



Statement before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria

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Chairman Perkins, Vice Chairwoman Manchin, Vice Chairwoman Maenza, and Honorable Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of safeguarding religious freedom in northeast Syria.

I have been fortunate to travel to northeast Syria twice. On my first trip, in January 2014, I attended the convention in which an array of representatives—Muslims, Christians, and Yezidi; Kurds and Arabs—adopted a provisional constitution. I visited schools and universities, saw girls and women walk to church, and sat in teahouses in several different towns to watch daily life. I was able to walk around alone to talk to a variety of residents without any political party representative or security guard accompanying me.

Last summer, I returned to northeastern Syria to speak at a forum hosted by the Rojava Center for Strategic Studies at a conference center adjacent to a Yezidi village several miles outside Amuda. Authorities had renamed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria out of deference to the region's diversity. The region had made good on its promises to guarantee religious freedom. Members of different religious and ethnic groups worked together in the Autonomous Administration, lived in the same neighborhoods, and interacted with each other in the market. The town of Amuda even hosted a small community of Jews who integrated with their neighbors in a way that is a fading memory elsewhere in Syria and in Arab countries. Women and girls, some covered and others not and not all accompanied by men, socialized at a local amusement park. Some restaurants discreetly served alcohol to not only local Christians but also Muslims who sought to drink something more than a soft drink or bottled water with their dinners.

Turkey's Interventions in Northeast Syria Imperil Religious Freedom

While the region's largely Kurdish leadership had upheld its commitment to religious freedom in areas it controlled, the same could not be said with Turkey, which, in January 2018, intervened militarily into the Afrin district, the westernmost canton that until that point was controlled by the Autonomous Administration. While President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said Turkey intervened in Afrin to fight terrorism, this is false: Afrin was never a center of terrorism, and Turkish diplomats could not point to any terrorist attack launched against Turkey by Kurdish authorities based in Afrin or elsewhere in the Autonomous Administration. The Turkish decision to invade Afrin appears more consistent with Erdoğan's obsessive campaign against Kurds and his desire to silence domestic opposition, which, in a time of conflict, he can depict as treasonous if they dissent.

The domination of Afrin by Turkey and the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army has fundamentally eroded religious liberty. Turkish-backed administrators refuse to register locals with Kurdish names, and the Turkish administration refuses to issue identification cards to Christian and minority women who do not cover their hair or wear conservative Islamic veils. Turkish forces have razed Kurdish and minority graveyards in the region, actions more consistent with ethnic cleansing than counterterrorism.

Turkey's record of rolling back religious liberty in Afrin made its actions following its subsequent incursion into the Autonomous Administration more predictable. Turkish authorities made little secret of their desire to end the Autonomous Administration's self-rule and change local demography. Rather than stand up for religious liberty, the Trump administration treated it with

disdain. On October 6, 2019, the White House announced it would effectively greenlight a Turkish incursion into northeast Syria. “Turkey will be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria. The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation. . . . Turkey will now be responsible for all ISIS fighters in the area,” the press secretary stated after President Trump spoke by phone with Erdoğan.¹

The abandonment of Syrian Kurds came after a nearly yearlong internal campaign by US Special Envoy James Jeffrey, a former US ambassador to Turkey, who has long carried Turkey’s cause both inside government and out. Speaking to reporters after a US-Turkey working group meeting on December 7, 2018, for example, Jeffrey said US cooperation with the Kurds was tactical and temporary but that it was bilateral ties with Turkey that mattered. “We want to have cooperation with Turkey across the board on all Syrian issues,” he said.² These remarks appear to have convinced Turkish political and military leaders that there would be no consequence if Turkey replicated its Afrin strategy elsewhere in northeastern Syria.

