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Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations

Khayrallah al-Hilu

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
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Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations

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Executive Summary

Turkey has been able to assert control and extend the influence of its security services over Afrin with the help of Turkish-aligned Syrian armed factions organised under the National Army. This has taken place amidst violations by these armed factions, including acts of looting, theft, kidnapping and the requisitioning of civilian property, together with attempts to terrorise the civilian population for several months after Turkey seized control over the area, causing Kurds to flee.

The military and civilian police have greatly aided Turkey in imposing relative stability in the region security. As a result, Turkey has been able to pull strings in Afrin among the armed factions and the military and civilian police, along with their various specialised departments. Ankara has thus consolidated an atmosphere of ‘managed chaos.’ It has established a delicate balance in the security situation that provides it all the necessary means of control and intervention in the area. This has reinforced persistent fear among the local population in Afrin.

However, Ankara has not created a clear model of self-administration in Afrin. As part of the Astana process, a security understanding with Russia led to an agreement not to establish structures that could serve as alternatives or rivals to the Syrian state in the areas under Turkish control. Turkey has instead pursued a policy of ‘delegation and oversight,’ establishing local councils in which the political representation is unfair, with an over-representation of the Arab population and the manufactured representation of Turkmens as an ethnic group. Ankara has also installed a new loyalist Kurdish political elite and dismissed Kurdish technocrats from local councils.

Following the Eastern Ghouta reconciliation process in March 2018, Afrin became the main destination of opposition forces forcibly displaced from Ghouta. In addition, Ankara has attempted to fill the void left by the displacement of the Afrin Kurds by importing thousands of families of National Army fighters, including Arabs and Turkmens, and settling them in the homes vacated by Kurdish civilians.

Afrin’s agriculture-oriented economy has faced depressed conditions and failed to develop amidst the consolidation of investment plans in favour of Turkish traders. The latter have recently become active in the area, where a new market has opened up for their commercial activities. National Army leaders have also employed their capital with Syrian traders displaced from Ghouta and Homs.

Introduction

Afrin is located in north-western Syria on the Turkish border. Administratively, it constitutes part of the Governorate of Aleppo. Socially, it is one of the most enduringly Kurdish areas of Syria. It has a relatively small Arab population which has long been integrated into local Kurdish society.¹ Afrin is distinctive among the Kurdish regions of Syria for its favourable climate and abundant rainfall, which have made the area's landscape a forest of olive and fruit trees.

The Syrian regime gradually withdrew from the Afrin area and in 2013 handed it over to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkey considers this group an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and therefore a terrorist organisation. In January 2014, Afrin became one of three cantons under Kurdish self-administration.² Although it was under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a large number of displaced persons from other parts of Syria, especially from Aleppo, fled into it,³ even relocating their businesses there. The area was also spared conflict between competing armed factions, making it relatively secure. It therefore represented a better model than other areas outside the control of the Syrian regime.

The situation remained stable until February 2016, when YPG forces advanced toward several Arab towns, most notably Tall Rifaat in Aleppo Governorate. The YPG imposed its authority over these towns in an attempt to establish a corridor connecting Afrin to the eastern Euphrates through Arab areas under the control of Syrian opposition factions. Tension grew between the YPG forces and Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions, and battles continually broke out between the two sides. Animosity between Arabs and Kurds also increased as a result of actions by the Kurdish units, which shaped the behaviour of the armed factions aligned with Turkey once they took over Afrin.

Following the failure of negotiations between Moscow and the YPG, and the YPG's refusal to withdraw from the area and turn it over to the Syrian regime, the battle for Afrin broke out at the beginning of 2018.⁴ Russia could do nothing but withdraw from its small base in Kafr Jana toward the Tall Rifaat area on 19 January 2018.⁵ This was considered a green light from Russia for Turkey to launch its assault.⁶

¹ Arabs from the al-Boubana and 'Umayrat clans originally came to this area as shepherds. They adopted the Kurdish language and integrated with the local Kurds.

² At that time, the two other cantons in the self-administration were Al-Jazeera and Kobani. These cantons were then altered according to the Administrative Divisions Act of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, issued in July 2017. On developments in the self-administration, see Bader Mullah Rashid, 'The Lost Kurdish Umbrella in Syria... Between Quarrelling over Power and Brittle Agreements' (in Arabic), analytical paper (Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 20 March 2019) <http://bit.ly/2X2173T>

³ Most of these refugees came from the eastern neighbourhoods of the city of Aleppo and included a number of Christians and Armenians from the al-Midan neighbourhood, which was on the front line in the battle for Aleppo.

⁴ Despite strong U.S. support for the YPG in eastern Syria in fighting the Islamic State organisation, in July 2017 Washington informed these forces that it was not concerned with Afrin, and that the region was under Russian influence. Washington demanded that the YPG should come to a political settlement with Russia so that the region could avoid an expected Turkish attack. Interview via WhatsApp with a YPG advisor, 16 March 2019.

⁵ Russian military police deployed to Afrin on 20 March 2017 with the goal of preventing any confrontation between the YPG, Turkish forces and FSA factions, according to a statement by the Russian Ministry of Defence. For more information, see: Al Jazeera, 'Russia Has Deployed Forces in Syria's Afrin and Denies Establishment of Base' (in Arabic), 20 March 2017, <http://bit.ly/2LbZ2zS>

⁶ Abdullah Al-Darwish and Hassan Burhan, 'Turkish Agency: Russia Has Withdrawn Its Military Forces from the Afrin Area of Northern Aleppo' (in Arabic), *Smart News*, 19 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2X1phA5>. Via the Deputy Head of the Russian Federation Council Committee on Defence and Security, Frantz Klintsevich, Russia announced that "it would not intervene militarily in the case of an outbreak of a confrontation between Assad's forces and the Turkish military with the launch of the Afrin operation." Syrian Network for Print Media, 'Battle for Afrin Removes International Cover for Kurdish Forces' (in Arabic), 30 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2RuOVqW>

This Russian-Turkish understanding concerning Afrin led to a total collapse of the de-escalation zones that Turkey had guaranteed in the Astana process.⁷ Turkey launched operation ‘Olive Branch’ simultaneously with a major operation to take over territory in Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, which had been included in the de-escalation agreement. As Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the beginning of Olive Branch on 20 January 2018,⁸ the Syrian regime and Iranian militias gathered their forces around Eastern Ghouta, and Russia launched intensive airstrikes on Eastern Ghouta on 5 February 2018.

In fact, the Turkish military intervention in Afrin served the common interests of several parties. Russia sought revenge on the YPG for being an ally of the United States. After the YPG refused to hand the Afrin region over to the regime, the latter benefitted indirectly and achieved its goal of dismantling the most important Kurdish stronghold in Syria. As for Turkey, it succeeded in extending its control over a larger portion of Syrian territory.

On 23 March, Turkey announced that it had taken complete control of the Afrin region.⁹ This came after two months of violent fighting in which both sides suffered sizeable casualties. Hundreds of civilians were killed or wounded during the Turkish offensive and aerial bombardment¹⁰ and during the Turkish advance to Shahba,¹¹ to which the Kurdish forces had withdrawn.¹²

Now, more than a year since the Turkish army established control over the Afrin border region, how has Turkey transformed the administration of the area? What policies has it pursued to expand its influence? Do Turkey’s policies suggest that Ankara has achieved total hegemony in the Afrin region or that it has a plan to integrate the area into Turkey? In which fields are Turkish policies the most evident and influential?

This paper first discusses the security and military structures that Turkey has established to exert control over the region and the role played by Syrian opposition military factions. It then proceeds to examine its local governance as a means of imposing facts on the ground through the establishment of a new Turkey-linked political class and efforts to tie local councils, civil society organisations and public services directly to Turkey. The paper also examines the demographic change that took place during and after the battle for Afrin and its role in Turkey’s attempt to secure control over the area. It concludes with an examination of the rapid shifts in the local economy, the negative implications for social and political stability and Turkey’s economic strategy in this border region.

This study relies primarily on 43 interviews conducted between March and May 2019 with members of the local populace and persons who had been displaced to Afrin from Ghouta and the northern Homs countryside in 2018, with military leaders and members of armed factions loyal to Ankara and with staff of medical and aid organisations.¹³

⁷ On 4 May 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed in Astana to establish four de-escalation zones: northwest Syria (Idlib and its surroundings), the northern Homs countryside, eastern Ghouta and southern Syria.

