



Minorities in Afrin: Violations undermine religious practices after 2018

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Yazidi Shrine in a village in Afrin, 2023 – Exclusive to Lelun Association

The testimonies and documented evidence in this report, prepared by researchers from the Lelun Association for Victims, reveal a profound transformation in the religious and cultural practices in Afrin, northwestern Syria, post-2018. What was once a region known for coexistence and ethnic diversity has been reshaped into a landscape where minorities face identity erasure, intimidation, displacement, and property confiscation, in clear violation of international law and minority rights.

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1. Executive summary:

This report documents the profound shifts affecting minorities in Afrin, a region in northwestern Syria, focusing on the period between 2018 and 2024, particularly after the 2018 military operation “Olive Branch.” The report draws on testimonies from ten individuals—Christians, Yazidis, and

Alawites—who were native residents of the region and provides an in-depth analysis of the violations they experienced.

The collected testimonies reveal a pattern of abuses following the takeover of Afrin by armed factions affiliated with the Syrian National Army (SNA). These violations include arbitrary detention, torture, intimidation, property confiscation, and the desecration of religious sites for military use. This systematic persecution led to the mass displacement of minorities, while those who remained were forced to hide their identities to survive.

The report identifies key factions of the Turkish-backed SNA involved in these violations, including Jaysh al-Sharqiya, al-Jabha al-Shamiya, Sultan Murad Division, Military Police, Faylaq al-Sham, Hamza Division, and Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (al-Amshat).

This situation starkly contrasts with the pre-2018 period, when minorities in Afrin enjoyed relative freedom in practicing their faith and visiting their places of worship. The report documents how this relative stability has turned into a state of fear and organized persecution.

2. Report methodology:

The report employs a meticulous documentation methodology, including:

1. In-depth interviews with ten key witnesses, conducted between August 2024 and November 2024, during which researchers focused on the violations suffered by minorities while the area was under the control of the SNA factions, and they are distributed as follows:
 - Eight women (Yazidi, Christian, and Alawite)
 - Two men (Alawite - Yazidi)
2. All witnesses have been given pseudonyms for their safety and the safety of their relatives who are still in the area, and all those interviewed are original residents of the Afrin region, and have lived there for long periods before 2018.
3. All those interviewed are from a Kurdish background, and diverse religious and sectarian backgrounds (Yazidi - Christian - Alawite), which gives them a unique perspective as they have lived through the transformation of the region's situation before and after 2018.
4. The information contained in the testimonies was verified through:
 - Cross-checking different narratives
 - Analyzing the chronology of events
 - Documenting patterns of recurrent violations in various accounts

The intersection of testimonies and their agreement on the pattern, nature and credibility of violations enhances their credibility, as each

witness presented his independent account that is consistent with the general picture of the violations.

- Using UN reports that confirm what was stated in the report by the witnesses.

3. Background:

Afrin, located in northwestern Syria, was historically a model of religious and ethnic diversity, with Kurdish, an Arab minority, Yazidi, and Christian communities living together for decades. The region was historically characterized by its relatively open nature and acceptance of religious and cultural diversity.

The region included several sects, religions and denominations, including followers of the [Yazidi](#) religion, who are distributed across 22 villages, most of whose inhabitants are Yazidis. There are villages shared by Muslims and Yazidis together, and they contain nineteen shrines of their own.

As for the [percentage](#) of Yazidis residing and displaced from the Afrin region after Operation Olive Branch in March 2018, the number of Yazidis decreased from 35,000 to less than 1,500 people.

- In addition to the Yazidis, there was a presence of Christians, numbering 190 families before Operation Olive Branch in the region, and Alawites, numbering 150,000 people, who are largely concentrated in the Mabata/Maabatli district.

An exclusive photo of the Alawite center in Mabata/Maabatli district in 2017



4. Minorities in Afrin before 2018:

4.1. Religious freedoms

Afrin was known for its religious, ethnic and cultural diversity and its relative calm after the start of the Syrian revolution, which led to the outbreak of multiple wars between the parties to the Syrian conflict. It has always been a destination for many Syrians.

