



‘WE HAD NOWHERE ELSE TO GO’

**FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND
DEMOLITIONS IN NORTHERN SYRIA**

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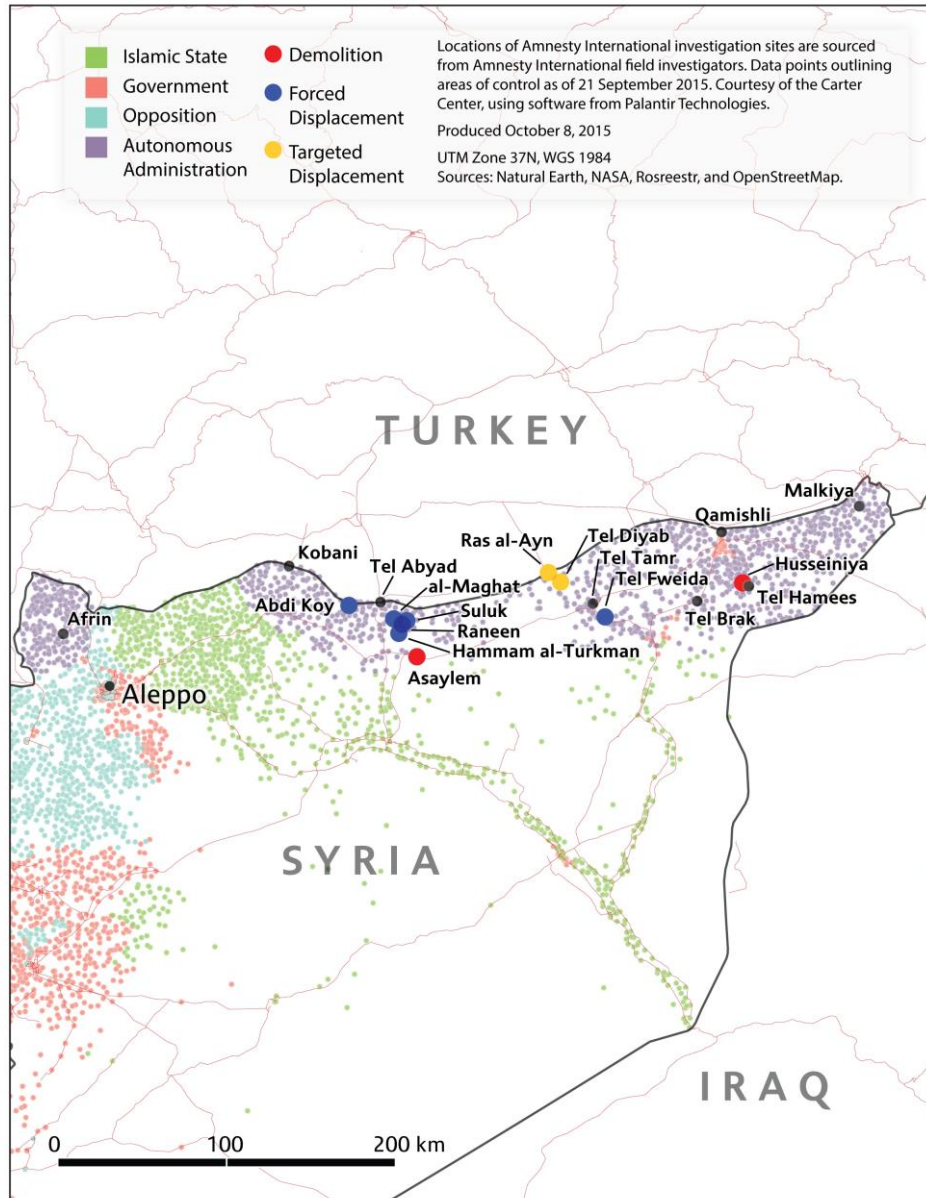
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Cover photo: Residents stand on the roof of a destroyed home in Husseinliya, a town in northern Syria under the control of the Autonomous Administration led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD). ©Amnesty International

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SUMMARY

Amnesty International has documented a range of abuses perpetrated by the Autonomous Administration security forces in areas of northern Syria under their control. These abuses include forced displacement, demolition of homes, and the seizure and destruction of property. In some cases, entire villages have been demolished, apparently in retaliation for the perceived support of their Arab or Turkmen residents for the group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) or other non-state armed groups.

There are three predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Syria, referred to locally as Rojava, that are under the de facto control of the so-called "Autonomous Administration". Since January 2014, this administration has been led by the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party, PYD), a Syrian Kurdish political party.

For this report, Amnesty International conducted research in the areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration in northern Syria, visiting 14 towns and villages in al-Hasakeh and al-Raqqah governorates and interviewing 37 individuals who had directly experienced abuses perpetrated by the Autonomous Administration's security forces or witnessed them. Amnesty International researchers also interviewed 11 individuals in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in July 2015, including members of Syrian Kurdish political parties that are not represented in the Autonomous Administration, journalists and NGO workers, and 25 refugees from the area administered by the Autonomous Administration when visiting southern Turkey in August 2015.

In July and August 2015 Amnesty International investigated the forced displacement of residents from 10 villages and towns in areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration: the town of Suluk and its surrounding villages, including al-Ghbein, Raneen, Hammam al-Turkman, al-Maghat, Mela Berho, and Asaylem, as well as the villages of Abdi Koy and Tel Fweida in the Tel Abyad and Tel Tamr countryside, respectively, and Husseiniya in Tel Hamees countryside.

In Asaylem and Husseiniya, villagers were not only displaced, but Autonomous Administration security forces demolished resident homes. Amnesty International visited the village of Husseiniya in early August 2015, and saw that all but one of the homes in the village had been demolished by the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), the Autonomous Administration's military wing. Residents said there were approximately 90 homes in the village. One resident told Amnesty International:

We stayed at home... They [the YPG] said, 'Stay in your homes. We won't bother you. We have come to liberate you [from IS]. We just want the names of the people that are wanted.' But then they wouldn't even let us take our clothes out of the house... They pulled us out of our homes and began burning them... Then they brought the bulldozers and they began demolishing the homes... Every time I tried to come near the house they would push me back...

Amnesty International also interviewed residents from Ras al-Ayn and the village of Tel Diyab in Ras al-Ayn countryside who said that they had been forcibly displaced by the YPG and Asayish, the Autonomous Administration's police force, and that their property had been destroyed or confiscated, though they said that they – and not the entire community – were singled out for this treatment.

While the majority of residents affected by these unlawful practices are Arabs and Turkmen, in some cases, for example in the mixed town of Suluk, Kurdish residents have also been barred by the YPG and Asayish from returning to their homes. Elsewhere, for example in Abdi Koy village, a small number of Kurdish residents have also been forcibly displaced by the YPG. Amnesty International researchers also observed that Arab and Turkmen residents continued to reside unmolested in other areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration, including, for example, in the city of Ras al-Ayn, which is predominantly Arab.

In September 2015, Amnesty International provided a summary of its preliminary findings to officials of the Autonomous Administration. As of this writing, Amnesty International has received no response from the Autonomous Administration.

The deliberate demolition of civilian homes described in this report is unlawful under international humanitarian law, which prohibits the destruction or seizure of the property of an adversary, unless required by imperative military necessity.

International humanitarian law also prohibits the displacement of civilians during non-international armed conflicts except for their own security or for imperative military reasons. While the Autonomous Administration has claimed that its forced displacement of civilians has not been arbitrary because it was necessary on military grounds or for the security or protection of local residents, this report documents cases in which there was no such justification. Amnesty International considers that these instances of forced displacement constitute war crimes.

