

The Governance Structure of Turkish-controlled Afrin

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Abstract

Since March 2018 Turkey and allied Syrian actors have controlled the Afrin region of northern Syria. The subsequent five years have been marked by acts of criminality and infighting incidents between the dozens of Turkish-backed militias in the region, an insurgency campaign, acts of terrorism, and dramatic demographic changes to the detriment of the region's indigenous Kurdish population. This paper examines and outlines the Turkish-installed local governance structure, highlighting the relationships between Syrian civil and military actors and the various Turkish institutions present, what effects this regime has had on the region's security situation, and it relates to broader Turkish policy within Syria.

Introduction

Bordered on two sides by Turkey, the Afrin region sits within the far northwestern corner of Syria. Afrin is comprised of a wide, fertile, southern valley, containing the region's two largest settlements of Afrin and Cindires, rolling hills in the center and to the west, and low

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shrub-covered mountains in the north along the Turkish border. The region's landscape is dotted with olive trees; the fruits of which and their products comprise the basis of the local economy. Economic life has long been oriented towards Aleppo city roughly thirty kilometers to the southeast, to which Afrin belongs to administratively.

Throughout its modern history, Afrin's demography was almost exclusively Kurdish population, with estimated percentages of Kurdish speakers typically ranging from ninety to ninety-five percent.² While most of this Kurdish population adhere to Sunni Islam, the region is home to small Ezidi and Alevi³ communities as well.⁴

Like other Kurdish-populated regions of Syria, collectively referred to as *Rojava*,⁵ Afrin experienced some anti-government protests during the beginning of the country's civil uprising of 2011. Kurdish demonstrators protested grievances specific to the Kurdish community as well as those faced by Syrians more broadly. However, the fate of Afrin and Rojava soon diverged from other anti-government areas of Syria as all-out war broke out in 2012.

In Afrin and elsewhere, the Democratic Union Party (PYD)⁶ and the party-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ) militias quickly came to dominate Kurdish society. The movement was able to utilize its broad but in no way universal support and its unparalleled organizational capacity to

² Afrin's small pre-civil war Arab population resided in Afrin city and several villages and towns on the surrounding plain

³ Kurdish-speaking Alevis who have roots to the north in modern-day Turkish provinces including Kahramanmaraş and Dersim, with no historical relation to Syrian Arabs of the 'Alawi faith.

⁴ For more the region's history and demographics see Sebastian Maisel's *Yezidis in Syria: Identity Building among a Double Minority* (2017), and Thomas Schmidinger's *Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Rojava* (2019).

⁵ Rojava means 'the west' in Kurdish

⁶ The PYD was formed underground in 2003 by local members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Turkey-oriented Kurdish militant organization that had been based in Syria essentially from its founding the late 1970s until the 1998 signing of the Adana Agreement forced it to flee abroad. According to historical accounts, the PKK had largely dominated local politics in Afrin over the course of these twenty years, maintaining strong organizational capacity and significant levels of public support. See: Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (2014), p.137-8, Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (2009), p.77-78



overshadow other Kurdish political parties, establishing a monopoly of violence within Rojava following the Syrian government's strategic withdrawal from Kurdish areas in July 2012. The PYD's legitimacy among Kurds in Syria was furthered the increasing prevalence of Islamists and jihadists within the armed opposition, and the failure of the political opposition to adequately address Kurdish grievances within its program. As an enclave essentially surrounded⁷ by opposition-controlled territory since 2012, these dynamics were particularly salient in Afrin.

The PYD-led administration governed Afrin for five and a half years as part of the broader 'canton' system that evolved into what is now known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Over the course of this period, the administration largely maintained a policy of neutrality with regards to the Syrian regime and armed opposition, awarding Afrin relative tranquility albeit under soft blockage. This changed in early 2016 when local YPG and YPJ units, operating under the newly formed banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), took advantage of a regime offensive to the southeast and, with the assistance of the Russian Air Force, launched an offensive of their own. This resulted in the seizure of a stretch of opposition and Islamic State controlled territory east of Afrin, referred to by the AANES as the Şehba region. Seen more broadly, this 2016 offensive was an attempt on the part of the PYD-led administration to connect Afrin to other areas under its control further east, increasing Ankara's already belligerent attitude towards what it viewed as a PKK statelet.

