



ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER

AFTER ISIS: ENSURING A FUTURE FOR CHRISTIANS AND OTHER MINORITIES IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

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BRIEF

North and East Syria is both religiously and ethnically diverse. It is inhabited not only by (primarily Sunni Muslim) Arabs and Kurds, but also by Syriac-Assyrian, Armenian, Turkmen, Circassian, Alevi, Yazidi, Nawar and Chechen minorities.

These ethnic groups themselves belong to different, sometimes overlapping, religious communities. The largest non-Muslim religious community is the Christian community, primarily made up of Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian Christians. According to research published by the Syriac Strategic Research Center, before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 there were about 300,000 Christians in the region which now constitutes North and East Syria. However, that number is estimated to have dropped to 100,000, as Christians in the region suffered large-scale attacks at the hands of ISIS, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and their proxy militias, and other radical jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra.

The Christian community faces the immediate danger of what interviewees describe as further ethnic cleansing by the TAF and proxy militias united under the banner of the Syrian National Army (SNA), under de facto Turkish control. In the most recent offensive, Turkish-controlled militias – many of whom subscribe to a jihadist ideology – have advanced to the perimeters of a traditional Christian heartland, the Khabour Valley.

Alongside the genocide they suffered at ISIS' hands in Sinjar, the Yazidis, who make up the next-largest minority denomination in North and East Syria, have also suffered forcible ethnic change at Turkey's hands. The small Yazidi community in Sere Kaniye was entirely displaced in 2019 as Turkey invaded the city, along with almost all of the Yazidi villages in the surrounding countryside, while the larger Yazidi community in Afrin was similarly decimated during Turkey's invasion of that region.

Christian community leaders in North and East Syria frequently describe attacks by both ISIS and Turkish forces as a repetition of the genocide carried out by Ottoman forces in 1915 against Armenians, Syriac-Assyrians and Greeks. That genocide drove thousands of refugees to the regions which today make up North and East Syria, seeding much of the region's religious and ethnic diversity. By the final decades of the 20th century, these groups were living under the control of the Syrian Government in Damascus. While tolerant of religious plurality to a certain extent, the Ba'ath Party under Hafez and then Bashar al-Assad enforced an Arab-nationalist

agenda which denied ethnic plurality and spread fear of dissent in civil society.

The outbreak of war in 2011 and subsequent establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) provided an opportunity for all of these minorities to establish their own civil organizations, political parties and military forces, often for the first time, as well as obtain guaranteed representation in political structures to represent their communities' interests. The AANES enshrines religious and ethnic minorities' right to practice their culture and beliefs freely, openly and autonomously as a fundamental aspect of its political project.

This aim has to some extent been realized, though in some instances minority groups have also experienced disagreements with the AANES. This report will give an overview of the history and present-day political, military and civil-society organization of religious and ethnic minority groups in the north-east. Primarily drawing on primary interviews, it will also provide a short assessment of the extent to which these groups have participated in the political process in the north-east, the disputes they have had with the AANES and how these have been resolved, and their prospects for survival in the 21st century.

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1 METHODOLOGY AND REMIT

1.1 AUTHORS

The Rojava Information Center (RIC) is an independent media organization based in North and East Syria. The RIC is made up of local staff as well as volunteers from across Europe and North America. Some of us have experience in journalism and media activism and came here to share our skills, and others joined bringing other skills and experiences to the team. There is a lack of clear and objective reporting on Rojava, and journalists are often unable to make contact with ordinary civilians and people on the ground. We set up the RIC to fill this gap, aiming to provide journalists, researchers and the general public with accurate, well-sourced, transparent information. We work in partnership with civil and political institutions, journalists and media activists across the region to connect them with the people and information they need.

1.2 AIMS

The RIC has been conducting long term-research on minorities in North and East Syria with the aim of furthering an understanding that the conflict in the north-east does not only affect the Syrian Kurdish minority, who are often framed as the only victims of ISIS and Turkey's military operations in this region.

Subsequent to our report '[Beyond the Frontlines](https://rojvainformationcenter.com/beyond-the-frontlines-the-building-of-the-democratic-system-in-north-and-east-syria-report-rojava-information-center-december-2019-v4/)'¹, which gave an overview of the unique political system being put into place in North and East Syria, we also wished to explore in more depth to what extent this model has been able to bring peace and stability to religious and ethnic minorities that have been prosecuted and repressed for hundreds, or even thousands, of years, in the context of a conflict which has often precipitated violence, prejudice and even genocide against these communities.

The report closes with policy recommendations for international actors seeking to ensure a safe future for Syria's religious and ethnic minorities.

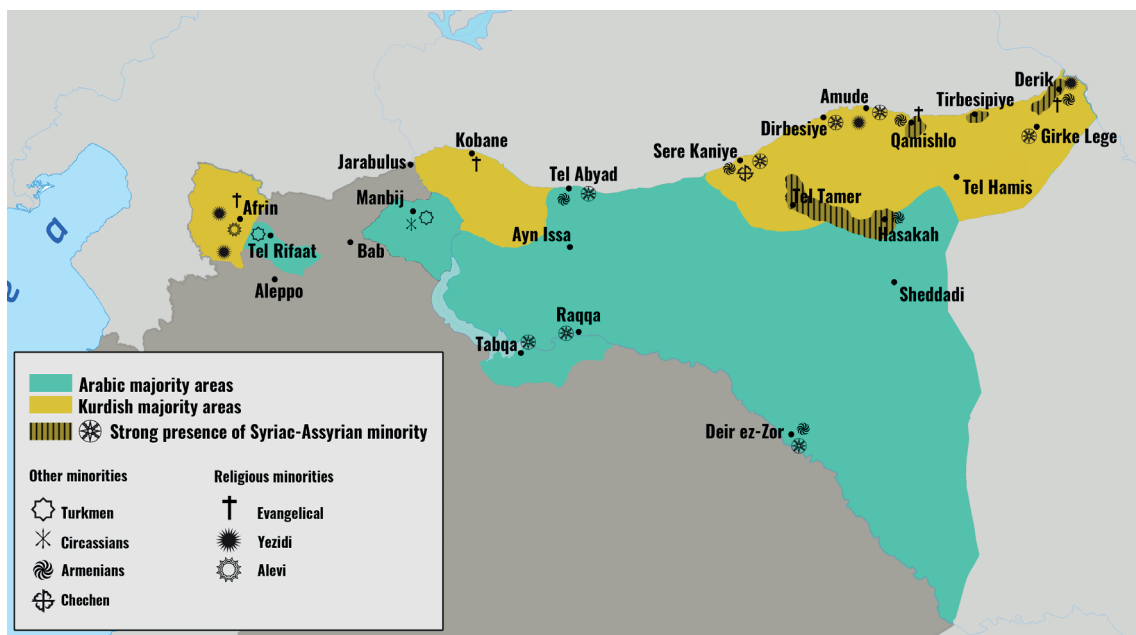
¹ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/beyond-the-frontlines-the-building-of-the-democratic-system-in-north-and-east-syria-report-rojava-information-center-december-2019-v4/>

1.3 METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The report is based on over 30 interviews with members of the various minority religious and ethnic groups resident in North and East Syria. The bulk of these interviews were conducted with representatives of political structures, civil society organizations, religious leaders and members of civil defense institutions – both autonomous structures affiliated to a particular religious or ethnic group, and members of these groups who are participating in broader umbrella structures on the level of North and East Syria as a whole. The report also draws on interviews with internally displaced people (IDPs) from the relevant minority groups.

Different people with the same religious-ethnic background may choose to refer to or define themselves with different terms. This has contributed to long-term confusion and lack of clarity about precisely which minority groups are present in North and East Syria, and how they relate to one another. We have attempted to clarify these differences within the report. Some inconsistencies inevitably resulted: while trying to highlight the areas which lack clarity, we acknowledge that there may be errors in the report as a result of this.

There was not scope within this report to deeply engage with the history, practices and representation of the ‘minorities among the minorities,’ like the Circassians or the Chechens, whose populations in the north-east are no higher than the hundreds. This report could also have been far longer had it taken on a more historiographic perspective, exploring the traditions, culture and religious practices of each minority, but we chose to give an overview of this background while focusing on the present political context. As such, the door remains open for further research examining each of the religious and ethnic minority groups in turn.



2 ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

2.1 OVERVIEW

As noted above, there is a significant degree of confusion about the nomenclature used for the religious and ethnic minority groups in North and East Syria. We provide some information about the general or traditional beliefs of each minority below, though it should be noted that due to mixture or even assimilation between minorities, many people identifying as part of these groups do not follow precisely these belief systems. Nonetheless, it is possible to divide the peoples of North and East Syria into three religious groups, containing a number of religious and ethnic subdivisions.

RELIGIOUS GROUPS	CONSTITUANT RELIGIOUS GROUPS		CONSTITUANT ETHNIC GROUPS	PRIMARY LANGUAGE
CHRISTIAN	SYRIAC	ORTHODOX	SYRIAC-ASSYRIAN	ASSYRIAN-ARAMAIC
		CATHOLIC		
	ASSYRIAN	NESTORIAN (ORTHODOX)	SYRIAC-ASSYRIAN	EASTERN NEO-ARAMAIC TUROYO
		CHALDEAN (CATHOLIC)		
	ARMENIAN	APOSTOLIC	ARMENIAN	ARMENIAN
CATHOLIC				
EVANGELICAL		KURD, ARAB (CONVERTS)	KURMANJI KURDISH OR ARABIC	
MUSLIM	SUNNI		ARAB	ARABIC
			KURD	KURMANJI KURDISH
			CIRCASSIAN	CIRCASSIAN
			CHECHEN	CHECHEN
			TURKMEN	TURKISH ² (TURKMEN DIALECT)
			NAWAR	NAWARI
	ALEVI		KURD	KURMANJI KURDISH
SUFI		KURD	KURMANJI KURDISH	
YEZIDI	YEZIDI	YEZIDI	KURMANJI KURDISH	

² Distinct from the Turkmen language spoken in Turkmenistan and central Asia.

2.2 COMMUNITIES

ORIGINS

The Assyrian and Syriac Christian communities in North and East Syria trace their origins to the Assyrian empire, a Mesopotamian kingdom in the ancient Near East and the Levant that existed as a state built around the Assur city-state from 2500 BC. It was one of the first empires on earth. Despite the empire's collapse in 600 BC, its remnants survived as a geopolitical entity, for the most part ruled by foreign powers.

Before the Roman conquest, their language, Aramaic, dominated the Middle East as far as Iran as the language of trade and commerce. Christianity arrived in Assyria between the early first and third centuries, when the Assyrians began to gradually convert from the ancient Mesopotamian religion to Christianity. During the fourth and fifth centuries, a schism developed over the nature of Christ. Over the course of 2500 years, the Aramaic spoken by different denominations developed into mutually unintelligible versions. Three of these varieties are still spoken as a mother tongue:

WESTERN NEO-ARAMAIC

spoken in the Anti-Lebanon region to the north-west of Damascus

EASTERN NEO-ARAMAIC OR 'TUROYO'

the mother tongue of most Syriac people in Syria

ASSYRIAN-ARAMAIC

the mother tongue of most Assyrian people in Syria³

The two latter varieties, still spoken today by Christians, are the most important minority languages in the Jazera region of North and East Syria. But over the course of centuries, many Syrian Christians have undergone a process of Arabization and now generally use Arabic in their daily life, a practice that even extends to religious services in some instances.

³ Schmidinger, Thomas, *Rojava - Revolution, War, and the Future of Syria's Kurds*, Pluto Press, 2018

'These differences exist because our people don't know their history. The regime wants them to think that they are originally Arabs. They just know what they learned in school, that the history of Syria is just the last 1500 years since Islam came. So how can these people know their own nationality? Solely through their relation to the church. So if someone says "I'm Syriac," it's because he is related to the Syriac church, and the same with Assyrian and Chaldean people.' — **Malak Hanna, Syriac Red Cross**

THE OTTOMAN GENOCIDE

At the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire engaged in a series of acts of ethnic cleansing, constituting genocide against minority communities living within its borders. These events had and continue to have a profound influence on the history, culture and politics of Christian communities across the Middle East in general and North and East Syria in particular.

In 1892, Sultan Abdulhamid II ordered a campaign of mass conscription or murder of Yazidis as part of his campaign to Islamize the Ottoman Empire, which also targeted Armenians and Christians in general.⁴ The principal genocide occurred in 1915, conducted by the so-called Young Turks against the Armenian, Greek Christian and Syriac-Assyrian peoples. Around 1.5 million Armenian and over 750,000 Syriac-Assyrian people were killed in this genocide, known to the Assyrians as Sayfo (sword) and to the Armenians as Aghed (catastrophe). Besides pogroms and massacres throughout their traditional homeland, and the forced conversion of millions to Islam, Armenians were lined up and made to walk towards the Syrian desert in convoys tens of thousands strong. Although the expulsions resembled deportations, brutal treatment at the hands of the guards overseeing the marches made clear that their real agenda was the planned elimination of the Armenian population through a process of starvation and exhaustion.

Others either survived the death marches or otherwise escaped to neighboring countries. When refugees arrived in Syria, they were distributed all along the border regions of Syria, including in what is now North and East Syria.

