

# Withering Branch:

The Story of Afrin and its Peoples, Pre & Post

“Operation Olive Branch”



**Washington Kurdish Institute**

Dominic Brunaccioni

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# Section I: *Background on Afrin*

## Antiquity to 2012

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The city of Afrin (Kurdish: Efrîn, Syriac: ܐܦܪܝܢ, Arabic: عفرين) is the administrative center of the Afrin District, as part of the Aleppo Governorate of the Syrian Arab Republic. As a historical region, Afrin has been traveled through and managed by many different nations, empires, and states. Whether hosting a [monument](#) for the generals of Alexander the Great, or as a Roman military base to [counter](#) the ancient Armenian Empire, Afrin has witnessed decades of history and culture. But the most defining feature of the city is its entrenched history with the olive oil tree, which some archeologists [believe](#) have existed in Afrin for more than 4,000 years. Olive oil farming is a historical practice in Afrin and [continues](#) to be a dominating factor of the city's market.

Starting as early as the 16th and 17th centuries, historians and leaders began to [record](#) a newly arrived ethnic group in the area of Afrin, the Kurdish people. As centuries continued, Kurdish people began to represent a growing population connected to Afrin, so much so that Ottoman officials began to [recognize](#) Afrin as "The Kurdish City." With the eventual fall of the Ottoman Empire and the signing of Sykes-Picot in 1923, Afrin fell under the jurisdiction of French-Administered Syria, and had relatively normal population and economic growth throughout the changing politics between France and Syria throughout the 19th century, including decades after Syria's independence from France in 1941, save for [small sparks](#) of ethnic tension between Arabs and Kurds. This period of stability would continue throughout the proceeding Syrian

constitutions that would follow the Second Syrian Republic in 1950, then as part of the United Arab Republic in 1958.

Following the 1963 Coup d'Etat and the rise of the Ba'ath Party to power, Damascus began passing policies of Arabization and were especially [streamlined](#) during Hafez al-Assad's presidency starting in 1971. All of the policies, both passively and actively, discriminated against the ethnic, gender, and religious minority groups in Syria, with the [majority](#) of the policies targeted towards the Syrian Kurdish peoples. Languages other than Arabic were banned in all Syrian public school systems, and Kurdish-sponsored private schools were forbidden to operate. Kurdish geographical names were replaced with Arabic, and the Ba'ath Party began conducting [censuses](#) that would manipulate the Kurdish ethnicity in Syria to effectively be nonexistent, therefore rendering them stateless and invisible. In 1973, Damascus began the process of [evicting](#) Kurdish peoples off their land in Northern Syria and donating residence privileges to Syrian Arabs.

In 2011, as the Syrian Civil War erupted and spread conflict to every corner of Syria, the People's Defense Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, Arabic: وحدات حماية الشعب, Turkish: Halk Savunma Birlikleri, Classical Syriac: ܘܚܕܐܬܐ ܕܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ), a Kurdish militia commonly referred to as the YPG, [rose up](#) against the Syrian Government Forces and began forcing the remaining troops out of Afrin. The Women's Protection Units (Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, Arabic: وحدات حماية المرأة, Classical Syriac: ܘܚܕܐܬܐ ܕܗܝܘܬܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ ܕܗܘܠܐ), Turkish: Kadın Koruma Birimleri), abbreviated as YPJ, is a women's defense militia that closely collaborates with YPG members and leaders, and following the YPG's rise to power in Afrin, began working [alongside](#) them to defend the city. In July of 2012, Syrian President Bashaar al-Asaad [ordered](#) his troops to pull out of

mainly Kurdish areas to fight off rebel threats elsewhere in Syria, which resulted in the YPG and YPJ being the de facto defense force for the city.

## **Section II: *Afrin under Kurdish Control***

**2012 - 2018**

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Following the takeover of the city by the YPG and YPJ, the Kurdish political party “Democratic Union Party” (Kurdish: Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat) commonly abbreviated as PYD, assumed de facto political authority of Afrin, seeing itself as the political wing of the YPG and YPJ. With Asaad’s troops also pulling out from the regions of Kobani and Jazira, the PYD now controlled three swaths of territory, all with majority Kurdish populations. With this change, the YPG and YPJ established themselves as external security protectors for these regions, while the PYD handled the internal affairs of the cities. In terms of YPG and YPJ concerns from 2012 to 2014, acts of human rights abuses were [reported](#), especially on the offense of utilizing child soldiers. Skirmishes between Kurdish soldiers and Syrian Arab Republic soldiers were extremely commonplace during this time. PYD officials were also [accused](#) of committing arbitrary detentions of Arab citizens for several years. However, many Human Rights organizations that were conducting oversight from 2012 to 2014 [noted](#) that the abuses and violations committed by both Assad’s troops and Syrian opposition militias severely outweigh the amount of offenses committed by the YPG and YPJ.

In 2014, the need for greater cooperation against foreign and domestic threats in Syria, as well as the call for democratic reform, motivated the regions

of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira [to establish](#) a regional governing body to fulfill the needs of the northeastern Syrian peoples. The organization would go under many names and would be led by different political parties, but the cooperation between the three regions would eventually lead to a federal governing body with the present title of the “Autonomous Administrations of North and East Syria.” (Kurdish: Rêveberiya Xweser a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê, Classical Syriac: ܪܝܘܝܬܐ ܕܩܘܒܐܢܝܐ ܕܩܘܒܐܢܝܐ ܕܩܘܒܐܢܝܐ, Turkish: Kuzey ve Doğu Suriye Özerk Yönetimi, Arabic: الإدارة الذاتية لشمال وشرق سوريا ) The politics of the AANES, also known as Rojava, involves existing local councils, city and municipal governments, and advisors of minority groups meeting together to rule by the Social Construct.

Alongside Kobani and Jazira in 2014, Afrin began to democratize and pass governmental reform, effectively becoming the “Autonomous Canton of Afrin”, which then made Afrin an autonomous section ruled under the Social Contract. The [Social Contract](#) itself is an agreement that defines the political and administrative purposes of the AANES, the democratic and expressive freedoms it guarantees to all citizens under its Self-Administrative regions, and the responsibilities and duties of the Self-Administrative regional officials to the AANES. In 2014, the AANES was referred to as the “Democratic Autonomous Administration”, before changing its name in March of 2016 to the “Democratic Federation of Rojava – Northern Syria” with an updated constitution, and then again changing its name in December of 2016 to the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” with another updated constitution. For the purposes of this paper, all former organizations before the AANES will be referred to as pre-AANES, for the ease of communication and information.

It must be noted that in the early years of the Autonomous Cantons, territorial legitimacy was miniscule for Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira. The territories

would expand as the years progressed. The cooperation between Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira allowed for much more political legitimacy for both local and executive Afrin political officials. The Social Contract of 2014 established the [creation](#) of the following for each Autonomous Administration: a Legislative Assembly, an Executive Council, a High Commission of Elections, Supreme Constitutional Courts, as well as various Municipal/Provincial Councils. Elections were open to citizens of all ethnicities encompassing the Afrin Self-Administration; whether Arab, Kurdish, Syriac (Assyrians, Chaldean Arameans), Turkmen, or Armenian. As part of the AANES' Self-Administrations, officials of Afrin had to sign onto the Social Contract, which in terms of electoral freedom also guaranteed [the right](#) to vote regardless of race, religion, belief, or gender. The official languages of Afrin became Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac. However, all communities in Afrin's jurisdiction had the [right](#) to be taught in their native languages.