The circumstances of some of the instances of forced displacement documented in this report suggest that they were carried out in retaliation for people's perceived sympathies with, or family ties to, suspected members of IS or other armed groups. This would constitute collective punishment, which is a violation of international humanitarian law.

Amnesty International calls on the Autonomous Administration to cease all such abusive practices, allow displaced persons to return to their homes, compensate them for their losses, and ensure that the officials responsible for these abuses are held accountable.

Amnesty International also urges all states supporting or co-ordinating with the Autonomous Administration in its military operations, such as those that form part of the US-led coalition fighting IS in Syria, to publicly condemn unlawful demolitions and forced displacement practices and to ensure that the provision of military assistance, including military co-ordination, is not being misused to commit violations of international humanitarian law, including unlawful demolitions and forced displacement.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research that Amnesty International conducted in July and August 2015 in the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Syria (an area referred to locally as Rojava), southern Turkey, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Amnesty International requested and received permission from the Autonomous Administration of the predominantly Kurdish region of northern Syria, which has since January 2014 been led by the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party, PYD), a Syrian Kurdish political party, to conduct research in areas under their control. Amnesty International researchers travelled without restriction in July and August 2015 to areas of interest for the research, visiting 14 towns and villages in al-Hasakeh and al-Raqqa governorates and interviewing 37 individuals who had directly experienced abuses or witnessed them. All interviews with victims and witnesses were conducted in private, without any representatives from the administration present, and without any interference. In addition, Amnesty International researchers met with representatives of the Autonomous Administration and its security forces to request information about their operations. Amnesty International researchers also interviewed 11 members of Syrian Kurdish parties that are not represented in the Autonomous Administration, journalists and NGO workers in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in July 2015, and 25 refugees from the area administered by the Autonomous Administration when visiting southern Turkey in August 2015.

In most cases, the names of affected persons and witnesses whose testimony is included in this report have been changed in order to protect their identity.

In September 2015, Amnesty International provided a summary of its preliminary findings to officials of the Autonomous Administration, seeking their input regarding the human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law documented in this report.

In compiling this report, Amnesty International also examined photo and video material, some of which was provided by local residents and some of which was publicly available, as well as satellite imagery, crosschecking these sources of information with witness accounts, media articles, and other reports.

Amnesty International wishes to thank all those who contributed information and otherwise supported the production of this report.

BACKGROUND

Approximately 2.5 million people live in the three cantons under the control of the Autonomous Administration: Afrin, Ain al-Arab (also known as Kobani) and Jazira. In addition to Kurds, these areas are populated by other ethnic groups including Arabs, Turkmen, Syriacs, and Armenians.

The Autonomous Administration's police force, the Asayish, and its military wings, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ), maintain security in these areas since gaining control in 2013.

Kurds in Syria were subjected to long-term discrimination and serious human rights violations before the uprising there began in 2011. They faced restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language and culture, and were denied the full provision of education, employment, health and other rights enjoyed by Syrian nationals. More than 120,000 Kurds were also denied the rights to a nationality and passport. In April 2011, the Syrian government granted the nationality to most of these Kurds.¹

Syrian government forces have largely avoided armed confrontations with the YPG and YPJ and have not been targeting areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration. YPG and YPJ forces have, however, been involved in an armed conflict with non-state armed groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and the group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS) in the areas near or under their control. IS has been responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes, in areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration including indiscriminate shelling, targeted attacks on civilians, torture and killing of detainees including civilians – including children – and captured fighters, unlawful restrictions on life-saving assistance, and mass forced displacement. Local monitoring groups and media outlets have reported on the widespread forced displacement of Kurdish residents by IS from areas under their control, including in Tel Abyad and its outskirts, since as early as July 2013.

In September 2014 a coalition of states led by the United States began carrying out air strikes and other attacks on IS, including in areas adjacent to territory under the control of the Autonomous Administration. As US-led coalition forces helped to push IS out of these areas, the YPG and YPJ began to take them over. This report describes some of the abusive practices that these forces employed in those areas in 2015.²

¹ BBC, "Syria's Assad grants nationality to Hasaka Kurds", 7 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12995174> (accessed on 29 September 2015).

² Amnesty International has previously documented other abuses committed by Autonomous Administration security forces in northern Syria, including the arbitrary detention, mistreatment, and unfair trials of detainees held on terrorism charges, and the unlawful recruitment of child soldiers. See,

DEMOLITION OF ENTIRE VILLAGES

HUSSEINIYA, TEL HAMEES COUNTRYSIDE



Some of the homes that were demolished in the village of Husseinia. © Amnesty International

Amnesty International visited the Arab village of Husseinia in the Tel Hamees countryside in early August 2015. Villagers told Amnesty International researchers that nearly 90 homes in the village had been demolished, leaving only a single home still standing, and Amnesty International researchers saw the ruins of the destroyed homes during their visit. Satellite imagery of the village of Husseinia taken in June 2014 and June 2015 analysed by Amnesty International reflect that 225 buildings were standing in 2014, but that only 14 remained in 2015, a 93.8% reduction in one year. The destruction reflected in the satellite imagery is not consistent with shelling but rather the demolition of the village. Residents said the YPG carried out the demolitions in February 2015, displacing most residents to nearby villages and to the city of Qamishli. Some Husseinia residents remained in the village, living in a school that had not been destroyed.

for example, Amnesty International, "Syria: Arbitrary detentions and blatantly unfair trials mar PYD fight against terrorism", 7 September 2015.



Satellite imagery the village of Husseiniya taken on June 2014. ©CNES 2015, Distribution AIRBUS DS, June 2014.



Satellite image of the village of Husseiniya taken on June 2015 reflects that almost the entire village has been razed.
© CNES 2015, Distribution AIRBUS DS, June 2015.

Residents said that the village came under the control of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an armed opposition group, in February 2013. A local Arab official from the Tel Hamees countryside said that the YPG first clashed with the FSA and other non-state armed groups in the Tel Hamees countryside in December 2013, and that the biggest confrontation between the FSA and the YPG took place in the village of Husseiniya in February 2014.³ The official said that at that time, a number of armed groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa' 114,

³ Interview in Turkey, 21 August 2015.

Forsan al-Sunna, and a group affiliated with IS forced the YPG to retreat. According to this official, the YPG sustained heavy losses in the clashes, with 13 YPG fighters being killed in the fighting, and others being killed when a suicide bomber attacked a YPG tank and killed all of the soldiers inside it.⁴ The clashes lasted one day according to local residents.⁵

Farah⁶, a local woman who was present when the clashes began, and other residents said that some homes in the village were damaged during the clashes in February 2014 but that these homes were rebuilt later in the year. She explained:

The clashes started very early in the morning, around dawn... I remember that some of the homes were burned because of the clashes but the owners reconstructed them. I think around 20 homes were affected, but I don't remember exactly... The clashes lasted for one day.⁷

In January 2015 IS took complete control of the village. Several local residents said that none of the locals was affiliated with IS, but one resident said that in fact three men from the village were.⁸ IS controlled the village until 20 February 2015 when they withdrew from the area along with their local members, and the YPG was able to take control of the village.⁹ During the IS withdrawal there were no clashes in the village, according to local residents.¹⁰

Mariam¹¹ a mother of seven living in the village, said that four or five homes were destroyed by IS when they took control of the village, but that these homes had been rebuilt before the YPG took over.

