

The Peace and Security Implications of Enforced Disappearances in Turkey's Kurdish Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the instances, circumstances, and implications of enforced disappearances in Turkey and in Turkish-occupied northern Syria in the context of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, incorporating data and insights from human rights defenders from Turkey and Syria.

An estimated 1,352 people have disappeared in Turkey since the 1980 military coup, according to the Truth Justice Memory Centre. The majority went missing in the mid-1990s. The victims of these enforced disappearances were often political activists and were predominantly ethnic Kurds.

The perpetrators were almost never held accountable. Activists who spoke out for justice faced judicial harassment and police brutality. This reality stands as a testament to the ongoing reality of discrimination, erasure, and silencing of Kurds and other minorities in Turkey—a major driver of conflict and instability in Turkey and neighboring countries.

But enforced disappearances related to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict are not a thing of the past, nor do they only occur in Turkey. As northern Syria became the primary flashpoint of the military conflict between the government of Turkey and armed Kurdish groups, disappearances perpetrated by Turkey-backed armed groups in areas of northern Syria under Turkish control became a major human rights issue.

According to the Synergy Association for Victims, more than 1,200 civilians in Turkish-controlled Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad have reportedly been disappeared. Victims are often targeted on the basis of their Kurdish ethnicity or their real or perceived support for or participation in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

These crimes impact their immediate victims, their families, and their communities—as well as fueling mass displacement and conflict between Syrian Kurdish groups and Turkey at the strategic level.

Any future political and security understanding between Turkey and Syrian Kurds will have to, at a bare minimum, allow displaced Kurdish populations to return safely to their homes and have a fair and representative stake in the governance and security of their region. This will not be possible without justice for the victims of disappearance and meaningful guarantees of non-recurrence.

Humanitarian measures around disappearances in Turkish-occupied Syria could be manageable confidence-building measures towards de-escalation.

Political steps towards a lasting, just Turkish-Kurdish peace could build on the basis of narrow human rights-based action addressing urgent conflict flashpoints in northern Syria.

WHAT ARE ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES?

According to the [United Nations](#), an enforced disappearance occurs when "persons are arrested, detained or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of Government, or by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect, consent or acquiescence of the Government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such persons outside the protection of the law."

Disappearances are first and foremost violations of the rights of the immediate victims. Such examples of the rights violated are "the right to recognition as a person before the law," "the right to liberty and security of the person," and "the right to an identity," among others according to the United Nations. However, they also have a serious impact on their families and communities, such as "the right to protection and assistance to the family" and "the right to an adequate standard of living."

We are from Serekaniye [Ras al-Ain]. My husband, who was a member of the internal security forces, was arrested in 2019 by factions during the Turkish invasion. We thought he had died. Later we were able to confirm that he was being held in one of the factions' prisons, according to a person who was detained with him. They are constantly moved from one place to another. For two years, we have received no information about his fate.

Two years had passed since our marriage when we had our daughter. We spend our days hoping that he will return someday and that we can live together again. The absence of my husband is incredibly difficult. We can't live our lives as we should. We always hope for his return, and his family also suffers from this loss.

As for support, I only need one thing: to be able to see him once or hear his voice. If someone could reunite us, it would be the greatest support for us.

Justice means that my husband, who was tortured and detained by factions, should be released. We need to know his whereabouts and be able to communicate with him, or have a lawyer take up his case.

My innocent husband should be released, as he has not done anything wrong or committed any violations, and the perpetrators should be held accountable.

Anonymous

Wife of Victim of Enforced Disappearance in Turkish-Occupied Syria

As a result, this crime has "frequently been used as a strategy to spread terror within the society." In armed conflicts around the world, "the use of enforced disappearances, like many war crimes, is a 'military tactic meant to terrorize communities and demoralize civilian resistance.'" Disappearances often occur in the context of civil unrest and so-called 'counter-terrorism' operations. Political dissidents, human rights advocates, and members of ethnic and religious minorities are often targets. Fear of disappearances can lead to displacement of targeted communities.

International legal experts warn that "when there are large numbers of missing persons, this can prolong the trauma of conflict, exacerbate the fragility of peace, and impede the development of democratic society."

DISAPPEARANCES AND IMPUNITY IN TURKEY'S KURDISH CONFLICT

According to the Truth Justice Memory Centre, at least 1,352 people have disappeared in Turkey since the 1980 military coup, which saw a far-right regime crush democratic dissent and attempt to eradicate Kurdish identity.

