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## Syrian Yezidis under Four Regimes: Assad, Erdogan, ISIS and the YPG

By Amy Austin Holmes

Yezidis have inhabited the region of Greater Syria for a millennium. Due to Islamization, repeated massacres since the time of the Ottoman Empire, and a genocidal attack by the Islamic State in 2014, their numbers have dwindled, making them one of the most endangered religious minorities in the Middle East. Yet small pockets of Yezidi communities continue to inhabit the hills and plains of northern Syria and western Iraq. Many were hopeful that the defeat of the ISIS Caliphate would ensure their continued survival, but the practice of buying and selling Yezidis continues and an estimated 2,878 are still missing. Until this day, Yezidis are forced to pay

ransoms of tens of thousands of dollars to free their family members who have been kidnapped, and many are still held in captivity.<sup>1</sup> The survival of Yezidis living in their ancestral homelands in both Syria and Iraq is imperiled.

The two Turkish interventions into Syria in 2018 and 2019, known respectively as Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring, have driven almost the entire Yezidi population in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn in Syria from their homes. All of the villages in northwest and north-central Syria with Yezidi inhabitants – some 51 villages in total – are now

under occupation by the Turkish military and their affiliated militias, many of which espouse Islamist ideologies. More than half of the sacred Yezidi shrines in Afrin have been destroyed or desecrated since the Turkish intervention, making it virtually impossible for Yezidis to openly practice their faith. Some of the militias in Afrin have kidnapped Yezidis and forced them to renounce their religion.

In Iraq, Yezidis have struggled to rebuild Mount Sinjar, home to the largest community of Iraqi Yezidis, and the site of unspeakable atrocities when ISIS attacked in August 2014. Sinjar is a disputed territory, claimed by both the central government in Baghdad and seat of the autonomous Kurdish region in Erbil, which has complicated and slowed the reconstruction of the area. Furthermore, repeated Turkish airstrikes in Mount Sinjar have terrified the Yezidi population, many of whom still live in tents. Turkish airstrikes recently hit Mount Sinjar, just as more than 150 Yezidi families had returned after living in IDP camps.<sup>2</sup> Turkey justifies both the occupation of northern Syria and the airstrikes in Iraq as necessary to target PKK militants. But Turkish military operations also deter Yezidi civilians from rebuilding their lives in the aftermath of genocide. Even after the defeat of ISIS, it is increasingly unlikely that Yezidis will be able to continue to live in their ancestral homelands in Syria and Iraq unless swift and decisive action is taken by the international community to ensure they can return.

The tragedy that has unfolded in Sinjar since 2014 put a spotlight on the Yezidi minority in Iraq. Nadia Murad, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and genocide survivor, has emerged as a courageous leader who advocates on behalf of her community on the international stage. In July 2019, Ms. Murad met with President Trump at the White House where she implored him to help Yezidis return to their homes in Sinjar. However, the

plight of the Yezidis in Syria has been largely ignored. Over the past decade of the Syrian conflict, Yezidis have lived under four different forms of government: the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the rule of the Islamic State, the local Kurdish-led self-government known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), and now under Turkish occupation. What follows is a brief comparison of these four types of government and their impact on the Yezidi community of northern Syria.

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### The Yezidi Identity

The Yezidis in Iraq and Syria belong to the same distinct ethno-religious minority. Pockets of Yezidi communities also exist in southeastern Turkey, Iran, and the Caucasus. They are followers of the same ancient monotheistic religion. Due to constant persecution over centuries, their numbers have dwindled; the best current estimates indicate that no more than one million Yezidis are left world-wide.<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to obtain reliable information about the precise number of Yezidis in Syria, in part because under the Baathist regime they were required to register as Muslims on their official ID cards. However, prior to the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the U.S. Department of State estimated that there were some 80,000 Yezidis in Syria.<sup>4</sup> Sileman Cafer, a Yezidi leader from Afrin and author of the book *Qewlen Ezdiyan (The Yezidi Texts)*, estimated

that there were approximately 60,000 living in Afrin alone prior to 2011.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest documented history of Yezidi presence in Greater Syria (known in Arabic as Bilad al-Sham) can be traced to the year 1070, when Sheikh Adi bin Musafir was born in a small village in the Beqaa Valley, in modern Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> Yezidis have lived in Afrin, the predominantly Kurdish region in the northwest of Syria, since at least the 12th century. Numerous ancient monuments and shrines attest to their long-standing presence in the area. According to their own accounts, the Yezidi people have suffered some 74 massacres throughout history. Yezidis have been subjected to Islamization or encouraged to hide their identity to escape persecution. In 1935, there were around 85 Yezidi villages in Afrin, but now only 23-33 remain.<sup>7</sup>

Although ISIS at one point controlled almost half of Syria, they were never able to launch the kind of massive assault on any Yezidi communities in Syria as they had done in Sinjar. Why? Syrian Yezidis are clustered in the north, in areas where the Kurdish armed group known as the People's Protection Units, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG), had established de facto control since mid-2012. As will be discussed later, under YPG protection Yezidis in Syria were spared many of the horrific crimes that their co-religionists in Iraq suffered. Indeed, the Yezidi community and culture were allowed to flourish. Under the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration, the Yezidis were given more freedom to practice their religion than they ever enjoyed under Baathist rule. However, those freedoms are once again in danger under Turkish occupation.