The Social Contract of 2014 also officially recognized the YPG/YPJ as the sole military force for the three Administrations, as well as the [formal](#) recognition of Asayish forces (Kurdish: Asayîş, Arabic: الأَسَيش, Classical Syriac: ܐܣܝܝܫ) as the local civil police. While Asayish (Also known as ISF) had been in existence since 2013, its strength grew rapidly in 2015 and was [reported](#) in 2017 to have approximately 3,000 personnel in Afrin. At its height, Asayish units in Afrin maintained anti-terror squads, military checkpoint units, organized crime task forces, traffic directories, among others. In 2015, following the cooperation with the United States and local minority Syrian Groups, the Syrian Democratic Council (Kurdish: Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk, Arabic: مجلس سوريا الديمقراطية, Classical Syriac: ܡܥܠܝܫܐܐ ܨܘܪܝܐ ܕܡܘܕܪܐܬܝܩܐ) also known as the SDC, was [formed](#) as a legislative body for Northeastern Syria. The SDC would not officially merge with the pre-AANES until 2018, which to the present has

carried out the legislative policies and duties for Northeastern Syria. AANES officials also formed the Executive Council of Northeastern Syria (Kurdish: Encûmena Rêvebir a Federaliyê, Arabic: المجلس التنفيذي للفيدرالية, Classical Syriac: ܡܫܘܠܬܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܡܐܢܐ ܕܩܘܪܕܝܢܐ), whose members are appointed by the SDC. The Executive Council is tasked with implementing the policies that the SDC signs into law for all of the regions in Northeastern Syria, with one of those being the Self Administration of Afrin.

In 2014, the pre-AANES [stressed](#) that local political parties should still continue to assist the cities and regions it was serving, but only if other political parties were given the proper grounds to participate in elections. In the context of Afrin, this meant that the PYD could continue to involve itself in local and regional elections, under the protection and executive authority of the pre-AANES. PYD officials also ran in Executive Council and SDC elections. After its political establishment, immediate focus was put towards the infrastructure of the Afrin Self-Administration, [specifically](#) in the areas of social-economic development, culture, education and health, local affairs, and security management. Although isolated from the rest of the Self-Administrations, Afrin began to flourish economically, politically, and culturally. As compared to the rest of Syria, Afrin was relatively stable and became a [safe haven](#) for many IDPs and refugees from other Syrian cities, many of whom fled to Turkey through the Syrian-Turkish border via Afrin.

But Afrin's location alongside the Turkish border was proving to be a growing threat, as Turkey [perceived](#) the Afrin Self-Administration's Kurdish population and flourishing PYD political presence as a potential risk to their own stability. Along with the rest of Northeastern Syria, Afrin's majority Kurdish populations and ideologies of decentralization threatened Turkey's own social and political systems, as Kurdish groups in Turkey could potentially take action

to form their autonomous region upon seeing the success in Northeastern Syria. [Fearing](#) a spread of Kurdish political parties and pushback on nationalism in its own borders, Turkey began to seek the abolishment of the Afrin Self-Administration and its connections to the AANES. For several years, Turkey unsuccessfully staged [multiple attacks](#) on Afrin in order to overtake the city, primarily through the use of proxy jihadist groups, with the occasional use of its own Turkish troops.

As Afrin continued to reform itself, its Self-Administration demanded greater protection. Defensive and offensive support came from YPG and YPJ groups exclusively from 2014 to 2017, but received greater support when the Syrian Democratic Council expanded its military wing, the multi-ethnic Syrian militia known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish: Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk, Arabic: قوات سوريا الديمقراطية, Classical Syriac: ܩܘܘܬܐ ܕܥܘܪܝܢܐ ܕܩܘܕܫܐ ܕܥܘܪܝܢܐ, Turkish: Suriye Demokratik Güçleri), commonly abbreviated as SDF, to the Afrin Self-Administration. On February 25th of 2017, YPG and YPJ leaders met to officially [announce](#) their merging into the SDF, meaning that the protection of the Afrin Self-Administration fell onto the sole authority of the SDF. Officials from Afrin and other Self Administrations recognized the emerging Turkish threat but could do little to consistently safeguard Afrin, as it was geographically [separate](#) from the rest of the territories that the AANES operated in.

In 2016, Turkey began small-scale [operations](#) in an attempt to curb the success of Afrin's political system and exert its control over the city via the use of jihadist proxies, with the use of its own military authority being less common. SDF efforts to resist Turkish advances into Afrin continued for just under two years as fears of a complete Turkish invasion into Afrin [loomed](#) on the horizon. Turkey's invasion of Afrin would remain unsuccessful until 2018 with its launch

of “Operation: Olive Branch.” (Turkish: Zeytin Dalı Harekâtı) In early 2018, the Turkish government and military officials [declared](#) that the Self-Administration of Afrin was an acting terrorist organization, and also accused city officials of harboring terrorist leaders and terror groups. On January 19th, 2018, it was then deemed constitutional by the Turkish government for its military to cross the Turkish-Syrian border and intervene in the city and the Afrin regional area. This crisis caused many Kurdish peoples in the Afrin Self-Administration to flee to other regions of the AANES, as the SDF became increasingly unable to fend off the Turkish military and Turkish-backed rebel groups.

## **Section III: *Operation Olive Branch***

### **2018 - 2021**

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The intervention of Afrin was officially titled by the Turkish authorities as “Operation: Olive Branch”, and on the day after its announcement on January 20th, 2018, Turkish Air Forces began to fly over the Turkish-Syrian border and [carry out](#) offensive strikes. More than 100 bombs were targeted approximately at the city of Afrin on the first day of the invasion, garnering criticism from international governments and local institutions alike. On January 18th, the Russian Armed Forces had fully evacuated their base in Northern Syria as Turkish troops prepared to invade the Turkish-Syrian border. The Russian withdrawal from Kafr Jana may have been one of the many [greenlights](#) for Ankara to begin Operation Olive Branch. Following the failure to establish relations with the YPG, the invasion of Afrin seemed to favor Moscow by sending a message to Kurdish militias, that if given the chance to cooperate with either Russia or the U.S., those who choose the U.S. would pay the price.

On Afrin specifically, immediate [criticism](#) came from European human rights groups and Syrian historical protection organizations, who alleged extreme abuse on Afrin citizens and the [destruction](#) of many Kurdish cultural monuments in the area. On the ground, Turkish troops and Turkish-backed militias began to push deeper into Syria and advance towards Afrin. On March 17th of 2018, Afrin was on the brink of collapse, as much of the SDF fighters had been killed or had fled combat, as the military effort from Ankara was [overwhelming](#) the Kurdish forces, and the geographical divide between the rest of the Autonomous Administrations in the AANES meant that Kurdish reinforcements could not properly sustain Turkish advances. In Afrin, local journalists [accused](#) Ankara of bombing the main hospital in Afrin, which the Turkish Armed Forces vigorously denied [wrongdoing](#), and instead promoted its ongoing success in “stabilizing” the city of Afrin as its forces pushed to the city center.

