

**United States House Oversight and Reform
National Security Subcommittee
“The Trump Administration’s Syria Policy:
Perspectives From the Field”
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**Testimony of
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Chairman Raskin, Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Roy, Ranking Member Hice, and distinguished Members of the House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today during dark and dangerous times for my people, the people of North and East Syria.

Over 11,000 of our men and women were lost in the historic battle to defeat ISIS. These brave members of our Syrian Democratic Forces perished on the mission to counter the oppressive bloodlust of ISIS extremism. We fought not just to reclaim our homeland, but to defend our democratic ideology — instead of letting the destructive rhetoric of ISIS extremists rule over us. The battle resulted in a victory that was announced earlier this year by President Donald Trump and celebrated across the world. As we know, it was another announcement by President Trump on Sunday, October 6, that has heralded chaos and bloodshed for our people.

The Turkish invasion into our region began on October 9, 2019. Many of our people have died. Over 130,000 have been displaced. The invasion itself constitutes an act of aggression that is prohibited by international law. The actions of Turkey constitute acts of genocide against the Kurdish population. In addition, Turkey has committed grave human rights violations, to include the likely use of white phosphorus on civilians, showers of aerial bombs over population centers that endanger civilians, and horrendous murders such as the killing of Kurdish political leader Ms. Hevrin Khalaf. A fragile “ceasefire” has been announced, first by Vice President Mike Pence and then by Presidents Erdogan and Putin. We will see whether Turkey abides by this “ceasefire.” It is not wise to take the Turkish government at its word.

The “ceasefire” agreements, made by the US and Turkey, then Russia and Turkey, cede large portions of our territory to Turkish military control. Now the same fighters who defeated ISIS are being told to retreat like criminals, and being labeled “terrorists.”

We are not terrorists. The Syrian Democratic Forces are brave men and women who have fought to defend their homeland against occupation, first by ISIS and then by Turkey.

Our region had grown into the most stable and secure region in Syria. Our governance structure, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), was responsible for oversight of roughly 30% of the country, and has provided services such as water, electricity, education, sanitation services, and courts and dispute settlement. We had not been aligned with either the Assad government or the armed uprising. Now, the Turkish invasion is destroying the best bid for a democratic model in the Middle East. All that we have built may not survive.

We ask the United States Congress to act. The sanctions bill that you are working on has promise to deter Turkey in the long run. The stronger that bill is, the more Turkey will weaken and falter in its imperial ambitions in the long run. In the short term, what would save us is immediate action to deter the Turkish attacks, whether or not Turkey violates its new “ceasefire” agreement.

Specifically, we ask that you:

- **Stop the Turkish aggression on North and East Syria.**
- **Stop the Turkish genocide against the people of North and East Syria.**
- **Impose immediate, substantial sanctions on Turkey.**
- **Exercise all diplomatic pressures that could deter the Turkish aggression.**
- **Deploy international peacekeepers along the border with Turkey.**
- **Suspend Article 5 of the NATO Charter regarding the Turkish intervention in North and East Syria.**
- **Restore the International Coalition's control over the airspace in North and East Syria to prevent Turkey from bombing the region.**
- **Impose a no-fly zone.**
- **Send international observers to document the violations committed by the Turkish army and the so-called "National Army" and assess the humanitarian situation resulting from the Turkish invasion.**

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Turkish Incursion and War Crimes

In the past two weeks, our relative stability was shattered. The whole world has watched in horror as the Turkish army's invasion of Northern Syria, backed by tens of thousands

of its affiliated militias. Despite the 120-hour ceasefire agreement reached through the US mediation on 17 October 2019, the Turkish military machine continued to target civilians, medical centers, ambulances, medical and rescue teams. The Syrian Democratic Council would like to let you know that the lives of the civilians and wounded in Sari Kani (Ras al-Ain) are in great danger, which require an international action to open humanitarian corridors to rescue them.

It is quite clear, at this moment, that the aim of this agreement was not the ceasefire, but rather an attempt to circumvent the international pressure and absorb the public and international reactions against the Turkish invasion. While the Syrian Democratic Forces has expressed full commitment to the ceasefire agreement and has taken all the necessary steps to ensure its success, Turkey has not abided by the agreement and increased its attacks and aggression on our region.

Turkey is now trying to liquidate the fighters who defeated ISIS in Ras Al-Ain and is seeking through the ceasefire agreement to legitimize its occupation and proceed to occupy further territories. We have not noticed any sign that Turkey is going to implement the ceasefire agreement, which will aggravate the humanitarian crisis in our region.

