



Genocide Emergency: Rojava and Northern Syria
January 2026
by Franzie Schatzl

Rojava (the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) is facing a coordinated campaign of annihilation. Following the collapse of the Assad Regime and [Ahmed al-Sharaa's](#) (Abu Mohammed al-Julani) rise to power, Damascus's conflict with the Kurds has been [revived](#). Since mid-January 2026, forces of the transitional government, joined by allied local tribal militias, have engaged in siege tactics, spreading terror, and mass displacement. The government forces are attacking the very conditions needed for Kurdish survival, through cuts to water and electricity, food scarcity, blocked access routes, displacement, violence and humiliation. We are witnessing a convergence of destruction and destabilization from multiple directions.

Kobani is a symbol of Kurdish resistance, the city where the Kurds were [besieged](#) by the Islamic State (ISIS) and triumphed. Today that same city is being pushed towards [collapse](#). People have been melting snow to drink water. Four Kurdish children have died from cold exposure as the siege by government forces tightens, according to the [Kurdish Red Crescent](#). A statement from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) describes Kobani as cut off, with civilians facing growing shortages. The siege by the Syrian military is especially dire for [internally displaced persons](#) (IDPs), who have the least protection and the fewest survival options. Deprivation is not "collateral" when it is systematic, prolonged, and lethal. This is a humanitarian disaster caused by siege conditions.

Fighting and coercion are producing more [displacement](#) in and around northern Syria, including Aleppo. Humanitarian reporting describes families fleeing violence in freezing temperatures with urgent needs for shelter, food, heating, and protection. Local [agreements](#) intended to protect civilians are being undermined. Documentation by Syria-focused accountability groups warns of dangerous escalation affecting [civilian neighborhoods](#).

Kurdish women have stood at the frontlines of Kurdish survival: they fought against ISIS, defended villages, and built councils, schools, and communities from ruins. Now, gender-based violence is being used as a strategy of annihilation. One of the most brutal acts documented in this escalation was the killing of the Kurdish woman fighter [Denîz Ciya](#), who was thrown from a high building in Aleppo after being captured. Her death was not only an execution but a public message threatening to punish Kurdish women who resist and lead. Such methods mirror the violence used by ISIS against women and minorities and are intended to terrorize entire communities by targeting those who embody resistance and continuity. Denîz Ciya's killing stands as a stark example of the gendered nature of this genocide and the deliberate use of cruelty to erase Kurdish women from public and political life.

A video circulated online shows a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) militiaman displaying a [severed braid of a female fighter from the Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\)](#) and framing it as a trophy, using the Kurdish word "hêval" ("comrade"). The video sparked outrage worldwide. Although subsequent accounts disputed elements of the claim, the terrorizing effects remain. This display of a woman's braid represents a desecration of the body as well as a symbolic attack on Kurdish identity and womanhood. In Kurdish culture, women's braids embody collective memory, connection to land, ancestry, and traditions passed through generations. In mourning, cutting or unbraiding hair has long expressed grief. Now the braid has acquired a new political meaning: Kurdish women worldwide are braiding their hair on camera and posting it publicly as a form of defiance, turning a violated symbol into an [act of resistance](#).

This escalation in Rojava is not an isolated crisis. It unfolds within a wider geography of Kurdish struggle against occupation and coerced control that has, for decades, led to mass displacement, demographic engineering, and systematic repression across the region. In Türkiye, solidarity protests are being crushed, as in [Mardin](#), where police have violently dispersed demonstrations and targeted protesters. There have been [allegations that gender-based violence](#) has been committed against Kurdish women in northern Syria by members of Turkish-backed militias. In Esslingen, Germany, an Arab Syrian Islamist supporter publicly [celebrated](#) the destruction of Kurds, wearing military-style clothing and chanting songs associated with calls to kill Kurds. In Antwerp, Belgium, an assailant at a [Kurdish demonstration](#) injured multiple people with a knife, leaving some in critical condition.

[International abandonment is now explicit](#). The United States has again abandoned the Kurds, while Damascus demands the full “integration” of the SDF into the State’s forces, without credible guarantees for Kurdish civilian protection or self-administration.

Genocide is not only mass killing. It is also the deliberate destruction of a group’s ability to live, as stated in [Article II, act \(c\) of the UN Convention on Genocide](#). Kurds are being punished for seeking autonomy, their aspiration branded as illegitimate. Kurdish identity is being attacked through symbolic violence. The campaign is coordinated and escalating into a humanitarian disaster.

Genocide Watch recommends:

- Immediate humanitarian access to Kobani and all besieged areas. Open protected corridors for fuel, heating supplies, medical aid, water access, and food.
- Independent investigation of war crimes and gender-based atrocities. Evidence collection must include open-source material and witness protection.
- Protection for women and children in displacement and winter conditions. Expand emergency shelter, protection from gender-based violence, medical response, and safe access routes for families displaced toward Aleppo and surrounding areas.
- The restoration and full protection of Kurdish language, culture, and public life in Bakur and Rojhelat, including education and political expression.
- The immediate halt to [drone warfare](#) and aerial strikes, including in and around Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo, where civilian harm and displacement are intensified.
- A shift to dialogue and peace: the current militarized approach is producing chaos and instability far beyond Syria and risks wider regional escalation.
- The immediate release of the civilians reportedly [kidnapped](#) by mercenaries, and the establishment of independent mechanisms to locate the disappeared and hold perpetrators accountable.

GENOCIDE WATCH is the founder and coordinator of the Alliance Against Genocide

E-mail: president@genocidewatch.org Website: www.genocidewatch.com Tax exempt EIN: 26-1672589