

## The Repercussions of the Quake and the Response of Local Governance Structures in Afrin's Jindires

Al-Sina'a Neighbourhood from 6 February to June 2023



**The Repercussions of the Quake and the Response of Local Governance  
Structures in Afrin's Jindires**

**Al-Sina'a Neighbourhood from 6 February to June 2023**

**(A Research Report)**

- **Legal Research and Analysis: Riad Ali**
- **Field Research: Walid Bakr, Sawsan Rashid, Khonaf Othman, Shiyar Khalil**
- **Preparation and Revision: Ferhad Ahma, Perwîn Khalil**
- **Cover Photo: Al-Sina'a Neighborhood/Jindires/Afrin**

## Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary .....	4
2. A Glimpse of the al-Sina'a Neighbourhood .....	7
3. Property Status Before the Quake .....	9
4. Existing Institutions' Handling of the Quake's Repercussions.....	12
A. The Residents Rescued Each Other Using Available Means.....	12
B. The Local Council Deprives Victims of Their Destroyed Properties' Rubble	14
C. The Local Council Only Registered Destroyed Properties in Return for a Fee	15
D. Obtaining Proof from Syrian Government Departments Preconditions Property Registration .....	16
E. Armed Groups Rob Locals of Rescue Machinery, Discriminate against Victims, and Withhold Aid Shares .....	18
F. The Quake's Impact on Property Rights and Population Movements...	20
5. The Powers and Decision-Making Mechanisms of the Jindires Local Council	23
6. Conclusion and Recommendations .....	26

---

## 1. Executive Summary

The adverse consequences—pertaining to both mortality rates and material losses—of the earthquake that shook large parts of Syria and Türkiye on 26 February 2023 were immeasurable. However, the toll the tremors took on Syrian communities remains the heaviest due to the catastrophic situation already gripping Syria, the ongoing hostilities, divisions, fragmentation, and multiplicity of parties in control of the hit areas, as well as the absence of actors that would have played a positive role in mitigating the quake's after-effects. This is in addition to the plummeting economy across Syria.

This research report monitors the multi-layered woes of the residents of the al-Sina'a neighbourhood in the city of Jindires/Afrin in northern Syria—controlled by Türkiye and the Syrian opposition—tracing the catastrophic repercussions the victims of the 6 February quake and its aftermath are struggling with. Additionally, the report documents the lack of actors capable of carrying out necessary relief tasks in such cases and the often passive and disruptive role of existing ones. Moreover, the report reveals how civilian structures—established after Operation Olive Branch in 2018—are involved in violations and how their work does not effectively alleviate the suffering of people nor prevent further abuses. Therefore, the report unveils the complex reality in Afrin, where the culprits behind breaches are not armed groups alone but also civilian entities. Worse yet, the report corroborates that the armed groups are using these civilian structures to polish their image on the one hand and to bestow legitimacy on violations they are perpetrating on the other.

The report's target area, which the Syrian National Army (SNA) predominates, is a site for numerous violations of the population's basic liberties and human rights, including the right to ownership. These abuses have been substantially documented by local and international bodies, notably the [Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria](#). In July 2023, PEL-Civil Waves also published an extensive [research report](#) documenting systematic violations of housing, land, and property (HLP) rights in Afrin after 2018. The report uncovers the details of the multiple patterns underlying these violations, building on 90 interviews with locals who fled Afrin to al-Hasakah province. Aggravating the already dire status of HLP rights in the area, the quake and accompanying forced

---

---

displacement waves, especially with the massive destruction that befell houses and other buildings, have presented SNA-affiliated armed groups with a new and favourable opportunity to seize the properties of several owners under various guises.

It remains beyond the capacity of this report to encompass and analyse the countless repercussions that accompanied and followed the quake. Therefore, the researchers dedicated this space to investigating the quake's direct impact on the locals' properties while also addressing the response of the local councils and operative armed groups to the disaster. For its geographical scope, the report targets locals from the al-Sina'a neighbourhood in Jindires city. The city was one of the worst hit by the tremors, having suffered massive deaths and material damages. Thus, the al-Sina'a neighbourhood is approached as an exhibit, through which an overview of the situation across the Syrian areas in the quake's radius can be discerned, advancing the search for different ways and forms to assuage the impacts of the disaster on stricken communities and prepare for future emergencies.

For this report, PEL-Civil Waves interviewed 18 quake survivors who resided in the target area during the monitoring period, which lasted from February to June 2023. Among the interviewees are property owners in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood, whose homes were occupied by other people when the tremors hit. Notably, the names of the witnesses are withheld upon their request and out of concern for their security.

PEL-Civil Waves recorded the quake-effected material losses of the interviewed victims. Out of 46 real properties, 21 were destroyed and 25 were partially damaged, having sustained restorable cracks. Additionally, two vehicles were wrecked. Only one victim managed to utilize the rubble of their damaged property, while 15 could not. Almost all 15 victims accused the local council and SNA-affiliated armed groups of confiscating the debris. The remaining two victims were not concerned with rubble, as their properties were only fractured.