⁸ Al Jazeera, ‘Olive Branch...’ The Battle to Recover Afrin’ (in Arabic), 20 June 2019, <http://bit.ly/2IAOnPu>

⁹ It seems that Turkey chose this date because it coincided with the 103rd anniversary of the Battle of Çanakkale, in which the Ottomans defeated Britain and France. On the occasion of the Turkish army’s victory, President Erdoğan announced in a speech: “The Turkish flag today flies over Afrin.” See: *Yeni Şafak*, ‘Erdoğan: We Have Taught a Lesson to Those Who Attempt to Establish a Terrorist State on our Border’ (in Arabic), 18 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2MqtTeb>

¹⁰ Sputnik, ‘Killing of at Least 222 Civilians Since Beginning of ‘Olive Branch’ in the City of Afrin’ (in Arabic), 10 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2WWInrg>

¹¹ The ‘Shahba region’ is the name the YPG gave to the Arab villages that it took over in 2016: Tall Rifaat and its surroundings between the areas of al-Bab and Afrin.

¹² Al Jazeera, ‘All Regions of Afrin in Hands of Turkish Army’ (in Arabic), 24 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/31cL4U8>

¹³ This paper is careful not to reveal names because of the threats to soldiers in the armed factions, civilians in Afrin and activists. It was difficult to acquire information from many active military parties and those employed by the local councils, given their fear of surveillance of communications by Turkey.

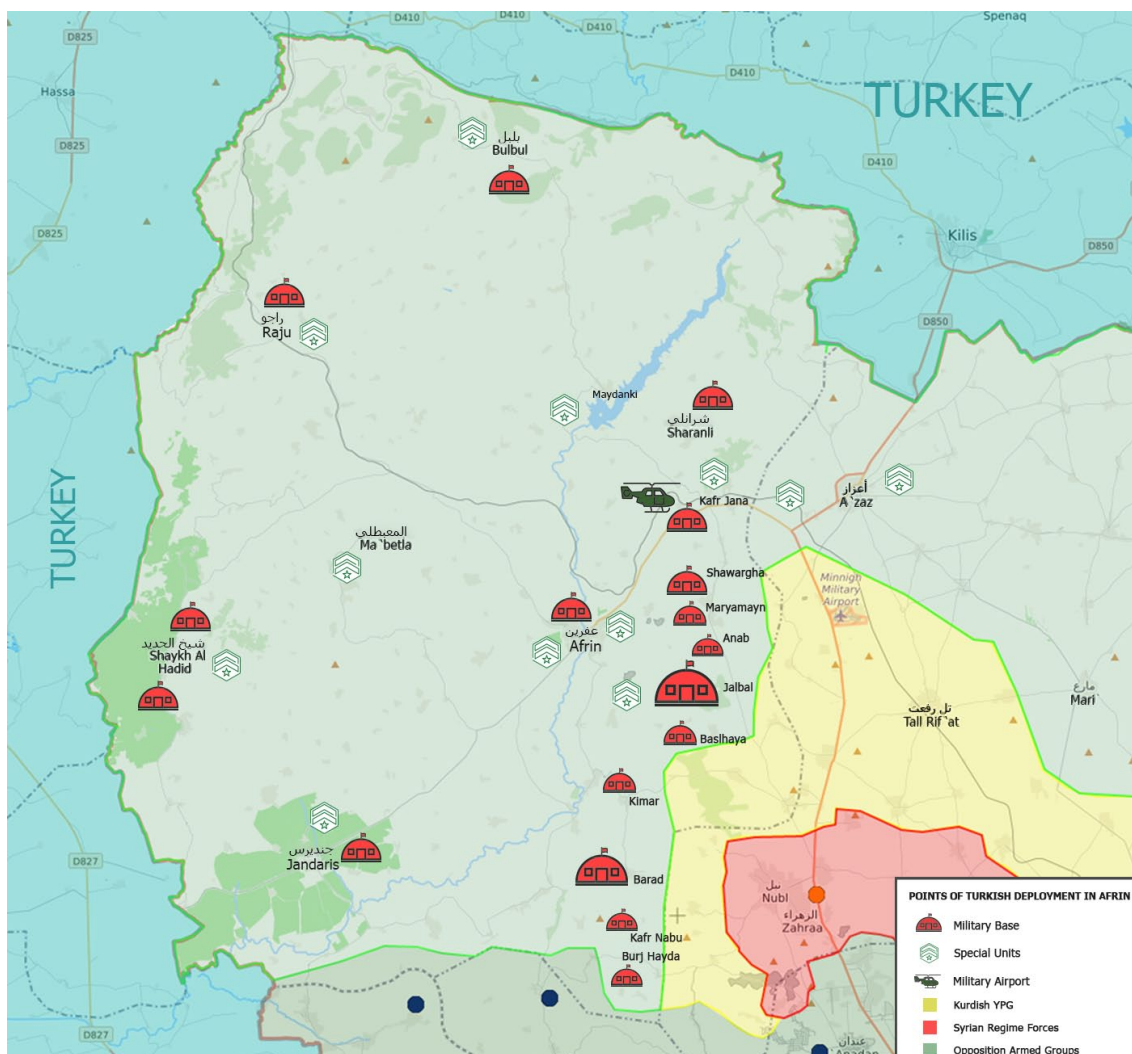
1. Building a New Military and Security System

The Syrian regime gradually retreated from Afrin in 2012, leading the YPG to take control over the entire area in 2013. The YPG then formed an internal security apparatus, the Asayish, which was equivalent to a security service and executive police force in the Afrin canton, where the Kurdish self-administration constituted the ultimate authority. This situation, which lasted six years, changed dramatically in March 2018 when Turkey directly intervened to impose its security and military authority. It also did so through Ankara-aligned Syrian armed factions, and then using military and civilian police.

1.1. Turkey: The Ultimate Authority in Afrin

Once Turkey had established control over Afrin, Turkish special units, along with the Turkish military intelligence, took over the YPG security and military headquarters and captured documents belonging to the Kurdish self-administration bodies.¹⁴ Turkey then established a large number of military command posts. At the time of writing in late June 2019, it is still constructing new military bases, some of which are located on the Turkish-Syrian border and others throughout eastern Afrin facing Shahba on the front line with Kurdish forces (see map 1). Jalbal is the largest Turkish military base in the region, followed by the Kafr Jana camp, which hosts a Turkish military helipad.

Map 1. The Turkish deployment in Afrin



Source: the author

¹⁴ Testimony by a fighter accompanying Turkish forces, Skype interview, 12 March 2019.

Furthermore, Turkey has established an intelligence station to detect and monitor YPG cells. The intelligence services also directly oversee the operations of other parties engaged in providing security in the area (see below) and constitute the ultimate authority in Afrin.

In addition, Turkey has established a Syrian Task Force affiliated with the Turkish Police Special Operations Department within the Turkish General Security Directorate. The Syrian Task Force is considered Turkey's main security force in Afrin¹⁵ and is known locally as the 'Turkish commandos.' It is made up of 12 units deployed throughout Afrin's administrative areas, but its members are subordinate to the security departments of Ankara, Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis and Adana. Turkey has also established a Syrian Special Forces Unit (the 'Syrian commandos') within the Afrin civilian police. In practice, however, this unit is under the command of Turkish intelligence. According to the testimony of two Afrin civilian police officers, this unit executes its missions alongside Turkish special forces in raids and by arresting members of Kurdish cells.

It is by these means that Turkey has established security and military centres with the aim of asserting complete control over Afrin. Turkey has simultaneously expanded the restructuring of Ankara-aligned Syrian armed factions from the 'Euphrates Shield' region¹⁶ to Afrin, incorporating them under the umbrella of the National Army.

1.2. The National Army Under Ankara's Command

Armed factions that had participated in operation 'Euphrates Shield'¹⁷ fought alongside Turkish forces in the battle for Afrin. By the end of 2017, Turkey had incorporated these factions into a so-called National Army under the supervision of the Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence. The National Army factions were initially distributed among three legions: The National Army, the Levant Front and the Sultan Murad Division.¹⁸ Later, all armed factions in areas under Turkish influence, including Jaysh al-Islam and the al-Rahman Legion (which had been expelled from Eastern Ghouta), were integrated under the banner of the National Army, and Ankara relied on them to impose control over Afrin and expel the Kurdish forces. Turkey directly supplies these armed factions with ammunition and pays wages to their fighters – which number 30,000 in both Afrin and the 'Euphrates Shield' areas – using income from the Jarablus and Bab al-Salameh crossings.

