

Report: Syria's Yezidis face 'existential threat' from Turkey, ISIS after US withdrawal

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The Yezidi community in Syria, along with other religious minorities, would face an 'existential threat' from the Turkish military operation or potential resurgence of ISIS that could follow the withdrawal of American military personnel from Syria, a [report](#) from the Free Yezidi Foundation warned.

There were an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 Yezidis in Syria before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. ISIS targeted Yezidis for extermination and enslavement, with their attacks on Sinjar, Iraq categorized as a genocide by several states and international organizations. Islamist opposition groups in Syria have also singled out Yezidis, and other religious minorities, for persecution.

The report warned that any measure that weakens the SDF would allow for a resurgence of ISIS—a grave threat to Syria's minorities. "With the absence of

another force to prevent such a resurgence, there is no doubt that 'Daesh 2.0' will be born upon the withdrawal of US forces and the reduction of SDF strength. Once Turkey engages in battle for Syrian territory from the West and the North, SDF will face a dual threat from Turkey and Daesh. Absent international support, this will be catastrophic for Syria, Iraq, and the whole world, it claimed."

The invasion and occupation of Afrin, the report said, is a preview of what the future might hold for Yezidis in Syria if Turkish forces or Islamist militias were allowed to attack SDF-held areas in the event of an American withdrawal. "Afrin, in the northwestern corner of Syria, was a safe haven that was often spared the worst of the Syrian civil war. In this area, members of various religions and ethnicities coexisted peacefully. Notably, this included Christians and Yezidis, minorities at extreme risk in other parts of Syria and Iraq. Turkey then took the action to invade Afrin, claiming a necessity for its own national security. Teaming up with a number of terrorist outfits that operate in Syria, including Al-Qaeda offshoots, Afrin was eventually completely overtaken. Many Yezidis have fled, which we know from the information from our own community and has also been reported. Our holy places were desecrated, many individuals from Afrin were persecuted," the report stated.

Interviews with displaced Yezidis forced out of Afrin paint a dark picture of the situation there. One Yezidi man kidnapped by a Turkey-backed militia was [threatened](#) when he gave his captor the name of his village: "These areas were occupied by the infidels and now it is [going] back to their original owners and original names ... We came here to regain our lands and behead you," the militiaman told him. Other displaced civilians describe individuals being forced to convert to Islam in order to access food or medical treatment.

American officials have given Yezidis, and other Syrians, few reasons to believe that they will offer protection from such a scenario. The United States provided no opposition to the invasion of Afrin, and U.S. officials have not spoken out against abuses that continue to be committed there. Calls from other Syrian religious minorities, notably the region's Christian community, have met little international response, despite the gravity of the threat they face.

The report concluded with recommendations to regional and international forces to continue support for the SDF in the fight against ISIS, work to ensure that Yezidi IDPs can safely return to their homes— and prepare to accommodate waves of refugees in the event of a Turkish invasion or an ISIS resurgence in northeast Syria.

"Any premature withdrawal of the United States forces from Syria not only endangers religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, it vastly increases the likelihood of a resurgent Daesh militant power," it concluded. "This is an existential threat to minorities like the

Yezidis."