### (Figure 1) Locations of Yezidi Settlements in Syria by Region

Five regions of northern Syria with clusters of Yezidi settlements <sup>8</sup> <i>(not including IDP camps)</i>	Number of settlements with Yezidi inhabitants	Current control of region
Afrin	33	Turkey and affiliated militias
Ras al-Ayn/Serekaniye	18	Turkey and affiliated militias
Amude	12	Syrian Democratic Forces
Hasakeh	24	Syrian Democratic Forces + some regime presence
Qahtaniyah/Tirbespi	8	Syrian Democratic Forces
<b>Estimated total of Yezidi settlements in Syria</b>	95	

### Baathist Rule: Denial of Yezidi Identity

Even before Hafez al-Assad became President in 1970, the central government in Damascus had promoted an ideology of pan-Arabism which denied recognition to many of Syria's distinct minority groups in an attempt to consolidate power over a diverse society. Later on, Yezidis were unable to identify as Yezidi on their official ID cards, but were registered as Muslims. They were not allowed to celebrate religious holidays, such as their New Year known as *Charshama Sor* (Red Wednesday), nor were they allowed to have Yezidi religious symbols on their gravestones. They were required to participate in Islamic Studies classes in public school and to swear on the Qur'an to testify in court. They were bound by Islamic Sharia courts in terms of marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws – although Yezidis are not Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

The ban on the Kurdish language also impacted the Yezidi minority. Under Ba'athist rule, parents were not allowed to bestow Kurdish names on their children. The Kurdish language was not to be spoken, even at private ceremonies such as weddings. Some Yezidis identify as ethnic Kurds who practice a distinct religion from most Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni Muslim. Others consider their Yezidi identity both a distinct religion and ethnicity, meaning they do not identify as Kurds or Arabs at all. For this reason, Yezidis can be considered a 'double minority' persecuted for both their religion and their ethnicity.

In short, under 40 years of Ba'athist rule, until forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad withdrew from the area in 2012, Yezidi identity was completely denied and suppressed by the government. Nor does the government in Damascus intend to confer on Yezidis any of their distinct religious or national rights, and it is therefore doubtful that restoration of regime control

in the area will allow them to return to their ancestral lands and rebuild their communities.

### The Islamic State: Enslavement and Genocide

At its height, the Islamic State ruled over some eight million people in Iraq and Syria, controlling a vast territory about the size of Great Britain. While millions of Iraqis and Syrians suffered under the rule of the Islamic State, Yezidis undoubtedly suffered the most. The list of atrocities committed by Islamic State militants is long: forced religious conversion, mass displacement, kidnapping, torture, destruction of sacred monuments and shrines, and the sexual enslavement of Yezidi women and girls. Islamic State militants swept across Syria, applying the same genocidal policies as in Iraq. Former Secretary of State John Kerry said that these "grotesque and targeted acts of violence bear all the warning signs and hallmarks of genocide."<sup>10</sup>

ISIS established and operated slave markets, known in Arabic as *souk sabaya*, in Syria just as in Iraq. These slave markets were set up in numerous cities including Al Bab, Al Mayadin, Al Shaddadi, Raqqa, and Tadmur (Palmyra). Other holding sites and prisons were created for female captives in Al Shaddadi, Tel Hamis, Al Mayadin, Deir Ezzor, Manbij, Al Bab, Al Tabqah, and Tadmur.<sup>11</sup>

A report by the United Nations Human Rights Council describes how ISIS inflicted different crimes on their victims, depending on their age and gender:

"Yazidi women and girls are violently and regularly raped, often by different men, and over a prolonged period of time. They are beaten, sold as chattel, insulted and humiliated. The treatment that

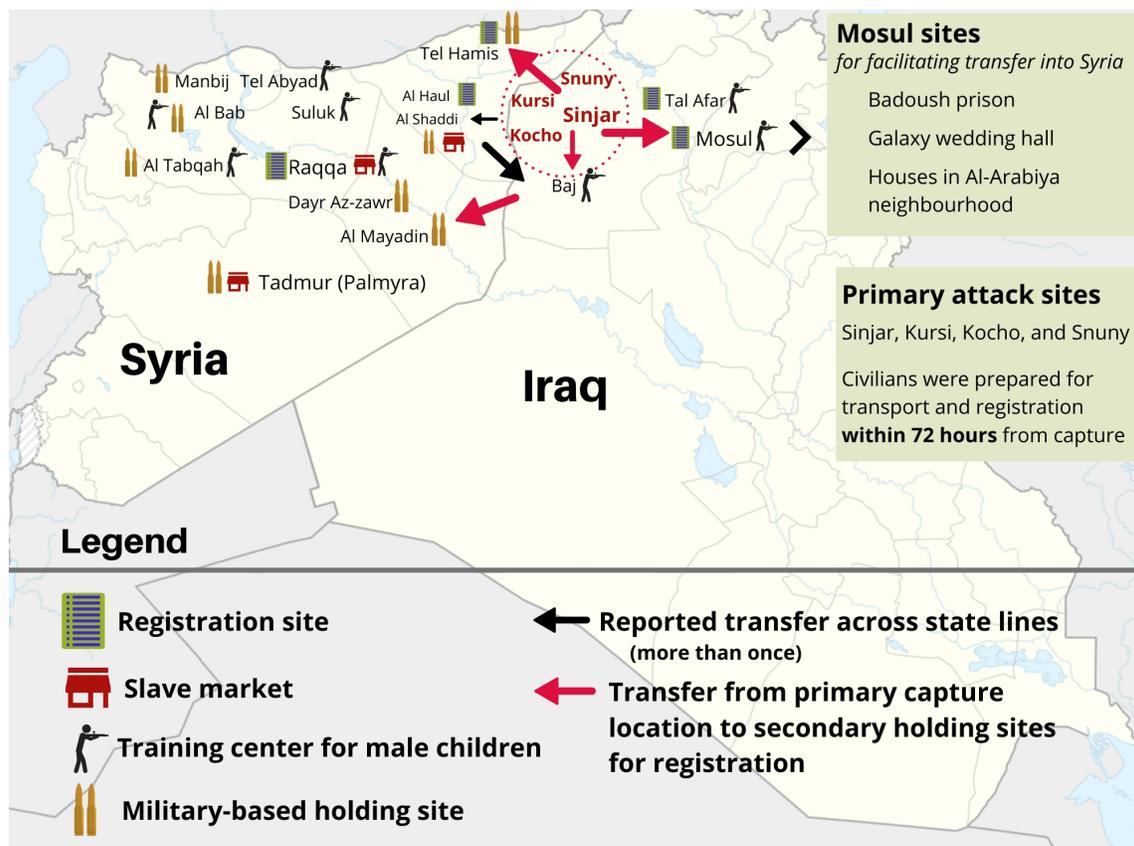
they endure in captivity causes them indescribable physical pain and mental suffering, effectively stripping them of their human dignity.”<sup>12</sup>

