

# LOST SECURITY IN NORTHERN SYRIA SAFE ZONES

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 Analysis

On December 12, 2020, Syrian journalist Hussain Khattab was assassinated in Albab city in the Turkish controlled northern Syria safe zone. The assassination was carried out in broad daylight by masked motorcyclists, who fired at him directly on the street and fled.

This murder did not come too much of a shock for the population, but it raised many questions about just how safe is such the safe zone and how does it serve good for those who were fleeing from the war.

## Accident or security mess?

It is difficult to judge the security reality in the northern Syria areas under Turkish control, as most areas have experienced wars and armed conflicts. It will take a long time to retrieve security and restore the normalcy of life. However, understanding the true magnitude of the problem is necessary to assess the situation and propose solutions, which is why I undertook

quick monitoring to follow up on the security situation in Albab city, particularly in 2020.

Albab city was one of the first cities liberated from ISIS in 2017 through the cooperation between the opposition National Army factions and the Turkish forces. It has approximately 150,000 people, half of which are forcibly displaced persons from Aleppo, Homs, and eastern Ghouta, according to 2019 local statistics.

After following the news<sup>1</sup> and local pages that focus on local disseminating, I found that:

- During 2020, Albab city had more than 75 security incidents, which killed 57 civilians and wounded more than 175.
- Most security incidents were concentrated in the form of explosions of cars or bicycles on the road. Some of them were discovered and deactivated by local police, but the rest

killed more than 60% of the total deaths and caused 70% of the total injuries.

- Assassinations ranked second in Albab's security incidents. 11 of the total 17 attempts were successful and led to the death of 12 people and the wounding of 11. Most of the assassinations were directed at police officers or social figures, either done by shooting the victims or detonating their cars.
- Many normal fights that take place daily turned into armed clashes which harmed the civilians, especially when one or both sides of the quarrel were from the local armed factions, each team often call their relatives and clan to resolve the argument in their favor.
- Most of these security incidents victims were children and women, especially when these operations took place in residential neighborhoods, near the mosques, and in commercial markets, which left a large number of victims.
- During 2020, this city was subjected to 5 air or missile strikes, targeting civilian areas and mosques, resulting in many deaths and injuries despite the international consensus to be a safe zone.
- The abovementioned facts indicate one city's situation in 2020 alone, so we can imagine similar scenarios in the rest of the cities and towns whose condition is no different from

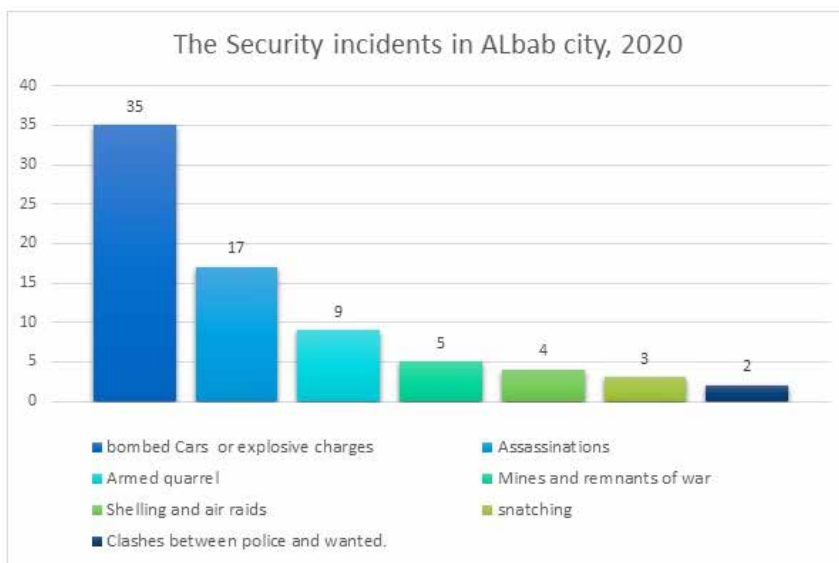
that of Albab city, which host about two million civilians.

