

# Turkey's Invasion Campaigns in Syria



Washington Kurdish Institute

September 8, 2020

*The report highlights the activities of ISIS since the Turkish invasion of the Kurdish region and Turkey's three invasion campaigns in Syria since 2016.*

## Islamic State Sleeper-Cell Activities from October 2019 - July 2020

Since the beginning of the Turkish invasion into the Kurdish region of Syria, the so-called “Operation Peace Spring” of October 2019, the activity of ISIS sleeper-cells has changed significantly over the course of late 2019 and the first 7 months of 2020. There was a noticeable increase in attacks that correlated with the Turkish invasion, likely as a result of the Kurdish -led and US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) needing to reroute manpower and equipment towards the frontlines near where Turkey occupied in Gire Spi (Tal Abyad) and Serekaniye (Ras al-Ain). Following the end of offensive operations by the Turkish-backed forces, the activities of sleeper-cells dipped significantly, including arson attacks on the farmlands under the control of the SDF. However, in June, activity significantly decreased again, directly correlating with the beginning of the “Deterrence of Terror” operation that the SDF began conducting with Coalition forces. This led to a major increase in raids, which directly seemed to impact the activity and number of attacks. Notably in some cases, despite the number of attacks decreasing, the efficiency in terms of casualties (especially assassinations of political and tribal figures) seemed to increase. Overall, what can be concluded is that Deir Ez Zor province will continue to be a hotbed of instability for the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (AANES), due mostly to ISIS activity, but also partially because of the Syrian regime influence, and increasingly, sleeper-cell activities of the [Turkish-backed groups](#).

October 2019:

On average, approximately one ISIS sleeper cell attack per day (1.1 per day) throughout the month, despite the beginning of the Turkish invasion. [There were 48 attacks overall, 45 being claimed by ISIS, with three not being claimed by any party.](#) Despite the month having an overall steady average, once the Turkish invasion began, the number of attacks throughout the remainder of the month rose to 1.8 per day.

November 2019:

63% rise in sleeper cell attacks in November vs the month of October. There were 83 attacks documented in November. This includes 38 deaths, although October had more, at 51. Over half (58%) of these attacks took place in Deir Ez Zor, where 21 people were killed. The rest took place in Hasakah. Many of the targets of ISIS attacks were the heads of the local government of towns and villages, known as (Mukhrat), but also council members, religious figures, and one prominent politician, Lina Abdulwahid, of the Syria Future Party.

December 2019:

The number of attacks rose slightly to 84. 74 were claimed by ISIS, the rest by one, although the number of deaths went down to 18. 49 attacks happened in Deir Ez Zor, 14 in Hasakah, 13 in Raqqa, 7 in Tabqa, and 1 in Manbij.

January 2020:

A 40% decrease from December, decreasing to 50 attacks with 32 deaths. This included 11 dead mukhtars and council members. This is the lowest number since the Turkish invasion. 40 of these attacks took place in Deir Ez Zor, with the remainder spread between Manbij, Hasakah, and Raqqa.

February 2020:

In February 2020, ISIS conducted 61 sleeper cell attacks versus 51 in February of 2019. This continues the trend of an increase in activity since the Turkish invasion (only 41 attacks in September 2019). 21 Mukhtars and council members were killed as a result of this activity as well. The decrease in raids conducted by SDF forces with coalition partners correlates with this as well.

March 2020:

Likely due to the issues regarding COVID becoming prominent in March, all numbers regarding sleeper-cell attacks fell in March. Only 48 attacks were conducted this month. There were 24 deaths, but only 8 of those were mukhtars and council members, the rest being seemingly random. Overall, the amount of assassination fell by over 50%. All attacks took place in Deir Ez Zor, Raqqa, and Tabqa regions.

April 2020:

Attacks further decreased to 40, or by 16% from the month prior. However, the number of deaths increased from 24 to 29, with 41%, or 12, being assassinations of mukhtars or council members. What was notable for this month was that two of the attacks were not claimed by ISIS, but rather Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, a member of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. 75% took place in Deir Ez Zor, 15% in Hasakah, 8% in Raqqa, and 2.5% in Manbij.

May 2020:

Attacks increased to 84, and deaths up to 36. With the onset of summer, and extremely dry weather, arson attacks began to be conducted. 6 mukhtars were killed, and the leader of the Syria Future Party (who's previous member, Hevrin Khalaf, was infamously murdered by Turkish-backed forces) was injured in an assassination attempt. Attacks were up by 110% from April. This month, just over half, or 54% of attacks, were claimed by ISIS. 25% were largely arson attacks that the Syrian National Army claimed to perpetrate. The rest were unclaimed.

