

# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROUNDTABLE

October 9, 2020

The Honorable Donald Trump  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

*Re: Request to Impose Sanctions to Stop Turkey's War Crimes in Northeast Syria and Beyond Under EO 13894*

Dear President Trump:

We are an informal group of organizations and individuals who advocate for international religious freedom. We ask that your Administration take immediate action to stop Turkey's withholding of water from over one million people in the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) and Turkey's ongoing, horrendous war crimes in areas it has seized and occupies inside AANES ("the Occupation Zone").

We respectfully ask you to impose sanctions on Turkey like those originally imposed pursuant to your October 14, 2019 Executive Order 13894 "Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria" (the EO).<sup>[1]</sup> We note and are extremely grateful that you extended the EO for one more year on October 8, 2020.

Turkey made commitments to you and Vice President Mike Pence on October 17, 2019 to get those sanctions lifted: the Joint Turkish-US Statement on Northeast Syria (the "Statement").<sup>[2]</sup> Sanctions were imposed due to the huge outcry from this IRF Roundtable, other US citizens, NGO's, and the US Congress over Turkey's invasion. The Statement says: "The Turkish side expressed its commitment to ensure safety and well-being of residents of all population centers in the safe zone controlled by the Turkish Forces (safe zone) and reiterated that maximum care will be exercised in order not to cause harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure."

Turkey has utterly failed to honor its duties under the Statement. It has engaged in innumerable war crimes in the Occupation Zone and in Afrin, which it invaded in 2018, directly and through its jihadi "Syrian National Army" (SNA). It is still driving out original residents, after hundreds of thousands fled when it invaded. It is arresting Kurdish Christian converts and Yazidis for "apostacy," seizing property, eliminating Yazidi temples and Christian churches, raping and trafficking young women and girls, forcing Christian and other minority women to wear Islamic veils in order to obtain official documents, refusing documents to people with Kurdish names, pillaging food supplies, and burning or stealing crops and olive groves.<sup>[3]</sup> It has uprooted the democratic, pluralistic governance system set up by AANES, that gave religious freedom and equal rights to all, replacing it with Islamic law and Turkish administration.<sup>[4]</sup> Recently, in Afrin, at least two Kurdish converts to Christianity were arrested for apostacy and their fate is unknown, a woman resisting a jihadi "husband" was raped and murdered, and at least eleven women went

missing.<sup>[5]</sup> Afrin women are reportedly being trafficked by the dozens to Libya, where Turkey has shipped thousands of SNA fighters.

A recent UN Human Rights Council Special Commission reports that it has: “reasonable grounds to believe” that SNA fighters “repeatedly perpetrated” the war crimes of pillage, destroying or seizing property of an adversary, hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape, and looting and destroying cultural property, as well as transferring detainees to Turkey for trial under Turkish law. It says Turkish officials deserve criminal prosecution if they knew or should have known about these crimes, which seems self-evident.<sup>[6]</sup> Turkey has appointed a Turkish governor for Afrin and appointed District Governors for Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad, and the SNA operates under Turkish military/intelligence control.<sup>[7]</sup> The US Department of State and Department of State have received multiple reports of abuses committed by Turkish-supported forces in the Occupation Zone and have attempted to change Turkey’s behavior through negotiations to no avail.<sup>[8]</sup>

Beginning in March 2020, Turkey “weaponized” its control over the captured Alouk water treatment plant in Ras al-Ain. It has withheld clean water supplies to over 1,000,000 people living in the still free part of AANES.<sup>[9]</sup> They have had no running water since July. Efforts are underway to dig new wells and truck water in, but at best, this will supply only 25% of needed water. Turkey even stopped the flow of the Euphrates River to what was once the most productive agricultural region in Syria, interfering with electricity production at the area’s main electric plant. Then on September 9, Turkey bombed an AANES electricity plant in Tel Tamer subdistrict depriving the entire area of electricity. Tell Tamer is the Christian heartland of AANES, populated by descendants of refugees from the Turkish Assyrian genocide of 1914-24.