The brutal violations against humanity perpetrated by the Turkish army are still ongoing. Even the internationally prohibited weapon, white phosphorus, has been directly used against civilians and confirmed by the medical teams who treated injuries. The Amnesty International's report issued on 18 October 2019 confirms the commission of war crimes by Turkey and its affiliated terrorist factions during the operation dubbed "Operation Peace Spring" based on reliable evidence, reports and testimonies. We call upon the international commissions of inquiry to document these crimes and to hold the perpetrators accountable.

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Betrayal, Security Mechanism, Border Zone

Many in North and East Syria, and our allies across the world, are using the word “betrayal” to describe the abrupt policy reversal toward North and East Syria. They say it is wrong to suddenly leave an ally alone to face an attack such as the one that Turkey is conducting now. They say that we have been thrown to the wolves.

Most in the international community don't understand the depth of the policy reversal. In the months before Turkey's incursion, the US had been brokering a deal between

Turkey and our Syrian Democratic Forces. This deal was for a security mechanism at the border, which Turkey labeled a “safe zone.”

Turkey had pushed for us to withdraw from the border up to 30 km. We suggested a much smaller zone. We were doubtful, but the US diplomats assured us that, if we withdrew all of our forces as Turkey was requesting, the United States would be there to prevent an attack on our people. We agreed on a compromise with Turkey, as brokered by the US diplomats. In good faith, we removed most of our soldiers and abandoned and destroyed many of our defensive positions.

That’s why there were no defense forces along the border area to meet President Erdogan’s armies on October 9, 2019.

Now that the US has withdrawn its forces from our region, Turkey has negotiated with Russia to support a security mechanism at the border, and Russia has agreed to give them most of the terms that they wanted.

Now we have confirmed that Turkey had never intended to keep up their end of the bargain. In fact, it is likely that the Turkish military used information it gleaned during our negotiations to coordinate an even more effective and more deadly attack on the people of North and East Syria.

Furthermore, our forces often prioritized according to the guidance of US military advisors. For example, our forces made the fight against ISIS a priority instead of reclaiming our region of Afrin, which is sovereign Syrian territory that has been occupied by the Turkish military since January 2018.

Turkey continues to occupy Afrin, a historically Kurdish city and region to this day. Our brave fighters with the SDF have been known to wonder aloud, what may have happened if we had taken our military to Afrin instead of staying the course in line with US priorities.

Some of our soldiers are from the Afrin canton. Some spilled their blood, paying the ultimate price, not reclaiming their home city of Afrin, but many miles away, battling ISIS. Why were they fighting so far from their occupied homeland? Because the US asked them to.

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Afrin, Occupied by Turkey

Sovereign Syrian territory has been occupied by the Turkish military and Turkey-backed forces, a hostile occupying military, since long before October 9, 2019.

On January 20, 2018, Turkish-backed forces invaded the peaceful canton of Afrin, a predominantly-Kurdish region of 1,840 square kilometers, with a population of 172,095. Its invasion occurred four years after the establishment of a democratic, autonomous, civil administration of the Afrin people. This new administration had proven successful. Afrin had become a safe haven for all Syrians from different regions of Syria with different affiliations, living in brotherhood, peace, and security, despite the state of siege imposed upon it, and frequent attacks and assaults by armed groups affiliated with the Syrian opposition.

The Afrin people, civil administration, and the local military forces, and the women's protection units did not accept the handover of the city to the Turkish regime. At the same time, they did not allow themselves to be part of the reproduction of the authoritarian central system — despite calls from the Afrin Executive Council to just let the authority in Damascus bear its responsibilities and deal with the Turkish occupation from the perspective of sovereignty and the joint defense of Syrian territory.

The decision of the people, society, and autonomous administration in Afrin to resist the Turkish occupation was a historic decision. The resistance of Afrin lasted 58 days, in which Ankara used all kinds of weapons against the civilian population. Resistance continued despite the silence of the international community and collusion with the occupying forces.

The resistance to the invasion in Afrin resulted in more than 1,000 martyrs. And the resistance continues to this moment amidst grave losses from the forces of the Turkish occupation and its terrorist mercenaries. The people of Afrin will not subside until liberation and the safe and stable return of its people to their land, the accountability of murderers, and perpetrators of all crimes including the demolition of temples and dispensaries and the theft occupation and demographic change to the people, history and geography of the Syrian Arab city with a Kurdish identity.