⁴ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13530194.2019.1683718?src=recsys>

CHRISTIANS UNDER BA'ATH PARTY RULE

More recently, life for all people in Syria – Christian communities included – has of course been dominated by Ba’ath rule. Under the Ba’ath governments which first took power in 1963 and came to be dominated by the Assad family by 1970, many minority groups were denied the right to publicly express their identity or engage in cultural or religious practices. Christian minorities were free to study their own language, but only privately. Their identity was kept alive through religious practice and via the oral transmission of tradition and culture.

It was common for Christians to work as employees of the Syrian Government and join the Ba’ath party, often reaching high levels in the government of the Syrian Arab Republic. In 1982, when the Muslim Brotherhood attempted uprisings in Aleppo and Hama, the Syrian Government arrested many Christians on suspicion of being related to other groups or parties, due to the fear of external forces outside of the Ba’ath Party. Some of the Christians arrested at that time spent up to 35 years in jail.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA TODAY

Regarding language, history and religion, we can divide the Christian community in North and East Syria into three groups: Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian. The first two are culturally close to one other and share a common heritage, but separated on points of language and by historic theological differences.

SYRIAC	SYRIAC ORTHODOX CHURCH
	SYRIAC CATHOLIC CHURCH
ASSYRIAN	ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST (NESTORIANS)
	CHALDEAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
ARMENIANS	ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH
	ARMENIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
GREEK	GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OF ANTIOCH
	MELIKITE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH OR BYZANTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH
EVANGELICAL CHURCHES	

SYRIACS

In North and East Syria, the Syriac community, also known as the Aramean community, is organized around the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syriac Catholic Church. The largest church in the region is the **Syriac Orthodox Church**, an ancient Christian Church tracing its history to Saint Peter and Saint Paul and their time in Antioch in the 1st century. There are large communities of this Church in Qamishlo, Derik, Sere Kaniye and many other towns close to the Turkish border.

In the 17th century a split in the previous church resulted in the formation of the **Syriac Catholic Church**. Although they have their own rites, they accept the Catholic Pope as their spiritual leader.

There is an Archeparchy of Heseke and Nusaybin, with eight parishes and about 5,000 believers, headed by Archbishop Jacques Behnan Hindo.

Under the Ba'ath government there was never a serious survey of the population figures of any minority, but a rough estimate suggests that more than 40,000 Syrians lived in the Jazira region prior to the war.



Syriac Orthodox Church, Heseke

ASSYRIANS

The Christian Assyrians of North and East Syria are organized around the **Assyrian Church of the East** (whose followers are also known as Nestorians). Their members lived in Hakkari (in present-day Turkey) until they were killed and driven out of that region during the 1915 genocide. They were resettled across 64 towns in Iraq, but in 1933 they became victims of the Simele massacre committed by the newly-formed

Iraqi Army, in which at least 10,000 Assyrians were murdered.

About 30,000 survivors fled to the French Syrian protectorate. They established the towns of Heseke and Tel Temir and around 35 villages between those two cities, along the Khabour Valley. This region was home to around 25,000 Syriac-Assyrian people. However, many of them left when ISIS attacked their villages in spring 2015. There is a huge diaspora of Assyrian people all around the world. The USA has the largest community, with about half a million members.

The Assyrian Church of the East also has a Catholic branch, the **Chaldean Church**. Today it is the largest Church in Iraq and has some parishes in North and East Syria as well. They belong to the Chaldean Catholic Eparchy of Aleppo that had about 30,000 believers before.

ARMENIANS

Most of the Armenians who arrived in North and East Syria following the 1915 genocide are members of the **Armenian Apostolic Church**, who operate their own church communities and schools in Qamishlo, Derik, and Heseke. This community also has its own **Armenian Catholic Church**, with a parish in Qamishlo. There was an important Armenian community in Kobane prior to ISIS' assault on the city, and Armenian communities in Afrin, Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye until the two recent Turkish invasions. Armenians can also be found in Deir-ez-Zor. Many ethnically Armenian people have been assimilated, and are now practicing Sunni Muslims, making it hard to arrive to an estimate of their population in the region.

OTHER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES: EVANGELICAL AND GREEK CHURCHES

In North and East Syria there are also small parishes of the **Greek Orthodox Church** of Antioch, part of the Orthodox Church under the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and its corresponding Catholic church, the **Melkite Greek Catholic Church**.

The **Evangelical** community is made up of Kurdish and Arab converts, meaning this small community also vulnerable to attacks by radical Islamic factions. Former Sunni Muslims attending Evangelical services may also face suspicion from their neighbors.

Such a church with three parishes existed in Afrin until 2015. They include the Church of the Good Shepherd, built in 2012, with roots in the Evangelical Union Church in Aleppo. Following the occupation of Afrin this church now operates in Shehba, with a congregation of about 150 families, a number three times lower than before the occupation. However, following the invasion of Afrin, a number of Muslim families started attending the church for the first time. There are also small evangelical communities in Derik and Kobane.

2.3 YAZIDIS

Yazidis are among the smallest minority groups in Syria – once numbering around 30,000 to 60,000 individuals.⁵ Meanwhile, about two-thirds of Syrian Yazidis have left their villages to find refuge abroad. In North and East Syria, Yazidis are present in both the Jazira and the Afrin regions. Co-chair of the Yazidi House organization Ilyas Saydo has estimated that there are currently only about 3,000 Yazidis living in 56 villages in the Jazira region, located in the countryside around the towns of Tirbe Spi, Heseke, Derik, Amude and Sere Kaniye.⁶ The six Yazidi villages around Sere Kaniye are completely empty now following Turkey's invasion and occupation of this region. Prior to Turkey's 2018 invasion, there were also 24 Yazidi villages in Afrin, with a population of somewhere between 5,000 and 15,000. Again, this indigenous population has almost entirely fled, either to elsewhere in North and East Syria, into Syrian Government-held territory, or abroad.⁷

Yazidi communities have a larger presence in Iraq, particularly in their ancestral homeland of Sinjar (Shengal) and the areas of Mosul and Duhok. Although there is a dearth of reliable statistics on demography, community estimates state there were about 550,000 – 600,000 Yazidis in Iraq before the ISIS genocide.⁸

Members of this religion trace their beliefs as far back as 2500BC and the dawn of civilization in the Middle East. The syncretic Yazidi religion has a number of unique characteristics. Their pantheon has a monotheistic God, but he is only the creator and is no longer an active, immanent force in the world. In his place, they worship Malak Ta'us, the peacock angel. They pray twice a day, when the sun rises and when it sets. The Jamiyah festival, a kind of pilgrimage to Lalish (Iraq), involves certain dances and the ritual beheading of a bull, while in North and East Syria different Yazidi communities in Afrin and Jazira have their own distinct rituals. Some of these rituals are traced as far back as ancient Sumer by their practitioners.

⁵ Sido, Kamal. Rojava – A “protection zone” for religious and ethnic minorities in northern Syria? https://www.gfbv.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Reporte_Memoranden/2016/Northern-Syria-research-trip-2016.compressed.pdf

⁶Idem

⁷ RIC interview with Eisha Sido, member of the Yazidi Women's Union of Afrin, Shehba, January 2020

⁸Domle. K. (2013) Yazidis: A Deep-Rooted Community in an Unstable Present. In Salloum, S. (2013) Minorities

Under the Ba'ath government, popular conceptions of Yazidis as devil-worshippers remained in place among the civilian population and were perpetuated in the education system. Yazidis were subject to repression of their (Kurdish) language and unique religion and cultural practices, in line with policies of Arabization. In 1962, about 60 percent of the Yazidis became stateless after the Syrian Government stripped residency rights from around 120,000

Kurds through Emergency Law no. 93.⁹ Affected people were deprived of all their civil rights, meaning they were officially unable to work, access services or move around the country. Yazidis could not always celebrate their religious festivals openly, but did so underground. In 2008, during the celebration of the Çarşema Sor ('Red Wednesday') festival in Faqir village, Afrin, large numbers of Yazidis were arrested.



Yazidi tombs close to Mizgeft village, in Jazira region

'Before the revolution we had no real existence as Syrian Yazidis. Our family experienced great suffering at the hands of the regime. They were constantly at our house, putting us under pressure due to our political activities. We couldn't sleep at night because we never knew when the regime was going to kick in the door.' — **Zinar, Yazidi journalist with the Yazidi channel Cira TV**

The Yazidis therefore faced twofold repression, both as Kurdish-speaking individuals repressed by the Ba'ath government and as members of a religious minority which has faced significant violence, prejudice and repression at the hands of its Sunni Muslim neighbors, including Kurds. Though the situation has historically been better for Yazidis in Syria as compared to Iraq, Yazidi interviewees report denying their identity to their Kurdish neighbors prior to the 2011 uprising, and experiencing feelings of shame connected to their religious identity.

⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/syria1007/3.htm>

2.4 MUSLIM MINORITIES

TURKMENS

Turkmen have had a presence in Syria for around a millennium, since nomadic Turkmen tribes in the region migrated in successive waves from Central Asia to work as mercenaries for Al-Mu'tasim, the Abbasid caliph. By the 12th century, the Turkmen came to power during the reign of Imad al-Din Zangi, the founder of the Zangid dynasty, and the Turkmen settled in Aleppo, where they came into confrontation with the Crusaders. In exchange for their military service, Zangi distributed fiefdoms in the area to the Turkmen. The Mamluk writer al-Qalqashandi indicates that the Turkmen formed units in the regular armies of Greater Syria. Turkmen lived mainly in northern Syria where they maintained a sedentary lifestyle, rather than the nomadic life of their forebears.

During the Ottoman period (1517-1917), Turkmen societies enjoyed semi-autonomous rule and were led by hereditary chiefs, considered the de facto rulers of the Syrian villages.

Syrian Turkmen, who are Turkish speakers, are now the country's third-largest ethnic group, after Arabs and Kurds. Before the Syrian Civil War, the number of Turkmen was estimated at between 200,000 and 500,000. They lived mainly in Aleppo and northern Latakia. In North and East Syria, the Turkmen population is mostly based in and around Manbij. Before the war, in Manbij region there were at least 11,000-12,000 Turkmen, with some sources indicating that up to 20% of the city's population was Turkmen in origin. There are also Turkmen around Tel Abyad, most of them close to the Turkish-Syrian border, and in Raqqa.

Turkmen fighters were among the first to join the armed uprisings against the Syrian Government, developing a close relationship with the Turkish state from the outset, and being given top posts in many of the Turkish-controlled armed factions. Some Turkmen-led battalions are now not only the most influential in the Turkish-backed SNA, but also among the most ruthless fac-

tions to have carried out Turkey's policy of forcible demographic change in Afrin and elsewhere.

Turkmen-led factions include the Sultan Murad Division, Suleyman Shah Brigade, Mohammad Fateh Brigade, Samarqand Brigade, and Al-Mu'tasim or Hamzat Division, among others. The Sultan Murad Brigade is the largest and most powerful of the Turkmen groups gathered under the banner of the

"Now, Turkey wants to impose its own system on our regions which it has occupied: to weaken the economic status of the people, to impose its own IDs on them. They seek to use Turkmen for this, to say that they have their own people on the border with Rojava, and that they speak the Turkish language, and that as such Turkey is responsible for them. They used this as an excuse for their occupation." — Edhem Bozo, member of the Neshwan tribe in Gidrish village of Afrin, IDP displaced into Shehba

Syrian Turkmen Brigades. For further information about the Sultan Murad Brigade, see RIC's factsheet on the SNA.¹⁰

CIRCISSIANS

The Circassians are descendants of Caucasian Muslims who fled to the Ottoman Empire following the advance of Russia and the brutal colonization of the Caucasus between 1763 and 1864, when Russian forces displaced between 1.5 and 2 million people. Only 100,000 of these people could escape to the Ottoman Empire. Before 2011, there were around 700 Circassian families in North and East Syria. Now there are around 150 families, almost all in Manbij.

Murad Khazma, a member of the Circassian Association in Manbij, tells RIC: "our relationship with the regime was peaceful. It was permitted to speak Circassian, and there was school for the Circassians, just as there is now."

CHECHENS

Syria is home to a small Chechen population, who emigrated there due to the Chechen-Russian conflict. After the Syrian Civil War's outbreak in 2011, about 3,000 Chechen militants also traveled to Syria in order to wage jihad there, and formed numerous anti-government militias. The most notable Chechen-led groups in Syria were Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, the Caucasus Emir-

¹⁰ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/03/factsheet-factions-in-the-turkish-backed-free-syrian-army/>

ate (Syrian branch), Jund al-Sham and Ajnad al-Kavkaz.

The hostility between Chechens and the Syrian Government is exacerbated by the close relationship between Russia and the Assad government, as well as historical Chechen-Russian conflicts. There are also a number of Chechen soldiers fighting for the Assad government, however.

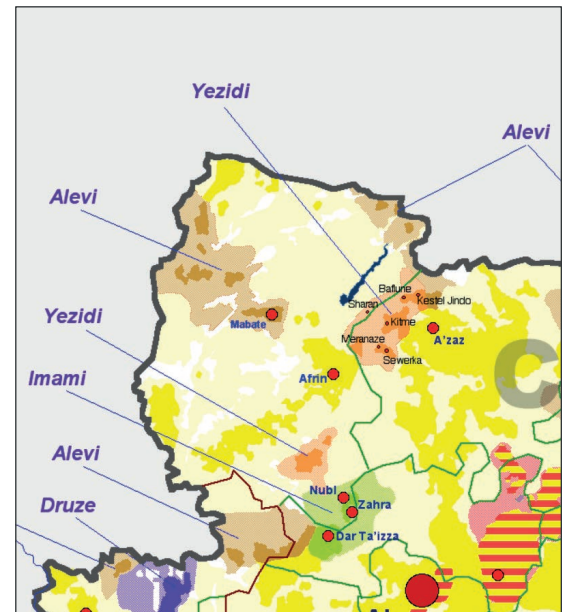
There are no reliable figures on the Chechen population in Syria; however, estimates ranged from 6,000 to 35,000 in 2008. In terms of North and East Syria, a small Chechen community lived in Sere Ka-niye prior to the 2019 Turkish invasion.