“In respect of its abuse of Yazidi boys between the ages of seven and 15, ISIS has committed the war crime of using, conscripting, and enlisting children.”<sup>13</sup>

ISIS was able to operate slave markets for Yazidis across their so-called Caliphate on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border and ISIS emirs enforced the same fatwas in both countries. ISIS henchmen conducted beheadings on public squares in both Syria and Iraq.

As the crow flies, there are Yazidi villages in Syria which are only 63 miles away from Sinjar, where the genocide took place in 2014. And yet, ISIS was never able to launch the kind of massive assault on Yazidis across the border because their communities were, for the most part, protected by the YPG and the Syrian Democratic Forces. Furthermore, the murderous rampage of ISIS across Syria was stopped before it could get to Afrin. Its doomed attack on the Kurdish town of Kobane marked the beginning of the end for the Caliphate. After a siege lasting more than four months, ISIS militants were defeated and pushed out of Kobane in early 2015.

**(Figure 2) Map of Sinjar attack and the logistics in transferring civilians to sites of slavery**



ISIS Installations in Syria and Iraq. Source: *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*

## Kurdish-Led Autonomous Administration: Recognition and Representation

When the forces of the Assad regime withdrew from northern Syria in the summer of 2012, the Kurdish-led YPG stepped in to fill the vacuum. However, the YPG was not able to establish full control of all the areas from which the regime had withdrawn and initially only took control of three cantons. These included Afrin in the west, Jazira in the east, and Kobane in the middle. The three cantons were non-contiguous and between them other armed groups vied for power.

Many Syrian Yezidis inhabited regions that had fallen under YPG protection since mid-2012. This protection, combined with the geographical isolation, especially of the northwestern canton of Afrin, allowed them to continue to live in their ancestral villages without facing a genocidal onslaught similar to what happened in Sinjar. The YPG did not only protect the Yezidis from the worst atrocities of ISIS, the Autonomous

Administration that was established allowed Yezidis a degree of religious freedom they had never previously experienced in Syria.

Perhaps the most fundamental change enacted by the Autonomous Administration was the recognition of the Yezidi religion under Article 33 of the Social Contract. Instead of hiding their religious beliefs, Yezidis were able to identify openly. They could celebrate their religious holidays, they had the freedom to not only practice their religion, but to choose their religion and convert without penalty. Yezidis were promoted to positions within the Autonomous Administration and a Ministry of Religious Affairs was established in which Yezidis, Christians, and Alevis were represented. The Yezidi Cultural and Social Association was established with its headquarters in the city of Afrin. Numerous smaller institutions, known as “House of the Yezidis” (Mala Êzîdiyan) were established in areas across North and East Syria. I visited one near the village of Amude in 2019.



Mala Êzîdiyan (Yezidis House) of the Jazira Region. Source: Author

Furthermore, the Autonomous Administration did not interfere in the internal religious affairs of the Yezidi minority. For example, the Yezidi community is organized in a hierarchy that is sometimes referred to as a caste system, headed by a religious leader known as a sheikh, and a secular leader known as a prince. Marriage between men and women of different castes is discouraged. Although the hierarchical caste system of Yezidi culture is at odds with the egalitarian ideology of the Autonomous Administration, which strives to achieve equality between genders and people of various ethnic backgrounds, Administration officials have largely maintained a laissez-faire approach to the Yezidi community.

