Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn: Attacks on Returning Kurds Test Authorities' Commitment to Safe and Dignified Returns



- STJ Calls For An Independent Investigation Into The Documented Violations, Accountability For Those Involved, Compensation For Those Affected, And Guarantees Of Non-Recurrence

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1. Executive Summary:

On the morning of Monday, 26 October 2026, approximately 200 displaced Kurds from the city of Tell Abyad/Girê Spî and its surrounding countryside headed to the District Directorate building, carrying documents attesting to their ownership of lands and properties from which they had been displaced several years earlier due to the Turkish military operation known as Operation Peace Spring, launched in October 2019.

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) learned that official government entities in the Raqqa Governorate had asked individuals wishing to return to obtain a "Real Estate Statement" and a "Land Area Statement" from the Raqqa Directorate of Real Estate Interests to prove ownership. They were also required to complete an application for the restitution of real estate property, available at the entrance to the Tell Abyad Courthouse.

The displaced individuals complied with these requirements, most hoping that, after completing the paperwork, they would be able to reclaim their properties and return to their villages immediately, following years of severe hardship caused by forced displacement.

In exclusive testimonies given to STJ, returnees stated that they arrived at the Tell Abyad District Directorate building on a date scheduled by the District Administration, expecting to be escorted to their lands and properties to reclaim them.

However, a protest gathering of Arab residents formed outside the building, where demonstrators threatened the returnees and demanded that they leave. Some members of the gathering then began attacking, smashing vehicles and setting others on fire.

As a result of these attacks, a large number of returnees, including women and children, were forced to remain inside the District Administration premises for several hours. They were eventually transported in security vehicles to other areas, including the very areas where they had spent years enduring forced displacement.

Raqqa Deputy Governor Mohammed al-Hamidi, in a statement to Welat TV, had previously attributed part of the tensions to what he described as a "lack of coordination." He also cited "concerns" among some local residents about the presence of individuals he claimed had "previous outstanding disputes".

However, witnesses and sources interviewed by STJ expressed dismay at the decision to assemble the returnees at the agreed date and location without ensuring adequate protection or implementing the necessary security measures that should have preceded

their arrival. This was particularly concerning given that, according to the sources, the returnees had received assurances that they would be able to reclaim their properties.

In his testimony documented by STJ on 27 October 2026, Ciwan Sherif, one of the returnees, stated that the number of security personnel and vehicles present was "small". He added,

> "The security forces also did nothing and did not even prevent the attackers from assaulting residents' vehicles. They simply stood by and watched."

Another witness, identified as Luqman Mashu, whose testimony was documented by STJ on 27 October, told the organisation that General Security personnel were present while the vehicles were being set ablaze. He stated,

> "We asked several personnel to fire a few rounds into the air to stop them from burning our cars, but they refused, claiming that they had no orders to fire."

This was not the first incident in which displaced Kurds faced attacks while attempting to access their areas of origin. In March 2026, two Kurdish civilians were assaulted in the city of Tell Abyad/Girê Spî during a visit in which one of them sought to inquire about the status of commercial premises belonging to his family.

Similarly, on 10 August 2026, the arrival of the first convoys of displaced persons in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and the surrounding countryside was accompanied by attacks and threats. These incidents prompted the Displaced Persons Committee to suspend preparations for a subsequent convoy until adequate security guarantees were in place.

The circumstances surrounding these incidents and the parties involved vary. Taken together, however, they point to the persistence of serious concerns facing many displaced Kurds, particularly when considering returning to their areas of origin or attempting to reclaim their properties, despite the publicly announced "return arrangements".

The exclusive testimonies obtained by STJ reveal an intersection of disputes over houses and land with political accusations and remarks targeting returnees based on their Kurdish identity or alleged affiliations with Kurdish political actors. These developments unfold against a backdrop of accusations by some Arab residents of the area against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whom they accuse of handing over their sons to Iraqi authorities, who detained them on suspicion of affiliation with the Islamic State (ISIS).

This briefing examines the circumstances of the three incidents, what they reveal about the transitional authorities' failure to protect returnees and address property disputes, and the measures announced in response to previous attacks.

It also assesses whether investigations, promises of compensation, and commitments to accountability have led to tangible action, and what, if anything, has changed for displaced persons who continue to await their return to their areas of origin.

Furthermore, the briefing examines the interrelationship among safeguarding the right to return, addressing property-related violations, and holding those responsible to account, treating these as interconnected imperatives to redress harm, rebuild trust, and prevent violations from recurring.

2. Methodology

This report is based on 10 testimonies and interviews with witnesses who directly experienced or observed the incidents in Tell Abyad/Girê Spî and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. STJ documented these testimonies in May and August, and on 27 and 28 October 2026. The interviewees included displaced civilians originally from the two cities and their surrounding countryside, as well as sources and members of committees and groups working on issues concerning displaced persons.
The report also draws on interviews with other individuals familiar with the background and context of the incidents, including local activists.

The testimonies describe the experiences of individuals who attempted to visit their areas of origin, inquire about their property, or reclaim it. These include individuals who participated in a visit to the Tell Abyad District Administration on 26 October; individuals who provided information about the attacks that accompanied the arrival of a convoy of displaced persons in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê on 10 August; and witnesses who described an earlier assault on Kurdish civilians in Tell Abyad/Girê Spî.