Most Husseinia residents fled the village before the YPG took control of the area. When they returned they found that their homes had been demolished. Farah explained:

In mid-February we heard that IS was retreating from the Tel Hamees countryside and the sound of coalition warplanes intensified so we decided to leave to Qamishli... We left before the YPG entered and returned in the beginning of March 2015. When we came back we saw our homes were demolished... We don't know

⁴ Interview in Turkey, 21 August 2015.

⁵ Local residents who spoke to Amnesty International were unable to remember the exact date in February 2014 on which the clashes occurred, but were consistent in saying the clashes lasted for one day during that month.

⁶ Real name withheld.

⁷ Interview in Syria, 2 August 2015.

⁸ Interviews in Syria, 2 August 2015.

⁹ Interview in Turkey, 21 August 2015.

¹⁰ Interview in Syria, 2 August 2015.

¹¹ Real name withheld.

*who did it, but who else was here other than YPG?*¹²

Amnesty International researchers spoke to another woman who was present in the village when the YPG took it over. She saw them demolish her home, as well as the homes of others. She said:

*We stayed at home... They [the YPG] said, 'Stay in your homes. We won't bother you. We have come to liberate you [from IS]. We just want the names of the people that are wanted.' But then they wouldn't even let us take our clothes out of the house... They pulled us out of our homes and began burning them... Then they brought the bulldozers and they began demolishing the homes... Every time I tried to come near the house they would push me back... The people that came were wearing green camouflage uniforms... They said they lost martyrs, but we are not responsible.*¹³

Her brother told Amnesty International that the YPG accused the villagers of supporting IS and said they had lost 90 fighters during clashes in the village in February 2014, and then burned their homes by way of retaliation. He explained:

*They said, 'You were with IS in the clashes against us [in 2014]', but in this village, not one person remained in their home... We fled at the beginning of the clashes ... When the YPG came [after taking over the area] we were here and they pulled us out of our homes and they started burning the homes. After setting them on fire... they brought bulldozers and the YPG started the demolitions. They demolished home after home until the entire village was destroyed... We want compensation and to rebuild our homes... We don't have the means to rebuild... Now we are displaced in the villages, we don't have electricity or water... They said they lost 90 martyrs in this village but we have nothing to do with it. There were clashes between IS and the YPG, but what does it have to do with us? Not one family remained in the village [during the clashes]... Not one villager died because there were no villagers here during the clashes.*¹⁴

All of the residents who spoke to Amnesty International said that they were not compensated for their destroyed homes. Nor were they provided with alternative housing, or given the means to rebuild.

VILLAGES SOUTH OF SULUK

On 14 June 2015, YPG forces captured the town of Suluk, 20km south-east of Tel Abyad, together with several surrounding villages. The area had previously been under the control of IS. Residents of several villages near Suluk, as well as other villages approximately 35km south of Suluk, told Amnesty International that the YPG had carried out extensive demolition

¹² Interview in Syria, 2 August 2015.

¹³ Interview in Syria, 2 August 2015.

¹⁴ Interview in Syria, 2 August 2015.

operations, destroying all or most of the homes in these villages.

In Asaylem village, 35km south of Suluk, Salman¹⁵, a local resident, told Amnesty International that the YPG had demolished 100 of 103 homes. YPG fighters had entered the village on 22 June 2015 and told villagers to leave, citing concerns for their security.¹⁶ Residents were told that they could return to the village in three days, but instead their homes were demolished. In describing the displacement and demolition, Salman explained:

On the fourth day of Ramadan [21 June] around 25-30 YPG soldiers came to our village and asked us to leave for our own security. We were able to take some of our belongings. At the time, the nearest IS base to our village was 17km away. The YPG were wearing camouflage military uniforms and their flag was hanging from their cars. They told us that we could come back in three days so we decided to wait in the fields 3km away from the village. I had a clear view of the village. We stayed for 12 days in the fields because they wouldn't allow us to come back for the same reason as before. After that, the clashes started with IS. IS entered the village but the fighting only lasted for one day. We were hearing the gunshots. IS retreated. One of us went to ask them if we can go back but they said no... One day after the clashes ended I saw one bulldozer with the yellow [YPG] flag arriving in Asaylem and demolishing the houses... Only three of the homes in the village were not demolished. We don't know why. My home was demolished... [A commander from the YPG] insisted on us leaving... We left to Turkey because we had nowhere else to go... We did not ask PYD for housing and they never offered.¹⁷

Salman told Amnesty International that early in the morning on the day of the demolition he heard an explosion, possibly a car bomb, and while it was not clear if the car bomb killed YPG fighters, he said he believed the demolition may have been in retaliation for the bombing.

¹⁵ Real name withheld.

¹⁶ Phone interview 19 August 2015.

¹⁷ Phone interview, 19 August 2015.

FORCED DISPLACEMENT OF ENTIRE VILLAGES

Amnesty International collected information regarding the forced displacement of residents of eight other villages in areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration. Amnesty International researchers visited four of these towns and villages from which residents were displaced, speaking with a number of local residents.

VILLAGES SOUTH OF SULUK

Amnesty International researchers visited the town of Suluk and three surrounding villages on 30 and 31 July, interviewing a number of local residents. Amnesty International also interviewed a resident from one other village south of Suluk who was forcibly displaced. At the time the area, which had been held by IS from June 2013 until 14 June 2015, was under the control of the Autonomous Administration, and was secured by YPG fighters. According to Ciwan Ibrahim, the director of the Asayish, on 1 August, the closest frontline to Suluk was 7km away in Tirwaziya, al-Raqqa governorate.¹⁸

The roads cutting through two villages south of Suluk that Amnesty International researchers travelled to, Raneen and Hammam al-Turkman, were blocked by road barriers. Residents from here and another resident from al-Maghat, a neighbouring village, consistently described how they were forcibly displaced from their homes by fighters who they believed to be members of the YPG. They claimed that they were forced to leave even though they were civilians and even though their villages had not been the site of clashes, were at a distance from the frontline, and did not have improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in them. Villagers told Amnesty International that they believed they were being punished collectively because some villagers were members of IS or supported IS.

In the village of al-Ghbein, which Amnesty International was able to visit, local residents told researchers that YPG fighters were visiting the village regularly and telling them that they had to leave the area, but that they had nowhere else to go. They too said that there were no apparent security threats in the area that would have required them to leave for their own security and they denied any involvement with IS or other armed groups.

Marwan¹⁹, 30, a day labourer married with six children, told Amnesty International that he was forced to leave his home in Raneen in late July 2015.²⁰ Raneen is a small village in a

¹⁸ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.

¹⁹ Real name withheld.

