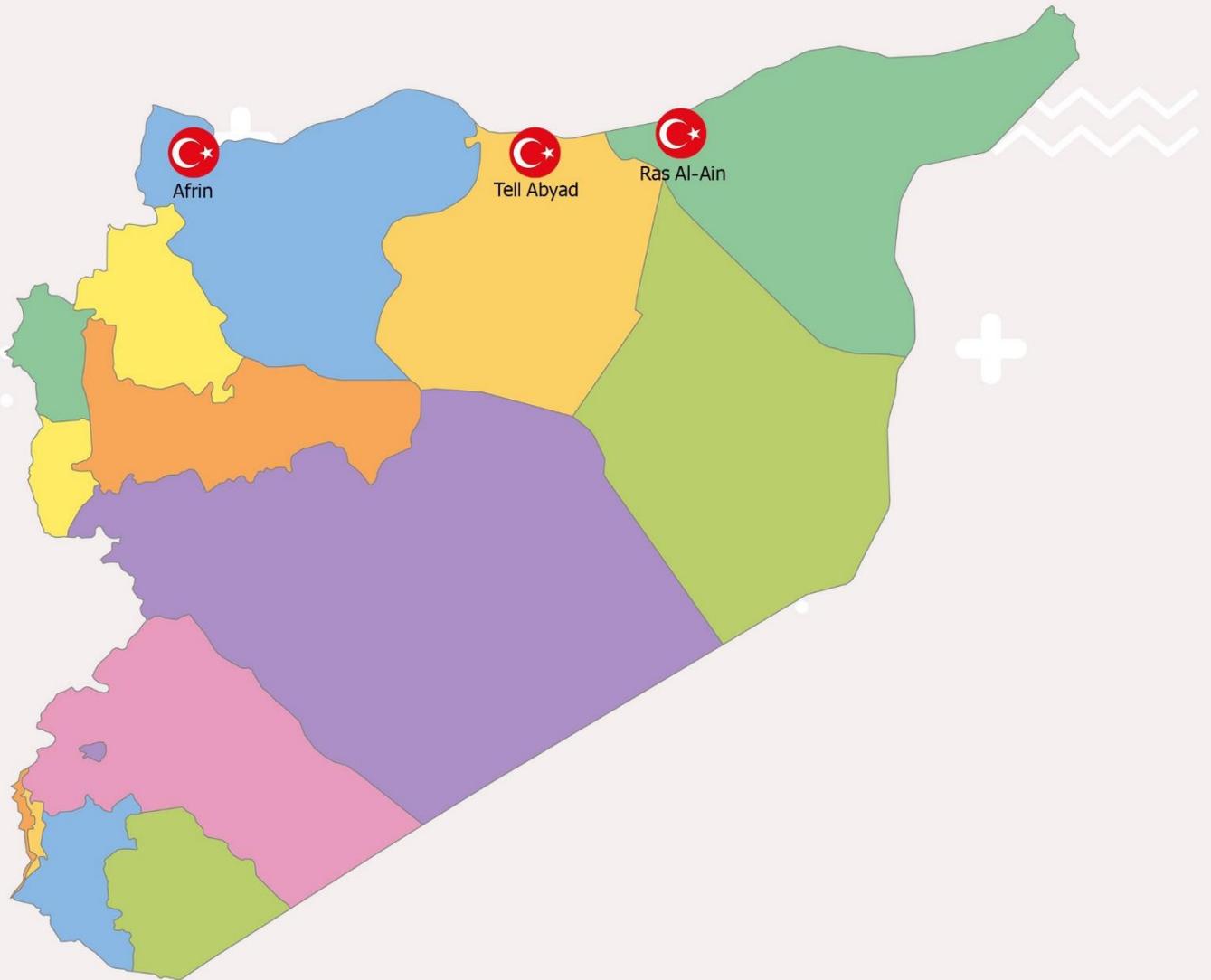


The Demographic Changes in the Syrian Kurdish Cities



Studies and Researches Unit

 www.asocenter.org

 info@asocenter.org

 (+964) 751-4413372

ASO Center for Consultancy and Strategic Studies

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Introduction:

In order to delve into the demographic changes issue in the Syrian Kurdish cities occupied by the Turkish government alongside a number of radical Islamic factions, the issue and its roots have to be deeply considered and understood in modern history for each of Syria and Turkey. The current demographic change carried out by Turkey is nothing but a continuation for what Al-Baath party has started in Syria, which is what currently the Turkish government has implemented in the Kurdish cities, particularly in the cities west of Euphrates river.

