented crimes, were integrated into the Syrian army following the “Victory Conference,”³⁸ at which Mr. Ahmed al-Sharaa was appointed President of Syria.

5. Recommendations

The findings in this report demonstrate that the widespread violations in Afrin since 2018, including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, financial extortion, looting, and ethnic discrimination, constitute a systematic pattern and that certain practices amount to crimes against humanity. This necessitates an urgent legal and political response at the national and international levels. Accordingly, STJ presents the following recommendations:

5.1 To the Syrian Transitional Government

- Officially acknowledge the violations committed in Afrin since 2018 and launch independent, comprehensive investigations into them, including those perpetrated by factions now integrated into the Ministry of Defense. Issue a formal apology to the victims, particularly given that the implicated factions have now become part of the Ministry of Defense.
- Link the integration of armed factions to clear accountability and disciplinary mechanisms that exclude individuals implicated in serious crimes from any security or military positions.
- Ensure that transitional justice processes cover all violations without exception, so they are not limited to crimes committed by the former regime but also

³⁷ The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/un-strategy-and-plan-of-action-on-hate-speech> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

³⁸ “Decisions of the Syrian Victory Conference... A Point of Order,” [in Arabic], Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 5 February 2025, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85> (Last accessed: 28 March 2026).

include crimes committed in 2025. This requires amending Decree No. 20, which establishes the National Commissions for Transitional Justice, to align with this approach.

- Protect economic and property rights through a legal framework that criminalizes looting, extortion, ransom practices, and financial blackmail of detainees, while ensuring compensation for victims and the restitution of their property.
- Ensure civilian and judicial oversight of all places of detention, establish a national registry of detainees and missing persons, and immediately release all individuals held in unofficial detention sites.
- Shut down all informal detention centers and prisons managed by armed factions, and ensure all places of detention are placed under the oversight of the Ministry of Justice and the Public Prosecutor.
- Suspend all military commanders named in human rights reports or on international sanctions lists pending the outcome of investigations, and subject them to criminal and administrative accountability procedures.

5.2 To Civil Society Organizations and the International Community

- Support local documentation and transitional justice programs, and provide direct legal and psychosocial assistance to victims.
- Expand international sanctions to include individuals responsible for torture, enforced disappearance, and ethnic discrimination in the region, and ensure transparency in listing criteria.
- Monitor accountability processes the interim government may undertake against perpetrators, and exert pressure to ensure that violations committed in Syria by all parties are addressed.
- Strengthen coordination between human rights organizations and local initiatives to share data on detainees and forcibly disappeared persons, and establish a joint platform to document violations.
- Launch field and media awareness campaigns on the risks of discrimination and identity-based violence to promote a culture of accountability and genuine equal citizenship.

6. Arbitrary Detention: The First Step in a Cycle of Violations

“They put me in a car and ordered me to keep my head down. They beat me whenever I raised it. They hurled insults and verbal abuse at me, and no one told me the reason for my arrest or where they were taking me.”

Kinan, detained at a facility controlled by the al-Amshat in September 2024.

Armed factions affiliated with the SNA continued, during 2024 and 2025, to carry out arbitrary arrests of civilians in Afrin and its surrounding areas, according to documentation by STJ. These arrests occurred in various contexts, including at flying checkpoint, city entrances, workplaces, and when residents returned from displacement areas, without any judicial warrant or official explanation for the detentions.

Field data indicate that arbitrary arrest was not an exceptional or isolated practice but rather the primary entry point into a broader chain of violations, including torture, financial extortion, enforced disappearance, and property seizure. In several recent cases, civilians were detained immediately upon returning to Afrin or while passing through checkpoints, and were subsequently transferred to detention facilities run by armed factions or by the military and civilian police, without being allowed to contact their families or to be brought before a competent judicial authority.

These practices were not limited to a specific period; they persisted beyond the fall of the Assad regime. STJ documented cases of arrests targeting civilians returning to Afrin in late 2024 and early 2025. These individuals were intercepted at checkpoints at the city's entrances under the pretext of "identity verification" or "security screening," and subsequently detained for periods ranging from several days to weeks without being presented before a judicial authority.

In one case documented by STJ, the witness Zuhair (55), a grocery store owner, returned with his family to his village in the Afrin area after the Assad regime fell in December 2024. During their return, they were stopped at a Military Police checkpoint at the entrance to Afrin in Kafr Janneh, accompanied by his 25-year-old son. After their identities were checked, checkpoint personnel took both the witness and his son to a nearby military facility without presenting an arrest warrant or providing any explanation for their detention. The witness described the conditions of his detention as follows,

"We stayed for three days in a military facility about fifty meters from the checkpoint, which belonged to the Military Police. We were blindfolded, beaten, and had no idea whether we would be released or transferred elsewhere."

In a similar case, Saad (25), a tailor arrested in February 2025 at a flying checkpoint operated by the Civilian Police in Afrin and recently released, stated,

"The officers only asked for my ID. Then the checkpoint supervisor came and started questioning me: Where have you been? Where do you live? What do

you do? After that, they told the driver to leave, and no one told me why I was arrested or where I was being taken.”

In a similar context, STJ documented the arrest of Suhail (33), a farmer, after his return to the Afrin area following the end of military operations and the fall of the former regime. Suhail had been displaced with his family from Afrin since 2018 and decided to return to his village of Qatmah in the Sharran district on 18 December 2024, just days after the fall of the Assad regime. Upon entering the area, they were stopped at a Military Police checkpoint at the entrance to Afrin, where vehicles and belongings were searched and the IDs of all family members were collected under the pretext of “security screening.” After waiting nearly an hour, two checkpoint personnel asked Suhail to step out, claiming they needed “some information.” He was then taken to a nearby Military Police building, where he was detained without an arrest warrant or official explanation, along with dozens of other civilians returning that same day. Suhail described the moment of his arrest and what followed,

“They told me: get out, we just need some information from you. They took my belongings and money, then put me in a room where there were many young men, all from Afrin. No one questioned me or interrogated me.”

During his initial detention, the witness was neither brought before a judicial authority nor informed of specific charges; he was subjected to mass detention and discriminatory verbal abuse. He was subsequently transferred to a detention cell affiliated with the Civil Court in Afrin, and later to M'arata Prison, where he was held for several months before being released on bail in May 2025.

These practices are not isolated incidents or limited to the most recent period; rather, they reflect a long-standing pattern dating back to 2018. Years of field monitoring and documentation in Afrin and its surrounding areas make it clear that arbitrary detention has been the initial and most widespread link in a broader chain of violations committed by factions affiliated with the SNA. Instead of serving as a lawful mechanism of accountability, detention has been transformed into a tool of financial and psychological extortion and a means of subjugating and humiliating civilians, particularly on the basis of their ethnic identity or place of origin.

For example, Nawar (42), furniture worker, described his arrest at the al-Shatt checkpoint near the city of A'zaz, stating,

“In 2021, I was stopped at a checkpoint run by the Levant Front near A'zaz while returning to Afrin with my family. They asked for my ID and began questioning me about where I was coming from and where I was going. They then made me

get out of the car and detained me in a room for several hours. After that, they placed a bag over my head and covered my eyes before transferring me to an unknown location.”

Several testimonies also described night raids on homes carried out without any legal procedure, during which doors were broken down, rooms were searched, and individuals were taken away blindfolded to unknown locations. None of the detainees or their families were aware of the precise reason for the arrest or the identity of the responsible actors.

In his testimony, Haitham (40), grocery shop owner, recounted the circumstances of his arbitrary arrest by members of the Levant Front, along with the assault and theft that accompanied it, stating,

“In January 2019, around 9 p.m., a patrol came to my house near the M’arata roundabout in Afrin. They arrested me violently and beat me during the raid; they even took me while I was only wearing pajamas. They put me in a Hyundai Santa Fe, and while doing so they searched the house and vandalized the furniture, stealing all the money inside, about \$800 and 3,000 Turkish lira (TL) as well as my phone and my wife’s phone.”