The questions inscribed into the documentation form, designed for this report, focused on the availability of life-saving means and machinery, the role of civil structures/institutions on the ground in rescue operations, the human and material losses caused by the earthquake, as well as the extent to which victims benefited

---

from the debris of their destroyed properties, whether the destroyed properties were subjected to any documentation processes, and whether operative institutions, particularly local councils, had any role in these processes.



## 2. A Glimpse of the al-Sina'a Neighbourhood



Image 1-Satellite footage of the al-Sina'a neighbourhood in Afrin's Jindires city.

The al-Sina'a is one of Jindires's largest, most important, and most vital neighbourhoods. Al-Sina'a stretches across the space between the city's entrance and exit on the road leading to the Hammam border crossing with Türkiye, with a population of 2,000 to 3,000 people. It was called the *al-Sina'a* (industrial) neighbourhood as it hosted a cluster of industrial facilities at its center, and it kept the name despite the relocation of all the businesses to the *al-Sina'a al-Jadideh* "New Industrial Zone." Some call the neighbourhood the Villat district because a large number of its properties are villa-structured, especially on the street extending from Salah al-Din Mosque all the way to the east. Administratively, the neighbourhood is run by the Jindires City Local Council. Militarily, it is primarily under the control of Jaysh al-Sharqiya (the Eastern Army). The army officially operates under the mantle of the SNA—an affiliate of the Syrian National Coalition—and its fighters hail from Deir ez-Zor province.

---

Following the occupation of Afrin in the aftermath of the 2018 Operation Olive Branch, nearly half of the neighbourhood's Kurdish population fled. Currently, the neighbourhood is inhabited particularly by internally displaced persons (IDPs) from several other Syrian regions, such as Deir ez-Zor and Eastern Ghouta. A number of these IDPs have filial relations with the controlling armed groups, especially those under the Eastern Army, which has a headquarters in the neighbourhood. The information PEL-Civil Waves collected demonstrates that the sub-groups brought under the army's flag have almost complete hegemony over the neighbourhood. Before the quake, there were two mosques in the neighbourhood: one old and called Salah al-Din Mosque, and one newly established by the Eastern Army. The second mosque was critically damaged in the earthquake and was subsequently cleared away. Next to the now-demolished mosque, the building of a hospital stands. The hospital is officially called al-Rafah. However, locals identify it by the colour of its paint as *al-Mashfa al-Zahri* (Pink Hospital).

Additionally, the neighborhood is a site for three camps established after the quake and called Ahl al-Nakhawa, Abu Othman, and Ziyara. The larger segment of these camps' population is Arabs, who resided in the neighbourhood and dwelled in the houses of Kurdish owners, who either escaped the area or were forced out of their properties after Afrin's occupation. The Kurdish locals who remain in the area and are affected by the quake preferred setting up tents across from their damaged homes rather than moving into the emerging camps.

The report's monitoring period coincided with the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Afrin's occupation by the Turkish military and the SNA and registered the killing of four Kurdish relatives at the hands of [fighters from the Eastern Army](#). The four family members died after they were shut with a DShK on Newroz Eve. Notably, the deaths triggered a Kurdish uprising, whereby the Kurdish community demanded that the Syrian armed opposition groups in Jindires city and other areas remove their forces and shut down the center they had established within residential neighbourhoods. Several of the civilian protestors also said that Kurdish victims suffered discrimination in the context of the quake, especially during rescues. It is worth mentioning that even though six months have passed since the killing of the four Kurdish civilians, the perpetrators continue to enjoy impunity, while neither the Eastern Army nor the other armed groups' centers have been removed from the



---

area. Furthermore, the army continues to exercise hegemony over the area's residents.

### 3. Property Status Before the Quake

Several violations targeted the real properties in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood in Jindires city. The abuses included the destruction of some and the illegal seizure and looting of others over the first few months of 2018. The breaches happened shortly after Operation Olive Branch was initiated, ultimately leading to Türkiye's control over Afrin and its districts, including Jindires city. Notably, Amnesty International [classifies](#) Türkiye's presence in the region as an occupation.

After they controlled Afrin along with the Turkish military, the Syrian armed opposition groups continued to perpetrate a wide range of violations against the Kurdish population. These abuses included killing, kidnapping, arrest, extortion, and the arrest of a ransom, which were often accompanied by brutal torture and degrading treatment. Additionally, over the past five years, HLP rights violations have been especially rampant. Notably, property seizures remain one of the primary motives for the killings, arrests, and torture the locals face. According to PEL-Civil Waves's July 2023 report, several homes and properties owned by the residents were confiscated, their contents looted, or used to settle in strangers after their original owners fled the area following its occupation. Moreover, the same report documented an array of attacks on properties, characterized by being systematic and widespread, targeting residents on a discriminatory ethnic basis. Such attacks included assaults on and destruction of properties owned by civilian individuals who never partook in hostilities, the seizure, arbitrary confiscation, and looting of homes and other properties belonging to civilians, and the destruction or seizure of civilians' cattle, groves, and trees, as well as expropriating their crops.