Sebastian Maisel at the University of Leipzig is the author of several books on Syrian Yezidis. In one such volume published in 2017, just one year before the Turkish intervention in Afrin, he explained in no uncertain terms the significance of the Autonomous Administration for the Yezidis:

“For the first time in history, they [Yezidis] live in an area free from persecution and annihilation and find their beliefs and heritage appreciated by their neighbors. Not by all neighbors and not in every Yezidi village of course, but in those territories controlled by the Syrian Kurds.”<sup>14</sup>

The remarkable level of religious freedom has also been recognized by the bipartisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedoms (USCIRF), which was created by Congress in 1998. In their 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF wrote:

“Areas of northeastern Syria under AANES control – under SDF protection but with limited support from the United States and the GCDI [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS] at year’s end –

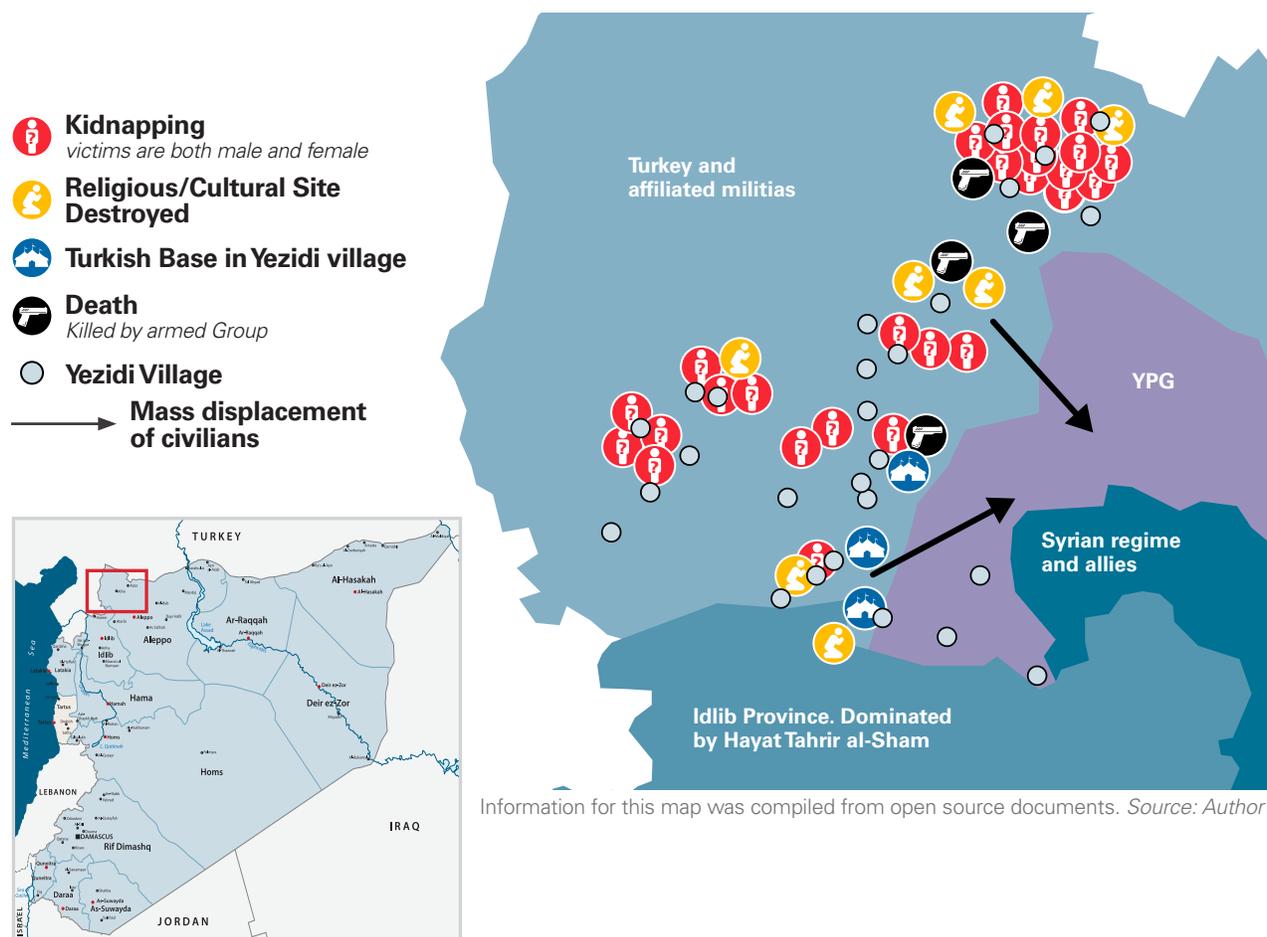
remained a crucial center of positive religious freedom conditions in Syria. As in the prior year, AANES authorities continued to allow Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, and others to openly practice their faiths and express their religious identities.”<sup>15</sup>

## Turkish Occupation: Kidnappings, Extortion, and Demographic Change

This bastion of religious freedom in northern Syria is being incrementally destroyed by successive Turkish military interventions. Turkey and Islamist militias on their payroll are now organized in what is known as the Syrian National Army (SNA), also referred to as the Turkish-backed opposition. In January 2018, Turkey launched a major offensive codenamed Operation Olive Branch against the YPG, resulting in the capture of Afrin in March 2018. The entire canton is now occupied by Turkey and a range of militia groups under its support.<sup>16</sup> To what extent Turkey is able to control or influence the actions of these groups is a matter of some disagreement among expert observers.

What is not in dispute, however, is that the Turkish-led intervention and occupation of Afrin has had a devastating impact on the native population, especially religious minorities. An estimated 90 percent of the Yezidi population of Afrin have been driven from their homes – either fleeing the area in advance of the oncoming militias, or forcibly evicted by armed gangs once they arrived. All Yezidi villages in Afrin, and those who remain, now live under Turkish occupation. This includes the 19 sacred Yezidi shrines in the canton, many of which have been defaced or looted. The Center for the Yezidi Association in Afrin was also attacked and defaced and Yezidi cemeteries have been desecrated.



