

**Q4**  
**2021**

# **THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION**

**DOCUMENTING RIGHTS ABUSES IN TURKISH OCCUPIED  
REGIONS OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA**



**ROJAVA  
INFORMATION  
CENTER**

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# OCCUPIED AFRIN

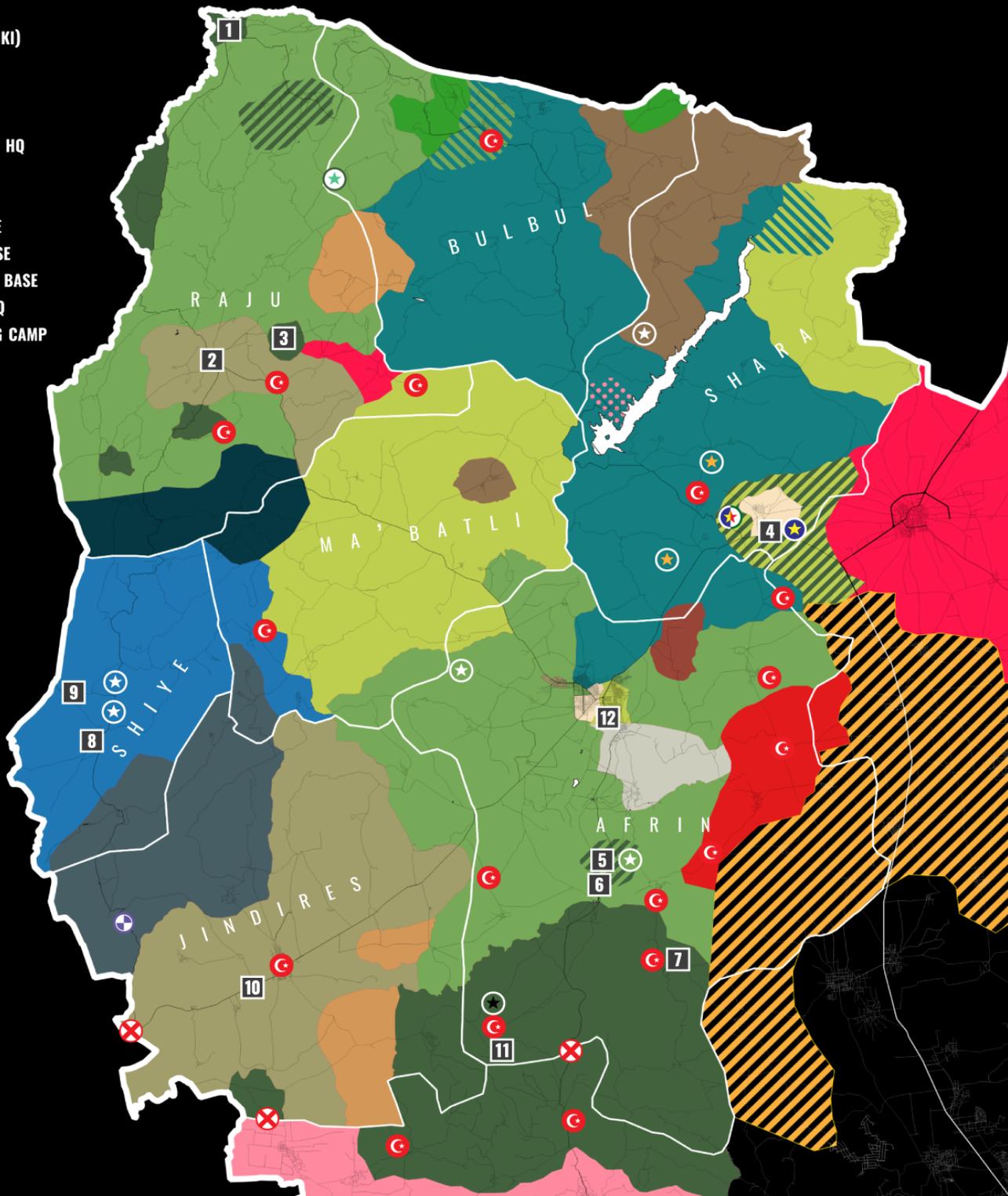
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB
- AHRAR AL-SHAM
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM
- FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- HAMZA DIVISION
- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- JAYSH AL-ISLAM
- SULTAN MEHMED FATIH
- 13TH DIVISION
- SULEIMAN SHAH BRIGADE
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION
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- TURKISH CONTROL

TURKMEN  
FACTIONS

- MILITARY POLICE HQ
- SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ
- HAMZA BASE
- SULTAN MURAD BASE
- SULEIMAN SHAH BASE
- FAYLAQ AL-SHAM BASE
- LIWA REJAL AL-HARB BASE
- JAYSH AL-NUKHBA HQ
- AL-WAQQAS TRAINING CAMP
- TURKISH BASE
- MILITARY CROSSING

- 1 PRISON (MAYDAN IKBIS)
- 2 MAHATTAH PRISON (RAJU)
- 3 GORAN PRISON
- 4 AHRAR AL SHAM PRISON (QATMAH)
- 5 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- 6 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)
- 7 MIT PRISON (BARAD)
- 8 SULEIMAN SHAH PRISON (SHIYE)
- 9 QARMATLAQ HQ & PRISON
- 10 AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA PRISON
- 11 FAYLAQ AL-SHAM PRISON (ISKAN)
- 12 TURANDA PRISON (RUN BY MIT)

- SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES
- GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA
- TURKISH ARMY AND  
TURKISH-BACKED GROUPS
- HTS - EXTREMIST GROUPS

