



Free Yezidi Foundation Report: Withdrawal of US Troops from Syria

Implications for Minorities in Syria and Iraq

4 January 2019

The Free Yezidi Foundation is grateful to the United States of America, especially the armed forces, for the intervention to combat and degrade Daesh (ISIS, ISIL) after its genocidal attacks against our people.

Further, we are grateful to the United States for expressions of solidarity and support with religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, including Yezidis, Christians, and others. After targeted attacks and atrocities perpetrated against our civilians, based on our religion, it was and remains necessary for the international community to come to our side as we attempt to rebuild and recover. We applaud the United States for leading this effort.

At this stage, it is timely and appropriate to outline the impact that the withdrawal of the United States armed forces from Syria may have on religious minorities, to assess how recovery efforts should be recalibrated, and to examine how minorities should consider future in the short and medium term both in Syria and in Iraq.

Withdrawal of US Forces from Syria, Security Vacuum, Resulting Threat to Minorities

Syria

Conservative estimates currently assess the number of Daesh members in Syria at 14,500 fighters¹, while others place the figure at 20,000 to 30,000². From the experience in Iraq, it should be noted that a large number of individuals who joined Daesh or participate in various crimes, including the enslavement and rape of Yezidi women, later melted back into the local population. It should therefore be understood that a significant number of Daesh adherents or sympathizers exist both in Iraq and Syria, beyond the number of actual fighters or members, and this is a serious danger that must not be understated³.

At the same time, Turkey has scarcely concealed its tactical support for Daesh⁴. In some cases, this has been direct, such as facilitation of easy passage for Jihadists from abroad, through Turkey, to Syria and to Daesh-held land. But in its incessant attack against the SDF and YPG, especially in areas such as Afrin and Manbij⁵, Turkey has battled against the coalition's allies on the ground. This has been a crucial source of indirect support to Daesh in the past years. With the removal of

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/19/us-troops-syria-withdrawal-trump>

² <http://undocs.org/S/2018/705>

³ <https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2018/08/18/are-body-counts-really-the-right-measure-of-success-or-failure-in-the-fight-against-isis/>

⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/28/syrian-kurdish-militia-manbij-turkey>

US forces and potentially the cessation of US air strikes, Turkish support will further diminish SDF's strength on the ground. These areas will then be ripe for return to ISIS control⁶.

Sadly and tragically, we have seen this occur already. Afrin, in the northwestern corner of Syria, was a safe haven that was often spared the worst of the Syrian civil war. In this area, members of various religions and ethnicities coexisted peacefully. Notably, this included Christians and Yezidis, minorities at extreme risk in other parts of Syria and Iraq⁷. Turkey then took the action to invade Afrin, claiming a necessity for its own national security. Teaming up with a number of terrorist outfits that operate in Syria, including Al-Qaeda offshoots, Afrin was eventually completely overtaken⁸. Many Yezidis have fled, which we know from the information from our own community and has also been reported⁹. Our holy places were desecrated, many individuals from Afrin were persecuted¹⁰. The threat from Turkey¹¹ and its extremist allies are therefore genuinely existential threats to religious minorities¹².

It is important to recall that prior to the attacks in the summer of 2014, Daesh (at that time AQI) was limited in numbers of fighters¹³. Many of the members were from Iraq, but the movement gathered steam in a security vacuum in Eastern Syria. Daesh overtook Mosul with only a few hundred fighters¹⁴. With the absence of another force to prevent such a resurgence, there is no doubt that 'Daesh 2.0' will be born upon the withdrawal of US forces and the reduction of SDF strength. Once Turkey engages in battle for Syrian territory from the West and the North, SDF will face a dual threat from Turkey and Daesh¹⁵. Absent international support, this will be catastrophic for Syria, Iraq, and the whole world. At the same time, the acute and existential threat to religious minorities, as illustrated through the sad example from Afrin, cannot be overstated.