In late March 2018, a military checkpoint stopped a car carrying witness Firas (38), tailor, and his family as they were returning to Afrin. The personnel requested IDs for verification. After a period of waiting, they allowed the rest of the passengers to leave and detained the witness along with another individual on the grounds of “checking whether they were wanted persons.” The witness was subsequently transferred by vehicle to an unknown destination, accompanied by armed members of a military faction, without any explanation of his whereabouts, in circumstances amounting to clear arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance.

7. Enforced disappearance

“They told my wife, 'Do not bother looking for him anywhere. Go to the cemetery; you will find him there because we killed him. Do whatever you want, we do not care'.”

Youssef, arrested by the Civil Police in Afrin (detained multiple times between 2018 and 2024).

Analysis of the testimonies reveals a complex detention network in which the responsibilities of different factions overlap. A single detainee may be transferred

among multiple facilities or prisons during detention, for example, from headquarters operated by factions such as the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, the Sultan Murad Division, and the Levant Front to facilities run by the Military Police³⁹.

In many cases, factions denied holding the individual or claimed no knowledge of their whereabouts, even when the detainee remained in one of their own facilities.

STJ has also documented the continued use of enforced disappearance as a policy, despite shifts in territorial control. Several witnesses reported being arrested during Operation Deterrence of Aggression or after the fall of the regime, and their families received no information about their fate.

One case involves a witness who reported his son, Adel, missing after the latter was arrested during the operation. Despite the fall of the former regime in Syria, Adel remains missing to this day, reportedly transferred as part of an exchange between armed factions and the Syrian government. This case illustrates how civilians have been used as bargaining chips between parties to the conflict and how arbitrary detention has evolved into prolonged enforced disappearance involving multiple authorities, each denying responsibility for the victims' fate and leaving their families trapped in a cycle of uncertainty and denial.

The witness stated,

“On 2 December 2024, the factions entered the town of Tall Rifat and arrested my son from his workshop, claiming he was affiliated with the SDF. They transferred him to a facility run by the 52nd Division near the village of Qatmah, it was like a house converted into a prison, holding more than 13 detainees from Afrin. After months of searching, I learned where he was and managed to visit him for only ten minutes. He was extremely thin, with marks of beating and restraint all over his body, and his hands and neck were covered in bruises. They told us they were planning an exchange with the SDF and would not release him. After that, they refused further visits and turned us away every time we tried to ask about him. On 25 June 2025, we learned that the faction had handed him over, along with others, to the Ministry of Interior and that he had been transferred to a prison in Aleppo. Since that day, no one knows where he is.”

³⁹ Established in March 2018 with direct Turkish support and funding, this faction is characterized by an extensive security structure comprising several offices, including the Intelligence Office/Investigation Department. Most members are former SNA personnel.

These practices are not new but rather a continuation of policies documented over many years. In earlier testimony documented by STJ, Mufid (42), a farmer, described being displaced with his family after armed factions entered Afrin in March 2018. A few days later, they decided to return to their village, Arab Ushaghi, in the Maabatli district of Afrin. Like other residents, they were required to report to the headquarters of the Muhammad al-Fatih faction, which controlled the area, where they were told there was no reason for concern and that they could return home. However, only a few days separated that reassurance from the start of an ordeal that would last seven years. Mufid recounted,

“On 8 April 2018, they summoned me to the headquarters under the pretext of a simple investigation. They told my father it would take only two hours and that I would return home, but those two hours turned into seven years. I was transferred to al-Rai Military Prison. Visits were not allowed, and no one even knew that I was being held there. Throughout my detention, my family repeatedly went to the prison, and the answer was always the same: ‘Your son is not here.’ Some people in our village even told my father that I had died, because all news about me had completely stopped, and everyone believed that I was indeed dead.”

In another testimony detailing enforced disappearance and identity manipulation in detention facilities, Salim (59), a public employee, recounted his experience after being arrested and held at al-Ma’sara Prison, operated by the Levant Front, and later at the Military Police branch in Afrin city, stating,

“During my detention, my family tried to find me by any means possible. They reached out to a former neighbor in Aleppo with many connections, including a nephew who was a commander in the Military Police. This man personally searched the records at al-Ma’sara Prison for my name but could not find it. We later learned that I had been registered under a different name to prevent anyone from tracing my whereabouts. The same thing happened at the Military Police branch in Afrin, where my name was deliberately recorded incorrectly, keeping my identity unknown throughout my detention.”

These testimonies clearly illustrate enforced disappearance practices in areas controlled by armed factions, which rely on stripping detainees of their legal identity and denying them any means of communication or official acknowledgment of their detention. This deliberate falsification of official records, combined with the use of some detainees as bargaining chips and their later transfer in exchange deals, serves to deny responsibility for their detention and to prolong their confinement outside any judicial framework. Such cases constitute violations of fundamental safeguards under IHL and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). They also reflect the absence of oversight or accountability

mechanisms within these facilities, leaving the fate of hundreds of detainees suspended between denial and silence. More alarmingly, these practices did not cease with the fall of the former regime but have continued under the new authorities. This underscores that enforced disappearance in Syria remains an entrenched practice that transcends changes in power, reflecting the absence of a genuine system of accountability and justice.

8. Network of Unofficial Detention Facilities

“They took me into a building near the checkpoint; it had a black iron door and was not a known prison. They told us it was just a temporary location, but we remained there without being brought before any authority.”

Suhail, detained at a Military Police checkpoint on 18 December 2024.

Cross-cutting testimonies from dozens of victims and survivors indicate that armed factions affiliated with the SNA established, in Afrin, a wide network of unofficial prisons inside civilian buildings seized after the area's takeover⁴⁰. The use of schools, factories, and residential houses enabled arbitrary detention, torture, and financial extortion in isolated locations, outside any form of oversight and beyond any legal or judicial framework. In this way, civilian infrastructure originally intended for education, work, and housing was transformed into instruments of repression, operated under a security-oriented logic⁴¹.

One of the most prominent examples of educational facilities being transformed into instruments of oppression rather than enlightenment is the Girls' Commercial School on al-Villat Street in Afrin. Converted into a detention center operated by the Military Police, the school's basement was used to hold detainees in cramped, humid cells, while the upper floors were repurposed for interrogations. According to testimonies, detention at this facility entailed prolonged torture and a complete severance of contact with the outside world.

Similarly, a preparatory school in the Sharran sub-district was repurposed as a police station, where acts of torture and humiliation were documented. These operations were reportedly carried out by Syrian personnel alongside several Turkish officers. Notably, Amnesty International has previously documented Türkiye's and its allied factions' militarization of schools in Syria, emphasizing that “Under IHL, and particularly

⁴⁰ To view the list of prisons and detention centers mentioned by witnesses during interviews, please refer to Annex 2: Categorization of Violation Patterns Documented in the Testimonies of 41 Victims in Areas Controlled by the SNA.

⁴¹ "Arbitrary Detention and Torture are a Systemic Oppression Policy in Northwestern Syria", STJ, 1 February 2023, <https://stj-sy.org/en/arbitrary-detention-and-torture-are-a-systemic-oppression-policy-in-northwestern-syria/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

in situations of occupation, schools benefit from special protection, and the education of children must be provided for.”⁴²

In the villages surrounding Afrin, armed factions also seized key industrial facilities, repurposing them as detention centers. A primary example is the olive mill in Sajo, which became notorious as al-Ma'sara Prison. Operated by the Levant Front, the facility served as a central site for torture and financial extortion. According to consistent testimony, the internal courtyard was used for collective punishment, with detainees forced to stand or run barefoot in extreme temperatures. Inside the dormitories, prisoners faced severe overcrowding, a complete lack of ventilation, and the systematic denial of medical care.