Afrin's internal status quo was abruptly interrupted on 20 January 2018 with the commencement of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, a cross-border invasion of the region. The Turkish military (TSK) spearheaded the operation with auxiliary support from the Syrian National Army (SNA), a coalition of Syrian opposition factions

⁷ The Shi'a-populated towns of Nubl and al-Zahra' abutting Afrin to the southeast formed a pro-government enclave throughout this period with which relations were maintained.

assembled by Turkey in late 2017.⁸ Despite initial stiff resistance enabled by the rugged terrain of northern and western Afrin, SDF light infantry was ultimately unable to withhold the multi-pronged assault of Turkey's Special Forces and Air Force.

Faced with encirclement by late March, the SDF defenders carried out a tactical, abandoning all but a handful of villages located in Afrin's peripheral southeast. According to the UN, over 130,000 civilians followed the YPG into the adjacent Şehba region.⁹ This overnight evaporation left Turkey a blank slate with which to develop a new governing regime in Afrin.

Operation Olive Branch was the product of a shift in Turkish Syria policy that occurred over the course of 2015 and 2016, leading to the eschewal of regime change in Damascus in favor of narrower national security interests. Several major developments within domestic and regional affairs caused this pivot, perhaps most importantly the government's tanking of the Turkey-PKK peace process, resulting in renewed warfare by July 2015, and Russia's direct intervention into the Syrian civil war in late September of the same year. Since 2016 Turkey has pursued two objectives within Syria: the eradication of the Kurdish political project as represented by the AANES and the SDF, and the development of a nominally opposition-controlled "safe zone" to contain potential future refugee outflow, while allowing for greater deportation of Syrian refugees residing within Turkey.¹⁰

This transition first materialized into actual policy with August 2016's Operation Euphrates Shield, an at the time unprecedented Turkish cross-border invasion of Islamic State-controlled northern Aleppo. Turkey's direct intervention and a corresponding Syrian regime offensive to the south shattered the possibility of the SDF

⁸ Zaman al-Wasl (2017), 30 rebel groups merge under Interim Govt's banner, form 'The National Army', <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/31991.html>

⁹ UN OCHA (2018), Syrian Arab Republic: Afrin Flash Update No. 2 (as of 29 March 2018), <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-afirin-flash-update-no-2-29-march-2018-enar>

¹⁰ For more on this policy transition see Gönül Tol's *Erdogan's War: A Strongman's Struggle at Home and in Syria* (2021), chapter 4.



establishing a contiguous zone of control stretching from Hatay to Iraqi Kurdistan. January 2018's Operation Olive Branch, targeting SDF-controlled Afrin, was later followed in October 2019 by Operation Peace Spring, Turkey's third cross-border offensive. This most recent operation targeted a stretch of SDF-controlled territory east of the Euphrates encompassing the towns of Tell Abyad and Ras al-ʿAin/Serê Kaniyê and their surrounding countryside.¹¹ Since then, Turkey and its local proxies have administered these three areas through the same constitutional framework, nominally under the control of the Syrian Interim Government (SIG).¹²

Overview

In Afrin and the rest of Turkish-controlled Syria, Turkey has installed a complex system of governance consisting of various Turkish actors and their Syrian counterparts, each responsible for different aspects for civil administrative, internal security, and military duties. On paper, Afrin is administered by the SIG through the Afrin Local Council, the highest governance body in the region. The Police and National Public Security Forces (or the "Civil Police"), affiliated with the SIG's Ministry of the Interior, are tasked with day-to-day regional security and standard police matters. Meanwhile, the SIG's Ministry of Defense is intended to be the ultimate military authority to which the factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the SNA's Military Police Department answer to.

Deployed in parallel to, or rather above, each of these Syrian institutions are their Turkish counterparts. These include representatives of the Hatay governorship and various government ministries, security forces affiliated with the Ministry of the Interior, the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), and the TSK. The

¹¹ It must be mentioned that Turkey has directly intervened into Syria's Idlib province as well, beginning in 2017. However, Turkey has not involved itself in Idlib's administration and local security portfolios which instead lie in the hands of former al-Qa'idah affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), making the region and Turkey's role with it distinctive from the three areas of operations. Currently, Afrin is one of the three regions within this broader Turkish/SNA-controlled sub-state entity.