Iraq

Due to disagreements between Baghdad and Erbil relating to Article 140 and the administration of 'disputed' territories, the areas largely inhabited by religious minorities have been the subject of territorial disputes for years¹⁶. This is a complex matter with many facets, but for the purposes of security, sufficient to note that the security of these areas has changed hands several times over the past five years. As such, there is not a well-established and entrenched security mechanism in place. Encouragingly for Shingalis, Yezidi-led and Yezidi-dedicated security forces are currently in place, which is perhaps the best chance to maintain stability and community-trusted security

⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/28/turkey-is-lying-about-fighting-isis/>

⁷ <https://www.gfbv.de/en/news/northern-syria-promising-first-steps-towards-peaceful-coexistence-of-all-population-groups-8074-1/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/too-many-strange-faces-kurds-fear-forced-demographic-shift-in-afrin>

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-yazidis-isis-islam-conversion-afrin-persecution-kurdish-a8310696.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-afrin-yazidis-idps-fafin-896855921>

¹¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/>

¹² <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/in-afrin-turkey-seeks-ethnic-cleansing-not-terror-eradication>

¹³ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/19/isis-thousands-fighters.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27778112>

¹⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/e2f8f4d0-0465-11e9-99df-6183d3002ee1>

¹⁶ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-and-kurds-trouble-along-trigger-line>

mechanisms¹⁷. The same is true in some Christian towns and the locations of other religious minorities¹⁸. At the same time, as for all security forces throughout Iraq, weapons, supplies, and support are necessary to maintain local defense and confidence in security. A resurgence of Daesh just across the border in Syria poses the same danger as the summer of 2014. Are the local units prepared to defend territory against future Daesh incursions in Iraq? Will the Iraqi air force and security forces be capable of defense against Daesh from Syria and Daesh combined with sympathizers inside Iraq? Will the United States continue to assist and lead with air strikes and guidance in such a fight, or also withdraw from Iraq?

It should be noted in this regard that both the Iraqi Security Forces and KRG Peshmerga experience regular attacks from Daesh sleeper cells throughout the ‘disputed’ areas¹⁹, and few could reasonably argue that Daesh is permanently defeated in Iraq or Syria, even if the terrorists do not hold territory as before. Fortunately, the current arrangement in Iraq has prevented such attacks from exploding in the way we saw in 2014. With the absence of US forces in Eastern Syria, the past may be prologue, and we hope this can be prevented.

Humanitarian Assistance, Dignified Return of Minority IDPs, Associated Security Dangers

The international community is rightly and justly dedicated to facilitating the dignified return of IDPs to their homes, including in these areas²⁰. But without studious analysis of the current security situation in these areas, the impact of a stronger and expanding ISIS in Eastern Syria, and the ability of these civilians to guarantee safety and security, any effort toward humanitarian settlements can be dangerous. **The need for accurate, robust early warning systems and security assurances must be the first and most important aspect of any effort to prompt return of civilians to any part of Ninevah, including Shingal.** If humanitarian assistance and rebuilding efforts promote return of our people to the homeland, we hope it will not culminate in the next genocidal attack from Daesh in coming years. This sort of unintended consequence cannot be permitted. All donors and funders of Shingal and Ninevah plains resettlement must consider the security of the area and the absolute guarantee that we are not inadvertently moving IDPs into the crosshairs for future attacks. The international aid and political commitment to religious minorities such as Yezidis and Christians is admirable and clearly heartfelt. The implementation of this commitment must also be intelligent and well-planned.

The Free Yezidi Foundation strongly supports and has advocated for a safe, dignified return of all IDPs in these areas, especially religious minorities, and the importance of freedom of movement. Equally important for a sustainable future, however, will be genuine local political representation and local security arrangements with dedication and capacity for local protection. We cannot use aid funding and enthusiasm to rush vulnerable populations back to their homelands unless there are security forces trusted by the local population and equipped to handle possible future attacks. It is no secret that religious minorities in Iraq have all sought a permanent presence of American troops or international peacekeepers in the Ninevah and Shingal areas. Sadly, we know that this is

¹⁷ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/183-winning-post-isis-battle-iraq-sinjar>

¹⁸ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/after-isis-whats-next-iraqi-christians-18895>

¹⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-military-islamic-state-still-poses-threat-in-iraq-syria/4628365.html>

²⁰ <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2018/10/23/en/us-assistance-enabling-iraq-s-yezidis-return-safely-their-ancestral-homelands>



not a likely prospect, and never has been. Absent such an external guarantee of safety, what can be provided to ensure returning families that Daesh 2.0 will not destroy their villages again?