The testimonies included in the report reveal that the period before 2018 was characterized by a formal level of relative freedom.

Ronahi Muhammad [1], a Christian, describes that period by saying: "Before the armed factions took control, I used to go out and practice my rituals with absolute freedom, and I used to go to church with my family and friends. I had no fear or anxiety and I was not subjected to discrimination."

Avesta Issa [2], a Yazidi survivor, talks about the period before 2018: "I come from one of the villages with a Yazidi majority in the region. Our lives were calm and there was a broad acceptance of all sects among our people at that time."

Eva Ali [3], who hails from the [Alawite](#)-majority Mabata/Maabatli district of Afrin, says: "The reality of life in our districts and villages was very calm. We did not witness any arrests or extortions. We had official [centers](#) and we used to visit our Alawite shrines regularly and live in peace with all the sects present in the region."

In March 2018, the "[Olive Branch](#)" military operation was a turning point in the history of the [region](#), says Loren Aziz [4]: "The situation was very bad from the first day the bombing of Afrin began, fear and anxiety prevailed over us throughout the war."

5. Violations after 2018:

5.1. Sudden shift and forced displacement:

The year 2018 was a profound turning point for minorities in Afrin, as their lives were turned upside down with the start of the military operation. It was not just a change in the controlling forces, but a radical shift in the social and religious fabric of the region.

The testimonies documented in this report reveal a rapid course of events, starting from the first moments of anticipation and fear, through direct targeting of religious symbols and institutions, and ending with an organized campaign of arrests and torture by armed factions.

The violations were not limited to the living only, but extended even to depriving the dead of their right to burial, in an increase in cruelty that reflects the depth of the targeting of minorities.

"When we heard the news about the armed forces advancing towards the center of the city, most of the residents were in a state of complete fear and terror, and the Christian Kurds in particular were living in a state of even greater terror," says Ronahi Muhammad [1].

"During 2018, the number of Christians in Afrin was about 190 families in the center of Afrin city, 45 of whom were in the Jindires district and 15 in

the Mabata/Maabatli district. We sent several appeals for international protection and to stop the war, but we did not receive any response,” Ronahi Muhammad [1] added.

5.2. Property confiscation:

Minority properties in Afrin have been subjected to widespread confiscation and extortion, which have gone beyond the seizure of homes to include agricultural lands and main sources of income, and the oppression of residents.

Loren Aziz [4] explains: “The al-Jabha al-Shamiya seized the olive trees on our agricultural land, which number about 400 trees,” belonging to her family.

Ronahi Muhammad [1] confirms: “They also seized our lands because the absence of the owner of the land is considered a justification for them to seize it, as they prevent any of our relatives from plowing it or harvesting olives.”

These confiscations have taken on a systematic nature that reflects a clear policy of forced displacement, as control was not limited to property only, but extended to include the replacement of new displaced persons from other areas in their homes.

In this regard, Loren Aziz [4] says: “Armed militants of the al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction raided our house in the village to arrest me and my family members, but we weren't there, so they robbed the entire house and settled a family of armed men from the city of Homs in it, and seized our entire house under the pretext that we were infidels.”

In other cases, the confiscation of the property of minorities in Afrin went beyond simple control or seizure of real estate, to reach the level of deliberate and systematic destruction, cutting off any possibility of return in the future.

Loren Aziz [4] indicates in her testimony to Lelun: “I owned a house in Afrin in the al-Mahmoudiya neighborhood near Tishrin School. The building was four floors and each floor had three apartments. The armed militants knew at the time that the house was owned by people who had converted to Christianity, and they began searching for us. When they did not find us, they blew up the entire building, and nothing remained of it except rubble.”

She added: “Some people who were secretly in the area told me that militants affiliated with the Sultan Murad Division seized a house owned by

an Armenian man who came to the Afrin region after World War I and was the last Armenian living in the region. He left it after the armed factions took control of the region. They also seized his shops in the Jindires district and turned it into a mosque, and named it "Al-Farouq Mosque."