June 2020:

Attacks fell from 84 to 45, likely due to the beginning of a joint anti-terror operation conducted by the SDF with the Coalition forces that led to a large increase in the number of raids. This represents a 46% decrease in the amount of attacks. Most were IED or shooting assassination attacks. 73% took place in Deir Ez Zor which has consistently suffered well over half of all sleeper-cell attacks. Deaths overall fell from 36 to 22, representing a 38% decrease, although the attacks that did take place were more effective, with 12 mukhtars and council members being assassinated.

July 2020:

In July, 7 mukhtars and council members were assassinated. In the beginning of August, Deir Ez Zor saw wide-scale protests due to the continuing poor security situation that stemmed from these assassinations. All arson attacks stopped, with only IED attacks taking place outside of Deir Ez Zor. The number of attacks fell



further from June, down to 34 from 45, a decrease of 24%. Overall, the amount of attacks has decreased by 30% since the beginning of 2020.

### **Life under the Turkish occupation of Kurdish towns: October 2019-July 2020**

On October 9th, 2019, Turkey and its Syrian rebel proxies launched their long-desired invasion of the Kurdish region dubbed “Operation Peace Spring”, in an attempt to create a “safe zone” between the towns of Sari Kani (Tal Abyad) and Giri Spi (Ras al Ain.) Turkey claimed the invasion was to [resettle the Syrian](#) refugees that have lived in Turkey since the civil war which was also a rejected plan by the international community since it was a plan of changing the demography of the region and granting the Arabs lands that were Kurdish. The invasion also targeted the US-backed SDF as it was a bid to end the US-Kurdish cooperation against ISIS. Furthermore, the Turkish invasion displaced over 300,000 people, continued the demographic change policies that Turkey had begun in the Afrin region since 2018, and led to what is now another lawless part of Turkish-occupied Syria. Similar to other areas under the Turkish occupation, loosely connected militia alliances, many of whom subscribe to a Salafist ideology, and some of whom are former [ISIS fighters themselves](#), rule through terror, [extortion, kidnapping](#), and [looting](#). Yazidi shrines have been destroyed, Kurdish women are kidnapped and tortured in unknown locations and people are evicted from their houses at random. One of the most shocking moments that revealed the true nature of the operation was the [graphic murder of Hevrin Khalaf](#), the young, female leader of the Future Syria Party, who was killed by militiamen from Ahrar al-Sharqiya, one of the most radical amongst the Turkish-backed groups.

Another aspect of the Turkish occupation that has been underreported, is the abuse of the Alouk water station that Turkish forces now control. [The Alouk water station](#) provided the water supply of the entire city of Hasakah, in which several hundred thousand people live. Since Turkey gained control over it, they have shut off water to the city eight times as of August 21st, 2020, depriving the people of running water. Overall, the infighting and abuse of the local population that has gone on since the occupation began in October 2019 can be expected to continue, so long as dozens of militias, that act more like mafia gangs than

religious extremists, and who often have rivalries with one another, rule over the region.

### **Some of the Security Issues Facing the Region Due to the Turkish Invasion**

October 2019:

The invasion begins on October 9th. [70,000 people fled the areas of conflict within the first weeks](#), after intense attacks on Giri Spi (Tal Abyad) Sari Kani (Ras al Ain), Qamislo, and shelling across nearly the entire border region, from Manbij to Derik. [The SDF brokered a deal](#) with the [Syrian regime and Russia](#) after the US forces withdrew from the region and allowed Turkey to invade. By October 14th, around the time that Tal Abyad was fully occupied by the Turkish-led forces, regime units and Russian military police troops agreed to supplement the SDF in key areas, such as the Manbij contact line, Kobani, Ayn Issa, etc. The rest of the month is largely characterized by the siege of Ras al Ain. Turkish forces made several unsuccessful attempts to capture the town after besieging it on October 17th. [After fierce fighting, the SDF agreed to evacuate the city on October 20th.](#)

November 2019:

Despite the ceasefire agreement being reached that led to the evacuation of Ras-al-Ayn by SDF forces, [the Turkish-backed Jihadists also known as Syrian National Army \(SNA\)](#) continued to push against the now combined SDF and Syrian Army forces, focusing on the areas around Tel Tamer and Ayn Issa. This month also had some of the first examples of reported infighting and instability amongst the newly Turkish-occupied area, with two deadly car bomb attacks taking place in and around Tal Abyad, each killing and wounding civilians. [Between the 20th and 24th of the month, the SNA attempted to take Ain Issa, capturing the silos and parts of the town falling under their control, before the SDF managed to retake all lost areas in a counter-attack.](#) In the chaos, [hundreds of ISIS terrorists](#) and their families were able to flee after the SDF guards were hit by Turkey.