The researchers responsible for this report also reviewed publicly available statements by officials within Syria's transitional authorities and local figures, a previous report published by STJ, and open-source materials from human rights organizations and media outlets on return conditions and related incidents. This review aimed to cross-check the testimonies against available evidence and reporting. The report distinguishes between what witnesses directly observed and information they relayed from others or expressed as personal opinions or assessments. It also presents accounts from the different parties involved and identifies issues that could not be independently verified.

STJ's researchers obtained informed consent from all participants after explaining the voluntary nature of their participation, how the information would be used, and the possibility of its publication in this report. At participants' request, the researchers used pseudonyms and withheld any identifying details in light of potential security risks.

3. From Displacement to Unsafe Return Arrangements

The Turkish military operation known as Operation Peace Spring, launched on 9 October 2019 with the participation of Syrian factions affiliated with Türkiye, displaced large numbers of residents from Tell Abyad/Girê Spî, Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and the surrounding rural areas. Five days after the operation began, the United Nations reported that at least 160,000 civilians had been displaced from areas in north-eastern Syria, noting that violence had forced residents to flee the areas surrounding the two cities. Those displaced included members of different communities who sought refuge in other parts of Syria and abroad.

During the years their owners were absent, properties in both areas were looted, appropriated, or confiscated, and some displaced persons faced significant obstacles to accessing or reclaiming them. In a June 2026 report, STJ documented complaints about threats and assaults, the continued occupation of properties and use of land belonging to displaced persons, and financial demands and disputes over vacating certain properties. The report noted that returns remained limited, despite the gradual return of some families following the political change in Syria.

Following the announcement of arrangements to implement the 29 January 2026 agreement between the Syrian government and the SDF, the return of displaced persons from the two areas became a topic of discussion and consideration. In this context, the first convoys of displaced persons departed al-Hasakah for Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and its countryside on 10 August 2026. However, their arrival was accompanied by assaults and threats against a number of returnees, most of whom were Kurds.

Khaled Ayo, Director of the Human Rights and Documentation Office at the Serê Kaniyê Displaced Persons Committee, stated in a previous testimony to STJ, documented in August 2026, that "Arab settlers were roaming the city's streets carrying weapons, searching for returning Kurdish families and attacking them while chanting sectarian slogans." He further noted that the return of displaced Kurdish families to their homes "was met with rejection, the smashing of car windows, threats, gunfire, and beatings with sticks by individuals who had seized civilians' homes, most of whom were Iraqis, as well as displaced persons from Deir ez-Zor who refused to return to their areas of origin."

After these incidents, the Serê Kaniyê Displaced Persons Committee announced it would suspend preparations for the next convoy until guarantees for the safety of returnees were secured. The Committee's Head of Relations, Ciwan Îso, made this statement to Rudaw on 11 August. Subsequent returns were announced in successive groups. On 13 October, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) quoted Mustafa Abdi, a member of the Presidential Team tasked with implementing the agreement, as saying that the fifth convoy comprised 385 families and that arrangements had been made to ensure their safe return.

In Tell Abyad/Girê Spî and its countryside, witnesses interviewed by STJ reported that some Kurdish landowners had reclaimed their properties after approaching local authorities and, under security escort, encouraged others to submit similar requests. On 24 October, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also reported that dozens of families had returned individually or in small groups to villages in the countryside of Tell Abyad/Girê Spî and Ain Issa, seeking to reclaim their homes and land, accompanied by security forces affiliated with the new authorities in Damascus.

These developments, however, did not dispel the concerns of all displaced persons amid ongoing property disputes and unanswered questions about the guarantees in place to protect them. Against this backdrop, individuals asserting property claims approached the Tell Abyad District Administration on 26 October 2026, where the assaults examined in the following section of this report took place.

4. Returning to a Landscape Burdened by Displacement and Property Disputes

The concerns of displaced Kurds from Tell Abyad/Girê Spî predate the events of October 2026. Throughout the years of conflict, the city experienced successive waves of threats, displacement, and violations as control shifted among different armed forces.

In July 2013, amid clashes in the Tell Abyad/Girê Spî area, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) documented accounts of announcements broadcast over mosque loudspeakers urging residents of a predominantly Kurdish neighborhood to leave within a short period in anticipation of bombardment. The report also described the displacement of civilians, the detention of men and young people at a checkpoint, and violations including looting and pillage. These accounts indicate that, for some residents of the city, fear of displacement and targeted attacks had taken root years before Operation Peace Spring.

Prior to the assault on 26 October, STJ documented an attack against two Kurdish civilians, Khalil Ismail, also known as Khalil Mirzo, and Sharfan al-Ramo, during a visit to Tell Abyad/Girê Spî in the preceding month of Ramadan.

According to a witness who was present during the incident, Khalil was asking the person occupying one of his commercial premises about the property's status when another individual confronted him, accusing him of belonging to the SDF on account of his Kurdish identity. A group of people then gathered around the restaurant where he had sought refuge. With the help of others, he reached the home of a local family, who sheltered him, before an acquaintance in the Military Police intervened and escorted him to safety.