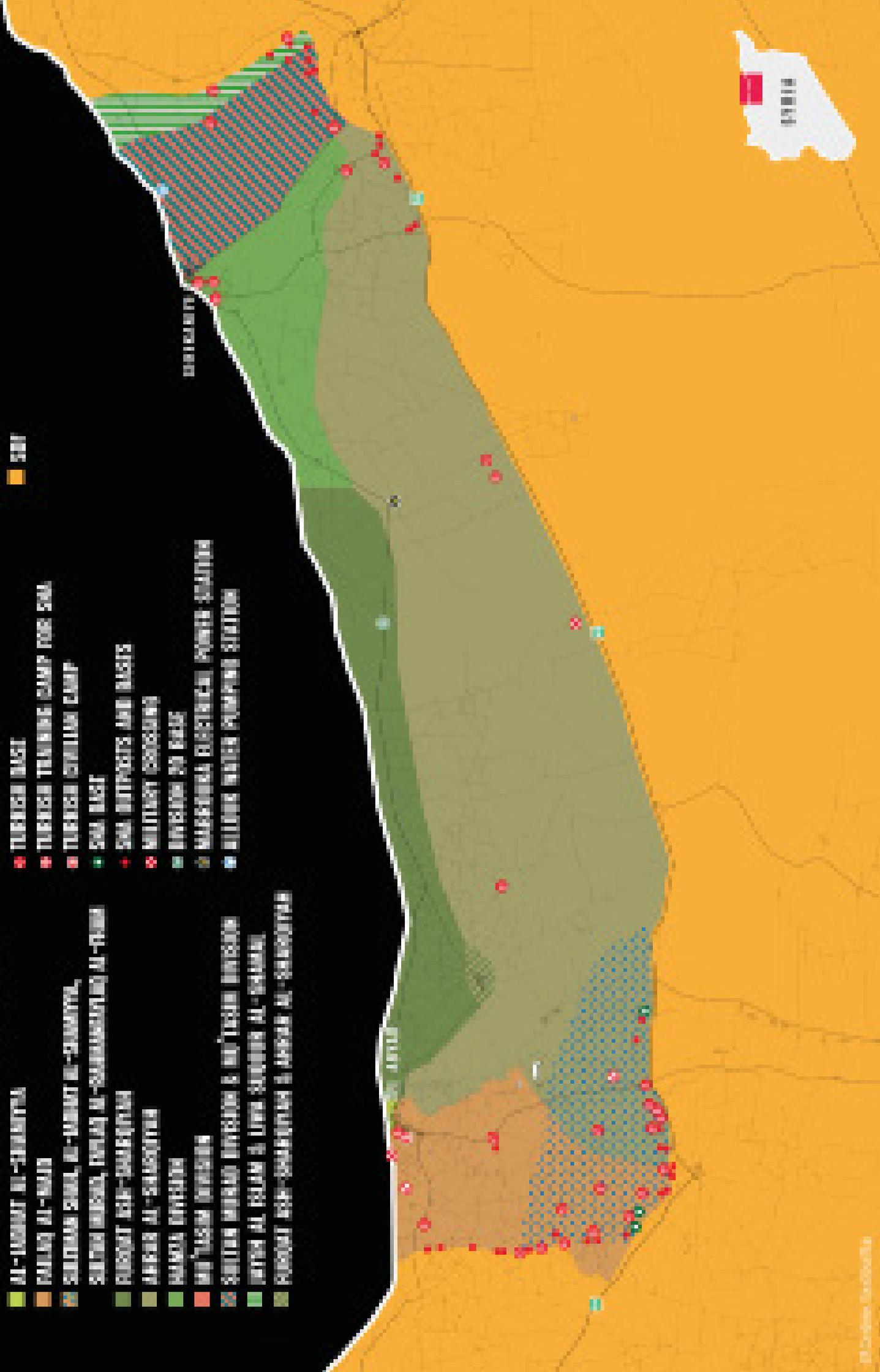


# OCCUPIED M4 STRIP

- AL-BASMAT AL-SHAMATIYA
- FALAJ AL-MAJID
- SULHAN SHUKR, AL-MAHDI AL-SHAMATI, SULHAN MUSA, FALAJ AL-SHAMATI, AL-FUJAYR
- FURQAN AL-SHAMATI
- ABYAN AL-SHAMATI
- HANJAL DIVISION
- MU'JASSIM DIVISION
- SULHAN MUSA, DIVISION & MU'JASSIM DIVISION
- HAFSA AL-FUJAYR & UMM SAUD AL-SHAMATI
- FURQAN AL-SHAMATI & ABYAN AL-SHAMATI

- TURKISH BASE
- TURKISH TRAINING CAMP FOR SAA
- TURKISH SYRIAN CAMP
- SAA BASE
- SAA OUTPOSTS AND BASES
- MILITARY COACHING
- DIVISION HQ BASE
- HISTORICAL ELECTRICAL POWER STATION
- ALLIANCE WATER PUMPING STATION

■ SBT



# INTRODUCTION & METHODS

## INTRODUCTION

This is the fourth installment of our “The State of the Occupation” Report, which focuses on human rights violations in Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria (NES) – namely in Afrin Canton, which has been occupied since 2018, and in the so-called ‘M4 Strip’ (the 5,000km<sup>2</sup> area north of the M4 highway that was occupied in 2019 and includes the towns of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad). The report aims to fill a critical gap in the documentation of human rights abuses occurring there, and to counteract the stage-managed narrative of the occupation strategically crafted by Turkey and parroted by some of the world’s largest publications.<sup>1</sup>

While Turkey claims it invaded to create a “security buffer” and a “humanitarian zone” for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) from other parts of Syria as well as those residing on Turkish territory, the occupation has turned the two regions into a patchwork of fiefdoms where human rights abuses are commonplace. A report from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has confirmed that Turkish-backed forces of the Syrian National Army (SNA) have committed an “onslaught of violations” against civilians including “war crimes” like “hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape.”<sup>2</sup>

These SNA militias that rule the regions and their leaders operate with impunity and use intimidation tactics to consolidate their control over the local population, often for personal gain. The indigenous Kurdish, Christian, and Yezidi populations are systematically displaced and replaced by predominantly Arab and Turkmen settlers. Turkey’s social engineering project in the occupied territories has been extensively documented by the world’s leading human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch, and the UNHCR.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=E>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-erdogan-afrin.html>

## METHODS

This report is based on our own Open-Source Intelligence Research in close cooperation with the Afrin Human Rights Organization, a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that collects testimonies on the ground and first-hand. We also shared information and worked with the Hevdestî Association, an organization based in Qamishlo that advocates for victims of the Turkish occupation of the M4 Strip. Also two national NGOs (Syrians for Truth and Justice; Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria) that maintain independent databases on Afrin and the M4 Strip were consulted. This data was compared with research of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based organization. It was particularly difficult for us to collect reliable and complete data from the M4 Strip, as there was a less well established domestic media in the area even before the Turkish invasion and some sources on the ground. For this reason, the charts in this report refer only to Afrin.