December 2019:

In December, the main Russian-Turkish patrols, in particular around Kobani, were underway. They had started in the months prior as part of the ceasefire deal but became more regular as offensive military operations ended. The patrols were met with protestors who threw rocks at the Turkish vehicles. The Turkish soldiers responded with tear gas and later killed two protestors [after being run over by vehicles or shot](#). With the end of military operations, Turkey began to send fighters from Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring areas of the [SNA to fight on behalf of the Government of National Accord in Libya](#).

January 2020:

This month, the Turkish-backed factions were reported to have stolen a large amount of farm resources from the population of the “Peace Spring” area. [It was reported that one farmer had over 20 sheep taken from him](#). Furthermore, Russian and Turkish forces conducted patrols around Ras-al-Ayn and Al-Darbasiyah. Turkish-backed groups began to loot the grain silos of Tal Abyad and transport the grain back to Turkey, and while doing so, a landmine allegedly went off, injuring and killing members of the Turkish-backed forces. [Sporadic clashes continued in the villages around Tal Tamer](#).

February 2020:

February was characterized by [clashes around Tal Tamer](#), with a continuing military build-up there. Information about casualties continues to be limited, although dead and wounded were confirmed on both sides, [including a landmine explosion that injured 5 Turkish-backed fighters](#). Much of the focus of Turkey and its proxies was on [the clashes with the regime in Idlib](#), as dozens of Turkish soldiers and hundreds of rebel fighters were killed.

March 2020: In March, the [Alouk water station was shut off twice for periods of days at a time](#) by Turkish-backed forces that control it, leaving over a million people in the Hasakah region without running water. [Clashes continued in the Ayn Issa region](#), as the Turkish-backed forces [targeted the M4 highway](#), villages surrounding it, and had one of their commanders, from the Suleiman Shah Brigade, killed by SDF forces in retaliation.

April 2020: In April, [families of Turkish-backed fighters arrived in large numbers to Ras al Ain](#), as part of Turkey's demographic change campaign. Infighting also took place, as the Turkish-backed "3rd corps" unit [besieged the military police headquarters in Tal Abyad](#), due to corruption and blackmail of local citizens.

May 2020:

May saw more infighting and instability. Looting took place on a large-scale, with Turkish-backed forces [seizing diesel engines, water pumping equipment, and other machinery that civilians who fled were forced to leave behind](#). At the beginning of the month, on May 2nd, an [IED blast near Tal Abyad killed and injured several fighters](#) of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia. [More families of Turkish-backed fighters were transported to Ras al Ain to continue the demographic change of the region](#).

June 2020:

The most prominent incidents that took place in June were the uptick in arson attacks against wheat crops. ISIS sleeper-cells conducted these on a large scale, mostly in Deir Ez Zor, and the Turkish-backed forces [did the same in the areas around Tal Abyad](#). Additionally, reports claimed that [these groups also imposed a "zakat" tax on crops that were harvested by locals](#), further making the cultivation of food difficult.

July 2020: [A car bomb killed 6 people, reportedly Turkish-backed fighters](#), on the last day of the month, in Ras al Ain. Additionally, a truck bomb [killed 8 people in the Rasal Ain area](#) as well. Furthermore, a [drone strike reportedly injured multiple Russian soldiers and Asayish security members in Darbasiyah](#), although it was unknown who carried out this attack.

## **The Turkish invasion of Afrin**

In January of 2018, Turkey and the Syrian Opposition groups that Turkey backs invaded the Kurdish-majority, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held region of Afrin in the northwest of Syria. [Before the Turkish invasion](#), Afrin was the most peaceful region in Syria, having never seen any fighting from the civil war. However, the



Turkish President's anti-Kurdish rhetoric insinuated that the region posed a threat to Turkey. Over the course of nearly two months of intense fighting, Turkey and their Jihadist proxies occupied nearly the entirety of Afrin with the exception of the small Shehba region, centered around Tal Rifaat. Over 1,500 SDF fighters were killed and the operation to retake ISIS-held Deir Ez Zor [had to be postponed](#) for the duration of the invasion. Out of a population of nearly 300,000 at the beginning of the invasion, 167,000 people were displaced by March 2018, with this number only increasing, and most of Afrin's population moving to Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps in Shehba. The Afrin invasion was [greenlighted by Russia](#) since the Kurds refused to hand over the region back to the Syrian regime led by the dictator Bashar al Assad.