This is a real emergency. *People are dying daily of the heat, drinking contaminated water, and thirst.* Many of the affected are Christians and Kurds who fled the Khabour River Valley and areas newly occupied or bombed by Turkey. Once prosperous, they now live in tents or bombed out buildings without water or electricity with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees. They have no way to maintain sanitation protocols in the midst of an expanding COVID19 epidemic in the area. Residents say that water is more expensive than gold and harder to buy. They have to prioritize water purchases over food, and their families are starving.

Eighty-nine humanitarian organizations working in AANES (in August) have publicly petitioned the international community for action.<sup>[10]</sup> In a rare public criticism of Turkey, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II wrote to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on August 21, 2020. He noted that Turkey is denying basic human rights to those affected, “namely their right to live.” He wrote: “***Using water as a weapon—which is not the first time—is a barbaric act and a flagrant violation of fundamental human rights.... If this water blockade continues, it would only be appropriate to characterize this inhumane act as a crime against humanity.***”<sup>[11]</sup> The Operation Inherent Resolve Report to the US Congress confirms these facts.<sup>[12]</sup> As far as we are aware, there have been no public US condemnations of Turkey despite private promises made by US officials to intervene in the water crisis in late August. Your extension of the EO is a very significant step.<sup>[13]</sup> We are simply asking that sanctions be imposed under it.

Your administration has tried to protect Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities in the Middle East. However, we are saddened to report that the Christian population of AANES has dropped from 30% of the total population to 10% (less than 100,000) since the start of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>[14]</sup> Yazidi and Kurdish populations are also dwindling. Turkey's conduct gives them no hope of living in safety. Ongoing Turkish bombardments are also driving out historic Yazidi and Christian populations in Northern Iraq. Now Turkey has prodded Azerbaijan to invade and occupy the historic Armenian Christian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh), part of Armenia since the 7th century BC. Turkey is using the same SNA fighters, Turkish fighter jets, and Turkish weaponized drones used to invade AANES a year ago. Faith-based communities believe that the US must take strong action in light of Turkey's manifest war crimes and its flagrant violations of its obligations as a NATO member and signatory to UN treaties.

Turkey's President appears to believe that no one will stop his aggressive steps against AANES and other countries. But sanctions are something President Erdogan understands. Please promptly reimpose the same sanctions as those imposed under the EO in 2019 against Turkey and its high level officials. We also highly recommend that sanctions be imposed individually against the Turkish governors of Afrin, Ras Al Ain, and Tel Abyad and the Turkish military officials, SNA, and others responsible for war crimes identified by the UN Special Commission on Syria and our own military and State Department. We would like to see sanctions continue until Turkey pulls out of Afrin and the Occupation Zone so that democracy and religious freedom provided by AANES can return.

We also urge you to act, by Presidential order, to remove AANES from Syria-wide sanctions administered by the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC). Those sanctions deprive AANES of access to world financial markets and foreign investment. AANES has enormous untapped natural resources: oil, farmland, and water and an industrious, educated population. Relief from Syria-wide sanctions and designation of AANES as a special economic zone would enable its residents to rebuild their economy and repay the US and its allies for their war costs through trade and economic opportunities. This is an important step, in line with the OFAC approval of a US company's contract to improve the AANES oil production capacity.

We further ask that the US and our allies use their diplomatic might to require that AANES's Syrian Democratic Council have a seat at the table in any Syrian peace talks and that they support the AANES pluralistic democratic governance system as a model for all of Syria. This could have a significant impact on moving all of post-war Syria into alignment with US national security interests, just as AANES is now. It would provide and promote religious freedom throughout the region and secure a safe place for Christians, Yazidis, and other minorities to return and prosper. Syria peace talks should also have the goal of requiring Turkey to return to its own borders, returning now occupied parts of AANES and Idlib to peace, religious freedom, and democratic self-governance.