This pattern was repeated at al-Barad Prison in the village of Qibar, a commercial warehouse formerly used for fruit storage and later repurposed as a detention facility. Several witnesses described the conditions there, most notably Isa (58), a physician and former detainee, who stated,

“This detention center is a warehouse that used to be a cold storage facility for fruit, about ten meters long and five meters wide, with several rooms. Each room held between eight and ten people. There were also female detainees. There was no bathroom inside the warehouse, so we were taken outside to a toilet once a day, and each person was given only one minute to relieve themselves before being forced back. Anyone suffering from diarrhea or any intestinal illness had to relieve themselves inside the room using pieces of cloth, which were then thrown into a narrow, hidden corner of the room.”

Testimonies also documented the conversion of a bakery warehouse in the Sharran sub-district, seized by the Sultan Murad Division, into a detention facility. Witnesses described the site as cramped and scented with yeast, a grim reminder of its original purpose before it was repurposed for detention and interrogation. Salim (59), a public employee, provided a vivid account of the degrading conditions within these warehouses, which were transformed from civilian structures used for bread production into closed spaces for torture and humiliation,

“They sealed all the windows of our cell with blankets and forbade us from leaving. We were confined to a square room, roughly three by three meters, still heavy with the scent of yeast. After removing the bakery equipment to convert the site into a detention center, they forced us to clean their quarters and

⁴² "Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin", Amnesty International, 2 August 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

headquarters. The facility was commanded by a man known as Abu al-Mawt (Father of Death), the security official for the Sultan Murad Division in that area. He was a large man, accompanied by a deputy, a young man of about 22 or 23 with long hair and a beard who carried a pistol at his waist. This deputy would boast of his former membership in ISIS before joining the Sultan Murad Division. We felt the weight of his words when he came to beat us with iron pipes, green plastic hoses, or rifle butts, striking our faces, backs, and heads indiscriminately, with utter indifference to whether we lived or died.”

Testimonies further indicate that small structures adjacent to military checkpoints serve as initial detention sites. Civilians are often held at these locations immediately following their arrest before being transferred to undisclosed facilities operated by armed factions or the Military Police. These sites are used for interrogations and temporary detention, operating entirely outside judicial oversight. Armed factions also repurpose confiscated homes and villas as security offices and makeshift prisons. For instance, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (also known as al-Amshat) established a security base inside a civilian house. Muhsin (19), a painter, described it as follows,

“I was detained by members of the al-Amshat faction in their headquarters, which had previously been a civilian house. They turned the basement into a detention cell, a single room that was indescribably filthy and horrific. The toilet was inside the same room, and we drank water from the same tap as the toilet. On the upper floor, there was a command room, two rooms for the fighters, and an interrogation room.”

The Sultan Murad Division also established a security center in a villa that included a basement used for isolation and torture. At the Kawah roundabout, the Levant Front converted a local administrative building into a major security and interrogation center, where several witnesses reported ill-treatment and torture. One of the most notorious detention sites was the al-Talae camp in Kafr Janneh, which served as a military headquarters for the Levant Front and became infamous enough that locals referred to it as the “Air Force Branch,” a clear reference to the notorious intelligence branches of the former Syrian regime.

The testimony of Haitham (40), a grocery store owner, provides a detailed account of the detention conditions in this facility, where he spent nearly a year and a half. He described the daily realities inside and the repeated acts of torture he witnessed, saying,

“They used to take me once a week to the torture room without even interrogating me. The prison consisted of four communal cells and six solitary

confinement rooms, holding more than 150 detainees. Torture sessions against prisoners took place every night, and I could hear their screams.”

Some detention facilities became known among local residents by names that evoked fear, such as “Abu Ghraib Prison” and the “Black Prison” (*Al-Sijn al-Aswad*),⁴³ labels coined by communities to reflect the severity and brutality of what was taking place inside them.

Testimonies documented by STJ consistently indicate that most detainees were initially unaware of where they were being held, due to the deliberate practice of blindfolding them during transfer or repeatedly moving them between facilities. These sites operated in complete isolation from any civil or judicial oversight, with armed factions sharing control over them and transferring detainees among themselves according to shifting interests and arrangements.

9. Women in the Circle of Detention: Dual Gender-Based Targeting

“They released me without a trial. My child and I walked out; he had just turned one year old. I spent a year and five months being moved among five different prisons while my family knew nothing of my whereabouts.”

Reem (33), arrested by the Sultan Murad Division while four months pregnant.

The testimonies documented by STJ show that the arrest of women in Afrin and its surrounding areas was not an exception but a sustained practice marked by compounded violations, in which women were subjected to inhuman and degrading detention conditions and targeted on the basis of their gender. Several witnesses reported the existence of dormitories designated for women inside prisons, where civilian women were detained without any legal basis or judicial orders, often in overcrowded spaces lacking privacy and access to medical care.

Several corroborating testimonies also reported hearing women’s screams from adjacent cells during interrogations, accompanied by insults and threats from guards who subjected them to openly degrading and humiliating treatment. Witness Isa (58), a physician, described violations that undermined the dignity of female detainees at Hawar Kilis prison, confirming,

“I used to see them sometimes being taken out into the prison courtyard wearing only their underwear. I saw this with my own eyes through the small opening in the door of the room where I was detained.”

⁴³ "The Black Prison of Afrin", Atlantic Council, 14 May 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-black-prison-of-afrin/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

Among testimonies documenting arbitrary detention and systematic torture of women, Leila (41), a seamstress, described the severe conditions of her detention by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division in Afrin, during which she was transferred among four prisons over more than six years without trial. She narrated,

“They beat me during the arrest and took me in my pajamas to their headquarters, then placed me in a small room before the interrogation began. I was blindfolded, and they beat me with their hands and a green hose, along with humiliating insults. They deliberately intensified the beating whenever I refused to answer, and the interrogation sessions continued for days, marked by continuous humiliation and physical and psychological abuse. The food was limited to a piece of bread and a small portion of vegetables per day; hunger and cold were part of the torture methods. After that, I was transferred from one prison to another for years without any trial. Even after my release, I still fear being arrested again.”

Numerous testimonies indicate that women were targeted for arrest as a coercive tactic to force their husbands or male relatives to pay ransoms or surrender. STJ documented a harrowing case in which a mother was tortured in the presence of her detained son, Iyad (33), a teacher, at the Military Police prison in Afrin. She was suspended in the “*shabeh*” (ghost) position, also referred to as “blanko/blanco”, in full view of her son in an attempt to force a confession, intensifying the psychological suffering of both. Iyad stated,

“The guard was beating me brutally while I was blindfolded, and at the same time, he was beating my mother nearby. Then he removed the blindfold and said, ‘Look at your mother.’ She was suspended in the ‘blanko’ position, blindfolded, and they were beating her. In that moment, I wished the ground would open and swallow me rather than see her like that. I cannot describe what I felt as I watched my mother being beaten and tortured before my eyes. I begged the guard: ‘I will kiss your hands and feet, sir. I will write whatever you want in the report and sign it, just take my mother down from the blanko’. He replied, ‘That is more like it.’”

In addition to the torture of his mother in his presence, members of the Sultan Murad Division also attacked his wife at home. Iyad described,

“They stormed my house and beat my wife, who had given birth only a week earlier to twin babies, with her Cesarean wound still unhealed. They also kicked the newborn twins with their feet.”