The insistence by Erdoğan and Turkish diplomats that the original sin was US partnership with Syrian Kurds is anachronistic. When I first visited northeastern Syria, US diplomats refused to sit or talk with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the main Syrian Kurdish political party, because, as one American diplomat in Europe explained to me in November 2013, the State Department did not want to antagonize Turkey. The reason the United States reversed course and began cooperating and coordinating with Syrian Kurds in late 2014, more than three years after the Syrian civil war began, was because its efforts to stop Turkish support for radical and extremist groups in Syria had failed. At the pivotal battle for Kobane, Kurdish fighters held out for more than four months against an Islamic State onslaught only to emerge victorious. During the siege, Turkish military and intelligence officials allowed Islamic State fighters to cross its border in order to attempt to outflank Kurds fighting the Islamist radicals.

Erdoğan’s normalization if not collusion with the Islamic State goes deeper, however. When Islamic State fighters stormed the Turkish consulate in Mosul and took several dozen hostages, Erdoğan bent over backward to avoid calling them terrorists.³ About 90 percent of the foreign fighters who entered Iraq and Syria to fight with al Qaeda or the Islamic State crossed the Turkish border, often with the facilitation of Turkish security forces. So too did weaponry.⁴

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and their constituent militias sacrificed more than 10,000 men and women to defeat first the al Qaeda–affiliated Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat an-Nusra) and then the Islamic State. To trust Erdoğan to contain the Islamic State or protect religious liberty is akin to trusting an arsonist to guard against forest fires.

¹ “Statement from the Press Secretary,” The White House, October 6, 2019.

² “US Envoy to Syria: Cooperation with Syria’s Kurds ‘Temporary, Tactical,’” *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 9, 2018.

³ Ceylan Yeginsu, “Militants Storm Turkish Consulate in Iraqi City, Taking 49 People as Hostages,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2014.

⁴ Ahmet S. Yayla, “Turkish ISIS and AQ Foreign Fighters: Reconciling the Numbers and Perception of the Terrorism Threat,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, July 5, 2019.

Indeed, this can be seen in how Turkey and its proxy forces have treated the issue of Yazidi women and girls captured by the Islamic State and forced to become sex slaves to Islamic State fighters. In December 2019, at the invitation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), I visited Sinuni, a Yazidi town in northwestern Iraq, just seven miles from the Syrian border. It is a traumatized town. While the defeat of the Islamic State has allowed it to begin to rebuild, trauma and the legacy of displacement and Islamic State sexual violence remains just below the surface.

In the offices of one local organization, I had the opportunity to meet with Yazidi survivors and local activists who coordinate their rescue and return. On the day I visited, smugglers had contacted one activist with proof of life regarding her little sister, who was 13 years old when the Islamic State abducted her but now, after repeated rapes by a series of Islamic State husbands, had a child. That was one case, but local activists estimate that almost 3,000 kidnapped Yazidis remain in areas of Syria now administered by Turkish-backed proxy forces and perhaps in Turkey proper.

Here, US policy could do more. US diplomats in Baghdad and Erbil—many of whom do not leave the embassy and consulate compounds let alone go anywhere near the Syrian border—largely dismiss Yazidi claims of survivors in regions under Turkish control, but the proof-of-life and active smuggling trade suggests many captives remain alive.

The Formation of Erdoğan's Religious Intolerance

To understand Erdoğan's attitude toward religious freedom and liberal attitudes toward diversity, it is essential to understand his upbringing. When Erdoğan was 13 years old, his father moved the family from eastern Turkey to Kasimpaşa, an Istanbul slum. There, Erdoğan worked as a street vendor, traveling each day to more affluent districts, where he observed but grew resentful toward and disgusted by Western decadence. He was a lackluster student in most subjects, but he took to Islamic studies at a local madrasa, where he distinguished himself as an orator in class and a soccer player outside of it.⁵

Erdoğan had ambition. He made no secret of his desire to study at Mülkiye, the elite political science academy that was, for Turks, traditionally the springboard into political leadership, but he fell short of its entrance requirements, the first of many humiliations that Erdoğan would nurture into a poisonous grudge.⁶ He subsequently worked as an unskilled laborer while playing semiprofessional soccer.