## Conspiracy or omission

The northern Syrian areas, particularly those under Turkish control, are targeted by many parties in order to turn them into troubled areas. The Assad regime is seeking to control them in an attempt to bypass the agreements between the international parties concerned. So, it disrupts security by recruiting several cells within the region, exploiting the security vacuum and smugglings that take place between the opposition and regime-controlled areas.

On the other hand, Kurdish militias are also targeting these areas, disrupting its security and threatening Turkey's security as a reprisal for losing control of these areas after military operations. The Kurdish militias considered Turkey – for its support for the opposition national army and leading the fight since 2016 – as a party that thwarted its plan to establish a Kurdish state in northern Syria.

The remaining ISIS fighters or their loyalists are also trying to launch some retaliatory operations given their strategic loss in those areas after having them under their control for several years. These three parties shared the same goals and interests and took advantage of the security weakness to send or recruit cells to carry out bombings using cars and bicycles or to kill influential people or leaders with firearms.



On the other hand, despite Turkish efforts to train the civilian police, they are still unable to manage the area's security, in addition to the lack of resources and equipment needed to detect explosives. The civilian police's competencies are also in conflict with the national army and its military police, which have led to abuses, authority conflicts, and chaos in the region administration.

Furthermore, despite the presence of numerous roadblocks in the safe zones, the civilian police and even the military are neglecting security checks and vehicle searches. They do not show any serious measures to stop the bomb-filled cars from entering. Rather, barriers can become a means of blackmailing passersby and imposing levies.

For these reasons, this security vulnerability created a suitable environment for smuggling, theft, and abduction. A number of groups worked in drug and arms trading operations under the cover of some corrupt elements of the National Army that wanted to secure additional financial resources. So the kidnappings, looting, theft under threat, and law bypass clearly increased, especially with groups that have tribal extensions. These groups have carried out numerous murders, facilitated the entry of smuggled cars, confiscating civilian property, and counterfeiting currency.

There are many news and rumors that the corruptions of some national army members who run the region have been commanded; many factions were also accused of abusing their influence and torturing detainees similar to that of the Assad regime.

## Everyone's losing

No one can deny the great challenges that Syrians face in managing areas beyond the Assad regime control, nor can anyone deny the efforts made with very limited possibilities and modest expertise, amidst the presence of many enemies. And no one can deny the Turkish government's efforts to help these areas to support the stability of civilians who have suffered many years of war.

All these efforts, however, cannot succeed in an insecure environment; on the contrary, insecurity will be a barrier against all efforts and prevent them from attaining their goals and establishing

an acceptable model of a region with security and freedom, as the Syrians dream. Syrians in the opposition areas appear to be the biggest losers, because they live in an environment that threatens their security and stability, especially since they bear the greatest responsibility in the security absence. Disunity, multiple and conflicting responsibilities, as well as the arms chaos, are thwarting all the sincere efforts to control the region and ensure its stability and development.

But the failure to implement the free Syria model will be the most important loss in this equation. This model was the main dream which millions of Syrians had been proclaiming, and for it, they had made sacrifices. This failure in managing the regions will give the larger pretext that Assad, despite his huge crimes, is best suited to run the country, and there is no right alternative to replace him.

Syrians are not the only losers in these situations, Turkey also loses every day since insecurity continues, as this situation will prompt thousands of Syrians to think about entering the Turkish borders through smugglers to reach a safer place, and it will also make its security and military forces in Syria in the crosshairs of targeting and reprisals. Moreover, Turkey would lose a trump card to negotiate for a political solution, since a successful Turkish role in administering and stabilizing northern Syria would make the position of the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition stronger and more lucrative.

Between the absent common interests and the stalking enemies, nearly two million Syrians in northern Syria live in a state of renewed terror, where complete security loss could happen anytime. Despite the cessation of military operations and battles, the internal battles that are taking place on their lands still threaten their security and the innocent civilians in turn become victims of bombings, assassinations, or mines.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Albab City News, <https://www.facebook.com/city.albab.sy/>, Albab City: <https://www.facebook.com/AlbabCity1/>