However, soon after asserting control over the area, the Turkish army allowed certain National Army factions to openly pillage the city of Afrin. Intensive looting continued for around two weeks until military police reinforcements arrived from the Azaz area. National Army factions also expropriated the property of Kurdish civilians¹⁹ who fled as fighting approached their villages, with their houses being converted into military bases, warehouses for stolen goods²⁰ and shelters for fighters and their families.

¹⁵ Anadolu, 'Turkey... 'Syrian Task Force' Continues to Maintain Security in Afrin' (in Arabic), 15 November 2019, <http://bit.ly/2KuGSZK>

¹⁶ The 'Euphrates Shield' region refers to the northern and north-eastern Aleppo countryside. This was the name of the military operation launched by Turkey in 2016 to expel the Islamic State from this area, which ended in March 2017. Among the main cities in the area are Jarablus, Azaz and al-Bab.

¹⁷ The most prominent of the Syrian opposition factions that participated in the 'Euphrates Shield' are the Levant Front, the Hamza Division, the Sham Legion, the Sultan Murad Division, the 13th Division, the Northern Division, the Mountain Hawks and the al-Mu'tasim Brigade.

¹⁸ Almodon, 'Factions of 'Euphrates Shield' Become a Regular Army' (in Arabic), 24 October 2017, <http://bit.ly/31WuYOH>. The Sultan Murad Division is the most closely aligned with Turkey. It includes Turkmen fighters and its first-rank leaders are all Turkmen.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Turkey-Backed Groups Seizing Property in Afrin' (in Arabic), 14 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2HWu3Wo>

²⁰ Amnesty International, 'Syria: Turkey Must Stop Serious Violations by Allied Groups and Its Own Forces in Afrin', 2 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2n5GAMd>

The armed factions have refused to return these houses to their original owners on the grounds of their actual or imagined support for the YPG.²¹

It is worth noting that the armed factions most closely aligned with Turkey are the same ones that have continued to commit violations against civilians. These groups are named after Ottoman sultans, such as the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade and the Sultan Murad Division, in addition to the Sham Legion, which is a Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. These armed factions are responsible for the protection of the portions of Afrin that border Turkey, which is Turkey's main priority. The Sultan Murad and Sultan Suleyman Shah armed factions have become proxies for Turkey in its military conflicts and constitute a facade for the crimes and violations generated by Turkish policy. They are motivated by financial gain, the promise of continued Turkish support and the pleasing of their Turkish backers. In contrast, Turkey has decreased its support for other armed factions in order to weaken and subdue them. These include the Levant Front, the most powerful armed faction in the 'Euphrates Shield' area, which constitutes an obstacle that has prevented Ankara from achieving hegemony there and especially in the faction's bastion in Azaz. Turkey was able to widen the influence of the National Army factions to Afrin with operation 'Olive Branch,' which allowed it to move its military power there along with more than 15,000 fighters from the 'Euphrates Shield' area in order to impose its authority and maintain security.

Turkey has thus succeeded in transforming the National Army factions into militias under its command, directing them as it sees fit. In this way it has prevented them from confronting the Syrian regime since the beginning of operation 'Euphrates Shield,' ensuring that they only go into combat with Kurdish forces. Simultaneously, Turkey has reined in the role of the National Army factions in favour of the military police, which it also commands.

1.3. Forming Military Police Units to Maintain Security

On 20 February 2018, Turkey established a military police administration in the 'Euphrates Shield' area under the control of the Syrian Interim Government's Ministry of Defence.²² to rein in excesses and violations committed there by fighters belonging to the three National Army legions.²³

Following Turkey's assertion of control over Afrin, and since the outbreak of looting and thieving by certain armed factions, the National Army command has sent Levant Front military police units from Azaz to the city of Afrin.²⁴ Large checkpoints have been erected to prevent the transportation of stolen goods from Afrin to the 'Euphrates Shield' area.

However, these small groups of military police from Azaz have not been enough to control the security situation or put a stop to looting. Instead, criticism of Turkey and the National Army factions has intensified as angry helpless individuals have seen their shops ransacked and cars stolen.²⁵

²¹ Human Rights Council, General Assembly, United Nations, 39th session, Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/39/65, 9 August 2018, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/39/65>

²² Turkey also established a central military court in the city of al-Bab and three military police centres in al-Bab, Azaz and Jarablus. These police forces are an executive implemented for the military court, run by military judges.

²³ Syria News, 'Establishment of Military Court and Police in the 'Euphrates Shield' Zone' (in Arabic), 20 February 2018, <http://bit.ly/2X2nwCY>

²⁴ Hassan Burhan, 'Military Police: Our Goals in Afrin are Control over the Security Situation and the Prevention of Violations' (in Arabic), *Smart News*, 28 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Wvx0Xe>

²⁵ Interviews conducted between 25 and 30 March 2019 with five Kurdish men from the city of Afrin, who spoke about the pillaging of their stores and homes. They claimed that soldiers from Ahrar al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sharqiya wrote the names of their factions on certain stores, and that fighters from the Sultan Murad Division and Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade looted stores in Afrin market.

Arab and international media have disseminated clips of looting in Afrin,²⁶ prompting Turkey to form cores of new military police units in the area. Most of the fighters in these units have been loaned from National Army factions, including the Sham Legion, the Sultan Murad Division, the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade and Ahrar al-Sharqiya. These are the very same armed factions implicated in the reports of looting and thieving. All these factions are made up of Arabs and Turkmens and include no Kurdish fighters.

In July 2018, the National Army Chiefs of Staff appointed a deputy to the head of the military police in the area of operation ‘Olive Branch.’²⁷ Turkey also established three branches of the military police in Afrin, Jandaris and Raju. A National Army officer and deputy were appointed to each branch.²⁸ Each branch depends on the military police administration in Afrin but has become more closely tied to the Turkish special forces or intelligence services stationed in Afrin, from which it takes direct orders.

In fact, military appointments are made jointly by Turkish authorities and the National Army Chiefs of Staff. Turkmen leaders aligned with Turkey have a consultative role in naming certain officers. The decision to keep civilians out of command positions in the military and civilian police in Afrin and the ‘Euphrates Shield’ area was essentially made by Turkish military and security officials. The situation is somewhat distinct among the factions of the three legions that constitute the National Army, as Ankara exerted pressure to ensure the appointment of a civilian to lead the Second Legion.²⁹

1.4. The Police Force and General National Security

On 23 March 2018, the *Yeni Şafak* newspaper – which is aligned with the Turkish security authorities – revealed Ankara’s plan to train 1,000 local police officers to provide security and protect the city of Afrin.³⁰ Turkey spent a month training the first cohort of 620 civilian police officers in Turkish police academies in Adana and Mersin,³¹ and then trained three additional cohorts soon afterwards.³² The police command continues to train new policemen to enrol in the police and general security forces.

Turkey has divided Afrin geographically into three police sectors – Afrin, Jandaris and Raju – which are each subdivided into precincts. This division is subject to Turkish security and military control, giving priority to protecting the borders in Raju and Jandaris and annexing inland regions to Afrin. In addition, specialised departments linked to the police command have also been put in place in Afrin, operating as police stations in each of the three main sectors.

²⁶ Alhurra (YouTube), ‘Looting and Arrests in Afrin after Turkish Forces Take Control’ (in Arabic), 19 March 2019, <http://bit.ly/2Nh8FA6>

²⁷ Appointment decision of Colonel Hassan Muhammad al-Hussayn as head of the military police for the entire area of Afrin, National Army Chiefs of Staff, Decision No. 64. Unpublished internal memorandum accessed by researcher, 23 July 2018.

²⁸ National Army Chiefs of Staff decision, No. 62. Unpublished internal memorandum accessed by researcher, 23 July 2018.