What came next is less clear. While his official biography says he received a degree in 1981 from the Department of Economic and Commercial Sciences at Marmara University, no such department existed at the time, and it is unlikely Erdoğan could have worked full time in a menial job and still attended.⁷ Regardless, the university has no record of Erdoğan's matriculation.⁸

⁵ David L. Phillips, *An Uncertain Ally*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2017), pp. 3-7.

⁶ Phillips, p. 7.

⁷ "Biyografi: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, n.d.: <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/receptayyiperdogan/biyografi/>

⁸ Cengiz Candar, "Is Erdogan's university diploma forged?" Al-Monitor, June 15, 2016.

What is certain is that Erdoğan became the leader of a local youth branch of Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan's National Salvation Party, a conservative Sunni party permeated with anti-Western sentiment. At a party rally, he met his wife, Emine. They had four children, each of whom received a deeply religious education. The 1980 coup energized Erdoğan, especially after police killed four Islamist students protesting the crackdown.

After the National Salvation Party disbanded, Erbakan took Erdoğan under his wing in the Welfare Party, an organization that promoted both Erbakan's religiosity and his suspicion of the United States and Europe. Erdoğan rose rapidly through party ranks. By 1985, he was head of the Welfare Party's Istanbul office.

In 1994, after three unsuccessful attempts to win elected office—failures Erdoğan blamed on a system rigged against him and fellow Islamists—he finally won Istanbul's mayoralty on a platform that appealed to more conservative Turks: building mosques, banning alcohol sales, and restoring public worship in Ottoman mosques that had been transformed into museums. He made no secret of his agenda and described himself as the "Imam of Istanbul" and a "Servant of Shari'a."⁹

In December 1995 elections, the Welfare Party won 21 percent of the vote and entered into a coalition government, which, in June 1996, enabled Erbakan to become prime minister. The constraints of coalition limited his ability to impose his agenda, but even his limited efforts—both in foreign policy and his greater support for religious schools—upset the Turkish military, which forced his resignation after just one year. Erbakan would make no comeback: On January 16, 1998, Turkey's Constitutional Court banned the party, a decision that outraged Islamists but that the European Court of Human Rights upheld.¹⁰

It was against Erdoğan's sense of the injustice of the military's actions that, at a rally in the southeastern town of Siirt, he recited an old poem that declared, "The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets."¹¹ Charged with religious incitement, a court sentenced Erdoğan to 10 months of imprisonment, forcing his resignation from the mayoralty. Ultimately, he served four months but was legally prohibited from holding further office, a ban overturned by his newly rebranded political party when, by an electoral fluke, it amplified a 34 percent showing into a two-thirds Justice and Development Party in Turkey's parliament.

Over subsequent years, Erdoğan used the power of his office to consolidate power; he wielded once-technocratic administrative bodies against political enemies and independent press, slowly choking free expression and debate. Against the backdrop of plummeting Turkish press freedom, the newspapers that Erdoğan did embrace give insight into his mindset. Here Erdoğan's religious intolerance and penchant for conspiracy shine through. Abdülkadir Özkan, a columnist for *Milli Gazete*, for example, opined, "Let us state immediately that all developments [in Syria] are related

⁹ "İddianame," T.C., Yargıtay Cumhuriyet Başsavcılığı vs. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, ["Indictment," Republic of Turkey, Supreme Court of Appeals, Chief Public Prosecutor's Office vs. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice & Development Party)]. SP. Hz.2008/01, March 14, 2008, p. 31.

¹⁰ European Court of Human Rights, *Refah Partisi (Parti de la prospérité) et autres c. Turquie*, no. 41340/98, 41342/98, 41343/98, and 41344/98 (sect. 3), July 31, 2001.