Other testimonies further reveal the targeting of pregnant women and mothers, and the resulting violations affecting children from birth. In her testimony, former detainee Reem (33), a housewife recounts being arrested while pregnant and transferred among multiple detention facilities without any clear charge or court appearance. She gave birth while in detention, and her infant spent the first months of life in a harsh, unsanitary environment, deprived of basic rights to care, nutrition, and safety, while the mother endured pregnancy and motherhood within a punitive system that does not recognize human dignity. She testified,

“When my delivery date approached, they took me from al-Barad prison to al-Rai hospital, where I gave birth to my baby. After one week, they returned me to the prison, and I stayed there for six months. Even my child was constantly crying because there was very little food, and he suffered from malnutrition.”

During this period, the mother received no special care or adequate medical support, despite her vulnerable condition and the presence of an infant requiring continuous attention. Throughout this time, her family had no knowledge of her whereabouts and only learned of her situation after she was transferred to M’arata prison shortly before her release, when they were allowed to visit her once. Throughout this period, the mother was denied specialized care or adequate medical support, despite her vulnerable health and the presence of an infant in need of constant attention. Her family remained entirely unaware of her whereabouts, until her transfer to M’arata Prison shortly before her release, when they were granted a single visit.

10. Torture and Inhuman Treatment

“I was held in a room where I remained blindfolded and shackled to a chair for three full days. I was only allowed to get up from the chair when they took me to the restroom.”

Issa (58), a Physician.

Testimonies indicate a consistent pattern of torture and ill-treatment. Methods ranged from beating with plastic hoses and electrical cables to forcing detainees’ heads into vehicle tires, suspending detainees for prolonged periods, and administering electric shocks. Accounts also describe the use of locally known torture positions, such as the “flying carpet” (*Bisat al-Rih*) and the “tire” (*Dulab*), as well as collective punishment in dormitories, verbal abuse, and threats of sexual violence. Several witnesses also reported being completely stripped of their clothing, either during searches or as part of torture practices.

Yasser (40), a vegetable seller arrested in Afrin in 2024 by the Military Police, described the coercive methods used during interrogation, saying,

“They told me there were confessions against me, confess or you will see stars at midday. They took me down to a basement room and beat me with a hose, kicked me, and placed me on the ‘flying carpet’. For more than an hour, two of them took turns torturing me. Then they threw me into solitary confinement without food or water. The next day they beat me again until I lost consciousness.”

The testimony of Zuhair (55), a grocery store owner arrested at the Kafr Jannah checkpoint in December 2024, further confirms that beatings accompanied interrogation even after the regime fell. He confirmed,

“Interrogation was accompanied by beating, kicking, and slaps to the face. I did not know where the blows were coming from, as my eyes were covered with a piece of cloth.”

In another context, Yasin (38), a construction worker, recounted that he was arrested on 19 December 2024, by members of the Levant Front, beaten in front of his family, and again during transfer, before being subjected to severe torture inside the facility. He stated,

“They arrested me after insulting and violently beating me in front of my wife and children. They kept beating me for about half an hour during the transfer. Then, after hours of interrogation, two men came and tortured me severely. I was beaten all over my body with hands, feet, and sticks until I could no longer move, and I remained lying on the ground until the morning.”

These recent testimonies do not exist in a vacuum; they are deeply interconnected with the broader context of violations documented in previous years. Rather, they reflect the persistence of the same patterns of torture and inhuman treatment observed in Afrin since 2018, indicating that these practices are systemically entrenched rather than merely episodic or tied to a specific security context.

Among the harrowing patterns reported in the testimonies, one particularly notable practice is the abuse of a detainee in the presence of their family, or vice versa, as a means of humiliation and extreme psychological coercion. These practices were rarely intended to extract information; rather, they served as a premeditated tool to extort confessions or to accelerate the payment of ransoms.

Iyad (33), a teacher detained from 2021 to 2024, offers one of the most harrowing accounts of systematic torture in the Military Police prison in Afrin, where he was subjected to multiple forms of physical violence from the very first moment of his detention, without any actual interrogation or questioning. His testimony describes a sequence of torture methods used against him, including suspension, electric shocks,

and severe beatings with various implements, as well as the torture of his family members in his presence. Iyad recounted,

“They tied me in the ‘chicken’ (al-*farrouj*) position, fastening my hands under my knees and placing a metal rod under my armpits, leaving me suspended in the air about eighty centimeters off the ground. After a few minutes, my entire body went numb. Then one of them lit a small gas burner under my feet. After they burned, he removed it and began beating my feet with a plastic hose they called the ‘Al-Akhdar al-Ibrahimi.’ I cannot describe the level of pain I felt. After that, they placed me in the tire and continued beating me without asking me a single question. That was their ‘welcome’ for me.”

Iyad further testified that he was subjected to daily torture for 66 consecutive days while held in a cramped, solitary cell measuring approximately 1 meter by 1.7 meters. During this period, he endured four sessions of the “chicken” (*farrouj*) position and five sessions of the “blanko”, both excruciating suspension methods, along with three sessions of electric shocks. These were accompanied by systematic beatings with plastic hoses, iron pipes, and multi-core cables. As a result of the sustained abuse, he suffered a deep, open wound on the sole of his foot, approximately six centimeters in diameter, exposing the underlying bone. Iyad added,

“Sometimes they would beat me and my father together, and other times they would bring my brother-in-law and torture all of us. They recorded my screams during interrogation and sent them to each other on their phones. I heard the recording myself while they replayed it and laughed. Throughout the 66 days, they would always return me to the cell unconscious.”

In many cases, detainees were forced to sign confessions that were not read to them or that they did not know the contents of. One detained witness described what happened to a fellow prisoner who was later sentenced to death after confessing,

“He confessed after they took him to the scene of the crime and set him on fire, to the point that the sole of his shoe melted and stuck to his feet. He told them he was ready to sign whatever statements they wanted and agree to any testimony they wished him to give.”

In another testimony, Karim (30), a journalist detained from 2018 to 2020, described the brutal torture he endured after being arrested by the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division and transferred to a detention center in Hawar Kilis, the exact location of which he could not identify. His account spans three months of daily violations and degrading treatment. Karim narrated,

“They would lay me on the ground, place a metal door over me, and force other detainees to walk and jump on it while I lay underneath. They would cut open the skin on my back with a blade, pour lemon salt or vinegar on the wounds, and often forced me to remain completely naked during torture. Sometimes they left me hanging for hours and forced me to eat dirt and stones from the ground. Once, they tied me by my genitals and dragged me through the courtyard while masked guards laughed and insulted me. Beyond the beatings with sticks, iron pipes, and hoses, which occurred almost daily in the morning and evening for three months, they also burned me, shaved my pubic hair and armpits with a lighter, and administered electric shocks. On one occasion, they broke a chair over my head, causing severe bleeding. They tortured us, starved us, forced us to insult ourselves, and enjoyed it.”

11. Health Conditions and Medical Neglect in Detention Facilities

“We were forbidden to leave the cell or even to ask for 'breathing time.' We had to relieve ourselves in the room; if anyone dared to ask to use the bathroom, they were brutally beaten. We slept directly on the floor, without mattresses or blankets.”

Salim (59), detained by the Sultan Murad Division.

The testimonies documented by STJ reveal clear patterns of medical neglect inside detention facilities, particularly following episodes of torture, when detainees are left without any medical examination or treatment despite visible injuries. In his testimony, Yasser (40), a vegetable seller detained at the Military Police branch in Afrin in 2024, described being held in solitary confinement for several days after being tortured without receiving any form of medical care, stating,

“They left me in solitary confinement for four days. My body was swollen, and no doctor came to treat my injuries.”

Testimonies also show that food in prisons across Afrin and its surrounding areas was systematically used as a tool of torture and coercion. Starvation itself was a deliberate method to weaken detainees and break them psychologically. In most detention facilities operated by armed factions, such as al-Ma'sara Prison, Sultan Murad Division facilities, and prisons under the Military Police, meals were limited to extremely small portions, insufficient to sustain basic energy levels. Some detainees reported receiving half a loaf of bread per day with boiled potatoes or a single tomato, while in other facilities, such as the “Black Prison” in Rajo, meals were limited to bulgur or soup.