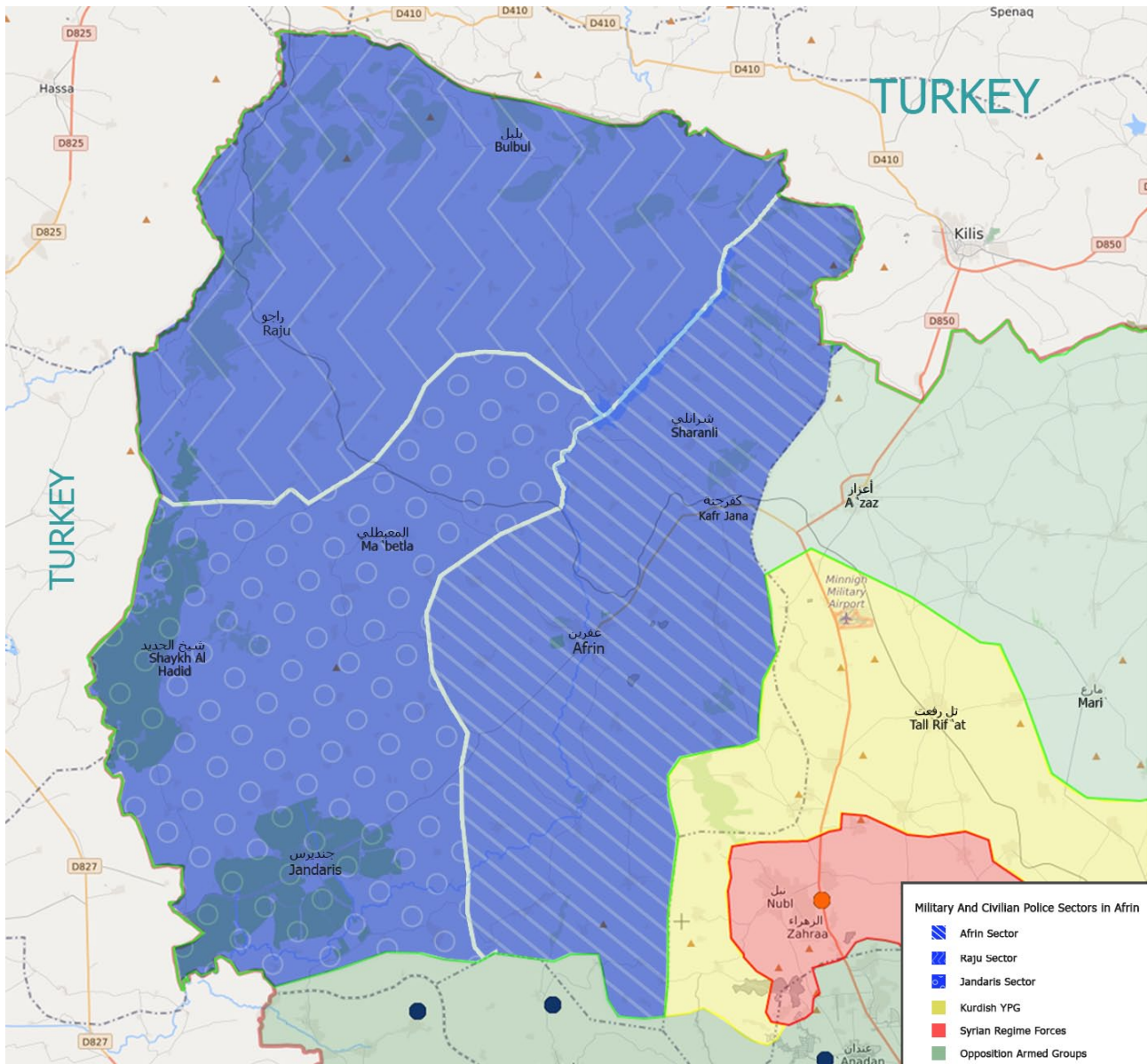
²⁹ The Second Legion includes four factions: Sultan Murad Division, Hamza Division, al-Mu’tasim Brigade and Kata’ib al-Safwa. A Turkmen, Fahim ‘Isa, was appointed as leader of the Second Legion. He is a civilian who leads the Sultan Murad Division and is close to Turkey. See also, Enab Baladi, ‘Free Syrian Army’ Forms the Second Legion of Northern Aleppo’ (in Arabic), 28 November 2017, <http://bit.ly/2FpNh5q>

³⁰ Manar Faraj and Mahmud Issa, ‘Syrian Police Soldiers Trained by Turkey Will Take over ‘Security’ in Afrin’ (in Arabic), *Yeni Şafak*, 23 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/32d9XiR>

³¹ Daily Sabah, ‘Turkey... Graduates Cohort of Police to Work in Afrin’ (in Arabic), 10 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2HYDSDC>

³² Montaser Abu Zayd, ‘Free Police in Afrin: Maintaining Internal Security,’ *Almodon*, 29 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2K1mPD1>. The second cohort, which included 800 soldiers, graduated two weeks after the first. Anadolu, ‘Awaited Afrin Police Subject to Intense Training in Turkey’ (in Arabic), 30 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2K1mPD1>

Map 2. Military and civilian police sectors in Afrin



Source: the author

Ankara appointed Lieutenant Colonel Rami Tlass, a Syrian Arab Army defector from the city of al-Rastan (Homs governorate), as leader of the police and general national security forces for the entire Afrin region.³³ The lists of applicants accepted into the police force issued in February 2019 indicate that the policemen come primarily from Eastern Ghouta and Homs, followed by individuals displaced from Idlib and Hama. The lists include only three local Arab inhabitants of Afrin, and no Kurds, among the 301 accepted.³⁴ This suggests that Turkey aims to exclude local Arabs and Kurds from the security sector, regarding them as a source of concern and remaining suspicious of their connections with the YPG.³⁵

³³ Captain Rami Tlass, who is aligned with Turkey, defected from the Syrian army in 2012. During his work in northern Syria, he was promoted by the opposition chiefs of staff. As leader of the Afrin police, he promoted himself and 12 other officers to the rank of colonel. Unpublished internal memorandum accessed by the researcher, No. 88.5, September 2018.

³⁴ 'National Police and General Security Forces in Afrin' (in Arabic), Facebook, 13 February 2019, <http://bit.ly/2Y7wr2r>

³⁵ One member of the local council in Afrin expressed Turkey's fear that YPG units could infiltrate the police forces, suggesting this as the reason why certain applicants were rejected. Interview in Gaziantep, Turkey, 17 April 2019.

This has created greater uneasiness between local residents and the *de facto* authority represented by the opposition armed factions and Turkish forces. It has also deepened the conflict between persons displaced from other parts of Syria and the Afrin Kurds.

Through its policies, Turkey has militarily succeeded in expelling the YPG from the Afrin pocket on its border and has used National Army factions to execute its security strategy, leading to the expulsion of half of Afrin's inhabitants through waves of arrests and kidnappings. Within a year, Turkish forces and Turkey-aligned Syrian armed factions have arrested more than 2,500 civilians, around 1,000 of whom were still imprisoned by March 2019.³⁶ Most of these prisoners have been accused of being members of the PYD or the YPG.³⁷ However, one activist from the area claimed that all PYD party members and YPG fighters had left the city,³⁸ and a source in the YPG alleged that none of the group's fighters had been captured in Afrin and that all such prisoners are civilians.³⁹ In addition, Ankara's role in giving the armed factions free rein has created conditions that have allowed a rise in kidnappings. Well-off civilians are being kidnapped for a ransom of 1,000 to 10,000 USD, depending upon the economic status of the victim.⁴⁰ The kidnappings have specifically targeted Kurdish civilians, but are motivated by their wealth rather than any supposed connection to the YPG. Those accused of belonging to the YPG, by contrast, are arrested and have their wealth immediately confiscated. Some individuals have been kidnapped multiple times and have paid multiple ransoms.⁴¹ In some cases, children under 18 years of age have been targeted. Activists blame networks affiliated with the armed factions for these kidnappings on the ground that these are the only armed groups in the area.⁴²

After a few months of giving the armed factions free rein, Turkey has supported military and civilian police forces in order to achieve relative security in the area. Indeed, Ankara has been able to pull strings in Afrin among the armed factions and military and civilian police, along with their various specialised departments. It has thus been able to create a form of 'managed chaos,' which it has used as it pleased, placing a Sword of Damocles over the Afrin population and thus facilitating the consolidation of its control over the security situation. Unlike in the 'Euphrates Shield' zone, where members of the armed factions and military and civilian police forces were mostly native to the region, the National Army in Afrin is made up of non-local fighters acting without local accountability or oversight. Turkey has faced difficulties in imposing a military and security end state in the 'Euphrates Shield' zone over the last three years because the fighters under its command are locals and therefore linked with the local population through kinship and clan ties, which impedes implementation of the Turkish agenda. In contrast, members of the armed factions and police forces in Afrin follow Turkish orders more strictly because they lack kinship or regional ties with the local population.

³⁶ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 'Syrian Observatory Documents the Outcome of One Year of 'Turkish Violations' in Syrian Afrin' (in Arabic), 21 January 2019, <http://bit.ly/2K0JwHI>

³⁷ According to military sources in the National Army, a large proportion of detainees remain in a prison under the control of Turkish forces in the al-Ra'i area. Interview via the Telegram application with a military leader of the armed factions of the National Army, 20 April 2019.