A day later on March 18th of 2018, just less than two months after the beginning of Operation Olive Branch, Turkish officials and Turkish-backed militia groups successfully captured Afrin from full SDF and SDC control. The militias immediately began erasing the city’s Kurdish heritage, as Kurdish shrines, flags, cultural and historical sites were targeted and destroyed by Turkish military forces. Bulldozes were brought into Afrin [specifically](#) to destroy statues of Kurdish political and military leaders, with one of [Kawa](#) being destroyed on March 18th. It was reported that Turkish officials often displaced Kurdish materials, civilians, and residences with Turkish and non-Kurdish Arab replacements. The Turkish Armed Forces publicly [denied](#) the destruction of any Kurdish monuments in Afrin, citing that any local monuments and cultural heritage in Afrin was “inviolable” and would never be touched by any member of their militias. (For more information on Kurdish erasure,

displacement and replacement, see Section IV). With the siege of Afrin being [successful](#) for Turkish-led authorities on March 18th, the city of Afrin then became the de facto responsibility of the Turkish government and military, which has remained the dominant “public” presence in Afrin to the present year of 2021.

Alongside the Turkish government, the defense of the city was [adjudicated](#) to Ankara’s most prominent military proxy group since the 2017 Euphrates Shield Operation: the Syrian National Army. (Arabic: الجيش الوطني السوري, Turkish: Suriye Millî Ordusu, Kurdish: Artêşa Niştimanî ya Sûrî) The group is commonly referred to as the SNA, as well as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA). In 2018, at the time of the invasion of Afrin, the SNA comprised [approximately](#) 25,000 soldiers. The SNA’s political wing, the Syrian National Council, assumed theoretical political control of the Afrin region, but this is to an extremely limited extent. This is because most political decisions for the Afrin region are [directly](#) controlled and imposed by Ankara, but such policies are left for the SNC to implement. In addition to the replacement of SDF and SDC as local representative militia and politicians in Afrin, Turkey also began to investigate the possibility of [establishing](#) local police and military police in Afrin, effectively ensuring their complete and total control over the Afrin security complex, as the city was widely unstable following the invasion.

On August 2nd of 2018, the human rights organization Amnesty International produced a [report](#) exposing Turkish-backed Syrian militias on multiple accounts of abuse, arbitrary detentions, looting, forced displacement, robbery, and torture of Afrin residents and refugees. The report also mentioned several accusations of Syrian National Army militia demolishing and evacuating Kurdish homes in Afrin to reinvent the spaces for SNA military bases and safe-points for Kurdish goods stolen by the Turkish-backed groups. Two such

groups, Ahrar al-Sharqiya and Jaish al-Sharqiya, whom both of which are part of the SNA, were given [free reign](#) to loot Afrin, and did so incessantly for the period of two weeks. The looting of Kurdish homes and Kurdish stores was so rampant (Many shops were still open for business, and had merchandise stolen from the SNA during business hours) that another militia of the SNA, the Levant Front, was ordered by Ankara and the Syrian National Council to establish [military checkpoints](#) in the major roads of Afrin to check for stolen goods, which largely failed to yield any returns back to Afrin civilians. Being that the Levant Front primarily operated in the Azaz region of Syria (22 kilometers away from Afrin city center), it had sparse political influence and familiarity with the Afrin region, and could not stabilize [control](#) over the SNA groups that were exasperating Afrin businesses and its general civil society.

One of the goods most targeted by the SNA are the olive trees native to the Afrin region, which is the foundation of Afrin's economy. In 2018 alone, it was reported that approximately [70 million](#) Euros worth of Afrin olive oil was stolen by the SNA and Ankara, to then be sold by Turkish companies to European and North American markets. Local councils established by Ankara also forced [local farmers](#) to pay heavy taxes in order for them to maintain the land they owned. SNA officials also confiscated olive oil from Afrin farmers attempting to pass through the multiple checkpoints established around Afrin.

To respond to the lack of control over its proxies, Turkey promised to [train](#) 1,000 local Afrin civilians in the Turkish cities of Adana and Mersin to effectively form a military and local police force, as to bring a semblance of security for Afrin residents. This effort effectively removed police control from the Kurdish-sponsored Asayish forces. Ankara also stated that once the training was complete, security would effectively be transferred from the SNA to the local institutions. This never materialized, as the Syrian National Army still has

primary control of Afrin's security to the present. Following the creation of a military police and a local police in 2018, Turkey divided the city of Afrin into three "[police sectors](#)": Afrin, Jandaris, and Raju, which have the primary goals of annexing land into the Turkish-controlled areas of Afrin and monitoring the Turkish borders from any Syrian threats. This policy has resulted in [numerous accusations](#) of Turkish border soldiers indiscriminately firing on Syrian civilians and the unlawful beating of civilians via batons.

To further evolve its security influence, Ankara later [established](#) the "Syrian Task Force" in 2018, which operates in Afrin and other areas of Turkish-controlled Kurdish Syria. The STF has since grown to 12 units in 2021, who are all subordinates to Ankara and are dedicated to the monitoring of Kurdish civilians and other Syrian minority ethnic groups. In addition, Turkey also created the "Syrian Special Forces Unit" [specifically](#) for operations in the city of Afrin, whose officials answer and operate entirely underneath Turkish intelligence, whose primary job is to arrest Kurdish civilian cells. At the end of 2018, Turkish-backed Syrian military and local police forces, as well as proxy militias, [arrested](#) more than 2,500 Afrin civilians, the majority of the cases deemed arbitrary arrests by several human rights groups. Turkish efforts in emergency health resources have been mixed, as Ankara dispatched the Turkish Red Crescent and the government-controlled Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) to distribute relief to Afrin civilians since January 29th of 2018. Both organizations have been [accused](#) of ignoring Kurdish victims and prioritizing non-Kurdish Afrin civilians.

Within just a few months, Turkey systematically assumed total control over Afrin, rampantly removed and replaced Kurdish political and security influences from what is considered one of the most prevalent and historic Kurdish cities in Greater Kurdistan. The swift introduction of policies from

Turkey that created security forces and militias, on both the regional and local levels, has been devastating for the freedoms of Syrian Kurdish civil societies.

## **Section IV: *Turkishization of Afrin***

**2018 - 2021**

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As soon as the Self-Administration of Afrin was captured by Turkish authorities and Turkish-backed rebel groups, Turkish President Recep Erdogan announced that all working organizations in Afrin would fall under their jurisdiction. Although criticized by domestic and foreign groups alike (See Section V), Turkey nonetheless seized control of Afrin and immediately began to implement one of the most dangerous policies for Afrin citizens: Cultural and social Turkishization. (Turkish: Türkleştirme, Kurdish: Tirkkirin, Arabic: تتركيب, Armenian: Թրքացում) Turkishization, also known as Turkification, involves the systematic erasure of an ethnic identity and its immediate replacement with a Turkish identity, with this process being carried out through the [control](#) of multiple different institutions.

With Afrin specifically, Ankara sought to target its Kurdish political and educational institutions, much like it [does](#) to its own Kurdish populations in Eastern Turkey. Ankara publicly announced its seizure of the Afrin political body and its school districts and stated that their intentions were to appoint teachers and clerics. As reported in 2019, the Turkish Ministry of National Education announced that it had [complete oversight](#) of the educational curriculum in Afrin, Azaz, Jarablus, and al-Bab. In Afrin specifically, Ankara manages a total of 243 schools, primary and high schools. All educational institutions in Afrin and the former Afrin Self-Administration regional area were forced to fly the Turkish

flag both on the outside of the buildings and inside the classrooms, with Turkey being the [only](#) country that maintains a military presence in Syria to display its flag on non-military premises. The teaching of Kurdish and other Syrian minority languages was banned in all schools, and the language curriculum was altered to be taught in only Turkish and Arabic. As early as 2018, SNC officials in Afrin and Bilbil began [replacing](#) the historical Kurdish names for the villages with Turkish titles, but this also extended to name-changes of dams, squares, parks, and administrative and service departments.

