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Understanding the Dangers of a Turkish ‘Safe-Zone’ in Syria

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Brief Analysis

It has been almost a month since U.S. President Donald Trump’s abrupt announcement that American forces would leave Syria shocked American enemies, allies, and Trump’s own officials alike. For Washington, the question of what comes next has been a matter of significant debate and speculation. For Northeast Syria—and the millions of people there who have fought ISIS and built a fragile democracy against all odds—it is a matter of survival.

Both Trump and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, have agreed that their next step in Syria is the creation of a so-called ‘[safe zone](#)’ extending 20 miles into Syrian territory. Erdogan has stated that the zone will be administered by Turkish forces and has amassed [thousands of troops](#) at the Syrian border in preparation. His justification for this step is that this massive force is needed to [fight terrorism](#)—though the borders of the zone stop far short of Syria’s final pocket of the Islamic State (IS), where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continue to fight to deprive the group of its last sliver of territory.

Such a plan is a radical departure from the policy that has driven IS back and brought peace and stability to nearly a third of Syrian territory. If allowed to proceed as Erdogan hopes, it will not be a ‘safe zone,’ but a corridor of death.

Trusting Turkey to fight IS is the first grave mistake the Trump administration has made by entertaining this idea. Turkey refused to take action against the terrorist group when it was at its strongest in 2014 and 2015, emphasized by reports claiming that Turkey turned a blind eye to [foreign fighters crossing its borders](#). In the areas Turkish officials tout as a model for their safe zone, al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has made significant [territorial gains](#) in the past several weeks alone.

It is clear that Turkey has taken harsher action against the Syrian Democratic Forces—who have liberated more Syrian territory from IS than any other actor in the conflict—than they have against any of the Islamist groups that use Syria as a base to terrorize the world. Last year, Turkish forces enlisted these militias as partners to invade the Syrian Kurdish city of Afrin—displacing hundreds of thousands of people and subjecting those who remained to looting, arbitrary detentions, forced religious conversions, and sexual violence.

Once so peaceful that refugees from across Syria traveled there to build new lives, Afrin under Turkish occupation is now reminiscent of cities under IS rule according to reports on the ground and as described by the independent UK-based [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#). The Kurdish language is [banned from public life](#). Civilians are [regularly kidnapped and tortured](#) to extort ransoms from their relatives. Women cannot appear in public without adhering to strict Islamic dress codes. Christians, Alevis, and Yazidis—who once practiced their faith proudly and openly—have been told by militiamen that they must convert, flee, or be killed. The United States Department of Defense has even admitted that the invasion of Afrin, and subsequent poor governance in areas administered by Turkish-backed militias, has given IS a safe haven to regroup.

The world cannot allow what happened in Afrin to happen to the [3.5 million people currently living in Northeast Syria](#). The borders of Erdogan’s “safe zone” encompass the homelands of nearly all of Syria’s Kurds, Christians, and Yazidis—groups that have a long history of experiencing atrocities at the hands of the Turkish state. This new proposed military incursion is nothing less than the same policy of occupation and ethnic cleansing by a different name.

Given the current situation, a legitimate international safe zone could be effective to prevent more bloodshed and ensure stability in Syria. Such a zone could be administered by the international forces, which already work closely with the SDF and understand the importance of a democratic, pluralist, and equal society that Northeast Syria is trying to build. Within its borders, the SDF could work with these international partners to combat IS sleeper cells—like the one responsible for this week’s devastating attack in Manbij—and to rebuild liberated areas so that more displaced Syrians can return to their homes.

The enduring defeat of IS will require significant work for years after its territorial defeat. The SDF and its civilian counterparts have begun that work across Northeast Syria—building democratic institutions, protecting religious freedom and gender equality, strengthening local security, and preparing for a negotiated settlement to Syria’s war. A “safe zone” under exclusive Turkish control would do nothing but turn this hard-won peace into further bloodshed and chaos. If the United States falls for Erdogan’s rhetoric, the world’s best hope for peace in Syria will be lost. ❖



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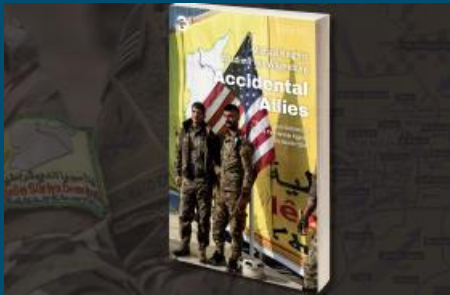


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