The majority of the victims were Kurds who went missing in the mid-1990s. The Truth Justice Memory Centre identifies two categories of victims: "journalists, politicians, activists, lawyers, and human rights defenders, who represented the mobilization around the Kurdish political movement" and any civilian "living in the Kurdish region who was accused of logistically supporting the PKK or being a member of the militia organization."

These individuals were accused of terrorism or support for terrorism. These accusations are a powerful form of dehumanization that states often use to justify serious abuses. The United Nations has warned that "the measures adopted by States to counter terrorism have themselves often posed serious challenges to human rights and the rule of law," citing torture, unfair legal processes and repression of minorities and human rights defenders.

Disappearances contributed to prolonging and intensifying the Kurdish conflict in multiple ways. They reinforced Kurdish perceptions that the state discriminated against them and could not represent them. Along with other unsolved state-linked murders, they “removed capable leaders and activists from the political scene and raised the cost of political and social participation for Kurdish civilians,” which “weakened peaceful campaigns for democratization, Kurdish rights and a negotiated end to the armed conflict between the state and the PKK.” Those who lost loved ones often sought to take justice into their own hands: “some of the relatives of victims took up arms and joined the PKK after witnessing injustice.” Fear of being subjected to enforced disappearance and other abuses—which has been recognized as a form of torture and therefore a rights violation and of itself—contributed to mass-scale displacement of Kurds from Kurdish regions. That displacement created new conflict flashpoints in the places to which Kurdish communities fled.

Perpetrators were never held accountable. The relatives and communities of disappearance victims are continuously harmed by this reality: “impunity is experienced as a second trauma that relieves the pain and triggers the appearance of symptoms and emotions of anguish and permanent feelings of sadness, rage and impotence.” in Turkey, this strengthened Kurdish perceptions of discrimination, injustice, fear, and a need for justice outside of state structures.

“The policy of impunity for enforced disappearances is linked to the Kurdish problem and the Kurdistan problem. The most intense period of enforced disappearances was the 1990s—in other words, the most intense years of the war in Kurdistan. There are very few people in the region whose relatives are not missing. The whole region is full of mass graves.

The people know where these mass graves are. Therefore, the continuation of this policy of impunity actually means the continuation of the policy of non-resolution of the Kurdish question.”

Eren Keskin
Human Rights Association of Turkey

When Kurds organized and spoke out, they often became victims of state violence and discrimination themselves. The Saturday Mothers, a group of relatives of the disappeared

who have met weekly for years to call authorities to reveal the fate of the disappeared, regularly face police brutality and legal threats. Members of the group have been attacked by police, detained, and put on trial multiple times since the 1990s. This type of violence and discrimination further entrenches Kurdish grievances with the state.

While Kurdish communities and human rights advocates hoped that the peace process between Turkey and the PKK that occurred between 2013 and 2015 might lead to justice, this was not ultimately the case. The peace process did create democratic space for Kurdish politics and human rights advocates, as the atmosphere of conflict and securitization and criminalization of Kurdish concerns was lessened. This gave activists demanding justice for victims of enforced disappearances and their families opportunities to organize.

However, observers noted at the time that “the need for a truth and reconciliation mechanism has hardly been on the agenda of the government,” despite high-level Kurdish demands that disappearances and other serious crimes be addressed as part of talks.

The Turkish government’s refusal to address these crimes contributed to Kurdish skepticism about negotiations. Kurdish participants in talks identified the government’s refusal to establish a truth and reconciliation commission—one of the steps in the “Road Map” for peace proposed by jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan that formed the basis of the first round of Turkey-PKK peace talks—impacted their willingness to move forward. A Kurdish source familiar with the 2013-2015 talks claimed that the PKK had established a committee of its own that collected interviews with its members about irregularities and abuses they were aware of or had participated in during the course of the conflict—but that this information was never shared as no truth commission was established.

These details suggest that concrete efforts for truth and justice in relation to disappearances and other serious crimes committed over the course of the conflict could have saved Turkey’s peace process before it fell apart—a breakdown that led to severe democratic backsliding in Turkey and created or strengthened significant regional and global security challenges that continue to exist today.

DISAPPEARANCES IN TURKEY’S CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS

The resumption of conflict in 2015 contributed to its unprecedented internationalization. Many analysts assess that one reason why Erdogan’s government abandoned talks was the military success of Kurdish-led forces against ISIS in northeastern Syria. Turkey feared that this could lead to the creation of a Kurdish autonomous region on its border.