The source reported that one of the two men was beaten and injured, and that their shared vehicle was smashed, dragged through the market, and then set on fire. Taken together with the 26 October assault, this incident highlights the serious risks faced by displaced Kurds attempting to access their properties amid accusations linking them to the SDF. It also raises questions about the measures taken after the earlier incident to prevent similar attacks from recurring.

The consequences of absence and displacement extend beyond the inability to return home; they also affect agricultural land, a vital economic lifeline and primary source of livelihood for residents, including returnees. Without their owners, this land has become fertile ground for disputes over lease agreements, proceeds, and which authorities are entitled to administer it, especially because it has become a source of income for those who cultivate it in the owners' absence.

In an earlier report, Kurdish resident Majo Khalil told STJ that individuals occupying land belonging to displaced persons in Tal Ahmar and Bagha Jagh had refused to vacate it before the end of the agricultural season. According to his testimony, they informed the owners that they were paying a share of the produce to the local council.
In a recorded video statement, Abu al-Tayba al-Hamdo al-Qaisi, who served as Director of the Sovereign Fund Office in Raqqa Governorate until early October 2025, described how land classified as "absentee property," as well as other land that he said had been cultivated by the SDF in Tell Abyad/Girê Spî and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, was managed. He stated that he had been tasked with collecting agricultural yields, drafting contracts, and registering them at the Fund's central office. He added that those overseeing the process later moved toward leasing out the land and intervening in selecting those permitted to cultivate it. The official described the practices as "arbitrary, bordering on haphazard," explaining that some investors had to hand over whatever portion of their harvest could be obtained, while others did not.

This situation is clearly illustrated by an incident recounted by witness Malak Kilo. In his testimony to STJ, documented on 27 October, he said that on 20 October 2026, he received a phone call informing him that a tractor was plowing his land, located approximately 12 kilometers north of Ain Issa. Describing his reaction, Malak Kilo stated,

> "We went to the land and drove away the farmer who was plowing it, removing his tractor from the property. He told us that Abdo al-Jarbou had handed the land over to them. Afterwards, al-Jarbou came to our village, and we asked him: 'How can you dispose of this land? Are you the government? Who gave you the authority to hand over this land?' We told him that we were its rightful owners. However, he evaded the question and accused someone else of having directed him to the land."

In Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, the obstacles to return went beyond the security concerns that accompanied the first convoy in August 2026. They also hindered families' ability to access and reclaim their homes and, in turn, to secure the basic conditions necessary for a stable return. Although convoys to areas in the city's countryside, as well as to the countryside of Tell Tamer and Zirkan/Abu Rasin, later resumed, a number of displaced persons from the city center and other villages continued to await the resolution of issues involving homes occupied by other individuals, alongside mine clearance, road security, and the restoration of services.

In this regard, Mohammed Hajo, an administrator at a camp for displaced persons from the city and its surrounding countryside, told The New Arab in an interview published on 5 October that the third convoy had traveled to villages included in the return program. However, according to Hajo, Kurdish families were unable to return to some villages because of the presence of a Turkish military base, while residents of another village faced obstacles arising from the occupation of their homes. Reaching the villages included in the convoys was not, in itself, sufficient to ensure a stable return. Returnees spoke of damage to their homes and the difficulties of repairing them amid shortages of water, electricity, and basic services, as well as road closures. One returnee told the same newspaper that his family had been forced to take their tent with them to the village until they could rebuild their home. Other returnees, according to Hawar News Agency, called for roads and infrastructure to be rehabilitated to facilitate movement and access to essential needs.

STJ had previously documented the extent of the destruction inflicted on villages in the Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê countryside in a report, including al-Qasimiyah. A video produced by STJ showed destroyed homes and damage to the village cemetery. In the same report, STJ quoted witness Ciwan Khoshnaw, who described what he found upon inspecting properties in the area,

> "All houses had their doors and windows stolen. One of my uncles' homes was completely leveled to the ground by a tracked bulldozer."

These developments coincided with continued obstacles to return, including property seizure and the absence of security guarantees.

The website 7al.net also reported that Mahmoud Jamil, spokesperson for the Serê Kaniyê Displaced Persons Committee, said that families returning with the fourth convoy on 8 October were prevented from entering several villages because of Turkish forces and military bases. As a result, some families were forced to set up tents on the outskirts of their villages. STJ was unable to independently verify the circumstances of each case or, based on the materials available, obtain a response from the Turkish forces regarding these accounts.

Regarding occupied homes, Rudaw reported on a circular issued on 26 October by the Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê District Administration and its Security Directorate. The circular warned that some individuals occupying displaced persons' homes were demanding payments from returning owners in exchange for vacating the properties.

The circular threatened legal action against those who violated it. However, the available information does not indicate how many complaints were addressed or what outcomes resulted from the measures taken.
These accounts reveal the range of obstacles confronting returnees. While some who have yet to reach their homes face disputes over occupation or restrictions on entering their villages, families who have managed to return still need habitable housing, essential services, and viable livelihoods to remain. Conditions vary from one village to another, underscoring that the assessment of return must take into account not only the organization of convoys but also property owners' ability to reclaim their assets and establish a stable life there.