ALEVIS

The Alevis of Afrin are the only Kurdish-speaking Alevi community in Syria. They arrived over the past several centuries, escaping bouts of persecution in Turkey’s Anatolia. The most recent major influx was in the wake of massacres perpetrated by the Turkish Republic during the 1938 Dersim uprising.

Alevis follow a syncretic form of Shia Islam and Sufism (see below) based on humanistic ideals expressed in mystical poems instead of strict rules, passed on through oral tradition. They are followers of Ali, the brother-in-law of Prophet Muhammed, and the Twelve Imams of ‘Twelver’ Islam.¹¹ Interviewees from Afrin say their religious culture is connected to nature and a holistic approach to the universe, with these beliefs often drawing on folk beliefs alongside Islamic teachings. Each month has its own sacred meaning – for example, in the coldest and darkest month of the year, Afrini Alevis engage in fasting and prepare themselves and their land for the time ahead. Alevism is notable among Muslim sects, as it does not segregate men and women, even during prayers. Their rituals take place in a ceremony called the ‘cem’ (pronounced ‘jem’) in a meeting-house or ‘cemevi’.¹²

Afrin’s Alevis live within the centrally located Ma’abatli (or Mabata) sub-dis-



Alevis and Yazidis in Afrin

¹¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/02/10/religious-diversity-and-the-alevi-struggle-for-equality-in-turkey/#833810a6d03a>

¹² <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/3284/alawites-syria-alevis-turkey>

trict. The community's size prior to the Turkish investigation was estimated to be somewhere from 10,000 to 15,000. As Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, explains: "Alevi is not to be confused with Alawites, just as Protestants are not protestors. Despite semantically similar names (Alevi derive their names from their reverence for Ali, a close relative of the Muslim prophet Mohammed), Alevi and Alawites represent different strains of Islam".¹³ Within the context of North and East Syria, it is important to note that Syrian Alawites are Arabs whereas this Alevi population are Kurds.

SUFIS

Sufi Islam is an esoteric form of Islam with millions of followers in countries across the world, including significant communities in Turkey, Algeria and Sudan. In North and East Syria Sufi Islam has had a following for centuries, particularly among the Kurds in the Jazira region but also in Kobane, Raqqqa, Deir-ez-Zor and Afrin . According to the leader of one of the main branches of Sufi Islam in North and East Syria, there are between 5,000 and 10,000 practitioners in North and East Syria.

Practitioners describe their faith as recognizing differences and acknowledging each person's right to their own religion and own practices, and not at-

'Abdullah Ocalan's idea of the "brotherhood of the peoples" is very close to the Sufi understanding of Islam, and this is the basis on which the AANES operates in North and East Syria. The AANES respects everyone's right to practice their own religion privately, but does not allow anyone to force their religious beliefs on anyone else. Their approach is like the Sufi approach: moderate and gentle.'

— **Sheikh Qadri, Sufi Sheikh and Co-chair of the Religion and Beliefs Office of North and East Syria**

tempting to impose Islamic beliefs on anybody by force, instead placing importance on the connection between the individual and God.

¹³<https://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/17/are-syrian-alawites-and-turkish-alevis-the-same/>

NAWAR

Nawar is a term for several traditionally-nomadic communities used primarily in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Despite a shared origin and culture, interviewees from North and East Syria's Nawar people distance themselves from another traditionally nomad ethnic group of Indo-Aryans known as the Rom, Roma or Romani people. Nonetheless, like the Roma, the Nawar originate in the Northern Indian subcontinent. Several tribes who moved as far as Western Europe between the 6th and 11th centuries are called Rom, while those who remained in the Middle East are typically known as the Dom or Dumi.



Nawar man in 'Afrin' IDP camp, Shehba

The Nawar are a sub-group of the Dom who live in North and East Syria. Their language, Nawari, is a dialect of Domari; however, most them are at least bi- or trilingual and today also speak Kurdish and Arabic. While primarily Sunni Muslim, there are also a number of Alevi Nawar. Because of their nomadic origins, the Nawar have traditionally moved around rearing sheep, selling craftworks and working as itinerant dentists. There are than 30,000 Nawar in the region today, whose members sometimes live in settlements of huts and tents on the outskirts of towns and villages, although prior to the Turkish invasion there was a settled and prosperous Nawar community in the city of Afrin, where they continued their traditional work as dentists. The Nawar are spread across North and East Syria from Afrin to Derik.

'A hundred years ago, we came from the mountains of Bayazid and Agirî (Ararat) in northern Kurdistan. Why did we come here? Because of the violence we experienced in Turkey. Turkey's hand is behind all of this. We move from one place to another, which is our heritage. First we tended sheep, but afterwards we gave this up and everyone went to separate jobs. We didn't forget our roots, that we are all one tribe. Now our culture is mixed with the Afrin culture. Somehow, we have lost our original identity. During the rule of the regime, we were living under oppression, we were tortured. Later jihadist gangs destroyed our houses and forced us to flee. Now we are living in Shehba in security, thanks to the AANES. We cooperate with them and our children have become fighters in YPG. Some have also fallen as martyrs.' — **Masoud, Nawar leader**

3 ISIS: ATTACKS ON MINORITIES AND SUBSEQUENT EMIGRATION

As part of its rapid expansion throughout Syria and Iraq, ISIS seized control of around 100,000km² of territory, conducting a series of bloody atrocities against members of minority religious and ethnic groups in the process.

While it is not the objective of this dossier to document all of ISIS' crimes, ISIS' violence was particularly focused against minorities such as Christians and Yazidis. Per ISIS' ideology, Yazidis are not "children of the book" like Christians or members of mainstream Muslim denominations, and so legitimate targets for murder and enslavement, most notably in the Sinjar genocide. Christians, likewise, were specifically targeted by ISIS as non-Muslims, whose persecution served a dual purpose of sending a message to the Christian West.

Besides the Yazidi genocide outlined below, hundreds of Christians were slaughtered, beheaded on camera and targeted by ISIS bombings. Members of minority Islamic sects have also been targeted.¹⁴

ISIS' arrival in or near to Christian-populated regions in North and East Syria led to a large-scale emigration of Christians, and a subsequent decrease in their numbers. According to research published by the Syriac Strategic Research Center, whereas the Christian population east of the Euphrates was about 300,000 prior to ISIS' invasion, it is now only around 100,000.

"There were families who didn't leave the villages. They said they would stay there until the end, and they were taken away by ISIS. After some time, villages where ISIS had captured a great number of people were liberated by the young people of the Khabour valley." — **Madeleine Khamis, commander of the Assyrian Khabour Guards**

¹⁴ <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions>

CHURCHES IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA DESTROYED OR DESECRATED BY ISIS, JABHAT AL-NUSRA OR TURKISH-BACKED FORCES

This list includes Christian places of worship targeted by and looted, desecrated or destroyed by forces hostile to the AANES. It does not include churches struck by shelling during conflict, or syncretic holy places targeted in Afrin. See this overview by Bellingcat for a picture of widespread violations against other holy places in Afrin.¹⁵

CHURCH	LOCATION		OUTCOME
ST. MALKE SYRIAC ORTHODOX	GHARDUKATHE, TIRBE SPI		SEIZED AND BURNED BY AL-NUSRA IN 2013, SHELLED WHEN AL-NUSRA WITHDREW FROM THE VILLAGE
ST. BISHU	TEL SHAMIRAN	KHABOUR VALLEY	SEIZED, LOOTED AND DESECRATED BY ISIS DURING 2015 OPERATION
CROSS	TEL TALAAT		
ST. ZAYA	TEL GORAN		
ST. SHAMUN	ABU TINA		
ST. QEREYAQOUS	TEL BALUA		
ST. SHALITA	KHABOUR SHAMI		
ST. SHAMUN	TEL KHARITA		
ST. QEREYAQOUS	TEL MAKHADA		
ST. ODISHO	TEL TAL		
RAB HERMIZ	TEL HERMIZ		
MARY KHAMA	TEL NASRI		
ARMENIAN MARTYRS'	RAQQA		DESECRATED BY ISIS
PONTIC CATHOLIC			USED BY ISIS AS A WOMEN'S PRISON, AFTER TOTALLY DESTROYED
ST. SARKIS AND BAGHOUZ ORTHODOX	TABQA		DESECRATED BY ISIS
ST. SAMAN PONTIC CATHOLIC			DESECRATED BY ISIS, DESTROYED IN ISIS TUNNELLING OPERATIONS
SYRIAC ORTHODOX			DESECRATED BY ISIS
ARMENIAN MARTYRS'	MARKADH, NEAR HASEKAH		DESTROYED BY ISIS IN 2014
ARMENIAN	TEL ABYAD		DESECRATED BY TURKISH-BACKED SNA FIGHTERS IN NOVEMBER 2019
EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN	AFRIN		DESECRATED BY TURKISH-BACKED SNA FIGHTERS, MAY 2018

In 2015, ISIS launched an assault against the Christian heartland of the Khabour region in Heseke province. They seized most of the 35 Syriac-Assyrian villages there and took around 250 hostages, including women and children, demanding ransom for their return. As a result, 95% of the Assyrian population in the Khabour region fled. Christians were murdered and women were reportedly sold in Iraq as sex slaves. The majority of those captured were released following the payment of a multi-million-dollar ransom by private donors.¹⁶

The region remained partially occupied by ISIS militants for a period of approximately three months, during which time villages were looted and places of worship were set on fire or severely damaged by explosions. Fewer than 1,000 Assyrians returned to the Khabour Valley following its liberation from ISIS' control.



Mary Mariam Assyrian Church (Church of the Virgin Mary) in Tel Nasri, Heseke

“We experienced great suffering in that region. The same suffering from Sinjar through to the Khabour Valley, the same suffering repeats over and over. And now an occupying force [Turkey] has again passed into our lands, once again in the name of Islam, is slaughtering people once again. In Syria everyone is the mother, the sister of a martyr, the widow of a martyr.” — **Hevin Aisa, Armenian Council**

In Tel Abyad, the **Armenian** Apostolic community fled when ISIS took over the city in 2014 and returned when it was taken by YPG in 2015. In Kobane there was also an eight-hundred-strong Armenian community, which operated churches and a school. Following ISIS' attacks, only five Armenian Christians remain in the city. Abraham Karagulih, an Armenian doctor in Kobane, told RIC: “Our people went to Aleppo or Armenia, and they will not come back.”

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-bishop-mar-afraam-athneil-saved-226-christianhostages-isis-a7458376.html>

According to the Ministry of Diaspora of Armenia, since the start of the conflict, 16,623 Syrian citizens of ethnic Armenian background have arrived to Armenia. The government is offering several protection options, including simplified naturalization by Armenian descent, with 15,000 persons acquiring Armenian citizenship as a result).

The **Yazidi** genocide, which Yazidi community leaders describe as the 72nd genocide, pogrom or mass killing faced by their people throughout their history, took place in Sinjar in 2014 at the hands of ISIS. The Iraqi Kurdish 'Peshmerga' forces were ordered to withdraw before ISIS' advance, leaving the Yazidis defenseless. A series of massacres, rapes and abductions ensued, with ISIS killing nearly 5,000 Yazidis, capturing 6,300 more, and forcing 400,000 to flee to Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan. An estimated 55,000 Yazidis fled into the nearby Sinjar Mountains.¹⁷

In the mountains, dozens of Yazidis died of starvation and exhaustion, with

"People were driven out of their villages, brought to prison or killed. If there was a beautiful girl, they took her for themselves, had sexual relations with her, then sold her again. There was a market with a roundabout [in Raqqa], and that roundabout was a place for buying and selling Yazidis." — Saoud Digire, member of the Yazidi women's militia YJŞ and former ISIS captive

the remainder facing extermination at ISIS' hands until Syrian YPG units and PKK fighters stationed in these mountains could together open a humanitarian corridor to Rojava. Images of the Yazidi genocide and the opening of the humanitarian corridor were seen around the world, and this event – together with the YPG's successful defense of Kobane against besieging ISIS forces - was a significant contributing factor towards the creation of the USA-led International Coalition to defeat Daesh. Sinjar was liberated some months afterward, in a joint operation involving PKK fighters, Yazidi units and Peshmerga units, backed by US airstrikes. The UN would later formally recognize ISIS' actions in Sinjar as constituting genocide.

¹⁷ <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions>

4 MINORITIES IN THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

4.1 AANES STANCE ON MINORITY GROUPS

The withdrawal of the Syrian Arab Army and subsequent YPG and YPJ victories against ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist groups brought the Syrian Kurdish movement to a position where it was able to declare autonomy in the three Kurdish-majority cantons of Rojava in 2014. A core idea of the political paradigm advanced by this movement, on the basis of ideas developed by imprisoned PKK leader and Kurdish political figurehead Abdullah Ocalan, is that they do not seek to establish a state of their own. They instead fight for a political system that embraces the cultural and political rights of all people.

