

سورية اراپ جومهورىيىتى سايونما باكانلىرى  
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ع الشرطة العسكرية  
فوق راس العين

## **SNA atrocities in Turkish-occupied Ras al-Ain, Tel Abyad in north Syria**

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## **Introduction and Methodology:**

Scores of secret and public prison or as locally called ‘Slaughter Houses’ are located in Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) and Tel Abyad in northern Syria, held by Turkish forces and Turkish-backed armed opposition factions, also known as the Syrian National Army (SNA). These factions have been committing horrifying violations against detainees ever since they took control of the two regions following a Turkish invasion in 2019.

The forcibly detained go through terrifying torture, verbal and physical abuse, and inhumane and humiliating treatment. They are starved, not permitted to contact their relatives and denied their right to proper health care and legal representation. These factions violated the detainees’ right to life and killed hundreds under torture or by shooting.

These violations against human rights amount to war crimes according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. This method is adopted by SNA factions in all regions under their control without any regard to the lives of prisoners or their rights. The absence of monitoring and the facilitation of impunity for perpetrators, in addition to being constantly supported and assisted by Turkey, may cause more tragic killing of detainees.

These prisons are rife with torture and abuse, carried out on the orders of faction leaders without any legal accountability. This lack of consequences means that the perpetrators can continue to commit crimes with impunity.

Turkey has seized these regions and sponsored the armed factions, hence must take full responsibility for these heinous crimes against detainees. Being one of the signatory and ratifying states on the 1984 Convention against Torture, it must also interfere to put an end to these serious human rights violations in SNA prisons. It is imperative that those responsible for these heinous crimes are held accountable. Justice must be served for the victims, and the human rights of all detainees must be respected and safeguarded.

From May to July 2023, the Monitoring and Documentation Department of North Press interviewed 24 individuals, including two former detainees, two relatives of other detainees, eight civilians residing in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad who witnessed several incidents and arrests, six SNA militants, as well as human rights activists and individuals knowledgeable about detention mechanisms and torture circumstances in both areas.

The interviews mentioned in the report were conducted online. The obtained information were examined and compared to several reports and relevant human right and media investigations.

The Department obtained a list of names of detainees in some prisons in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad in addition to the coordinates of some secret prisons located far from inhabited areas. All these information were confirmed through comparing them to exclusive and open sources.

It is worth mentioning that all names listed in the report are pseudonyms for safety and security reasons.

## Survivors' tales

### Inhumane detention conditions

“For five consecutive days, my brother Karim who has diabetes was abused and tortured constantly for eight months in one of the secret prisons of Sultan Murad faction in Sere Kaniye. After he went missing for eight months, we found him passed out in the street. My brother Karim died as a result of torture and ill-treatment and because they denied him his medication,” Karim’s brother, Salem al-Ahmad said.

Karim was arrested by the Sultan Murad faction in his house in front of his wife and children in the summer of 2022 after refusing to sell his land to one of the faction’s security leaders. However, the charge was smuggling members of the Syrian Democratic (SDF) into Turkey.

Salem added, “Before he died, my brother told me how they tortured him. They hanged him by the hands with a metal chain to the ceiling. Then, several militants started to beat him. He stayed hanged for five days, releasing him only twice. They did not give him his medicine too.”

“My brother’s body was covered in severe wounds and scars caused by torture. He also lost sensation in one

of his hands as a result of torture and electrocution. He was allowed only a loaf of bread every 24 hours or more," he added.

After eight months, one of the factions in the countryside of Sere Kaniye found the man on a street in an area near the city. "We took him to the hospital. He was in an extremely bad condition. After staying for months in the hospital, he died as a result of damage to his vital organs due to untreated and repeated diabetic seizures and malnutrition. Although the faction assured us that they were investigating my brother's case, they listed the perpetrators as unknown and closed his case," Salem said.

According to Karim's brother, not only was he arbitrarily detained and subjected to physical and psychological torture, but he was also denied health care and a fair trial. Investigations were not even conducted in his case, and the perpetrators were not held accountable, despite their known identity.

Areas controlled by Turkish-backed SNA factions continue to experience security chaos due to the absence of a coherent and effective judicial and administrative system. The region is governed by armed factions that use the force of arms, kidnapping, forcible disappearance, and arbitrary detention, along with torture and field executions, as reported by many

witnesses who have fled those regions. They feared that their children would be subjected to atrocities by these factions for flimsy and malicious reasons, with no control, accountability, or consequences for these actions.