January 2018:

Turkey began Operation Olive Branch on January 19th, 2018. [Over 150 airstrikes would target the region](#) by January 20th, and dozens of buses full of Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters from groups such as Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Sultan Murad, and others begin to cross into Syria. By January 28th, the [Barsaya mountain had been captured](#) by these forces, with many Syrian rebel fighters now moving to the Afrin battle from Idlib.

February 2018:

In the beginning of February, there was a slowdown in the number of Turkish airstrikes, with some speculation that Russia had [implemented a no-fly zone](#) as a result of a Russian SU-25 fighter jet being shot down in Idlib, however, it did not last long, and Turkish bombardments continued as they had previously by [February 9th](#). By the end of February, Turkish forces had begun to slowly [encircle Afrin city](#).

March 2018:

By March 6th, the SDF officially stated that nearly [2,000 of their fighters](#) had been moved directly away from the front-line against ISIS in Deir Ez Zor to the fighting that was going on in Afrin. In the days following, Turkish-backed troops [captured the town of Jindires](#) and the Afrin Dam, which cut off water access to the city of Afrin itself. At this point, civilians had mostly fled to Afrin and were beginning to again flee the city itself. Turkey hit [the only functioning hospital](#) in the city of

March 17th with an airstrike, putting it out of use. The SDF largely withdrew without a fight in order to avoid civilian casualties, and the Turkish-backed forces [captured the town](#) on March 18th, bulldozing a statue of Kawa, the Kurdish blacksmith hero. Nearly immediately afterward, on March 19th, videos and [reports of wide-scale looting](#) on the part of the Turkish-backed forces began to come out, and the [UN High Commissioner of Human Rights](#), Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, stated that many civilians had been killed by airstrikes, ground-based attacks, and improvised explosives in the region.

### **End of military operations- present:**

Since the Turkish occupation began over two years ago, different Kurdish groups, such as [Afrin Liberations Forces and the Wrath of Olives](#), have begun insurgency campaigns against the occupying Turkish-backed groups, as well as the Turkish military itself. The human rights abuses against the local population have increased significantly as well. The rebel militias that Turkey has backed have had [significant cases of infighting](#) between one another, including one incident in November of 2018 that left 25 Turkish-backed rebel fighters killed. The behavior in terms of the [type of human rights abuses](#) that have been committed against the local population is akin to that of a criminal mafia or gang, including [kidnappings for ransom payments, seizure of citizens' property](#), the torture and [murder of Kurdish women](#), and the targeting of Yazidis, whose shrines have been largely demolished in the region, drawing parallels to the treatment of Yazidis in Sinjar by ISIS. Some examples of these abuses are as follows

- In March of 2018, in the days following Afrin city's occupation, Turkish-backed forces [heavily looted](#) the houses and shops of the city, with some local people claiming that their homes were completely stripped of all belongings. One rebel fighter was photographed driving a tractor full of motorbikes.
- Since April of 2018, [large-scale demographic change](#) has taken place, with Syrian Arab refugees from other parts of Syria, such as Eastern Ghouta, being resettled in the Afrin region. In April of 2018, it was reported that a commander of the Turkish-backed group Faylaq al-Sham had begun living in the Afrin region.

- The Yazidis of Afrin have [had to flee](#) or be subject to forced conversion and the destruction of their places of worship. Even villages that Yazidis called home have seen their names changed since the occupation began, further continuing the oppression that Yazidis have faced from Jihadist groups.
- In March of 2020, [a 24-year old Kurdish woman was kidnapped](#) by the Hamza division. To this day she has not been seen or found ever since. In May of 2020, videos and photos were released showing a [prison site in Afrin](#) that Turkish-backed groups had used to keep local women they had kidnapped as prisoners in cages, subjecting them to torture and abuse. In June of 2020, the Sultan Murad rebel group [murdered a young Kurdish woman](#) they had kidnapped a few weeks earlier, leaving her body in a field. Hundreds of kidnapping and killing cases have been reported against the Kurds by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [\(SOHR\)](#).