¹² The SIG is an opposition government established by the internationally recognized National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary Opposition Forces ("Etilaf") in 2013, now headquartered in the city of A'zaz

presence of the Turkish institutions on the ground and their authority over the official Syrian bodies has prevented the SIG hierarchy detailed above from materializing and has relegated the executive branch and ministries of the SIG to an entirely ceremonial role. Further obstructing this SIG-based governmental structure from developing is the failure of the SNA to coalesce into a unified military with a functioning chain of command responsive to the SIG, as individual faction leaders jealously guard their autonomy and power.

Civil Administration

The Afrin Local Council was established within the presence of the SIG president on 12 April 2018, several weeks after the Turkish offensive concluded.¹³ Members of the council were elected by a Turkish-selected committee made up of “local notables, independent political figures and members of the Independent Syrian Kurdish Association (KKS),”¹⁴ a marginal political organization established in 2016 by pro-Turkish Syrian Kurdish activists outside the opposition-aligned Kurdish National Council (KNC) coalition, in the Turkish city of Urfa.¹⁵ To this day the Local Council largely consists of the same twenty members chosen in April 2018, including eleven indigenous Kurds, eight Arabs selected in part from the small al-Boubanah and al-‘Umayrat tribes local to Afrin, and one Turkmen, an ethnicity not present in the region prior to 2018.

The Hatay Governor’s office maintains direct control over the Afrin Local Council through an appointed representative, locally known as the “Turkish governor,” along with other Turkish civilian advisors. Decision-making over administrative affairs as inconsequential as the timing of school exams ultimately lay in the hands of the Hatay

¹³ Etilaf (2018), Intikhab majlis mahli li-‘Afrin bi-hudour ra’is al-‘Itlaf al-Watani wa-ra’is al-Hukoumah al-Mu’aqqatah, <https://www.etilaf.org/all-news/news/الانتخاب-مجلس-محلي-لأفرين-بحضور-رئيس-الإتلاف-الوطني>

¹⁴ al-Hilu, K. (2019). “Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations.”

Middle East Directions (MED): 10. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/63745>

¹⁵ Rûpela Nû (2016), Kombenda Kurdên Serbixwe yên Sûriyê hate ragihandin Kaynak: Kombenda Kurdên Serbixwe yên Sûriyê hate ragihandin, <http://www.rupelanu.com/kombenda-kurden-serbixwe-yen-suriye-hate-ragihandin-233h.htm>



representative. Various ministries relating to the economy, education, and, notably, the Turkish Diyanet, maintain a visible presence in the region as well. Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) coordinates humanitarian aid largely funded by Turkish and international Islamic charities, supervised on the ground by local Syrian NGOs. Turkish companies have been awarded numerous service contracts pertaining to services and construction.¹⁶

Internal Security

As is the case within Turkey, Afrin's internal security is not handled by the TSK but rather a mixed deployment of Turkish Gendarme and Police Special Forces units from the General Security Directorate, both affiliated Ministry of the Interior. Together these units make up Turkey's 'Syrian Task Force,'¹⁷ stationed in compounds located in Afrin's main cities and towns oversee its Syrian counterpart institution, the Civil Police, while carrying out security operations of its own.

Media coverage of Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soyly's July 2021 visit to security sites within Afrin city highlighted the central role of the so-called 'Security Campus' to regional security.¹⁸ This 'campus' is a fortified compound located on the western edge of the city, containing the headquarters of various Turkish and subservient Syrian institutions. Among these sites include the Turkish General Security Directorate building, the City Security Management System building, the [Hatay] Governor's guesthouse, the central Afrin courthouse, and the base of a currently unidentified Turkish security force at the site of the now heavily fortified, former "Azhar school" house. The short segments of footage available from Soyly's visit

¹⁶ Syria Direct (2023), 12 years on, 'revolution' service institutions under Turkish authority, <https://syriadirect.org/12-years-on-revolution-service-institutions-under-turkish-authority/>

¹⁷ Anadolu Agency (2018), Afrin'in güvenliği özel harekata emanet, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gunun-basliklari/afrinin-guvenligi-ozel-harekata-emanet/1311765>