In addition, we reviewed local news articles from the Afrin Post and Documenting Rights Violations in Sere Kaniye to corroborate the rights violation data. We also relied on reports from the United Nations and the European Parliament, as well as academic articles. Historical information is based on previous reports of Rojava Information Center (RIC) or third-party sources where cited.

The maps were created with the help of the Afrin Human Rights Organization, the Hevdestî Association, military sources, and witness testimonies. We were not able to independently verify all factional affiliations, but some prison locations were confirmed using satellite data. Witness testimonies also helped assign militias to individual villages and towns. Nevertheless, we do not claim our report to be exhaustive.

The first RIC quarterly report from early 2021 provided detailed background information on the occupation, including information on each major SNA faction operating in the area. The report from the first quarter also included a longer section on the history of the occupation. All the reports are available on our website.

*All maps and graphics were created by cartographer and designer Eduardo Artica (@LCarabinier)*

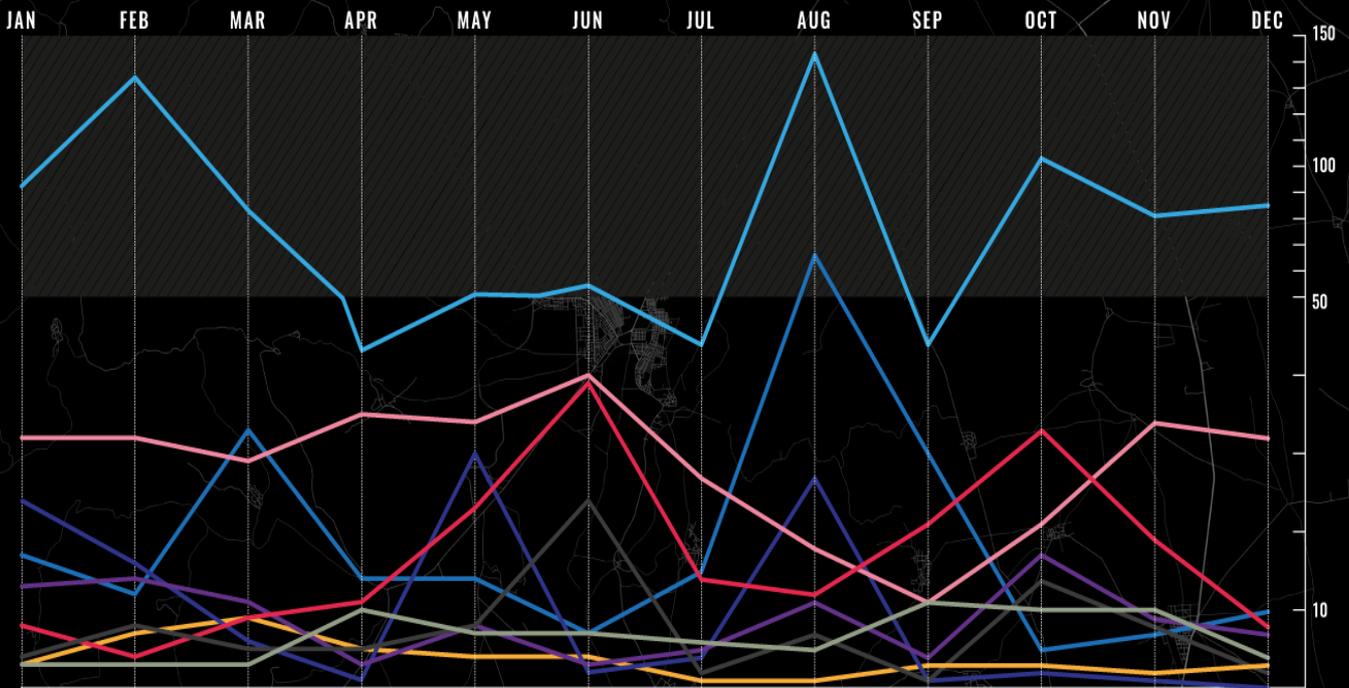
# QUARTERLY REPORT

## UNLAWFUL ARRESTS, TORTURE & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Last year, RIC recorded 1,095 cases of arrests or abductions throughout all Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria (NES). 236 of those arrests included cases of extortion, while at least another 114 arrestees were subjected to torture. 88 civilians were killed by Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) militias in 2021. The RIC also recorded 107 cases of gender-based violence against women by the SNA and Turkish authorities this year.

Throughout 2021's Fourth Quarter (October to December), RIC recorded 269 arrests in Turkish-occupied areas of NES – fewer than during the year's third quarter but more than in the second quarter. The Afrin region accounted for about 80 percent (221), but this can be partly explained by the lack of reliable sources from the M4 Strip. Arrests peaked in October (103) due to large-scale arrest campaigns by the Sultan Muhammad Fateh and Al-Muta'asim Billah militias.

— BOMBINGS — INFIGHTING — EXTORTION/THEFT CASES (NOT KIDNAPPING) — GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE EVENTS — INJURY/ASSAULT/ATTEMPTED KILLING (NOT KIDNAPPING)  
 — DEATHS — ARRESTS INVOLVING TORTURE — ARRESTS INVOLVING EXTORTION — UNLAWFUL ARRESTS/KIDNAPPING



@LCarabimier, OpenStreetMap

As RIC's last 'State of the Occupation' report highlighted, harassment of Arab notables indigenous to predominantly-Kurdish areas by the Turkish-backed authorities is increasing. For instance, Muhammad Muhammad, an Arab cleric and son of a sheikh, imam and muezzin in the Quban Mosque in Aleppo, was arrested on October 1<sup>st</sup> in Rajo. A raid on the house of the leader of the Arab al-Bobana clan in Afrin led to clashes between the clan's members and al-Jabhat al-Shamiya militias, resulting in the abduction of the sheikh and the shooting of his son on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Yet violence directed against the local Kurdish population, particularly in Afrin, is still the norm. On October 21<sup>st</sup>, Aram Kalil a civilian from Bulbul was arrested by SNA militias simply because he spoke Kurdish. In November, SNA militias tore down Afrin city's Newroz roundabout, a symbol of the Kurdish New Year, one of the most important dates in the Kurdish calendar.