Turkey also constructed a “religious high school” that ties itself closely to nationalistic and extremist Islamic politics, which some sources have [reported](#) is leading the Afrin youth into being indoctrinated and recruited into Islamic extremist groups. Ankara’s Directorate of Religious Affairs stated in 2019 that Ankara had stationed five muftis and 299 clerical staff to Afrin, for the [express](#) purpose of indoctrination. Other educational-religious institutions were built in 2018 and 2019 that train clerics in Afrin to then later be sent to other regions of Syria, Turkey, Europe, and the Diyanets in North America. This comes as previous loosely enforced hijab rules in schools were tightened by Ankara’s oversight of Afrin.

To tackle the issue of political influence, Ankara [established](#) an “interim local council” for Afrin, with its elections supposedly held on April 12th of 2018. The council’s initial design was to elect 20 local leaders who [swore](#) to the ideology of “Syrian territorial integrity”, which followed the ideology of the Turkish authorities operating in the area under Olive Branch. The board, established to be temporary under its creation, featured members of Kurdish, Turkmen, and Arab descent, all of whom were citizens of Afrin and supported the invasion of Afrin by Ankara. Another specific prerequisite to be elected into the council was to have never fled Afrin during the Olive Branch Operation.

With regard to the choice of the word “election” of the pro-Turkish Afrin council, it is widely [suspected](#) that the entire candidate selection process was administered by Ankara and not by the legitimate ballots of the Afrin population. While the council is majority Arab and has a minority Kurdish population, the Kurdish members of the council are all loyal to Turkish interests, which only furthers the division and legitimate representation of Kurdish peoples.

Another policy that Turkey is utilizing to Turkify Afrin is by systematically [replacing](#) Kurdish populations and homes, with Turks, Syrians, and Palestinians. While census data in Syria is limited, the last official Syrian [census](#) in 2004 reported that there were approximately 200,000 Kurdish peoples in the region of Afrin. Upon the first weeks of the siege of Afrin in 2018, more than half of Afrin’s current Kurdish population [fled](#) the city, and have never returned. When the two-month siege was over, the total number of Kurdish people left in Afrin was just about 40,000. This meant that the amount of empty homes, villages, and apartments was abnormally high, and Ankara began to [transport](#) non-Kurdish peoples into these homes, dramatically decreasing the Kurdish demographics of Afrin. While some Turks have been moved, most of the injected population that Ankara has brought over are Palestinian and Syrian refugees, as well as extremist militia fighters that have been loyal to the Turkish advances in Syria and its anti-Kurdish policies. President Erdogan justified this population policy in 2019 with his [statement](#) that his administration aims “to give Afrin back to its rightful owners”, which in Ankara’s perspective meant the replacement of Kurds with non-Kurdish Arab families and extremist Islamic militias, which almost none of whom have had any legitimate and historical connection nor to Afrin, neither the entirety of the Northeastern region.

The year 2019 saw further enforcement of Turkishization, as additional Kurdish schools were vacated and repurposed as Turkish military bases. The jihadist proxy groups under the Syrian National Army also began to institutionalize its own rhetoric, as women [reportedly](#) were forced to wear lace and black clothes. SNA forces also began to [force](#) shop owners to only accept Turkish lira as payment and refused the use of the Syrian pound, as well as banning various Syrian food items for sale. The extremist group Shabab al-Huda became one of many primary forces of Afrin youth indoctrination in 2019, which [opened up](#) various schools in Afrin that have had its entire pro-Turkish curriculum mandated by Ankara's Directorate of Religious Affairs.

With almost the encompassing Kurdish population of the Afrin city de-populated by Turks, and its new residents either previously Turkified via Islamist indoctrination or are currently being Turkified, Afrin has severely lost its Kurdish historical, cultural, political, and social roots. Nonetheless, Ankara's policies are continuing to 2020 and 2021, with almost every evacuated household previously belonging to a Kurd or another Syrian ethnic minority family having been already parceled out to Non-Kurdish citizens. To further the Turkishization of Afrin, Ankara has [reportedly](#) begun forcefully evicting and displacing the remaining Kurdish families and individual residents of Afrin to other Syrian towns such as Bilbil and Roja.

## ***Section V: International Response***

**2018 - 2021**

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The international community had a variety of reactions to the invasion of Afrin but were common to be negatively perceived than positive. Starting in

January of 2018, many NATO members were extremely critical of the Turkish advances in the city, with France being the most vocal against the invasion of the city. French President Emmanuel Macron [immediately](#) called for a United Nations Security Council meeting over the affairs of the city and the military actions by the Turkish forces. A few days later, officials from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs [reaffirmed](#) their relationship with the Kurdish peoples and the French support for the YPG, and [wished](#) that Turkey carry out the necessary security operations in Afrin, warning Ankara that causing civilian deaths could be “reprehensible.” France would later publicly criticise the ongoing human rights abuses that were being committed by Turkey in Operation Olive Branch. Turkish Foreign Minister Hami Aksoy later [commented](#) that France’s claims of human rights abuses committed by Turkish-backed groups were “baseless”.

At the outbreak of Operation Olive Branch, U.S. authorities were quick to comment on Washington’s neutrality to the invasion, with one Pentagon [official](#) stating that, “We understand Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK, which is recognized by the United States as a foreign terrorist organization.” On January 24th, President Donald Trump and President Erdogan met on the matter of Operation Peace Spring, where Trump [urged](#) Turkey to de-escalate conflict and limit its civilian casualties. In response to Trump a day later on January 25th, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister, Bekir Bozdağ, [announced](#) that “anyone supporting the YPG militia will become ‘a target’” in Ankara’s military operations. Since the initial public squabble between Washington and Ankara in early 2018, U.S. reactions and criticisms of Operation Olive Branch became practically nonexistent.

The reaction from Russian officials was quite minimal, most likely because Turkey had cooperated and communicated with Moscow far ahead of Operation Olive Branch’s commencement in January. When asked about the invasion of

Afrin on February 16th, The head of the Duma Committee on Defense, Vladimir Shamanov, [affirmed](#) that “Not to recognize the Turkish interests in Afrin is impossible.” Several NATO members condemned the invasion of Afrin, those being Bulgaria and the Netherlands. Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Halbe Zijlstra, [said](#) on January 22nd that “Turkey has the right to self-defense, but then it must be very reserved. We are very concerned about the large-scale intervention that now appears to be taking place,” as well as mentioning that, “If Turkey starts fighting the Kurds again, that won't help [In the fights against IS].” Bulgarian President Rumen Radev went [as far](#) as to call for an EU-led intervention against Turkey in response to their incursion, as Ankara’s actions in Northeastern Syria could “lead to serious difficulties.” At a [conference](#) on January 25th, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that “Turkey is the NATO Ally which has suffered most from terrorist attacks over many years and Turkey, as all of the countries, have the right to self defense, but it is important that this is done in a proportionate and measured way.”