## **Arbitrary detention**

The situation is similar in Tel Abyad. Although the factions may have different names, the controlling power remains the same. In January 2023, a young man was arrested in Tel Abyad by the Levant Front (al-Jabha al-Shamiya) faction only days after being forcibly deported from Turkey.

Iman Abdulaziz, the mother of the young man in her forties, recounted, “We were together, and just days after being deported from Turkey, armed men suddenly surrounded us and arrested my son in the city center under the pretext of being suspicious. Two days later, I received a call demanding \$10,000 within 48 hours to release him. They accused him of collaborating with the SDF and threatened to hand him over to Turkish Intelligence if I did not deliver the money. They even made me listen to his screams as they tortured him.”

The woman tried to contact an official authority to help find her son and release him, but she failed. Then when the faction found out about it, they raised the amount to \$15,000.

Iman Abdulaziz was only able to gather \$6,000. The faction agreed to the amount and released her son. They instructed her to go to a remote area where she found her son with a scrawny body and torn clothes.

“They brutally tortured him. As well as electrocuting him, beating his genitals, and burning cigarettes on his body, they forced him to drink diuretics and tied his penis. His teeth were broken as a result of the violence inflicted upon him,” she added. The young man and his mother fled their home and were smuggled out of Tel Abyad to the city of Raqqa.

### **In the basement**

“Everyone crossed except for me. I was arrested because I am a Kurd.” Rami Hassan, a young man in his twenties, was arrested out of 10 people attempting to cross the Syrian-Turkish border illegally. He was incarcerated in a small dark basement room under the stairs in a prison of the SNA’s Civil Police in Sere Kaniye on August 2021.

“I was subjected to various forms of physical and psychological torture,” he recounted, describing what he had endured in prison.

Hassan added, “When I was arrested following a failed attempt to escape, my hands were tied behind my back with plastic handcuffs, and my eyes were covered. Someone said ‘take him to the city prison.’ At that moment, I was shattered and lost hope of survival.”

Before attempting to seek refuge in Turkey, his friends had warned him about the Civil Police branch, describing it as “the most terrible branch,” saying it is the division that commits the most torture and abuse violations.

The young man was interrogated three times during the eight days he was detained. He experienced torture, verbal abuse, and physical assault. “When I arrived at the prison, I was questioned about many details, such as the purpose of my visit, my destination, identity, family background, and military and political affiliations. Finally, they asked me where I was planning to carry out a suicide bombing. I was shocked. I immediately defended myself and explained that my only reason for coming was to cross into Turkey and then onto Europe.”

During each interrogation, the young man was forced to kneel with tied hands and covered eyes while being threatened not to fall or collapse. Whenever he fell, they would make him sit down again. They would hit him with a wooden rod on his back and bones, and also slap and punch him, in an attempt to coerce him into confessing that he came to the city to carry out an explosion.

“One time, they blindfolded me and shone a bright light directly on my face to ensure that I could not see. I believe that someone of high rank was present during the interrogation because I could hear the sound of papers and someone was writing down my statement. They demanded that I give them the names of the individuals who had encouraged me to come to the city. I continued to explain that I was a civilian and an asylum seeker, and that I had no political or military affiliations. They tried to use my freedom as a bargaining chip,” Hassan recounted.

After confirming he was a civilian with no military affiliation, “They began to abuse me psychologically. I heard them say if he does not say anything useful, kill him. Minutes later, I heard a gunshot. I thought it hit me, and I collapsed. Minutes later, I realized they shot in the air.”

“They only allowed us to use the bathroom once every eight hours, and they threatened me if I couldn’t hold it,” he said. He paused for a moment and then continued, “I can’t even describe it... it was a horrific threat, so I refused to drink water out of fear that they would fulfill their threat. As for food, they gave us meals three times during the eight days, and water was only a small bottle per day.”

Days after his arrest, the silence of the dark, quiet basement was broken by the sound of footsteps and the opening of a door. Hassan recalled, “They brought someone to the next room. They beat him with an iron rod, and his screams echoed throughout the place. They told him, ‘So, you’ve been working with the pigs?’ Suddenly, the beating and screaming stopped. I heard them dragging him on the ground as if he were a burlap sack. I believe they killed him.”

During his detention, the factions coerced Hassan into taking some unidentified pills. He was subsequently deprived of water and food for 24 hours and was not allowed to use the bathroom due to the militants being engaged in clashes near the prison. As a result of the torture and abuse, he lost consciousness and collapsed. Later, one of the militants woke him up by pouring a bucket of water over him before leaving. Hassan overheard someone say, “Take him out and

kill him.” He remarked, “I felt relieved. Death is better than this torture.”

