

Please cite as: EUAA, '2.4.1. Kurds' in *COI Report - Syria: Country Focus*, July 2025.

2.4.1. Kurds

Kurds constitute the largest ethnic minority in Syria, with an estimated population of 2 to 2.5 million,266 or up to 10 % of the country's pre-war population of 23 million.267 Kurdish population is concentrated in the regions of Afrin, Kobani, and Jazira, neighbourhoods of Aleppo and Damascus cities, and, to a lesser extent, in several districts in Raqqa city.268

During a visit to Afrin, Aleppo governorate, in mid-February 2025, interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa pledged to extend the authority of the new government in the region and to end violations, such as arbitrary arrests, extortion, property seizures, and deforestation, committed by Turkish-backed SNA factions, which have controlled the area since 2018.269 On 10 March 2025, Al-Sharaa and SDF commander Mazloum Abdi signed a tentative agreement to start the integration of the SDF into the new Syrian army.270 The agreement also promised that Kurds would be given the right to citizenship and other constitutional rights, including the use and teaching of the Kurdish language, while those in displacement would be able to return to their homes.271 At the beginning of April 2025, SDF forces left predominantly-Kurdish neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh in northern Aleppo,272 which had been under their control since 2015.273

During negotiations with the interim government, Kurdish political parties emphasised the government protection of Kurdish citizens and their rights as a key demand.274 As a 'unity conference' held in Qamishli on 26 April 2025, the Kurdish National Unity Parties (PYNK) and the Kurdish National Council (ENKS/KNC) jointly called for Syria to be recognised as a 'multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-religious' state and advocated for federalism, recognition of Kurdish as an official language, and restoration of citizenship to Kurds stripped of it after the 1962 census. 275 In response, on 27 April 2025, the new government rejected the federalism proposal as a 'threat to national unity' and a violation to the deal signed with the SDF.276

Although pro-Türkiye groups reportedly reduced their military presence in Afrin as of April 2025, Nadine Maenza, president of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Secretariat and former chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), noted in an interview to Kurdish media Rudaw that removing Turkish-backed militias remained difficult, due to Türkiye's support to Al-Sharaa.277 In April 2025, STJ reported that despite official announcements about the dissolution of the SNA factions, these groups, including affiliated

Military Police, remain active in Afrin, with some of their members redeployed elsewhere.278 Similarly, in May 2025, Human Rights Watch noted that, although most SNA checkpoints had been removed, the factions continued operating from their former bases.279 However, regarding Afrin in particular, a Kurdish activist interviewed by media outlet Syria Direct at the end of April 2025 noted that between 70 % and 80 % of SNA factions have left the town.280

As noted by Human Rights Watch, despite their prior involvement in serious abuses, SNA fighters have been incorporated into Syria's Armed Forces, with some commanders appointed to senior government and military roles.281 Following the recapture of Manbij from the SDF in December 2024, SNA factions were reportedly involved in looting homes and shops owned by Kurds. Fearing arrest or murder, many Kurdish residents fled the city.282

In January and February 2025, according to sources, Military Police and the Suleiman Shah Brigade (al-Amshat) made arrests in Afrin, including people returning to the area, with some cases involving extortion for their release. On 7 February 2025, one day after the Military Police entered Afrin, it reportedly arrested six people, four of whom were accused of 'raising pro-SDF slogans while welcoming the General Security delegation,' releasing them 18 days later.283 While arrests by SNA decreased in March, according to reports, hundreds of people have remained in detention in SNA-run prisons, supervised by Türkiye.284 As noted by STJ in April 2025, Afrin prisons and detention centres remained operational and were reportedly used to hold large numbers of Kurdish detainees arrested by various SNA factions 'on pretextual charges' such as alleged affiliation with the PKK, SDF, or DAANES.285

After the change of the government, Kurdish families who had been displaced from Afrin and other areas affected by the Türkiye-led military operation 'Olive Branch' since 2018286 started returning to their villages.287 At the beginning of April 2025, media outlet Welet, citing the EKNS in Afrin, reported that more than 20 000 Kurdish families had returned.288 According to Syria Direct, the number of returnees to Afrin has increased in April 2025, reportedly raising the Kurdish population in the city to an estimated 60-70 % of its total population.289 In March 2025, Rudaw reported that some settler families of displaced Arabs had left Afrin, abandoning, in some cases, entire villages.290 As reported at the end of April 2025, in some villages, up to 90 % of former residents have retuned, though return rates vary across the region.291 By the end of May 2025, many settlements in Afrin were reportedly abandoned after SNA families had left.292

As reported by Syria Direct on 30 April 2025, the new government has not made any official announcement to encourage their return and guarantee the safety of returnees.293 Furthermore, as noted by Rudaw in April 2025, there has been no decision of the new government to support the return to Afrin, with some returnee families returning on their own and others with the assistance they receive from the ENKS.294

In April 2025, sources noted that the continued presence of SNA militias in Afrin have been preventing Kurdish IDPs from returning.295 Many Kurdish returnees faced difficulties reclaiming their homes taken over by SNA commanders and fighters or Syrians displaced from elsewhere in the country.296 Returnees often faced demand for payment to reclaim their homes,297 with Al-Amshat reportedly extorting between 2 000 and 5 000 US dollars from returning families and imposing taxes on olive farmers.298 Between December 2024 and January 2025, SNA fighters reportedly detained nine Afrin residents over unpaid taxes, extorting demanding up to 3 800 US dollars from each to be released.299 As reported in April 2025, in Rajo, Afrin district, the SNA's Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction was extorting shop owners and seizing properties of displaced persons.300

In addition to violations of house, land, and property rights and 'potential tensions with host communities' during return to northern Aleppo, the Kurds continuously faced denial of access to civil documentation and basic services.301 While, as noted by the European Network on Statelessnes (ENS), the change of government in Syria could offer an opportunity to address the issue of statelessness,302 which affects part of the Kurdish population,303 no information was found regarding the legal status of the stateless Kurds under the interim government.