At times, food deprivation was used as a direct punitive measure. A detainee at one of the al-Amshat faction's facilities was reportedly denied food for seven consecutive

days. Muhsin (19), a painter, described the early days of his detention and torture, during which beatings, starvation, and denial of water were combined into a pattern of physical violence and deliberate humiliation,

“I endured seven full days of beatings in every possible way. They placed me in the tire and beat my feet with hoses and whips, and extinguished cigarettes on my body amid a barrage of insults and humiliation. Throughout those seven days, they gave me no food at all, and I was only given a small sip of water two days after my arrest.”

Mufid (42), a farmer, testified that food and water at al-Rai Central Prison were entirely withheld for consecutive days, leading to the deaths of five prisoners from starvation and physical exhaustion. On other occasions, detainees were provided only with the guards' discarded leftovers, which Mufid described as “rotten, inedible scraps”, thrown to them as if they were waste.

In overcrowded dormitories, hunger intensified suffering. At the Military Police prison, one bucket of yogurt was reportedly shared among thirty detainees, while at the “Black Prison,” each person received only half a cup of soup.

The issue was not limited to food scarcity but also became a channel for financial extortion. At prisons such as M'arata Military Prison and the Military Police facility in Afrin, detainees were forced to purchase food from an internal canteen known as “*al-nadwa*” at inflated prices, using money deposited by their families in prison trusts. Several witnesses reported that prison administrators also stole food sent by families. In this context, hunger became an integral part of the detention economy, where the cost of food was extracted twice: once from the detainee's dignity and once from their families' pockets.

Corroborating testimonies indicate that medical conditions in prisons across Afrin and its surrounding areas amounted to deliberate neglect rather than genuine care, with so-called “medical services” functioning as an additional tool of extortion and abuse. Meaningful healthcare was largely absent, with treatment typically limited to painkillers, while some individuals within the medical system exploited their positions for financial gain or even participated in acts of torture.

Salim (59), a public employee transferred among several detention facilities, described the medical conditions in M'arata Prison,

“We only received a quarter of the prescribed medication; the rest was taken by the medical officer, known as Dr. Abu Ammar, although he was not a real doctor. He used to steal medicines and sell them to other prisoners.”

Salim also recounted his experience in the “Black Prison” in Rajo,

“There were no medical services at all. If someone fell ill, he had to pay 100 TL just to be allowed to see a doctor. If he needed medicine, he had to pay three times its price and would usually receive only part of it because the rest was sold to other prisoners.”

Violations in Afrin prisons went beyond medical neglect to include the direct involvement of medical personnel in torture, with nurses no longer providing care but part of the machinery of violence. Salim described this disturbing dynamic, stating,

“In the ‘Black Prison’, they would take the prisoner out and place him in the tire, and five guards would gather around him, along with a nurse. After he lost consciousness, the nurse would pour water on him to revive him, and then they would continue beating him again.”

Medical neglect was not limited to the absence of healthcare or the exploitation of medical staff; it also extended to the conditions inside detention facilities, where suffocating ventilation and the denial of fresh air compounded detainees’ physical suffering and turned detention into a slow process of asphyxiation. Testimonies indicate that poor ventilation and the prohibition on access to open air were among the harshest daily forms of suffering in Afrin’s prisons and surrounding facilities, as enclosed dormitories became suffocating spaces resembling tombs.

Mufid (42), a farmer, described his experience in al-Rai Prison,

“Initially, they placed about 50 people in one dormitory, while in others, there were around 100 detainees. At first, the dormitories were completely sealed with no ventilation. Later, they opened small vents and installed exhaust fans (turbines), but they never allowed us access to the courtyard. After three years, they began allowing us outside for ‘breathing time’ (*tanaffus*); without that small break, I would have lost my life in prison.”

In Hawar Kilis Prison, Firas (38), a tailor, described similar conditions, saying,

“They would take us out once every ten days for about two hours to get fresh air, and ventilation in the dormitories came through large openings that pumped air into the rooms and the corridor between them.”

These testimonies align with reports from other detention sites, where ventilation openings were described as extremely narrow, measuring no more than 30 to 40 centimeters in the “Black Prison” in Rajo, while cells in al-Ma’sara Prison were completely sealed, with only a small pipe-like opening in the ceiling. In facilities operated by the Sultan Murad Division, windows were reportedly covered with

blankets, blocking airflow entirely. In M'arata Prison, access to the courtyard or 'breathing time' (*tanaffus*), was limited to once a week or every ten days for only half an hour, while in Military Police facilities, such breaks were reportedly entirely prohibited.

These accounts show that the deprivation of air and light was not merely a matter of poor detention conditions but a direct violation of detainees' right to dignity and physical integrity. It was used as a coercive tool and a form of cruel treatment that rises to the level of torture under international standards.

12. Trumped-up Charges Targeting Kurds on Ethnic Grounds

"Your sons are the Party's pigs, and we will never let them go."

Father of Adel, who has been forcibly disappeared since his arrest in December 2024.

The documented testimonies reveal a deeply entrenched pattern of systematic ethnic discrimination against Kurds in Afrin, forming a central pillar of the broader system of arrest, torture, and financial extortion. These accounts indicate that the abuses were not isolated incidents or the result of individual misconduct, but rather reflected an implicit policy adopted by armed factions affiliated with the SNA, under which Kurdish identity itself was treated as a *de facto* accusation, sufficient to justify arrest, torture, and the deprivation of property and dignity.

A majority of witnesses testified that prefabricated accusations of affiliation with Kurdish entities, such as civil communes, the Asayish security forces, or the YPG, were a primary pretext for arrest. These detentions often occurred within a broader framework of discriminatory and exclusionary practices. In one such instance, Suhail (33), a farmer, reported that detention officers used language that criminalized Kurdish identity itself, frequently asserting, "All Kurds are PKK, and anyone who stands with the Party has no honor."

Similarly, Nader (55), a farmer, and Salim (59), a public employee, reported being detained on the basis of malicious allegations that they had served on neighborhood committees during the Autonomous Administration (DAANES). Meanwhile, Samer (43), a barber, and Wael (45), a farmer, were arrested for alleged affiliation with or support for the PKK. As for Youssef (31), a farmer, Iyad (33), a teacher, and Mufid (42), a farmer, the reason for their detention was their performance of compulsory service in the previous administration's institutions. This was treated as a "terrorist affiliation" warranting punishment, despite the fact that those who refused to join were forcibly arrested by the Autonomous Administration under the "Self-Defense Duty" officially declared on 21 July 2014.

The abuse was not limited to fabricated charges; it included a constant stream of insults and threats that defined daily interrogation sessions. One interrogator reportedly told Youssef, “If it were up to me, I would slaughter the child in its mother’s womb before the old woman,” while another shouted, **“You Kurds should all burn in hellfire.”** Iyad was subjected to a barrage of sexualized and discriminatory slurs: **“You Kurds want to build a state? The Free Army is stepping on your heads, and we will keep [violating] your mothers.”** Similarly, a guard told Salim during a torture session, **“You Kurds, you infidels... You Kurds should not live, you should die.”** The repetition of these expressions across multiple testimonies indicates that contempt for Kurds was not incidental; rather, it was an intrinsic component of a dehumanizing discourse aimed at targeting identity and ethnicity rather than merely extracting information.

This discrimination also extended to detention conditions and daily treatment. According to Iyad (33), a teacher, and Nasser (42), a blacksmith, Kurdish detainees were allowed to use the toilet for only one minute, while Arab detainees were given longer periods. Visits were also strictly restricted, allowing only relatives with the same family name, whereas others had broader access. Even speaking Kurdish inside security facilities was completely prohibited, as reported by Adel’s father.