On January 29th, Armenian Foreign Minister, Edward Nalabandian, [expressed concern](#) for the region of Afrin, calling it a “New hotbed in the region, which will lead to human casualties. ... We are supportive of controversial issues to be resolved through negotiations and by using international platforms.” While no official opinion was given by Italian representatives, protests broke out across the nation and continued for several months into 2018, with activists protesting [outside](#) the Turkish Embassy in Rome and at Italian arms production [factories](#). Similar protests in support of Afrin were set to occur in Pristina, Kosovo on February 18th, but not before Kosovan police cancelled and [banned](#) the event on February 2nd. Kosovar Minister of Health and political representative for the Kosovar Turkish minority, Mahir Yağcılar, [urged](#) Kosovo citizens to “avoid activities that would damage Kosovo’s image and the country’s

relations with Turkey.” Ankara would later [praise](#) Kosovo’s move to ban the protests.

Other European countries also expressed their concerns for Afrin, with the Cyprus Ministry of Foreign Affairs [condemning](#) the invasion of Afrin to be “illegal” on January 22nd, and Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström [canceling](#) her visit to Turkey in response to the attacks. Germany, at first, had a mixed response, with German Foreign Ministry's deputy spokesman, Rainer Breul publicly [stating](#) on January 19th that, “Turkey has legitimate security interests along its border with Syria.” Breul also added that “We hope and expect that Turkey will continue to exert political and military restraint.” As the days continued however, with accusations of human rights abuses committed by Turkey in Afrin mounting, public opinion of Operation Olive Branch sank in Germany, with the German Government [banning](#) the future sale of Leopard tanks to Turkey on January 25th, after it was discovered that the German-made tanks were used by Ankara to advance into Afrin. The German Parliament on February 1st publicly [criticized](#) Turkey’s invasion of Afrin and the Federal Government of Germany for the lack of its actions towards Turkey in response to the attacks. On February 19th, the Argentinian Parliament passed a [resolution](#) expressing “their condolences to the people of Afrin who have suffered bombings since January 20th.”

Iran heavily criticized the invasion of Afrin, with one Iranian parliamentarian in February [quoting](#) Turkey to be a “fascist dictatorial state because of the Olive Branch operations.” Tehran was quick in its rebuke of the legitimacy of Turkey’s claims of security issues in the city and [urged](#) Ankara to cease its incursion as soon as possible. A month after the launch of Operation Olive Branch, it was revealed that Iranian militias and soldiers were present in Afrin as early as January 2018, with some Turkish airstrikes [killing](#) Iranian

soldiers. Tehran, while critical of Ankara for its occupation of Afrin, has been especially secretive about its own influence in the region, keeping its operations alongside the Kurdish militias largely silenced. The presence of Iranian-backed militias alongside YPG soldiers frustrated Ankara, and in February of 2018 a senior advisor to President Erdogan mentioned that while Tehran did not specifically oppose the idea of an invasion of Afrin, Iran has [continued](#) to “try and stab Turkey in the back.” It was even stated that Ankara had called Iranian President Hassan Rouhani [several times](#) in the unsuccessful attempt to convince Tehran to not send troops to Afrin, which Iran consistently ignored for months.

For the few that expressed positive receptions, the most interesting was the United Kingdom, who followed a similar pattern of hesitant support at the announcement of Operation Olive Branch in January, but never condemned the invasion in the months after, much like France, Germany, and other NATO and European countries did. On January 22nd, the United Kingdom released a statement on Afrin by Boris Johnson, then-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. In the [statement](#), Johnson concluded that “Turkey is right to want to keep its borders secure. We share the goal of reducing violence and keeping the focus on the most important task: a political process in Syria that leads to the end of the Assad regime.” On January 26th, Prime Minister Theresa May met with President Erdogan about the ongoing events in Afrin. A spokesperson for Lady May [summarized](#) the meeting with the following: “The Prime Minister and President Erdogan agreed on the need to protect civilians and avoid a deterioration in the humanitarian situation. ... The Prime Minister also underlined that the UK would continue to work with Turkey to tackle the threat posed by the PKK more broadly.” Following the meeting between May and Erdogan, the United Kingdom has remained largely silent on Operation

Olive Branch for the continuation of Turkey's presence in the region. On March 18th, during a UK Parliament [inquiry](#) of the "Syrian Armed Conflict", Labour politician Hilary Benn asked the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if the United Kingdom had supplied arms to Turkey that had been used in the invasion of Afrin. Sir Alan Duncan replied, "We cannot categorically state that UK weapons are not in use in Turkish military operations in Afrin." In 2019, the United Kingdom did [suspend](#) arms trade in Turkey to prevent their use in Syria. However, this is to note that the ban was in reaction to Operation Peace Spring and not Operation Olive Branch.

Other countries that expressed support for Operation Olive Branch were Azerbaijan and Qatar, with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister, Hikmat Hajiyev, [stating](#) on January 21st: "Azerbaijan fully understands Turkey's security concerns against terror threats," and that "We wish that brotherly Turkey and Turkish people never again becomes subject of treacherous terrorist attacks." Qatari Foreign Minister Ak-Khater [publically supported](#) Turkey on January 23rd, citing that "Turkey, a NATO member, has always been a stabilizing factor in the region."

One of the most vehement supporters of Operation Olive Branch has been the unrecognized Republic of Turkish Northern Cyprus, which is a self-proclaimed republic recognized only by Turkey and internationally recognized as part of the Republic of Cyprus. On January 19th, Turkish Cypriot Foreign Minister, Kudret Ozersay, [said](#) that "We fully stand by and are a supporter of Turkey in its fight against terrorism and in its steps that have been taken to ensure its territorial integrity." Two days later on January 21st, Prime Minister Huseyin Ozgurgun tweeted his [well wishes](#) for a successful outcome for Operation Olive Branch. Also on January 21st, the local Turkish Cypriot newspaper *Avrupa* (English: Europe) published a piece [criticizing](#) the capture of Afrin as "yet another occupation by Turkey", which reportedly made its

headlines back to Turkey on the same day and frustrated Erdogan to an incredible degree. Erdogan [remarked](#) that *Avrupa* was a “cheap and nasty newspaper” and that Turkish Cypriots “should give the necessary response to this,” encouraging them to attack the establishment. The next day, 500 protestors holding Turkish flags [surrounded](#) the newspaper’s building and hurled stones and eggs at the building and its staff, as well as unsuccessfully attempting to break into the building. Turkish Cypriot police reportedly [did not intervene](#) as individuals smashed windows and vandalized the building. The complex was severely damaged by the protestors, and the President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Mustafa Akıncı, condemned the attacks on *Avrupa* and made an appearance at the protests in an attempt to ease tensions, but was [instead](#) attacked by the protestors himself. A [demonstration](#) was held a few days later in Nicosia in support of *Avrupa*. In 2019, after months of legal battles, President Erdogan was ultimately [unsuccessful](#) in suing the newspaper and its journalists for their coverage of Afrin.

Following the capture of Afrin in March of 2018, President Macron offered to host a [meeting](#) between Turkey and the SDF in March of 2018, which Ankara denied attending. France then invited SDF and YPG leaders to the Elysee Palace, where President Macron once again [committed](#) France’s allyship to the Kurdish peoples and vowed to reach dialogue with Turkey, which to the present Ankara has never accepted. France has [continued](#) its criticism of the actions carried out in Afrin to the present, and closely monitors the civilian deaths that have occurred in the city. Other NATO members continued their criticism as well, as in March of 2018, Luxembourg’s foreign minister Jean Asselborn [commented](#) that Turkey’s invasion of Afrin has “nothing to do with self-defense anymore.”