We in the Democratic Council of Syria salute the resistance of Afrin. We condemn and deplore in the strongest terms the crimes of the Turkish military occupation against Afrin.

We affirm that without the liberation of Afrin and its return to the scene of January 19, 2018, the day before the cowardly Turkish offensive, and without ending the entire

Turkish occupation of the other Syrian regions, we cannot even talk about a sustainable solution to the Syrian crisis. In this regard, the United Nations, the General Assembly, the Security Council, the human rights organization, all organizations and civil society institutions in Syria, the Middle East and the world, and all those interested in resolving the Syrian crisis, are all called upon to shoulder their responsibilities towards the suffering of the general people of Syria, and in particular what is happening in Afrin.

Swift steps should be taken to put an end to the Turkish occupation of Afrin, to hold the perpetrators accountable, and to bring them to justice as war criminals and against humanity.

I reaffirm that the issue of Afrin's liberation is one of our most important national constants towards resolving the Syrian crisis on the path of a political solution.

To this day, our occupied territory of Afrin seems to have been forgotten.

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Turkey is Guilty of Genocide, But They Are Not Alone

To be Kurdish is to be under attack. The Turkish Kurds have been living under constant threat of persecution since the founding of the modern Turkish state, and the administration of Erdogan is continuing its policies of genocide. Now Syrian Kurds are feeling Turkey's spite.

The Turkish government has banned the Kurdish language and even banned the use of the words "Kurd" and "Kurdish." They have burned Kurdish villages. They have committed forced resettlement.

Turkey and the United States have both signed the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (1948). The Genocide Convention makes it clear that killing members of a group is punishable, as well as "deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part."

But take note that being complicit in genocide is also punishable, according to the convention. Any head of state, or any country, that knowingly acts in complicity and allows another to commit the egregious acts of genocide is guilty.

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Turkey Used White Phosphorus

Several soldiers, civilians, and small children emerged in our hospitals with very strange burns. Doctors were left perplexed, not knowing how to treat the burns. Experts viewing photo evidence confirmed that the agent used appeared to be white phosphorus.

White phosphorus is a chemical agent that reacts with the water within the body to generate an intense burning that cannot be put out with water. It is against international law to use white phosphorous in civilian areas or endanger civilian life by using it in dense urban areas.

There is no doubt that Turkey used a deadly chemical agent against our people. There is strong evidence that that agent was white phosphorus, as noted by the Amnesty International report on human rights violations in Syria, “Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies,” dated October 18, 2019.

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War Crimes Committed by Turkey

The blood on Turkey’s hands cannot be ignored. There have been many war crimes committed by Turkey in addition to the use of banned chemical agents.

Hevrin Khalaf, a Kurdish politician and head of the Future Party, a Syrian political party, was traveling in a black SUV with her driver along Route M4, Northeast Syria, near Rajim Aanwa, on October 12. She was stopped by members of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia, a Turkish-backed militia. The militia members pulled her out of her car.

“I’m head of a political party,” Hevrin can be heard saying, in a video posted to social media. The video shows the militia members standing over a dead body, presumably that of her driver, and leaning into the backseat of the car.

Hevrin’s body was found utterly brutalized, with dozens of bullet holes, lacerations, and skin detached from her scalp where she had been dragged by her hair. The vehicle itself was also found with bullet holes in it, slashed tires, and further damage. Their hatred of the Kurdish people expressed itself in bullets and blood.

The evidence of this attack is on display in several gruesome videos posted to the social media accounts of the attackers. They are so confident in their impunity as they commit

these war crimes that they have posted their violations to their own accounts for all to witness.

Such is the brutality and malice of an occupying force.

Turkey has made claims that their aerial attacks are “precise.”

Was it “precise” to bomb 8-year-old Sarah Yousef Hussein and 11-year-old Mohammad Yousef Hussein? They were a brother and sister playing outside of their home on October 10, near al-Salah mosque in Qamishli, Syria, when Turkish mortars struck them. A piece of shrapnel became lodged in Mohammad’s chest. Sarah’s leg was struck.

The two were rushed to the hospital, and laid out side by side. Mohammad was having difficulty breathing. It seemed the shrapnel was lodged deep into his chest cavity. Mohammad died. Sarah had her leg amputated.

A rescue worker told Amnesty International that there were no military bases or checkpoints anywhere in the vicinity. Turkish mortars did, however, strike a bakery and a restaurant as they carried out indiscriminate attacks over a residential area of Qamishli.

