

# The Turkish Occupation of Afrin, Mass Displacement of the Population and Situation of Refugees in Shehba

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The occupation of Afrin by the Turkish state caused severe humanitarian challenges at all levels. Particularly women are affected in many different ways, concerning a massively decreasing livability up to serious menace for their lives and dignity.

## I. Afrin Canton and Achievements of Women's Freedom

Before the outbreak of Turkish occupation attempts on **20.01.2018**, the canton of Afrin and its women had been achieving various progresses concerning women's freedom: A system of mutual women care had been built up by dint of women's houses, women's communes and assemblies, the co-chair system, that ensured **women's participation in all political positions and decision-taking** unexceptionally. Also Afrin's women were establishing all-female defense forces, such as Women's Defense Forces (YPJ), the Societal Defense Forces (HPC-Jin) and the Women's Security Forces (Asayişa Jin). All these women's organisations had an autonomous status in order to enable women to take their own decisions and actions. Due to this progressive system it was possible for Afrin's women to defend themselves and their society against reactionary forces mysogenic mentality active within the society as well as outside the society in the form of religious fundamentalist armed groups. Women in the Middle East are facing a long-term repression by sexist policies, which recently peaked once again in **femicides conducted by ISIS** and other islamist groups active in the region. With the growing power of ISIS women were exposed to sexist crimes against humanity in all regions controlled by the islamists. The most violent and tremendous example was the massacre in Sindjar in August 2014, where the world community was not able to protect thousands of Yezidi women from being kidnapped, raped, sold, tortured and killed in large scale. Afrin's women were able to protect themselves from these inhumane groups by means of their self-organisation until 2018. Here women were acting as a key factor to develop the democratic and ecological administration. Afrin is a symbol of women's freedom and revolution.

## II. War on Afrin: Heavy Pressure for the Population

With the beginning of the **non-legal Turkish invasion** on Afrin on **20.01.2018**, people of Afrin were subjected to disastrous and prolonged brutality in their homeland. Due to constant heavy shelling with artillery and airstrikes on all different regions of Afrin Canton as many as **645 civilians were injured, at least 232 killed<sup>1</sup>, 200.000<sup>2</sup> displaced from their villages** seeking security in Afrin city. The negative impact of the war on the situation of women, became evident. As the Turkish state has chosen, trained and supported **radical-islamist organisations as its allies**, cruel examples of an anti-women mindset already was made public during the war, such as the sexist

**mutilation of the female fighter**  Barin Kobane's dead body on **01.02.2018**. Also cases of rape and kidnapping of women were reported in the villages taken over by the army of the Turkish state and the above-mentioned allies. Until 01.03.2018 also at least 82 were injured by Turkish artillery, airstrikes and snipers, some of whom lost their ability to see or their limbs, 23 were killed<sup>3</sup>. Women also experienced difficulties because of the beginning shortage of food and water in Afrin city due to the increased population, often remarking especially the lack of baby-milk to feed their newborn children. The constant bombings also had a **psychological effect** causing for example the inability to suckle their babies. Children are suffering psychological attacks and disorders because of fear and stress. Altogether the phase of war on Afrin was very strenuous for the population. It **was characterised by crimes against humanity**, especially conducted by the islamist armed groups deployed by the Turkish state. **War crimes** such as targeting civilians houses, the water stations and dams, schools, bakeries, medical points, medical staff and Afrin's main hospital "Avrin" indicated the **Turkish state's strategy of total annihilation of the people** during the operation.

### III. Occupation of Afrin City: 14.-18.03.2018

When the Turkish army and its allies shelled the city directly from **14.-18.03.2018** this led to **47 civilian deaths at minimum and dozens of more injured** as well as a spontaneous stampede of almost the entire population of Afrin city. This displacement of the masses happened in a chaotic and dangerous manner, as the occupying forces continued to **target even civilians leaving the city, killing at least 13**. A number of civilians also died on the road because of the fright and got heart attacks or the huge exertion as many had to go on foot for tens of kilometres to Shehba region. Remaining civilians in the city and surroundings lived **cruelities by the invaders leading from looting, expropriation, torture to extrajudiciary killings**. The policy of radical Islam is discriminating women to an enormous extent. According to that it is reported, that in occupied Afrin **women are being treated as property by the occupying forces, they are being collected, kidnapped and used as servants and object of rape**. It gets clear that Afrin's occupation is a project of male dominance which is focused on the **total subordination of women and the occupied society**.

### IV. Mass Displacement of Afrin's Residents to Shehba Region

At the moment more than **100.000 refugees are staying in Shehba region**. Around 20.000 displaced people seeked shelter in Nubil, 10.000 in Zehra. An estimated 50.000 reached Aleppo, whereas another 5000 crossed to Minbic. In Shehba the preliminary counting in the towns and villages result in the following numbers: Around 20.000 found shelter in Til Rifat, 12.000 in Fafin, in Ahras 10.000, 7000 in Babnis, 4000 in Halissa, 3700 in Um-Housh, 2500 in Ghirnata Farms, 3000 in Kefer Naya, 2000 in the new Refugee Camp 'Wargeha Berxwedan' and 1500 Kefer Nasseh. More of 40.000 displaced people are spread in more than twenty other villages of the area. An exact counting and assessment of the refugees and their needs is still in process. Among them most of the 25.000 Yezidis who were traditionally living in Afrin.<sup>4</sup> Many of them live in the streets, damaged houses, in tents or schools. After their violent displacement from their homes in Afrin and the theft of their property by the Turkish state and its allies, they are deprived of their basic human rights.

