



Stability, Security, and Justice in Afrin, Syria: Background

In January 2018, the Turkish Armed Forces and several Syrian rebel militias launched an attack on the peaceful Northwestern Syrian region of Afrin. Afrin, home to Syria's oldest Kurdish community along with significant Yezidi, Alevi, and Christian minorities, had been nearly untouched by eight years of war. Under the Democratic Autonomous Administration, its economy [grew](#), its people [participated](#) in local democratic structures, and Syrians fleeing war in other parts of the country were able to seek refuge.

Turkey sought to gain control of the region in order to implement a campaign of forced demographic change that would benefit Turkish strategic goals in Northwest Syria. As the operation began, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [stated](#) falsely that the historically Kurdish region was majority-Arab, and that Turkey sought to "return" it to its "original owners." Members of Turkish-backed jihadist militias involved in the operation [threatened](#) to behead "infidel Kurds."

Occupying forces took control of the center of Afrin City on March 18th. By that time, airstrikes had devastated much of the region, and over 200,000 of Afrin's 323,000 pre-invasion residents had been [displaced](#). Reports of [looting](#), [kidnappings](#), [forced](#) religious conversions, and [destruction](#) of historic and [cultural](#) sites belonging to Afrin's diverse indigenous populations began to pour out of occupied Afrin almost immediately. This humanitarian crisis was not the only consequence of the attack. In late 2018, Department of Defense found in late 2018 that the invasion [strengthened](#) al-Qaeda and ISIS.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have repeatedly stated that any just solution to the Syrian conflict requires an end to the occupation of Afrin. SDF General Commander Mazlum Kobane [stated](#) recently that "if the Turkish state wants a political solution, it must return Afrin to its people. Without the return of the people of Afrin to their homes and restoring Afrin's normal status, we cannot reach a solution."

Turkish officials, meanwhile, continue to openly discuss their efforts towards demographic change. Recent figures [suggest](#) that up to 300,000 people may have been moved into Afrin— suggesting that Turkey has effectively removed and replaced its original population. Many of these occupiers are not vulnerable civilians, but members of Turkish-backed militias with links to al-Qaeda and ISIS. This population transfer [violates](#) international law, and meets United Nations definitions of [ethnic cleansing](#). Occupying forces have also begun construction of a [wall](#) intended to separate Afrin from the rest of Syria, in a violation of the country's sovereignty.

There can be no true peace and stability in Syria until all occupying forces leave Afrin; all displaced Afrin residents are allowed to return to their homes and receive compensation for injuries and material losses resulting from Operation Olive Branch; and all individuals and entities responsible for the invasion, occupation, and crimes committed therein face justice.