**(Figure 3) Incidents targeting Yezidis and displacement from Afrin, Syria**

Since Turkey invaded Afrin, kidnappings of civilians have become a common occurrence. According to data collected by local human rights researchers, there have been over 1,500 kidnappings in Afrin since March 2018, when the region was captured by Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian militias. Other local monitoring organizations put the number even higher.<sup>17</sup> Until Turkey either withdraws or allows unimpeded access to Afrin for independent human rights organizations and journalists, it will remain challenging to verify precise numbers. Philippe Nassif, the MENA Director

at Amnesty International said, "There has definitely been an uptick in terms of persecution of anybody that shows any kind of dissent to Turkish or rebel presence in Afrin."<sup>18</sup> On June 4, 2020, a crowdfunding campaign was initiated on social media to help raise money for six Yezidi women who are allegedly being held captive in Afrin by one of the militias.

The Director of the Yezidi Association in Syria has been collecting information specifically on Yezidis who have been killed or kidnapped since the Turkish

occupation of Afrin began. He and others say they have not received any outside help to document violations against Yezidis despite the commitment of the Trump Administration to protect religious minorities. Using information provided by locals and cross-referencing with other sources we could confirm that at least 47 Yezidis have been kidnapped

in Afrin since March 2018. I provided a list of those cases of kidnapped Yezidis in my written testimony, which I submitted for the Hearing on “Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria” that was held by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on June 10, 2020.<sup>19</sup>

**(Figure 4) Kidnappings of Yezidis in Afrin**

Village and District	Armed Groups Active in Area
Burj Abdallah, Afrin	Hamza Division base in neighboring Bassouta village, <sup>20</sup> Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Sham active in district. <sup>21</sup>
Kimar, Afrin	Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Sham active in district; <sup>22</sup> Turkish base in village; <sup>23</sup> Hamza Division base in neighboring Bassouta village <sup>24</sup> and military presence in town since military operations concluded. <sup>25</sup>
Qara Bash, Afrin	Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Sham, Hamza Division active in district. <sup>26</sup>
Ghazawiya, Afrin	Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Sham, Hamza Division active in district.
Qibar, Afrin	Mu'tasim Billah Brigade post in village. <sup>27</sup>
Turandah, Afrin	Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, Faylaq al-Sham, Hamza Division active in district. <sup>28</sup>
Ain Dara, Afrin	National Front for Liberation, <sup>29</sup> Hamza Division base in neighboring Bassouta village <sup>30</sup> and presence in town since military operations concluded. <sup>31</sup>
Çeqelê Cûmê, Jinderes	Waqqas Brigade, Liwa Samarkand, Faylaq al Sham, Jaysh al Sharqiya and Ahrar al Sham. <sup>32</sup>
Qatmah, Sharran	Turkish base in adjacent Kafr Janneh village. <sup>33</sup>
Qestel Jindo, Bulbul	Faylaq al-Majd, Firka Shimal, Rijal al-Harb active in district; <sup>34</sup> Sultan Murad base 6km away in Qorne. <sup>35</sup>



Sheikh Junayd Shrine – before and after destruction – in Feqira (Qarah Bash). Source: *Ezdina News* (27 March 2018). "Robbing and destructing another yezidi shrine in Afrin." Accessed from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAPN73RG\\_qU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAPN73RG_qU)



Yezidi Center in Afrin – before and after destruction. Source: Author

Armed groups often demand exorbitant sums of money, as high as \$40,000, to secure the release of a single person. Even before the recent devaluation of the Syrian pound, this was an impossible amount to pay for ordinary Syrians. In June 2019, a 10-year old boy with Down syndrome was kidnapped along with his father and grandfather. The rebel group demanded

