

Human rights watchdog confirms Turkish-backed rebels loot and destroy property in Afrin

by Wladimir van Wilgenburg - 14/06/2018 08:52



Turkey-backed armed groups in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have seized, looted, and destroyed the property of Kurdish civilians in the Afrin district of northern Syria, Human Rights Watch [said](#) in a report on Thursday.

The human rights watchdog called on Turkey and FSA groups to compensate displaced residents whose homes were looted, or taken over.

The anti-government armed groups have installed fighters and their families in residents' homes and destroyed and looted civilian properties without compensating the owners.

“Destroying or moving into the property of people who have had to flee the fighting is

not what the Free Syrian Army fighters should be doing when they move into an area,” said Priyanka Motaparthy, acting emergencies director at Human Rights Watch. “Instead of protecting vulnerable civilians’ rights, these fighters are perpetuating a cycle of abuse.”

Turkey and its allied rebels captured Afrin from the People’s Protection Units (YPG) on 20 March, after a two months campaign. According to the United Nations, the fighting displaced at least 137,000 people. After rebels took the area, many houses were looted and the property was destroyed. Moreover, displaced civilians from other parts of Syria were placed in houses of people from Afrin who were displaced.

HRW interviewed in person two displaced people from the Afrin district, both of whom are in Qamishli, who said that FSA fighters had seized, destroyed, and looted their residential or commercial property. Although rebel groups invited civilians to complain about abuses, none of Afrin’s civilians was compensated.

“Destroying or moving into the property of people who have had to flee the fighting is not what the Free Syrian Army fighters should be doing when they move into an area,” HRW said.

“Jassem,” a media activist who left Afrin on March 11, said that the FSA police task force that Turkey had created to maintain order in Afrin seized and occupied his family home

In other cases, FSA fighters also appeared to install families displaced from other parts of Syria in the homes of displaced Afrin residents. One displaced person said he had seen fighters move families displaced from other parts of Syria into his displaced neighbours’ apartments.

One displaced Afrin resident, ‘Samer,’ said he saw FSA fighters move displaced residents from other parts of Syria into the homes of Afrin residents who had fled as a result of the fighting.

He said that April 26 a week before he left the city of Afrin, he saw 31 white buses arrive and stop in Azadi square, in the city centre. He said within a few days, three apartments in the building adjacent to his were occupied by families displaced from elsewhere in Syria. He said the neighbourhood was under the control of the Turkish-backed rebel group Sultan Murad.

“Under the laws of war, pillaging, or forcibly taking private property for personal use is prohibited and can constitute a war crime even in the context of fighting in an area,” HRW said.

“Combatants are not allowed to seize property for personal use, including to house their own families. The laws of war also prohibit destruction of property not justified by military necessity,” the human rights organization said.

“De facto governing authorities have an immediate duty to provide shelter for displaced families and other vulnerable people without adequate shelter in the territory they control, but they must do so in a way that does not infringe on the owners’ property rights,” HRW added.

“Turkey and the FSA groups in Afrin should compensate displaced residents whose property they have seized, destroyed, or looted, and should not permanently deprive residents of their property,” HRW concluded.

“They have a duty to ensure that the property rights of the owners are protected and that they are able to return to their place of habitual residence in dignity and safety,” the statement added.

Other human rights groups have also documented human rights abuses by rebels in Afrin.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) on Tuesday [reported](#) that seven families from Eastern Ghouta in Afrin were forcefully displaced by the Turkish-backed Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham after these families refused to live in houses without the approval of the original house owners.

After they contacted the original homeowners to sign rental contracts, Ahrar al-Sham forcefully expelled them, and were threatened with being jailed for ‘dealing with Kurdish forces’.

“Those who made the decision to take over Afrin also took on the responsibility of ensuring that both the residents of Afrin, and people there who have been displaced elsewhere have basic shelter in a way that doesn’t infringe on either of those groups’ rights,” Motaparthly said. “So far it seems that they are failing to do the right thing by

either group.”