On March 1st, a Russian Security Council aid [alluded](#) to the United States' weapon sales to the YPG being responsible for the invasion of Afrin: "The delivery of modern weapons and encouragement of separatist sentiments among the Kurds provoked Turkey into carrying out the military operation in Syria's northern Afrin region." On March 14th, the International Relations Commission of the Uruguayan Parliament [expressed](#) distress for Afrin and requested situation reports for the region by the Kurdistan National Congress. On March 20th, Kurdish activists in Belgium and Switzerland held [protests](#) in front of European Union buildings in support of Afrin and called on European nations to intervene in Northeastern Syria. Also on March 20th, German Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly [commented](#) on Afrin for the first time, condemning the invasion and that "Turkey's actions were unacceptable despite its security interests. ... It's unacceptable what's happening in Afrin, where thousands and thousands of civilians are being pursued, are dying or have to flee." Officials from the Turkish Foreign Ministry [addressed](#) Merkel's remarks shortly after, calling Merkel's statement "Far from reality," and "Unacceptable." Officials also mentioned that Ankara finds it "Extremely strange" that "Some of our allies are looking at the situation through the eyes of terrorists."

On March 23rd, the Cyprus House of Representatives passed [legislation](#) that condemned the Afrin invasion and stated that Ankara's presence in the city is in violation of international law. For the months following the invasion of Afrin, Iran continued to slam Turkey for the siege of the city, and [reportedly](#) sent 4,000 Iranian-backed fighters to push back against Ankara's control of the city. After [several](#) trilateral peace talks between Russia, Turkey, and Iran in later 2018 and 2019 over the status of Syria, Tehran has since eased its rhetoric against Ankara, but still sees events like Afrin as a threat to its interests in the region. On April 9th, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [stated](#) that "Russia

expects Turkey to hand over Afrin to Assad.” A day later on April 10th, President Erdogan [rebuked](#) Lavrov’s comments as “a very wrong approach. We know full well to whom we will give back Afrin. ... We will decide this, not Mr. Lavrov.”

Following the month of April in 2018, reactions and condemnations to Operation Olive Branch dropped dramatically, as well as media coverage of the invasion. Following the initiation of Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring in 2019, almost all attention in Syria was given to the areas affected by the new operation, meaning that any remaining attention to Afrin was all but lost. Since then, there has been scarce direct references to the peoples and crisis in Afrin by foreign governments. On October 21st of 2020, Swedish Special Envoy to Syria, Per Ornius, as well as an advisor at the European Institute for Peace, Avin Jettin, met with Afrin refugee delegates at the AANES headquarters in Qamishlo. At this [meeting](#), Ornius vowed to “continue to shed light on the crimes committed by Turkey and its mercenaries in Afrin, and work to return the displaced, and to search for ways to solve the issue of the displaced with the international community.” On November 3rd of 2021, the newly appointed Russian Ambassador to Iraq, Elbrus Kutrashev, commented on the situation in Afrin, [describing](#) the Turkishization of Afrin to be “a disaster against the local population.”

## **Section VI: *Afrin Post-Olive Branch***

**2018 - 2021**

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Following the fall of Afrin and the complete control of its inner and outer workings to the SNA and Ankara, SDF officials vowed to bring Afrin back into Kurdish hands. The collapse of Afrin saw the rise of a new militia, the Wrath of Olives (Kurdish: Xezeba Zeytûnê, Arabic: غضب الزيتون, Turkish: Zeytinin Gazabı).

The Wrath of Olives was [formed](#) in retaliation to the Turkish occupation of Afrin, with its group carrying out attacks against Turkish troops and Turkish backed-groups since March of 2018. Another rebel militia group, the Afrin Liberation Front (Kurdish: Hezen Rizgariya Efrine), also emerged to defend Afrin from Ankara and its supporters. The HRE has had [successful](#) raids against Turkish military bases and has faced multiple skirmishes against Syrian opposition forces since the group's creation in the latter half of 2018. The HRE would later choose to merge under the SDF. After Operation Olive Branch was completed in March of 2018, SDF officials promised to continue [guerrilla warfare tactics](#) against Turkey in order to take the Afrin Administration back into AANES control, because a direct confrontation with Turkish militias was no longer viable for Kurdish forces.

As Turkey tightened its grip on Afrin, it quickly became clear that removing Ankara's forces from Afrin would be close to impossible. But still, SDF forces carried out [attacks](#) on civilian sympathizers and pro-Ankara Afrin police in the years following Olive Branch. Much of these attacks are connected with the HRE or the Wrath of Olives. In 2018 alone, both of the militias accounted for a [total](#) of 220 attacks. Civilians were often either purposefully or accidentally [targeted](#) in many of the attacks from the HRE and the Wrath of Olives, with the groups often otherwise claiming that they had eliminated "supporters of the invasion", but would sometimes go as far as to say that the punishing of civilians would occur as long as Ankara continued its occupation of Afrin. This has led to the YPG and later the SDF to maintain looser ties with the groups, as not to assume their liability in civilian attacks, per strong [advice](#) from Washington.

Both the Wrath of Olives and the HRE continue in operation to the present, and have constituted much of the local pushback against Ankara's

influence in Afrin. As explained in Section IV, the Kurdish peoples of Afrin had rapidly lost population, political control, and cultural presence in the city. The local economy of Afrin had crashed severely, and those who were forcibly displaced to other towns surrounding Afrin were likely to never return back to the city. The small percentage of those who did return, were met with an Afrin unrecognizable to them, with foreigners in their homes, who upon [confrontation](#) with the new homeowners would be kidnapped and be demanded to pay thousands of dollars as ransom. Turkey also announced that another militia umbrella group, the Syrian National Front for Liberation, would be [merging](#) with the Syrian National Army and would immediately begin posts in Afrin. The growth of the Syrian National Army was beginning to be quite threatening, and even more so in 2019, when Ankara launched a third offensive into Kurdish Syria, this time titled “Operation Peace Spring”. With the third offensive into Northern Syria, [additional](#) militias were added under the Syrian National Army’s umbrella, and more control over Afrin was allotted to the SNA. The merging group in question, titled the [National Front for Liberation](#), had previously led 20 militia groups under its own umbrella, and when combined with the SNA, the [official count](#) became 40 militia groups overall, all of whom are directly controlled and financed by Ankara.

Because Operation Peace Spring was initiated primarily due to Ankara successfully convincing then U.S. President Donald Trump to begin withdrawing U.S. forces from

Northeastern Syria, the AANES scrambled to find a new ally to protect them, and found one with the Assad government. Outlined in the agreement brokered by Moscow, territories completely controlled by Turkey and SNA forces, like Afrin, were now territories to be [targeted](#) by the cooperation of

Assad's forces and the SDF. Afrin has seen no advances from Damascus and Rojava however, and the city has continued to be held by Ankara to the present.

One of the largest criticisms [voiced](#) by Afrin activists, as well as Syrian human rights organizations, was the loss of global focus that befell Afrin in 2019 to the present. Both international and domestic media, following the escalation of conflict in nearby Idlib and the subsequent Turkish military operation elsewhere in Syria, substantially decreased their international attention and coverage towards Afrin, with much of it to never return. This allowed security advancements from Turkey and the SNA to be much easier, as the international arena was no longer prioritizing Turkey to cease their control over Afrin.

