



## What is happening in Turkey-occupied Afrin

This report provides an overview of Turkey's violation of International Human Rights Law in its occupation of the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin in northern Aleppo, Syria. Much of what is described also applies to the Turkey-occupied Azaz-Jarablus-al-Bab triangle. A [Human Rights Watch statement, June 14, 2018](#), and the [OHCHR report for June, 2018](#) support the claim that there are on-going war crimes and crimes against humanity occurring in Afrin. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) warns that if Turkey is allowed to expand its occupation of northern Syria other areas could be effected. The OHCHR recommends that Turkey abide by international law and ensure the safety and well being of civilians. Kurdish Lobby Australia considers Turkey is intent on undermining the achievements of Syrian Kurds and their allies and supports calls from Afrin residents and IDPs, the Syrian Democratic Council, the Barzani-backed Kurdish National Council and various bodies in the European Union for the international community to exert pressure on Turkey to withdraw all its military forces and Turkey-backed militias from Afrin, and for political negotiations on Syria's future to include Turkey's withdrawal from Syria.

### Summary

Turkey is blocking international media and humanitarian aid organisations from entering Afrin. While Turkey is investing in Afrin, including creating a police force by recruiting Islamist extremist militants from eastern Ghouta, under Turkey's watch, there is on-going:

- Continued displacement of IDPs from Afrin;
- Inadequate humanitarian aid for those displaced;
- Inadequate humanitarian aid for those inside Afrin, including IDPs from around Damascus;
- Turkification of Afrin, e.g. forcing Afrin residents to have Turkish ID cards;
- Arabisation of Afrin;
- Islamisation of Afrin, including forced conversions and women being subjected to strict Sharia Law;
- Freedom of movement prevented;
- Other war crimes and crimes against humanity including large scale settlement of militants and IDPs in empty homes of those displaced; looting and destruction of property, detention of thousands; torture, and kidnapping for ransom; &
- Militia infighting over the spoils of war.

Syrian Kurdish responses to what is happening under Turkey's occupation include holding protests, making statements, collecting evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, calling for the withdrawal of all Turkish security forces and Turkey-backed militias, and conducting an insurgency.

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## Introduction

Turkey is intent on having an influence on Syria's future. [Turkey](#) now occupies 4,000 square kilometres of Syria, including Afrin, the Azaz-Jarablus- al-Bab triangle and a major part of Idlib. If the [3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey](#), 600,000 people in northern Aleppo and 2.5 million people in Idlib are taken into account, Turkey oversees 25 percent of Syria's population. Turkey is a significant backer of Syrian opposition groups that attend the Astana and Geneva negotiations, and has established a new Syrian 'National' Army of up to 60,000 fighters from over 35 militias. Many are Islamist extremists, including former ISIS and al-Qaida fighters.

The extent of Turkey's influence over the future of Syria will depend on how it manages its tense and contradictory relations with the US, Russia and Iran, its intentions and actions on the ground, the Assad regime's response to its occupation of northern Syria, and the international community's response to Turkey's actions in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

## What is happening in Afrin under Turkish occupation

### Turkey is blocking international media from entering Afrin

Turkey continues to block international media from entering Afrin. Consequently, details in this report are sourced mainly from Fars News, Firat News and Rudaw.

### On-going displacement of Afrin residents

The [UN](#) estimated that after Turkey took control of Afrin city on March 18, about [50,000 to 70,000](#) civilians remained in the city and 135,000 residents remained in the district. The UN claimed that at the end of April, [137,000 people](#) remained displaced from Afrin, although registration of IDPs had yet to be completed (i.e. this could be an underestimation).

On [May 3](#), the US State Department urged 'all relevant actors' to allow the return of the 137,000 IDPs to Afrin. Kurds claimed that Turkey was preventing displaced residents from returning.

