

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 \(http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=90531\)](http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=90531). The Kurdish language is [banned from public life \(http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/85e1ae9c-9915-4c1d-89b0-a283d752d462\)](http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/85e1ae9c-9915-4c1d-89b0-a283d752d462). Civilians are [regularly kidnapped and tortured \(https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2018/10/syria-afria-fsa-sdf-kidnapping-gangs-ransom.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/originals/2018/10/syria-afria-fsa-sdf-kidnapping-gangs-ransom.html) 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 \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/war-displacement-reshuffle-syrias-demographic-map/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/war-displacement-reshuffle-syrias-demographic-map/). 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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Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

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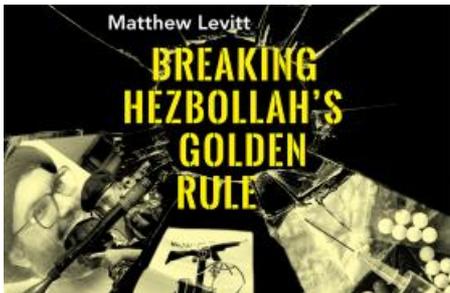
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