¹⁸ This week in northern Syria (2021), What Süleyman Soyly's Eid al-Adha trip tells us about the Turkey's security presence in Afrin, <https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/what-suleyman-soyly-aid-al-adha-trip-tells-us-about-the-turkeys-security-apparatus-in-afrin>

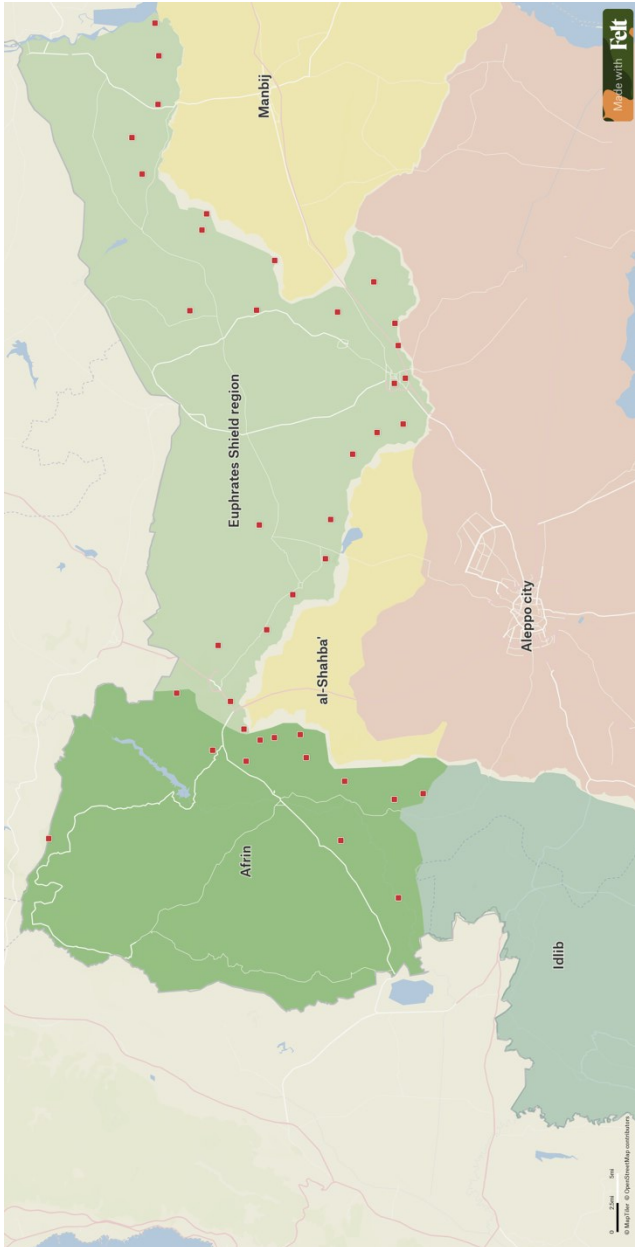
reportedly shot inside the City Security Management System building show individuals apparently affiliated with Turkey's General Directorate of Security observing video feeds from checkpoints set up at each of the entrances into Afrin city.

Outside of the various institutions affiliated with the Turkish Ministry of the Interior it's reported that MIT is present as well, however this is nearly impossible to elucidate its role given the intelligence agency's clandestine nature. The primary Syrian actor present within the compound is the 'Syrian Police and National Public Security Forces,' the Civil Police.

Turkish Military

The Turkish military deployment with Afrin is primarily concentrated in the region's southeast, overlooking the front line with the SDF and regime forces in the Şehba region. In this rocky upland area Turkish soldiers, heavy weaponry, and armor are stationed in approximately a dozen walled-off forward operating bases and fortified positions, largely constructed between 2018 and 2020. From what can be ascertained by way of satellite imagery, the Turkish military maintains a minimal presence within Afrin's interior, manning only one active base on the region's southern plain. In the region's far north, a base was built on the peak of Darmiq Dagh mountain, straddling the Syrian-Turkish border. In 2019 construction began on three additional bases located within southern and western parts of the region's interior, however this construction was paused indefinitely for unknown reasons. The geography of Turkish military deployment, heavily concentrated along lines of contact, implies both that it does not play an active security role within Afrin's interior and that by 2019 Afrin was not seriously threatened by internal insurgency.