Taken together, the testimonies and statements about the two cities and their surrounding countryside show that obstacles to reclaiming property take multiple forms. These include the continued occupation of homes and the use of agricultural land, disputes over which entity is authorized to administer or lease such properties, and restrictions that prevent some families from reaching their villages.

These accounts also raise questions about the role of the entities that administered these properties or collected revenues from them, and about the procedures available to their owners for reclaiming them. Establishing responsibility requires examining the relevant contracts, records, and decisions, as well as hearing from property owners, occupants, and the authorities concerned.

5. Amid Calls to Disclose the Fate of Detainees and Reports of Attacks Against Returnees

Discussions on arrangements for return took place alongside ongoing demands by Arab families from Tell Abyad/Girê Spî for disclosure of the fate of missing or detained relatives, whose disappearance or arrest local actors have attributed to the SDF. This issue calls for a serious investigation into each case, including determining the whereabouts of those detained or establishing the fate of those missing, and identifying responsibility based on the facts, without holding displaced Kurds, including those returning to the area, responsible.

The issues of return and detainees were raised together during a meeting in al-Hasakah in April 2026 between Presidential Envoy Ziad al-Ayesh and SDF Commander Mazloum Abdi. According to SANA, the meeting addressed follow-up on the integration process, the release of detainees, arrangements for handing over prisons, and the return of displaced persons to areas including the western countryside of Tell Abyad/Girê Spî.

However, in some of the rhetoric surrounding events in the city, calls to determine the fate of missing persons went beyond demanding accountability from the relevant authorities and instead directed accusations at returning Kurdish civilians, holding them collectively responsible for acts attributed to the SDF. Witnesses interviewed by STJ said that on 26 October 2026, an individual entered the courtyard of the District Administration, collectively accused those attending to official business of belonging to the aforementioned forces, demanded to know the fate of missing relatives, and threatened to smash their vehicles and set them on fire.

In a video statement, local media figure Ali Shibli said that the presence of individuals he claimed were affiliated with the SDF coincided with a gathering of relatives of detainees and missing persons. Shibli considered that the meeting between the two groups had "contributed to the situation spiraling out of control." He also called for prioritizing reassurance for the families of detainees and for initiating dialogue among them.

However, a source from the Tell Abyad Kurdish Youth Gathering, speaking to STJ, described the media figure's allegations about specific individuals as "inaccurate." The source said that claims that senior figures or officials affiliated with the SDF were present among the families amounted to a "distortion of the facts." The source added that none of the protesters had identified any such individuals or specified who they were, and that they could not even cite specific names as examples to substantiate their claims.

These incidents underscore the need to distinguish between families' right to know the fate of their relatives and to hold those responsible for violations accountable, and the imposition of collective blame on civilians based on ethnic identity or presumed affiliation. Addressing the issue of missing persons requires access to the records of the entities that detained or took custody of them, rather than turning the return of displaced persons into a means of exerting pressure on individuals whose personal responsibility has not been established.

A serious response to the demands of the families of missing and detained persons requires that questions be directed, through official channels, to the International Coalition, its partners within the SDF, and the relevant bodies within Syria's transitional authorities. These entities may hold information about individuals detained or who disappeared over the past several years. They are responsible for disclosing any information and records in their possession concerning individuals they detained or about whose fate they have information, and for cooperating with the competent authorities and the families concerned to establish their whereabouts or clarify their fate.

In this context, the Tell Abyad/Girê Spî District Administration could, in cooperation with local residents and the relevant bodies dealing with detainees and missing persons, compile a list of individuals whose families are seeking information about their fate, gather available information and documentation on the circumstances of their disappearance or detention, and refer their case files to the competent authorities. It could then follow up on these cases with the International Coalition, its partners within the SDF, and any other entities that may hold relevant information.

Families should also be kept informed of the measures taken and the findings reached, while ensuring that confidentiality is respected and the safety of those providing information is protected.

Responding to families' demands regarding missing persons and safeguarding displaced persons' right to return to their properties are two responsibilities that require serious, parallel attention. The suffering of families of missing persons cannot be used to justify threatening civilians or preventing them from reclaiming their properties, just as their right to know the truth and to hold accountable those responsible for any violations committed against them cannot be disregarded.

6. From Hopes of Reclaiming Land to a Gathering Outside the District Administration

6.1. Preparations and Arrangements Ahead of the Return

In the days leading up to 26 October 2026, displaced persons from Tell Abyad/Girê Spî and the surrounding countryside circulated reports that some Kurdish residents had reclaimed their land after approaching local authorities, accompanied by security forces. These reports rekindled hope among others of recovering the properties they had left behind following Operation Peace Spring in 2019, particularly their agricultural land.

Testimonies documented by STJ on 27 and 28 October converged on the fact that a number of residents had approached the relevant authorities in the Raqqa Governorate and prepared documents establishing their ownership. They were reportedly instructed to attend the Tell Abyad District Administration at 10:00 a.m. on Monday to be escorted to their villages and to have their properties returned.