According to a spokesperson of the new Turkey-appointed [Afrin city council](#), between May 21 and May 25, 200 families returned to Afrin. What he failed to mention was that these families had to pay thousands of dollars to Turkey-backed militants manning the checkpoints to be allowed back in.

At the end of June, John Ging, Director of the Coordination and Response Division in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, claimed [134,000 people](#)

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<sup>1</sup> There is mounting evidence of Turkey's support for ISIS and al-Qaida, and alleged role in [supplying chemicals for the Ghouta sarin attack](#) in August 2013, which was blamed on the Assad regime.

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[from Afrin remained displaced](#) in the Tel Rifaat sub-district, and the towns of Nubul and Zahra, i.e. only 3,000 people had returned to Afrin.

Compare this rate of return to what is happening in Raqqa. The UN claims that between October 2017 and mid-June 2018, [138,000 people](#) had returned to Raqqa out of a pre-ISIS population of about 200,000. This is despite 80 percent of Raqqa having been destroyed during the four month campaign to liberate the city.

### **Inadequate humanitarian aid for Afrin IDPs**

Many of those displaced from Afrin live in squalid conditions. On [May 1](#), the UN announced that 49 percent of \$16.3 million was being allocated for projects to help these people. Aid focuses on basic services like food, water, shelter, and health care. However, Afrin IDPs continue to suffer from a lack of medicines, water, shelter, electricity, schooling, and so on. See [report](#) for details. This did not stop those in the Berxwedan and Serdem camps [rejecting Russian humanitarian aid](#), once in April and again in May, because Russia let Turkey invade Afrin. Protesters chanted, 'We want Afrin, not your aid.'



[Figure 1](#): Afrin IDPs in the Tel Rifaat region

### **Inadequate humanitarian aid for those inside Afrin, including IDPs from Ghouta**

For those inside Afrin, Turkey continues to block entry to all non-Turkish humanitarian aid organisations that are not registered and approved by Turkey. Many IDPs from Damascus are being housed in [squalid Turkey-run camps](#). The new Turkey-established Afrin administrations have no jurisdiction over these camps. Inside these camps, an increasing number of people suffer dehydration from a lack of water, the extremely unsanitary conditions and a lack of medicines to combat diarrhoea and other illnesses. In June, Turkish forces were allegedly [preventing IDPs](#) from returning to eastern Ghouta.

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## **Turkey's contributions to Afrin**

By May 24, Turkey had established multi-ethnic administrations in Afrin that are overseen by [Turkish nationals](#), and [running water](#) had been restored to Afrin city, which had been without water since March 9, after Turkey destroyed the infrastructure. Bakeries, a hospital, some schools and waste removal services had begun to operate, and by the end of June there was even talk of establishing branches of [Turkish universities](#) in Afrin city. Turkey claimed health services were available 24/7, but the OHCHR reported an [acute lack of healthcare](#), with many requiring treatment at a hospital outside the district. If travel is approved, the individual is often required to pay militants at each checkpoint. Meanwhile many shops remain closed, food prices are high and there are long queues to buy bread.

### **Turkey has created a police force by recruiting Islamist extremist militants**

Turkey has created a police force by recruiting Islamist extremist militants. In April, Turkey began recruiting al-Qaida linked *Faylak al-Rahman* militants from eastern Ghouta as police. After one month's training, on May 11, [620 police](#) assumed duties in Afrin, with *Faylak al-Rahman* actively recruiting more militants for training. These police are paid [\\$200 a month](#). Turkey was also training 3,000 militants in [Sivas](#) (Turkey) to be deployed as police in Afrin under *Jaish al-Islam* commander, Rami Talas. On June 11, [800](#) more police went on active duty.

By the end of June, [Turkey](#) claimed to have 2,000 police operating in Afrin, with another 2,000 in training. [Police vans](#) display a Turkish flag, and Turkish and Arabic writing. In early July, Turkish officials claimed that Turkish armed forces would gradually hand over security to this police force. Given the on-going crimes and infighting between Turkey-backed militias in Afrin, which Turkish security forces have been unable to stop, how police with one month's training and a background in militancy will perform is highly questionable.