Furthermore, the report demonstrated the de facto forces' negligence of the rights of the victims, who, in addition to this, struggled in the throes of intense fear and insecurity in case they considered filing a complaint or reclaiming their seized properties. The fear and insecurity stem from the fact that the perpetrators are members of the Türkiye-backed armed groups or are civilians who have filial relations or acquaintanceships with fighters within these groups. Additionally, the

horror is deeply seated within the identity of the victims themselves, being Kurds without military protection whatsoever, while also liable to false charges of affiliation or alignment with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria that previously controlled the area.

Notably, across its reports, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria established that such violations were indeed perpetrated by the armed groups and systematically. For instance, in paragraph 46 of its 14 August 2020 [report](#), the Commission said that "[d]uring the period under review, the Commission corroborated repeated patterns of systematic looting and property appropriation as well as widespread arbitrary deprivation of liberty perpetrated by various Syrian National Army brigades in the Afrin and Ra's alAyn regions. After civilian property was looted, Syrian National Army fighters and their families occupied houses after civilians had fled, or ultimately coerced residents, primarily of Kurdish origin, to flee their homes through threats, extortion, murder, abduction, torture, and detention."<sup>1</sup>

Interviewed in April 2023, one of this report's witnesses—a resident of the al-Sina'a Neighborhood in Jidires who was displaced to Qamishli since the start of Operation Olive Branch—said that his apartment was destroyed in the quake. He added that it was seized by SNA-affiliated armed groups after the area was occupied in March 2018. The apartment was used to house the family of a fighter with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS- former Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front). The witness narrated: "[After we escaped the Turkish incursion into Afrin in 2018, my home was expropriated by a commander of al-Nusra Front who hails from Deir ez-Zor. \[The commander\] threw our belongings and clothes onto the street and set them on fire. He lived there up until the day the earthquake hit. The entire building collapsed and was destroyed. However, I do not know what happened to the people who lived in the apartment.](#)"

Interviewed in person in February 2023, a second witness, who currently resides in Hassin village in the al-Shahbaa area of Aleppo, said the Turkish invasion of Afrin forced him to flee Jindires in 2018. He added that since he left Afrin, the ruling armed groups have kept his two-story house in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood. The house was also partially damaged in the 2023 earthquake. The witness said, "[My house has been confiscated by the armed groups and settlers since 2018. As I](#)

---

<sup>1</sup> For additional reports by the Commission of Inquiry on Syria, addressing Afrin, especially after its occupation by Türkiye, visit the following link: <https://www.ohchr.org/ar/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation>

---

learned from neighbors, none of those who lived in the house were injured because it did not collapse but was only partially damaged, having sustained countless cracks."

The residents who chose to remain in the area following its occupation were forced to leave their properties after the quake. Several of these properties were no longer habitable or safe, for they were destroyed or partially damaged. After they were robbed of their dwellings, the residents had to endure the complex measures and long waits for relief aid, which only exasperated their already harsh conditions, further aggravating the woes of conflict that have been ongoing for over a decade. Despite all these challenges, the residents still hoped for a body to rebuild, restore, and rehabilitate their damaged properties or offer them compensation for their losses, regardless of how small. However, the residents' faint hope crashed against the absence of reliable and capable entities whom they could seek in such circumstances. Rather than providing support, the existing entities only intensified the agony of the locals, who had yet to recover from the impact of the devastating tremors.

Despite the extensive damage the earthquake caused to the region's properties, several of the report's witnesses claimed that Turkish aerial and artillery shelling, which signalled 2018's Operation Olive Branch, had previously damaged other properties. Interviewed online in February 2023, one of the witnesses, who remained stuck under the debris for eight hours before neighbours could rescue him, said that the Turkish airstrikes during the operation in 2018 destroyed two of his shops entirely.

#### 4. Existing Institutions' Handling of the Quake's Repercussions



Image 2- The Jindires City Local Council's conclusion of a post-quake inspection of one of the witness's properties in al-Sina'a neighbourhood. The results are spray-painted on the property wall, declaring it needs *tarmim* (restoration).

According to the testimonies collected by PEL-Civil Waves, the governing bodies of all classifications and specialties in the area, including the local council and controlling armed groups, had no productive role in rescuing victims stranded under debris over neither the first hours nor days after the quake struck. On the contrary, their role became determinantal as they further burdened the victims and contributed to their already great suffering. The analysis of the collected testimonies showed the following post-quake trends:

##### ● A. The Residents Rescued Each Other Using Available Means

The witnesses said that the area's residents themselves carried out rescues and pulled victims from the rubble, using only primitive tools they had around. The residents had neither specialized rescue crews nor machinery, which caused a large number of those struggling beneath the wreckage to die. A witness from the al-Sina'a neighbourhood lost her husband and two daughters in the quake. Interviewed online in May 2023, she narrated: "I was stuck in the rubble for two hours. There was an opening above us. I had my son in my arms. I kept pushing him

---

toward that gap until neighbours managed to save him. Then they pulled me out. However, my husband and two daughters remained beneath the debris. I only had a glimpse of my husband's legs, and I never laid eyes on my daughters, even when their bodies were recovered. They did not allow me to have a look at them, and they were buried on the same day. The day the quake hit, there were no organizations or rescue teams. They were civilians who helped each other out. Those who rescued me and pulled out the dead bodies of my husband and daughters were neighbours, Kurdish citizens from Jindires."