A notable trend this quarter was the increase in crimes against minors. For instance, a 15-year-old girl was arrested in the city of Afrin by military police on December 6<sup>th</sup>; her whereabouts remain unknown. A youth was apprehended and tortured by the Turkish gendarmerie while trying to cross the Turkish border. Another youth from Qamishlo died in a Turkish hospital on October 10<sup>th</sup> after being tortured by Turkish gendarmerie while trying to reach al-Aziziya village on the outskirts of Sere Kaniye a month before.

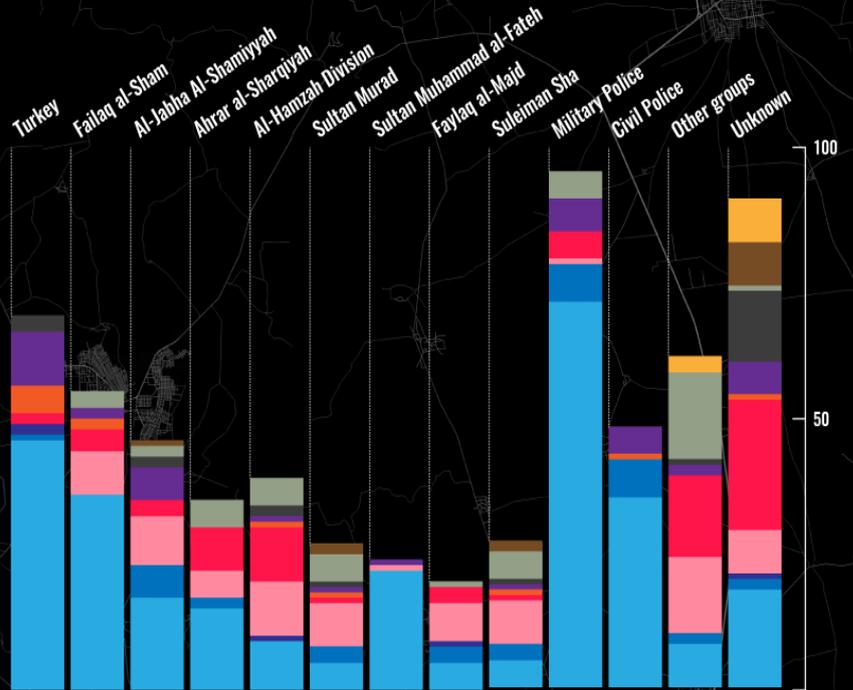
In addition, the Jaysh al-Islam militia has been recruiting minors from Camp 385 (near al-Qaryat al-Shamiya), taking advantage of the precarious situation of their families. On November 16<sup>th</sup>, 90 children from the refugee camp were initiated into Jaysh al-Islam's training camp.

The RIC recorded 34 cases of violence against women this quarter. This is an increase of more than 60% over the previous three-month period, after downward trends from April to June and July to September. In one example, a Yezidi woman was arrested on December 4<sup>th</sup> in the village of Basufane, Afrin District, and recently condemned to six years in prison on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May. Another woman, Hayat Subhi in Ali, from Karo village, Bulbul District, was arrested for phoning her sister in Aleppo, who was imprisoned for 15 years.

Two women were also beaten during a mass arrest campaign by the Faylaq al-Sham militia in the village of Iska, Sherawa District, in November. As a consequence, clashes ensued and 20 civilians were arrested and transferred to Iska prison, a few kilometers from the village, by the militia.

FACTIONS

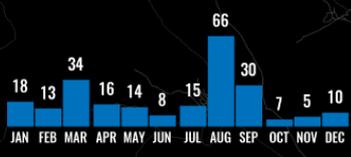
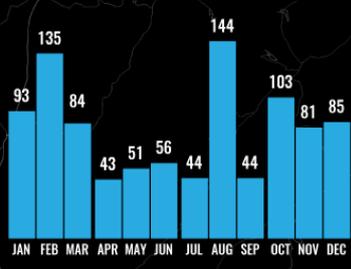
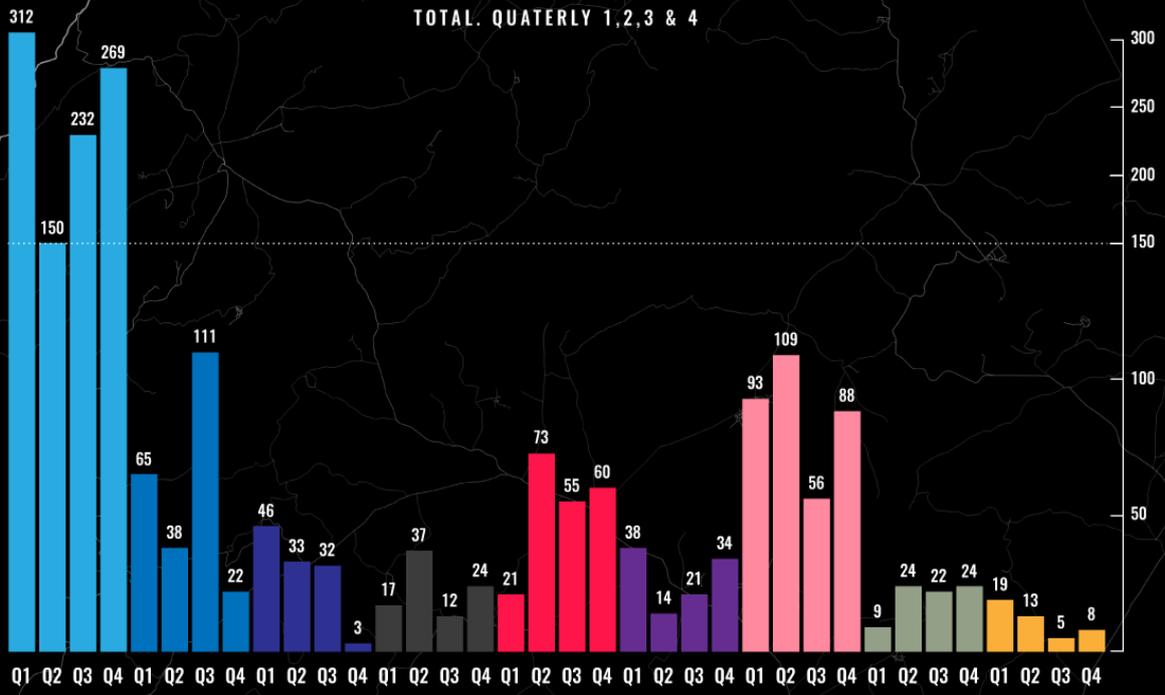
- BOMBINGS
- GANG MEMBER DEAD
- INFIGHTING
- DEATHS
- GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE EVENTS
- TORTURE
- INJURY
- EXTORTION/THEFT (NOT KIDNAPPING)
- ARRESTS INVOLVING TORTURE
- ARRESTS INVOLVING EXTORTION
- UNLAWFUL ARREST



@LCarabinieri, OpenStreetMap

In this quarter, Turkish forces were involved in 46 cases of arrests, more than double the cases for the previous period. Most of these unlawful arrests were in Afrin (33) compared to twelve in the M4 strip. The arrests betray the central role Turkey plays within the occupied areas. Moreover, as Human Rights Watch found in October 2021, at least 63 Syrians have been forcibly transferred to Turkey to stand trial there, a serious breach of international customary law.