Active Turkish military bases in the Afrin and Euphrates Shield regions, made by author

Syrian National Army

Several SNA factions man positions located in between the front-line Turkish bases. However, most factions present in Afrin do not deploy fighters to these points of contact. Instead, most SNA fighters reside within private homes, headquarters, and training grounds scattered across the region's interior, composing a patchwork of largely overlapping fiefdoms in which factions predatorily insert themselves into the local economy.

The SNA was established in December 2017 by Turkey as a nascent Syrian interim military under the leadership of the SIG's Ministry of Interior. Every armed opposition group active within the Euphrates Shield region at the time was incorporated within its structure, each factions assigned brigade and division numbers within the SNA's three legions. The thirty or so armed groups that form the SNA are surviving components of Syria's decentralized secular and Islamist armed opposition, relegated to Turkish proxy-dom after five years of failing to unify against the regime and much more ideologically and organizationally cohesive jihadist factions. It's highly unlikely that the unification process that took place in 2017 would've occurred without significant Turkish prodding.

Despite this unprecedented step towards a unified structure, the Syrian National Army has remained a largely cosmetic entity to this day. While individual factions technically fall under the hierarchy of legion leadership and above that, the SIG's Minister of Defense, these factions frequently act as individual actors. Instead of dismantling the pre-existing factions in the Euphrates Shield region and creating a new rationalized military structure, Turkey simply assigned these factions new institutional identities within the three SNA legions. Initially factions used these new identities in their branding alongside their original names and logos, however, this has increasingly gone by the wayside. Turkey's relatively light touch with regards to SNA institutionalization is most likely due to avoiding the high costs and backlash that would come with disempowering armed faction leaders, many of them long time MIT assets. This, in



combination with low SNA salaries, paid by Turkey and partially financed by Qatar, and the weakness of civil institutions, has facilitated widespread criminality on the part of both SNA leadership and foot soldiers.¹⁹

Effects on ground

This convoluted governing apparatus rules over a population that's changed dramatically since the initiation of the Turkish invasion. While post-2011 demographic data is essentially non-existent, estimates of Afrin's population prior to Operation Olive Branch range from 300,000 to 500,000.²⁰ The region's native Kurdish population has dwindled since 2018 following the massive exodus in March of that. Arab and Turkmen IDPs from other parts of Syria as well as the families of SNA fighters have been settled in Afrin, often renting out property seized by SNA factions from now absentee owners. According to one "2020 estimate...the district was home to 154,682 residents, (overwhelmingly Kurds), and 285,550 displaced persons, who are overwhelmingly Arab."²¹

Since 2018 Afrin's native Kurdish population has fallen victim to widespread abuses largely perpetrated by members of SNA factions. These include cases of property seizure, SNA protection rackets targeting the regions' farmers, kidnappings and disappearances, torture, and occasionally murder.²² Arrest campaigns are carried out by factions, the civil and military, as well as the various Turkish security apparatuses present, occasionally resulting in the illegal extradition of Syrian citizens to Turkey to be tried on terrorism

¹⁹ Tsurkov, E. (2022). "The Gangs of Northern Syria: Life Under Turkey's Proxies." *New Lines: Intelligence Briefing*: 6. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/syria/the-gangs-of-northern-syria-life-under-turkeys-proxies/>

²⁰ The discrepancy in these estimates is due to the unknown numbers of displaced peoples, many of whom were Kurds living in Aleppo city, that fled to Afrin during the war.

²¹ Tsurkov, 5.

²² Puttick, M. (2020). "Cultivating Chaos: Afrin after Olive Branch."

https://www.ceasefire.org/turkey-orchestrating-destruction-demographic-change-in-northern-syria-new-report/?fbclid=IwAR1zCN5-FGdKq0oncUXP8kbim08Ju5xqRjw_xwU7Q6GLCBp6qbeslDeG4xM

charges.²³ Individuals are frequently arrested on often baseless accusations of past or present affiliation with the SDF and/or AANES. While individual Kurds maintain administrative positions throughout the Local Council system, these figures have proven unable or unwilling to adequately address the widespread victimization of Afrin's indigenous population. Whereas IDP populations from elsewhere in Syria often maintain strong ties to SNA factions originally from their home regions, providing them defense mechanisms from widespread abuse, there are no Kurdish or Afrini SNA factions, meaning the indigenous population has no armed representatives.