A second witness, who now resides with his family in a tent he set up across from his destroyed house, corroborated this account. Interviewed in May 2023, he narrated: "Together with the young men in the neighbourhood, I helped the people stuck in the debris. We continued to pull people submerged by the wreckage for a week and also helped those who wanted to recover their belongings and needed items from the rubble. These were all individual efforts by the neighbourhood's residents. None of the authorities were around on the first day to help the victims. The role of the local council was limited to recording the names of property owners and giving them ownership cards after they requested that they exclusively bring title deeds registered within official records in Aleppo."

A witness who lost his wife and two daughters in the quake gave a matching account. Interviewed in May 2023, he said: "My family and I were at home during the quake. We got stuck in rubble. I was rescued three hours after the quake hit by my brothers and relatives. I held my face down while my wife had hers up. I watched her as she choked on dust. She passed away just two hours later. My brothers and relatives struggled to pull my wife's dead body because her leg was trapped under a pole. They also quickly managed to rescue one of my daughters. However, the other two died, and they could not recover their bodies until the next day."

Interviewed in June 2023, another witness from the al-Sina'a neighbourhood, whose apartment building was destroyed with all its contents, recounted: "Individually, over the first hours and even the first day, we managed to rescue those trapped in the rubble of the building where I lived. We tried our best to get equipment and reached out to the council, Civil Defense, and armed groups to intervene. However, we received no response."

---

---

## ● B. The Local Council Deprives Victims of Their Destroyed Properties' Rubble

The local council geared the rubble removals toward its interests. The majority of the witnesses Pel-Civil Waves's team interviewed corroborated that the council established hegemony over the clearouts, especially the extraction of steel from destroyed buildings. Interviewed in February 2023, one witness recounted: "They took all the steel they found in the remains of collapsed buildings. They did not give us the extracted steel by way of compensation, for steel is sold for good money. We were watching when they removed debris, but we took nothing ourselves. The local council said it will keep the extracted steel in return for the removals and cleaning up the city. Unfortunately, we did not profit from the debris at all. [The council] claimed it would turn the area where the building once stood into a marketplace, and if we ever demanded a share of the steel [profits], they would ask for a rubble removal fee. Therefore, we were forced to give up on the rubble." This account matches the statement of another witness, who lost his wife, his cousin's wife, and her daughter, who were visiting them the day the quake struck. Interviewed in May 2023, the witness said rubble removals were carried out in the presence of the local council, whereby debris was separated into separate cement and steel piles. The local council then took the steel. Another witness, whose second-floor apartment was partially damaged and car destroyed by falling parts, narrated: "The local council issued a decision providing for rubble removals. Debris removal became a business. I heard the neighbors say that each load of rubble was sold for 7 to 10 USD. We did not inquire into rubble prices, certain that we would get none of it."

Interviewed online in May 2023, a witness based in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood said that the local council seized the rubble of her house, especially the steel bars. This was confirmed by a fifth witness interviewed in April 2023. The witness's two shops were destroyed in the earthquake. Another witness, who was met in May 2023, highlighted the negative role the armed groups played concerning rubble removals. He said the groups confiscated debris taking advantage of the people's agony. He stressed that affected people started to remove the wreckage on their own, without asking for assistance from the local council or the armed groups, fearing the latter would steal it. He further said: "Following the destruction and acting at the behest of the local council, the armed groups began lifting the rubble. They confiscated the plots where decimated buildings were constructed. In

---

---

response, citizens created a hashtag, calling for [property owners] to tackle the rubble themselves to protect their construction sites, official documents, and money. They set up tents on top of the wreckage."

### ● C. The Local Council Only Registered Destroyed Properties in Return for a Fee

The local council did not only seize the rubble of destroyed buildings; it also exploited the catastrophe to deepen the suffering of the aggrieved victims. In the quake, the council found an opportunity to profit from the afflicted populace, using damage documentation. The local council recorded the names of the affected people and registered the level of damage, complete or partial, that befell their buildings, only on the condition that owners pay 150 to 300 Turkish Liras (TL) in fees. Additionally, the council neither assisted nor promised to help owners. Interviewed in May 2023, one witness confirmed that the local council had no positive role in helping the victims, as it only registered the names of affected property owners in return for money. He explained: "The local council did nothing to aid the victims or guarantee that they would get any assistance. Its response was limited to recording the names of [affected properties' owners] and giving them a paper citing their names as owners, only after they presented them with title deeds issued exclusively by the Aleppo real estate registry. Those who opted for registration paid the council 300 TL in return for that ownership card."

The measure was corroborated by a witness, who has an apartment on 20<sup>th</sup> Street in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood. He highlighted the struggles the local council put him through during an April 2023 interview: "I registered with the local council to obtain a card that proves I am the owner of the apartment. The card is issued to owners in return for a fee paid to the local council's [payment counter]. The fee ranges between 100 and 300 TL, depending on the property or the construction site. This is not to mention [the costs] of obtaining a real estate status statement and a construction license for those who do not already possess these documents. I obtained the statement and license for 150 TL in addition to the 200 TL I paid at the counter. As if what we have endured under these circumstances was not enough, we also had to pay to get this card." Elaborating on the role of the local council, he proceeded to say: "so far, we have not received any help from the local

---

---

council, nor compensation, aid, or even a tent. They gave us nothing, and I do not believe they will do anything about our properties decimated in the earthquake."