¹¹ "İnsanları korkutmak" ("Intimidating the People"), *Milli Gazete*, March 23, 1999.

to imperialist interests and Israel's security."¹² *Yeni Şafak*, perhaps the Turkish president's favorite paper, suggests that the US military not only sought intentionally to kill Muslim civilians but also systematically raped women and methodically executed sleeping children in Afghanistan. Turkey's duty, it argued, was to resist the United States.¹³

In 2017, *Yeni Şafak* editor İbrahim Karagül argued that every development in the Middle East since the 1991 Gulf War was actually a plot by the United States to destroy Islam in general, and Mecca and Medina in particular.¹⁴ Such arguments might seem far-fetched, but they explain Turkey's current behavior in northeastern Syria. After all, if the United States were engaged in a war against Islam and if Syrian Kurds—many of whom did not share Erdoğan's Muslim Brotherhood-inspired conservatism and some of whom are not even Muslim—allied with the United States, then, by default, Syrian Kurds are working against Islam, and the groups disparaged as al Qaeda affiliates or even the Islamic State are fighting to defend all Muslims.

Likewise, while Erdoğan and his followers might consider the Kurds apostates for not adhering to his vision of Islam, he has no such doubts about the religiosity of the Islamic State. Here, Erdoğan's willingness to wave off the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court indictment of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir is important. "A Muslim can never commit genocide," Erdoğan declared to explain his willingness to host Bashir at an Islamic summit in Turkey.¹⁵ The international community might have condemned the Islamic State's brutality and its atrocities against Yezidis, Kurds, Christians, and Shi'ites, but Erdoğan is willing to rationalize or excuse these, given both the Islamic State's religiosity and his own disdain for others' regional faiths and practices. Erdoğan also seemed to embrace the same political and theological exegesis that the Islamic State employed to justify discrimination against and targeting of Kurdish communities.¹⁶

The disdain with which Erdoğan treats religious minorities under his control is the rule rather than the exception. Throughout his premiership and presidency, he has repeatedly razed Alevi houses of worship and forced Alevi children to attend religious classes promoting Sunni Islam. Then, on January 31, 2020, Erdoğan pardoned the perpetrator of an arson attack that killed 31 Alevis in 1993, the worst religious massacre in Turkey in the past three decades.¹⁷

Conclusion

In *Dancing with the Devil: The Perils of Engaging Rogue Regimes* (Encounter, 2014), I surveyed the history of more than a half century of US diplomacy with rogue regimes and terrorist groups. Whether in North Korea, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and myriad other examples, one truism emerged: Policymakers may focus on terrorism and nuclear proliferation, but religious freedom is often the canary in the coal mine that first confirms regimes' disdain for international norms. Alas, Turkey now fits the bill.

¹² Abdulkadir Ozkan, "Kaddafi'yi devirmek ABD'nin, Esad bölgenin işi!" ("Taking Down Al-Qadhafi was America's Task, Taking Down al-Asad is the Region's!"), *Milli Gazete* Online, March 28, 2012.

¹³ Tamer Korkmaz, "Pudingin içinde neler var?" ("What is in the Pudding?"), *Yeni Şafak*, September 26, 2014.

¹⁴ İbrahim Karagül, "They're Preparing a Doomsday War... Protect Turkey!" *Yeni Şafak*, December 5, 2017.

¹⁵ "Sudanese President Bashir's visit to Turkey in limbo," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 11, 2009.

¹⁶ Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and the Kurds: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel*, September 2017.

¹⁷ "Cumhurbaşkanı Kararı," *Resmî Gazete*, No. 31025, January 31, 2020.

Turkish officials dismiss the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as a terrorist entity because it has embraced the political philosophy of imprisoned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan. The United States has designated the PKK a terrorist entity since 1997. The timing of its designation, 13 years after the PKK launched an insurgency inside Turkey, was based less on any change in the PKK insurgency or objective set of metrics and more on the Clinton administration's contemporaneous desire to conclude a large arms sale and an objective desire to support a NATO ally. Regardless, there is no evidence that the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria engaged in any terrorism that warranted the Turkish incursions that have so imperiled religious liberty. To the contrary, before the Turkish incursion into northern and eastern Syria, most terrorist incidents were launched from Turkey into Kurdish-controlled Syria.¹⁸

Regardless of the merits of PKK designation, the simple facts are these: First, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria not only committed to protect religious freedom rhetorically but also did so in deed. And, second, Turkish authorities and their proxy forces have rolled back religious liberty in areas they administer and patrol and have imperiled religious freedom beyond their zones of occupation by diverting attention away from efforts to keep the Islamic State suppressed.