Since 2018, Turkey has intervened militarily in northern Syria in order to degrade and destroy both the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey does not differentiate between the SDF and AANES and the PKK and considers both to be terrorist organizations.

“Today, Turkey's policy in Syria— which is outside its borders, in the Kurdish regions—has caused many people to be harmed and disappeared in custody. However, some wars are seen as more important by states: for example the war between Russia and Ukraine. That's why they fight harder for these wars to end. Unfortunately, the war in Kurdistan is not on the agenda of world organizations. As human rights defenders, all our efforts are to ensure that the war in Kurdistan is put on the world agenda and that people in our geography can live in peace.”

Eren Keskin

Human Rights Association of Turkey

In March 2018, Turkish forces and affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA) militias took control of the region of Afrin in northwestern Syria from the AANES and SDF in Operation Olive Branch. In October 2019, following a green light from U.S. President Donald Trump, Turkey and the SNA seized the region between Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad in northeastern Syria in Operation Peace Spring. Both regions remain under Turkish control today.

While there are notable differences in Turkey's governance and security strategies in its domestic Kurdish conflict and its cross-border operations in Syria, many continuities are apparent. First, in both cases, the goal of Turkish strategy is not only to eliminate a Kurdish armed group or political structure, but to remove or weaken the Kurdish social base that could allow any such entity to exist. Second, widespread abuses against Kurdish civilian populations, particularly Kurds accused of supporting Kurdish armed groups or political parties, is one means by which this goal is accomplished. Third, the systematic nature of the abuses and the exclusion of local Kurdish communities from meaningful participation in relevant political and security structures means perpetrators cannot be held accountable and victims cannot access protection, furthering the culture of impunity.

Unsurprisingly, in this context, enforced disappearances have been extensively documented in the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria (COI) and NGOs have found that victims are disproportionately ethnic Kurds. They include members of Kurdish political, social and cultural organizations, former members of previously existing SDF and AANES governance and security structures and their relatives, and any civilians accused of collaborating with the AANES and SDF.

“Synergy Association for Victims documented at least 1,219 cases of enforced disappearance in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, Tall Abyad and Afrin regions, which are occupied by Turkey as a result of “Operation Olive Branch” in 2018 and “Operation Peace Spring” in 2019. In Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tall Abyad alone, Synergy documented the enforced disappearance of 233 people, including 18 women, at the hands of the Turkish forces and opposition Syrian National Army (SNA). Moreover, Synergy documented the transfer of at least 93 Syrian prisoners to the Turkish soil during and after “Operation Peace Spring”, as 52 of them were arbitrarily sentenced to 13 years’ imprisonment and life imprisonment. While in Afrin, Synergy documented the enforced disappearance of 986 people, among them 47 women and two children, at the hands of the Turkish forces and the opposition SNA.”

Izzadin Saleh

Synergy Association for Victims

Perpetrators are predominantly members of SNA militias and SNA-affiliated police forces. These groups are armed, trained and supervised by Turkey. The United Nations and a variety of human rights groups have consistently reiterated that Turkey is responsible for ensuring that international law is respected by groups under its control in regions where it is the occupying power.

While extrajudicial killings have been reported, many of the disappeared in these regions are thought to be alive in unknown locations in Syria or possibly in Turkey. Some have been released from militia ‘black sites’ after being missing for months or years: in one famous 2020 case, the whereabouts of eight women were inadvertently revealed when clashes between rival Turkey-backed groups resulted in them being moved from one unofficial

detention site to another. The women were later released over time as a result of public outcry; at least one was reportedly abducted again by the same militia.

Disappearances in the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones are linked to large-scale Kurdish displacement—a major human rights issue in and of itself and a significant structural grievance driving continued conflict between the AANES and SDF and Turkey.

“Enforced disappearances and other crimes committed in areas under the control of the opposition factions have a tragic impact on those regions’ populations. Many were forcibly displaced from their homes and now live in camps in difficult humanitarian conditions. Funding and aid for these camps is decreasing. Families suffer from the loss of their relatives. Many women now bear responsibilities beyond their capabilities because their husbands have been killed or gone missing, and they must now support their children alone.”

