Twitter Thread by Rojava Information Center

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[FACT CHECK]

The @nytimes recently published an article about the Turkish occupation of Afrin, calling it a 'safe zone'. The article contains several inaccuracies about the situation on the ground, outlined

The Afrin canton has seen virtually no combat during the Syrian Civil War. Religious minorities were protected under the AANES and its predecessors in this overwhelmingly Kurdish region. An estimated 316,000 internally-displaced Syrians - both Kurdish and Arab - fled to Afrin.

> But as an end to the decade-long Syrian civil war still confounds the world, Turkey has become the only international force on the ground protecting some five million displaced and vulnerable civilians. Today, the Turkish soldiers are all that stand between them and potential slaughter at the hands of President Bashar al-Assad's forces and those of his Russian allies.

The invasion's raison d'être does not hold up to scrutiny. Turkey accused the PYD/YPG forces in Afrin of launching "more than 700 attacks" against Turkish cities. However, upon further investigation, only 15 confirmed incidents of cross-border attacks from Afrin emerged.

The Turkish intervention in Afrin was not selfless. Turkey always had its own interests in mind. Its main aim was to root out Kurdish forces it considers a security threat and provide a space for the residual rebel forces fighting against Mr. al-Assad, a loathed rival. The Syrians who settled around Afrin have fled Syrian government forces.

Over half of Afrin's majority-Kurdish population were forcefully displaced by Turkey's invasion and prevented from returning. Around 400,000 Syrian Arabs were settled in the region. Currently, Arabs and Turkmen make up around 75% of the population…

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey was widely criticized by the United Nations and Western leaders three years ago when he ordered Turkish troops across the Syrian border into Afrin, an action seen as opportunistic and destabilizing. Thousands of Kurdish families fled the Turkish invasion, along with the Kurdish fighters. In their place came hundreds of thousands of Syrians from other areas, who have swollen the population, taking over homes and camping on farming land.

...Together with Turkey's erasure of the Kurdish language and culture in occupied Afrin, this amounts to a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing and a prosecutable crime against humanity.

The invasion of Afrin was conducted with the help of proxy militias, many of which adhere to fundamentalist Sunni Islam. These fighters were recruited from radical groups in Syria, such as HTS and ISIS. They stand accused of committing war crimes in Afrin.

In Afrin the Turks have handled security like any NATO force, surrounding their administration building with high concrete blast walls and sealing off a "green zone" that encompasses the main shopping street in the center of the city.

Furthermore, occupied Afrin - the 'de facto safe zone' described by the author - is plagued by the kidnapping of Yazidi and Kurdish women and girls - over 150 to date - as well as other violent crimes, many of which are perpetrated by Turkey's

proxy militias.

In fact, Turkey's invasion severely damaged Afrin's infrastructure. 64 schools and important health and water facilities were destroyed (Afrin hospital alone was bombed three times). The 2018 invasion was thus severely destabilizing for the region.

> "Our main aim is to make their life more normal," said Orhan Akturk, deputy governor of the adjoining Turkish province of Hatay, who is also responsible for Afrin. "Keep schools open, and hospitals working so people can resume their lives."

Turkey stands accused of similar crimes in Afrin. Around 300,000 forest and olive trees have been cut down since the invasion. More than 10,000 ha of arable land has been burned down - with much of the remaining agricultural produce, including its olives, being sold in Turkey.

> "If we were not scared, we would not have come here," said Jarir Sulaiman, one of a group of elders leaning on canes outside their communal tent.
>
> Once a wealthy landowner, he said the Syrian government had cut down his olive groves after seizing control of their village, Khiara, south of Damascus. He ruled out returning home while Mr. al-Assad remained in power.

The Turkish language is not "the choice of the people." Rather, Turkey has embarked on a forceful Turkification campaign in occupied Afrin, with mandatory Turkish language lessons in schools and its implementation as a language of administration in the region.

> Syrian students are busy learning the Turkish language and seeking ways to get to Turkey to study or work, said Nour Hallak, a Syrian activist living in the Turkish-controlled part of Aleppo province. "It's something that makes me laugh and cry at the same time," he said. "Turkish language is spreading, it's the choice of the people."

The full RIC report about occupied Afrin can be found below.

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