In this regard, Luqman Mashu said,

> "We returned to the city of Raqqa and obtained a Land Area Statement and a Real Estate Statement for our properties. We then went to the Deputy Director of the Tell Abyad District, where they took our fingerprints and asked for our phone numbers as well. They asked us to inform our relatives, families and friends that they should be here next Monday at exactly 10:00 a.m., so that they could accompany us to our villages and hand over our properties to us."

Mashu added, speaking of his family's wait for an opportunity to return after years of displacement,

> "We are searching for a glimmer of hope for our return [...] We can hardly believe that there might be a chance for us to return."

This was what led Malak Kilo to hope that he would be able to reclaim his land and property and return to the life he had been forced to leave behind when he was displaced. he said,

> "We have 2,500 dunams of agricultural land in the village, which we have been deprived of for eight years. We are living in rented houses belonging to other people. We expected that, following the integration, we would also be able to reclaim our properties. We had planned to take possession of our land, cultivate it and work on it during this year."

The testimonies STJ collected for this report are particularly significant in light of the authorities' subsequent account of what happened. They indicate that many attendees

had done so pursuant to prior arrangements and after completing their documentation, even if some were also hoping to submit new applications that day.
If the appointment was intended to escort applicants whose documentation was complete to their properties, why did the District Administration not clarify this arrangement to residents in advance by announcing that the designated day would not be used to receive new applications and by specifying when the intake of applications would resume? It could also have identified the individuals invited to attend, or at least specified their number and the arrangements for their attendance, while providing the necessary protection. Such measures could have reduced confusion and helped ensure an orderly handover process.

6.2. From Waiting to Threats and the Burning of Vehicles

On the morning of Monday, 26 October 2026, property claimants arrived near the Tell Abyad/Girê Spî District Administration, expecting, according to their testimonies, to complete procedures to reclaim their properties and then proceed to their villages under a security escort. After waiting outside the building, they were asked to enter the enclosed courtyard, while their vehicles remained outside.

In his testimony to STJ, Luqman Mashu said that those present had been waiting for a committee they expected to accompany them to their villages. However, they noticed unusual activity outside the District Administration and a group gathering at its entrance. Meanwhile, some companions, including his father, were still waiting in the vehicles outside.

According to Luqman Mashu, an individual entered the courtyard and accused those present of belonging to the SDF, which had been integrated into the Syrian Ministry of Defence. He linked their presence to the fate of missing or detained members of Arab tribes who were allegedly being held by the SDF. The witness said the man threatened to smash their vehicles and set them on fire unless they left. Sardar Rashwani recounted hearing a similar threat from someone who entered the courtyard with security personnel before they escorted him out.

Witness accounts converged on the identity of the individual who entered the courtyard and issued threats. Several witnesses interviewed by STJ identified him as Ahmed Ali Bashir. On 26 October 2026, he appeared in a video circulating on social media, calling for the expulsion of returnees from the city if the government could not secure the return of their detained and missing relatives. This account was corroborated by Sherwan Ali, who told STJ about the incident,

> "Ahmed al-Bashir came in and accused all of us of being members of the SDF. He said he was demanding the return of their sons and brothers who had been killed or detained by the SDF. He threatened that unless we left the place within

> fifteen minutes, they would start smashing things and setting them on fire, which is exactly what happened".

STJ was unable to independently verify these allegations.

Sherwan also noted that the tribal figure Abdo al-Jarbou entered the District Director's office that same day, accompanied by another individual. The two subsequently left without speaking to the returnees, and, according to Sherwan, the acts of vandalism and arson occurred immediately afterward. He added that residents had circulated allegations that al-Jarbou had incited protesters to attack the returnees after describing them as members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, Sherwan stressed that he had neither witnessed nor heard this alleged incitement, which had reportedly taken place outside the building.

This is consistent with the account provided by another witness, Malak Kilo, to STJ. He noted,

> "Two men arrived, one of whom was Abdo al-Jarbou, and they entered the District Director's office. Al-Jarbou then came out while speaking on his phone, appearing visibly upset. People subsequently gathered outside the District Directorate and began protesting."

Similar accounts appeared in other testimonies documented by STJ, and activists also circulated the same allegation on social media, here and here. Nevertheless, STJ was unable to independently verify these allegations.

Luqman Mashu stated that the window of his car had been smashed while his father was inside. He said he had asked the security personnel stationed at the entrance for help before his father was able to make his way into the District Administration building. He added that those attending to official business heard vehicles being smashed and saw smoke, and that when they left the building, they saw signs of burning.

Witnesses' estimates of the number of people present and the vehicles damaged varied. Shivan Osman estimated that around 150 people were present and reported that approximately 60 vehicles had been set on fire, attacked, or otherwise sustained varying degrees of damage. Other witnesses gave higher estimates.

Footage circulating online from the early moments of the attacks appeared to show a vehicle belonging to the General Security forces in close proximity to the incident, without intervening or taking steps to prevent the attacks.


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Witness Malak Kilo told STJ that when the women accompanying their group entered the Directorate's courtyard, they reported that the protesters had told them,

> "Thank God you are women. If you had been men, we would have slaughtered you by now."