²⁰ Interview in Syria, 30 July 2015.

predominantly agricultural area where most residents work as cattle herders, farmers, and manual labourers, residents said. When Amnesty International researchers spoke to him, Marwan said that he had been living in a relative's deserted home in a nearby village for four days. He explained that he was forced to leave Raneen along with all of the other village residents, approximately 50 homes, by YPG fighters in late July. He said the YPG fighters, who were Kurdish men wearing green camouflage uniforms and speaking in Arabic and Kurdish, accused him and other villagers of supporting IS; he said that they threatened to shoot the villagers if they remained in the village. He said that he believed the YPG knew which villagers were in fact affiliated with IS, but that despite this were penalizing the entire village. He explained:

Four to five [YPG] men came to the village... The first time they came to the house was about 15 days ago [before the interview was conducted, around 15 July]. They said, 'You need to leave', and accused us of being IS. We are all civilians and we don't want to leave our homes, but they accused us of being IS and said we had to go. They said you have two hours to go or something bad will happen... Two to three days later they came back and again said 'You need to leave', but we didn't. We said, 'Where should we go?'... IS is there [to the south], we can't go to Turkey, and we have kids with us. There is no water... They came back and told us we had to leave... They said, 'If we come back and find you we will shoot you... You have 24 hours to move out or we will shoot you.' No one stayed... [When the YPG came to my house] I gave them my ID. They have the names of the people that worked with IS; some people [from the village] were with IS, but not us. Why are we having to leave because of them? There are over 50 houses in the village, but only three to four homes were with IS.²¹

Sabah²², a married woman with six children who was living with her family in Raneen, where her husband works in agriculture, said that around 4 July 2015 four to five men carrying guns and wearing green camouflage uniforms came to their home and said that the village was a military zone, and that they could no longer live there.²³ She explained:

They said it was a military position but there were no clashes and no IEDs. They went into my house and searched it [but there was nothing there]. They told us to leave, that we couldn't live there, but we said we had no place to go. They said 'That's your problem...' [After that] the week or so before we left they came almost daily. The last time they said we had two hours to leave. I think everyone left after that.²⁴

Sabah told Amnesty International that they left the village in late July. A third Raneen

²¹ Interview in Syria, 30 July 2015.

²² Real name withheld.

²³ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

²⁴ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

resident, Safwan²⁵, who spoke to Amnesty International in a nearby village where he was temporarily residing, said that he too was forced to leave his home. "They told us we had to leave or they would tell the US coalition that we were terrorists and their planes would hit us and our families," he said. "We left so we would be safe from their snipers and the planes... In Raneen some people were with IS, there were lots of problems, but we had nothing to do with anything."²⁶

In the nearby village of Hammam al-Turkman residents were gathered into the local school by the YPG and told they had to leave the area.



The entrance to Hammam al-Turkman blocked by a barrier placed by the Autonomous Administration, 30 July 2015. © Amnesty International

Farid²⁷, a resident who works as a day labourer, and who was present when the villagers were displaced, told Amnesty International that there are about 1,400 Turkmen families in the village along with 10 Kurdish families.²⁸ A second resident, Wael,²⁹ 35, a manual labourer,

²⁵ Real name withheld.

²⁶ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

²⁷ Real name withheld.

²⁸ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

said there were approximately 1,000 homes in the village. Farid said that in 2012 the FSA took control of the village, that in 2013 they were joined by Jabhat al-Nusra, and that in 2014 IS took over. He said that some children joined IS after they took over the village, but that these residents left with IS when they lost the village to the YPG.³⁰ After the YPG took the village, on 15 June, a car bomb killed three YPG fighters 4km from Hammam al-Turkman at a checkpoint in Damishli. The following day there were skirmishes between the YPG and IS in the village before IS was pushed back. A second car bomb went off at a YPG checkpoint at the health clinic in the village on 18 June killing a YPG fighter and injuring one civilian and three days later IS shot and killed a second YPG fighter near the clinic.³¹ It was after the death of this fighter that the residents were told by the YPG that they had to leave the village. Farid explained:

After the death of the soldier, the YPG gathered all the people in the village and took us to the school. In the meantime they searched the houses and then said that we had to leave the village immediately. We barely had time to pack. We asked for how long but they didn't specify. We left to the fields. We stayed in the fields for a month and a half and then we left. Some stayed in Syria and others went to Turkey.³²

Hassan³³, aged 35, another Hammam al-Turkman resident who works as a farmer, told Amnesty International that when the YPG gave residents notice that they had to leave they gave them 24 hours to depart. "They threatened us with US coalition strikes, saying that if we did not leave they would tell the US we were IS... but the people from the village who were with IS, left with IS," he said.³⁴

Wael, said that he and other residents did not understand why they were forced to leave. "Residents didn't leave under IS... There are no IEDs in Hammam al-Turkman... Residents didn't know why we were asked to go. There was no fighting at the time."³⁵

After extensive negotiations, Farid explained that 50% of the residents were finally able to return home on 17 August 2015. "They said that we could return if we told them who supported IS," he said.³⁶

²⁹ Real name withheld.

³⁰ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

³¹ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

³² Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

³³ Real name withheld.

³⁴ Interview in Turkey, 19 August 2015.

³⁵ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

³⁶ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

Maha³⁷, aged 44, a mother of four from al-Maghat, approximately 1.5km from Hammam al-Turkman, told Amnesty International that she fled on 22 June 2015. Amnesty International researchers interviewed her in a nearby village. She said she left al-Maghat after Kurdish fighters wearing green camouflage uniforms came to the village and told residents they needed to leave because there were IEDs in the area and it was a military zone. She said soldiers who spoke Arabic and Kurdish came to the village three times warning them to go before they forced them to leave, giving them one hour to pack up their belongings. She told Amnesty International, "I told them we had nowhere to go, and they said we could go to hell for all they cared. There were no accusations against us, only injustice."³⁸

When Amnesty International researchers visited al-Ghbein village, which lies just south of the town of Suluk and is usually made up of about 100-120 families, they spoke with several residents.³⁹ They said there were approximately 30-40 families living there at the time.⁴⁰ Residents told Amnesty International that IS was in control of the village for about two years before the YPG took over the village just before Ramadan began in 2015, which was on 18 June.⁴¹ One resident, Salim⁴², said that while IS was in control of the village it never had a base in the village. He said that four people from the village were affiliated with IS but that they withdrew from the village when IS fled from the area.⁴³

The residents complained to Amnesty International that after the YPG took over the area from IS they no longer had electricity or water, bakeries were closed and YPG fighters shot in the direction of residents and at their cattle. They were also regularly told by the YPG that they had to leave the area because it was a military zone. They said that on one occasion in June 2015 Arab fighters working with the YPG, who were wearing green uniforms and only spoke Arabic, came to the village and told the residents they had to go.

Yasser⁴⁴, a local resident, told Amnesty International that about 10 days after the start of Ramadan, in late July, YPG soldiers visited the village and told residents they had to leave their homes because it was unsafe to remain there. After this visit he said fighters came to the village about every week to 10 days to tell villagers to leave, becoming more aggressive and insistent as time went on. He said:

Ten YPG soldiers dressed in camouflage uniforms arrived in a four-wheel drive. They

³⁷ Real name withheld.

³⁸ Interview in Syria, 30 July 2015.

³⁹ Interviews in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁴⁰ Interview in Syria, 30 July 2015.

⁴¹ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁴² Real name withheld.