#### A. Subsistence Supplies

Food and water supplies are scarce. The amount of **wholesome food is insufficient**, as it is not possible for the local community nor the present aid organisations<sup>5</sup> to provide diverse food covering the essential nutrients of vitamins, proteins, minerals and fibre. Only the supply with bread could be properly implemented for all Afrin refugees in the region until now. People with e.g. gluten intolerance are necessarily suffering health problems. The supply with milk for children and infants remains problematic as the proper amount is not available.

Moreover there is **not enough clean and drinking water** to fulfil the needs of the people. This is because many wells of the region are either dried-out or need electronic apparatus to pump out the water, which are not available. The water now used by the people has not been analysed for its drinkability and is thus a health risk for the population.

#### B. Health

Many refugees suffered from **health problems during and after their displacement**, as they have been walking for a long time in bad weather conditions and with big loads. Afterwards many stayed outside without blankets so typical diseases like bronchitis and gastroenteritis were spreading quickly.

The **health care in Shehba region can only fulfil basic needs**. Even though the Kurdish Red Crescent has built up several medical points and a hospital is in progress in Fafine village, the possibilities for proper treatment are often very limited. There is a lack of professional medical staff, devices, surgery and laboratory equipment and medicine. People with chronic diseases can not find the necessary medicine in many cases.

#### C. Education

With the beginning of the war on Afrin on 20.01.2018 children and students could **not attend their education institutes** anymore due to security reasons. *All 318 schools had to be closed down.* The Turkish army was often also targeting schools among other public buildings<sup>6</sup>. After the end of the Turkish operation some schools have been opened by the invading forces again, but reportedly enforcing nationalist Turkish and Islamist assimilation policy on children. Children and students who became refugees are until now still **deprived of their right to education**, because other basic needs like the food and water supply are still in the process of arrangement for thousands of people. The education is still on pause, but should be start all over again soon.

#### D. Safety

People were **fleeing Afrin for the fear of death and oppression originating from the Turkish army and its islamist allies**. They came to Shehba region under the toughest circumstances in hope for a residence secure from war events and especially the oppression by a fundamentalist islamist mindset most often leading to pure violence against women and any opponents. But

still the situation of the refugees is not safe, as **they are not protected by any international safety mechanism like the UN** and all the worse **geographically close to areas belonging to the forces occupying Afrin**. Shehba area is very close to the Syrian town Azaz, which was entered by the Turkish state in August 2016 and now hosts a number of jihadist groups and fighters. Some of the refugees de facto just live 2 kilometres away from the forces they just fled from<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore it is not impossible **that the Turkish state plans to continue its brutal campaign**, comments concerning Til Rifat in Shehba region were repeatedly expressed by Turkish officials. Recent agreements between the Turkish state and Russia, which has its troops stationed in Shehba as well, strengthen doubts about the safety of the displaced civilians. Thus Afrin's refugees continue to live the fear of a next assault to be imposed on them soon. They could once again become a target by Turkish airstrikes.

Apart from that it is notable, that the Shehba region as well has been a war area until 2016, as it was controlled by ISIS before and just liberated recently. This is why on one hand **many houses still are damaged** and not proper for living nor for playing children. But on the other hand **ISIS militants left a big amount of mines in the places they had occupied** before. The clearing of the mines could not yet be fully finished, which makes the area dangerous for civilians. Especially children can easily step on mines in abandoned houses or next to walking paths. A number of victims of mine injuries in Shehba were registered after 18.03.2018<sup>8</sup>.

## V. Responsibility of the International Community

Having in mind the atrocities people are facing on one hand in Afrin Canton and the humanitarian catastrophe on the other hand as refugees in Shehba region it is important that the international community takes responsibility and does not continue to turn a blind eye. During the war on Afrin many attempts have been made to call for political support, but all measures carried out by the international community proved to be not successful to prevent the horrible situations for the civilian population and especially for women.

In the **8181<sup>st</sup> UN Security Council Meeting** Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, noted, that “Recent developments in Syria raised questions about the sustainability of the Astana de-escalation arrangements”. Subsequently the **UN Security Council adopted the resolution 2401 of the on 24.02.2018 suggesting a 30-days-ceasefire** all over Syria. Notwithstanding the United Nations failed to take proper responsible actions to change the dramatic situation, to put across its own decisions, to prevent the violation of international law and fundamental human rights in Syria and specifically in the occupying war of Afrin.