### **Euphrates Shield: First Turkish invasion into Syria**

In August of 2016, the Turkish military, along with rebel groups that it backs, initiated a [military incursion](#) into Northern Syria as a result of advances made by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against ISIS in the areas west of the Euphrates around Manbij . Turkey claimed the offensive was to target ISIS around Dabiq, Al-Rai, and Al-Bab, but its main task was to stop and weaken the SDF battling ISIS. The offensive began Turkey's precedent for the use of jihadist groups to engage in occupations and resettlement/demographic changes around the country. It was the first direct involvement of the Turkish forces.

August 2016:

The offensive began with the ["capture" of Jarablus](#). Jarablus is a major town on the border of Turkey and Syria, across from SDF-controlled territory on the other side of the Euphrates. Many reports disclosed the lack of real fighting that took place, as ISIS supposedly had relinquished control of Jarablus without a fight. According to an [ISIS fighter interviewed by The Independent](#) in 2016, ISIS did not leave Jarablus without a fight. He stated that "they simply shaved off their beards". He further went on to describe that, when the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) were fighting to capture Tal Abyad from ISIS, Turkish border guards

supplied the ISIS defenders with ammunition and weapons. Following this, Turkish-backed forces pushed towards SDF-held villages, and on August 28th, [20 civilians were killed](#) and 50 more wounded reportedly by Turkish strikes. [The Columbia University's Program on Peace-building and Rights found links between Turkey and ISIS in a research conducted in 2015.](#)

September 2016:

Turkey began moving Syrian refugees to the areas they had taken, with [1,900 refugees](#) settling in the Jarablus area as of September 14th. Turkish-backed forces pushed towards the town of Al-Rai. On September 16th, US forces attempted to join Turkish-backed troops in their operation, however, they were met with [threats and derision](#) from many Turkish-backed groups, especially Ahrar al-Sharqiya, which referred to the American soldiers as infidels and threatened to pull its forces from the operation. In late September and early October, the Turkish-backed forces began to push towards [Dabiq](#), a town important for ISIS propaganda.

October 2016:

The month began with a halt to military operations, as ISIS managed to recapture about [20 villages](#) from the Turkish-backed forces. However, soon after, the operation was resumed and Dabiq was eventually captured, followed by a [push towards Al-Bab](#). Simultaneously, there was an attempt by the SNA to push towards [Tel Rifaat](#), held by the SDF in Shehba, however, this was ultimately unsuccessful.

November 2016- February 2017:

Overall, it took Turkish-backed forces nearly 3 months to [capture Al-Bab](#) as a result of heavy resistance in the area of the city and within the city itself. Turkey lost [59 soldiers](#) in the fighting for the town as well as hundreds of Turkish-backed rebel fighters were killed. There were further clashes with [pro-government forces](#) and [SDF forces](#) as they made pushes into ISIS-held territory as well. [During Al-Bab's liberation, Turkish airstrikes killed At least 95 civilians including about 40 children.](#)

## The Syrian National Army

The “Syrian National Army” is a coalition of Turkish-backed Jihadists groups that was formed as a merger between the previous coalition, known as the National Liberation Front, and other groups that were caught between al Qaeda’s offshoot Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and the NLF. They are loyal to Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government, which is based in Azaz, in northern Aleppo Governorate. The majority of the SNA members are radical Jihadists splitting into two doctrines: Salafism and Muslim Brotherhood. They are mostly anti-secular movements, and hostile to ethnic and religious minorities. They aim to establish a Sunni extremist Syria.

### Some of the Groups Within the SNA:

- Sultan Murad Division

The Sultan Murad Division is the most prominent Turkmen group within the Turkish-backed coalition known as the SNA, with a [claimed manpower of 9000 fighters](#). They have participated in Turkish operations since Euphrates Shield, and have existed since 2013. Sultan Murad has faced numerous allegations of war crimes, including photo evidence of their fighters [torturing YPG prisoners of war](#). They also conducted indiscriminate shelling of the [Kurdish Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood](#) of Aleppo with banned chemical components, which killed at least 83 civilians between February and April 2016. Most recently, Sultan Murad participated in the Operation Peace Spring in the [battle of Ras al Ain](#) as well as volunteering to [send fighters to Libya](#).

- Hamza Division

The Hamza Division [originated in 2013](#) as an anti-Assad opposition group that eventually became one of the members of the Turkish-backed coalition, first participating in Euphrates Shield in 2016. Since then they have fought the Kurds and the SDF. The group has had significant cases of infighting with other Turkish-backed militias, [especially Ahrar al-Sharqiya](#). Hamza has also sent fighters on behalf of Turkey [to Libya](#). In May 2020, the unit faced significant criticism over reports that it was participating in the [prisons where naked women](#) from Afrin



were being held in cages. This led to more infighting, especially with Jaysh-al-Islam.