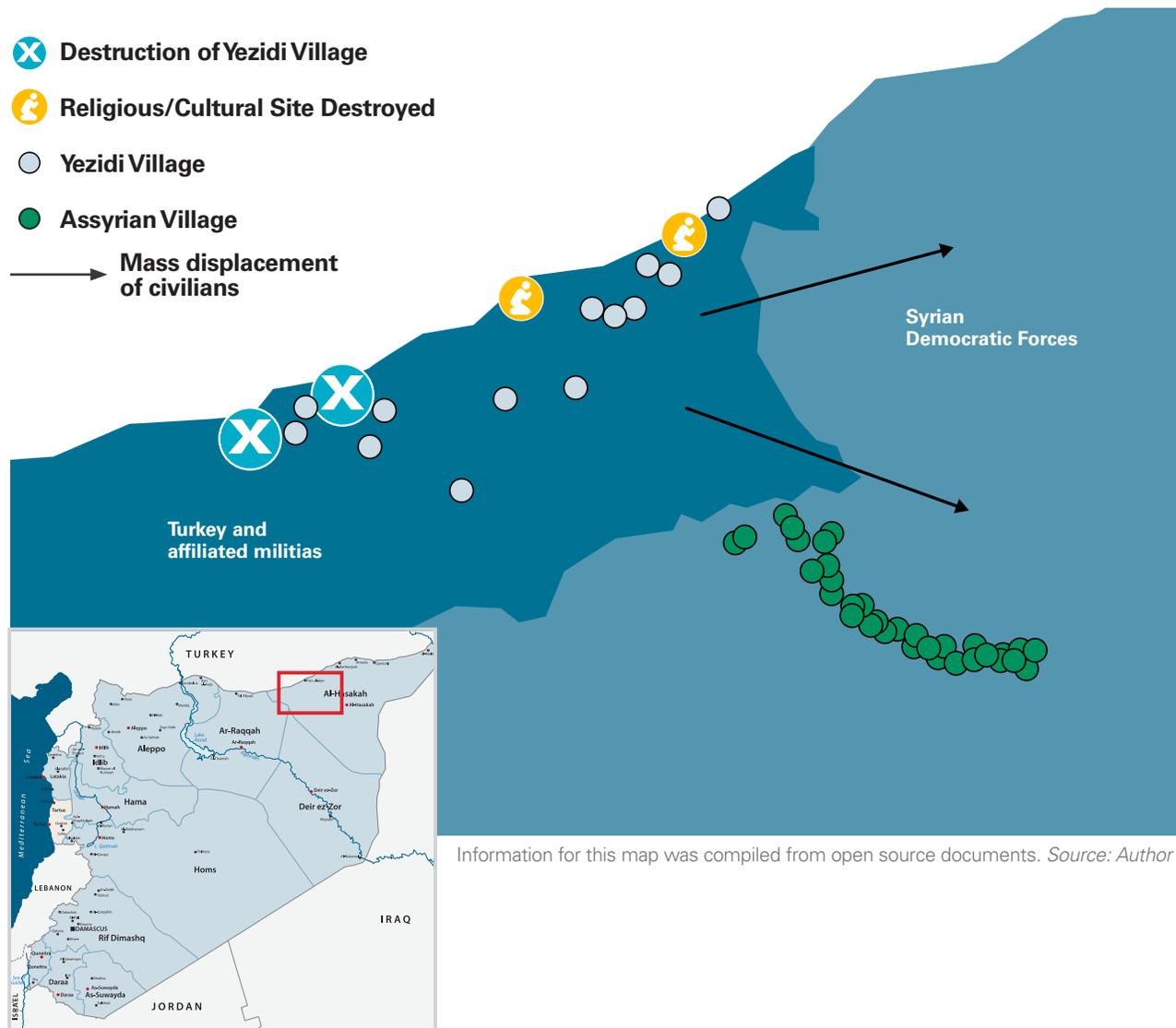
\$10,000 as ransom. All three were then killed when the family was unable to pay. Ali Hussein al-Khansuri's family paid \$40,000 to secure the release of his cousin Aziza earlier this year. He has six other family members who were abducted from Sinjar in August 2014 and are still held captive. The Syrian armed faction holding them has reportedly demanded



\$90,000 to release all of them.<sup>36</sup> If by some miracle the money is raised to secure the release of loved ones – usually through family members living abroad – Yezidis are still not safe.

On March 5, 2020, a 20-year old Yezidi woman by the name of Ghazala Battal was kidnapped in the village of Burj Abdullah by the Hamza Division. Just a few days later, on March 9, her mother Kuli Hassan was

**(Figure 5) Incidents targeting Yezidis and displacement in Ras Al-Ayn**



Information for this map was compiled from open source documents. *Source: Author*



also kidnapped by the same militia.<sup>37</sup> On February 5, 2020 a 19-year old Yezidi woman by the name of Laura Hassan was kidnapped in the village of Qara Bash (Faqiran in Kurdish). She was reportedly tortured and forced to renounce her religion. In May 2018, Omar Shamo Mamo, a 66-year old Yezidi man, was killed for refusing to convert to Islam. Some families have had multiple members of their family kidnapped and live in constant fear of being kidnapped again.

As I argued in both my written and oral USCIRF testimony, kidnappings, extortion, and forced religious conversion are ways to pressure the few remaining Yezidis to leave Afrin. They are methods of forcing demographic change, without actually killing people.<sup>38</sup>

### Impact of the Turkish Operation “Peace Spring” on Yezidis and Christians

The Turkish intervention in Afrin in Northwest Syria in early 2018 was approved by Russia, as the area was protected by Russian aircover since a deconfliction agreement was settled with the United States. US forces had never been stationed in Afrin. For this reason, many residents of the area placed the blame for the ensuing tragedy – including mass displacement of civilians and forced demographic change – on President Putin. However, a similar scenario was then repeated the following year, when another Turkish intervention commenced shortly after a phone call between President Trump and President Erdogan on October 6. The so-called Operation Peace Spring led to another wave of mass displacement of civilians and forced demographic change. After Operation Olive Branch launched in January of 2018, virtually all Yezidi villages in Afrin were occupied by

Turkey. During Operation Peace Spring, all Yezidi villages in the area of Ras al-Ayn (Serekaniye in Kurdish) fell under Turkish occupation as well. By some estimates forced demographic change has happened in more than 10 villages.<sup>39</sup> By other estimates “more than two dozen” Yezidi villages have been deserted.<sup>40</sup>

Operation Peace Spring also had a decimating impact on other religious minorities, especially Assyrians, Armenians, and Syriac Christians. At least 137 Christian families were displaced. Armenian families living in Ras al-Ayn were also evacuated.<sup>41</sup> The Armenian embassy in Damascus provided assistance to between 16-30 families. Due to this intervention, the second-deadliest concentration camp of the Armenian genocide in Syria is now under the full control of Turkey and its allied militias. In 1916, an estimated 65,000 Armenians were killed in Ras al-Ayn.

In an effort to end hostilities, Vice President Pence led a delegation to Ankara. The White House statement announcing the October 19 Ceasefire Agreement declared: “Turkey is implementing a ceasefire. The two governments committed to safeguard religious and ethnic minorities.”<sup>42</sup> However, Turkey violated the terms of the agreement negotiated by Vice President Pence less than one day after it was negotiated.<sup>43</sup> Turkey has continued to violate the ceasefire agreement since then, as militias continue to push farther east and west, expanding the areas under its control. There are 35 Assyrian villages in the Khabur region, which are just a few miles away from the area that Turkey and its militias control. Tel Tamer, which is the main population center, is only six miles from the frontlines. Some villages are even closer.



