

Northeast Syria: A Beacon of Religious Freedom that Deserves Our Protection

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Turkey just [announced its plan](#) to attack one of the few oases of religious freedom in the Middle East -- and it is doing so after President Trump began withdrawing U.S. troops from a part of northeast Syria.

Yet backing out of Northeast Syria is a betrayal of our friends and allies, a disavowal of our values, and will *work against* our long-term interests in the region. It could also lead to the death and displacement of thousands of religious minorities who have found protection under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

It is an oft-overlooked story that in the wake of ISIS's genocide, the Kurdish-led SDF established a semi-autonomous area in Northeast Syria in which religious freedom flourished and religious minorities were protected. Pluralism thrived and democracy began to gain a foothold. This area

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stood in stark contrast to the surrounding countries where religious persecution is rampant. This [beacon of freedom](#) had the additional effect of serving as a bulwark against Iran, which would otherwise seek to gain influence in Syria, expanding its regional power and threatening Israel and the United States' allies in the Gulf.

With Turkish President Erdogan's announcement of his pending invasion, all of this is now at risk. Though the Kurdish forces in Northeast Syria have long been a trustworthy American ally, Turkey [accuses them](#) of being a terrorist group. But this excuse by Erdogan only serves to hide the fact that Turkey has a long history of attacking Kurds and is unhappy to see them develop a successful semi-autonomous region in Syria, although this area poses no threat to Turkey.

Erdogan has previously made threats against northeast Syria. Several months ago, the U.S. agreed to a "safe zone" in Syria along the Turkish border to act as a buffer between Turkey and the Kurdish-controlled area of Syria. However, the U.S. wasn't moving fast enough for Erdogan. This past weekend, he threatened to take matters into his own hands. On Sunday night, President Trump had a phone call with Erdogan that proved to be the deciding factor. The president agreed to withdraw U.S. troops from the safe zone.

Our Kurdish allies were devastated by the news. They understandably [feel betrayed](#), and it's hard to interpret these U.S. military actions any other way. Kurdish fighters fought and died alongside U.S. troops to defeat ISIS. In the aftermath, they have acted responsibly and detained a number of former fighters. On top of that, they were building their own version of democracy which is truly pluralistic and protected religious freedom. They didn't ask us to do the work. The SDF and their co-laborers did it all themselves; they just wanted our support. The U.S. had promised to keep just 1,000 troops in Syria, to [ward off any ideas of attack from Turkey](#), or anyone else.

Where religious freedom and human rights flourish -- especially in such a hostile environment -- it warrants U.S. support. Especially when those who have established a society with these features have been such close and faithful U.S. allies.

Yet now, in spite of all our allies have done, we've endorsed a Turkish military operation against them. It is understandable that this would cause doubts in the minds of others who might work with us.

President Trump is trying to look out for America's interest, but he's making a mistake here. Maintaining a free and secure Northeast Syria and preventing a Turkish attack is in America's interest.

The SDF [will go to war](#) if Turkey invades, and this would wreak havoc in a region that the U.S. has invested a great deal in. A Turkish military operation in Northeast Syria may lead to the death and displacement of thousands of religious minorities who lived out their faith freely in Northeast Syria. In such an environment, the resurgence of ISIS is more likely, not less.

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The absence of any U.S. troops will also only embolden Iran. Once the SDF are cleared out of northeast Syria, Iran would come in, paving the way for it to project power all the way to Israel's border. In addition to constituting a serious threat to Israel, Iranian expansion in Turkey would threaten other U.S. allies in the Gulf.

President Trump has acknowledged the need to pursue America's interests in foreign policy, and that's good. But the United States' interest in the region is closely tied to the future of northeast Syria. The president needs to realize that and reverse course -- before it's too late.