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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 August 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Syrian Arab Republic: Alevis and Yazidis in Afrin threatened with extinction

Situation of Yazidis

On August 4, 2020, the Afrin Civil Council, which was installed by the Turkish occupying power, announced its intention to build a school on a site where a Yazidi center was located until the occupation of Afrin by Turkey and the Syrian Islamist opposition groups. A picture of the foundation stone for the planned school was published on the official website of the council. The foundation stone clearly stated – in Turkish, under the Turkish national flag – that it is an 'Imam Hatip Okulu'.¹

An Imam-Hatip-School (Turkish: imam hatip lise) is a (Turkish) state-run vocational school where the Islam religion and the Quran are taught and Islamic Imams (prayer leaders) and preachers are trained. The fact that the foundation stone for this school was laid on the anniversary of the genocide against the Yazidis (on August 3, 2020) has a symbolic character: "Now, Muslims live where Yazidis once lived – and Islamic Quran schools are being established where Yazidi centers or schools were." From the viewpoint of the Yazidi community, this is to be seen as a continuation of the practices of the Islamic State (IS). Also, this is a clear sign that the Turkish occupying power is not willing to abide by any of the rules that, according to the Geneva Conventions, an occupying power has to respect with regard to the people living in an occupied region.

*"The property of municipalities [in an occupied territory], that of institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, even when State property, shall be treated as private property. All seizure of, destruction or wilful damage done to institutions of this character, historic monuments, works of art and science, is forbidden, and should be made the subject of legal proceedings."*²

The current practice of the Turkish occupation regime shows that it is not willing to protect the cultural and religious life of the people of Afrin, in this case the Yazidis and other minorities. On the contrary, Yazidis and other minorities in the Afrin region – which, as an autonomous region, was once an oasis of religious freedom – are in the process of being exterminated by the occupation regime.

After the Turkish occupation regime dispersed the Christian community in the Middle East by driving them out of Afrin, the Yazidi and Alevi communities are now facing extermination.

As of March 2018, Turkey's Islamist allies caused havoc in Afrin for several months. They plundered and burned, and a strict Islamist regime was introduced – which was especially hard for women and people of other faiths. Those who did not submit to it were and are punished draconically. In February 2015, when a member of the STP visited the region, there was only one Armenian still living there with his son. For fear of Turkish Islamist rebels, these Armenians were then only able to move within Afrin. According to the Evangelical Christian Union Church, about 200 to 250 Christian families (about 1,200 people) were living there before the invasion of the Turkish army. All these Christians had to flee Afrin after the invasion of the Turkish troops. Now, there are no Christians living there anymore.

Before the Turkish occupation, there were about 20,000 to 30,000 Yazidis living in Afrin. Now, there are only 1500 Yazidis left. Almost all Yazidi villages or villages with a Yazidi population in the region between Afrin and Mount Simon – such as Basufan, Baadi, Barad, Kimar, Iska, Shadere, Ghazzawiya, Burj Abdalo, and Ain Dara – were attacked by the Turkish air force at the beginning of 2018. The Yazidi village of Qestel Cindu had already been attacked by IS and other Islamist groups in 2013. Even back then, Turkey supported or tolerated Islamist fighters in Northern Syria. Many Yazidi olive groves and fruit trees were destroyed, and their livestock was killed.

Because of the growing threat to the Yazidis in Afrin, Nadia Murad, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and UN Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking, called for an international inquiry into the treatment of the Yazidis and in particular Yazidi women in Afrin.

¹ <https://www.ezdina.com/2020/08/Reportag-Ezidi197.html?fbclid=IwAR35g6jfwIHXX9CmIghS6BEePk3p-BKsv4SWmRl0vuX8tO-nVZAHw5fqtE8>

² https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v2_rul_rule40

During the clashes between rivaling pro-Turkish Islamist groups in early June 2010, it had become known that the Arab-Sunni Hamzat militia was operating secret prisons for women in Afrin. Pictures of naked women being held there circulated in social media. Five Kurdish women, among them a Yazidi woman, were identified in videos and pictures.³

Situation of Alevis

Before the Turkish occupation in March 2018, Afrin was inhabited by a tolerant Muslim population. Under the Turkish occupation regime, the situation changed fundamentally. Turkish President Erdogan uses religion – in this case Islam – as a weapon, inciting against anyone who rejects a strict interpretation of the Quran.