When asked what was happening outside, the women said,

> "The attackers smashed the car windows and overturned the vehicles. General Security personnel were among them, filming them and laughing, as though they were pleased with what was happening."

In a video statement, Ahmed Bashir al-Haj, Director of the Media Office at the Tell Abyad District Administration, said that a protest had been scheduled for the same day to demand disclosure of the fate of detainees and missing persons, and that the arrival of a "large number" of people seeking administrative services coincided with the protesters' gathering.

He acknowledged that vehicles had been smashed and set on fire, but said that security personnel and local residents had attempted to "protect the returnees and their vehicles." However, footage circulated by accounts belonging to several protest participants and local media figures showed security forces standing by as onlookers, without making any apparent attempt to intervene or prevent the attacks.


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Al-Haj's statement that the protest was scheduled for the same day raises further questions about the District Administration's and the security authorities' responsibility to assess potential risks and take protective measures. If the relevant authorities knew in advance about both the protest and the scheduled arrival of property claimants, why did they not take adequate steps to manage both groups and protect those attending official business and their vehicles, particularly after threats emerged? This question is especially significant given residents' testimonies indicating that the District Administration itself set the date for their appointments.

The official Alikhbaria Syria channel reported that "Internal Security Forces have deployed in Tell Abyad, in the Raqqa countryside, following attacks targeting groups of local residents as they returned to the area, and are working to pursue those involved." This confirms that the forces intervened after the attacks.

6.3. Official Statement: Coordination Failures, and Promises of Accountability and Compensation

After Raqqa Deputy Governor Mohammed al-Hamdi arrived at the Tell Abyad/Girê Spî District Administration, those attending official business were asked to select representatives to meet with him. Sherwan Ali, who attended the meeting, told STJ in an exclusive testimony that the Deputy Governor had assured them that the file concerning their return and the recovery of their properties "would be addressed," and that property owners "would subsequently be summoned in small groups, one after another, to take possession of their properties".

Shivan Osman said that those attending had challenged al-Hamdi's explanation that the incident had resulted from "poor coordination," noting that they had come after contacting the relevant authorities and receiving a specific appointment. He added that their trust in the responsible authorities had been "damaged" by what had happened.

In a statement to Welat TV following the incident, Deputy Governor Mohammed al-Hamdi acknowledged that prior coordination had taken place between the District Administration and some local residents, but described it as "insufficient." He said that coordination had involved "around 25 to 30 people," whereas, according to his estimate,

between 125 and 150 people had arrived in more than 40 vehicles. He also referred to the presence of individuals whom he said some residents of Tell Abyad/Girê Spî feared because of "previous disputes".

Al-Hamdi's account aligns with some of the claimants' testimony about prior coordination but differs on whether that coordination was adequate and on how many people were expected to attend. Witnesses interviewed by STJ said they had all been given the same Monday appointment at 10:00 a.m. Several held Shaaban al-Abd, Deputy Director of the Tell Abyad District Administration, responsible for the incident, because he had been tasked with receiving applications and assigned the same appointment to all applicants, insisting they attend at the same time. Some were also reportedly asked to inform their relatives and acquaintances. Witness Ciwan noted that some of those present were individuals "who had hoped to submit their applications that day".

These accounts raise questions beyond appointment scheduling: What information did the District Administration and security forces have about the expected number of applicants and the planned protest? What measures were taken to protect those present and their vehicles once threats began to emerge? The claim that some individuals were involved in "previous disputes" also needs clarification regarding its nature and who is responsible for verifying it, without allowing it to become a basis for collectively accusing the other applicants.

Al-Hamdi said that "around 30 vehicles, as well as some motorcycles, had sustained damage," and that a committee tasked with assessing the damage would document it to prepare to address the cases of those affected. He also referred to "a directive to establish a central committee tasked with several areas of work, including civil peace, damage assessment, the determination of responsibilities, and legal measures." He affirmed that "efforts to restore rights to their rightful owners would continue once the return mechanism had been reorganised".

Based on currently available and publicly disclosed information, these measures remain announced commitments and steps that require follow-up to determine whether the committees were actually formed, what findings emerged from the damage assessments, whether those responsible for the attacks were identified and referred to the judiciary, whether compensation was paid, and whether applications to reclaim properties were processed.

The local official's account of the security forces' role differs from witness testimony that the forces present had "failed to adequately prevent the attacks." However, the two accounts converge on the fact that those attending official business remained

inside the District Administration building, and that security forces later helped escort them out of the city.
According to the witnesses, they gathered and traveled in groups in security vehicles toward Raqqa, Ayn al-Arab/Kobanî, and other areas. Luqman Mashu and Sardar Rashwani said some of the vehicles transporting them were pelted with stones near Ain al-Arous and other villages before continuing out of the area.

7. Previous Attacks on a Convoy of Displaced Persons Returning to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê

On 10 August 2026, the first convoy of displaced persons returning to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and its surrounding countryside departed from the city of al-Hasakah. The convoy was part of the return arrangements under the agreement signed on 29 January 2026 between the Syrian government and the SDF. It comprised approximately 410 families from different communities, most of whom were heading to villages in the countryside of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, while other families, primarily Kurdish, were bound for the city center.