- 266

  MRG, Syria, January 2025, url

- 267

  Arab News, Kurdish fighters leave northern city in Syria as part of deal with central government, 4 April 2025,url

- 268

  GEG, Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat, 4 March 2023, url

- 269

  STJ, Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations Against Kurd, 11 April 2025, url

- 270

  TWI, Facilitating the New SDF Agreement Is Key to Stabilizing Syria, 2 April 2025, url

- 271

  AP, Syria's government signs a breakthrough deal with Kurdish-led authorities in the northeast, 11 March 2025, url

- 272

  AP, Kurdish fighters leave northern city in Syria as part of deal with central government, 4 April 2025, url

- 273

  Arab News, Kurdish fighters leave northern city in Syria as part of deal with central government, url

- 274

  ISW, Iran Update, April 30, 2025, 30 April 2025, url

- 275

  Salih, M. A., The Syria of Sharaa and the Syria of Kurds and minorities, The New Region, 29 April 2025, url

- 276

  Reuters, Syria’s Sharaa rejects Kurdish demands for decentralization, 27 April 2025, url

- 277

  Rudaw, Displaced Kurds, Yazidis fear return to Afrin: Activist, 27 April 2025, url

- 278

  STJ, Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations Against Kurd, 11 April 2025, url

- 279

  HRW, Syria: Türkiye-backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians, 14 May 2025, url

- 280

  Syria Direct, ‘Afrin belongs to its people’: More Kurds return to Afrin, while others wait for guarantees, 30 April 2025, url

- 281

  HRW, Syria: Türkiye-backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians, 14 May 2025, url

- 282

  Hevdesti, Manbij: The Rise of Human Rights Violations by Syrian National Army Factions (SNA), 25 December 2024, url

- 283

STJ, Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations Against Kurd, 11 April 2025, url

- 284

HRW, Syria: Türkiye-backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians, 14 May 2025, url

- 285

STJ, Syria/Afrin: Promises by Transitional Authorities to Restore Rights and End Violations Against Kurd, 11 April 2025, url

- 286

Rudaw, Hundreds of Kurdish families return to Afrin as settlers leave, 9 March 2025, url; Welat, 8 Kurdish Families Returned to Their Villages in Afrin, 9 April 2025, url; Rudaw, Displaced Kurds, Yazidis fear return to Afrin: Activist, 27 April 2025, url

- 287

Syria Direct, Waning hopes: Will Damascus help Afrin's Kurds reclaim their homes, 12 February 2025, url; Rudaw, Hundreds of Kurdish families return to Afrin as settlers leave, 9 March 2025, url; Welat, 8 Kurdish Families Returned to Their Villages in Afrin, 9 April 2025, url; Rudaw, Displaced Kurds, Yazidis fear return to Afrin: Activist, 27 April 2025, url; Syria Direct, 'Afrin belongs to its people': More Kurds return to Afrin, while others wait for guarantees, 30 April 2025, url

- 288

Welat, 8 Kurdish Families Returned to Their Villages in Afrin, 9 April 2025, url

- 289

Syria Direct, 'Afrin belongs to its people': More Kurds return to Afrin, while others wait for guarantees, 30 April 2025, url

- 290

Rudaw, Hundreds of Kurdish families return to Afrin as settlers leave, 9 March 2025, url

- 291

Syria Direct, 'Afrin belongs to its people': More Kurds return to Afrin, while others wait for guarantees, 30 April 2025, url

- 292

NPR, Afrin settlements nearly abandoned after SNA families' departure, 31 May 2025, url

- 293

Syria Direct, ‘Afrin belongs to its people’: More Kurds return to Afrin, while others wait for guarantees, 30 April 2025, url

- 294

  Rudaw, Displaced Kurds, Yazidis fear return to Afrin: Activist, 27 April 2025, url

- 295

  TWI, Facilitating the New SDF Agreement Is Key to Stabilizing Syria, 2 April 2025, url; Rudaw, Displaced Kurds, Yazidis fear return to Afrin: Activist, 27 April 2025, url

- 296

  Syria Direct, Waning hopes: Will Damascus help Afrin’s Kurds reclaim their homes, 12 February 2025, url

- 297

  Syria Direct, Waning hopes: Will Damascus help Afrin’s Kurds reclaim their homes, 12 February 2025, url

- 298

  HRW, Syria: Türkiye-backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians, 14 May 2025, url

- 299

  HRW, Syria: Türkiye-backed Armed Groups Detain, Extort Civilians, 14 May 2025, url

- 300

  Syria Direct, ‘Afrin belongs to its people’: More Kurds return to Afrin, while others wait for guarantees, 30 April 2025, url

- 301

  GPC, Protection Landscape in Syria – A Snapshot: March 2025, 3 April 2025, url

- 302

  ENS, Syria has the power to change, from one of the biggest statelessness exporters to a role model for the Global North, 22 May 2025, url

- 303

  EUAA, Syria – Country focus report, October 2024, url, pp. 62-64

© European Union Agency for Asylum 2026 | Email: info@euaa.europa.eu