### **Turkey insists Afrin residents have Turkish ID cards**

In June, the [Turkish army and Turkey-backed militants began issuing mandatory Turkish ID cards](#) to people in Afrin, including IDPs from Ghouta, allegedly to improve security. Militants threatened to burn down the houses of those who refused to accept the [Turkish ID cards](#).

### **Turkification of Afrin**

From March 18, Turkish and militia flags were hung on all government buildings in Afrin. By July, the [militia flags](#) had been taken down, and Turkey-backed militias were being asked to wear uniforms with a patch of the Turkish flag. School children now learn the Turkish language and chant pro-Turkish and pro-Erdogan slogans.



School in Afrin under Turkey's administration

### Arabisation of Afrin

Turkey is changing the demographics of Afrin. Between April and the end of May, Firat News claims that [60,000 militants](#), as well as their families arrived in Afrin from eastern Ghouta and southern Damascus, presumably including the [35,000 IDPs](#) mentioned in other sources. Among those who arrived were *Jaish al-Islam* militants, [700 families](#) from *Faylak al-Rahman*, as well as ISIS and Palestinians from Yarmouk refugee camp.

Others from eastern Ghouta refused to go to Afrin because Afrin residents were being forcibly evacuated. Of those who arrived, some [refused](#) to live in the empty houses of Afrin IDPs. In June, the Turkey-backed militia, *Ahrar al-Sham*, evicted seven Sunni Arab IDP families because they wanted to pay rent to the Kurdish owners of the houses they had been settled in.

According to Turkey's ambassador to the EU, [Faruk Kaymakci](#), Turkey wants to transfer to Afrin at least 350,000 Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

### Extreme Islamisation of Afrin

In April, women's centres were converted to centres for Islamic studies. In May, the newly recruited police from *Faylak al-Rahman* were given authority to impose strict Sharia law, and subsequently [women were ordered](#) to not leave their homes without being fully covered and being escorted by a male member of the family. In June, Turkey-backed [militias put up posters](#) telling women to wear the niqab, obey Sharia law and stay at home. Afrin residents were angry about these posters and after a few days Turkish police took the posters down. This has not stopped militants harassing women in the street.

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## Turkey prevents freedom of movement

Turkey is preventing freedom of movement between subdistricts of Afrin and neighbourhoods of towns. Afrin city remains under curfew from 9 pm to 6 am. Throughout the city there is a strong military presence, with checkpoints, military bases, tanks and other armoured vehicles. Turkey has divided neighbourhoods of Afrin city and other towns among Turkey-backed militias, including *Faylaq al-Rahman* and *Jaish al-Islam*, each with their own checkpoints, while the Turkish military has checkpoints throughout the countryside. Civilians need written approval to be able to move between these security 'squares'. Kurds, in particular, find it difficult to obtain approval. Different towns and regions are regularly cordoned off when the military undertake security operations, including airstrikes. Already described are the difficulties faced by Afrin residents in need of medical attention outside Afrin.

## Other on-going war crimes and crimes against humanity

Despite the presence of Turkish security forces and officials, numerous Turkey-backed militias continue to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity. In some cases, Turkish soldiers perpetrate the crimes. Please refer to KLA's statement on [war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed in Afrin up until May 21, 2018](#).