⁴³ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁴⁴ Real name withheld.

had women with them and had the yellow [YPG] flag on the car. They were carrying weapons. They started shooting in the air and the children began crying. They came to my house and told me that we had to leave the next day because it was not safe for us to stay. I told them that I was ready to risk my life but that I would not leave my village. They [the YPG] said, 'If you don't leave we will tell the warplanes [of the US-led coalition] to attack you... After a week three men came around 12pm. They had shaved beards and spoke Arabic. They did not look like they were from the YPG. They were wearing green uniforms. They told us that we had until 3pm the same day to leave but we told them what we told the ones before them. They threatened to shoot us if we didn't leave... The last visit was 10 days ago... Three YPG soldiers came around 12pm. They were wearing camouflage uniforms. They did not use force but they repeated the same thing over and over again. The closest frontline is more than 25km away.⁴⁵

Salim,⁴⁶ a second resident, told Amnesty International that YPG fighters who came to the village to tell residents to flee also opened fire on the livestock of local herders. He recalled:

The first day [of Ramadan, 18 June]... a group of YPG fighters dressed in military camouflage uniforms arrived. They were aggressive. They entered my home and searched it. They said they were searching for guns. They went outside and shot at my neighbour's sheep. The people started gathering. A YPG fighter asked us to leave the village in Arabic... [but] we insisted on staying... They told us that we had to leave because it is a military zone.⁴⁷

Wafa⁴⁸, a mother of five living in al-Ghbein, told Amnesty International that YPG fighters came to the village more than four times to tell residents that they had to leave the area or be forced out. She also said that the YPG told residents that they could not go past the edge of the village toward Suluk, and that shots were fired in the direction of residents who approached the area from a school in Suluk where the YPG was positioned.⁴⁹

Another resident, a man displaced from a nearby village, told Amnesty International that the YPG shot in the direction of two children when they approached an area bordering both the village and Suluk. Amnesty International spoke to the children, who confirmed the story. He said that by late July the YPG had visited the village on four occasions that he was aware of to tell villagers they had to leave.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁴⁶ Real name withheld.

⁴⁷ Interview in Syria, 30 July 2015.

⁴⁸ Real name withheld.

⁴⁹ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁵⁰ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

A 91-year-old man from al-Ghbein who suffered from heart disease complained to Amnesty International that the YPG told him he had to leave the village, which was cut off from electricity and water. He said that he wanted to travel to Turkey where his wife and children were living, but that he was denied entry three times at the border. "I am hungry and thirsty," he said. He had nowhere else to go.⁵¹



The town of Suluk to which residents have not been allowed to return, 30 July 2015. © Amnesty International

Inez⁵², a resident of the town of Suluk, a mixed Arab and Kurdish town, was forced, along with other residents, to leave by officers who she thought might have been from the Asayish. She claims that they told her it was not safe for anybody to remain in the area. She explained:

Ten days before Ramadan [8 June] we left because of the US coalition air strikes. We returned on the first day of Ramadan [18 June] when IS had left Suluk... We were at my neighbour's home preparing to break our fast when a group of men and women dressed in camouflage uniform knocked on the door. Some of them only spoke Kurdish. They told me we had to leave immediately because it was a military zone. They threatened shooting in the air and said we

⁵¹ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁵² Real name withheld.

had to leave. I told them there was no other place to go but they didn't care. In 15 minutes we had to pack but most of my belongings and clothes were still at home. I did not have time to pack everything... After 10 days I went to check on my house. I found my clothes and furniture next to the house and burned, but the house was fine. One of the Asayish officers saw me. He started shouting at me asking me to leave immediately. We left right away.⁵³

While Suluk residents said that Kurdish residents of the town left when IS took it over, and therefore were not displaced by the YPG, the Autonomous Administration security forces have not allowed either Kurdish or Arab residents of the town to return. According to an international correspondent who visited the area, on 20 August five displaced Arab women and 20 children conducted a protest in Suluk against the YPG for not being allowed to return to their homes.⁵⁴

Akram Dada, the head of the local civilian council in Tel Abyad, told Amnesty International that the YPG also forced 800 Turkmen to leave Mela Berho.⁵⁵ Journalists have reported that the YPG displaced the Turkmen on 6 July 2015 and have identified some of the displaced persons by name.⁵⁶ Akram Dada told Amnesty International that Mela Berho was 15km away from the closest frontline at the time of the displacement.⁵⁷

VILLAGES IN THE TEL ABYAD AND TEL TAMR COUNTRYSIDE

Amnesty International interviewed residents from two villages in the Tel Abyad and Tel Tamar countryside who said that they and all of their neighbours were displaced from their homes by the YPG, even though they were civilians and there were no apparent security threats in the area.

Amnesty International spoke with three residents from the village of Abdi Koy in the Tel Abyad countryside. Talal⁵⁸, aged 34, a local resident who worked as a handyman, told Amnesty International that before villagers were forced to leave the area there were 500 people, primarily Arabs, living there.⁵⁹ He explained that the village came under the control of the FSA in 2012, that in 2013 clashes between the YPG and FSA began, and that in

⁵³ Interview in Syria, 31 July 2015.

⁵⁴ Charles Marlot, "Syria: the difficult cohabitation between Kurds and Arabs", *Le Figaro*, 27 August 2014, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2015/08/27/01003-20150827ARTFIG00302-syrie-la-difficile-cohabitation-entre-kurdes-et-arabes.php> (accessed on 1 September 2015).

⁵⁵ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

⁵⁶ Ghadaf Rajeh, "Pictures: Kurdish Militias continues displacing Arabs from Tel Abyad countryside", Saraj, 14 July 2015, <http://goo.gl/htfzsP> (accessed on 9 September 2015).

⁵⁷ Interview in Turkey, 20 August 2015.

⁵⁸ Real name withheld.

⁵⁹ Interview in Turkey, 19 August 2015.

August 2013 IS took over the village. He said that IS held the village until mid-June 2015 when the YPG took it over. He said that, when the YPG entered the village, they gathered all of the residents in the local school and told them they had to leave the area for their own security. Some YPG fighters accused the residents of being members of IS. He told Amnesty International:

Three days before Ramadan started this year [15 June], the YPG entered... They entered the village in the morning and gathered us all in the school. They lined the men along the wall... [and] searched us one by one and searched our homes... We stayed in the school for two hours and then they told us we had two hours to leave because it was not safe to be here. They were screaming all the time that we were all IS... but in our village there was only one 16-year-old guy who joined ISIS and he left... They said we could come back when the area was safe but even then the closest frontline was 4km away... I have heard that people are now allowed to return to Abdi Koy.⁶⁰

A second resident, Wissam⁶¹, a merchant who left Abdi Koy when IS took over the village in 2013, said that IS confiscated his goods, property ownership documents and passport, and that after the YPG took back the area he asked a local leader if he could have his property back. "He told me that the YPG had found arms in our houses and the shops we own so my properties were confiscated... I also asked him if we could return to our village but he said 'Not now because it is a military zone'," he told Amnesty International.⁶²

Amnesty International also spoke to two residents from the village of Tel Fweida in the Tel Tamr countryside, which is comprised of about 100 homes. The village came under the control of the FSA in 2012, which was later joined by Jabhat al-Nusra, and then these groups clashed with the YPG in 2013. The YPG took control of the village in January 2015.

Sultan,⁶³ a local resident who works as an electrician, told Amnesty International that when the YPG entered the village they lined up dozens of residents and told them that they had to join the YPG or leave the area under their control. He recalled:

When the YPG entered the village at night they lined 63 people along the wall including me and my brother. They told us, 'You either join us or leave the land of Kurdistan.' They left and said they were coming the next day. We decided to leave early the next morning [13 January 2015]. We were not able to get all of our belongings. Fifteen days ago people told us that they passed through the village on their way to al-Hasakeh and that it was completely empty.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Interview in Turkey, 19 August 2015.

⁶¹ Real name withheld.

⁶² Interview in Turkey, 19 August 2015.

⁶³ Real name withheld.

⁶⁴ Interview in Turkey, 19 August 2015.

TARGETED FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND DESTRUCTION OF HOMES

SUSPECTED OR ACTUAL AFFILIATION WITH NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

Amnesty International interviewed three individuals who said the YPG destroyed their homes or confiscated their property and forcibly displaced them because of their suspected or familial affiliation with other non-state armed groups. Amnesty International also gathered information about six other people who residents claimed the YPG similarly targeted.