In March 2018, a new era in Afrin's history began. Within two years, much of what the people had built up over centuries was destroyed. The Kurds are suffering under the Islamization and Turkization policy practiced by Turkey. For the few Alevis who stayed in Afrin, but also for the Yazidis, Erdogan's policy could lead to complete extermination.

Afrin's Alevis speak "Kurmanci" – the same Kurdish dialect that all Kurds in Afrin speak – and feel closely connected with other Kurds. Many Alevis identify themselves Muslims, but want to be recognized as an independent religion. The Alevis strictly reject the Islamic Sharia law. Also, other rituals of Islam play no role for them. While women are usually seen as inferior to the men in Islam, men and women are equal in Alevism. They pray together at the "Cem". Also, women are not required to wear a headscarf. Even though Afrin's Alevi community was only a small minority until the Turkish occupation, they played a major role in the political, cultural, and economic life of Afrin. One of the founders of the first "Kurdish Democratic Party" in Syria was the Alevi Muhammad Ali Khojah (1916 - 1965).

The "autonomous self-government" of Afrin, which was fought by Turkey and radical Islamists, made the Alevi Hevi Mustafa first president of the autonomous government of Afrin. The election was interpreted as a sign for peaceful coexistence of different religions. Mrs. Mustafa held this office from 2014 until the Turkish occupation in March 2018. In February 2015, a member of the STP visited Mrs. Mustafa in the besieged city of Afrin and conducted an interview with her.

Until 2018, the Alevi community lived mainly in the sub-district of Maabatli, about 14 km to the north-west of Afrin. Maabatli is one of seven sub-districts of Afrin. About 12,000 people lived there until the beginning of the Syrian revolt. Most of them were of the Alevi faith.

Many Alevis found refuge in Afrin when they were forced to flee from Turkey. Thus, one of the most famous leaders of the Kurdish freedom movement, the Alevi Dr. Nuri Dersimi (1892 - 1973), was able to find a new home in Afrin. Many of Dersimi's relatives were massacred by the Turkish military in 1937/38. Dersimi worked as a veterinarian in the northern Syrian metropolis of Aleppo for several years. According to his wish, he was buried in a cemetery not far from Afrin. His wife was buried there as well. Before his death, Dersimi made sure that a burial place was established there. The last time a member of the STP visited Dersimi's grave was in 2015. Dersimi's grave was desecrated following the Turkish occupation. The cemetery chapel was looted and partly destroyed.

Other Alevi cemeteries and sanctuaries were destroyed as well. The existence of many places with the addition "Dede" or "Baba" shows that many Alevis lived in Afrin. Gradually, the Alevi community was forced to convert to Islam in the Ottoman Empire. The recent Turkish occupation could mean an end to Alevism in Afrin – as the Turkish state is continuing its policy of Islamization inside and outside of Turkey with all its rigor. The disappearance of the Alevis, Yazidis, and Christians in Afrin will lead to an end to religious diversity there.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to:

³ <https://www.gfbv.de/en/pm/geheimgefaengnisse-in-afrin0-10059/>

- Call on Turkey to withdraw its troops and all armed Islamist factions from Afrin and other regions in northern Syria. Until then, Turkey must ensure that the cultural and religious life of the Yazidis, Alevis, and all other ethnic groups in Afrin remains protected.
- Call on Turkey to stop the ongoing ethnic cleansing against the Yazidis, Alevis, and all Kurdish population groups in Afrin.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to call on the UN to:

- Send investigative teams to Afrin and other regions occupied by Turkey to assess the situation and to document the atrocities against the civilian population.
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