According to this political philosophy, the shared values and principles of a society are seen as more important than the ethnicity or religion of the people living in it, as opposed to the model of “one nation, one flag and one party,” common to the Assad and Erdogan governments, among other Middle Eastern powers.

This distinguishes the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitîya Demokrat, or PYD) – and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) in which it plays a leading role – from its principal political rivals in Syrian Kurdistan, the Kurdish-nationalist parties which form the ENKS coalition and favor the establishment of a Kurdish-nationalist state or statelet after the pattern of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

Advocates of the political system advanced by the PYD say it avoids the danger of reproducing the oppression of one people by another via a state apparatus dominated by members of one ethnicity, as has occurred in the KRG with Kurdish repression of the Yazidi minority there, for example (see above).

Later, this led to the September 2018 creation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) as the main structure of self-governance, covering not only the three original Kurdish-majority cantons in Jazira, Kobane and Afrin but also Arab-majority areas in Raqqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and Deir-ez-Zor liberated during the war against ISIS. An account of this system

in theory and practice can be found in the RIC report “Beyond the frontlines: the building of the democratic system in North and East Syria.”¹⁸

“The AANES was built with Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, Arabs... so it made possible the creation of a brotherhood of peoples in the region. It is not based on a certain religion or race, but on democracy.” — Joseph Lahdo, leading member of the Syriac community and AANES co-chair for Local Municipalities and Ecology

Rather than dissolving identity, culture and language, as happened under successive Ba’ath governments in Syria, this ideology aims to promote the establishment of a “democratic nation,” built on the principle that all identities should be given space to organize themselves and be represented at every level of decision-making, but that none should be given a higher status than others.

4.2 LANGUAGE AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

This is put into practice in North and East Syria through policies such as the adoption of Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac-Aramaic as the three official languages of North and East Syria, though practically speaking Arabic remains the lingua franca and primary language of most meetings and political affairs, and official documents are typically published only in Arabic. All children are taught in their mother tongue, plus a second language (typically Arabic or Kurdish, as applicable).

Case Study: The Executive Committee of the AANES

In the Executive Committee there are 2 co-chairs from different parties:

- 1 Kurdish woman from Jazira
- 1 Arab man from Raqqa

And also 5 vice-chairs:

- 2 Arabs, each a representative of a different tribe
- 1 Kurd as representative of the Kurdish community in Afrin
- 1 Kurd as a representative of the Kurdish community in Jazira
- 1 representative of the Christian community

¹⁸ <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions>

“When we were young we lived with neighborly good feeling between Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs and Turkmen. But the authoritarian state created differences in between us, and forced us to take backward steps. Kurds and Arabs looked on one another with mistrust. After the revolution, unity developed between all the peoples of the region, to live together, struggle together, fight together on one front and become connected to one another.

In the system of the AANES, whichever one of our departments you look in, you will never find a department completely made up of people of one [ethnic or religious] origin. Each co-chair, each vice-chair, is from a different origin: as many origins as there are races in our region. This is all in addition to political parties representing the individual ethnic groups. Our system has been built up on the basis of the democratic nation and the unity that exists here is not just something which is written in our social contract, forcing all these nations to participate in the AANES: rather, this culture is the culture of North and East Syria.”

— Berivan Khaled, co-chair of the Executive Council of the AANES

Another important step taken by the AANES was the establishment of specific legislation protecting Christians’ property. As a rule, property rights in North and East Syria are “by use.” The AANES does not engage in expropriations of property, and anyone resident in the north-east has the right to retain their property for use as prior to the war. However, should they leave the region, rather than standing empty, their land or property may be put to reuse by the political and military administration – as co-operative farming land, for example, or as a military outpost, administrative office or women’s house.

This law, however, does not apply to land owned by Christians. In recognition of the special hardship and dangers which caused so many of the local Christian population to flee in the face of ISIS’ advance, the AANES has enshrined special protections meaning that Christians’ land, homes, property and churches are held in trust until such time as they may return to the region, with a special committee of members of the Khabour Valley Christian community established to administrate this law and resolve any disputes that may arise. (See below for an account of property disputes between the AANES and Christian communities which led to this decision.)

Though this committee has on occasion donated land belonging to the Christian community for use in housing IDPs displaced by the Turkish invasion, the large majority of abandoned Christian property and villages remains held in abeyance until such time as the population feels safe enough to return.

Case Study: Tel Nasri

The village of Tel Nasri, south of Til Temir, was originally an Assyrian Christian village. Prior to ISIS' invasion of the region, it was home to around 70 Assyrian Christian families. Following ISIS' invasion of the region, the village was left largely empty, as the majority of its residents fled to the relative safety of nearby cities like Til Temir or Heseke – or, more commonly, left Syria altogether and traveled to Europe as refugees.

Under the laws of the AANES (see above), Christian property is granted special protections. As such, the village remained largely empty even following ISIS' defeat and the return of civilian life to Til Temir and its environs.

Following Turkey's invasion of Afrin in January 2018, hundreds of thousands of primarily Kurdish IDPs fled the region and traveled eastward into Jazira. Recognizing the urgent need, the committee charged with administering Christian land held in abeyance offered to open up Tel Nasri and other villages to IDPs. The offer was repeated in October 2019, as Turkey once again invaded Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, driving many more Kurdish, Arabic and other IDPs southward from Sere Kaniye toward Til Temir.

As a result, the village is now home to just three remaining Assyrian families, plus scores of families of Kurdish IDPs from Afrin; scores more families of Kurdish refugees from Sere Kaniye; and a number of Arabic IDP families, also from Sere Kaniye and Arab villages in the surrounding countryside. In some cases, there are five or six families living in a single home, as well as occupying a large hall originally built as a meeting-place for villagers. The village is experiencing shortages of tarpaulin, gas, and other essentials.

The village residents are therefore organizing themselves into communes for the distribution of aid and mutual support. There is one commune of Assyrian Christians; two for the Arabs from Sere Kaniye; two for the Kurds from Sere

Kaniye; and two for the Kurds from Afrin. All of these communes should have male and female co-chairs, and each is represented on a village-wide council. In this way, the residents hope to respect their varying way of life while still organizing as one communal body, and ensuring that the voices of the Assyrians are not swamped by the new-comers.

The main difficulty the village council has faced so far in this process is convincing the conservatively-minded Assyrian Christian families to put forward a female co-chair alongside their male representative on the council, in particular given the very low number of Assyrian families left in the village. Nonetheless, the council members say that Assyrian representation is of particular importance, and they are working to accommodate the Assyrians as fully as possible into the village council.

4.3 THE RELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY AND ACADEMY FOR DEMOCRATIC ISLAM

The AANES's secular position on religion is laid out in the Social Contract, the founding document of what was then known as the Democratic Federation of North and East Syria. The Social Contract states that public affairs are not to be conducted on the basis of religious beliefs nor on the basis of familial or tribal culture, while simultaneously recognizing religious institutions and the right of every citizen to practice religious beliefs.

There are a number of AANES initiatives at work to put these principles into practice. The Religious Assembly was established alongside the declaration of autonomy of Rojava in 2014, by members of the local Christian community, the Yazidi House and the Union of Muslim Believers. It is part of TEV-DEM, an umbrella organization that gathers all the civil organizations of North and East Syria.

The Assembly works to promote interfaith harmony and understanding, organizing social and institutional visits between members of different faiths: delivering educational programs on faith and mutual understanding, including in communities liberated from ISIS; and appearing regularly on local TV and radio networks to discuss faith matters.

The Religion and Beliefs Office began its work at the same time as The Religious Assembly, but as part of the executive body. Nowadays it is part of the AANES. Sheikh Qadri, co-chair of the Religion and Beliefs Office and also one of the founders of the Religious Assembly, tells RIC that the Assembly was founded in order to “promote respect between religions, for example encouraging members of the different communities to join the holy celebrations of other communities, such as Ramadan (a Muslim celebration), Easter (Christian) or Çarsema Sor (Yazidi).”



Sheikh Qember (Mendim), Yazidi religious leader; Sheikh Qadri, Sufi religious leader and co-chair of the Religion and Beliefs Office; and Seher, Arab Muslim member of the Religious Assembly of North and East Syria

“I searched all over the world and humanity, but I never before saw something like this, where Yazidis, Muslims and Christians sit together. I want to tell you something, from my heart: today, I am a Yazidi, but I place our holy books next to the holy Koran, and embrace both of them. You will see nothing like this anywhere else.”
— **Sheikh Qember (Mendim), Yazidi religious leader**

In 2019, the Academy for Democratic Islam was created by members of the Religious Assembly, with the aim of promoting mixture and exchange between religions and beliefs. A committee was created to train mullahs [Islamic religious teachers] over the course of two years. Graduates will deliver sermons in local mosques and promote a new religious culture, described by Sheikh Qadri as a model of a gentler Islam in opposition to the ‘hard’ Islam of ISIS: “Our military forces have succeeded in defeating ISIS, but their ideology and way of thinking remains. We want this mentality to be cleansed from our lands as well, and achieve an ideological victory also.”

4.4 WOMEN AND RELIGION

In North and East Syria, women are particularly at risk of hardship and the denial of their human rights as a result of cultural practices linked to Islam, and to a lesser extent other religions such as Yezidism and the various Christian denominations. Hardships faced by women include honor killings, domestic violence, forced marriage, and restriction to domestic labor in the home.

“The existence of this system is something with great value and significance. Because as women, our voices are heard, we can express ourselves and declare our truth.” — **Seher, Religious Assembly of North and East Syria**

Women in the Religious Assembly, along with colleagues from the Waqfa Jin (Women’s Institute), work to specifically tackle these issues among women. More broadly, much of the work of the women’s movement in North and East Syria is concerned with tackling misogyny and gender-based violence and oppression among Muslim and other faith communities. You can see our dossier “Beyond the Frontlines” for a fuller overview of the political and civil society institutions at work in this area, and see below for a look at the role and position of women in political parties, military forces and civil society institutions associated with the various minority religious and ethnic groups.

COMMUNES AND COUNCILS

The commune is the lowest level of political organization in the AANES’ system of grassroots-up democracy, generally made up of less than 200 families. Every person, of any ethnicity or religion, has the right to participate in their commune and to submit reports, complaints or proposals via the commune to be relayed to higher levels of the AANES where appropriate. Interviewees in ethnically “mixed” communes report that this can generate understanding between neighbors of different religious or ethnic backgrounds, because through the commune their voice can be heard at the same level, though in practice most communes remain primarily or wholly made up of people from a single ethnic or religious background.

From neighborhood to regional level, all ethnic groups are represented on the councils of the region, as well as in the leadership of each council.

All ethnic groups in a given region should be represented among the co-chairs and deputy co-chairs of that region, meaning the ‘higher’ levels of the political system are more ethnically and religiously mixed than the hyper-local communes.

In rural areas one commune can be a whole village, or even several villages, of a particular ethnic or religious background, while some city neighborhoods are also ethnically homogenous. As such, it is not uncommon for ethnic and religious minorities (in particular) to organize themselves autonomously on the commune level. For example, in Manbij city, Turkmen organize themselves autonomously within the communes of the five all-Turkmen neighborhoods and in Turkmen villages.

“Now the communes are resolving not just questions of bread and diesel, but personal questions, questions of religious beliefs, conflicting opinions, all kinds of things.” — **Mohamed Said, PYD co-chair in Tel Tamer**

5 MINORITY RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS

5.1 OVERVIEW OF KEY ORGANIZATIONS IN NORTH AND EAST SYRIA

	SYRIAC	ASSYRIAC	ARMENIAN	YAZIDI
POLITICAL PARTY	SYRIAC UNION PARTY	ASSYRIAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY ASSYRIAN DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATION		
WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION	SYRIAC WOMEN'S COUNCIL	ASSYRIAN WOMEN'S COUNCIL		YAZIDI WOMEN'S UNION
CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION			ARMENIAN COUNCIL	YAZIDI UNION (IN AFRIN AND JAZIRA)
MILITARY FORCE	SYRIAC MILITARY COUNCIL (MFS)	KHABOUR GUARDS	ARMENIAN TABUR	YBŞ (IN SINJAR)
WOMEN'S MILITARY FORCE	BETHNAHRIN WOMEN'S PROTECTION FORCES (HSNB)	KHABOUR GUARDS WOMEN'S UNITS		YBŞ (IN SINJAR)
INTERNAL SECURITY FORCE	SUTORO SOOTORO	NATTOREH		

5.2 POLITICAL PARTIES

The Syriac Union Party (SUP) was created in October 2005 and operated secretly until 2011. SUP members have faced imprisonment, torture and disappearance at the hands of the Syrian Government's security apparatus, most notably the disappearance of executive committee member Rubel Gabriel Bahho and SUP vice-president Sait Malki Cosar, both of whom are missing and presumed dead. In 2011 SUP members joined mobilizations in opposition to the Assad government in Damascus. However, members soon left the opposition due to its failure to recognize the Syriac-Assyrian cause and the rapid rise of Sunni extremism among the ranks of the armed opposition. In 2014 the SUP joined the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (the previous incarnation of the AANES). The SUP's participation came despite internal opposition from some quarters of the Syriac community, many of whom remain close to and influenced by the Syrian Government. Interviewees tell RIC the Assad government has used Syriac media and church sermons to spread disinformation and discourage their participation in the political project in North and East Syria.