*Helez Abdulaziz
North Press Agency Documentation Department*

Afrin and Ras al-Ain were key bases of support for the AANES and SDF. Many Kurds from these regions—Afrin in particular—were integral to the establishment of NES political and security structures in and before 2011 and to their successful expansion across one-third of Syria during the campaign against ISIS. Many more participated actively in these structures, fighting far from their homes to ensure the defeat of the jihadist group. Displaced communities from these regions are thus an important constituency for the Autonomous Administration whose preferences about security and political choices hold weight for leaders.

Today, poor conditions in IDP camps, ongoing abuses in the occupied zones preventing returns, and a perceived lack of international support—especially in comparison to the support they see given to ISIS families in al-Hol—are significant concerns for these communities. They will not accept AANES policy choices that appear to abandon them to permanent displacement, with no prospect of a future safe and dignified return to their homes.

Disappearances are also among the motivations driving people to continue joining the SDF, as men and women displaced during Operation Peace Spring and Operation Olive Branch join up in response to Turkish and SNA abuses against their communities and relatives. Women in particular have reportedly been motivated to join the Women's Defense Units (YPJ) in part by the [reports of the treatment of women abducted by SNA militias](#).

CONCLUSIONS

Disappearances and related human rights issues, a culture of impunity, and the challenges that these dynamics pose to stability will remain on the agenda in Turkey and Syria. Turkish cross-border military operations have escalated in recent months following Erdogan's victory in May elections. Turkey has reiterated that it will not withdraw its forces from Syria at any time soon, and continues to claim the right to intervene in a 30-kilometer-deep 'safe zone' that includes essentially every remaining Kurdish population center in Syria. This means more civilian populations are at risk of forced displacement or of the severe ethnically and politically motivated rights abuses, including disappearances, that take place in occupied zones.

The domestic political dynamics in Turkey driving renewed conflict show few signs of changing, meaning that an environment of impunity for past crimes and permissiveness for new ones—particularly in Turkish-occupied Syria—will continue to exist.

That said, Erdogan's Turkey has been sensitive to international pressure before, both on Syria and on human rights issues. Targeting action to support human rights improvements that could benefit stability in Syria and Iraq on a larger strategic level would be a worthwhile battle to pick.

Today, the primary location of the armed conflict between Turkey and Kurdish groups is northeastern Syria. A major SDF/AANES grievance with Turkey—second only to active military attacks against the region and the threat of a future ground operation—is the status of the Peace Spring and Olive Branch zones and of their Kurdish populations, including both displaced populations and those who have attempted to remain in the region under brutal militia rule.

Any future political and security understanding between Turkey and Syrian Kurds will thus have to, at a bare minimum, allow displaced Kurdish populations to return safely to their homes and have a fair and representative stake in the governance and security of their

region. This will not be possible if Turkey does not reveal the fate of all persons to have gone missing in the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones since they came under Turkish control; release those victims who are still alive in detention, whether in Syria or in Turkey; punish all perpetrators of disappearances and related abuses like extrajudicial killings, torture, and sexual violence and remove them from the regions impacted; and offer meaningful, tangible guarantees of non-recurrence.

Humanitarian measures around disappearances, taken in accordance with Turkish law and international law, could be manageable confidence-building measures towards de-escalation. They would not necessarily be seen as political, and would not need to involve direct engagement between overtly political actors on either side. They could be framed as purely legal humanitarian processes and could be supported by the international community.

Political steps towards a lasting, just Turkish-Kurdish peace could build on the basis of narrow human rights-based action addressing immediate conflict flashpoints in Syria. Ultimately, any overall peace process could then build on this 'human-rights-first' approach to include mechanisms to address disappearances and all other violations committed by all parties involved over the course of the fighting.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Publicly and privately convey to Turkey that Turkish forces and all Turkey-backed armed groups must:
 - a. Reveal the fate of all persons to have gone missing in Turkey in the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones since they came under Turkish control;
 - b. Release those victims who are still alive in detention, regardless of their geographic location or whether they are held in official or unofficial facilities;
 - c. Punish all perpetrators of disappearances and related abuses like extrajudicial killings, torture, and sexual violence and remove individuals and entities involved in these violations from the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones;
 - d. Offer meaningful, tangible guarantees of non-recurrence to impacted families and communities; and
 - e. End all retaliatory action against individuals and entities that document disappearances and other human rights violations and work for justice on these issues.

