

# No Hope of Coming Home for Civilians who Fled Turkey's "Safe Zones" in Northern Syria

A field-based commentary from Syria's Washukani camp showcasing why civilians who fled Turkey's Peace Spring offensive in 2019 still refuse to return home.

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**RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES** – COMMENTARY

*By Wilson Fache – Middle East Consultant*

In October 2019, Turkey launched a military campaign codenamed "Operation Peace Spring" to drive the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) away from its border and carve out a "safe zone" in northern Syria.

A year and a half later, civilians who fled the fighting say they are too scared to go back home as long as rebels of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) occupy the area. Lootings, kidnappings, and attacks at the hands of these groups have been widely documented whilst Kurdish forces are accused of carrying indiscriminate car bomb attacks in areas under the effective control of Ankara.

[No hope of coming home for civilians who fled Turkey's "safe zones" in northern Syria](#) | Wilson Fache

Rows after rows of white and blue tents stretch on the muddy plain. Washukani camp, located in the Hassakeh countryside, is home to 14,500 people who had fled the assault of Turkish-backed forces.

"As long as these extremist groups operate there, no one will go back because we are scared. Some people returned home, and they were robbed, kidnapped, or even killed," Stera Reshik, a camp manager who was herself displaced during the offensive, told the BIC.

Their towns and villages are located inside what Ankara describes as a "safe zone" emptied of SDF fighters. Turkey sees the YPG (a core component of the SDF) as a Syrian extension of its long-time enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The Brussels International Center travelled to north-eastern Syria twice, in December 2019 and again in March 2021 to conduct interviews with dozens of displaced civilians. They have been anonymized for security reasons.

The part of Syria they used to call home is a 32km-deep strip between the towns of Tell Abyad and Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn, in Arabic) that is now under the control of Turkish-backed groups.

"If I tell you what my name is, they'll cut my head off," a 60-year-old man told the BIC in the privacy of his tent, inside Washukani camp. He was able to return home briefly by paying a smuggler, seeing with his own eyes the damage done by Turkish affiliates. "They stole everything: money, motorcycle, television, even my fridge. Of my house, only the walls remain!", he said, huddled near a stove on which he was boiling tea.

Tent after tent, testimonies resemble one another with all interviewees voicing concerns over their safety if they were to return and describing the systematic looting of their homes by rebel groups. "As long as they are there, we will not go back," they said in chorus.

"Initially, we wanted to remain but [armed groups] kept threatening us. At some point they threw a hand grenade near our house and fired in the air to scare us, then they kicked us out and took over our house. We left everything behind, including money and jewellery," an Arab mother displaced from the village of Leylan told the BIC. "My husband's family had seven houses in the village. Armed

groups took over four and burned down the remaining three. We would like to go back home but we heard that our house is still occupied.”

Many found themselves compelled to flee because of avowed or perceived allegiance to the SDF. “Those with no links to the SDF were sometimes able to stay, but my husband and two of his brothers had been part of the YPG so we had to flee,” a mother of six told the BIC.

Others with no military or political affiliations still had to leave because remaining there could have been interpreted as choosing the FSA over the SDF. “I would have liked to stay, but if I had I would have been accused of supporting these groups. The SDF would have seen me as an enemy. So, for the sake of neutrality, I was left with no choice but to escape,” a 23-year-old blacksmith told the BIC.

Previous Turkish operations, in Jarablus in 2016 and in Afrin in 2018, showed these civilians that Ankara-backed groups had probably come with the intention of permanently staying. Those who fled but still have relatives in the area have had to find creative ways to keep finances afloat despite a landscape fractured by front lines, no man’s lands, and checkpoints.

“We can’t go back for fear of being arrested. Instead, to send money to our families back home, a woman collects it and hides it under her burqa to cross checkpoints,” one of the participants in this scheme, a native of Serekaniye, told the BIC.

The town, which was taken over by Turkish affiliates in October 2019, had been under the control of Kurdish forces since 2013 when they claimed it from Jabhat al-Nosra and other rebel groups, whom themselves had seized it from the Syrian regime a year earlier.

A United Nations investigation from August 2020 stated it had “reasonable grounds to believe” that the FSA and in particular members of groups such as the Hamza Brigade and the Sultan Murad Brigade “repeatedly perpetrated the war crime of pillage” in Serekaniye and “may also be responsible for the war crime of destroying or seizing the property of an adversary.”

The UN Commission also documented allegations of abductions, arbitrary detentions, extortions, forced conversions to Islam, rape, psychological harm, and torture.<sup>1</sup>

A senior Kurdish official told the BIC that her hope was for the US and the EU to apply pressure on Ankara to withdraw from the area – or, at the very least, to force Turkey to remove rogue elements such as the Sultan Murad Brigade and instead deploy groups that do not routinely commit war crimes.

But attacks allegedly perpetrated by elements of the SDF have also been documented in areas of northern Syria taken over by Ankara.<sup>2</sup> On 9 January 2020, the detonation of a car bomb in Serekaniye killed four Turkish soldiers. On other occasions, these indiscriminate attacks killed scores of civilians.

“Last month, a bomb exploded just twenty meters away from me. I was lucky to make it out alive, but some people died,” recalled Abu Hamza, a native from Raqqa who moved to Serekaniye in 2017 after his house in the former ISIS stronghold was flattened by an airstrike of the US-led coalition.

Despite dangers emanating from both the FSA and the SDF, he still lives in Serekaniye to this day. “My children and I have a job – which also means we get free bread because one of my sons works in a bakery. My grandchildren go to school and we do not pay rent because we live in the house of a relative who fled to Germany. So, for us, the situation is good,” he told the BIC over the phone.

“I am a refugee anyway, so SDF or FSA, it makes no difference to me.”

He also confirmed that displaced Syrians from Eastern Ghouta had moved into vacated houses in his neighbourhood. “But on some occasions, the original owners came back so the police made the other family leave,” he explained.

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1 “Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic”, United Nations Human Rights Council. 14 August 2020.

2 “The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria”, International Crisis Group. 25 November 2020.

All along, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had said he wanted to resettle Syrian refugees from Turkey to his “safe zones” - a policy that had been met with accusations of demographic engineering.

The three consecutive Turkish operations since 2016 did not only force civilians out of their homes, but it also undermined the territorial integrity of the Kurdish-led self-administration.

Now, some Kurdish officials fear that a new military offensive around Tell Tamer or even Ain Issa may strike a blow that would irremediably fracture their autonomous region.

Still, some civilians remain hopeful that they - and the self-administration - will find their way back to Serekaniye and other parts of Syria taken over by Turkey. “For the first time in my life, I was living under Kurdish control. I was so happy; it was a hundred times better than living under the Assad regime. We were no longer second-class citizens,” Khalil, a 40-year-old Kurd, told the BIC.

“Our dream will not die, we will resist, and the next generation will be able to live again [in Serekaniye] under an autonomous authority,” promised this father of three, a shy smile on his face.

*Jwan Mirzo and Karam al-Hindi contributed to this report as translators.*

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

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