This discriminatory policy extended beyond verbal humiliation to include widespread looting and the unlawful appropriation of property, which served as an explicit punitive tool against the local population. During his interrogation, Imad (31), a tailor, was told by an officer: **“You no longer have houses in Afrin; they have become ours.”**

This pattern of discrimination demonstrates that such targeting was not an isolated act or the result of transient hostility; rather, it was part of a systematic policy of exclusion that treated Kurds as a “lesser group” and exploited their presence to consolidate control and influence. In this context, torture served not only as a means of punishment but also as a tool to reconfigure power dynamics and identity hierarchies in Afrin. By combining degrading treatment with financial extortion, these practices effectively subjected Kurdish civilians to a regime of collective punishment.

13. Release for Ransom: Detention as a Tool of Extrajudicial Extortion

“The branch members demanded \$5,000 from me. They told me bluntly: ‘You will remain in prison unless you pay.’”

Issam, detained at a security facility belonging to the Sultan Murad Division in the al-Zaydiya neighborhood (2024–2025).

Detention-based extortion constitutes one of the most visible systematic violations in Afrin. Here, the deprivation of liberty has been transformed into a sustainable revenue

stream for armed factions and a financial lever that fuels their political and military influence.⁴⁴ Testimonies reveal that detention centers effectively operate as closed markets for extortion and bargaining, where the 'price of freedom' is determined by a family's financial capacity rather than any legal or judicial standard. In this environment, freedom has been reduced to a commodity, and ransom serves as the de facto law governing the fate of detainees.

Testimonies from victims indicate that the release of detainees does not result from judicial decisions but from direct financial negotiations between detainees' families and faction members or intermediaries linked to them. Yasser (40), a vegetable seller, arrested in 2024, explained that his release followed financial negotiations with his family, stating,

"They told me to 'contact your family to secure your release'... they asked for \$10,000, then reduced it to \$6,000. After it was paid, I was released without a trial."

In another case, Zuhair (55), a food seller, was detained at a Military Police branch affiliated with the SNA until February 2025. Despite being informed that he would be released after a session before a military judge, he confirmed that his release was ultimately conditioned on payment without any official receipt, stating,

"I paid around \$500 and they did not give me any receipt or proof."

This case is not an isolated incident; STJ has previously documented a consistent pattern in this same branch in years prior. In a 2022 testimony, Samer (43), a barber, recounted being held at the Military Police branch without being referred for investigation or brought before a judge. Instead, his detention became a matter of financial negotiation, as he was held until a payment was brokered for his release. He recounted,

"They did not interrogate me; they just said I was transferred from the Sultan Murad Division. After two months, a person from outside the prison came to me and said clearly: 'To be direct, you will not be brought before a judge unless you pay.' Negotiations took place over the amount, and we agreed on \$1,500. After I paid, I was finally transferred to court."

Anas (27), an electrician moved between several detention centers affiliated with the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division before being held at the al-Talae camp in Kafr Janneh. He reported that his release was also the result of a financial deal,

⁴⁴ "Arbitrary Detention and Torture are a Systemic Oppression Policy in Northwestern Syria", STJ, 1 February 2023, <https://stj-sy.org/en/arbitrary-detention-and-torture-are-a-systemic-oppression-policy-in-northwestern-syria/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

"I stayed in that prison for one year and one month, until they suddenly released me without knowing the reason at the time. After I got out, one of my relatives in Afrin told me they had paid \$5,500 for my release."

Basil (35), a shipping office owner, described how even transfers between detention facilities became part of explicit deals inside the Military Police branch in Afrin,

"My family paid \$7,000 to the head of the branch so I could be transferred to M'arata Military Prison, in order to appoint a lawyer to request my release... After I was released, I found that my shipping office and home had been confiscated and all their contents stolen, and even my car had been damaged because they used it in raids."

Jawad (37), a blacksmith, was detained in the Military Police in Afrin for more than a year, he explained,

"I stayed in prison for one year and three months. An interrogator named Abu Ahmed used to visit me and told me: 'If you pay, we will release you innocent.' Two weeks later I paid \$3,500, and he transferred me to the judge. After the first hearing, I was released. After I got out, Abu Ahmed came to my house and demanded a 'release bonus,' so I gave him \$300."

The testimony of Hazem (65), a merchant from Afrin, is a clear example of the use of detention as a tool of material extortion. He was abducted in 2019 by the al-Ghab Brigade, led by Mu'taz al-Abdullah, and initially held at their headquarters in the countryside of Afrin before being transferred to the former Asayish headquarters in the city, which was later taken over by a security group affiliated with the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division. Hazem narrated,

"I heard them say: 'do not release him for less than \$100,000'. Then they demanded that my family pay \$75,000 within 24 hours, or they would not even see my body. I told them I did not even have ten dollars. They kept me in an underground cell for a full month, during which I was subjected to daily torture by an interrogator known as 'the Ghost.' During that time, my wife contacted an intermediary and shared voice messages she had received, including the \$100,000 ransom demand. After negotiations, I was released. However, upon my return, other factions such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya attempted to seize my house and land, and I began receiving death threats to force me to leave Afrin permanently."

Jalal (24), a farmer, was arrested in 2024 by members of the 51st Brigade, who had converted a poultry farm between Tell Rifaat and Kafr Naya into a secret detention

facility where some of the harshest forms of extortion and abuse were carried out. He stated,

“The prison officer told me: if you do not have the required amount, go to the hospital in A’zaz and sell your kidney and bring me \$2,000. I refused and asked him to contact my father to secure the money. My father told him that all he had were ten containers of olive oil worth \$1,500, so they agreed to take that instead of cash. There were other detainees with me who were released for different amounts: one for \$4,000, another for \$3,000, and even a 15-year-old child was released for \$3,000. As for me, I paid an additional \$1,000 just to remain in my own house, which they claimed belonged to one of their members.”

Salim (59), a public employee, described his detention alongside his son at a security headquarters belonging to the Malek Shah Brigade in the village of Berava near the Maydanki Dam, explaining how his arrest escalated into extortion accompanied by threats against his family and property,

“The officer told me: ‘Give me \$10,000, and I will release you and your son immediately. I will personally take you in my car to your home, and no one will harm you as long as I am present in the village.’ I replied: Because of repeated arrests by the factions, I already owe \$3,200, and I have no source of income. Even my 300 olive trees do not benefit me, as most of their harvest is stolen by your members. Still, I have a tractor, a house, and 300 olive trees. Keep my son with you, and I will sell everything and bring you the amount you demand, just stop the beating.”

STJ further documented the release of several detainees after payment of ransom without any official documentation or judicial ruling, while the individuals concerned often remained formally “wanted” by the court even after paying, indicating that the judicial system had no real role in decisions about arrest or release.

These corroborating accounts reveal that the financial extortion of detainees has evolved into a self-contained system within faction-run prisons and Military Police facilities. In this profit-driven structure, the roles of interrogators, guards, and civilian intermediaries converge into a single operational chain. While the sums demanded range from hundreds to thousands of dollars, the impact is uniform: freedom is transformed into a commodity whose value is dictated by the victim’s identity and the family’s financial capacity. This practice stands in flagrant violation of the principles of justice and IHL, which strictly prohibit detaining or releasing individuals conditioned on ransom payments.

This system does not stop at cash extortion, as financial coercion is closely intertwined with systematic property seizures. Following arrests or displacement, there have been documented cases of confiscation and looting of shipping offices, vehicles, blacksmith workshops, as well as money and personal belongings. In some instances, the very purpose of arrest appears to have been the takeover of homes or the prevention of owners from returning, with civilian property treated as “spoils of the liberation of Afrin,” a logic fundamentally incompatible with IHL, which explicitly prohibits pillage.