Similarly, Turkish forces – especially its secret service (MIT) – have been involved in ten cases of violence against women - i.e. more than a quarter of the cases recorded by RIC. For example, the lawyer Najah Umar Arus, who was arrested by MIT on October 23<sup>rd</sup> upon her return after the KDP-tied Kurdish National Council (KNC) declared Afrin safe (see our Q3 report). A female student was also detained by MIT on December 26<sup>th</sup>. Moreover, two men and a woman were arrested by MIT in the village of Kafr Safra in the Jinderes district of Afrin on December 1<sup>st</sup> - the two men were released while the woman’s whereabouts are still unclear. The Turkish occupation of NES has been disastrous for the development of women’s rights in the region. SNA militias’ abuses against girls and women have run rampant, not despite, but with the aid of Turkish oversight.



@LCarabinier, OpenStreetMap

## EXTORTION, THEFT & SEIZURE OF PROPERTY

In the last three months of 2021, RIC registered 88 cases of extortion, robbery, unauthorized sale of property and looting, which is an increase of over 60% quarter-on-quarter, but still lower than 2021's first six months.

In this quarter, RIC was also able to confirm that at least 3,688 trees were cut down by SNA groups in the occupied areas. The number of unreported cases is likely much higher, especially in Afrin, where a large number of olives are grown and olive oil is produced. In one particularly egregious case, a 65-year-old man from Gundi Hassa, Maabatli district, had his olive crop looted by SNA militiamen. The man attempted to defend his land, was arrested, tortured, and suffered a heart attack upon his release, from which he later died.

The looting of crops, particularly in Afrin, is closely tied to Turkey's demographic engineering project. In Afrin, most indigenous farmers are Kurdish and thus almost always the victims of such theft, which robs them of their means of subsistence. During the fourth quarter of 2021, the two cases with the highest number of trees cut down or looted involved Kurdish families: in one case 400 trees belonging to three brothers of the Zaluha family in Sherawa District were cut down; in a separate case 140 olive trees were uprooted.

In addition, there were at least 19 cases of unlawful property confiscation and sale. Among these were twelve houses confiscated from Afrin's indigenous population, all of which were sold to Arab IDPs from the Homs and Damascus regions who the Turkish government resettled in Afrin. One of the most significant seizures for sale was the house of Suleiman Nuri Numan, in the city of Afrin, who died under torture in al-Rai prison several months ago.

The levying of taxes on agricultural production by SNA militias and the occupation government was constant throughout the year, especially on oil production and livestock. However, in the last quarter of 2021, these taxes were also increasingly being imposed on the service sector, such as stores. Arbitrary confiscations of vehicles in order to extract a levies were also recorded during the fourth quarter. Perhaps the most serious event on the economic level was the imposition of a 50% tax on all olive production in areas on the frontline with SDF-held areas of Afrin. SNA authorities claim the area is also used by the Afrin Liberation Forces - a local Kurdish paramilitary force established after occupation of Afrin - in order to infiltrate their territories and stage attacks against Turkish and SNA targets. The olive tax lays bare how Turkish-backed local authorities make use of economic policy as a weapon of war, including against the civilian population.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL LOOTING & DESTRUCTION

Since the beginning of the Turkish occupation, the historical and archaeological heritage in these areas have been subjected to a campaign of looting and illicit trade. The archaeological pillaging represents not only a significant loss of the cultural riches of the area, but also a direct attack on the memory and identity of the indigenous population of these regions. The number of attacks on the regions' historical heritage is probably much higher, but due to the harsh punishments meted out for documenting such crimes, many such attacks go unreported.

There were at least three notable incidents in this quarter. In the Tel Kishor enclave, in the Raju district, on the border with Turkey, several phases of destruction were already carried out between 2019 and 2021. The most recent occurred in November 2021, when the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh militia used heavy machinery to excavate the site, resulting in the destruction of many priceless artifacts.

At Deir Sawan archeological site, located about 3km from the village of the same name in Sheran district, the Sultan Murad Division similarly plundered the Tel. This site has been registered with the Syrian Antiquities Administration since 1981. Before the invasion of Afrin, the area had not been excavated, but satellite imagery from August 2019 shows that the area was looted. The acropolis, of an estimated 4000m<sup>2</sup>, was bulldozed, according to local sources. The same sources claim that the artifacts and remains taken from the site were sent to Turkey to be sold. Excavations at a third site, Maratah Hill, an archeological site also registered by the Syrian Antiquities Authority, are still ongoing.



*Settlement of Deir Sawan.  
Satellite Image courtesy of Afrin Directorate of Antiquities.*

## NEW SETTLEMENTS & DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Since the occupation of Afrin in March 2018, more than half (or around 300,000 people) of the Kurdish population was forcefully displaced and replaced by almost as many IDPs from predominantly Arab regions of Syria (mostly Ghouta, northern Hama, rural Damascus, and Idlib). Most of the latter were settled in the Bulbul, Sheran, and Afrin districts. It is estimated that at least 80% of the total population of Afrin needs humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup>

In Afrin, campaigns to build new settlements are supported mainly by Turkish donors from Qatar ('Atla Without Borders Foundation') and Kuwait ('International Charitable Association for Development'). According to the Afrin Human Rights Organization, in 2020, around 65% of the settlers were family members of SNA militiamen or ISIS members who fled after the defeat of the organization. Settlement villages have mushroomed throughout Afrin in order to aid Turkey's demographic engineering project. According to North Press Agency, there are 95 Turkish-built settlements in Syria, of which 45 are located in north Aleppo.<sup>4</sup> According to news-gathering website Efrin Lezgin, as of the publication of this report, 32 settlements have been built in the Afrin region alone since 2018. They break down by region as follows:

- Afrin district: 2
- Jindires district: 10
- Shiye district: 3
- Sheikh Hadid district: 3
- Raju district: 2
- Sherawa district: 5
- Bulbul district: 7

In the villages of Muhammadiyah and Deir Balut, around 600 families were settled, including 325 Palestinian families, and a number of families displaced by Israel's invasion of the Golan Heights in 1967. Even as the Turkish government seeks reapproachment with Israel, Palestinian refugees are being instrumentalized by Turkey and the Turkish-backed local authorities in order to irreversibly alter the demographic composition of the region towards a heterogeneously Sunni Muslim and majority-Arab area. The Civil Documentation Center for Palestinian Refugees estimates that 7,500 Palestinians have already been resettled in the Afrin area from Daraa, Homs, Aleppo, and Yarmouk camp in Damascus.

<sup>3</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/attachments/4376111a-dc6c-3618-9fd9-dd7248af10ec/reach\\_syr\\_situation\\_over](https://reliefweb.int/attachments/4376111a-dc6c-3618-9fd9-dd7248af10ec/reach_syr_situation_over)

<sup>4</sup> <https://npasyria.com/en/77890/>

Work began to build the new settlement village of Shamiya east of the city of Afrin - a project for the civil police of the Syrian Interim Government, and 70 families from Ghouta and Aleppo governorate were accommodated in Baflijun, an area with a Yezidi majority.<sup>5</sup>

Another settlement called Kuwait al-Rahma (pictured) was opened this year with the support of the Palestinian-Kuwaiti foundation Sham al-Khai between the villages of Qibar and al-Khalidiyaa, an area traditionally inhabited by Yezidis. The site on which it was built was completely razed during the invasion in 2018. Around 100 people were displaced. The complex includes 380 housing units, a mosque, a center for Quranic studies, a pharmacy, and a school.

The two foundations mentioned above, in cooperation with the Turkish 'Ahsan Relief and Development Association' based in Ankara, have provided financial and material support for the construction of a housing complex called Basma near Kali Nawaleh, in the village of Sadere in Sherawa district, exclusively for the settlement of Turkmens.



*Kuwait al-Rahma settlement in Afrin*

All these projects are promoted by the Turkish 'White Hands Assocation', which features more than 45 partners in their settlements-construction projects.<sup>6</sup> Not only do they receive support from within the Middle East, but Western powers too, such as the United States and Great Britain, through foundations like 'Rahma Worldwide' and 'Human Appeal'.

Recently, in May 2022, Turkey re-affirmed its plan to put into effect a 30km-deep 'security zone' along its border with NES in order "to ensure the safety and stability" of 1,000,000 Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey, who would be transferred to these areas. Given that most Syrian refugees in Turkey are Arab Sunni Muslim, and NES' border regions are majority-Kurdish areas, the implementation of this threat would mean a demographic engineering project on a scale not yet seen and would have disastrous consequences for the region.

<sup>5</sup><https://nrIs.net/en/settlers-and-settlements-in-Afrin>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.ezdina.net/2021/05/video-charity-association-builds.html>

## INFIGHTING

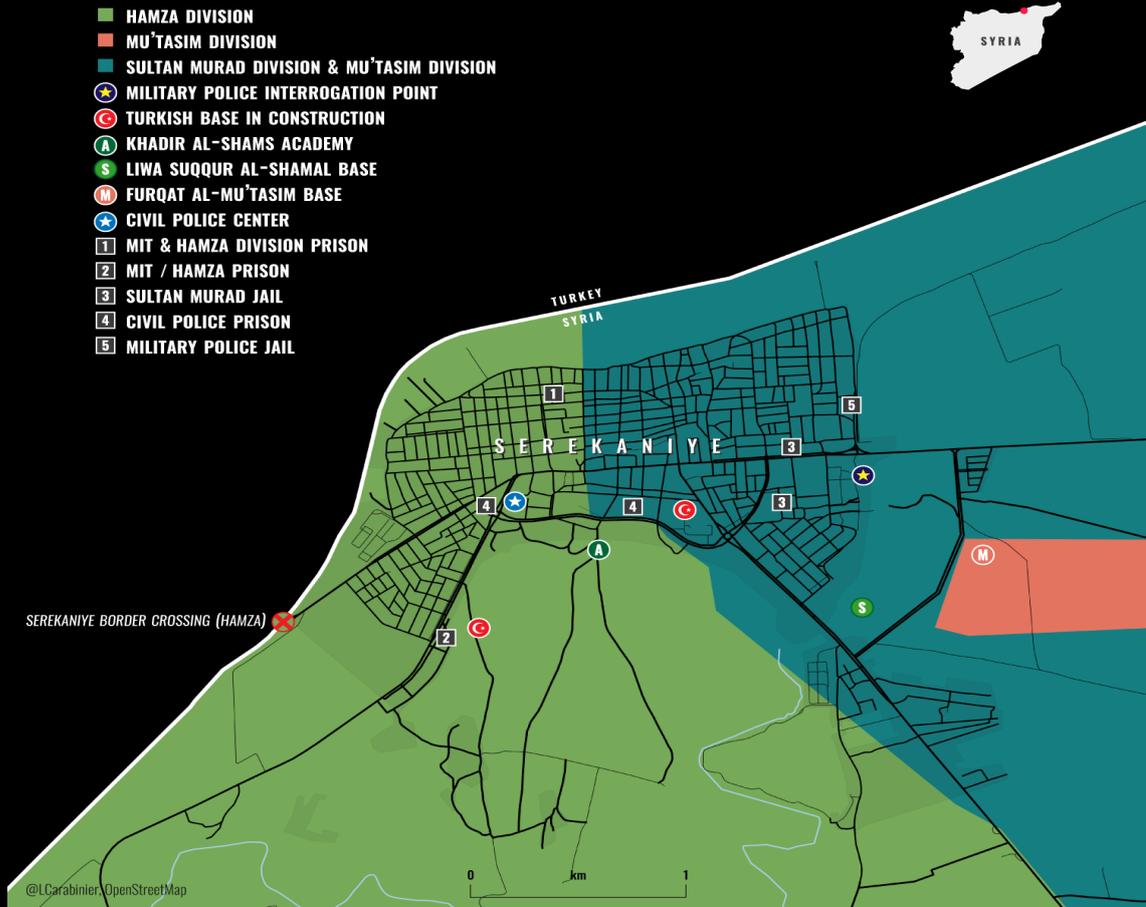
In the last quarter of 2021, RIC recorded 24 cases of infighting, more than half of them in October (17), and twice as many in Afrin (16) as in the M4 Strip (8). Together with the period from April to June, these were the most active months for fraternal violence. Five of these fights involved disputes over stolen goods. At least 22 civilians were injured as a result of the infighting, four other civilians were killed, and two unlawfully detained. In addition, RIC recorded 3 cases of violence against women in relation to infighting, as well as the deaths of 21 SNA militiamen.