"In the beginning of the revolution we were in favor of change and peaceful struggle. That's why we participated to demonstrations (with the opposition). But we saw that a lot of persons and organizations that were taking part in the demonstrations were problematic and far from the ideal in which we believed." — **SUP Member, Qamishlo**

Like the SUP, the Assyrian Democratic Party (ADP) was formed during the rule of the Ba'ath government, historically standing closer to Damascus than the rival Assyrian Democratic Organization (see below). After the establishment of autonomy in 2012, the ADP opened formal offices in Til Temir, Heseke and Qamishlo. Its aim was to organize the Assyrian people to secure their cultural and religious rights. As opposed to the SUP, the ADP was traditionally broadly supportive of the Syrian Government, but despite some disputes its relations with the AANES and PYD have gradually improved over the years since 2012. (See below for more information on these disputes.) The ADP is a participant in the SDC and has recently expressed support for its political project of federalism and regional autonomy.

Per Shaxmun Kako, a spokesperson of the ADP, the Assyrian people “don’t want to organize their life around tribal leaders, which is the practice of the surrounding Arab population,” and in this sense have proven open to the political project in the north-east as the best possible alternative, while still remaining a closely-knit population which prefers to conduct its own affairs where possible.



Shaxmun Kako, Assyrian Democratic Party

The ADP is not affiliated with the **Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO)**, which is aligned with the Syrian National Council, the internationally-recognized but politically impotent official opposition-in-exile. The ADO has aligned itself with the Syrian opposition, and at the time of writing had just formed a new alliance with the Kurdish opposition coalition ENKS at a meeting in Qamishlo, in the context of ongoing negotiations between ENKS and the PYD.

Yazidis have not established their own political party. However, following the establishment of the AANES, Yazidis moved from a position of extreme marginalization to one where their beliefs and practices are actively highlighted by advocates of the dominant political philosophy as an example for others to follow. As a result, the Yazidi community is proportionally extremely active in the political structures and new social movements of North and East Syria.

In opposition to elements of the Christian community, the Yazidi community has actively participated in the political project in the north-east from the outset. Many Yazidis play a prominent role within the municipalities of cities and the individual ministries and bureaus. Despite the small size of their population, four chairs are specifically reserved for Yazidis at the highest level of the AANES.

Among them is Suleiman Jafar, co-chair of the Legislative Council of North

and East Syria.

There was no **Armenian** party before the revolution, since this community has long been the most assimilated into the Arab community, and until this day they have no formal political party of their own. Armenian people participate in many AANES structures as individuals, while at the same time, there are many Armenians, mainly in cities, who retain connections to the Assad government.

5.3 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

Despite their lack of a political party, the **Armenian** community in Heseke is in the process of setting up an Armenian Council. This civilian organization aims to promote Armenian culture, history and language, and in particular understanding of the Armenian Genocide. It still hasn't been formally opened as an office – with its planned office space currently occupied by IDPs displaced in the latest Turkish invasion – but planning and recruitment are underway.

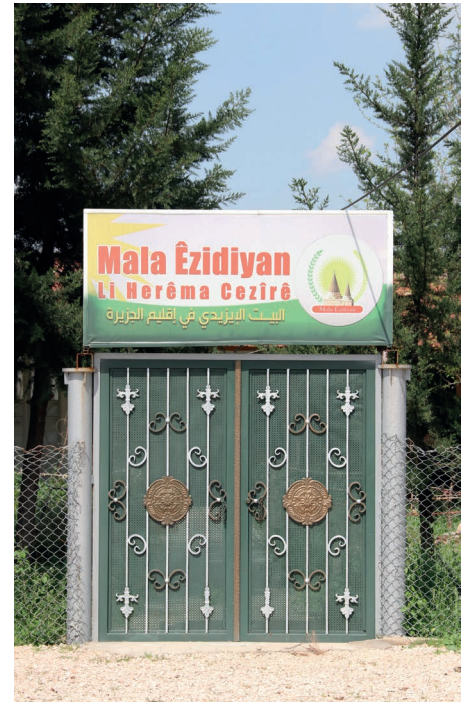
The council is first being built up in the Jazira region and in the future wants to expand into other regions where there are also Armenian communities as Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor, and even outside of North and East Syria, for example in Homs. As a result of the Armenian community's traditional closeness to the Assad government, co-founder Hevin Aisa stresses to RIC that the Armenian Council will function on a bilateral or non-aligned basis, welcoming both Armenians aligned with the AANES and those close to Damascus.

The **Turkmen** community in Manbij gathers in a Turkmen Association in the city center which provides a meeting place, language lessons for adults and children, history and culture lectures, and art and sports activities. The association also engages in political organizing in the local community, visits families, and holds meetings in Turkmen neighborhoods. Their goal is to introduce lessons in their 'Turkmen' dialect of Turkish (distinct from the Turkmen language as spoken in Turkmenistan and Central Asia) in the schools of Turkmen neighborhoods and villages.

The **Yazidi** people were originally represented by the Yazidi Association (Komele Yazidi) in Afrin, established in 2011, with the Yazidi House (Mala Yazidi) established in Jazira in 2012, even before other institutions of the revolu-

tion were established. In Afrin, the Yazidi Association initially faced violent opposition from the Syrian Government until their forces withdrew from Afrin as the Syrian conflict progressed. Leila Brahim, co-chair of the Yazidi House in Jazira, tells RIC: “although we have lived here for a long time, our communities were somewhat isolated from one another. Now, with the Yazidi House, we have become close to one another.”

Last year, the Yazidi House and Yazidi Association were united into the Yazidi Union, an umbrella organization which organizes Yazidis in Sinjar, Rojava and Europe. The Yazidi Union has a cultural committee, a women’s committee, a youth committee, a religious belief committee and a reconciliation committee that seeks to resolve disputes between people through dialogue. They have attracted particular attention for their work in helping to rescue, care for and return home Yazidi women kidnapped by ISIS and later liberated by SDF.



Mala Yazidi, Jazira region

“Our work is in civil society, organizing the Yazidi community. We left Afrin as IDPs and came to Shehba. Our people were living in fear and danger, so we swiftly moved among the people, distributing aid to them in the places where they lived.” — Eisha Sido of the Yazidi Women’s Union in Afrin

Since 2012 there is also a Yazidi-specific channel, Cira TV, broadcasting from North and East Syria to the global Yazidi community and focusing on Yazidi affairs.

Alevis practice their faith freely and have begun to organize politically under the AANES, most significantly with the 2017 opening of an Alevi cultural center in the Ma’abatli area.¹⁹ Hevi Ibrahim Mustafa, an Alevi from



The Alevi center opened in the town of Ma’abatli, Afrin, in 2017

¹⁹https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22MvTZ3_JUc

“This new system gives us the opportunity to survive, to keep our old standards alive in this new era – both to organise our own society, and for our women and young people to organise themselves autonomously as well. Everybody has a role to play...”
 — Hevi Suleiman, member of the Afrin Alevi community and the ‘Kongra Star’ women’s movement in Afrin



Hevi Suleiman, member of the Afrin Alevi community and the ‘Kongra Star’ women’s movement in Afrin

Mabet, also became the first administrative head of the canton of Afrin.

The **Evangelical Christian** community also enjoys a positive relationship with the AANES. Diyar Khdan, a priest with the Evangelical Church of Shehba, tells RIC: “The AANES provides us shelter and protection. At the beginning there was some mistrust and tension. But then they came closer to us, attended our prayer ceremonies and got to know us. They discovered we are peaceful people. So they accept us, protect us and even encourage us.”

5.4 WOMEN WITHIN MINORITY ORGANIZATIONS

There are a significant number of women involved in the autonomous civil and political structures of the various minorities, though they typically remain under-represented. In the **Turkmen** Association in Manbij, women are entitled to organize autonomously, but only a few women are active participants. One of them, Amel Dada, is co-chair of the External Relations Office of the AANES.

In the **Syriac** community there is the Syriac Women’s Council , established on July 20 2013. The Syriac Women’s Council works in the economic, social, political and military fields. Siham Qiriyo, representative of the Syriac Women’s Council says: “many of our daughters and sons have died for this land, which is the most difficult issue to face [for the women]. Many of them have two

children who died in our region to defend us from terrorism.”

Likewise, there are **Yazidi** women autonomously organized in the Yazidi Women’s Union, which focuses on educating Yazidi women on their religion and their culture. According to Eisha Sido of the Yazidi Women’s Union of Afrin, women have a sacred position in the Yazidi religion. For example, in the Yazidi faith, it is forbidden to take more than one wife. While Yazidi women face significant prejudice and persecution within their own community, the Yazidi culture in North and East Syria (and Afrin in particular) is typically more open

”Women face difficulties across the Middle East, but especially Yazidi women. We didn’t let anyone know that we were Yazidi, because of the fear built up over thousands of years of violence and pillaging. Yazidi women were stuck inside the walls of their home. But nowadays if there is a meeting with five men, there will be five women as well, if there is a march with a thousand men, there will be thousand women there too.” — **Eisha Sido, Yazidi Women’s Union in Afrin**

and progressive on gender questions than the larger Yazidi community in Iraq. Despite historical marginalization within their communities, many Yazidi Women have attained a new role in society as a result of the political process in North and East Syria, through both civil society and military institutions.

“We want to give an opportunity to women because they suffered greatly. We experienced specific suffering during the war.

Now, women are playing a key role in North and East Syria. As such, there is a strong contingent of women in our center.”
 — **Hevin Aisa, Armenian Council**

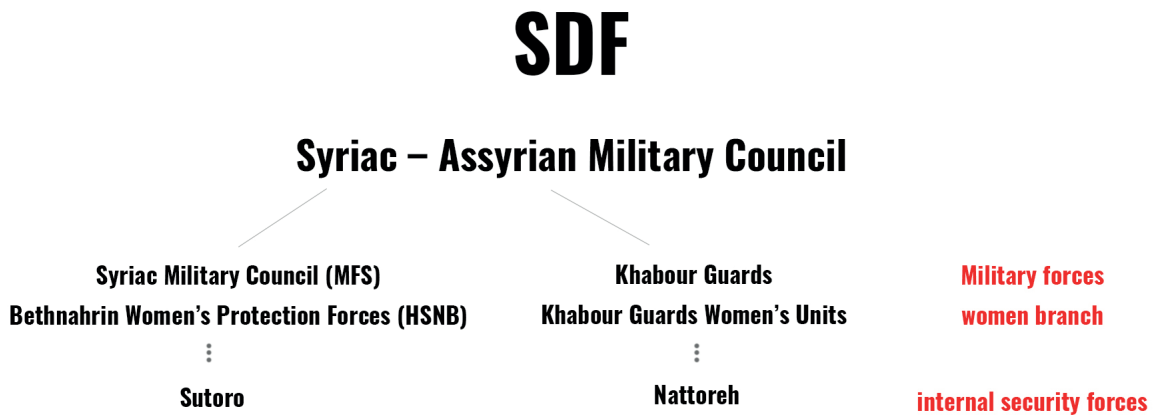
“As women, we take part in everything, nothing is forbidden to us and we are not ashamed of doing anything.” — **Hevi Suliman, Alevi member of North and East Syrian women’s movement Kongra Star**



Hevin Aisa, Armenian Council

6 MILITARY FORCES

According to the social contract of the AANES, every minority religious and ethnic group has the right to self-representation and to its own military self-defense forces. There are several such forces, most of which are united under the umbrella of the SDF. Unlike the civil society bodies discussed above, these military formations have been more extensively discussed elsewhere, but a brief overview is nonetheless important because the military field plays a significant role in broader inter-community relations – both good and bad. There are also some new formations in this field which have not been covered in previous reports.



SYRIAC FORCES: SYRIAC MILITARY COUNCIL AND SUTORO

Established on 8 January 2013, the Syriac Military Council (commonly known by its Syriac-Aramaic abbreviation MFS, for Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo) maintains a close relationship with the Syriac Union Party. It has participated both in defensive operations in the Syriac heartland in offensives against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra across North and East Syria, with MFS forces even participating in the operation to rescue Yazidis from ISIS genocide in Sinjar in 2014. MFS forces were also involved in clashes against the Syrian Arab Army in Heseke. In 2015, the MFS became a founding member of the SDF. MSF commander Kino Gabriel is now the chief SDF spokesperson.

Sutoro is the Syriac police force in Jazira Canton, where it works in concert with the general Asayish police force of the canton, patrolling ethnic Christian areas.

The Sutoro should not be confused with Sootoro, a pro-Syrian Government security force which uses the English translation “Syriac Protection Office.” Sootoro emerged as a result of a split between AANES-aligned and Damascus-aligned elements in the Qamishlo branch of Sutoro, aligning itself with the Ba’athist government.

Where Sootoro is only present in Qamishlo and largely reserves its activities to those districts still under Syrian government control, Sutoro also operates in other cities with a Syriac presence, such as Derik, Heseke and Tirbe Spi.



Members of the Sutoro women units

ASSYRIAN FORCES: KHABOUR GUARDS AND NATTOREH

With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the Assyrians developed their own military force, the Khabour Guards. It takes its name from the Khabour Valley, the region where Assyrian people settled after the genocide of 1915. The group was established on the basis of unity between the different ethnic groups in this region in response to the emergence of common enemies, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, and is specifically concerned with the defense of the Khabour Valley. They also have Arabs in their ranks, residents of the Khabour Valley who joined up to defend their villages.

The Khabour Guards have for some time maintained military coordination with the MFS, alongside whom Khabour Guards units have participated in offensives against ISIS outside the Khabour Valley. They are de facto affiliated with the ADP, along with Nattoreh, an internal security force equivalent to the Asayish which patrols and operates checkpoints in the Khabour Valley.