The young man was taken out of the prison and put into a car. A few minutes later, a militant pulled him out of the car and ordered him to kneel. After untying his hands and uncovering his eyes, the militant threw him into a deep pit. He still wonders how he managed to escape and walk hundreds of meters back to his home in the countryside of Hasakah.

He concluded by saying, “I had lost hope to survive. I thought it was my last moment alive, but I survived.”

### **Similar to a cemetery**

Omar al-Ahmad, a 27-year-old architect from Aleppo city in northern Syria, had no choice but to leave the city to avoid compulsory military service with the Syrian government forces. In October 2021, he crossed into Sere Kaniye with the intention of reaching Turkey. However, he was arrested by the al-Rahman Legion (Faylaq al-Rahman), along with four other men, near the border.

“They tied our hands, covered our eyes, beat and dragged us on the floor. They took us to somewhere that smelled like livestock,” he said.

The five men were detained in a barn in the freezing winter without having anything to sit on amid suffocating smell and humidity, according to al-Ahmad.

“Three days later, they gave us some water and dry bread. We were allowed to use the bathroom once every 24 hours. Before that, we were not permitted to use the bathroom and had to urinate in empty bottles,” he recounted. Meanwhile, the faction’s militants were “negotiating with our families using our mobile phones to get a ransom that started with \$5000 and lowered to \$2,000. We knew our families did not have that money and could not come by it.”

One week after their arrest and confinement in the barn under harsh and humiliating conditions, the faction lost hope of receiving any ransom and began torturing them instead.

Al-Ahmad took a deep breath and commenced his narration of the torture he experienced, saying, “The torture began by pouring cold water on us and then beating us with a whip and iron chains. Each militant handled one of us. The beating would continue until our bodies became numb, and we would pass out. They would leave us for two hours and repeat it. We spent the entire night being tortured, and it continued until the next day at noon. They took us out and left

us naked and barefoot on our knees in the freezing temperatures. The cold air touching our bodies was another torture to our wounds.”

As soon as they were outside, they surveyed their surroundings to figure out their location. He described, “We saw a rural house that appeared to have been seized from its owners. There was a barn with mud walls and a tin roof, and the house consisted of three rooms. Two modular rooms with the Turkish flag flying above them were situated beside the house. In front of the property, there were two military vehicles with the words al-Rahman Legion (Faylaq al-Rahman) written on them, as well as the van that brought us there. We remained outside for over five hours.”

The men were taken back to the barn, where they passed out due to fatigue, exhaustion, and prolonged starvation. In the morning, they woke up to the sound of gunshots. This was the adopted method to wake detainees, either by a sound bomb or gunshots.

“I was transported to a room that had three flags, the Turkish flag, another with Faylaq al-Rahman written on it, and the flag of the Free Syrian Army (former name of the SNA). They put a camera in front of me, and I was forced to confess that I worked with the SDF and I was caught while attempting to detonate a car bomb in the city,” al-Ahmad said. He had no choice

but to say what the militants wanted to hear without knowing the purpose.

The men were taken to the barn except for two. “We were transported to the electrocution room. Before the new round of torture began, I asked the militants about the other two men. He replied that they were being interrogated by Munkar and Nakir (In Islam, Munkar and Nakir are angels who question the dead about their faith in their graves). We will reunite you with them, you pigs.”

They would play local popular songs and electrocute the young man multiple times until he passed out without being questioned about anything. They woke him up with cold water and took him back to the barn again. “After the evening meal, Abu Saeed al-Khedr, the militants’ officer, arrived with some take-out food and informed us that we would be released in a month’s time since our families had paid the ransom. They attempted to blackmail us with the footage they had recorded of us confessing that we had planned to carry out an explosion if we spoke about the we had endured during our detention,” recounted al-Ahmad.

“We were transported to another place with concrete walls about two hours far from the first location. They put us in a 30 square meter concrete room with around 50 people detained under false charges. The families

of the detainees had paid their ransoms. I spent almost two months in prison before they released and threw me at the entrance of the village of Tel Halaf [in the western countryside of Sere Kaniye], which seems to be close to the detention center, considering we reached there in half an hour passing through dirt and asphalt roads,” he added.

