

## 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 Maqsood and Ashrafiyeh 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.<sup>[281](#)</sup> 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.<sup>[282](#)</sup>

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.<sup>[283](#)</sup> While arrests by SNA decreased in March, according to reports, hundreds of people have remained in detention in SNA-run prisons, supervised by Türkiye.<sup>[284](#)</sup> 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.<sup>[285](#)</sup>

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 2018<sup>[286](#)</sup> started returning to their villages.<sup>[287](#)</sup> At the beginning of April 2025, media outlet Welet, citing the EKNS in Afrin, reported that more than 20 000 Kurdish families had returned.<sup>[288](#)</sup> 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.<sup>[289](#)</sup> In March 2025, Rudaw reported that some settler families of displaced Arabs had left Afrin, abandoning, in some cases, entire villages.<sup>[290](#)</sup> As reported at the end of April 2025, in some villages, up to 90 % of former residents have returned, though return rates vary across the region.<sup>[291](#)</sup> By the end of May 2025, many settlements in Afrin were reportedly abandoned after SNA families had left.<sup>[292](#)</sup>

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.<sup>[293](#)</sup> 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.<sup>[294](#)</sup>

In April 2025, sources noted that the continued presence of SNA militias in Afrin have been preventing Kurdish IDPs from returning.<sup>[295](#)</sup> Many Kurdish returnees faced difficulties reclaiming their homes taken over by SNA commanders and fighters or Syrians displaced from elsewhere in the country.<sup>[296](#)</sup> Returnees often faced demand for payment to reclaim their homes,<sup>[297](#)</sup> with Al-Amshat reportedly extorting between 2 000 and 5 000 US dollars from returning families and imposing taxes on olive farmers.<sup>[298](#)</sup> 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.<sup>[299](#)</sup> 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.<sup>[300](#)</sup>

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.<sup>[301](#)</sup> While, as noted by the European Network on Statelessness (ENS), the change of

government in Syria could offer an opportunity to address the issue of statelessness,<sup>302</sup> which affects part of the Kurdish population,<sup>303</sup> no information was found regarding the legal status of the stateless Kurds under the interim government.

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