On 25 February 2017, the Khabour Guards joined the SDF. This drew a line under historic disputes between the Khabour Guards on the one hand and the MSF and YPG on the other (see below).

SYRIAC-ASSYRIAN MILITARY COUNCIL

The Syriac-Assyrian Military Council was formed in 2019 to unite the two largest Christian militias in the region under one banner. It is aligned with the political principles of the SDC, and it is as part of this formation that both the MSF and the Khabour Guards have participated in the defense of their homeland against the 2019 Turkish offensive against North and East Syria (see below).

SYRIAC-ASSYRIAN WOMEN’S FORCES

The Bethnahrin Women’s Protection Forces (HSNB) operates in the Jazira region. Bethnahrin is the Syriac-language name for the region known as Mesopotamia. During the announcement of its formation, the group declared that it will fight under the guidance of the SUP (see above) and “defend the values of Syriac people and women’s rights, act in solidarity with other nations’ women, and struggle against reactionary tendencies.”²⁰ In November 2016, the HSNB took part in the Raqqa offensive alongside the MFS and the SDF.

“Syriac people should protect themselves and act in solidarity in order to sustain their motherland, identity, existence, and heritage. We as Assyrian-Aramaic-Chaldean-Syriac women founded a military organization to destroy the barbarism of ISIS. We will provide security and protect the property of our people.” — **Bethnahrin Women’s Protection Forces foundation declaration**

The Khabour Guards Women’s Units are the female division of the Khabour Guards. Madeleine Khamis, a female commander of the Khabour Guards, explains: “unfortunately, our numbers are small because there are very few Assyrians left in the Khabour valley, only around 650. Moreover, our society is not completely like Kurdish society. Assyrian women are more known for being the mothers of families [than fighters].”



Madeleine Khamis, commander of the Khabour Guards

²⁰ <http://bianet.org/english/women/167293-bethnahrin-women-protection-forces-founded-against-isis>

ARMENIAN TABUR

The Armenian Tabur (or Armenian Battalion), also known as the Tabur Shehid Nubar Ozanyan, is a new project establishing an all-Armenian military force and also working for the restoration of Armenian language, origins and folklore. It is part of the Til Temir Military Council. Their military training started in December 2018, and a few months later they participated in the defeat of ISIS in Baghouz. After this, they participated in the military campaign to defend Sere Kaniye from Turkey’s 2019 invasion, and to this day continue to fight in defense of Til Temir and the Christian villages Til Tawil and Qabash, located on the new conflict line as Turkish-controlled forces apply pressure on this region.

The battalion includes Armenians from different towns and cities as Sere Kaniye, Abu Rasin (Zirgan), Heseke, Til Barak and Qamishlo, who receive cultural, history and language lessons alongside their military training. They are also working on setting up an autonomous women’s battalion, despite similar difficulties in recruiting enough women, and working in tandem with the new Armenian Council.



Members of the Armenian Tabur during the celebration of their foundation, December 2018

“When we first arrived here, we were just soldiers, silent, not speaking together. But then we fought side-by-side in military campaigns together against a common enemy, and at the same time we learned our mother tongue, and raised up our own flag as part of SDF. These things brought us together.” — **Hirant, spokesperson of the Armenian Tabur**

“In terms of a military force, Armenians were never strong. This was a mistake [in 1915] because the Ottoman empire was huge and they were able to slaughter the Armenians, to shed their blood, until lakes of blood formed... violating women’s honor, raping them... and when ISIS came we feared the same thing repeating itself. So we took our place in the self-defence forces of the AANES.” — **Hevin Aisa, member of the Armenian Council**

YAZIDI FORCES: YBŞ, YJŞ AND HPÊ

Following the 2014 genocide in Sinjar (Iraq), the Yazidi community started to organize themselves. Many young Yazidis in North and East Syria joined YPG and YPJ, while in Sinjar itself, independent self-defense forces were established.

The YBŞ (Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê, Sinjar Resistance Units) was formed in 2007 to protect the Yazidi community in Sinjar but only fully built up in 2015, following the genocide. This period also saw the creation of an all-women militia, the YJŞ (Yekîneyên Jinên Şengalê, Sinjar Women's Units) to protect the Yazidi community in the wake of ISIS' attacks.

The HPÊ (Hêzên Parastina Êzîdî, Yazidi Protection Forces) are the civil defense forces in Sinjar, and work to ensure internal security.

While not formally part of the SDF, YBŞ and YJŞ fighters have fought alongside the SDF in anti-ISIS campaigns (most significantly that to retake Raqqa) in North and East Syria, and have a close relationship with the forces that led the original liberation of Sinjar.

“YJŞ is an answer to the 2014 genocide and the trade in Yazidi women and girls. I joined YJŞ at the time of the Raqqa operation. In the place where we suffered so much, that place where we were sold. And I took my revenge, but not just my own revenge, but revenge for hundreds of Yazidi women and children.” — Saoud Digire, Yazidi woman enslaved by ISIS and now member of the YJŞ

7 CRITICISMS AND DISSENT

Focus on – and criticism of – the AANES’ approach to relationships between ethnic and religious groups has understandably focused on the relationship between the Kurds and Arabs, who make up by far the largest ethnic groupings in North and East Syria. In terms of the gamut of political opinion in North and East Syria, highly-conservative Arab communities in regions newly-liberated from ISIS represent the polar extreme to Kurdish communities in Jazira, the majority of which have long supported the political program being advanced by the AANES. It is in these Arab communities that the AANES has faced the most significant opposition to its political program, in tensions widely documented and discussed elsewhere – and which will be the focus of a forthcoming report by RIC.

The minority groups which are this dossier’s subject have for the most part enjoyed either positive or merely neutral relations with the political project in the north-east. In particular, representatives of traditionally-marginalized groups such as Yezidis and Alevis have only positive things to say about steps made in the past years to incorporate them into local and regional politics.

7.1 MILITARY DISPUTES

In terms of the Christian communities, however, there have been points of conflict which deserve closer consideration. As noted above, many members of Christian communities retain political and economic ties to the Assad government. For the most part, this results in a neutral if uneasy co-existence, with Damascus-linked Christian forces in Qamishlo keeping to the Damascus-controlled districts of the city, and vice-versa in terms of those linked to the AANES. Damascus-backed Christian militias and AANES-controlled forces have only come into open conflict on one occasion, following an ISIS car bomb which provoked a spike in tensions in Qamishlo.²¹

The Syriac Military Council has from the outset worked closely with the YPG and later as a founding member of the SDF, but the Assyrian Khabour Guards were for some time opposed to co-operation with or assimilation under the SDF umbrella.

These tensions came to a head following the 2015 killing of David Gendo, a commander of the Khabour Guards. Gendo was assassinated by YPG mem-

²¹<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tensions-soar-between-syrian-kurds-and-christians>

bers, allegedly as a result of his unwillingness to see the Khabour Guards brought under the ambit of the Syriac Military Council. (The killers and their accomplices were found guilty via the AANES legal system and sentenced to jail sentences of up to 20 years, in what an independent human rights commission found to be a fair trial open to international observation.)²²²³

This event led to a temporary split within the Khabour Guards, with some units choosing to fight alongside the MFS and YPG in ongoing operations against ISIS, while others – closer to the Assyrian Democratic Party – refused to take any further part in operations, remaining in the Khabour Valley and focusing on internal security in Assyrian villages in their region of origin.

This rift was eventually healed, however, with the 2019 formation of the Syriac-Assyrian Military Council, at which time the AANES' main security force, the Asayish, handed over control of a number of checkpoints in the Khabour Valley to Khabour Guards units. Mr. Gendo is now commemorated as a martyr by the MFS, SDF and YPG alike, in a symbol of improved relations between these forces and the Khabour Guards. The only Christian militia not allied with the SDF is now the Syrian Government-linked Sootoro in Qamishlo.

7.2 CIVIL AND POLITICAL DISPUTES

Case Study: Assyrian Democratic Party

Officials in the ADP describe the relationship between the ADP and the AANES as broadly positive, but colored by disputes relating to the Syriac-Assyrian Military Council. Apart from the issues outlined above, both of the co-chairs of the Military Council are married to one another, and this is something the AANES does not allow. ADP officials tell RIC that the AANES' approach on this subject has been inflexible, and failed to recognize that it is difficult for the small and traditionally-minded Assyrian community to find women for leadership positions in line with AANES policy on gender equality. A grouping within the ADP wanted to solve this situation by removing the married couple from their roles and make them ordinary members, but this was not accepted by all of those involved in the Council. As such, the head of the Assyrian Office was removed from his office. Officials also complain that the AANES has not provided financial support to the ADP.

²² https://www.reddit.com/r/syriancivilwar/comments/3ek20o/the_trial_regarding_the_assassination_of_khabour/

²³ <https://twitter.com/sylezjusz/status/628326705262915584>

Outside of the military field, the main criticism levelled at the AANES has concerned the AANES' school curriculum. In 2018, the AANES sought to impose its own curriculum in private, Syrian Government-funded Syriac schools still using a Damascus-approved curriculum, provoking criticism from the school authorities.

A deal was later reached in September 2018 between the AANES and the local Syriac Orthodox archbishopric, where the two first grades in these schools would learn the AANES' Syriac curriculum and grades three to six would continue to learn the Damascus-approved curriculum. In its own public school system, the AANES continues to offer mother-tongue education in Syriac to Syriac children, and offer Syriac as a second language to Arabic, Kurdish and other students.

Similarly, complaints over the AANES making use of Christian property following their flight from the region were resolved to the satisfaction of all parties interviewed by RIC through the introduction of the special law outlined above, enshrining special protections for Christians' homes, property and land to hold them in abeyance until such time as they return, and establishing a committee of local Christians to oversee this process.

In general, relationship between Christian communities and the AANES has been typified by enthusiastic participation in some quarters and a cautious distance in others. For example, Hevin Aisa of the new Armenian Council tells RIC that until now the Armenian people have typically remained far from AANES: "This is because they fear being exposed to the regime. For this reason, the Armenian Council keeps far away from politics. It has members closer to the regime and some closer to the AANES."

This conciliatory language is typical of civil-society activists navigating relationships with the AANES on the one hand and Damascus-linked individuals and bodies on the other. A distinction is also clear between the Christian community in Qamishlo (and to a lesser extent Heseke), where Damascus has retained control of some Christian neighborhoods throughout the war and the community accordingly continues to look to Damascus for protection; and, on the other hand, communities in the Khabour Valley, Til Temir, Derik and Tirbe Spi, which have participated more enthusiastically in the political project in the north-east.

8 CURRENT THREATS

8.1 AFRIN: FORCIBLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

“We have not forgotten the Seyfo genocide of 1915 when thousands of Assyrian-Syriacs, Armenian and Greeks living in Turkey were murdered. The Turkish state is repeating history, not only against our people, but also against others such as the Arabs, Kurds and Chechens. Every year we have to relive the same scenario and we will no longer accept it. We are trying to build a democratic nation, but unfortunately many people are influenced by [Turkey’s] neo-Ottoman ideology.” — **Gabriel Shamun, SUP co-chair**

Turkey’s 2018 invasion and subsequent occupation of Afrin in 2018 gives an indication of the risk that further invasions pose to minorities in North and East Syria. The population of the region was around 95% Kurdish, with large Alevi and Yazidi minorities, plus smaller Armenian, Arab and Nawar communities. Afrin formed a region that was both ethnically and linguistically far more homogeneously Kurdish than the other Kurdish regions within Syrian borders.

Today the majority of Christians and Yazidis from Afrin have been forcibly displaced, residing either in IDP camps in the Shehba region or in other Syrian cities. The remaining minority populations in Afrin were publicly threatened with death or forced conversion by Turkish-controlled militias subscribed to a radical Islamist ideology prior to the invasion – a threat that has to some extent been realized. Turkish-mandated demographic engineering in Afrin has been well documented, and you can see our dossier ‘Turkey’s Track Record: The occupation of Afrin’ for a full overview.²⁴

In brief, this has constituted processes of Arabization (through the installation of Arab militiamen from elsewhere in Syria and their families in formerly-Kurdish, Yezidi, Christian and Alevi towns and regions), Turkification (via the introduction of a Turkish school curriculum, renaming and rebranding of physical and governmental infrastructure, and establishment of de-facto Turkish control over all aspects of government and civil society), and Islamification (via the school curriculum as well as forcibly by Turkish-controlled armed groups), plus the establishment of a “Turkmen belt” along the border regions with Turkey.

²⁴ <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/11/turkeys-track-record-the-occupation-of-afrin/>

Christians, Kurds, Yezidis and other ethnic and religious minorities who were living in Afrin have been forcibly displaced. Since the violent displacement of a majority of the population, estimates indicate that up to 75% of the population is now made up of Turkmen and Arab settlers brought in by Turkey. Arab families displaced from Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and other regions of Syria have been resettled into houses that have been confiscated from their Kurdish, Yezidi or Alevi owners. This is despite the fact that prior to the Turkish invasion, Afrin was already home to significant numbers of Arab IDPs fleeing the conflict elsewhere in Syria.

In May 2019, figures from the authorities in Afrin indicated that at least 88,000 people had been resettled in Afrin, the majority from Ghouta. At that time, Turkey dissolved the administrative bodies responsible for documenting the original residencies and ID documents of the displaced people and forced them to register with the local authorities. This both undermines the future chances of return for those who have been forcibly driven out and strengthens new residents' hold on seized property.