One of the witnesses Pel-Civil Waves met in May 2023 reiterated the information provided by the previous witness. His testimony also highlights the distrust the populace harbors for the local council, saying: "The Jindires Local Council has offered us nothing. I did not even register my name with them because they are constantly trying to profit from us. When they write numbers on our properties, they ask for money. The council is hopeless and has not promised us a thing."

Several affected people refrained from registering their destroyed properties with the Jindires Local Council, lacking trust in its measures because they felt the council was only seeking money. On this, an owner whose several apartments in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood were destroyed said the following during a June 2023 interview: "The local council did not provide the affected citizens with anything. When it announced the measures designated for registering the properties of afflicted owners, I extensively dug into the level of assistance the local council can offer. However, I concluded that the proceedings were useless. Therefore, I did not register my properties with the council because it was requesting up to 150 USD in registration fees, paid for papers, records, tariffs, and registering the name of the owner and the name of the broker [ . . . ]. I learned that all this was done under instructions from the Turkish governor. To be honest, this was an attempt to defraud the people of their money. That is why I did not register my name with them. They did nothing to those who registered their properties."

- **D. Obtaining Proof from Syrian Government Departments Preconditions**  
**Property Registration**

The local council issues the area's residents, both locals and IDPS, identification documents (IDs) as a substitute for those released by the Syrian government. The council's ID registration database is directly connected to the Ankara-headquartered Turkish Ministry of Interior. A large segment of the area's populace believes that this identification process aims at altering the region's makeup and identity since all residents, even IDPs, are registered as born there, which raises concerns over likely demographic change. Notably, the local councils in the region are inconsistent as to their recognition of official documents the residents possess. Ironically, the local councils do not recognize government-issued IDs and strictly

---



---

impose on locals that they use their issued cards. However, the Jindires Local Council has obliged quake victims, wishing to register their properties, to obtain proof of ownership, asking them to procure real property status statements from the real state registries of the Syrian government in Aleppo province, headless of the risks locals might face upon going to government-held areas and visiting Syrian State-run departments.

A previously quoted witness, who said that the role of the local council is limited to registering the names of owners, showed Pel-Civil Waves's field researcher the ID he obtained from the Jindires Local Council. He then added that he did not register his name with the council as an owner of a destroyed property due to the complex measures, the prerequisite to obtain proof of ownership from the Aleppo-based departments of the Syrian government, and his conviction that the whole process is futile. He said: "The local council did not make any other measures beyond recording the names of owners of quake-affected properties [shops and houses] and giving them property ownership cards after asking for title deeds, registered exclusively by the Aleppo real estate registry. [A previously cited witness told me that the local council recognizes only title deeds issued by the real estate registry, which are kept within the official records in Aleppo]. Additionally, [the local council] requested the contract signed by the construction broker and the construction site owner, the person who owned the piece of land on which a building is set up. I visited the local council three times and presented them with the real property status statement issued by Aleppo's real estate registry. I had communicated with relatives there, who obtained it and then shared it with me through WhatsApp. I also visited the construction broker from whom I purchased the apartment and shop to obtain a copy of the contract he signed with the construction site owner. However, he was very busy. Then, I thought that all these measures were to no avail. Therefore, I never visited the local council again and did not register my name."

When victims cannot obtain the property statement and other demanded documents from the Syrian government's departments needed for registering ownership with the local council, the local council procures the documents for them in exchange for a fee. One of the quake's affected people corroborated this dynamic, saying: "I obtained a title deed from the Jindires Local Council after they asked me to provide them with deeds I possessed, which are exclusively registered

---

in the [Syrian] government's registry. In case the owner does not have the needed title deeds, they give the number of the property's site to one of the council's employees, who obtains the documents from Aleppo in return for a 75 TL fee. After that, [the owner] pays 125 TL to get the ownership card issued by the local council, [bringing the total expenses] to 200 TL for each property, even if the different properties all belong to the same owner." During the May 2023 interview, the witness showed the field research the ID and ownership card he was issued by the local council.



Image 3-The address card issued by the Jindires Local Council to one of the report's witnesses.

#### ● E. Armed Groups Rob Locals of Rescue Machinery, Discriminate against Victims, and Withhold Aid Shares

Because the Türkiye-backed SNA armed groups are holding the reins of power in the region, they are de facto forces and are thus obliged to run the area to provide residents' needs based on available resources and without discrimination. Therefore, the armed groups had to act immediately and invest all their resources

---

to serve the quake-affected residents, especially those trapped in the rubble. However, this was not the case in the days following the tremors. According to witnesses, the armed groups did not help in any way to save victims and even treated them unfairly. For instance, they ignored the victims trapped in the al-Sina'a neighborhood and directed life-saving equipment—owned by civilians and brought by the Civil Defense rescue teams—to locations where their affected relatives were.