This lack of responsive security guarantor has led some of the local Kurdish population to look for assistance from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly Syrian al-Qa'idah affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, due to its hostility towards the SNA. This tendency was most recently exemplified by a case involving the murder of four Kurdish men by SNA fighters during a March 2023 celebration of the Newroz holiday in the city of Cindires.²⁴ When local authorities failed to bring the killers to justice, the families of the victims crossed into HTS-controlled Idlib with the bodies of the deceased and met with the group's leader, Abu Muhammed al-Jawlani. The next morning HTS sent operatives to the Cindires Military Police headquarters, eventually resulting in the arrest of the SNA fighters.

Security situation

Since the end of offensive operations, Turkey has continued pursuing its two primary objectives of eradicating the YPG in Afrin and establishing a "safe zone," with varying degrees of success. The primary challenges facing such efforts have been insurgent activity, likely carried out by SDF-aligned groups, unclaimed acts of terrorism such as car bombs and assassinations, random incidents of violence

²³ U.S. Department of State (2022). 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkey (Türkiye), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/turkey/>

²⁴ Syrians for Truth and Justice (2023). Jindires/Afrin: The Full Story of the Nowruz Eve Murder, <https://stj-sy.org/en/jindires-afirin-the-full-story-of-the-nowruz-eve-murder/>



and predation relating to chronic structural issues within the SNA, and, most recently, attempts made by Idlib-based former al-Qa'idah affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to expand its influence into Afrin and other parts of Turkish-controlled Syria.

Afrin's anti-Turkish insurgency began immediately after the end of Operation Olive Branch ended in March 2018. Following the cessation of full-scale hostilities three different militant groups have claimed attacks against Turkish and SNA targets in the region: the YPG, Ghadab al-Zaytoun ("Wrath of the Olives") Operations Room, and the Afrin Liberation Forces (known by the Kurdish acronym "HRE"). Between March and December 2018, the YPG Press Office claimed approximately 140 insurgent actions across Afrin. While most of these self-reported actions occurred in relative proximity to the SDF-controlled Şehba region, many allegedly occurred deep within Afrin, implying they were carried out by cells left behind after the YPG withdrawal.²⁵

In the summer of 2018 Ghadab al-Zaytoun announced its existence and began a campaign of ambushes, kidnappings leading to executions, and car bombs in Afrin and the adjacent Turkish-controlled Euphrates Shield region. HRE's first claimed attack took place in December 2018, several days after the YPG claimed its very last insurgent attack in Afrin.

Since mid-2020 HRE has become the sole insurgent group active in and around Afrin. This is a little misleading as almost all HRE attacks take place along the Afrin/Şehba front lines. This combined with the lack of other claimed insurgent activity from other outfits implies that counter insurgency operations have exhausted all cells left behind and that anti-Turkish insurgents largely lack the capabilities to infiltrate the region they might've once possessed in the early days of operations.

²⁵ Bellingcat (2019). Wrath of the Olives: Tracking the Afrin Insurgency Through Social Media <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/03/01/wrath-of-the-olives-tracking-the-afrin-insurgency-through-social-media/>

While there's no evidence confirming such, it's widely assumed that both Ghadab al-Zaytoun and HRE are SDF front groups. The former published multiple videos depicting executions of SNA militants, in addition to several civilians, and claimed several car bombs that resulted in dozens of civilian deaths and injuries, leading to speculation that the SDF had established the group to avoid association with such grisly activities. Meanwhile the biographies of deceased HRE fighters published by the group frequently indicate that much of its membership consists of YPG veterans.