In July of 2019, it was revealed via an [interview](#) with a council member that all acting local councils in Afrin directly answered to the nearby Turkish province of Hatay, which is where they receive all of their revenue from. It was also revealed that Ankara had explicitly banned the Syrian Interim Government from opening any offices in Afrin for the sole purpose of maintaining Ankara as the primary political decision maker in the city. In April of 2020, a car bomb was detonated in Afrin city-center, which Turkish officials claimed had killed 40 people. While no group took responsibility for the attack, Ankara [implied](#) the YPG/SDF's involvement, which the militia group has denied. In response to the attack in Afrin, Turkey retaliated with an offensive on the city of Tell Rifaat, an SDF-controlled area run alongside the Assad regime, before being convinced by Russia to cease advances towards the city.

SNA militia groups continued to harass Afrin olive tree farmers in 2020, with one militia group being [accused](#) of systematically cutting down 500 trees in the month of June alone. Farmers wishing to cultivate land that legally belonged to their relatives had their land rights removed and were instead given to the SNA. Political officials also introduced [legislation](#) in 2020 that barred Afrin olive

oil farmers from selling their products to other cities and regions in Syria. The checkpoint systems established in late 2018 rapidly deteriorated starting in mid-2019. The little semblance of security for Afrin citizens regarding legitimate checkpoint safety had all but [vanished](#) in 2020, with the remaining checkpoints in place largely serving the financial needs of the SNA by forcing travelers to either pay fines or face being arrested. Ankara continued its practices of Kurdish eviction effectively into 2020, with SNA soldiers systematically removing Kurdish residents of Afrin and then reselling their homes at extremely low prices to non-Kurdish citizens, with some [estimates](#) being \$3,000 to \$5,000 USD for two-story homes. In October of 2020 [alone](#), 135 Afrin residents were forcibly arrested and kidnapped, with most reports accusing SNA affiliated groups of being responsible.

To the present day of 2021, Afrin still sees much political and military violence. On June 12th, two missiles were launched into Afrin, one missile targeted a residential area and the other targeted the Al-Shifaa Hospital, which killed 13 civilians and injured 27 more civilians. Turkish officials [maintained](#) that the cause of the attack was from Kurdish militias, but later reports found that the Syrian Government was [responsible](#). International organizations like the United Nations and the World Health Organization have condemned the attack, with the WHO [urging](#) “all parties to the conflict in northwest Syria to respect the safety and neutrality of health workers and health facilities.” The State Department also released a [statement](#), calling the attacks “barbaric.” On June 14th, UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, [said](#) that “Such appalling attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including healthcare facilities and workers, are unacceptable and must cease.” Also on June 14th, the U.K. and French Foreign Ministries, as well as the European Union at large, [called](#) for the cease of targeting civilians and medical officials.

In recent developments, Turkey and SNA officials have [hinted](#) at the possibility of launching another operation in Northeastern Syria, this being the fourth, to capture Tell Rifaat and its surrounding villages. On October 22nd of 2021, an anonymous SNA field commander held an interview with Al-Monitor, where they [detailed](#) how Ankara explicitly told the militias to increase their military “readiness” and accused SDF officials in Tell Rifaat of bombing Turkish troops in Afrin. A few days later on October 26th, the Turkish Parliament [reapproved](#) the Turkish government’s mandate to invade Syria and Iraq, which has brought even greater tension to the Northeastern Syrian region.

Kidnappings of Afrin citizens from Turkish intelligence agencies and SNA officials occur weekly, with SNA soldiers having free reign to decide what the ransom price is for each citizen, with some prices [reported](#) to be as high as 2,000 Turkish lire per person. Russian interests in North Eastern Syria have considerably expanded in the years since 2018, and while Russian Armed Forces have never publicly interacted with Afrin on the ground, tensions with Moscow and Ankara spiked when Russian fighter jets [attacked](#) a Turkish-backed militia group in Afrin on September 26th of 2021. Moscow claims that the militia group in question, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, was to be removed in areas north of Aleppo in a deal signed by Turkey and Russia in 2018, therefore making their presence in cities like Afrin illegal.

The most recent [monthly report](#) for Afrin detailed the SNA’s responsibility in the murder of three residents, the torture of seven residents with two of those being elderly, and the kidnapping of more than 71 residents with 16 of those being elderly and one being a minor. [Within](#) the month of November, 3 additional mosques were built, several Kurdish sites were altered and one completely destroyed, and 3,500 olive trees were cut down. This adds to the August 2021 [projected](#) total of more than 1.5 million olive trees that the

SNA militias have burned and destroyed in the city since Operation Olive Branch. Afrin continues to be caught in the center of such conflicts between the warring foreign powers and domestic instability to the present.

## **Section VII: *Policy Recommendations***

**2018 - 2021**

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The situation on the ground in Afrin is indisputably bleak, and producing realistic policy recommendations for the city can be just as frustrating. As Turkey has an absolute monopoly over security and political power in Afrin, advocating for policies that legitimately bring greater protection for the Kurds and other Syrian minority groups is a daunting task. Ankara has done much to cement its grip on the region, with local militias and political councils at their complete disposal, for both intelligence sharing and overall favorability of control. The previously Kurdish-majority city of Afrin has had its entire Kurdish identity systematically stripped away, and most Kurdish residents have never returned to the city. Historical and cultural monuments have been destroyed, the Turkish *lira* has replaced local currencies in use, and shops and farmers experience looting and ravaging by the very same militias that Ankara continues to finance for Afrin's stability.

This is not to say that Turkey has entirely ignored the needs of Afrin, as it has [funded](#) much of what constitutes Afrin's present infrastructure, especially in terms of water and electricity. While certain observers could very well argue that these reforms are simply additional steps for Turkey to maintain complete control over all of Afrin's needs, the bottom line of this observation is that Turkey is at least somewhat attempting to ensure Afrin does not collapse from

the effects of Operation Olive Branch that still ring throughout the city even now. But in terms of the somewhat beneficial policies, Ankara has implemented for Afrin, they are much too minuscule and are far outweighed by the negative policies that have been put in place for several years.

Discourse on policy recommendations for Afrin have been sparse since 2018, largely due to the scale of the Syrian civil war overshadowing Operation Olive Branch itself. There has been [advocacy](#) for policies that hold Turkey accountable for its actions, while still allowing Washington to work with Ankara in their interests of developing Afrin. This involves making certain concessions to Ankara. Although a hypothetical scenario, largely because the “returning” of Afrin to Washington, Assad, or some third-party peacekeeping organization, is incredibly unlikely as giving control of the city to groups or proxies not controlled by Ankara lacks substantial gains that would motivate Turkey to pursue such a policy. However, opening up Afrin to larger-scale foreign assistance and aid, under Turkish supervision, is beneficial for all parties involved. As Afrin continues to be disregarded and vandalized by SNA militias, the economic and overall wellbeing of the city has deteriorated, and the poor state of the city has many parties worried that its instability could be the [next breeding ground](#) for IS and other radical groups.