**(Figure 6) Yezidis in Syria under Four Regimes**

<b>Yezidis in Syria under Four Regimes</b>			
<b>Baathist Assad Regime</b>	<b>Islamic State</b>	<b>Autonomous Administration of NE Syria</b>	<b>Turkish Occupation</b>
<i>1970 ~ July 2012</i>	<i>ISIS Caliphate controlled ~40% of Syria between 2014 and March 2019</i>	<i>The AANES controlled Afrin from July 2012 until January 2018, and Ras al-Ayn until October 2019</i>	<i>The Turkish military and their proxies have occupied Afrin since January 2018 and Ras al-Ayn since October 2019.</i>
<p>Yezidis could not identify as Yezidis on their official ID cards, but were registered as Muslims</p> <p>Many Yezidi citizens had been stripped of their citizenship, and were treated as stateless (maktum) or foreigners (ajanib) in their own country</p> <p>Yezidis could not openly celebrate religious holidays</p> <p>Yezidis could not use Yezidi symbols on gravestones</p> <p>Yezidis could not give Kurdish names to children</p> <p>Yezidis could not name shops with Kurdish names</p> <p>Yezidis were required to take Islamic Studies classes in school, to swear on the Quran in court, and were bound by Islamic Sharia when dealing with marriage, divorce, or inheritance – although they are not Muslims</p>	<p>ISIS was never able to launch an assault against Yezidis in Syria similar in scale to the genocidal attack on Sinjar, Iraq</p> <p>When ISIS captured Yezidis, they were either enslaved or killed</p> <p>In Syria, ISIS operated slave markets in Al Bab, Al Mayadin, Al Shaddadi, Raqqa, and Tadmur (Palmyra)</p> <p>Female captives were held at the following military-based holding sites: Al Shaddi, Tel Hamis, Al Mayadin, Deir Ezzor, Manbij, Al Bab, Al Tabqah, and Tadmur</p> <p>Female captives were sexually enslaved</p> <p>ISIS atrocities against Yezidis have been recognized as a genocide</p>	<p>The YPG/SDF protected Yezidi villages from ISIS</p> <p>Yezidis allowed to identify openly as Yezidis</p> <p>The Yezidi religion was recognized as a religion in Article 33 of the Social Contract</p> <p>A Yezidi Cultural and Social Association and many smaller “Houses of the Yezidis” were opened</p> <p>Schools could teach about the Yezidi religion</p> <p>Yezidis were promoted to positions within the Self Administration and represented in the Ministry of Religious Affairs</p> <p>Freedom of religion, including freedom to be non-religious and freedom to convert were protected</p> <p>Between 2015 and April 2019, over 850 Yezidi women were freed from ISIS captivity in Syria by the SDF/YPG</p>	<p>All Yezidi villages in Afrin are now occupied by Turkey and Turkish-backed militias</p> <p>All Yezidi villages near Ras al-Ayn/ Serekaniye are now occupied by Turkey and Turkish-backed militias</p> <p>All 19 Yezidi shrines in Afrin are under Turkish occupation, more than half have been looted or defaced</p> <p>Yezidi cemeteries have been desecrated</p> <p>The Yezidi Cultural Associations in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn were destroyed</p> <p>Some names of Yezidi villages have been changed</p> <p>An estimated 90% of the Yezidi population of Afrin has fled since Turkey invaded</p> <p>Turkey has established military bases in several Yezidi villages in Afrin</p> <p>Yezidis have been killed for refusing to relinquish their homes or property to militias</p> <p>Yezidis still remaining in Afrin have been frequently kidnapped by Turkish-backed militias, sometimes demanding exorbitant sums of money as ransom</p> <p>Some militias have forced Yezidis to renounce their religion</p>

## Conclusion

Over the past decade, Yezidis in Syria have lived under four different regimes. When the forces of Bashar al-Assad still controlled the North, Yezidis experienced systemic denial of their identity. In prior decades many Yezidis had been stripped of their Syrian citizenship and had been rendered either as foreigners in their own country (*ajanib*) or entirely stateless (*maktum*). Those who were allowed to retain their Syrian citizenship were forced to register as Muslims. After Assad's security forces withdrew from northern Syria in mid-2012, Yezidi villages in Afrin and Jazira cantons were protected by the Kurdish-led YPG. When Islamic State militants took over large parts of Syria and established their Caliphate starting in 2014, they were unable to launch a genocidal assault on Yezidi communities as they had done in Sinjar, Iraq, because most Yezidi settlements were guarded by the YPG and SDF. However, Yezidis who had been captured in Sinjar by ISIS were bought and sold in slave markets in numerous cities across Syria, just as they were in Iraq.

Once regions of Syria fell under YPG/SDF control, the Autonomous Administration passed laws that for the first time recognized the Yezidi religion. No longer required to identify as Muslims, Yezidis could embrace their identity openly. Yezidis were represented in the Ministry of Religious Affairs and in numerous local councils and committees. For a few years, they lived free from persecution and fear of annihilation. They experienced recognition and representation, establishing numerous cultural associations. This brief flourishing of Yezidi culture lasted until January 2018 in Afrin and until October 2019 in Ras al-Ayn/Serekaniye, when the Turkish intervention put it to an end.