In a statement documented by STJ in August, Luqman Issa Lahimas, a member of the Serê Kaniyê Displaced Persons Committee, said that returning families, particularly those heading to the city, had faced threats and attacks, including physical assault, smashed vehicle windows, and gunfire. Citing eyewitness accounts, he added that the convoy arrived without an adequate security escort and that a number of families returned to their areas of displacement after being attacked or out of fear that the attacks would continue.

Khaled Ayo, also told STJ that armed individuals had been moving through the city streets in search of returning Kurdish families, and that some families had taken refuge in nearby villages before leaving the area. He added that, according to information received by the Committee, those who had been physically assaulted were Kurds, including both returnees and vehicle drivers.

The New Arab quoted sources it had interviewed as saying that Kurdish families had been attacked upon arriving in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, and that armed men had prevented several returnees from entering their homes. The newspaper also quoted a lawyer from the city as saying that members of five families had been beaten, with some subsequently taken to the hospital.

By contrast, the al-Hasakah Governorate Internal Security Command stated in a statement to Alikhbaria Syria on the day of the incident that its units had intervened to disperse a "brawl" that, according to its account, had broken out after families returned

to their homes without prior coordination and a dispute arose with the occupants. It added that the competent authorities were handling the incident in accordance with legal procedures.

Following the incident, Ciwan Îso, the Serê Kaniyê Displaced Persons Committee's Head of Relations, told Rudaw that approval for the convoy to proceed had been granted following assurances from the Presidential Team regarding the security situation. He added that the Committee had decided to suspend preparations for the next convoy until guarantees for the safety of returnees were secured. Meanwhile, Enab Baladi reported that the Internal Security Command had announced the "arrest of a number of those involved" and the temporary suspension of return convoys. The coverage, however, did not provide sufficient details about the identities of those arrested or the outcome of the measures taken against them.

The incident in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê demonstrates that the question of protection had already arisen more than two months before the attacks in Tell Abyad/Girê Spî. In both incidents, the issue of "prior coordination" featured in the competing accounts, while witnesses also described threats and attacks accompanying displaced persons' attempts to reach their areas of origin and reclaim their properties.

8. Following Repeated Attacks: Have the Authorities Addressed the Underlying Risks?

Repeated attacks against displaced Kurds raise questions about how seriously Syria's transitional authorities have addressed the risks facing returnees. Available testimonies and public statements point to an atmosphere of tension and opposition to returns, along with ongoing property disputes and political accusations against property owners.

In Tell Abyad/Girê Spî, the District Administration's and security forces' responsibility to assess potential risks before gathering applicants comes into focus. Witnesses said they had attended at a time set by local authorities, while the Director of the District Administration's Media Office indicated that a protest calling for disclosure of the fate of detainees and missing persons had been scheduled for the same day. Were the Administration and security agencies aware in advance that the two gatherings would coincide? If so, what measures were put in place to protect those attending official business and their property, and to prevent tensions from escalating once threats emerged?

The authorities' response to the repeated attacks also raises questions about the seriousness with which accountability efforts are taken. In addition to testimonies

identifying individuals accused of making threats or inciting violence, videos and photographs of the incidents and some of those involved circulated on social media. However, the information available for this report does not establish whether investigators used these materials, whether they identified the roles of the individuals shown, or whether judicial proceedings were initiated against anyone found responsible in either Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê or Tell Abyad/Girê Spî.

If the authorities announced measures in the aftermath of these incidents, were those affected informed of the outcomes? Were investigations launched to examine the roles of both the perpetrators and those who incited them, as well as to scrutinize the response of the forces tasked with providing protection? The lack of clear information about the outcomes of complaints and investigations undermines displaced persons' confidence in the effectiveness of seeking redress from institutions and raises concerns that leniency toward perpetrators may embolden them to repeat such attacks.

The response must not be limited to security and judicial measures; there is also a pressing need to address rhetoric that conflates Kurdish identity with assumed political or military affiliation and that holds civilians responsible for actions attributed to the SDF. Witnesses reported that such accusations were directed at people in Tell Abyad/Girê Spî before their vehicles were attacked. What steps have the authorities taken to correct this perception in their media and political discourse and to affirm that citizens' rights to return, property ownership, and protection are not contingent on ethnic identity or political views?

This question is especially important in mixed areas, where tribal leaders and local notables play a role in dialogue and conflict resolution. Do the authorities ensure balanced participation by representatives of affected communities, including displaced Kurds, property owners, and women, or does their growing reliance on tribal figures give certain local actors greater influence over the conditions for return and the resolution of disputes? How do the authorities ensure that any mediation role does not become authority over returnees' rights or serve as a cover for exclusionary rhetoric?

Answering these questions requires publishing investigation findings, describing the measures taken to protect returnees, and clarifying the criteria for selecting participants in dispute resolution processes. Trust cannot be built on promises alone; it requires enabling those affected to know what happened, access their property, and seek recourse through institutions that provide protection and redress.

9. Political Positions and Calls for an Investigation and the Protection of Returnees

The attacks on displaced Kurds in Tell Abyad/Girê Spî prompted local and international calls for the protection of returnees and for an investigation into the events. These calls came amid warnings about the incident's potential impact on civil peace and on efforts to enable displaced persons to return to their areas of origin.