³⁸ Interview with S.M., a Kurdish activist living in Holland, 6 April 2019.

³⁹ Phone interview with a Kurdish researcher close to the YPG, 10 April 2019.

⁴⁰ Interviews conducted by the researcher with detainees who faced arrest and escaped by paying ransoms in Shaykh al-Hadid, which is controlled by the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade. Unpublished report, rights organisation.

⁴¹ Human Rights Organization in Afrin, daily reports, 7 March 2019, <http://bit.ly/2KwmnvP>

⁴² Unpublished report by a rights organisation examined by the researcher, and interview with Kurdish activist S.M. from Afrin, 6 April 2019.

2. Building New Local Governance Structures and a New Local Political Elite

From early 2014 until operation ‘Olive Branch,’ the Afrin area was governed in accordance with the Kurdish self-administration system.⁴³ Seventeen ‘people’s municipalities’ were established in cities, while communes in the villages and neighbourhoods were the final links in the chain of self-administration.⁴⁴ The Executive Council was the highest authority in the area, although real control remained in the hands of the YPG and the Asayish internal security forces. In Afrin as in other Kurdish areas, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) monopolised the political scene once it had eliminated rival Kurdish forces, notably the Kurdish National Council (KNC).⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the PYD funded its administration of the Afrin region using oil revenues from the Rmaylan field in Hasakah governorate, which is under YPG control and remains the most important revenue source for the Kurdish self-administration.

The battle for Afrin caused most of those employed by the bodies of the self-administration to flee, while those who remained faced the threat of arrest. All local institutions that were linked to the PYD were immediately dissolved once Turkish forces gained control over the region. New structures under direct Turkish administration have taken their place.

2.1. New Local Councils Lack Proper Representation

Even before it had announced military victory in Afrin, Turkey provided support to the Independent Syrian Kurdish Association,⁴⁶ holding a ‘Save Afrin’ conference in the city of Gaziantep on 18 March 2018 with the goal of forming a new local administration to replace the Kurdish self-administration. The conference was overseen and facilitated by the governor of Gaziantep. The attendees were limited to independent Kurdish, Arab, Alawi and Yazidi figures, together with members of the Independent Syrian Kurdish Association. The conference was not attended by the Kurdish National Council (KNC) because of its stance against the military operation,⁴⁷ or by independent youth activists, which weakened its legitimacy.

The ‘Save Afrin’ conference elected 35 people to form the local city council. Then, on 10 April 2018, Turkey established a general committee for local councils in the entire Afrin area that included local notables, independent political figures⁴⁸ and members of the Independent Syrian Kurdish Association. Ankara widened this committee to include 107 members: 100 men and 7 women.

⁴³ On 30 November 2013, the constituent assembly of the joint interim administration met in the city of Qamishli and divided Rojava into three cantons: Al-Jazeera, Ayn al-Arab/Kobani and Afrin. The self-administration was made up of an Executive Council, a Legislative Council, a Judicial Council, a High Commission for Elections, a High Constitutional Court and the Local Councils. The Executive Council was equivalent to a head of government and commanded 22 organisations equivalent to service ministries.

⁴⁴ ‘Local Administration in Syrian Kurdish Areas, Afrin as a Model’ (in Arabic), report (Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 3 July 2015), <http://bit.ly/2XcjcMN>

⁴⁵ This is a coalition that includes 14 Kurdish parties opposed to the PYD. It was established in October 2011 and joined the Syrian National Coalition in August 2013.

⁴⁶ This group aligned with Turkey and headed by Abdelaziz Temmo was established in the city of Urfa in June 2016. It is registered as an association in Turkey. It includes Kurdish opposition political activists without previous party affiliations and has minor political representation in comparison with the KNC.

⁴⁷ Yekiti Media, ‘The Kurdish National Council Affirms Its Total Rejection of the Statement by the Coalition Supporting Turkish Intervention in Afrin’ (in Arabic), 22 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2WZjCdS>

⁴⁸ The most prominent of these are the poet and political activist Hassan Shandi and the shaykh of the al-Boubana clan, Ahmad al-Nabhan.

While there were no women on the local councils in the cities of Jandaris, Raju and Shaykh al-Hadid, the councils of Afrin, Bulbul and Ma'betla each included two women, and the local council of Sharan included one.

These bodies do not actually adequately represent the makeup of local society. This is especially true in the case of the Afrin city council, where Arabs won a disproportionately large number of seats. Despite the fact that the Arab presence in the city is limited to the al-Boubana clan inhabiting a few villages on the Afrin river plain,⁴⁹ Arabs hold eight seats on the city council. In contrast, Kurds hold eleven seats, which are occupied by independents and individuals affiliated to Turkey with no political record. Despite their virtual absence from the area, Turkmens formally hold one seat, which was given to Dr. Ahmad Haji Hassan, an Ankara-aligned Arab who holds Turkish nationality and runs the medical office at the Bab al-Salameh border crossing.

On the other hand, the city council of Jandaris, which was formed on 20 April 2018, is more representative of the reality on the ground. It has fifteen members, twelve of whom are Kurds from the Independent Kurdish Coalition of Syria and three of whom are Arabs.

2.2. Powerless Local Councils and a New Ankara-Aligned Political Elite

The Turkish province of Hatay directly oversees the local councils in the Afrin area through three Turkish regional governors appointed to the security zones of Afrin, Raju and Jandaris. These officials represent the governor of Hatay and preside over the local councils in their respective areas.

The local councils are theoretically subordinate to the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), but they receive executive orders directly from Turkey. The head of Afrin city council, engineer Sa'id Sulayman, confirmed this in an interview with the newspaper *Hibr* on the nature of the relationship with the SIG. This is consistent with the testimony of a member of the local council in Afrin, who confirmed that Turkey oversees the coordination and execution of planning. This dependence on Turkey is due to the absence of the SIG, which Ankara has prevented from opening offices in Afrin.⁵⁰

The local councils in the Afrin area receive monthly allocations from Turkey via the governor of Hatay, along the lines of the local councils in the 'Euphrates Shield' zone.⁵¹ These allocations are derived from revenues from Turkish-Syrian border crossings in the area. Turkey also distributes a portion of these revenues to the National Army and allocates another portion to the repair of infrastructure.⁵²

However, Turkey has launched a series of arrests that have not been limited to individuals accused of working for the self-administration but have also targeted members of the newly established local councils. In September 2018, the president of Afrin council, Zuhayr Haydar, was arrested and dismissed from his position. On 12 August 2018, the vice president of the Shaykh al-Hadid council, Ahmad Shaykhu, was apparently killed under torture by members of the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade, several days after being arrested for demanding that several houses that had been expropriated be returned to their owners. A leader of the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade has rejected this accusation,

⁴⁹ Interviews with researchers, activists and figures from the al-Boubana and 'Umayrat clans in Afrin, February 2019.

⁵⁰ Interview with a member of Afrin local city council, 21 April 2019.

⁵¹ The governor of Kilis oversees the region of Azaz, the governor of Gaziantep the regions of Jarablus and al-Bab, and the governor of Hatay the region of Afrin.

⁵² According to financial statements for the Afrin city council examined by the researcher, between 27 and 30 May 2019 employees received wages in Turkish lira as follows: the president of the council, 2000 lira (350 USD); members of the council, 1300 lira (225 USD); and employees, administrators and labourers, between 550 lira (100 USD) and 900 lira (160 USD).

claiming that the detainee died of an asthma attack.⁵³ In early May 2019, the Jandarîs military police arrested Jîkrkhuîn Isma'îl, a member of the local council, and turned him over to Turkish intelligence without disclosing the reason for his arrest.

The removal of all previous self-administration employees in the Afrin area, the suppression and arrest of KNC members and the arrest of local council members who were fundamentally aligned with Turkey but criticised the behaviour and daily practices of the armed factions has led to the exclusion of well-known political actors. It has also led to the formation of a new Kurdish political elite oriented around clientelism. It is tied directly to Turkey and benefits from its protection and from the absence of rivals. This elite includes figures who were previously unknown in the Kurdish scene in Afrin: notably Sa'id Sulayman, the current president of Afrin city council; Husayn Mustafa, vice president of the 'Save Afrin' conference; Dr. Ahmad Haji Hassan, an Arab with Turkish nationality who serves as president of the medical office on Afrin city council; and 'Abd al-Nassir Hassu, a Turkmen with Turkish nationality who serves as president of the Afrin Chamber of Industry and Commerce. This suggests how firm the link between this class and Turkish security policymakers has become. Turkey's policy has also encouraged the consolidation of the role of Turkmens in areas outside regime control. The appointment of the Turkmen 'Abd al-Rahman Mustafa as president of the SIG on 27 June 2019 might accelerate the Turkification of the 'Euphrates Shield' zone and the area around Afrin.