An above-cited witness emphasized that "the information and news he gathered were painful. Civilians were abandoned under debris, and souls surrendered to death. Even though several civilians attempted to partake in the rescues, they were not allowed to offer a hand. I know a person who had machinery—[a bulldozer]. The day after the quake hit, he headed to Jindires town to help with rescues in any small way he could with his modest resources. However, fighters at one of the security checkpoints on the road to Jindires beat, insulted, and humiliated the man. They also took hold of his machinery. They told him, 'We are more worthy of saving our citizens than you. You deserve only death.' According to the information I collected, the machinery was sold in Idlib."

A Jindires-based witness, who lost her daughter in the quake while her house was destroyed and rendered inhabitable, confirmed that SNA fighters are confiscating humanitarian aid allocations. They are depriving the residents of assistance, distributing it to relatives or proponents. During a May 2023 interview, the witness added: "We received relief aid two or three times only, even though the town was full of humanitarian allocations and from diverse associations. However, the allocations were distributed at the whim of the official listing the names of those in need. The SNA fighters took the supplies and distributed them to settlers in the camps because the SNA had the aid in its grip and controlled the town. They would seize the contents of any aid car or truck once it entered the district."

In another May 2023 interview, a witness corroborated that armed groups seized humanitarian assistance allocations and distributed them to their fighters' families. Relief workers even did not refrain from practicing such discrimination. The witness narrated: "Over the first two weeks, the armed groups confiscated aid vehicles and distributed the rations to their families. Then, the organizations, associations, and their workers began doing the same." An above-cited witness corroborated this

---

---

account, stating: "Over the first three days following the earthquake, there were no tools or machinery to rescue people trapped in the rubble. Therefore, over the first three days, 'the powerful preyed upon the weak.' Even though the Civil Defense hastened to rescue those trapped, certain individuals, [fighters], would coerce them to redirect the equipment and machinery toward their families and homes."

Notably, the violations perpetrated by the armed groups were not limited to those listed above. Additionally, the groups withheld a portion of the money that donors and relatives outside the city sent to the victims. In a May 2023 interview, a witness said he stopped sending money to affected people because the armed groups confiscated nearly half the sums he transferred. He added: "I tried to help a few friends with whom I maintain contact. I sent them money out of compassion. I wanted to assist them, even if only a little. However, my friend told me not to send money because fighters from the controlling armed groups were seizing half of the money. There are fighters from al-Hamzat and al-Amshat factions in front of every remittance office in Afrin. They are taking half of the transfer, so I did not send my friend cash."

#### ● **F. The Quake's Impact on Property Rights and Population Movements**

The armed groups operating in the region went further with their abuses. In addition to taking advantage of the quake and the ensuing chaos to seize what was left of the properties of affected residents and the rubble of damaged buildings and taking money from the affected owners in return for registering their decimated properties in their records, the armed groups used the disaster to force a segment of the graved residents to leave the area so they could house other people in their homes, often closer and more loyal individuals. Several witnesses said that numerous partially damaged buildings were leveled to the ground, their remains removed, and their sites used for setting up tents to shelter a few quake survivors. Interviewed in May 2023, one witness said: "After the quake, I visited the location of my apartment every day, hoping I would get the chance to salvage a few items, especially the iron doors. One day, however, I was shocked to see that the entire building was swiped off and the rubble taken away. The place was cleared without informing any of the landlords. The arena was cleaned up and used for setting up tents."

---

---

One of the above-cited witnesses said the local council infringed on the building where he lived: "The council removed the rubble and said they would turn its location into a marketplace, with no regard to the fate of the residents of the collapsed building. The council disposed of their properties, [the construction spots], as if they were without owners." About his forced displacement, the witness added: "We sought refuge at my father-in-law's house. He gave us a room. I continue to live there with my family."

Another witness, whose several apartments in the al-Sina'a neighbourhood were destroyed in the quake, said that the armed groups and the local councils are confiscating the properties of locals displaced to areas held by the Autonomous Administration, treating the estates as if they were State-owned. During his June 2023 online interview, the witness added that they are also using the plots where buildings previously stood to set up camps and prefabricated houses, explaining that "properties of citizens living in the area are constantly confiscated, and the charge of belonging to the Autonomous Administration or dealing with them is always ready to be used against them."

Pel-Civil Waves's team spoke to a witness close to the Jindires Local Council in June 2023. The witness touched on the role of the local council in the few days following the quake, highlighting that: "Following the quake, 83 housing centers were established in Jindires and its villages. For instance, the Jindires stadium was transformed into a makeshift shelter, as were most of the schools and squares of the government or official departments. Additionally, tents were erected among olive trees and on farmlands surrounding Jindires to obtain aid from organizations operating in the region. The factors of need and beneficiaries were out of the picture because the controlling armed groups decided who to label as in need of the affected people. The groups did this to help their relatives and families settle in these shelters, and also so that they could gain access to assistance allocations and steal from them in a corrupt manner, unchecked by the local council, which had no presence in those places and was unable to intervene."

The witness added that the armed groups urged people to sell their lands through threats or luring them with lucrative amounts of money; the latter were individual and rare cases. Two such sales happened in Jindires: "Nearly 20 hectares around Jindires district were purchased from displaced locals for exorbitant sums. The

---

---

astronomical prices were a strong motive for selling the piece of land that had become a burden to its Kurdish owner, threatened now and then by the armed groups on various pretexts."