AANES is a small area in the greater scheme of things, but it is the place where ISIS was brought to its knees. It offers more than a fair chance of being the place where the antidote to ISIS (religious freedom and democracy) takes root and flourishes in Syria and the Middle East. It already serves as a bulwark against significant US national security threats from ISIS and Iran. It could be a place where Christians and other minorities thrive. But, this will only happen if the United States fulfills

its moral obligation to stop the ongoing atrocities by Turkey against people whose only crime was to join with the United States in the fight against ISIS.

Respectfully,

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[1] *Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria*, October 14, 2019, 84 FR 55851, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/10/17/2019-22849/blocking-property-and-suspending-entry-of-certain-persons-contributing-to-the-situation-in-syria>

[2] *The United States and Turkey Agree to Ceasefire in Northeast Syria*, 10/17/2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-turkey-agree-ceasefire-northeast-syria/>

[3] April 1-June 30, 2020, *Operation Inherent Resolve Report to the U.S. Congress* (“Inherent Resolve Report”) at 69.

[4] That system is unique in the Middle East in providing democracy and equal rights to all religious and ethnic groups and to women, granting religious freedom (including the right to convert) and making Syriac (the language of Jesus) and Kurdish official languages. It is generally modeled on rights provided in US laws. *Social Contract of the Democratic Self-Administration of Northern Syria*, January 29, 2014, as amended December 29, 2016, English Translation at <https://vvanwilgenburg.blogspot.com/2017/03/social-contract-of-democratic.html>; *Beyond the Frontlines: the building of the democratic system in North and East Syria*, Rojava Information Center, June 30, 2020, <https://rojivainformationcenter.com/2019/12/report-beyond-the-frontlines/>

[5] *August 2020: 11 Women Reported Kidnapped*, <https://missingafrinwomen.org/reports/august-2020/>

[6] *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, UNHRC, 8/14/2020, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/45/31>, at 9-15.

[7] *Turkish state prepares for annexation of occupied territories*, ANF News, 12/7/2019, <https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/turkish-state-prepares-for-annexation-of-occupied-territories-39919>

[8] 2020 4-1 to 6-30, *Report of the Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve to the US Congress*, at 5-6, <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>

[9] *Turkey/Syria: Weaponizing Water in Global Pandemic?* Human Rights Watch, 3/31/2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/turkey/syria-weaponizing-water-global-pandemic>

[10] *89 organizations denounce Turkey’s repeated water cuts to hundreds of thousands in Syria’s northeast*, North Press Agency, 8/24/2020 [https://npasyria.com/en/45753/?fbclid=IwAR10k2iBrRNmPjkfiQ\\_SHD6nMp6JcTUQChuwCTfMIN-Bloi9xTL4RJeJZJw](https://npasyria.com/en/45753/?fbclid=IwAR10k2iBrRNmPjkfiQ_SHD6nMp6JcTUQChuwCTfMIN-Bloi9xTL4RJeJZJw)

[11] <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/08/24/syriac-orthodox-patriarch-mor-ignatius-aphrem-ii-sends-letter-to-u-n-secretary-general-over-water-crisis-in-hasakah-syria/?fbclid=IwAR3jYG2F-QpkgbJLnHuXB8AZ3XB69bDjv55hBpp3g6wLknmYIWWdJPI3Qh4>

<sup>[12]</sup> Inherent Resolve Report, above, at 77.

<sup>[13]</sup> US Delegation Meets with Autonomous Administration, Discusses Hassakeh Water Crisis, 8/24/2020, The Syrian Observer. <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/60062/us-delegation-meets-with-autonomous-administration-discusses-hassakeh-water-crisis.html>

<https://syriacpress.com/blog/2020/08/27/u-s-state-department-promises-to-pressure-the-turkey-over-north-and-east-syria-water-crisis-but-no-official-condemnation-made/>

<sup>[14]</sup> *After ISIS: Ensuring a Future for Christians and Other Minorities in North and East Syria*, Rojava Information Center (September 8, 2020). <https://rojivainformationcenter.com/2020/09/after-isis-ensuring-a-future-for-christians-and-other-minorities-in-north-and-east-syria/>