

Anything Left in Afrin for Older People after the Turkish Incursion?



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Abu Rinas (75) was eager to narrate how his family fared after they forcibly fled the Afrin region in northern Syria. However, tears flooded his eyes once he parted his lips. Struggling to catch his breath, he let his wife continue their tale.

The story of the Yazidi couple, Abu Rinas and his wife, speaks volumes about the situation of the region's older population—one of Afrin's Kurdish community's most vulnerable groups. The older locals grappled with various violations after the Turkish military and affiliated Syrian armed opposition groups invaded the region in the spring of 2018.

Abu Rinas, who hails from Afrin's suburbs, dedicated 30 years to his work as a truck driver, during which he moved between different Syrian areas and neighbouring countries. Once his finances improved, he chose to settle in his village, where his six sons also got married and continued to live with their families.

About the impact of the Turkish incursion on the area, Umm Rinas (70) said:

“The 13th of March 2018 splits our family's life into two phases. We were displaced that day, leaving behind the yield of long years for which there can never be compensation. Because of this, Abu Rinas finds it difficult to recall what happened.”

In late March 2018, their son Rinas decided to return to the village with relatives. He heard the Islamist armed opposition groups, which had recently controlled Afrin at the time, were permitting the return of civilians. After arriving in the village, Rinas and a cousin died in a mine explosion.

Crushed by grief, Abu Rinas and his wife rushed to the village, disregarding all the information they had learned about the notorious armed opposition groups. After they buried the two bodies, they had to set up a funeral tent in an entirely deserted village.

The couple realized they had to hasten out of Afrin, for the armed groups had looted all the homes in the village, sparing none, including their own house and the houses of their six sons. They sought a way to flee, but then something unexpected happened. Umm Rinas narrated:

“A Toyota [pickup truck] stormed our house. There were six individuals in military uniforms onboard. They arrested Abu Rinas, saying they would return him in half an hour. They came back after some time and took the car we drove to Afrin. They released him 12 days later, and only after we paid a 5000 USD ransom.”

“Pigs and Infidels”

Abu Rinas recalled a few details of his arrest for alleged affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). He stressed that the militants who abducted him took turns threatening him and insulting his religion. They told him, **“You are with the PKK... Yazidis are *kufar* (infidels) and pigs.”**

In countless [consistent accounts](#), victims of violations in the Afrin region spoke about the use of affiliation with the PPK as a pretext to arrest and torture locals by the Syrian armed opposition groups, who also insisted on stigmatizing Yazidis as heretics, seized their properties and prohibited them from returning to their homes.

Abu Rinas said the militants hit him with cables and the butts of their rifles, which bruised his back and inflicted lacerations on his left heel. He also continues to seek treatment for the acute bronchitis he developed in detention.

He also cannot forget how the militants relentlessly tortured him for four days to force him to succumb to their demand for a ransom in exchange for his release.

As for the culprit behind his kidnapping and torture, Abu Rinas believes he is a commander of the Sultan Murad Division, known as Abu Maryam al-Haskawi. He said:

“I saw Abu Maryam leading a group of fighters one day. He seemed in charge of them. I have never met him before, but I once heard someone calling his name, to which he responded.”

The older Yazidi man listed the names of three relatives who later migrated to Germany. He said they could testify to his arrest because they negotiated his release with al-Haskawi.

After his release, Abu Rinas and his wife had to look for smugglers to escape Afrin and thus were unable to find out what had happened to their other properties, which they later discovered had all been taken over by different armed groups.

“A Lifestyle”

According to statistics, there are [nearly 14 million olive](#) trees in Afrin. Beyond that, locals say it also contains perennials and is home to several of the longest-living people.

Walat Zaradasht (59), another IDP from Afrin, attributed the high life expectancy in the region to the prevalent lifestyle, deriving its power from nature and a culture that values farming and tending to olive trees.

Based in al-Qahtaniyah/Terbasbiyah city in northeastern Syria, Walat said that a large number of the older locals fled to safer areas with their families after the Turkish incursion. He added that only a tiny percentage of them remained in their home areas, hoping their presence would prevent the armed groups from seizing their properties.

Walat hails from Bafilyoun village, administratively affiliated with the Sharran district. The al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front [occupied the entire village](#). The front denied the displaced locals the right to return to their homes and instead brought in the families of its militants and IDPS from elsewhere in Syria.

In Bafilyoun village, Walat lost his house and orchards, dotted with over 3,500 olive and other fruitful trees. He was also robbed of his house in the al-Ashrafiya neighbourhood in Afrin city. The Military Police used his home to settle the families of its officers.

Walat said that following their displacement for two and a half years, his parents passed away twenty days apart. He added:

“My father was indeed 85 years old and had cancer. However, had he remained in Afrin, he might have lived for another ten years.”

Walat said that three of his older maternal uncles, who fled their villages and sought refuge in the al-Shahbaa area, also died last year. One after the other, they were consumed by anguish for being away from their villages and orchards, where they grew up and spent most of their lives.

In the years following the Turkish invasion, several media outlets and rights groups [reported](#) dozens of assaults on older people across the Afrin region. The victims either died or suffered severe injuries. In most cases, the criminal reports cited unknown perpetrators.

“Nostalgia”

Six years into displacement, a sense of yearning still overcomes Abu Rinas and his wife when they talk about Afrin. Before the Turkish invasion, the couple planned to retire since they had helped their sons achieve stability in life. Filled with sorrow, Umm Rinas said:

“Each of my sons had their own home and job, besides the groves and houses that belonged to their father. Now, however, we cannot even afford medicines for their father, who only got sick after we were displaced from Afrin.”



About Beyti Project:

The project aims to document the violations of Housing, Land, and Property rights in the context of the Syrian conflict, especially in the areas that witnessed widespread forced displacement on a national, ethnic, religious, sectarian, or regional basis.

During the implementation of the project, Beyti is keen to coordinate and cooperate with Syrian local initiatives and relevant international organizations, in order to contribute to building the comprehensive Syrian narrative by collecting and documenting the violations committed by all parties and dealing with the victims on the basis of equality and non-discrimination.

In the early stages of the project, Beyti plans to issue a brief guide on property rights violations in Syria, in addition to stories of people who are forcibly displaced. Also, STJ aims to create a database capable of documenting and archiving the forms and interviews that are conducted in a secure manner that adheres to international standards for documentation so that they are analyzed and presented in the form of interactive reports and maps in the future.

Beyti Project welcomes all cooperation and coordination initiatives aimed at preserving evidence and seeking to achieve justice and accountability for all violations committed against Syrian property throughout Syria.

The values and vision of Beyti Project are consistent with those of STJ which seeks to achieve equal rights for all Syrians, documents human rights violations committed in Syria and against Syrians, and works to reach justice and change.



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