In parallel with the establishment of the military and civilian police and the formation of the local administration in Afrin, Turkey has made demonstrating its capacity to provide regular services to the population of Afrin a major priority.

2.3. The Provision of Public Services

As it had previously done in Azaz and al-Bab, Turkey has provided security and basic services like health care, aid, education and water. It has also tried to provide a continuous electricity supply. In Afrin, Turkey has directly supervised service provision carried out exclusively by local councils with mainly Ankara-aligned Kurdish members. The SIG has therefore been limited to a merely symbolic role in this field.

As far as security is concerned, police and general national security forces have been placed under the oversight of local councils that operate as executive authorities regulating procedural matters. For instance, the local council is responsible for dealing with traffic violations, imposing fines and collecting fees, including those imposed on agricultural yields. These taxes are returned to the local council on collection by the police. Criminal police refer criminal matters to civilian courts that Turkey staffs and administers, although these courts retain some independence. They apply 'unified Arab law'⁵⁴ and are run on the model of courts of law by specialised judges rather than local shaykhs.

Turkish authorities have also taken up the role of intermediaries between civil society, humanitarian and aid organisations, and the local councils, matching the aid provided by the former to the needs of the latter. The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) coordinates aid work in the Afrin area and aid organisations require its approval to distribute aid in the area. In fact, AFAD plays the role of coordinator between these organisations and local councils. Other relief organisations

⁵³ Obaidah Al-Nabawani, 'Accusations of the Killing of an Individual Under Torture Following His Arrest by the 'National Army' in Afrin' (in Arabic), *Smart News*, 13 June 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Wn2wSO>

⁵⁴ Unified Arab penal law is a legal project developed by the Arab League's Arab Centre for Legal and Judicial Studies. It is a pilot project that has not been implemented in any Arab state but it has been implemented in areas outside regime control. See the website of the Arab Centre for Legal and Judicial Studies, 'Unified Arab Penal Law' (in Arabic), 19 November 1996, <http://bit.ly/2RsXqmD>

active in the area include the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH),⁵⁵ the Turkish Red Crescent and a number of other Turkish organisations, such as Hayat and Physicians Across Continents Turkey, which work in the medical and humanitarian fields.

Syrian humanitarian organisations work under direct Turkish supervision. One such example is the Al-Amin organisation, which works in the health, aid and educational fields and has special status with the Turkish authorities.⁵⁶ The second tier among aid organisations is occupied by Bahar, the Syrian American Medical Society, White Hands and Ihsan.

In the medical field, the Provincial Directorate of Health in Hatay oversees medical organisations operating in Afrin, granting licenses to hospitals, medical centres and clinics. It also repaired and operates Afrin's main hospital. It appointed a Turkish director to head the hospital and pays the wages of its employees.⁵⁷

In the field of education, the Turkish authorities have eliminated the Kurdish curriculum imposed by the self-administration and replaced it with that of the SIG's Ministry of Education. Two textbooks teaching the Turkish and Kurdish languages have been added as optional courses. The Hatay Directorate of Education oversees the local councils' offices of education, which pay the salaries of teachers and other employees in the education sector. Teachers are paid a salary of 1500 Turkish lira per month, two thirds of which are paid by the Al-Amin organisation and the remaining third by the Turkish government, which allocates these funds from revenues from border crossings. Moreover, the Turkish authorities have attempted to achieve stability in the education system by repairing schools, providing opportunities for university studies (as they have done in the 'Euphrates Shield' zone and Idlib) and accepting local students into Turkish universities.

As for electricity, Turkey is working to repair the grid to restore power using massive generators. It has done the same in the cities of Azaz and al-Bab, where it contracted with two Turkish energy companies, ET Energy and AK energy Ltdşti, which have succeeded in providing constant electricity. Work is currently under way to provide power to the city of Jarablus using the same model. The city of Afrin is expected to have constant electricity by August 2019, although no Turkish investor for this project has yet been announced.

Providing such necessary services and expanding employment opportunities should undoubtedly make the local Kurdish population and displaced Arabs highly dependent on Turkey and local actors loyal to it. Turkey has actually been more successful in extending its authority over a number of councils in the Afrin area, especially the major ones, than in the 'Euphrates Shield' zone. Nevertheless, it meets serious opposition to certain of its decisions and actions from supporters of the Syrian revolution who still regard the Turkish role with a great deal of hesitation.

The status of the local governance structures in the Afrin and 'Euphrates Shield' areas intersects with Turkey's refusal to delegate any serious political role to the opposition SIG. This stems from Ankara's preference to administer the area based on understandings with Russia that stipulate that no opposition-led institutions can be established in territories under the control of Turkish forces.

⁵⁵ It supports bakeries and some camps, cares for orphans and sponsors several health centres. It operates ten centres in Syria in the area of operation 'Euphrates Shield' and Afrin.

⁵⁶ The Al-Amin organisation for Humanitarian Support was established in Gaziantep, Syria, in mid-2012. It is a partner of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). It is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is the Syrian institution that receives more Turkish political support than any other organisation in Afrin. It also receives major support from the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center. The institution's website can be found at <http://bit.ly/2IXO3Yc>

⁵⁷ Interview with a doctor in Afrin. This hospital was a YPG military infirmary when it was first built. Turkey then repurposed the facility after gaining control over Afrin in March 2018.

3. Demographic Changes

The issue of demographic change in Afrin has not yet attracted significant attention, in part because Turkish control over the local security services makes it nearly impossible for Syrian research organisations to operate there, and in part because the civilian population has become a pawn in attempts at political polarisation and in media spats between Turkey and the YPG. The IMPACT organisation has published one of only a few reports covering demographic shifts in Afrin.⁵⁸ On the one hand, the YPG is held responsible for preventing Kurds from returning to Afrin, while both Turkey and its allied armed factions are pushing them to leave by tightening security measures against them. Kidnappings have also forced many victims to pay ransoms and then flee from Afrin to more secure areas like Minbij and east of the Euphrates. On the other hand, the movement of forcibly displaced people from Ghouta, Homs and Daraa to Afrin might be considered part of a Turkish plan to settle these groups permanently, with the aim of shifting the ethnic population structure in favour of Arabs and Turkmens.

3.1. Native Inhabitants Before, During and After the Battle for Afrin

According to the 2012 census, the population of the Afrin area was 523,258. The total number of residents was estimated at around half a million before operation ‘Olive Branch.’ The local Kurdish population was estimated at around 350,000. This low figure can be explained by the relocation of large numbers of people to the city of Aleppo, the flight of many politicians and activists opposed to the PYD and attempts by other Kurds to avoid conscription. In addition, around 150,000 persons displaced from other parts of Syria, including individuals who fled from eastern Aleppo because of fighting in 2012 and 2013, were living in Afrin. These displaced people were hosted by the local population at the beginning. After the YPG took control of Afrin, the Asayish imposed old rental contracts and a sponsorship system for those who had come for visits or temporary work.⁵⁹

According to the United Nations, the YPG prevented civilians from fleeing toward Aleppo in the first month of the Turkish assault on Afrin.⁶⁰ The group refused to open the road to allow an exodus toward the areas of Shahba and Tall Rifaat to the east of Afrin until several days before Turkish forces and National Army factions advanced to the city of Afrin. Turkish media accused the YPG of using civilians as human shields,⁶¹ and one Kurdish activist corroborated this accusation.⁶²

Following Turkey’s assertion of control, displaced persons in the Shahba area – under YPG control – found themselves under pressure on three sides. First, the Syrian regime prevented a flow of tens of thousands of displaced persons to the city of Aleppo⁶³ in an attempt to invest politically in the Kurdish card.

⁵⁸ ‘Socioeconomic Impact of Displacement Waves in Northern Syria. Case study: Challenges in Daily Living for the Communities in Afrin District, Azaz and al-Bab’, report (Berlin: Impact, May 2019), <http://bit.ly/2J1vsvC>

⁵⁹ Manaf Quman, ‘Residency Conditions in Areas Under Control of Kurdish militias Tougher than in Refugee-Hosting States’ (in Arabic), *Noon Post*, 16 May 2016, <http://bit.ly/2WQ33Au>

⁶⁰ Smart News, ‘United Nations: Reports that ‘Self-Administration’ and Regime Preventing People from Fleeing the Afrin Area’ (in Arabic), 31 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/2WfffGj>

⁶¹ Al Jazeera, ‘YPG Takes Up Position in Afrin and Prevents Population from Fleeing’ (in Arabic), 12 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2XLuvRc>

⁶² Interview with Kurdish activist S.M. conducted in Holland, April 2019.