TEL DIYAB, RAS AL-AYN COUNTRYSIDE

Bassma Mohamed al-Bilal, a teacher and mother of three young children who was living with her family in Tel Diyab, 15km outside of Ras al-Ayn, told Amnesty International in August 2015 that she and her in-laws' homes were intentionally burnt by YPG soldiers and they were forcibly displaced in February 2014. She said this took place even though they are civilians, they did not pose a military threat to the YPG, and they were not affiliated with armed groups. They believed they were attacked because of her brother-in-law's affiliation with the FSA and because of his and his brothers' refusal to join the YPG. Amnesty International visited her and her in-laws' home in Tel Diyab, a village comprised of about 200 Arab homes, in July 2015 and observed that their homes had been burnt.



A room destroyed by fire in the home of Bassma Mohamed al-Bilal in Tel Diyab. © Amnesty International

According to Bassma, Tel Diyab was under Syrian government control until 2012 when FSA fighters took over the area. The area was then taken over by the YPG in November 2013. The nearest frontline to Tel Diyab at that time was Assadia, under the control of Jabhat al-Nusra, which is approximately 1-2km away.

Bassma told Amnesty International that her husband, a teacher, was detained by the Syrian government for his involvement in peaceful protests in 2011, and that he left Syria after he was released in late 2011.⁶⁵ Bassma said that her husband never joined the FSA or otherwise took up arms. When she spoke with Amnesty International in August 2015 her husband was an asylum-seeker in Europe and her resettlement application to join him was pending.

After her husband left Syria, Bassma, her children and her in-laws remained in Tel Diyab until November 2013, at which point they left the village for one week while clashes between the YPG and other armed groups were happening in the area. She, her children, parents-in-law, and sister-in-law then returned to the village when the fighting subsided later in November. They were able to return, passing through Asayish checkpoints, with the help of a Kurdish neighbour who drove them. Bassma told Amnesty International that on the night that the family returned to their home, a YPG officer visited it, telling them they needed to leave. According to Bassma, YPG and Asayish visits continued until the officers looted and set fire to her and her in-laws' homes and forced them to leave the village.

⁶⁵ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.



A room destroyed by fire in the home of Bassma Mohamed al-Bilal's in-laws in Tel Diyab. © Amnesty International

Bassma explained what happened:

We arrived back at the house after dark... One to two hours later a car came and a YPG officer, wearing a YPG uniform arrived, asking us why we were there and why we had come back... He told us that the house belonged to the YPG now, for their martyrs, but I asked, 'how, this is a private home?' He said there was no place for us here... The next day at around 8.30am six to seven Asayish officers came and searched the house. Some of them were armed. Then another car came and searched, perhaps three to four men, followed by three other men. Some were wearing civilian clothes, some military. I knew they were Asayish from their car and their uniform... I asked them if they had a paper giving them authority to search but they just laughed and said they would search... They said they were searching for weapons.

The third day a YPG commander and two other YPG officers came again and told me that we had to leave because it is a military zone. I told him that there were no clashes and Assadia was no longer under the control of Jabhat al-Nusra. The next day at 2am I saw the house of my neighbour 400m away from mine on fire. Thirty minutes later I saw a car driving away but I couldn't tell who they were. The house was empty but the owners are affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra. I was sleeping in the house of my in-laws. I was terrified that we would be next... Three days later around nightfall the YPG commander came and told me that if I didn't leave they would

burn my house. I told him it was late so I couldn't leave. He said, 'Then you leave tomorrow or I come and demolish it and clean the area of its garbage.'... I called ...local tribal leaders and others and asked them to come the next day. I wanted to resolve the issue. The next day they all came ... The YPG commander came between 11am and 12pm... There were more than 10 or 15 YPG guards with weapons... I said to him [the YPG commander], 'You are the YPG – the People's Protection Units – we are people. You should protect us.' But they just said that we needed to leave the house. I asked why and he said he was concerned for our safety. I said there was no military here so there was no reason to worry... but he said I needed to go... I said, 'If I go when can I come back?'. No one answered my question... These visits happened in December 2013.⁶⁶

Bassma told Amnesty International that a local YPG member came to her home and told her that if she joined the PYD she would be allowed to stay in her home. She said that when she refused, YPG fighters came back to her home and set it on fire. She explained:

Every day they were coming and going... [Then in the beginning of February] they called and said tomorrow they would come to burn the house... I stayed at my in-laws' house... After breakfast [it was a Monday at around 8am or 9am] one car came with a commander who needed an Arabic translator... It was me, my mother and father-in-law, sister-in-law and my kids at my in-laws' house and we hid my father-in-law because we were afraid they would arrest him... They started pouring fuel in my in-laws house. My mother-in-law was there refusing to leave and they just poured it around her... The commander was leading the operations... They found my father-in-law and began hitting him on his hands... I said, 'Even if you burn my house I will get a tent and pitch it. This is in my place. I will stay in my place.' But they said the problem was not with the house but with the people in the house ... They were taking things from the house, the window frames, the doors, the water pump, all the stuff from the house... For 13 years you build a life and they leave you with nothing.⁶⁷

Bassma told Amnesty International that after her home was destroyed she and her children eventually made their way to Turkey.

Jalal⁶⁸, another Tel Diyab resident, told Amnesty International that at least two other homes were also looted and burnt in the village because the residents had family members affiliated with the FSA.

Amnesty International interviewed a second family from the city of Ras al-Ayn. Ahmad, a Ras al-Ayn resident, told Amnesty International that one of his three sons was a fighter with the FSA's Farouq Brigade in Ras al-Ayn, which began fighting the YPG in Ras al-Ayn in 2013. In November 2013, a few months after the YPG took control of the area, he said they detained

⁶⁶ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.

⁶⁷ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.

⁶⁸ Real name withheld.

his 14-year-old son. When his son was released from detention 15 days later, the entire family left Ras al-Ayn. "We never went back home [from fear of reprisals] but our neighbours told us that the PKK [referring to the PYD] took our belongings and confiscated our home and shops." Ahmad gave Amnesty International the names of four other families from Ras al-Ayn who he said also had their properties confiscated.

RESPONSE FROM THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

Amnesty International researchers interviewed Ciwan Ibrahim, the director of the Asayish operating under the Autonomous Administration, and Redur Xelil, the spokesperson for the YPG, regarding the Autonomous Administration's policies on displacement.

Ciwan Ibrahim acknowledged that in some cases families had been forcibly displaced from areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration, but claimed that the number of cases was limited. Characterizing these as isolated incidents, he said that security forces only displaced local residents when the "threat of terrorism" required it. He explained:

In some dangerous areas there are some specific cases that are very small, resulting from the terrorist threat, where families were sent away from the area... Only 25 families were forced to leave across Rojava... [They are told] 'Folks, remove your things please, and if you leave from this area until the war ends it will be a good thing...' You have terrorists in al-Raqqa and their families – the uncle, and brother, and sister – are here, and they are in communication, giving them information. We were forced to distance these families. Not detain them. Distance them. Take them outside of the area.⁶⁹

He told Amnesty International that security forces relied on informers who had infiltrated IS to obtain information regarding which families were "supporting terrorism" or were members of IS. They also obtained such information from documents and electronic devices belonging to IS members that security forces were able to confiscate after clashes.⁷⁰

However, the residents of the villages where Amnesty International documented displacement, as well as other witnesses, denied any such connections. They consistently said that they were forced to leave despite being civilians and having no links to armed groups. The residents said they were never afforded a chance to defend themselves or to see the evidence against them.