While the armed groups seized lands and properties at liberty, the local council did not stop the confiscations nor come up with a mechanism to regulate their usage, according to the witness, who referenced several seizure cases: "The armed groups used the premises of the Electricity Directorate and the area surrounding it to establish camps. They used public institutions and properties. Similarly, the al-Sharqiya/Eastern faction used the farmlands of the Farmers' Association, under the supervision of the Jindires Local Council, to house IDPs and people from outside Afrin and have access to aid, as well as probably to contribute to changing the area's demographic makeup. This too happened, and the local council did not interfere."

The witness stressed that the local council did not respond to the people's needs, not even after sufficient time had passed following the quake, but rather took advantage of its powers to issue ownership documents. The witness said: "We visited the Jindires Local Council, determined to meet the head of the council and his deputy, both influential figures in the region. We wanted them to permit us to remove our building's rubble. However, we were provided with no answer and told to wait. Every day, a few other residents and I would ask for a response, but we never got one. Ultimately, we had to sell debris untouched to a civilian entity in the area, which purchased and removed rubble with the council's permission."

Moreover, the witness said that the local council confiscated the rubble of destroyed houses, which were not officially registered under the names of owners: "In agreement with the local council, the Civil Defense cleared out the rubble caused by the recent quake. The council allowed owners whose homes were destroyed to sell debris to these entities. Nevertheless, the council seized the properties, removed their remains, and kept the money for which steel and other contents were sold, in the cases of owners whose ownership over the destroyed buildings was not established."

---

---

## 5. The Powers and Decision-Making Mechanisms of the Jindires Local Council

The Jindires Local Council is affiliated with the Free Aleppo Provincial Council. In its turn, the latter is linked to the Ministry of Local Administration and Services of the Syrian Interim Government of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. However, this report's witnesses all agreed that the local council has only a marginal role, stressing that decisions—especially those of a critical nature—are made by the Turkish government through their representatives on the ground, including Turkish soldiers and civilians, and at times Syrian figures and entities, such as the Coalition. Notably, the witnesses said the Afrin region is entirely under the administration of the Turkish governor of Hatay. They added that the Turkish governor assigns the head of the local council, who, in case of resignation, also refers to the governor, not a Syrian entity.

For further details on the Jindires Local Council's decision-making capacities, Pel-Civil Waves interviewed a witness in June 2023. He is familiar with the working dynamics of the council since he is in the construction field and has to periodically refer to the council to remain informed of the decisions needed to facilitate his work. He stressed that Syrian bodies on the ground are effectively subject to the Turkish government and do not act without its orders. He said: "In Afrin, there is a security hierarchy on the ground; every [Syrian] entity is assigned a Turkish security official. Additionally, and in general, no one dares to act unless they have obtained official Turkish permission. Members of armed groups and their proponents continue to perpetrate daily individual violations against locals, even without Türkiye's orders [ . . . ]. The local councils are affiliated with the Turkish government, are bound by its direct orders, and never act without its approval." Moreover, the witness cited the arrest of the former head of the local council, which he said is an instance of the Turkish hegemony over the councils' activities: "When the former head of the local council, Subhi Rizq, who hails from and resides in the region, tried to act in the best interest of the local citizens and residents and bring in big projects, he was arrested on malicious security reports and remained in detention for nearly three years. He was released only about a month ago. Once Rizq was arrested, Mahmoud Hafar was assigned as the head of the council in his place. Notably, the Syrian National Coalition established the local councils in Afrin on the Turkish Intelligence's orders." Addressing the powers of the local councils, the witness

---

added: "The powers of all local councils, among them the Jindires Local Council, are limited. They have no right to proceed with anything without referring to Turkish Intelligence. They can only freely distribute water and remove garbage without directly seeking the Turkish side's affirmation."

Investigating the restrictions of the local councils' capacities, Pel-Civil Waves interviewed another informed witness in June 2023, who corroborated the information passed by the above-cited witness—especially the local council's submission to the Turkish government. He said: "The council is entirely dominated by the Turkish government. The council is a service provider. It issues death and birth statements and documents related to property sales, purchases, and ownership transfers. This is all done under the approval and full supervision of the Turkish government, maintained through council referrals to the Turks now and then."



Image 4-Jindires Local Council-issued Arabic-Turkish ID of one the witnesses.

A third earthquake victim interviewed in June 2023 echoed this point, saying that the local council appears to be in charge, which applies to all local councils in the Afrin region. However, in reality, the councils receive orders from the Turkish governor through the SNA-affiliated armed groups on the ground. The accounts on the Turkish hegemony over the role and decision-making process of the local councils, including the Jindires Local Council, in SNA-held areas are corroborated by a report published by *Syria TV* on 22 December 2022, titled "Non-specialized Quotas and Turkish Seals: The Makeover of Northern Syria's Local Councils". In the report, one of the cited sources speaks about the appointment of the heads and



members of the local councils, saying: "The Turkish province, which oversees the management of an area, asks dignitaries from the area to present a list of candidates who would be subjected to extensive security vetting. They can begin work immediately if approved. If not, they are replaced with other individuals without looking into their skill sets." The four Turkish provinces of Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Urfa supervise the administration of the SNA-held areas in the Peace Spring strip, encompassing Aleppo's northern and eastern suburbs.<sup>2</sup>

Cited in the same report, lawyer Youssef Hussein shed light on the reasons underlying the local council's underperformance: "Poor governance is a consequence of sidelining the Syrian Interim Government in northern Syria and the Turkish province's direct management of councils and all public institutions, as well as the fact that the province's office in the area has powers not possessed by the Interim Government. The government has no immediate power over these councils, which contributed to their failure."