⁶³ Al Jazeera, ‘[Human Rights] Watch: Damascus Prevents Entry of People Fleeing Afrin’ (in Arabic), 8 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2QMrnhb>

However, a small minority of displaced persons were able to pay large bribes to regime forces to cross through checkpoints into Aleppo.⁶⁴ The regime forces only allowed inhabitants of Aleppo city – among them, Christians and Armenians resident in Afrin who carried civilian personal identification issued in Aleppo – to cross but they did not allow individuals who carried IDs issued in Afrin to cross. Second, the YPG prevented these populations from returning to their homes and villages in Afrin after the Turkish army and armed opposition factions took control of the area.⁶⁵ Finally, the Turkish forces and armed factions also stopped them from sneaking into the area along branch roads from Shahba to Afrin. A small proportion of people were able to cross, however, after paying bribes to the armed factions positioned on the front between Afrin and the Shahba area.

According to data verified by a rights organisation in January 2019, 150,000 Afrin Kurds remained in a state of forced displacement,⁶⁶ including around 70,000 children and 45,000 women. The number of people displaced from Afrin include more than 5,000 who have become refugees outside Syria, in addition to around 145,000 internally displaced persons. These include 60,000 people, making up 12,500 families, in camps in the Shahba area (Berkhdan, Serdem, Afrin and Shahba camps) north of Aleppo.

Although police commanders and local councils have not reported any statistics on the number of Kurds remaining in Afrin, Kurdish activists suggest that in late April 2019 around 150,000 remained in the area, as opposed to around 350,000 Kurdish recorded in the unofficial census in 2018.⁶⁷ This suggests that more than half of Afrin's Kurd population was displaced in two stages: first, during the period when the YPG controlled the region, and then more broadly after operation 'Olive Branch.' The exodus of youths has deprived local councils and aid organisations of members from this segment of the population. The security situation has prevented meaningful mobilisation against the armed factions because of the threat that any such activism would result in accusations of belonging to the PYD.

3.2. Resettling Forcibly Displaced Persons from Ghouta and Homs

Following the surrender of opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta in April 2018 and in the northern Homs countryside in May 2018, and the expulsion of armed factions to the northern Aleppo countryside, Turkey took the opportunity to resettle displaced persons in the Afrin area. Ankara justified the resettlement of these people by arguing that they had been expelled from their homes. Many people were relocated from the al-Bab area to Afrin.⁶⁸ These displaced persons give mixed accounts of their treatment by the Turkish forces and the National Army: some suggest that they received good treatment in Afrin while others complain that they were dealt with poorly in the al-Bab area as a means to encourage them to relocate to Afrin.⁶⁹

According to a precise unpublished census conducted by Afrin local council at the end of May 2019, the number of people displaced to Afrin had reached 87,936. Displaced persons from Ghouta and Aleppo Governorate respectively represented 51 percent and 20 percent of this group.

⁶⁴ Bribes reached as much as 2,000 USD per person. Hassan Burhan, 'Flight from Afrin to Aleppo city: 'Smuggling Trip from Another State' (in Arabic), *Smart News*, 17 February 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Xq52rX>

⁶⁵ Qasioun, 'YPG Prevents Afrin Population from Returning Home' (in Arabic), 24 March 2018.

⁶⁶ Rights organisation, final draft of unpublished report that the researcher was able to examine, 24 March 2019.

⁶⁷ Al Jazeera, 'Afrin... A Syrian city Turkey Wants to Purge of Terrorist Organizations' (in Arabic), 14 January 2018, <http://bit.ly/31eMLAz>. Activists and inhabitants interviewed by the researcher agreed on this number.

⁶⁸ Interview with a member of the committee of displaced people from Eastern Ghouta, 6 June 2019.

⁶⁹ Interview with a member of the committee of displaced people from Douma. Interview with a media activist from the northern Homs countryside, 8 May 2019.

One could add these figures to the 2600 families who had fled fighting in the northern Hama countryside to Afrin by late May 2019. The Sultan Murad Division has also relocated its fighters' families from the 'Euphrates Shield' zone to Sharan, which is under its control. Another 600 displaced families have relocated from the Albil camp to the east of Azaz, and there are an estimated 600 Turkmen families in the area too.

Turkish policy has affected displaced persons from Ghouta, Homs, Deir Ez-Zor and other areas. On 17 May 2019, Turkey dissolved the committees of the displaced,⁷⁰ which had been providing identification documents and residency permits to displaced persons with the goal of preserving their original civil registration. These persons have thus been forced to acquire IDs from the registry of the Afrin local council, which they perceive as a step towards settling them once and for all in the area, alienating them from their homes and depriving them of their right to return in the future.

4. Changes in the Economic System

Afrin's economy has been in recession since Turkey gained control over the area, and its economic activity has been linked to armed faction leaders and their networks. A large number of small industrial facilities, workshops and professional offices owned by displaced persons from Aleppo – especially Armenians and other Christians – have shut down. Turkey has also avoided engaging in any development activities, opening a large market for Turkish traders to sell their products.

4.1. Hampering Agricultural and Industrial Production

Agriculture constitutes the major source of livelihood in Afrin: 75 percent of the population worked in this sector before 2011.⁷¹ Indeed, Afrin stands out in Syria for its millions of olive trees.⁷² Afrin's olive oil was traditionally smuggled into Turkey via local and Turkish networks until the YPG took control of the area and Turkey constructed its wall along the Syrian border.⁷³ After Turkey asserted its control over the area, the region's olive oil industry faced an organised campaign of looting by National Army factions. In 2018, almost 70 million euros worth of olive oil were transported and sold by Turkish companies in European markets.⁷⁴

After March 2018, local councils quickly imposed a requirement that farmers secure their permission to harvest their crops and pay a new tax of around 10 percent. Armed factions have also forced farmers to give up a portion of their olives and olive oil at checkpoints, imposing duties upon farmers on their way to their lands. These policies have even led some farmers to avoid collecting their harvests.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Jisr, 'Turkey Decides to Close the Offices of the Displaced in Afrin Area' (in Arabic), 17 May 2019, <http://bit.ly/2K0UOLE>

⁷¹ Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), status report, 'Afrin Area, the Social, Political and Economic Situation,' January 2019.

⁷² BBC Arabic, 'War in Syria: Olives of Afrin Have Become a 'Source of Income' for Armed Groups' (in Arabic), 20 January 2019, <https://bbc.in/2JYKuUt>

⁷³ In August 2015, Turkey began to build a concrete wall to prevent the flow of refugees, keep Islamic State forces from entering Turkish territory and prevent smuggling networks. The 711-km wall goes through rural Idlib, Afrin, northern Aleppo and portions of the provinces of Raqqqa and Hasakah.

⁷⁴ The Telegraph, 'Turkey Accused of Plundering Olive Oil from Syria to Sell in the EU,' 14 January 2019, <http://bit.ly/2QO9Vsy>

⁷⁵ Interview with 'Abu 'Adnan,' an olive orchard owner in Shaykh al-Hadid, controlled by the Sultan Suleyman Shah Brigade, who refrained from collecting his olives, on 18 May 2019.

National Army factions have also seized orchards from farmers, accusing them of being YPG members. Moreover, a 20 percent tax was imposed on absent and displaced owners of orchards until their relatives could secure the consent of the local council to harvest the crops from the orchards. The olive orchards of farmers who have been displaced and who have been unable to delegate the task of harvesting to family members have remained under the control of armed factions. Later, the National Army Chiefs of Staff ordered the armed factions to turn these orchards over to the local councils⁷⁶ in order to have them harvested and to resolve unaddressed matters with the owners or their relatives. This step was taken to minimise public criticism of the armed factions, but it also constituted a step by Turkey to fund the local councils with proceeds from the olive harvest. Nevertheless, many armed factions have refused to hand the orchards over to the local councils. Instead, they collect the harvest by force of arms,⁷⁷ employing displaced persons who need such work to survive.

In addition, the Turkish army has bulldozed some agricultural fields in order to expand its camps and headquarters, and also those of the armed factions. However, Turkey justifies these actions under the pretext that the fields had been used to store weaponry and as hideouts for YPG cells, especially in the areas bordering the forests of Raju, north of Afrin.