14. Enduring Physical and Psychological Impacts

“Because of the severe injustice I suffered at the hands of the factions, I began to contemplate suicide; I simply could no longer endure it.”

Youssef, who suffers from a constant sense of being hunted and a fear that has stripped him of the ability to lead a normal life.

The testimonies show that the consequences of torture do not end upon a detainee’s release but instead leave permanent physical and psychological scars. Several cases document fractures and burns, as well as partial or complete loss of vision or hearing resulting from beatings to the head or the use of metal instruments during interrogation. In this context, Mufid (42), a farmer, told STJ,

“After I was released from al-Rai prison, it turned out that I had completely lost sight in my right eye, while my left eye only sees 40%. According to the doctor’s report, the cause was being kept underground for three years without seeing sunlight even once, in addition to continuous torture. I also developed diabetes. I suffer from severe headaches, hearing problems, and chronic pain in both feet.”

Similarly, STJ documented neurological injuries resulting in recurrent seizures and convulsions. Raed (25), a tailor, reported that he was arrested by the Levant Front and, in July 2017, transferred from al-Ma’sara Prison to Basuta/al-Qala’a Prison, where he was subjected to severe torture that left lasting physical and neurological effects. Raed explained,

“The torture was intense. They hung me and tied me in the middle of the room, then beat me with hard objects resembling electrical cables until I began having epileptic seizures and convulsions. I was moved among several prisons run by the Levant Front, and the seizures would occur every month or two. They would give me sedatives without any medical examination or transfer to a hospital.”

Several survivors also developed chronic respiratory problems, including asthma from suffocation or smoke exposure in sealed cells. Others continue to suffer severe,

persistent pain in the joints and limbs from prolonged suspension on devices such as the “blanko” or the “flying carpet.”

The psychological impact, however, is deeper and less visible. Many survivors described a persistent fear of leaving their homes or passing through checkpoints, along with panic attacks, sleep disorders, and recurring nightmares that force them to relive the torture. Some expressed a profound sense of helplessness and a loss of purpose, while others attempted suicide under the crushing weight of constant threats and insecurity. For most survivors, this fear is no longer just about the possibility of re-arrest; it has become an embedded feature of daily life. Even the most minor incident can trigger traumatic memories, thrusting them back into chronic anxiety and instability.

15. A Systematic Policy to Entrench Impunity for Perpetrators

Despite the vast scale of violations documented by witnesses in and around Afrin, including arbitrary arrest, torture, looting, and extortion, there has been no genuine accountability for those responsible. Instead, the local power structure, defined by the entanglement of armed factions with the Military Police and the judiciary, has established a closed system of impunity. Within this system, abuses are treated as institutionalized practices, politically shielded and externally supported. This reality is reflected in a purely performative judiciary and the total absence of command responsibility.

Testimonies documented by STJ indicate that referral to the judiciary does not safeguard justice but rather continues violations in an official form. After interrogation in faction-run facilities, detainees are typically transferred to the Military Police or to military courts in al-Rai or M'arata, and at times to a civil court. However, these proceedings are largely procedural formalities, as verdicts are based on coerced confessions previously extracted under torture or threats.

Furthermore, there were no recorded instances of exculpatory witnesses being summoned, nor were detainees permitted to appoint independent counsel. Conversely, several judges were documented treating case files as pre-formulated military dossiers. One judge, identified across multiple testimonies as J.A., reportedly threatened detainees with execution and categorically refused to investigate allegations of torture or the falsification of interrogation transcripts.

The pattern extends to the recycling of leadership rather than accountability: commanders against whom violations have been documented are often reassigned to new positions or transferred to other factions under the guise of “restructuring,” preserving their influence and shielding them from prosecution. These figures continue to operate in the field, amid a transitional government policy that incorporates factions

into the Ministry of Defense without subjecting them to any meaningful accountability mechanisms.

Following the transitional president's promise during his 15 February 2025 visit to Afrin to dismantle armed factions in the region and restore rights to their rightful owners, those factions continue to operate without accountability.

For example, Fahim Issa was appointed Deputy Minister of Defense, in addition to his role as commander of the northern sector in Syria.⁴⁵ He was a founding member of the Sultan Murad Division and previously served as its commander⁴⁶.

Similarly, Muhammad al-Jasim (Abu Amsha), who is accused of serious violations, was appointed commander of the 25th Division under the Ministry of Defense on 2 February 2025,⁴⁷ despite being under U.S. Treasury sanctions imposed on 17 August 2023 in connection with violations against residents of Afrin, including rape⁴⁸.

Similarly, Sayf Bulad (Abu Bakr), commander of the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, was appointed head of the 76th Division in the Syrian Army in Aleppo,⁴⁹ despite being named on the same U.S. sanctions list for his faction's involvement in documented cases of torture⁵⁰.

Likewise, Ahmad Ihsan Fayad al-Hayes (Abu Hatim Shaqra), commander of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction, was appointed by the transitional government's Ministry of Defense

⁴⁵ "What Position did Fahim Issa Hold in the Syrian Ministry of Defense?" [in Arabic], Syria TV, 13 April 2025, <https://www.syria.tv/%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D9%91%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%81%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%9F> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁴⁶ "Fahim Issa" [in Arabic], Syrian Memory Institution, <https://syrianmemory.org/archive/figures/5cd80356658c9f000109f846> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁴⁷ "The Syrian Defense Appoints 'Abu Amsha' as Commander of the Hama Division [in Arabic], Enab Baladi, 3 February 2025, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/737327/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%91%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF%D9%8B%D8%A7/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁴⁸ "Treasury Sanctions Two Syria-Based Militias Responsible for Serious Human Rights Abuses in Northern Syria", US Department of the Treasury, 17 August 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁴⁹ "Appointment of Sayf al-Din Bulad as Commander of the 76th Division of the Syrian Army in Aleppo" [in Arabic], Syria TV, 3 February 2025, <https://www.syria.tv/%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-76-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁵⁰ "Treasury Sanctions Two Syria-Based Militias Responsible for Serious Human Rights Abuses in Northern Syria", US Department of the Treasury, 17 August 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1699> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

as leader of the 86th Division in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah,⁵¹ despite both he and his faction being sanctioned by the United States for serious violations against civilians, including torture that led to death.⁵² Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the death of a Kurdish civilian, Rezan Khalil, from torture in a detention center operated by the faction in Afrin⁵³.

These appointments reflect a broader pattern of impunity, indicating that the transitional government has not yet adopted a serious approach to accountability or to breaking with the former regime's practices, particularly torture and ill-treatment. Some of these appointments followed violent events on the Syrian coast between 6 and 10 March 2025,⁵⁴ which targeted members of the Alawite community and resulted in the deaths of 1,743 civilians⁵⁵.

Amnesty International reported in an investigation that militias affiliated with the Syrian transitional government were involved in mass killings in the coastal region, without naming specific factions.⁵⁶ On 28 May 2025, the European Union imposed sanctions on the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division, the Sultan Murad Division, and the al-Amshat as entities, as well as on Abu Amsha and Abu Bakr personally, holding them responsible for serious human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions during the coastal events⁵⁷.