A picture of the shop that was converted into a mosque in 2018



Avesta Isso [2] confirms by saying: "I visited my house after I was released from the Azaz prison affiliated with the Military Police. My house was looted and dug up after we were displaced from it. A number of militants affiliated with the al-Jabha al-Shamiya faction came with me while I was asking the prison militants to allow me to visit my house until I arrived in Aleppo. After I arrived in Aleppo, I heard that they had burned my house."

Salah Youssef [9], a Yazidi, adds to Lelun: "The Yazidi villages in the region were subjected to Afrin has undergone multiple changes and violations, including my village of Basoufan, which is considered one of the villages with a Yazidi majority in the region. After Operation Olive Branch, we were forced to leave our villages, and many of the homes of my Yazidi relatives were converted into mosques, and the graves of our people in the village were vandalized."

Regarding attempts to reclaim ownership of the Church of the al-Rai al-Saleh from the Jaysh al-Sharqiya, Zainab al-Issa [6] told Lelun: "A religious intermediary contacted the faction's members controlling the building to reclaim the church peacefully during an official call, but the faction suggested returning its ownership in exchange for an exorbitant fee, which the intermediary could not do. The faction also expelled all residents of the building in which the church is located and seized it completely."

Eva Ali [3] adds about the violations against the Alawite minority, part of whose areas are under the control of the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division

(al-Amshat) faction, saying: "Villages in the Mabata/Maabatli district are being subjected to a wide campaign of violations by the Sultan Suleiman Shah Division (al-Amshat) faction that controls some of the villages. My mother's family was forced to leave their villages and move to other areas in Afrin after the faction imposed a fine of nearly \$12,000. Some of the graves of our relatives in the villages of Dimelya in the Mabata/Maabatli district were also vandalized."

An exclusive photo by Lelun of the vandalism of graves in the Mabata/Maabatli district



5.3. Religious restrictions and discrimination:

The violations targeting minorities have escalated, forcing them to abandon their religious identities to avoid persecution. The International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has repeatedly reported ethnically or religiously motivated practices against minorities in Afrin. Numerous testimonies and information indicated the deliberate targeting of Kurds in general and other minorities in particular through confiscation and looting, verbal abuse, and inhumane treatment during detention. For instance, the Commission noted statements like: "If it were up to me, I'd kill every Kurd aged one to 80 years," made by a security member of the SNA. The Commission also repeatedly noted the systematic targeting of minorities in looting and property seizures, as well as their interrogation about their faith and ethnicity while in detention.

This has created an exceptional situation in which minorities are forced to practice their rites and rituals in secret, turning their homes into secret religious shelters, and even religious minorities, including Yazidis and Christians, refraining from visiting shrines and churches out of fear, and forcing some to pretend to be Muslims.

Berivan Hikmet [5] recounts: "After the armed factions took control, members of the Jaysh al-Sharqiya and Sultan Murad Division attacked the church building to seize it, converting it into a military base for Jaysh al-Sharqiya militants."

Ronahi Muhammad [1] shares shocking details: "After R.M. was arrested by the Faylaq al-Sham faction in Afrin, his wife suffered a severe psychological shock that led to her death following his release. Members of the faction prevented him from burying her, placing her in a tractor and dumping her body in a pit outside the village, labeling them as infidels unworthy of burial near Muslim graves."

Zainab al-Issa [6] adds: "Most Christians in Afrin face discrimination and live in fear. My uncle, who still resides in the village, is afraid to attend church in the city. He practices his prayers and rituals secretly at home to avoid persecution."

Yara Ismail [7] describes the violations faced by her Yazidi [relatives](#): "One of our Yazidi relatives living in the village of Qibar was forced to recite the Islamic Shahada by a displaced sheikh living in the area, after they were initially attacked by a number of gunmen while they were in the city center. After repeated harassment by them, calling them infidels and the like, the two men moved to their village of Qibar, but the Muslim militants did not leave them alone, and continued to harass them until they appeared in a video clip in which they declared their conversion to Islam against their will."

5.4. Destruction of religious sites:

Religious shrines considered spiritual landmarks by minorities in Afrin have also faced violations by armed factions.