For both Ankara and Washington, an Afrin free of IS influence is a shared objective in their Syrian foreign policies, and it is through this approach that both countries should cooperate in regards to Afrin. As the international community understands that Ankara [finances](#) the SNA, and [Washington](#) the SDF, the United States could commence confidence-building with Turkey by requiring the SDF to respond more openly about the criticisms it faces in the public sphere, in exchange for Turkey to do the same with the SNA. This recommendation comes as the United Nations has [urged](#) Turkey to consolidate

its proxies and hold them more accountable, which Turkish officials [agreed](#) to do in an independent investigation. Turkey considers the SNA as its most vital actor in the region, but the SNA has not been entirely cooperative, as several times SNA leaders have [lied](#) to Ankara in order to receive additional funding. Creating checks and balances for the SNA is indeed beneficial for Turkey, but only if Washington does the same for the SDF. While neither Turkey nor the US wish to see each others' proxies become further legitimized, the potential outcome of unorganized and irresponsible proxies further destabilizing Syria is motivation for both nations to find common ground. Afrin is an excellent example, as while Washington would very much wish to have SDF forces replace SNA authorities in the city, they would much rather avoid the threat of unregulated SNA proxies contributing to a resurgence of IS.

The introduction of greater U.S. and European aid to Afrin, if permitted by Ankara following its cooperation as mentioned, would strengthen the city to a considerable degree and ensure that the youth of Afrin are not persuaded to join militias that threaten Afrin's stability. This comes as HRE and Wrath of Olive militias, who are allies of neither Washington nor Ankara, are [increasing](#) their attacks on civilians in the city. If international aid is agreed upon, the educational area would most likely stay "hands-off" from the West, as Turkey will indefinitely seek to control the political, religious, and cultural spheres of Afrin's youth for its own gains. However, Washington and Europe can make headway in maintaining a radical-free Afrin in the areas of health, food, and economic assistance. Per the recommendation of the United Nations in 2021, the more jobs and food that are provided in Afrin, the [less likely](#) that the city's residents will be to seek refuge and salaries from armed factions and militias. The more [resources](#) that are allocated to the [job markets](#) of Afrin, especially the Kurdish olive oil farmers currently being taxed by SNA officials, the more that

the general livelihood of Afrin residents will improve and the likelihood of their radicalization via the HRE and Wrath of Olives will decrease, likewise with the chances of being recruited and disillusioned by the SNA. These developments would stabilize Afrin while simultaneously convincing Turkey that the West is primarily interested in areas that do not threaten Ankara's influence over the region.

But under most circumstances for a brighter future for Afrin include scenarios that have Kurdish visions muddled in the vast concessions that both Washington and Ankara would have to make. The idea that Afrin could one day return to its status as a Kurdish-majority city is highly unlikely, even if greater cooperation between the West and Turkey over Afrin is achieved. This is primarily because of the policies Turkey has implemented due to Operation Olive Branch, especially with its [demographic initiatives](#) to increase the percentage of Arab residents, which it has successfully achieved for the past three years. If Washington wishes to see Kurds return to Afrin, and if for some reason Ankara agrees to such a policy, the question becomes of what to do with the Arab residents that have taken the homes of the Kurdish peoples, some living in residence for several years. Many Arab residents would object to giving up their homes, but the Kurds would most likely argue that they are the rightful owners. To avoid such a conflict breaking out across the city, economic incentives would be offered to any resident of Afrin to move to newly constructed residential areas and homes in Afrin, which such a construction process would be co-funded by Turkey and Western partners, which Turkey in the past has [demonstrated](#) its willingness to invest in Afrin's construction. But convincing Ankara to even consider such a policy, let alone finance it, could only be done with assistance and encouragement by the United States and Europe. Major concessions would have to be made by the West and their involvement in

Syria for Turkey to perceive such a policy as beneficial, as relocating Kurdish residents back to Afrin be seen as reintroducing terrorists back to the city in the perspective of the Erdogan Administration.

If an agreement can be reached between Turkey and the West on the coexistence of Arabs and Kurds in Afrin, the essence of such a deal would require discourse on the criticisms of Turkey during Operation Olive Branch, as Ankara has been continuously threatened by various groups to be charged with their involvement in the Syrian Civil War. Likewise, nations continue to condemn Ankara on its overall actions in Syria, and the restriction of weapons sales and other necessities to Turkey have been in place in certain countries for several years, so there is merit to the idea that Europe and the United States have [leverage](#) in alleviating these restrictions if Ankara allows for foreign presence and non-military cooperation in Afrin. This is the primary reason why the plight of the Kurds must be craftily worded in reference to how the United States should cooperate with Turkey. If Afrin is to ever see greater peace and a decrease in militarization, it must be done via international agreements, and Ankara will never commit to such policies if the Kurds of Afrin are outlined in them or overtly benefit from them. The West must first find a path shared by Ankara to redefine the landscape of Afrin, and only after the city has been stabilized should the U.S. and Europe approach policies that specifically target the Kurds.

This recommendation relies on the idea that the more assistance the West targets in areas that SNA militias operate and dictate the daily livelihood in Afrin, the less influential the SNA's soft-power becomes. The environment of hostility for Kurdish Afrin residents would diminish, enticing former Kurdish residents to return in various capacities. This also accounts for other institutions in Afrin that [account](#) for ethnic discrimination, like the health

networks run by the Turkish government. If Western oversight can be shared on how hospitals operate and how patients are treated, Kurdish acceptance and coexistence can be initiated through the inside-out. While many Afrin residents of Kurdish descent will [likely](#) never return, the willingness to see the city restored as a center of Kurdish identity still exists for some former residents, and could very well be the driving force behind their repatriation.

Convincing Turkey to implement any cooperative policy in Northeastern Syria is daunting, but once Ankara has agreed to terms that allow Washington to strengthen the city of Afrin and its surrounding areas, the logistics of reintroducing Kurdish civilians becomes somewhat less troublesome. Finding common ground may be complex for both Turkey and United States, but the threat of a resurgence of extremism is certainly a factor both nations could connect on. The recontextualization of each other's proxies and the expanded accountability of their actions would display signs of mutual strategic interest. If such policies were enacted, Turkey allowing the West greater access to Afrin would be potentially viable, as an expansion in aid to certain institutions in the city is indeed beneficial for Ankara, as expanding Afrin's [economic capabilities](#) means more commodities sold in Turkey, and less total reliance on the olive oil business that the SNA has ravaged for years. It is only with a redefined Afrin that then the Kurdish question comes into place, and while the Turkification of Afrin would still continue, the city would shift towards a climate that may not be necessarily welcoming of Kurds, but at least open for them to return and reside in a city decreased in militia and radical influence.

But no matter the concessions given and the state of Afrin in any such hypothetical scenario, the reality is that the various systems in place due to Operation Olive Branch are deeply felt by the city, and the Kurds that return to Afrin would find a town that they simply do not recognize. Struggling to readapt

to a society overwhelmingly controlled by Turkey would be terrifying for Kurdish refugees, but the reality is that the city of Afrin has been forced to move past its Kurdish origins for several years. The town is no longer ravaged by warfare, but is a city safe for only those who Ankara chooses.

The international coverage of Afrin has long since faded for several years and is now a common sight only on the list of other Northeastern Syrian towns that Turkey controls in Syria. But the fight on the ground has yet to cease, and that exhaustive drive of the Kurds is what must conclude the modern analysis of Afrin. The city has lost its Kurdish culture, and foreign powers have done their best to ensure Afrin stays as such, but the people of Afrin have yet to forget, and likely never will. The individual struggle that Afrin residents have been forced to bear may be a losing fight, but it is a battle admirable enough to witness in the hope that international powers can one day agree that the city is better off being taken care of rather than disregarded as extremism and political uncertainty slowly spread within the city's fragile borders.

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*Dominic Brunaccioni is currently a research assistant at the Washington Kurdish Institute (WKI), who studies International Relations at American University. Dominic takes a particular interest in Turkey's affairs.*