Virtually all of the gains in religious freedom established by the Autonomous Administration have been rolled back in areas now controlled by Turkey. While Turkey claims to only target PKK militants in its interventions in Syria, hundreds of thousands of civilians have also suffered. Furthermore, the cumulative impact of Turkish policies and the actions of Turkish-backed militias has been a change to the demography of the areas they control.

Yezidis in Syria who survived the genocide are now subjected to ethnic cleansing. Yezidis living under Turkish occupation have been killed, kidnapped, detained, disappeared, and held for ransom until their families pay exorbitant sums of money to secure their release. Some Yezidis have been subjected to forced religious conversion by militias. They have been forcibly displaced and driven from their homes. Their places of worship have been destroyed, defaced, and looted. Even their cemeteries have been demolished and vandalized. An estimated 90 percent of the Yezidi population of Afrin has fled since the Turkish intervention. Those who remain in Afrin live in a state of fear and are unable to practice their religion openly.

Turkish officials will likely deny responsibility for the actions of militias that operate in areas under Turkish control. But those armed groups are part of the Syrian National Army which is trained and paid by Turkey. Furthermore, as the evidence presented here illustrates, the persecution of Yezidis in areas occupied by Turkey is enduring and systemic. Turkish officials will also claim they are only targeting the PKK. However, they should answer for how the destruction of Yezidi shrines achieves this goal. How forcing Yezidis to renounce their religion achieves the defeat of the PKK. And why the militias on Turkish payroll kidnap so many people.



While some US officials and members of Congress have been quick to condemn Turkish actions that directly threaten US interests – such as the acquisition of S-400 air defense systems from Russia or the imprisonment of Pastor Andrew Brunson – the response to the repeated Turkish interventions in Syria since 2016, and resulting persecution of religious minorities, has not been as decisive. This may now be changing. In their 2020 Annual Report, the bipartisan US Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended that the United States “exert significant pressure on Turkey” to “provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria.”<sup>44</sup> On July 1, an amendment to the NDAA was introduced by Senator Menendez that noted that it is “the sense of Congress that Turkish and pro-Turkish forces should end all practices involving arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary executions, and other unlawful treatment.”<sup>45</sup> The amendment also required that a report be commissioned on violations committed by Turkey and Turkish-backed groups in Syria. The report should include:

“recommendations for establishing accountability mechanisms for civilian harm, war crimes, other violations of the law of armed conflict, and gross violations of human rights perpetrated by Turkish and pro-Turkish forces in northeast Syria, including the potential for prosecuting individuals perpetrating, organizing, directing, or ordering such violations.”

These recommendations and reports need to be followed up by concrete actions. Otherwise, endangered religious minorities who survived the horrors of ISIS, may not survive the Turkish occupation of their villages and forced demographic change. Unless Turkey withdraws from all of the areas it has

occupied in Syria, it is unlikely that the indigenous population, including religious minorities, will ever return to their homes. Yezidi communities have inhabited Greater Syria for a millennium, but they are now at risk of being erased from the map entirely in our lifetime.

### Recommendations for US Policy

1. Increase efforts to find the estimated 2,800 Yezidis who are still missing. Recently Yezidis have been freed who were being held captive in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq. Improved coordination between all relevant authorities is needed to find and release Yezidis who are still in captivity.
2. Set a clear timeline for Turkey to withdraw from all of the areas it occupied in northern Syria, as recommended by the bipartisan US Commission on International Religious Freedom. If allowed to continue, the Turkish occupation will prolong the larger Syrian conflict and also prolong the suffering of religious minorities, possibly leading to the permanent removal of Yezidis and Christians from their ancestral homelands.
3. Demand that Turkey uphold the October 17 Ceasefire Agreement negotiated by Vice President Pence which governs the regions occupied during Operation Peace Spring. In the ceasefire agreement, Turkish officials committed to protecting religious minorities. However, as a result of the Turkish intervention and occupation, virtually all religious minorities – Yezidis, Armenians, and Assyrians – have fled the area. If they do not return, the forced demographic change will become permanent.



4. Conduct a high-level fact-finding mission and visit the areas in Syria under Turkish control. The purpose of the independent bipartisan delegation would be to witness and oversee an investigation about the impact of the Turkish-led intervention and occupation on the people of the region, as required by the amendment introduced by Senator Menendez. This should include conducting a census and a survey of the displaced population and current inhabitants of the occupied regions. The findings should be compiled in a report that should be made available to the public and used to inform US policy.
5. Support the systematic documentation of ISIS crimes in both Syria and Iraq. Until now, Yezidis in Syria have been forced to document the atrocities against their community with virtually no outside support. This documentation will require increased cooperation between the authorities in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Until now, more resources have been dedicated to support the documentation of ISIS crimes in Iraq than in Syria. An uneven or unsystematic documentation of the genocide and war crimes against the Yezidis would constitute a further injustice to the victims. The research and documentation in both countries should be coordinated and conducted with the highest levels of academic professionalism.
6. Provide the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria with the support they need to continue their policies that protect religious minorities and support religious freedom. This should include support to rebuild infrastructure so inhabitants can return to their homes, as well as rebuilding schools and religious shrines destroyed in the war. Support the ongoing Kurdish unity talks, and expand the talks to include Yezidis, Christians, Arabs, and all the diverse religious and ethnic constituents of North and East Syria.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.



## Endnotes

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