Avesta Issa [2] states: "Many Yazidi shrines and tombs, including Sheikh Hamid Shrine in Qastal Jindo in Sharran district, were destroyed by Sultan Murad faction members."

Photos of Sheikh Hamid Shrine and surrounding Yazidi graves vandalized.



Photo of the al-Rai al-Saleh Church in Afrin in 20 April 2018 after its seizure by Jaysh al- Sharqiya members.



Loren Aziz [4] adds: "Three days after we left the area, armed factions entered the church in Afrin, looted it, and marked it with 'There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah,' along with other slogans."

Samir Ahmed [8] remarks: "Since the Olive Branch operation and the SNA factions' control over Afrin, numerous Alawite shrines, such as Yagmour Dada and Af Gheri in Mabata/Maabatli, have been vandalized. Armed factions target shrines under the pretext of searching for gold or to tighten their grip."

Photo of Af Gheri Shrine vandalized in 2018



Zainab al-Issa [6] reports on the vandalism of the al-Rai al-Saleh Church: "After the Jaysh al-Sharqiya faction seized the church, its members looted it entirely, tearing out the tiles, sockets, and wiring in search of valuables."

5.5. Arrests:

Avesta Isso [2] recounts her arrest by the Military Police: "I was arrested in June 2018 during my return to Afrin at a checkpoint near the city center. They asked about my Yazidi background, and when I confirmed, I

was detained under the pretext of routine procedures for returnees. I was imprisoned for about a year and a half, enduring torture and being labeled an infidel. I was released after relatives found out I was in Azaz prison. I also paid a \$2,000 ransom."

Ronahi Muhammad [1] documented the case of a relative detained by the Faylaq al-Sham: "On July 30, 2020, a relative of (R.M.) was detained by the Faylaq al-Sham in Afrin and released after a year. He had suffered severe physical abuse, leading to long-term psychological issues."

Salah Youssef [9] adds: "A Yazidi relative from Basoufan was sentenced to five years in prison by Faylaq al-Sham for alleged ties to the previous local administration (AANES). During her husband's visit to her in Marateh prison three years ago, the prison guards informed him of the sentence issued against his wife, which stipulates that she spend five years in prison. When he returned and passed through the Turinde village checkpoint, one of the armed militants of the "Faylaq al-Sham", called "Abu Hussein," recognized him and hit him on the neck with the butt of his weapon, so he was transferred to one of the hospitals in the area."

Avista Isso [2] discloses: "I was arrested on June 20, 2018, and humiliated for my religious background. At one point, I was forced to recite the Shahada under threat of cigarette burns, which I refused to do."

Barin Ahmed [10] describes in her testimony to "Lelun" the detention of one of her Yazidi relatives and the murder of his wife: "An elderly Yazidi man from the village of Qatmah in the Sharran subdistrict was detained by the Jal faction, which was in control of the village at that time. He was held in a prison run by the Hamza Division faction, which demanded a ransom of \$25,000 from Hannan's family for his release. However, the family's financial inability prevented them from providing the full amount, so they paid \$600 with a promise to pay the remainder in installments to secure his release. Despite this, the family faced constant harassment from the faction members who controlled the village until his 66-year-old wife was killed when unknown individuals threw a hand grenade into their house at 2 a.m."

6. Long-term impacts:

6.1. Displacement consequences:

Forced displacement and systematic pressure led to the geographical scattering of minority communities from Afrin, creating challenges in preserving their religious identity and community bonds. The pattern of dispersion shows a distribution across several main axes, with varying challenges faced by displaced individuals in each area.

Zainab al-Issa [6] describes: "Those forcibly displaced to Shahba were later compelled to flee to Lebanon following the latest military operation, which caused a significant number of our people to move toward areas east of the Euphrates. Due to the lack of security guarantees and the rapidly changing situation in the country, some chose Lebanon despite the [dire](#) circumstances. This decision was driven by the tensions and threats minorities face in other regions of Syria."

Images showing the destruction of crosses and Christian graves in Mar Georges Church in Hama, Syria.