Throughout May, June and early July [Turkey-backed militias continued](#) to:

- Force non-Muslims such as Christians and Yezidi to convert to Sunni Islam;
- Close churches, [destroy Yezidi temples](#), and desecrate graves;
- [Force civilians to leave their homes](#);
- Settle many thousands of newly trained [police](#), Turkey-backed [militants and their families](#), and IDPs from eastern Ghouta into the empty homes of [Afrin IDPs](#).
- [Destroy crops](#) and houses. For instance, in late June there were instances of militants setting [fire to houses](#) and hectares of olive trees;
- [Loot](#) and confiscate [residential and commercial property](#), cars, crops, livestock, farm machinery, [electrical cables](#), [generators and telecommunication masts](#) on a daily basis. Much of the loot is sold in the [markets](#) of Azaz.
- Kill or injure civilians in public places. For instance, on [June 1](#), in the process of plundering, Turkish soldiers killed five Arab civilians and wounded others. On June 21, after Turkey-backed militants killed one and wounded other members of a family while attempting to confiscate their car, people began protesting in several towns calling for Turkish security forces and militias to leave [Afrin](#).
- Kidnap [civilians](#) for ransom. In June, [140 Afrin citizens were abducted](#), mainly for a ransom of up to USD\$3,000. For instance, civilians were kidnapped in several places on [July 1](#) and [July 3](#).

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- Detain people, including women, who are suspected of having links with the former Syrian Kurdish security forces or administration. In May alone, Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants [detained 3,295 Afrin residents](#). Some are held for around 10 days or until their family pays a ransom. [Hundreds](#) have been put in prisons in Afrin, Azaz and Hatay (Turkey), or in a school in the village of Hikheh, that has been turned into a [detention centre](#). An unknown number have 'disappeared'. Arrests continued in June. For instance, following the assassination of a military training commander of the Turkey-backed *al-Shamiyeh* Front by unknown assailants on June 8, Turkey's Army Intelligence arrested 'tens' of civilians in the [Maabati](#) district, and *al-Shamiyeh* opened fire on those who protested these arrests.
- Deprive those detained of water, or subject them to beatings, electrocution or other forms of abuse. For instance, Ahmed Sheikho, deputy head of the newly appointed local council in Shera died on [June 12](#) from injuries sustained from being tortured while detained by the *Sultan Suleyman Shah* Brigade. Firat News claims that some KNC and Arab 'collaborators' have been subject to mistreatment or worse.
- Kill 'many' of those detained, with '[large numbers](#)' having disappeared, their whereabouts unknown.
- [Rape and kill women and girls](#). In one case, three militants raped a two year old before killing her in front of her mother. They then raped and killed the mother. Azaz police investigated and arrested the three men.

### **Militia infighting**

Another major destabilisation and threat to civilian life is that Turkey-backed militia regularly engage in armed clashes with each other over turf, checkpoints and the 'spoils of war'. Incidences include:

- On May 16, Turkey-backed *Ahrar al-Sham* and the *al-Shamiyeh* Front exchanged heavy fire that left casualties on both sides.
- On May 24, there was another fight between militias. When Turkish police tried to stop the fighting, *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah* fighters [attacked](#) the police, who had to bring in reinforcements.
- On [May 28](#), [Turkish soldiers](#) in armoured vehicles had to break up a fight between *al-Hamza* Brigade and *Liwa al-Mo'atasem* over who would take possession of houses around the Kawa roundabout in the centre of Afrin city, and [unknown assailants](#) attacked a *Liwa al-Mo'atasem* commander.
- On [June 12](#), Turkish security forces intervened when *al-Sultan Mohammed al-Fatih* and *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah* fought over who would take possession of vacant properties.
- In the [same week](#), fighting between the Sultan Murad Brigade and *Tajamo Ahrar al-Sharqiyah* lasted two days. The fighting caused casualties on both sides and only ended with the arrival of Turkish soldiers in military vehicles.
- On June 18, in a park in Afrin city, the *al-Shamiyeh* Front clashed with militants in the new police force. In the clash two *al-Shamiyeh* Front militants were killed and an unknown number of civilians wounded.