There are nevertheless actions the United States government could undertake to defend and preserve religious freedom in North and East Syria.

First, US representatives must base policy not on what they once imagined Turkey to be, but rather calibrate American actions to what Turkey has become. With Turkey and Turkish-backed proxy forces interacting and directly supporting Islamic State veterans in both Syria and Libya, no US envoy or diplomat should on good faith accept Ankara's promises to fight terrorism or guarantee religious, cultural, or political freedom in Syria.

Second, the goal of US policy—not only for the sake of religious freedom but also for regional security and counterterrorism—should be to extricate Turkish forces from northern Syria. This will not be easy. After all, Turkish forces still occupy one-third of Cyprus more than 45 years after the events Ankara used to justify its aggression passed, but the United States should use all financial leverage to raise the cost of Turkey's ethnic cleansing and repression. Financial sanctions accompanying the successful push to free Pastor Andrew Brunson suggest that Erdoğan is both sensitive and vulnerable to such financial measures.

Third, the US government must resolve the illogic of designating the PKK to be a terrorist group while working with its offshoot in Syria. Much of the initial designation appears rooted in subjective rather than objective consideration. When a Belgian court reexamined evidence about

¹⁸ “Database: Over 30 Turkish cross-border attacks against Rojava in 2019, only 1 attack targets Turkey.” Rojava Information Center, August 28, 2019, <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-30-turkish-cross-border-attacks-against-rojava-in-2019-only-1-attack-targets-turkey/>

PKK culpability earlier this year after Turkish pressure to arrest Kurdish activists allegedly affiliated with the group, the Brussels Court of Appeal concluded that the PKK was “a party in a non-international armed conflict” rather than a terror group.¹⁹ De-designating the PKK need not mean embracing the group diplomatically nor abandoning Turkey, but it would enhance American leverage and ability to mediate conflict.

Fourth, while the State Department issues an annual Report on International Religious Freedom to the US Congress, the severity of ongoing violations should mandate the State Department submit biannual reports addressing religious freedom in areas seized by Turkey and Turkish proxy forces from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Fifth, given the likelihood that Yezidi girls and women kidnapped by the Islamic State remain alive in areas controlled by Turkey and Turkish proxy forces, the State Department should task US diplomats with interviewing activists and family members of abducted women to determine what credible cases exist where relatives possess proof of life of their kidnapped loved ones. Political and diplomatic rhetoric about the tragedy that befell Yezidis under the Islamic State falls flat when the opportunity exists to rescue those who were passed like commodities to Turkish-backed Islamist forces.

Sixth, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the political wing of the SDF, applied for a US Treasury Department Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) waiver almost five years ago, but it has not received a response. It is unclear whether OFAC dropped the ball against the backdrop of the change in US administrations or whether failure to act on the SDC’s request for a waiver is deliberate, but it is unfair and undercuts the fight for religious liberty if appointed representatives from the Autonomous Administration cannot report easily and frequently to commissioners, congressmen, and those most interested in defending the cause of religious freedom.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

¹⁹ “Turkey protests Belgian court ruling decision on PKK,” Associated Press, March 11, 2019; “Belgian Courts decide: the PKK is not a terrorist organisation but a party in a civil war. Towards a turning point in the approach by the EU and its member states?” Kurdish Institute Brussels, January 30, 2020, <https://www.kurdishinstitute.be/en/belgian-courts-decide-the-pkk-is-not-a-terrorist-organisation-but-a-party-in-a-civil-war/>