As for the manufacturing sector in Afrin, it is primarily concentrated around olives. Prior to 2011, there were an estimated 186 olive presses in the area.⁷⁸ There were also 12 soap factories that manufactured soap using olive pomace, and 17 factories for the production of olive pomace oil used in heating.

Beyond collecting taxes in cash and kind, the armed factions seized some olive presses or stole their equipment, sometimes forcing the owners to pay exorbitant sums to recover them and begin using them again from the winter of 2018. This also happened with factories producing olive pomace oil, plastic bags, watering pipes, tin, pickles and honey, together with tourist restaurants in Kafr Jana, Maydanki and Bassouta.

4.2. New Partnerships

The new reality on the ground has led traders and manufacturers in Afrin to establish partnerships with armed factions to protect their interests. This has been especially true for owners of soap and olive pomace oil factories and olive oil presses. In these arrangements, the armed faction provides direct or indirect protection of the facility, preventing other armed factions from extorting the owners or looting the facility. This protection is provided in exchange for a share of the profits or an agreed sum.⁷⁹ The Kefo company is one of the best examples of these partnerships.⁸⁰ Factories with owners who have refused to pay protection fees have remained closed and face daily threats of extortion from armed factions.

These partnerships not only include Kurdish traders but also traders displaced from other parts of Syria. Therefore, a new class of traders has emerged that is connected to leaders of armed factions rather than Turkey. These new traders are especially involved in household appliances and construction materials, and have tried to build partnerships with armed faction leaders as a means of increasing their capital and guaranteeing their protection.

⁷⁶ Ro'a Yahya, 'Afrin... Local Councils Responsible for Olives' (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 20 September 2019, <http://bit.ly/2MsLFh5>

⁷⁷ BBC Arabic, 'The War in Syria' (in Arabic), 20 January 2019, <https://bbc.in/2JYKuUt>

⁷⁸ Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), status report, 'Afrin Area, the Social, Political and Economic Situation,' January 2019.

⁷⁹ Interview with a factory owner who said that most owners of factories and facilities pay fees to guarantee their security and continued operation. Interview via Facebook Messenger, 4 May 2019.

⁸⁰ Kefo, manufacturer of coal tar soap, owned by the industrialist Jingiz Kefo, is the largest company producing soap in Afrin.

On the other hand, armed faction leaders have been eager to employ their own capital with traders, industrialists and moneychangers, and make new investments. They are aided by the fact that their capital is guaranteed by their own status as the *de facto* authorities in the region. Although these partnerships are not yet obvious, they are likely to expand and become more apparent with the opening of the Jandaris crossing.

Originally established by Turkey for humanitarian purposes, the Jandaris crossing will apparently be used to facilitate trade with Syria, attracting Syrian traders and moving activity from Sarmada and al-Dana to Jandaris due to its proximity to Idlib and the city of Afrin. If Syrian transit routes or the land route to the Gulf are reopened, Jandaris will constitute the point of entry for Turkish goods into regime-held territory.

4.3. Establishing a Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Turkey is encouraging Turkish investors, such as construction companies in the city of al-Bab, to operate in Syria and invest in the electrical power sector. Ankara has an interest in opening the Afrin market to members of the Turkish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, especially in the construction sector, given the large demand for housing caused by the growing number of displaced persons in Afrin.

To this end, Ankara supported the formation on 11 February 2019 of a Chamber of Commerce and Industry belonging to the Afrin local council. The chamber is headed by the Turkmen ‘Abd al-Nassir Hassu, who is close to Ankara. The chamber has announced that it is ready to receive applications for membership, but has set conditions that the investors’ investments be limited to the Afrin area and that they have an account in a Turkish bank or the Turkish Post Office (PTT). It will begin giving permission to enter and exit Syria via the Jandaris crossing once it officially opens.⁸¹ By the end of June 2019, the chamber included 216 members, most of whom were Arab and Turkmen traders who had relocated to Afrin and were currently residing there. Most of them are, in fact, small traders – none are well-known traders or major investors.⁸²

On 29 April 2019, Hatay Province sponsored a conference for Afrin businessmen for the Afrin and Hatay Chambers of Commerce and Industry under the slogan ‘Together we work to build a future Syria.’ The conference aimed to increase trade via the Jandaris crossing up to 100 million USD annually in its next phase of operation.⁸³

Similar to what it has done at the ‘Euphrates Shield’ zone crossings, Turkey collects taxes at the new Jandaris crossing in Afrin in US dollars (around 2 million USD per month) and pays the salaries of employees in those areas in Turkish lira. This provides support, however limited, for the lira as a currency. Moreover, in order to manage financial transfers, Turkey has opened a branch of the PTT in Afrin, which delivers transfers, originally sent in foreign currencies, in Turkish lira, pumping hard currency into the Turkish treasury. It is unclear, however, if these expenditures on financial support for police forces, hospitals, education and aid come only from Turkey’s revenues from border crossings or from Qatari aid.

⁸¹ Afrin Local Council, ‘Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Afrin to Start Registering Industrialists and Traders on 23 February 2019’ (in Arabic), Facebook, 20 February 2019, <http://bit.ly/2Z31tZg>

⁸² Interview with a member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Afrin, in the Turkish city of Reyhanli, 8 August 2019.

⁸³ Kizil Elma, ‘Meeting of Afrin Businessmen and Turkish Investors in Turkish Province of Hatay’ (in Arabic), *Euphrates New Agency*, 30 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2WqlgoR>

Ankara is also encouraging Turkish business investment by opening a new market for Turkish investors. Afrin had previously depended on the regime's market in Aleppo, and Turkey was long excluded from the Afrin market for years due to the YPG's control over the area.

Due to the unstable security situation, Afrin has not yet been made attractive to major industrialists and Turkey has not yet established industrial zones as it did in the 'Euphrates Shield' region in places like Azaz and al-Bab. However, Ankara has contributed to the restoration of infrastructure, such as the construction of the Maydanki dam, which supplies the city of Afrin and many neighbouring areas with drinking water, after it was damaged during military operations in January 2018. Turkey has also repaired damage to major roads, including the Bassouta-Afrin and Jandaris-Afrin routes.

However, Ankara seems to exhibit little interest in reviving industrial facilities that have ceased operation or were partially damaged during combat, and whose owners have had to resort to paying armed factions for protection agreements. Turkey seems to be erasing Afrin's pre-2018 economy and building new partnerships that it dominates, seeking to place Turkish capital at the core of the local economy so that Afrin simply becomes a market for trading rather than engaging in any local development. Indeed, Ankara seems to be attempting to limit the area's productive capacities, for example in the olive sector.

A war economy based on theft, expropriation of land and kidnapping remains in the hands of the leaders of armed factions and their networks, all under Turkish control. The blind eye that Turkish forces turn toward the armed factions' practices deepens their involvement, and the armed factions' dependence on Turkey has reduced them to mercenaries.

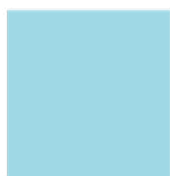
Conclusion

A year after its military intervention, Turkey has succeeded in asserting a great deal of control over Afrin using a variety of means to pursue its harsh and clear policy. Its most important instrument has been security, which it has tried to maintain by strengthening the military police under its command to assert hegemony over the armed factions. It has likewise used the civilian police to assert its control over civilian life. Ankara has also managed to push out the YPG and subjugate the armed factions of the National Army. At this point, no force is now strong enough to challenge Turkey or its perceived violations in the area.

Turkey has imposed a subtle demographic shift by importing new Arab refugee populations to supplant displaced Kurds. It has asserted control over the local councils and effected changes within them, imposing an unfair system for representing the area's ethnic and religious elements. It has also followed an economic policy that aims to connect the region directly to Turkish investors. It is therefore anticipated that major Turkish companies will arrive in Afrin soon, although so far no contracts have been signed with Ankara or the local councils. Deliberations in this field have only just begun after the businessmen's conference held in Afrin in April 2019.

Furthermore, Ankara has appointed Kurds aligned with it to civilian and military positions and administrations and provided major humanitarian and aid support. It is also responsible for maintaining local security and through the Russian-Turkish accord ensuring that Russia does not bombard the area.

Finally, it has been working quickly and quietly to Turkify the region, with the goal of linking Afrin to Turkey in the medium term, taking into account all possible outcomes of the Syrian conflict. If Syria moves towards partition, then Ankara has already taken its share. And in the case of a political solution, it is now guaranteed a major influence inside Syria. However, Turkey's current role in Afrin remains dependent on its relationship with Russia, which now constitutes the only obstacle to total Turkish domination of the area.



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