The decline in insurgent attacks corresponds with a more concentrated Turkish military presence in southeastern Afrin. Over the course of 2018-20 Turkey constructed a series of bases and fortified positions stretching from the northern town of Kafr Jannah, approximately ten kilometers from the Turkish border to the southern village of Basoufan, located at the convergence of Afrin, opposition-controlled Idlib, and regime-controlled western Aleppo province. These bases are identifiable via satellite imagery by their concrete blast wall perimeter, transported sectionally from across the Turkish border, and the presence of armor and artillery.²⁶

In addition to the Ghadab al-Zaytoun claimed attacks detailed above post-2018 Afrin has repeatedly been targeted by car bombs. The deadliest of such occurred in central Afrin city on 28 April 2020 when a fuel truck rigged with explosives detonated in front of a marketplace, killing 53 and wounding at least 50 others.²⁷ While it's widely assumed SDF-linked actors were responsible, Turkey never published any evidence identifying responsible actor leaving open the possibility that the Islamic State or regime agents were responsible. Car bomb attacks have declined in recent years following the erection of sizable security checkpoints at all entrances to Afrin city and other

²⁶ Popular Front (2020). The Militarisation of Jebel Laylun: the frontline between the SDF and occupied Afrin, <https://akmckeeper.substack.com/p/the-militarization-of-jebel-laylun-turkish-fortifications-in-eastern-afrin>

²⁷ BBC (2020). Syria war: Dozens killed in truck bomb attack at Afrin market, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52454134>



major cities, manned by the SNA Military Police and overseen by Turkish security forces.

The most endemic threat to public security in Turkish-controlled Afrin stems from SNA factions themselves. Incidents of infighting between and even within the factions are common, occasionally escalating from small arms fire to use of heavy weapons. Often these clashes are caused by personal disputes over property or abuse of individuals at checkpoints. While such incidents interrupt daily life and occasionally lead to civilian casualties, they do not threaten the institutional order of the region.

The post-2018 status quo has been somewhat upending due to events occurring in June and October of 2022. Idlib-based HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) twice intervened in intra-SNA conflict, initiating brief invasions of Afrin in a bid to extend its influence northwards and eastwards. Both times these actions have targeted al-Jabhah al-Shamiyah, the largest and most powerful faction within the SNA. In both the June and October instances Turkey stepped in after several days of clashes and forced HTS to formally withdraw from the region. While HTS's military brigades left Afrin for Idlib, it's widely reported that members of its security body stayed behind, maintaining a sizable covert presence.²⁸

In October, the HTS attack was coordinated with two SNA rivals of al-Jabhah al-Shamiyah, Furqat al-Hamzah and Furqat al-Sultan Suleiman Shah. The other most powerful SNA faction, Furqat al-Sultan Murad, reportedly had a tactic agreement with HTS established beforehand to remain neutral in the conflict. These factions are among the closest to Turkey, have each cultivated a Turkmen ethnic identity over the years (though a large portion of their fighters are Arabs) and were the main SNA factions recruiting fighters for Turkey's mercenary expeditions to Libya and Azerbaijan. This has led to significant speculation regarding Turkey's role in the HTS incursions into Afrin. However, it is unlikely that Turkey wishes

²⁸ Syrians for Truth and Justice (2023). HTS Scales Up Its Presence in Afrin After the Türkiye/Syria Quake, <https://stj-sy.org/en/hts-scales-up-its-presence-in-afrin-after-the-turkiye-syria-quake/>

for HTS to formally takeover Afrin and upend the governance system Turkey has put in place. Rather it appears that they view HTS as a useful counterweight to al-Jabhah al-Shamiyah which, due to its size and its embeddedness within the city of A'zaz and surrounding countryside, can act in a manner more independent than other SNA factions.

Conclusion

Since March 2018 Afrin has suffered from an enduringly chaotic security environment. This is largely the result of the governance structure developed by Turkey, characterized by the hands-on role played by the Turkish military, security forces and bureaucratic institutions, the disempowerment of the local administration and the Syrian Interim Government, and most notably, the enduring failure of the Syrian National Army to cohere into a unified military body. The active role of Turkish administrators in the Afrin Local Council, the on the ground presence of Turkish security forces and intelligence agents, and the empower of individual SNA faction leaders to the detriment of the SNA institutional framework, all serve to maintain Turkish dominance over Syrian actors and ensure the continued pursuit of Turkish policy goals. Despite the weak institution building, Turkey has enjoyed success in combating YPG insurgent activity and through facilitating demographic change to the detriment of the Afrin's native Kurdish inhabitants, has prevented potential re-emergence of Kurdish autonomy in the region for the foreseeable future.