- A. Now it is inevitable to take strong political actions to **finish the Turkish occupation of Afrin Canton** and to ensure the **departure of all occupying forces**, including the Turkish army, Islamist armed forces as well as the administration imposed by the Turkish state. Their presence in Afrin is a violation of international law and conventions, neglecting the sovereignty of the state Syria as well as the peoples' right to self-determination and security. It is not only **counteracting achievements in terms women's freedom** and expression which have been accomplished during the past years on this ground. It is **encouraging a rapist culture to**

**spread and a femicide** by neglecting women's right to existence, integrity and dignity. Any democratic political power in the world must work to stop the occupation and enable women and all people of Afrin to live in dignity. An end of the occupation can help to recover the **inner stability Afrin's people had achieved before the Turkish aggression** against them.

**We call the United Nations to play its role to influence the political situation on the ground and to maintain international law.**

- B. Furthermore it must be taken care of the **health and security of the people in Shehba** region. Once hosting tens of thousands of refugees from other parts of Syria Afrin's people suffer the same destiny nowadays – **living under unacceptable unhealthy conditions and serious shortages**. Additionally the refugees are still not safe, as they remain politically unprotected until today and live in continuous prospect to be attacked once again by the Turkish state and its islamist allies.

**The United Nations should take responsibility for the refugees in Shehba region, who became victim of the Turkish aggression.**

**They should have the status of protection by the UN.**

This counts notably for the 2 refugee camps ('Wargeha Berxwedan' in Fafine, 'Serdem' in Til Sosin) in the Shehba region, which were just newly constructed to help to fulfil the need of housing for the people.

- C. A large-scale **UNO programme of humanitarian aid** should be prepared urgently to send necessary materials to fulfill the basic human needs of the people, such as:

1. housing <i>[selection]</i>	2. medicine <i>[selection]</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) tents</li> <li>(b) blankets</li> <li>(c) mattresses</li> <li>(d) pillows</li> <li>(e) sheets</li> <li>(f) dishware</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) anti-biotics</li> <li>(b) medication for chronic diseases</li> <li>(c) maternity medication</li> <li>(d) pediatric medication</li> </ul>
3. medical equipment <i>[selection]</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) ambulances, mobile clinics</li> <li>(b) surgery instruments, urinal catheter</li> <li>(c) dressing, gauze bindings, sterile gauze, compression bonds,</li> <li>(d) anaesthesia machine, coagulation devices, ray devices, artificial respirators, osteoporosis devices, steoporosis devices, sterilization devices, defebrinlinator, oxygen generators, blood measurement devices</li> <li>(e) other medical materials - surgical thread, nylon, medical alcohol</li> </ul>	
4. foodstuffs, sanitation <i>[selection]</i>	5. electricity <i>[selection]</i>

- (a) live-saving foodstuffs
- (b) baby milk
- (c) sanitary articles

- (a) generators
- (b) water pumping stations
- (c) solar panels

D. A **special international court mechanism** should be established to prosecute War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in Syria, including those crimes that have been carried out during the war on Afrin and the following occupation by the Turkish army and related jihadist groups. All the responsables of the non-legal occupation as well as **criminal subjects guilty of plundering, rape, murder and massacres on women and the people** of Afrin need to be judged in **front of an international court**. Therefore special mechanism have to be established to collect evidences of human rights violations, to receive applications and to listen to victims and witnesses of war crimes and human rights violations.

## VI.

### Appendix:



[1] Islamist allies of the Turkish state mutilating the body of female fighter Barin Kobane, 02.02.2018



[2] Intense artillery shelling on Afrin city, 14.03.2018



[3] Turkish artillery shelling on Afrin's Mahmoodiye district, 14.03.2018 close to hospital "Avrin"



[4] Victim of Turkish artillery shelling on Afrin city, 14.03.2018



[5] Destruction of hospital "Avrin" after Turkish artillery shelling on 16.03.2018



[6] Victims of Turkish shelling on the road attempting to leave the city on 16.03.2018



[7] Mass displacement from Afrin, 16.03.2018



[8] Afrin's people arriving in Shehba Region, 19.03.2018



[9] Afrin refugees staying in a mosque in Ehres/Shehba region, 23.03.2018



[10] New refugee camp 'Wargeha Berxwedan' in Fafine/Shehba region, 29.03.2018

- 1 Afrin Health Council, 10.03.2018
- 2 Statement of Afrin Social Work Council, 08.03.2018
- 3 Afrin Health Council, 01.03.2018
- 4 According to the Yezidi Organisation of Afrin
- 5 Only the Kurdish Red Crescent (heyva sor) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) are distributing the necessary food supplies.
- 6 According to Afrin Education Committee until 27.02.2018 at least 27 schools were targeted, among them 7 in Rajo district, 5 in Jindirese district, 5 in Shera district and 10 in Bilbil district.
- 7 e.g. the distance from Shaykh Isa to the area controlled by Turkish forces in Marea area
- 8 e.g. *Fatima Mahmoud*, 45, left foot amputation and right hand injury and many shrapnel in the body after mine explosion in Kefer Neye; *Barakat Shaaban*, 15, fracture of the right forearm, shrapnel in the abdomen and injury to the pubic and femoral artery after mine explosion on Til Shaer road; *Ahmed Hanif Suleiman*, 16, face injury, shrapnel in the head and jaw injury and blood vessels after mine explosion on Til Shaer road (report Kurdish Red Crescent, 03.08.2018)