- Ahrar al-Sharqiya

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is arguably the most controversial militia within Turkey's SNA. The group is made up of hardcore jihadists and has been documented as having committed a slew of war crimes. They have reportedly [welcomed former ISIS fighters](#) into their ranks as the Caliphate shrank over the years. The group has also sent fighters to Libya on behalf of the [Government of National Accord](#) that Turkey supports, and has had significant cases of [infighting with other groups](#), such as the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement. The militia became most prominent due to its [brutal murder of Hevrin Khalaf](#), a Kurdish politician from North-East Syria, who was tortured and killed after the group's fighters fired on her vehicle, killing her driver.

- Jaysh al-Islam

Jaysh al-Islam originated as the major power in the rebel-held Eastern Ghouta region of Damascus, on which it imposed a Salafist ideology. [After its defeat there](#) by the Syrian Government in April of 2018, the group relocated fully to Turkish held territories, with its [new headquarters in Jarablus](#). Since then, the group is a fully integrated part of the SNA and has participated in the [Peace Spring operation](#), fighting for control over Ras al Ain in October and November of 2019. The group has numerous allegations of war crimes against it, including [torture against civilians](#), and the use of [Alawite human shields](#) in order to deter government bombardment when the militia ruled Eastern Ghouta.

- Ahrar al-Sham

Ahrar al-Sham is a coalition of [different Islamist groups](#) that has served a consistently large role in the Syrian Civil War as a whole, both in the battles against the regime in Idlib, and the Turkish-backed operations in the Kurdish region. The group [merged in February of 2018](#) with the Nour al-Din al-Zenki group. The group has had many allegations of war crimes levied against them, including [use of chemical weapons](#). Dozens of civilians were killed and kidnapped by the group in an attack on [an Alawite village in Hama](#) Governorate in 2016.

- Sham Legion

Sham Legion is a coalition of various Islamist rebel units formed in March 2014, many of which had [Muslim Brotherhood connections](#). The group has [participated in all Turkish operations](#) in Syria since Euphrates Shield, and [has sent fighters](#) to help Libya's GNA combat General Haftar's forces on behalf of Turkey. It at one point received [BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles](#) from the United States in order to help combat the Syrian government under Assad.

- Faylaq al-Rahman

Faylaq al-Rahman is an [Islamist militia](#) in Syria that has been backed by both [Turkey and Qatar](#), although recently Turkey [reportedly cut their support](#) to the group because they refused to send their fighters to Libya. The group participated in [Operation Olive Branch](#) against the SDF in Afrin and has in the past received [BGM-71 TOW missiles](#) from the United States. They were the other major rebel group based in Eastern Ghouta, the other being Jaysh al-Islam, and the two often [fought over control](#) over the region. Following the defeat of rebels there, the group helped facilitate the transfer of IDPs from Eastern Ghouta to [resettlement in Afrin](#).

- Nour al-Din al-Zenki

Nour al-Din al-Zenki is another controversial group that has joined with Turkey's Syrian National Army, although it has officially merged with Ahrar al-Sham into one group under Turkish control. It at one point received [BGM-71 TOW](#) missiles from the United States. At one point the group merged with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, although they [eventually went to war](#) with them following their merger with Ahrar al-Sham into the Syrian Liberation Front. The most prominent incident involving this group was the July 2016 incident that took place during the end of the Battle of Aleppo, in which a young Palestinian boy [was beheaded by the group](#). Zenki claimed he was a fighter, but other sources stated he was only 12 years old and a child to a poor Palestinian family that lived in one of the many refugee camps run by the regime. The group has also been accused of [throwing homosexuals off rooftops, and of abducting and](#)

[torturing humanitarian workers](#). They [participated in Turkey's 2019 offensive](#) into Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn.

- Suqour al-Sham Brigades

Suqour al-Sham is a rebel militia that [joined the Turkish-backed forces](#) in August 2018. They openly rejected representative democracy in 2013, signing a charter that dedicated them to Sharia and pledging to [establish an Islamic State](#). They have [conducted suicide attacks](#) in the past with Al-Nusra, as well as [sending fighters to Libya](#) upon request from Turkey. The group took part in [Operation Peace Spring](#) in October and November 2019.



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