We need lots of data and statistics, which are inaccessible accurately at the current time, in order to conduct the study and research in the demographic change in the Kurdish region in Syria. Therefore, this report is a preliminary that paves the way for the start of integrated research studies on the demographic change roots in the Kurdish region since the emergence of the Syrian state, the unity government and what are Turkey's efforts in supporting radical Islamic factions.

The demographic change is not an emergency case in the Kurdish issue in Syria, as it is extremely complex and linked to the Turkish and Iraqi geographical areas. There are still pending files on this issue, especially the "Arabic Belt" issue, which has remained, up to this day, one of the most controversial issues between the Syrian political and popular parties.

Since Turkey intervened in the Syrian file, it was evident that Turkey's main concern was standing against the Kurdish issue and thwarting any Kurdish endeavor towards Kurdish rights in Syria. From Turkey's perspective, the Kurdish issue solution in Syria is considered a real threat to its national security, given that any Kurdish supremacy there could enhance the desire of Turkey's Kurds to demand similar rights. The Kurdish border region in Syria is Turkey's last outlet on the "Sunni" Arab world, after the Kurds in the KRI managed to achieve autonomy and cut off geographical contacts between Turkey and the "Sunni" Arabs in Iraq.

The Turkish intervention has not remained diplomatic and it had refused the Kurdish political presence in the Syrian solution negotiations since 2017. Turkey has moved towards direct military operations in the depths of Syria, since then, and it was obvious that the Turkish project was integrated in controlling the areas of Kurdish presence, expelling the Kurdish population from them and housing groups close to radical Islamic factions loyal to it in Syria.

From then on, Turkey has occupied three major cities in the Kurdish region in Syria, namely; Afrin, Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain and Tell Abyad. It also, works to expand the occupation of Kurdish cities and towns, implement the process of changing the ethnic composition in the Kurdish border region, expel the Kurdish population from it and displace them towards the eastern regions of Syria and keep them away from geographical contact with the Kurds in Turkey.



The Executive Summary:

The demographic changes that target the Kurdish region in Syria, are one of the main reasons for the Turkish intervention in Syria. As Turkey fears that the Kurds in Syria will be able to achieve a kind of autonomy in the country, which subsequently increases the possibility that the Kurds in Turkey will get an opportunity in pursuit of similar demands, just like the Kurds in Syria. Thus, in order to thwart the Kurdish efforts in Syria, Turkey began carrying out more than one military operation, targeting a number of Kurdish cities and towns, on the border strip neighboring the Kurdish region in Turkey.

The Turkish pursuit does not stop at the removal of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from the border strip with Turkey, nor on the demographic change based on the expulsion of Kurds from the Kurdish border cities and the resettlement of Arabs and Turkmen, but also is aiming to changing the ethnic composition of the Kurdish region neighboring Turkey and the establishment of a border strip composed of Islamic fighters Syrians and their families, with the aim of turning them into a separation barrier between the Kurds in both Syria and Turkey.

During the implementation of these schemes, Turkey occupied three main cities in the Kurdish region in Syria, through two military operations, namely the "Olive Branch", which enabled Turkey to occupy Afrin city and its countryside, and the "Peace Spring" that enabled it to occupy Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain in Al-Hasaka governorate and Tell Abyad in Raqqa governorate.

After occupying the three Kurdish cities, Turkey expelled more than half a million Kurds and carried out criminal operations; including ethnic genocide, murder, field executions, kidnapping and appropriation of civilian homes. Also, the calls and reports of international organizations did not succeed in deterring Ankara from its practices.

Turkish Military Operations to Occupy Kurdish Cities

Before 2018, the Turkish military operations were limited to targeting only border posts, outposts and SDF patrols, People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) in areas controlled by the Self-Administration. However, after 2018, the Turkish government started to implement 2 military operations with the support of Syrian radical factions that enabled Turkey to occupy 3 major cities in the Kurdish region in Syria.

The Olive Branch Operation:

On January 20, 2018, the Turkish army officially announced the start of the Olive Branch Operation, with the aim of occupying Afrin city and its countryside and removing the SDF. The Turkish government called the operation; "olive branch", due to the fact that Afrin is characterized by large numbers of olive trees.