Redur Xelil, the YPG spokesperson, told Amnesty International that residents had to vacate some areas for their own security, and not necessarily because of any ties to armed groups. He explained that these displacements were carried out to avoid civilian casualties during clashes and to prevent injuries from IEDs that IS had laid in villages. He said:

With regret... in war the person that is harmed first and foremost is the civilian. We

⁶⁹ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.

⁷⁰ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.

know it. But there are some situations where there is no other option... The families that are on the frontline... Who is responsible for them if IS attacks? When clashes happen there is shooting and car bombs, airplane shelling; all kinds of weapons are used. The better solution is to move civilians away from the frontlines until the situation improves... There is no other solution militarily... Second there are thousands of IEDs in this area. How can you keep families, and women, and kids amongst the IEDs? They are still there.⁷¹

He added that IS was benefiting from the presence of civilians in these areas, and using them to plant car bombs or carry out other attacks on the YPG.

The residents who spoke to Amnesty International, however, said that there was no condition that made it militarily necessary for them to leave their villages either for their security or for the security of others. They cited the absence of IEDs, clashes, or other immediate security threats, including bombings, in their villages.

In addition, while Redur Xelil acknowledged that the Autonomous Administration should provide alternative housing for civilians forced to leave for security reasons, and said that they did, none of the residents who spoke to Amnesty International said they had been informed that they were entitled to such assistance. On the contrary, they consistently said that their pleas to YPG officials to allow them to stay in their homes because they had nowhere else to go were met with indifference.

⁷¹ Interview in Syria, 1 August 2015.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL STANDARDS

International humanitarian law, or the laws of war, sets out rules of humane conduct that legally bind all parties to armed conflict, whether state armed forces or non-state armed groups. These rules aim to minimize human suffering, and offer particular protection to civilians and those who are not directly participating in hostilities. Serious violations of international humanitarian law are war crimes and those who commit or order war crimes are individually responsible and must be brought to justice.

In addition, as the de facto government administration in control of the predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria,⁷² the Autonomous Administration should respect the human rights of individuals under its control, including with regard to forced displacement. As the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has consistently emphasized, “non-State actors that exercise government-like functions and control over a territory are obliged to respect human rights norms when their conduct affects the human rights of the individuals under their control.”⁷³

HOUSE DEMOLITIONS

The deliberate demolition of civilian homes described in this report is unlawful under international humanitarian law, which prohibits the destruction or seizure of the property of an adversary, unless required by imperative military necessity.⁷⁴ Punitive destruction of homes on the basis of suspected political affiliation or on grounds of ethnicity or other discriminatory grounds also violates the prohibition of collective punishment.⁷⁵

“Destroying or seizing the property of an adversary unless such destruction or seizure be imperatively demanded by the necessities of the conflict” constitutes a war crime in non-international armed conflict.⁷⁶

⁷² The Autonomous Administration in Rojava was established in January 2014, in a PYD-led initiative. It introduced a provisional constitution, established ministries, a military and police force, and established a judicial system. Since then the Autonomous Administration has also introduced new laws which are in force across the territory under their control.

⁷³ Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the implementation of Human Rights Council resolution 7/1, Human Rights Situation in Palestine and other Occupied Arab Territories, UN Doc. A/HRC/8/17 (6 June 2008), para. 9. See also Andrew Clapham, “Human rights obligations of non-state actors in conflict situations”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 88, No. 863, September 2006. Clapham notes that it is especially appropriate and feasible to call for an armed group to respect human rights norms when the group “exercises significant control over territory and population and has an identifiable political structure.”

⁷⁴ ICRC Customary IHL Study, rule 50.

⁷⁵ ICRC Customary IHL Study, rule 103.

⁷⁶ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 8(2)(e)(xii).

FORCED DISPLACEMENT

International humanitarian law prohibits the displacement of civilians during non-international armed conflicts except for their own security or for imperative military reasons.⁷⁷ When displacement occurs, international humanitarian law requires that all possible measures are taken to ensure that displaced civilians receive adequate shelter, and enjoy satisfactory hygiene health, safety and nutrition; and that families are not separated.⁷⁸ Furthermore, displaced persons have the right to voluntary return in safety to their homes as soon as the reason for their displacement ceases to exist. And their property rights must be respected.⁷⁹

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement⁸⁰ further underscore that every person has the right to be protected from being arbitrarily displaced from her or his home (Principle 6(1)). The Principles “shall be observed by all authorities, groups and persons irrespective of their legal status and applied without any adverse distinction.” (Principle 2(1)). Prior to displacement, authorities must explore all feasible alternatives (Principle 7(1)).

Whatever the original circumstances of the displacement, the competent authorities have the responsibility to help establish conditions for, and to facilitate, the safe, voluntary return of the displaced to their homes (Principle 28(1)). And they have the duty to help the displaced recover their property and possessions, and where this is not possible, to obtain appropriate compensation or another form of just reparation (Principle 29(2)).

⁷⁷ ICRC Customary IHL Study, rule 129; see also ICC Statute, Article 8(2)(e)(viii) (characterizing unjustified forced displacement of civilians as a war crime).

⁷⁸ ICRC Customary IHL Study, rule 131.

⁷⁹ ICRC Customary IHL Study, rules 132 and 133

⁸⁰ E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The deliberate demolition of civilian homes described in this report is unlawful under international humanitarian law, which prohibits the destruction or seizure of the property of an adversary, unless required by imperative military necessity. International humanitarian law also prohibits the displacement of civilians during non-international armed conflicts except for their own security or for imperative military reasons.

While the Autonomous Administration has claimed that its forced displacement of civilians was not arbitrary because it was necessary on military grounds or for the security or protection of local residents, this report documents cases in which there was no such justification. Amnesty International considers that these instances of forced displacement constitute war crimes.

The circumstances of some of the instances of forced displacement documented in this report suggest that they were carried out in retaliation for people's perceived sympathies with, or family ties to, suspected members of IS or other armed groups. This would constitute collective punishment, which as noted above, is a violation of international humanitarian law.

Amnesty International makes the following recommendations to the Autonomous Administration and the states supporting or co-operating with it.

TO THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

Amnesty International urges the Autonomous Administration to:

- Immediately cease the unlawful demolition of civilian homes;
- Compensate all civilians who have had their homes unlawfully demolished, confiscated, or looted by security forces;
- Allow civilians who have had their homes unlawfully demolished to rebuild or provide them with comparable alternative housing;
- Cease the forced displacement of civilians except for their own security or for imperative military reasons;
- Where displacement is unavoidable for imperative military reasons or the security of civilians, provide the displaced with essential food and potable water; basic shelter and housing; appropriate clothing; and essential medical services and sanitation; and ensure displacement is for the shortest time possible;
- Allow civilians who have been subject to unlawful forced displacement to return to their homes;
- Investigate and remove from the ranks all persons responsible for committing or ordering unlawful demolitions of homes, forced displacement, and other serious violations of international humanitarian law.

TO ALL STATES SUPPORTING OR CO-ORDINATING WITH THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

Amnesty International urges all states supporting the Autonomous Administration or co-ordinating with it in military operations, such as those that form part of the US-led coalition fighting IS in Syria, to:

- Publicly condemn unlawful demolitions and forced displacement practices that violate international humanitarian law;
- Take urgent measures to ensure that the provision of military assistance, including military co-ordination with, the Autonomous Administration is not being misused to commit violations of international humanitarian law, including unlawful house demolitions and forced displacement.