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

Governments and organizations have expressed, through good will and fraternity, the importance of religious minorities returning to their homes. This must be done with all due concern for safety of civilians as a first priority, rather than creation of physical buildings or centers. The international community must not be in such haste to facilitate return that it ignores the danger posed by extremists and sets the stage for Yezidi genocide⁷⁵. The Free Yezidi Foundation applauds the US government, and in particular, USAID for effort, attention, and political will to promote return of Yezidi families to their homes²¹. But in the event of a future Daesh storm gathering steam in Syria, with tacit or indirect support from Turkey, Yezidi families cannot be left again as sitting ducks to be attacked, slaughtered, and raped²².

Daesh is Global Threat

The Free Yezidi Foundation has specific and particular attention to the situation facing Yezidis. In many cases, this threat also applies to other religious minorities living in the same areas, including Christians, Shabak, Kakayees, and others²³.

But the danger of Daesh abroad is not insignificant. If the strongest force containing and eliminating the Daesh threat, the SDF, cannot succeed, Daesh will grow back²⁴. The attacks on Western cities will continue, with Syria and/or parts of Iraq as the operational and ideological base. Although this may not be an existential threat to other people the way it is to Yezidis, the danger to international peace and security is real and substantial.

This is why we all must underscore the importance of continued solidarity of the entire international community with those who contain and combat Daesh, such as the SDF, rather than leave a vacuum and set the stage for Daesh 2.0²⁵.

Furthermore, victims of direct or inspired Daesh attacks in Paris, Orlando, San Bernardino, Manchester, Nice, Berlin, and other cities have good judicial and security reasons for seeking the capture and eventual trials for Daesh leaders, including Al-Baghdadi. At the very least, if Daesh perpetrators are not apprehended to face justice in courts of law, they should be defeated on the battlefield. It is folly to suppose that thousands of Daesh adherents will simply stop fighting or

²¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/help-is-on-the-way-at-last-for-religious-minorities-in-iraq/2018/07/26/e6d58265-76f5-4d26-abcc-a76ce7e1aeca_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4bc6ffa266d2

²² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2018/08/01/they-came-they-killed-they-destroyed-and-it-will-happen-again/#2399493e6844>

²³ <https://minorityrights.org/publications/no-way-home-iraqs-minorities-on-the-verge-of-disappearance/>

²⁴ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/key-us-lawmaker-calls-senate-hearing-syria-withdrawal-1155856845>

²⁵ <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/423085-bret-stephens-pulling-us-troops-in-syria-will-create-a-vacuum>



change their ideology. And it is impossible to imagine that Turkey, of all countries, would be a force to contain Islamic extremism²⁶.

If the United States withdraws its troops from the fight, it is essential that other coalition members maintain a strong firewall against Daesh, even bearing the considerable cost, rather than ever again cede territory, momentum, land, power, and a quasi-functioning state to such a terrorist group.

Recommendations

US Department of Defense and CENTCOM: Make every effort to maintain capacity to conduct air strikes in Syria, and delay withdrawal of forces as long as possible. Maintain capacity to conduct air strikes in Iraq and continue providing ground support and assistance to Iraqi security forces.

US Department of State & USAID: Ensure that every effort to prompt return of religious minorities to homes is accompanied with robust and effective planning for emergency evacuation. Consider the security impact of all associated aid projects and ensure that such incentives for minority IDPs do not unintentionally lead minority communities into dangerous, life-threatening situations. Include safety and security considerations of our communities ahead of or along with urgency for project implementation. Consider all aid efforts with the associated risks from a potential resurgent Daesh across the border in Syria.

Coalition Partners: To the greatest extent possible, maintain capacity to conduct air strikes against Daesh in Syria. To the greatest extent possible, support the SDF anti-Daesh alliance on the ground in Syria.

Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government: Ensure sufficient level of preparedness and coordination in case of future incursions by Daesh/Turkey on Iraqi soil, including Shingal and Ninevah plains. Conduct or conceive of preparedness exercises and contingency planning on the immediate evacuation of civilians from danger zones in the event of any future attacks.

United Nations: Prepare for next wave of refugees fleeing Eastern Syria into Iraq. Pay special attention to possible attacks in Syria against minorities, especially Christians, and the possibility of renewed atrocities and ethnic cleansing efforts by Daesh in parts of Iraq, including against Yezidis and other minorities, or an upswing of violence and armed conflict among ethnic and/or religious groups in Ninevah province and beyond.

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Comments or questions can be addressed to info@freeyezidi.org

²⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-isis-afirin-syria-kurds-free-syrian-army-jihadi-video-fighters-recruits-a8199166.html>