

UN report shows a regime of rampant abuse and apartheid in Turkey controlled Afrin

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A new report released by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) paints a picture of how Afrin has been administered by the Turkish Armed Forces and its Arab rebel affiliates. The report recounts "high levels of violent crime, with civilians falling victim to robberies, harassment, abductions and murder", it also mentions the particular discrimination that Kurds have faced in Afrin since the city was taken from the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD) at the beginning of this year.

The report alleges that "theft, harassment, cruel treatment and other abuse, and on occasion murder" is committed by the Sultan Murad Division, the Hamza division, and the Ahrar Al-Sharqiya rebel groups, while looting is alleged to occur "on a daily basis" with stolen goods sold in the markets of Azaz in Euphrates Shield territory, to

the disregard of the Turkish backed police force operating there.

"Civilians have informed OHCHR that a number of members of armed opposition groups operating in the area are former well-known local criminals, smugglers, or drug dealers", the OHCHR further reported.

The report also complains of a growing industry of human smuggling and kidnapping.

"OHCHR has documented at least eleven cases in which civilians including women and children were abducted, some of them later released after paying ransoms ranging between USD 1,000 to 3,000, while the whereabouts of others remain unknown."

The complicity of Turkey's authorities

According to the OHCHR, the government of Turkey has only nominally handed over power to the so-called Syrian Interim Government based in Ankara. Turkey administers Afrin with the help of a "Syrian national" who regularly visits the district although he is not based there. Two Turkish nationals, however, have been tasked to be Wali (governor) by the governor of the Turkish district of Hatay. One of these two Wali's visits Afrin every second day for a few hours and reports back.

Turkey administers Afrin through its police force, its stationed military personnel and the armed groups which they fund. Afrin district is divided into "security squares" that are under the control of various armed groups, including the newly arrived Jaish Al-Islam and Failaq Ar-Rahman groups which were opponents in Eastern Ghouta. Each security square is made up a number of neighbourhoods and is controlled by different armed groups. For civilians that want to move from one "security square" to another, they are required to receive written approval from either the Turkish army or the armed groups. The Turkish Army controls the city through a network of checkpoints in the outskirts of Afrin. If civilians would like to move between villages, cities and towns, they also need written permission.

"OHCHR received information that people originally from Afrin district -- particularly Kurds -- are subjected to stricter screener procedures and lengthier processes to obtain approvals than internally displaced fighters and their civilian families and other civilians who have recently arrived in Afrin from Eastern Ghouta and other areas", the report states.

Apartheid

In one story that is recounted, a minibus was stopped where the Turkish soldier asked if there were any Kurds aboard. A middle-aged man en route to the hospital responded that he was a Kurd from Afrin, and was asked to produce a permit showing permission to travel. "Other non-Kurdish passengers were not required to show any permits or provide evidence of their reasons for travelling", the report recounts.

There have been other ways in which a system of virtual apartheid has been put into place, with particular vulnerability shown to the Kurdish majority of the city. "OHCHR continues to receive reports from Afrin district of civilians, including women, being taken from their homes or detained at checkpoints, based on accusations of being former fighters of/or affiliation with Kurdish forces" the report states, citing one story where a 20-year-old Kurdish woman accused of being a former member of the Kurdish Women Protection Forces (YPJ) was compelled to show up at a Sharia court in Euphrates Shield territory.

Other forms of discrimination include property theft and ethnic cleansing. "IDP's are for the most part ethnic Arabs, many of who have been placed randomly by the armed groups in the empty house of civilians (mostly Kurds)."

Settlers in Afrin, furthermore, have refused to vacate their homes for *the original owners*.

"Many civilians seeking to return to their homes have found them occupied by these fighters and their families, who have refused to vacate them and return them to their rightful owners."

"There have also been reports of civilian property being confiscated under the pretext that the person had been in some way affiliated with Kurdish forces", the OHCHR reports.

Rebel impunity

The armed groups which oversee the occupation of Afrin alongside Turkish forces have also been accused of being internally divided, often engaging in criminal activities against civilians and against each other without any fear of repercussions. On the 6th of May, for instance, 10 male civilians originally from Deir-ez-Zor were shot

dead at a checkpoint controlled by armed members of the Al-Waki family, an infamous family with known ties to armed groups. In response, Ahrar Al-Sharqiya and Ahrar Al-Sham exchanged gunfire, which ended up killing three civilians, including one woman, and injuring 19 others.

"the infighting between various armed groups has been exacerbated by the arrival, with the approval of Turkey, of additional fighters from groups such as Failaq ar-Rahman and Jaish al-Islam", the report further states.

Armed groups, while bestowed with the right to administer Afrin, have on various occasions evaded the law. In one case, for instance, Hospital staff were abused by members of the Hamza division. Two male and one female nurse were accused of not working fast enough to tend to one of their relatives. The rebels proceeded to shoot bullets in the air and shut down the hospital for four hours. On the following day attacked the nurses. "The perpetrators were reportedly handed over to the police by the Hamza Division on 5 May, but they were released a few days later after threats were made to the "police" by high ranking members of the armed group."

The United Nations has recommended that "Turkish military forces and affiliated armed groups exercise control, including but not limited to respecting and protecting the rights to life, liberty, and security of person, freedom of movement, access to basic services (healthcare, education etc.)".

"Freedom of expression and opinion, and freedom of discrimination based on race, religion, political or other opinions" must be ensured, the report concludes.