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- After three days of [widespread clashes](#) between the *al-Shamiyeh* Front (aligned with *Jaish al-Islam*) and *Liwa al-Mo'atasem* (aligned with *al-Rahman*), [causing casualties on both sides](#), a meeting was held on June 30 to put an end to their differences. At the meetings a fight broke out. Seven militants were killed and many more were wounded.
- On [July 3](#), there were more gunfights between militias over loot from shops and homes in two neighbourhoods of Afrin city, and in Jinderes.
- On [July 4](#), after Turkish soldiers urged the Turkey-backed *al-Hamza* Brigade<sup>2</sup> to leave Afrin city, and the Brigade refused, Turkish soldiers targeted the Brigade with artillery fire. An exchange of fire occurred in two locations inside Afrin city.
- On [July 5](#), *Faylaq al-Sham* and *Ahrar al-Sham* clashed in Jinderes over stolen livestock causing 'some' deaths and injuries among the militants.
- On [July 9](#), renewed clashes broke out between the *al-Shamiyeh* Front and *Liwa al-Mo'atasem* causing casualties on both sides.

The behaviour among militias varies. For instance, the Sultan Murad Brigade, *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah*, *Jaish al-Sharqiyah* and *al-Hamza* Brigade have gained a reputation for their [harsh treatment](#) of Afrin residents, particularly Kurds. Back on [March 9](#), the office of the General Prosecutor of the Syrian 'National' Army in Azaz invited residents of Afrin to submit complaints to the office, although it is unlikely that Afrin Kurds would go to this office established by Turkey. In Afrin, some militants claim to be taking a stand against the looting. For instance, [Liwa al-Mo'atasem](#) started collecting looted property, claiming it would be returned to its former owners after the security campaign ended. A few militants involved in Operation Olive Branch have expressed concern that some militias are ruining the reputation of all militias.

There is some debate about whether the aforementioned war crimes and crimes against humanity are being carried out on a systematic basis. This is a mute point given the frequency, widespread and on-going nature of the incidences, and that militias do not have a unified command structure.

## **Kurdish responses to Turkey's occupation of Afrin**

### Protests

There have been a number of protests in Afrin and elsewhere opposing Turkey's invasion and occupation of Afrin. For instance, on June 30, following the abduction of more than 100 civilians in the previous three days, protesters gathered in Kawa Square demanding an end to the atrocities and the occupation of Afrin. Some IDPs from eastern Ghouta joined the demonstration after witnessing the behaviour of Turkey-backed [militants](#) in Afrin.

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Hamza Brigade participated in Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. It was involved in a major clash with *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah* in Afrin on March 25, that resulted in 200 Hamza militants being captured.



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## Public Statements and Data Collection

The [Syrian Democratic Council](#) (SDC) that oversees the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, which included Afrin before March 18, issued a detailed summary of Turkey's war crimes and crimes against humanity between January 20 and May 1, 2018. The council called for an immediate withdrawal of Turkey-backed forces, the reinstatement of all property and possessions to Afrin residents, compensation for any irretrievable losses, and a process to ensure perpetrators of war crimes are brought to justice.

At the end of May, leaders of Syrian Kurdish political parties and civil society wrote a letter to the [UN](#) Secretary General and High Commissioner of Human Rights requesting that the UN intervene to allow media and humanitarian agencies into Afrin, and to stop Turkey committing atrocities and changing the demographics of Afrin, allow Afrin IDPs to return home, and insist all Turkish (backed) forces withdraw from Afrin.

The [Barzani and Turkey-linked Kurdish National Council \(KNC or ENCKS\)](#) has tried to co-ordinate with the occupiers to ensure a return to stability, but after the killing of Ahmed Sheikho on June 12, the Council strongly condemned the act and other acts of the Turkey-backed militants in Afrin. KNC is collecting evidence of the ongoing abuses and called for an investigation into the 'practices of the [militia] factions ... against civilians, including theft, looting and considering Kurdish property to be the spoils of war, confiscating the houses of residents and settling their families in them, which creates obstacles for returning displaced people and even prevents them from returning'. KNC asserted the perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions.