The large amount of infighting can be explained by the significant restructuring of the SNA militias in anticipation of another Turkish incursion that fall. On October 1<sup>st</sup>, a new umbrella group (the 'Revolutionaries' Movement') consisting of the Sultan Murad Division, Levant Revolutionaries, First Division, Muntasir Billah and Faylaq al-Sham (Northern Sector) was announced. In addition, a different grouping was generated on October 18<sup>th</sup> under the name of Third Division, which included Faylaq al-Majid, the Sultan Malek Shah Brigade, Jaysh al-Islam, Liwa 51, al-Jabha al-Shamiya (Levant Front), and Liwa al-Salam. The Revolutionaries Movement was short-lived and shortly thereafter, at the beginning of 2022, it dissolved in order to form a new merger under the name of Revolutionary Front for Liberation. Another new formation, the Liberation and Reconstruction Movement, which includes Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Jaish al-Sharqiya, Suqor al-Sham, and the 20th Division, was formed in early 2022.

Arguably, the most violent clashes occurred on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December in the city of Afrin, when a Sultan Murad commander fatally shot the wife of one of his subordinates in the head, leading to an internal uprising. Women, too, were the main casualties when clashes broke out between al-Jabha al-Shamiya and Ahrar al-Sham in the city of Jinderes on November 23<sup>rd</sup>. Ahrar al-Sham militiamen holed themselves up in a building and took an unspecified number of women hostage. The latter event led to clashes involving grenades and medium-weight weapons in the town of Suluk, in the M4 Strip, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, when Ahrar al-Sharqiya accused Sultan Murad of collaborating with the US and the International Coalition shortly after the Coalition killed two ISIS leaders in the M4 Strip.

Another large number of clashes was due to SNA militias' criminal activities. Border crossings into Turkish territory are particularly coveted because of the very high fees charged by the Turkish-backed groups to those wishing to seek opportunities outside Syria or to smugglers of goods, which yield enormous profits. On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, one of these checkpoints, established by the Hamza Division in the village of Til Halaf, was attacked with RPGs – 4 kilometers from the town of Sere Kaniye and just 500 meters from a Turkish military base.

One of the factions with the most incidents of infighting this fourth quarter has been the Suleiman Shah Division. Its leader, 'Abu Amsha', stands accused of multiple crimes, such as rape, killings, as well as drug production and trafficking, particularly of Captagon pills. In November, clashes with machine guns and RPGs broke out between the military police and Suleiman Shah Division when the latter's barracks were raided due to the fact that the militia was giving refuge to a drug kingpin there.



On December 10<sup>th</sup>, the Azm Operations Rooms initiated an investigation process against 'Abu Hamsha' and a number of his commanders, which surprisingly reduced the cases of infighting of Suleiman Shah Division, likely due to a fear of a more severe punishment against their leader. As a result, the final month of the year was relatively peaceful.

## DRUG TRAFFICKING

Drug production, distribution and consumption in the occupied areas is not a new phenomenon, yet it appears it is spreading fast across SNA militias. Far from attempting to intervene, Turkish forces have allowed SNA militias such as Suleiman Shah Division and Hamza Division a relative free reign to enrich themselves from the production and control over the smuggling routes of drugs such as Captagon.



*Drug laboratory in Basuta*

According to al-Monitor, 532,420 Captagon tablets were intercepted in the Afrin region in October alone.<sup>7</sup> Only in August, another shipment of some 500,000 tablets had been seized.

A study published in April by the Center for Operational Analysis and Research shows that the value of drug-related operations in all of Syria was \$3.46 billion in 2020. Le Monde newspaper described the country as a “narco-state.”<sup>8</sup>

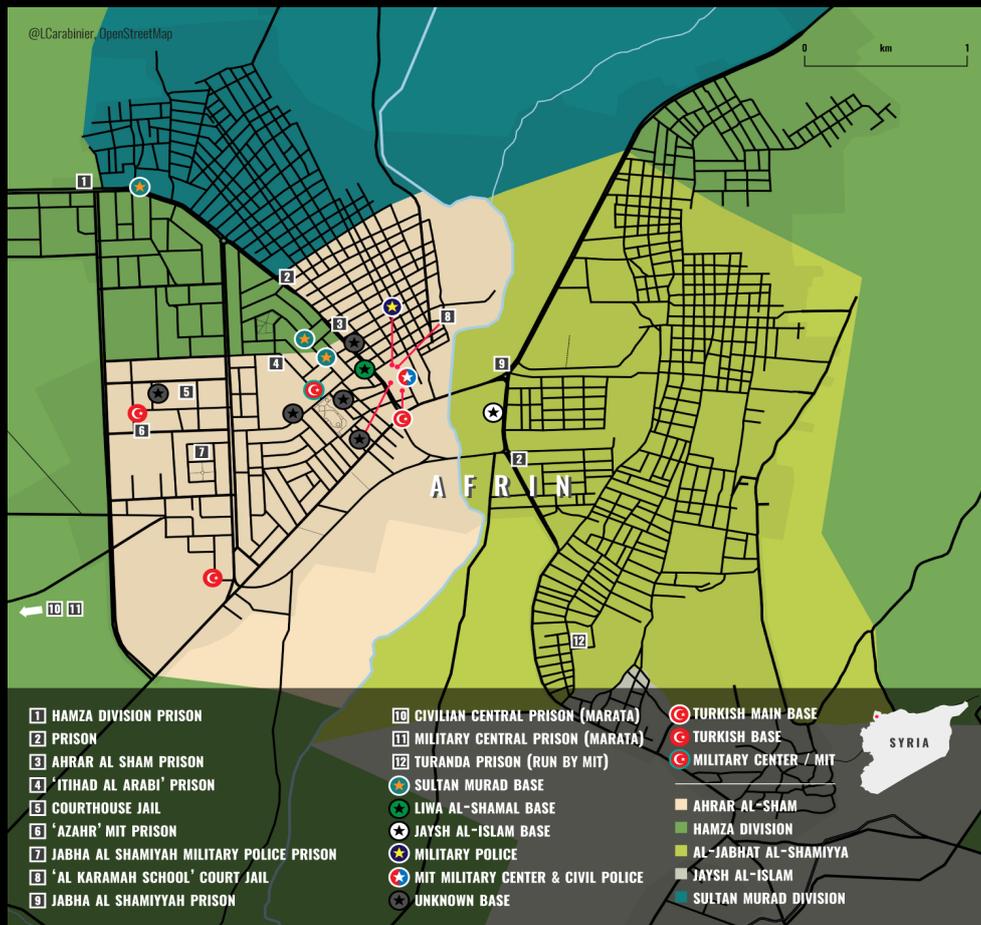
On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Military Police dismantled a Captagon laboratory in the village of Basuta, which is under the control of the Faylaq al-Sham and Hamza Division militia, arresting four workers, three of them belonging to the Special Forces<sup>9</sup>, while the rest were tipped off about the operation and fled to Turkey, including their leader, Abdullah Halawa, Syria TV said. The clashes resulting from the raid led to several injuries on both sides.