2. Continue to use yearly Country Human Rights Reports on Turkey and Syria to document conditions in the occupied areas of northern Syria, including enforced disappearances. Extensive engagement with Syrian and Kurdish organizations documenting abuses in the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones should be continued.
3. Provide diverse and strategic support for civil society organizations, particularly Kurdish-led organizations, working to document and seek justice for human rights abuses in Turkey's Kurdish conflict and in particular its cross-border military operations in northern Syria. Given the sensitivities of accepting open international support and funding in some contexts, this support can be offered in partnership with civil society groups, international organizations, and other third parties. It should enhance the most needed capacities of these organizations based on their own evaluations. It should include support on how to access international justice mechanisms, given the extremely low likelihood that victims will receive justice in Turkey's current system.
4. Coordinate greater governmental and NGO support for IDPs in northern Syria displaced by Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring. This should include both humanitarian support to meet basic needs of displaced communities in under-resourced refugee camps and specialized medical and psychological support for survivors of torture, sexual violence, and other abuses in the occupied areas. These individuals often flee to said under-resourced camps after escaping the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones, where they are unable to access the specialized support they may need.
5. Take concrete steps towards international accountability processes that will address the grievances of victims in Turkish-held Syria. This should start with an international fact-finding mission to the areas occupied by Turkey during Operation Peace Spring and Operation Olive Branch and to IDP camps in northern Syria home to communities displaced by these military operations. The mission should include representatives of the U.S. and other Coalition member governments, UN bodies, and human rights organizations, as well as representatives of North and East Syrian institutions previously representing the occupied regions and NES-based NGOs engaged in monitoring violations in these areas. It should be guaranteed complete access to the relevant areas free from Turkish or SNA intervention and assurances that subjects will not be subjected to retribution. The goals of this mission should be:
 - a. To extensively and accurately document the impact of the two Turkish incursions on communities, including documentation of war crimes, crimes

against humanity, and human rights abuses (including disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, and the theft of land and property), the conditions of displaced communities and their humanitarian needs, and the preferences and opinions of both displaced communities and those remaining in the occupied zones. This documentation should be published as a report to inform policymakers and the public.

- b. To establish the basis for the creation of an internationally-supervised complaints office based in these regions under international supervision. This office should take complaints of rights violations from residents of these regions and follow up with local authorities to ensure their just and timely resolution. It must be able to ensure that complainants will not face retribution for registering violations against them.
6. Reassess the application of counter-terrorism frameworks to the Kurdish question in Turkey and the resulting armed conflicts, as well as any other policies that may legitimize common pretexts used by Turkey and Turkey-backed groups for disappearances and common justifications for impunity for actions taken by security forces in the course of the Kurdish conflict.

Enforced Disappearances Related to the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey and Turkish-Occupied Syria		
	Turkey	Turkish-Occupied Syria
Who are the perpetrators?	<p>Turkish military and police forces</p> <p>Turkey-backed paramilitary groups</p>	<p>Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) militias</p> <p>Turkey responsible as an occupying power</p>
Who are the victims?	<p>Predominantly ethnic Kurds</p> <p>Members of legal Kurdish political, social, and cultural organizations</p> <p>Accused of collaborating with the PKK</p>	<p>Predominantly ethnic Kurds</p> <p>Members of Kurdish political, social and cultural organizations</p> <p>Former members of previously existing Kurdish-led governance structures</p> <p>Accused of collaborating with the AANES and SDF</p>
Military Context	<p>Disappearances largely occurred during Turkish shift to more aggressive counter-insurgency strategy against the PKK in Kurdish-majority regions after 1993</p>	<p>Disappearances occurred after Turkey and Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) militias seize territory from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) after Operation Peace Spring (2019) and Operation Olive Branch (2018)</p>

Enforced Disappearances Related to the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey and Turkish-Occupied Syria

<p>Governance of Impacted Areas</p>	<p>Emergency rule declared in 1987 gave unelected government appointees and security forces sweeping powers</p> <p>Kurdish communities have little to no meaningful power in governance and security structures</p>	<p>Kurdish communities have little to no meaningful power in governance and security structures</p>
<p>Associated Violations</p>	<p>Extrajudicial killings</p> <p>Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment</p> <p>Families of victims threatened and extorted</p>	<p>Extrajudicial killings</p> <p>Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment</p> <p>Families of victims threatened and extorted</p>
<p>Relationship to Mass Displacement</p>	<p>Disappearances coincided with period of large-scale displacement of predominantly Kurdish populations</p>	<p>Disappearances coincided with period of large-scale displacement of predominantly Kurdish populations</p>