In the last detention center, al-Ahmad was shocked to find out that many of the detainees had chronic diseases such as tuberculosis and others he did not identify, but the effects were visible on their skinny bodies. He said, “During the two months I stayed there, they did not bring a single doctor to check them or take any of the detainees to a medical center. The only food we received was a dry piece of bread and some lentil soup. The sick were left to face death. The place was similar to a cemetery.”

Two months after being detained, al-Ahmad and two of the men who were with him were thrown at the entrance of Tel Halaf. They stayed there for 15 days and crossed the border again to Turkey after paying a smuggler \$1,500.

## Public and secret SNA prisons

According to security sources within SNA factions in Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, the public and secret prisons are run by Turkish Intelligence. The factions send the detainees' files to Turkey to check their security status. Then, some detainees are transported to Turkish territory illegally, while the remaining are subjected to the extortion of the factions to get ransom from their relatives. One of the sources noted that large numbers of detainees are not registered in the records and hence become are used by the factions to get money. Most of these detainees are asylum seekers and get arrested while attempting to cross the Syrian-Turkish border. When that happens, they are tortured, abused, raped, and sexually harassed, which is considered a routine procedure within the prisons of the SNA factions.

The source indicated the presence of more than 27 prisons, of which nine are public, such as the two central prisons of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, two prisons of the Military Police faction, three prisons affiliated with the Intelligence apparatus of the Defense Ministry of the Syrian opposition's Interim Government in the two cities. The remaining prisons are secretly located in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad and their countryside. The Levant Front (al-Jabhat

al-Shamiya) faction has two prisons. The Faylaq al-Rahman, Mu'tasim Division, and al-Amshat factions have secret prisons in Tel Abyad and its countryside. Jaysh al-Sharqiya has a prison in the town of Hamam al-Turkman. The Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Division 20 have a prison in the town of Suluk. The al-Hamzat Division has two prisons, the Sultan Murad faction has two, and the Third Legion faction has six.

The Monitoring and Documentation Department confirmed the coordinates of 13 prisons and security centers of the SNA factions, including six in Tel Abyad, such as the Military Police prison, the Military Court, the Civil Police, Tel Abyad Central, security center of the Levant Front and its prison.

One of the detainees that survived told the details of one of the secret prisons of the Levant Front in Tel Abyad. He said, "The prison is a farm with a two-floor building in a remote area. The first floor consists of two 50-meter-long rooms used to detain about 70 people. The basement has three rooms used for solitary confinement and another for torture."

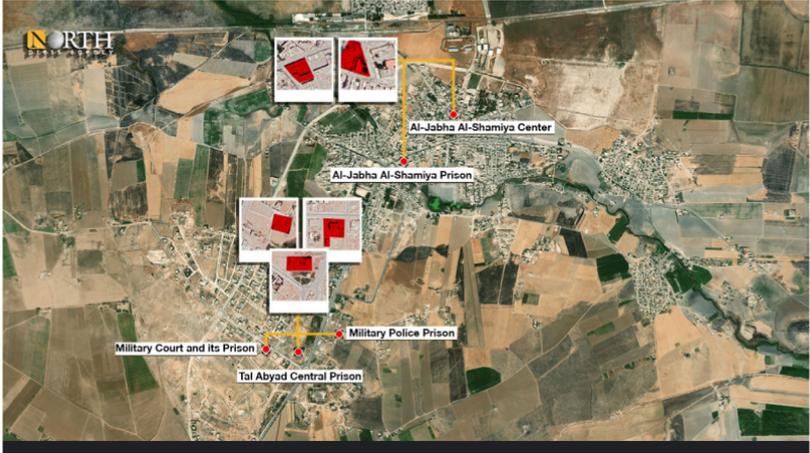


Photo caption: Satellite images of the SNA prisons in the city of Tel Abyad and the town of Suluk in the north of Raqqa, northern Syria

Our Department also confirmed the coordinates of seven prisons and security centers in Sere Kaniye, including three prisons of the Sultan Murad Faction, one of the al-Hamzat faction Prison, a center, and prison of the Civil Police, and the Central Prison in the city.



Photo caption: Satellite images of the SNA prisons in the city of Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) in the north of Hasakah, northeast Syria

## Statistic of detainees

Since the beginning of 2023, our department recorded the arbitrary arrest of 89 civilians by Turkish-backed SNA factions in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad. In Tel Abyad, 13 individuals, including one child were arrested, mostly by the Military Police. In Sere Kaniye, 76 individuals, including four women, were arrested, of which 42 people were arrested by the Civil Police, 27 by the Military Police, and seven by the Sultan Murad faction.