An image depicting the destruction of religious symbols in the Greek Orthodox Church of Hagia Sophia in the Suqaylabiyah area of Hama, Syria.



Ronahi [1] says: "It is difficult for minorities, including us Christians, to decide to [return](#) to Syria, especially for those forcibly displaced from Afrin. The political transition phase and military developments in Syria are marked by uncertainty. Syria urgently needs transitional justice to hold perpetrators accountable, ensure the return of displaced people, and redress victims, particularly minorities facing persecution and numerous violations by various conflict parties. This forces them to flee and fragments the social fabric. Syria is a diverse mosaic, and we do not want to be defined by a single, imposed identity against our will."

6.2. Ongoing psychological effects:

Minorities in Afrin live in a state of fear and anticipation, affecting both those displaced and those remaining in the region. This reality forces them into a state of self-denial, abandoning their religious practices and traditions. Fear of being identified has become a pervasive struggle, turning life in the region into a continuous cycle of hiding and enforced self-denial of identity.

Ronahi Muhammad [1] explains how Christians in Afrin go into hiding: "Those remaining in the region have changed their residences to avoid being discovered."

Christians in Afrin continue to erase traces of their identity, even removing digital details that could reveal their faith. Berivan Hikmet [5] recounts: "A few months ago, a brother in a Christian group who lived in Afrin left all our groups because he could no longer communicate, practice his rituals, or acknowledge them. He told us, 'I want to protect myself because there are no guarantees for us here.'"

Victims also struggle to document their suffering due to challenges accessing locations like the al-Rai al-Saleh Church to record damages caused by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction. These difficulties hinder the creation of a complete record of violations, exacerbated by ongoing intimidation and surveillance, making it dangerous to gather information or testimonies.

This dire situation prompted Zainab al-Issa [6] to call for international action: "We urge greater attention to the plight of minorities in Afrin, to advocate for their suffering, and to ensure they have safe spaces to practice their rituals."

Zainab highlights the magnitude of their ordeal: "We can no longer even state who we are. I have refrained from entering my area since 2018 because my relatives warned me not to return because I was a Christian."

7. Legal analysis:

The documented events and testimonies reveal a systematic pattern of severe violations of international humanitarian law and human rights in Afrin. Since 2018, the International Commission of Inquiry and other human rights organizations have consistently reported on these violations, which could amount to war crimes and/or crimes against humanity under Articles 7 and 8 of the Rome Statute, the founding treaty of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which Syria has not ratified.

The documented patterns expose a deliberate plan for ethnic cleansing, reflected in three main levels:

1. Direct persecution through detention, torture, and intimidation.
2. Forced displacement by pressuring minorities.
3. Efforts to erase religious identity by destroying places of worship and desecrating them for theft or military purposes.

These practices contradict the core principles of humane treatment mandated by international humanitarian law, which is one of the customary rules binding on all parties to an armed conflict, and which requires respect for the dignity of persons and prohibits abusive treatment in general, a dominant concept reflected in most rules of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Depriving certain groups of this humane treatment because of their religion, race, belief or any other reason may amount to unfair discrimination against them, which violates one of the most important pillars of international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

It should be noted that gross and widespread violations of human rights on discriminatory grounds may amount to the crime against humanity of persecution. This crime is linked to the commission of other crimes and does not preclude responsibility for them, but if these crimes are committed on a discriminatory basis against an ethnic or religious group – as is the case in the content of this report – they may also meet the elements of the crime of persecution. Given the nature of the gross violations addressed in the report and which have been documented by various international and local bodies, it may be possible to prove a systematic pattern of severe deprivation of minorities in Afrin of their fundamental rights in violation of international law. These violations

include severe deprivation of liberty including freedom of belief, torture and inhuman treatment, looting and appropriation of property, forced displacement, deliberate destruction of cultural property such as religious sites, hostage-taking, and others.

The ICC could potentially investigate these violations as crimes against humanity, given their systematic and widespread nature. National courts with universal jurisdiction could also prosecute these crimes.

Urgent international action is needed to investigate and address these violations in Syria, provide immediate protection for victims and witnesses, and ensure systematic documentation of ongoing abuses.