On 27 October 2026, a spokesperson for the US Department of State told Rudaw that the United States condemned violence against civilians, called on the Syrian government to hold those responsible to account, and ensured the security of returning families. The spokesperson also stressed the need to enable displaced persons to return to their homes safely and voluntarily, free from violence and intimidation, and urged the government and local authorities to rebuild trust among different communities.

In a separate statement published on 26 October 2026, the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in Syria condemned attacks on Kurdish families, linking them to violations that accompanied the return of displaced persons to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in August. It called on the Syrian government and the Raqqa Governor to establish an investigative committee, hold those responsible to account, and take measures to protect returnees and their property. It also condemned using accusations of affiliation with the SDF as a pretext to target families or obstruct their return.
For its part, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), in a statement issued the same day, condemned the attacks and threats it said had targeted returnees, holding the Syrian transitional government responsible for protecting them and safeguarding their property. It called for an independent, public investigation; accountability for those who carried out and incited the attacks; and restraint to avoid further escalation amid tensions that emerged in al-Hasakah after the incident. The Council considered the events a breach of the 29 January 2026 agreement.

These positions converge in calling for the protection of returnees and accountability for those responsible for the attacks. The practical impact of these calls, however, will depend on the measures authorities take and whether they can be followed up, including investigations, compensation, and enabling property owners to reclaim their rights safely.

10. Legal Analysis

The practices documented in this report, including restrictions imposed on and attacks against displaced persons returning to reclaim their properties, as well as the smashing and burning of their cars and motorcycles based on their ethnic identity, constitute a breach of the transitional authorities' commitments to uphold the rule of law and ensure the safe return of displaced persons to their places of origin. Their recurrence

also undermines the country's constitutional and legal framework and threatens the transitional justice process and efforts to build civil peace.

These attacks violate Article 16 of the 2025 Constitutional Declaration, which affirms 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." Attacks against returnees because of their Kurdish identity also violate Article 10 of the same Declaration, which stipulates that "Citizens are equal before the law in rights and duties, without discrimination based on race, religion, gender or lineage."

Furthermore, these practices reflect the Syrian transitional authorities' failure to honor their commitments under the integration agreement with the SDF, concluded on 29 January 2026. Article 14 of the agreement explicitly provides for "ensuring the return of all displaced persons to their cities and villages (Afrin, Sheikh Maqsoud, and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê), and appointing local officials within the civil administrations in those areas".

In this context, the failure of the local administration and security forces to fulfill their duties, coupled with attempts to justify these shortcomings by citing "poor coordination" or "previous disputes" without acknowledging their direct responsibility for the violations, raises serious questions about the transitional authorities' willingness to prevent such violations in the future and to hold those responsible and involved to account. This is particularly concerning given that the authorities failed to take the necessary measures to prevent the disorder that paved the way for these violations, despite local officials acknowledging that they were aware in advance of demonstrations scheduled for the same day to demand information about the fate of missing persons.

At the international level, the violations documented in this report contravene Syria's international obligations, particularly those set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 17 affirms every person's right to own property and stipulates that no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of their property.

Similarly, Article 5 of the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), to which Syria acceded in 1969, requires States Parties to guarantee everyone's right to own property and to housing without racial, national, or ethnic discrimination.

These obligations are further complemented by the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (GPID), which prohibit the arbitrary deprivation of property and possessions and place primary responsibility on the governing authorities to establish the security and legal conditions necessary to facilitate the voluntary return of internally

displaced persons. They also require the State to assist displaced persons in recovering the property and possessions they left behind or were dispossessed of during their displacement.

11. Recommendations

In light of the above, addressing this crisis requires the transitional authorities to move beyond "promises and merely nominal committees" and take concrete, meaningful action. International actors must also fulfill their responsibilities. STJ considers that the following measures should be taken, with each actor acting within its mandate:

11.1. The Transitional Government should:

- Conduct an independent, transparent, and public investigation into the incidents documented in this report and hold accountable all who carried out or incited the attacks.
- Provide victims with effective remedies and compensation for the damage inflicted on them and their vehicles.
- Establish clear, transparent administrative mechanisms for managing returns and property recovery. These should include unified communication channels and clear public announcements of application dates and criteria to avoid arbitrary arrangements that may lead to disorder.
- Enact legislation criminalizing hate speech and incitement on national, ethnic, or religious grounds, in accordance with international human rights standards, to safeguard civil peace. It should also promote responsible media discourse consistent with this objective.
- Translate the general understandings set out in the integration agreement with the SDF concerning the return of displaced persons into concrete implementation mechanisms governed by a clear timetable.

11.2. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (COI- Syria) should:

- Conduct comprehensive investigations into recurring violations against displaced persons returning to their places of origin and document these violations in its periodic reports.

11.3. The Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons should:

- Pay particular attention to the extent to which the authorities are meeting their obligations to create conditions conducive to the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of displaced persons, and request country visits to Syria to assess the situation in this regard.

سوريون من أجل الحقيقة والعدالة
Syrians For Truth & Justice

ABOUT STJ

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

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

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