On 20/01/2018, Turkey carried out intensive airstrikes on Afrin and military sources stated that the bombing targeted 108 military targets out of 113 ones. The most prominent targeted posts were; the radio station in Sheikh Hadid district, Hejiko headquarters in Rajo, Ghazawiya checkpoint, Bursaya mountain, Qibar camp, Malikiyah village, Hamdiya, Hajilar, Tell Sallor, Freeriya, Brigade 135 near Qibar, Tell Rifaat and Ming military airport.¹

The Turkish military operation was launched, despite the US demanding Turkey not to start it, amid US officials' concern about US forces in Manbij city, which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan confirmed will be the next after Afrin. Ankara accuses Washington of seeking to establish an "army of terrorists" on the Turkish-Syrian border, after the US announced the training of a border force of 30,000 fighters, most of them being Kurds.²

Since then, the military factions supported by Turkey have continued to commit violations against the population and the greatest of these violations is kidnapping for ransom and robbery of civilian properties, such as houses, cars and olive trees, according to reports by the international "Human Rights Watch" organization, as well as testimonies from residents and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.³

The Peace Spring Operation:

The Peace Spring, is a Turkish military operation launched with the support of Syrian Islamist militias on October 9, 2019, with the aim of occupying Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain city in Al-Hasaka governorate and Tell Abyad city in Raqqa governorate. The operation was called "The Peace Spring," due to the great number of springs in Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain city.

The Turkish forces launched their military operation "Peace Spring" against Kurdish militants in northern Syria, according to the announcement of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, noting in his tweet on "Twitter" that the target is Kurds and jihadists alike. Also, identical sources indicated that raids were launched on Ras Al-Ain; the border city and tens of civilians were displaced within minutes after Erdogan announced the start of the operation.⁴

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated that, since the start of the Turkish military operation in northern Syria on October 9, the Turkish forces and their loyal factions advanced with intense cover from the air and on the ground, over a total area of 4,875 km² by 9.2% of the total area controlled by the SDF, which is more than a quarter of Lebanon's area. At the same time, the regime forces entered, under an agreement with the SDF, through Russian mediation, into an area with an estimated area of 18821 km²; by 35.6% of the total area controlled by the SDF, which means that the SDF lost control of 23,641 km², after it controlled an area of 52,916 km²; by 28.6% of the total area of Syria; before the start of the military

¹ The Olive Branch: A Battle to Reclaim Afrin <https://bit.ly/3eh9Mtk>

² Turkey: the "Olive Branch" Operation Has Started and Airstrikes on Afrin Despite Threats of the Assad Regime <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/2018/01/20/turkey-operation-olive-branch-afrin>

³ One Year after the Turkish "Olive Branch": This is What Happened to Afrin and its People <https://bit.ly/34PbteD>

⁴ Erdogan Announces the Launch of the Turkish Military "Peace Spring" Operation <https://bit.ly/2TKG2eZ>



operation "Peace Spring." Hence, this implies that the SDF controls only 15.7% of the area of Syria.

The Turkish military operation caused another humanitarian catastrophe, adding to the series of crises Syrians have been suffering from for 10 years. As a result of that military operation, the number of displaced people who fled from their towns, cities and villages in Tell Abyad, Ras Al-Ain, Darbasiyah, Kobani, Ain Issa, and other east of Euphrates areas at the border with Turkey, exceeded 300,000 civilians, amidst difficult humanitarian conditions in the region, due to the significant escalation in the numbers and destination of the displaced, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. It also indicated that "The repercussions of the Turkish intervention did not stop at the point of displacement, but rather caused a number of deaths without differentiating between civilians and non-civilians. The number of civilian deaths since the start of the Turkish military operation reached 146, including 7 women and 4 children, while the number of deaths among the SDF, Military Councils and Internal Security Forces, has reached more than 510, since the start of the Turkish military operation as a result of Turkish air and ground bombardment and clashes with the Turkish forces and their loyal factions. In addition to the death of 28 members of the regime forces and wounding others, as a result of missile strikes carried out by the Turkish forces and the factions loyal to them on the northwest axes of Manbij and east of Ain Issa town, in the locations of the regime forces deployment."⁵

The Demographic Change in Kurdish Cities

Afrin

As their properties were systematically looted and appropriated by Syrian National Army forces, civilians approached senior Syrian National Army members in the Afrin and Ras Al-Ain regions to lodge complaints. In response, many found themselves threatened, extorted or detained by Syrian National Army members, while others were abducted and forced to pay ransom directly to Syrian National Army senior members for their release. The Commission remains concerned by the prevalent and recurrent use of hostage-taking by Syrian National Army forces.⁶