⁵¹ "Pro-Turkish Commander Appointed in SDF Areas" [in Arabic], Asharq Al-Awsat, 6 May 2025, <https://aawsat.com/%D8%B4%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%82%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9/5139997-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8D-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%82-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁵² "Treasury Sanctions Syrian Regime Prisons, Officials, and Syrian Armed Group", US Department of the Treasury, 28 July 2021, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0292> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁵³ "Everything is by the Power of the Weapon: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria", Human Rights Watch, 29 February 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria> (Last accessed: 1 April 2026)

⁵⁴ "Syria: Distressing scale of violence in coastal areas", United Nations, 11 March 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2025/03/syria-distressing-scale-violence-coastal-areas> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁵⁵ "Post by Seen for Civil Peace", Facebook, 29 March 2025, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02epVf4gSF8SpfXTCX4kLbuTORnbPPVGoqTyGZr32FbDx72ZgKutXUsZVH41kxunqcl&id=61571943375811 (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁵⁶ "Syria: Coastal massacres of Alawite civilians must be investigated as war crimes", Amnesty International, 3 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/04/syria-coastal-massacres-of-alawite-civilians-must-be-investigated-as-war-crimes/> (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

⁵⁷ "Council Decision (CFSP) 2025/1110 of 28 May 2025 amending Decision (CFSP) 2020/1999 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses", European Union, 28 May 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ:L_202501110 (Last accessed: 12 April 2026).

Annex 1: Categorization of Violation Patterns Documented in the Testimonies of 41 Victims in Areas Controlled by the SNA⁵⁸

Category	Specific Violation / Item	Number of Victims	Additional Notes and Details
Types of Accusations	Affiliation with or support for the DAANES/PKK/YPG/YPJ	28 victims	The most prominent and frequent charge used to justify arrests.
	General Terrorism Charges	5 victims	
	Possession of explosives or involvement in bombings	3 victims	
	Collaboration with Russians or foreign entities (non-Kurdish)	1 victim	
	Forced confessions of major crimes (e.g., murder) or military tasks	At least 7 victims	Focus was on forcing admissions of membership in Commune Committees or the PKK.
	Release after the fall of the Assad regime	13 victims	
Physical Torture	Beating with a hose (multi-core cables)	17 victims	The most common method; utilized plumbing/sanitation hoses.
	Blanko (Suspension by the limbs)	10 victims	Victims were left suspended for several hours in some cases.
	<i>Dulab</i> (The Tire): beating the back/legs while inside a tire)	12 victims	
	Electric Shocks	8 victims	Administered via flashlight-like devices or clamps on fingers/heels.
	Burning/Cauterization (Cigarettes or gas blowtorches)	7 victims	Intensity increased by spraying the victim with

⁵⁸ These statistics are based on 41 documented testimonies collected by STJ in 2025. Witnesses were often subjected to multiple violations and transferred among several detention facilities operated by different factions.

			water during the process.
Psychological Torture	Profanity and discriminatory slurs	Core component	e.g., “PKK dogs,” “son of a whore.”
	Threats of execution or sexual assault against female relatives	At least 3 victims	Used as a tool for psychological suppression.
	Torturing family members in front of the victim	2 victims	Intended to break the victim’s psychological will and to extract confessions.
Financial Extortion	Highest ransom demanded	Up to \$100,000	Advanced extortion cases started negotiations at \$75,000.
	Common ransom amount actually paid	\$1,500 – \$7,000	To secure a victim’s release.
	Forced sale of assets (Real estate, olive trees, gold) to pay the ransom.	Multiple cases	One victim was pressured to sell a kidney to pay the ransom, but he refused.
	Looting property	At least 8 victims	Blacksmith workshop (\$60k), grocery stock (\$40k), tire shop (\$30k), a car, and a motorcycle.
	Personal theft	At least 7 victims	Confiscation of phones and jewelry (including a child’s gold earring) during raids.
Primary Perpetrators	Military Police	16 testimonies	
	Sultan Murad Division	10 testimonies	
	Levant Front/al-Jabha al-Shamiya	8 testimonies	
	Al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division	4 testimonies	
	Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (also known as al-Amshat)	5 testimonies	

	Military Court	9 testimonies	Acting as the sentencing body or used as a legal threat.
	Civilian facilities converted into prisons	At least 3 sites	Olive mill in Sajo, a school, and warehouses in Afrin.
Long-term Physical Impact	Permanent loss of sight / severe visual impairment	2 victims	
	Hearing impairment / chronic ear issues	3 victims	
	Fractures and deformities (Ribs, fingers, hands)	At least 3 victims	
	Seizures and convulsions	1 victim	
	Death resulting from torture	1 victim	

Annex 2: Prisons and Security Centers Documented in the Testimonies of 41 Victims in Areas Controlled by the SNA

No.	Prison / Facility Name	Location or Description	Controlling / Responsible Entity
1	Thaeroun Security HQ	Afrin – Near Nowruz Roundabout (Formerly Asayish HQ)	Thaeroun Movement
2	Military Police Branch Prison (Afrin)	Commercial School – al-Villat Street (Also known as Old Saraya Prison)	Military Police / Levant Front
3	Former Asayish Center	Al-Mahmoudiya area – Afrin	Al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division
4	Hawar Kilis Prison	Near the Syrian-Turkish border	Al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division (under direct Turkish supervision)
5	“Abu Ghraib” Prison	Unofficial name used by prison guards	Levant Front (likely)
6	Al-Zira'a Prison	Al-Bab city	Al-Amshat
7	Rajo Police Station	Rajo District	Military Police / Al-Amshat
8	The Black Prison (Al-Sijn al-Aswad)	Near Rajo	Al-Amshat
9	Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam HQ	Afrin (Temporary security HQ)	Army of Islam/Jaysh al-Islam
10	Levant Front Security HQ	Kawa Roundabout – Afrin	Levant Front
11	Kafr Janneh / Al-Talae camp Prison	Kafr Janneh – Near Afrin	Levant Front
12	Al-Ma'sara Prison	Sajo area – North of A'zaz	Levant Front
13	Basuta/al-Qala'a Prison	Afrin	Al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division
14	Sultan Murad Security Office (Al-Rai)	Al-Rai town	Sultan Murad Division
15	Intelligence Outpost (Bulbul)	North Afrin	Al-Mu'tasim Division
16	M'arata Prison (Civilian Section)	Outskirts of Afrin	Military Police
17	M'arata Prison (Military Section)	Outskirts of Afrin	Military Police

18	Al-Rai Central Prison	Al-Rai	Military Police
19	52nd Division HQ	Entrance of Qatmah village - Afrin	52nd Division
20	Al-Barad Prison	Afrin - Near the arch at the eastern entrance	Sultan Murad Division
21	Military Police Branch (A'zaz)	A'zaz	Military Police
22	Military Police Outpost	Entrance to Afrin at Kafr Janneh	Military Police
23	Criminal Security Branch (Afrin)	Afrin	(Not Specified)
24	The Court Prison	Old Court building	Levant Front
25	District Bakery Warehouses	Sharran	Sultan Murad Division
26	Local Administration HQ	Kawa Roundabout - Afrin	Levant Front
27	Sharran District Police Station	Sharran	Sultan Murad Division
28	Al-Mowasalat (Transport) Center	Basuta - Detention site	Al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division
29	Kafr Naya Prison	Poultry farm converted into a prison between Kafr Naya and Tall Rifat.	51st Brigade
30	Counter-Terrorism HQ	A'zaz	Military Police / Thaeroun
31	Maarin Central Prison	Maarin village - Afrin	Military Police
33	HQ near Juwayq (Jowqah) village	Near Afrin	Unspecified faction (likely Levant Front)
34	Malek Shah Brigade Security HQ	Berava village (Ali Bazenli) - Near Maydanki Dam	Malek Shah Brigade
35	Al-Waqqas Brigade HQ/ Al-Amshat	Merwanê village - Afrin	Al-Amshat
36	Sultan Murad Division Security HQ	Al-Zaydiya neighborhood - Afrin	Sultan Murad Division
37	al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division Security HQ	Post office building in Bulbul district	al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division
38	The Security Quarter - MIT HQ	Afrin (Under direct supervision of Turkish officers)	Turkish Intelligence (MIT)

39	Maydanki HQ for Sultan Murad	Afrin	Sultan Murad Division
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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 unflinching 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.