Conversely, original Afrin residents who want to return to the region face many obstacles. The UN Human Rights Council has documented that "displaced civilians returning to Afrin have been frequently barred from accessing their property if it had been appropriated by members of armed groups and their families. Others were required to pay up to several thousand dollars to have their goods and vehicles returned to them after they had been stolen."

"During the [Afrin] war, we stayed more than 40 days in Hadj Khalil village, near Rajo. 42 or 43 people were martyred, among them one of my sons. My daughter joined the defense forces too. Later we fled to Afrin [city], and there we were bombed also. We got the impression we would all die. Others fled to Beirut where there is a big Armenian community. Later we came to Shehba. Our relationship with the AANES is very good. We consider ourselves as Kurds of Armenian origin." — **Shamsi, Armenian IDP from Afrin**

The Turkish occupation has been typified not only by direct demographic change, but also the destruction of any markers of prior forms of culture or belief. One example is the Turkish air strikes on Afrin that destroyed or damaged several ancient Christian sites, including the UNESCO-recognized Brad Christian heritage site, and the Julianus Church, one of the oldest Christian churches in the world.²⁵

²⁵ <https://globalchristiannews.org/article/turkish-warplanes-destroy-one-of-worlds-oldest-churches/>

Bellingcat has documented evidence of systematic targeting and desecration of religious sites both in airstrikes and by SNA militiamen. The Alevi Ali Dada shrine, Yazidi Qara Jornah shrine, Sufi Nabi Houri shrine are among dozens of examples of religious sites targeted through grave desecration, vandalism and looting.²⁶

“The largely unsystematic pattern of these desecrations points to them likely being conducted randomly by different actors — for multiple reasons which range from religious or ethnic sectarian animus to personal gain through looting — it is clear that little to no effort has been exerted by the Turkish-backed governance bodies to prevent such incidents...” — **Alexander McKeever, Bellingcat**

The Yazidi community has experienced significant suffering as a result of the Turkish occupation in Afrin. Their presence in the region dates back to at least the 13th century . Estimates typically place the pre-war population somewhere between 5,000 and 15,000, largely residing in 24 Yazidi villages, of which 7 are solely Yazidi. Most of the Yazidis fled during the Turkish invasion, while those who stayed were subjected to violence and oppression.

Since the invasion, at least 19 Yazidi shrines have been desecrated and destroyed. Turkish-backed forces forcibly converted a number Yazidis to Islam by bringing them to the mosque, beating and torturing them if they did not pray. Some were even killed. One such victim was 60-year-old Omar Shamo from Khibari village, who was beaten by militiamen in an attempt to force him to say the “shahada” of Islam - the phrase which, if spoken aloud, is believed to constitute acceptance of Islam. He refused, and so was killed.



The interior of the Sheikh Humayd shrine in Afrin following the partial collapse of its roof

²⁶ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/07/11/afrin-incidents-of-desecration-and-destruction-of-cultural-sites/>

“19 of our holy places in Afrin have been despoiled, looted – they steal what they can and destroy whatever is left. These holy places are thousands of years old, and historic places in their own right, on top of their special value to us as Yazidis – such as Tel Ashtar [Ishtar Hill, or Ain Dara]. To us Yazidis, Ashtar was an angel. It was not only the Turkish proxy forces, but also Turkish warplanes that bombed these historic sites. It is clear that they intend not only to kill people, but also to destroy the history of these people on this land. Turkish proxy forces also looted these sites, most significantly a large statue of a lion from Ain Dara.” — **Eisha Sido, Yazidi Women’s Union of Afrin**

Along with the looting of Yazidi buildings and religious sites and shrines, the Yazidi Union center and Cira TV center were specifically targeted, being among the first sites in Afrin city proper targeted for looting. The Yazidi Women’s Union and the NGO the Human Rights Organization of Afrin both report that their contacts inside Afrin were detained, violently punished or killed for sending pictures of the looting to contacts outside the occupied region.

Most of the Yazidi community fled to the Shehba region in Aleppo province, today home to around 6,000 Afrini Yazidis alongside over 200,000 Afrini Kurds, all of them IDPs.

Diya Xudiret Betar is a Yazidi IDP in Serdem Camp, where she has been living for two years. She tells RIC: “We continue to maintain our traditions and our culture and we share it with our neighbors so that everybody knows that we live here and we still exist.”

The Alevi minority were also targeted during the Turkish invasion of Afrin. A number of Alevi fighters lost their lives trying to protect Alevi holy places from the invasion. These holy places were ransacked, destroyed, and in some instances turned into military bases.

Hevi Suliman, a member of the Alevi community now displaced to Shehba, tells RIC: “A few of our people remain in the occupied areas, mostly just old men and women. Some of them have been kidnapped, others killed. The rest of the Alevi people are in Shehba or regime-held areas, and a small number have left Syria. But even now, when our people in Europe die, they are sent back to Afrin to be buried, so they don’t become cut off from their roots.”

As noted above, the small Evangelical Christian and Nawar minorities have also been displaced by the invasion. The Evangelical Christian community remains in the Good Shepherd church in Shehba, with a congregation of about 150 families, a number three times lower than before the occupation. The Nawar are based in an all-Nawar camp in Shehba known as ‘Afrin Camp’, which is administrated by the AANES.

8.2 TURKISH ‘PEACE SPRING’ OPERATION

On 9 October 2019, Turkey launched a new attack against border cities throughout North and East Syria, with the aim of occupying the cities Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, along with the surrounding countryside.

During the first days, dozens of towns and villages were shelled. A number of predominantly Christian enclaves suffered attacks, including villages in the Derik countryside and the Christian neighborhood of Bisheriye in Qamishlo, although these enclaves are far from the region Turkey was seeking to occupy. Christian residents were injured and killed in these attacks.

“In Derik people didn’t leave their village even though the shelling drew close. They were afraid, but not like in 1915, because now the people are organized, they have their own force, and they will fight till the last breath. Maybe Turkey will try to conduct a genocide, but our people are more prepared than in 1915.” — **Malak Hanna – Syriac Red Cross**



One of the victims of indiscriminate Turkish shelling targeting Christian neighborhoods

Per a 2020 UN report, Turkish-backed groups have committed war crimes across areas now under their control, constituting “myriad violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by SNA fighters, using language comparing their ‘enemies,’ to ‘infidels,’ ‘atheists’ and pigs’ when referring to civilians, detainees & property...”, “the displacement of the entire Yazidi population in Sere Kaniye and large swathes of the Kurdish population, the expropriation and looting of schools, businesses, bakeries, olive groves, vehicles, agricultural tools, “the war crime of murder and repeatedly the war crime of pillaging... hostage-taking, cruel treatment and torture... these violations may entail criminal responsibility for Turkish commanders who knew or should have known about these crimes.”²⁷

²⁷ https://twitter.com/UN_HRC/status/1234436461245673472

Sere Kaniye was an ethnically and religiously diverse city, where relations between different ethnic and religious groups were relatively strong. A good example of this diversity was the relatively high number of marriages between different communities. A Christian IDP from Sere Kaniye describes the city: “Even before 2011, we were living all together, Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians and Syriacs. I am Christian, but most of my friends were Kurds and Arabs. Until the Turkish invasion, a visitor in Sere Kaniye could see how we, people from different nations, used to eat together or even sleep on the same mattress.”

In both Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad almost the entire Christian population, around 150 families, was displaced. Most of the Christian community fled to the Khabour Valley, Heseke or Qamishlo.

Per the Syriac Red Cross, a small number of Christian families have traveled back to Sere Kaniye following the cessation of hostilities by posing as Arabs. However, there is no possibility for these families to live a normal life, and they remain confined to their houses. In another incident, homes belonging to Armenian Christian families in Tel Abyad were looted and marked out as the new property of Turkish-controlled faction Jabhat-al-Shammiya.²⁸

“By gathering so many jihadists and bringing them inside Sere Kaniye, Erdogan has repeated what happened in 2012 [when Sere Kaniye was seized by al-Qaeda proxy Jabhat al-Nusra]. They declare they are fighting for peace and for the return of the children of this area. But I have seen by myself that they behave differently. Sere Kaniye looks like a dead city. An 11,000 year-old city is being destroyed. Undoubtedly, they have come to destroy and loot. It is like we have travelled back 1500 years ago, to the time when certain tribes lived by pillaging.”

— **Christian IDP from Sere Kaniye**

Oum Joseph, an Armenian from the Tel Abyad countryside displaced to Raqqa, describes the invasion in this way: “When the attacks of the Turkish-backed factions started, we spent five days under shelling, we saw these attacks with our own eyes. They killed our neighbors, stole our things, looted our property. We left our village, 30KM from Tel Abyad, on 15 November. We were three days on the road, and with difficulty we arrived to Raqqa. We are 17 people living here in one house. Our situation is really bad and we experience all kinds of difficulties. Now there are jihadists living in our home, they don’t allow people to return to the village and fire on those who attempt to do so.

²⁸ <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=146432>

There are no other Armenians left in Tel Abyad. There is no help for us coming from outside. Only the Raqqa Civil Council helps us. Jihadists have seized our home and burned our wheat and barley. What does Erdogan have against us that he attacked us in this way? We just want these attacks to end. Where are our human rights? Those responsible for human rights should attend to their work.”

Case Study: Controversy Around Tel Abyad Orthodox Church

Turkish propaganda during and after the war attempted to make use of the local Christian community, placing YPG and SDF visual materials in churches in Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad and claiming the churches had been used as military bases.²⁹ Turkish media announced the reopening of the church, with footage showing small handfuls of worshippers inside the church.^{30,31}

Multiple journalists debunked these claims, for example demonstrating that Turkey had staged the presence of military materials inside the church in an attempt to discredit YPG by sharing recent footage of their visits to the place of worship.³² A member of the local Armenian community told RIC: “It’s all a show. This woman [shown speaking in the video] is neither Armenian nor Christian, she has just dressed up for the camera. And we could always worship freely in this church; there was never an SDF base there. Turkey and its jihadist militias are the greatest danger to the Armenian people. They have all fled Tel Abyad because of this.”

Ironically, the same church used in these propaganda efforts was subsequently vandalized by Turkish-backed militiamen now occupying Tel Abyad.³³

There are also ten Yazidi villages around Sere Kaniye that have been occupied by Turkish-backed forces, which have a total population of about 1,000.³⁴ The population was distributed geographically throughout Merikis, Jan Tamer, Lazka, Shukria, Java, Ldara, the tomb of Sheikh Hussein, Matala, Bir Noah and Hamidia. Along with these villages, a branch of the “Yazidi House” and the properties of the Yazidi community in the city itself were also seized and looted. The Yazidis have completely left the region, in a clear-cut instance of demographic change for which Turkey bears responsibility.

²⁹<https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/1185247419480580097>

³⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkKi8H-aGlg>

³¹<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/vg/video-gallery/turkey-reopens-churches-mosques-in-syrias-northern-towns-of-tal-abyad-and-ras-al-ayn/0>

³²https://twitter.com/NPA_English/status/1185623467351330820

³³<https://akmckeeper.com/2019/12/27/>

[murder-looting-and-displacement-two-months-into-turkeys-invasion-of-eastern-syria/](https://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=160922)

³⁴<https://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=160922>

“[The Yazidi population there] saw what happened in Afrin, the violence and enforcement of Islam by the jihadists, and so they fled as the first bullet was fired,” per Leyla Brahim, co-chair of the Yezidi House of Jazira. Some of these Yazidi IDPs are living in homes in the city of Heseke while others are in Washokani camp in the outskirts of the city.



1 - Footage of the Armenian Orthodox church recorded by North Press Agency on June 2019



2 - Church with supposed YPG/PKK propaganda in TRT World footage, October 2019



3 - Tel Abyad Armenian Church after being vandalized by SNA, November 2019. Photo via Jenan Moussa



4 - Tel Abyad Armenian Church after being vandalized by SNA, November 2019. Photo via Jenan Moussa

ISIS SLEEPER CELLS ATTACKS AGAINST MINORITIES

The Turkish invasion enabled ISIS sleeper cells to step up their activities, with attacks against both general targets and religious minorities undergoing a significant rise since the start of the operation. Sleeper-cell attacks were driven down to a record low in September 2019 (43 attacks), but shot back up following Turkey’s October 2019 invasion, with November and December seeing 83 and 84 attacks respectively. Notable among these attacks was the assassination of Armenian Priest Housib Petoyan and his father as they drove to Deir Ez-Zor to work on repairs to the Armenian Church there, claimed by ISIS in November 2019.³⁵ The Christian community had also been targeted by ISIS prior to the Turkish invasion, most recently in a car-bombing in July 2019.



CAR-BOMB IN FRONT OF THE SYRIAC CHURCH IN QAMISHLO, 11 JULY 2019

It is not only ISIS which engages in sleeper-cell attacks in the north-east. Joint car-bombings targeting churches which killed five civilians in Qamishlo in November during Turkey’s Peace Spring offensive may point to the involvement of Turkish-backed sleeper cells.³⁶ ISIS issues swift claims for any attack they commit, and even some where their involvement is unclear, but issued no claim for these attacks. This adds credence to reports from local security forces that the perpetrators had been arrested and confessed to receiving direction and payment from Turkey.