Looted household items were transported and sold through a coordinated process; which may indicate a premeditated policy implemented by several brigades. Such items were often moved freely through Syrian National Army-staffed checkpoints by both Syrian National Army fighters and senior-ranking members and were stored in ad hoc locations such as warehouses, or sold at open markets. In one such case in March, a returnee to Tel al-Arisha village found his house looted, including its windows, doors and generators, which had also happened to numerous other houses on the same street. A senior member of Division 24 (the Sultan Murad Brigade)

⁵ One Year After the "Peace Spring": "New Map" and Demographic Change <https://bit.ly/2HVGG6G>

⁶ UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: No clean hands – behind the frontlines and the headlines, armed actors continue to subject civilians to horrific and increasingly targeted abuse <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=A>



of the Syrian National Army sold back to him his own household goods from a warehouse that was being used as a storage point for looted goods. He fled immediately thereafter.⁷

The Commission also received reports of forced marriage and the abduction of Kurdish women in Afrin and Ras Al-Ain, which primarily involved members of Division 24 (the Sultan Murad Brigade) of the Syrian National Army. In January, a woman was abducted by a member of the Brigade, who forcibly married her and divorced her shortly thereafter. In addition, the Commission notes that, in areas under effective Turkish control, Turkey carries a responsibility to, as far as possible, ensure public order and safety, and to afford special protection to women and children. Turkey remains bound by applicable human rights treaty obligations vis-à-vis all individuals present in such territories.⁸

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented the number of the displaced from their areas towards the north of Syria with 120,000 displaced people from eastern Ghouta, southern Damascus, southern Damascus countryside, eastern Qalamoun, northern Homs countryside and southern Hama countryside. The committee monitored - according to reliable information - the arrival of the bulk of the displaced to the Afrin region, whose inhabitants hundreds of thousands were displaced by the Turkish "Olive Branch" operation.⁹

According to reliable sources, tens of thousands of newly displaced people have been resettled in civilian homes and farms owned by Kurdish citizens, who fled Turkish violations and the violations of the pro-Kurdish factions. The committee also monitored the Turkish authorities' settlement of the displaced from Eastern Qalamoun and Eastern Ghouta in Afrin region, as part of a comprehensive process of demographic change in the region.¹⁰

Since March 2018, when Turkey and allied armed groups seized control of Afrin, hundreds of people have been returning to the city by foot through a mountainous route, as the YPG has blocked the official routes into the city, deliberately preventing displaced people from returning to Afrin. Many of those who managed to return found that their properties had been confiscated and their possessions stolen by armed groups allied with Turkey. Ten people told Amnesty International that Syrian armed groups had confiscated properties and shops in Afrin. Displaced residents said they were informed by their relatives and neighbors that their homes were either being used by the pro-Turkey armed groups as military headquarters, or occupied by displaced families from Eastern Ghouta and Homs. One teacher displaced in a camp in the al-Shahba region told Amnesty International that his house in Jenderes had been confiscated by *Faylaq al-Sham*. He said: "My neighbour told me that my home was confiscated. He sent

⁷ The Previous Reference

⁸ UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: No clean hands – behind the frontlines and the headlines, armed actors continue to subject civilians to horrific and increasingly targeted abuse

<https://www.ohchr.org/AR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=A>

⁹ Ankara Carries out Ethnic Cleansing in Syrian Afrin <https://bit.ly/2Jowmop>

¹⁰ Ankara Carries out Ethnic Cleansing in Syrian Afrin <https://bit.ly/2Jowmop>



me images that clearly show the name of Faylaq al-Sham written on the wall of the entrance door.”¹¹

Amnesty International also interviewed three displaced residents who reported that armed groups had confiscated their shops. A man and his son, a graphic designer, who owned three shops in Afrin said a relative had told them their home had been confiscated by the armed group called *Ferqa 55*. They also received pictures showing one of their shops converted into a butcher shop by a family from Eastern Ghouta. An owner of a supermarket in a village near Afrin told Amnesty International that a relative had told him recently that his supermarket was first looted, and was now being run by family from Eastern Ghouta.¹²

Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain

Similarly to in Afrin, the civilian properties of Kurdish owners in Ras Al-Ain region who had fled battles during Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 were also appropriated by Syrian National Army forces. Members of Division 22 (the Hamza Brigade) of the Syrian National Army engaged in widespread and organized looting and property appropriation in Ras Al-Ain, including by marking house walls with the names of individual brigades. Civilians narrated consistent accounts to the Commission conveying their fears about remaining and their inability to return to their homes, which had been looted and occupied by the brigades or their families in the immediate aftermath of hostilities. On two occasions, civilians recalled being instructed not to return by Syrian National Army commanders and fighters.¹³