A security source said the number of detainees registered in official records since the beginning of 2023 in both areas reached 490 detainees, including 100 women and children under the age of 18 whose numbers were not known.

The source noted that inside the prisons of the Civil Police in Sere Kaniye alone, there are about 170 detainees, including six women, and about 135 detainees, including 11 women, in the prison of the Military Police. In the prison of Hamam al-Turkman, affiliated with Jaysh al-Sharqiya, there are about 35 detainees, mostly asylum seekers, who were arrested while trying to cross the Syrian-Turkish border and then were released after getting ransom from their

relatives. In the village of al-Mabrouka, there are more than 90 people in the al-Hamzat and Sultan Murad prisons.

## **False charges**

SNA factions arbitrarily arrest asylum seekers intending to cross to Turkey illegally and others who come to the region after the Turkish invasion under false charges, such as the intention of carrying out assassinations, explosions, photographing security locations of the factions, working with the SDF, or being a former employee in an establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Based on testimonies of five asylum seekers who crossed through Sere Kaniye, the factions forced all of them by force of arms to confess that they came to the region to carry out attacks and recorded their confessions and later used it against them to get money in return for their release.

Amid the security chaos and complete absence of a judicial system in these regions, SNA militants abuse their power inside prisons and detention centers without being monitored or held accountable, as international organizations, particularly those working

in the field of human rights, have limited access to these areas. The detainees experience extremely bad and inhumane conditions. They are denied the right of defense, hiring an attorney, or being informed of their legal status. These actions are enlisted as forms of torture, human rights violations, and crimes against humanity.

## Turkey's responsibility

Since taking control of north Syria, Turkey has illegally transported scores of detainees, mostly Kurds, from Turkish-backed SNA prisons to Turkish territories.

According to statistics of the Monitoring and Documentation Department recorded since the beginning of 2023, Turkish forces transported 25 Syrians from SNA prisons in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad to Turkey, eight detainees, including one woman, from Tel Abyad and 17 from Sere Kaniye. Most of the detainees are asylum seekers who were arrested while trying to cross the border and were charged with "threatening Turkey's national security."

In addition to illegal transportation, which is considered a violation of international law, Turkey, as a neighboring country, also violates international humanitarian law by directly interfering in the conflict inside Syria. Turkey directly supervises the SNA prisons, records of the detainees, and the sentences issued against them, in addition to visits conducted by Turkish security officials and officers to the SNA prisons and security centers.

According to a security source within the Military Police in Sere Kaniye, all factions act upon orders from Turkish commanders. Our department managed

to confirm the names of six members of Turkish Intelligence and prison supervisors who oftentimes took part in interrogations, abuse, and torture of detainees.

## Legal point of view

Turkish-backed SNA factions are considered a party to the conflict in Syria, but are not directly subjected to international laws, covenants, and treaties signed or ratified by Syria, being a non-state entity.

However, the factions are subject to Syrian laws and legislations, which in turn criminalize acts of torture, arbitrary detention, subjection of individuals to severe forms of distress and punish individuals who commit acts of torture or abuse or order to use these acts against others while performing their vocational duties or because of it. The Syrian Penal Code, issued on June 22, 1949, forbids torturing individuals, safeguards their dignity, forbids subjecting them to coercion, and prohibits arrest and detention in cases other than those stated by law. However, the survivors and families of victims will not achieve retribution because the Syrian judiciary classifies these regions outside its security control with no possibility of enforcing the law, considering Syria is going through an unstable geopolitical reality with various controlling powers on the ground, facilitating impunity.

SNA factions are bound by international humanitarian law and human rights laws in times of armed conflict

that forbid arbitrary detentions, torture, arbitrary deprivation of life, and other inhuman treatment. The laws impose on parties to respect the fundamental human rights of individuals regardless of their legal or political status and prohibit exposure to discrimination because of their affiliation.

Therefore, they must abide by their obligations as a party to the conflict, cease and prohibit torture and guarantee humane treatment of the detainees, captives, and prisoners according to Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Articles 2 and 3, common to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, demand the humane treatment of individuals without discrimination and risk to their lives. They forbid, in particular, murder, mutilation, torture, cruel, inhumane, degrading treatment, taking of hostages, and unjust trials. These conventions incite all parties to respect the fundamental rights of individuals regardless of their legal or political status and forbid discrimination based upon affiliations. All this remains within the scope of “demand, urge and prohibit,” without strict obligation or interference by the Security Council in accordance with Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations to cease the violations mentioned above.

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