On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Military Police dismantled a Captagon laboratory in

<sup>7</sup><https://al-monitor.com/originals/2021/10/turkish-backed-syrian-groups-pursue-drug-operations-aleppo>  
<sup>8</sup><https://coar-global.org/2021/04/27/the-syrian-economy-at-war-captagon-hashish-and-the-syrian-narco-state>  
<sup>9</sup><https://www.npasyria.com/en/65547>

## BOMBINGS & ISIS RESURGENCE

In the period from October to December 2021, the RIC documented 8 bombings throughout the occupied territories of NES. Three of them in the Afrin region and five in the M4 Strip. Three occurred in October and December each, while two happened in November. This period was the least-bloody in this respect, second only to the third quarter of 2021, in which only 5 cases of bombing were recorded.



On the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, several missiles hit a residential neighborhood in Afrin city, injuring thirteen civilians and killing two. This incident was not claimed by anyone, but the YPG denied that they were involved in the attack.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/26303-Senior-UN-official-condemns-missile-attack-in-north-syria-city-of-Afri>

On the morning of December 1<sup>st</sup>, a bomb exploded near a school in one of the neighborhoods controlled by Jaysh al-Islam. The attack was most likely related to clashes in Sere Kaniye between Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sharqiya. No civilian casualties were reported but, after the incident, a citizen's protest movement was launched demanding greater security in Jaysh al-Islam-controlled neighborhoods.

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, a guided missile fired by the Afrin Liberation Forces, a local Kurdish paramilitary group established after the occupation of Afrin, targeted a vehicle belonging to the SNA on the road near the village of Burj Haydar, south of Afrin city, leaving an unknown number of dead and wounded.

The deadliest bomb attacked occurred on October 11<sup>th</sup>, when a car bomb exploded in the middle of Afrin market, near a key Jaysh al-Islam site, leaving 6 militia members and 7 civilians dead, and 16 others wounded or seriously injured. No one claimed the attack.

The other two attacks took place during October in the M4 strip and were carried out by the International Coalition. In the first case, near the village of Suluk, an airstrike killed a senior former ISIS commander, Abu Abdullah al-Raqqawi. Al-Raqqawi held a pre-eminent position in the jihadist group Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion), a group that controls areas of southern Idlib and Latakia. The second attack took place on October 25<sup>th</sup>, when a British Royal Air Force drone strike in a camp near Sere Kaniye killed Abu Hamza al-Shuhail, another former ISIS leader and known to be a major arms dealer, as well as three of his accomplices.<sup>9</sup>

This is not the first time that ISIS members have been found operating in Turkish-occupied areas of Syria. Security forces in al-Hol warned that camp escapees were being smuggled to occupied Sere Kaniye. In the aftermath of ISIS' prison escape attempt in Heseke, many of those who escaped from the prison were later said to have arrived in Turkish-occupied areas. In addition, ISIS' two former leaders were found to be hiding mere miles from the Turkish border, one only in February of 2022.

<sup>9</sup><https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-a-jihadist-and-an-arms-dealer-killed-in-global-coalition-drone-strike>

## CONCLUSION

Human rights violations remain at an all-time-high in Turkish-occupied areas of Syria. Despite international attention in the third quarter, and Turkey's attempt to organize the SNA militias into a re-modelled professional fighting force for a threatened invasion of North and East Syria in the fall, the crimes committed by said militias did not noticeably drop in relation to other quarters.

On the contrary, violence is increasingly also directed against Arab tribal notables who peacefully coexisted under the former political model. The militias have furthermore zeroed in on figures of authority within the communities which traditionally inhabited the occupied regions, presumably in order to create power vacuums which can then be filled by a top-down authority.

The cases of seizure of IDPs' lands and properties are on the rise and stand out for occurring mainly in Kurdish majority neighborhoods and town. On the one hand, this theft allows for personal enrichment of SNA militia leaders. Yet on a larger scale it has led to a four-year-long expropriation of the goods of the occupied areas from the indigenous population, and its transfer to Arab settlers. Likewise, the constant meddling with agricultural production, especially in Afrin, has gradually ceased to make it worthwhile for farmers to continue cultivating their land. Many have fled the region. A similar process is underway in relation to the archaeological and historical heritage of the occupied regions.

The international community has thus far been unable to stop these abuses in part because they misunderstand the fundamental basis of the occupation. Turkey is not failing to intervene against SNA militias when they commit human rights abuses, but is rather directly involved in many cases of abuse themselves, often involving women and children, as figures this quarter show. The construction of settler villages elucidates this point: funded by Turkey and its regional allies, and sanctioned by Turkish politicians, these settlements are part of the Turkish project of constructing a 'friendly' Arab and Turkmen belt along its border. Should Turkey invade Syria once more, as it threatened to do again in May 2022, the fate of Afrin and the M4 Strip would see itself reproduced across most of North and East Syria.

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