During the period under review, the Commission corroborated repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation as well as widespread arbitrary deprivation of liberty perpetrated by various Syrian National Army brigades in the Afrin and Ras Al-Ain regions. After civilian property was looted, Syrian National Army fighters and their families occupied houses after civilians had fled, or ultimately coerced residents, primarily of Kurdish origin, to flee their homes, through threats, extortion, murder, abduction, torture and detention.¹⁴

Amnesty International indicated that "Turkish military forces and a coalition of Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, during the offensive into northeast Syria."¹⁵

The organization gathered witness testimony between 12 and 16 October from 17 people including medical and rescue workers, displaced civilians, journalists, local and international

¹¹ Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin <https://bit.ly/384suDi>

¹² The Previous Reference

¹³ UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: No clean hands – behind the frontlines and the headlines, armed actors continue to subject civilians to horrific and increasingly targeted abuse <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=A>

¹⁴ The Previous Reference

¹⁵ Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies <https://0i.is/xk7N>



humanitarian workers, as well as analyzing and verifying video footage and reviewing medical reports and other documentation.

The information gathered provides damning evidence of indiscriminate attacks in residential areas, including attacks on a home, a bakery and a school, carried out by Turkey and allied Syrian armed groups. It also reveals gruesome details of a summary killing in cold blood of a prominent Syrian-Kurdish female politician, Hevrin Khalaf, by members of Ahrar Al-Sharqiya, part of the Syrian National Army, a coalition of Syrian armed groups equipped and supported by Turkey.¹⁶

In another case, the home of a Kurdish family was appropriated by members of Division 22 (the Hamza Brigade) and later converted into an institute for Qur’anic studies run by a Turkish NGO, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief. On 22 June, its official opening was inaugurated by the governor of Şanlıurfa (Turkey). Reports of the use of civilian houses for military purposes by Turkish ground forces in Dawoudiya village have also been received. The residents of Dawoudiya have been prevented from returning to their homes, some of which were destroyed between April and June, while other houses have been appropriated for military purposes by Turkish armed forces.

Regarding incidents of detention, civilians in both Ras Al-Ain and Afrin were most often detained by Syrian National Army members for their alleged past links to the Self-Administration, and were deprived of access to legal counsel, and on some occasions, interrogated by Turkish officials with the assistance of interpreters prior to or while in detention. In most cases documented by the Commission, civilians were detained in the Afrin central prison or in an underground unit of the Syrian National Army Military Police headquarters located in the building of a former commercial high school in Afrin. The unit is comprised of five larger cells and four solitary confinement cells. Others were taken to unknown detention sites.

In detention, civilians – primarily of Kurdish origin – were beaten, tortured, denied food or water, and interrogated about their faith and ethnicity. One boy described to the Commission how he had been detained by the Syrian National Army Military Police in the city of Afrin in mid-2019, and held for five months in the Syrian National Army headquarters, before being transferred to the Afrin central prison and released in March 2020. While detained, both Syrian National Army members and Turkish-speaking officials dressed in military fatigues were present. The boy was handcuffed and hung from a ceiling. He was then blindfolded and repeatedly beaten with plastic tubes. The boy described how the officers interrogated him about his alleged links to the Self-Administration. In another case, two women were detained by the Syrian National Army in November 2019, at a checkpoint operated jointly with Turkish officials in the Ras Al-Ain region, when returning to their homes.

¹⁶ The Previous Reference



Tell Abyad

Since the incursion into northern Syria started, Turkish Armed Forces and the SNA have taken control of the area between Tell Abyad/Gire Spi and Ras Al-Ain/Serekaniye and part of the international highway (the M4) running between southeast Turkey and northeast Syria. Despite an October 22 ceasefire and safe zone agreement between Russia and Turkey, clashes between the Syrian Democratic Forces – the Kurdish-led forces once backed by the United States-led coalition against the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).¹⁷

According to the United Nations, the incursion initially displaced at least 200,000 people, and about 100,000 are now returning. Almost half have returned to areas controlled by the Turkish-backed factions and the Turkish Armed Forces in Tell Abyad, Ain Issa, and Suluk.¹⁸

According to reliable sources from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Turkey has embarked on Thursday on the demographic change process that it seeks in the areas it controlled in northern Syria. The sources confirmed that a number of residents of northern Syria had been transferred to Tell Abyad city, which was under the control of the Turkish forces and the factions loyal to them as part of the Turkish military operation "Peace Spring".