³⁵<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/armenian-priest-murdered-by-isis-in-eastern-syria-33srl6jfh>
³⁶<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/blasts-kill-6-syrian-town-turkey-191111154834074.html>

8.4 RESISTANCE AND MOBILIZATION

Following the latest Turkish invasion, Syriac NGOs like the Syriac Red Cross worked in Heseke in coordination with one other and created an emergency committee to support IDPs, particularly those from the Christian community but also mobilizing members of the Christian community to support other IDPs. The Syriac-Assyrian Military Council was deployed in Tel Tamer and in Christian villages along the frontline, playing an active role in the defense of the Khabour Valley region.

At the time of writing, frontlines have settled in and around Christian villages surrounding Til Temir, some of which are subjected to regular bombardment by Turkish-backed forces despite the official declaration of a ceasefire. The Armenian Tabur, which is based in a village close to Til Temir, has also played an active role in the defensive operations in Sere Kaniye and is now stationed on frontlines to the north of Til Temir.

Though limited in numbers, the Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces (HSNB) and the Khabur Guards Women's Units also participated in the protection of the Syriac-Assyrian villages in the Khabur valley, across four lines of conflict. They worked with the local municipality in addition to their military responsibilities, for example assisting the municipality to find communal water tanks and distribute them among homes and villages after the water flow was cut due to Turkish shelling of the Mabrouka water station on the second day of the operation.

“The Turkish threat of further military operations in northern border areas, including Qamishlo and Derik, threatens the existence of the Syriac Christian community in North and East Syria, which needs to be safe and secure. This community also has to be recognized and involved in all political negotiations in order to guarantee its interests in Syria.”
— **Statement released on 27 Oct 2019 by Kino Gabriel, SDF spokesperson/MFS General Command member**

9 PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

A number of common themes emerged throughout the scores of interviews conducted by RIC as the basis for this dossier. On paper, the political project in the north-east certainly offers opportunities to minority ethnic and religious groups not afforded to them anywhere else in the Middle East in terms of guaranteed political representation, protection and promotion of their cultural rights. Our dossier “Beyond the Frontlines” offers a deeper look to the extent to which these aims have been realized in practice. Here, it is sufficient to note that the political system lays a foundation for multi-ethnic and multi-religious inclusion, but work still needs to be done to ensure that the reality lives up to that potential.

We were able to speak to a broad range of political actors from minority religious and ethnic groups from the level of the commune, up to the highest levels of the administration. Since many of these groups have also experienced historic marginalization alongside the Kurds, there is a strong sense of community and shared benefit emerging from the historical changes in the north-east.

It is notable that some interviewees, such as representatives of the Assyrian Democratic Party, felt comfortable openly voicing disagreement with the AANES on certain issues while nonetheless remaining broadly supportive of the political program in the north-east. This is indicative of positive development across recent years, following historic tensions which have occasionally broken out into violence.

On issues such as property expropriation and education, the AANES has concretely proven itself willing to reach compromise with minority religious and ethnic groups where their wishes diverge from the AANES political vision. If many members of Christian communities are in a sense waiting for the return of their historic patrons in the Damascus government, they nonetheless appreciate and benefit from the protection offered to them by the AANES and SDF, while others are enthusiastically engaging with the new political project in the north-east.

The efforts in North and East Syria must also be considered in the context

of a vast exodus of Christians and Yazidis from the Middle East in general, in particular precipitated by the rise of ISIS alongside other extremist factions. The reality is that these minority groups are dwindling in numbers in North and East Syria as they are across the Middle East. While there are still places in which these communities endure, it is only in North and East Syria that one can find such concrete efforts to preserve, protect and advance the cause of minority religious and ethnic groups.

These efforts, and the sense of unity described above, are inevitably underpinned by the existence of a common enemy in Turkey and its program of forcible demographic change, carried out by Turkish-controlled factions whose ranks include many former ISIS fighters and commanders.³⁷

Whatever criticisms representatives of minority and ethnic groups may have voiced of the AANES, AANES control was highly preferable to Turkish rule for all, and for many also preferable to a return to marginalization and assimilation under rule from Damascus. This is particularly true for the Yazidi community, with one interviewee describing their newfound status in society as a “dream” made reality, but also for Alevis, Sufis and a sizeable portion of the Christian community, particularly those living outside of urban centers where Damascus retains a foothold.

Interviewees commonly drew a line between Turkey’s present-day invasion and the genocide committed one hundred years ago, which drove their forebears to Syria. They express fear of forcible co-option under the Turkish state, with Islam as the only permissible religion, a fear which is becoming a reality in Afrin, Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.

Many IDPs express a will to return to their homes, while interviewees report that diaspora communities likewise retain hopes of returning to the north-east. But these hopes will not be realized until the protections, support and autonomy that the AANES is able to offer to minority religious and ethnic groups on the local level are matched by an international effort to prevent further Turkish attacks on the north-east; roll back the Turkish invasion and occupation of formerly-diverse swathes of North and East Syria; and hold the TAF and SNA responsible for conducting war-crimes and forced demographic change in these regions. On this basis, a number of policy recommendations present themselves.

³⁷<https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

10 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Conducting an international fact-finding mission into both Turkish-occupied & AANES areas**

Firstly, international actors should seek to understand the situation for minorities in North and East Syria.

Local human rights defenders have protesting over rampant rights abuses conducted against from the time of Afrin's occupation onward, but their documentation of systematic rape, kidnapping, extortion, torture, arbitrary imprisonment, Arabization of the population and socio-political Turkification has yet to make an impact in terms of international actors' attitudes towards Turkey and President Erdogan's government, despite the fact that these violations particularly affect Christian and Yazidi minorities in these regions.

Part of the problem is that Turkey almost never allows independent journalists, rights monitors or humanitarian observers into the zones it occupies in Syria, while violently crushing civilian journalism and activism within these areas. International actors should insist that Turkey allows an independent fact-finding mission to enter both Afrin and the newly-occupied zone between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, comprising UN observers as well as independent journalists, and to conduct a thorough assessment of the rights violations being conducted against Christians and Yazidis there.

Such a fact-finding mission should make a parallel visit to border regions still under the control of the SDF, to assess the situation for minorities in these regions as compared to the situation in Turkish-occupied regions. The delegation could also be accompanied by Christian or other faith leaders from the USA or elsewhere, as well as representatives of the Yazidi diaspora.

Prompt action could prevent both the loss of evidence, and the entrenchment of systematic demographic change in the occupied areas. With Turkey now threatening to expand its zone of occupation through further attacks against Kurdish regions, it could also prevent a third, equally catastrophic invasion from taking place.

2. Strengthening indigenous minority organizations

Secondly, support should be offered to minority organizations within North and East Syria – both those linked to the AANES, and civil-society organizations such as the Armenian Council which align themselves separately to the AANES project. Strengthening these organizations will not only enable them to maintain their humanitarian, social and cultural projects, but also to play an advocacy role, both on the international stage and in terms of acting as a check and balance against the AANES.

Concretely, this support could constitute financial support for civil society and humanitarian programs (see below), invitations to speak before international forums such as the UN, or invitations to participate in formal discussions over the future of Syria as official representatives of Christian, Yezidi and other minority groups. International humanitarian actors should seek to coordinate with these groups to understand and meet their communities' needs in North and East Syria.

Those disputes which have arisen between the AANES or SDF and Christian communities have on occasion become a political football for disputes between the PYD and the Damascus government. Strengthening indigenous organizations will enable them to advocate for their own interests, whether these align with the AANES' program or not.

3. Using \$50,000,000 White House funding for religious and ethnic minorities to support these goals

Following an October 2019 announcement by US President Donald Trump, \$50,000,000 was assigned to Syria stabilization, "with a focus on protecting members of persecuted religious and ethnic minorities and advancing human rights and accountability".³⁸

The money is split between the Syrian Civil Defense (or 'White Helmets'), the Department of State and USAID. The DoS portion is earmarked for "the collection, compilation, and analysis of human rights abuses committed by ISIS and the Syrian regime to use in future or existing justice efforts."³⁹ Expanding this to include rights abuses being committed by Turkish-backed forces, who

³⁸<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Aug/04/2002470215/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20INHERENT%20RESOLVE%20APRIL%201,%202020%20-%20JUNE%2030,%202020.PDF>

³⁹Idem

are the main force conducting human rights abuses amounting to war crimes and forcible demographic change against Christian and Yezidi communities in Syria today, will ensure that justice and accountability is achieved for all minority communities in Syria.

Meanwhile, USAID reported that via its portion of the funding, “minority activities will restore essential services; rehabilitate infrastructure; strengthen minority participation in governance and civil society; restore economic activity, particularly for those displaced by the Turkish incursion, and expand education, vocational training, and health care.”⁴⁰ USAID funding should be used to support both local minority organizations in North and East Syria, and to enable the AANES to better support, work alongside and incorporate the minority communities currently living under the protection of the SDF.

4. Preventing the Assad government from portraying itself as minority communities’ best protector in Syria

The Assad government has often sought to portray itself as the best protector of minorities in Syria. Thanks to the rapid spread of violent Sunni Islamism throughout the ranks of the Syrian opposition, Damascus has been able to reap political capital from its supposedly ‘secular’ stance against these factions – despite its lack of tolerance for Kurdish, Yezidi and other non-Arab cultural identities.

Supporting both the AANES and minority communities organized within it, as outlined above, will serve to remind the world of the often-forgotten fact that a democratic, secular opposition does remain in Syria, and indeed controls a third of the country in the north-east. Rather than rushing into uncritical support of a Syrian opposition now dominated by factions with an extremely poor track record of rights abuses against religious and ethnic minority groups, policy-makers seeking to hold the Assad government to account should extend critical support to the SDF and AANES and their program for a secular, multi-ethnic and religiously diverse Syria. Most importantly, they should listen to and magnify the voices of minority community leaders and activists living and working in North and East Syria, who are often equally critical of the Assad government and the Islamist-dominated Syrian opposition in its present-day incarnation.

⁴⁰Idem

By encouraging the Christian community in North and East Syria to buy in to the AANES political project, and simultaneously strengthening independent minority organizations capable of holding the AANES to account in the context of what is already the only democratic and secular political framework in Syria, the Assad government can be prevented from making political capital out of atrocities committed against minority groups by Islamist groups acting in the name of the Syrian opposition.

5. Preventing Turkey from conducting forcible demographic change in the Khabour Valley and elsewhere

Finally, it remains unclear where Turkey intends to continue its military operations against North and East Syria. The Christian community in the Khabour Valley is perhaps most at risk, but rumored operations east of Qamishlo would likewise threaten Christian and Yezidi minorities there, while more broadly than any operation against North and East Syria will threaten the political project and humanitarian infrastructure which has provided a uniquely safe haven for minority groups throughout the Syrian conflict.

Two successive Turkish invasions have resulted in the forcible imposition of an often-radical interpretation of Sunni Islam in regions previously noted for their longstanding religious diversity and newfound culture of secularism and tolerance under the AANES. Faith leaders in the USA should convey the concerns of Christian communities in North and East Syria to their political leadership, and urge them to prevent a third, equally catastrophic invasion by exerting diplomatic pressure on Turkey including the pre-emptive threat of financial sanctions.

As noted above, the Christian and Yezidi communities in these regions are dwindling. Urgent action is needed to ensure a future for these peoples in their ancestral homeland, and the AANES is the only actor in the region taking such concrete action. By supporting both the AANES and independent minority-group advocacy within AANES-controlled regions, the drain of Christians, Yezidis and other minorities out of their ancestral homeland can be halted, and the nascent project of autonomy and co-existence in the north-east can be given the space it needs to grow and mature.

Postscript: Future perspectives from minority group community leaders

“Most of the Christian community fled to Europe due to the threats they have faced, [most recently] the Turkish invasion. They are looking for peace, but this is not what they really [find]. Lots of them have psychological problems because they are not used to the lifestyle in Europe. In the future, if this area is stable and secure, there are a lot of families thinking about coming back.”

— Malak Hanna, Syriac Red Cross

“We are working on the project of bringing people back here, and we are still connected with our people in the diaspora. They all think of coming back, but they tell us that they cannot as there is no security here. Their homes were destroyed by ISIS, but it is not just about material objects: it is deeper than that. We get out of one disaster and we pass straight into another. We liberated ourselves from ISIS and Erdogan came with groups of terrorists, in the same way.”

— Madeleine Khamis, commander of the Khabour Guards Women’s Units

“When the Assyrian society looks to the future, it only wants to remain here, living freely among the various peoples of the region. The most important thing is the concept of the brotherhood of peoples.”

— Shaxmun Kako, Assyrian Democratic Party

“Today, Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad are under attack. Maybe tomorrow it will be Til Temir, Heseke and Qamishlo. We thank everyone that takes the displaced into consideration, opening their doors to people who have fled with nothing but the clothes on their backs. This helps us believe in humanity.”

— Gabriel Shamun, co-chair of the Syriac Union Party

“We are from Syria, we live here, we have to find a way to live here. We need support for our women and children who were held by ISIS, we need schools, we need psychological support. This is what international actors need to provide. There are still Yazidis who fled the genocide in Sinjar living in tents.”

— Leyla Brahim, co-chair of the Jazira Yazidi House

“After thousands of years, in Afrin our identity has been accepted and valued as Yazidis for the first time, in the system of democratic autonomy. It’s like a dream for us, that we can share our religion openly in front of the whole world. In those last four or five years in Afrin, we lived out this dream. We hope that we can return to Afrin and that Turkey and its proxies will leave. For us it is an existential question of our continued survival. For this reason, we remain here and will not leave.”

— Eisha Sido, Yazidi Women’s Union of Afrin

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