

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM R O U N D T A B L E

September 10, 2020

The Honorable Donald Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Turkey's Inhumane War Against Religious and Ethnic Minorities in NE Syria Must Be Stopped!

Dear President Trump:

We are an informal group of organizations and individuals who advocate for international religious freedom: scholars, religious and secular leaders, human rights advocates, and faith-based NGO's. We ask that your Administration take immediate action to stop Turkey's withholding of water from 1.5 million people and its other horrendous war crimes inside parts of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) that it seized and still occupies in 2018-2019. This is a matter of life and death.

We ask you to re-impose US sanctions to stop Turkey—including reinstating your Executive Order of October 14, 2019, “Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria.” Turkey has failed to honor the commitments it made to you and to Vice President Mike Pence in the Joint Turkish-US Statement on Northeast Syria dated October 17, 2019 (the “Statement”). The Statement was intended to protect minority citizens of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) after Turkey's invasion of AANES produced a huge outcry from US citizens, NGO's, and the US Congress. The Statement said: “The Turkish side expressed its commitment to ensure safety and well-being of residents of all population centers in the safe zone controlled by the Turkish Forces (safe zone) and reiterated that maximum care will be exercised in order not to cause harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure.” Note: we refer to the “safe zone” as the “occupation zone”—a more accurate descriptor.

Despite promises to treat people well, Turkey has engaged in innumerable war crimes in the occupation zone and in Afrin, which it invaded in 2018. It is still driving out original residents, arresting Kurdish Christian converts and Yazidis for “apostacy,” seizing property, converting almost all Yazidi temples and many Christian churches into mosques, raping and trafficking young women and girls, pillaging food supplies, and burning or stealing crops and olive groves. It has imposed Sharia law, uprooting the democratic, pluralistic governance system set up by AANES.¹ Just this month, in Afrin, at least two Kurdish converts to Christianity were arrested for apostacy and their fate is unknown, a woman resisting a jihadi “husband” was raped and murdered, and at least eight women went missing. Afrin women are reportedly being trafficked to Libya by the dozens. In total, Turkey has driven over 400,000 prior residents from their homes and businesses and seized them.

Recently, Turkey has “weaponized” its control over the Alouk water treatment plant (located in the Turkey-controlled occupation zone) against 1.5 million people living in the free part of AANES. They have had no running water for the last month, after constant interruptions since March. Turkey even stopped the flow of the Euphrates River to what was once the most productive agricultural region in Syria. This also interfered with electricity production at the region's main power plant. Turkey just bombed an AANES electricity plant far beyond the occupation zone border and villages in the Khabour River Valley. The Khabour is the Christian heartland of Syria and the place that resisted an ISIS invasion in 2015, leading to US efforts to protect its residents.

This is a real emergency. *People are dying daily of the heat, drinking contaminated water, and thirst.* Many of the affected are Christians who fled the Khabour and other areas occupied or bombed by Turkey after its 2019 invasion. They now live in tents or bombed out buildings without water or electricity with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees. They have no way to maintain sanitation protocols in the midst of an expanding COVID19 epidemic in the area. Residents say that water is more expensive than gold and harder to buy. They have to prioritize water purchases over food, and their families are starving.

Eighty-nine humanitarian organizations working in AANES and also the UNHCR (in March) have publicly petitioned the international community for action.² In a rare public criticism of Turkey, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II wrote to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on August 21, 2020. He noted that Turkey is denying basic human rights to those affected, “namely their right to live.” He wrote: “**Using water as a weapon—which is not the first time—is a barbaric act and a flagrant violation of fundamental human rights.... If this water blockade continues, it would only be appropriate to characterize this inhumane act as a crime against humanity.**”³ There have been no public US condemnations of Turkey despite private promises made by US officials to intervene in the water crisis in late August.⁴

Despite your administration's promises to protect Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities in the Middle East, we are saddened to report that the Christian population of AANES has dropped from 300,000 to less than 100,000 since the start of the Syrian Civil War.⁵ Yazidi and Kurdish populations are also dwindling. The rate has increased since the Turkish invasion last year because they have no hope of returning to their homes and living in safety. Ongoing Turkish bombardments in Northern Iraq are having the same effect. It is a real disappointment to faith-based communities that the US remains silent about Turkey's manifest war crimes, despite commitments to hold Turkey to its October 17, 2019 written promises to treat local populations with respect.

Sadly, Turkey's President appears to believe that no one will stop his aggressive steps. Turkey interprets our public silence as weakness. Sanctions are something President Erdogan understands. Please announce that you will promptly reimpose the 2019 sanctions if Turkey's behavior does not dramatically improve.

We also urge you to act, by Presidential order, to remove AANES from Syria-wide sanctions administered by the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC). Those sanctions deprive AANES of access to world financial markets and foreign investment. It has enormous untapped natural resources: oil, farmland, and water. Relief from Syria-wide sanctions and designation of AANES as a special economic zone would enable its residents to rebuild their economy and repay the US and its allies for their war costs through trade and economic opportunities. This is an important step, in line with the OFAC approval of a US company's contract to improve the AANES oil production capacity.

We further ask that the US use its diplomatic might to require that AANES's Syrian Democratic Council have a seat at the table in any Syrian peace talks and that the US support its pluralistic democratic governance system as a model for all of Syria. This could have a significant impact on moving post-war Syria into alignment with US national security interests. Syria peace talks should also have the goal of requiring Turkey to return to its own borders, returning now occupied parts of the AANES to peace and democratic self-governance.

Finally, we ask that the US assemble a multi-national fact-finding team to document what Turkey has done inside the occupation zone and in Afrin and to recommend sanctions, including war crime prosecutions, against those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and other war crimes.

¹ That system is unique in the Middle East in providing democracy and equal rights to all religious and ethnic groups and to women, granting religious freedom (including the right to convert) and making Syriac (the language of Jesus) and Kurdish official languages. It is generally modeled on rights provided in US laws.

² https://npasyria.com/en/?p=45753&fbclid=IwAR10k2iBrRNmPjkfiQ_SHD6nMp6JcTUQChuwCTfMIN-Bloi9xTL4RJeJZJw;

³ <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/08/24/syriac-orthodox-patriarch-mor-ignatius-aphrem-ii-sends-letter-to-u-n-secretary-general-over-water-crisis-in-hasakah-syria/?fbclid=IwAR3jYG2F-QpkgbJLnHuXB8AZ3XB69bDjv55hBpp3g6wLknmYIWWdJPI3Qh4>

⁴ <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/60062/us-delegation-meets-with-autonomous-administration-discusses-hassakeh-water-crisis.html>; <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/08/27/u-s-state-department-promises-to-pressure-the-turkey-over-north-and-east-syria-water-crisis-but-no-official-condemnation-made/>

⁵ “After ISIS: Ensuring a Future for Christians and Other Minorities in North and East Syria,” Rojava Information Center (September 2020).

AANES is a small area in the greater scheme of things, but it is the place where ISIS was brought to its knees. It offers more than a fair chance of being the place where the antidote to ISIS (religious freedom and democracy) takes root and flourishes in Syria and the Middle East. It could be a place where Christians and other minorities thrive. But, this will only happen if the United States fulfills its moral obligation to stop the ongoing atrocities against people whose only crime was to join with the United States in the fight against ISIS.

Respectfully,

LAW AND LIBERTY TRUST

JUBILEE CAMPAIGN USA

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