Was Turkey being “precise” when it dropped bombs on a convoy of journalists traveling together on October 13 near Ras Al-Ain, Syria, to cover a demonstration against the Turkish attacks? This attack killed the Syrian-Kurdish reporter Saad Ahmed. Shrapnel from the incident struck Saad in the head. Although he was rushed to a nearby hospital, he could not be saved. Five other civilians were killed, and 59 civilians were injured in this attack.

Was it “precise” when Turkey dropped bombs on a school near Salhiye on October 10, a place where civilians had taken shelter from the attacks? The bombs killed four civilians. According to Amnesty International, a Kurdish Red Crescent worker rushed to the scene to pull bodies from the wreckage. When he saw the small, blackened corpses of the two children, he could not even tell if they were male, female, or tell anything else about them — their corpses were too badly burnt.

The evidence is clear. Dead bodies do not lie. Turkey’s attacks are indiscriminate bombing campaigns of civilians. Their mercenaries are brutally murdering people in horrifying extrajudicial killings. These attacks must be called what they are: war crimes.

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ISIS Re-emergence

Following the final defeat of the ISIS “caliphate” in Baghouz, Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces were left holding 70,000 ISIS detainees. These were several thousand fighters, including foreign nationals, and a very large number of ISIS family members and support personnel. The AANES did everything we could to ensure these detainees were kept under humane conditions, despite our resources being stretched thin.

We called upon all of the major governments of the world, especially the United States, to offer resources in the form of financial support and legal resources in order to process each one of the 70,000 detainees and ensure each was given a fair trial. We also asked for these countries to fulfill their international obligations of repatriating their nationals, but these nations by and large declined to fulfill their obligations.

We warned the international community in the strongest possible terms that this situation represented a tinder box waiting for a spark. Violent terrorists were being held together, talking, eating, meeting together every day and planning future attacks. Families are being held together to raise their children to be future terrorists under peer pressure from other families, without integration into the rest of society and without possibility of youth interventions or secular education. ISIS had not gone anywhere, it was just waiting for the right moment to re-emerge.

Despite our urgent pleas for help with the ISIS detainees, we received only silence from the major governments of the world.

Now that our region has been invaded by Turkey, all of our efforts to contain ISIS have been compromised. We are one prison break away from the re-emergence of ISIS. And our forces will not be the ones guarding the cells.

The political will, the resources, the time, and the hopes of the nations of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, led by your US Department of State, have already been spent. The lives of 11,000 soldiers cannot be recovered. The US policy reversal has cast doubt upon whether it will be possible to contain ISIS in the future, as any decisions related to the prisoners will not be made by either the US or SDF.

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We are firmly committed to our ideals. We believe in equality, women’s rights, ecological consciousness, religious pluralism, and community empowerment. We believe government should truly be directed by the people. Many in Washington seem to

think it is unusual to be committed to these ideals. But ask the youth of your own country -- the climate activists, the socialists, and some of the younger members of Congress. They don't think we are so idealistic. They know our movement is necessary.

In Northeast Syria, we know who we are and what we believe. We invite the United States to have the same moral certainty. We invite you to respect your allies, the people whose sons and daughters fought with you.

There is a Kurdish expression, "We have no friends but the mountains." We ask that the United States prove that it will in fact be a friend to the Kurds, the Arabs, the Syrians, and all of the people of North and East Syria. Please restore your support to avoid further acts of genocide against our people, and avoid a tragic re-emergence of ISIS.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak before you about the deadly crisis facing my people, and look forward to your questions.

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ILHAM AHMED was born in the Kurdish city of Afrin in Rojava, Syria. Ahmed has been part of the Kurdish struggle for freedom and democracy since the 1990's, with a particular focus on women's rights. As an active member of the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD), a network of civil society organizations from inside and outside of Syria, Ahmed participated in a number of international conferences on women's issues.

Ahmed currently serves as Executive President of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), a coalition of multiethnic organizations representing the peoples of the federal region of northern Syria. Ahmed is the most recognizable and central figure for the regional authority of the most stable, peaceful region of Syria. The SDC is the political arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has been allied with the United States Armed Forces in the struggle against ISIS and global terrorism. Ahmed has appeared on many TV news programs, in publications such as *The Washington Post* and *Foreign Policy Magazine*, and has authored op-eds in *The New York Times* and other publications.