It is also necessary to establish an independent mechanism to ensure the safe return of the displaced, the recovery of confiscated property, and fair compensation for material and moral damages. This mechanism must also include guarantees for freedom of worship and religious practice in accordance with international human rights standards.

This report constitutes a solid legal basis for prosecution to establish legal responsibility for documented violations against religious minorities in the Afrin region, and requires urgent action from the international community to stop these practices and hold those responsible accountable.

8. Recommendations:

International Level:

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- **UN Security Council:** Pressure Turkey to fulfill its obligations under international law as the supporter and controller of the factions.
- **International Independent Commission of Inquiry on Syria:** Pursue documented cases of violations against minorities for prosecution and accountability.
- **ICC Prosecutor's Office:** Open an investigation into possible religious and ethnic crimes, document victims' testimonies as potential evidence in future trials, and prosecute those responsible for documented violations, noting that Syria and Turkey are not parties to the Rome Statute, so the case should be referred by the Security Council.

Regional Level:

- **Arab League:** Form a national-level committee monitored by the UN to address the situation of religious minorities in northern Syria,

press armed factions to cease violations, and support the right of displaced individuals to return.

- **Regional organizations:** systematically document violations against religious minorities, provide legal support to victims, and create a database of confiscated property.
- **At the humanitarian level/humanitarian organizations:** Organizations should provide due protection for human rights when designing and implementing projects, providing psychosocial support to the displaced, providing urgent humanitarian assistance, and supporting rehabilitation programs for victims.
- **Human rights organizations:** Document ongoing violations and cooperate with UN bodies, including the International Commission of Inquiry and the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, provide legal assistance to victims, and raise international awareness of the issue of religious minorities in Afrin.
- **Practical recommendations for protection/immediate protection mechanisms:** Establish a hotline to report violations, provide safe shelters for those at risk, and secure safe routes out of dangerous areas.

9. Conclusion:

What is happening in the Syrian region of Afrin is not just isolated violations, but a clear strategy aimed at radically changing the religious and cultural identity of the region. With the international inaction about holding those involved accountable and restricting the armed factions to limit their violations committed in the region, the region is exposed to radical changes in its cultural heritage and ethnic diversity.

This report reveals clear patterns of violations directed against minorities in Afrin after 2018, which led to demographic changes and forced displacement of the region's residents. Documented testimonies reflect the extent of suffering and the depth of the crisis facing minorities, and confirm the urgent need for effective international intervention.

In conjunction with the liberation of Syria from the former regime and the release of all detainees from their prisons, the Afrin region suffers from countless violations in light of the political changes taking place in Syria, the failure of international efforts in the occupied areas, and their failure to pressure the SNA factions to release most of the detainees in the prisons of the regions of Afrin, Tel Abyad, and Sere Kaniye.

The absence of international accountability and the weakness of the humanitarian response exacerbate the suffering of the victims and increase the continuation of violations, as the situation requires urgent and comprehensive international action to protect what remains of religious diversity in the region, guarantee the right of safe return of the displaced, and ensure that the people of the minorities in the region practice their religious rituals safely, without restriction, discrimination, or violation.



► About LELUN:

We are a group of daughters and sons of Afrin, who love its soil, are devoted to its olives, and we believe in the history of the fathers and grandfathers, and in fulfillment of their efforts and struggle in preserving the human being, the land and the trees, and in order for the trees to return to their splendor, and for the families and loved ones to return to their mountains, plains and homes, it was necessary to launch The ground is being prepared for the return of rights to their owners and the pursuit of justice.

The goal of justice for the victims was the main stimulus that generated us; Young men and women of Afrin who are jealous of its people, people and land, regardless of their nationality, sect, background or political affiliation, to establish an association for the victims of violations in this Afrin under the name "Lilon", to extend a helping hand to the affected women on an equal footing. by defending them.

"Lilon" will work to contribute to the prosecution efforts by providing evidence related to the violations committed against the residents and people of the Afrin region by all parties to the conflict, and to contribute to compensating the affected victims.



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