At the end of June, Hevi Mustafa from the former Afrin administration and others made presentations to an [international conference in Brussels](#), outlining the plight of Afrin IDPs and the ongoing abuses inside Afrin. The EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), the Kurdish institute of Brussels, Koln and Stockholm, and KURD-AKAD (Kurdish academics) issued a final statement calling for an 'immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Turkish forces and their affiliated groups from Afrin and all Syrian territories they occupy' and 'the unconditional release of 'all abducted men, women, and children and the provision of adequate compensations for the victims.'

The [Syrian Democratic Council was highly critical](#) of a statement about human rights made by Staffan de Mistura and John Ging to the UN Security Council on June 27, 2018. Ging claimed that 'Turkey has made great efforts in peace and security in Afrin.' The SDC claimed that their statement failed to highlight the living conditions of more than 134,000 people who remain displaced, or the on-going atrocities occurring in Afrin.

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## Kurdish insurgency

When YPG withdrew from Afrin city on March 16 – 18, saying they did so in order to save lives and prevent the city from being destroyed, they promised to continue fighting the Turkish occupation. Between [April 29 and May 8](#), the YPG claimed to have killed 15 Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants in attacks inside Afrin city, Jinderes and various villages. On [May 3](#), one of the *Faylak al-Rahman* commanders, Abu Khalid al-Zaqloul, involved in negotiations to form the police force, was killed in a bomb explosion, along with his wife and two others, for which the [YPG claimed](#) responsibility. The YPG claimed Zaqloul was co-ordinating with Turkey's National Intelligence Agency (MIT), and was responsible for forcing Afrin residents from their homes, and settling those from eastern Ghouta in the empty houses. They also accused him of establishing Sharia courts.

On [May 12](#), YPG killed seven Turkish forces in the Shera district. In response, Turkey conducted airstrikes in the area, which is six kilometres northwest of Afrin city. On [May 27](#), commander of the *Mashaal Tammo* Brigade, Abu-Mariam al-Haskawi, survived an assassination attempt by an unknown group calling themselves 'Hawks of the Land of the Olives'. At the beginning of June, YPG claimed to have killed a 'large number' of Turkish forces in attacks on [two military bases](#). On [June 13](#), two YPG attacks killed at least 15 Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants. On June 24, [Fars News](#) reported that the YPG launched eight offensives in northern Aleppo (i.e. inside and outside Afrin) in the previous week, and killed six Turkey-backed militants on [June 24 – 25](#).

By June 25, the [YPG](#) claimed to have killed 2,491 Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants since January 20. Turkey claimed to have 'neutralised' (i.e. killed or captured) more than [4,513](#) 'terrorists' in Afrin by June 29.

On [June 27](#), two explosions in Kawa Square near the *al-Shamiyeh* Front headquarters and one explosion outside a Turkish military base near Dersim Hospital killed five Turkey-backed militants and six civilians, and wounded another twenty. One of the wounded was a *Jaish al-Islam* preacher. A group calling themselves the [Afrin Falcons](#) claimed responsibility, saying they were unaffiliated Kurdish youths that had decided to liberate Afrin. A YPG official claimed it was not possible for these youths to have perpetuated the attacks in the centre of Afrin city, as it was heavily militarised. On [July 3](#), several bombs went off, one near Afrin hospital and another near a petrol station causing several militant casualties. The perpetrators were not identified. On July 8, YPG targeted a convoy and killed two Turkish soldiers in Shera subdistrict and killed three *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah* militants in Rajou subdistrict.

In early July, the YPG claimed it would co-operate with the Assad army to drive Turkey out of Syria. On [July 3](#), a Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesperson announced that Turkish forces would withdraw and leave Afrin security to ['local' police](#). Other Turkish officials claimed that Turkey was staying indefinitely to oversee Afrin's 'development'. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said that Turkey would never hand Afrin over to the Assad regime. After Turkey's elections on June 24, Erdogan reiterated his promise to expand Turkey's operations in northern Syria.