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## Human Rights Council

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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.

[26 May 2021]

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

## **Statement for the United Nations Human Rights Council: Women's rights violations in the northern Syrian Arab Republic**

The de facto autonomous Kurdish region in Northern Syrian Arab Republic has been under massive threat since the invasion of Afrin by the Government of the Republic of Turkey in January 2018. The Kurdish population has recognized the opportunity for self-determination in the Syrian power vacuum during the civil war. In the course of this, a grassroots democratic system was introduced in 2012 to secure the rights of all people living in the region. At the top of the agenda, however, was the liberation of women. This system, and the hopes associated with it, were destroyed by Turkey's war of aggression.

It is noteworthy that the revolution in Northern Syria was initiated and carried to a particular extent by women's organizations. In 2016, a new social contract followed, constituting the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, in which Women's rights played a central role. The change in the role of women could be demonstrated in many ways. The most fundamental and important achievement was probably the strengthening of women's rights and their protection. For example, a new law enacted as part of the social contract stated that violence against women, their exploitation and discrimination are considered crimes and are punishable by law (DFNS§25). In addition, there was a 40% gender quota in all areas, and management committees were always double headed including at least one woman. More economic opportunities for women have been created by establishing numerous women's cooperatives. This should ensure that equality between women and men is promoted in terms of wages, schooling and professional status, inheritance rights and even testimony in court. The new social contract also prohibited the marriage of young women without their consent and polygamy. The goal was to abolish the religious rules that oppress women. In the course of this development, the Kurdish autonomous region of Northern Syria was long considered a model of success for a democratic and social society in the war region. However, all these hopes were shattered by Turkey's war of aggression.

On January 20, 2018, the Government of the Republic of Turkey began the invasion of Afrin (Operation Olive Branch), which is part of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, in violation of international law. Already in the first days, there were air raids on the 3,000-year-old Ain Dara temple of the goddess Ishtar, which is considered a symbol of the matricentric history of the region. It cannot be classified as a coincidence that the Turkish state makes the history of women the target of its attacks. This can only be seen as a means to reinforce the patriarchal order in the region. Sadly, there is various evidence for it: in the first days of the Turkish offensive in Syria, a video became known on social networks. It showed troops supported by Turkey desecrating the body of a Kurdish female fighter. Similar photos and videos of soldiers proclaiming the successful capture of Kurdish women were shared on Twitter by journalists and academics in Syria. In addition, the 35-year-old politician Hevrin Khalaf was ambushed. She was reportedly pulled from her car, beaten up, dragged by her hair, and shot. Pictures of her mutilated body surfaced online and caused an international outcry. This sadly joins a string of targeted killings by drone strike of feminist activists. This includes Zahra Berkel, a Kurdish activist who has campaigned for women's rights in Syria for years. In addition, captured female fighters are raped, tortured, and their stripped corpses are publicly displayed. The gruesome videos shared on social media are likely part of a psychological warfare effort to teach Kurdish women to fear sexual assault.

This shows that the autonomy efforts have been and continue to be massively threatened by the Republic of Turkey, both militarily and politically. After the occupation of Afrin, a repressive, Islamist regime was introduced, and since then women have been pushed out of public life back into private homes. Nowadays, news from Afrin are sparse, but they indicate that Turkey's Islamist allies are trying to force the veil on Kurdish women there, robbing houses at random and committing acts of violence against the remaining Kurdish women. In addition, there are horrifying reports of the abduction and rape of Yezidi

women. Not only that, but Turkey and its Islamist allies appear to be seeking ethnic cleansing of the region: The proportion of the Kurdish population, including the Yazidi, Alevi, and Christian parts, dropped from 96 to less than 35 percent. Turkey is apparently seeking a lasting demographic change in the Afrin region – which has been Kurdish for centuries – and wants to arabize or turkify it.

The UN should react immediately because a member violates the UN Charter and wages a war of aggression against a de facto autonomous region (Afrin) on the territory of another independent state, the Syrian Arab Republic. Accordingly, Turkey's attack on Afrin constitutes a breach of international law: Turkey had not obtained the consent of the Syrian government or authorization from the United Nations Security Council. Nor can Turkey invoke the right of self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, as it claims, because there was no armed attack as defined by this provision. Turkey wants to prevent official recognition of constituting the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria at all costs. It fears an uprising by the Kurds in its own country. However, such toleration of a war in violation of international law by a NATO partner and the general silence that exists only increases everyone's own complicity. Whether under the control of Turkish-backed militias or the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, it is clear that no one in the autonomous region of Northern Syria will have women's rights at the top of their agenda.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Republic of Turkey to:

- immediate withdrawal from the occupied territory of Afrin,
- protection and preservation of Kurdish autonomy,
- recognition of general human rights and especially the rights of women.

In addition, Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to:

- ensure diligent and impartial investigations into the events and attacks against women to provide the necessary mechanisms to ensure access to justice and persecution of perpetrators,
- protection and preservation of Kurdish autonomy,
- recognition of general human rights and especially the rights of women.