Türkiye has recently been setting up a new coordination system between Ankara and local councils in 13 areas of Syria, primarily A'zaz, Jarabulus, al-Bab, Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ayn, by appointing one governor to all the areas it controls in cooperation with the SNA-affiliated armed groups. The same governor would have access to the administrative powers of the previous seven governors assigned to handle coordination in those areas. This system aims to "curb administrative confusion in these areas and run relations at high levels of coordination with Türkiye."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> "Non-specialized Quotas and Turkish Seals: The Makeover of Northern Syria's Local Councils" (in Arabic), Syria TV (last visited: 22 August 2023), available at:

<https://www.syria.tv/%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D9%88%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A>

<sup>3</sup> The article was first published by Türkiye Gazetesi, close to the Turkish government, and translated by The Levant. "Establishing Their Presence: Ankara to Assign Turkish Governor to Occupied Syrian Areas" (in Arabic), (last visited on 22 August 2023), available at:

<https://thelevantnews.com/article/%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A1..-%D8%A3%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A->

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Rather than using the 6 February earthquake as a wake-up call to end the chaos and insecurity that has engulfed the Syrian population, the controlling bodies have used it to boost their profile within the community and increase their power. The de facto authorities also used the catastrophe as a cover to perpetrate additional crimes and violations, which is now a persistent and key characteristic of these authorities, especially the SNA-affiliated armed groups and the local councils. These authorities are obliged by Türkiye's orders, which maintains effective control over the region and uses them as proxies to perform its control.<sup>4</sup>

- The Turkish government should recognize the state of "occupation" in the areas under its control, and the international community should compel Türkiye to do so, thereby fulfilling the obligations imposed by international law on the occupying Power, primarily focused on the need to respect all its international contractual and customary duties, in particular, those in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, especially those on the treatment of civilians and the protection of their property.
- The Turkish government must order SNA armed groups to leave city centers, not interfere with the lives of the civilian population, not intervene with the work and decisions of local councils, and hand over the administration of these councils to the indigenous people of the region.
- The Turkish government should direct the Syrian Interim Government to implement these steps since the latter claims power over local councils and armed groups. At the same time, pending the implementation of the said steps, those parties (the armed groups and councils) must not politicize humanitarian aid designated to the population affected by the earthquake, stop seizing civilian property, return the property seized to its owners, and hold those involved in such violations accountable.

---

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, paragraph 93 of the report of the Commission of Inquiry on Syria dated 8 February 2022, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/documentation>

- 
- Syrian civil society organizations, particularly rights groups, should document the properties damaged by the earthquake and raise awareness among those affected of the importance of documentation to protect their property in the future. These organizations should act impartially and avoid discrimination in the provision of assistance.
  - Local councils should facilitate the work of Syrian civil society organizations and publish a list of the names and properties of people affected by the earthquake to avoid any future tampering with records. They should also make registration/documentation procedures free of charge to encourage people to engage in these activities.
  - International organizations, particularly United Nations bodies, should increase support for affected locals to help them restore or rebuild damaged buildings, depending on the status of the property involved, provided that humanitarian aid is distributed transparently and under the supervision of those UN bodies, without armed groups and local councils having any role in such distributions, owing to public distrust of them, as derived from the testimonies on which the present report is based.
-



## About “PÊL”

PÊL- Civil Waves is an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit organization that works to strengthen the roles of women, youth, and forcibly displaced communities in Syria, founded in 2013.

“PÊL” works in a diverse multi-ethnic, religious, social, and cultural community and believes that protecting and managing diversity and including all residents fairly guarantees sustainable peace. To this end, “PÊL” works to engage all citizens without prejudice or discrimination and at all levels. We believe that promoting community dialogue between individuals and different population groups and between them and local governance structures is essential in easing current tensions and establishing a more just future.

“PÊL” believes the ongoing conflict in Syria since 2011, associated with decades of bad policies, has affected the environment and created significant challenges that affect the lives of the population now and the country's future for decades to come. To this end, we promote awareness of environmental protection and the expansion of green spaces, monitoring ecological problems and their link to destabilizing social cohesion and developing solutions and alternatives to face these challenges.

“PÊL” focuses on victims of forced displacement. It seeks to strengthen the response to the housing, land, and property rights violations in Syria and enables the affected people to organize themselves and defend their cases. We believe that systematic and expanded legal and narrative documentation of land, housing, and property rights violations is essential in ensuring the dignified return of forcibly displaced and internally displaced persons to their areas of origin. Therefore, “PÊL” documents the testimonies and narrative stories of the victims of these violations and supports advocacy efforts and legal follow-up in this context.



@civilwaves



pel-cw.org



info@pel-cw.org