APPENDIX

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION

Amnesty International Letter to the Autonomous Administration

18 September 2015

Co-president of Rojava

Dear Mr. Salih Muslim:

I write to share with you a summary of Amnesty International's preliminary findings based on research it has carried out into alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in areas under the control of the PYD-led Autonomous Administration in Syria.

We would request that you respond to these findings at the latest by 30 September 2015. We will publish our findings in a forthcoming report, and would reflect in it any response that the Administration is able to provide Amnesty International before the report is finalized.

Amnesty International conducted research into forced displacement and the demolition of villages and homes in northern Syria. From 27 July to 3 August 2015, our researchers visited fourteen villages and towns in the region, interviewing displaced persons and others affected by the conflict. Amnesty International also interviewed 25 displaced persons from northern Syria in southern Turkey in August 2015. Our preliminary findings indicate that the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Asayish forces committed serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

ALLEGED DEMOLITION OF VILLAGES

Amnesty International visited the village of Husseinia in the Tel Hamees countryside in early August and saw that all but one of the village's approximately 90 homes had been demolished. One former resident told Amnesty International that she was in her home when the YPG demolished it with a bulldozer. While she was allowed to flee, she was not allowed to take out her belongings. Other displaced residents told Amnesty International that they returned to Husseinia after the YPG took control of the village to find their homes razed to the ground. They all told Amnesty International that the Administration did not provide them compensation or alternative housing, and that they were not allowed to rebuild their homes.

Local activists told Amnesty International that other villages under the control of the Administration were similarly razed, including villages south of Suluk such as Asaylem and Mushayrfa. One activist said that homes in Akrasha and Safana, in the Tel Hamees

countryside, were similarly burnt down in July 2015. A resident from Asaylem village, 35 kilometres south of Suluk, told Amnesty International that he saw YPG forces demolish 100 of 103 homes after taking control of the village in June 2015. He explained that without prior notice YPG forces asked residents to leave their homes for their own security, saying that people would be allowed to return in three days. Instead of allowing returns, the YPG demolished their homes. Villagers were not provided any compensation or alternative housing, and have not been allowed to rebuild their homes.

ALLEGED FORCED DISPLACEMENT OF ENTIRE VILLAGES

Amnesty International collected information regarding the forced displacement of residents of eight villages and towns in areas under the control of the Administration: the town of Suluk, the surrounding villages of al-Ghbein, Raneen, Hammam al-Turkman, Mela Berho, and Maaghat, and the villages of Abdi Koy and Tel Fweida in the Tel Tamr countryside.

Residents of the affected villages told Amnesty International that the YPG, and in some cases the Asayish, told them and/or their neighbours to leave their homes and villages. They were told to leave for their own security or because they were accused of being part of or affiliated with non-state armed groups including the group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS). The information collected by Amnesty International strongly indicates that civilians were displaced from these areas absent a meaningful threat to their security or a military imperative. All affected persons said that the Administration did not provide affected persons with adequate notice, genuine consultations, and compensation or alternative housing. In all cases residents were not told when, if ever, they would be able to return to their homes.

Incidents of forced displacement documented by Amnesty International include the following:

- Forbidding Suluk residents from returning to their town after the YPG took control of the area in June 2015;
- Forcing approximately 1400 families in the Turkman village of Hammam al-Turkman and approximately 50 families from the Arab village of Raneen, south of Suluk, to leave their villages in June and July 2015, respectively;
- Forcing residents of Maaghat village, south of the town of Suluk, to leave their village in June 2015;
- Regularly ordering residents in the Arab village of al-Ghbein, south of the town of Suluk, to leave the area in June-August 2015;
- Forcibly displacing approximately 500 families in the predominately Arab village of Abdi Koy, in the Tel Tamr countryside, in June 2015;
- Telling residents of the Arab village of Tel Fweida, in the Tel Tamr countryside, to join the YPG or leave Syrian Kurdistan, in January 2015, which led 100 families to leave the village;
- Forcibly displacing approximately 800 Turkmen villagers from Mela Berho in July 2015.

ALLEGED TARGETED DESTRUCTION OF HOMES

Amnesty International interviewed residents of the border city of Ras al-Ayn and the village of

Tel Diyab who said that they, but not all of their neighbours, were forcibly displaced, and that their property was destroyed or confiscated.

- Members of a displaced family from Tel Diyab village, near Ras al-Ayn -- who are now in southern Turkey -- told Amnesty International that the YPG and Asayish forces told them to leave because of their suspected familial affiliation with non-state armed groups opposed to the Syrian government. The family added that two of their homes were destroyed after they were forced to leave. Amnesty International visited two of the destroyed homes and observed the destruction.
- Members of a displaced family from Ras al-Ayn city, now in southern Turkey, told Amnesty International that the YPG confiscated their home and shops after they left the city, fearing reprisals because one family member had fought against the YPG as part of a Free Syrian Army brigade.

We would appreciate it if your Administration could provide its view of what occurred during these incidents. We would also request that you provide the following information:

- The names of villages subjected to forced displacement or demolition and the number of affected people;
- The names of the officials who authorised the forced displacement of village residents and the demolition of their homes;
- The purpose and intention behind these practices;
- What steps, if any, the Administration has taken to assess the legality of such practices;
- What investigations, if any, the Administration has undertaken to assess the harm caused to civilians as a result of these practices;
- Whether any officials or other persons have been held accountable for ordering or participating in forced displacement or the intentional destruction of civilian property. If so, how many people were held accountable, and what punitive measures were taken;
- Whether any affected persons have been compensated for the intentional destruction of their property or their forced displacement, and if so, how many;
- Whether alternative housing was provided for any affected persons, and if so how many;
- What criteria is used by the Administration before deciding whether an individual or a community can be forcibly displaced;
- What procedures the Administration follows in implementing an order to forcibly displace a population with regard to notice, consultation, and compensation.

As mentioned above, Amnesty International would be grateful to receive a response by 30 September 2015, which would allow us to integrate it into our forthcoming publications.

Yours sincerely,
Tirana Hassan
Crisis Response Director

CC:
Redur Xelil
Spokesperson for the People's Protection Units (YPG)

Ciwan Ibrahim
Director of the Asayish

'WE HAD NOWHERE ELSE TO GO'

FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND DEMOLITIONS IN NORTHERN SYRIA

Civilians living in the areas of northern Syria under the de facto control of the Autonomous Administration led by the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party, PYD) are being subjected to serious abuses that include forced displacement and home demolitions. The Autonomous Administration has failed to provide civilians with compensation for their losses or alternative housing. Many of the civilians who have lost their homes and properties have nowhere else to go. While some have sought refuge in southern Turkey, others are displaced in Syria at times living in schools, camps or with relatives.

This report documents the deliberate demolition of civilian homes and the forced displacement of civilians, and in some instances entire villages, by the Autonomous Administration, in particular its police and military wings. While the Autonomous Administration has claimed that its forced displacement of civilians was not arbitrary because it was on military grounds or for the security or protection of local residents, this report documents cases in which there was no such justification. Amnesty International considers that these instances of forced displacement, demolitions and confiscation of civilian property constitute war crimes.

Amnesty International calls on the Autonomous Administration to cease all such abusive practices, allow displaced persons to return to their homes, compensate them for their losses, and ensure that the officials responsible for these abuses are held accountable. Amnesty International also urges all states supporting or co-ordinating with the Autonomous Administration in its military operations, such as those that form part of the US-led coalition fighting IS in Syria to ensure that the provision of military assistance, including military co-ordination, is not being misused to commit violations of international humanitarian law.

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