The sources also elaborated, to the observatory that the Turkish forces "began carrying out transfers of citizens who wish to move to Tell Abyad, where escort cars depart daily in the morning and in the evening after registering the names of those wishing to move." Witnesses stated to the observatory that those who wished to resettle were "transferred from Jarablus to the border with Turkey and then to Tell Abyad, accompanied by their possessions and belongings, under the pretext that they return to their original areas through Turkey."¹⁹

In this regard, the Commission notes the allegations that Turkish forces were aware of incidents of looting and appropriation of civilian property and that they were present in detention facilities run by the Syrian National Army where the ill-treatment of detainees was rampant, including during interrogation sessions when torture took place. In failing to intervene in both cases, Turkish forces may have violated the above-mentioned obligations of Turkey.²⁰

In another case, a Kurdish-Syrian man said that his family fled to the city of Raqqa after a Turkish airstrike killed his parents and wounded his brother on October 9 in his village of Kayuta, nine kilometers from Tell Abyad. He said he also learned from neighbors that his home has been unlawfully occupied. He said that on about October 11, his Arab neighbors who had

¹⁷ Syria: Civilians Abused in 'Safe Zones' <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2019/11/27/335938>

¹⁸ The Previous Reference

¹⁹ Turkey Launches the "Demographic Change" Campaign in Northern Syria <https://arbne.ws/3jRQ2xs>

²⁰ UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: No clean hands – behind the frontlines and the headlines, armed actors continue to subject civilians to horrific and increasingly targeted abuse <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=A>



returned to Kayuta told him that a local Arab family had occupied his house, followed by members of Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh.²¹

He said his uncles communicated with Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh about the house, and that the armed group shared pictures of them occupying the house. One of his uncles attempted to return to the village at least five times but the SNA faction turned him away at the entrance and told him it was a military area. However, he saw that his Arab neighbors who had told him his house was occupied were allowed in the village.

Three other Kurdish residents of Tell Abyad displaced by the hostilities on October 9 confirmed that their property also was illegally occupied. They said that their Arab neighbors had contacted them and told them that their houses had been looted, and that SNA fighters had installed themselves or displaced Arab families in their houses between October 14 and 18. One displaced Kurdish Syrian man who owns a shop in Tell Abyad said that on October 18, he saw photographs of his shop marked “seized for the benefit of Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh” and that an Arab neighbor whom the fighters had offered some of the man’s wares told him that Ahrar al-Sharqiyyeh had looted everything and tried to sell it.²²

Recommendations and Conclusions:

It has become clear that the mission of the Turkish intervention in Syria is aimed to annihilating the Kurds there, changing the demographic engineering in the Syrian Kurdish cities, expelling Kurdish civilians, bringing Arabs and Turkmen and housing them in Kurdish homes, and carrying out looting, plundering, murdering and kidnapping operations against the Syrian Kurds. Since 2018 until now, more than half a million Kurds have been displaced and all of them have been subjected to serious human rights violations. Since the occupation of Afrin, Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain and Tell Abyad, the Kurds have been subjected to arrest, kidnapping, and “identity killings,” their properties and shops were looted and stolen, and their homes were appropriated and turned into new houses for the families of Syrian militants or the displaced coming from various Syrian cities and governorates. Therefore, the international community and UN agencies are supposed to do and commit to the following:

First: Put pressure on Turkey to stop human rights violations in the cities of Afrin and Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain and Tell Abyad and to remove the militants from city centers.

Second: Work to end all discriminatory Turkish projects against the Syrian Kurds and to return the displaced to their homes and remove the settlers from them.

Third: Work to support documentation, research and investigation processes on issues of property appropriation, violations and demographic change in the occupied Kurdish cities.

²¹ Syria: Civilians Abused in ‘Safe Zones’ <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2019/11/27/335938>

²² The Previous Reference



Fourth: Ensure that the demographic change file is included in the agenda of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, in order to solve the issues related to all the discriminatory projects that took place in the past and present in Syria.

Fifth: Work to end all foreign occupations on Syrian lands, especially the Turkish occupation.

Sixth: Ensure the achievement of transitional justice in Syria and hold accountable war criminals who committed the most heinous crimes in the cities of Afrin, Serekaniye/Ras Al-Ain and Tell Abyad.

Seventh: The provision of urgent support to the displaced in al-Shahba camps and the camps of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor governorates, which lack the most basic necessities of life.

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